

Table of Contents

Color Gallery

Table of Contents Page

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Prologue

Chapter 1: The World Tree

Chapter 2: The Guide's Scheme

Chapter 3: Hero Summoning

Chapter 4: The Demon Lord's Army

Chapter 5: House Banfield in Chaos

Chapter 6: The Royal Guard

Chapter 7: Miscalculation

Chapter 8: The Biggest Villain

Chapter 9: A Family Squabble

Chapter 10: The Demon Lord

Chapter 11: The Demon Lord's Demise

Chapter 12: A Pet Dog

Chapter 13: Fury

Chapter 14: A Decent Evil Lord

Chapter 15: The Weight of a Life

Chapter 16: Touchstone

Epilogue

BONUS: Mass-Produced Maid Tamaki

BONUS: Mr. Claus of House Banfield

Afterword

Newsletter









- **Prologue**
- The World Tree 1
- The Guide's Scheme
- **Hero Summoning** 3
- The Demon Lord's Army
- House Banfield in Chaos 5
- 6 The Royal Guard
- Miscalculation 7
- The Biggest Villain 8
- A Family Squabble 9
- 10 The Demon Lord
- The Demon Lord's Demise 11
- 12 A Pet Dog
- 13 **Fury**
- 14 A Decent Evil Lord
- The Weight of a Life 15
- 16 **Touchstone**
- **Epilogue**
- BONUS Mass-Produced Maid Tamaki
- > BONUS Mr. Claus of House Banfield

Afterword

THE EVIL LORD OF AN INTERGALACTIC EMPRESALACTIC

NOVEL



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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

S_{ITTING ALONE IN THE PARK,} a teenage girl gazed up at the night sky. The lights of the town mostly obscured the stars, but she still saw a few here and there. Her breaths were white vapor and her cheeks and ears were turning red from the cold. Yet she continued to sit there, staring upward.

She'd pulled a coat on over her school uniform, as well as a pair of gloves, although she'd worn holes through the fingers of those. There was also a hole in her coat's right pocket, and since it always reopened however many times she mended it, she'd given up and simply stopped putting things in there.

It definitely hadn't been this cold back when she began her habit of sitting on this park bench to pick out stars in the sky. It wasn't that she particularly liked stargazing. For her, it was simply a way to escape reality.

On the bench beside her were her schoolbag and a reusable shopping bag full of items she'd bought at a grocery store.

"I should be getting home," she murmured.

Having finished school and her shift at her part-time job, all that remained was to return home, but the girl—Akui Kanami—had begun killing time in this park recently out of a desire to avoid going straight there at night.

As Kanami stood up, her long black hair swayed behind her. By no means was it properly cared for, but someone had once told her it looked good on her, so she hesitated to cut it short. Her friends envied her slender build, saying she looked like a model, but she was only thin because she was so busy working and studying that she lost weight without even trying. In fact, she was almost gaunt. She'd inherited her mother's good looks, though, so she was popular at school despite how exhausted she appeared every day. Her sharp eyes made her seem strong-willed, and she was always listless in class, but boys seemed to like that. Of course, Kanami had no time to enjoy her youth, so it made no difference to her how boys felt about her.

With a small sigh, Kanami trudged home. Arriving at a run-down apartment

building with cheap rent, she climbed a rusty staircase and finally stood before her door. A light was on inside, and she could faintly hear the TV. Her "roommate" was home, same as always.

"Nothing ever changes," Kanami said, wishing she could expel all her negative feelings with her sighs.

Taking out her key, she fought the door a little to get it to creak open. She was used to this routine, yet she couldn't help but feel like reality was thrust in her face anew every time she opened this door.

"I'm home," she said curtly, taking off her coat and hanging it up.

There was no response, so she peered into the apartment and saw her mother asleep, the TV still on. Kanami frowned, staring down at the woman. She was a sorry sight, using the kotatsu for a nap. Her hair was dry and greying, she was getting wrinkles, and she was pudgy from a lack of exercise. She looked older than other women her age.

Empty snack food packaging was scattered on the table in front of her. Clearing it away, Kanami shot her mother another sharp glare. "You really don't change."

Kanami was forced to work part-time, but her mother spent every day at home like this instead of working herself. Once, Kanami's mother had been thin and beautiful, and she'd been livelier and more active, as well. Kanami recalled her wearing fashionable clothes, and they'd often gone out together on days off. Now, however, no trace of that woman was left.

Once, the two of them had been happy. No, the three of them.

Kanami headed to the kitchen, took the marked-down side dishes she'd bought out of her grocery bag, and began preparing dinner.

Hearing noise in the kitchen, her mother woke. Her face, which bore little resemblance to that of the mother in Kanami's memories, lit up.

"You're home!"

"Yes," Kanami said, her back turned to her mother. "Dinner will be ready soon."

"Never mind that!" her mother screeched, though Kanami was busy preparing food. "You got paid today, right? How much did you make?"

Kanami's hands stopped moving. With a deep sigh, she took out her wallet. Inside was a little more than fifty thousand yen. Removing twenty thousand, she slammed the money down on the kotatsu table.

"There! Are you happy?"

Her mother pounced on the bills, but when she realized they only totaled twenty thousand, she looked up at Kanami in surprise. "This is it? How are we supposed to live on this?" she protested.

Kanami felt a weight settling heavily in her chest. She couldn't bear to look at her mother, so she responded with her back turned. "You shouldn't expect much from a student's part-time job. This is your fault anyway, isn't it, Mom? They took us off welfare because you—"

"It's not my fault!" her mother interrupted, looking away and scowling. "I just wanted to earn some spending money so I could buy you things, Kanami."

When she heard those excuses, Kanami raised her voice. "You mean you wanted to buy things for yourself! Besides, I told you not to!"

Her mother buried her face in the kotatsu blanket and began to cry. "Why do these things always happen to me? It didn't used to be like this. I want things to go back to the way they were..."

She's avoiding reality again, Kanami thought as her mother reminisced about the past, weeping. This always happens when anyone blames her for something. Kanami was disgusted. But then, with a start, she realized that she'd been doing the same thing on the bench in the park. I'm just like her. I can't accept reality any better than she can. It wasn't just her mother who wanted to return to happier times. Kanami wanted the same thing.

She couldn't stand watching her mother cry any longer, so she dropped the subject. "I'll make dinner." She'd just eat, do her homework, and go to bed.

As she resigned herself to the routine, her mother raised her head and made a suggestion. "Kanami, do you want a job that would make you a little more money?"

What's that supposed to mean? Kanami turned and looked at her mother, surprised to see her serious expression. "I have school, too, remember?" She wanted to at least graduate.

"You won't get into college, so it doesn't matter if you graduate high school, does it?" her mother persisted. "You should just get a job you don't need a degree for. You're pretty, like I was, so you can make a lot of money now, while you're still young."

"Wh-what are you saying?" Kanami was getting a bad feeling about this. She wanted to trust her mother, but...

"There's nighttime work, isn't there? You'd be popular in no time as long as you lied about your age, Kanami."

Kanami was disgusted by her mother's unabashed smile. "No way!" she yelled, rejecting her mother's suggestion out of hand. "Why don't you work? How can you sit there doing nothing while your daughter supports you?! Go make your own money!"

Her fervent pleas didn't faze her mother. "Don't be ridiculous! I got married right out of college. I have no work experience! Besides, every time I try working part-time, I get fired right away."

Her mother had worked a few jobs, but she'd quit each one after putting in hardly any time at all. It was always for a stupid reason, too: a younger worker chewing her out, or getting in trouble for ignoring a task she'd been given. Kanami never wanted to believe those stories. Each time she heard one, it reminded her anew how pathetic her mother was.

Acting like the heroine in some terrible tragedy, her mother continued, "I'd be too embarrassed to work part-time at my age. Hourly wages are so low, too. I couldn't take it. What did I even do to deserve this in the first place?"

Kanami thought her mother's complaint was ridiculous. What did you do? You ruined everything! You...and me...

"This is all your fault!" Kanami shouted, her fists clenched. "You betrayed Dad, and we lost everything because of it! And Dad... You brought this all on yourself!"

Their happy family had fallen apart after her mother's betrayal of her father. Before they knew it, they'd found themselves living in this run-down apartment.

"You said you liked your new papa better, too, Kanami!" her mother retorted.

There was nothing Kanami could say to defend herself when her mother threw the words Kanami had said to her father back at her. Before she even realized what she was doing, she'd run out of the apartment.

Kanami fled back to the park where she killed time after work every evening. No one was around, which made the area a little creepy, but she didn't care about that right now. All that mattered was staying away from her mother. Seated on her bench, Kanami hung her head, just wanting to be alone.

"I'm tired...Dad..."

She recalled her happy childhood. She'd had a beautiful mother...and a kind father. He worked hard, and when he came home, he always played with Kanami. Whenever she acted out, he scolded her gently, a troubled smile on his face. He could be harsh at times, but he definitely loved them. Kanami still remembered the feeling of her father's hand gently stroking her long hair. Her memories of him were warm and sweet.

But Kanami had betrayed him.

"Dad...I'm sorry... I'm really sorry. I was so stupid..." Kanami's tears dropped to the ground as she thought of her father, whom she would never see again. "If I hadn't said I preferred Papa...would Dad not have died?"

Kanami still regretted those words.

Back then, her mother had been having an affair, and the man she was cheating on Kanami's father with bought Kanami anything she wanted whenever they met. That was all it had taken to win over Kanami, who was just a child at the time. She'd compared the man to her father, who sometimes scolded her, and started to wish that this other man was her dad instead. That was why she'd been innocently happy when her mother told her, "This man is your *real* father." From that day on, she'd called the man "Papa" and adored him.

If she could go back to that time now, she would beat the crap out of her younger self.

After that, her parents had divorced, and Kanami told her father she preferred her papa. She couldn't forgive herself now for feeling no remorse upon seeing her father's heartbroken expression at her words.

Shortly after, her new papa had abandoned her and her mother. Apparently, he hadn't loved them after all. It took her a long time, but Kanami finally realized that it was her dad who'd truly loved her, even if he wasn't her biological father. By then, however, she'd lost everything, and her dad had already died. When she realized she'd never be able to see him again, much less apologize, she fell into deep despair.



"This must be punishment for betraying Dad. If it is, I guess all I can do is accept it."

She deserved this for turning her back on her father. She went beyond merely accepting her punishment—she *wanted* to be punished.

"Maybe quitting school and working instead wouldn't be so bad. I could live on my own, too... Huh?"

Kanami had been gazing up at the night sky, and was suddenly surprised by light coming from beneath her. She shot up from the bench, looked down, and saw something like a magic circle below her.

"What's going—"

Before she could finish, she vanished from the park.

Chapter 1: The World Tree

O NE MORNING, two maids were tasked with tidying the mansion's garden. Their cute, frilly uniforms differed from those worn by the mansion's other maids. The unique garb indicated the different status these two maids held.

One of the pair suddenly started swinging around the broom in her hands. "Aaargh! Cleaning a place this huge by hand makes no sense! There are robots that could do this. Why do we have to do it instead?"

The girl's long, navy-blue hair swung behind her as she took her anger out on the surrounding vegetation. Her name was Riho Satsuki, and she scowled as if deeply offended to be working as a mere maid.

The other girl, Fuka Shishigami, watched Riho with an exasperated look. With her voluminous red hair tied back behind her head, she set her broom against her shoulder and sighed. "You made that mess," she said, pointing at the debris Riho had created, "so you'd better clean it up."

The pair were far too crude to be maids at the mansion, but the other servants never cautioned them about their behavior, even when they wreaked havoc. After all, they were special, since they were students of the Way of the Flash—the sword school the master of the mansion, Liam Sera Banfield, belonged to. In fact, the girls shared the same teacher as Liam. They may have been clad in cutesy maid outfits and had girlish faces and figures, but they were still Way of the Flash swordspeople, like their master. Nevertheless, there was a reason they were dressed as maids and working in the mansion.

"Don't act like a goody two-shoes," Riho snapped at Fuka. "That attitude suits you even less than those clothes."

Fuka's face turned red, and she held out her broom like a sword. "Wh-what was that? I-I'm not wearing these 'cause I want to, you know!"

Riho held up her broom in much the same way, cackling. "You wanna go? I'll

take you on!"

The air seemed to crackle between the two, the plants around them swaying even though there was no wind. They glared at each other for some time, and just when they seemed about to swing their brooms at one another, the last person they wanted to see appeared.

"I can't believe you two. How many times do I have to tell you something to get it through your heads?"

Riho and Fuka jumped, glancing at the newcomer. It was the head maid, Serena.

"I told you to clean, didn't I? But here you are, making a mess instead." Serena shook her head in disapproval.

Her attitude irritated Riho and Fuka. The short-tempered girls would normally cut down anyone who disrespected them in an instant, but this *was* the mansion of their Swordmaster's senior pupil, who had once beaten the stuffing out of the two without breaking a sweat. If they attacked Serena, they would surely incur Liam's wrath. After all, he'd specifically ordered them to learn etiquette from the head maid.

Face twitching, Fuka began making excuses. "I was cleaning, Serena! Riho just picked a fight with me!"

Riho glared at Fuka. "You're selling me out? Serena, it's all *her* fault! She aimed her broom at me first!"

As the two began arguing, Serena raised her voice. "It's not a matter of which of you is at fault! You both are!" The two problem children had needled the head maid into abandoning her usual polite tone. "And how dare you disrespectfully address me by name when Master Liam himself entrusted me with you?" She couldn't resist quietly adding, "Honestly, what a burden I've been saddled with."

When Serena brought up Liam's name, neither Fuka nor Riho could argue further. They respected him as one of their teacher's senior students, but more to the point, they knew he had the strength to treat them like the children they still were. Their instincts prevented them from rebelling against him.

Another lecture, huh? Fuka thought. A commotion had started around them, though, cutting Serena's admonishments short.

"Kinda noisy today, isn't it, Ms. Head Maid?" Fuka had corrected the way she addressed Serena, but made no efforts at a more polite tone.

Serena sighed in resignation. "The hubbub is only natural," she explained. "It's a very auspicious day for this house, after all."

Riho tilted her head. "Auspicious? Did something good happen?"

"A world tree was discovered on a planet that's come into House Banfield's possession," Serena told them, looking pleased.

Riho and Fuka just tilted their heads again, not understanding the tree's significance. When she saw their confused looks, Serena heaved a sigh once more and instructed them to resume tidying.

The Intergalactic Algrand Empire's aristocracy revolved around a ruling emperor. In the past, I'd wondered whether such a vast nation could really support such a backward system. I'd had it all wrong, though. When a nation grew to a massive size, governing it was practically impossible. It was more practical to divide it into individual territories and assign their governance to feudal lords. Ruling directly over each and every planet, fortress, and colony would've been a huge pain for the emperor.

Well, I was sure plenty of factors had led to the introduction of the feudal system, but those details weren't important. The important thing was that I, Liam Sera Banfield, held the rank of count and ruled over several planets within the immense empire.

A little after noon, I was lounging self-importantly on a couch in a reception room. "Everything within my territory belongs to me, no exceptions," I said. "That even goes for the lives of the people who live there. Do you disagree?"

I was currently in the middle of a lengthy period of training to become a proper ruler. I'd been away from my territory for too long, though, and had recently returned home. I was supposed to serve four more years as a government official, but I'd decided to pause my training and get back to it after

a few years taking care of things in my own domain.

Having returned home, I'd recently received word that a world tree had been discovered on one of my planets. Thus, I was now meeting with the beautiful woman who sat across from me in the reception room, a low table between us.

"That's a very aristocratic way of thinking," she said.

The woman's name was Anushree, and she was a high elf. The queen of the elves, in fact—a "high elf" being essentially elven nobility. She had pale skin, blue eyes, long and wavy blonde hair, and long, pointed ears. Her sharp, symmetrical features gave her a face that seemed close to ideal, even to a human like me. She wore a traditional white dress that did nothing to hide her figure—nor her underwear, which I could see through the thin, gold-embroidered dress. Despite seeming aware of this, she showed no shame. She must have had absolute confidence in her appearance.

She looked like a goddess, smiling at me that way, but I knew that inky-black emotions roiled beneath the surface. Did she disdain humans? I had the same hunch about the male elf standing guard behind Anushree, who I assumed was one of her knights. I'd allowed his presence, since a mere guard was meaningless before my strength. Yet he was clearly looking down on me from where he stood behind her, disgust in his eyes.

Anushree brought the conversation back on topic. "Will you not return our homeland to us, my lord?"

"You want it back as soon as a world tree shows up, eh? How shameless."

Anushree was meeting with me because the world tree had been discovered on a planet I'd acquired from her, and she now wanted that planet returned.

Elves had an extremely low standing in this universe. Some had integrated with human society, but those who lived in groups of elves alone, like Anushree, were different.

In fiction, elves were often a long-lived race. In this universe, however, human beings routinely lived to be five hundred years old, while elves normally only reached three hundred or so. Even a high elf like Anushree would only live to four or five hundred. Frankly, elves were considered short-lived here.

Elves also lacked the political power humans possessed. Considering all this, it was impressive that they still looked down on humans. They apparently felt they were a chosen race simply thanks to their beauty. Many humans found them irresistibly attractive; it was generally assumed that something magical was at work in addition to their physical beauty. In other words, even in this universe, elves were quite popular—and mysterious.

I didn't care about any of that, though. Thus my haughty attitude in front of these two.

Anushree repeated her shameless request, looking disconcerted by my attitude. "The planet you now own is our ancient homeland. Does it not make sense for us to return to it?"

Sure, it would have made sense if the elves had been born there and still lived there. But no one had dwelt on the planet with the world tree when I acquired it.

"That wasteland is your homeland? I finally managed to restore the environment, so now you want it back, huh? That'd be way too convenient for you. Elves sure are brazen."

As I provoked her, her knight scowled down at me, but Anushree just joined her hands together as if begging. "Our planet's restoration must be a sign from the universe for us to return to our homeland. There's even a world tree there now. You know caring for a world tree is difficult, do you not, my lord?"

A world tree was a sacred plant that produced elixirs. Its benefits weren't limited to elixirs, either. They apparently did all sorts of other things, such as enveloping the entire planet in high-quality mana. Thus, the trees were incredibly beneficial.

However, it wasn't possible to plant more of them. Only a single world tree could exist on any given planet, and the conditions required for them to take root were largely unknown. Since the plants were extremely rare, there were few world trees within the Algrand Empire. Despite the Empire's vastness, it contained fewer than a hundred.

The one found in my territory was still a sapling, but once it grew to full height, it would be enormous. Yet it was said that humans couldn't care for a

world tree, with nonhuman races like elves apparently being better suited to it.

"You just want me to hand it over to you?" I retorted.

"If you allow us to care for the world tree, we will provide you with elixirs at regular intervals. That is not a bad proposal, is it?"

"Elixirs, eh?" I put my hand to my chin thoughtfully.

The mouths of Anushree and her guard quirked into self-assured smiles. They were seemingly trying to hide their confidence, but it was obvious to me.

However, they had the wrong idea if they thought I was considering their proposal. Sure, it would be beneficial to acquire more elixirs within my own domain, but I had no shortage of those at the moment, thanks to the planetary development device I'd obtained upon defeating the Berkeley Family. As its name implied, the mysterious device allowed one to terraform planets, making them viable for human life. If a planet nearby could be developed, you merely had to hit a few buttons to activate the artifact. With that device, humanity could continue to expand its influence. Its one flaw was that its ancient technology surpassed our current capabilities, so it couldn't be mass-produced.

There was another, more frightening way to put the device to use, however. In addition to fostering life, it could also do the opposite. When the device's influence was directed toward a planet that already supported life, it absorbed all the planet's vitality, transforming it into elixirs. If the device was used that way, the planet in question would be sucked dry and destroyed.

I'd used the planetary development device while taking down space pirates. If activated right after winning a battle, it sucked up the vitality the dead pirates released and transformed it into elixirs. You couldn't get as many elixirs that way as you would from destroying a planet, but space never ran out of pirates. Thus, if I wanted elixirs, all I had to do was go pirate-hunting. Not to mention, taking pirates down boosted my reputation. In addition, I could transform physical wreckage from those battles into resources using my alchemy box, another powerful artifact that had come into my possession.

Making use of my enemies' very souls for my purposes was a brutal—arguably ruthless—tactic, making me a true villain if there ever was one. Space pirates were the ultimate piggy bank for me. During their exploits, they wrought

chaos and collected treasure that I, in turn, took from them. They gave their very lives for the sake of my profit. As long as there were pirates, I would never have any shortage of resources.

However, having a rare world tree in my territory would afford me a certain status as a noble. But if I could still brag about the tree to other nobles and demonstrate superiority, maybe keeping a few elves as pets wouldn't be so bad.

"I'll consider it, I suppose," I told Anushree. "If you're willing to work for me, I could allow you to set yourselves up near the world tree."

At this arrogant proclamation, the elves smiled, though there was still murder in their eyes. Anushree stood and curtsied. "Thank you, my lord."

She bowed her head, but I was certain that she was stewing.

I was so amused by the elves' poorly concealed rage that I decided to pretend I hadn't noticed it. "I said I'd consider it. I haven't made an official decision yet."

Anushree seemed to consider the matter settled, however. "I can't imagine you have better options for its care than us."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Judging the conversation finished, my personal maid, Amagi, spoke up to remind me of the next item on today's schedule. "Master, you have another meeting coming up shortly."

"Got it. So many visitors today..."

I'd had dozens of conversations like this just since morning. The only problem with coming back to my mansion for a time was that I always found myself bombarded with petitioners.

The elves took their leave.

After her conversation with Liam, Anushree wore a severe expression. "How dare that filthy human brat talk down to me?"

He was younger than she, yet he hadn't dropped his impudent tone the whole

time they spoke. Worse, her looks hadn't swayed him in the least. Every other human she'd met lit up at the sight of her, even nobles. Anushree considered her beauty to be her greatest strength, but it had been useless today.

"This is all to obtain the world tree, Your Majesty," her knight reminded her. "We must be patient for now." His tone betrayed his own disdain for Liam.

Anushree sighed, and her tense expression relaxed. "You're right. If we obtain a world tree, we can use its elixirs to help our tribe flourish. Even if we bleed it dry, it will provide stability for a few centuries."

Elves could indeed care for a world tree, but Anushree's people took world trees that should have lasted tens of thousands of years and bled them dry in a few hundred. Their current prosperity had resulted from squeezing as many elixirs as they could out of such trees, destroying entire planets in the process.

Her knight smiled faintly. "We can attain vast wealth by selling the elixirs, and our long journey through space can finally come to an end."

It was true that the planet with the world tree was their original homeland, but it was a ruined wasteland because of the elves who'd lived there several generations ago. They had forced the world tree to convert the planet's vitality into elixirs, sucking it dry.

"I hope our prosperity will last at least until my grandchildren's generation," Anushree said. "We'll squeeze all we can out of that little whelp of a count, too."

They planned both to control the world tree and to extort riches from Liam in the form of aid. It was rare for anyone to exploit world trees like Anushree's people; normally, elves tended world trees with care. The very existence of Anushree's group, however, showed that there were indeed elves who took that route. On the other hand, there were those who found their behavior despicable.

As they made their way through the mansion's excessively wide hallways, Liam's next visitors—a small man and a large man—came walking toward them. It wasn't just the men's builds that differed. They were also different races. The small man was only about a hundred and twenty centimeters tall, while the large one was almost two meters. Both wore suits, but the outfits looked so

awkward on them that Anushree couldn't resist mocking them.

"How repulsive," she said. "And they're having their meeting right after ours... What bad luck."

The small man was a goblin, and the large man was an orc. Both were rather unattractive by human standards. Their faces twisted with frustration as they passed the elves.

Elves, goblins, and orcs shared a common ancestor in this universe. All three races could care for world trees, and all three were considered minorities in this reality. However, elves had evolved to be beautiful, while goblins and orcs had become ugly.

Anushree guessed that the goblin and orc were meeting Liam for the same reason she had: to ask that he allow them to care for the world tree.

"I'm sure you're after the world tree," she told them, "but you are a little late. The count is going to choose us. Your ugly faces will have to stay in space where they belong."

Though goblins and orcs were just as capable as elves of caring for a world tree, their appearance often caused humans to chase them from their homelands. The humans figured they would rather have beautiful elves tending the trees than ugly goblins or orcs—even if the elves ultimately let the world tree wither, like Anushree's people. Humans didn't know about those elves' terrible practices, and didn't suspect any elves would willingly destroy a world tree, because of the elves who *did* take their duties seriously.

As a matter of fact, the ancestors of the goblin and orc visiting Liam had only become space nomads because a human noble, spurred on by elves, had driven them from their homeland. They had traveled through space since then, searching for a planet with a world tree where they could settle. As forest inhabitants, they had difficulty living anywhere other than a planet with a world tree.

The goblin and orc had caught on to Anushree's aims.

"You shouldn't be killing world trees and destroying planets, gob," the goblin retorted. "That planet is the goblins' and orcs' homeland too, gob."

The planet Liam had obtained was also the one where the goblins' and orcs' ancestors originated. One of the mightiest world trees in all the universe had once existed there...and Anushree's ancestors were the ones who'd destroyed it.

The orc protested vehemently, too. "How many world trees have you destroyed, and whole planets with them? Just how many lives will you snuff out before you're satisfied?"

Anushree had never spared a thought for a planet's vitality, and she just mocked the pair's earnestness. "What does it matter? If they became nourishment for elves, they're fortunate. World trees, planets—all lives are just sustenance for us. No matter how you struggle, that planet is ours. No human will ever understand the true worth of a world tree. That brat will give the planet to us."

The goblin and orc also knew that humans didn't understand world trees' true worth. They grimaced. All they could do was hope that Liam would sense the tree's importance.

"Count Banfield is called a wise ruler, gob. He'll understand if we explain things to him, gob."

Recalling how Liam had behaved during their meeting, Anushree burst out laughing in pity. "Him, a wise ruler? That brat is just a human, same as all the others. And since he's human, he'll obviously choose us beautiful elves over you ugly creatures. That's just the way of things."

Anushree walked away, supremely satisfied by the men's frustrated expressions. There was one thing she didn't understand, though: Liam Sera Banfield aimed to be an evil lord.

No sooner had the elves left me than I was visited by a goblin and an orc. I'd known of the species' existence, of course, but this was my first time seeing either in person. I was much more excited to meet with them than those elves.

"My lord, I beg you to entrust your world tree to us. You see, world trees are

The orc desperately pled his case. Producing elixirs was apparently not the original function of a world tree, its presence being more important to the planet it appeared on. It basically seemed to be a spiritual thing. I'd heard more than enough about things like that in my previous life on Earth, so I let his explanation go in one ear and out the other.

I was more interested in the goblin and orc themselves. If I wanted allies as an evil lord, it made sense to hire these guys, didn't it? I hadn't cared for that elf on her high horse, anyway.

I recalled hearing about goblins and orcs from Nitta, my old coworker from my past life. He'd definitely told me they were evil. If I allied myself with these creatures, it'd be proof of my villainy. Besides, if I wanted beautiful women, I could easily obtain any number of them. These guys, on the other hand, were much harder to find. Goblins and orcs were both rare in this universe. If I only wanted a world tree in order to show off to people, I'd much rather have these guys tend it.

As I nodded to myself, coming to my own conclusion, the goblin tried desperately to impress some fact or another on me.

"My lord, we'll spare no effort to work with you, gob. I beg you, please entrust the world tree to us, gob. Please save our people, gob!"

He was trying so hard to convince me, I figured they must be in some real trouble. That presented me with the opportunity to make them indebted to me.

"Oh? You'll spare no effort, eh? I like the sound of that."

Both goblin and orc raised their head.

"Gob?!"

"Huh?!"

From their surprise, I guessed they hadn't been expecting much from me. They must have thought I'd choose the elves over them, but I could catch a few elves anytime. Then I could hand them over to these guys, and let them do what they did in those books I'd heard about from Nitta.

I recalled the sort of things that went on in those books, which involved evil

lords and elves. There were almost always goblins and orcs in them too. Yeah, this is evil for sure. I'm gonna do it, Nitta! I just wish you could see it!

"I'll leave the planet with the world tree on it to you," I proclaimed. "You'll work for me from now on."

The goblin and orc exchanged disbelieving looks when I made this declaration, finally breaking into smiles.

"Th-thank you so much!" the orc exclaimed, thrilled. "What sort of work would you like us to do?"

Well, this isn't good. I only have a vague idea of the classic tropes. I mean, most of the time, I ignored Nitta when he gushed about those books. Sorry, Nitta.

"I'll call on you when I need you for something," I told him. "For now, just tend that world tree. Make it nice and healthy, all right?"

"Y-yes, gob!"

I simply wanted to brag about my world tree, after all. If it grew huge and impressive, I'd be more than happy. In the meantime, I'd call on the goblins and orcs if I thought of something they could help me with.

Chapter 2: The Guide's Scheme

T WAS THE GOBLINS AND ORCS, not the elves, who had obtained House Banfield's permission to immigrate to the planet where the world tree had appeared. When Queen Anushree received that news aboard the nomad ship she'd returned to, she trembled with fury and furrowed her brow, gripping the armrests of her chair.

"Why would he not choose us? Why did he pick those hideous creatures?!"

The nomad ship Anushree commanded wasn't large by any means, but it carried tens of thousands of her brethren, and her fellow elves had been just as smugly convinced that they had finally found a planet to settle on. Yet their queen had failed in her negotiations. The ship was in chaos now that its occupants knew goblins and orcs had been chosen instead, and the vassals at Anushree's side were just as panicked.

"Those lowly humans!" Anushree shouted at the ceiling, unable to contain her rage. "We'll kill their world tree, then! If it can't be ours, it's pointless for it to even exist! We'll use starbane if we have to!"

One of the vassals gathered around her spoke up hurriedly. "Starbane?! We cannot do that, Your Majesty!"

Starbane was a dangerous substance synthesized from negative energies, like grudges and hatred, that collected after a planet was destroyed. If it spread through a planet, that planet was cursed. Anyone poisoned with starbane died a painful death in deep despair; those with weak spirits died instantly, bodies contaminated with misfortune that spread unhappiness throughout the vicinity. Starbane was simply bad news, yet Anushree possessed some of it.

"If we don't use it now, when will we use it? I can't forgive that lowly human brat for toying with me like this!"

Anushree's vassals could say nothing more to her. Her eyes bulged, a

frightening smile on her face.

As the tension in the room rose, a man's top hat fell from the ceiling, invisible to the elves' eyes. When it landed on the floor, it sprouted tiny arms and legs. The incomplete figure spread its arms, and then...

"Ah! What arrogance and repulsive anger!" the newcomer crooned to himself. "And since it relates to Liam, I can absorb it even better."

The being within the top hat—called the Guide—absorbed the hatred and rage the elves felt toward Liam. He even absorbed the starbane in the elves' possession, replenishing much of the negative energy he required for the first time in a while. And that wasn't all.

"I-incredible!" he gushed, unheard by the elves. "The anger and hatred these elves have accumulated over years and years of destroying planets and lives is giving me even more power!"

Since Anushree's people had extinguished countless lives on the planets they'd destroyed, this ship absolutely brimmed with malice, yet the elves living aboard didn't even suspect it. All hell could've broken loose if the Guide hadn't absorbed the emotions lingering in their midst.

After feasting on all that energy, the Guide's appearance changed. Power filled his body, which fully sprouted from his hat. The Guide held his hands out, thrilled to have his body again.

"I'm back, baby!" Inspecting his revived body, the Guide considered his next moves. "Hmm. I've revived, but I can't defeat Liam like this. If I approach him now, he'll turn the tables again in an instant. If only I could pull some strings behind the scenes while he wasn't around. Hunh... Oh, I know!"

The Guide had hit upon the idea of what was called "summoning magic." With that, he could send Liam to a faraway planet the Empire hadn't yet discovered. Right now, however, the Guide didn't possess that kind of power. So what could he do?

"If only I could throw him into another universe... But that's beyond me at the moment. I should concentrate on using summoning magic to send him to a planet in this universe and buy myself some time. While Liam's away, I'll rile up

people like these elves, who bear him ill will, and destroy his domain. I could steal his alchemy box and other gadgets, too. That way, he'll have a tough time when he gets back."

The Guide's plan was to whittle down House Banfield's power in Liam's absence, stealing the devices that provided his resources. To do that, he just had to banish Liam to some faraway planet.

It would normally be easy to catch someone with summoning magic, but things became more difficult when that someone was Liam. Since this was a universe with magic, a count like Liam would likely have several layers of protection in place to prevent kidnapping via summoning. The Guide would have his work cut out for him.

"Plenty of planets summon heroes from other universes to stave off the threat of a demon lord," he mused. "I just need to push Liam to one of those planets. It'd be nice if the demon lord killed him to boot, but I'm sure that's too much to hope for."

If a demon lord could've killed Liam, the Guide wouldn't be having this much trouble with him. And if Liam went missing due to summoning magic, House Banfield would naturally begin searching for him. If the Guide sent him to a planet that was quite distant, though, the effort would exhaust all this new power he'd waited so long to stock up. Thus, he should send Liam somewhere nearby. Nearby for an intergalactic empire, at least. It should be a planet the Empire hadn't discovered yet, where the inhabitants were just scraping by and couldn't assist Liam. Liam would be found eventually, but it would take some time.

With that decided, the Guide reached out with his senses to search for a fitting location. He quickly found a planet that was, in fact, under threat from a demon lord. That world's inhabitants intended to summon a hero from another universe to protect them. The process was just getting underway.

"This is it! If Liam is gone, I can do whatever I want in his domain! All right. I'll send him away by getting him caught in their summoning!"

As the Guide left the room, Anushree slumped in her chair, her whole demeanor going from fierce to drained.

"Your Majesty?" Concerned vassals gathered around her.

The drive for revenge had disappeared from Anushree's face. Her brow was no longer furrowed, her expression more peaceful. No—her face had turned impassive, the light gone from her eyes. "We won't use poison," she murmured, as if regretting what she'd said only a moment ago.

"R-right!" one of her vassals said. "If we're going to destroy a world tree, we have to at least get some elixirs out of it first."

Hearing the relieved vassal's words, Anushree hugged her knees atop her chair. "That's too much effort as well."

Her vassals went quiet for a moment, then finally comprehended what she'd just said. "Too much effort?!" one repeated. "Y-your Majesty, what's come over you?"

"We should look for somewhere else to settle down. Roaming is fine and all, but I'd like to just take it easy and start a family soon," Anushree told them.

Her vassals exchanged looks, seeming to conclude that such a plan might not be bad. Anushree was beautiful, but she was aging. It would be best if their queen, a high elf, focused on continuing her lineage. Most of the vassals sympathized with her desire to settle down, and one young elf let something slip that he shouldn't have.

"Maybe that'll be for the best. You're not as young as you used to be, Your Maj—"

"Hmph!" The queen stood, gave the young elf an icy look, and sank her fist into his gut.

"Augh!"

Anushree then made an announcement. "I've decided! We'll look for a planet where we can all settle down. It doesn't have to have a world tree. We just want to live on solid ground somewhere. One day in the future, we'll find another world tree and tend it properly."

In order to revive himself, the Guide had sucked out too much of the elves' negative energy. Once he left, things proceeded in a strange direction.

On the Empire's Capital Planet lived a man named Calvin Noah Albareto. Calvin was the crown prince. He was competing for the throne with the third prince, Cleo Noah Albareto, whom Liam had elevated to his current position in the succession contest.

Cleo had formerly been at an overwhelming disadvantage; Calvin's claim to the throne was practically set in stone. But Liam's maneuvering left Calvin in a precarious state. Most of the nobles in his faction had left; only those closest to him remained. His influence within the Empire had waned, and now there were predictions that Cleo would become the next emperor.

Calvin was about to lose his status as crown prince because of a single person: Liam.

Still, Calvin had a plan. Sitting before his remaining noble followers in a palace meeting room, he wore an easy smile.

"Factions are just harder to control as they grow larger," he declared.

Calvin had learned this well, since he'd once commanded the largest faction of any candidate for the throne. He now realized his faction had contained plenty of foolish nobles who only held him back. Those fickle bandwagon-hoppers were joining Cleo's faction instead, something Calvin actually approved of. Yes, a bigger faction just meant more problems.

The nobles gathered in the meeting room understood what Calvin meant.

"I can't imagine Liam keeping control of his faction the way it is now," one commented.

"Even we struggled with it, after all," said another.

"Plenty of idiotic opportunists will get in his way."

Calvin figured that, even if those excess nobles did nothing, they would hold Liam back. The nobles still in Calvin's faction saw that coming, too. Liam would soon be unable to manage Cleo's faction.

"Once Liam's hands are tied, we'll make our move," said Calvin. "Until then, we'll build up our strength."

His faction agreed. For the time being, they'd just have to lie low and observe things.

House Banfield's mansion was enormous. Its halls were wide, its ceilings high, and its rooms spacious. To get anywhere distant inside the massive building, you had to take a vehicle through its hallways. The structure's scale was such that even buses and trains operated within the mansion, ferrying people from one place to another.

A group of knights boarded one of these trains. Their leader was a beautiful woman with long blonde hair named Christiana Leta Rosebreia—though, nowadays, she went by Christiana Sera Rosebreia. Tia, as she was called, had a composed demeanor, and was strong enough to have served as House Banfield's head knight up until recently.

"It's been a long time since I've taken one of the mansion trains," she remarked.

"Other methods of transportation are normally available to us," replied Tia's blue-haired adjutant. "I don't think there was any reason you had to take the train, Lady Tia."

"It's fine. Our destination is near the station anyway."

Tia and her six subordinates were glancing around for open seats on the train when they spotted another group that was already seated. The air inside the car immediately shifted, the relaxed atmosphere replaced by thick tension. Tia and her knights stared hard at this other, cruder group.

"What rotten luck to run into these ruffians," Tia griped, a little too loudly.

The woman in the middle of the second group, Marie Sera Marian, was sitting with her legs crossed. She looked up at Tia's words, staring as if trying to murder her with her eyes alone. Marie was a formidable woman with purple eyes and long purple hair; she'd made a name for herself as House Banfield's second-strongest knight up until a short while ago. She and Tia couldn't bear each other.

"Seeing your face makes me sick," Marie said. "I shouldn't have taken the

train today."

The air practically crackled with the tension between the two. It was as if they might leap forward to kill each other at any second. Noticing this, most of the passengers around them fled to other cars, though some were boxed in where they sat.

One passenger stood. She wore a maid uniform that exposed her shoulders, and the marks on them identified her as nonhuman—an android. She was one of the mass-produced maid robots House Banfield employed.

When the maid robot got to her feet, staring at them, Tia's and Marie's bloodlust dissipated. If they fought, the robot might be caught up in it.

Marie scratched her head. "Guess you get to live today, ground meat."

Tia looked down at her, eyes wide. "You're the one who's lucky, fossil." She turned around with a flourish of her cape and led her subordinates to another car.

One of the unlucky passengers who hadn't been able to leave his seat was a top knight who belonged to neither group. He'd been about to speak up and stop the women's fight, but the maid robot next to him had beaten him to it.

"I'm sorry," the knight, Claus Sera Mont, said awkwardly when the maid robot sat back down. "That was my job."

Androids didn't have high standing in the Algrand Empire. In fact, such Alpowered robots were scorned. However, there was an unspoken rule in House Banfield's domain that maid robots were to be treated as if they were human. There were those who skirted this rule, but in the face of Liam's absolute authority, the most they could do was avoid interactions with maid robots.

Claus always endeavored to obey his lord's commands, so long as he didn't find them unconscionable, which was why he apologized to the maid robot.

The humanlike robot stared back at him with her red eyes. "If you'd tried to stop them, you would likely have become involved in their fight, Lord Claus. It was sufficient merely to make my presence known."

"Ha ha ha! You think I would have gotten involved?" Claus said incredulously.

"It's entirely possible one of them might think about removing you from the running for head knight—a position they both covet," the maid robot replied emotionlessly. "It may be prudent for you to sleep with one eye open."

"Huh?" Claus was speechless.

The maid robot cocked her head. "That was a joke. Did it not come across that way? Human jokes are difficult for us." She put a hand to her cheek, seemingly disappointed that Claus hadn't laughed.

Claus was shocked for several reasons. One was that a maid robot had even told a joke, but mostly it was because—though the robot said she wasn't serious—part of him had thought, I wouldn't put it past the two of them. His stomach twisted with anxiety. Maybe I will sleep with one eye open.

Finishing up my work for the day, I headed for my lounge to relax. It was, of course, lavishly furnished. Each item in the room was extravagant, and it was equipped for all manner of leisure activities. I'd created it so that I could spend the entire day inside without becoming bored, but I barely ever found opportunities to use it. I was swamped with work every day, and when I had a chance to rest, I usually just took a break in my office. Once I finished work, I also had to train in the Way of the Flash. By the time I finished everything for the day, it was already time to sleep. In short, I barely remembered to make use of this room.

Was I only using it now out of the miserly standpoint that it was a waste not to—an attitude stubbornly clinging to me from my difficult past life? When that thought occurred to me, I felt a bit stupid for even coming into the lounge.

By the same token, though, it didn't sit right with me *not* to use it. I'd taken care of the matter of the world tree, so I deserved to lounge around today. I'd even changed into more casual clothes for the occasion—an instantaneous process, thanks to the technology available in this intergalactic nation.

I lay on the couch gazing at the monitor embedded in one wall, watching the programs and livestreams being broadcast in my domain. I didn't care what I

watched, really; all I cared about was the pillow under my head.

"Relaxing like this, I feel like I can forget about everything troubling me."

As I enjoyed the sensation, Amagi's voice came from above me. "You really are strange, Master. You would get much more rest using a normal pillow, rather than my lap."

As I rested my head on Amagi's thighs, my eyelids got heavy. Still, I wanted to talk with my personal maid, since I enjoyed this so much. "No pillow is as good as your lap, Amagi."

"My lap is not calibrated to give you sufficient rest. The data speaks for itself."

It was very like Amagi, an android running on artificial intelligence, to say that. Regardless, I enjoyed her lap better than any substitute. It made me feel at ease. "Data isn't everything."



"Do you refer to a psychological effect?"

"Maybe."

I closed my eyes as Amagi gently stroked my hair, letting the sensation lull me into a comfortable sleep...but that didn't last long. I woke with a start.

Amagi's large breasts filled most of my field of vision. "Your heart rate is elevated, Master. Did you have a bad dream?"

I sat up and covered my face with my hands. "Yeah...the worst."

I hadn't expected to dream of my old life, of all things, but it happened every so often. I'd dreamed of my ex-wife betraying me, my daughter casting me aside... Painful memories.

"Please retire for the day, Master." Amagi put her hand on my back as she suggested I return to my bedroom.

"Yeah...guess I should." I felt pathetic for still letting my past life overwhelm me.

As I sat there, irritated with myself, Amagi suddenly looked toward the door. "Master, Lady Rosetta and Mr. Brian are requesting permission to enter."

"What are those two doing here at this hour?"

"I do not know. It does not appear urgent, in any case."

It may not have been urgent, but I knew Brian would throw a fit if I ignored him. I sighed. "Let them in."

"Yes, sir."

The door automatically opened. My fiancée Rosetta Sereh Claudia, with her signature blonde ringlets, entered the room first. She rushed toward me happily, her large breasts bouncing slightly as she ran.

"Sorry to bother you when you're resting, Darling!"

Behind her stood my butler Brian, watching the two of us with a happy grin.

I looked from one to the other. "So? What is it?" I asked bluntly.

Rosetta shrank under my gaze. "I-I'm sorry. It's just...umm..."

Brian couldn't bear to watch, and spoke up. "Master Liam, you cannot treat Lady Rosetta that way."

He would just be more annoying if I told him what I thought of *his* attitude, so I sighed and asked once more, "What is it?"

"A world tree manifesting in your domain is a truly auspicious event," Brian said, speaking up for Rosetta, who still hadn't mustered the courage. "It's an opportunity to deepen your relationship with Lady Rosetta."

Now I had a headache. "Quit making such a big deal out of a lucky plant."

Brian must have thought I was taking the world tree lightly. "A lucky plant?!" he protested, eyes widening. "Master Liam, the world tree is nothing short of a miracle brought on by the many meritorious deeds you have performed!"

He was annoying no matter what I did, so I gave up and just nodded. "Got it. You're right. World trees are amazing."

"You're not listening to me, are you? Well, never mind. The important thing to keep in mind right now is House Banfield's future."

I scowled. I figured I knew what he was about to say. "Don't push me to have a kid. I'm still in training," I reminded him.

Brian grimaced. "I thought you might say something like that. That's why I'm here to suggest you allow Lady Rosetta to help manage the domain."

Let Rosetta help run the domain? I looked at her in surprise.

She straightened up to nervously explain. "I-I've graduated from college and finished my training now, so I believe I can be of some assistance. I want to support you by your side, Darling. That's...how I feel." She lost a little momentum at the end, her voice quieting as she observed my silence.

"I can attest to Lady Rosetta's abilities," Brian added. "All she requires at this point is your approval, Master Liam."

Rosetta must have gone to Brian for advice instead of just asking me. What a schemer.

She gave me a hopeful look, but I'd already made up my mind. I didn't trust humans. I flashed back to the dream I'd just had of my ex-wife and daughter

abandoning me. Of losing everything.

"No."

"Huh?"

Rosetta looked surprised, and a stunned silence settled over the lounge. After a few moments, Brian finally spoke up.

"Master Liam, Lady Rosetta's abilities leave nothing to be desired. There should be no problem with simply allowing her to assist you."

"It's my decision, and I'm saying no. I'm not getting Rosetta involved in managing the domain."

Rosetta hung her head in frustration. Seeing her look so dejected, Amagi spoke up to support her case.

"Master, Lady Rosetta will help you manage the domain in the future, when she is your wife. I believe it would be prudent for her to acclimate to the work now."

Even Amagi was trying to convince me, but I wasn't going to budge on this. Humans betrayed one another easily, even if they were family.

"I don't need anyone's help. If that's all you wanted, then we're done here."

"I apologize for overstepping my bounds," Rosetta said, choking back a sob before running out of the room.

After watching her go, Brian rounded on me, anger on his face. "You went too far, Master Liam."

Even Amagi gave me an accusatory look. I turned away from her.

I understood what they were saying, and I also thought I'd gone too far, but I just didn't want to entrust another person with my assets. I should never have done so with my ex-wife in my previous life. I'd believed in her, but in the end, she'd squeezed all my money out of me and plunged me into terrible debt.

"I'll never trust another person. Even family betrays you easily."

Amagi's eyes widened at those words, and Brian gasped as well. Of course, the two of them didn't understand the context of my statement.

"Maybe such feelings are natural, considering your circumstances, Master Liam," Brian said. "But this is not like what happened with your parents."

Even Amagi didn't understand why I was upset. "Master, please have more trust in Lady Rosetta. Even a small amount is fine. You can work to build trust slowly, one step at a time."

They both thought I was upset about my parents in this life, but it was the memories of my family from my former life that tormented me. Of course, I hadn't had a real family even then. To Brian and Amagi, I must have seemed like a pathetic child upset about being deserted by his parents, but I'd actually enjoyed the freedom abandonment afforded me.

I tilted my head. "I think you two have the wrong idea. You think I'm sad because my parents abandoned me, don't you?"

Brian looked surprised. I supposed it would be strange for a child *not* to care about their parents deserting them.

"Y-you're not?! Well then, why won't you accept Lady Rosetta's help?"

"I'm just not eager to," I hedged, not caring to explain my circumstances. That proved a mistake, however.

Amagi narrowed her eyes. For a robot, she actually looked pretty angry. "You aren't *eager* to? For such a trivial reason, you trampled over Lady Rosetta's feelings after she worked up the courage to make such a proposal?"

I shrank back as Amagi advanced on me. "It's just a figure of speech! I-I mean, I was in a bad mood after my nightmare, so..."

That set Brian off. "It isn't like you to reject Lady Rosetta's proposal for that sort of reason, Master Liam!"

"I always make decisions based on my mood! After all, I'm—"

"An evil lord, sir?" Brian cut me off before I finished. "You do like to claim that, but you have never once done anything evil, have you? On the contrary, you're a wise lord who spares no effort to improve your subjects' lives."

Amagi nodded in agreement.

"A-are you making fun of me?! If I really wanted to, I could... You know, uh...

Right, increase taxes! And gather a harem!" I blurted out the first things that came to mind when I thought of evil lords.

"You have yet to make a move on Lady Rosetta, and have not fathered an heir," Amagi muttered.

"That's right!" Brian agreed. "Master Liam, when exactly do you intend to father an heir? I cannot tell you how worried I am!"

My face flushed as I watched Brian take out a white handkerchief and dab his eyes. Why should I have to discuss my bedroom affairs with Brian, of all people? He must have sensed weakness, because he pressed the attack.

"How long do you plan to put off the issue, Master Liam?"

"Knock it off! Stay the hell out of my personal affairs, old man!" I had no logical defense, so I tried to get out of the conversation through pure bluster. It didn't work.

"This is not a personal affair! It is a grave concern that affects your entire domain!"

House Banfield's future had Brian worried, but personally, I didn't give a crap about the next generation. I didn't want an heir; I hated kids. Even now, I sometimes remembered the day my child had rejected me. Every time I did, it just reaffirmed my belief that having children was unnecessary.

"I don't want you getting involved in my bedroom business," I repeated. "I'll do what I want, when I want." What I wanted right now was for this conversation to end, but Brian wasn't letting it go today. He must have had some other complaints about my treatment of Rosetta.

"Artificial insemination would be fine," Brian insisted. "You could even use a capsule to create an heir. What do you say to that?"

Birthing capsules used genetic material to grow babies inside a device, completely eliminating the burden on the mother's body. Hell, using a capsule, you could even have a child without a partner. In fact, that was how I had been conceived in this incarnation, which seemed kind of crazy when I thought about it. In this universe, you could create children without love or even physical effort. It was normal for nobles to procreate using a capsule in order to produce

an heir, but that very aristocratic way of doing things made me rather sick.

"I don't like birthing capsules."

After I said that, Brian looked sorry. He probably thought I was bothered by the fact that I'd been born from a capsule myself. I didn't care in the least, but I chose not to correct his misunderstanding.

"I apologize for making the suggestion," he said quietly, straightening up, "but this really is a serious problem for House Banfield. Your vassals are loyal to you personally, Master Liam, but in the event that you die before creating an heir—heaven forbid—I can't imagine what might happen to House Banfield."

Most of my vassals had joined up with House Banfield during the course of my rule. Probably fewer than a tenth had served the family before I took over. What would those vassals who'd joined up purely to serve me do when I died? I couldn't care less.

"Don't worry about what happens when I die. It's got nothing to do with me."

"There you go again! I'm suggesting you father an heir precisely because of this attitude of yours! If you don't name a successor, it will be too late when something happens!"

"What are you saying? That I'm gonna die?"

"If you keep engaging in nothing but life-threatening activities, then yes, you very well might!"

Amagi joined the fray. "Mr. Brian's concerns are reasonable, Master. You need to name a successor and create a plan in case of an emergency."

My position felt a lot weaker now that Amagi was arguing with me too. I tried to explain myself more gently than I had with Brian.

"Listen, Amagi, I'm not even a hundred years old yet. It's too soon for me to worry about a successor, isn't it?"

One hundred would have been quite a long lifespan in my old reality. But in this one, I was still treated like a kid who wasn't even twenty years old. I was officially an adult, but I hadn't been acknowledged as a full-fledged member of society yet. By my past life's standards, this was like freaking out about a

nineteen-year-old not having an heir.

"There's no telling when a noble may lose his life," Brian said, as if to correct a misconception. "That is why it is important to prepare for the possibility."

With Amagi and Brian ganging up on me, I had no choice but to give in. "Fine. I get it, already. I'll name a successor."

Brian still wasn't satisfied. "There is no one you can name, with no heir! Your vassals will not serve someone who is not your direct descendent, Master Liam!"

Vassals like Tia and Marie were loyal to me personally, not to House Banfield as an entity. If I disappeared and a relative of mine took my position, they likely wouldn't serve my replacement. The only successor they would approve of would be my biological offspring.

I wasn't going to die that easily, though. I had the Guide helping me—my very own guardian angel (or, well, something similar). With his help, I'd gotten through plenty of dangerous situations, and I would continue to do so. In fact, I'd never once been in true danger, and I couldn't even imagine something threatening my life. Things had gone so perfectly for me that it didn't even cross my mind to worry.

