

NOVEL

4

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I'M THE **EVIL LORD** OF AN
**INTERGALACTIC
EMPIRE**

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“Oh,
I wonder
what Darling’s
doing right
now.”

ROSETTA ▶

▶ **ROSETTA’S MAID TRAINING!**

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ROSETTA ▶

▶ **ROSETTA’S MAID TRAINING!**

"We mustn't, my lord! Someone will see us! ♡"

"Ahn! ♡
Nooo! ♡
...Just like that!"

Liam will look me over with his feral, hungry eyes, and then he'll pull closer...

But a young man's carnal desires wouldn't be stopped by such words...

◀ EULISIA

➤ MY LIAM SEDUCTION STRATEGY!

A full-page illustration from a Gundam magazine. On the left, Marie, a young woman with long, flowing purple hair and red eyes, is shown from the chest up. She has a determined, slightly angry expression with a wide, toothy grin. She is wearing a white and purple mobile suit. To her right is the mobile suit Teumessa, a large, complex purple and white machine with multiple joints and a long, thin sword-like weapon extending from its back. The suit is shown in a dynamic pose, as if it's just finished a transformation or is about to attack. The background is a deep space scene with a blue and purple nebula, stars, and a small white and green mobile suit in the distance. The overall color palette is dominated by purples, blues, and whites.

“Who’s
going to kill
who? Don’t
talk the talk
if you can’t
walk the
walk!”

Enraged by
the enemy
vowing to
kill her lord,
Marie put
the Teumessa
through a
transformation.

◀ **MARIE**

BFC-X102-[M]

▶ **TEUMESSA**

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**I'M THE EVIL LORD OF AN
INTERGALACTIC
EMPIRE**

NOVEL



WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

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NADARE TAKAMINE



Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

IN ANY WORLD, meaningless customs and traditions are everywhere. Even those that were necessary for some reason in the past tended to lose their meaning over time. Humans are foolish creatures, however, and though they might realize they're following their silly customs for no reason, they'll continue for many long years, unable to give them up. And even for an evil lord like me, Liam Sera Banfield, it can be difficult to go against the societal grain.

"Spending half a century on training is a complete waste of time," I muttered, staring at the holographic image projected before me.

I'd already graduated from primary school, but the hologram portrayed me in the uniform of the military academy, the next step in my schooling. One would think a cadet's uniform should have as little ornamentation as possible, but with the Empire's glorification of nobility, the uniform was gaudy as hell.

My appearance in the image conformed to the military academy dress code set by the academy. My hair was cut a little shorter than usual, but there really weren't any other changes to my person. Had I grown at all since entering primary school? I was already in my late sixties, but I still looked like a middle or high schooler in terms of my previous life. At my present age, technically I was an adult in this world, but society still treated me like a child. I couldn't help but maintain my sensibilities from my past life, so I felt that spending over fifty years on one's education before being considered an adult was absurd. However, that was simply the norm in this world. After all, even after this extended training period, people's lives lasted hundreds of years.

My most trusted maid robot, Amagi, stood tall and beautiful beside me, gently admonishing me for my complaints. "As a noble, you must at the very least become qualified as both a military officer and as a government official, Master. Without such qualifications, you will not be seen as a fully-fledged member of the nobility."

Amagi's glossy black hair was gathered in a ponytail, and she wore a maid uniform that was a bit too provocative, leaving her shoulders exposed. The rest of the outfit was quite elegant, so it seemed unnatural to have her shoulders

bare like that, but each robot maid bore a mark there that indicated that they weren't human. The law stated that this mark must be visible, so no matter how much it annoyed me, I couldn't order her to cover her shoulders.

"I'm just venting."

"You do not wish to attend the military academy."

"Well, I can't get out of it with money."

The worst part of my training would surely be my time serving in the military, when my life might actually be in danger. I would be stuck in the service for six years after graduating from the academy. Even nobility had to serve, and that meant the possibility of fighting battles and losing one's life. A harsh period awaited me there, one that apparently dominated the memories of most nobles who'd been through training. There were those who tried to worm their way out of it, but as Amagi stated, the Empire wouldn't accept you as a legitimate noble without going through military training.

To me, though, throwing those who would never be expected to fight in the future due to their noble positions into the military was just stupid. Plus, actual career soldiers had to put up with spoiled noble brats in their ranks. However, money did tend to grease the wheels in this world.

"Anyway, how about we make some charitable contributions before my time in the military? Amagi, send the Imperial Army a message from House Banfield. Tell them to expect a generous donation this year. Also, if they have any equipment they're looking to get rid of, we'll buy it off them."

The military was always upgrading its weaponry, replacing old equipment with new, so when they acquired updated tech, they sold their old hardware to the nobility. The military was always spending tons of money. However, there were plenty of times where their investments didn't bring returns and their budgets were always getting cut, so they were always trying to make a little money back somehow. That was where nobles with deep pockets like me came in. The Imperial Army was ever eager to receive donations or sell their old equipment to the rich. If I happened to mention my military training when offering such financial assistance, they were sure to do whatever they could to make me comfortable during my time with them. Normally, nobles were

expected to act as an upstanding example to everyone around them, so manipulation of that sort was frowned upon. But I was a villain, you see, so I would never hesitate to make use of whatever options and resources I had available to me. In fact, I preferred to use underhanded methods such as these.

Amagi opened her mouth to say something, but checked herself and quickly moved to carry out my command. She only gave me a bit of a resigned look. “As you wish, Master.”

“Money is everything in this world. With money, one can bend even morality to their will. If I have the means, I say why not enjoy my time in the military?”

Just as I was thinking to indulge in a loud, villainous laugh, someone arrived at my office’s door, and Amagi gave them permission to enter. This was my mansion, my planet, and no one could stop me from enjoying my moment of gloating...but then Rosetta walked into the room.

She asked, “Darling, have our uniforms for the military academy arrived? I must try mine on too!”

At the appearance of my beaming fiancée, I ended up spluttering instead of laughing.

“R-Rosetta?”

Her name was Rosetta Sereh Claudia. The first feature that leapt out at you was her long, radiant blonde hair, which was styled into thick ringlets. With that blonde hair, her blue eyes, and a rather voluptuous figure for someone the same age as me, she was practically the ideal woman, as if she’d stepped right out of a painting.

We’d met in primary school, and she was the first human woman I’d taken an interest in since my reincarnation. At first, she’d possessed a steel will and treated me coldly, as though I were completely beneath her notice. I became determined to break that will of hers, but by the time I managed to secure my engagement with her, she’d already fallen for me. It might sound odd for me to say this, but Rosetta was head over heels for me and I had no idea why. If Rosetta had a tail, she’d probably be shaking it like crazy every time she was around me.

Once again, I thought of a coworker from my previous life, Nitta, and recalled him using the term “relationship speed run.” It’s true that my goal had been for her to submit to me, but she’d done it so fast, it left me flummoxed. I’d been looking forward to crushing her will, but after she’d fallen for me so suddenly, I found myself rather...scared of her. Basically, I had no idea what to do whenever she was around me.

At the moment, Rosetta had her face right up in mine, eyes sparkling with the eagerness to inspect her new uniform. If I backed up, she just moved forward to close the distance. At a loss for what to do, I turned to Amagi for assistance. I felt pathetic doing so, but my robot maid was the only one I could rely on for help.

“This is difficult to say, Lady Rosetta, but there is no military academy uniform for you.” As Amagi plainly stated this fact, I fell in love with her all over again.

At first, Rosetta’s face was blank, as if she hadn’t understood the meaning of Amagi’s words, but as they finally sank in, she began to panic. “W-wait. I’m going to the military academy with you, aren’t I, Darling? W-wasn’t that the plan?”

No matter how much she looked between my face and Amagi’s, the truth was that the only ones in our circle who’d be attending the military academy were me and the former Imperial prince I was currently looking after, Wallace Noah Albareto. Some minor nobles from House Banfield would also be attending, but Rosetta was not among them.

Amagi explained to Rosetta that there was no need for her to attend the military academy. “Master is the only one obligated to serve in the military. There are, of course, some couples who both serve, but that is not common.”

“B-but I’d feel bad if only Darling had to attend.”

When I saw her being so meek, I couldn’t help but think, *This isn’t right! Shouldn’t you be more confident?* In fact, I preferred that she’d say something like, “I wouldn’t mind attending in your place if you’re going to be a coward about it!” *You’re supposed to be more arrogant, aren’t you? What happened to that high horse you used to be up on?* I wanted to say all this out loud, but I knew it would be pointless, so I simply informed her of my decision instead.

“This matter is already decided, and I won’t be taking any complaints.”

Rosetta looked surprised for a moment, but she quickly hung her head and apologized, “I shouldn’t have spoken out of turn.”

That was somewhat satisfying, but what I really wanted was to see her get upset, as I still hadn’t given up on my desire to torment the noble-minded Rosetta. This was where my attack truly began!

“Well, I don’t have a military academy uniform for you, but I did have another special uniform prepared...”

I snapped my fingers, and the three-dimensional hologram switched to a mannequin-like figure wearing a maid uniform. The figure was clearly based on Rosetta. As I enjoyed her flustered reaction, I summoned a certain person to the room.

“You’ll be undergoing your own training right here at the mansion. Serena!”

Serena, who’d been standing ready outside, entered my office. She was the head human maid of House Banfield, boasting the same amount of power within the mansion as its butler, Brian. Though she was an older woman, she stood proud and tall, and every one of her movements was graceful and refined. Taking her place before Rosetta, she explained my plans for her.

“We have judged your basic education to be insufficient, Lady Rosetta. As such, while Master Liam is attending the military academy, you will make use of an education capsule and undergo some etiquette training. If possible, the master would also like you to undergo training at another noble house.”

Despite being nobility, Rosetta had led a completely destitute life, and hadn’t been able to complete a basic education. She hadn’t undergone training at another noble house either, so by this world’s standards, she was barely qualified to even be a noble. Anyway, the Empire didn’t require women to serve in the military, for some stupid, antiquated reason like “ensuring the children of the next generation.” This outdated tradition led some people to undergo sex changes just to avoid military service. Apparently, many people graduated from military academy to discover that friends of theirs had become women in the time they’d been apart. Personally, I didn’t really want to go *that* far to avoid serving.

In any case, the current topic was Rosetta, not the military academy. I commanded Serena in a stern tone, “Serena, I don’t want you going easy on Rosetta. In fact, I’d like you to give her a strict education.”

Serena’s eyebrows raised slightly, as if my command had surprised her, but she quickly regained her impassiveness and asked, “Is that right? I don’t mind giving her more gentle guidance.”

In the future, Rosetta would be in a higher position than Serena. I suspected Serena might want to suck up to her now for better treatment later, but I wasn’t going to let that fly. I knew Serena was a highly capable head maid, who was strict with the noble ladies in her past position at the Imperial palace. If I wanted her to be firm, she wouldn’t let Rosetta intimidate her.

“That won’t be necessary. Give her a thorough education. Teach her just what it will mean to stand beside me.”

I tried to put on my best stern expression as I looked over at Rosetta, whose manner and movements were awkward with nervousness. *That’s right, you’d better be scared! Don’t forget that this is enemy territory for you!*

I had wanted to break her steel will myself, but just being around Rosetta these days threw me off so much that I’d pretty much given up on that. The only thing I could look forward to now was seeing her cry because she couldn’t endure Serena’s bullying.

“I want you to take these lessons to heart before I return, Rosetta,” I commanded firmly. “Consider that an order.”

Rosetta clenched her fists and put on a brave face. “I will.”

“No! No! I don’t wanna go to the military academy!”

It was the day of our departure for the military academy, and former Imperial prince Wallace was clinging to a pillar in House Banfield’s spaceport. He was a flashy-looking, blue-haired young man whose features suggested a certain shallowness. True to his appearance, his personality was every bit as superficial as one might suspect.

I had become his patron and therefore looked after him, but every time I gave him a little pocket money, it was gone in an instant. At the end of every month, he was always absolutely broke. When he first arrived at my mansion, he was given some respect as a former Imperial prince, but now everyone called him a good-for-nothing leech behind his back. In truth, though, it wasn't like I was expecting anything of him; I'd just become his patron because I liked the idea of having a member of the Imperial family as a lackey. Now when I looked back on the decision, I really felt like I jumped the gun.

I couldn't just throw him out now that I'd taken him in, however, so I grabbed Wallace by the scruff of his neck and marched toward the ship.

"Just shut up and get in!"

Even though he looked like a high schooler, Wallace was throwing a tantrum like a spoiled toddler.

"I won't survive a day in the military! Beautiful, sensitive people like me become punching bags for anyone with a higher rank just because they feel like it!"

Wallace had a rather inflated opinion of himself. As I dragged him behind me, I assured him that wouldn't be a problem.

"Don't worry, I've already taken measures. I made sure Tia and a few other of my knights are already on the inside. If anyone tries to lay a hand on either of us, they'll learn a hard lesson."

You couldn't wait to implement such safeguards after you were already enrolled. If you had the funds, it was best to be well-prepared beforehand.

Still, Wallace kept resisting.

"What'll you do if some vicious instructor sets their sight on us?"

"We don't need to worry about that, either. I've made hefty donations to the military over the past several years, all with notes attached saying, 'I'm greatly looking forward to my time at the academy.' Anyone stupid enough to hassle me will get transferred to the front lines."

In primary school, a delinquent named Derrick had picked a fight with me, but

I knew my preparations for the military academy were flawless. Even if an instructor did decide he had a problem with me, the upper brass would have my back.

Hearing all this, Wallace finally relaxed.

“You’re the only person I know who’d go that far to prepare for their time at the military academy, Liam. I’m relieved to hear it, but a little astonished too.”

“That’s just what it means to be rich. Money and authority are meant to be used, and I’m not one to hesitate when it comes to exercising my power for my own good.”

A minute ago, Wallace had been crying and wailing, but now his face took on a grim expression as he reminded me of House Banfield’s current dilemma.

“Even if you can make use of your money and authority at the military academy, there’s nothing you can do about the Berkeley Family, is there? Are you really okay with how things are going on that front?”

The Berkeley Family were the relatives of Derrick, the one who started a fight with me in primary school. Despite being nothing more than a collection of barons, they were gearing up for a conflict. Tensions between House Banfield and House Berkeley were high.

“What about them? If they stand up to me, I’ll just knock them down.”

“As always, I’m relieved at your confidence,” Wallace sighed.

I shoved him forward with annoyance. “If you’re done whining, then get on board already.”

I gave him a kick for good measure, then followed him onto the moving walkway that would take us to my ship. The moving walkway led to the Vár, a superdreadnought several thousand meters long, that functioned as my army’s flagship. The thing was entirely too huge and looked more like a building than a battleship. The fact that this monstrosity functioned as a ship was one of those things that made this world so unbelievable to me.

At the end of the moving walkway, a large group of people had lined up to see me off, including Amagi and my butler Brian. Rosetta had been left at home.

After all, I couldn't let her sully my dignity as an evil lord by calling me "Darling" in front of all these people.

Amagi was as composed and professional as ever, but beside her, Brian was wiping away tears with a handkerchief. Well, I guess crying was "the same as ever" for him. What a pain.

When he saw me, Brian blubbered, "You're finally off to the military academy, Master Liam. I'm so proud, but I can't help worrying about you too!"

I might have been a noble, but I was going to be joining the military, which meant I could get caught up in military conflicts. An enemy wouldn't hesitate to fire on you just because you were nobility, and no matter how noble your birth, when you died, you died, just like anyone else in this world. Brian was beside himself with worry about that very thing. To make things more dramatic, in his free hand he clutched a framed picture of my great-grandfather. I wasn't the least bit happy, having a gray-haired old man crying over me this way.

"Cut it out, already. And don't forget to keep an eye on Rosetta while I'm gone."

"Why, of course I plan to watch over her, Master Liam, but what do you mean by 'keep an eye on her,' exactly?"

Brian didn't seem to catch my drift, so I elaborated a bit.

"I've tasked Rosetta with receiving a *strict* education. So, Brian, I want you to keep an eye on her too. Do you get what I mean, now?"

Because so many people were watching us at that moment, I couldn't exactly tell him, "I want you to make sure Rosetta is thoroughly bullied." However, Brian had been by my side ever since I'd been reincarnated. He stood up straighter and nodded, finally understanding my meaning. "Of course, sir."

There were some areas that required improvement, but Brian was a fairly capable butler. He tended to get involved in strange things sometimes, but I enjoyed having subordinates I could rely on.

Finally, I turned to Amagi. "We'll be apart for a while again. I'll miss you."

I took her hand. I didn't like leaving my territory, but the thing I hated most

was not being able to see Amagi.

She gave me a somewhat frustrated smile. “You should save lines like that for your fiancée, Master. I too will be wishing for your safe return. Please take care of yourself.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure some of this will be a pain, but a god of good fortune is always watching over me.”

I had to make sure to thank the unseen presence that I was sure still looked out for me, even now.

While I talked with Amagi, Marie approached, no doubt to inform me that it was time to leave.

Marie Marian, who would also be attending the military academy with Wallace and me, dropped to one knee and bowed her head. She was a female knight with striking lilac-colored hair, and she stood out even at House Banfield as a rather talented individual. She was probably just about as tough as Tia, who had some personality problems, but it was Marie’s appearance that I valued most about her. She had an air to her like a sharp blade, and though she revealed some pathetic traits every once in a while, she was on the whole a very attractive female knight. I kept her at my side because it was only fitting for an evil lord to be served by beautiful women, after all.

“It’s time, Lord Liam.”

Reluctant as I was to do it, I let go of Amagi’s hand.

“Understood. Amagi, contact me right away if anything happens.”

As the crowd saw me off, I boarded the Vár.

Because of the Empire’s massive size, there were actually a number of military schools, but being the closest to the Imperial Capital Planet, the one known as the Imperial Military Academy was for the elite. Only those who had graduated primary school with the best grades, or the children of nobles who would carry the future of the Empire on their backs, were allowed to attend this particular institution.

However, even a school such as this had its problem children. On the first day of class, cadets with questionable records were summoned to an indoor training facility. Among these was Marie. All of the cadets there wore black tank tops, cargo pants, and boots, and stood in a line. The brawny instructors before them all looked fierce enough that it was unlikely an unskilled knight could even lay a finger on them. These instructors had been specially chosen to preside over those cadets judged to be slightly problematic. The fact that Marie and these other problem students were allowed to attend this elite academy at all was proof of their talents.

Standing before the cadets, the voice of one of the instructors boomed out to them loudly, without the need of a megaphone, "You kids with spots on your records aren't like the other cadets. Your training will be particularly rigorous, so you better be prepared to work your asses off if you want to earn the honor of serving in this military!"

The instructor zeroed in on Marie. "Looks like we've already got somebody who thinks they're above the rules. You! Did you not read the regulations before you enlisted? There's no long hair at the military academy!"

Marie stiffened and scoffed at the instructor. "Don't bark at me. I'm just here to become officially qualified as an Imperial soldier. There's nothing you people could possibly teach me."