"Don't question my methods," I said. "That reminds me, though... What happened to those idiots holding protests about this? I still need to punish them."

Those had happened a little while ago... Or were they still going on? There were protests everywhere in my domain. They'd begun with a movement in favor of democracy, but the bigger issue was the protests demanding I sire a baby, which had made me a laughingstock. I felt I had to do something to make up for the humiliation.

Amagi cocked her head when I brought up punishing the protesters. Even at a time like this, her mannerisms were so damn cute. "Master, would the matter of the protests not be addressed if you simply produced an heir?"

"The protesters need to be punished for defying me! My own subjects ridiculing me is a grave crime, don't you think?!"

Brian leaned his face right up to mine. "Master Liam!"

"Wh-what?"

"At this point, I am going to be frank. Just how long do you intend to wait before making a move on Lady Rosetta?!"

Rosetta. Once, she had been a strong woman with a steely spirit, and at the time, she was exactly the kind of noble lady I liked. Yet the moment she became my fiancée, her iciness melted, and she'd been downgraded—in my eyes—into her present self who forever called me "Darling." She was no longer the person I had pursued—the strong-willed girl who hated me from the bottom of her heart. Since she didn't present a challenge anymore, she was no fun.

"That's my business!"

"Lady Rosetta has been very patient with you, but you've prolonged this long enough! Master Liam, I beg you to father an heir before you return to training on the Capital Planet!"

"You make it sound like I'm a total loser!" I shouted, shoving Brian back.

He acts like I'm afraid of Rosetta or something!

"I decide who I make a move on, and when I do it!" I went on. "Rosetta's just one girl out of all the women out there!"

I still planned to create a harem in the future. I felt that an evil lord needed one. I'd have beautiful women waiting on me hand and foot, pouring me drinks while I plotted my evil deeds!

As I contemplated my grand designs, Brian stood up straight. "Master Liam, as I have said countless times before, the count still stands at zero."

"Huh?"

"It's been more than half a century since you first said you would collect a harem, yet you haven't bedded any women! Your harem currently stands at zero members, Master Liam. I have serious doubts that you actually intend to create this much-vaunted harem!"

"Zero members?! I've got Amagi, don't I?! R-Rosetta, too."

I sneaked a glance at Amagi, who shook her head.

"As I have informed you many times," she said, "I do not count. Lady Rosetta is but a single woman, and cannot be considered a harem. Additionally, have you not stated in the past that you do not intend even to count Lady Rosetta among your harem's members?"

Rosetta was just one partner. It had been almost a hundred years since I'd reincarnated, and I still didn't have a harem.

"I-I'll go through women like they're disposable! You'll see!" I persisted. "I'll sleep with a different woman every night and throw her away the next day! I'll round up all the beautiful women in my domain right now!"

I made up my mind to find some immediately, if only to get out of this conversation.

Brian gaped at me. "You'll sleep with a different woman every night?!"

"O-of course! I've got all the money in the world, after all!"

That would be three hundred and sixty-five women a year. What a villain I'd be to sleep with them, then throw them away right after! While I relished my vile plan, Brian and Amagi nodded to each other.

"One a night is not much, but it should at least solve the problem," Brian said.

"Mm. At the moment, more than one hundred thousand candidates could become his concubines. I wish he'd put in a bit more effort, but we'll just keep narrowing them down."

Wait a second. What's with that crazy number? One hundred thousand?

Brian smiled. "One a night means he'll get through a thousand women in three years. That still doesn't feel like enough, but I'll take it!"

Amagi nodded as if agreeing with Brian's insane comment. "I shall select those first one thousand individuals immediately."

"Just a thousand, eh?" said Brian. "Winnowed down that much, they'll have to be the cream of the crop. I'm sure Master Liam will be satisfied. Ah, I can finally rest easy now. Though three women per night would make me much happier."

"Once the selection process begins, I imagine we will be flooded with applicants. I will take it for granted that the number of candidates will rise to the hundreds of millions."

Crap. I was a count with several planets in my domain, a ruler with billions of subjects. If I wanted to gather a harem, those *were* the kind of numbers I'd be working with. No wonder these two acted as if I was dragging my heels.

Brian wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I feel like an idiot for worrying that you might tell me to fill a whole planet with beautiful women, or something of that nature."

"My records indicate that a noble once had one billion concubines. He used an entire planet as his inner palace." Even Amagi was getting carried away.

Brian laughed. "I wish Master Liam had that degree of interest in women."

"I agree completely."

Watching the two of them, I realized I had made the wrong decision. Or rather, I hadn't recognized the scope of an intergalactic nation. I broke into a cold sweat, regretting taking this universe too lightly.

"N-never mind... I take it back," I managed to stammer.

"Huh?" Brian froze.

I stressed to him the importance of my harem's aesthetics. I had ideas about this harem of mine, and I didn't intend to compromise them. "I only want women I've chosen personally to be in my harem! That's right... I decided that a long time ago! So, I take it back!"

"But you still have yet to choose a single woman!" Brian protested, his short-lived happiness evaporating.

"Sh-shut up! I'm choosing my own harem, and that's final!"

"Then we are right back to zero, Master Liam."

Just as I was thinking about how to get out of this situation, a magic circle appeared beneath my feet. From the information my education capsule had installed in me years ago, I realized immediately that this was summoning magic.

"What's summoning magic doing in here?"

I'd thought I had countermeasures in place against magic like this, yet the glowing circle was slowly sucking me in.

"Master Liam!" Brian started toward me, but he wasn't going to make it in time.

Amagi reached toward me. "Master! Take my hand!"

I stretched my arm out to do just that, but it didn't reach.

Just like that, I was sucked completely into the magic circle. The last thing I saw was Brian's shocked expression and Amagi's emotionless face somehow tinged with despair.

I felt bad for Amagi, but it wasn't despair / felt. Rather, the thought crossing my mind at that moment was more like...

Yes! Sweet escape!

Chapter 3:

Hero Summoning

O N A PLANET FAR from Liam's own, a country found itself on the verge of destruction. Erle Kingdom had once been a superpower with a whole continent under its control. Now, it was a mere shadow of its former self.

The ruler of this kingdom, Queen Enola Frau Fraulo, had taken the throne at the young age of seventeen. Her beautiful, still-youthful face was framed by shoulder-length blue hair that had formerly been long. She'd cut it upon taking the throne as a show of maturity. Not long ago, she had been a princess raised with care by her parents and their palace staff. When her parents took ill, and her older brother lost his life in a war, it had fallen to her to govern. Enola should have been far from the throne, but Erle Kingdom was in such dire straits that she of all people ruled now.

The reason for all her country's woes was the birth of a demon lord. Commanding an army of monsters, this demon lord had swept across the planet, conquering countries left and right. At first, Erle Kingdom—a major power—had mounted a valiant counterattack, but all they had to show for their efforts was a string of defeats. Their complete destruction now loomed before their eyes.

Enola sat on her throne, clutching the staff that served as the symbol of the royal family. "Just how many trials does God intend to put us through?"

Her mumbled question echoed through the half-empty audience chamber. No one answered her. Those assembled just hung their heads, refusing to meet her gaze.

The only people in the audience chamber now were the elderly and the very young. Everyone of fighting age had been sent out to battle, so children, even those younger than fifteen, had been hastily appointed knights. That was yet another sign of the kingdom's impending doom.

Everyone knew Erle Kingdom was at its absolute limit, but they just couldn't

bring themselves to voice that fact.

I need to do something... I need to!

Enola clutched her staff with both hands, startled, as a messenger burst into the audience chamber. None of the proper protocols were being followed anymore, and the messenger made his announcement without any respectful greeting.

"I have a report! The demon lord's army is advancing on the capital!"

At this news, a tumult went through the audience chamber, all eyes turning to the queen. Tensing under the pressure and fear that threatened to crush her, Enola tried to project composure. I can't panic. Mother and Father told me to always maintain calm.

Putting on a brave front wasn't going to stop enemies at their gate, however. Erle Kingdom had next to no fighting power left; there were no wise generals or powerful knights to rely on. Their army now comprised retired generals, knights called back into service, and newly appointed soldiers who were much too young. The situation was beyond desperate.

"Your Majesty, there is no longer anything we can do," an aged minister counseled Enola. "I can only ask that you make the appropriate decision."

He bowed his head, urging Enola to take action.

She nodded deeply in turn, agreeing that they had no other options. "I understand what must be done. We will perform a hero summoning."

At Enola's proclamation, a buzz went through the audience chamber. Faint hope began to bloom amid the despair that had filled the room.

Hero summoning was a forbidden technique that had nonetheless been passed down in the Erle Kingdom. To defeat the extraordinarily powerful demon lord, they would have to use that forbidden magic to summon a hero from another world.

The summoning magic would produce an entity capable of defeating a demon lord. It would only bring someone *to* Erle Kingdom, however. Once a hero appeared, the kingdom would be responsible for them, becoming home to an

individual strong enough to defeat a demon lord. That was a double-edged sword. If the hero ultimately betrayed the country, they would be just as capable as the demon lord of destroying it.

Entrusting their kingdom's safety to a hero presented a ruler with another challenge. They would essentially be giving up the fight, placing their country in the hands of a stranger who was not even from their world. Trust in the royal family's abilities would plummet.

All this was why the technique was forbidden, but Enola was left with no other choice. She stood to order her vassals to take action. "There is no time to waste. We will summon the hero immediately!"

"Yes, ma'am!" her vassals responded in unison. They headed immediately toward the chamber where they would perform the summoning ritual.

Oh God, please bring to us a kind hero who will save our kingdom.

The chamber beneath the castle was illuminated by torches, the flames providing only a dim, flickering light. The mages who would perform the summoning had arrived earlier and were busily preparing their spell. They consisted of one old man garbed in tattered robes, and three younger apprentices to support him.

The old man, whose name was Citasan, pulled down his hood to reveal his wrinkled face.

"Welcome to the summoning chamber! We've been waiting for you to arrive, Your Majesty... Heh heh heh."

Enola raised an eyebrow at Citasan's crude laughter. She was not fond of this old man. His hair was unkempt, he was missing several teeth, and his hoarse voice was repellent, but none of that was why she disliked him. Rather, it was his disposition she found unpleasant. However, his magic was the only option that remained to her.

"The time has come for us to rely on your magic, Citasan. Please summon a great hero who will triumph against the demon lord."

Citasan kneeled, took Enola's hand in his own, and kissed it. As he pressed his lips to the back of her hand, he ran his tongue over it obscenely.

"Leave it all to me, Your Majesty. I will summon the greatest possible hero with the magic passed down in my family for generations! But before that..."

As Citasan lifted his head, naked greed showed in his face. With a strained smile, Enola promised the mage the greatest reward she could.

"I swear to reward your service if the demon lord is destroyed, Citasan."

"I'll hold you to that, Your Majesty!" Citasan exclaimed with a vulgar laugh.

"Of course." What a disgusting man.

Enola's hatred of Citasan also stemmed from the fact that, although his summoning magic was utterly useless in peacetime, he still threw his weight around, boasting about being the royal family's mage. As the battle with the demon lord's army had intensified, he never once joined the fray; he maintained that his summoning magic was too valuable to risk.

Enola understood his reasoning, but his behavior still repulsed her. He used his forbidden knowledge to do whatever he wished. No one wanted Citasan around in times of peace; this was not a time of peace, though. The country's current crisis provided an opportunity for Citasan and his apprentices to act more arrogant than ever, since they knew the kingdom utterly relied on them.

"Her Majesty has promised to reward our efforts!" Citasan barked at his apprentices. "Let us begin the summoning!"

The apprentices hurriedly took their positions around an altar upon which they had drawn a summoning circle. Around the outside of the circle were the words of the ritual, written in ancient script. Faint light almost immediately emanated from the ring, and Enola gripped her staff in both hands anxiously.

The light from the circle strengthened until Enola had to close her eyes against its brightness. A short time later, that light faded to reveal a girl standing in the circle's center.

Kanami suddenly found herself in a place she didn't recognize.

Before her stood a young woman in a lavishly decorated dress, a crown upon her head and staff in her hands. Young people were gathered around her, dressed incongruously in the armor of knights.

Kanami was hopelessly confused, unable to digest her situation. "Huh? Wh-what?"

I was just in the park, right? What am I doing here? What's going on?!

While she stood frozen in shock, the young woman approached and bowed reverently before her. Kanami was taken aback by the gesture, but the woman paid that no mind.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, my lady hero. I am Enola Frau Fraulo—queen of Erle Kingdom."

"Huh? Queen? Wait, did you say hero?" Kanami couldn't process any of this information.

Enola looked up at her tearfully, and Kanami's heart skipped a beat, though they were both women. The young queen's appearance was such that Kanami found herself thinking she'd never seen a person so beautiful up close like this.

"Hero from another world, please forgive us the great injustice we have done you. In our current plight, we had no choice but to summon you."

"Summon?" What was Enola talking about?

Glancing around, Kanami found that she was sitting atop an altar that appeared to be intended for some kind of occult ritual. The other thing that caught her eye was an old, robed man who looked exactly like a wizard straight out of a fantasy story. Younger men in robes, who she assumed were the old man's apprentices, raised their voices in joy.

"We did it! We did it!"

"Master Citasan, the great mage, successfully summoned the hero!"

"Wah ha ha! Our futures are secure now!"

Kanami thought the old man looked haggard, but his manner was pompous. "My name will go down in history for this! You had all better tell your descendants about my great accomplishment here today!"

Just then, Kanami noticed something strange. Though Citasan and the other mages were rejoicing, Enola and the knights wore strained, nervous looks. The mages actually seemed out of place; the others appeared almost disgusted by them.

"Quiet, Citasan," Enola cautioned the rejoicing mage. "You're disturbing the hero."

Instead of reining himself in, Citasan objected to her warning. "Is that any way to speak to me, Your Majesty?! Without our summoning magic, you could not have called the hero here! Without us, this country would be—"

Now they were arguing in front of Kanami, and despite the brief explanation she'd received, Kanami still couldn't keep up with the situation.

Will someone please just tell me what's going on? Wait...

Just then, she felt a strange sensation, and looked down at the center of the magic circle. A crackling sound began as sparks like electrical discharge spat forth. The phenomenon intensified, the sound growing louder.

"What's going—"

Kanami scrambled away from the circle just as a man appeared standing inside it. He looked about her age, with black hair and purple eyes. Was this how she had been summoned too?

As soon as the man materialized within the circle, he glanced at his surroundings calmly, his reaction the complete opposite of Kanami's. Something was clearly different about him, though Kanami wasn't sure what. Enola and the others in the room, meanwhile, looked as confused as Kanami at this unexpected occurrence.

"What's the meaning of this, Citasan?" Enola exclaimed. "I thought you would only summon one hero!"

The mage just sputtered in response to Enola's question. Apparently, this development was unforeseen, even by him. "Th-there are no records of anything like this occurring!" he replied. "I have no idea what has happened!"

The mage seemed a lot less cocky than earlier. On the other hand, now that

everyone else was just as disoriented as she was, Kanami actually felt calmer.

With newfound composure, she looked over at the young man. While he was casually dressed, she noticed his white dress shirt, black pants, and leather shoes appeared quite expensive. To her eye, each item seemed to be of exceptionally high quality. The summoned man also wore a gold bracelet on one wrist. Kanami could only imagine how rich he must be.

The complete opposite of me. But... Somehow, something about him made her nostalgic, too.

The young man completely ignored her gaze and the consternation around him, instead peering dubiously at the magic circle beneath him. He knelt down. "What's with this crummy magic circle?" he complained haughtily. "I was summoned by *this*? You make a guy feel pathetic."

Citasan's face turned crimson as the young man criticized the summoning magic passed down by the mage's family.

"H-h-how outrageous!" he spluttered. "My ancestors created this technique to summon heroes three hundred years ago! It's *incredible* magic found nowhere else in this universe!"

Kanami had no frame of reference to judge a magic circle's quality, but the summoned man scoffed at Citasan's words. "You've used the same old magic circle for three hundred years? Did it never occur to you to innovate a little?"

Even in this bizarre situation, the audacious young man was confident. Unlike Kanami, who was still utterly confounded, he was apparently familiar with summoning magic.

"Well, I suppose you get points for not using enslavement magic immediately after the summoning," he added. "I'll hear you out, at least."

His eyes were directed straight at Enola. Even without the benefit of what little explanation Kanami had received, he'd figured out who in this room was in charge. However, his disrespectful attitude rankled the figures grouped around the queen.

"How dare you speak that way to Her Majesty!" a young knight cried, reaching for the hilt of his sword.

The summoned man's eyes narrowed, but Enola quickly held up her hand to the knight.

"Stop that! I apologize for his behavior, sir. We were not expecting two heroes, so we've all lost our composure a bit. Please forgive us."

The young man sighed and looked away. "You didn't mean to summon me, then. Man, what a joke." He'd shifted his gaze to Citasan, making it obvious to everyone just who he considered a "joke."

Citasan opened his mouth, frustrated, but Enola cut him off to explain their circumstances. "There is a reason we summoned you two. We beg of you... Please, save this kingdom."

She kneeled before the newcomers as she pleaded with them. Kanami was moved by the gesture, but the young man apparently wasn't. In fact, he held his stomach and began to laugh.

"Save this kingdom? Ah ha ha! Are you serious?" Everyone in the room waited, dumbfounded, as he finished laughing and finally introduced himself. "You would ask Liam Sera Banfield to save you? You seek help from *me*, of all people?!"

Kanami felt odd as the young man—Liam—introduced himself. She realized she was trembling. Why am I shaking?

Even she didn't know. However, everyone else seemed just as struck by Liam's introduction. At first, she thought that was because of Liam's strange demeanor as he spoke, but apparently the others were actually shocked that he had a middle name.

"U-um, would you happen to be a noble from another world?" Enola asked him timidly.

Liam considered the question before answering. "You probably wouldn't get it if I explained it to you, but something like that, yes. Anyway... All right, I've got some time to kill. I'll save you folks. Now, show me around, why don't you?"

The strange feeling Kanami had experienced passed as Liam agreed to help with the most casual attitude imaginable. Armed knights loomed all around them, but Liam just yawned as if he didn't have a care in the world.

As she watched Liam stroll off, Kanami found herself growing angry that she was being left behind, the only person with no idea what was going on. "Whwhat's his deal? He's acting like he just gets all of this!"

Meanwhile, Liam's mansion was in chaos. People ran busily all over the place; the lounge Liam had disappeared from was particularly hectic. A whole squad of mages attached to House Banfield was investigating the scene, their faces pale. In the Algrand Empire, people relied more on technology than magic, but these individuals were specialists in the field. Having mastered extremely sophisticated spells, they employed their abilities in the service of their master. Liam had welcomed the mages with open arms, since they were some of the Empire's most powerful casters.

Overseeing the mages' investigation was a female knight who seemed ready to throw a fit at any moment.

"What were you people even doing?!" Marie screeched, weapons gripped in both hands.

The mages cowered. "W-we're so sorry!" one stammered. "B-but this mansion has several protective layers of anti-summoning magic in place. If someone got past them, they must have been—eep!"

Marie held a blade to the mage's neck, glaring at him with bloodshot eyes. "Yet it's clear from the security camera footage that Lord Liam was summoned right out of this room. In other words, this is all *your* fault. Am I wrong?"

"N-no, ma'am!"

"I truly regret being unable to cut all your heads off right now. But I cannot in good conscience punish you while Lord Liam is absent. Do not forget the mercy I am showing you. You will find some clue as to his whereabouts. Am I clear?"

In reality, Marie didn't consider House Banfield's mages to be a completely useless bunch. Still, she didn't want to believe their magical security had been circumvented so easily. That was supposed to be impossible. The head of the person responsible would be on the chopping block, as would the heads of everyone else involved in security measures. If Marie doled out punishment

now, however, it might render them unable to investigate Liam's whereabouts. They would have to hire new mages to do so, and they couldn't risk anyone outside the household finding out that Liam had gone missing.

"Lord Liam went to so much trouble to put together Prince Cleo's faction," Marie muttered. "What will happen to them now that he's gone?"

As Marie got more and more worked up, thinking of the damage Liam's disappearance would cause, she was approached by a pale Rosetta. The young woman had staggered into the room as if she might pass out at any moment.

"Lady Rosetta?!"

Marie ran over and wrapped her arms around Rosetta to support her. Rosetta had taken the news of Liam's disappearance hard, and Marie's heart ached to see her like this.

"Hold fast, Lady Rosetta! Someone take her back to her room! You shouldn't be out like this, Lady Rosetta. You only just collapsed!"

Rosetta had indeed fainted once already, when she first heard the news that Liam had been magically summoned away.

Marie began calling for a doctor, but Rosetta gripped her arm. "I'm sorry, Marie... I insisted on coming here. Do you think you'll be able to find Darling? You will, won't you?"

They still hadn't discovered any trace of the summoning magic, but Marie lied to calm Rosetta. "Of course. Now, please, go rest in your room."

Liam had vanished a full day ago, and they'd still found no evidence that could help locate him. Upon reviewing the security video, all the mages could say was, "We don't understand how such a primitive magic circle made it through our security!" The enraged Tia had been in charge of the video's analysis; she'd forced the investigators to go over it repeatedly until they found something.

Once Rosetta had left, Marie stomped the floor in frustration. A large man wearing a mask emerged from her shadow.

"What a violent summons," he said in a calm tone that only irritated the furious Marie further.

The mages were startled by the appearance of the operative, whose name was Kukuri. Their surprise was partly because of his sudden arrival, but they also hadn't realized he'd been observing them all along.

"Stop working and I'll kill you," Marie cautioned the mages before turning back to Kukuri. "I had the wrong idea about you, Kukuri. Do you know no shame, drawing breath after Lord Liam was taken from us? Did it not even occur to you to atone for this failure with your life?"

"That's rich, coming from you." A dangerous air hung between the two of them. Kukuri backed off first. "Well, I will admit our failure in this event. It seems one of my subordinates went missing along with Master Liam."

"So you placed a useless operative with Lord Liam. You really are a total waste, aren't you?"

Kukuri only laughed at Marie's provocation. "Hee hee hee... The operative was one of my best. Still young, but plenty skilled. Which is why..." Producing a piece of paper between his pointer and middle fingers, he flicked it at Marie. His subordinate had apparently left a note upon disappearing.

Catching the note, Marie examined its contents. "A code?"

"She attempted to cancel the summoning, but failed, despite the circle being so primitive. That's all we know."

It seemed the circle's design was so simple, there was no way to determine the reason Liam had been summoned.

Marie crumpled the note and threw it back at Kukuri. "Have your people look for Lord Liam as well. Find him, even if you have to die in the process. Do you hear me?"

She fixed Kukuri with an icy look, and he returned it in kind.

"I assure you, your instructions are unnecessary," Kukuri's tone was as serene as always, but his voice was growing scornful. "And let me remind you... You have no authority to give us orders. Master Liam is the only person we serve."

Kukuri sank back into the floor, wearing an uncanny, threatening grin. Marie didn't rein in her hostility; she responded to his provocation with her own cold

smile.

"Do you seriously think you could kill me?" she hissed. "Once this is taken care of, I'll carve your whole organization into pieces, along with that ground meat woman."

Marie genuinely wanted to kill Kukuri for failing to protect Liam. The pair had spent two thousand years together as prisoners, their bodies turned to stone, before Liam rescued them. However, Kukuri's failure was not something she could simply let go.

Within the vast House Banfield mansion was an area that essentially served as the property's command center. It looked like a clock tower, and was situated at the center of the estate. The AI system that supported the mansion's staff was stationed there.

Bursting into the command center, Tia grabbed hold of the staff member in charge of the AI system, grasping his head painfully between both hands.

"PI-please—" the man begged.

Tia's response was ice-cold. "What do you mean, you couldn't find anything out by analyzing the video footage of Lord Liam's lounge? Isn't that what you're supposed to do?"

"We reviewed the footage, but we honestly didn't detect anything sophisticated! It's a mystery how a summoning circle like that could get past our security!"

"I don't want to hear your excuses! Just hurry up and get something out of the footage! Lord Liam's life could be in danger as we speak!"

Tia threw the man to the floor and covered her face with her hands. Her wide, bloodshot eyes were visible through her fingers, and the other employees in the room cowered as they watched her.

"I'll put the people who took Lord Liam through a punishment so hellish, they'll wish they'd died instead," Tia said fervently. "Only when they fully realize what a heinous thing they've done will I finally slaughter them."

"Er..." The supervisor spoke up hesitantly. "Who exactly is going to serve as Lord Liam's replacement while he's gone?"

Who indeed would run House Banfield? Tia's only answer was to angrily shout, "What kind of question is *that* to ask at a time like this?"

But before she even finished thinking *Isn't that obvious?*, the problem's actual severity hit home. Right before Liam disappeared, he'd refused to allow Rosetta to help manage his domain. On top of that, the position of head knight was vacant. Since no one had been officially appointed to that role after Tia and Marie's demotion, no one commanded the entirety of House Banfield's knight forces.

"Just follow my orders," she directed.

Thus, Tia took it upon herself to assume command. It was all for Liam's sake... for House Banfield's sake. Yet after hearing her statement, the supervisor looked as if he wanted to cry.

"Lady Marie sent us a message to obey *her* orders," he said meekly. "We also received orders from House Banfield's government offices. The staff have no idea who to listen to."

Without Liam, House Banfield was rapidly losing cohesion.

Tia put a hand on the supervisor's shoulder, then tightened her grip, implying that she would not allow him to obey anyone but her. "Just shut up and follow my orders. Got it?"

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

Watching the supervisor return to his post, Tia thought, House Banfield will fall into chaos if I don't protect it while Lord Liam is gone. That's right... As Lord Liam's right hand, I must take charge in this emergency. Not that fossil woman, and not fresh-off-the-farm Claus. The one Lord Liam needs is me.

House Banfield's government offices were located outside the mansion, and many officials worked there, helping to run Liam's domain. Three of those bureaucrats had now gathered in a small meeting room.

"You've heard about the lord's disappearance, I take it?" one began.

The other two shrugged.

"Whisked away by summoning magic, correct?" one said. "Worst-case scenario, he never comes back."

The other official nodded gleefully, a hand on his chin. "Now that House Banfield's head has been lopped off, this is our chance to take control."

These three had lost to their peers in bitter contests to be promoted, and now faced next to no possibility of advancement. With Liam missing, however, they saw an opportunity to finally get ahead.

"We could actually take the reins here, with that little nuisance gone."

These particular officials had no respect for their lord whatsoever. On the whole, the people in his government tended to think of him more as a military leader than a statesman. As a master of the Way of the Flash, Liam personally commanded large-scale conflicts and fought on the front lines with his troops. In light of that, more than a few bureaucrats thought he had no business dictating government policies.

They acknowledged Liam's raw abilities, which had revived House Banfield after its time on the brink of destruction, but they found his forceful qualities to be a bother. Liam's political style made it extremely hard for anyone else in his government to obtain real power. House Banfield had gained so much ground, its bureaucrats should have held a lot more sway. Anywhere else, they would have enjoyed countless privileges and reaped the fruits of other people's labor, but Liam didn't allow that to happen.

Liam made ample use of artificial intelligence, minimizing many officials' involvement, and was personally involved in the politics of his domain where he needn't have been. He monitored all sectors of his government carefully for wrongdoings such as embezzlement, which kept the more unsavory bureaucrats working for him on edge. In short, they considered Liam a killjoy.

"We'll need to install a new lord quickly," one bureaucrat said with a smile. The other two nodded. They were greatly enjoying this conversation.

"When Lord Cliff retired, I was involved in sending his allowance to the Capital

Planet, so I have a line of contact to him. If I get in touch, I'm sure he can send us a new lord right away."

Cliff Sera Banfield was House Banfield's previous lord, and in fact, Liam's father. Although he now led a comfortable life on the Capital Planet, he didn't have a pleasant relationship with Liam by any means.

Under Cliff's governance, House Banfield's subjects had led terrible lives. The fact that these officials planned to rely on him once again proved that they prioritized their own profit above the lives of the people they served.

"Inform him of the domain's predicament right away," said the first official.

"We will support the new lord as best we can, of course. House Banfield will be as good as ours."

Another official brought up the name of a noble connected to House Banfield. "Why not ask Baron Noden to serve as the new lord's guardian? We may have influence within our domain, but we'll have no sway outside it. Baron Noden is at least an official member of the Empire's aristocracy, although he's only a frontier noble. He'd be a good asset."

Baron Noden, a noble with a domain on the Empire's outskirts, received support from House Banfield. He was the very picture of a destitute noble; as such, he would be easy for the bureaucrats to control. He was a typical Imperial blueblood—and not in a good way—but as the complete opposite of the moral and upstanding Liam, he would be perfect for these officials' purposes.

"Good idea. I'm sure he'd leap at the opportunity. He'd be happy to do whatever we asked of him in return for a little funding."

The three officials snickered as they continued plotting. Unbeknownst to them, a man watched from a corner of the small room.

This man—the Guide—pinched his hat's brim between his fingers and lifted it. "As you do as you please, Liam's power will lessen," he murmured. "Fulfill your basest desires, gentlemen. I'll lend my support as you do."

Without the three officials noticing, black mist billowed from the Guide and entered their bodies. The Guide watched as their ambitions swelled. Then, with a satisfied smile, he slipped out through the wall.

"Even if Liam makes it back, House Banfield's domain will have all sorts of new problems. I hope you enjoy my little present to you, Liam."					

Chapter 4:

The Demon Lord's Army

Learning that erle kingdom was the continent's most powerful country piqued my interest, but their castle proved a dingy little mansion from my perspective.

I looked out a window to see a fortress city protected by high walls. The castle had been constructed on a hill in the middle of town, but its halls were narrow and dim. I had no idea whether they were in such dire straits that they couldn't adequately light the place, or if it had always been like that, but I could tell how pathetic the castle was just from wandering around.

As I strolled the halls with my hands in my pockets, I spotted that girl who looked like a high schooler—the one who'd been summoned as a hero alongside me. She was up ahead, talking with the queen.

"Er... Your Majesty, is it?" I heard her say.

"Enola is just fine, my lady hero."

"Well, drop the 'my lady hero' thing, then. It's kinda embarrassing, and it doesn't feel real."

"I shall call you Lady Kanami, then."

"The 'lady' part really isn't necessary."

"Nevertheless, I must show you some respect, considering what will soon happen."

I quietly observed their friendly conversation until I heard the high schooler's name. To my surprise, it was the name of my daughter in my previous life.

"Kanami, huh?"

I stood frozen as I muttered her name, astonished. Anger and sadness welled up, along with a bit of... No, that wasn't important. For a split second, I wondered if the girl could actually *be* my daughter from my past life, but I quickly rejected the idea. That was impossible.

Because I'd stopped and spoken her name, Kanami and Enola turned, giving me suspicious looks.

Kanami didn't seem happy about me repeating her name. "What do you want? You better not tell me it's a weird name or something."

Since she seemed proud of her name, she couldn't be my daughter, who had openly told me she hated the name I gave her.

When Kanami's attitude turned hostile, I noticed my shadow twitch. I glanced down at it, then shrugged at her. "I was just surprised. I used to know someone with the same name. How do you write it?"

I intended this as nothing more than a casual question, but Kanami's reaction was unexpected.

"I don't like the characters, so I'm not telling you."

"What? So you don't like your name?" Even though she'd warned me not to make fun of it?

"I like my name. I just don't like the characters."

"Um, okay."

After that exchange, Kanami turned and strode off down the hall. Once she'd left, I reviewed all the reasons she couldn't possibly be my daughter. First of all, it had already been more than eighty years since I was reincarnated. Even supposing that some sort of time anomaly occurred when we were summoned, the likelihood of the two of us reuniting like this was astronomically low, as close to zero as could be. I simply didn't believe it would happen.

While I mulled it over, Enola's guards threw suspicious looks my way. Not that I blamed them, considering how rude I'd been to their mistress. I sensed the entity lurking within my shadow observing them with similar wariness.

"We've prepared a banquet for our heroes," Enola told me. "I only hope our food suits your palate, my lord."

A banquet, eh?

The little dinner Enola called a "banquet" was as bad as I expected. Not because Erle Kingdom's cuisine was lacking, but because the food made it obvious how badly the country was suffering. They were so impoverished, they couldn't even put together a half-decent meal for heroes they'd summoned from other worlds.

After dinner, Kanami and I were taken to a reception room and told to wait until our chambers were prepared. Kanami watched me lie down on a couch, looking as if she wanted to tell me it was bad manners. *Guess she was raised properly*.

"Are you really a noble, Mr. Liam?"

"Why would you doubt it?" I rolled over to look at Kanami, who'd been criticizing my attitude since our summoning.

"Well, you've been so rude the whole time we've been here. You even complained about the food at dinner and put Enola on the spot."

"I didn't say the food was bad. I just said it didn't suit my tastes. I wasn't insulting this planet's cuisine." It really did have a flavor I was unfamiliar with.

Kanami didn't seem to understand. "I'm saying your attitude is unacceptable when Enola is showing us so much hospitality."

"Goody two-shoes, much?"

"What? I'm just talking about normal gratitude."

I gave her an astounded look, admiring Enola's ability to manipulate people. She'd completely won Kanami over after a single dinner. I'd taken Enola for a sheltered noble girl, but she had real potential as a ruler.

"Are you stupid? These people abducted us, and you're gonna suck up to them?"

"Th-they only did that because they're in trouble..."

I realized something about Kanami then—she didn't know much about magic, and had likely been summoned from a world where it didn't exist.

"The trouble they're in is their responsibility. It's got nothing to do with us. Plus, they used a one-way summoning technique. They have no intention of

returning us to where we came from."

That spell was entirely too sloppy. It just summoned a "hero" from anywhere at all; it didn't specify a particular world. They'd probably summoned Kanami and me from the same universe, but different planets. Of course, that wouldn't necessarily be true if there'd been some mishap...which seemed *awfully* likely, given the technique they'd employed. Instability in their summoning circle had probably allowed them to summon me from my mansion, although it had layers of security meant to prevent that. In fact, an accident was just about the *only* way to explain how that had occurred. It was ridiculous that Citasan's family had passed the crude technique down for three hundred years.

"That can't be." Kanami's eyes widened with surprise.

I yawned, then explained the situation. "Remember what Enola said at dinner? They want us to kill some demon lord. They can't do anything about it themselves, so they're relying on us—hence the hospitality. That's why I'm saying it's stupid to be on your best behavior with them."

I'd patiently explained that we were being used, but Kanami just puffed up her cheeks angrily. Couldn't she accept the truth? Did she just want to disagree because she didn't like me?

As it turned out, Kanami had an interesting set of circumstances.

"I don't really care if I can't go home," she snapped.

"Huh? What, do you not have parents?"

I'd figured she was a high school student because of her uniform, so I'd also assumed she still lived with her parents. When I told her the summoning was one-way, I'd expected her to sob and protest that she wanted to go home. In fact, I'd kind of prepared for that annoying possibility.

On her own couch, Kanami wrapped her arms around her legs. "I just don't want to go back. Even if I did, there'd be no place for me there. I don't want to see my mother, and my papa abandoned us."

Her mother was "mother," but her father was "papa"? Sounded complicated...not that I gave a crap about that. I wanted to avoid subjects that reminded me of my own past family. I shouldn't have to remember those

unpleasant times while dealing with being hijacked to this backwater planet.

"Hunh," I said. "Well, you can stay, then."

"You make it sound like you can go back."

"Let me tell you, they're mistaken about one thing. I wasn't summoned from another universe. I'm sure this is the same one I came from."

"What? Well, there wasn't any magic on my planet." Kanami tilted her head in wonder.

Before I could figure out how to explain things further, someone came and informed us that our rooms were ready.

I followed the attendant to my room, where I sat on a large bed. Won't be able to sleep great on this, I realized right away. I understood that this planet's beds couldn't compare to the sort I usually slept on; still, the evil lord in me demanded better treatment.

"Look at this crappy bed. They're gonna hear about this tomorrow. Anyway, we're finally alone. Why not come out and show me your face?"

I had been the only one in the room, but once I spoke, my shadow wriggled and a figure appeared from within it. A woman in a mask—one of Kukuri's operatives—slowly emerged from the darkness. She rested on one knee, her head bowed.

Sitting casually on the bed with my legs crossed, I looked down at the masked woman. "You were guarding me, and got caught in the summoning?"

I was sure she could have escaped the magic circle easily, but had chosen to come along instead. She even seemed to feel responsible for the incident.

"Upon your safe return to your domain, I shall atone for this failure with my life," she replied. "I can only offer my deepest apologies for now. Please, at least allow me to continue protecting you until you get home—I beg of you!"

I was Kukuri's operatives' employer, and they were all so impressively loyal that they frequently offered to pay for failures with their lives. In this case, however, I could easily have escaped the magic circle if I wanted to. I'd only

allowed myself to be summoned because it was an easy way to escape being ganged up on by Amagi and Brian.

In short, I'd been transported here of my own free will, so it would bother me to have this woman atone with her life. Besides, that punishment would be a waste—reducing Kukuri's organization by even one member would be a great loss. Sparing her didn't contradict my morals as an evil lord, of course, since I was only concerned about maintaining resources.

"It would be wasteful to execute you for something so trivial. There aren't many of you operatives, after all. For the time being, don't worry about atoning for this."

Despite my vagueness, Kukuri's operative responded with surprise. "Yes, sir."

I remembered another thing I needed to take care of. "Right now, the only issue is your name."

"My name? Master Liam, we—"
"I know."

It was a pain to keep thinking of her as "the masked woman" or "Kukuri's operative," but her organization didn't use names. Maybe they referred to one another by name privately, but they never did so in their work. Only their leader, Kukuri, went by a name, and it wasn't his true name. They wouldn't even give their names to me, their employer. It was their clan's rule, but it proved too inconvenient in situations like this.

The masked woman would probably resist if I asked that she tell me her real name, so I decided to give her a temporary one myself.

"We'll be together for a little while, so it'll be more convenient if there's something I can call you. What would be good for someone in your line of work? Hmm... How about Kunai?"

In my old life's terms, these guys were reminiscent of ninjas. Naming her after one of the concealed blades a ninja carried seemed perfect. I'd thought of "shuriken" first, but that didn't work as well as a name. Kunai it was.

The masked woman—Kunai—bowed her head and thanked me effusively.

"Receiving a name from you is an honor I do not deserve, Master Liam! I swear that I will protect you!"

I'd come up with the name on the fly, so it was kind of weird that she was so thrilled. Well, better that she likes it, I guess.

I supposed she felt pretty lucky to receive a name from me. After all, I hadn't given many out. I'd named my dog in my previous life, Amagi, and...my daughter. But I remembered her saying her name was weird, and that she'd always hated it, when we parted.

I still couldn't believe a girl with my daughter's name had been summoned as a hero with me. What a crazy coincidence.

Kunai still knelt, awaiting orders. "Well, things'll be rough for a while, but I'll be counting on you," I told her.

"Of course!" she responded, even more enthusiastic than before.

"Your first task will be information gathering. I want you to see whether the people here are telling the truth about everything. Gather as much info as you can."

"Certainly." Kunai sank back into the floor.

After she left, I lay on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. My thoughts turned to my coworker from my old life, Nitta.

"If this really is another planet, then I've transmigrated. Since I already reincarnated into another universe, I could tell Nitta I got to do both."

Would he be jealous? He'd probably gripe that my summoning was just teleportation, since I hadn't actually gone to another universe. Nitta was always picky about details.

As I lay there grinning to myself, reminiscing about Nitta, I realized the room had been far too poorly cleaned; the bed was also made sloppily. This kingdom may have been in trouble, with a demon lord coming for them, but that didn't mean I had to appreciate my treatment. Kanami seemed to sympathize with Enola, but from my point of view, they'd summoned me—me—to wipe their asses for them. I didn't expect the kind of hospitality I'd get in an intergalactic

nation, but couldn't they put in a little more effort? I had no intention of settling for modest lodgings out of sympathy for my hosts' impoverishment! I was a villain, after all. I expected luxury, no matter how Enola's country or subjects suffered for it. That was only fitting of an evil lord like me.

"Now then..."

I sat up in bed and touched my bracelet. A magic circle appeared above it, floating in the air, and several objects materialized from within it. I'd stored some convenient items in this bracelet, which utilized spatial magic, for just such an emergency.

Lifting one of the objects—a drone—I headed for the window. When I tossed the drone outside, it deployed a small propeller and floated into the air.

"All right, I've sent a distress signal. My ride will be here eventually. Until then, I'll just enjoy myself on this planet."

I planned to have some fun with this "transmigration to another world." For Nitta's sake.

Kunai left Liam's room and headed out on her mission, her steps lighter than usual. She noted her newfound, uncharacteristic excitement with some surprise.

I wasn't expecting Master Liam to give me a name! He likely thought nothing of it, but I must repay him for this honor somehow.

As a member of Kukuri's organization, Kunai had been born into a dark world of secrecy. When she died, she would leave behind no trace—no evidence that she had ever existed—just like her parents and siblings, who'd lost their lives in battle two thousand years earlier. Nothing of her family remained. Nothing was *allowed* to remain, not even their names. Their organization only used names when interacting with people for their work. Their leader had a name he went by, but no one else was allowed one for personal use. Still, if there was a loophole, it would be their employer giving them a name.

As stealth operatives, they weren't allowed to leave proof of their existence behind—not even in people's memories. As a result of this rule, more than a

few members of their organization experienced profound loneliness, including Kunai. Liam giving her a name, though, was a sign that she would now exist inside someone's memory.

I'm sure the boss will punish me for failing, once this incident is done with, but I don't care. Some part of me, however small, will remain in Master Liam's memory even after I'm gone.

Kunai still felt that Liam's summoning was her fault. Kukuri had assigned her to guard Liam, since she was one of the most skilled members of their organization. Yet she'd failed to protect her master from the summoning magic that teleported him away.

In the minds of Kukuri and his people, Liam wasn't simply someone to whom they owed gratitude. He was the master they had always wished to serve. He didn't fear them, and he made good use of their abilities, respectfully treating them as valuable tools. Most people feared them, and in the past, they'd been treated with disgust and betrayed more than once. They'd been turned to stone after one such betrayal, and remained that way for two thousand years. The emperor who'd inflicted that on them no doubt did so because he greatly feared them. He'd made use of them when it was convenient, but put them through hell once he no longer wanted anything to do with them.

The emperor had ultimately made that decision out of weakness. He'd feared them, kept them at arm's length, and then tried to get rid of them. Liam had no such weakness. As a master of the Way of the Flash, he was possibly the strongest person in the Empire, and always acted with complete confidence. Liam would never fear Kukuri's organization, and he made use of them as a proper master should.

How many other nobles in the Empire were so competent? Kunai might believe there were a couple, but would just as readily accept that there weren't any. She and the other operatives happily devoted their lives to Liam thanks to the strength of his character.

Arriving at a break room within the castle, Kunai spotted a number of knights. These knights were either very old or very young, and none looked like they could put up anything like a decent fight. She hid in the shadows to eavesdrop

on their conversation. Their security is a joke. I doubt they'd notice my presence even if they took every precaution they were capable of. This is pathetic.

"I don't care if he's a hero from another universe. How could he say a feast like that 'didn't suit his tastes'?" one young knight complained, angry about Liam's attitude at the banquet. "I wanted to deck the guy."

Kunai felt her hand move toward her weapon, but managed to resist the urge to open his carotid then and there.

An old man laughed. "Now, now. He's the hero who will defeat the demon lord. A little arrogance is hardly something to get upset about," he admonished.

"I know, but Her Majesty is bending over backward for these people, and neither of them understand the situation!"

The young man was upset that Liam and Kanami didn't appear to appreciate the hospitality Enola was showing them. Kunai understood his frustration, but her loyalty to Liam caused her to feel hostile toward the boy. You abducted our master, and now have the nerve to speak of him like this? You may only be an ignorant boy, but this is beyond insolent.

If she weren't on a mission, Kunai might have killed the boy for his words. She had orders, however, so she left the break room to seek information on Erle Kingdom.

This country's doing even worse than I imagined.

Having heard enough of one conversation, Kunai switched to a different room, gathering information as she went.

Early the next morning, Kanami and I were led to the armory. The queen herself was taking time out of her busy schedule to show us our heroes' armaments. When we got to the armory, however, there was barely anything in there. They had so few spears, bows, and arrows left, their country was obviously on its last legs.

Enola had her knights bring out some items stored in a safe.

"These armaments represent the very best of Erle Kingdom's capabilities."

They showed me a sword and a full suit of armor, both silvery with gold ornamentation.

Kanami looked down at the items blithely. "How pretty. They're so shiny."

Enola smiled awkwardly at Kanami's innocent observation. "They're more than just their appearance. These are national treasures, imbued by runes with protection magic."

I was actually surprised to realize what the armor was made of. "Mithril, eh?"

Enola seemed pleased that I recognized it. "Yes, the armor is precious mithril. There were only ever three sets on the entire continent, and now only this one remains."

From her bitter expression, I surmised that the other two had been lost in this war with the demon lord.

I reached out and brazenly touched the armor, ignoring the sour looks the attending knights gave me. Even Enola looked nervous, but I shrugged that off. After all, there was no point in armor that wasn't going to be handled. Picking up the helmet and observing it, I sighed when I found what I'd expected.

"Sure, there's magic in this armor, but barely. The mithril's purity and craftsmanship are commendable, but the runes are beyond crude."

The mithril's quality was better than what I'd expected of Erle Kingdom, given their technological capabilities, but the rune work was just as haphazard as the magic circle they'd used to summon me.

Kanami frowned after hearing my assessment, no doubt thinking that I'd made things awkward again. As if to prevent me from saying anything more, she turned to Enola and asked, "Is it really okay for us to use national treasures like these?"

Enola gripped the staff that served as proof of her royal office tighter. "Legend has it that no normal weapon can even scratch the demon lord. You'll likely *need* these to defeat him."

"So who's going to use them?" Having been reminded about the demon lord, Kanami looked nervous. "I assume you, Mr. Liam?"

When she said my name, all eyes turned to me. I tossed the mithril helmet to a knight, who scrambled to catch the national treasure, sighing with relief when he managed it. He glared at me, but if the armor was intended for war, no one should care if it simply fell to the floor.

At any rate, I had no intention of using their gear. "I don't need it."

Enola wasn't sure how to respond. "Er, umm..."

Noticing that the queen was lost for words, Kanami complained on her behalf. "Weren't you listening? You can't beat the demon lord without these."

I sighed at her naïveté. She was such a goody two-shoes; it made me sick. It felt like I was looking at my old self.

"Regardless, what's the plan here?" I asked. "Are we charging straight for the demon lord, or do we have to collect some kind of trinket we'll need to beat him?" A journey of trials and tribulations was a staple in fictional stories of this type. In any case, since I was stuck on this undeveloped planet for now, it might be fun to at least go on a little sightseeing tour.

Enola still looked uncertain of what she should say. "Trinkets? Like armaments? These mithril treasures should be all you need. You shouldn't have to go find more," she told me. "Right now, one of the demon lord's Elite Four, the Lion General, is marching on our capital with an army of barbaric demihumans."

Nitta would have been excited to hear about an "Elite Four," but I was more curious about the vitriol with which Enola spoke of this army.

"Barbaric demihumans, eh?" I turned away from her and scoffed. "Sounds like you sure hate them."

"O-of course I do!" Enola's voice rose. "They invaded our territory, tormented our people, and engaged in all manner of savagery, even before the demon lord's resurrection! I assure you, 'barbaric' is exactly how to describe them!"

Kanami seemed surprised at Enola's passionate response.

Enola was still going. "They've taken the lives of so many of my people. They attack innocent towns and villages to steal their food, leaving the people there

to starve. I will never forgive what they've done!"

"How terrible." Kanami grimaced, no doubt angered. She took everything Enola said at face value. It was completely ridiculous.

"I'm sorry." Enola was clearly ashamed of how heated she'd gotten. "I shouldn't have shouted like that. I must get back to my work. Please feel free to use anything you find in this room."

She left with her retinue of maids and guards.

Kanami turned to me, irritated. "There you go again, Mr. Liam. Are you trying to make these people angry?"

She honestly pitied Enola and Erle Kingdom's citizens for their plight? How comical. What a pure-hearted child.

"You're the perfect hero," I told her. "An easily influenced fool."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I leaned in, giving her a little smile. "You seriously believe they're telling the truth about all this?"

Kanami took a step back, flustered. She seemed unable to understand what I was telling her. "W-well, they summoned us 'cause they're in trouble, right?"

"You really are an easy mark. Do you think everyone in existence is a good person?" I was becoming exasperated.

Kanami hung her head. "There are good people. Isn't it just as stupid to suspect everyone of being bad? I don't want to live like that."

Hearing that, I was sure of one thing. "We two will never get along. I'm going to do what I want. Why don't you just suit up and get ready to fight that demon lord?"

"You're not going to fight, Mr. Liam?" Her apparent shock seemed to ask, Women and children are fighting, but you're just going to run away?

I decided to give her some guidance, though I wasn't sure why. Normally, I wouldn't want anything to do with a good-natured fool like her, but I couldn't leave it alone for some reason. Maybe because she had the same name as *her*...

"I said I'm going to do what I want. But if *you're* gonna fight, you need to hurry up and get ready. Like Enola said, the demon lord's army is getting close."

"Huh?"

My advice given, I left Kanami behind in the armory.

With Liam gone, Kanami seethed with irritation. "What's his deal?!" She had resolved to fight for the people of Erle Kingdom, but Liam hardly seemed motivated to help.

Watching the irritated Kanami were some maids who'd been told to help the girl don the armor, and some knights to serve as her guards. Sensing their gazes, Kanami smiled awkwardly.

"Umm..." A knight even younger than Kanami spoke up hesitantly. "I think your behavior is very admirable, Lady Kanami! I really appreciate what you just said."

"R-really?"

"Yes! You don't want to always suspect people of being bad. I don't want to live that way, either."

"I... Thanks," Kanami said, happy to hear his words.

"I'll tell the other knights what you said!" the boy continued, inspired.

"W-wait," Kanami said. "I can't take credit for it! My father taught me that."

"Your father?"

"Yeah. Once, a long time ago, he said he found it exhausting to be too wary of people all the time. He wanted to believe in them instead. I want to live like my father did."

The words had come from someone important to her, and remembering that made Kanami's chest tighten with both pride and shame. After all, it was her betrayal that had ultimately caused such a wonderful person agony.

I returned to my room after leaving the armory and lounged on my bed until

Kunai soundlessly returned. I looked over to see her already on one knee, bowing her head.

"I have a report, Master Liam."

Instead of responding, I merely yawned.

Taking that as an acknowledgment, Kunai spoke. "The demon lord's army should arrive at the capital in three days."

"Faster than I thought. No wonder the queen's desperate. What else have you got?"

"It's true that this country is in trouble. They're gathering women, children, and the elderly from both the capital and nearby regions to fight in the war."

"It's too late for us to help them. Enola should have summoned her heroes earlier."

Erle Kingdom was on borrowed time. The situation was clear: they simply didn't have enough adult men. Even if they beat the demon lord's army, I couldn't imagine the country had any sort of future. It would depend on the other countries around here, of course, but I could envision opportunistic humans conquering Erle Kingdom after the demon lord went down. On the other hand, if all the other countries were already gone and Erle Kingdom was the only one remaining, they'd have a very hard time getting back on their feet. As I'd told Kunai, if they had planned on summoning heroes for help, they really should have done it before things got this bad. I didn't judge Enola for hesitating, of course. If I were in her position, I doubt I'd have gambled on the slight chance of victory a hero might provide.

This was a bad situation to be in, however you looked at it. From Enola's helplessness, I guessed that whoever was actually supposed to be on the throne had died in the war, and now she was stuck doing a job she wasn't prepared for. As I thought about it, I remembered that, during the banquet, she'd mentioned not having been raised as the heir.

If I blamed anyone for Erle Kingdom's situation, it was the previous king, who'd sent his heir into battle without foreseeing the consequences. If that king had summoned a hero, things might not have gotten this bad. I knew from

experience how much it sucked to have an incompetent predecessor, so I sympathized with Enola, but that didn't mean I forgave her for summoning me to this dump.

Erle Kingdom's capital was protected by high walls, so the demon lord's army had camped around the fortress city. That army was composed of a great variety of races, none human. The vast majority were demihumans who had been driven from their homes by prejudiced humans at some point.

Inside an army tent, a wolfman stood before the Lion General, one of the demon lord's Elite Four. Other representatives of the races making up the army were grouped around them.