In response to Marie's declaration, the instructors took off their jackets. Every year, some strong-willed brats were revealed in this room, and it was customary for the instructors to knock those cadets down a peg by force.

"Looks like you'll need to be given especially strict instruction."

The instructors ordered the other cadets to form a large circle around her, which they then entered, stretching their arms and loosening up as they did so.

The instructors surrounded Marie.

"I think you can expect to go to the barracks with an injury or two today, girlie."

One of the instructors rushed forward with a fist aimed at Marie's face. The reason none of them intended to hold back against a woman like her was

because they had already determined that she possessed a certain degree of skill. However, they would soon find out how wrong they'd been in guessing just how skilled she was.

The instructor's fist passed right over Marie as she swiftly leaned back to dodge it.

"Your bark's worse than your bite," she said. "They'll let anyone be an Imperial soldier these days, won't they? How about I instruct *you*?"

Still leaning back, Marie aimed a kick at the brawny instructor's chin, and the force of her blow sent him flying. She then straightened herself calmly, while the instructor was left lying face-up on the floor.

Marie extended a hand and beckoned to herself, provoking the other instructors with a sneer. "Why don't you all come at me at once? I'll teach you so-called soldiers what real violence is."

Looking back at their fallen comrade, the other instructors grew enraged.

"We'll wipe that smirk off your face!" one of them growled.

Just as she had suggested, all the remaining instructors charged her at once. The whole time, Marie kept a smug smile on her face. Her former polite façade had been discarded, as she displayed her true nature.

She said, "I'll beat it into you! I'll show you who's really in charge here!"

Their little bout was over in less than an hour. Seated atop a heap of semiconscious instructors, Marie laughed loudly.

"Weak. So *weak*! Can instructors like this even provide 'rigorous training'? Maybe I should retrain the lot of you! If you'd like, I could think up some training exercises that would have you weeping and wailing like children!"



Marie looked down with scorn at the groaning instructors beneath her.
Honor, my ass. To me, what would be an honor is serving as House Banfield's—no, as Lord Liam's head knight. I have no loyalty to the Empire. All I have for the Empire is contempt.

Marie despised the Empire that had betrayed her long ago. She was only attending the Imperial Military Academy in order to protect Liam—and to fulfill his desire to have Imperial knights for vassals. Two thousand years ago, Marie was an Imperial knight, but her qualifications were obsolete in the present age. In fact, her very identity had been erased from history, so she had to acquire all new qualifications in order to become an Imperial knight. Since Marie was only attending the military academy to achieve that end, the training she could expect to undergo would serve only as an amusement to her.

She looked down at the instructors and told them coldly, “If you want me to cut my hair, you can tell me to do so when you’re able to back up your threats. If all of the instructors here are like you, it just shows how little one can expect from the ‘honorable’ Imperial Army.”

The instructors could say nothing in response. Normally, something like this would have gotten a cadet kicked out of the academy, but Marie was connected to House Banfield. No one in the military’s upper brass would want to anger a noble family that had provided such generous donations to their cause. The instructors had been bested, not just in skill, but in authority as well. All they could do was despair at the incredible problem child they now had on their hands.

Suddenly, another cadet—another knight of House Banfield, like Marie—rushed over to her. This knight was part of the woman’s faction, and her face had gone pale. However, her worry didn’t seem to stem from the fact that her superior had just beaten the crap out of their instructors on their first day at the academy. Rather, it seemed she was anxious about another matter.

“Lady Marie, Lord Liam is contacting you.”

“Huh?”

The other knight manipulated her tablet, which then displayed an image of Liam’s face. Cowed by Liam’s expression of extreme annoyance, Marie adjusted

her position on top of the instructors so that she sat up straight at attention.

“Lord Liam! I-is there some emergency?”

Marie worried that something had happened to her lord, and she watched anxiously as Liam raised an eyebrow and explained the reason for his displeasure.

“No, the only thing currently bothering me is you, Marie. Just now the instructors asked me to do something about you. Are you really causing problems on your first day? Is that any way for a knight of mine to behave?”

“N-no, I... Er, they told me to cut my hair! But a woman’s hair is her life! I can’t just cut it so easily.”

Liam’s response to Marie’s excuses was a cold, “Cut it.”

“Huh?”

“You were aware of the regulations before you arrived, were you not? Are you really going to stoop down to Wallace’s level? He got in trouble for his hair too, and now he’s bald.”

Marie didn’t particularly care about Wallace, but it did hurt her pride to be compared to him. At the mansion, he was disdained for being a freeloader, a layabout, and a horrible playboy. Frankly, he had a lousy attitude about life, and Marie had seen Serena reprimanding him more than a few times.

I-I’m not that bad, am I?

“L-Lord Liam—”

“Cut your hair. And don’t cause any more trouble for me. Or are you saying I’m a fool for following regulations and cutting my own hair before I came here? Well, Marie?”

Under Liam’s glare, Marie hung her head. “I would never mock you, Lord Liam.”

Watching Marie tremble with shame, Liam gave a satisfied snort and told her, “Then hurry up and cut your hair. Conversation’s over.”

He broke off the call and Marie looked down despondently. With tears in her

eyes, she wrapped her beautiful hair around her fingers and made up her mind. She hated the idea of cutting the lilac hair that she was so proud of, but if the order came from Lord Liam himself, she had no choice but to obey it.

“I-I’ll go cut my hair right now.”

The instructors under Marie all let out weary groans.

If that was all it took, then what was the point of everything we just went through?!

While Liam and crew were experiencing their first day at the military academy, back at House Banfield’s mansion, Rosetta was learning directly from Serena. A ball was balanced on top of her head to correct her posture, and she walked along a chalk line drawn on the floor. Rosetta moved with exceeding care and perfect posture, lest the ball roll off her head. Her long blonde ringlets stood out against the chic navy blue maid uniform she wore. The harsh expression that had once been so common to her face had been replaced with one of anxiety as she concentrated completely on her movements.

Serena clapped her hands and pressed Rosetta, “How long are you going to take to walk that line? Move faster! You need to be bold!”

Serena was being harsh in her instruction. Rosetta would normally have stood above her in the mansion’s hierarchy, but Liam had ordered the head maid to be strict, and she was honoring that order.

Rosetta tried to move more quickly, and the ball promptly fell from her head. Watching it bounce off the floor, she started to cry. “I hate this!”

Serena just looked at her with utter exasperation. “How many times do I need to say this for you to understand? Rosetta, you must complete this training in order to become a wife worthy of Lord Liam. In the first place—”

Rosetta wasn’t crying because of Serena’s strict training. She had led an extremely painful life up until now, so she was easily able to bear Serena’s harshness. What she *couldn’t* bear was being apart from Liam.

“I wanted to attend the military academy with Darling!”

That wasn't all. Rosetta hadn't even been allowed to see Liam off when he left. Or, to be more precise, she hadn't been able to see him off at all.

"I can't believe Darling left while I was still in the education capsule! I couldn't even say goodbye!"

As Rosetta sobbed, Serena gave a little sigh and responded coolly, "There is no need for a future duchess to serve in the military. What you require right now, Rosetta, is the ability to manage a household. While Lord Liam tends to outside matters, someone has to run things here at the mansion in his home territory. You do not need to wield a weapon to learn that role."

If two people were to be married in the future, only one of them needed fulfill the obligation of serving time in the military. There were women who underwent a sex change in order to join the military, just as there were men who did the same and instead trained in domestic responsibilities. There were, of course, plenty of women who served in the military as they were, and thus the Imperial Army was made up of roughly thirty percent women. The bottom line was that there was no need for Rosetta herself to serve, but she desired to share all things, good and bad, with Liam.

"I wanted to be of use to Darling..."

Even though she was frustrated with the weeping Rosetta, Serena also respected the young woman. *She has the right attitude, at least.*

By the time she graduated from primary school, Rosetta's grades had risen to the low end of average. They had only expected her time in the education capsule to raise her grades to about mid-range average, so the fact that she had exceeded expectations could be chalked up to her own personal efforts. Serena actually rated Rosetta even more highly than that, but she was still troubled by the girl's less-than-refined personality.

She's not the type of girl you tend to see in noble households.

There were plenty of women who devoted themselves to their husbands, sure, but not many would want to follow their betrothed even into military academy so fervently.

Liam, on the other hand, practically fled along with Wallace to the academy

while Rosetta was helpless in the education capsule when he heard that she wanted to go with him.

Serena took a deep breath to refocus herself and returned to Rosetta's instruction.

"You'll never be finished with this if you keep crying, Rosetta. If you want to become a woman befitting Lord Liam, get back up and pull yourself together."

When she heard that, Rosetta stopped whimpering and stood straighter, wiping her tears away. "I understand. When he returns, I'll show Darling that I can be a proper duchess to stand at his side. Six years will go by just like that."

"That's wonderful, but Lord Liam will not be returning for some time after that."

"Huh? B-but...it should only take six years to graduate from the military academy!"

"After he graduates, Lord Liam will enter a period of practical training that will last two years," Serena explained dutifully. "After that, he will serve in the military for at least four more years. Depending on where he is assigned, he may not return to House Banfield for a minimum of twelve years."

"H-he'll come back at least once in that time to visit, though, won't he? Of course he will, right?"

"It is Lord Liam's plan not to return for some time so that he may finish with his military service as quickly as possible."

"No waaaaay!" Rosetta burst into tears all over again.

"During that time, you'll need to complete your training with another noble house, as well."

"So, I won't be able to see Darling at all for twelve years...?"

Serena's brow furrowed. "Are you even listening to me?"

"Y-yes!"

Normally, upon reaching a certain age young nobles were sent to other households as part of their education, but as there had been no houses that

would take in someone from House Claudia, Rosetta hadn't completed that part of her training. Nobles who never underwent this would be looked down upon, so Rosetta's situation needed to be resolved as soon as possible. However, there was a problem plaguing House Banfield at the moment...and that was the Berkeley Family, the group of pirate nobles who currently antagonized them.

Serena thought to herself. *While we're feuding with the Berkeley Family, we'll have to choose where we send Lady Rosetta quite carefully...*

If they made the wrong choice in where to send her for training, something terrible might happen. If they unknowingly entrusted her to a house with ties to House Berkeley, she could be taken hostage.

Lord Liam left Lady Rosetta at the mansion so she wouldn't prove a burden during his training, but leaving her here for the full twelve years makes for other problems. What do we do about this?

Serena had much to think about regarding Rosetta's immediate future.

Baron Berkeley's mansion was a grand building of extravagant design. Practically a city in itself, it spanned a wide area.

In a large office almost too excessive for a baron, the boss of the Berkeley Family, Casimilo, sat smoking a cigar. Blowing a plume of smoke from his mouth, he looked down at a man who cowered on the floor before him. This man was a noble who had opposed House Berkeley.

Casimilo spoke to the noble in a mock tone of sadness. "To not only speak poorly of other people, but directly interfere with House Berkeley... That's just not a nice thing to do."

Casimilo's sons, who stood in attendance, smirked cruelly. Every one of the sons who surrounded the man on the floor ruled over their own planets, as the Berkeley Family was an organization made up of the baronies of Casimilo and his sons. Of course, his sons had only been able to become barons because Casimilo had parceled out his vast territory to them, so that they could appear as independent lords. In reality, however, Casimilo still stood at the top of their collective domains. In its entirety, their territory rivaled the domain of a duke,

and therefore, Casimilo ruled over a vast number of planets, with over one hundred thousand ships at his command.

In addition to all this, Casimilo also controlled a great many of the pirates spread throughout the Empire. Small rogue bands and those pirates who made their way into Empire's territory from outside remained independent, but for the most part, the Empire's pirate population answered to the Berkeley Family. Hence, their moniker of Pirate Nobles.

Many nobles had aligned themselves with Casimilo, but there were those who defied him as well, such as the man before him now. His face contorted with emotion, this man shouted at Casimilo, "S-screw you! You were the one who sent all those pirates into my territory in the first place!"

Casimilo continued to smoke his cigar as he listened to the man's accusations. "Well, all you had to do was hand over what I wanted and walk away. Can't you understand the feelings of a man who wants to give one of his sons some independence?"

Casimilo had obtained his vast domain by taking over the territories and peerage of other nobles to hand out to his sons, and the methods he utilized to achieve this were always forceful.

"You'd kill my family just for that? Even destroy my house? You damn piraaate!"

The man jumped to his feet and lunged at Casimilo, but a number of his sons pulled out handguns and squeezed their triggers. The man dropped to the floor, a puddle of blood immediately spreading out around him. As his last act, though, he muttered the name of a noble who would stand against the Berkeley Family.

"Bastards... I hope House Banfield wipes out the whole lot of you."

The noble expired, and Casimilo dropped his cigar, grinding it out under his heel.

"What a fool. He could have kept his life if he'd just done as we told him."

"Does this mean I'm a baron now, Dad?" the son in question asked excitedly.

“Hmm? Sure, of course. Just remember, though, I’ll be the one managing your territory.”

Nevertheless, his son was elated to hear it. “Now I’m at the top of the Family too!”

Casimilo had no idea what this ecstatic son’s name was, or where he stood among his many brothers in terms of age. He only made his sons barons because he figured he wouldn’t have to worry as much about being betrayed, as opposed to making barons out of those who had no blood relation. He’d never had any love for his children and saw them merely as subordinates.

Having now been assured of this particular son’s independence and loyalty, Casimilo went on to consider the next order of business. “Now, we’re running low on elixirs. We need to squeeze a planet to replenish our supplies, but where would be a good location?”

“I know a place,” one of his sons spoke up. “There’s this girl I’ve been going after, but her family said they wouldn’t give her to a pirate noble. I’ve been wanting to get back at them for that.”

Elixirs were miraculous medicinal solutions, able to cure virtually any illness or injury. They were exceedingly rare and expensive items, and therefore difficult to come by. However, the Berkeley Family was in possession of a means of mass-producing such elixirs: the so-called planetary development device. It was an ancient technology originally used to revitalize ruined planets, but if misused it could instead turn planets abundant with life into empty husks. In that scenario, elixirs were the byproduct of the process, synthesized from the massive loss of life on these destroyed planets.

As the lanky son who had made this request stood there fiddling with his long hair, Casimilo easily made the decision to ruin an entire planet, thus killing off all its people and animal life, just to obtain some elixirs.

“Well, if we wipe them all out, it won’t exactly matter what they think, will it? See to it.”

“I will! I can keep the girl, though, right? I want to make her my mistress.”

“Do as you like.”

House Berkeley's great advantage was that they held several of these planetary development devices from a bygone civilization. As a result, Casimilo had made his fortune killing not only people, but entire planets.

Gazing down at the dead man, he frowned as he recalled the words the noble had uttered with his final breath.

"Last but not least, what's going on with House Banfield right now?"

The Berkeley Family wielded great power in the Empire, and yet there was someone willing to go up against them. That someone was Liam Sera Banfield.

Casimilo's sons exchanged glances, hesitant to report what information they had.

Seeing this, Casimilo pressed them. "Tell me."

Finally, one of his older, bearded sons reported, "We sent some assassins of our own along with some big names we hired to take him out, but they all failed."

"Tenacious bastard. Well, as long as we keep sending them, he's bound to feel the pressure eventually and leave us an opening."

Outwardly, Casimilo appeared to take this report calmly, but one of his more perceptive sons knew he was actually more than aggravated by the news and stepped forward to suggest a change of plan.

"Dad, that Liam prick's in the military academy now. I don't think the Imperial Army will appreciate it if we send any assassins after him there."

Casimilo knew this already, but his pride had been wounded and he felt he needed to make a show of force for that very reason.

"And? You want us to just sit back and wait years for him to complete his training? Listen up—nobility is a business founded on reputation. Always has been. This punk takes us lightly, and you want us to just do nothing about it?"

Another of his sons suggested a different mode of attack. "Dad, House Banfield's in debt. I hear it's a pretty big amount too."

Before Liam's birth, House Banfield had been a poor, tiny territory out in the boonies, teetering on the verge of collapse, and it likely still was. No matter

how much better Liam might have made things, surely they would still have a vast amount of debt on their shoulders.

“The debt his predecessors left him with? What of it?”

“He’s borrowed from some companies where we have people behind the scenes. Why don’t we make some *persuasive* suggestions that they collect on those debts right away?”

Casimilo wasn’t sure about this suggestion. He happened to know that Liam had been steadily repaying his debts. *If the companies we’re involved with collect aggressively from this kid who’s diligently making his payments, we’ll only lose trust with other clients.*

House Berkeley had their hands in a number of moneylending businesses, both for the profit and to get dirt on other houses. The money they made from this was nothing to sneeze at, and if the businesses lost clients because of a downturn in reputation, that would lead to significant losses to their profits. On the other hand, if they kept sending assassins after Liam and those assassins continued to fail, more and more houses would look down on the Berkeley Family.

We’ll just have to prepare ourselves for some losses if we want to crush that damned kid.

In direct contrast to House Berkeley, Liam had been making a name for himself by destroying pirates left and right. Casimilo knew that one day it was inevitable he would have to face off against this noble with a reputation as a pirate hunter.

If I don’t take him down now, I’ll be the one in trouble in the future if he becomes even more prominent.

Plenty of nobles resented House Berkeley, but had thus far not opposed him. However, if they joined forces with Liam once he himself was a fully-fledged noble, Casimilo would have a huge problem on his hands. Yes, he definitely wanted this taken care of before Liam finished with his education.

“Very well. Spread a rumor that House Banfield is on the verge of collapse and won’t be able to pay off the remainder of their debts. Hearing this, all the other

moneylenders he's borrowed from should rush to collect as well."

House Berkeley shifted their sights from Liam himself to House Banfield as a whole, and a true conflict between great noble houses began to unfold.

Chapter 1:

Military Academy

AN ENTIRE PLANET had been set aside as an army training facility: the Algrand Empire's Imperial Military Academy. The planet's urban areas, dense forests, deserts, and snowy plains were all used for military training. From warships ready to launch to an entire orbital space station, every resource was utilized for the education of the soldiers tasked with protecting the Empire.

I, Liam Sera Banfield, was currently attending that academy, in the Strategy Department where elites were sent. Everyone here was on a path to becoming an officer of some rank or other, to stand above the common soldiers. Anyone whose aim it was to command in the future was absolutely required to attend courses in this department, so the competition was fierce.

One might expect to see only elite soldiers here, but in the Empire there were always exceptions, and these exceptions were young nobles. For the regular students at this school, only brilliant ones with good grades could get into this department. However, any old noble could do the same just by virtue of their family's name. This was just more proof of the unalterable status of nobility in the Empire. I was one such noble, enrolled in this department for no other reason than I was going to be a duke in the future. In other words, among the deserving elite in this department, there were also hopeless incompetents enrolled only because of their nobility status. In the Empire, such outrages were sadly commonplace.

"The circumstances of your birth aren't everything in this world, but don't you think they influence a lot?"

I had brought up this very subject up with Wallace while we sat in the academy's cafeteria. Wallace, with his shaved head, gave me an odd look as he chewed on a hunk of hard bread. As was the norm, we found ourselves eating a meal that emphasized nutrition over taste.