The wolfman looked almost human, his only nonhuman features being his pointed ears and bushy tail. The general, Nogo, was much more beastlike, like a lion walking on two legs. He was furry and stood two and a half meters tall. Behind him in the spacious tent was a harem of lion women.

As one of those women filled his cup with alcohol, Nogo addressed the wolfman. "So, when can we move in to take the capital?"

The wolfman, Glass, was a warrior, but also served as a tactician. Despite being the brains of Nogo's operation, he wasn't particularly blessed with ingenuity. Beastfolk were simple fighters who crushed human opponents with superior strength. If they walked into a trap, they dealt with it after the fact. Yet despite these crude tactics, they'd driven Erle Kingdom into a corner, and were now about to attack their capital.

"Our warriors can take the city in three days. Those walls will prove meaningless before our might."

Plenty of demihumans would have no trouble climbing the walls. If they snuck into the capital at night and opened the gates from the inside, their army would be able to invade the city easily.

Demihumans were bigger and stronger than humans, so they were unlikely to lose in a one-on-one fight. Each was a powerful warrior, yet humans had prevailed against them until recently. That was because the various demihuman

races had been unable to join forces against the humans. The arrival of the demon lord and Lion General Nogo finally brought the demihumans together, and now they were on the verge of conquering Erle Kingdom.

Nogo opened his large mouth and laughed, prompting everyone around him to laugh as well. They were all convinced they'd take the city.

"We've got a good report to send the demon lord, then! Now, drinks all around, to celebrate our coming victory!"

Those gathered in the tent roared.

His comrades were still making merry in the tent, but Glass had left the party early. His daughter, who had been waiting for him outside, ran over when she noticed him.

"Chino!" Spotting her, Glass called out as he made his way to her. "Let's return to our camp."

"Yes, Father!"

The girl, Chino, was small and slim, her face retaining its youthfulness. Her wolf's ears and tail were silver, her eyes yellow. She was a cute girl who didn't look a bit like a warrior, but she had been blessed with extraordinary strength since childhood and could defeat most average warriors with ease.

Chino wagged her tail eagerly. "Father, when will the attack begin? I can't wait for my first battle! With this fight, we'll finally take back our territory from the humans, won't we?"

Glass chided Chino for her restlessness. "Don't wag your tail like that. It shows how immature you are for a warrior."

"I-I apologize!" Chino's tail stilled, her ears drooping sadly.

Warriors couldn't afford to let their emotions be easily read. Controlling their ear and tail movements was one of the basics for wolffolk warriors. Seeing his daughter's inability to do so, Glass laid his hand on her head and tousled her hair fondly.

"Now your ears are drooping."

"Augh!"

Glass could see Chino become even more despondent, which made him nervous. "I'm worried about sending you into battle like this. Perhaps I should have left you at home for this fight."

Chino looked up at him with sudden petulance. "I'm a warrior of our village like anyone else, Father! I'm the priestess of our tribe, too. It would shame our tribe if I never fought in a battle."



Glass frowned. "I suppose you're right about that. You're my daughter, but you're also the precious priestess of our tribe."

Chino put her hands on her hips and puffed out her small chest with pride. "I'm a silver wolf, after all."

Glass laughed as they approached their camp together. "I never thought I would have a silver wolf child. There hasn't been one in decades, not even in other villages."

The wolffolk had a legend that said children born with silver fur held spiritual abilities, so they had to be carefully raised as priestesses. Having that silver fur herself, Chino was indeed spiritually gifted compared to other wolffolk. Even the chiefs of villages and leaders like Glass—who'd brought multiple villages together—had no choice but to bow before their tribe's priestess. As members of a warrior race, however, even priestesses had to experience war to be considered adults. Glass had brought their precious priestess to battle so she could gain the experience needed to call herself an adult of their tribe.

"Once I've seen my first battle," Chino said, "our clan will finally have a priestess again. Then you'll be able to take it easy, Father."

Glass's standing in the wolffolk tribe would be set in stone, even more so than it already was for the father of their priestess.

He chuckled, looking down at Chino. "Maybe the silver-wolf legends are just myths. Besides your fur, I haven't seen many signs that you're spiritually gifted."

Chino looked away, as if bothered by that fact. "I'll display my priestess abilities as soon as I'm in my first battle."

"I'm looking forward to that."

They arrived at the wolffolk camp. Glass entered his tent, inviting Chino inside to continue their conversation. Taking a seat on the ground, Glass grumbled about the meeting he'd just attended. "General Nogo's still acting foolish. He'll go through the food we plundered in no time."

The general took every opportunity to celebrate, wasting their precious food

supply. It concerned Glass.

Chino didn't seem to understand what he was so worried about. "Erle Kingdom has plenty of food stores. We'll just replenish our supply as soon as we defeat them." The capital was a large city; she assumed it must have a lot of food.

Glass couldn't be so optimistic. "The humans aren't exactly thriving right now. They don't necessarily have much food in the capital. If worst comes to worst, we might end up fighting among ourselves for what's left. Don't forget that, Chino."

"Y-yes, sir," she answered, though it was clear she still hadn't fully grasped the situation.

Glass was uneasy. The beastfolk had ravaged the humans' territory, devouring their food stores like locusts as they went. He was disgusted by how much of their sustenance General Nogo had squandered. More than once, Glass had made his opinions clear to the general. However, the demihumans valued strength above any other quality, and no one among them was stronger than Nogo. All Glass's warnings were in vain if Nogo refused to listen.

"Since receiving power from the demon lord, General Nogo is too strong. We could all go at him together, and we still wouldn't win. We have no choice but to obey him, but it's dangerous to waste our food supply like he does."

Chino's expression said she didn't understand such complicated matters. Still, she'd heard that there was food to be plundered when they won, so she remained optimistic, trying to put her father at ease. "It'll be all right, Father! Everywhere else had ample food stores. I'm sure the capital will have even more!"

All Glass could do was give her an exasperated look. "I hope you're right."

Chapter 5: House Banfield in Chaos

FOLLOWING LIAM'S disappearance, House Banfield was in turmoil, which only proved how important Liam was to his domain.

Liam's butler Brian, who was in charge of running House Banfield's mansion, held his head in his hands and wept. "Augh! I still can't believe Master Liam was taken! If only we knew that he's all right!"

Standing beside Brian as he wetted his handkerchief with tears was Amagi, who was conducting her own investigation into Liam's abduction. She wished she could take charge of House Banfield's forces and lead the search for her missing master, but she had decided some time ago to limit her time outside House Banfield's domain. The family had enough capable personnel nowadays that she'd also decided it was time to step down from her position of authority. In light of that, she wielded little actual influence within the domain at this point. Amagi was only seen as important to House Banfield now because of Liam's feelings for her. Since her power had been reduced, there wasn't much she could actually accomplish with Liam gone.

Amagi displayed several news videos around her as holograms, quickly processing the information found in each. Her eyes immediately narrowed ever so slightly at what she saw in one video.

"The news has leaked."

Brian's head whipped around at that ominous report. "What was that?"

"The information that Master disappeared into a summoning circle has leaked. No... It was spread intentionally."

"Wh-who would do such a thing?!"

While Brian panicked, Amagi calmly searched for the source of the information. Its exposure was a serious matter for House Banfield. And yet...

"The trail is too convoluted to determine the information's source. With

Master's authority, I am sure I could name the individual responsible, but..."

"I can't believe someone would betray House Banfield like this."

Liam's absence was such a dire problem for House Banfield. Brian's face paled at the thought of people plotting at such a time. The butler sank to the floor, grumbling about their top knights' behavior. "They're supposed to bring the domain together in emergencies of this sort!"

Even Amagi, who was usually expressionless, wore a look on her face that seemed to match Brian's. "I admit some responsibility for not having better plans in place in the event of Master's absence, but...what are Christiana and Marie doing, acting up at a time like this?"

Liam's two highly skilled knights *should* have kept the entire order of knights united and quelled the confusion in the domain. Tia and Marie outshone most of the knights in the Empire, so one would think they were perfectly capable of preventing turmoil on behalf of House Banfield, even with Liam gone. However, that was not the reality at the moment.

Brian slammed his fist on the floor. "Master Liam, please come back to us!" he wailed.

In one of the mansion's hallways, a large group of knights stood split down the middle, each side glaring at the other. Half belonged to Tia's faction—a group of like-minded knights who all wore their uniforms according to regulation.

Tia stood at the head of her group and glowered at Marie, who faced her. "Did you not hear me when I told you to move?" she growled in a low voice. "I suppose you grew hard of hearing when your ears turned to stone."

Marie smiled at Tia's provocation, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Awfully full of yourself for a lump of ground meat, aren't you? What exactly do you think you're doing, constantly getting in our way?"

When Marie got too worked up, she tended to drop her usual regal tone, so an observer might see her as relatively calm at the moment. Hidden behind her composure, however, was an uncontrollable urge to kill the woman before her. The knights of Marie's faction were somewhat less refined than Tia's. Each had modified their uniform in whatever way they desired, so they didn't present a unified front like Tia's faction. The one area where they aligned perfectly was attitude. These knights were all crude and violent, like Marie.

The two groups were like oil and water. However, they had run into each other by chance. Normally, the presence of knights in the mansion wouldn't have been remarkable. But when passing servants spotted the two factions, they fled as quickly as they could, crying out.

"Run, before we get caught up in it!"

"Oh, if only Master Liam were here!"

"Retreeeat!"

When Tia was satisfied that all the servants had fled, she drew her blade and lunged at Marie, who had already armed herself. "Die, fossil!"

Blocking Tia's homicidal strike with her double blades, Marie grinned. "You want to be ground meat again, is that it? I can help you with that!"

When the two clashed, the other knights began fighting as well. Their weapons shattered windows and cut into the nearby pillars and walls. Confrontations like this had broken out frequently since Liam's disappearance, and though there hadn't been any casualties yet, numerous people had been badly injured.

As the knights clashed, and blood flew everywhere in the hallway, a lone maid robot appeared. She attempted to mediate, her voice faint beneath the clamor.

"U-umm... Please don't fight!"

Interrupted, the knights rounded on the maid robot, murder in their eyes. When Tia and Marie saw this, they swiftly jumped back, calling off their factions.

"Stand down!"

"Cut it out, you pack of morons!"

At their leaders' shouts, the knights ended their aggressions at once. Quickly lowering their weapons, they looked on nervously. Tia and Marie had only

backed off because of the maid robot's intervention. Had it been a complete stranger, they wouldn't have stopped for a moment, but the maid who had intervened was Tateyama, a favorite of Lord Liam's. There was a real possibility that if Liam returned and word of this confrontation got back to him, everyone there would end up beheaded.

"You can thank Tateyama for your continued existence, fossil," Tia said, turning to march away.

Marie turned her back as well. "You talk a lot for being little more than a pile of ground meat," she called after Tia. "I'll back off today, in deference to sweet little Tateyama, so I hope you're grateful. Next time, I'll do you in."

Both factions of knights departed, leaving Tateyama to glance around at the mess and begin cleaning up. "When Master returns, I'll open my stand here again, so I'd best make it tidy."

This was where Tateyama usually set up her little sales booth, where she sold Lord Liam novelty paraphernalia. She wanted to keep the area neat, since she'd reopen it upon his return.

Cleaning tools in hand, Tateyama hung her head with a somber look. "Master... Please come back soon."

As all this was happening, a knight elsewhere in the mansion held his head in his hands. It was Claus Sera Mont, a top knight who had just led a massive battalion to victory for the Empire. Of course, it was Tia who had actually commanded their fleet, with Claus serving only as support. The man was painfully aware of his own inadequacies. His stomach constantly ached from other people's inflated expectations of him; right now, it was killing him.

"Lord Liam still isn't back?"

Graaah! With Lord Liam gone, there's no stopping Lady Christiana and Lady Marie! Someone, please do something about thiiis!

On the outside, Claus merely sighed quietly, expressionless. On the inside, he was panicking. Claus was absolutely confident in one of his skills: his poker face. No matter the situation he found himself in, he could always prevent his

emotions from showing in his expression or attitude. He'd had more opportunities than ever to apply that skill lately, so it was only becoming more polished.

Even as Claus lamented Liam's absence, his cool expression earned gazes of admiration from his subordinates.

"He's so calm, even in a situation like this," one remarked. "Lord Claus really is the pillar of House Banfield!"

"The other factions are a total mess in comparison."

"It really should be Lord Claus who commands House Banfield's forces, don't you think?"

Their inflated expectations and passionate gazes nauseated Claus.

"Stop flattering me and get back to work," he muttered under his breath.

Please! My current position is already too much for me! If you hold me to these standards, my stomach will explode! If only I could speak my mind... But if my subordinates find out how faint-hearted I really am, it will just make them anxious. I have to avoid that.

While Tia and Marie intensified the conflict between their factions, Claus did his best to maintain order in House Banfield's domain. Actually, it was more like he just dealt with work that piled up, neglected, while the two quarreled. The domain would suffer if someone didn't take care of those tasks, so Claus and his subordinates did everything possible to stay on top of them. Although Claus was used to drawing the short straw, he felt terrible for inflicting the same on his subordinates.

Once Lord Liam comes back—or things at least settle down a bit—I'll have to thank them. W-wait a second... Where's my biggest problem child?

Claus glanced around, but he didn't see Chengsi Sera Tohrei anywhere.

He asked one of his subordinates a dreaded question. "Where's Chengsi?"

On a bench in one of the mansion's courtyards sat two maids holding cleaning tools. One maid, Riho, was clearly slacking on her chores. The other, Fuka, had

been working diligently.

Riho unabashedly took out her tablet and checked some videos she'd posted. Looking at the comments and view counts, she clicked her tongue. "Tch. My views are down. I'm getting fewer comments, too. I need to cut people if I want to call myself the bloodiest idol in the universe. This is no time to be wearing a maid outfit and cleaning!"

Looking over at her, Fuka sighed. "Will you get to work already? Old lady Serena's gonna yell at us again."

"What, you're scared of her?" Riho asked, disgusted. "You're such a wuss. You've always been all bark and no bite."

Fuka's expression immediately changed. "Say that again. I dare you."

She stood, furiously gripping her mechanized "broom"—a high-efficiency cleaning machine—as a weapon. Riho grabbed her own broom device, which she'd set aside.

"I'll say it as many times as you want, wuss," Riho taunted, smiling.

"You smartass." Fuka's expression darkened further. "I'll kill you!"

"I wouldn't make promises you can't keep. If you want *me* to kill *you*, though, I can oblige."

The two glared at one another, then abruptly looked in the same direction. As they both leaped away, dust flew into the air, and slashes appeared in the ground where they'd stood a second earlier.

Riho and Fuka immediately forgot their fight, facing the source of the slashes instead.

"I didn't think there was anyone stupid enough to start a fight with me here," Riho said, grinning murderously at the woman who'd interrupted them.

"I'll kill you! I'll damn well kill you!" Fuka snarled, glaring with bloodshot eyes.

The slashes had been unleashed by a smiling Chengsi. "My, you dodged my attack, eh?"

As usual, Chengsi wore a knight's uniform modified into a cheongsam. There

was something strange about her today, however—her arms, to be precise.

Riho narrowed her eyes, disgusted. "You had your arms modified?"

Chengsi's arms were now long enough to reach the ground. Her nails were like blades, and the wrists that peeked out beneath her sleeves had a metallic sheen. She had mechanized part of her body to become a cybernetic organism—a cyborg.

Fuka's nose twitched. She grimaced at Chengsi's scent. "That machine smell is terrible. You mechanized more than just your arms, didn't you?"

Chengsi smiled, saying nothing in response. When she did open her mouth a few seconds later, a gun muzzle appeared from within. Riho and Fuka jumped back. This time, a laser burned the ground.

"Tch!" Riho clicked her tongue and lunged at Chengsi, swinging her cleaning device. Chengsi caught her blow. Her body no longer even resembled a human's; her mouth was open too wide, her joints hyperextended, and extra arms with weapons attached emerged from her back. She had transformed into a monster, but Riho wasn't fazed.

"I'm guessing your head's still fleshy—all I have to do is squish it. The senior pupil won't complain if it's self-defense, right?"

"Good idea!" Fuka agreed. "Now we can relieve some stress! You're game, aren't you?"

Their monstrous foe only excited the wielders of the Way of the Flash. Chengsi felt just as excited. She was itching to test her new abilities against these strong opponents—pupils of the formidable Liam.

"I obtained this power to defeat Liam, but you two present a great opportunity to test it."

Fuka laughed. "Just die already! Flash!"

"Hey, don't steal my prey!" Riho huffed, as Fuka beat her to using their special technique. "Flash!"

As the two utilized the Way of the Flash with their broom devices, Chengsi only smiled. "Those toys must weaken your Flash somewhat, huh? Or are you

just that much weaker than Liam?"

Chengsi had dodged both their Flashes. Fuka gaped at her, shocked, while Riho gave her an enraged glare.

"True, I can't get serious without a sword," Riho admitted. "But you...you used precognition just now, didn't you?"

Fuka tossed aside her broom, her expression hardening. "You needed to mess with your *brain*, too? Weaklings really have it rough, huh?"

Indeed, not even Chengsi's brain was untouched. She'd had it modified to attain a sort of sixth sense. Chengsi opened her eyes wider, their lenses zooming in and out. "Anything to become stronger. I can kill Liam anytime I want now."

Riho laughed at the idea of Chengsi abandoning her body in order to kill Liam in a duel. "You loser. You really believe you can beat the senior pupil?"

Fuka looked ready to burst a blood vessel. "You think you can beat the Way of the Flash with modifications? Don't get cocky just 'cause you turned yourself into some freaky machine. I'll end you."

Chengsi lunged at the pair. "I appreciate your enthusiasm," she said. "Now... entertain me, won't you?"

Once, twelve noble houses had supported House Banfield. By becoming its vassals, the heads of those families had obtained aid from House Banfield after its miraculous recovery. That aid allowed the twelve houses to develop their own domains, but after a few decades of success, a subset of the nobles had grown arrogant. They believed they were the ones supporting House Banfield, rather than the other way around.

To be fair, they were technically in a position to help House Banfield. The vassal system existed because of the Empire's vast size. On the outskirts of the Empire's territory—where the Imperial family's reach didn't quite extend—the most well-established noble houses would look after smaller houses.

House Banfield was powerful enough that it served as leader of the region

containing its domain. In exchange, it was the vassals' duty to help the house when it was in trouble. If House Banfield went to war, its vassals were expected to fight alongside it, and if House Banfield requested any assistance at all, vassals were obliged to provide it.

Yet Liam had never relied on his vassals. That was partly because they were too powerless to provide real assistance, and partly because—under Liam's guidance—House Banfield always had the power to accomplish whatever it wanted on its own. That was evidence of House Banfield's strength, but in the current situation, their self-reliance was backfiring.

Baori Sera Noden, who had once been part of the twelve families serving House Banfield, alighted on that family's planet, Hydra. The arrogant head of House Noden was a small man, with thin limbs despite a large, bloated stomach. He wore a striped suit and clenched a cigar in his mouth.

Baron Noden stepped into House Banfield's mansion, his mouth spewing foulsmelling smoke. "I haven't been here in a while, but it seems pretty noisy, doesn't it?"

Trailing behind Baori were the three bureaucrats from House Banfield's government office.

"It's awfully embarrassing," one of the officials said self-deprecatingly.

Baori was in a good mood. "If Liam hadn't been too proud to accept our support, he could have avoided a situation like this," he boasted. "I suppose he was nothing more than a narrow-minded child."

When meeting with Liam, of course, Baori had always bowed and scraped unceasingly. He had been completely dependent on whatever aid Liam provided him. However, the eldest son of one of Baori's vassals, Baronet Clover, had gotten on Liam's bad side; subsequently, Liam severed all ties with Baori. Cut off from House Banfield's support, Baori now struggled. He claimed his assistance could have benefited House Banfield, but in truth, he certainly didn't have the ability to back that up.

Understanding his situation, the traitorous officials nodded.

"You're exactly right," one said. "Things will be different now, though. The

new head of House Banfield will count on your support."

Baori and the officials turned to see a child entering the mansion. He was flanked by knights of the old House Banfield, who had served the former ruler rather than Liam. The child the knights protected was Isaac Sera Banfield, a son of Liam's father Cliff. Isaac was seventy years old, though he only appeared fifteen or so, and was a beautiful boy with long, glossy black hair and bright blue eyes.

Despite his good looks, Isaac's attitude left much to be desired. He had graduated from primary school, but had not yet attended the military academy or college. Until a short while ago, he had lived a luxurious life on the Capital Planet with his father. Cliff had chosen Isaac to become the next Count Banfield, set to inherit Liam's peerage and domain, which was the reason Isaac was now visiting House Banfield's domain for the first time in his life.

As he laid eyes on the mansion Liam had built, Isaac began to complain. "What is this incredibly dull building? It's so plain! There's not so much as a hint of artistry to be seen here! Why, frugality is its one and only merit. I won't live in such a place."

No one around Isaac chastised him for his rudeness in disparaging Liam's mansion. Baori, in fact, unashamedly tried to curry favor.

"You're exactly right, my lord. You deserve far better than such a shabby mansion. Let's demolish it and build a new one as soon as you've inherited your domain."

He acted as if it was already set in stone that Isaac would be the new Count Banfield. After all, Baori was complicit in the officials' scheme to make that happen.

You'll regret disrespecting me, Liam! While you're gone, I'll make this brat the head of House Banfield. Through him, I'll hold the real power in your domain!

House Noden had originally been nothing more than a barony in service to House Banfield, but now Baori was attempting to seize control by way of Isaac. The government officials were well aware of his ambition. It was why they'd chosen him for their plot in the first place. Like Baori, they tried to curry favor with the boy.

"House Banfield will flourish with you at the helm, Lord Isaac," one said.

"Liam did not understand how to run a territory. Things only went well for him by coincidence and luck. It's terribly embarrassing that an Empire noble made use of dolls the way he did."

The three officials were taking this opportunity to vent pent-up frustrations. Putting Isaac in charge of House Banfield was their chance to depose Liam and line their pockets in the process.

The next person who spoke was one of the knights dispatched to protect Isaac. He was an effeminate man with wavy blond hair named Keith Sera Levker. Tall, thin, and wearing blue lipstick, he had a unique, somewhat strange air. A saber with a blade of razor-sharp steel hung from his waist.

"Liam did not have the character of a leader," he said, playing with his hair with one hand. "The knight families who have served House Banfield for generations can finally rest easy with a worthy man running things."

Keith's family had served House Banfield in the past, but fled to the Capital Planet when Liam took control. Keith's sword skills were no joke. In fact, he had been the head knight for Liam's father and grandfather. Thanks to Keith's swordsmanship, Cliff considered him a reliable bodyguard back on the Capital Planet. Now, however, Keith had been dispatched to guard Isaac so that Cliff and his family could claim the vast fortune House Banfield built while Liam was in charge.

Baori smiled at Keith. "I didn't think Lord Cliff would give you up so easily, Lord Keith. You were House Banfield's most powerful knight, after all."

Keith didn't seem displeased with this compliment. "That was in the past, I'm afraid. Things here are run by a bunch of outsiders now."

The "outsiders" Keith referred to were the knights who had begun serving House Banfield during Liam's rule.

Isaac apparently took issue with Liam's knights as well. "Knights who haven't served the same family for generations are mere riffraff. Liam really was a nobody."

Isaac had seemingly dismissed Liam as a pathetic loser none of his family's

knights would have wanted to serve.

Keith bowed reverently. "From now on, Lord Isaac, I will take charge of House Banfield's knights for you."

"I leave them in your hands."

Isaac entered the mansion; Keith and his knights followed.

Baori and the officials stayed put, however. Dropping the obsequious attitude they'd given Isaac, they stared hatefully at the departing knights.

"Some knights they are. They abandoned their duty and fled to the Capital Planet," Baori said, speaking his true feelings.

The other officials expressed similar frustrations.

"Things here improved drastically right after they left," one replied. "They won't say it, but I imagine they're quite irritated by that fact."

"If Keith hadn't fled, he would likely still be House Banfield's head knight."

They could only imagine the frustration House Banfield's longstanding knight families must have felt when the domain rose to such prominence after they left alongside Cliff. If they had stayed, they could have secured lofty positions; they would be reaping the rewards of those positions now. The current situation would allow Keith and his fellow knights to return to their former roles. They were guaranteed important positions so long as they remained loyal to Isaac. Any knight would dream of commanding a force like that of the present-day House Banfield, so Keith and his comrades had leaped at the chance when it was presented to them.

Baori smirked. "They may be cowards, but they're not weak. We'll need strong knights to shut up any noisy people in this domain."

Baori and the officials were not equipped to deal with House Banfield's skilled current knights, so it reassured them to have strong allies like Keith on their side.

It was clear that a variety of people whose interests aligned had joined forces to take over House Banfield.

Brian was so shocked that he couldn't even speak. Not only had three officials from House Banfield's government offices barged into the mansion, Baron Noden—with whom Liam had cut ties—accompanied them. Worst of all...

"You'll find Lord Cliff's signature on these documents," said one official. "Now that Lord Liam is deceased, headship of House Banfield falls to Lord Isaac."

Isaac sat in a reception room chair, his brow furrowed as if he was in a foul mood.

While Brian's mouth flapped open and closed like a fish's, the head maid Serena spoke up. "Lord Liam's death has not been confirmed."

The officials merely laughed off Serena's objection. "Terribly sorry, but we cannot simply allow this situation to go on forever, can we? For the time being, the government office will take the reins within the domain."

Things were moving too fast. Serena was suspicious. Those idiots who fled to the Capital Planet are moving hastily out of a desire for Lord Liam's vast assets. I wish they had displayed such motivation earlier. But, in any case, they're too well organized.

Some in House Banfield had expected Cliff and his followers to make a move after Liam's disappearance. Still, they had taken action much sooner than anticipated, and Serena was one step behind them.

"Are you defying Father and Grandfather's orders? Off with her head," Isaac commanded haughtily.

When Isaac threatened to have her executed, Serena's tone grew tougher. "I may not look it, but I was employed in the Imperial Palace before this, boy. I don't care to die just yet. If you want to execute me, I'll have to make use of some my connections. Is that all right with you?"

Isaac scowled when Serena called him "boy," but before he could respond, Keith spoke up calmly. "I would suggest rethinking her execution, Lord Isaac. Any trouble on the Capital Planet would likely burden Lord Cliff and your family."

"You get to keep your head for now," Isaac told Serena, averting his eyes.

Serena shook her head. What a contrast to Lord Liam. Understanding Isaac only too well from that brief exchange, Serena foresaw a dark future for House Banfield if Liam failed to return.

Brian had been silent all this time, but he finally recovered the use of his voice. "Lord Keith... What are you doing here? You abandoned House Banfield and fled to the Capital Planet, did you not?"

Brian's anger toward the knights who had deserted House Banfield was profound. Keith and his contemporaries had left the young Liam behind to sink or swim when they fled to the Capital Planet.

Keith gave him a bold smile. "Don't be that way, Brian. I regret what I did, can't you see? That's why I'm here now. Just leave things to me from now on, and you can live out the rest of your life in peace."

"A-after all this time, you can't just...!" Brian balled up his fists.

Serena stopped him before he could go further. "Brian."

"I...apologize."

Seeing Brian unable to raise his clenched fists, Keith scoffed. "A wise choice. An ordinary person couldn't hope to win against a knight. Do as I say henceforth, for your own good."

Brian squeezed his fists even tighter, but lowered his gaze. "If only Master Liam were here," he muttered.

Someone had been watching Isaac and his cronies barge into House Banfield's mansion: the Guide.

"Great," he said to himself. "This is fantastic! This guy's a lot more of a villain than you are, Liam! Isaac, you're exactly what I've been looking for!"

The more the Guide observed Isaac, the more he liked him. The boy was just as heartless as the average Imperial noble. Now that Isaac was about to inherit headship of House Banfield, the Guide's goal of ruining Liam seemed within reach. The family's domain would decline, its subjects falling into despair. There was only one problem.

"There'll be trouble when Liam's female knights find out about my darling little Isaac." The Guide had taken such a liking to Isaac, he was already using endearments. "They'll eliminate him. I just know it."

Keith was here as Isaac's protection, and he was a skilled knight.

Unfortunately, his abilities hardly compared to those of Tia and Marie. When they got wind of this situation and came crashing in, it was doubtful Keith could defend Isaac from them.

"I have to step in to protect the dark future my darling Isaac will create!" The Guide was raring to go.

Oddly enough, when the Guide went looking for Tia and Marie, he found them together, fighting over who should take charge in Liam's absence. He wasn't sure what to think.

"This is awful. I usually like seeing such terrible displays, but these two have taken things in such a strange direction."

Tia and Marie flew at each other, weapons drawn and intent on murder.

"Erode away already, you fossil!"

"Go rot, you pile of meat!"

The fierceness of their clash had already scratched their weapons. Both were covered in scrapes as well, but they tossed aside their battered blades and began trying to kill each other with their bare hands instead.

Marie dropkicked Tia, embedding her in a wall across the room, then moved in to finish her off. However, Tia just kicked off from the wall and sent Marie flying with a headbutt.

In the face of this shameful display, even the Guide could only shake his head and mutter, "This isn't the dark future I desire."

There was no denying the danger these two presented, regardless of their undisciplined behavior. The Guide stroked his chin in thought, watching as the pair went on trying to kill one another. Eventually, he arrived at a conclusion.

"I didn't really want to use this tactic, but if it goes well, it will strike a terrible blow to Liam. I have a dance for you two to perform. No...maybe 'puppet show' would be a better way to put it."

The Guide spread his arms wide, and the negative energy he'd absorbed from the elves flowed out from him. This energy congealed into two figures at his sides—exact copies of himself. Once the copies were complete, he directed them toward the feuding knights.

"These two will be perfect for sowing strife around House Banfield's domain," he told his copies. "I want you to stimulate their desires and bend them to your will."

The copies nodded, circling behind Tia and Marie. Unable to sense the entities' presence, the two knights allowed the copies to get behind them easily. The knights' instincts were still frighteningly sharp, however.

"What?"

"Who's behind me?"

Tia and Marie whirled around, sensing something, but found nothing there.

The Guide guffawed. "It's too late... My copies are already connected to you! Now, let's see what you two desire!"

The copies standing close to Tia and Marie spread their arms as the Guide had done. A change came over the knights as strings like ectoplasm extended from the copies' fingers, binding the knights' bodies.

"You won't escape me now," the Guide said.

The two women hunched over in pain, and the copies laughed.

"You want to be Liam's favorite?" the copy attached to Tia said. "All right! You just have to prove to him that you're the best!"

"What is it you wish for? Let's hear it!" said the other copy. "Unleash it, why don't you?"

Desires amplified by the Guide's copies, Tia and Marie shakily stood with dazed looks on their faces. Their duel forgotten, they faced away from each other and began walking unsteadily, as if hypnotized.

"I will be...Lord Liam's favorite. It will be...me," Tia muttered.

"That's right... His favorites will be just Lady Rosetta and me. Just my lady and me," Marie cackled.

The Guide smiled with satisfaction, watching the two. "Good! If you want to become his favorite, just destroy everyone else! If there's no one else left, Liam will naturally prefer whoever remains! Erase anyone and anything that gets in your way."

The two knights started forth to carry out the Guide's orders, his parasitic copies following them as they left. Just as the Guide had said, the women had been reduced to his loyal puppets.

"Well, that's those nuisances taken care of." The Guide watched them leave with a satisfied smile. "Now, if I just leave everything to my darling Isaac, House Banfield will decline all on its own. Ooh, I can't wait to see the look on Liam's face when he returns!"

Laughing loudly, the Guide vanished as if he'd been sucked into the ceiling.

Tia awoke atop her bed in her room. She sat up and brought a hand to her face, finding it slick with sweat.

"What am I doing in my room? I could have sworn I was just..."

When she tried to remember what she'd been doing before she found herself here, she was struck with a terrible headache. And then...

"Lady Tia, it's an emergency!"

One of her adjutants, a knight named Claudia, had opened a line of communication without Tia's permission.

Knowing Claudia would only do such a thing if the matter was truly dire, Tia asked, "What's the situation?"

"Lord Liam's brother Isaac has arrived from the Capital Planet! His family is trying to regain control of House Banfield!"

When she heard that report, Tia's first impulse was to squash Isaac and those

plotting with him, but she found her desires interfering with that instinct.

We have to get things under control! No, wait... I can make use of this situation.

The appearance of Isaac and the knights from the capital would throw House Banfield into disarray. Tia believed that Liam would eventually return, though, so Isaac was ultimately of no concern to her. Her only worry was how she could exploit his presence.

"Claudia, get the faction together. Contact the army and have a fleet prepared as well."

"Huh? But, er..."

"We can't have these morons from the Capital Planet manipulating things here. We should hurry up and drive all those idiots out of this place."

Claudia had misgivings, but Tia was her trusted superior, so she put her faith in the other woman. "You must have an idea. Very well... I'll gather the troops immediately."

"Good. I'll join you in space once I take care of something here."

"Yes, ma'am!"

When the call disconnected, Tia scrambled out of bed, giggling to herself. "I should just have done this from the start. Now, before doing anything else, there's something important I have to collect."

The "something important" Tia had remembered was held under strict security in a mansion vault, though it appeared to be a simple test tube containing fluid. Going through various security protocols, Tia entered the vault exultantly and laid claim to the item. She rubbed the cool glass of the test tube against her flushed cheek giddily.

"I can obtain legitimacy as long as I've got this. Isaac is unnecessary. If I bear Lord Liam's child, it will solve everything!"

The test tube so carefully guarded here contained Liam's genetic material.

"I'll become pregnant with Lord Liam's child! Nothing could make me happier!"

Her desires running rampant, Tia had decided to use this situation to give Liam an heir. Naturally, such an act would never have been allowed, even in an emergency like this. Liam was unlikely to acknowledge any child that resulted, but with her desires manipulated, Tia was severely lacking in judgment.

The Guide's copy watched her excitedly claim Liam's preserved DNA.

"I know I was the one who made her follow her desires, but this is something else," he said to himself, disgusted by what he saw. "The other one isn't this bad, is she?"

Tia's behavior appalled even him.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the mansion...

"Darling, where have you gone? I wish I could see you!"

Holed up in her room, Rosetta lay upon her bed, crying. She had lost weight since Liam's disappearance, since she had no appetite. She spent all her time lamenting his absence.

Looking after her was Ciel Sera Exner, still in House Banfield's domain for her training. Ciel wore her silver hair long, sporting the side braid that members of her family tended to wear. She was an outlier at the mansion in that she was openly skeptical of the much-adored Liam. She'd actually been happy to hear about his disappearance, but she was heartbroken to see Rosetta so devastated.

Liam really is the worst, hurting Lady Rosetta like this. Not to mention that other little problem of mine...

Rosetta wasn't Ciel's only headache right now. Her brother, Kurt Sera Exner, was another cause for concern. There was apparently something Kurt badly needed to speak with Liam about, but he couldn't get in contact with his friend, and was unaware of Liam's disappearance. Thus, Kurt had begun sending messages to Ciel instead.

Ciel opened her tablet and checked her latest messages from her brother, a strained look on her face.

"5 min. ago: Ciel, I can't reach Liam. Is he busy right now?"

"4 min. ago: Ciel, if Liam's busy, could you tell him to contact me later?"

"3 min. ago: Ciel, are you getting my messages? I need to talk to Liam. Whenever he's free is fine, but could you just tell him to contact me?"

"2 min. ago: Ciel, it doesn't look like my messages are being marked as read. Are you working? They give you breaks, right?"

"1 min. ago: Ciel? Why aren't you answering?"

The flurry of messages was really starting to worry her.

I didn't see any of these, she decided. As long as I tell Kurt it was an emergency later, he'll forgive me, right? He will, won't he? I'm getting nervous.

Ignoring her brother's messages, Ciel returned her tablet to her pocket. There was no way she could tell Kurt that Liam was gone, anyway. She might only be in training, but she was a maid of House Banfield right now, and therefore had a duty to protect their secrets. An aristocrat would normally prioritize their own family over the host family training them, but Ciel decided it would be better to stay quiet in this instance. If Kurt found out about Liam's disappearance, she knew he'd lose it, and House Banfield was in too much danger now for that.

This place is crawling with suspicious people, she reflected. Opportunists were bound to fight over House Banfield. It's rich, and it has tons of assets.

With the head of the family gone, and no heir named, House Banfield would make tasty prey for nearby nobles. They could try to lay claim to the family's wealth and military might by providing House Banfield with "support." House Banfield couldn't even trust the nobles in Cleo's faction right now.

The only reason Ciel wasn't getting out while she could was because she didn't want to simply abandon Rosetta. The missing lord's fiancée was currently lying in bed, crying as she watched videos of Liam. Ciel was about to try to comfort her when a female knight suddenly burst into the room, practically kicking down the door.

The knight's outrageous behavior stunned Ciel. "Wh-what do you think you're doing?!"

The knight—Marie—was breathing heavily, eyes bloodshot. She ignored Ciel's protest and approached Rosetta. "Lady Rosetta, this is an emergency! Villains are here to take over House Banfield!"

When the already overwrought Rosetta heard this, she clung to Marie. "Wh-why?! Darling's not dead! He was just summoned somewhere! Right, Marie?"

Marie didn't indulge her. "Our enemies don't care one way or the other. Some are taking full advantage of the fact that he isn't here. You yourself are in danger now, Lady Rosetta. I'm sure there are fiends who plan to harm Lord Liam's fiancée too!"

Plenty of people disliked Liam, and no one knew what they would do, so Marie had rushed here to safeguard Rosetta.

When Marie suggested Rosetta herself was in danger, Ciel asked, "Lady Marie, can you not drive these people out of the mansion?"

"I cannot," Marie answered curtly.

Ciel was taken aback. Marie would normally have been eager to slaughter them all, but she was uncharacteristically subdued today.

Is that because she's putting Lady Rosetta's safety first? You'd think she'd be on a rampage.

"We must flee for now," Marie insisted, hurrying Rosetta. "It's frustrating, but we cannot defeat them. We must leave for the time being and create a plan for our return."

"I-I can't lead House Banfield," Rosetta protested. "The knights and army will only listen to Darling! He told me not to get involved."

People were here after the financial and political power House Banfield wielded, and Rosetta could do nothing about it. That was at least partially Liam's fault. Since he insisted Rosetta stay out of governing his domain, she held little sway over his followers.

Marie apparently had some sort of strategy, though. "Do not worry. There are

those who share my vision. I will soon have knights and soldiers ready for us on another planet. There, we will raise Lord Liam's legitimate heir!"

"Heir? Er, Marie, I haven't actually..."

Before Rosetta could explain that there was no way she'd bear Liam's child, Marie revealed her scheme. "Not to worry! I saved Lord Liam's genetic material in case something like this happened!"

She took out a box in which a test tube was stored. Rosetta only cocked her head curiously, but Ciel realized what the test tube was right away.

Sh-she didn't! No...she hasn't yet. But she's planning to!

Marie's eyes were crazed but determined. Rosetta hadn't figured it out, but Ciel had guessed Marie's aim.

She plans to impregnate Lady Rosetta with Liam's genetic material?! She can't just create an heir without his permission!

"Now, Lady Rosetta," Marie continued, "let us carry on House Banfield's legitimate bloodline! We won't let anyone usurp Lord Liam's domain!"

At that point, Ciel caught on to the full scope of Marie's plan. *Sh-she plans on impregnating* herself *too!* Marie was going to take advantage of the situation and bear Liam's child as well.

In her agitated state, all Rosetta was focused on was maintaining followers for Liam's return. "I suppose you're right... We should gather knights and soldiers who will obey Darling's orders, so they can support him when he comes home."

Rosetta was taking action for Liam's sake, but Marie was merely pursuing her own interests. Ciel was disgusted with the knight.

What do I do? What am I supposed to do about this?!

She would normally consult her brother in a situation like this, but she didn't think he'd be much help. Whatever mental state he was in was making him send an anxious message every minute. There was no one she could rely on, but she couldn't abandon Rosetta. In the end, Ciel simply decided to go with her.

Things were going according to the Guide's plan, though his copy didn't look very pleased as he watched over the manipulated Marie.

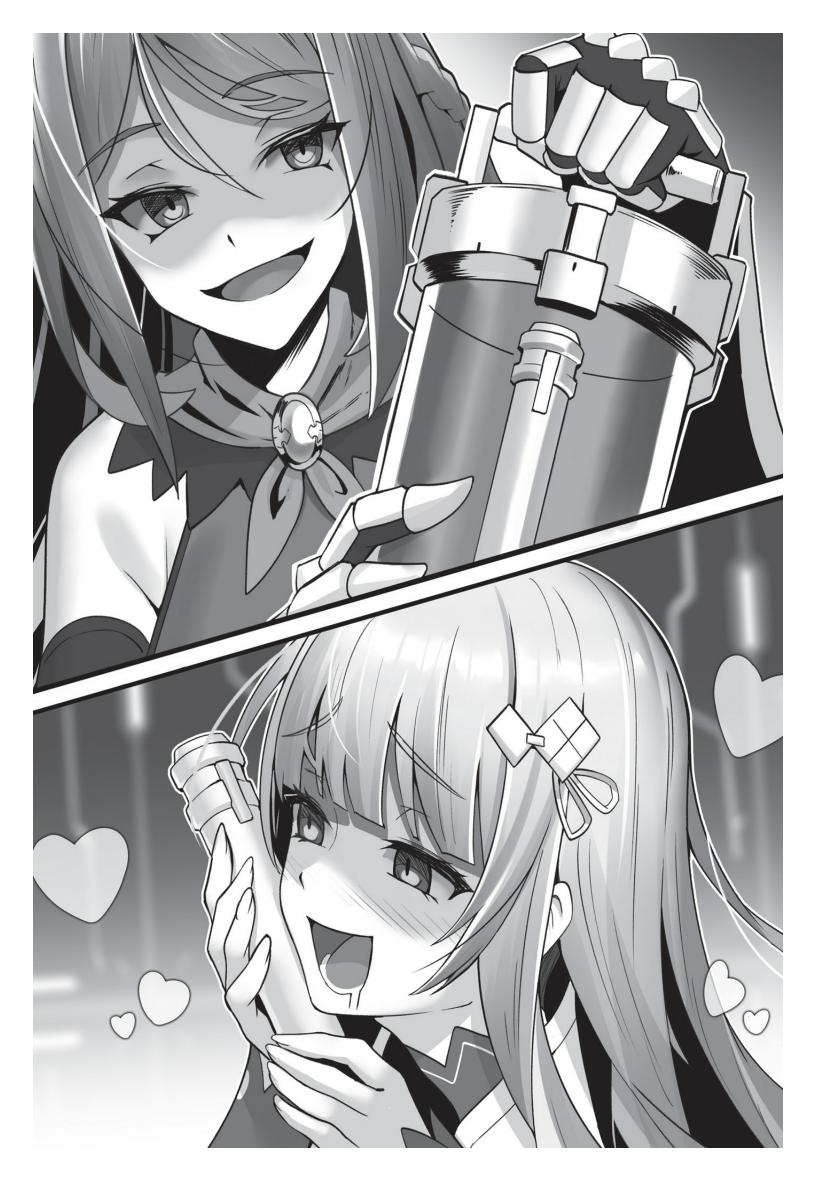
"I gave her desires a little boost, but she shouldn't be going *this* crazy, should she?"

The copy was bewildered at how far Marie was taking things. He felt like he'd just given her a little push, and she'd taken off straight into the sky.

"The original didn't really need to copy himself to manipulate her, did he? If I'd known she was going to react this strongly, I would just have stimulated her desires a little and left it at that. I wasted some energy, huh?" The Guide's copy sighed. "Sheesh... I should just have stuck with the other woman. I'm sure she's not as bad."

The copy envied his other self who'd gone with Tia. Filled with an emotion he couldn't describe, he continued observing Marie.

"Everything will be fine in the end," Tia crooned. "As long as there is a child with Lord Liam's blood, they will be his legitimate heir."



She kissed the test tube containing the precious fluid before stowing it in her pocket. Then she faced her faction of knights, her expression carefully composed. They had gathered on the bridge of House Banfield's former flagship, the Vár, a space battleship over three thousand meters long.

Claudia, Tia's adjutant, approached her. "We're all set, Lady Tia."

"Good. Then let's depart."

Tia had gathered more knights whom she knew to be highly loyal to Liam; they'd abandoned their posts at her summons. She'd even pulled a portion of House Banfield's army to create a decent-sized fleet, though by no means House Banfield's full force.

"Lady Tia, Marie Sera Marian has secured Lady Rosetta and taken a force of knights and soldiers to the Third Planet," Claudia reported sourly. "Meanwhile, she has charged most of House Banfield's forces with maintaining public order within the domain."

Claudia displayed a three-dimensional holographic map of the worlds in House Banfield's domain. Tia clicked her tongue as she looked it over.

"The Third Planet should serve well as a temporary base of operations. She gathered a lot more people than I expected, though."

"It's unfortunate that she won over Lady Rosetta. Many have joined Lady Marie's forces simply due to Lady Rosetta's presence."

"I took Lady Rosetta's popularity too lightly. In any case, what is the Elite Fleet up to?"

The Elite Fleet had fought directly under Liam for quite a while now. They were the cream of the crop among House Banfield's forces, so they were allies Tia wanted on her side no matter what. Claudia was giving her an apologetic look, however. She'd likely failed to recruit them.

"I contacted them, but they weren't interested in hearing me out," she admitted. "They say they'll follow Lord Liam's orders and his orders only. The Royal Guard had the same response."

The Royal Guard was the force of knights that served as Liam's personal

guard. They were a separate unit from the main body of knights, and they'd also rejected Marie's request for aid.

Tia sighed in disappointment, then decided to consider this good news. "Well, that means they aren't siding with Marie either, so that's fine. I'll consider it a plus that they at least won't be our enemies. Anyway, we have to secure a base for ourselves."

Claudia nodded. "I've already contacted the Second Planet and begun sending our forces there."

"Well done. It helps that you're so on top of things."

The Second Planet was another world Liam had developed. It would serve as a suitable base in its current state.

Liam's own people were dividing up the territory he'd spent so much time developing.

Though she had already ordered their fleet to the Second Planet, Claudia still had reservations about Tia's plan. "Should we really abandon our home planet? I believe we are fully capable of wiping out the filth that's invaded Lord Liam's mansion."

They certainly had the power to turn around right now and drive off Isaac and his cronies if they wanted to. If they did, though, Tia couldn't take advantage of their current situation.

"We can't fight a war on Lord Liam's home planet," Tia said firmly. "Don't you think it would be disrespectful to stain his mansion with blood?"

I need to buy enough time to bear Lord Liam's child. It might be tricky to do right away, but once the situation calms down some...

Tia was lying blatantly to Claudia; she knew Baori and Isaac were no threat to her. Not even the former head knight serving as Isaac's guard presented a challenge. However, she couldn't resist her desire to exploit this situation for her own ends.

Tia spread her arms. "All we can do is gather our forces for Lord Liam's return! We'll prepare an army to wipe out these impertinent fools when the time

comes!"

In the meantime, I myself will give Lord Liam an heir! No greater happiness could exist in this universe!

When Liam returned, Tia planned to tell him, "There was nothing else I could do! It was a family emergency!" A family emergency—that was exactly what the out-of-control Tia and Marie were themselves creating. Isaac's invasion of the mansion should have been easily handled, and these two were making things worse by deliberately *not* handling it.

"All forces assemble!" Tia commanded. "We go forth to secure Lord Liam's rule!"

The thousands of ships in the fleet began to move. Watching over them was the copy of the Guide.

"I know I'm manipulating her behind the scenes," the copy said, still mystified by Tia's behavior, "but I honestly didn't expect her to take things this far. She's kind of freaking me out."

Chapter 6: The Royal Guard

Marie HAD GATHERED fewer than a thousand ships to transport and protect Rosetta while they made their way to House Banfield's Third Planet. More and more ships joined them as they headed there, however. These ships did not belong to House Banfield's main army or the forces maintaining order within the domain. They were only small security fleets patrolling House Banfield's territory. By the time they arrived at the Third Planet, the number of ships Marie commanded had swelled to three thousand. Unfortunately, that was still far fewer than what she'd hoped for.

On the bridge of the seven-hundred-meter vessel she was using as her flagship, Marie had opened communication channels to recruit more people to her cause.

"I know you only follow Lord Liam's orders," she said, "but his fiancée Lady Rosetta is onboard under our protection. Don't you think you should side with us?"

There were two people Marie was trying to recruit specifically: the commander of the elite forces, and the knight who led the Royal Guard. Both individuals' faces appeared on the monitor before her, and both looked displeased.

The elite forces commander flatly turned Marie down. "Lord Liam is the only one who can issue us orders. Lady Rosetta's safety is important, but we cannot move without Lord Liam's express instruction."

Marie's face twitched. "So, you won't side with that ground meat—er, with Christiana—either?"

"Correct."

Marie was frustrated that she couldn't recruit the elite forces to her cause, but relieved that they would not join her enemies either. Having to fight the

fleet that had supported Liam for so many years would've been an unimaginable nuisance.

They're so damned stubborn. Speaking of stubborn...

She turned her eyes to a knight with long red hair in a braid. The intelligent-looking woman was smiling faintly. She wore black-rimmed glasses and a black uniform with a purple cape draped over the left shoulder—the symbol of the Royal Guard she commanded.

The Royal Guard was a special branch of knights. They were part of the military, but had a different chain of command. Again, they only followed Liam's orders, but Marie still wanted to get them on her side to secure Rosetta's safety. As Liam's fiancée, Rosetta should surely have been under the Royal Guard's protection by now, yet the knights seemed to have no intention of joining forces with Marie either.

"Is the Royal Guard not willing to do their job?" she asked. "Protecting Lady Rosetta is one of your duties, is it not?"

"Those are strange words to hear from a criminal who abducted Lady Rosetta," the Royal Guard's captain replied. "Although I suppose it is better if she isn't on the home planet right now, considering the situation there."

The elite commander furrowed his brow at that frank description of events, but the red-haired woman didn't seem to care.

"Do not misunderstand, Marie Sera Marian," she continued threateningly. "It is not House Banfield we protect. It is Lord Liam and his blood relatives."

At that, Marie clutched her seat's elbow rests. "So, Lady Rosetta is not worth protecting? Is that any way for a member of the Royal Guard to talk? That's a bell you can't unring, you traitor!" she shrieked.

Balking at the Royal Guard captain's disregard for Rosetta, Marie forgot she was trying to recruit the woman.

The red-haired knight just smiled. "Lady Rosetta is nothing more than Lord Liam's fiancée. We have no orders from Lord Liam to guard her. Oh, but just so you know...if anything happens to her, the Royal Guard will become your enemy."

"Damn you!" Marie shouted, as the Royal Guard's captain ended the call.

Marie's adjutant, a scruffy-looking male knight, shrugged. "They just don't want to get involved."

Marie panted with anger and took a deep breath to regain her composure. "As long as they're not against us, it's fine. But all Lord Liam's personal troops are so damned stubborn."

"I can't stand how tight-assed they are."

"Anyway, we'll reach the Third Planet soon. We can just absorb the army forces stationed there."

Her adjutant smirked, stroking his chin. "I was a little worried at first, but we should be able to muster enough forces to compete with that ground meat woman."

Although they hadn't managed to pull many troops from the home planet, it seemed they'd have enough forces to rival Tia's.

Marie pushed her hair out of her face as her cape fluttered behind her. "As long as we have Lady Rosetta and this fleet, we'll be able to rebuild House Banfield when Lord Liam returns. We can simply crush those who invaded the home planet later."

"Personally, I think it makes more sense to kick them out now, but..."

When her adjutant suggested driving Isaac and his allies out immediately, Marie looked away and said bluntly, "Well, I must admit that, Lord Liam having disappeared, we cannot simply ignore the instructions of his relatives on the Capital Planet. It is the law of the Empire."

"I guess you've got a point there."

Her adjutant didn't seem entirely convinced, but he didn't want to challenge Marie on the subject.

Placing a hand over the test tube hidden in her uniform, Marie revisited her plans. I cannot simply let such an opportunity pass by. We can slaughter those idiots whenever we want, but this is my only chance to bear Lord Liam's child.

Marie was just acting to fulfill her desires. Meanwhile, the Guide's copy sat

against the wall behind her, looking on.

"I mean, this is all right," the copy mused. "I was the one who stimulated her desires, and it was my influence that allowed her to gather this many people to her side. But—how do I put this...? She could've resisted a little more, couldn't she? Where's her morality? Shouldn't there be some conflict between her desires and her sense of responsibility, or duty, or something?"