"Where's this coming from? A more important observation is that it sucks

here. Just because my hair was a little long, I have to spend an entire year bald? That's ridiculous!"

He still couldn't get over our first day at school. Wallace had arrived with longer hair than allowed by regulations, and his punishment was to spend the next year completely shaved. Long hair presented a number of problems, such as potentially impeding one's sight, so everyone here, including the women, had to wear it short. Eila Sera Berman, who sat with us, had previously boasted hair that fell to the middle of her back if she let it down, but now her hair was shorn too.

While she chewed her food, Eila glared at Wallace with unconcealed contempt. "Wallace, can you not interrupt him? Anyway, what were you saying, Liam?"

By now, Wallace seemed used to Eila's attitude, so he didn't seem particularly bothered by her remark, except to say, "Harsh as always."

"I told you to shut up, didn't I?"

Eila being cold to Wallace was normal enough, but there was something odd I'd been curious about. Why had she enrolled in the military academy too? I'd assumed she'd be going on to college with our friend Kurt, so it had been a surprise to find her here. The two of them had gotten along well, and I had even expected they might get together at some point. I just didn't understand why Eila had come here instead. I knew she must have her reasons, but I didn't want to make things awkward by prying. I decided I'd save the question for when we were somewhere a bit more private.

I returned the conversation to the topic Wallace had derailed. "What I'm saying is, I was born a noble. For that reason alone, I'm able to attend the elite program here. I'm sure for the regular students, that makes me an object of resentment."

I had said this at a normal volume, but the cafeteria's bustle gradually quieted around me. My fellow cadets from the Strategy Department were here with us, including many of those "regular students" I'd just referred to. Overhearing our conversation, it might very well seem a natural-born winner like me was basking in his superiority, looking down on those who had worked hard to get

here.

Wallace glanced about nervously, cautioning me for my careless remark. “Can’t you be a little more quiet when you say stuff like that, Liam? Look around you.”

I took a look and saw the glares of the natural-born losers seated around me, their brows furrowed in anger. Meanwhile, in contrast, other cadets looked back at me approvingly, but I was guessing those were my fellow nobles. They probably felt much the same way I did.

“Well, it’s the truth, isn’t it? If they have a problem with it, they can talk to me personally. If they have the courage to, that is.”

I took another glance around, but apparently no one had the guts to confront me. Each person whose eyes I met quickly looked away. They were probably too afraid to defy a current count and future duke. The military academy was huge, so it was impossible to remember the names or even the faces of every cadet here, but I was certain all the ones who glared at me were ordinary cadets. Such students couldn’t say a thing against a noble, no matter how much resentment they harbored. They may have been elites in terms of their hard-won achievements, but they were powerless in the face of the Empire’s nobility-first doctrines.

This was it—exactly what I was after in my reincarnated existence. Right now, I was being the consummate evil lord.

Upset by what I had said, a senior cadet walked over to me and barked, “Quite a confident attitude you’ve got there.” He put his hand on our table and bent down, sneering at me.

“Dolph?” Wallace exclaimed in surprise.

I recognized the name of this upperclassman, having heard he was the head of the senior class. I was sure Dolph himself was a noble, yet he had the moral superiority to be angry at me for disrespecting the regular students? This was the type of noble I absolutely couldn’t stand.

Dolph stared at me haughtily and scoffed, “I hear you’ve got decent grades, but I hardly think that justifies the attitude. You’re still new here. You’re not as

special as you think—there are plenty of people just like you here. You should reconsider your behavior a little.”

Dolph Sera Lawrence, his hair all slicked back with some sort of product, appeared to be something of a strange noble, one who sympathized with the common citizenry. He was thin, but clearly had a soldier’s trained physique. He wasn’t bad-looking either, and no doubt he was popular and had a fair number of hangers-on, but I just couldn’t stand that pompous look on his face. Moreover, I couldn’t stand him lecturing me. After all, the nobles of House Lawrence were only viscounts—and thus ranked below me.

I replied, “The school’s top student takes it upon himself to lecture me, eh? How arrogant of you.”

“That’s not an attitude you should be taking with an upperclassman.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? Don’t get cocky just because you’re in a higher grade than me.”

“You’re in the military now. You must really be ignorant to bring up peerage here.”

“Interesting thing to say. Shall we test whether peerage really is meaningless in the military, then?”

My opponent was an upperclassman, but a noble ranked below me. There was no reason for me to back down and act inferior to him. I was in the military now? He had no idea how much I had donated to the academy and the Imperial Army. They would overlook any behavior on my part.

Nevertheless, Eila looked worried. Wallace was trying to get me to back off.

“Liam, stop that!” Eila fretted.

“Pick your battles, man!” Wallace said. “This is *Dolph* you’re talking to!”

Neither of them wanted me to get into this, but I hated people who thought they had the moral high ground, as they reminded me too much of my previous life. I had been just like them once, believing that being a good person was the way to live one’s life. Look where that had got me! I was sure this guy was full of righteous anger for me belittling the general populace, and perhaps he was

justified for feeling that way—but his sanctimoniousness made me sick.

“So, what do you wanna do?” I asked. “You wanna go?”

If he meant to pick a fight with me, I intended to reciprocate. Dolph raised his chin slightly, a vein standing out on his forehead. Apparently, though, he preferred a challenge to a physical fight.

“Meet me in the simulator room. I’ll teach you how to behave in front of your upperclassmen.”

“Sounds like an entertaining lesson.”

I gave him a smirk and a buzz went through the cafeteria. I overheard snatches of furtive conversation.

“Hey, Liam and Dolph are gonna go at it in the simulator!”

“Those two?”

“That’ll be a good show.”

The excitement swept through the cafeteria, but Wallace only held his head in his hands. “Liam, why are you so—”

With a resigned look on her face, Eila sighed, “You really don’t change, do you?”

Eila had known me since our time training at another noble house, so it came as no surprise to her that I wouldn’t back down.

“Of course,” I told her. “This is just what happens if you pick a fight with someone above your station.”

When he heard me say this, Dolph visibly reddened. “Just you wait.”

Surely he was just boiling with rage at my bringing peerage into the military and speaking so arrogantly to an older student.

The military academy’s simulator room was used for individual training and for group lessons, and was therefore a large facility that could accommodate many students at once.

A sizable number of cadets had packed themselves into one section of the room, all of them here to watch the showdown. Competing today were Liam, who had already earned some of the highest grades in the first-year class, and Dolph, the top student in the sixth-year class. The two of them were about to face off in the simulator as commanders of their own armies. Everyone else was simply there to watch.

Members of the audience cheered for both sides of the conflict. Leaning on a railing that separated him from the simulation area, Wallace gave a little sigh, sweeping his gaze over the cadets who cheered for Liam.

“Liam’s so popular with the commoners.”

Many of the regular students were cheering on Liam. He had nobles in his corner too, but the majority of his support came from the common cadets. On the other side, numerous nobles who didn’t care for Liam were cheering for Dolph.

Standing next to Wallace, Eila commented as if this was totally obvious. “Dolph’s a typical nobles-first type. He thinks your birth means everything and commoners are just tools to be used. There’s no way he and Liam would get along.”

Dolph was the second son of House Lawrence, a noble from birth. Consequently, he felt that the nobility always stood above the common people and that the latter should put their lives on the line to support the former. Liam had offended him by saying students like themselves were only in the elite course because of their birth, and not because of their hard work.

Wallace recalled shady rumors he’d heard about Dolph since arriving at the military academy. *It’s true Dolph is talented, but I’ve heard he uses dirty tactics too. I hope this doesn’t get ugly.*

Dolph’s skills were the real deal, but he apparently also wasn’t afraid to use whatever means were at his disposal. This left Wallace worried for Liam. After all, they’d only just started school here and he was up against a senior. The five years of experience Dolph had over Liam might not have seemed like much, but it could make all the difference. Despite Liam’s talents, his opponent had held the top spot for his grade through his whole time at the military academy.

Wallace couldn't imagine this would be an easy contest for his friend.

Though...his "top student" status isn't without suspicion.

There were rumors that Dolph was only at the top of his grade because he went around thwarting the competition. Some even said he'd get students expelled on false charges if they seemed like potential rivals, and that he partnered with dangerous people and had the families of rivals taken hostage to force them to drop out. Allegedly, he collected dirt on people and forced them to intentionally score get lower on their written and practical tests.

"Liam's moral fiber is impressive, if he's picking fights with guys who don't care what they have to do to win," Wallace said. Even if Liam tended to say nasty things, Wallace felt his friend had a very keen sense of right and wrong, plus the skill to back up his principles.

"Why don't you try learning from him a little?" Eila said to him coldly. "You know you're only in the Strategy Department because of all of his donations, don't you?"

"Ugh! I-I know that. What about you, though? Did you get in purely based on skill?"

"Don't lump me in with you. The instructors said I barely passed."

"Barely, eh?"

"Well, that's better than you!"

It was well-known in the academy that Liam had gotten into the Strategy Department on merit, whereas Wallace had been told by the instructors that his grades wouldn't normally qualify him. He was admonished to follow Liam's example, proving to him that Liam had gotten in on his own skill.

In other words, the regular cadets knew that while Liam was a noble, he had been accepted on his own merits, and on top of that, he seemed to have complaints about other nobles. At the military academy, Liam was a beacon of hope for ordinary students, and a nuisance to the nobles.

When the simulators started up, everything around those in attendance went dark. In the air, fleets of miniature space craft faced each other, these being 3D

holographic projections. The two boys manipulated their respective control panels, and Liam's fleet immediately went on the offensive.

"Charging right in?" Dolph called out in criticism. "Looks like you don't even know the basics! Those tactics might work against pirates, but they won't work against me!"

"What was that?" Liam replied angrily.

He increased his attack, but unfortunately it was just as Dolph had said. Liam's fleet was slowly losing ground.

"If all you can do is charge forward like a wild boar, you're no match for me. Your formations suck too! You're not utilizing your fleet properly. If this is all you're capable of, you must have been fighting some really weak pirates to earn those medals of yours!"

In the simulator, a participant was able to customize their fleet. You weren't shown your opponent's fleet before combat began, so it was considered part of the training to predict what your opponent would come up with. Liam had formed a fleet specialized for attacking, which he excelled at, but Dolph's fleet was geared toward defense. The situation was disadvantageous for Liam, and it made seem like Dolph had seen through Liam's strategy from the beginning. It was as though he'd known exactly what sort of fleet Liam would organize and exactly what formations he'd use to attack.

"Dolph's done something," Wallace realized.

Seeing Liam in such a precarious position, Eila looked over at Dolph's face where it was displayed on one of the audience's large monitors. "He's got a nasty smile on his face. He probably planned this from the beginning."

As Liam's fleet continued to suffer losses, the noble students all started to jeer at him.

"Is this all the Pirate Hunter amounts to?" someone called out.

Another cried, "You might be able to beat some lousy pirates, but just remember you're no better than anyone else here!"

"Country bumpkins like him should really know their place."

Everyone seemed sure of Liam's defeat. Though the ordinary students had caught on to Dolph's cheating too, they were afraid to protest. Without any proof, their complaints would just add to Liam's shame. It was obvious that Dolph wasn't playing fair, but all Wallace and the other students could do was continue to watch it play out.

"He's going to lose at this rate," Wallace groaned.

The number of Liam's forces had been depleted significantly.

Eila was also sure he would lose. "He can't turn this around, can he?"

The situation was so bad for Liam that even his friends had written off his chances, and so had all the regular students.

Meanwhile, a figure watched over the battle, standing upside-down on the ceiling.

The man who stood upside-down on the ceiling wore a striped tailcoat with the brim of his top hat pulled low to hide his eyes. Only his mouth was visible, curved in a smile.

"I see that things have gotten interesting while I was stocking up on power at the Capital Planet."

The Guide watched over Liam and Dolph's confrontation. Having been thoroughly tortured by Liam in the past, he had been resting up in the Imperial Capital, feeding on despair to replenish his strength. He'd since gained back a bit of his depleted power, so he had come to check in on Liam.

When he was this close to Liam, however, the boy's feelings of gratitude caused him pain. If he stayed nearby for too long, he'd end up writhing in agony.

Liam was beloved by his people now. When his own feelings of gratitude combined with those of his subjects, they formed a terrible power. The Guide could no longer ignore the power Liam was gaining, but it would be difficult now for him to make Liam unhappy by himself. That was why he was visiting at this moment. He wanted to see if he could come up with any fresh ideas to take

Liam down—and as he watched Dolph, he hit upon one.

The Guide slowly descended from the ceiling, then moved toward Dolph. None of the students in attendance could perceive the mysterious figure as he walked past them and stood next to Dolph, who wore an ugly smile on his face, secure in his imminent victory.

“This boy has plunged quite a few people into despair. Just my type.”

Dolph had crushed countless rivals in order to maintain his place at the top of his grade. He was resented by many people in many places, not just at the military academy. That hatred had accumulated in coils all around him, so the Guide found it quite pleasurable to stand close by. Unlike Liam, Dolph was an enticing noble who was rotten to the core. The Guide particularly enjoyed how he had tampered with the simulator to win against Liam.

“I’ve got a good idea!” the Guide said, reaching out to touch the simulator control panel. The black smoke that emerged from his hand entered the simulator through a seam and instantly something odd began to happen. Dolph’s fleet, which up to now had maintained its superior position, gradually started to lose ground. The difference in numbers between his surviving ships and Liam’s began to shrink.

Dolph was bewildered by this turn of events. “Wh-what the...?”

Liam, on the other hand, was smiling. “What’s wrong, top of the class? Weren’t you going to show me who was superior?”

Seeing Liam get cocky, the Guide bared his teeth in a wide grin. It was amusing to him that Liam seemed to believe he was turning the tables through his own power.

“Good—get cocky. That’ll lead you to your end, Liam.”

The Guide, for all his hatred of Liam, was indeed working to help him win. Yet, he had his reasons.

“Dammit!” Dolph cried. “Dammit! There’s no way!”

Dolph rushed to reposition his ships, but it created gaps through which Liam attacked, wearing down the senior cadet’s advantage. Liam’s remaining fleet

was structured around taking the offensive, and steadily ate away at Dolph's numbers. The former gap between the players closed quickly. Suddenly, Dolph was the one who was losing, and his chances for a comeback looked unlikely.

"Wh-why? Did you also...?" Dolph was panicking, face gone pale. He had been so certain of his victory before. He suspected Liam of cheating somehow too, but he couldn't bring that up, could he? If someone investigated the simulator to prove that Liam had cheated, they'd discover the same thing about Dolph. He was in a precarious position now, due to his own actions...and because of the Guide's interference.

The Guide put his hand on Dolph's shoulder, speaking close to his ear. "I expect much from you. I think this loss will drive you forward, and you'll never let Liam get away with making you lose again... Isn't that right?"

Dolph couldn't hear the Guide's words, but he glared at Liam, a vein popping out on his forehead. He had always done whatever it took to stay on top, to never lose to anyone. It was humiliating to lose now to Liam—to a student so much younger than himself.

"You won't get away with this... I won't let you get away with this, Liam!"

When the simulator ultimately ruled Liam the victor, the ordinary students in the room all cheered. The nobles, on the other hand, just gave the defeated Dolph scornful looks, some openly mocking him.

"That's all the top of his grade can do, eh?"

"That's all a coward like him is capable of."

"Even while cheating, he couldn't beat Liam, huh?"

It was all so humiliating, but the words that stung the most came from his opponent, Liam. Victorious, Liam spoke down to Dolph as if it was only natural that he had triumphed.

"This is what happens when all you know is the simulator. You should experience real war sometime. I can teach you whatever you want, as your upperclassman in *life*... Cadet Dolph."

Watching Liam gloat so mercilessly, the Guide nodded in satisfaction. Dolph,

on the other hand, was glaring at Liam with an incredible scowl on his face.

“You bastaaard!!!” he growled.

The Guide chuckled to himself. “That’s right—let your hatred for Liam grow. Eventually, you’ll take him down. I’ll prepare the battlefield myself.”



The Guide reflected on the previous short-sighted attempts he'd made against Liam, when he'd been preoccupied with the pain the boy caused him. Rather than expend a great deal of energy trying to take Liam down himself, the Guide decided to carefully orchestrate his demise. For now, he wanted to let Liam get a little full of himself, which was sure to cause the boy to let his guard down. When everything was in place and the right time came, he would get rid of Liam in one fell swoop.

"Let that head of yours get bigger, Liam. I look forward to seeing your face when you lose everything."

Just like that, the Guide sank into the floor, vanishing. Dolph was left behind, grinding his teeth and glaring at Liam.

"Just remember this," he snarled. "Because I'm not gonna be forgetting today anytime soon."

This was the moment when yet another person began despising Liam with all his heart.

The day after he defeated Dolph in the simulator, Liam was surrounded by nobles in the Strategy Department's lecture hall. They'd all hated him until the day before, but they'd done an about-face and now tried to cozy up to him.

"That was real impressive, Liam!"

"A senior, and Dolph no less—the top of the class!"

"Just goes to show what someone who's seen real combat can do!"

The other students sang Liam's praises, and Liam didn't exactly disapprove.

"Oh, I'm not that great. It's just that he was weak."

No matter how humble he tried to appear, the nobles around Liam continued to compliment him. It was undisguised flattery. Watching the scene from a distance, Wallace grew fed up with these nobles who had so quickly changed their tune.

"They just want to cling to whoever's the strongest. Oh, what a fantastically

honest bunch.”

Eila, also watching from afar, was just as exasperated as Wallace, but for her own reasons glared at the cadets closest to Liam. One of them put a hand on Liam’s shoulder, and Eila’s features contorted into something fearsome.

“Damn adulterers, trying to get close to Liam...”

Wallace turned from the enraged Eila and checked on the regular students instead. They were all glowering at the nobles, bitter expressions on their faces. He figured they were probably just as disgusted with the nobles’ change of attitude as he was.

Just yesterday they were making fun of him for being from the sticks, but now they’ve totally changed their tunes.

Nobles that had been ignoring Liam before were now fawning all over him after his victory over Dolph.

Wallace sighed. “Reminds me of primary school.”

When he muttered this, Eila clasped her hands together beside him and reminisced aloud about her cherished memories.

“Things were so nice in primary school! Liam and Kurt got along so well, and they went everywhere together. I was so happy watching them. I can’t believe Kurt had to go away to college first since he decided to become a soldier. It just sucks that they’re apart now.”

Wallace noticed that there was no mention of him in all her reminiscing. “Wait a second... I hung out with them too. Actually, they dragged me around everywhere and put me through a lot...”

“Sorry, I don’t remember that. Are you sure you graduated from primary school, Wallace?”

“I did! I was there the whole time with you, including graduation!”

After primary school, Kurt had gone on to college because he was Baron Exner’s heir. As a military family, they held off on attending military academy until the final stage of their education. From primary school, they advanced to college to become qualified as government officials, and then after graduating

from the military academy they would simply remain in the military. It was more efficient and tailored to their futures. So, Kurt had left with a heavy heart to walk a different path than his companion.

Eila thought, *Poor Kurt was so down when he realized he'd have to part with Liam, wasn't he?*

Kurt really had been dejected when he'd learned that Liam planned to attend the military academy first.

She sighed, "It would have been so fun if Kurt were here too. You, I could take or leave, Wallace."

"Hey, I don't want to be in the military, you know. I just came with Liam 'cause I had no other choice, since he said he wanted to get this over with."

They both looked back at Liam, still being fawned over. He seemed to be enjoying himself, but the two of them felt a bit neglected at the sight.

"It's ten years too soon for someone with no real combat experience to beat me," Liam said to the nobles gathered around him. "Dolph chose the wrong person to go up against."

The young nobles weren't quite sure what to say to that. Lives were long in this world, so the notion that Dolph would catch up to Liam in only ten years' time seemed surprising.

"Huh? Ten years?"

"Just ten years?"

"Th-that's pretty fast."

Eila laughed. "He's cocky, but he keeps realistic expectations when it comes to his enemies' abilities. It's just like Liam."

Wallace shrugged but smiled with relief that things were as they should be. "Liam will be Liam, I suppose."

Then, into the lecture hall strode Marie, her long hair cut short. A stir went through the boys at the sudden appearance of such a beautiful woman, but the woman in question paid them no mind, pushing through the people surrounding Liam as if they weren't even there.

“Lord Liam, I just heard!” Marie exclaimed in her sweetest voice, eyes sparkling as she stood before him with her hands clasped.

“Marie,” Liam said stiffly, to acknowledge her.

Not noticing his obvious displeasure, Marie began to passionately recount what she’d heard about his victory. “To defeat a senior in a simulator battle! Of course, I wouldn’t expect anything less, Lord Liam. I was so devastated that I couldn’t witness your gallant battle myself that I ended up taking out my frustration on the instructors a bit. If you had just called for me, I would have been there as fast as I could!”

Hearing Marie admit her antics, both Wallace and Eila sighed deeply.

“Liam’s sure got some eccentric knights,” Wallace said. “Taking out her frustrations on the instructors? That can’t be good.”

“It just makes it worse when you know how talented these knights are too.”

Liam looked unamused by Marie’s sudden appearance and effusive praise. He knew she should be in another class.

“Oh yeah? That’s too bad, Marie. Now why don’t you hurry back to class?”

“No, please let me extol your virtues a little longer, Lord Liam! I won’t be satisfied until everyone around you knows just how wonderful you are!”

Marie’s eyes were wild as she praised Liam so fervently that even the people hoping to become his lackeys were a little put off by it.

“After all, it should be common knowledge that you’re incredible, Lord Liam—it’s simple fact!”

Watching Marie gush this way, Wallace murmured, “Yup, reminds me of our time in primary school...”

I liked a good yes-man. My favorite kind of person was the one who was like a loyal dog, who would sing my praises no matter what I did. When Marie praised me to high heaven the way she did, though, I couldn’t help but think that...no, this isn’t quite it.

Marie had worked herself into a complete frenzy, her eyes glassy as she said things like, “You’re a perfect being, Lord Liam!”

This was going so far that it was just creepy. My head knight Tia was just as bad. I could trip and fall flat on my face and she’d probably say, “An exemplary show of grace, Lord Liam!” It became so ridiculous that it began to sound to me like mockery.

No matter how much they praised me, it just felt so pointless.

“You’re a truly amazing person, Lord Liam!”

“Well, glad to hear it. Marie, go back to your classroom now.”

“But why, Lord Liam?”

“Because class is about to start.”

“Oh, don’t worry about a little thing like—”

“Just go back already!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Imagine being late to class just because she was too busy complimenting me! Did Marie have no awareness at all how my knights should conduct themselves? Since she was just as bad as Tia, it made me feel that it had been a mistake to make her my second most important knight. It was true that they were both highly talented, but the two of them had all these other problems.

As Marie left the classroom with slumped shoulders, the people who had been crowding around me all dispersed too. They’d probably been turned off by Marie’s extreme bootlicking. I had just been about to gain some lackeys, but they were all scared off by Marie. She really did seem to be more trouble than she was worth. She didn’t know how to keep her sycophancy to a reasonable level and made me look foolish as a result. My good mood from earlier was totally ruined now.

One of the cadets who had been crowding around Liam slipped out of the lecture hall nervously, as if fleeing. He was heading down the hallway when Marie, who was hiding around a nearby corner, called out to him.

“Class is about to start, you know. Where do you think you’re going?”

The cadet’s eyes went wide and he pulled a knife from his pocket, lunging with it toward Marie. She grabbed his arm and quickly threw him to the floor, pinning him down.

“And what were you planning to do with that knife, hmm? Want to tell me? Who ordered you to do what, exactly? Well? Well? Spill it!!!”

“L-let me go!”

The cadet struggled against her, so Marie grabbed one of his fingers and bent it back, a sunny smile on her face.

“Augh!”

Marie clucked her tongue, unimpressed by the student’s attempt at stifling a scream.

“Barely more than an amateur. Why did you get close to Lord Liam?”

She broke another finger of his, but the cadet still didn’t answer. He was continuing to struggle, trying to get away, when a man in black slowly began to rise from the floor. Marie wasn’t surprised by this newcomer’s appearance, but the cadet was clearly shaken by it.

The man who had emerged from the floor was Kukuri, the head of an organization that handled House Banfield’s less savory business. His body was wrapped in a black cloak and his face was covered by a mask. It was his job to protect Liam from the shadows, and he possessed an incredibly ominous aura. His voice was low, and he chuckled as he looked upon Marie and the cadet.

“I can’t have you acting on your own like this, Miss Marie.”

“Kukuri, who put him up to this? He’s not competent enough to be a Berkeley assassin.”

Snickering, Kukuri spilled the beans. “He’s not a hired assassin... He works for House Lawrence.”

Hearing this, Marie snapped the bone in another one of the cadet’s fingers. “Ah... Dolph, eh?”

The disguised student's face twisted in agony. On top of the pain, he hadn't been able to hide his distress when his employer's name was revealed. Amused by the young man's reactions, Kukuri shared the rest of the information he knew about him.

"Yes. This person was sent to the academy with a fake identity... His entire background is fabricated. He's one of the operatives planted here to help Dolph maintain his position as top student."

"I see."

The phony student's main role was to collect information for Dolph to exploit and to spread rumors for his benefit. The man appeared to be involved in more violent business as well, but from Marie's and Kukuri's perspectives his abilities were sorely lacking. Kukuri had purposely allowed him to remain free up to now, so the man was irritated that Marie had taken it upon herself to apprehend him.

"You know, I was observing this one to find out just what sort of information he was collecting on Master Liam."

"He approached Lord Liam with ill intent. For that alone, he deserves death, does he not?"

Kukuri shrugged. He agreed in part, but still disapproved of the interference in his job.

"I understand what you mean, but as I said, he isn't a professional assassin, so I was leaving him alone for the time being. There's no going back now though. Let's reveal his identity and hand him over to the military."

"Oh? You don't want to kill him?"

"Well, we could, but then Dolph's misdeeds might never come to light. We'll always have the option to kill him later."

Marie released the man and Kukuri took hold of him instead, pinning his arms behind his back. Together, they began to sink into the floor. Terrified by this mysterious process, the man tried to scream, but Kukuri covered his mouth so he couldn't call for help. Marie watched until no trace was left of them, then finally headed on toward her own classroom.

“Lord Liam has plenty of enemies here too,” she mused.

At the military academy, Marie and Kukuri took care of all of the assassins that dared to get close to Liam.

A few weeks later, Dolph was in an enraged state. While Liam had gained followers, Dolph had lost his. Isolated at the military academy, he was now a subject of ridicule for all those around him.

“Dammit! How dare they treat me like this!” he fumed. “This is all because of my incompetent men!”

By this time, all of the operatives Dolph had snuck into the academy had been caught. They were immediately expelled, and naturally there had been calls for Dolph to take responsibility for their actions as well. Still, he escaped expulsion so far himself due to his noble status, but as punishment he would no longer graduate at the top of his class. It was also very likely that his guaranteed spot in the military upon graduation no longer remained on the table.

“What do I do? What am I supposed to *do*?”

Many members of House Lawrence served in the military, so Dolph’s actions had caused problems for these relatives as well. Since he was also in trouble at home, he couldn’t expect any help from his family.

“This is all because of Liam of House Banfield! I was supposed to get ahead in the military and serve as a marshal one day!”

He’d done whatever it required to stay on top, but now all his effort and machinations would go unrewarded.

Dolph’s hatred for Liam only kept growing as from his point of view, all of his hard work would go unrewarded.

“I swear... I swear I’ll have my revenge. You’re not going to get away with this, Liam!”

Dolph vowed to use whatever methods were at his disposal to take revenge on his enemy.

Chapter 2:

House Berkeley Makes Its Move

THE MILITARY ACADEMY contained a special communications room, which nobles like me used to contact their territories in order to run things back home. In fact, that was the only way the academy would approve of communicating with the outside.

I couldn't make use of it every day, but I appreciated having the opportunity to check in with Amagi from time to time. Unfortunately, she had just made me aware of a report that instantly ruined my good mood.

"You're being swarmed by debt collectors?"

"Yes. They seem to believe our financial situation has worsened and they are eager to collect quickly."

"Worsened? House Banfield's?"

I couldn't process what she was telling me. Our financial situation was just fine. If anything, it was improving. If debt collectors were flocking to my home planet, then something unusual must have happened there.

"Is there some problem at home?"

"No, everything is fine. Our funds are not increasing as precipitously as they were before, but settling the frontier planet is complete now, so there should be no further financial issues."

"Then why are debt collectors coming?"

I just couldn't imagine why debt collectors would think our financial situation was worsening.

Amagi tried to explain. *"This is unconfirmed information, but... We suspect it is the work of House Berkeley. There is a high probability that several financial institutions we have dealings with have been heavily infiltrated by the Berkeley Family."*

“That damn Derrick’s family.”

Derrick was the guy who picked a fight with me back in primary school. In a contest between mobile knights, he tried to kill me, but I beat him at his own game. From my point of view, it had been nothing more than squashing a bug that had meant to sting me, but his family wouldn’t stay quiet about his self-inflicted demise.

“House Berkeley is quite large, so any conflict with them is bound to be trouble. Head Maid Serena is awfully on edge about it.”

“Trouble? Because of their peerage?”

“They are all barons, but as there are so many of them, they wield a considerable amount of combined power.”

“These barons think they can stand up to a count just because there’s a bunch of them? Small fry are small fry, no matter how many of them there are... But I do see your point.”

You never knew where nobles might be connected. I had killed one guy, Derrick, but now all his relatives were coming out of the woodwork to stand together against me. It was true that a collection of smaller powers combined could spell big trouble, but in the long run, I didn’t think I had much to worry about from the likes of House Berkeley.

“Well, let’s pay off all our debts. How about we gather those rare metals we’ve got in storage and sell them to Thomas?”

If these lenders were desperate for their money back, then I’d just have to pay them. After all, I had the assets to do so. Repaying debts was only natural, so I’d do what I had to do. Even so, I couldn’t let these people get away with taking me lightly.

“I proposed just that, Master Liam, but Thomas isn’t in a position to purchase our entire stock. Thus, we are unable to procure sufficient funds. We could pay in material, but the debt collectors will only purchase our rare metals for less than half the market price, so I thought I should seek your approval before making such a decision.”

“These vultures wanna rip me off for my rare metals?”

There were many things I hated, but chief among them was debt collectors. They had made my past life a living hell. I would never forget how I'd suffered under debts that I wasn't even responsible for, and the terrible methods used to collect them. Likewise, in this world my grandparents had saddled me with a vast debt I had nothing to do with. I had planned on returning it properly, in installments so I wouldn't take a big hit all at once, but if they were going to be unreasonable about collecting then I wouldn't make things easy for them.

"I don't want them getting such a good deal out of it. If we have to sell them for cheap anyway, then sell the metal to the Empire."

"Are you sure? The Empire will pay even less than the debt collectors for the material."

"It's better than letting the damn debt collectors profit."

In actuality, I could make as many rare metals as I wanted, so I was basically free from all financial worries at this point. After all, I possessed the incredible alchemy box the Guide had given me that could convert scrap into rare metals. In the end, this situation was simply a matter of principle.

"Make them understand who they've picked a fight with. I want you to put pressure on House Berkeley."

"Economic warfare, you mean?"

If House Berkeley wanted a war, a war was what they would get.

"It's not much of a war if I'm guaranteed to win, though."

There was nothing they could do to compete against me and my alchemy box. I almost felt a little sorry for them.

"Very well, we will apply pressure without escalating matters too far. Incidentally, how is your life at the military academy? You have not been sick or injured, have you?"

Since we were done talking about House Berkeley, Amagi expressed her worries for me.

"Training here is way too lax compared to what I did with Master Yasushi. Well, it's not that bad, I suppose... There are no real problems. Actually, if

anything, it's only a problem that there's nothing for me to learn here."

"What do you mean?"

I recalled my match with Dolph. If that was what the top student here was capable of, there was probably no need for me to put in serious effort.

"A senior here picked a fight with me, but I kicked his butt in a simulator battle. Wish you could've seen it, Amagi."

Amagi didn't seem to share my pride at this news, her usually inexpressive face even showing a slight frown as I bragged.

"What's wrong?" I asked nervously, and she scolded me.

"You appear to be getting too full of yourself, Master."

"It's only right that an evil lord should be full of himself. What can I say? I defeated an idiot who thought he could take the moral high ground with me. It's a joke that he's the highest-ranked student here."

Amagi's eyes narrowed as she listened to me make light of the military academy, and she hammered her point home.

"I would not read too much importance into a mere squabble between students, Master. There are important lessons for you to learn at this school."

Amagi was really being harsh today. She didn't blindly sing my praises like Tia and Marie would have. It made me a little sad, to be honest, so I became sullen.

"You're the only one who can get away with taking that attitude with me, you know. If anyone else talked to me like that, I'd have their head."

"I am merely giving what I judge to be valuable counsel. You may remove my head whenever you wish to do so."

Remove Amagi's head? Never—she shouldn't even joke about that.

I raised my hands in surrender. "I'll take your counsel to heart, so don't be mad."

"I am not angry."

"By the way... Err... How's Rosetta?"

Was the troublesome girl who'd hoped to attend military academy with me minding her manners at home? I was curious to hear how things were going with her, even if she was something of an afterthought compared to Amagi.

"As you wished, Lady Rosetta is receiving strict lessons on etiquette from Serena. We will send her to another house for training at some point, but we cannot be hasty while we are in conflict with House Berkeley."

"Ugh. I'm sick of hearing that name," I said.

I felt like everywhere I went, I heard the name Berkeley. It must've been as common a surname as something like Tanaka in the Empire.

"Well, I'm not really concerned about Rosetta, but it would harm my reputation if the Berkeleys managed to do something to her. So yes, be careful where you send her. Not for her sake, as I say—it's just because I have to protect my own name."

I made sure to emphasize my point and Amagi bowed her head to me.

"Understood. Very well, Master—we will speak again later."

The call ended and I stood up from my seat and stretched.

"Well, if Amagi insists, I guess I'll take my studies a little more seriously."

The next day in class, we were taught the basics of fleet warfare. It was material I'd already covered during my time in an education capsule, but it felt different hearing it in person from an instructor. The teacher went on and on about modern warfare from his place behind the podium.

"In a fleet battle, the more ships there are in a formation, the longer the period of maneuvering before actual contact is made will be. This is because a simple straightforward charge can prove dangerous. The side that's already in place, waiting for the enemy to arrive, will naturally have that as an advantage. A straightforward charge should always be avoided."

The instructor used a holographic animation of a fleet battle to illustrate his point clearly to his students. The ships lying in wait took out the vanguard of the charging fleet, which sent the rearguard into a panic and brought about their

swift defeat.

“Of course, results will depend on the quality of your vessels and the experience of your crew, but running headlong at an enemy of a similar caliber is unwise. If you’re going to be successful, you’ll have to plan carefully. Most straightforward charges should only occur when you’re pursuing ships that are fleeing. I pray there are no reckless fools intent on being heroes here. The military doesn’t need heroes... What it needs is superior officers. So, I hope none of you become heroes.”

The cadets all smiled at this. Some of them even whispered to each other, things like, “Won’t catch me doing that” or “Not me,” and laughed.

But I didn’t laugh. After all, the relentless charge was House Banfield’s forte, the strategy that had guaranteed us victory in every battle. If such an approach was considered faulty, did that mean the pirates I’d been fighting up until now had all been surprisingly weak?

I spoke up. “Instructor, what sort of advantage would you say is necessary for a charge to be effective, then?”

“Cadet Liam, eh? I hardly think I need to teach you this, but... Let’s see. I’d say you’d have to have at least four times your enemy’s numbers in order to overpower them.”

Four times the ships? If that were the case, House Banfield wouldn’t even be able to take on ten thousand ships. I’d based my whole approach on a direct offensive and trained all my soldiers accordingly. It would appear House Banfield had made a serious mistake with its strategy.

“Four times... Four times, huh?”

While I was lost in thought, Wallace asked in a carefree tone, “What’s up?”

“Just thinking that I should start reinforcing my military.”

“Why?”

I needed to direct my military to utilize a new strategy other than charging in, and I needed to increase their numbers. How could I call myself an evil lord if my military was lacking? My aim wasn’t to be some two-bit villain who couldn’t

stand up to the strongest enemies; I wanted to be in a position to utterly trample my foes. No, I wouldn't be able to relax until I was absolutely confident in my power.

"Military... Military preparations..."

I should contact a weapons factory right away. Amagi too. However, even if I did decide to change how my military did things, my new strategies wouldn't reach my actual military commanders for a few years, at least. And it would take longer to retrain all my officers and troops. There I was, charging ahead recklessly again, even when it came to my ideas. Dammit! I screwed up. Evil lords must be flexible, though, so I focused on the quickest expedient. I'll just have to be glad I figured this out relatively early.

"For the time being, I'll aim to double my forces to sixty thousand ships. Or maybe I should I go for ninety?"

When I muttered that to myself, Wallace was surprised. "Huh? You want that many more ships?"

Well, obviously. You can't skimp on your military. After all, my military might was what made it possible for me to even be an evil lord. With that kind of might, I could shut anybody up. It was the pinnacle of violence, so I wasn't about to skimp on it.

That's right. I'd forgotten it already. It was just as Amagi had said: I couldn't afford to get too full of myself here. I had learned something new at the academy, after all, and that was that I didn't have the military power to truly consider House Banfield safe. I mustn't allow that situation to lead to disaster.

"All of a sudden, I'm feeling more motivated."

Wallace looked mystified by my intensity. "A-are you? Well, that's good, I guess. I-I'll be rooting for you."

Rooting for me? You'll be doing more than that. You're my underling, don't you forget it!