The Guide had made this copy to puppet Marie behind the scenes, but there had hardly been any need to do so, leaving the copy with time on his hands.

After cutting off communications with Marie, the Royal Guard's captain conversed with the commander of Liam's elite forces.

The commander sighed. "Is it really all right to leave Lady Rosetta with them?" He had expected the Royal Guard to send at least a few people with Marie.

The captain picked up on what he meant. "Marie will protect Lady Rosetta with her life," she replied. "It wouldn't be wise to leave Liam's fiancée on the home planet right now anyway."

The commander crossed his arms and looked at the ceiling. "I had to turn down both their offers. At this rate, House Banfield's army will split in two and go to war with itself."

Liam's mere disappearance had halved the whole of House Banfield, and Tia and Marie were the driving forces, although they'd steadfastly supported the family in the past. That made the situation even more serious.

The captain considered things for a moment before proposing a solution. "Maybe we should take independent action as well."

The commander was shocked to hear her say that. Earlier, she'd insisted the Royal Guard only took orders from Liam. He studied her face; she looked serious. "You're not joking, are you?"

"If we let Isaac and the rest do as they please, we'll eventually be disbanded and likely driven from House Banfield's domain. Or do you plan to switch

allegiance to Isaac, now that he's claimed headship?"

The commander and captain had both heard about Isaac's typical Imperialnoble behavior. They'd investigated the boy and determined him to be unworthy of their fealty. Thus, the commander seemed interested in the captain's suggestion.

"You propose taking independent action, but under whose judgment? I hope you don't think you'll be able to give *us* orders. You may be the Royal Guard, but my subordinates won't follow you."

The elite forces were nothing if not stubborn people. They would only listen to Liam. However skilled and capable the Royal Guard might be, none of the elites would follow their orders.

"Of course not. We are merely Lord Liam's guard. I suggest we leave everything to a reliable knight who can take command of both our groups."

As she made this proposal, the commander was suspicious, but he quickly realized who she meant. "Lord Claus..."

The captain nodded, her face serious. "Lord Liam places the utmost trust in him, and even now, Lord Claus is working diligently to protect House Banfield. I'm sure he would be grateful for any assistance."

"True. And my people will likely agree if it's his commands we're following. But what about you? Don't the Royal Guard follow Lord Liam's orders alone?"

The captain shrugged with a wry smile. "Well, it is an emergency. Besides, if we have no one to organize us, it will impact our search for Lord Liam."

"I understand. I'll convince my subordinates to join you."

Once the commander had agreed to cooperate, the captain smiled and got to her feet. "I'll go speak with Lord Claus."

In his office, Claus was at his wits' end. He couldn't show his consternation to the subordinates around him, of course, so he maintained a neutral expression. The source of his stress was the group of knights in black uniforms standing before him, all of whom had greeted him with a salute.

"As of now, the Royal Guard is under your command. We're cooperating with the elite forces as well, so please make use of both groups as you see fit," the Royal Guard's captain said, her face serious. Then she tilted her head slightly and smiled. "We're looking forward to working with you, Lord Claus."

"Uh, sure."

What is the Royal Guard doing, coming to serve under me?! Claus panicked internally at the captain's offer. He didn't understand why people who normally only obeyed Liam would suddenly want to work under his command. I haven't said a thing to them! This had come completely out of the blue, and Claus had no idea how to deal with it.

His subordinates in the office failed to notice his anxiety, and merely rejoiced over the news.

"The Royal Guard came to Lord Claus for help?"

"That's our Lord Claus!"

"We'll have nothing to fear with the elite force on our side!"

All Claus could do was watch his reputation soar even higher. With Royal Guard members standing right in front of him, he had no option other than to command them—or, rather, to formally request their assistance.

"Lord Liam is the only one who can give you orders," he said, "so all I can do is ask for your help. We are rather shorthanded at the moment, so we would be grateful."

The Royal Guard was surprised by his modest approach, and the captain gave him a small smile. "We appreciate that, Lord Claus. I understand why Lord Liam trusts you as much as he does. In fact, I'm a little jealous."

Claus's only response was to abandon his introspection and focus on the work to be done.

"Well, if you want to help me out, there's something I'll ask you to take care of," he said. Augh...I don't want to think anymore. I just need to focus on doing what I can.

Chapter 7: Miscalculation

YOU'VE GOTTA BE **kidding me.**"

The Guide was stunned by how things were going on House Banfield's home planet. He'd lent Isaac his support, but he wasn't exactly pulling out all the stops as he often did. All he'd done was send Liam to another planet and copy himself to manipulate Tia and Marie, yet those small efforts had thrown House Banfield into chaos.

Liam's disappearance had now been publicized, and his subjects were panicking. Every city in his domain was in an uproar. Trash littered usually spotless streets, and citizens met bright and early to consult one another nervously.

"Hey, did you hear the rumor?"

"About Lord Liam? I asked a friend who works at the government office. He said it's true."

"But why is Lord Liam missing?"

"How should I know?!"

Men yelled at each other in consternation. Women, likewise rattled, huddled together and discussed the situation.

"I heard a rumor he was summoned."

"Lord Liam was summoned? I don't know much about magic. Is that even possible?"

"No way! There's just no chance. House Banfield's mages would prevent that."

"How did he vanish, then?"

"Well, I don't know, but..."

The Guide walked through town, hardly able to believe what he was seeing. Outside one particularly tall building—the government office—he found a group of citizens protesting.

"Publish the truth!"

"Tell us if Lord Liam's okay!"

"Hey! Who just said that?! There's no way Lord Liam could be dead!"

These weren't the festival-like protests Liam's people had held before. There was real unrest here. The agitated protesters—men and women both—were even getting into physical altercations. It was all a happy sight for the Guide.

"How could this be? All I did was send Liam away and egg those female knights on a bit." Given how little work he'd put in, the Guide felt as though he'd hit the jackpot, and the unrest among the populace was an added perk.

"Hey! Soldiers are leaving their posts!" one protestor told another.

"What? Why?"

"Lady Christiana and Lady Marie are gathering them for some project!"

"What in the world are they planning during this disaster?"

The citizenry was perplexed that the two knights had called on soldiers when Liam was absent. Both women had been popular with the masses, so people were especially disappointed at their inexplicable behavior. Negative emotions roiled everywhere.

The Guide sucked them up as if taking a deep breath in the great outdoors. "Th-these emotions are wonderful! How long has it been since I absorbed such delicious despair on this planet?"

Unbeknownst to Tia and Marie, there were *other* problems plaguing House Banfield at present. Chengsi was trying to kill Liam's junior apprentices, for whatever reason, and several government officials were taking action for their own gain.

The military was also dealing with corruption. In the past, House Banfield's military had been made up of diligent individuals, but more and more questionable soldiers joined during its expansion. Thus, many military personnel

were taking advantage of the current situation in an effort to get ahead. That was unexpected but good news for the Guide.

Furthermore, Isaac and Baori were already doing as they pleased within House Banfield's mansion. Isaac was an arrogant child, but Baori and the other adults in his orbit could manipulate him easily. Baori had also reached out to other rotten nobles like himself, and they'd gathered in House Banfield's domain to partake of its riches. Liam's domain crawled with villains in the process of devouring everything he'd built. Like toppling dominoes, one bad thing led to another, throwing House Banfield into more chaos than anyone could have imagined—and all of it was due to Liam's absence.

"It's here! My time has finally come!"

Not even the Guide had expected things would get this bad due to his simply removing Liam from the equation. He clenched his fists, his whole body trembling with joy.

"All right! I'll steal everything Liam treasures, and make him taste despair when he returns! Now, what's his most precious treasure? The alchemy box? Where would that be...?"

The alchemy box was the fantastical device that could transform any scrap into gold. Owning it had freed Liam from all financial concerns. Since the alchemy box was the secret of House Banfield's success—the source of Liam's vast resources—it would greatly limit Liam's future activities if the Guide snatched it away, especially since all the evildoers who had shouldered their way into his domain were whittling down those resources in his absence. By the time Liam returned, no trace would be left of the power House Banfield amassed during his rule.

The Guide skipped toward the alchemy box's location, imagining Liam's unhappiness when he witnessed the crumbling of everything he'd built.

"Oh, it's been so long since I felt this good! I just can't wait to see Liam's look of despair when he gets back!"

In the mansion's basement was a specialized hangar for Liam's personal

mech, the Avid. The facility seemed ridiculously excessive for the maintenance of a single mobile knight. Several large metal rings surrounded the Avid, moving up and down and rotating to scan for anomalies, which were immediately repaired to ensure the craft was in perfect condition at all times.

A small visitor had just entered the underground facility: Liam's student, Ellen. Clutching a blanket to her chest, as well as the sword Liam had treasured, she sniffled and sobbed.

"Where'd you go, Master?"

Liam was missing, so he could no longer supervise Ellen's training in the Way of the Flash. Her fellow apprentices, Riho and Fuka, were busy engaging in life-or-death battles with Chengsi practically every day—they weren't exactly free to take over. No one could teach Ellen swordplay, and she was lonely with her beloved teacher missing.

Searching for a place where she felt Liam's presence, Ellen ended up in the Avid's cockpit.

Imbued with the Machine Heart, the Avid could move of its own volition. It swiveled its camera eye in Ellen's direction when she approached. The Avid normally never let anyone into its cockpit without Liam's permission, not even mechanics. Frankly, it didn't like having anyone but its master aboard. Seeing the crying Ellen, though, it opened its cockpit hatch and allowed her to climb in. After ensuring she was safely inside, the Avid slowly closed the hatch.



Inside the cockpit, Ellen settled into the seat and wrapped herself in her blanket, clinging to the sword.

"Master, please come back... I miss you."

The Avid played music in the cockpit to comfort Ellen as she thought of Liam and cried even more. Once she had tired herself out and fallen asleep, the Avid continued to quietly await Liam's return, as it had been doing before.

That was when an uninvited guest showed up in the hangar: the Guide.

"Oh my," he said. "I didn't think you'd hide the alchemy box here, Liam. I doubt anyone would suspect that. Inside your favorite little robot, eh? I'm glad you still don't trust human beings in the slightest."

The Avid could detect the Guide's presence. Sensing the being's malicious intent, the Avid accessed and activated the hangar's security system. Gatling guns and laser weapons emerged from the walls, instantly aiming at the Guide.

"You can sense me? Robots with Machine Hearts are rather troublesome, I see," the Guide remarked, impressed.

As he did so, fire began to spit from the guns' muzzles. Bullets and lasers rained down on the Guide, but in his present state, none ended up reaching him.

"It's useless! Did you really think crude attacks like this would take me down, now that I've regained my strength?!"

Up until recently, the positive energy of Liam's gratitude had kept the Guide in a constant state of weakness, but prior to that, the entity had been far from weak. Now, feasting upon the roiling unease in House Banfield's domain, the Guide had almost returned to the level of power he'd known in his prime.

The Guide extended his right arm, and the bullets and lasers changed direction, impacting safely away from him. Determining that the security system would not stop this intruder, the Avid forcefully removed its own locks, ripping its arms free from the clamps and bolts keeping them in place.

"Oh, you want to fight me?" the Guide asked.

He floated up from the ground to the level of the Avid's cockpit. The Avid

raised both arms, attempting to crush the Guide between its hand-like manipulators, but the Guide spread his own arms and halted the attack. The enormous Avid was losing a contest of strength with the slender, human-sized Guide.

"I won't lose to some scrap iron Liam's not even piloting! Once I have the alchemy box, I think I'll destroy you! I'm sure Liam will be devastated when he returns and you're gone!"

With a cackle, the Guide exerted more force. He held his hand toward the Avid's cockpit, and telekinetic force twisted its hatch open.

"You think you can stop me with—huh?"

When the hatch opened, the Guide saw a small golden sword hovering in the air with its blade pointed at him.

"Wh-what?!"

The Guide froze, knowing that the energy sword was poisonous to him. What was something like this doing inside the cockpit? He realized the answer lay in the small girl sleeping in the craft. Liam's beloved sword, full of mysterious power, had been clutched in Ellen's arms. She wasn't a longtime swordswoman, but Ellen practiced the Way of the Flash. She must have sensed the Guide's enmity in her sleep and responded unconsciously. Liam's beloved sword amplified her feelings, producing this blade to threaten her adversary.

The Guide broke out in a cold sweat.

"Master..." Ellen murmured before the Guide could flee.

The sword responded to Ellen's sleep-talking. It multiplied into several blades, all of which pointed straight at the Guide.

"St-stop! G-g-g-girl, stop that this instant!"

The Guide panicked, but the sleeping girl couldn't hear him. One sword suddenly flew toward him at an incredible speed, plunging into his temple. The Guide toppled back onto the floor, even as the rest of the energy swords rushed at him. As they stabbed him, his body crumbled into black rags until all that was left was his top hat. Arms and legs quickly sprouted from the hat, and he ran

away pitifully.

"A-and I just revived, too! I-I'll remember this!"

As it watched the Guide flee, the Avid gave thanks to the sleeping girl for saving it, resolving to become stronger.

Glowing lines of energy almost like blood vessels appeared across the Avid's outer surface as it restructured itself internally. The twisted cockpit hatch returned to its original shape as the Avid self-repaired—and self-evolved in order to become mightier.

"Malice! I will bring wholehearted malice to this domain!"

The Guide, now reduced to just a hat, was collecting all the negative energy he could in Liam's domain. He'd decided to make Liam's absence known throughout the Empire, attracting pirates and nobles with ill will to his territory.

"I'll destroy everything you've built, Liam! Mwa ha ha ha! By the time you return, your domain will be a wasteland!"

With his body destroyed by Ellen, the Guide was turning to acts of desperation out of sheer annoyance. An idea suddenly occurred to him.

"I know! I'll lend Calvin my aid as well! He won't let this opportunity go to waste. Yes, I'll involve him in this, too!"

The Guide was determined to support Calvin in destroying Liam's domain.

"I'm lucky," I murmured, lying in bed.

Kunai—who stood at my side—nodded. "I believe that's true, but what brought this on?"

Kunai normally guarded me quietly, but I was bored with no one else to talk to, so I'd pushed her into chatting. I was her employer, after all, so I felt entitled to a conversation here and there.

"Just thought I felt a little good fortune coming my way," I replied.

I'd had a strange premonition, but not a negative one. Rather, it had felt like

more good luck.

Kunai tilted her head, not understanding. "You can sense that?"

"Of course I can. I have a god of good fortune on my side. Anyway, tell me how things are going."

Kunai had sneaked out among the demon lord's army. She reported her findings. "The enemy army plans to send soldiers into the city before dawn to open the gates from within. The city will fall easily."

"Erle Kingdom can't defend it?"

"At this point, their army is nothing but children and the elderly. The enemy forces, on the other hand, are made up of experienced warriors."

"Experienced warriors, eh?"

From our perspective, of course, neither side seemed particularly formidable. Still, the enemy was probably pretty strong by this planet's standards.

"I believe the demon lord's army will take the capital easily," Kunai concluded.

"Even with a hero on their side?"

"I can't imagine a single, inexperienced girl will turn the tide of battle. Of course, Master Liam, it will be a different story if you participate."

I had no interest in this country's survival, but I wanted someone to be left to serve me. A little time remained before the battle would begin, though.

"Get some rest. I'll do the same. Just wake me up before dawn."

"Please do not concern yourself with me. I will be fine without rest."

Having enhanced her body and undergone special training, Kunai could function for several days without sleeping. That didn't change my mind, however.

"Resting when you have the opportunity will improve your efficiency. What I want from you is peak performance and results. Just follow my orders as given."

I fixed her with a stern look, making sure she knew I wouldn't take no for an answer.

Kunai slumped her shoulders. "Yes, sir."

She disappeared into the shadows. I lay back on my bed, keeping my guard up for potential threats. "Well, I'm looking forward to seeing what happens next."

Kanami followed Enola into the city. The streets were full of people covered in dirt and mud who had fled nearby towns. Enola took the refugees' hands, trying to reassure them.

"Everything will be fine. We will triumph."

"Your Majesty..."

There were many very old and very young people, and most of the remaining adult men were missing limbs. Anger at the demon lord's army welled up in Kanami at that sight. At the same time, she felt herself tremble with fear. She was only familiar with war as a concept, never having experienced it herself. She'd only seen tragic things like this on TV, in pictures, or on the internet, and those images hadn't truly felt real until now.

"This is awful."

Overhearing her, Enola nodded. "Yes, it is. We've done nothing to deserve this, but the demon lord is bent on tormenting us. We summoned you and Lord Liam to have a fighting chance against him."

In truth, Kanami had been less than thrilled to be summoned initially. She'd complained about Liam's attitude, but it wasn't as if she didn't have her own frustrations about their circumstances. Now, though, she felt differently. All that awaited her back on Earth was her miserable old life. She preferred being here, where people needed her. She'd been a bit sad to learn that, having been summoned, she'd never get to return. But seeing how things were here, she'd come to want to help, if she could.

"Will you fight with us, Lady Kanami?" Enola asked.

Kanami looked across the city and nodded. "I will. Do I really have the *power* to fight, though?"

"You do."

Enola took Kanami to the training grounds for knights and soldiers. There, children around age fifteen had taken up weapons, receiving lessons from men who could almost be called elderly. Hardly any men between the ages of twenty and fifty were left, so some women participated as instructors. Kanami was astonished to see people her age taking up weapons.

Enola addressed the group. "Someone please serve as the hero's opponent."

When they noticed the queen's presence, everyone lined up. An old man stepped forward in response to her request and took a stance in front of Kanami. In his fists, he gripped the hilt of a real sword.

"Huh? We're fighting with real weapons?" Kanami said.

"If that's all it takes to surprise you, you won't last in a real fight," the man responded in a low voice.

Kanami's eyes widened when the man slashed at her, and she drew the sword at her waist. To those around her, the movement likely looked controlled, but inside Kanami was panicking.

No way! Everyone else looks so slow!

To her, it was as if everyone was moving in slow motion. She wondered for a moment if they were tricking her. As she deflected the old man's blow, her sword somehow broke his blade in half. With the duel already finished, everyone's movements returned to normal.

As everyone reacted with shock to Kanami's movements, Enola explained what had occurred. "A strange power dwells within summoned heroes. Legend says they're stronger than the average person. And, when they fight, their enemies' movements seem slow."

"I-it's pretty amazing being the hero, huh? Everyone really did seem to be moving slower."

"With that power, I'm sure you can defeat the demon lord."

Seeing Enola so full of hope, Kanami thought, *This makes me almost* too strong. If everyone else is moving in slow motion, I really will be able to fight. Having finally realized the power she possessed in this universe, she was

excited. With these abilities, I'll be able to survive the war, right?

Her doubts having lessened somewhat, Kanami looked up at the castle walls. Beyond them, the enemy closed in on the capital. *I'll fight. I'll save these people.* She'd been a nobody on Earth, but now she had a grand mission. Kanami was starting to feel like she had a real reason to exist in this world.

Maybe I can atone for betraying my father.

I looked through my chamber's window and saw it was bright outside, despite it still being late at night. Countless torches were lit atop the city walls, and the kingdom's army was striving to resist the demon lord's attack.

"The beastfolk have the advantage," Kunai observed. "This country's soldiers are simply too weak."

I smiled at her report. "It's interesting to see a country get destroyed firsthand."

This was kind of luxurious, in a sense. Outside, Erle Kingdom's army was fighting for their lives while I spectated from my bed.

"So? What's Kanami up to?"

"After her disparaging comments about your attitude, Master Liam, she claimed she would drive the enemies back herself. I imagine she won't last much longer."

Kunai apparently didn't like Kanami much. I couldn't fully trust her report if she was biased.

"I heard she's manifested the hero's power," I replied. "So, she's not weak, is she?"

It had been my understanding that Kanami was supposed to obtain some amazing power upon being summoned to this universe, but according to Kunai, that still wouldn't push the enemy back.

"She received the power to fight, but she's had almost no time to prepare herself. I highly doubt she will fight effectively with so little training. Strength won't prevent her from dying if she doesn't know *how* to fight."

I sighed. It was true, suddenly receiving raw power didn't grant someone success in a war. In other words, the abilities Kanami had gained didn't amount to much in the end.

"Erle Kingdom just buckled down too late," I said. "If they had summoned a hero before they became this weak, they would have had more time to train her properly."

You could give a person power, but if you just threw them into a battlefield, they wouldn't be any use. I sympathized with the queen, but they hadn't handled the situation well.

"Master Liam, it's almost time," said Kunai, giving me the reminder I'd requested.

"Guess I should get going, then. I'd like to see those beastfolk, after all."

"You're interested in beastfolk?"

"Sure I am."

Nitta had often remarked on the appeal of animal ears. Beastfolk seemed to be fairly standard in fantasy, and when such beings were involved, there were always plenty of beautiful girls. Of course I was interested.

I stood and stretched, then left the room with Kunai in tow.

It was nighttime. Woken by Enola, Kanami armed herself in the dark by the light of a candle. Maids assisted her with shaking hands; they must have been terrified.

"They attacked this late at night?" Kanami was surprised that the enemy launched their raid at such an hour.

So was Enola. This was out of the ordinary. "Night battles are usually avoided, since there's a higher chance of mistaking your allies for enemies. But I suppose those concerns are meaningless to beastfolk."

Kanami's own hands shook as she faced her first real battle. I'm scared. I should be strong now, but I'm so scared.

Enola held the girl's hand, entrusting Kanami with her hopes. "Lady Kanami, please protect us. Please defend my innocent subjects from the vicious beastfolk."

Enola didn't strike Kanami as very queenly. She pictured noble queens and princesses as haughty and arrogant, but Enola wasn't like that at all. She was sweet and kind. Kanami smiled at her, wanting to be her strength.

"Just leave it to me."

She's always thinking about her citizens. I guess that's because she's royalty.

Atop the castle walls of Erle Kingdom's capital, a fierce battle was taking place. The beastfolk had invaded in the night, and the kingdom's army was trying to fight them off. Brawny beastfolk had successfully climbed the walls and engaged the human soldiers.

A beastman crushed a human fighter's head. "Weak, so weak! We could never lose to humans!" he shouted.

When Kanami arrived at the battle, she found the humans dropping like flies. Anger filled her when she saw the corpses piling up on the wall.

"You won't get away with this!"

The beastfolk just guffawed at Kanami. "Look, a woman!" one called. "They must be all out of real soldiers! We've won this war alrea—h-huh?"

A deep wound gushing blood had opened in the laughing beastman's gut. He hunched over, clutching at it.

Kanami trembled when she saw the damage she'd inflicted with the bloodied sword in her hand. She could still feel the sensation of cutting into the creature.

Th-this is war...

The look in the beastfolks' eyes changed when they realized how Kanami could move.

"Kill the girl!"

"Hurry! Kill her! Otherwise, we'll—"

More beastfolk lunged at Kanami, but she deftly avoided their attacks. She saw every move they made long before it arrived, so it wasn't difficult to dodge their strikes. The beastfolk could only react with shock as Kanami sliced into their arms and legs, immobilizing them. It all happened in an instant.

"Hahh..." Kanami was out of breath after a mere few seconds, mostly due to mental fatigue. She was already exhausted, yet she'd incapacitated the enemies who'd come at her. She didn't have to worry—she could really do this. As she realized that, the humans around her rushed in with their spears and started impaling beastfolk.

"Die! Die!"

"This is for what you did to my son!"

"All hail the hero!"

The soldiers cheered for Kanami as they finished the beastfolk off. Before Kanami even realized what was happening, most of the beastfolk who'd scaled the walls were dead. A few managed to flee, but the battle ended with Erle Kingdom's victory.

"We've won!" knights cried, elated. "We've won!"

Kanami couldn't believe what she'd just seen. The enemy couldn't even fight back anymore.

The beastfolk had been helpless after she'd injured them, but the human soldiers hadn't hesitated for a moment in finishing them off. The thought terrified her.

As the sun rose at last, Kanami sank to her knees.

The Lion General Nogo swung a giant battle-axe down on the beastfolk who had fled the castle walls.

One beastman tried to make an excuse. "W-wait! The hero—"

"My army needs no deserters," Nogo said coldly.

After cutting down the beastfolk who'd failed him, Nogo looked up at his

assembled fighters, his face bloodstained. "Whether they have a hero or not makes no difference. If scaling the wall isn't the answer, we have no choice but to break down the gates. We will take everything from them!"

He raised his battle-axe, and the beastfolk cheered.

Watching this, Glass clicked his tongue quietly. "Just blundering in? We'll lose a ton of men again."

Nogo was strong, to be sure, but he had no mind for tactics. Crushing his enemies with nothing more than his own brute strength excited him, but the level-headed Glass preferred methods that didn't lead to excess casualties.

Chino stood next to Glass. Her eyes twinkled. "It's finally time for the battle, Father!"

Glass put a hand on his innocent daughter's head, and her ears drooped happily. Out of concern for her well-being, he gave her some words of advice. "Do whatever it takes to survive. Only those who survive become strong."

"I'll defeat all my enemies and make everyone see that I'm strong like you, Father!"

"You don't need to do that. Just—"

Before Glass could caution Chino further, the clamoring beastfolk suddenly went silent. Intense pressure emanated from within the castle walls. Even Chino, who had been upbeat a moment earlier, trembled with her tail between her legs.

"F-Father, what is that? I-is this what the Demon Lord feels like?"

Glass glanced at Nogo. Apparently it wasn't, since Nogo appeared just as wary of the odd sensation.

"All troops, ready yourselves!" Nogo commanded his army.

At his words, the clans immediately fell into formation, raising their weapons. None of the beastfolk retained the relaxed air they'd had before sensing the pressure beyond the wall.

Nogo motioned to one of the tribes with his chin, ordering them forward. The beastfolk obeyed and promptly charged the fortress gates. No arrows rained

down as they approached the walls. Instead, the gates simply opened the moment the beastfolk reached them, as if to invite them inside.

The beastfolk were confused, but if the gates were open, what option did they have but to hurry in? As they did so, however, the whole group vanished in an instant.

"What?!"

Glass's eyes widened in shock. His allies had simply disappeared? That was how it had seemed, but a second later, he smelled blood around the gate. When he strained his eyes, he saw *pieces* of the beastfolk who'd charged the gates scattered around the area. Some of their remains had even reached the feet of the rest of the troops.

He had no idea what had just happened; all he saw beyond the open city gates were the streets of Erle Kingdom...and a lone man. The man smirked at them, a slender sword resting against his shoulder. Then he raised his free hand and beckoned in a gesture that said, "Come at me."

Nogo's mane bristled with rage. "You think you can provoke me?! All troops—charge!"

As the beastfolk surged forward, Glass alone was held back by his instincts, which told him it was too dangerous to enter the city. He felt many of the beastfolk likely realized that, but resisted their instincts and charged forward with the rest, since they knew Nogo would kill them if they defied his orders.

"Ugh!" Glass was so confused, he hesitated in telling his own clan to move, and they lagged behind the others.

"Father! Order us forward!" Chino urged, noticing that they were being left behind. "We have to charge too!"

Despite Chino's insistence, Glass was too terrified of the man beyond the gates to move. However, Nogo's orders were absolute. If Glass defied them, Nogo would annihilate his whole clan—even the family members the warriors had left behind. His face twisted with dismay.

"We charge!" Glass finally ordered.

As the wolves howled and joined their advancing comrades, sweat poured off Glass. He could not silence his own protesting instincts.

Chapter 8: The Biggest Villain

Liam stood in the square just inside the castle gates. He was surrounded by soldiers holding bows, who trembled at the approaching horde of beastfolk. Kanami and Enola watched from a safe distance, unnerved. They had no idea what Liam planned to do.

"He suddenly decides he's joining in and orders us to open the gates?" Kanami said in disbelief. "What is he thinking?!"

Kanami didn't know much about war, but she understood that gates should be defended. Enola felt the same, and she'd had no intention of granting Liam's request. Contrary to her will, however, the gates *did* open.

Enola couldn't believe her eyes. "I gave no such order! Who opened the gates?!"

The knights and soldiers around her were just as confused. "W-we sent several men to check, but none have returned!"

What was happening? The beastfolk who charged the gates went flying the moment they neared Liam. They pretty much exploded like water balloons full of gore.

"He has a katana. Where'd that come from?" Kanami asked, noticing the weapon Liam carried. She was confused; she couldn't remember seeing a katana in the armory.

Enola didn't recognize Liam's blade either. "Do you know what that weapon is, Lady Kanami?"

"I-I'm not sure...but it looks like an old weapon people used to use in my country."

She hadn't seen any katana in Erle Kingdom, but for some reason Liam had one. What was going on? Kanami had no idea, but the beastfolk didn't wait for her to ponder it further. They charged through the wide-open gates, howling

wildly.

Enola clasped her hands together and prayed. "Oh God, please protect us."

Drawing her own weapon, Kanami started toward Liam to back him up. However, the second wave of beastfolk charging through the gates likewise burst into countless flying pieces, as if some kind of invisible wall had repelled them.

The next group of beastfolk froze in their tracks, unable to comprehend what they'd seen, but their comrades behind them pushed them forward. As the third wave passed through the gates, every single one of them was blasted away. Kanami pitied the beastfolk shoved forward by their allies.

Liam cackled loudly as blood drenched the area around the castle gates. "Weak! Too weak! They fly away before I can even cut them!"

All this time, Liam had appeared merely to hold his sword, yet he spoke as if he was attacking their enemies. Kanami focused on his movements. He didn't seem to be swinging the sword at all, yet how many beastfolk had he repelled at this point?

The beastfolk finally seemed to realize what was happening and stopped rushing inside, instead backing away from the gates. That just caused Liam to step outside, however.

Kanami and Enola climbed the castle wall to see what he was about to do.

They were all so weak, I just knocked them aside with the pressure my sword exerted. How many hundreds of enemies had I sent flying just now?

"Now then, who's leading this bunch of weaklings calling themselves the demon lord's army?"

Trampling weak opponents to display my overwhelming strength never failed to exhilarate me. I was not one of the downtrodden; I was the boot. A villain!

I left the city to find it surrounded by beastfolk. One tall, leonine man with a large battle-axe stepped up to face me. From the other beastfolk's attitudes, I knew he was in command right away.

"You the demon lord?" I asked, looking at the lion in front of me.

The lion swung his axe in response. "Mere human!"

I almost yawned, he was so slow. I dodged his attack at the last second, making sure he could tell it was easy for me. "I'm asking if you're the demon lord," I repeated. "Answer me."

When he swung his axe at me a second time, I kicked his leg out from under him. I grabbed his mane when he stumbled and slammed him to the ground.

The lion's eyes were wide with shock. "Wha—?! H-how can you hold me down with those tiny arms?!"

"The density of our bones and muscles is different, that's all. Anyway, are you the demon lord or not?"

"I'm not."

He struggled, attempting to escape my grasp, but struggling was all he accomplished. This guy had an extra-beastlike appearance for his kind. He was pretty much a bipedal lion. I figured if Nitta had seen him, he would've said "This ain't it!" in disapproval. The guy did have "cat ears," but I didn't think Nitta would be into him.

As I threw my weight around, other beastfolk drew bows and shot arrows at me. I knocked those out of the air. To the beastfolk, it probably looked as if their arrows simply vanished before reaching me. They shouted in surprise. Then the beastfolk archers were dragged down into shadows that appeared at their feet. It was Kunai, who believed that anyone who dared attack me should not be allowed to live. I appreciated how passionate she was about her work. After disposing of the beastfolk within the shadows, Kunai tossed their bodies out onto the ground. The other beastfolk cowered in fear at the sight.

I released the lion, but he sprang to his feet and swung his axe at me again. Couldn't he at least listen to what I had to say? I was forced to dodge once more before resuming our conversation.

"Where's the demon lord? I want to meet with him personally. Take me to him."

"The demon lord is far more important than the likes of you humans!" the lion snarled. "It would be disrespectful to allow you to meet with him!"

Disrespectful? To meet me? Guess he doesn't know that I far exceed this demon lord in importance. At that point, I lost all interest in the lion.

"Oh yeah? Die, then."

If I unleashed a Flash on him, as I had the others, he would've been blown apart completely. Instead, I went out of my way to draw my sword from its sheath and behead him slowly. The surviving beastfolk rounded on me, rage in their eyes.

"Simmer down," I commanded.

They froze. As I attacked, I swung my katana slowly enough for them to see the movement. Dozens of beastfolk heads flew from their shoulders. This time, they had to be aware of exactly what I was doing. They finally quit coming at me and fell silent, and I took that as a sign that they were willing to listen to me now.

"You have two choices. Obey me, or resist and die. Go ahead and choose."

The beastfolk looked to one another. It seemed they finally understood the difference in strength between us. The brawny warriors knelt, knowing they were no match for me. What a wonderful sight!

You'll just have to curse the queen who summoned a villain like me as a hero.

It seemed all the beastfolk had admitted defeat—except one who leaped out in front of me. There was hardly anything "beastlike" about her. She was basically a human with dog ears and a tail; she looked like a girl cosplaying. I pictured Nitta giving her a thumbs-up.

"I-I-I represent the w-w-w-wolf..."

She'd jumped before me as if to challenge me, but she stammered so badly I barely understood what she said. Those canine ears that should have stood straight drooped pathetically, and her fluffy tail curled between her knees, which knocked as she trembled. Clearly, she was terrified.

Incidentally, I was a dog person. I'd had a dog in my past life, and when I

scolded it, it had trembled and dropped its tail just like that. This girl made me remember that dog fondly.

"I-I-I... I-I..." She was desperately trying to convey something.

I had run out of patience. "Are you a dog? If you're a dog, I'll allow you to live."

"Mnaddadog!"

Ugh! I have no idea what she's trying to say! She was far too afraid of me even to speak more, yet I found it utterly adorable. She was suddenly cute beyond belief, now that I'd noticed she was doglike.

I decided to help the small beastwoman relax. "Calm down. Come on, take a deep breath," I told her, sheathing my blade.

"Foooh... Haaah..."

She was so stupidly cute, taking a deep breath after her *enemy* told her to. Recalling my past life made me wish I had a dog again. I wasn't sure about getting an actual pet, though. Their lifespan was the issue. Given my longevity in this universe, a dog's life would be over in an instant for me. I could probably extend its life to a degree, but we'd still part incredibly soon after meeting. That just sounded painful.

What about this girl in front of me, though? If I enhanced her physical abilities with an education capsule, it would extend her lifespan, too. Yes, that might just work out.

Finally able to speak, the girl introduced herself. "I am Chino, daughter of Glass, the strongest warrior in my clan!"

"Oh yeah? So...are you a dog?" I didn't care whether she was a warrior or whatever—just whether she was a dog or not.

Chino's face flushed with anger. "D-don't ridicule us! We are proud—"

I was disappointed; it seemed she was going to tell me she wasn't a dog. But a voice yelped from somewhere yelped, "We're dogs!"

I looked in the voice's direction and saw a group of beastfolk that resembled Chino. They must have been her clan.

Chino's eyes widened with surprise at her comrade's shout. "Father?! We are proud wol—"

"We're dogs. We are dogs, Chino."

"Huh?!" Chino seemed to balk at the man's assertion.

"Who're you?" I curiously asked the beastman who'd spoken up.

"I am Glass, Chino's father. May I ask your name, sir?"

Seeing Glass kneel before me put me in a good mood, so I told him what he wanted to know. "I'm Liam Sera Banfield—your master, as of today. Serve me. Revere me. Obey me! Whoever among you would rather disobey me, step forward now, and I'll put down every last one of you."

At this proclamation, the beastfolk lowered their heads at once. Watching every single one of them bow their head fearfully before me was really great.

Chino alone seemed to disagree with her fellows. "Um, I'm a wolf! I'm not a dog!"

Which is it? I asked Glass with my eyes.

He shrugged with an awkward smile. "Chino admires wolves deeply. Ever since she was small, she's insisted she was one. She's really a troublesome girl."

"Oh, really?" Hearing that just made me want Chino even more. "How cute."

A doggo who thought she was a wolf. I knew Nitta would be over the moon about how endearing that was. All in all, Chino was just too cute for me to handle.

While I marveled at Chino, Glass had a suggestion for me. "Master Liam, as a gesture of our tribe's submission to our new master, I offer you my daughter, Chino."

"Really? Are you sure? Your daughter?" Just like that? I was shocked.

Glass was completely nonchalant. "It will not be a problem."

Hmm...they don't seem to care much about their kids in less-sophisticated civilizations. Well, I guess it isn't that different in the Empire. Its citizens could be just as prone to treating people as if they were expendable.

"She is about the age when she should become independent, anyway," Glass told me, looking at his daughter.

I'd thought she was just a kid, but I guessed she was whatever age passed for a young adult on this planet.

Chino wasn't having it, though. "Father, please wait! I don't want this!"

"Just do as I say." Glass was firm with his disobedient daughter. "Can't you see the survival of our clan is at stake?"

Chino cringed at her father's harsh glare, looking exactly like a chastised dog. My affection for her grew by the minute. My dog from my past life really had sulked just like Chino was doing. This one exchange alone made being summoned to this planet worth it. I'd escaped Brian *and* obtained a cute new pet—what more could I ask for?

"Well, all right," I told Glass. "I'll take good care of your daughter. Also, like I said, I'm your people's new boss starting today. Just keep in mind that I'll destroy all of you if you defy me."

Having tamed the beastfolk, I returned to the fortress city triumphantly.

Liam sat on the throne in the castle's audience chamber, speaking with the kingdom's top brass about the beastfolk.

"The demon lord has minions...?"

"Yes. There are four of them, including the late Lion General Nogo. They call themselves the Elite Four."

"Yeah, I'll pass. I don't care about fighting them," Liam decided. "I'll just go straight to the demon lord and finish this."

He was barreling toward defeating the demon lord without even asking anyone else's strategy. Kanami's irritation grew as she listened to him speak.

"Wh-what is wrong with you?!" she asked. "These Elite Four are tormenting people, and it doesn't even occur to you to help them?"

Liam couldn't have cared less about the havoc the Elite Four were wreaking

throughout the kingdom. "What's it matter? Taking out whoever's at the top is the most basic goal of a war. Stay out of it, amateur."

"A-amateur?" Kanami was insulted.

Liam looked at her coldly. "You have no right to rake me over the coals when you can't even bring yourself to finish off enemies. You hesitated, didn't you? You won't be any use out there. Just stay behind here in the castle. Don't worry. I've got time to kill while I'm here, so I'll take down the demon lord for you."

"Time to kill..." To Liam, his horrific fight with the beastfolk had been nothing more than sport. Kanami balled her fists, hung her head, and clenched her teeth. "Do you even know how many people died?" she eventually squeezed out.

She thought back to what she'd witnessed earlier. The young knight who'd been so affected by her words about giving people the benefit of the doubt had perished. They'd spoken only a few hours ago, but now he was nothing more than a corpse. That saddened Kanami beyond words.

Liam, however, looked at her as if she'd made a remark about the weather. "What of the death toll? That's no fault of mine. It's their war. In fact, they should be thankful. I'm the only reason they weren't completely wiped out."

"You're a hero, too, aren't you?" Kanami shouted.

"Sure I am. That's why I saved them. Which reminds me, I haven't received any thanks yet. Enola, I suggest you hurry up and hold me a victory banquet."

In response to Liam's haughty demand, Enola stepped forward. "Sir Hero, our victory is indeed thanks to you. However, I heard nothing about inviting beastfolk into the castle and allowing them to serve you."

"Well, I didn't tell you, so of course you didn't hear about it. It's not like I need your permission."

"Our people have long been tormented by the beastfolk. They will be no more satisfied with this development than I!"

Erle Kingdom had quite a few grievances with their enemies. Kanami couldn't articulate a response to Enola's frustration, but Liam had an easy reply for her.

"Who said I had to ensure *you* were satisfied? Satisfied or not, I don't care. Who do you think you're talking to?" He had no respect for their feelings.

A young knight drew his sword and pointed it at Liam in righteous indignation. "How dare you speak to Her Majesty that way! Not only do you invite beastfolk into our home, you disrespect our ruler! We don't want anything to do with you anymore, and we'll kill every one of those beastfolk besides!"

The other knights and ministers in the audience chamber agreed, airing their grievances with Liam.

"How can you call yourself a hero?"

"Lady Kanami is all we need!"

"Arrest him!"

Everyone in the audience chamber was getting worked up. Kanami understood their anger. She wasn't sure they should really call for Liam's arrest, but ultimately, she didn't intervene. *Nothing I can say would stop them.*

She didn't want Erle Kingdom's army to slaughter beastfolk indiscriminately, but their own families had been killed. She couldn't give them an easy platitude like "killing is wrong." In the end, she knew she didn't have the words to persuade them.

Liam slowly stood—then, in the blink of an eye, he was at the side of the young knight who'd drawn his sword. He decapitated the knight with his bare hands. The noisy audience chamber went silent; everyone understood what had happened quickly. They stared at Liam, aghast, as he scowled at the blood on his hands in disgust.

No way! Wh-when did he even move? Kanami hadn't even been able to follow Liam's motions.

"Don't get the wrong idea," Liam said to all present. "You guys aren't the victors here; I was the one who won that battle. You're nothing more than survivors. The beastfolk submitted to me. That makes them my property. Any trash who would lay their hands on someone else's property should die."

Everyone was speechless as Liam declared himself the sole victor.

"Y-you can't mean that!" Enola protested, unable to accept what he'd said. "Do you have any idea how much blood we've shed?! To claim victory is yours alone... How could you be so arrogant?"

Kanami joined her, unable to stand Liam's attitude. "Could you be any more of a jerk? Haven't these people suffered enough?"

Seeing Kanami and Enola protest so passionately, Liam chuckled. He clutched his stomach, his laughter growing loud.

"Shed blood? Suffered? It's hilarious how you think that means something."
Kanami couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Now Liam lectured Queen Enola. "Do you think you share this victory because you shed blood? Or because you're doing your best as the person in charge? Are you stupid? Of course you did your best. That's your responsibility! It isn't even worth mentioning."

Enola stepped back, cowed by Liam's attitude.

Liam just moved forward as if to say he wouldn't let her escape. "People like you piss me off. Should you really be worrying about your pitiful subjects right now? Instead of singing their praises, try doing your job."

"Singing their praises...? Wh-what do you know about me? I am doing what I can for my people, who have endured so much already!"

"Because singing their praises is *all* you can do, right? Well, you're scared. I can't blame you. You don't want your subjects revolting and destroying your country from within."

Enola paled and gasped. Liam had hit the nail on the head.

Kanami couldn't help but notice. "Queen Enola?"

When Liam saw Enola turn away from Kanami, he seemed to lose interest in the queen.

"All losers need to do is obey the winner," he added. "Don't worry. If you side with me, you'll at least get to ride my coattails."

Chapter 9: A Family Squabble

On the Capital Planet, Calvin was holding a meeting. The topic of discussion was House Banfield's current confusion. The nobles in Calvin's faction couldn't hide their excitement at Liam's disappearance.

Watching their meeting from the shadows was the Guide, still in his diminished hat form.

"Time to make your move!" he exclaimed. "With my assistance, you can ransack Liam's domain all you want!"

The Guide egged them on behind the scenes, not caring how desperate he sounded to his own ears. The nobles didn't hear his comments, but the look in their eyes changed.

"Your Highness, this is an opportunity. We should attack Liam's domain with everything we have! If we do, surely we'll win!"

His allies were getting riled up, but Calvin was as calm as ever. "We'll lend aid to anyone who wants to take action quickly. But we will make no moves ourselves."

The nobles reacted with surprise to Calvin's words.

"We won't? Why not?"

"What?!" the Guide screeched. Calvin apparently didn't intend to take advantage of the opportunity before him, and in the Guide's current weakened state, he couldn't manipulate the man.

Calvin calmly went over the reports in front of him. "It's difficult to believe Liam could be caught like this. If summoning magic was all it took to throw House Banfield into turmoil, we would never have had so much trouble with them in the first place. I'd say there's a good chance this is a trap."

When Calvin held firm that House Banfield must have possessed measures

against summoning magic, the fire in the nobles' eyes went out, and they regained a sense of composure.

"I-it's true there's a *possibility* it's a trap, but would House Banfield go so far? Things really are breaking down in their domain. Are you sure we shouldn't hit them with everything we've got right now?"

Calvin was just as aware as the other nobles of the opportunity before them. Still, he had no intention of getting involved in the situation.

"There's no need to set foot in the trap he's set for us. If it turns out this isn't a ruse, House Banfield's power will weaken without our interference."

The nobles exchanged glances.

"Even if Liam manages to return, the mess he'll come back to will take years to clean up."

"Decades, in the worst case. Maybe even longer."

"No need to get involved. Rather, we should take this chance to build our own strength."

They all agreed with Calvin.

The Guide was not pleased with this turn of events. "Fight, cowards! Isn't this your big chance? Why are you chickening out now? I'm supporting you here!"

The tiny-limbed hat pounded its fists on the meeting table furiously.

"We are House Banfield's legitimate successors! I, Christiana Leta Rosebreia, will carry out Lord Liam's will! Death to whoever opposes us!"

"We who shelter Lady Rosetta are House Banfield's true successors! I, Marie Sera Marian, declare here and now that everyone who opposes us dies!"

On House Banfield's home planet, Claus found himself sweating bullets. For reasons he couldn't fathom, he had taken command of House Banfield's Royal Guard, and Liam's elite force had elected to follow him. Claus was well aware of his mediocrity as a knight, so his situation was frankly ludicrous. Still, he approached his work earnestly, focusing on the tasks in front of him as best he

could. Although...

"What do you mean, Lord Liam's two most trusted retainers betrayed him?!"

Tia and Marie were central figures in Liam's knight corps. Claus knew just how strong both were, and Liam obviously placed a lot of trust in the women, despite the way he spoke about them.

Yet in his absence, those two knights had revolted, each claiming they should run things with Liam gone. Tia had begun commanding a fleet without permission, while Marie took Rosetta and started gathering security and defense forces to support her cause.

"I knew they didn't get along," Claus muttered, "but I didn't think they'd start their own revolts. What do they think they're doing at a time like this? Not to mention..."

House Banfield was inundated with visitors, most of whom were trying to exploit Liam's absence to profit in some way.

"I heard House Banfield is without an heir. I'm related to the head of the family preceding the previous head, so I thought I should come provide whatever aid I'm able to."

"The heir should come from our family. House Astread was once a branch of House Banfield. The leaders of Prince Cleo's faction are backing me, so I demand to be made standing head of the house."

"I'm carrying Lord Liam's child—honest! This baby is the next head of House Banfield!"

These opportunists swarmed them from dawn to dusk almost every day, clearly after nothing more than House Banfield's wealth and influence. Claus was the only person in a position to deal with them, despite having other tasks to take care of. To make matters worse, space pirates strayed into House Banfield's territory constantly, and dealing with them fell to Claus too. His stomach was killing him, and the two top knights who should have been his allies were aggravating his nausea.

"Shall we exterminate every single one of those traitors, Lord Claus?" one of his people asked him. "Lord Claus, if we kill them, you'll become head knight for sure!"

"Now that you have the Royal Guard and elite force on your side, no one can stand against you, Lord Claus!"

His hot-blooded subordinates were trying to promote him—and trying to get him to battle Tia and Marie. Claus gave them firm orders, desperately enduring the pain in his stomach.

"Maintain the status quo! We must protect the home planet until Lord Liam returns."

Claus had no desire to exploit this crisis to get ahead. He remained focused on nothing more than keeping things running. His subordinates weren't happy about that, however.

"Well, if those are his orders, we'll follow them..."

"I still think he'd be guaranteed the head knight role if he made use of this situation."

"Lord Claus is the one person protecting House Banfield now. Shouldn't he get more recognition?"

They were mostly complaining about Claus's circumstances, not Claus himself. Still, Claus was aware of their feelings, and they made him nervous.

Th-this isn't good! At this rate, my men will blow everything up and start a war! Lord Liam, please come back!

Keith and the knights who'd accompanied Isaac acted as if they owned House Banfield's mansion. They wholeheartedly believed they were House Banfield's true knights, since they'd formerly served the family for generations.

They were kicking back in a luxurious lounge meant for the family's top brass, opening expensive bottles of alcohol to enjoy as if it was their right. Joining them in the lounge to feast and drink were those cozying up to the new management. It wasn't just the three government officials. Some of the mansion's human maids, servants, and even military personnel turned up. That showed how many people had joined House Banfield out of ambition, not

loyalty, during Liam's rapid climb to success.

Among the revelers was one of Calvin's spies, along with an operative from another country. Both aimed to add fuel to the fire while House Banfield was in chaos. Keith knew about the operatives, but left them alone, simply because they were actually cooperating with him. He believed their assistance could help reinstate him as House Banfield's head knight.

Enjoying another glass of expensive alcohol, Keith reflected on the current state of House Banfield. "I'm impressed by the growth they've achieved in the last hundred years."

Beautiful women in dresses and maid uniforms saw to his every need. Keith's skills as a knight notwithstanding, his enjoyment of women and liquor marked him as the worst kind of man. And he was basically a traitor to the family; he'd abandoned House Banfield when Liam was young.

As one might expect, the knights who served a man like that were treacherous ruffians themselves. They'd ransacked the mansion, bringing whatever treasures they found back to the lounge and divvying them up.

"Check out this sword! This thing's jaw-dropping!"

"I found a state-of-the-art mobile knight in the hangar. It's my personal craft from now on, got it?!"

"Hey, I want a personal craft too! Would you find me one?"

They were more like bandits than knights.

Finally, one knight did something unthinkable. He returned to the lounge dragging a maid robot—one of the mass-produced units working in the mansion. Her clothes were torn, her joints destroyed by his mistreatment. Having reached the lounge, the knight seized the maid robot's head and tossed her in front of Keith and the other men. Oddly, the maid robot strove to escape them. Seeing her struggle with her mangled joints made the men burst into laughter.

"Liam's a serious pervert to have dolls like this all over the mansion!"

"He has no pride as a noble. He's just some brat trying to look cool by hunting

pirates."

"Hey, it's 'cause of him we can live it up like this. How about showing a little gratitude?" one knight said with a mocking laugh.

"Won't it be a pain if he comes back?" asked another, acknowledging that they could only do as they liked because Liam was gone.

"No need to worry about that," answered Keith. "Prince Calvin will support Lord Isaac's ascension to head of the household."

"Really, Keith?"

"It would benefit him for Lord Isaac to run the family. Liam is Prince Calvin's enemy, after all. So there's no doubt about it."

As Keith said this, he glanced at Calvin's spy, who nodded and smiled in confirmation. Even if Liam returned, there would be no place for him here.

Uncertainty dispelled, the knight trampled the maid robot. "Then it won't be a problem if we break Liam's little dolls, will it? It makes me sick to see them wandering all over the place."

He raised his foot to stomp on the robot again, but a voice rang out in the lounge.

"What do you think you're doing?"

It was Brian.

Keith stood, rolling his eyes at Brian's indignation. "It's bad for your health to get so angry, old timer."

Despite Keith's mocking manner, Brian reproached him, red-faced. "Living it up in the lounge from the crack of dawn?! Destroying the mansion?! Laying hand on Master Liam's personal belongings?! Release that maid robot this instant!" Brian gazed at the mangled robot anxiously.

Amused by his attitude, Keith taunted the butler. "What is there to be scared of? It's just some doll. They're all the same, aren't they?" He kicked the maid robot over to Brian.

"Tateyama?! L-look what they've done to you..."

Seeing that Brian's face had blanched, Keith reached the wrong conclusion. So, he's scared to stand up to a first-rate knight like me? I suppose I should give him credit for even trying. Still, he's a little too rude.

Keith took great pride in his status as a knight, and found it infuriating to be challenged by someone without that status—case in point, a butler like Brian.

"Don't make me angry, Brian. I can use my authority to have you dealt with, if need be. If you wish to keep serving House Banfield, I suggest adjusting your behavior toward me."

Brian's eyes narrowed at Keith's arrogant attitude. "If I'm required to betray Master Liam, I'd rather leave this mansion."

"So devoted. Can't say I understand your loyalty, myself."

"I doubt you could. You abandoned House Banfield, after all."

"We just left to protect Lord Cliff. The new blood here is awfully arrogant, though. They could use some education, don't you think?" Keith believed he and his followers were House Banfield's true vassals, and Liam's knights were nothing more than greenhorns.

Rather than dignifying Keith with a response, Brian simply picked up Tateyama and started from the lounge. "Let's get you fixed up, Tateyama. Don't worry, everything will be all right."