When Casimilo at House Berkeley received the report, the cigar dropped from

his mouth. Gaping with disbelief, he asked for clarification.

“Wh-what did you just say? Tell me one more time!”

The son who had called him couldn't hide his panic either. *“House Banfield just sold off a stockpile of rare metals. The Empire bought them, and that bastard Liam used the funds to pay back his entire massive debt. At the same time, our moneylender friends have taken a huge hit in reputation because of their aggressive collection methods. You should be prepared for a couple of them to go under, Dad.”*

Their attempt to drain House Banfield of its resources had only ended in a loss of trust in the lending businesses they had their hands in. Their own profits would feel the effect.

“Don't worry about that!” Casimilo barked. “Just keep up the attack! Think of the damage to House Berkeley's name if we let the kid go after all this!”

“G-got it.”

With the call ended, Casimilo lowered his head into his hands.

“This can't be happening! Wasn't he supposed to be just some poor noble?”

He didn't think House Banfield had *that* much financial flexibility.

Why was he still in debt when he had access to resources like that all along? I thought he was financially burdened, putting his money into developing planets out in the boonies. This kid's going to be more trouble than I thought.

At this point, it was simply a matter of who would give in first. If House Berkeley threw in the towel now, people would look down on them for being weak. Now that they had started this fight, they had to win it, because the side that lost in a conflict between noble houses would inevitably be ruined. Casimilo had started a fight that he couldn't afford to retreat from.

“Well, we've got our elixirs. If we need to, we can sell those off to make some big money fast. I don't care how many rare metals they've got stocked up. It's House Banfield that'll fold first.”

They had to destroy entire planets to produce elixirs, but there was a great demand for these remarkable potions. Casimilo was sure that Liam would have

to admit defeat eventually.

“I guess we shouldn’t have picked a financial fight with the boy. Now we’ll be taking a fair amount of damage ourselves...”

Their involvement in the moneylending businesses had been exposed and hence those businesses had taken hits to their reputations. If he’d known that this would happen, he would have come at the problem from a different angle.

“We can’t lose anything more to that boy.”

Their fight was ramping up in intensity...for one side, at least.

In his dorm room at the military academy, a noble cadet from House Berkeley confirmed the contents of an attaché case that had been brought to him. Only people loyal to the Berkeleys were present, and they had a lookout keeping watch in the hallway.

The object they were checking in the dim room was something extremely dangerous.

“So, this is the starbane?” Zargon asked.

Inside the case was a carefully secured capsule, filled with a purple fluid that Zargon had been assured was toxic.

“Be careful with it, now,” said the lackey who had delivered the case. “This stuff’s more like a curse than a highly concentrated poison.”

“You can really curse somebody with this thing?”

“If you use this, you can kill that Liam guy without anybody finding out it was poison,” the lackey explained. “The curse in this thing is the real deal. After all, it’s the distilled grudge of an entire planet that was burned to a shell.”

Produced through the destruction of a planet, starbane was a liquid composed from the tormented energies of all that world’s extinguished creatures. Anyone who consumed it would be cursed and would die in agony. The only way to avoid death was to counteract the starbane with an elixir, and if you didn’t already have one on hand, you wouldn’t be able to act quickly enough to treat it. Once a certain amount of time had passed, even an elixir

would be ineffective, and the victim's fate would be sealed.

Zargon, who was also Casimilo's grandson, snickered maliciously. "Grandfather, my dad, and my uncles are all cowards. I'll kill Liam with this and become a top member of the Family."

The lackey sucked up to the confident Zargon. "Don't forget what I did for you when you do."

"I won't. Where'd you get this, anyway?"

Smirking, the underling brought up an unexpected name. "You heard of the Planetary Restoration Group?"

"Yeah. They're a charity organization, though, aren't they?"

"On the surface. See, they claim to be doing philanthropy, but actually they harvest materials like this from destroyed planets. They don't really *restore* much of anything."

The group engaged in the minimal restoration of environmentally damaged planets where possible, but they didn't put any serious effort into it. Instead, they made massive profits dealing in more nefarious ventures.

"Well, not like I really care. So, we just get Liam to consume this? The curse won't spread from him, will it?"

"Not if you know how to administer it. We already bribed one of the cooks in the cafeteria. Liam will die writhing in agony, with the curses of an entire planet weighing down on him."

"Heh heh heh. Then today's his last day in this world."

A woman walked down a hallway of the Imperial Military Academy.

This was Tia—Christiana Leta Rosebreia—a female knight with green eyes and blonde hair cut short per academy requirements. She held the position of Liam's head knight.

Tia was at the military academy for the same reason Marie was—to obtain the official qualifications necessary to serve as a knight of the Empire. It was a

bit strange for his two top knights to be attending military academy at the same time, but there were a couple of reasons for that.

For one thing, with only Liam's authority granting them their status as knights, to the rest of the Empire the two women would be viewed as vassals, inferior to proper Imperial knights. If they gained the necessary qualifications to be considered Imperial knights, however, it would also grant additional prestige to Liam, being proof of the quality of the people who served him.

Then, there was the most important reason: Tia and Marie didn't trust one another.

As she walked down the hallway with other knight candidates for House Banfield, Tia inquired about the current situation.

"How's our scouting going?"

"Not very well," one of the others reported. "Most of the cadets have come here to join the Imperial Army."

While she was here, Tia maintained her leadership role over the other knight candidates that had been sent with her. To prevent anything from happening to Liam while he attended the academy, students from House Banfield had been inserted into every grade level. Plus, while managing the people who already worked for House Banfield, Tia was also scouting for new talent to join their ranks.

"I pity the fools who don't even want to find out what a joy it is to serve Lord Liam."

As Tia spoke those words with the utmost devoutness, the knight candidates around her all nodded in agreement. It showed just how much the knights of House Banfield revered Liam.

House Banfield's top knight suddenly received an urgent communication on her tablet.

"Lady Tia!"

"What is it?"

"The military police just took Lord Liam away!"

“Huh?” Tia was speechless for a moment at this unexpected report, but she quickly collected herself and requested further information. “Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?”

“A cadet passed away in the cafeteria. It was Zargon of House Berkeley. The military police took Lord Liam in for questioning as a witness.”

The light faded from Tia’s eyes as she snarled, “And that fossil Marie, who was supposed to be guarding him?”

“I did hear that she protested, but I don’t have any more information than that.”

Tia clicked her tongue and spat a dirty word that didn’t suit her beautiful appearance.

“Shit!”

The suspicious death of a cadet had occurred at the military academy.

Seated across from me in an interview room was a brigadier general serving in the military police. Why was I seated in this room? Because they looked into the deceased subject’s relationships, and it seemed like they had focused on me as a suspect.

“You have a connection to House Berkeley, do you not, Count?”

The fact that they’d sent a brigadier general to interview me, a mere student, showed that they were at least affording me some respect, but this respect wasn’t enough to stop me from being pissed off that I was being treated like a criminal when I was innocent of the crime.

“Are you accusing me of this? Where’s the evidence that I killed him, hmm?”

“The deceased cadet was a member of House Berkeley.”

It was true that there was bad blood between myself and the Berkeleys, but I wasn’t so worked up that I’d be killing off just anyone associated with them. I was frustrated at the insinuation, so I took out my annoyance on the brigadier general.

“So? There are Berkeleys spread all over the Empire. I don’t even know which one he was. It doesn’t matter that his stupid family has a problem with me. I had no idea of this guy’s existence until now.” I didn’t have a shred of interest in this dead guy.

As the interview continued, I heard shouting from outside the room.

“You bastards think you can lock up Lord Liam without any proof? You want me to kill you, huh? Who’s gonna take responsibility for this???”

I recognized the shouting as it was coming from Marie. Several members of the military police were apparently trying to hold her back.

“P-please calm down!”

“We have permission from the military academy.”

“I told you, we’re just trying to confirm his alibi!”

The guys outside were trying to placate Marie, but in here, the brigadier general already appeared certain I was the culprit.

Even from inside the room, I could hear Marie’s roars. “I’ll kill every last one of you!”

I was embarrassed, and as I sat staring back at the brigadier general, I wished she’d just shut up. I said, “Outside they’re talking like this is just a formality, but you seem to think I’m guilty. Is that your personal determination?”

This probably wasn’t any way for a cadet to speak to a brigadier general, but I was a count. In my mind, I had nothing to fear from the military man in front of me, since in the Imperial Army it was only natural for nobles to receive special treatment.

“N-no, it’s just that the situation demands...”

I was sure the stammering brigadier general did suspect me, and I understood why he would, since I had a potential motive, but I hated false accusations. They reminded me of my past life when I had unfairly been painted the bad guy in my divorce.

Someone new joined the group outside the door, adding to the chaos. It seemed my head knight had also arrived.

“You pathetic fossil!” Tia shouted at Marie. “You were with him, and you still let Lord Liam get locked up in a place like this? You antiques are useless!”

“Say that again, you ground meat wench! I’ll rip that mouth of yours to shreds!”

At first, I thought Tia was here to give me some assistance, but apparently, she just showed up to have it out with Marie. The change in noise from the other side of the door told me their fight turned physical. The room shook, the door warped, and dust fell from the ceiling.

“S-somebody stop those two!” a man out there blurted out.

“Call backup!”

“Get some instructors from the school over here!”

The military police outside were panicking, and the brigadier general heaved a sigh, one hand over his face.

Do those two seriously not even care about rescuing me? My estimation of both of them was plummeting.

“I’ll turn you to dust, fossil!”

“And I’ll turn you back into ground meat!”

The fight was growing more and more heated. *Seriously, what are those two trying to do? Have they forgotten they’re my two highest-ranking knights?* What a disgrace. I was getting more and more pissed by the moment.

“If you’ve got no proof, you can’t keep me here,” I stated. “I’m not gonna play along with this anymore.” I stood up, and the brigadier general rushed to stop me.

“Wait!”

“Shut up. Talk to me again when you’ve got some evidence.”

With the inside of the interview room becoming just as noisy as the outside, a member of the military police stuck his head into the room.

“Sir! We’ve found some evidence!”

The brigadier general grinned at this news, no doubt thinking he had me

cornered.

“What? Good work! Count, you can’t talk your way out of this any longer!”

The officer shook his head, however. “N-no, sir. We found evidence...in the deceased cadet’s room. He was in possession of starbane, sir!”

“Wh-what was that? Contact Imperial Army headquarters at once and evacuate the school immediately!”

The brigadier general was absolutely freaking out now, having completely forgotten his attempts to arrest me. *Starbane, huh? I’ve heard of that... I think it’s some kind of curse, concentrated into a physical substance. Like, you drink it and become cursed, or something. Are these Berkeleys total idiots, drinking something like that?*

“Ah, you don’t mind if I leave now, do you?” I said.

I exited the room, greeted by aghast expressions on the faces of the military police. Just as I was thinking how to go about complaining about these fools later, I happened upon Tia and Marie grabbing each other’s hair and throwing punches at one another. It was a knock-down-drag-out brawl that left even the burly military police officers stunned into inaction.

“You fossil!”

“Can it, ground meat!”

I watched the fight coldly. Marie seemed to be besting Tia ever so slightly. They hadn’t even noticed me. These two were seriously lost causes.

“How long are you two going to keep at it?” I said harshly. “Let’s get out of here!”

When I spoke up and they saw me standing there, they finally stopped fighting and hurried to straighten up their clothing. *Little late for that*, I thought wearily, as I started back toward my dorm room.

Chapter 3:

Patrol Fleet

THE BODY OF THE MAN who had tried to assassinate Liam and instead ended up dying in agony was now in the morgue. Having just arrived, the Guide stared down at his body in disgust.

“Cursing Liam to death wasn’t a *bad* idea, exactly...”

If the cadet had succeeded in his assassination, the Guide would have been a little disappointed for not having a hand in it, but he still would have been joyful enough. Unfortunately, the plan had failed. The ever-alert Kukuri had found out about the man’s poisoning plot and poisoned Zargon first, before he could enact it.

“You do have a connection with Liam, though, so thankfully I’m able to feed off your suffering anyway.”

The Guide placed his hand on the man’s face, and the corpse’s twisted expression became much more relaxed and peaceful. Due to his strong connection with Liam, the Guide had found to his frustration that he was no longer able to efficiently extract negative emotions from anyone who lacked a connection to Liam...but he was able to absorb them extra-efficiently from those who *were* related to him. Though Liam hadn’t known this man personally, Zargon’s strong desire to kill Liam was enough to allow the Guide to enjoy his residual emotions as if they were a fine wine.

“How delectable! Because of that potion, he also contains the negative emotions of an entire destroyed planet. Well, child, you were a fool, but you have provided a great deal of sustenance for me.”

The Guide’s mouth stretched into a crescent moon smile as the strength flowed into him.

“Ah, yes... I’ve gained back a lot of my power. Now, to prepare one...no, two or three more moves that will cast Liam into the pit of despair.”

Liam was the first person who had ever caused him to suffer this much, so the Guide had vowed not to cut any corners in obtaining his revenge. He had sworn in his heart to treat Liam to every variety of hell this reality had to offer. Up until now, he'd let down his guard too much, and been taken by surprise a few times. He was well aware that his defeats and the suffering they brought were because he had underestimated Liam.

"I'll gather Liam's enemies carefully...and then, when all my pieces are in place, I'll set them into motion!"

The Guide vanished from the morgue, loud laughter echoing behind him.

At the Imperial palace, the prime minister fumed as he read the military academy's report. All his subordinates in the room were on edge too.

"Remind me what the punishment is for handling starbane without authorization?" he said to them.

Actually, the prime minister was well aware of the answer to his own question. The problem was that the offending party had been a member of the Berkeley Family, so it would be difficult to serve them the punishment they deserved. Inevitably, there would have to be some sort of compromise.

"I'd say dissolution of the family, but House Berkeley will no doubt just sacrifice one of their lesser houses and that will be the end of that."

House Berkeley presented themselves as a coalition of small baronies, but in reality, they were one big house on the scale of a dukedom. Since outwardly they were nothing but a bunch of barons, they could get out of any punishment simply by pinning everything on one baron and cutting him off like a lizard's tail. Nothing would ever point to the true head of House Berkeley, Casimilo himself.

How had House Berkeley been able to achieve this advantageous arrangement? For one thing, they provided a stable supply of elixirs to the Empire. They'd used elixirs to gain favor with the previous emperor and had maintained that relationship ever since by offering their aid whenever it was called for. Because of this, their crimes had been buried several times in the past. By the time people caught on to their true nature, they'd become too big

to deal with, and this was why they were one of the current prime minister's greatest headaches now.

If only His Majesty would sever his connection to them.

At this point, cutting ties with House Berkeley would lead to significant problems within the Empire, which was an indication of just how much influence they had.

"The punishment won't even touch Casimilo," he sighed.

"No, sir. And in any case, the Empire still depends on him to provide elixirs."

"How frustrating."

One of the reasons the prime minister had such high hopes for Liam was that Liam had the potential to overturn this state of affairs on his own, without the Empire itself having to seem involved. If the Empire itself made a move, the problem could easily be solved as well, but it was too large, and they could only make their move slowly. It was also difficult to stop the Empire once it started to move, so it was difficult to get it started in the first place.

"Prime minister," one of his aides spoke up, reporting about another matter. "Now that our stock of rare metals is replenished, there are those in the military calling for reinforcements of our lost fleets."

"As always, the military asks the impossible."

The Empire wasn't the only intergalactic nation. Despite the incredible distances involved, they had commerce and conflict with neighboring nations. Since the Empire's total territory was so vast, the Imperial Army's ships had their work cut out for them patrolling its borders. Additionally, they sometimes even crossed those borders to invade and steal territory from other nations. Whatever the cause, they were always at war somewhere. Because of all this, the military basically ran through its supplies as soon as they were replenished.

Rare metals were frequently required for crucial mechanisms in both ships and weapons. More common metals might be used as substitutes, but with a noticeable drop in performance, so the demand was high for the proper materials. Thus, when the Imperial Army had learned about the great amount of rare metals Liam had sold the Empire, they clamored to get what they

needed.

The prime minister looked over the reports from recent battles at various points along their borders. “We’re being pushed back in several places...”

Too many battles were being waged for them all to command his attention. The most he could concern himself with, at any given time, was whether they were winning or losing overall.

One of the aides pointed out a serious issue with the military. “There are a couple of reasons for their problems, but a big one is that resources aren’t being utilized efficiently. We’ve increased the number of our patrol fleets unnecessarily.”

There was no denying the importance of the patrol fleets that defended the Empire’s territory, but a number of these had been given over to spoiled noble brats. Some of these nobles had graduated from the military academy but didn’t want to serve under anyone else, so they had been appointed commanders of their own patrol fleets. At least military higher-ups had deliberately given several of these nobles fleets that consisted of aged equipment, to take the brats down a peg. In any case, as a result of this indulgence, there were more patrol fleets than were necessary. Some of them had even defected and become pirates, and the military was requesting those fleets be dealt with, but a lack of budget, personnel, and other resources prevented the outlaws from being dealt with properly.

The prime minister said, “All frustrating problems, and every one of them requires money. Too much money.”

It wasn’t as simple as just dissolving the unnecessary fleets. The equipment and personnel would then have to be reallocated. Ships would need to be updated, and in these substandard fleets the crews were inadequately trained. Soldiers who hadn’t benefitted from regular training would have to be completely reeducated before they could be deployed somewhere else. In theory, the prime minister was capable of tackling this problem, but in a nation of this size, there were so many other matters that demanded his attention on a day-to-day basis and kept him busy.

“Well, what should we do about this?” he muttered.

The prime minister had endless issues to solve, as always.

I was now in my third year at the military academy. Things had gotten a little tougher, but I still found myself living a pretty easy life. Things were definitely less difficult than when I had trained in the Way of the Flash, and in fact, my biggest complaint was that I didn't have the time to properly practice my sword skills. I did what I could to make sure I didn't get rusty, but it didn't feel like enough. Since most of our time, from waking to sleeping, was planned out for us, all I could do was train by myself for a bit in the evening...but even that was difficult.

Currently, I found myself engaged in pointless chatter with my roommate Wallace as we awaited our assigned sleep time. Normally I did this just to kill a little time, but tonight I actually found the subject rather interesting. Wallace was telling me about his half-brother, who was serving in the military.

"He commands a patrol fleet?"

"That's right. Just like me, he left the palace, but he decided to live as a soldier. A regular fleet wouldn't accept him though, so he got assigned to a patrol fleet. Before he knew it, he was made commander of that fleet, and he's kind of stressed about it."

It seemed strange to me that a regular fleet wouldn't accept a royal, but then of course there were different ranks of royals, and therefore many like Wallace who had no hope of succeeding to the throne. Wallace explained that these royals in need of something to do were often more trouble than they were worth to take on, so most regular fleets wouldn't do it. Even if they had no real authority, these misfits were still royalty, so they couldn't be treated rudely, and if they happened to die in battle their superior officers would be subjected to harsh investigations. Thus, regardless of their actual ability, they were typically deemed too much of a hassle to work with.

Listening to Wallace describe the situation, it didn't sound so terrible to me being assigned to a patrol detail. Sure, serving in a regular military fleet could lead to a higher rank, but there were always the hazards of war to consider. The Algrand Empire's scale was so great that it might not feel like it, but at this very

moment they were waging war out there somewhere in the universe. When battles occurred, regular fleets fought them, and death always accompanied battles. Compared with the duties of regular fleets, things sounded carefree for patrol fleets. Sure, there was no room for promotion in a patrol fleet, but Wallace said you could pretty much do whatever you wanted with your patrol, especially in the case of someone like his brother, a royal.

“Doesn’t sound like a bad deal to command a patrol fleet,” I said, but Wallace gave me a look.

“Problem is, some of the fleets are made up of garbage. My brother Cedric was handed a fleet of thirty ancient ships. He says it’s pretty miserable patrolling out there in empty space.”

“That’s because they’ll be in trouble if he dies, right? He should just take it easy. If he doesn’t have a job to do, he should just enjoy himself.”

Wallace shook his head and sighed at my advice. “How are you supposed to relax in a cramped, uncomfortable ship? He’s all stressed about why he’s even out there, not to mention all his soldiers are rotten to the core.”

It seems that patrol fleets were where many soldiers ended up when they were demoted or had failed elsewhere. In an office environment, I supposed it would be like a do-nothing position where fairly useless people could coast until retirement. From what I’d heard, Wallace’s brother had told him that more and more of these pointless patrol fleets had been created, and the Empire was full of them. It sounded pretty inefficient to me, but the scale of this intergalactic empire was massive, and there were far too many other things to worry about to bother addressing this relatively insignificant issue.

Still, even if you did want to fix it, what could you do with a bunch of shoddy patrol fleets?

“I guess I’m not one who should be complaining about frivolous spending, but I’m still not sure I get why so many needless fleets would be deployed.”

Staring up at the ceiling, Wallace continued filling me in on the situation. “Well, there are a number of reasons for it. There’s a lot of rivalry in the military, right? Sometimes it’s about higher-ups wanting to send potential competition away before they can get a leg up on them. And when it comes to

demoting problem people, the point is to put them someplace where they'll be really miserable. Then, of course, there are troublesome nobles that it's best to ship off far away too."

"Nobles?"

"Well, you know how there are a lot of nobles who use their position to try to do whatever they want, right? In the military, that can lead to many deaths, so they just send these nobles off to command patrol fleets. That's why there are more and more of them. Reorganizing the whole patrol fleet situation would just be a massive project now, so they just kind of leave things as they are."

So in the end, Wallace's brother had been relegated to a patrol fleet because he was considered one of those troublesome nobles.

I asked, "It costs money to maintain these unnecessary fleets, though, doesn't it?"

"Well, they pretty much just resupply them every so often and otherwise leave them to themselves. Also, it's not like they don't serve any purpose whatsoever. They're good for additional visibility, as a deterrent. It wouldn't be good if pirate bases were established in places where there wasn't any patrolling."

I saw that various factors were responsible for maintaining this supremely wasteful state of affairs. I couldn't say I was too fond of frivolous spending like *this*. But then again, the more I mulled it over, the more I started to think that maybe this situation wasn't so bad.

"Interesting," I murmured. "I'm curious now."

"Curious? Well, I'm sure you're gonna end up in the regular service, so I don't think you'll really find out much more about the patrols."

"I'm not interested in the regular army."

Just like Wallace assumed, I'd already secretly received several offers from regular army fleets. There were different types of regular fleets too. You could be stationed on the border or out in the boonies. There were always the three individual fleets defending the Capital Planet, these being the elite Imperial Guard. I'd actually received an offer from them as well, but as I had confessed

to Wallace, I wasn't interested.

Why was I receiving different treatment than Cedric? Well, my financial power, obviously. The regular army wanted connections to powerful nobles. There was plenty in it for them in terms of donations and resources supplied by noble families. I mean, they wanted me so bad, they were sending field officers to me with promises of how well they'd treat me if I came and joined their fleets.

However, I just didn't like being ordered around. What would be perfect for me was a patrol fleet I could do whatever I wanted with.

"I've made up my mind, Wallace. I'm gonna get me a patrol fleet!"

Just as I was feeling motivated, Wallace tried to throw cold water on my enthusiasm. "Are you stupid?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Weren't you listening to me? My brother complains to me that his soul is *dying* at his current post! You'd have to be an idiot to volunteer for a position like that! Plus, the fleets are all made up of ancient tech. The living conditions are horrible, and you'd have to spend four years at the very least in an assignment like that!"

I knew very well that the reason Wallace was getting so impassioned was because I was his patron, and his assignment would have to correspond to mine. Meaning, he was against the idea because *he* would have to suffer.

Man, I'm looking after this guy 'cause I thought I could make a royal my lackey, but I just can't shake the feeling that he's nothing more than dead weight.

"You don't want to do this, Liam!"

"Oh, but I do. I've made up my mind. And..."

Wallace had no sense of vision. If a rich guy like me was assigned to a patrol fleet, all I had to do was invest in my position to make it a really great setup.

"I'll get myself a new ship, like my very own luxury liner, so we'll be able to enjoy our time out there on our pointless job."

“The military would never pay for that!”

“That’s why I will.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll use my own money to buy something real state-of-the-art.”

“But...if you’re the only one in a ship like that, the rest of your fleet will resent you. You don’t want to deal with that kind of backlash, do you?”

True, it was certainly a problem if your own troops hated you. You might end up having people firing at you not just from the front, but from the back too. It could prove dangerous acting like a two-bit villain who wanted to be the only one enjoying the good life. That wasn’t me—I was a true evil lord!

“Not a problem. I’ll just fill the fleet with them.”

“Th-the whole fleet?”

“That’s right. No one will complain if the whole fleet is state-of-the-art luxury liners, right?”

“I-I mean, probably not. With brand-new ships, though, wouldn’t the whole fleet be in training mode right from the start of your assignment? How would that work out?”

“That is a problem...”

There was nothing more frightening than using military equipment you weren’t familiar with. If we got dragged into a battle unprepared, we couldn’t just use that unfamiliarity as an excuse for failure. That was why an adequate training period was necessary anytime new equipment was procured. For a moment, I thought I’d have to scrap the plan, but then an idea came to me. If it would be too late to start training after I’d already begun my assignment, then I could just get everything ready well beforehand.

“I’ll start setting things up now, then. I’m rich, after all. What’s to stop me from doing so?”

“What? You’re really going through with this?”

“Of course I am. Tia will be graduating from the academy next year. I’ll make

preparing my assignment her first job.”

As a truly rich person, I wasn’t going to just donate money to get the assignment I wanted... I was going to create a whole job for myself! I’d soon start pressuring the military to accept my patrol fleet post while having my own fleet prepared. What an evil lord-like thing to do! It made my heart soar that even the military was powerless against the strength of my money.

“You know,” Wallace said, “there have been all kinds of nobles, Liam, but you might be one of a kind.”

“A first in the Empire, eh? I like that. Anyway, I’ll go give Tia her orders.”

In the communications room, Tia spoke with her former employer, the prime minister.

“The count truly is unique,” the prime minister said. “There have been nobles who prepared their own fleets and mobile knights before, but no one has ever said they’d prepare their own assignment.”

On the communicator’s screen, the prime minister couldn’t hide his surprise, but there was also amusement in his expression. Gauging his reaction to be positive, Tia was encouraged to go on with her request.

“Well, his offer isn’t a bad one, is it? Will you grant your permission, Mr. Prime Minister?”

The prime minister on the screen nodded even as he pointed out the problems with the plan.

“Well, there is the problem of an army fleet being under the count’s total control... But there are the costs of resupplying an excessive number of patrol fleets—are you sure House Banfield would really cover all those expenses for the count’s fleet?”

“Lord Liam has directed me to prepare a fleet suitable to his purposes, as well as devise a budget to maintain his patrol in the field. There would be no problems in that area.”

It was true that Liam had ordered her to gather a “suitable” fleet, but as Tia

practically worshiped him, her interpretation of suitable was “on the level of a regular army fleet or higher.” She genuinely felt that anything less wouldn’t be good enough for Liam.

It can’t be something Lord Liam would merely be willing to accept. I really need to surprise him if I’m going to make him see that I’m more competent than that fossil woman.

Tia was quite enthusiastic about this project, especially because of her rivalry with Marie. Her budget was plenty big enough, so she planned to have unnecessary patrol fleets recalled from the field and merge them into a force on the level of a regular army fleet. That was what she sought the prime minister’s approval for, since she knew the military leadership likely wouldn’t approve of it, even if she explained the financial benefit the Empire would see from providing those ships to Liam. Hoping to sway the prime minister and taking advantage of his familiarity with her and the fact that he was trying to deal with this very issue, Tia had known she had to speak with him directly.

He said, “I do have some conditions. If the count were to leave the military, he would have to allow the Empire to take over control of the fleet. Also, we would need to provide a nominal fleet commander, for the public eye.”

“What do you mean? You don’t think Lord Liam’s good enough to command?”

“He’s too young, and so are you. Even if he’s officially appointed to that role, he simply doesn’t have the experience to be viewed as a commander. We wouldn’t hear the end of it from the military if we force his promotion. That’s why our commander will be public-facing, but the count would be the one who was actually in charge of the fleet.”

So, Liam would provide the fleet, and even manage it, but all of its achievements would go to the Empire. Tia wasn’t happy with these conditions, but she accepted them in order to carry out Liam’s orders. In truth, even she knew that what Liam was proposing was absurd and that she wouldn’t be able to negotiate beyond a certain point.

We have a lot of costs to bear for insufficient rewards, but this is probably the best deal we can get.

“Understood, sir. I shall inform Lord Liam.”

“It was a wonderful suggestion. Tell the count he’ll be helping solve two of the Empire’s big problems.”

The call ended and Tia psyched herself up.

“I need to put together a fleet that’s truly worthy of Lord Liam. In two years, I’ll gather up these wasteful patrols, and their personnel will need retraining. I have to get the new fleet ready too—everything has to be ready by the time Lord Liam is officially assigned to his post.”

Tia was a person who was quick to show her flaws, but her strengths were still very impressive and the real deal.

“A fleet good enough for Lord Liam...and I’ll be there, serving him at his side!”

Tia pressed her hands to her cheeks, an entranced look on her face.



Meanwhile, House Berkeley was making its own moves.

“Dammit!”

Casimilo’s worries were only growing with each new report he received. None of his strategies had produced fruit during his years-long economic battle with Liam. The reason was simple: neither side had run out of money to throw at the other.

“What *is* he? What is that stupid brat?!”

Casimilo had elixir-producing planetary development devices at his disposal, and yet Liam still kept up with him financially. He’d even heard rumors that Liam was throwing money at some kind of military project, proving that he had plenty of money to throw around even while continuing this feud with House Berkeley.

“How many elixirs are we supposed to produce to keep from falling behind?”

The elixirs that were the source of House Berkeley’s finances were produced using the planetary development devices, and so by now they had destroyed countless planets in order to obtain these potions. House Berkeley sold the elixirs for vast sums of money, but also provided them to the Empire in return for political influence. If anyone got in Casimilo’s way, he eliminated them by force. He had built the Berkeley Family into one of the most powerful houses in the Empire.

Yet here he was now, struggling to remain on equal footing with Liam.

“How can we not squash a single little kid? Dammit! If we keep going at it like this, we’ll win eventually...but we’ll have lost so much in order to do it!”

His intention had been to completely crush House Banfield financially, but since Liam was proving a far more tenacious foe than he had anticipated, he decided to change tactics.

“We’re done playing nice. We’ve gotta smash this kid before he gets any older.”

Liam was still young, and from Casimilo’s point of view, full of potential. He

and Casimilo had different lifespans still ahead of them, and if Liam was able to gain an adult's experience, Casimilo was sure Liam would become his worst nightmare. Could he count on his young sons to keep up with Liam and beat him? Quickly concluding that he couldn't, Casimilo immediately contacted them.

"What is it, Dad?" asked the first son who appeared on his screen.

"Get in touch with the army. We need to get some specialists together to formulate a battle plan against Liam. We're going to war."

"War?! You're rushing into things, Dad!"

"Just shut up and do it! Bring me soldiers who can win against House Banfield. I don't care who they are—if they can beat that brat, accept anyone. Let them know we'll treat them well."

At some point, Casimilo had started to actually fear Liam, and this emotion had attracted someone to watch over him. The Guide presently stood beside the man, nodding in satisfaction.

Having made his way all the way here after hearing about House Berkeley's feud with Liam, the Guide applauded Casimilo.

"Wonderful. You're right to have judged Liam a threat."

The Guide felt that Casimilo was just his type of villain...and liked that he had more military power than Liam to boot. In addition to his over one hundred thousand ships, Casimilo was allied with pirates and other corrupt nobles. Through these associations, he had hundreds of thousands of ships at his disposal. Though Liam was expanding his forces, he didn't even have fifty thousand ships at his disposal. The Guide knew that Liam was satisfied with his current roster of thirty thousand ships in his fleet. It was proof that he was getting cocky after all of his victories.

The Guide chuckled sinisterly, imagining Liam's future defeat.

"You keep that guard down, Liam. Oh, you're definitely strong, but you're not invincible."

Casimilo had great military power and he also had many allies. On the other

hand, Liam had just a slightly above average number of high-quality ships. He had some allies of his own, but nowhere near as many, and he couldn't muster them as quickly as Casimilo could. The Guide was sure that his chance to finally ruin Liam was right before his eyes.

"Casimilo, you can do this. I'll support you with everything I have."

Black smoke emerged from the Guide, reaching out to coil around Casimilo's body. As he watched this, the Guide spread his arms wide.

"All sorts of people who are eager to take down Liam will soon gather to you. The Empire's villains will join forces to destroy Liam, and you will lead them and make them your power!"

The Guide had worked various manipulations so that Liam's numerous enemies would be drawn to Casimilo. With all of the boss' new allies, the gap between his and Liam's military might would just continue to widen. Up against a sufficient number of enemies, even Liam's high-quality troops would be overwhelmed. The Guide indulged himself, imagining Liam's misery when he met his terrible defeat.

"I've got other seeds I've been waiting to sprout too. I don't know if Yasushi can be nudged to join in, but what about that woman?"

There was a woman who had sworn revenge against Liam—Eulisia Morisille. She was a former lieutenant of the Third Weapons Factory who had returned to the military for retraining in the special forces. In her heart, Eulisia harbored a grudge against Liam.

"I'll make sure she's at Liam's side one day, just as she wants. It'd be enjoyable to see Liam get backstabbed by her too, after all."

A situation Liam wouldn't be able to escape, no matter how much he struggled, was slowly brewing. Watching it all come together, the Guide was absolutely euphoric.

"I feel it. I can feel it! I sense everything closing in on him!"

A great army of foes had begun to gather before Liam.

Chapter 4:

Rosetta's Training

THE IMPERIAL PALACE on the Capital Planet spanned the entirety of a continent. The palace and its grounds contained the royal family's living quarters and all necessary facilities, making for an unusual sight. The entire continent was covered in buildings, from one end to the other. Hundreds of millions of people lived and worked there.

Rosetta, who'd gone there for her etiquette training, gazed up at the sky from a hallway window. The Capital Planet's sky was fabricated, but it was beautiful to look at, nonetheless. Being encased inside a protective metal shell, the Capital Planet benefitted from an environment perfectly calibrated for human life. There were no natural disasters, and since the weather was artificial, it was even planned ahead day by day on calendars. On the Empire's Capital Planet, everything was perfect, and people who didn't live there dreamed of doing so.

But on that perfect Capital Planet, all Rosetta could think about was Liam.

"Oh, I wonder what Darling's doing right now..."

Serena had chosen her former workplace for the location of Rosetta's training. If the young woman trained in the Imperial palace, no one would ever be able to doubt her skills. Many other noblewomen also came here for etiquette training, and even those who trained as maids often had backgrounds of high standing. There were many stories of men flirting with maids while they went about their cleaning duties, only to find out that they were girls from very reputable and noble families.

The plan was for Rosetta to spend at least three years at the palace, learning how to be a good wife for Liam, before returning to House Banfield's domain after her education was complete.

Rosetta sighed. "There's something about this planet... I just don't feel at ease here."

She turned away from the window and had just resumed her work when

some girls who had recently reached adulthood approached her. They all wore less-than-friendly smiles on their faces above their maid outfits.

One of them remarked, “My, what is the heiress of House Claudia doing in a place like this?”

The leader of the group was the daughter of a marquis, and her lackeys were daughters of viscounts. Every girl in the group was of noble blood. While they were little princesses back at home, however, here they were all just maids.

“Well, I’m taking my break right now,” she replied.

Rosetta, who had graduated from primary school and looked like a high schooler, was surrounded by a group of girls who looked like they were only in middle school.

The marquis’s daughter spoke down to Rosetta. “It’s a bit embarrassing to be sent out for training at your age, isn’t it? Normally, you’d have been done with it a long time ago. Aren’t you at all ashamed to be here?”

The girls teased her and enjoyed her reactions. The other two giggled, obviously hoping to make Rosetta feel even more ashamed. Most of the girls here for etiquette training had only just reached adulthood, so it was indeed uncommon to see girls of Rosetta’s age pursuing the same.

“I have my reasons. I hope you’ll understand.”

Rosetta was trying to respond in a civil manner, but the marquis’s daughter crossed her arms, unsatisfied.

“What’s with that attitude? How about getting all humiliated like you used to, instead of pretending you’re okay with this? You know you’re trash, so why don’t you act like it?”

The leader had probably seen Rosetta shamed at some gathering in the past. She was teasing her like everyone used to, but Rosetta maintained her calm attitude.

“I am a maid in etiquette training right now, but I am also Lord Liam’s fiancée. I cannot shame my future husband.”

Rosetta’s response put the lead girl into an even more foul mood.

“Liam, eh? Sure, I’ve heard his name a little bit lately, but he’s still just some noble out in the sticks, right? A fitting husband for you, I suppose. I know something else about him too. That fiancé of yours is fighting with House Berkeley, isn’t he?”

Rosetta knew about the conflict with those dangerous pirate nobles, of course, but didn’t reveal her concerns.

“What about it?”

“Do you think he’ll make it out of that alive? I don’t know how safe you’ll be either.”

When Rosetta started walking away from the three laughing girls, the leader called after her.

“You’re running away? I knew the women of House Claudia were duchesses in name only. If I were in your shoes right now, I’d stand up for myself, because I have this thing called pride. Then again, if I was in your shoes my life wouldn’t have any worth, so I’d probably just lay down and die. People who don’t know when to quit are just awful, aren’t they?”

Rosetta bit her lip at the suggestion she had no pride as a noble.

I have to bear this. I can’t drag my Darling’s name down with me.

Rosetta despondently got back to her work, and just then, a silver-haired woman approached. She was Cattleya, one of Serena’s granddaughters. Cattleya herself was a maid of a higher rank and Rosetta’s superior. She also happened to be Rosetta’s etiquette instructor.