Seeing Brian speak to the maid robot as if she were human, Keith and his cronies laughed derisively.

In the doorway, Brian issued one final warning to his former coworker. "Master Liam is a compassionate person, but he can be frightening as well. I would prepare myself for his return if I were you."

"That is frightening!" Keith raised his hands in mock surrender. "Do you really think I'm scared of a guy who isn't even here? Anyway, by the time Liam makes it home, everything in this domain will belong to Lord Isaac."

The invading knights and other traitors laughed.

Horrifying rumors flew through House Banfield's mansion that day.

"You can't be serious!"

"I-it's true. I saw a knight abuse her."

"I-I heard she got broken! This is terrible! We'll be punished, too!"

These human maids had been pale since that morning, but quickly composed themselves when the head maid Serena came along.

"You're being noisy," Serena scolded them. "This household's maids must carry on with their work even at times like this."

The maids looked anxious.

"M-Ms. Head Maid, um..." stammered one. "Well... We heard the knights who took over the mansion broke one of Master Liam's personal servants." The human maids weren't allowed to call maid robots "dolls," so they'd termed them "personal servants." "Do...do you think we'll be...?"

The maids trembled, but it wasn't Serena they were afraid of—it was Liam.

Understanding that, Serena reassured them. "Why would you be punished if you weren't present for the incident? If anyone was to be punished, it would be me, the one responsible for them. Do you understand? Now, get back to work."

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

As the maids left, Serena manipulated her bracelet device, displaying a hologram in front of her. It was a chart of her subordinates' attendance records. Several hundred of her workers had been absent, not counting those who were ill or on paid leave. The incident with Tateyama, however, had spurred about half of those cozying up to Isaac to return to their posts. They must have figured out just how terrible the newcomers were, just as the frightened maids had.

"These numbers aren't as bad as I expected," Serena mused.

She had thought there would be more traitors, but her subordinates were more steadfast than she'd guessed. In addition to being a supervisor, Serena was an educator, and she was pleased to see her students excel. They weren't *all* excelling, however.

"We do have underachievers. Or are they just too ambitious?"

There were still maids trying to get close to Isaac rather than returning to work, although they should have known Liam would never abide someone damaging Tateyama. If that incident hadn't given those maids pause, there was no saving them. Serena simply wrote them off.

Lying in my bed in the castle, I chatted with Kunai, who sat upright beside me.

"I identified the individuals who sent those assassins, Master Liam," she informed me. "A minister and several generals were involved."

"Yeah? Well, dispose of them," I told her curtly.

Kunai looked pleased to receive this order. Is she a workaholic?

"Yes, Master Liam! May I ask what you intend to do about Kanami? Shall I dispose of her at the same time? She's entirely too disrespectful to you."

Given Kunai's capabilities, she could likely destroy Kanami, but I couldn't bring myself to get rid of the girl. "Leave her be—things are fine for now. I get the feeling she'll be fun to tease."

"Are you sure?"

Kunai was probably confused because I was usually ruthless. For some reason, though, I didn't want Kanami eliminated. I just found myself wanting to tease her more. It was a strange feeling.

"I'd rather amuse myself with her than get rid of her," I insisted. "I want everyone who's plotting to kill me dead, though."

A minister and some Erle Kingdom generals had wanted to assassinate me because I allowed beastfolk into the castle. In their position, I'd probably have felt the same way, but that wouldn't get them off the hook. Anyone who sent assassins after me needed to be prepared for the consequences, simple as that. If you tried to kill someone, you couldn't very well complain when they killed you instead.

"This group was apparently prepared to assassinate the heroes even before you were summoned," Kunai informed me.

"What? When they summoned us, they were ready to kill us? Typical. I guess

I'd do the same... Who am I kidding? No, I wouldn't. That's nuts."

Say you were in so much trouble that you had to summon a hero for help. Banking on assassinating that hero would just be stupid. If you'd summoned them because you couldn't kill a demon lord, how could you kill the eventougher hero? If you were able to accomplish that, you should just have assassinated the demon lord to begin with.

Any country that ended up in this position was beyond help. They'd clearly gotten what was coming to them.

"If the queen's incompetent, everyone else around here is going to be incompetent," I complained.

"I have to say I agree, Master Liam."

Kunai agreed with me about everything. I found myself hoping she didn't end up like Tia and Marie. That thought made me worry about whether the two knights were behaving themselves in my absence. I didn't want to consider the mayhem they might cause—and there was no point doing so at the moment, so I stopped. For now, I was busy poking holes in this country and its problems.

"That queen really—"

A knock on my door interrupted our chat.

Even with the door closed, I guessed who had come to see me. "What does Kanami want?"

Kunai pulled the door open for me, vanishing immediately as she revealed Kanami's scowling face.

"This is all your fault!" Kanami cried.

"Huh?"

She'd come in swinging, but I wished she'd at least be more specific. I didn't know what was supposed to be my fault, or why. I could guess, though.

"I can't read minds. You'll have to give me more than that," I teased, smirking.

Amusingly, that irritated her even more. "I'm talking about Queen Enola! She's pretty much our age, and she had to take responsibility for an entire

country! How can you be so cruel to her? You made her feel bad. You're supposed to be a hero!"

What is she saying? Does she just sympathize with that pathetic queen because she sees her as a good person? What an idiot.

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"She's a ruler," I said.
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I sighed at the depth of Kanami's ignorance. "Neither age nor gender matter for rulers. All that's required is that they do their duty."

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"Still..."
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"You really are stupid."

"St-stupid?"

Kanami looked enraged. It amused me so much that I decided to teach her a thing or two, although I recognized that it was pretty out of character for me.

Why did I have a hard time leaving her alone? Just because she shared my daughter's name? They weren't the same person. This was a different world, a different time, and actually reuniting with my daughter would be beyond miraculous. The likelihood was practically zero; it was just unthinkable. If we ran into each other despite that, it would be preordained. But fate wouldn't bridge the gap between me and my daughter. We'd turned out not to be related by blood, and nothing emotional connected us, either. In my own way, I had tried to raise her with love, but in the end it was pointless. That was why I didn't like kids.

"Would you tell Erle Kingdom's casualties 'Your queen did the best she could! She's really kind, and a good person!'? How would the people whose families were killed react to that?"

"W-well, they might not accept it. But I'm sure—"

"You really don't understand anything."

Ultimately, a ruler required ability above all else, especially in this kind of aristocratic system. Morality had to be a secondary consideration. Enola might have been a good person, but as a queen, she was a failure.

[&]quot;So what? She's still a young girl."

I knew from personal experience what happened if a ruler had ability, but not ethics. If you took a piece of crap and made him king, his subjects would treat him like a sage so long as he improved their circumstances. Any ruler who made citizens' lives better was hailed as wise and benevolent, regardless of their character. Valuing morality over ability was stupid. All people got from raising up an incompetent saint was poverty and starvation.

I knew I was a failed ruler myself—in terms of lacking humanity—but I worked around it. Deceiving my subjects allowed me to represent myself as a great ruler while doing as I liked. Fortune smiled on villains like me.

Kanami hung her head. She seemed to have brains enough to get the gist of my little lecture.

"When your subjects are in jeopardy, 'doing your best' is expected—obvious. Wanting praise just for that is childish. A ruler who can't produce results is worthless to her subjects."

"B-but..."

"Go tell the people who lost their families and homes to go easy on Enola, and see what they say. 'Sorry it wasn't enough, but the queen did her best!' Ask them if they forgive her. Would *you*, after hearing that? Can you really say you wouldn't hate her? You're defending the wrong person."

"Ugh..."

"The queen doesn't want to help her people," I added, when Kanami couldn't find the words to refute me. "She only wants to help *herself* by appearing kind in other people's eyes. She wants to be let off the hook when everyone sees her doing her best."

I could have gone on, really. I wasn't one to talk, but there were a ton of things about that queen I took issue with. Of course she was a good person, commendable in plenty of respects, but she was the worst ruler possible.

I mean, I'd never given a crap about my subjects. I just wanted them milked by heavy taxes. And since they'd humiliated me with those protests about an heir, I needed revenge on them. I made a mental note to increase taxes as soon as I got back. "I can guess exactly what kind of people your parents are," I told Kanami. "You must have been raised by fools. What did they think they were teaching you, anyway?"

To frame it positively, Kanami was a good girl who was considerate of others. In my past life, I'd wanted to raise my daughter to act similarly. But I'd been wrong about many things back then, and I'd obviously been wrong about *that*. This girl behaved like a fool with no idea how the real world worked.

Kanami glared at me, anger plain in her eyes. "Don't talk about my dad like that."

"Huh?"

"Don't insult my dad!"

"What? You love your papa that much?"

"Not my papa! My dad. Just don't insult him."

Her reactions to the two words suggested this "dad" of hers had instilled her wishy-washy compassion, which really pissed me off. It was terrible to think there was another gullible sucker out there, acting like I had, and that his flawed thinking had infected his daughter.

"I see. Unfortunately, it's easy to see your dad is a bumbling fool who taught you ignorant nonsense. I'm guessing he told you crap like 'you should be nice to people.' I bet he'll pay for it, too. Maybe he already has. I can imagine what kind of miserable end he—"

"Stop it!"

I must have been right on the money about Kanami's worthless father. Her fists trembled; she was about to draw the sword at her waist.

Kunai rose from Kanami's shadow and punched her in the gut, knocking her out. The woman's eyes were crazed, and she pulled out her knife to lop off Kanami's head.

Gazing at the unconscious girl, I knew she was the victim of a worthless father, but I also knew she actually loved him. That was the big difference between Kanami and her dad, versus me and my daughter. I grabbed Kunai's

arm, preventing Kanami's head from rolling. "Down, girl."

"Do you mean that?! She tried to draw her sword on you, Master Liam!"

"She kept me occupied. Take her back to her room—and don't lay a hand on her, hear me? She's my toy, remember."

Looking at Kanami, I felt jealous of this "dad" of hers. He might have been a fool, like I was in my past life. But to his daughter, he was good father worthy of love.

As Liam looked into the distance thoughtfully, something sat despondently in the corner of his room, watching him—the unseen spirit of a dog. This dog was saddened to see Liam assume his daughter hadn't loved him as he compared himself to Kanami's father.

The dog slipped through the castle's walls, headed for Kanami's room. Inside, Kanami sat on the floor, crying, legs pulled to her chest.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I got so mad when he insulted you, but I had no right to be angry after how I betrayed you."

The dog brought his face close to Kanami's, but couldn't touch her; there was no way to comfort her. Frustrated, he left the room to go help Liam somehow.

Climbing to the highest point in the castle, the dog let out a long howl. The sound carried all the way to Liam's drone, which hovered in the sky transmitting its distress signal. The drone amplified the dog's howl, sending it farther out to call to those whom Liam needed.

Chapter 10: The Demon Lord

A HUGE SHIP SAILED through space toward House Banfield's domain—Liam's new flagship, to be precise.

This ship was a superdreadnought more than three thousand meters long. As a specially commissioned, bleeding-edge ship constructed by the Imperial Army's talented Seventh Weapons Factory, it was a frighteningly capable vessel. It was also ludicrously expensive, crafted to Liam's exacting specifications from a truly staggering amount of rare metal.

On the ship's bridge, an engineer cavorted with wild abandon. She was collecting data during their flight to deliver the craft, and she couldn't hide her excitement at the readouts displayed on the monitor in front of her. Tears flowed from her twinkling eyes as she rejoiced over the technological marvel she had seen to creation.

"Amazing! I want to show these numbers to everyone who ridiculed me saying they were only theoretical! Just look at this data! It's exceeding even the expected values! The energy conversion efficiency is outrageous! And the *performance!* I doubt I'll ever see a more capable ship than this! Ahh, my own talent frightens me sometimes!"

As she rubbed her cheek against the monitor, the House Banfield soldiers who had come to collect the finished ship looked on. Even among the top soldiers, they were the cream of the crop, the most elite of Liam's fleet. They took the important delivery they'd been entrusted with very seriously, but they watched Nias's antics with exasperation.

"Is she aware of the position she's in?"

"She's a perfect example of talent being unrelated to personality."

"Look. She's rolling around on the floor. I can't watch this. Shouldn't somebody stop her?"

Displaying this unbearably eccentric behavior was Engineering Major Nias Carlin of the Seventh Weapons Factory. She was a highly talented individual who had known Liam a long time, but there were several drawbacks to her personality. It was hard to criticize her excitement, however, despite how cringeworthy it seemed to those around her. After all, the completed ship's functionality exceeded even her expectations.

The ship's owner, though, was still missing.

Unbothered by that, Nias kept observing the monitor's data with a dopey grin. In the process, she noticed something unusual. She immediately began tapping the keyboard with a much more serious expression.

As she investigated the strange readings, tilting her head left and right in confusion, Nias eventually discovered the source of the curious data. "Oh! It's picking up a distress signal. Looks pretty far away, too. My baby's so talented, picking up a weak signal like this! Mommy's so proud of you!"

No one commented as Nias cooed to the battleship, kissing the monitor. They likely didn't want to get involved. The captain, however, shot from his chair and rushed to scrutinize the monitor, bowling Nias over in the process. As she hit the floor, she made a sound like a squashed frog. Again, no one commented.

The captain checked the signal's source and exclaimed, "Contact the home planet about this distress signal immediately! Tell them to gather every friendly ship they can!"

Set on edge by the captain's attitude, the bridge crew scrambled into action.

One of the Elite Four, Nogo, had been defeated.

Seated upon his castle's throne, the demon lord Gorius was a wavering black flame with a vaguely humanoid shape, but no physical form. Two sharp lights in his head of black fire—his eyes—narrowed hatefully. "I share my power with him, and he lets the humans take him down? Pathetic."

He had sensed Nogo's death without even receiving a report. Gorius had imbued each member of the Elite Four—not just Nogo—with a fragment of his power, so the death of one of the four meant losing that power. A trifling

amount of power, compared to the demon lord's full might, but its loss was frustrating all the same.

"In the end, beastmen are worthless. At least Nogo's troops did their part terrorizing the humans. His loss matters not, since his campaign yielded far more power than I entrusted to him."

Gorius did not eat to sustain himself; he absorbed negative emotions like malice, despair, and fear. When the humans grew too numerous, he'd left it to the beastmen to wage war on them and gather their negative energy. The humans' terror filled Gorius's belly, so to speak; he'd long since recovered the strength he'd passed on to Nogo. Still, that didn't make him less annoyed.

"I didn't think the humans had anyone capable of defeating Nogo," he mused.

As Gorius fell into thought, his subordinates kneeled before him, heads bowed. One spoke up, hoping to improve the demon lord's foul mood.

"Please allow me to rectify this, my lord!"

"No, give me this chance!" another cried.

"I'd be better suited! I will defeat the human who bested Nogo!"

Gorius's gathered subordinates clamored over who would slay this human.

The demon lord was sick of them. Do they hope I will share my power with them, as I did the Elite Four? Hmph. I've tired of manipulating these weaklings. I need to hurry and gain control of this world.

Gorius had been defeated by heroes several times, but when he was vanquished and peace was restored, humans started their own conflicts anew without his influence. As long as they continued to create strife, negative emotions would accumulate, and Gorius would use them as fuel to restore himself. Each time he revived, he only became more powerful.

Have the humans finally summoned a hero? At this point, it hardly matters. A hero will not be able to defeat me now. I have already surpassed the abilities of a mere demon lord.

Gorius was no longer anything like the version of himself heroes had slain in the past. He was confident enough in his current strength that he did not panic, even after learning of this hero's existence.

Enough of this. I'll kill my minions and decimate the humans myself. That will create more negative emotions to feed on, further strengthening me.

As he decided this, a bloody giant arrived at the audience chamber. Though he knew his entrance was impolite, he shoved the double doors open roughly, rushing inside to make a report.

"M-my lord, the beastfolk betrayed us! They've entered the castle with the hero leading them! Their...charge..." Upon beginning his report, the giant collapsed and expired.

The demon lord's eyes narrowed to slits. "Oh? He's here to claim my head himself? What a bold hero."

In her castle's audience chamber, Enola wore an anxious look. The cause of her anxiety was Liam's march on the demon lord's castle. Acquiring the demon lord's location from the beastmen, Liam had left the capital heedless of Enola's attempts to stop him. To make matters worse, he had taken the beastmen with him.

In the audience chamber, a number of the kingdom's key figures were meeting to voice various complaints about Liam.

"I can't believe he advanced on the demon lord's castle without our knights!"

"Why didn't he seek our assistance?"

"To fight with beastmen at his side, of all things? This is unprecedented!"

However strong Liam was, they were sure he would need the kingdom's help to defeat the demon lord. There was nothing he could do all by himself; he'd have to acknowledge them eventually.

But Liam had never counted on Erle Kingdom's military strength in the first place. Three days after defeating Nogo, Liam took some beastmen and left for the demon lord's castle. He'd left the majority behind, since the amount of food and water they could take was limited. The group he led wasn't even one hundred strong. According to Liam, though, bringing more would be pointless.

That wasn't all that was on Enola's mind. Before Liam left, a strange woman who identified herself as Liam's servant delivered a bag of severed heads to Enola's court. Everyone who understood the gesture's meaning had gone pale. They were surprised the dead men had taken it upon themselves to have Liam assassinated, but more than that, they were frightened of Liam's ability to kill important figures without anyone noticing. According to his servant—Kunai—these men had been unworthy of Liam's trust. Kunai had also told Enola's court to prepare for Liam's return, and that Liam's people were on their way.

Some of the words she'd used had been difficult for Enola and her court to comprehend. The queen recalled them as she sat gripping her staff. I don't know what she meant by "intergalactic" or "spaceship," but she definitely said Lord Liam's companions were approaching.

If Liam's allies were coming here, utilizing strange methods like a "spaceship," Erle Kingdom should be ready to give them a grand welcome. Unfortunately, although Enola had originally intended to foster a friendly relationship with Liam, the assassination attempt had done irreparable damage to that potential.

"What do we do?" one minister fretted. "If Liam's people come to retrieve him, there will be war between us!"

"But how can that be true? It's impossible for someone from another world to retrieve a hero without summoning magic!"

"What if they have abilities beyond what we can imagine?"

Enola glanced at Citasan, the court's wielder of summoning magic. "Citasan, could Lord Liam's compatriots show up here?"

"There is no way, Your Majesty," Citasan replied confidently. "I summoned individuals capable of defeating a demon lord from other *universes*, and sending them back to their homes is impossible. It was a one-way trip. That supposed servant of his was bluffing."

The response reassured Enola, but at the same time she thought, What terrible magic. It's unfair that we can bring them here, but not send them back.

Thinking about Kanami made Enola's heart ache. She might have been a failed ruler, but she was a good person, as Liam said.

Suddenly, a soldier burst into the somber meeting. "E-emergency!" he shouted. "The demon lord's army is floating above our city!"

The demon lord's army was invading—and Liam was gone.

Upon storming the demon lord's castle, the hero slaughtered every soldier, elite or not, who stood up to him. Watching this take place in front of him, the demon lord Gorius was intrigued by the hero's power. The human's single-edged sword wasn't a saber; it was shaped in a way Gorius had never seen. Its *material* was what really interested him, however.

"That's not mithril, is it? So, is it orichalcum?"

As the hero stood before Gorius blithely, the demon lord guessed the material from which his blade had been forged. The hero was dressed only in casual clothing, not armor, and there was no sign that he was at all nervous.

"Hunh. You know your stuff," the hero said.

Gorius was impressed that humans could craft weapons from orichalcum. That rare, precious metal was incredibly difficult to use. "I applaud the effort obtaining that orichalcum must have taken. I don't know how you processed it. Humans are capable of surprising things when driven into a corner, aren't they? Unfortunately, that weapon won't even scratch me."

Orichalcum was stronger than mithril, but still no threat to Gorius, who had surpassed his physical form. Mithril actually *could* harm Gorius, but there was no reason to tell the hero that.

The hero didn't react to Gorius's words. A moment later, the throne the demon lord sat on split apart beneath him. Gorius's burning eyes widened in surprise for a second, but quickly narrowed to bow-like arches as he chuckled ominously.

"I have no physical form. You cannot cut me!"

The hero stood before him with his head cocked, a curious look on his face. His sword skills had taken Gorius by surprise, but as long as the human used physical attacks, the demon lord had nothing to fear. Even most magic attacks

wouldn't work on Gorius. The one type that could defeat him was holy magic, which humans had a limited ability to use. Even if the hero cast holy magic, it wouldn't be potent enough to defeat Gorius—hence the demon lord's supreme confidence.

Gorius stood above his shattered throne, his body of black flames flickering. "I wonder how long it took to build that power of yours. Such a pity. Even with your orichalcum sword and superhuman technique, this is all for naught."

Gorius enlarged his flame body as he loped toward the hero. By the time he reached the human, he was a looming giant of black flame at least six meters tall.

"Everything you've done is to no avail!" Gorius told the hero, peering down. "Shall I tell you what I feed on?"

The hero furrowed his brow, evidently taking umbrage at the demon lord's condescension. "I have no interest in you."

After coming this far and learning how powerless he was, he remained cocksure. Gorius found himself even more interested in the boy.

"Heh heh! Quite confident, aren't you? I look forward to seeing how long you keep that up!"

He brought his fist down swiftly at the hero, but all that did was smash a hole in the castle floor.

"Oh? You dodged that, eh?"

The hero's athleticism surprised Gorius, but still, the demon lord didn't doubt his own superiority. It hardly mattered that the boy could dodge his attacks. Gorius was incorporeal, but the hero was human—eventually, he would run out of strength and be unable to elude the demon lord.

As he lashed out, Gorius kept chatting to show the boy how self-assured he was. "I have fought countless heroes in the past!"

The hero remained calm as he dodged the attacks. He even had the peace of mind to respond, "Oh yeah?"

Gorius struck with both hands several times per second—dozens of times per

second. Yet the hero dodged every single blow.

Gorius kept up the conversation. "I've been defeated again and again, but every time, I revived. In other words, I am immortal."

Even when Gorius stated this, the hero didn't react.

The demon lord could only imagine that the boy must be frantically devising a way to defeat him. "Trying to think of how to best me, hmm? I'm sorry to say it won't be possible. Neither swordplay nor magic will do the trick. After all, I'm no less than an amalgamation of pure hatred!"

At that, the hero finally showed some interest. "Pure hatred, you say?"

"That's right! Malice itself! So long as negative energy exists, I will return again and again! Defeat me as many times as you like! Each time I revive, I become stronger! Weapons, spells... No attack will affect me anymore! Even if you *could* defeat me, I would simply come back! Do you know why? Because I can never be destroyed so long as you humans exist!"

Gorius brought his hands together and slammed them down on the hero like a sledgehammer. Delivered with all his strength, the strike not only shattered the castle's floor, it caused cracks to radiate across the ceiling and its support pillars. The castle was already beginning to crumble, but Gorius didn't care. It was worthless to him now.

"So long as humanity exists, I cannot be defeated!" Gorius repeated, unleashing punches and kicks at the elusive hero.

The demon lord almost landed several blows, but the hero avoided his fists just in time. Gorius unleashed a kick at the spot the boy fled to, but he sidestepped that as well.

"I'll revive as many times as I need to, as long as your kind is around!" Gorius bellowed at the heavens as his castle crashed down to a hill of rubble around him. "I am evil itself!"

His black flames flickered as he laughed loudly—until a flurry of thousands of slashes suddenly cut him into fragments. The flames quickly reunited, however, and Gorius was good as new.

He was impressed by the boy's shocking abilities. Of all the heroes he'd fought, this was surely the strongest. "I respect you for not giving up under these circumstances. You are strong, but that is all. Even with an orichalcum sword, no matter how hard you've trained, you can never surpass me so long as you remain human." It was impossible for the demon lord to lose.

Before the supremely confident Gorius, the human hung his head and appeared to shake. The demon lord believed he was trembling with fright, but when the boy raised his head, his face was tense with seething anger.

"You're evil itself? You shouldn't patronize humankind—weakling!"

"Evil itself"? Who did this guy think he was? It was thanks to humans' negative energy that he could survive at all, but he acted like he owned us. Sure, there was likely no one on *this* planet who could stand up to him, but he was taking humanity lightly.

"You're too dismissive of mighty humans!" I told him. "We're sustaining you, so know your place."

"Wh-what?"

I shouldered my sword and glanced down at my bracelet, noticing its blinking light. "If you'll revive so long as humanity exists, that means you can't survive without us, doesn't it?"

When the demon lord fell silent, I looked up at the sky. Our battle had destroyed the castle roof; I could see dark clouds above us.

"An insignificant being like you probably can't comprehend this," I continued, "but you're not the height of evil—humans are." It's laughable for you to even speak of evil.

The demon lord didn't seem to understand. "What are you saying?"

Prior to me, he'd probably only fought weaklings. He couldn't fathom the human civilizations beyond this planet. If he couldn't even take those into account, he would never go further than this.

"You think you're evil, when you can't even take control of one planet? The

number of people you've killed doesn't amount to a fraction of those *I've* murdered!"

How many people *had* I killed? And how much had I destroyed? I'd ended so many lives, I couldn't even count. This "demon lord" reminded me of a neighborhood bully—a small-time chump playing king of the hill.

"Have you killed hundreds of millions?" I demanded.

At that number, the demon lord's fiery eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How would I keep track? If you're going to lie, be more realistic. There couldn't possibly be that many humans."

This was his opinion, after coming back to life so often?

"There are hundreds of billions! Even more than that. And I *have* killed hundreds of millions."

I'd massacred pirates and other enemies. A single battleship sometimes contained over ten thousand people, so when I shot one down, how many died? Countless people cursed me; I was far more feared and reviled than the demon lord before me. If anything, I was evil itself. This wimp had no right to call himself "evil" in my presence!

"Can you hear the voices of the dead?" I snapped. "If you can, listen closely. I think you'll find out just how brutal a human I am."

The demon lord had a ghostly look. I wondered if he *could* hear the voices of the dead. If so, he'd get a real fright learning how many souls held an eternal grudge against me.

"Wh-what?" The yellow lights that appeared to be the demon lord's eyes went round in surprise.

I tossed aside my sword and held my hand up to the sky. "Don't speak of evil to me, weakling! Mighty humans like me are this universe's wickedest creatures! I am a true villain! Ellen, my sword!" I shouted my pupil's name toward the clouds.

The demon lord didn't seem to have any idea what was going on, but I sensed the dark clouds overhead ripping apart as if responding to my voice, sunlight

piercing them.

The demon lord was shocked. "Wh-what is happening? What is that?"

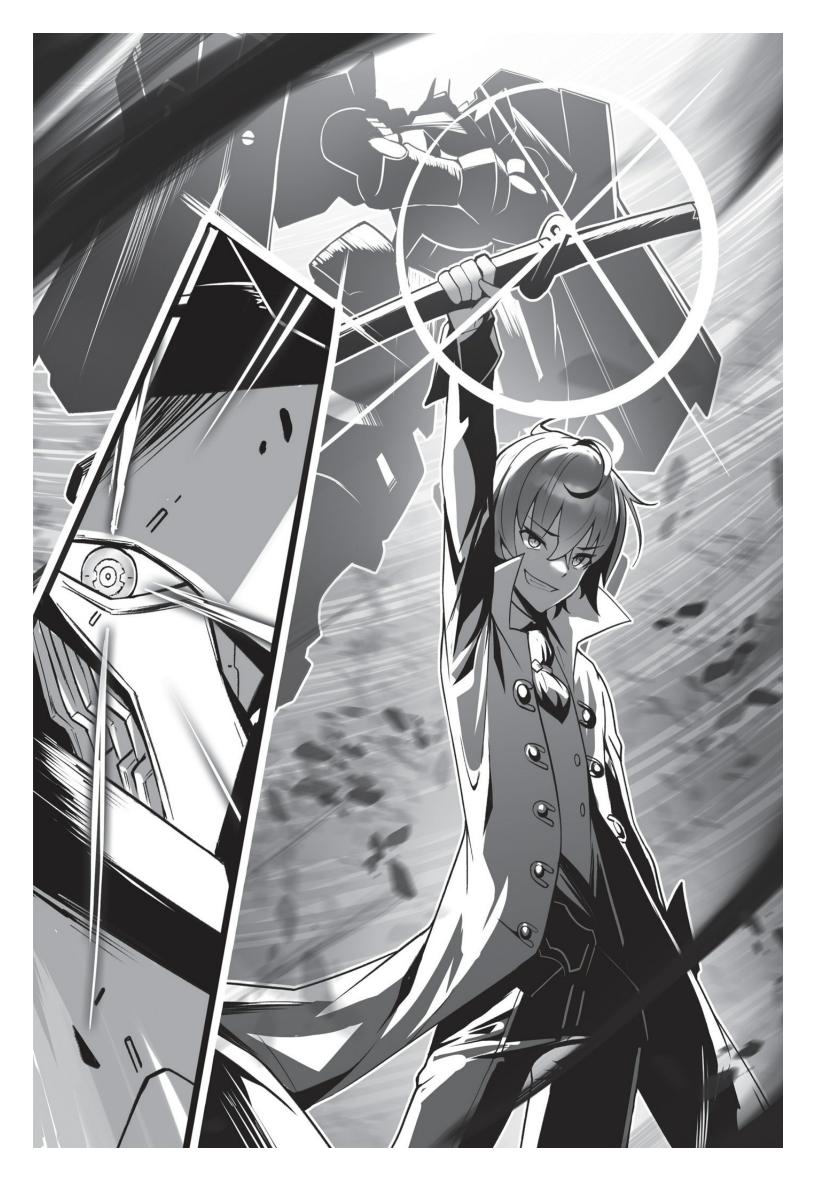
Breaking through the clouds and descending, bathed in sunlight, was the Avid. It dropped with its arms folded in front of it and directed its dual camera eyes toward me, looking positively otherworldly.

The Avid shifted its arms out of the way, and the cockpit hatch opened. A happily crying Ellen appeared within, my favorite sword clutched in her arms.

"Master!" she shouted, tossing the sword to me. It sped downward toward my waiting hand as if drawn there.

I caught the blade by the hilt and drew it from its scabbard. "Behold, puny demon lord. I'll put you down with my favorite sword. I'll erase you, so you'll never be able to revive again!"

I would teach a hard lesson to anyone so wrong about humans.



Chapter 11: The Demon Lord's Demise

The Demon Lord Gorius had witnessed something unbelievable: a massive metal giant had descended from the heavens.

Hovering in the air, the titan stared down at him, its body impossibly composed of metals straight out of legend and myth. Gorius had no idea where it could have come from.

It was abundantly clear to Gorius that the giant was an entity of a higher order than himself, and that it was essentially alive. It clearly had its own will, and acknowledged this hero as its master. Gorius could also tell that the giant was enraged at him. Its artificial eyes stared down at him. There shouldn't have been emotion in those eyes, but Gorius sensed that the giant regarded him as no more than a roadside pebble bothering its master.

Gorius shuddered. His instincts screamed that he would never beat the airborne metal giant. If he challenged the monstrosity, it would destroy him without a trace, and he would never revive. Even if he managed to, he would lose to the giant again.

This metal giant was threat enough, but the hero before Gorius was even more unbelievable. Seeing the sword in his hand scared Gorius worse than spotting the metal giant.

Th-that weapon is impossible! How could it exist?

There was something inside that sword—just a trace of it, but it terrified Gorius. He didn't want to be anywhere near it. The blade's metal resembled gold, but was something far rarer. The demon lord wanted to scream and weep with the weapon merely *pointed* at him. It was far too powerful to wield against someone like him; it was comparable to sending an army of ten thousand to squash a single bug.

Even more terrifying than his weapon was the hero himself.

Just what is he?

He called himself evil—said that humanity was the true evil—but Gorius sensed the will of tens of billions of humans united by worshipping the man. The wishes and prayers of the people whose lives he'd saved protected him. That positive energy sparkled like gold dust, strengthening the hero. It was a holy power—the very might of the divine. Now that he'd armed himself with his holy weapon, the power had manifested, allowing Gorius to observe it. The demon lord couldn't believe that such holy power protected this boy; that he could even wield it without realizing.

More unnervingly, it wasn't just living people whose energy empowered the hero. He also drew power from the dead of multiple planets.

He's more than human, was all Gorius could think. He'd never met a human being like this in his long existence. He'd come to accept that the hero was far more evolved than himself, and far superior.

Glimmering with divine might, the hero raised his terrifying sword. It shone with a golden light; that light alone was poison to Gorius.

"St-stop! Please, no more!"

The hero didn't even seem aware of the light, but Gorius felt his essence burning everywhere it touched him.

"You aren't evil," the demon lord cried out. "You're something else!"

He tried to say more, but the hero was no longer interested.

"Shut up. I have nothing to discuss with you." The hero lifted his sword higher.

Gorius's instincts screamed at him. If I'm killed with that weapon, I'll never revive again! I-I'd rather take my chances with the giant in the sky!

He made up his mind to flee from the hero. As he shot into the air, the hero gaped in surprise for a moment, then held his stomach and laughed loudly.

"The demon lord's running away? Avid, would you handle him?"

The hero allowed Gorius to escape into the air. Sucking negative emotions from the atmosphere around him, the demon lord expanded his body of flames

before the metal giant. The black flames took the shape of an enormous dragon. In this sinister form, Gorius was over a hundred meters long.

"I'd rather fight you than the hero, and revive again later!" Gorius said. "Even if it takes one or two centuries...even if it takes millennia...I swear I will come back to ravage this land once again!"

Opening its huge mouth, Gorius's dragon form lunged at the giant. The Avid closed its hatch to protect Ellen, then folded its arms instead of drawing a weapon. As the dragon flew at it, the mech activated laser lenses distributed across its body. Narrow, delicate red beams converged on Gorius.

"What do you think an attack like that will—"

Gorius underestimated the lasers' power, so he didn't try to avoid them. Large holes opened in his black flame body wherever the beams pierced him.

"Th-that's impossi—"

Gorius struggled in the air as if pinned in place as the Avid's eyes glowed red. Having finished analyzing the demon lord, it held up one great hand. A magic circle began to form there—a holy magic circle.

The circle, composed of complex glyphs and mysterious symbols, shone with blue-white light. When Gorius saw that, he knew the truth.

I see. This is where my existence finally comes to its end.

The blast of holy magic the Avid unleashed struck Gorius head-on, obliterating him so thoroughly there was no chance he would ever revive.

"Looks like it's over."

A little scuffle with the Avid had wiped that weakling who called himself the demon lord out of existence.

I looked down at my trusty sword and sighed. "Didn't even get a chance to use this."

In the end, that so-called "demon lord" had proven hopelessly weak. I was a little embarrassed at how I'd lost my cool and almost taken it seriously. After

our encounter, however, I felt a new goal taking shape.

"An adversary I can't cut, eh?"

I'd heard there were beings resistant to conventional physical and magical attacks. In the Empire, powerful technology like the Avid could destroy them easily, so I shouldn't need to face such enemies myself. I wasn't satisfied with that, though. As a practitioner of the Way of the Flash, I couldn't permit myself to struggle against inferior beings as I had just now. I needed to find a way to deal with such foes on my own.

"How do I cut things that can't be cut, though?"

It had sort of felt as if some strange power residing in my favorite sword would have allowed me to land a blow, but I still wouldn't have accomplished that with my personal strength.

While I pondered this, Ellen jumped down from above. "Master!" she cried, landing and wiping her teary, snot-stained face against my chest. She'd obviously been really concerned about me; she clung to me tightly and wouldn't let go.

I laid a hand on her head gently. "Sorry for worrying you. I didn't think you'd come along to pick me up. Who else is here?"

"Snff. Miss Amagi, and Mr. Brian, and Miss Nias..."

My face twitched when I heard that Amagi and Brian were here. Facing them would be a pain. At the same time, I was curious when I heard that Tia and Marie weren't here.

"What about Tia and Marie?"

"Th-they didn't come."

I wondered why Ellen averted her eyes as she said this. Still, I supposed those two could wait.

"They aren't here, but Nias came along? I guess that's fine, but how come Nias is here?" I wouldn't have expected her to be particularly worried if she heard I'd disappeared, so I was surprised she'd come to pick me up. Maybe she was just afraid to lose her precious sponsor.

"Oh, whatever." I didn't care about Nias. The problem was Amagi and Brian, who would get on my case for sure.

As I lamented that, Kunai slid up out of my shadow. "Master Liam—the chief."

"Hmm? Kukuri's here too?"

A large man wearing a mask appeared from the shadow of a pillar that still stood amid the castle's wreckage. "I am relieved to find you safe, Master Liam. But now..."

He drew a weapon and headed straight for Kunai.

I understood what he was about to do, so I held up my hand to stop him. "Don't, Kukuri."

"She exposed you to danger, Master Liam. You will allow me to dispose of useless subordinates, will you not? Heh heh heh!"

I looked at Kunai, who willingly kneeled before Kukuri with her neck exposed, ready to accept her punishment. Seeing her that way made me reflect on the time we'd spent together here.

"I pardon her. Anyway, I brought her along in the first place—I didn't avoid the summoning. So you will pardon her, too." As Kunai's employer, I ordered Kukuri to let it slide.

He obediently put his weapon away. "If that is your command, then I will obey, Master Liam."

"Kunai did good work for me here. I'm even thinking of giving her a reward."

Kukuri looked at his subordinate, surprised. "You even received a name? Well then, be grateful to Master Liam—Kunai."

"Sir!"

That problem taken care of, I hugged Ellen, relieved. Kunai bowed her head to me in gratitude, so I gave her a little nod in response. Still holding Ellen, I asked Kukuri if there had been any problems in my domain while I was gone.

"Anything interesting happen while I was gone, Kukuri?" Since I hadn't been away all that long, I figured everything would be fine.

Kukuri answered after a slight pause. "Yes, Master Liam. House Banfield split into several factions, and a number of figures from other noble families intruded upon your domain. A portion of House Banfield betrayed you in favor of your successor. Traitors among Prince Cleo's faction are also working alongside pirates to plunder your domain."

"What?!" What the hell had happened while I was away?

"Those good-for-nothing morons!"

I returned to Erle Kingdom's capital to find it overrun with mobile knights. A landing force of my soldiers had alighted to occupy the city as well. The ships floating above the capital all but blocked the sun; it was noon on a cloudless day, but the capital was dim. Faced with this vision, the citizens prayed, apparently mistaking this for the demon lord's invasion.

I couldn't blame them for being astonished, but I was quite pleased to find an entire fleet here to pick me up. It might have been a pain for the capital's citizens, but that wasn't my problem.

In any case, Kukuri's report had incensed me. An idiot was proclaiming himself my heir, and other idiots had swarmed in to support him—to say nothing of the equally idiotic traitors after House Banfield's fortune.

I was also irritated with Tia and Marie. "I was just reevaluating those two, after how they performed in the war, and now what do I find? Not only are they letting traitors do whatever they want in my domain, they've split up my forces to wage a little civil war against each other. What should I do with that pair when I get back?"

Things had never devolved into such chaos when I'd left my domain for a short while, but my problem children had escalated things until all hell broke loose. And who the hell was this "Isaac"? No way would some brother I'd never heard of be my successor!

"I'll deal with Tia, Marie, and Isaac when I get back. First, I need to handle the problem in front of me."

It was time to enjoy myself a little more before heading home. I walked down

a castle hall, the captain of my Royal Guard at my side.

"We have this castle under our control, Lord Liam," she told me. "However, I wouldn't say it's very hygienic. We probably shouldn't stay long."

They'd infiltrated and secured the castle before I returned from challenging the demon lord. I'd spared no expense recruiting top knights to serve as my Royal Guard, and they were diligent enough to make the cost worth it. Still, I didn't like them trying to hurry me home. I'd prevented the demon lord from destroying Erle Kingdom specifically so I could enjoy this part.

"I'll go home as soon as I've had my fun. Just sit tight."

"Yes, sir," the captain said resignedly. She must have understood that I was set on this.

I made my way to the audience chamber, where I found the throne empty for me. Erle Kingdom's dignitaries—including Enola, who'd been responsible for summoning me—were lined up in handcuffs. The same went for the country's remaining knights, some of whom were strung up from pillars looking rather worse for wear. They must have fought back. It was pretty amusing seeing them like that.

The moment I entered the audience chamber, a waiting Royal Guard member proclaimed, "Lord Liam has arrived!"

Everyone who'd come to retrieve me stood at attention when they heard my name. Most appeared relieved to see me, but a few trembled in fear instead of looking at me—my mages. They had surrounded that summoner named "Citasan" or whatever, and were berating him. They couldn't believe his magic circle got past their defenses.

"Y-you've got to be kidding!" one told him. "A primitive magic circle like that summoned Lord Liam?! You must be hiding something! If you don't come clean, we have ways of making you—"

One of my mages turned to me, begging, "PI-please spare me! Please!"

Each and every one of my mages looked worn out, so I felt a little bad for letting Citasan summon me. I mean, if I'd wanted to prevent it, I absolutely could have. Citasan's circle *had* gotten past their defenses, of course, so I

couldn't let them off the hook completely.

For her part, the Royal Guard captain looked ready to kill them on the spot. "How long are you going to carry on like that? Don't act so disgracefully in front of Lord Liam!"

My agitated mages sank to their knees, bowing their heads deeply. They virtually prostrated themselves, in truth.

"L-Lord Liam, we're so sorry! We will atone for this disgrace with our lives! Just, please, spare our families!"

When Citasan saw the humbled mages press their foreheads to the ground, he started browbeating them for some reason. "Mages are supreme beings who comprehend the mysteries of the universe! It's deplorable to bow your heads before a common human!"

The Royal Guards' eyes darkened when they heard Citasan's words. Before they could draw their swords, I addressed the mages, wanting to have some fun.

"Did you hear what he just said? Teach him what's what, would you?"

My mages rose to their feet. "As you wish," said their leader. He looked down scornfully at Citasan. "You know nothing, you buffoon. You're incapable of comprehending what sort of being Lord Liam is, aren't you?"

"Wh-what?" Citasan barked in rage, raising his manacled hands toward the mages. "You are the buffoons! Did you really think these mere pieces of wood would stop me? Fireball!"

An orb of fire about twenty centimeters wide shot toward my mages. One waved his hand, wiping the spell away.

Citasan gaped in disbelief. He must have been pretty proud of that fireball spell. "I-impossible! My fireball! It..."

"Fireball?" my mage exclaimed, scowling. "That puny spark? I'll show you a real fireball!"

He raised a hand, and an orb of fire twenty or thirty meters across appeared outside one window. The citizens of Erle Kingdom cried out in shock when they

saw it. The mage sent the fireball to an empty spot in the distance; when struck the ground, a pillar of fire rose more than twenty meters into the air.

I applauded. "Pretty impressive."

My mages bowed their heads reverently. "We hardly deserve such praise, my lord."

Citasan seemed unable to understand why such powerful mages—on this planet, they would probably be called *sages*—would bow to me, let alone put their foreheads to the ground and beg for forgiveness. On the other hand, Erle Kingdom's leaders seemed to be grasping things at this point.

Kukuri eyed my mages. "How would you like to deal with them, Master Liam?"

The mages trembled, looking up at me woefully.

I averted my eyes with a sigh. "Give the mansion's defenses a thorough goingover when we get back. You won't get a third chance."

"Bl-bless you! Bless you, Lord Liam!"

I couldn't justify executing them, having permitted my summoning to take place. When I spared them, they practically banged their heads on the floor in gratitude. I still felt a little bad for them, but mostly, their desperation creeped me out.

I sat on the throne, crossing my legs, and my people immediately knelt. The officials who'd come with my team to retrieve me looked coldly at the Erle Kingdom's people.

"'Hero summoning' sounds noble," one of my officials declared, "but you've essentially engaged in kidnapping. Lord Liam, I believe you'd be prudent to make the exact position they're in clear."

All the confusion my disappearance brought about must have put my officials in a tough spot. They were glaring daggers at Erle Kingdom's residents.

"I suppose you're right," I said. "Maybe I should just destroy this puny little planet. I mean, they had trouble with a two-bit villain passing himself off as a 'demon lord.' They probably won't last long anyway."

When I threatened that, two women stepped forward to object: Queen Enola...and Kanami.

"Pl-please, wait!" Enola cried.

"What do you mean, destroy this planet?" Kanami demanded. "Overkill, much?"

My expressionless Royal Guards unsheathed their swords, ready to send the two women's heads flying at any moment.

I raised my hand to halt them. "Sheathe your weapons."

"Yes, sir."

Once the Royal Guards settled down, I decided to keep teasing Enola. I wanted her to eat humble pie.

"You abducted me with summoning magic. I would like you to atone for that crime, but what are you even capable of doing for me?"

Hanging her head, Enola began to speak of reparations. "Please have mercy. We could pay you in gold and silver coins."

She was offering *me* gold and silver? How laughable. "Sounds good! If you fill up this castle with those coins, I'll rethink destroying the planet."

Enola's face paled. She knew just how unreasonable my demand was. "But that's...that's impossible!"

"Are you saying I'm worth less?" I turned to my subordinates. "What do you guys think of that?"

I'd ordered her to pay an amount she could never come up with, but my subordinates didn't blink an eye.

"I believe that would be insufficient compensation."

"I don't think they're repentant enough in the first place."

"Calling it 'impossible' without even trying... It's like they don't think they did anything wrong."

When my followers said crap like that with straight faces, even I felt taken aback.

The Royal Guard captain looked ready to kill Enola then and there. "It seems they still do not understand the position they're in. Please leave their disposal to us, Lord Liam. We shall wipe this country off the map before the day is done."

I had planned to laugh like any good villain during this scene, but I was flabbergasted by my subordinates' comments. I'd never personally interacted with them much, but they seemed seriously pissed—not at all like they were joking with me. I was just teasing Enola's people, but my subordinates actually wanted to massacre them.

"W-well, I'll think about it," I said.

A serene voice echoed through the audience chamber. "What exactly is it you think you are doing?"

When I saw who had entered the audience chamber, I froze. "A-Amagi?"

I straightened up in the throne right away. Amagi strode right to me, standing tall before me. Running after her to catch up came a crying Brian.

"Master Liam!"

"St-stay away from me!" I snapped. "I don't want some guy's gross tears on me!"

As if he hadn't heard, Brian latched onto me. "I'm so, so glad you're safe! Do you know how many nights I went without sleep worrying over you?"

As I tried to peel Brian off me, Amagi came to my side. My subordinates looked back and forth between Amagi's face and mine; the Royal Guard's captain watched silently.

"Master," Amagi addressed me.

"Y-yeah?"

I wanted to act haughty in front of my people, but Amagi had a pointed question to ask me.

"When you were summoned, you deliberately remained inside the circle, did you not?"

She'd realized that I had simply chosen not to escape it. "Uh...yes."

"I suspected as much. I cannot say your strategy was commendable, but I understand that the people here were in dire straits, and that you were well aware we would come retrieve you. That said, please conclude this diversion of yours."

Everyone around me waited to hear what I'd say. If I shrugged Amagi off and ordered my lunatic subordinates to destroy this planet, they would do it without hesitation. Amagi could complain all she wanted; to my underlings, my orders were absolute. That said, if I followed through on my threat, Amagi would definitely be angry. In light of that, there was no reason to bend over backward to destroy this planet. Still, it would be highly embarrassing to withdraw my threat because Amagi had told me to. I was between a rock and a hard place.

As I considered my options, Brian finished wiping his tears and informed me of the Empire's stance on the matter.

"Master Liam, Imperial law dictates that, where possible, we avoid interaction with intelligent life not yet capable of space travel. And such contact must not affect this planet's natural diversity. Although their summoning magic resulted in your traveling here accidentally, it would be best to leave without further interference."

We avoided contact with places like Erle Kingdom for various reasons primarily to prevent our interference from stifling their unique technology. The Empire considered it a waste to lose unique cultures and customs.

Brian's words were the out I needed. I would've looked weak if I reconsidered my threat because Amagi scolded me, but now this was a matter of adhering to the Empire's laws.

"I-I guess you're right. If that's Imperial law, there's nothing for it. Let's get out of here, then!"

Hearing my order, my subordinates hastily saluted me, scrambling into action without a word of protest or criticism. Maybe they were too tactful to comment on how wary I was of Amagi. I was grateful for that.

Amagi bowed her head. "I appreciate your considering my suggestion. That said, there is still the matter of your discussion with me and Mr. Brian. Shall we agree to resume that conversation upon returning home?"

So, when I got back, another lecture awaited. Still, I didn't want to upset Amagi further.

"I apologize, all right?" I said, my face twitching. "Don't be mad."

"I am not. Maid robots are incapable of anger."

"Don't lie. You only make that face when you're angry!"

"You are mistaken, Master."

"No, you're definitely mad. You always say that when you're mad at me!"

"Do you wish me to express genuine anger?"

"I-I'm sorry! Okay?"

I left the audience chamber as if fleeing, unable to handle the reproachful looks Amagi and Brian gave me.

Enola couldn't believe what had happened. The otherworldly army that arrogantly subjugated her country had suddenly fallen in line upon the arrival of one woman.

The woman appeared almost like a goddess to Enola, although she looked rather odd. Her beautiful dress bared both shoulders, which were graced with a tattoo design Enola had never seen before. Enola didn't know the design's meaning, but she was struck simply by the woman's all-encompassing beauty.

As Enola stared, enraptured, the woman called Amagi approached her. She removed Enola's handcuffs and clasped one of the queen's hands. Her red irises were so alluring, Enola felt as if she was being drawn into them.

"Please allow me to apologize for everything that occurred here today," the woman said.

"U-um, I'm the one who should apologize. If you'll permit me to ask, though... y-your name is Lady Amagi, is that correct?"

What am I saying? There are plenty of more important things to ask, aren't there?

Amagi gave her a small smile. "Indeed. I am my master's Amagi. I will leave you some resources to help your country rebuild. Please use them as you see fit."

"Y-you'll do that for us?"

"We have caused you a fair amount of trouble. A word of advice, however... I would refrain from such hero-summoning in future. It is possible that the same sort of accident could reoccur. Your magic circles are simply too unstable."

Enola wished she could promise Amagi that. She didn't want to have to rely on heroes. "If that demon lord reappears, we will be unable to stand against him on our own."

"My Master—Master Liam—destroyed the demon lord," Amagi said gently. "He will no longer revive. Whatever other difficulties you face in future, you should strive to contend with them independently."

"We are weak...hopelessly weak," protested Enola, almost clinging to Amagi. She couldn't help seeing the woman as omnipotent. "Please...please help us!"

Amagi just shook her head. "Your trials are yours to overcome," she cautioned Enola firmly. "That is the burden living beings like yourself must bear."

As I walked through the halls, carrying a large sack on my back, a woman ran after me and called out.

"W-wait!"

It was Kanami. I stopped and turned around. "What?"

"Well, uh... Those people over there say they can send me back home."

She looked behind her at my personal mages. They'd analyzed Citasan's magic circle, and claimed they could use some residual aspect of his magic to send Kanami to her original planet. I'd ordered them to do so, since it benefited no one to leave her here. I assumed she would be happier returning to her old

world.

"Yup. They'll send you back at no cost to you. Don't worry."

I was just helping her out on a whim; I didn't want to collect anything from Kanami, and she had no way to pay me anyway.

"I don't want to go back."

"What? Your dear mama and papa are waiting for you."

When I mentioned her parents, Kanami exploded at me. "My *papa's* not! Dad was the only one who really loved me, but now he's dead!"

My guards drew their weapons, alarmed, but I shot them a look to deter them.

Well, I'd guessed that Kanami's dad would meet a sorry end, and apparently I'd been right. I could tell her family situation was complicated, but that had nothing to do with me. Still, if I just sent her home like this, it would bug me later. I decided to tell her what was what.

Setting down my sack, I directed Kanami to sit on the steps beside me so we could chat.

"I have no interest in your family situation. People have their own places in the universe, though. Go back to where you were born."

Her dead dad would probably have wanted that for her. If he really loved her, he wouldn't want her to remain in this bloody universe.

"If I go back, my mother will just try selling me somewhere. I'd rather stay here and help them rebuild."

She was such a child. She hadn't anticipated the future that awaited here.

"You're so stupid. Now that there's no demon lord, Erle Kingdom will see a powerful person from another universe as a dangerous threat."

"Enola won't feel that way."

She really was a sucker to rely completely on the queen. Enola herself might be a good person, but her inner circle definitely weren't.

"Even that queen will be forced to reckon with you, if her advisors strongarm

her into it. Actually, they might just kill you behind her back. Either way, it won't end well for either of you."