From down the hallway, Cattleya noticed the three girls tormenting Rosetta hadn’t sensed her presence yet. “Not those girls again.”

“Miss Cattleya.” Rosetta curtsied when Cattleya stopped before her.

Cattleya looked back at the noisy trio of maids with an annoyed look on her face.

“One might think we didn’t teach our maids not to wield their social status like that here.”

Those three were used to being treated like princesses back home and

weren't accustomed to this new environment yet. Many girls like them here behaved in the same way they always had, even though they were supposed to be mere maids now. However, here, their family's standing was of no consequence.

Cattleya went on, "Well, I could scold them and they'd probably shape up, but... Rosetta, you should try solving such matters for yourself."

"Huh?" Rosetta was alarmed to hear that Cattleya didn't plan on disciplining the girls.

"Think about what you should do, and deal with it on your own. If you can't handle situations like this, you're going to have a lot of trouble in your future. I'll back you up, so show me what you can do."

As she watched Cattleya walk away, Rosetta pondered what to do about the three girls.

Am I being tested right now?

There were several ways she could go about shutting the girls up. The situation would be solved in an instant if she relied on Liam's influence, and she could even get back at them that way. Though, if she had to go running for help like that, would she be a fitting duchess for Liam?

I can't exploit Darling's power. If I did that, I'd be just like them. And really, I can't seek revenge against children who haven't even graduated from primary school.

That would be like a high schooler getting back at a middle schooler. Even if there was a reason for it, she knew what society would think, and how it would reflect on Liam. She couldn't harm Liam's reputation.

In that case, I'll just do as Darling would. I'll face them head-on! I'll do such good work here that everyone will have to see me as the perfect maid!

Optimistic, Rosetta had made up her mind to be the best maid she could.

With neither Liam nor Rosetta around Brian had become lonely back at House Banfield's mansion. During his breaks he kept sighing over and over, and Serena

was growing annoyed every time she saw this.

“Stop being so depressing.”

“Even Lady Rosetta is gone now. She always brightened things up here. I’m lonely without them here. And Master Liam is still away at the military academy... It’s like there’s no life left in the mansion.”

“It’s nice and quiet now. Once it gets busy again, you’ll long for days like this.”

Brian was worried about Rosetta. He was worried about Liam too, but he had faith that Liam could make it through any problems he had on his own. Rosetta, however, was a different story.

“Is Lady Rosetta well?”

“I left her with my granddaughter, Cattleya, and I have every faith in her. Lady Rosetta will be fine.”

Cattleya had Serena’s stamp of approval as a person Rosetta could be left with.

“I’m worried she might be bullied by the other girls there for training. You know how it can get a little...nasty between young girls.”

Having served House Banfield for many long years, Brian had seen many such ugly conflicts between women. That was what made his worries so acute.

“Ever the faint-hearted one, aren’t you?” Serena said to him. “That very thing is part of what Lady Rosetta needs to learn. It’s all just part of her training. You have to understand that.”

Serena was well aware of the type of situation Brian feared. Being that the palace was her former workplace, she knew what sorts of things went on, and had sent Rosetta knowing full well that some people there would approach her with ill intent. If Rosetta was to become a duchess one day, however, the girl had to be able to handle such matters.

“Cattleya will have her eye on her, so don’t worry.”

“That’s not the only thing I’m worried about. Our feud with House Berkeley has cooled down all of a sudden. That gives me a bad feeling.”

After several years in which the two families furiously competed with each other financially, House Berkeley abruptly backed off without warning. This sudden lack of aggression actually made Brian *more* nervous.

“Do you think they’ve given up trying to best us?” Brian asked.

“I’m sure they haven’t,” Serena stated. “In fact, indications are the Berkeleys are preparing for an actual war now. Lord Liam is expanding his army as well. I’m sure they both intend to settle things once and for all.”

“What? Master Liam is expanding his army because he saw a war coming? I thought for sure it was just a whim of his.”

Serena was utterly exasperated with Brian. The butler had been at Liam’s side longer than anyone, and therefore should have known not to underestimate Liam’s foresight. “Are you serious?” She couldn’t help but let her true feelings seep into her tone.

Does he just have good enough instincts to start building up his army right before House Berkeley got serious? Or did he see this coming from the beginning? Either way, he’s entirely too competent as always. What a frightening child.

In the future, Rosetta would have a tough time standing at the side of such an imposing person, Serena mused.

Meanwhile, having graduated at the top of her class, Tia had become a lieutenant. She should have gone on to a period of practical training next, but she’d been exempted under special circumstances so she could work on the reorganization of the Empire’s patrol fleets. To this end, she’d been given her own office, where she was busily putting together a fleet worthy of Liam.

“There’s a discrepancy with the number of ships and personnel in the 4,989th Patrol Fleet...”

According to the documents she presently studied, the fleet in question should have consisted of thirty ships, but some of them must have defected because now there were only ten. Correspondingly, there were fewer personnel than there should be, as well.

“These last ten ships aren’t even in good enough condition to reuse. They haven’t been maintained in the slightest. At least, we can remove the weapons systems, but the soldiers’ morale and training levels are so low that I don’t know what to do with them.”

As Tia pondered the problem, a female knight who had graduated from the academy and finished her practical training stood beside her. Tia considered her a close comrade who had been with her through tough times.

Tia continued, “I don’t think we can expect much from any of this.”

“I see...”

From their investigation of the patrol fleets, they had found that roughly sixty percent of the soldiers assigned to them wanted to leave the army. These people would probably get job training and be handed off to other employers just like that. But giving them that training and lining up civilian jobs for them would also cost money in itself.

Tia’s adjutant narrowed her eyes at the numbers. “So this is why the Empire didn’t want to reorganize their forces. It’s like no amount of money is ever enough.”

It was easier to prepare new fleets than reorganize old ones, so older fleets and soldiers had basically been abandoned. Despite this, Tia had her orders from Liam.

“Our mission is to make these resources usable. Lord Liam has given us an ample budget to do that job, so we’ll figure it out.”

If they wanted to make use of soldiers with poor morale and inadequate training, the first thing they had to do was let them have a break. Then, they could be retrained and outfitted with new equipment. Liam had given them enough of a budget to build several fleets, but the problem was he hadn’t given them much time to work with. Still, Tia smiled.

“These orders were given to us, not that fossil woman. We’ll do this, whatever it takes.”

Her adjutant held her head up high. “Yes, ma’am! I wonder what Lord Liam is thinking, though. We’re in the middle of a conflict with House Berkeley.

Preparing patrol fleets that won't contribute to our main fighting force doesn't seem logical."

Tia felt the same way, but she and the other knights who worshiped Liam always told themselves, "If Liam's doing it, there's a good reason for it!"

"It *is* strange...", she admitted.

Liam was probably the only noble who'd ever put this much money into a fleet he was only going to be making personal use of for a short time. What meaning could it have? Tia thought maybe the two of them were reading too much into it. And what Tia eventually, and rather forcefully, came up with was a conclusion that was far too convenient for them.

"With this much money, he should really be increasing House Banfield's forces... No, wait. I get it! So *that's* what it is! Of course, Lord Liam!"

Tia stood up from her chair, grinning, and her adjutant asked, "What is it?"

"This plan *does* have a reason!"

"Huh?"

Tia felt that she understood Liam's aim. "This is all a plan to lessen House Berkeley's future power and lead to Lord Liam's influence in the Imperial Army!"

"How so?"

"Look at this data. A large number of patrol fleets have abandoned their mission and fallen to piracy. That means they're potentially future allies of House Berkeley."

The way Tia saw it, Liam's plan was to reorganize the Empire's patrol fleets, and in the process, prevent more defections that would likely swell House Berkeley's pirate ranks. And as a result of this, the fleets put together by Liam would have inevitable ties to House Banfield. If he laid the right groundwork now, the Empire would likely assist him in future conflicts he had with House Berkeley.

"House Banfield alone has limited forces to draw on against Berkeley's greater fleets, but the Empire will back Lord Liam with reinforcements if he does this for

them. It's a brilliant move!"

Tia's adjutant gaped in surprise at Tia's fantastical thinking. "I never imagined he was thinking that far ahead."

Having come to this conclusion, Tia double-checked the budget she had to work with. "With this amount, we can put together a really solid force. And Lord Liam will be able to maintain his influence in the Army in the future. We've got to give this our all."

Tia was even more motivated now. Deeply impressed by Liam's far-reaching designs, she felt her devotion to him soar to even greater heights.

"We'll get rid of those garbage pirate nobles, and we'll even clean up some of the waste inside the Empire. Oh, Lord Liam is so high-minded!"

Her adjutant agreed wholeheartedly. "He's truly a peerless, wise ruler, isn't he?"

For a few moments the two of them basked in their feelings with flushed cheeks, the adjutant remembered something she felt that she should make Tia aware of.

"Lady Tia... I wasn't sure if I should report this to you or not..."

"What is it?"

"There's actually a comic series being produced about Lord Liam right now."

"Oh? On the Capital Planet? Well, that's wonderful—I'll have to check it out. That's strange, though... I should have heard about it already, considering how much I try to keep on top of news about Lord Liam."

"Well, it seems to be going around in rather secret circles."

"Oh my! That just makes me more excited to read it."

Tia looked at her adjutant expectantly, suspecting she already had a copy of this comic herself. Her eyes sparkled with girlish excitement.

"I don't know if you're going to like what you see..." Her adjutant then turned and used her tablet to project the comic onto a blank wall of Tia's office.

When she saw the comic, the childlike smile faded from Tia's face.

Interlude:

You Can Do It, Claus

WHILE LIAM WAS AWAY at the military academy, House Banfield had been facing a growing problem, without the benefit of Liam's guidance. His knights were dividing themselves into factions.

"What do you know? You just got here!"

"Oh, shut up, weakling!"

The two factions, controlled by Tia and Marie, were constantly quarreling. As for the subjects of their disputes, it could be anything: which faction's ships would be embarking first on practice maneuvers, whose ships would be using which ports, and so on.

Today, once again, the knights of both factions were glaring at each other as they shared a port on a military base that had been established on a repurposed resource planet. Meanwhile, stealing his way through the groups was a knight who wasn't affiliated with either faction.

The man's name was Claus Sera Mont. He had a tired appearance and looked to be in his thirties, but he too was a knight of House Banfield. He entered into service several years earlier but had kept his distance from both factions all this time.

All my coworkers are so hotheaded. It's tiresome... He sighed in relief when he was finally by himself, far away from the other quarreling knights. *They were a little quieter when Lord Liam was around, and neither one of the groups' leaders are here so there's no one to rein them in either... Then again, if those two were here, it would probably be even worse...*

As was to be expected, Liam had a huge influence over House Banfield. His orders were everything, and once his people had them, obeying them was all they concerned themselves with. Both factions were more subdued when Liam was around because they were too busy doing his bidding. Of course, the knights would still glower at each other and maybe provoke one another,

staying one step away from violence at all times, but it had never been this extreme.

At this point, someone could draw their weapon at any moment. Lord Liam won't be back for a while, so I don't know what's going to happen before then...

Claus's shoulders were heavy as he thought about the future when he suddenly heard quarreling voices from yet another direction. Apparently, the factions were arguing over which group should have to go investigate some suspicious ships that had been sighted.

"You guys can handle a simple mission like that, can't you?" one of Tia's crew said. "It's perfect for you fossils."

"You mean it's perfect for you lot, with your pirate grudge," one of Marie's knights spat. "Or are you too scared to go since you might get captured again?"

Coming upon this tense scene, Claus sighed yet again. Both factions wanted to rack up achievements out in the field to score points with Liam, so they tried to force any missions that seemed like simple busywork onto the other group.

Claus steeled himself as he approached the feuding knights. He said, "I'll take that mission, then."

With their sharp gazes all redirected at Claus now, the opposing groups managed to regain some of their calm. Because the man made sure to always remain a neutral party, he was able to interact with both sides as nothing more than a coworker.

"You, Sir Claus? Well, if that's the case..."

"He just saved your skins, pirate-haters. We'll leave it to you then, Sir Claus, the Chief of Busywork."

Watching the knights of both factions wander off in opposite directions, Claus was able to relax a bit again. He let out one last sigh.

"Chief of Busywork, eh? Fitting, I guess." Claus smiled in self-derision. Everyone around him treated him as a convenient tool to take care of all the work they didn't want to do. Thanks to that, neither faction saw him as an enemy, but it also meant that all the work he ended up doing was troublesome

and didn't help his reputation any. Investigating suspicious ship traffic typically wasn't very interesting, though it might lead to various headaches. Since that sort of work was all he did, people didn't think very highly of him. Still, Claus wasn't particularly bothered by this, especially when he remembered the house that he used to serve.

"Doing boring work will still gain you some points in the long run, and eventually lead to better pay," he muttered to himself. "This is heaven compared to before, when all my achievements were being stolen while my reputation and pay kept dropping. Being the Chief of Busywork is fine with me."

While his colleagues might jokingly dismiss him, Claus was ultimately satisfied with his current situation. He stretched out his back, then set about getting himself ready for this little mission.

"Now, to go investigate."

People also forced busywork on him at his hold job, before he had come to serve House Banfield. He knew he was being taken advantage of, but then again, he didn't have much ambition in the first place. Claus was just the sort of knight who was satisfied with the circumstances he found himself in.

Chapter 5:

Practical Training

THINGS HAD SEEMED BUSY lately for the Imperial Army. The military academy had set up reeducation and retraining facilities on another planet, which had been operating at full capacity for the past few years. The activity wasn't confined to just that planet, though, as things were similarly busy at many other of the Empire's facilities. A rumor was going around the academy that the Empire was planning some sort of big operation.

At present, I was a senior at the academy, in my sixth year. Tia had graduated before me, so I had given her the funds to put together my own patrol fleet. I was curious about her progress. I looked forward to the big reveal of what kind of fleet she'd assembled, but frankly I was pretty sure I'd given her way too much money to do it. I didn't even remember *how* much I gave her. Then again, what was the point of riches if you only let them pile up? It was a waste to let my riches sit around doing nothing, so I had just thrown whatever at her.

"It's going up again now..."

A portion of the tax revenue from my domain went into my pocket, but the amount was so huge it made me dizzy to think about it. The amount in my account increased way faster than I could use it, so there was almost no point. Hell, I was thinking I was probably failing as an evil lord if I couldn't think of a way to spend my money!

While I was lost in these thoughts, Wallace appeared and immediately launched into a plea for cash.

"Liam, gimme some allowance!"

"I just did that last week, didn't I?"

"I used it up already. I had to go out and treat my underclassmen."

It pissed me off that Wallace could boast so openly about goofing off. He regularly broke curfew, going out for drinks with his underclassmen and

meeting girls. And it was all on *my* dime!

“Why should I give you more money to fool around with?”

“‘Cause you’re my patron. W-wait, please, don’t hit me! N-nooo!!!”

I stood up threateningly, and Wallace covered his head with both arms.

“You don’t have to get so mad!”

“It pisses me off that you’re the only one having fun here.”

“Well, why don’t you goof off too, Liam?”

“If I could, I would, dammit!”

Of course I wanted to go out and party too, but I couldn’t forget what had happened to Peter Sera Petack when we had both trained at House Razel. *What the hell kind of STI causes your junior to explode anyway?! The viruses in this world are way too scary!* Even for an evil lord, that type of thing was terrifying. I knew as a noble I could afford to be treated with an elixir for any serious malady, but who would want to risk having their *thing* blow up in the first place?!

“How could I ever enjoy myself like you without being afraid I might lose it?” I blurted out, before I could rein in my true feelings.

Wallace laughed. “You and Kurt were both like this all through primary school! You never played around back then either. Come on, they can test you for STIs when you get back here. And if you’re unlucky, the worst that’ll happen is that you can use an elixir if you’re positive and lose your junior for a bit.”

“But I’d still be missing my member! Unless the possibility is zero, I’m not partying, okay?!”

Incidentally, I’d heard of two fellow cadets here during my six years who had suffered as Peter did. Others might joke like this was no big deal, but as long as there was even a slight chance of losing my small-but-mighty, I would prioritize my safety and skip that kind of fun. But still, I was an evil lord and wanted to have a good time too, dammit!

“It’s not like you have to go all the way,” Wallace said. “You can still have fun just drinking with the ladies, can’t you?”

“Well... I guess so.”

I couldn't imagine that going out drinking was all that much fun, but then again, maybe it was time for this evil lord to indulge himself more and properly waste some money. *Splurging on opulence with the money my citizens earned with their blood, sweat, and tears, eh? Now that's what an evil lord should be doing!* But...honestly, I just wasn't all that interested in it.

While I pondered all this, Wallace asked me about my plans for after graduation.

“By the way, Liam, any changes in plan for when you graduate from academy?”

“Still going to the Capital Planet. Bigshot nobles like me have to do their busywork there.”

If you were born into a prominent house, you naturally ended up having to train somewhere important, and no place was more important than the Capital Planet. The same would apply to Wallace, due to his lineage.

“Then I'll be there with you. Anyway, I am royalty, so it's expected. Kurt will be there too, at least, so we'll be able to hang out for the first time in a while.”

I didn't envision the three of us doing a lot of hanging out. There were a few reasons for that. Kurt would have graduated from university and have his own training period to deal with. Plus, the Capital Planet was ridiculously immense, so we might not even run into each other much, if at all. The *palace* itself was a big place. I mean, using a whole continent as a palace? There's excess and then there's *that*! I didn't think it'd be that easy for us to meet up with him.

I said, “You don't think he'll be too busy?”

I did communicate with Kurt every so often and he seemed awfully busy whenever I did. Still, Wallace was insistent.

“Kurt will come for sure if you invite him to join us somewhere, Liam! We shouldn't leave him out, right? At the Capital Planet we can hang out like we used to in primary school!”

“I just don't want to bother him by inviting him somewhere when he's busy.”

“Don’t you remember, Liam? At graduation, when you decided to move on to the military academy, Kurt was sad to hear it, wasn’t he? Even if you still talk here and there, it’s not like seeing each other in person. If you want to stay close in the future, then you really should get together.”

Thinking back on our graduation from primary school, I remembered that Kurt *was* crying, wasn’t he? It wasn’t like that was our final farewell or anything. That guy was simply too dramatic.

“Guess I’ll reach out to him when the time comes, then.”

“You should. Kurt will be really sad if you don’t! Oh yeah, and Rosetta will be on the Capital Planet too, right?”

My heart grew heavy when he brought up Rosetta. I knew she was on the Capital Planet too, but I didn’t think we’d be running into each other again quite so soon... I thought I might’ve been able to get away with not seeing her for another six years or so.

“What, should I reach out to her too?”

“What do you mean what? Why wouldn’t you? She’s your fiancée, isn’t she?”

After my talk with Wallace, I started to feel just a little anxious about my forthcoming life on the Capital Planet.

After his conversation with Liam, Wallace snuck away from the academy to a secret meeting with a certain girl. Yet this wasn’t a romantic tryst, and Wallace’s face was tense with anxiety.