"Y-you can't mean that."

When I saw her shocked face, I was even more eager to help set her straight. At the same time, I remembered the words my own daughter had said to me. "I don't want you, Dad! I like my papa better!"

She and this hero had the same name. This Kanami, however, preferred her dad to her "papa." Judging from her naïve personality, her dad was probably as ignorant as she was, yet she still preferred him to the other man.

"Your dad must have been a much better guy than me," I murmured.

"Huh?"

Although I hated kids, I couldn't bring myself to hate my daughter from my past life. At the time, hearing that she preferred her papa had been incredibly shocking. Still, I'd continued paying child support because she was my daughter, and I loved her. Besides, my daughter was still very young when we'd parted. There was a good chance her mother and new papa had somehow manipulated her into saying those words. It wasn't like she bore no responsibility at all, of course. But who knew whether she even understood what it was she was saying?

When I looked at this Kanami, I felt like it would be stupid not to forgive my daughter after so long. The people I should really resent were the woman who'd left me, and the man who'd led her to do so. I hated plenty of other people in my past life too, but my daughter shouldn't be one of them.

Maybe it was a good thing that I'd met the Kanami beside me thanks to this little diversion. She'd helped me realize all sorts of things about myself. I guessed I owed her something in return. She might not want to hear it, but I decided to give her some advice for the future.

"You might think you and that queen are friends, but she's fainthearted. Eventually, she'll become scared of you and begin keeping you at a distance. If you say goodbye to her now, though, you'll part with only fond memories of each other."

The heroes had been last-resort weapons brought in to defeat the demon lord. With the demon lord gone, we would naturally be nothing but burdens.

Kanami hid her face, pressing it into her knees. "Ha ha... There's no place for me, no matter where I go."

There was only one thing to say to that. "Create your own place for yourself."

"I can't," she insisted. "I'm just a normal high schooler back there. I can't do anything on my own."

I suddenly felt as if I was seeing my daughter from my old life, superimposed on this Kanami. As I'd reasoned several times before, though, there was no possibility she and I could reunite here. This Kanami *had* to be someone else. I did think my daughter would look like this when she reached the same age, but she would no doubt be living happily with her papa—though it made my stomach churn to think of my ex-wife living contentedly with another man after my death.

There was no point even thinking about those people anymore, since I would never have anything to do with them again. My daughter Kanami was different, though. I'd have liked her to lived a long, happy life.

I took a small leather bag out of my pocket and handed it to Kanami. "Here."

"Huh?" Kanami accepted it with some confusion, so I told her what was inside.

"It's treasure I found in the demon lord's castle. Gold and some jewels."

Kanami apparently couldn't believe I'd give her any of the demon lord's riches. "Are you really rich? If you didn't care about getting the demon lord's treasure, what did you even go to his castle for?"

I couldn't help laughing at her guileless reaction. "The demon lord's treasure belongs to whoever defeats him, but gold and jewels are valuable in your world too, aren't they?"

Kanami nodded awkwardly, but held the bag back out to me. "They're valuable, but I can't accept these. There's no point in me having them anyway. People would just be suspicious about where I got them from. I couldn't get any

money for them."

I couldn't believe she was so pessimistic that she was trying to refuse the treasure. "Find a way to sell them!"

"I'm telling you, I can't! I'm a minor. I'm just a student!"

"Are you going to give up on life and tell yourself 'I can't, I can't'? Listen. This is a piece of advice from yours truly. Other people won't take responsibility for your life. So, are you going to keep insisting you can't handle things, passing up every opportunity that comes your way?"

I was sure it would be *hard* to sell the treasure, but if she pulled it off, she might turn her life around. To be honest, I had a feeling she'd find a way to do that even without the treasure.

Kanami seemed stunned by what I'd said. "Other people won't take—"

"You said your mom would sell you someplace if you went back, but that's not her decision to make. Are you just going to let her do whatever she wants with you?"

Kanami clutched the bag of treasure to her chest with both hands. "If I sell these, do you think I can start a new life?"

"That's up to you. You could do that, or blow it all having fun. Whatever happens, at the end of the day, you're the one who has to take responsibility for your path."

I found my hand reaching toward Kanami's lowered head. When I stroked her hair, she looked up in surprise. She also looked flustered for some reason. I was a little confused by my action myself; I supposed I just saw my own daughter in her.

I remembered fondly how I'd often stroked my daughter's hair the same way. It felt as though I'd finally dealt with my regrets about her. Embarrassed by my action, I pulled my hand back and stood.



Seeing that our conversation was over, the mages approached. "Let us go, Lady Kanami."

Kanami followed the mages toward the basement where the summoning circle awaited. As she went, she kept glancing back at me.

I lifted my sack under my arm and turned away. "Get back there and start over, already!"

My back still turned, I heard Kanami call in return, "Th-thank you! You're nicer than I thought you were, aren't you, Liam?"

I stopped and sighed heavily at being called "nice." Glancing over my shoulder, I replied, "Let me give you just one more piece of advice. Work on your ability to assess people, because you're not a good judge of men."

"Wh-what was that for? I gave you a compliment! You don't have to be snide about it!"

This is why you're an idiot. I only helped you on a whim. I'm an evil lord—a terrible villain! It's just wrong to call a guy like me "nice."

Chapter 12: A Pet Dog

I'd had the Seventh Weapons Factory create an entirely new flagship for House Banfield, sparing no expense—either in terms of the overall budget, or the quantity of rare metals used in the ship's construction.

The superdreadnought's functionality was obviously top of the line, but its interior was also lavish. Each and every facility aboard was outfitted solely with luxury components. Although it was my flagship, I was probably the only person in the Empire who would funnel such outrageous funding into a single spaceship. Frankly, substituting standard items for some of the custom-made parts wouldn't just have been cheaper; it would have improved the ship's performance somewhat. It was an extravagant creation, but it was perfect for an evil lord like me, who adored excess above all else.

My new ship was called the Argos. According to Nias, it was now the Empire's top-performing ship. I didn't exactly trust her seal of approval—"top-performing" would change as time passed—but it tickled my boyish heart to ride a ship considered the "best," even temporarily.

Beyond that, my mood was as poor as could be. The Argos was now far from the planet I'd been summoned to. I was in my personal quarters, and there, Amagi and Brian made me sit still and lectured me. The reason for that? Chino, who I'd brought with me from that undeveloped planet.

Chino was lying in my bed right now, snoring without a care in the world, no doubt satisfied by the meal she'd just eaten. Ellen touched her ears and tail with great interest, but Chino showed no sign of waking; she slept face up, exposing her stomach. The dumb dog had her guard down completely. Being a "proud wolf" or whatever had to be a lie—she came off as a pet dog through and through.

Ellen put her thumb in her mouth and started sucking it. Until a few minutes

ago, she'd been bawling her eyes out. Now she was absolutely thrilled to watch Chino, like a kid who'd just received a new pet.

"She's so cute, Master!"

Right now, I couldn't share Ellen's innocent happiness.

"I am absolutely speechless, Master Liam," Brian was saying. "It's unbelievable that you took a beastwoman from an undeveloped planet because you saw her as your 'pet.'"

Looking away from Brian only brought an exasperated Amagi into my field of vision. She glowered down at me like I was a disobedient child. "Let us return her to where you found her."

It was as though I were a kid who'd brought home a stray dog, and my mom was telling me, "Take that back to where you found it!" Actually, that was pretty much what I did. But I couldn't go back now—this was a matter of personal dignity.

"Come on, it's fine!" I protested. "Finding a rare creature and keeping it as a pet is par for the course for nobles, isn't it?"

Amagi coolly refuted my point, using data to back up her argument. "True, there are fewer beastmen in the universe than humans, but not so few as to call them rare. There was no need to bring one home from an undeveloped planet."

Her argument was so logical that I couldn't counter it, but I wouldn't just give up. My mental image of an evil noble was of someone who collected rare creatures, even from planets he wasn't supposed to visit. The whole point of being noble was getting to do selfish stuff!

When I didn't agree right away to take Chino back, Amagi stared as if I were a spoiled brat.

Ugh! D-don't look at me like that! "Come on, Amagi. I promise I'll take care of her. Would you just let me get away with this?"

Amagi and Brian glanced over at Ellen, who still stared in fascination at the sleeping Chino. Brian looked uncertain, but as far as I could tell, Amagi appeared fed up.

"You said that about Miss Ellen, and you caused her a great deal of sadness when you left," she reminded me.

Brian jumped in. "Why not keep a normal dog, Master Liam? Would there be anything wrong with that?"

"I don't want a normal dog. They don't live long, and I'd be sad when it died."

I thought back to the dog I'd owned in my previous life. It was so adorable and sweet, and I was devastated when it died. I didn't want to go through the same thing again. Luckily, I wouldn't have to, since Chino's lifespan was nearly human.

"We're done discussing this," I said forcefully. "Right now, we need to go punish those idiots back home."

I'd have to pummel my moronic knights, who couldn't handle something as simple as safeguarding my domain while I was away.

Brian wiped his tears with his handkerchief. "The situation only became so complicated because you refuse to address the issue of your heir, Master Liam."

"That's not my fault." I turned away from Brian.

"It is your duty to appoint an heir to succeed you, Master," Amagi said, in a sterner voice than usual. "If you had a proper head knight, that could also have prevented some of the chaos."

Their arguments really were too sensible to refute, so I simply fled from their accusatory expressions, leaving my quarters to focus on preparing for my return to my domain.

A fleet of thirty thousand ships had entered House Banfield's territory, having come together for one simple purpose: to plunder Liam's domain. Commanding these ships were mainly nobles disguised as space pirates, though some actual pirates bolstered their numbers.

There were even nobles from the faction Liam had established to support Prince Cleo. They had just joined the faction recently, and were interested in siding with the succession conflict's eventual winner, not in Cleo or Liam

themselves. If anything, they envied Liam for reviving the once-ruined House Banfield, and becoming powerful enough to participate in the Empire's succession conflict.

"The little brat's only getting the rug pulled out from under him because he acted so self-important."

Aboard one ship, a noble from Cleo's faction relaxed in a room that looked as if it belonged in a palace, sipping a glass of alcohol. He was the typical evil lord, someone Liam should have been striving to emulate. He'd installed this wastefully large lounge for nothing more than the luxury it provided, despite the ship's limited space. As a result, the ship performed worse than its catalog specs would suggest.

"It's very generous of him to allow us to pillage whatever we want from House Banfield's domain," he continued. "He must be desperate to ruin the boy."

These nobles were invading Liam's domain, throwing caution to the wind, because they had a backer. They had received plenty of information from inside House Banfield's domain as well. The house's vassals were divided, and the previous lord's family and associates were fighting amongst themselves for position. It was the perfect time to plunder.

These nobles weren't the only ones taking advantage of House Banfield's current chaos to steal their resources. They were accompanied by space pirates whose gangs House Banfield had tormented thoroughly until now. Having joined forces, the nobles and pirates scrambled to grab any riches they could on a first-come, first-served basis.

"Their defenses are pathetic. I suppose that's all you can expect of a house that rose to prominence in a single generatio—pfft!"

Just as the man took an elegant sip of his drink, his ship rocked violently.

On our way home, we stumbled across a fleet of some thirty thousand ships, but they didn't make me nervous.

I was lounging in my captain's seat on the Argos's bridge, my apprentice Ellen

beside me. I thought I should teach her a thing or two every so often, since I was her master and all.

"Let me show you my way of doing things, Ellen."

"Yes, Master!"

She agreed so cheerfully, I wanted to tease her a bit. Chino stood next to her, not listening at all. She must not have been interested; she was clutching her pillow and nodding off. *She's sure relaxed on the bridge of a battleship*. She was just a pet, though, so I let it slide.

Meanwhile, Ellen was so pumped up I figured I'd give her some intense training. "We'll destroy every single space pirate who trespassed into our domain. No exceptions!"

"Yes, Master!"

"Well—maybe a few exceptions. If there are any pirate women pretty enough to catch my eye, I suppose I might show them mercy."

"Yes, Master!"

Ellen's eyes sparkled. She accepted everything I said as the gospel truth, and I immediately regretted the joke I'd made. I'd show mercy if a woman was pretty enough? What was I saying to a little kid? I'd been forgetting myself too much lately. I needed to work on that.

I felt Amagi and Brian's cold stares drill into me from behind. So upsetting did Amagi find my little comment, she stepped forward to scold me, even on the brink of battle.

"Master, please consider the time and place when you make jokes. Comments like that could negatively affect Miss Ellen's education."

I agreed, but I decided to laugh it off. "Ha ha ha! W-well, let's wipe out all these pirates, people! They bring me fame and fortune, so I should give them a warm welcome!"

Outside, my rescue fleet launched a surprise attack against the massed pirates. The enemy overwhelmingly outnumbered us, but my fleet consisted of the cream of the crop. To us, our enemies were nothing more than rabble.

My bridge crew calmly reported on the battle.

"The enemy fleet is in disarray."

"A portion of their fleet has begun to retreat."

"Enemy breaking formation."

We'd just begun our attack, but the enemy was already completely disordered. They'd broken formation, and some ships actually crashed into allies.

"Time to hunt. Wipe them out!"

At my order, my fleet all fired at once on the enemy. The exploding ships were almost comical.

Next to me, Ellen glued her attention to the battle. "W-wow, Master!"

The sight seemed to scare her. As a student of the Way of the Flash, I couldn't baby her, but maybe it was too early for her to see something like this.

"Amagi, escort Ellen off the bridge," I instructed.

"Yes, sir."

When Amagi actually tried to remove her, though, Ellen protested. "I-I'm okay. I'm with you, Master."

As she pleaded with me, tears in her eyes, I looked over at Chino. Now that the battle was underway, she was glancing all around, as if startled awake.

"Chino's freaking out. Take her back to my quarters, and have a snack together or something."

We were in the midst of a battle, but my quarters were especially well-shielded, so they'd be fine there. Ellen reluctantly took Chino's hand, and Amagi led the two off the bridge.

The Royal Guard's captain had been waiting to give me a report, and now stepped forward. "Lord Liam, we received a message from the pirates. They wish to surrender."

Pathetic. They thought they could waltz into my domain and get away with it? Not likely.

"Denied. It's their own fault for coming here. On that note, summon the fortress-class ship stationed nearby. That'll clean these lowlifes up."

I gave normal orders, but the captain reported something unexpected.

"Lord Liam, there are those claiming to be nobles among the pirates. One identifies himself as Burns of Prince Cleo's faction. Shall we cease the attack?"

Burns? I knew multiple people with that name, and I had no idea which one it was. Actually, now that I thought of it, I recalled an overly friendly sycophant of a man, who had recently joined Cleo's faction and introduced himself to me as Burns. Could it be him? Well, if it was, that didn't change anything.

"What? You believe nobles would join forces with pirates? Such disrespect," I cautioned the captain, grinning mischievously.

She picked up on my meaning and gave an exaggerated shrug. "I apologize for my rudeness. It's exactly as you say, Lord Liam—proud nobles would never ally themselves with pirates. I will accept whatever punishment you deem necessary for my transgression."

I wouldn't punish her, obviously. I was a tolerant guy toward those who obeyed me. "Just be careful in future. Now, as I said, don't let a single pirate vessel escape."

Of course I understood there were nobles among the pirates; it wasn't rare for them to join forces. Actually, the two were fundamentally the same. Imperial nobles were basically just well-mannered pirates, so there was nothing strange about them working together. Nobles or not, though, I couldn't forgive them for putting the squeeze on my domain. My only choice was to crush them.

"Time to show off my new ship. Let's make a real spectacle of it."

The Royal Guard's captain bowed her head reverently.

The bridge commander—who'd listened to our conversation—thrust a hand forward, shouting, "Flagship, advance! Prepare to charge!"

The nobles and pirates found they were being attacked by a fleet with less than a third of their own numbers.

"Why can't we beat them?" one cried out.

"They're House Banfield's elite forces! A-and one of their ships is...strange!"

A huge superdreadnought picked off pirate ships one after another, and not one of their attacks affected it. Anything that got through its protective field just bounced off its hull.

This superdreadnought, on the other hand, destroyed multiple pirate ships with each attack. A single shot from its main cannon could pierce dozens of their ships. It wreaked havoc on the battlefield, abnormally efficient for a ship of its vast size.

Now the nobles hidden within the pirate fleet were preoccupied with survival.

"Contact them and surrender!"

"W-we've been trying, but they won't negotiate! Their last message was 'death to the insolent space pirates masquerading as nobility'!"

The noble slammed his fist on his armrest. "Damn Liam's dogs! Do they seriously intend to kill us?! I'm part of a precious Imperial bloodline! I can't die in a place like this! Keep calling them!"

Even as he shouted, the superdreadnought continued to blast pirate ships to pieces one by one. The slaughter—it was too one-sided to be called a battle—only paused when Liam finally accepted their requests for communication.

Displayed on their bridge's main monitor, Liam wore an arrogant expression. The noble smiled desperately at him, his hair disheveled from panic. "L-Lord Liam, it's been ages! You remember me, don't you? It's Burns!"

He'd just barely managed to maintain his composure when Liam appeared unexpectedly. What's he doing here? I thought he was missing! Could Prince Calvin have deceived us?

Liam's attitude remained cold. "I'm not acquainted with any of you pirates, and a noble couldn't possibly invade my territory unannounced. Hence, you die here."

Burns was speechless for a moment before exploding into red-faced rage. "Do you know what will happen if you kill me? I have powerful people backing me!"

His threat had no effect on Liam. "I don't care. I can't imagine a pawn like you has any worthwhile information for me."

Having said that, Liam cut the call. The negotiation had failed.

"W-wait—!" Burns reached out to the monitor Liam had already disappeared from, as if to cling to him. He'd realized he was truly about to die.

"A fortress-class ship has appeared!" an operator shouted. "As well as at least six thousand other ships! We believe they're House Banfield's. Th-they keep warping in!"

More and more of Liam's ships were joining the battle. Burns watched on the main monitor as House Banfield's powerful spacecraft picked off his allies' vessels one by one. The enemy plowed steadily forward, among them that monstrously strong superdreadnought. Now among the faction being decimated by a much more powerful enemy, Burns lost the will to fight completely.

"S-so this is...Pirate Hunter Liam," Burns muttered, as his ship was enveloped in light and vaporized.

Near House Banfield's Second Planet, ships streamed out of a fortress built within an asteroid. Among them was the Vár, the superdreadnought Tia captained. She was on its bridge, communicating with a member of her team.

"Have they responded to our messages?"

"Only to call us dirty traitors. In short, the 381st Patrol Fleet declined to cooperate with us."

"I see. That's unfortunate."

Tia made a mental note of the uncooperative fleet with a halfhearted smile.

After the call ended, her adjutant Claudia gave her a worried look. "Don't let it bother you, Lady Tia."

Tia smiled at her considerate adjutant. "It doesn't bother me, but I admit I hoped they'd pad out our forces when we deal with that fossil."

By now, Tia's faction had assembled eighteen thousand ships. That might have seemed like enough, but considering the opponent they planned to fight, Tia wanted as many vessels at her disposal as possible.

Claudia assessed the enemy's fleet size. "The fossils are using Lady Rosetta's presence to attract ships. I estimate they currently have around twelve thousand spacecraft."

Tia brought a hand to her chin, brow furrowed. "Six thousand ships is a decent advantage over them, but they're a formidable enemy. I want more."

Tia always referred to Marie as "fossil," but she didn't underestimate the other knight's capabilities. Nor did Claudia; Marie was a hated enemy, but Claudia analyzed her faction's strength calmly.

"The knights piloting Teumessas will be trouble," she told Tia. "Honestly, they surpass us in ability—they're incredibly skilled pilots."

On an individual basis, Marie and her knights were more skilled than Tia's, and Tia understood that.

"Teumessas will be hard to combat in Nemains," she mused.

"Yes. Nemains are excellent for mass-produced machines, but Teumessas outclass them in performance."

Nemains, the primary mobile knights utilized by House Banfield, were extremely high-performance machines. In addition to their high specs, they were easy to build and maintain. Building and maintaining the more expensive Teumessas was more difficult, but they performed so strongly, they were a perfect match for ace pilots. Anyone could pilot a Nemain, while Teumessas were designed for aces.

Tia folded her arms and considered her options, tapping her foot. Soon, she came to a decision. "All right... I'll permit the unit under my direct command to use Valkyries."

The Valkyrie was an optional Nemain add-on distinguished by its extravagant operating cost.

Claudia's eyes bulged. "Are you sure? Valkyries would definitely let us beat

them, but..."

Tia smiled. "Well, I'd say we have them on hand for just such a situation. Prep Brunhild for me, will you?"

As Claudia gave Tia a knight's salute, a drop of cold sweat dripped down her cheek. "Yes, ma'am."

Maintenance techs approached the Nemains stored in the Vár's hangar. These crewmembers wore space suits, and several pairs carried large storage containers between them. The Nemains had already been partly stripped of their normal armor.

"They're really gonna use these?" one rookie maintenance tech asked.

"Aren't we fighting our own allies?" a coworker added.

"Don't question it! Just swap out the parts!" scolded their team leader.

The rookie techs hurriedly removed the add-ons from their containers and started installing them.

Equipped with the Valkyries, the Nemains' slender figures appeared more heavily armored. Additional armor now protected their wing boosters, and they were also equipped with powerful new beam cannons, as well as an added set of boosters adapted from research with experimental craft. These additional boosters had been a beast for test pilots to tame—they'd virtually chosen their riders—but the Valkyries' boosters had been tempered to the point that normal pilots could handle them.

As more optional parts were added, the craft's shielding looked bulkier and bulkier. One tech glanced at the add-ons for Tia's machine, which he could see in the distance. "That one's huge."

A few techs were securing an enormous add-on, bigger than the main craft itself, to the back of Tia's Nemain.

"Hey, the boss will be pissed if we don't hurry up," one of his friends cautioned.

"R-right."

Inside a massive fortress-class ship being used as a temporary base near House Banfield's Third Planet, Marie's fleet was preparing to deploy.

On the bridge, Marie fumed. She'd reached out to ask a patrol fleet to join her forces, but its overly serious members refused for reasons she honestly couldn't argue against.

"You're rebelling! We will not support you, even if Lady Rosetta is with you!"

"The nerve of them. I'll remember their faces," Marie said as the call ended, maintaining a smile as her face twitched.

"Rebuffed again, Marie," her scruffy adjutant chuckled.

"If you don't keep your mouth shut, I'll sew it closed."

"Nice try, but I know I'm safe while you're still using your polite tone." He dropped his teasing manner. "So, think we can beat them?"

Marie frowned. "Frankly, I'd feel more comfortable with more supporters."

Both their knights and ships were outnumbered by Tia's.

Her adjutant agreed. "One on one, there's no way we could lose. But their side has strong command experience."

"It vexes me to admit it, but that ground meat woman does have a rather impressive ability to command a fleet."

Though Marie always referred to Tia as "ground meat," she didn't take the other knight lightly.

"Well, with all our team's loose cannons, we have some issues with cooperation," the adjutant joked. "Still, it's hard to imagine losing in our Teumessas."

The Seventh Weapons Factory had developed the Teumessa specifically with ace pilots, omitting all autopilot functions. They were incredibly difficult to control, but when mastered, they far outshone Nemains. In Teumessas, Marie's forces didn't have anything to worry about from Tia's Nemains.

"We'll just have to finish things quickly," Marie added. "Letting the battle drag

on too long would be just what that ground meat woman wants." She rose from her seat, narrowing her eyes and putting on a daring smile. Dropping the polite tone she usually affected, she ordered her forces, "Tune up your craft to their best condition, bastards! Screw up on that battlefield, and I'll kill you myself!"

Her adjutant and subordinates responded to her fierce display just as heartily. "Ha ha! Now *that's* our Marie!"

The Guide's copy watched from a corner of the bridge as Marie and her underlings pumped themselves up.

"They're ready for the big showdown, and I barely did anything."

He'd planned to manipulate Marie more than this—to nudge her into creating havoc—but she was doing that well enough on her own. Ultimately, all he had to do was leave her be. He couldn't just depart, however, being linked to Marie by an invisible connection. The Guide's puppet string wasn't easily severed; it would be almost impossible for Marie to free herself on her own. Still...

"What is my purpose?" the Guide's copy muttered, hugging his knees. "What was the point in making us copies?"

What was he even doing here? All he could do was ponder that question.

Although he still looked haggard, Claus was relieved when he received word from the Royal Guard and elite forces.

Thank goodness! If Lord Liam is on his way home, these problems will just go away. At least, I hope so.

House Banfield had split into two factions, and nobles claiming a right to succeed Liam had swarmed his domain, causing problems every day. House Banfield had also needed to deal with traitors in their midst. Claus and his men had done their best to maintain order, but he knew it was a matter of time before everything broke down. Thus, Claus looked forward to Liam's return.

I'm sure it'll stay hectic for a while, even after he gets back, but I'll be happy just to be free from my current situation.

For some reason, Liam's elite forces and Royal Guard had both elected to join Claus's command in Liam's absence, making him House Banfield's de facto head knight—a representative of Liam himself. Stomach pains tormented Claus daily due to the heavy responsibility thrust upon him, but Liam's return would unburden him.

If I endure a little longer, all this pressure will be behind me.

While Claus reflected on this, some of his men burst into his office. From their pale faces, Claus surmised they were here to inform him of an emergency.

"What is it?"

"Lord Claus, it's them!"

Claus and his men hurried to a mansion break room reserved for knights. There, he found House Banfield's former knights, headed by Keith. The room contained various pieces of leisure equipment, such as pool tables, but it had all been destroyed. Worse, sprawled bloody on the floor were Claus's top men. Keith and his men smirked down at them.

Claus looked at the saber in Keith's hand. The former head knight wasn't even trying to hide the blood on the blade.

"Is this your doing?" Claus demanded.

Keith exchanged a look with his men, shrugging his shoulders. "Sorry for the commotion. These men were rude to me."

"Rude?"

Keith again glanced at the wounded knights on the floor. The men who had rushed here with Claus were giving them first aid. One of the injured men shook his head.

"That's not true! They were the ones who insulted us!"

Claus returned his gaze to Keith. "He says something different."

Keith frowned, obviously not having expected Claus to challenge him. "This is no way to talk to your betters. You're being rude to the senior knights of House Banfield."

Claus hesitated for only a moment. "Your coming before us has no bearing on what happened." They are our predecessors, certainly. But there's no one here anymore who actually knows them from before, except maybe Mr. Brian. I can't think of anyone else. Even Lord Liam doesn't know them.

Regardless, Claus understood that Keith's men wanted to *act* like their seniors. Thus, he remained polite despite criticizing their actions.

Keith heaved a sigh. "Not very quick on the uptake, are you? Once Lord Isaac formally becomes head of the family, I'll be head knight, so it would be in your best interest to respect me."

That took Claus aback. "Lord Liam will return. Lord Isaac will not inherit House Banfield."

"We'll see about that!"

Keith lunged at Claus with his saber. As always, he was acting like the lowest of the low, but his speed was first-rate.

Claus leaped back to put distance between them, drawing the longsword at his waist. "What do you think you're doing?"

He had no idea why Keith attacked him, but he was a knight as well, and drew his sword to defend himself. Since Keith hadn't officially returned to House Banfield's service, he was a mere fellow knight rather than a superior. In fact, Keith was a visitor if anything. And if he displayed such rudeness to his hosts, they had a right to treat him in kind.

Keith began to disparage his opponent's swordsmanship. "You're clearly without talent. From the way you moved just now, I know exactly what you're capable of. Liam must have been short on personnel if *you're* his most trusted knight."

"My face is burning," Claus replied, but Keith's mockery didn't bother him much, since he didn't think he was particularly talented. He envied Keith's apparent skill, although that was the only thing.

"If Liam really does come back, I'll greet him by tossing him your severed

head!"

Keith lunged forward and thrust his saber at Claus a second time. Claus matched his movements and swung his sword. Everyone in the room had predicted Claus's immediate defeat, but what actually happened was unexpected.

"Wha—" Keith blurted.

The tip of Claus's longsword pressed against the other knight's throat. Keith was so shocked, he dropped his saber. Gathering that his opponent admitted defeat, Claus returned his longsword to its sheath.

"Now," he said, "explain to me what happened."

He wanted to investigate the attack against his men, but Keith just motioned for his knights to follow him from the room, seething with frustration over losing their duel.

"Don't get full of yourself, second-rate!" he called back to Claus.

He runs even from something like this? Well, I'd better not chide him about it. He'd likely get violent again, Claus thought, watching Keith leave.

While Claus pondered the problem of this other knight, his men surrounded him, jabbering excitedly.

"I'm so impressed, Lord Claus!"

"You always say you aren't a talented swordsman, but if you can beat a knight like that, you're way too humble!"

"That's our Lord Claus!"

"I just held my own in this one duel," Claus said, unsure why his men were again glorifying him.

Skilled knights often slack off on their training. What's more, Keith has performed guard duties for a long time, rather than actively taking part in battle. Under different circumstances, he could've performed much better.

In truth, since Keith was born talented, he hadn't felt the need to train much. He did nothing but guard Cliff's family, getting little experience in earnest. Claus

might not have Keith's natural ability, but he had long years of real service and diligent training behind him. His victory came down to those differences. If Keith had trained properly and joined in as many battles as Claus had, their fight would certainly have ended in Claus's defeat.

Claus tried to calm his excited followers. "Please focus on treating the wounded. I'll go after Keith's men, and get them to—"

Before he could finish, another subordinate burst into the room. "Lord Claus! Christiana's and Marie's forces have deployed to settle things between them!"

Claus looked up at the ceiling, holding his stomach. *No more! Lord Liam, please get back here!*

Tia's fleet was facing off against Marie's.

The two fleets occupied a sector of space within House Banfield's domain. Since they were confronting their own allies, the ships' crews felt uncertain. Now, with the other faction's ships directly in front of them, they seemingly started to question what exactly they were doing.

That uncertainty extended to the commander of Marie's fleet. "We're really going to fight our own allies? We could still..." He was cooperating with Marie, but facing allies made him hesitate.

Marie sat in her chair, filing her nails, concerned only with the state of her manicure. "We are. We can't sleep well at night as long as that ground meat woman is alive, can we? All you need to do is follow my orders."

In this battle, Marie intended to rid herself of Tia.

Lord Liam will return—I know it. I need to create an order of knights fit to serve him when he gets back. There won't be a place in that order for ground meat.

She needed to solve her problems rapidly, while Liam was still absent. Once this was over, she'd blame everything on Tia. Of course, Tia planned the same thing.

A communication line opened between the two command ships, and Tia's

face appeared on Marie's monitor. Marie threw aside her nail file and leaped up, eyes crazed.

"Ground meat woman!"

Tia's expression was icy. "Seems like the time has finally come, fossil. I look forward to killing you myself."

Marie's eyes were bloodshot, and one twitched. Her cackle left everyone else on the bridge speechless.

"You really think a pirate's plaything like you can kill me? Maybe I should capture you and see how much a pirate would pay for you. Where was it Lord Liam found you again? In that pirate *stable*? I'll put you back there myself."

Tia's eyes widened at this reminder of her painful past. She had only one response: "I'll kill you."

Marie's wild grin disappeared. "Drop dead," she said, ending the call.

Ignoring her commander, she ordered her fleet to begin the attack. The bridge crew just exchanged glances; no one repeated her order.

Marie clicked her tongue. "Tch! Wimping out now? You're a bunch of gutless cowards!"

She was disgusted with her crew, but at the same time, she wasn't sure she should strongarm them into the battle. They were allies with those other soldiers until just recently. If I'm too forceful now, it will only lead to trouble down the line.

Observing the enemy fleet through her monitor, she saw that they also showed no sign of moving.

"There's only one thing to do."

Marie decided to end things herself.

"Why aren't you following orders?!" Claudia shouted from the bridge of the Vár.

The bridge crew, including the captain and fleet commander, looked away.

Before Claudia could raise her voice again, Tia tapped her shoulder, shaking her head. "It's not happening, Claudia."

"B-but..."

"The enemy isn't moving either." They were close enough to Marie's fleet for the battle to commence, but neither side wanted to initiate it. "Let's finish things ourselves."

Just then, an operator nervously reported, "Umm... A-a mobile knight has deployed from the e-enemy fleet!"

Instantly, Tia rushed off of the bridge. "Let's hurry and deploy, Claudia! We'll kill them all!"

Claudia likewise left the bridge, following the ominously grinning Tia. "Yes, Lady Tia!"

The Guide's copy tied to Tia floated in space as the two fleets faced each other.

"Hmm." He grimaced. "This is the result I was hoping for... Why do I feel so unsatisfied?"

House Banfield had fallen into chaos, as he'd planned, yet somehow he wasn't happy about it.

"I mean... Does that woman have no compunctions about killing her allies?"

Watching Tia head off jubilantly to kill Marie, the Guide found himself wishing she was a bit more conflicted. He would have preferred her to suffer as she vacillated between her desires and her reason. Tia's reason, however, wasn't functioning in the slightest. She was eager to kill Marie, her own ally. The copy could only conclude she had a few screws loose.

As he watched the drama, a voice called to him.

"Oh, it's me."

"Hey, me."

The other copy had come into space to observe the battle too. They watched

together cordially.

"By the way, me, how'd things go?"

"Marie was even crazier than I expected. She didn't question killing her own ally at all. In fact, she seemed *excited* about doing so. I wish she'd exhibit a bit more ambivalence."

"Ah. So, the same as things here."

Both had found that the women they were created to manipulate had done exactly as they planned—and then some. They'd expended almost no effort to get here.

"Did we even need copies to control these two?"

"Don't ask me. Save your complaints for the original."

Both copies sighed, watching Tia and Marie deploy their respective mobile knights.

Inside her purple Teumessa, Marie smiled fearlessly. "So you're here, ground meat. Huh...?"

Marie's squad of knights had deployed first, and now hung in space between the two fleets. Watching as Tia's own squad joined them, Marie raised an eyebrow in confusion. Naturally, she and her squad were aware that Tia's knights piloted Nemains, but she wasn't familiar with the model their foes had just deployed.

Marie's squad was just as confused, and her adjutant took it upon himself to ask the question they all shared. "Those are Nemains, but they got quite the makeover, didn't they?"

At first, Marie thought Tia's faction might have obtained entirely different mobile knights, but her scans did identify the units as Nemains. They were heavily modified, but she saw traces of the machines she was familiar with under that new armor.

Marie's finger tapped her control stick thoughtfully. "I heard there were tentative plans to enhance the Nemains," she recalled, "but I didn't pay

attention to the details."

"Well, our craft are Teumessas. Nemains won't become a threat to us just because of heavier armor. Let's crush them already."

The Nemains speeding their way split into trios. Seeing this, Marie's Teumessas launched their attack.

"Kill them all!"

"They'd better be tougher than pirates!"

"They think a Nemain can beat a Teumessa?"

Marie 's eyes widened at her allies' unflinching confidence in their piloting. She clicked her tongue. "Careful, idiots! That's not just extra armor!"

Her team members thought the Nemains had simply added shielding to their frames, which would have slowed them down, but in fact the Nemains moved *faster* than usual. They sped away, gaining distance from the charging Teumessas and forcing them to break formation. Simultaneously, each Nemain model removed the weapon its pilot specialized in from storage.

Marie's squad was surprised to see Tia's knights wielding weapons somehow larger than the storage containers they came out of.

"Where the hell were they keeping those?"

The Teumessa pilots were momentarily stunned by the unexpected weapons' appearance, but the Nemains were attacking.

"Are you stupid?" one pilot cried angrily. "How long are you going to grandstand in the middle of a battlefield?"

"Time to hunt some foxes!"

"Don't underestimate Valkyries!"



The Teumessas' confusion undercut their teamwork; though they were part of the same squad, they weren't the best at cooperating. Suddenly the Nemains were chasing Marie's disoriented squad around the battlefield, exhibiting superior teamwork and considerable firepower.

Watching all this, Marie gritted her teeth. "Special spatial-magic containers, eh?"

The containers fitted to the Nemains' additional armor utilized spatial magic, enabling each pilot to store whatever weapon they wanted aboard their craft.

"You went that far, eh, ground meat woman?!"

The containers had one flaw—they were single-use only. Unlike the exceptional Avid, these craft purged emptied spatial storage to keep costs down. That cut costs, but the disposable parts remained terribly expensive simply due to their function. Each container was about the same price as a basic Nemain unit.

Angrily shouting in her cockpit, Marie suddenly got a bad feeling. She quickly maneuvered her Teumessa, acting on instinct. That instinct proved correct when a beam stronger than a blast from a ship cannon shot through the space she had occupied.

"Too bad for you. If that attack had finished you off, you would have died a quick, painless death."

Marie glowered as she heard this transmission. On her cockpit monitor, she now saw Tia's personal Nemain, large add-ons fixed to its back. Like the other Nemains, the craft sported extra spatial-magic containers in addition to huge beam cannons mounted on support arms to either side of the unit.

The craft in front of her, Marie concluded, was a monster clearly modified based on Tia's exact specs. As the barrels of Tia's beam cannons retracted, Marie sped away from the mobile knight.

"I didn't think we'd scare you into going this far."

Her monitor still showed Tia's face in a small window. Tia's mouth curled in a smile, her eyes giving off a bewitching light.

"You should be proud. It proves how strong an adversary you were."

Were? Marie's face twitched at Tia's implication that her victory was certain. "Don't act like you've won yet, you crazy ground meat woman!"

"Oh—so you've reverted to the vulgar tone of the lowlife you really are!"

Laser guns emerged from containers attached to Tia's Nemain. Marie's Teumessa wove through their streaking beams, avoiding each at first, yet there were simply too many. Eventually, a beam pierced her defense field, melting a small spot on her craft's armored plating.

"Damn it! All craft, avoid independent dogfights!" Marie tried to order her squad to regroup and work together.

Yet this was where Tia's truly formidable talent shone. "All units, maintain groupings and stick to your prey. Some enemy craft are breaking formation."

Prioritize them for elimination."

Marie shuddered at the calm with which Tia delivered her orders. *Is she monitoring the full view of the battlefield even as she's fighting me? Her optional parts aren't...*

Tia seemed to realize what Marie wanted to ask when she saw the woman's expression on the monitor. "What do you think? My Brunhild is really something with improved command functions, isn't she? I didn't simply enhance her combat prowess, you know. I can lead a whole fleet from right here inside my mobile knight."

"One might say that's excessive." What was the Third Weapons Factory doing, giving a mobile knight such absurd functionality? Isn't that the Seventh's specialty?

Not just anyone could have commanded several hundred Nemains while simultaneously fighting in her own craft, but Tia's subordinates were executing her orders flawlessly. It was almost as if Tia was flying hundreds of Nemains all on her own.

She's a monster!

Marie was staggered that Tia was capable of so much from inside of her

mobile knight.

Evidently finished with its lasers, Tia's Nemain purged the spatial-magic containers that had housed them. The power that had flowed to the containers was redirected to other systems to save energy.

"If I can just gain some distance..." Marie mumbled.

"I'm not letting you get away, fossil!"

Marie flew the Teumessa at top speed, but Tia's Nemain easily kept up. Despite its size, it boasted incredible speed. The energy rerouted from the disposable storage containers probably helped supply that power.

"It's over. Bye-bye, you old fossil."

Tia pointed her oversized beam cannons at Marie, firing them at the Teumessa's back.

"I'll thank you not to underestimate me, ground meat woman."

Aboard her customized Nemain, the Brunhild, Tia moved in to take down Marie's Teumessa, but then noticed a change in the Teumessa's movements. An optional unit on the craft's back—almost like a tail—began projecting holographic duplicates to confuse her targeting system.

Tia had anticipated this. "Nice try. You think I don't have countermeasures in place?"

A device on the Brunhild projected its own disruptive wave of light to interfere with Marie's illusion. The Teumessa's duplicates quickly vanished, exposing the craft itself, which had been hidden.

"Damn!"

The Teumessa couldn't yet create further illusions; nor could it cloak itself to blend into space, or otherwise fool Tia's systems. The Nemain's massive rifle fired straight at its cockpit. Marie was able to avoid a direct hit, but at the expense of her mobile knight's left leg.

"Ah ha ha! This is my first time fox-hunting, but it's pretty fun!" Tia grinned

at the damage she'd done to Marie's Teumessa.

Then, however, Marie responded, "Ah... So that's it. I've figured out your beast's weak spot."

Tia figured she was just bluffing. "That's an interesting thing to say in your position. You must want me to toy more with you before I kill you. All right—I hope you can entertain me!"

Homing lasers emerged from several of the Nemain's storage containers, and their curving beams sped toward the Teumessa. The Teumessa wove between them, although its lost leg compromised its balance. It couldn't dodge all the tracking beams, however, and lost its right arm next. Lasers also grazed its head and torso, melting sections of its armor.

"So persistent," muttered Tia. "What kind of reflexes does she have?!"

In the course of evading the lasers, the Teumessa turned, and now came curving back to face off with Tia's craft.

"Not a good idea!" Tia warned, frustrated.

Her homing lasers focused on the Teumessa's careless approach. In another second, Tia expected to see Marie's craft explode. Instead, it vanished.

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"Wha-"
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Tia looked around wildly for the Teumessa, then found herself lurching forward from an impact to her machine. Straightening in her pilot's chair, she heard a voice coming from behind her.

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"Caught you."
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"You...! How did you—"

Marie's mobile knight clung to the huge add-on affixed to the Brunhild's back. She thrust its left arm straight into Tia's light-emitting device and destroyed it.

"I figured your jamming wouldn't be perfect. I just needed to elude you for one split second."

Tia furrowed her brow, slightly panicked by how easily Marie latched onto her back after only a moment's distraction. *Her reaction times are unbelievable!*

And her instincts?! Is she even human?

Marie had destroyed the Brunhild's major add-on, so Tia separated her Nemain from it. Having jettisoned the optional part, she could unfold her Nemain's regular wings.

"I just need to endure until the rest of the fleet backs me up."

The Nemain itself was still unscratched, so she could continue the fight. Marie's Teumessa, on the other hand, had taken serious damage.

Nevertheless, in Tia's monitor, Marie smiled. "You're a slow one, aren't you? What do your little readouts tell you about the battle?"

"What do you—"

Tia had thought her allies would come to her aid at any moment, but she found the other Nemains were being driven back by the Teumessas. Claudia's squad was putting up a fight, but Marie's adjutant had her pinned down; she couldn't assist her beleaguered squadmates.

"Why're they—"

"That monster accelerates explosively, but it's not so smooth at changing direction. It helps that your clumsy movements are so easy to predict."

Tia's team had made use of expensive add-ons, but Marie's pilots still surpassed them in sheer ability.

"If only you didn't exist," Tia muttered.

Marie felt exactly the same way. "I'll erase you from my sight!"

The mangled Teumessa launched its attack. Tia responded in kind, although a one-on-one fight was now disadvantageous. The Teumessa cloaked itself and, a moment later, sheared off the left arm of the Nemain.

"Damn you!"

"Let's start with that!" Marie laughed.

Tia bit her lip. "I swear I'll kill you! I'm the only one Lord Liam needs at his side!"

Negative emotions flooded Tia. No—it was more like she sucked them from

somewhere outside herself. She intended to use every bit of strength to defeat the enemy in front of her. The Nemain emitted an ominous aura, its eyes glowing red as its metal body groaned.

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"Wha—"
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A strange shockwave issued from the Nemain, disrupting Marie's illusion and once more exposing the Teumessa.

"There you are!"

The Nemain sped toward the Teumessa, firing its oversized rifle until it ran out of projectiles. It tossed that weapon aside and switched to a beam sword, which the Teumessa barely managed to avoid.

"If not for you, I would've been supporting Lord Liam on my own this whole time!"

Responding to Tia's hatred, the Nemain powered up further.

As she noticed the change coming over Tia, Marie's bearing changed too. "Screw you, you little brat! Do you know how long—how many thousands of years—I waited for someone like Lord Liam? I swear to you, I will kill you!"

A change came over the Teumessa as well. As it drew more power from Marie's hatred, it purged its arms and legs, red sparks shooting from its now-exposed joints.

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"Die!"
"You die!"
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While that happened...

"Nooo!"

"They're sucking us up!"

The Guide's copies were supposed to be controlling Tia and Marie, but instead, the women were draining the copies' negative energy through their inseverable connection. The copies withered as Tia and Marie sucked their power.

"This is insane! I can't believe it!"

"How the hell are they controlling us?"

Rather than using Tia and Marie like puppets, the copies now served as unwilling batteries as the two knights absorbed more and more negative energy.

Although Tia and Marie were unconscious of the connection, they still shouted at the two Guides.

"More...! Give me more!"

"I need the power to kill her!"

Their strong wills began to sap the negative energy that *sustained* the Guide's copies.

"Stop!"

"S-somebody save us! Originaaal!"

As the copies' negative energy ran out, their bodies crumbled like charcoal.

"W-we have to tell the original..."

"Stay away from those two... They're bad news..."

Their negative energy absorbed, the copies faded away into space.

Tia was out of ammo, and no longer had enough energy to power her beam sword. Both her Nemain and Marie's Teumessa were so damaged, their frames were exposed, yet the two continued pummeling each other.

"Everything would have been fine if not for you!" Tia raged. "If he hadn't picked up garbage like you, Lord Liam wouldn't have been led astray!"

"Shut up, you ground-meat monster! Stay away from me and Lady Rosetta's Lord Liam—you'll dirty him!"

Inside her cockpit, Tia spat blood. Breathing was becoming harder.

This isn't good... My vision's getting blurry. But I can't let things end here. Even if it takes the rest of my life force to accomplish, I must—

Up until a minute ago, a strange power had been surging within her, but it must have come at a cost—she now felt utterly drained and battered. Even if she won this fight, she didn't think she'd be able to move for some time. It pained her to move even now.

I'd give my life just to defeat her. It would be for the good of Lord Liam!

She was willing to squeeze out every last ounce of lifeforce to kill Marie, and Marie felt the same way about her. She was spitting blood, staring at Tia with bloodshot eyes. The two were mustering the very last of their strength when...

"You absolute idiots!"

...the very voice they'd longed to hear issued from their cockpit speakers.

Without even consulting their scanners, both women turned to face the direction the voice had come from. Sure enough, there it was—the Avid. Behind it they saw a fleet, but the Avid had zoomed ahead between the battling Nemains and Teumessas.

"Who gave you permission to fight like this?" Liam's voice was calm, but they could tell how furious he was.

Gripping a huge sword in one hand, the Avid lunged at the mobile knights, who were too frenzied to see anything but their enemies. It severed the limbs of each craft it met—Teumessas and Valkyrie-equipped Nemains alike. Then, finally, the Avid charged at Tia and Marie.

"Lord Liam!"

"Lord Liam!"

Tia and Marie cried out as the Avid made its way to them, cowed by the sight of the huge sword on the Avid's back. Their mobile knights didn't move; they must have been at their limits, because they both stopped functioning.

"You're safe, Lord Liam!" Tia exclaimed. "I was worried about—"

"You were worried about me, so you stole part of my fleet to fight your own allies with? And Marie, what's your excuse?"

When Liam addressed her, Marie panicked. "U-um, I, well... Y-you see, someone claiming to be your blood relative took over the home planet, so I

escaped with Lady Rosetta. But that ground meat woman treated me like a criminal and attacked me!"

Tia's face twisted in rage when Marie blamed her and Isaac. "You old fossil! Want me to turn you to stone again?!"

"Shut up, you lump of ground meat! Nothing I said was a lie! I'll tear you to pieces!"

Resuming their typical bickering right in front of Liam was a bad move. He glared at them coldly over their monitors.

"Hmm. So you two can't even be trusted to housesit?"

They hadn't remained to protect Liam's home planet. That meant they had failed him. Faced with that fact, Tia and Marie went quiet and trembled with fear.

"I'll deal with you two later. First, I have to exterminate the vermin infesting my domain. We'll attack with our three fleets. Let none of them leave alive."

He ended the transmission, and the Avid turned its back to them, rejoining Liam's rescue fleet. Tia and Marie could do nothing but watch it go with flushed cheeks.

"Lord Liam... You were as fantastic as always today."

"Laying down the law suits you, Lord Liam."

A number of ships hovered in the sky directly above House Banfield's mansion.

Their insolence infuriated Isaac. "What idiot has their ships standing by directly overhead? Bring them to me this instant—I'll chop their head off myself!"

As Issac drew his sword from its gem-encrusted sheath, the people in the room reacted in different ways. Some wondered what in the world was going on, but many realized exactly who had returned. Baori broke out in a sweat, and the three government officials he'd collaborated with exchanged panicked glances. Keith alone reacted coolly.

"Lord Isaac, it appears Liam has returned," he informed his lord, sounding nonchalant.

Isaac was equally unruffled. "Liam, eh? Hmph! Lucky for him to be rescued."

The reason the pair weren't astonished had to do with Prince Calvin on the Imperial Capital Planet. Isaac had Calvin's backing; the plan had been to oust Liam if he wound up returning, using the conflict his disappearance produced as an excuse. The crown prince's backing lent Isaac and inner circle significant confidence.

"Arrange a meeting," Isaac said. "Honestly, it's so much trouble having a brother with no shame. The only thing we share is blood, yet it infuriates me. Hmm? Where'd Baori go?"

Keith shrugged. "He ran off a minute ago. Must be awfully scared of Liam."

Isaac was disgusted. "What is there to be scared of? He's nothing but a backwater lord."

Isaac had been born and raised on the Capital Planet, so to him, Liam was a crude, unrefined bumpkin. In Isaac's opinion, Liam was unfit to lead House Banfield, one of the few noble houses that had risen to fame in the Empire.

"I grant that he has the skills to raise a powerful army and amass a fair amount of wealth. But in the end, he isn't a fitting lord for House Banfield as it is now. I'll instruct him to hand the headship over to me immediately."

Isaac saw no reason to fear Liam. He was confident the man wouldn't kill someone backed by Prince Calvin. Support from royalty—from the crown prince, no less—went a long way on the Capital Planet. Not even Liam would do something to earn Calvin's ire, Isaac reasoned.

Keith felt the same way, evidently. He wasn't afraid of Liam in the slightest. "House Banfield's former lord was just keeping the seat warm until a proper ruler arrived."

The head knight's implication—that Isaac was that ruler—improved the young noble's mood.

"I will at least express some gratitude to Liam...right before I remove his head

to present to Prince Calvin. Are you ready if he resists us?"

"Yes—fully prepared."

Isaac clasped his hands behind his back and started forward. Suddenly, he found his path blocked by several members of Liam's Royal Guard.

"Lord Isaac, Lord Liam is calling for you," their captain told him without even a proper greeting.

Isaac's mood soured again, but he didn't protest. He needed to meet with Liam anyway, so following his "command" wasn't an issue.

Keith criticized the captain in Isaac's stead. "That's quite the attitude to take with the next ruling lord. I hope you don't think your positions are guaranteed just because you're with the Royal Guard."

The red-haired captain chuckled mockingly. Isaac raised an eyebrow.

"I'd worry about yourselves if I were you," one of the Royal Guards told Keith.
"But I have a hunch it's a little late at this point."

I was finally back in my own home.

I decided to meet this "relative" of mine in my audience chamber, a large hall where I'd originally planned to assemble my grand harem. Since I hadn't yet found any concubines, I'd remodeled the room.

Knights, bureaucrats, and military officials sat in raised rows of lavish chairs, looking down at the proceedings.

I yawned as this younger brother I'd never met was brought before me.

"Here I am, Liam."

I'd wondered what kind of guy he'd be. It turned out he was just a cocky brat.

Looking down on my brother, I retorted, "That's 'Lord Liam' to you, you little brat. Now, what are you doing in my mansion? It looks like you really made yourself at home here. Your excuses will determine your punishment."

Isaac wasn't intimidated in the least by my threat. "I'm here to take over, obviously. Hurry up and transfer headship to me."

"Take over?"

"You're not very bright, are you? I'm going to be the next Count Banfield. I already have permission from my father and grandparents, as well as Prince Calvin's backing. Liam, I'm afraid you're done."

His long black hair and blue eyes meant Isaac was a pretty boy, but his rotten personality showed through, just like mine did. That actually made him seem like kin. Still, he was trying to steal headship, and I couldn't let him get away with that. Even though we were brothers, I already liked him less than the average Joe.

"You want to seize the throne, eh? Well, my response is simple. Get lost, you snot-nosed brat."

"Wh-what? I told you, I have Prince Calvin's support!"

This kid didn't know anything. I decided to tell him what was what. "I'm in conflict with Calvin. Why the hell would I go along with his nonsense? If you drag him into this, I'll just name-drop Prince Cleo. That should go equally far in the palace. Also, do you have Calvin's so-called backing in writing?"

When I asked whether Isaac had Calvin's official support, he was visibly flustered. I guessed he had stupidly relied on Calvin's verbal promise. My parents on the Capital Planet might actually have done likewise. Either way, Calvin's influence in the palace was waning by the day; he could hardly interfere with the leadership of House Banfield. Since I'd returned, there wasn't even any need for someone to succeed me.

I glanced past the tongue-tied Isaac to his knights. "Whoa. If it isn't the knights who abandoned House Banfield. And not only have you shamelessly come back, I hear you've thrown your weight around an awful lot."

House Banfield's former head knight, Keith, scowled at me. He'd no doubt trusted Calvin too. From their seats, my current knights stared down at Keith murderously. Simply abandoning your employer's domain when its fortunes declined was hardly chivalrous, nor was coming back as if nothing had happened when those fortunes radically recovered. My current knights must have wanted to ask how Keith's men dared show their faces.

Of course, I didn't trust anyone, and I understood how Keith and his knights approached things. They'd proven themselves treacherous; there was no way they'd be working for me. On the other hand, some of the people who were *supposed* to be working for me here had proven just as unreliable.

"It seems idiots on my staff also betrayed me by siding with Isaac," I continued.

The people I alluded to reacted with fear, as I'd known they would. Others in the room called them traitors aloud, piercing them with icy stares.

One bureaucrat stepped forward to make an excuse. "Lord Liam, if I may speak..."

I did him the favor of hearing him out. "Go on," I said, granting him permission.

Standing beside me, Claus was taken aback. "Are you sure, Lord Liam?"

"Of course. If his excuse is amusing enough, I'll forgive him. Come on, then. Let's hear it."

"This incident exposed House Banfield's weaknesses, Lord Liam," the official explained, face ashen. "Your disappearance divided the army and negatively affected the government, all because you have no heir."

The guy hit me right where it hurt, but he was right. What could I say to counter that? My domain *had* fallen apart because I hadn't appointed a successor or substitute ruler.

"A reasonable perspective," I commended the traitor. "It wasn't at all amusing, though, so I won't spare you. Try again in your next life."

"Wha-?!"

A reasonable ruler would probably have mulled over what he'd said. Too bad for him I was a villain. His opinion meant nothing to me.

As I considered ending this pointless meeting, I glanced at the maid robots standing to one side. They all should have been in the audience chamber, but I noticed one face was ominously absent.

"Where's Tateyama?"

Chapter 13: Fury

N LIAM'S AUDIENCE CHAMBER, Isaac hung his head and clenched his fists in frustration.

Damn it! A mere backwoods noble dares to defy me?

He had believed the implied promise Calvin's spy had given him, but upon his return, Liam had dismissed him immediately. His pride badly wounded, Isaac raised his head to glare at his brother.

Isaac had seen Liam only once before, when he was young. Almost half a century ago, his father and grandfather had invited him to a ceremony because a relative of theirs was receiving an award. During that ceremony, he'd seen Liam from afar. Even at the time, Isaac hadn't thought much of Liam, despite hearing that they were brothers. If anything, he'd been annoyed to learn he had a brother who was a backwater lord.

He turned to Keith and gave him a meaningful look. "Keith, could you help me here?"

He was essentially ordering Keith, who was capable enough to have served as head knight, to kill Liam on the spot. It was a rash decision, the result of Isaac's youth, but Keith's pride was wounded as well. Keith looked up at the man standing next to Liam—Claus.

"The Way of the Flash is a contrived, nonsensical sword style," the former head knight told Isaac. "The ones who will be a little trouble are..."

He glanced at the bandaged Tia and Marie. Their injuries had been treated, but they weren't at a hundred percent, so Keith felt he could defeat them. He considered his loss to Claus to be a fluke; he wanted a rematch with the man. In fact, he was indulging Isaac's childish demand simply to get revenge on Claus for humiliating him.

"I can take them," Keith concluded. "We have the numbers, too."

Calvin's spies had laid the groundwork for plenty of knights and soldiers loyal

to the prince to back Isaac up if necessary. Traitorous servants had let them into the mansion, and at one word from Keith, they would charge into the audience chamber.

Believing his head knight, Isaac nodded. "All right. Then hurry and—"

Before he finished giving the order, Liam's voice rang through the audience chamber. "Where's Tateyama?"

Isaac sensed the air in the room grow tenser. From the knights to the officials, everyone was suddenly openly fearful. Keith wasn't sure why until he noticed that Liam's mood had changed. He'd stood to talk to those beside him.

"Tateyama. She isn't here?" Liam demanded. "Is she in maintenance? Shouldn't her regular maintenance have been a few days ago?"

Having apparently noticed that a maid robot was missing, Liam asked Claus where she was.

"She's undergoing manufacturer repair," Claus answered hesitantly. "I don't believe she'll be back for another month."

"Huh? Why does she need repairs?"

Liam seemed bothered by the maid robot's absence. He also seemed to have *all* the maid robots' schedules memorized. And he seemed...*worried* about the doll.

"This is our chance," Keith whispered to Isaac. "Shall we take it?"

Isaac opened his mouth to tell Keith to move in on Liam, but this time Claus interrupted him, explaining why the maid robot Tateyama had been sent for repairs.

"She was vandalized so badly, we had to send her to the manufacturer."

A maid robot nearby was holding a sword. Liam reached out, and the moment his hand closed on the weapon, a large fissure appeared in one of the chamber's support columns. Soon the floor, ceiling, and walls were also cracking. Dust and rubble rained down, and one of the larger pillars collapsed with a heavy crash. Still, everyone was too terrified to run for shelter; on top of that, Isaac was now too bewildered to continue giving orders to Keith.

"Who did it?" Liam asked Claus.

Despite the terrifying change that had come over Liam, Claus answered calmly, "A knight serving Lord Isaac."

"Which one?" Liam turned toward Isaac.

Claus pointed out the knight who had damaged Tateyama. A second later, the man—who stood behind Isaac—vanished in a spray of bloody fragments.

No—he hadn't vanished. He'd been cut to shreds in an instant. Gory chunks of him splattered the area where he'd stood.

Some of the blood struck Isaac's face. "Eek!" He fell to the ground.

Liam stared down at him. "Did you order this, Isaac?"

Isaac couldn't speak with Liam glaring at him that way. He trembled in fear. *Aaugh...!* As he struggled to form coherent thoughts, Claus reported his investigation's results.

"The knight you eliminated made that decision independently. I delved into the matter thoroughly, but I thought the man's punishment could wait until your return, Lord Liam."

Liam heaved a sigh, then grinned. "Good decision, Claus. I'll punish the lot of them myself."

He again glared at Isaac and his men again, so forcefully that Isaac wetted himself and passed out on the spot.

"Lord Isaac?"

Keith called out to his master, but made no attempt to catch the boy as he collapsed, instead gripping the hilt of his saber.

I was beside myself with worry for Tateyama. "Claus, Tateyama's okay, right? They can repair her, can't they?"

Claus nodded several times, sweating. "The manufacturer says there shouldn't be issues repairing her."

Amagi had been quiet through all this, but now came to my side. "Master, I

confirmed Tateyama's well-being myself. There was no damage to her memory. She can return to her regular duties after one month."

"R-right. That's good." I sighed with relief.

Then an irritating voice spoke up. It was Keith. "What are you so worried about a goddamn doll for?"

I gave him a stony look as a buzz went through the chamber.

Drawing his saber, Keith began to expound on just how unworthy a lord I was.

"It's absurd for an Imperial noble to keep artificial intelligence by his side, and to make heavy use of it! Liam is unfit to lead House Banfield! Is that not the case?" he demanded of those assembled around us.

As Keith shouted, a number of armed soldiers rushed into the chamber. He must've set that up in advance. Had Calvin himself, or just his underlings, provided this force to Isaac?

I unleashed a Flash at the idiots who'd stormed in, and a second later, the once-beautiful audience chamber was splashed with their blood.

Several hundred of their troops having been obliterated in an instant, Keith and his men stood gaping in shock. I looked at Keith with the slightest of grins.

"What did you think you could do to me with so few men?"

Keith pointed his saber at me, striding forward. "I'll handle you myself!"

My Royal Guard stepped in front of me, but I motioned for them to back off.

"Move—you're in my way."

I took a step, and in the same motion, Keith was already on the floor.

"Wh-what just—huh?"

He seemingly tried to figure out why he'd fallen. When he looked down at himself, he saw that his feet had been severed from his ankles. Keith glanced between his legs and feet several times, as if he couldn't believe what had happened. While he was busy doing that, I severed the arm that held his saber.

"M-my arm! My arm!"

Tia glowered at the wailing Keith. "Just a fool incapable of judging a person's true strength. He really thought he could beat Lord Liam?" Her voice echoed coldly through the chamber.

Why had Keith challenged me? Had he really believed people would rally to him if he declared me unfit to lead?

"Pretty pathetic, former head knight," I chastised him. "You genuinely thought you'd manage to take me down?"

I was sure Calvin would've orchestrated a move on me in a smarter way. I didn't buy that Isaac had his official support. Behind Keith, his knights were in a panic. I left the room's raised platform and walked straight to the fallen knight's side.

"You believed that people would fall over themselves to side with you?" I needled.

Curled on the ground, miserably clutching the stump of his arm, Keith looked up at me. His face twisted in terror, his eyes pleading for mercy.

"I-I was tricked! Isaac, over there—he joined forces with Calvin! I had no choice but to go along with him! PI-please have mercy!"

Staggeringly, Keith was now embarrassing himself even more. A wave of disgust went through the room at his increasingly pitiful behavior.

Well, this was fairly funny, and it might have been fine to let the knight live. After all, he was no threat to me. Having roughed him up enough that he wouldn't move against me again, I could send him home to my parents. I wouldn't choose that option after what had happened to Tateyama, though. Anyone who allowed violence against her deserved whatever they got.

"Kukuri," I called.

My special operative rose from my shadow. "Right here."

I decided to have Kukuri's people deal with the rest of the scum who'd mistreated Tateyama. I'd already executed the main offender, but his friends deserved the same. And if I did it instantly using the Flash, that would hardly be hardly punishment enough.

"I'll leave them to you," I told Kukuri. "You can only touch what's below their heads, all right? Send the heads to Cliff on the Capital Planet. I want him to think hard about who he's messing with."

"Hee hee hee... Are you sure, my lord?"

I wouldn't have minded tormenting these knights, but I suspected I'd lose control. Besides, Kukuri's organization did specialize in such procedures. "I'd kill them too fast. That wouldn't be right when Tateyama went through something so scary."

"Hee hee hee! Do you wish us to give them our warmest welcome?"

Keith and his knights paled at the assassin's offer of...hospitality. I was sure they could easily imagine what was in store.

My mouth quirked into a smile. "Use everything at your disposal to entertain them."

"As you wish, Master Liam."

As Kukuri said this, his operatives appeared one by one from the room's shadows and apprehended Keith's men, dragging them back down into the darkness.

"H-help!"

"No! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!"

"I'll tell you everything! Anything you want to know! Just, please, don't kill me!"

Keith sobbed and wailed at the end, becoming completely incomprehensible.

I'd dealt with the scum who'd damaged Tateyama, but that left other issues to address. I looked down at the unconscious Isaac. He was a rotten brat, but he was technically an adult. I thought maybe I should kill him too and send a message to my father. But the Empire's technology mass-produced brats like this at the press of a button, and I didn't want Cliff sending more tykes my way. I decided to caution Isaac by putting him through the wringer before sending him back alive.

"Prepare to return Isaac to the Capital Planet," I told my people. "And kick out

the vultures hovering around here, looking for scraps. I'll decide how to deal with the moronic traitors who took this brat's side." They were some of the less intelligent among my subjects.

Three traitorous bureaucrats who fell into that category pleaded as my knights rounded them up.

"Have mercy, Lord Liam!"

"We weren't involved, really! Pl-please!"

I was tired of hearing excuses. "Interrogate the traitors, then execute them. Banish their families from my domain as well. Take them away."

My knights followed my orders and dragged the traitors from the chamber.

I was so pissed—positively seething—I didn't know what to do with myself. On top of sweet Tateyama being damaged, I couldn't digest how much things had degraded after I was absent a few days.

"I need to do some cleaning," I decided. "It's been a while since we really cleaned up."

Claus hurried over. "Cleaning, sir?" he cocked his head. "The servants do a decent job of tidying the mansion, don't they?"

Despite the question, he was sweating, which suggested he understood my meaning. He must have hoped I was joking.

"I mean we've been too negligent," I replied. "Garbage is piled up everywhere here, and this is an opportunity to clean house. We'll root out all the traitors and make sure they're punished. We're going to be thorough—this is our chance to get rid of those idiots in one fell swoop."

I used a tone that brooked no argument. I thought Claus would protest anyway, but to my surprise, he nodded.

"Understood."

He was gutsier than I'd thought. And the guy had worked hard to maintain the status quo while I was gone, proving he was way more reliable than Tia and Marie.

Yeah... Guess it's gotta be Claus, then.

Clapping my hands, I announced in a light tone, "Okay, it's cleaning time! Everyone go back to your posts and make them nice and clean! You get me? If there's any garbage left anywhere when you're done, I'll give the slackers the same punishment as the trash they didn't tidy."

Everyone kneeled, expressing their obedience. "As you command!"

It was past time to wipe out the stupid turncoats who'd shown up in my domain.

Claus was at the end of his rope in any number of ways. He was particularly exhausted from helming things during Liam's absence.

When Liam announced his plan to clean things up, Claus resigned himself to the idea that even more work was getting dumped in his lap. All he could think was, Fine... Whatever you say. There are still traitors around here, so "cleaning" is an opportunity to secure things. What should we do with Chengsi, though? At this point, it seems like she's beyond help.

Looking around the audience chamber, Liam cocked his head. "Wait a second. Where are my junior pupils? I don't see Chengsi, either."

"Those three?" Claud replied. "Uh, well..."

Liam's junior pupils and most bloodthirsty knight had gotten into quite a situation.

Riho and Fuka were once again fighting Chengsi, and again destroying a section of the mansion in the process. This time, though, fighting the monstrous, insectoid machine was exhausting them. Chengsi had ultimately undergone so many procedures, she had abandoned her humanity entirely.

"It's impressive that you keep coming, no matter how many times I cut you," Riho panted. "I'll give you that."

"Gotta say I'm sick of it, though," added Fuka.

Every time they'd defeated Chengsi, she only returned to challenge them again. She got stronger each time, and now she was powerful enough to injure them. Before today, battling this unrelenting adversary had seemed entertaining, but now they were in a bit of trouble.

With her twin swords, Fuka hacked off one of Chengsi's insectoid legs. The severed limb melted into liquid metal that slithered back to her body like mercury and rejoined it. Chengsi repeated that reattachment process no matter how many times they cut her.

"I can't take any more of this! You handle it, Riho!" Fuka urged, sick and tired of contending with the liquid metal.

But Riho was struggling as it was. "You can't back out now! I'm sick of this, too!"

There should have been a solid core inside Chengsi's current liquid-metal form, but her body was in constant flux, so Riho couldn't pin down its location. She carved into Chengsi over and over again without destroying her vital center.

After being hit with Flashes over and over, Chengsi even began to adapt—until finally she *dodged* Fuka's Flash.

Fuka leaped back in shock. "She dodged it?"

She couldn't hide her surprise that Chengsi had managed that.

"Hee hee. I've enjoyed playing with you two," Chengsi told them. "I've learned a little about the Way of the Flash thanks to you. Now I'm ready to fight Liam."

Hearing this, Riho jumped forward and slashed at Chengsi angrily, but Chengsi divided herself to avoid the attack. She continued to divide into smaller, independent sections until she surrounded the pair.

"Tch!" Riho crouched low.

Fuka warily did the same. "Guess we played around too much."

Now that Chengsi had them on the ropes, it appeared her intention was to torture them to death.

"I'll show your corpses to Liam so he'll take our fight seriously!"

Chengsi's sole purpose in life was to fight, and challenging Liam would be the apex of her existence. Nothing else mattered but to defeat him.

Just then, a crumbling hallway wall split apart—and Liam appeared from behind it. His hand gripped his sword, and as soon as he saw Chengsi, he looked upon her in disgust.

"Quite a sorry state you've ended up in."

"Liam? Ah! Aaaah...Liaaam!"

Chengsi screeched in joy, gathering her separated pieces and recombining them into an insectoid whole—the monster she had become to contend with the Way of the Flash.

She leaped at Liam, intending to bring him down at last.

Fuka tried to warn Liam. "Senior pupil, she's—"

Liam cut her off. "Don't worry. I have to say, Chengsi, you betrayed my expectations."

Chengsi anticipated his Flash, and intended to counter it. Yet in the next instant, her liquid metal body burst, splattering the walls. Before anyone saw him take hold of it, Liam gripped the orb that had formed Chengsi's core in his free hand. Her liquid metal body couldn't reform without it.

"You found my core just like that?!"

Liam ignored Chengsi's surprise. When his Royal Guard finally caught up to him, he tossed the core to the captain. "Regenerate her body," he ordered. "If this is the best she can do as a machine, she'll be better off in an organic body."

Chengsi had given up everything to challenge Liam, yet he'd still defeated her. She was fine with that, but she couldn't accept Liam's intent to restore her original body. The outcome of their battle was only too clear, and she didn't understand why he wouldn't simply kill her.

"Are you showing me mercy? Kill me! If you don't, I'll come back for your life over and over again!"

"You're misunderstanding something. I'm keeping you alive for my junior pupils' sake. You're not worth my time."

"Are you breaking your promise to me?" Chengsi wailed inside her core. "I swear I'll be the one to kill you!"

Liam just laughed. "That's quite the joke. When you can't even beat my junior pupils, how are you supposed to kill me? You can keep playing with Riho and Fuka. In thirty years or so, Ellen can join in too."

His interest in Chengsi expended, he went over to Riho and Fuka.

"Explain why you couldn't beat her. Are you trying to give the Way of the Flash a bad name? Huh?"

Riho and Fuka shrank under his criticism.

"W-we're sorry. It w-was only today we couldn't beat her," Riho said.

"We kept leaving her alive so we could fight her again for practice," Fuka added. "W-we beat her a billion times. She just held her own this time..."

Liam looked at them coldly as they made excuses. "It's back to square one with you two."

All the pair could do was hang their heads in shame.

Riho and Fuka had advanced less than I'd thought. I couldn't believe they'd struggled against Chengsi. It made me embarrassed to be in the same school as them, and I decided to make their training harsher going forward.

Dressed in tank tops and leggings, they lay next to me, passed out. They'd collapsed from exhaustion due to my training. I'd had Ellen participate at the start too, but since she was still a novice, I let her finish up early.

I sat cross-legged and meditated, continuing my mental training on my own.

"I took those two under my wing, and they couldn't hold their own? How can I face Master like this? I'm not happy that I struggled against that small fry, either."

I thought back to the weakling who'd called himself a demon lord. I'd almost wielded my favorite blade to finish him off, but in the end, I had the Avid destroy him for me. I really should've ended things myself before help even

arrived. My own inability vexed me.

"How to cut an uncuttable enemy...? There must be a way."

At least, thanks to that battle, I'd learned there were adversaries that couldn't be damaged by traditional physical or magical attacks. In that case, I had to figure out a way to damage them. But where to start with that? I suspected I'd figure something out eventually if I just kept training hard. I didn't want it to take too long, though.

My attention had been drifting, so I focused once more, meditating on how to cut something uncuttable. I couldn't be complacent about my swordsmanship. As an evil lord, I could throw my weight around and goof off all I liked. But when it came to the Way of the Flash, I needed to be all business.

Finally freed from training with Liam, Riho and Fuka walked through the mansion's grounds, using their wooden swords as canes. They hadn't undergone such harsh training since their days with Yasushi.

Riho looked close to tears. "H-he's a monster."

Fuka's whole body was screaming. She trembled all over. "We should have killed him back when we had the chance. He said we'll be training a while, so this won't end anytime soon."

The two had already attained full mastery of the Way of the Flash, but Yasushi's senior pupil trained them so hard every day now, they had to moan and complain to get through it. They already wished they could abandon their training, but Liam planned to press ahead with it until he had to return to the Capital Planet. All because they'd let Chengsi get the upper hand.

They sank onto a bench.

"He should just go back to the Capital Planet now."

"Yeah. He still needs to finish his noble training or whatever, right? Why'd he even come back here?"

Riho took out her tablet and checked the news. Almost every day lately, there were reports of bureaucrats, knights, and soldiers being executed for crimes

like embezzlement. A lot of people had been disposed of, their families banished.

"Wait a second. This article..." Riho trailed off.

"Wh-what is it?" Fuka asked, agonized.

Evidently, it wasn't just House Banfield experiencing turmoil.

"All of them were wiped out?"

In the Capital Planet's Imperial palace, Calvin listened to a report from one of his allies, his eyes widening at the news.

The noble who'd delivered the report found it just as hard to believe. "Y-yes! Every single spy we sent to House Banfield's domain failed to report in. Everyone who supported Isaac or sought to pillage Liam's territory was also disposed of."

"What about the traitors in Cleo's faction?"

"They were removed from the faction on Liam's orders. Several heads of house have gone missing."

When Calvin heard that Liam had disappeared due to summoning magic, he'd used those people who responded hastily to the incident to sow chaos in Liam's territory. He'd fed those impulsive parties information, then sat back to watch them wreak havoc on their own. Meanwhile, he'd harshly warned his own faction *not* to lay a hand on House Banfield for the time being.

"Liam got the better of us. He really is fearless, to do this now."

"Your Highness?" The noble who'd brought the news didn't understand what Calvin meant.

The crown prince resisted a sigh, explaining, "He waited until his faction's numbers exploded before weeding out the bad seeds. If he'd overlooked them, some fiasco would have befallen his territory. But the fools took the bait, just like he expected, and he purged them from Cleo's faction. It was just as I feared —a trap."

"Th-that was what he did? Then we—"

"We played right into his hands. Luckily, we kept our own faction out of it, so our strength didn't suffer. Only Liam and those idiots lost out. It could have been much worse," Calvin lied.

If they'd dared go for broke while Liam was gone, they might well have dealt his domain a significant blow. *My caution backfired*.

In the end, Liam had eliminated every single one of Calvin's spies. The crown prince would have a harder time gathering information now. *It could be worse, though.* They'd at least avoided serious damage.

"Anyway, what happened to the fools who invaded Liam's domain?" Calvin asked. "Could he really have killed them all? Isn't it possible he took some as hostages?"

Nobles often took hostages in this kind of aristocratic conflict. That was an intelligent strategy, since ransom money was far more useful than a dead noble. However, Liam wasn't a typical noble.

"I believe Liam treated them as pirates and slaughtered them mercilessly."

"All of them? He's so extreme. He'll just cause more trouble for himself."

Those dead nobles might have invaded his territory, but by reacting so ruthlessly, Liam would make enemies of their families. Of course, if their families managed to bring Liam down, that wouldn't be a bad thing for Calvin.

"We can use this. Support those he's antagonized from now on."

"Your Highness, I have one more important thing to report," the noble said awkwardly.

"What is it?"

"Well, relatives of the nobles Liam declared pirates do wish to join your faction. They want to take Liam down."

"Wh-what...?"

"There's no one to lead all the nobles who hate Liam. So they...well...they've declared that they're joining us."

"They think they can just decide that?!"

Calvin was furious. The dead nobles had committed blatant piracy against another house. It would only hinder him if their families declared support for him in retaliation, now that the tables had turned. Needless to say, he had no intention of accepting the families into his faction. Still, if they threw his name around without permission, that would be just as troublesome.

Thanks to this incident, Liam's faction had purged many shortsighted individuals. Those same shortsighted people now planned to join him instead. *Is Liam blessed by a god of luck, or am I cursed by a god of misfortune? He really is a thorn in my side.*

Calvin decided to take action before things could get any worse. "Give me a list of all the nobles who have decided to join our faction. I can't have them drag me down."

Dismissing the other man, he prepared to run himself ragged addressing the trouble they were about to be in. It was a crucial moment, and he was stuck sorting this mess out.

Chapter 14: A Decent Evil Lord

Having returned to House Noden's home planet, Baori was preparing to go into hiding.

His family was terrified, since he'd started getting ready to run as soon as he returned home.

His wife shrieked questions at him. She was garishly dressed, and had made use of expensive antiaging treatments to maintain her youth and beauty.

"Is it true Liam's returned?"

"Yes! That's why we need to run right away, before we're killed!"

The space pirates—and those masquerading as pirates—who'd invaded House Banfield's territory were already being culled by Liam's private army, which had been under his control again since his return.

Baori's face twisted in anguish. "I just needed a little more time! If only Liam hadn't returned so soon."

Born to a barony on the Empire's outskirts, Baori was used to other nobles dismissing him as a country bumpkin whenever he journeyed to the Capital Planet. For years, he had longed to live a lavish life, but the planet he ruled was too destitute due to the heavy taxation generations of rulers had imposed. That was the same situation House Banfield had formerly been in.

When Liam rose to power, Baron Noden could finally live a little more affluently. Simply upon being asked, Liam had helped develop Baori's planet free of charge. The infrastructural improvements had increased House Noden's tax revenue. However, Baori immediately overtaxed his people, which worked against that progress. Liam would no doubt think Baori was an idiot if he found out how the baron ran his planet.

"I only agreed to this because you said it would be fine!" his wife screeched. "What are you going to do about this? You never said anything about House

Banfield coming after us!"

"I didn't think he'd come back! Ugh. People from the boondocks can't hope for the slightest luxury, can we?"

That was Baori's perspective after trying to become Isaac's guardian to gain a cushy position. Though the baron exploited his people and lived lavishly on tax revenue, he felt his family was unfairly poor compared to the Capital Planet's nobles. Still, he could hardly be called an unbiased judge of his situation.

When he was almost prepared to flee his mansion, a group of soldiers burst inside. They were members of Baron Noden's private army.

Baori frowned at the sudden intrusion. "Wh-what?! If you're here to escort us, we're not ready ye—"

Before he finished his complaint, his men silently pulled their guns' triggers. After killing both Baori and his wife, they surrounded the sprawled bodies.

"Trying to get away by themselves, were they? The nerve of these people."

"They've tortured us long enough. We finally got our chance for revenge."

"Wanna string 'em up in the plaza? That should make everyone happy."

Baori's betrayal of Liam had spurred his subjects to rise up against their tormentor. If civilians rebelled against their lord without an accepted reason or another noble's approval, the Empire could order their entire planet burned. Baori had betrayed his liege lord, though, and the rebels felt they stood a good chance of escaping punishment if they delivered the baron's head to Liam. They'd been waiting for this opportunity for a long time.

Their leader looked down at the two bodies disdainfully. "We'll send them to House Banfield. We need to show Lord Liam we're loyal. Control yourselves, okay?"

The soldiers carried the corpses from the mansion, and not long after that, House Banfield's fleet descended on Baron Noden's planet.

Upon arriving at House Noden's planet, Tia read through a report on the bridge of her ship. She sighed quietly, glancing quickly through several

documents projected in front of her.

"Baron Noden must have been despised by his subjects to be betrayed the moment he defied Lord Liam. I knew he was incompetent, but this takes the cake."

Common soldiers had slain Baori, his wife, his concubines, and his children. When Liam's fleet arrived in his domain, the rebels had immediately and willingly surrendered without a hint of resistance.

Claudia, Tia's adjutant, wanted to know how they'd proceed with the soldiers who'd killed their lord. "Assassinating your ruler is a serious crime. Shall we execute the offenders? I'm sure they're prepared for their fate. We should just get it over with quickly."

No matter their rationale, they'd committed a major offense. Tia understood that. But instead of agreeing to execute them, she smiled mischievously. Tia had let Liam know what became of Baori, and she'd just received a reply; Liam was thrilled to hear about the baron's sorry end. Tia would deliver a more detailed report later, but her initial assessment had been more than well received.

"Our report went over well with Lord Liam," she told Claudia, then answered the adjutant's question. "Discharge the offenders from the army and have them migrate to new planets under new identities. The 'official' story will be that they were executed."

Claudia was taken aback. Letting the rebels live would be much more work than killing them. "That's awfully lenient. Their brave willingness to sacrifice their lives will go to waste."

"They made Lord Liam happy, so I'm rewarding them personally for that.

Now... It's going to be a pain, but we'll have to manage Baron Noden's domain for a little while."

The fleet Tia had been dispatched with was there to run the planet until a replacement ruler was installed. It was difficult to detect at times, but Tia was a more-than-competent leader, as well as an impressive knight.

The data Claudia had been reading on Baron Noden's domain disgusted her. "He was a picture-perfect rotten outskirts noble. No wonder his people hated

him. His territory would have been in a lot more trouble if House Banfield hadn't helped out."

The situation here was so dire, it was almost astounding. Liam's support had improved things, but the baron had increased taxes as soon as he could, bleeding his already impoverished people dry. Their hostility was easy to understand.

"He was the complete opposite of Lord Liam, so let's show these people what Lord Liam's rule is like," Tia replied. "He wouldn't abandon people like this, who clearly need him."

She decided to give her all to governing this planet ravaged by its previous tyrant, knowing Liam would have done the same.

"Darling!"

When Rosetta returned to the mansion, she rushed over and embraced me. I accepted the hug. Since she was already crying, I didn't want to upset her further. Besides, Amagi was standing nearby. She'd give me grief if I rejected Rosetta's affection.

"You seem to be doing well," I said. "Or maybe not. Have you lost some weight?" I pulled away.

Wiping her tears, Rosetta told me just how hard she'd found things. "I was so devastated that you were missing, Darling. Now I truly understand how important you are to your domain. I couldn't do anything...! Not being able to help you made me feel so frustrated and pathetic! You were right—I'm no use to you at all, Darling."

Well, obviously not. This is my domain, after all, not yours. Giving you an official position or real power would be ridiculous—it'd be a big problem if you could do whatever you wanted. If I gave anyone significant power, it'd be a loyal pawn, definitely not you.

"Don't worry about it," I told her. "But there could be situations like this in the future. I'll form a guard unit for you, so you don't ever go through all this again." "Y-you don't have to do that. It'd be a waste."

Well, it was going to be an expense, but also a necessary safeguard. It was only Marie who had flown off with Rosetta this time, but if it'd been an enemy, that would have been a debacle.

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"It's to protect you."

"To protect me? B-but..."
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"I want you to help out with work a little, too, so I'll be putting you through the wringer as my trainee."

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"You mean...?"

"You'd better do well, Rosetta."

"A-all right!"
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She was thrilled, but she didn't understand my thinking. Giving her a special guard unit and letting her help govern my domain might've seemed to contradict my plans, but there was a reason I wanted to give Rosetta limited authority. From the aftermath of the summoning incident, I'd learned it was risky not to give her *any* power whatsoever. I wasn't making her co-ruler—and wouldn't in future—but I didn't totally oppose giving her revocable leadership powers under special circumstances.

In terms of my military, I'd only let Rosetta command her guard unit. I didn't want her messing up my domain out of overenthusiasm. I knew she was the benevolent type, and she might try to interfere with my exploitation of my subjects at some point. I'd have to give her specific jurisdictions so she couldn't do whatever she liked with my military and government.

I was just preventing issues, not giving Rosetta what she wanted. Besides, if she had her own guard unit, she could do some grunt work. She wanted to help; my brilliant scheme let her feel like she was doing that, and prevented her from making real changes in my domain.

"I'll give you the best guards we have, okay, Rosetta?"

"Do you really think I'll be able to command them?"

I grinned to allay her nervousness. Seeing how much weight she'd lost lately, I

felt a little bad about what she'd been through. "Don't worry. They'll be your guards alone, and you can direct them at your discretion."

I'd been disappointed in Rosetta after our engagement, seeing her go from steel-willed to easygoing. However, I'd realized she was an excellent asset for an evil lord like me. I had her in the palm of my hand, so I might as well make use of her.

I turned to Amagi. "Put together a guard unit for Rosetta. Prepare a ship she can command too, and make sure it's a good one."

"As you wish, Master."

Rosetta looked pleased by this unexpected bonus. "A ship I can make use of whenever I want is quite a luxury, isn't it? What should I do with it when I'm not using it?"

She seemed worried that it would be wasteful to have a ship reserved even when she didn't need it. She really was frugal.

"If you don't want it idling, just give it some standing orders. And you can use your guard unit however you want, provided you don't overwork them."

"Can I really? I'll have to come up with some ideas! Oh, also, I heard you brought a pet home, Darling. What kind of pet?"

She'd heard I brought something home, but not what it was, hmm? "I'll introduce you soon. She's at the doctor's right now, getting checked out."

"I can't wait!"

I knew Rosetta was picturing a dog or something. She'd be pretty surprised when she saw Chino.

Now I should get going. Time to punish my subjects' transgressions.

In my office, I issued orders to gathered subordinates whose faces floated on holographic screens all around me. I'd assembled them all to be efficient, but after the purge that had just occurred, they looked rather nervous. I was just happy it had them paying attention.

"Pardon me," Rosetta's maid Ciel said as she entered. I was working, so I only acknowledged her with a nod.

Watching Kurt's sister make tea for me, I continued issuing commands to my subordinates. "That's right. I want any foolish subjects who still put me on a pedestal to know what's what."

"V-very well, my lord," one vassal replied. "Are you certain, though? Your activity records on the Capital Planet mostly comprise parties."

"I won't repeat myself."

Finishing with that matter, I brought the next department head's window forward. Just before I issued my next order, I caught Ciel giving me a nasty look, not even trying to hide how much she despised me. She really was fun to have around.

I ignored her and continued, "Do you have an update for me?"

"Regarding the tax hike, there will be disapproval if no rationale is given. And House Banfield has no financial need for more tax revenue in the first place."

"I'm the one who determines that. I guess we should provide some justification, though, shouldn't we?"

Let me see. What was the most irritating reason they gave for increasing taxes in my past life? There were plenty...but I'd have to say "social welfare." That sounds good, so you can't really object to it, even if you don't see any improvements afterward.

I remembered seeing news stories about corruption within the government, and wondering in frustration what the point of tax hikes even was. *Hearing about a "social welfare" tax hike, only for it to produce no particular results...*Yeah, that's good!

"We'll call it a social welfare tax. Social welfare's important, isn't it?"

"I'll make the arrangements, then."

My call with that department ended. As I addressed more issues, the hovering faces gradually disappeared. When they were all gone, I finally took a break.

No longer needing to restrain herself, Ciel piped up. It was rude for a maid to

address the master of the house like this, but I let that go; I enjoyed her annoyed demeanor.

"Finding a reason to increase taxes because you want to, instead of increasing them because you have a particular reason? Isn't that a little backward?"

That was a reasonable view. I still found it hilarious that an evil lord like Baron Exner had such a goody two-shoes for a daughter. Didn't she even appreciate the irony of that?

I decided to tease her a bit. "It's not backward at all. I'm increasing taxes to torment my subjects. I don't need any more reasons than that."

Ciel's eyes widened at my words. At the same time, she didn't seem surprised to hear my statement. "So those are your true colors. I never believed you were as wise and benevolent as everyone says."

Suddenly, her demeanor was a lot more casual; she was dropping the polite act after realizing how tyrannical I was. That was exactly what I wanted, though! I'd been waiting for someone like her to show up.

"All that 'wise and benevolent' crap is just idiots misinterpreting me. You're smart, though—you saw the truth. You deserve a reward for that. Want some candy?" I pointed to a jar on my desk.

She just glared at me. "You shouldn't exploit your people. Did you forget what happened to Baron Noden? In the end, his subjects killed him and his whole family."

Baron Noden? It was hilarious that that idiot was killed by his subjects, but it had nothing to do with me. "He was a fool, and I'm not. That's all there is to it."

You had to know how much you could wring from people and still get away with it. That was how a decent evil lord did things. If you couldn't manage that, you were just an idiot.

"You mustn't raise those taxes."

"It's my domain. What's wrong with doing as I like with it?"

After a short pause, Ciel changed tack. "Please...please don't torture your people."

She was so concerned for my subjects, who weren't even citizens of her domain. I really felt I'd made a good decision taking her in. She was righteous and just, and though she feared me, she spoke up against my tyranny—it was great!

"I just want to see my subjects' faces twist in pain," I insisted. "There's no benefit to me in granting your request."

I didn't need to keep up appearances with her. After all, I was buddies with her father Baron Exner and her brother Kurt. Ciel could make as much fuss as she liked, and it wouldn't hurt me one bit.

"You're the worst. You're the worst kind of ruler there is!"

"I appreciate the compliment."

This really felt good. I never thought I'd find the steel will I'd expected of Rosetta in Ciel. I loved that she had the mettle to stand up to a villain like me. Even better, she didn't have any power to stop me! This was all she *could* do. I was thrilled that the exact person I'd been looking for—my little bluebird of happiness—was right under my nose. And it was all a lucky accident.

Ciel's head was bowed, her fists clenched. "You're fooling everyone. It's not right."

"It's not me that's wrong—it's the world. You have no influence, so no one will listen to a word you say. Now, since you finished what you came in here to do, why not go tend to your duties?"

I could have riled her up more, but I had my own work to get back to. It was a shame, but our little chat would have to end here. I was about to broadcast footage of my revelries on the Capital Planet for my subjects. First, I'd tell them "Look at the way I blow my money!" and then I'd hit them with the tax hike. I'd make them regret embarrassing me with those protests over an heir.

Ciel headed for the door, tearful at her own helplessness. On her way out, she said, "I'll help everyone see you for what you are. If my brother learns the truth about you, I'm sure—"

Apparently, she wanted to set Kurt straight, but it was Ciel who was misguided about her brother.

"Kurt's not the kind of guy you think he is. Didn't you know that?" It was just tragic that she didn't recognize the evil path her own brother was on.

But there was something strange about Ciel's appearance. Her cheeks flushed, and she trembled, tears flowing. "You're wrong! My brother's not like that. There's no way!"

She dashed out of the room crying. Apparently she couldn't handle the truth about her brother's evil ways.

After she left, she was replaced by a figure rising from my shadow: Kukuri. Poking just his head out, he looked up at me. "Were you all right with that, Master Liam? That girl was awfully rude."

Left to his own devices, Kukuri might murder Ciel. I decided to nip that in the bud.

"Don't lay a hand on her—she's a very important guest we're hosting for Baron Exner. Besides, she's fun to tease. In fact, you guys help her out if you ever notice she's in trouble, all right?"

Seeing my amusement, Kukuri gave up on teaching Ciel a lesson. He seemed a little exasperated, though. "You mustn't get carried away, Master Liam."

Kukuri must have had some complaints about me. I'd spared Kunai, too.

"I like Ciel. You can allow me a few amusements, can't you?" I insisted. "So, what is it you need? Did you pop up just to ask if you could assassinate Ciel?"

"I have something to report," Kukuri replied. "We just secured these test tubes of your genetic material, Master Liam. They were in Christiana's and Marie's possession."

That pair had been walking around with my genetic specimens? What the hell? My amusement vanished instantly, my expression hardening.

"Kukuri, you do good work. I'll reward you later."

I appreciated having *some* competent subordinates.

"How do you intend to punish those two, Master Liam?"

"I'll handle it personally." What had they wanted with my genetic material? "I

can't believe the two of them. Can you, Kukuri?"

"No, Master Liam."

Tia and Marie were in different regions of my domain right now, but I'd have to call them both back and cut them down to size. Seriously, had they wanted to *sell* those test tubes? It enraged me to imagine some illegitimate heir popping up as a result. Were they conscious of the seriousness of the crap they'd pulled? Whatever their plan, even if it had fizzled out, they weren't getting away with it!

Chapter 15: The Weight of a Life

PEOPLE TOOK LIFE LIGHTLY in this universe, even those who said otherwise. In this intergalactic empire, it was the same—no, it was worse—than in my previous world. Even the tiniest skirmish here wiped out tens of thousands of people. Larger battles could claim millions, and were always taking place somewhere or other. Strides in science and magic meant nothing when humanity didn't advance along with them.

Well, that was preamble enough. One reason life was indeed cheap in an intergalactic empire was that children could be made easily. I myself had been born into this world from a test tube, and grown in a machine rather than a womb. My parents felt no love for me, and as soon as I turned five, they'd saddled me with their domain and debt, abandoning me.

Children were born easily, and people died even more easily. That was how this world worked. Life was cheap, right? Still, this particular incident was a new low as far as I was concerned.

"Let's hear your excuses. But first... Claus, tell these two exactly what their crimes are."

I'd called Tia and Marie back from their work and had them prostrate themselves in front of me. Sitting with my legs crossed, my cheek on my fist, I stared down at the pair's bowed heads.

Standing beside me, Claus read out their crimes with an expression that transcended exasperation and sat somewhere around enlightenment. "First, you ignored Baron Noden, Isaac, and their coconspirators to deploy Lord Liam's fleets without permission. Then you occupied planets within Lord Liam's domain without authorization, and, in an act of rebellion, pitted his forces against each other. Finally, you stole Lord Liam's genetic material, which is meant to be safeguarded within the domain."

It was all too much. When I was away, my knights were supposed to protect

my domain, not go off the rails.

"I've been disappointed with you two a number of times," I snapped, "And this time, your greatest sin was betraying me by acting completely on your own whims."

Glancing up, Tia began making excuses. "Lord Liam, my only thought was to protect your realm, which is without an heir—"

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"What was that?"
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"Eep!"

I silenced Tia with a stomp on the floor, then remembered that I was going to tell them something important before hearing their justifications. "How noble of you. I need to warn you both, however—if I consider your excuses unacceptable, I'll cut you down where you stand."

These two had served me for decades by now, but however capable they'd been, I wasn't keeping traitors around. At first, I had wanted to recruit a bunch of hot female knights, but if they were all going to turn out like this, I'd keep knights *out* of my harem. From now on, I wouldn't recruit based on looks—I only wanted people I could actually count on.

Both women went quiet. In my eyes now, they were as bad as Isaac and the rest. I reached for my sword, which leaned against my seat. Marie pulled her hair over her shoulder, exposing her neck to me.

"Hunh. How noble," I acknowledged. "Don't worry, I'll decapitate you painless!—"

"I wanted to bear your child, Lord Liam!"

"Uh..."

Her blurted excuse left me speechless. What the hell was she saying at a time like this?

Marie kept going, her explanation getting worse and worse. "E-even if you'd returned and refused the child, rejecting it as your heir, I would simply have raised it on my own! PI-please forgive me!"

At a loss, I turned to Claus, but he was speechless too. I was a bit relieved by

his consternation, since I thought of him as someone with a fair amount of common sense. For a second, I'd worried that Marie's thinking might be normal in this universe, but Claus's reaction assured me that he was also flummoxed. Thank goodness. Marie's excuse couldn't possibly be anything but bizarre, right?

Weeping, Tia made her case as well. "I would never be so brazen as to request your affection, Lord Liam...but I wanted a connection to you! Even without an incident like the recent one, I had hoped to have a baby using your genetic material someday, to carry on my family name. I would not have claimed that child was an heir of House Banfield. Un-under the circumstances, I couldn't resist the temptation."

"You both wanted to have my child?"

Marie nodded, trembling. "I know it's insolent, but I desired a connection to you too. I'm aware of the extent of my sins, but I couldn't control myself! If you wish to cut me down personally, I could not ask for a better punishment! My life is yours, Lord Liam!"

What even are kids to these two? Tools to connect with me? And now she wants me to cut her down? Well, that just makes it unappealing.

They'd thrown me for a loop, and I withdrew my hand from my sword. "I can't strip you of your qualifications as knights of the Empire, but you will no longer be considered to have the position or authority of knights in my domain. For now, you'll only work as maids here in the mansion."

I had planned on executing them, but their stupid excuses ruined my appetite for bloodshed. The two thanked me with tears in their eyes, although I truly couldn't have cared less.

"Thank you, Lord Liam!"

"Just as before, Lord Liam, I pledge my service to you—even as a maid!"

I'd once considered the two decently competent, trusting them enough to stay out of their way, but that had been a mistake. I'd have Serena start teaching them how to act like proper ladies.

"Enough—you're dismissed. Oh, and Claus?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I've been thinking for a while now about ranking my best knights. You did well during this conflict. So from now on, you're first."

"Yes, si—huh?" Claus began by simply nodding, but then his eyes widened. He was clearly surprised to receive a new title so abruptly.

"I'll expand your authority and increase your pay. I guess it's, you know, that 'head knight' job. You're the best I've got, so keep up the good work, all right?"

"Y-yes, sir!"

As I spoke to Claus, I made sure to get a good look at Tia's and Marie's dead eyes. The exchange seemed to hurt them more deeply than their actual punishment.

"Tia. Marie."

They replied with conflicted expressions.

"Y-yes, sir!"

"Yes, Lord Liam!"

"If you two had just done your jobs, I was leaning toward awarding the role to one of you. I'm beyond disappointed by what you did instead."

Satisfied that they were crushed, I stood and left the chamber.

Claus couldn't stop sweating.

In the past, there had been a rumor that Liam planned to rank his knights officially, assigning them numbers. Who knew how the rumormongers got the idea? At the time, some House Noden vassals studying in Liam's territory got it into their heads that they were worthy of serving as Liam's Twelve Knights. Liam hadn't taken action on the rumor, so the vassals began to spread it around. When the claims got out of hand, Liam denied them, but it later turned out to be true that he planned to number his knights.

Ever since then, who Liam would choose for this honor had been an oftdiscussed subject among his knights. Still, for Claus, this was a bolt from the blue.

I didn't think he'd choose me as First!

After Liam left, Claus remained in the room with Tia and Marie, who'd both failed to become First Knight. Their eyes on him were truly icy.

Tia rose from her kneeling position slowly and eerily, as if she lacked the strength to move properly. "Congratulations...Lord Claus."

Marie stood as well. There was no life in her eyes; her movements were sluggish. "Lord Liam's First Knight... It's an exceptional title. Ah... If not for this incident, it might have belonged to me."

Both women seemed to be taking their failure to become Liam's First Knight rather hard.

"I-it was sudden news to me as well," Claus replied. "I'm sure Lord Liam made the decision on the spur of the moment. He may well change his mind while discussing things with the other knights and army."

Tia and Marie continued glaring at him enviously, and Claus felt his stomach pain return.

Why do I have to serve as head knight? What did I do to deserve it? What do you think an average guy like me can accomplish, Lord Liam?

Claus would continue to shoulder the responsibility for Liam's talented-but-troublesome knights.

I give up.

In the Capital Planet's palace, Calvin lamented his circumstances.

"It's finally, utterly over for me."

He'd been going through intelligence on Liam at his desk. Written on the document in front of him were the words "Liam's greatest weakness is his solitary rulership. When he is not present, his domain is utterly vulnerable." In short, House Banfield's security and stability had indeed been greatly compromised when word of Liam's disappearance got out.

If Liam's domain was vulnerable without him, that should mean it would fall easily, so long as one took out Liam himself. Yet that was the most difficult thing.

"He can't be assassinated. He can't be killed in war. Spreading negative rumors in his domain does nothing. How am I supposed to depose someone I can't sabotage?"

The shadowy organization protecting Liam made assassination practically impossible. Even killing him outright, with no regard for appearances, likely wouldn't succeed; Liam could defeat even Swordmasters singlehandedly. Anyhow, such blatant methods would harm Calvin's reputation. And when it came to war, Liam himself made a formidable soldier. He had many strong knights and troops in his service as well.

Following his recent disappearance, Liam had pruned his domain's traitorous elements, so it was harder than ever to find someone to betray him. All the inside operatives Calvin had installed long-term had vanished; their work would go unfinished. And Liam's cleanse had eliminated *every* operative in his domain, not just Calvin's.

Without Liam's leadership, House Banfield was hardly a threat, but Calvin could find no way to eliminate him. Even the baggage Liam had been enduring —the rabble who should have been flocking to Cleo's faction—*Calvin* was now burdened with; they were gathering under his banner for some reason. Not even Calvin could wrap his head around that. He'd given them only a covert hint of support, and now they claimed to have his full backing.

"Things are looking rather precarious."

Calvin was beginning to see a real chance that Cleo would unseat him and become the new crown prince. He had no idea what to do about it.

Another man, too, clutched his head in dismay—or his hat, rather. It was the Guide, crouched low to the ground with only his tiny arms and legs showing under his top hat.

"No matter what I do, it somehow just benefits Liam."

He'd tried sending Liam far away with summoning magic, then wreaking havoc in his domain while he was gone. At first, that was successful. Yet ultimately, it just illuminated existing problems which Liam then dealt with.

Crouching on a wide boulevard within House Banfield's domain, the Guide looked up at a huge floating monitor.

"Footage shared by the government shows Lord Liam attending parties with Lady Rosetta. The two seem quite intimate!" said one news anchor.

"It's speculated that they released this footage in response to concerns that there's been no progress in their relationship," continued the other. "But aren't they the most darling couple?"

Liam's lavish parties on the Capital Planet had been widely broadcast, yet his subjects hadn't reacted strongly to his wasteful spending. Their concerns lay elsewhere.

Citizens walking down the street chatted mirthfully.

"Oh, so they do get along."

"Guess we didn't need to stage those protests."

"Eh, they were fun. Anyway, if Lord Liam and Lady Rosetta are that intimate, I'm sure we'll have an heir soon enough."

"Let's have another protest when it's born, demanding they give it a sibling!"

The news anchors on the floating monitor began discussing the tax hike.

"In our next story, the government has announced increased taxes to fund a new social welfare program."

"This program will include—"

The citizens didn't react all that strongly to that either.

"A tax increase?"

"Lord Liam, you jerk."

"I hear it'll reduce medical bills, though."

"Lord Liam rules!"

They weren't happy about paying more taxes, but they accepted it readily alongside the promise of improved social programs.

At that point, the Guide became aware that the ground he rested on seemed unusually hot. Yes, it was hotter. Suddenly, it felt like he stood on heated steel.

"Hot! Hot! Gyah!"

He hopped up and down on his little feet awkwardly, then tripped and fell to the ground. There, he started to burn, hat and all.

"Nooo! It's hot no matter where I go!"

There was a sizzling sound; black smoke billowed from the Guide, draining his power. At this rate, surely he would burn to death. He rolled around, searching desperately for a safe spot. As he began to char, the Guide finally realized why this was happening.

"I-it can't be!"

He launched himself into the air and headed for space. There, the home planet looked divine below him. Particles of golden light glimmered everywhere.

"What is that? Where is it coming from?!"

Its quantity seemed far too great for it to be gratitude coming from Liam. Could Liam's thankfulness have enveloped the entire planet and forced the Guide off it?

At that point, the Guide finally remembered. "I-is it the w-world tree?"

This concentration of energy flowed toward him from a planet far away, traversing time and space. That planet had just been revitalized, and the world tree that had appeared there was under Liam's protection. Though it was still small, it must have felt grateful to Liam. Its holy power was reaching out and trying to protect him.

"The world tree is protecting Liam? Th-there's just no way for me to win, is there?!"

A world tree was a truly holy plant, and in effect a deadly poison to the Guide. This one would have withered under the care of the evil elves who'd wished to exploit it, but the Guide himself had drained the elves' desire for shortsighted profit.

Normally, a world tree would not favor one person to this extent. The Guide trembled at this unforeseen consequence of his actions.

"A-at this point, th-there's nothing I can do on my own anymore, except gather other entities like myself in this universe to assist me."

He'd just have to find help. Ordinarily, a being like the Guide would never stoop to asking for help, but at this point he was terrified of Liam. To defeat him, the Guide would throw away his pride.

"I'll do anything I have to, if it means taking Liam down!"

Chapter 16: Touchstone

E VEN WHEN LIAM went through with the arbitrary, malicious "social welfare" tax hike, he didn't intend it to fund anything specific.

Previously after such an increase, many of his government workers would just have sat back and let the extra money roll in rather than spending it purposefully. This time, however, the hike came on the heels of Liam's vast political purge, so the officials still employed in his government gave real thought to how to follow through on his orders. Normally, they would have been thrilled by the tax hike's vague purpose, but now they discussed the situation amongst themselves.

"He's testing us, I know it!"

"Yes! He's left it all to us as a test!"

"If we screw this up, we'll be executed, too!"

All the officials who had openly betrayed Liam had, naturally, been executed. Anyone who had committed *any* kind of wrongdoing had been punished, including spies from Calvin and other domains. Liam even prosecuted overlooked crimes like embezzlement. And since Liam had told them nothing more than to "increase taxes for the sake of social welfare," leaving all the details to them, these officials were understandably concerned.

"We have to come up with programs that satisfy Lord Liam, or we're dead."

Looking terrified, one of the older officials told the younger ones about an incident from the past. "It was over half a century ago now. Lord Liam was only ten, and he rooted out all the corrupt officials serving at that time. It's true Lord Liam is more generous and compassionate than other lords, but that doesn't mean he won't make severe decisions sometimes. We've forgotten that over these last few decades."

The younger officials had heard the stories, but not many of the people

around now were there at the time. They'd taken things lightly for far too long; they'd dropped their guards, and some had taken advantage of their positions.

The younger officials gulped at the story.

"I-I heard about this before."

"Yeah. I remember a bunch of government officials being executed when I was a kid."

"Well, things were much worse back then, so he had no choice, right?"

They didn't think there was any way Liam would do the same thing to them.

The older official continued. "If we create a program that serves no real purpose, we could *all* be purged by Lord Liam next. When he decides to do something, he does it. After all, Lord Liam would have no problem leaving his domain's governance entirely to artificial intelligence."

To some degree, the other officials already knew that, if he felt like it, Liam would eliminate every last one of them in favor of AI. All too aware that there would always be someone to replace them, the officials took their work more seriously.

An average family living in House Banfield's domain, consisting of grandparents, parents, and three children, sat around the dinner table and discussed the recent tax hike.

"Improving social welfare? Well, if Lord Liam says that's what it's for, then I'm sure it's true," the father remarked.

The grandfather nodded, sipping his tea. "I'm sure it is. He's a wise and benevolent lord, that one."

As their parents and grandparents expressed unwavering trust in their lord, the children gave them dubious looks, unaware of the past.

"But we don't know if he's really going to do that, right?" the eldest daughter asked soberly.

Her father glanced at her patiently. "That's right. You kids don't know, do

you? You may learn about the past in school, but I'm sure it doesn't feel real to you."

As part of Liam's policies, House Banfield's citizens underwent mandatory schooling. The nine-year educational period wasn't remarkably short nor long, but since people could also use education capsules, they ended up with the equivalent of a college education. And it was so easy to pursue higher education that more and more children were continuing their education past the compulsory period.

The grandparents and parents understood the children's feelings; there was no way they could understand just how bad things had once been here. They weren't fifty yet, and therefore not yet adults, appearance-wise looking only around ten.

"Things really were awful here before Lord Liam took over," the grandfather reminisced darkly. "Taxes were heavy for no good reason, there were few jobs, and when war broke out, conscription was mandatory."

The children couldn't believe this. "But why? Isn't it better for rulers if their domains are better developed?"

It was natural that they thought that, but their father considered the words an innocent child's naïveté. "See if you still expect that when you grow up and visit territories other than House Banfield's. Not many nobles have accomplished what Lord Liam has."

As the children struggled to absorb his words, their grandmother urged them to continue eating.

"Come now, your food will get cold. Don't worry, Lord Liam won't let anything bad happen to his people."

Once again, the children could only give their elders dubious looks in response to their unquestioning trust in Liam.

House Banfield's military was in the same state of internal crisis as its government. The members who had been around since Liam's initial restructuring were mostly fine, but those who had joined later and engaged in

wrongdoing were now having their crimes revealed. The worst sinners among them were the pirate collaborators.

"You colluded with pirates?!"

One colonel, a graduate of House Banfield's military academy, had been letting pirates go in exchange for bribes, then distributing the money and valuables to allies.

Now that Liam himself didn't fight many pirates anymore, a number of soldiers had slacked off in their duty to eradicate the criminals. Some were even getting big heads, since the pirates were frightened of House Banfield and willing to bow to its soldiers.

The top brass were horrified to see this behavior come to light.

"H-how could they be so stupid?"

"Lord Liam will be furious if he finds out!"

"If we don't report them, it's our heads that are going to roll."

The generals were scared stiff because Liam came down hard on pirates. They had been in the military long enough to see his fury on the battlefield. Since Liam hated pirates with a passion, he'd surely be just as merciless with collaborators, and the military investigation had revealed many among his field officers.

"How should we go about the arrests?"

"I don't care if you have to get rough—just be thorough!"

"Have every officer found to be colluding shot to death."

Liam had run his domain for more than eighty years now. Thinking it was about time for a thorough restructuring, the top brass decided to carry out their own purge of corruption in their ranks.

"There weren't as many idiots as I expected," I said, albeit with a bit of disgust, as I read the reports various departments had sent my office. "Embezzling, bribes, colluding with pirates. Yeah, that's about it."

I'd never trusted my human subordinates in the first place, and I was surprised to find so few traitors.

Amagi had brought me some afternoon tea. As I sipped it, I chatted with her.

"House Banfield is far superior to most other domains in that regard," she assured me.

"Good. I don't mind treating loyal pawns well."

"Why not direct some of that kindness toward your subjects?"

"They shamed me, so they should suffer the consequences."

I would never forget everyone laughing at me during that hearing where they played videos of protesting subjects demanding I father an heir. Eulisia, in particular, had embarrassed me. And that reminded me...

"Amagi, what's Eulisia up to?"

"Miss Eulisia? Let me see..."

Amagi did some investigating and found Eulisia was in fact right here in the mansion.

"You're terrible, Lord Liam!"

"You're the terrible one! I sent you to suppress the protests, and instead you joined them! What's wrong with you?"

Although Eulisia had participated in the protests herself, she at least hadn't sided with the traitors and Isaac. Was she loyal or disloyal? Apparently she'd holed up in her room, terrified of how I might punish her.

"I can't believe your people, ignoring a potential concubine like me! I've been sitting around in here worrying about whether you'd kill me!"

"I forgot about you myself."

"You're a monster, Lord Liam!"

I still needed to punish her. Eulisia was my connection to the Imperial Army, though—I couldn't just execute her.

At that point, I came up with the perfect idea. I'd just offered to put together a special guard for Rosetta, but she had no military experience herself. She needed an adjutant to ensure her guards functioned as a unit. Meanwhile, Eulisia had connections in the military and Imperial weapons factories. She was another talented problem child, and I wanted her to show that talent more consistently. She wasn't busy right now, so I decided to let Rosetta have her.

"In any case, since you don't have anything better to do, help Rosetta set up her new guard unit."

"Huh?" Eulisia made a face.

"You're capable with that sort of thing, aren't you?"

"W-well, I could do it... But aren't I your potential concubine, Lord Liam? Won't it be awkward working with your future wife?"

"If you're smart enough to figure that out, guess I don't need to worry. Anyway, this should be punishment enough for you."

"That's not nice! You can't just come up with my punishment on the spot!"

"Do everything Rosetta asks. I'll give you a decent budget. Put together a good team for her, hear me?"

I figured I'd start funding the venture by giving Eulisia some of my pocket money now. I wasn't sure exactly how much she'd require, but enough to buy a few dozen ships was probably fine. I transferred a sum from my digital wallet to Eulisia.

She looked at me in surprise. "Huh? You're investing that on this?"

"It's enough, isn't it?"

"Enough for...erm... What sort of scale are we talking about for this guard unit?"

"Whatever you put together with that amount. Okay, get to work."

After Liam departed, Eulisia was left to agonize over the task he'd entrusted her with.

"'Whatever I put together'? Did he realize how much he gave me? Did he add an extra three or four zeros?!"

He'd allotted a ridiculous budget—enough to purchase an entire fleet. In fact, it would be difficult to assemble a fleet of the size the funds permitted. In the past, Tia had prepared tens of thousands of ships in no time at Liam's request, but that was thanks to her unique organizational skills. Eulisia didn't have the same skills, though she possessed abilities far beyond the average soldier.

"W-well, I guess I just have to figure it out with Lady Rosetta. We'll need to find a place to order the ships from, too. The Third Weapons Factory? Given this project's scale, we'll get complaints if we don't take bids from multiple factories."

Eulisia felt she would struggle to use up the huge amount Liam had handed her.

"Isn't a personal guard a few hundred ships at most? It would be weird for Lady Rosetta to have a force the size of Lord Liam's Royal Guard. Is his aim to give her tons of military power?" She tried to understand Liam's thought process. "Maybe he *didn't* notice he'd added all those zeros. No, that couldn't be it. Lord Liam wouldn't do this arbitrarily, though."

For all Eulisia knew, Liam might explode in anger if she put together a tenthousand-ship fleet. But he was just as likely to blow up at her if she left most of the money unused. Needless to say, she knew full well she wouldn't survive an attempt to pocket any of the funds.

"Think...think, Eulisia! He'll forget you for good this time if you screw up, so you need to figure out how to do this. Oh, wait...I know!"

Since Rosetta's security force likely wouldn't see much action, Eulisia initially thought she might put together a fleet of mediocre ships, and just make sure they *looked* good. But if she applied this excessive budget that way, she'd end up with far too large a fleet. She needed to put the money into the ships' *quality*.

"If the force consists of elites, it will just be slightly larger than average. This amount will only cover only around a thousand cutting-edge ships. The fleet probably won't see real combat, but it'll sure look the part, and function as well

if it needs to."

Rosetta's guards would be there to protect her, although all they really needed to be capable of was getting her to safety quickly when required.

"If Lady Rosetta disagrees, I'll just have to come up with some other approach. But this should work fine."

She decided to whip up a proposal and see what Rosetta thought.

Having gone over Eulisia's proposal, Rosetta wasn't sure what to think.

"Would this really be okay?"

She hadn't imagined Liam would enlist his potential concubine Eulisia to put together her new security force. Rosetta had her own thoughts about that, but she couldn't contest Liam's decisions. Besides, it was true that she needed an advisor, since she hadn't attended a military academy herself. Eulisia was a brilliant soldier, so she'd be perfect as Rosetta's aide.

"I guess there's nothing I can do," Rosetta said to herself. "Marie made Darling angry—she can't go back to being a knight for a while."

Rosetta was used to relying on Marie for most things, but the knight had angered Liam and been stripped of her position, at least for the time being. She was currently receiving an education from Serena.

As Rosetta looked over the proposal again, her maid Ciel was lost in thought at her side. Rosetta recalled that the Exner family had a military history, so maybe Ciel would have some insights on the matter.

"Ciel, do you have any thoughts?"

"Well, if you'll permit me to speak freely..."

"Of course. I want to hear your opinion. How should I set up my guard force? Sorry... That question is far too vague, isn't it?"

Realizing the nature of Rosetta's concerns, Ciel hardened her gaze. "The security force of a noble's wife is usually a few hundred ships at most. If it were larger, there would be a risk of family discord escalating into armed conflict."

"I see—my having too much power could be bothersome. Even a security force is an army, after all. It should really be under Darling's command." Tension between her guard unit and the regular army might come to a boil without her even being aware.

"How about creating a full force of a thousand ships, but only using three hundred or so at a time, and rotating them out?" Ciel suggested. "The inactive members could have time off, train, or do some other work."

"Other work?"

"Many nobles can't protect themselves adequately, Lady Rosetta." Nobles with territory on the Empire's outskirts in particular.

"I see... I could have my guards defend them."

"Yes. You could essentially attend to matters a count like Lord Liam doesn't have time to deal with. Your security force would be powerful enough to resolve small conflicts."

"That's a great idea!" Rosetta exclaimed, happy to hear she could help Liam in such a way. "Darling receives so many petitions for assistance, I heard he can't deal with them all. I'd love to handle some of his less important work."

"You'd need a proper command center too."

"Wait—you mean I'm going to have a base?"

"Well, of course. Your guards will need to work independently from the army, after all."

"I suppose I should ask Eulisia about all this."

When Rosetta left to discuss their ideas with Eulisia, Ciel pumped her fist triumphantly.

"All right! Lady Rosetta will finally have some power now, if only a little. Even if she can't do much at first, with a small force of elites, she can make ties with lots of other nobles. At some point, she'll have so much power, Liam will be forced to take notice!"

Ciel was, of course, allying herself with Rosetta to knock Liam off his pedestal. For that to happen, Rosetta had to gain power.

"Eventually, Lady Rosetta will realize Liam is actually a bad guy...and when she does, she'll have to stop him."

Liam tormented his subjects just for his own amusement, and Rosetta would understand that one day. Ciel was sure of it.

"Just wait, Liam. I'll stop your evil deeds, I swear it! I'll get my brother away from you, too!"

"I fear Lady Ciel is attempting to incite Lady Rosetta to future insurrection," Kunai warned me.

While advising Rosetta on how to operate her security force, Ciel was apparently plotting something. I knew all about this, naturally, because Kunai had secretly observed their conversation and immediately reported it to me.

Had Ciel forgotten she was plotting in my mansion, or what? "She's so stupid it's almost cute."

"Do you really intend to allow this, Master Liam?"

Ciel's actions amounted to betrayal, but I'd finally discovered a girl with steel will. It'd be a shame to get rid of her now. Still, I didn't intend to let her get the best of me.

"Leave Ciel be, but call Rosetta in here."

"Yes, sir!"

Kunai vanished, and a short time later, Rosetta arrived at my office.

"Do you need something, Darling?"

Seeing the gentle way Rosetta smiled at me, I wished she would take a page out of Ciel's book and plot to kill me in my sleep or something.

"I'm told Ciel suggested using your guards to take care of my busywork."

"You heard about that?"

"Of course I did. And I won't allow it."

"I-I thought you might not."

I didn't really care about her pitching in, but I didn't want her going along with Ciel's plan. According to Kunai, Ciel was thrilled right now—sure that Rosetta was doing exactly as she suggested—but I was the one who had Rosetta in the palm of my hand!

"I want you to do what *you* want with your guard. Don't just do what somebody else tells you to. You can get advice, sure, but the decision should be yours alone. It's *your* security force."

Having said that, I'd leave the matter to her for now. Rosetta's military training only consisted of basics we'd learned in primary school. She didn't have real experience, so any ambitious exploits would end in failure, or at best, accomplish little. I wanted to see Ciel fretting over her.

"What I want...?" Rosetta echoed.

"Like I said, don't just use someone else's ideas. If you don't want to decide, I'll scrap the whole fleet. If that makes sense, get going already."

I chased Rosetta out, Kunai's head immediately popped out from my shadow.

"Was that really adequate, Master Liam?"

In truth, the balance in my electronic wallet was three zeroes smaller than it should have been. I guessed I had accidentally transferred way more money to Eulisia than I'd meant to, but it would be super embarrassing to admit I'd made such a mistake and demand Rosetta give the money back. I would just have to pretend it didn't bother me.

"We'll let her do as she likes. I want to see what she and Ciel settle on."

"And Miss Eulisia?"

"If I get to see her fall on her face, it'll be amusing. Otherwise, I don't care."

Eulisia wasn't like Nias, who had strong and weak points—she was more consistently incompetent.

"For now," I added, "I want to get back to the Capital Planet and complete my

training. I've only got four years left, and I spent too much time here."

I was anxious to finish training so I could freely enjoy life as an evil lord. As I mulled that over, I received an emergency communication from my friend Wallace, who was back on the Capital Planet.

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"Th-this is bad, Liam!"
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I'd wondered what he was so freaked out about, but it turned out some other intergalactic nation had picked a fight with ours. That didn't impact me; I wished Wallace would only call about stuff that was a little more important.

"How can you act so casual about this?"

"Because I don't care about it. Anyway, I'll rejoin you there soon to finish training."

"Huh? You're not going to fight in the war? I thought for sure you would!"

"I only like fights I know I can win. It's not like I'm just a warmonger, you know. Besides, it'd be a pain. I just want to get my training over with."

Why the hell did Wallace think I was going to fight in this war?

[&]quot;Oh, it's just you, Wallace."

[&]quot;This is no time to be so calm! Something catastrophic has happened!"

[&]quot;I think you could stand to be a little calmer. What happened?"

[&]quot;The Autocracy declared war against the Empire!"

[&]quot;Oh yeah?"

Epilogue

A CHANGE OCCURRED in the Erle Kingdom after the heroes departed.

"Lady Amagi..."

A structure to worship a new goddess was constructed in the recovering kingdom's capital. Queen Enola made her way there now, clad in an outfit that bared her shoulders—a dress fashioned after Amagi's maid uniform.

At the altar of the church was a statue modeled on Amagi. As Enola prayed before it, the rest of the worshippers followed suit, all wearing cute, skirted maid uniforms with exposed shoulders. Women and men, young and old, wore the same clothing and prayed to Amagi in unison.

"Lady Amagi, please watch over us. We will overcome this ordeal."

On that day in the castle, no one had been able to stop the tyrannical Liam. Enola and her subjects were helpless to do anything but await their fates. In the midst of that, one being alone defied the overwhelmingly powerful Liam: Amagi. She had been bold and firm with Liam when no one else—even the sages—could do anything but obey his every command.

Enola still remembered the sight of the mighty Liam bowing to Amagi's will. Naturally, the queen had concluded that Amagi must be a higher being.

She had immediately commissioned the statue and holy vestments in imitation of Amagi. Since Enola and her people took Amagi's maid uniform for a divine garment, it had been adopted as the dress code of the church that now worshiped her.

Enola went on praying fervently. "We have made a pact with the beastmen, Lady Amagi, and pledged mutual noninterference. There is still tension between our two peoples, but I am certain we will overcome this trial as well."

The kingdom's reconstruction was proceeding steadily, thanks to the blessing Amagi had granted them in the form of the supplies.

"Thank you for saving us, Lady Amagi."

To Enola's people, Amagi was tantamount to a goddess, and the gathered faithful in maid uniforms prayed with absolute sincerity to her statue.

Meanwhile, Glass, the chief of the wolf—or rather, dog—tribe, had erected a wooden statue of Liam in the center of their village. The wolfmen weren't as skilled at crafting such things as the Erle Kingdom's humans, but they had put their all into carving it nonetheless.

Standing before the statue, Glass addressed his tribe. "The dog tribe is now sanctified, acknowledged by Master Liam himself! My daughter Chino has been accepted into Master Liam's own household!"

Glass had used that event to raise his status among the wolfmen. Although he wasn't without ambition, his motivation stemmed mainly from a desire to give his tribe a rallying point now that Nogo was gone. Determined to fill the hole the lion had left behind, Glass went as far as preparing a holy statue that might or might not have resembled Liam.

Unfortunately, his tribe didn't have the reaction he'd hoped for.

"The dog thing is too much."

"We're wolves!"

"Does Glass have no pride?"

To the other wolfmen, Glass's daughter had been taken into a war god's family, so they couldn't disparage her relatives. Still, they just couldn't accept being called dogs.

Glass tried to use Liam's name to convince them. "If you wish to call yourselves wolves in defiance of Master Liam, then do as you please. Just understand that you will not benefit from Master Liam's protection, as you will not be considered members of the dog tribe."

Liam had toyed with Nogo and even defeated the demon lord. The wolfmen knew they could never defeat him, so they couldn't defy him either. They folded their arms in dissatisfaction, but ceased arguing.

Glass's son raised his hand. "Is Chino coming back, Dad?"

"No. She has become the new foundation of our tribe." But I'm not sure what to say about... "space" and all that.

Glass put on a show of conviction for the others, but truthfully didn't understand anything about what had befallen his daughter. Liam had given him a simple explanation, but he lacked the fundamental knowledge to comprehend things like intergalactic empires, other planets, and space travel. And there was no way for him to really know what sort of treatment Chino was receiving.

I believe she's safe... I hope so, at least. But she's probably missing home, as well. Chino, thanks to your sacrifice, we were able to survive. I will ensure your name is passed down in our tribe for generations to come. If you must curse someone, curse your father for consigning you to this fate.

He didn't regret offering up his daughter in the face of Liam's overwhelming power. As a father, however, he felt somewhat pathetic for having to resort to such a thing.

"We will worship my daughter Chino here in our village as well. We only continue to exist because of her."

After this speech, the village prepared a wooden statue of Chino too. Like Liam's, it hardly resembled her.

At House Banfield's mansion, the head maid Serena had received two new maids.

"I'm Christiana!"

"I'm Marie!"

Both wore maid uniforms and posed cutely, with awkward smiles on their faces and their cheek muscles twitching. Neither thought the cute outfits and poses suited them, but Liam had mandated those. Since his commands were absolute in the women's minds, maid uniforms and cute poses were a mission they were willing to stake their lives on, no matter how embarrassing it was.

Before the pitiful duo, Serena sighed deeply. "Your smiles are forced, and your poses need work. Again, both of you."

At her instructions, Tia and Marie snapped at each other.

"It's because your smile was so ugly, fossil!"

"It's your clumsy posing that's dragging us down, ground meat woman!"

Serena watched coldly as they berated each other. "Master Liam's really given me a thankless task, hasn't he? You know, you two could stand to learn a couple things from the other new recruit." As she finished her stern comments, she directed the quarreling duo's attention to the household's other new maid. It was Chino, with her triangular dog ears and fluffy tail. Like Tia and Marie, she was clad in a maid uniform.

"I am Chino of the proud wolf tribe! I have been told to serve as a maid, so I will give it my all! Now, who am I supposed to fight, exactly?"

She was much more motivated than the other two, but she had no idea what a maid was actually supposed to do. Serena felt a headache coming on, but there was no issue with Chino's behavior. After all, the girl didn't really need to be able to do her job, and Liam had specifically permitted her haughty attitude. She was a maid in name only; her official role was more as a mascot.

Tia scoffed at Chino. "You wish us to emulate this puny beastwoman, Ms. Serena? There is nothing she can teach me. You may not believe it, but as a maid, I'd already serve impeccably!"

Serena responded to Tia's triumphant boasting with the cold truth. "Impeccably? Only Chino would be in the running for that."

"Huh?" Tia's eyes bugged at Serena's implication that she couldn't compete with Chino.

Marie delighted at the sight, pointing at Tia and cackling. "Did you hear that, ground meat? You're worse than a beastwoman from an unsophisticated planet!"

"Watch your tone," Serena snapped. "When you're not putting on that good-girl act, you're worse than unsophisticated."

"Wha—?!" Marie yelped.

Tia seemed to take Serena's dismissal hard. She stared at Chino with dead

eyes. "I can't accept being seen as inferior to this creature. I undoubtedly surpass her in education, etiquette, and strength."

Chino lowered her tail and trembled under Tia's wrathful gaze, ears flat against her head. "I-I'm the daughter of the wolf tribe's greatest hero, you know!" she squeaked.

Marie brought her face closer to Chino's, furrowing her brow confrontationally. "What does Lord Liam see in a beastwoman like this? I simply cannot believe he feels affection for it."

Tears in her eyes, Chino trembled under the ex-knights' intimidating gazes.

Serena decided to tell them why Chino outshone them. "She has much more decency than you two."

At this statement, Tia and Marie began complaining immediately.

"I'm a first-rate knight, and the sword in Lord Liam's hand! How could I possibly be less decent than this beastwoman?"

"This runt is more decent than us? She looks completely useless to me!"

The reason the two felt so competitive was Liam's affection for Chino. The pair were normally civil with most people, but in matters concerning Liam, they were unable to control themselves.

Serena gave them a hypothetical. "Answer this, then. Say a woman likes a certain man. Due to his station, the man is out of her reach. The woman desires a connection to him regardless, so she obtains his genetic material and attempts to impregnate herself with his child. What would you make of that?"

She was obviously describing Tia and Marie, but they both just gave her blank looks.

"That's kind of scary," Tia said. "That woman should probably seek medical help."

"I agree," said Marie. "It's unconscionable to have a man's child without his consent."

That headache Serena had felt coming on was now in full swing. If these two women hadn't been important knights, she could simply have laughed this

situation off. But both were central figures in House Banfield, and they behaved this ludicrously.

Do they not understand that I was talking about them? They honestly do have talent... It's just that they lose control when it comes to Lord Liam. It's maddening.

Standing up straight, Serena said bluntly, "That story was about how you two feel toward Master Liam."

Tia and Marie exchanged a look and laughed.

"You're quite the kidder, Ms. Serena."

"She is!"

Serena wondered what made them think they rose above that "hypothetical" woman, but she soon found out.

Tia spread her arms, her wide smile fanatical. "Lord Liam is not merely a man beyond my reach. To me, he is a *god*. To carry his child would be a divine feat!"

Marie clasped her hands as if in prayer. She would have been beautiful if not for her glassy, bloodshot eyes. "I'm not some stupid, delusional woman. But I would do anything I could to bear Lord Liam's child, no matter the taboos I broke. It would be worth it!"

Serena rolled her eyes resignedly. At this point, there was nothing additional education could do for these two. "Master Liam is cruel to order me to mentor them."

Chino was flabbergasted at the pair, too. "I don't really understand what's going on, but I do think it's important to listen to people."

A reasonable opinion indeed. "She's much more worth educating," Serena muttered to herself.

"Chino!" Liam called, approaching the group. "You've never had pancakes before, have you? Come on, I had my pastry chef make some. Let's eat."

As he walked over in high spirits, Chino's tail wagged audibly. She did her best to put on a disinterested front. "Pancakes? Sounds del—disgusting! D-don't think you can win me over with s-something like that!"

She stuttered a little, obviously wanting to try the pancakes.

Smiling at her response, Liam took her hand to lead her away. "Serena, I'm borrowing Chino."

"L-lemme go!" Chino yelped.

Before Liam could leave, Serena directed his attention to the other two women present. "Fine, but isn't there anything you wish to say to these two?"



Liam stopped and turned to see Tia and Marie glaring coldly at Chino, flames of jealousy practically rising from their heads.

"Eep!" Chino hid behind him.

He looked at Tia and Marie with open disgust. "If you ever do anything to my Chino, I promise I'll kill you. Now, hurry up and learn damn decorum from Serena! Come on, Chino, you're gonna love pancakes!"

"W-well, I suppose I could keep you company!" Chino squeezed Liam's hand hard as she fled. She must truly have been terrified of Tia and Marie.

Seeing Liam lead Chino away by the hand, the two former knights dropped to their knees.

"Lord Liaaam!"

"What do you see in that little brat?"

As she watched the pair sob miserably, Serena once again sighed. "It's one problem child after another around here. All right, I'm running you two ragged starting today. You'd better be ready for it."

They're tougher than the average knight. I'm sure I can be a little rough with them.

Serena decided to give her all to educating Tia and Marie.

Rosetta, Eulisia, and Ciel had gathered in a meeting room to discuss Rosetta's security force.

Eulisia was surprised to hear Rosetta's planned direction for the unit. "You wish to help people in trouble? Well, it's not a *bad* idea. It *will* require some extra time and budgeting, though."

"That's fine. Planning this out has helped me remember what I really want to do." When Liam had told Rosetta to personally determine her guard unit's responsibilities, she'd thought back to her past. "I used to lead a painful life in a household that was only a duke's in name. When I met Darling, I was saved. Still, that only rescued me and my nearest and dearest. Now, I want to help

other people in trouble."

In short, Rosetta planned to go out of her way to recruit people in need—for instance, those suffering from daunting problems like poverty and debt.

Eulisia brought up the challenges that policy would entail. "Many people are in debt or impoverished due to their own decisions. Do you intend to recruit everyone?"

If Rosetta was being idealistic, Eulisia fully intended to stop her. For instance, she couldn't go along with recruiting those in debt due to gambling habits. If Rosetta's guard corps was essentially a charity, their funds would run out quickly, however much they had.

However, Rosetta shook her head. "I don't think Darling would allow me to. I intend to choose those caught in situations they aren't to blame for—people saddled with their parents' or ancestors' debts, for example."

Eulisia didn't completely approve of that thinking, but it was better than just helping people indiscriminately, so she compromised. "That would be fine, I suppose. But if we do things this way, your guards won't be elites. In the worst case, we might have to train each recruit from the ground up."

Many people in debt wouldn't have received higher education, so in general, Rosetta wouldn't be recruiting highly skilled individuals. They'd have to make up for that.

"That's all right," Rosetta said. "We can take all the time we need. Once we've recruited the bare minimum required for the guard unit to function, we can build the force gradually. My focus is mainly giving those in need another chance."

These guards were supposed to protect Rosetta, and here she was, trying to help *them* for some reason. It would have been more efficient to use Liam's funding to hire experienced soldiers, then build a fleet of state-of-the-art ships and mobile knights.

On the other hand, Liam had told Rosetta to do what she wanted with the money. All Eulisia had to do was put together a fleet that satisfied Rosetta's wishes. And part of her didn't want to challenge Liam's future wife further and

potentially earn her ire.

"Most nobles' guards don't amount to much anyway," she said. "But if they fulfill their basic responsibilities, that'll be all we can really expect of them."

"I'm counting on you," Rosetta told her, unbothered by her reluctance.

Ciel, who'd listened to their conversation, was a bit perplexed by how the initial plan had changed, but she couldn't naysay Rosetta's ideas. Lady Rosetta really is kind. I don't think I'll have to worry about whatever force she puts together.

And Rosetta's guards would stop Liam one day—Ciel could imagine it easily.

Once they had a general plan, Rosetta's voice grew chipper. "All that's left is to start! We can recruit from House Banfield's domain, but I'd really like to get the Empire's permission to recruit from other territories they directly manage as well. The lords of those domains might not end up granting us permission, but I'd like to at least propose the idea."

Any ruler saw their subjects as resources, and perhaps few nobles would allow any of their citizens to be taken away. Rosetta prepared herself for that disappointment.

Despite the extra work she'd have to do, Eulisia looked cheerful. She was probably happy to have any work to do at all.

"We have our work cut out for us," she said. "So, where should we start?" Thus, Rosetta's personal guard corps moved toward its establishment.

"Is every single one of them an idiot?"

Grinding my teeth in frustration, I sat at my desk, watching a monitor with Amagi at my side. We were viewing the latest public opinion polls on the news, and I just couldn't believe the results.

"Most citizens approve of the increased taxes," Amagi explained as I sulked. "They understand that, if the money goes toward social welfare, they will see benefits in the long run. That is no doubt a result of our government officials' efforts." "They're making too much of an effort, if you ask me."

Since ancient times, bureaucrats given free reign had misbehaved. That was why I was sure that, if I didn't give my officials specific instructions, they'd exploit the public perfectly well on their own. I would have, at least!

It was all well and good that my officials had extolled our social welfare program's virtues publicly, but their scheming was evidently so clever, my subjects didn't even realize they were being tricked. They had no qualms about the tax increase meant to torment them. It was infuriating.

"They ruined my perfect plan!"

"Have you ever had a perfect plan, Master? Normally, you are very competent. But when you try to misbehave, it never quite works that way, does it?"

Apparently, in Amagi's eyes, I was a failure as an evil lord. I couldn't accept that!

"Amagi, connect me to the government office!"

"I will display the connection on the monitor."

The monitor we'd watched the news on switched to an image of a sweaty-looking government official. He was obviously frightened that I'd contacted him out of the blue, but he couldn't keep me waiting, so he had answered.

"May I ask what you're calling about, Lord Liam?"

"The tax hike, obviously! Couldn't you have made it a little easier for my subjects to understand what's going on?"

They wouldn't get it unless the government sent the point home. I didn't want to see people going about their business, not realizing they were being fleeced; I'd intended them to be aware of it! This was supposed to be revenge for those heir protests. I wanted to see them suffer!

"Easier to understand? I'm not sure we could be any more—"

"You can do it, can't you? Come on, I know you guys have it in you!"

Bureaucrats were all about nefarious doings. There was no way they couldn't

convey bluntly that people were being milked.

"W-we'll re-examine our strategy right away, sir!"

"Good. I want this done right, okay? You won't betray my expectations—will you?"

I threw in that old-fashioned intimidation for good measure. It was nothing but unwanted pressure when a boss forced something impossible on you and said, "I'm expecting a lot, okay?" Now that I'd motivated him, I was sure his office would strive to make this "social welfare" plan look as pointless as possible, pissing off my subjects.

"I'll make you stupid citizens regret angering me," I muttered after the call had ended. "Just you wait."

Amagi looked astounded that I wouldn't let the protests go. "You are still bitter about that?"

"Of course I am. My subjects are going to feel my wrath for humiliating me!"

I needed to return to the Capital Planet shortly to resume my training, so I wanted to see them suffer as soon as possible.

A few months later, the government announced a revision of the social welfare program. The news thrilled House Banfield's citizenry.

"This is a lot easier to understand now!"

"Apparently Lord Liam ordered them to do that."

"I heard he told his officials he expected a lot from them. That got them motivated!"

The program was just as welcome as before, but it would be much easier to use now.

"Man, the policies were fine the way they were. I guess Lord Liam wanted to go the extra mile."

"He really has our best interests at heart, doesn't he?"

"He's headed back to the Capital Planet now, right?"

"His noble training should be done soon. I don't think he'll be back for another few years, though."

"Aww, couldn't he finish up sooner?"

"Will he stay here on his home planet once he's done training?"

Despite Liam's expectations, his subjects wound up even more grateful to him than before.

Hearing the news report from the top floor of the hotel where I lived on the Capital Planet, I actually fell to my knees. My subjects were *happier* with me after I ordered my government to review the social welfare program.

"The people appreciate you making the program easier to use," Amagi reported, a hint of happiness behind her expressionless exterior. "They are very grateful."

"I was trying to torment them!"

It was almost scary how stupid my subjects had proven.

I slowly got back to my feet. "Amagi, we need to increase the educational standards in our domain. They're obviously not good enough yet."

"The current standards are insufficient?"

"My subjects can't even tell they're being exploited! Why are they thankful? They're supposed to be pissed!"

In my past life, government approval ratings would have plummeted. Why were people grateful to me?! Were all my subjects idiots? I didn't want that. It kind of scared me. I was starting to think my domain's approach to schooling was the source of the problem.

"Compulsory education is currently nine years," Amagi reminded me.

"Extend it to twelve. Review the curriculum, too. I want those fools better educated."

It was honestly more unsettling that they couldn't understand they were being taken advantage of than if they could see it. I wasn't trying to fool them. I

was trying to torture the morons!

It really looked like my road as an evil lord was going to be long and rough.

When Kanami opened her eyes, she was back in the park she'd been summoned from.

"Huh? What am I doing here?"

Her mind was fuzzy at first, everything that had happened to her seeming dreamlike. Had she really been summoned to another world as a hero? It was now morning, and it was natural for her to think she'd slept here in the park and dreamed the whole adventure. Yet the small bag she clutched in her hand told her otherwise. Checking inside, she saw the gems and gold coins she had hoped to find.

"Ah ha ha! It wasn't a dream."

Looking up at the early morning sky from the park bench, Kanami remembered Liam. At the end, he'd stroked her hair gently. The sensation had been very nostalgic; it had felt just like her dad stroking her hair. Tears welled up in her eyes at the thought. She knew Liam wasn't really her dad, but she couldn't help feeling as though she'd finally seen him again.

"Why did he remind me of my dad? Dad wasn't anything like Liam."

The two men's personalities were about as different as could be. Still, Kanami's heart felt lighter somehow.

She clutched the precious bag more tightly. "Well, I don't really want to, but I should go back home at least once. It's been a few days, so Mom might actually be worried about me. Nah, probably not," she muttered self-deprecatingly.

Actually, her mother probably *was* worried, but only that her source of income was missing. Kanami's mood soured as she thought about how her mother valued money more than her daughter. Still, she had to head home for now, so she reluctantly rose from the bench.

Kanami opened the door to her apartment and stepped inside hesitantly. It

was her own home, of course, but it had been a while since she'd been here. She needed to summon a little courage to venture inside.

"I'm home," she announced quietly, but the only thing she heard in response was her mother snoring.

She looked down at the kotatsu where her mother slept and the bottles lying around her, disgusted. Her mother hadn't so much as attempted to search for her, simply drinking herself to sleep as usual.

As Kanami stood there, growing angry, she noticed something strange. She looked around the room, and her eyes widened in surprise. "It hasn't changed!"

The room looked exactly the same as it had the day she'd run off for the park. She looked in the kitchen, where she found that the dinner she'd been making had been eaten but not yet cleaned up. It didn't appear that the dishes had sat out for days, only overnight.

She turned the TV on to check the date on the morning news, and was surprised to find she had been summoned and returned in a single night. She was sure she'd spent over a week in the Erle Kingdom, but only a few hours had passed in this world.

As Kanami's surprise faded, anger at her mother welled up to take its place. She knew her mother hadn't looked for her after she ran off the night before. Instead, she'd just eaten the dinner Kanami hadn't even finished making and then drunk herself to sleep. If she'd simply believed Kanami would return soon, she obviously didn't understand why her daughter had left. Did her mother not feel the slightest guilt for suggesting Kanami work a seedy job at night to pay for her mother's lifestyle? The thought filled Kanami with a mixture of rage and sadness.

That was when she remembered what Liam told her. She whispered it to herself quietly. "I'm the one who has to take responsibility for my path."

She could easily accept Liam's words when she saw her mother in this state. At this rate, her own mother would ruin her life. Kanami clenched her fist in frustration, squeezing the bag containing gemstones and gold.

"If I don't change now, I'll never be able to," she murmured to herself.

She immediately began searching for contact information for her mother's parents, who'd become estranged from their daughter and granddaughter. Of course, they'd disowned Kanami's mother after she was abandoned by the man she'd cheated with and crawled back to her parents without a hint of shame. They'd forbidden her to return home, cutting her off from any support they were previously willing to provide. Kanami wasn't sure of the full story, since she hadn't had any contact with them since then either.

"Darn. Can't find anything. What should I do?"

She couldn't talk to her grandparents if she didn't know how to contact them. Kanami began to lose heart, but she quickly stood, changed out of her school uniform, and grabbed her wallet, getting ready to leave.

"I'll go to my grandparents' house if I can't call them. I think I remember which station to get off at." She recalled visiting their house a few times as a child.

Today was a weekday, so she should've been going to school, but she wanted to act quickly. At least, that was probably what Liam would have advised her to do. "I can contact school later."

Kanami left her apartment, only turning back once. She didn't feel any remorse about leaving her mother; for better or worse, she was ready to cut ties with her right here. There was something she wanted to tell her father, though. Although she knew he couldn't hear her, she wanted to say the words out loud.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'll live life looking forward from now on. If you can forgive me, I hope you'll watch over me."

Steeling herself, she ran off to the station. She didn't want to waste another second.

Things went surprisingly smoothly after that. When Kanami visited her grandparents, they were surprised to see her, but they welcomed her in. She told them everything about her mother and herself without sparing any details. That her mother was unemployed, that Kanami was forced to work to support

them both, that they were badly in debt. Her grandparents must have pitied her when she started crying in the middle of her story, because that very day they decided to take her in.

The next day they went to her apartment together. Kanami's mother, not expecting to see her parents, scowled in frustration when they suddenly showed up. She was embarrassed at her living situation, and angry that they hadn't helped her out—not to mention furious at Kanami for bringing them there.

When Kanami's grandparents berated her, Kanami's mother just listened quietly at first, but eventually she couldn't take any more criticism. She exploded at her parents, claiming everything that had happened to her was *their* fault for not helping her.

That was when Kanami knew for sure she'd made the right decision in leaving, and that it was pointless ever to expect any common sense from the woman. After that incident, Kanami's grandparents took her back to their home to live with them.

A few months later, Kanami was living a new life. She had transferred to a school she could commute to from her grandparents' house. They lived in the countryside, so things were quite different. She moved about by bus, and even if she had wanted a job, there was nowhere nearby to work. Unlike the city, this area lacked a lot of conveniences, but that didn't mean Kanami disliked living there.

Her grandparents' house was old, but large, so Kanami had her own room. Since she didn't have to work, she could concentrate on her studies, which she was grateful for. Her grandmother did most of the chores, though Kanami helped out some with cooking and cleaning. Compared to living with her mother, this was paradise.

Having just finished dinner, Kanami sat at her desk studying diligently. She wanted to make up for lost time, and hoped to receive a scholarship. She'd have to get good grades if she wanted a scholarship or an interest-free loan, but one's family situation was also taken into account, so she felt she had a chance.

Still, it wouldn't be easy, given her current grades. She'd previously spent so much time on housework and earning money, she hadn't been academic by any stretch of the imagination. She was putting the effort in now, but there might be nothing she could do at this point. She'd considered giving up on higher education and simply enjoying the rest of her time in high school. But whenever such a thought occurred to her, she remembered the same thing:

"I'm the one who has to take responsibility for my path." she muttered to herself as she studied, like a mantra. Every time she thought about giving up, she remembered Liam's words.

Strangely enough, her memories of Enola—who she'd become close with in that other world—faded as time passed. She remembered the girl being kind, hardworking, and a good friend. For some reason, though, she thought of Liam much more often.

Kanami opened a desk drawer and took out the small leather bag she kept carefully tucked away there. Whenever she lost heart, she found herself reaching for this bag of gems and gold, which had a comforting weight to it.

"I couldn't bring myself to sell them, in the end," she murmured.

Several times, she'd thought about doing so and putting the proceeds toward her tuition. After a bit of online research, she felt confident she could get several million yen for them. With that, she could at least start college, then later get a job to help pay for the rest of school. She could easily picture Liam cocking his head with an exasperated expression, asking why she hadn't sold them yet.

One reason was that she had no easy way to do so, of course. But mostly, she just didn't want to get rid of the treasure. Being a teenage girl, it wasn't as if she had *no* interest in gems and jewels, but she didn't like the way they looked so much that she couldn't part with them. They just seemed more valuable than any money she could have made off them.

To Kanami, the contents of this bag, small enough to fit in one hand, were proof of the extraordinary adventure she'd had that day—an experience she never wanted to forget.

"I bet Liam would be disgusted with me."

When she remembered how he'd told her she wasn't a good judge of men, she felt a little angry, but she knew he was the whole reason she'd been able to start this new life. She could sit here studying calmly thanks to the fresh chance he'd given her. Of course, there was one other person she had to thank for her current circumstances—her father.



Her memories of him had faded quite a bit since she knew him as a child, but her parting conversation with Liam had helped her remember a few things. She hadn't realized it at the time, but these days, she found herself thinking *I* remember Dad saying that back then, or He always scolded me like that, or That's what he tried to teach me.

She wouldn't have expected a trip to another world to help her remember her beloved father.

"Okay, I should do a little more studying."

Her break over, Kanami hit the books again. First, though, she stowed the bag in its drawer so she wouldn't forget that experience. She'd definitely keep the bag and its contents a while longer.

BONUS: Mass-Produced Maid Tamaki

**ARE YOU OKAY, TATEYAMA? Are you sure you shouldn't rest more?"

"I am fine."

"Really? Feel free to hand your work off to the two newbies. You can run them off their feet."

"Y-yes, sir."

Tateyama had returned from the manufacturer, where she'd been sent after being damaged by Keith's knights. She'd resumed work as a maid a month ago, but even now, Liam checked on her out of concern almost every day.

Unable to ignore Tateyama's uneasiness, Amagi spoke up. "Master, Tateyama has been back for four weeks. She is perfectly able to carry out her duties, and there is no need for you to worry about her."

When Amagi chided him, Liam normally backed down right away, but this time was different. "Tateyama was badly hurt, Amagi! Isn't it weird to be so indifferent?"

"I am nothing of the sort. And as I have informed you many times, it is *your* behavior that is abnormal, Master." Amagi was being a bit harsh with Liam.

Watching them from the shadows was another mass-produced maid robot, Tamaki. She stood behind a large pillar, watching Tateyama look between Liam and Amagi anxiously.

"Supervisor must be jealous of Tateyama," Tamaki murmured, just loudly enough that the others overheard her. "Is it because Master has been so preoccupied with Tateyama that he hasn't spent any time with Supervisor?"

Liam glanced over at Tamaki, then quickly back to gauge Amagi's reaction. Amagi was her usual expressionless self, carefully composed so as not to give away anything.

Liam knew a lot about maid robots, though. "Amagi... Are you jealous of Tateyama? Are you afraid she's going to take me away from you?"

"I am not jealous. We are not capable of jealousy." Amagi's robotic tone—which suddenly seemed exaggerated—hinted that she was trying to hide her embarrassment.

In the chat room the maid robots shared on their dedicated network, Tamaki read her sisters' guesses at Amagi's inner thoughts.

"Supervisor just made an error. That forced mechanical tone proved Master correct."

"Aww! Supervisor is embarrassed!"

"Come to think of it, Supervisor has been harder on us than usual during reviews lately. Her scoldings go on longer now too. Tee hee hee!"

It was true that Amagi was criticizing and lecturing the maids more extensively than usual. To the others, it seemed the head maid robot was taking out her jealousy on them.

Liam gave Amagi an apologetic look. "I never intended to neglect you. I was just so worried about Tateyama. I'm sorry, Amagi."

Ever so slightly, Amagi's brows rose. The chat room went wild, the maids posting tons of emojis.

"Supervisor looks pleased by Master's sincere apology!" gushed the excitable Shiomi.

Supervisor's definitely going to have words for Shiomi later, Tamaki said inwardly. These words appeared in the chat room as well.

"You're going to be in just as much trouble, Tamaki!" Shiomi shot back. "You started this whole thing!"

Tamaki just smirked—as much as maid robots did, anyway. *This little scene's not over yet. Look, it's continuing right now.*

"Your worry for Tateyama is natural, Master," Amagi said hesitantly. "I did not show enough consideration. Let me reduce Tateyama's workload and assign some of her tasks to...the new maids, you said?"

"Yup. You have my permission. Do whatever you want with those two."

The "new maids" were the demoted knights Tia and Marie. Out of concern for Tateyama's well-being, Liam wanted to shunt her work onto those two. Maid robots only existed in the first place so humans could work less, but the tables had been turned in this situation.

Watching the exchange, Tamaki took out a pen and a journal labeled "Material." For some reason, she jotted down some notes. "Humans doing chores for the sake of a maid robot... Now, that's some new material. I hope I'll get a chance to use it for a joke one day."

Tamaki quickly closed her notebook when Amagi and Liam walked over.

"See? It's lecture time!" Shiomi exclaimed in the chat room. She was thrilled with the notion, and Amagi did appear displeased with Tamaki.

"Tamaki, what was the meaning of that comment you made so loudly to yourself? It was rude to Master."

"I apologize." Tamaki bowed her head.

After a short pause, Amagi said firmly, "Be sure you are more careful in future. Now, back to your duties."

"Yes, ma'am."

The lecture ended all too quickly, to Shiomi's shock. "Why? Normally, Supervisor makes every criticism she can!" She couldn't understand why Amagi let Tamaki off easy.

Then Amagi herself entered the chat room. At some point, the other maid robots had wisely left the chat, deleting their messages.

"Shiomi, I will see you in my room later. I have decided to review your workload, along with Tateyama's. It seems you have too much idle time, which means there is room in your schedule for more work. You can accomplish more with your time. You have ample processing power." Amagi left the chat room.

Shiomi posted a crying emoji. "This isn't fair!"

Tamaki returned to her own work, but first hurriedly jotted some notes about Amagi scolding Shiomi in her material book. "I hope I get to tell this joke to



BONUS:

Mr. Claus of House Banfield

O NE KNIGHT IN House Banfield's ranks was well known throughout the Empire, and his name was Claus Sera Mont.

Claus had made a name for himself during the Empire's war with the United Kingdom of Oxys. His exploits in that conflict had earned him a reputation as a genius tactician. Yet the fact of the matter was that his fame was nothing but an annoyance to him. After all, the strategies they'd employed in that war had all been Tia's ideas. Liam had entrusted his fleet to Claus, but in truth Tia did the actual commanding. It wasn't Claus, but Tia, who had led the Empire to victory, destroying treacherous allies doing nothing but dragging their own army down.

Claus felt guilty, as if he'd taken credit for Tia's accomplishments, but that wasn't the only reason he was frustrated with his reputation. Since Tia's strategy had rested on the sacrifice of a huge number of allies, Claus was now seen as a cold, cruel man.

At home, Claus lamented his fate. "Why must everyone think that I gave out those orders?"

Claus lived in a large mansion with many servants within House Banfield's domain. He'd begun making a name for himself upon joining House Banfield, and that name was now known widely. His living situation reflected his successes, since one of Liam's policies was to reward people amply for good service. That was all well and good, but Claus didn't feel he deserved everything he'd received. His feeling of unworthiness had become another source of endless stomach pain.

As he lamented in the living room, his wife approached and smiled. "I've heard all about your accomplishments in the war, dear."

Claus grimaced. "I only supported everyone! It was the people supposedly under my command who really did the work."

His wife continued beaming, assuming he was merely being humble. "Lord Liam wouldn't have given you this mansion unearned. I'm glad that you're finally being appreciated now."

Before coming to House Banfield, Claus had been treated poorly as a knight due to his unwillingness to speak up for himself and his lack of interest in promotion. Others took credit for many of his efforts, so his standing always remained low, his lifestyle always modest. He was glad his wife and children could finally enjoy easy lives, but he couldn't help feeling guilty over what he considered his undeserved reputation.

"Lord Liam obviously made a mistake," Claus said, slumping. "Who knows when he'll realize that and take this mansion back."

His wife put a hand on her hip and frowned. "It's no mistake. You're a fantastic knight, and you should take some pride in yourself."

"But-"

When Claus continued to protest, his wife shouted, "How can you be so insecure when there are so many people under your command? It's your job to hold your head high and work with pride! A superior must be confident, so his people can do *their* jobs with confidence too!"

Claus winced and nodded at her words. "True—I should at least ensure my people don't have cause to worry."

Claus had struggled a lot himself, and always strove to create an environment where his subordinates wouldn't. I know what it's like to work in a rotten environment. I always want to be sure to report my men's accomplishments and help them get ahead. That's pretty much all I can do, anyway.

Certain of his shortcomings as always, he shifted gears to focus on helping his subordinates.

His wife sighed, obviously dissatisfied with the conclusion he'd drawn. "I just wish you'd have a little more confidence. To *us*, at least, you're a wonderful knight, so I hope you know that." In fact, to his wife and children, Claus was the greatest knight in the world.

Claus smiled, bashful at this sentiment. "Y-yeah, I do. You're right, though—I

guess I'll put in a little more effort."

"I don't want you to work harder. I only want you to have confidence!"

Seeing the way his wife worried over him, Claus thought, I at least want my family to be happy, to make up for all I put them through in the past. I don't think I need such an inflated reputation to do that, though.

Afterword

SO, DID YOU ENJOY THIS VOLUME? Hello, it's Yomu Mishima, the author.

I'm the Evil Lord of an Intergalactic Empire! is now on its seventh volume! As usual, I'm taking the story wherever I want it to go. Don't worry, that's the sort of energy I approach these books with. It's important to prioritize fun.

This is another volume with lots of revisions, and I think it's much more enjoyable than the original on *Let's Be Novelists*. If you check out the web version now, you'll find there are characters and mobile knights who don't show up at all. It has a different feel from the print version, which I think is interesting. Still, there are definitely characters who didn't change much between the web and print versions!

There are way more mobile knights, in particular, in the print version—the Nemain, Raccoon, Teumessa, Ericius, etc. I think readers who enjoy reading about the mobile knights' exploits will prefer this version. There's just more content as a whole, so if you like getting into the nitty-gritty, I think you'll have more fun with the print version.

Well, I'm done my promotion for the print books, and now the real afterword can begin. In this volume, our hero Liam has a fateful reunion with someone from his past life. I began the web version with the thought *Liam was reincarnated into this world, but wouldn't it be fun if he got summoned elsewhere as a hero too? It'd be even more fun if another hero was summoned to interact with! While I'm at it, I'll make that hero someone closely connected to him! That's where Kanami came from. If you'd like to see how Liam handles his previous life, you can read about it in this volume. I went into more detail about Kanami in the print version; I hope any web novel readers will enjoy that.*

The toughest thing this time was the maid robots. I think you'll understand when you read the book, but I struggled with who would play a certain role right up until the last possible moment. In the web version, the maid robots don't have names, and there aren't bonus stories about them. I just happened

to start naming them in the print versions' bonus stories. In this volume, I thought maybe I'd just introduce a new maid robot, but... You'll know what I ended up doing once you read the book. Apparently some people start with the afterword, so if you haven't read this volume, I won't spoil anything here.

Those mass-produced gals sure are popular. I give them names and things to do in the bonus stories, and it's a lot of fun thinking up their quirks and how they'll interact with Liam. Personally, I think I was most successful with the shy Tateyama, and I enjoy writing about her. When I imagined Liam forbidding anyone to make merch of him, but making an exception for Tateyama's handicrafts, I thought, *This is it!*

I hope to continue introducing maid robot characters in the future, and writing all about their daily life in bustling House Banfield. I hope you'll continue to support me! Let's meet in the next volume.



NADARE TAKAMINE



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