The girl who sat waiting for him on a bench below the streetlights was Eila, who wore a displeased expression on her face. She made a show of checking the time and criticized Wallace exaggeratedly.

“I can’t believe you! Fifteen minutes late?”

“What do you want from me? I have my own life!”

“I don’t care about your life! You kept your promise though, right?”

“Of course I did!” Wallace puffed his chest and proceeded to tell Eila what

he'd accomplished. "I pushed Liam to invite Kurt out when he gets to the Capital Planet. It was hard work getting him to agree because he was all worried about how busy Kurt will be." Wallace shook his head, as if to emphasize how difficult the effort had been.

Eila looked away and smiled widely, eyes sparkling. "So the two of them will be able to hang out again. Ah... LiaKur really is the ultimate, supreme pairing. I knew the two of them had to part, but I couldn't stand Wallace taking Liam away from Kurt."

Eila boldly expressed her feelings with no regard for Wallace's presence right in front of her. It wasn't worth it to her to keep up appearances before him.

Meanwhile, Wallace looked on in disgust. "Those two aren't actually like that, you know."

"I know that! But... But... Staying true to your one true pairing is just what a fan does! No matter what!"

"What a terrible fan. I feel sorry for Liam and Kurt."

Ignoring Wallace's exasperated expression, Eila rambled about how much she'd suffered at the military academy.

"I'm sure *you* wouldn't understand. Do you know how close I came to breaking at the academy? Just because those two went to different schools, there's a comic now that has *you* stealing Liam from Kurt! And I hate to admit it, but it's hot!"

The plot of the comic was that Liam and Kurt had headed down different paths, and though they continued to think of each other, they became involved with different men. The comic had aroused Eila, but then she'd sunk into self-loathing because of her guilt.

"I can't understand how someone would dirty their hands with such heresy when they're that good at art!"

Wallace didn't even know how to react to Eila's impassioned words. "Uh-huh..."

"If they would draw a pure love story between Liam and Kurt... I said I'd pay

them three times the reward! I really did!"

"You did?"

"Yeah! But you know what they said? They only draw what they believe in! I have to admit their pride impressed me, but I would have cheered them on forever if they hadn't stained their hands with this horrible plotline! It's sickening to me to get off on a different pairing..." Eila groaned in self-disgust. "Being unfaithful to my own OTP... I'm a failure of a fan!"

"Do you 'fans' realize how disrespectful you're being to these real people?"

Wallace's words didn't get through to Eila one bit. She was preoccupied, thinking about the future of LiaKur all by herself.

Wallace cleared his throat loudly. "Anyway, Eila, you haven't forgotten *your* promise to me, have you?"

Disgusted by Wallace's smirk, Eila answered irritably, "Yeah, yeah. A mixer with some girls, right? I just can't believe you."

"Well, duh. My patron is Liam, you know. I've got to make the most of having a rich guy on my side."

Sure, they were feuding with House Berkeley at the moment, but since House Banfield was in an advantageous position, Wallace was able to be rather cocky. The only reason he had agreed to this arrangement with Eila was because she'd offered to set up this mixer for him.

"Just please promise me you won't get close to Liam for impure reasons."

"Like what you're doing is even a bit righteous..."

Having parted with Wallace, Eila headed back to her dorm in high spirits.

"If Liam and Kurt become close again, I'm sure those heretic pairings Liallace and LlaceLia will disappear! I'll never accept those terrible twists."

Having completed her objective, Eila was in such a good mood that she didn't notice a figure approaching her from behind. When she finally sensed the presence she spun around, only to be pinned to a wall.

“Huh?”

It had only taken a second, so at first Eila didn't comprehend what had happened. When she realized who was pinning her, she could only exclaim in surprise. Before her stood Tia and Marie, and in their hands were copies of the comic book Eila had published.

As Tia strengthened her grip on Eila, she leaned closer with a frightening smile. “Eila Sera Berman, you may be a friend of Lord Liam's, but I'm going to have to ask you for some information on this publication. If you could just tell me exactly who produced this comic featuring Lord Liam, and for what purpose they did so, I would be most appreciative.”

Next to Tia, Marie was so worked up her eyes were bloodshot. She had already drawn her sword with her free hand, and the blade trembled in the air ever so slightly. It would be clear to anyone that she was practically frothing with rage.

“Depending on your answer,” Marie said, “you may suddenly find yourself in much smaller pieces.”

Both knights obviously felt their revered Liam was being ridiculed. Eila was surprised to see the two of them working together when they were usually at each other's throats.

This is bad. This is so bad! If I'm honest with them, I'll die, but if I lie, they'll probably kill me too! Is this the end for me?!

It seemed to Eila that no matter what she said, the two of them would strike her down on the spot. Now that she thought about it, she hadn't run into anyone else on her way back to the dorm. The two of them had probably been prepared for her and somehow blocked off the area. When she realized that, Eila gave up on the idea of calling for help.

There's only one path open to me if I want to live!

Eila was stubborn.

“I-I have a file on my tablet. Open it.”

As Tia kept the young woman pinned, Marie took Eila's tablet from her and

opened a hidden file that Eila guided them to. As a result, several images were displayed before the three of them.

“Wh-what the...?”

“What in the world is this?!”



Tia and Marie gaped at the projected images. Tia was so shocked, in fact, that she let go of Eila. The pictures were of Liam during his time training at House Razel and in primary school. The images showed him hanging out with Kurt, his chest bared, and in other states that the two had never seen him in. The knights blushed, entranced by the dazzling smile Liam normally never showed his subordinates.

Released from Tia's grip, Eila sank to the ground. She proposed a deal to the two women. "If I die, all this data disappears. Also, I have more...extreme records stored more securely elsewhere."

The eyes of the two ferocious knights were filled with bloodlust, but Eila was no longer afraid, confident as she was that they would take the bait.

"If you let me go, then I promise to sell any future data I get on Liam to you two."

Both women shuddered at Eila's proposition, but they quickly feigned calm. Eila, however, could see right through them. The anger was gone from their eyes, which darted back fervently to the holographic images of Liam.

Tia refused Eila's offer, in order to gain a superior bargaining position. "You think we'll listen to such nonsense? You don't think very highly of us, do you?"

Eila shot a glance at Marie, who was piggybacking off of Tia's position.

"Indeed. You really think we'd do something to betray Lord Liam?"

Eila knew her deal was tempting, but it seemed their loyalty to Liam had won out in the end. Still, she remained calm and kept on negotiating.

"Do you really think it's okay to apprehend me?"

Tia's eyebrows raised at Eila's confident attitude. "Threats won't work. We're well aware that House Berman has no power to threaten House Banfield."

Eila just shrugged at that. "It's not a threat, I'm just trying to make a deal. I'm telling you that it'd be better for you to let me go if you want to protect Liam."

Marie tightened her fist around her sword's grip and raised it higher. "I don't agree. Why would letting you go benefit Lord Liam?"

“It really would,” Eila insisted, staring coolly at the two of them.

Tia and Marie both seemed to realize that Eila’s confidence meant she wasn’t bluffing. They went quiet so she could explain herself.

“It’s true that I had a hand in the comic going around now.”

At that, the gazes of both knights hardened.

Eila ignored that and went on. “And it’s true that the comic turned out rather extreme. But if I’m removed from the picture, even more extreme works will start circulating.”

Marie’s sword quivered again. “E-extreme?”

Eila explained to them that she led the largest collection of people creating these works, and that they generally fell under her management. “It would be bad for House Banfield if these works circulated without any sort of regulation, right? If you let me go, I swear I’ll hold these creators to higher standards.”

For a moment Tia remained silent with indecision, but then fixed her icy glare on Eila. “All we need to do is round up your entire group after we take you in.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it. These comrades of mine are spread out all over the Empire. I think you’d have a hard time catching each and every one of them. A good number of them operate underground, anyway.”

Marie clicked her tongue, imagining the difficulty of tracking down these individuals, at the same time a war appeared to be brewing. Begrudgingly, she said, “I suppose it would be more trouble if these people were unregulated.”

“Right? And if you let me go, I wouldn’t mind selling you two all of the data I’ve accumulated up until now. The original files, of course.”

Hearing this, Marie returned her sword to its scabbard. “Ugh! How cocky you are! But...if we kill you, there’s a chance these allies of yours will run rampant. Preventing that is our duty as Lord Liam’s retainers. Yes, that’s right, it’s our duty!”

It sounded to Eila like Marie was trying to convince herself of this, so she took advantage of the knight’s indecision. “That’s right. At this point, there’s nothing else that can be done about this. How about you, Miss Tia? Don’t you think it’s

best to let me go too?”

Tia shoved past Marie and began bargaining with Eila. “Sell all your data to me! I’ll make sure everything is fine! I’ll give you enough money so you can spend the rest of your life in comfort! Trust me, I’ll collect it from the knights in my faction—we can give you more than you could possibly need!”

Both knights looked positively glassy eyed at the prospect of obtaining Eila’s secret image files. The other woman snickered to herself. *I win! I get to live!*

“What?” she said. “Oh, I couldn’t do that... I want us to get along in the future, so I’ll sell them to you for a reasonable price. Anyway, you’ll let me go, right? And...you’ll let me collect all sorts of new data from now on too, won’t you?”

Tia nodded her head over and over again. “I suppose we must. You *are* Lord Liam’s friend, after all, and it’s normal to take pictures and videos of your friends. Of course!”

Marie pressed her palms together ardently. “I do hope you’ll continue to be a good friend to Lord Liam from now on.”

Eila smiled. “And I hope we’ll be friends too!”

Around this same time, Rosetta was greeting new young ladies who had come to train at the Imperial palace on the Capital Planet as their senior. She explained to them how they must conduct themselves henceforth.

“You are here for etiquette training, so you must remain humble. Taking your family’s status and waving it above other servants will not be tolerated.”

Rosetta was a lot more confident than she had been when she first arrived herself.

“Yes, ma’am,” the new girls replied nervously.

Rosetta smiled, to help them relax. “I will do whatever I can to assist you, so you can learn as much as you possibly can here. Let’s all work to improve together, shall we?”

It was imperative that a senior student earn good marks as an educator when

she took on juniors to train. Otherwise, she would never be able to move on to the role of an actual teacher.

The girls who had ridiculed Rosetta in the past watched in frustration from a distance. None of them had been picked to teach any new students.

When Rosetta sent the new girls on their way, the frustrated group took their leave as well. Cattleya approached Rosetta, smiling at her. She was happy that the once insecure woman she'd trained had turned out to be so responsible.

"I'm relieved to see that you're doing such a good job. You almost look like a different person than when you started here."

Rosetta bowed and thanked Cattleya for her compliments. "It's all due to your guidance, Miss Cattleya."

"Part of it is, but it's also because of your own ability. Have pride in yourself."

Having worked so much harder than anyone else during her training, Rosetta was now acknowledged by everyone around her as a skilled maid. In part, her success was due to the fact that she had grown up in such a harsh environment at House Claudia. Her training was nowhere near cruel enough to break her.

Thinking of the girls who'd just run off, Cattleya shook her head in disappointment. "I hoped those stupid girls would have learned from your example, but at this rate, they're not going to get very high marks. Am I right, Rosetta?"

"I have no particular comment on their abilities."

Despite them being fellow trainees, Rosetta had nothing to say about them.

Seeing Rosetta decline to complain, Cattleya smiled. She had advised Rosetta that small talk and grumbling about coworkers had no place at the palace. "You don't let your true feelings slip...just like I taught you. You've really learned a lot. You're only here for one more year, Rosetta, and during that time I'm going to leave these new girls in your hands. Show me you can handle it."

"Yes, ma'am."

"By the way, I've got a message for you from my grandmother. It seems Count Banfield will be stationed on the Capital Planet for his next round of training

next year.”

“Darling will be here?! Oh, umm... Pardon my outburst.”

Rather than disapprove, Cattleya chuckled to see Rosetta blurt out her feelings and stammer in embarrassment. “You two are very close, aren’t you? Yes, he’ll be staying here for two years, but men his age tend to indulge in less-than-savory entertainment with their seniors. You should be careful, Rosetta.”

“Lord Liam would never amuse himself in such ways.”

“Well, men who don’t allow themselves to relax tend to get too worked up, and serious people tend to take their failures much more seriously. You’ll have to keep a tight hold on his reins, Rosetta, but don’t smother him too much.”

It wouldn’t be at all strange for someone in Liam’s position to have a number of concubines one day. In fact, House Banfield might even be in trouble if he didn’t, because at present, there was no direct line of succession. If something were to happen to Liam, one of his distant relatives or even his predecessor might end up having to take his place. Amagi, Brian, and even Serena were especially concerned about this issue. The general opinion among his retainers was that Liam should be fooling around, even if it meant ignoring Rosetta’s feelings for him. What House Banfield needed right now was an heir, and it wasn’t necessary that said heir should come from Rosetta.

In fact, Rosetta had been delicately advised of this situation by Brian and Serena, so even if it hurt, she understood the situation as it stood.

“I understand that,” Rosetta said to Cattleya morosely.

“You don’t seem to accept it, though. Well, not that I can’t understand how you feel. You know, if you can provide an heir yourself, you can do whatever you wish after that.”

Many noblewomen freely pursued romance after they gave birth to an heir. Both Liam’s grandmother and mother had formed families with the other men they truly loved after fulfilling their duty to give their husbands an heir. For Rosetta, though, this concept held zero appeal.

“Lord Liam is the only one for me.”

“I envy that you can say that,” Cattleya remarked, and then returned to her work.

On the Capital Planet, a luxury hotel with a long history was being remodeled with great haste. Thomas Henfrey, who had come to supervise the construction, surveyed the exposed walls and workers operating machinery as he stood beside the hotel’s manager.

The manager gave Thomas a status report. “We’re working as fast as we can, but I still don’t think we’ll make it by next year.”

The hotel might once have been a high-class establishment, but in recent years, it had fallen into a sorry state and had barely been doing any business. During that period, it had caught the eye of Liam’s personal merchant. Thomas was the head of the Henfrey Company, a merchant who traveled the stars.

With his plump body, the man looked gentle at first glance, but his eyes were sharp. “Worst-case scenario, I don’t mind if the parts of the building Lord Liam won’t see take a little longer. How’s the staff training going?”

When Thomas came across the hotel, it was barely functioning as a business.

“We tried rehiring some people who used to work here, but we couldn’t get all of them. We’re training the new hires as best as we can, but without any on-the-job experience for them...”

“Just please get them ready as fast as you can. Once Lord Liam graduates from the military academy, this will be his home base for a while.”

“Yes, sir.” The manager’s eyes were deathly serious and his response was firm, showing his dedication to seeing this project through.

It wasn’t actually the hotel’s fault that guests had been driven away, causing its finances to plummet. The problems had actually originated with a single guest. This guest had gone on a drunken rampage, upsetting other visitors, and the hotel had no recourse but to throw the belligerent guest out. It was only later that they learned the man had been a noble. What happened next was your typical story of an entitled noble’s revenge. Harassment from that noble quickly led to the hotel’s decline in popularity. Even a respected luxury hotel

was doomed to go under if it became the focus of the elite's ire. Conversely, though, if the hotel could ally itself with another noble, it would be able to turn its fortunes around.

"Incidentally," the manager asked Thomas, "are you sure I should pick the people who'll be serving Lord Liam simply on the basis of ability? Shouldn't their appearance also be taken into consideration?"

The manager was concerned about giving Liam the opportunity to partake in the staff, if he felt so inclined.

Thomas smiled and shook his head. "Lord Liam has no interest even in the servants at his own mansion. It has nothing to do with his preferences—he's just very strict with himself. He'll think more highly of you if you put only competent workers at his side, rather than people for the purposes you're thinking of."

In Thomas's mind, Liam was an extremely virtuous noble.

The manager was impressed by what Thomas related. "I've seen many nobles here on the Capital Planet, but Lord Liam sounds truly admirable."

In good spirits, Thomas spoke more on the subject of Liam. "He has a bit of a sailor's mouth, but the man is truly compassionate. He shows no mercy to his enemies, but he's very generous to his allies. I don't think you have anything to worry about here. If you and your staff simply perform your jobs well, Lord Liam will show his appreciation."

The manager stood up straighter and held his head high. "You can count on us."

Things were in motion on the Capital Planet to prepare for Liam's arrival upon graduation. Thomas stood contemplating all these preparations with a sense of satisfaction when one of his employees came running toward him.

"Mr. Henfrey, sir!"

"What is it?"

"W-well, some Capital Planet merchants wish to meet with you!"

"What? Who are they?"

It was unusual for Capital Planet merchants to want to meet with a backwater merchant like Thomas. Normally, he would be the one trying to set up meetings with such people.

“Mr. Elliot of the Clave Firm, and Ms. Patrice of the Newlands Company. They both wish to arrange a meeting with you.”

Thomas’s eyes widened. “Those are big names.”

The Clave Firm was one of the foremost merchant companies on the Capital Planet and was a personal merchant for the Empire. And while the Newlands Company had its main store on this world, they also did business all throughout the domain. They both operated on a completely different scale than Thomas’s Henfrey Company. It was the same as if the CEOs of two nationwide companies wanted to meet with a store owner who had only a few locations out in the middle of nowhere. The manager had also heard of these famous merchants and couldn’t hide his surprise. These were two household names, and they wanted to meet with *him*.

“I can only think of one thing they’d want to talk about...” Thomas mused.

As he couldn’t well refuse, Thomas prepared for his meetings.

For the next phase of my training, I was assigned to a logistics department on the Capital Planet. Not only did we handle the distribution of personnel and supplies, but there were all sorts of other managerial duties to be dealt with. Frankly, the work was pretty boring. I didn’t think it was a suitable position for someone who had graduated with exemplary grades and earned the rank of lieutenant.

Of course, those “exemplary grades” of mine were partly fabricated, since I heard that nobles got bonus marks just for being nobles. The only reason I was made a lieutenant was because of my ancestry too.

So why was I working in logistics? Because if I scaled enough mountains of paperwork here, I would automatically be promoted to captain in a year. In two years, I supposed I’d be a major. Nobles moved up through the ranks just by sitting safely in the rear doing desk work. What a wonderful world this was

indeed.

Then, when I moved on to my official post, I could spend four years lazing about with the patrol fleet Tia had prepared for me and that would be it. I'd be completely done with my military training, and all I'd have left to do was spend some time at university, followed by a stint of more busywork as a government official.

Nobles enjoyed a nice little fast track through life without having to put in much effort, while watching everyone else struggle. Sitting back and living this life? I was the very picture of an evil lord.

At my new post, I still resided in the barracks as I was in training, but on my days off, I could get away to a hotel here on the Capital Planet. I spent every day working regular hours, enjoyed my evenings, and returned to the barracks to rest. It was truly felt good sneering at the elite military types, slaving away at their busy posts.

My place of work was a drab building that didn't get any natural light. Since the view out the windows was just of the neighboring buildings, images of nature were projected on the glass in lieu of actual scenery. It was an unpopular, cheaply made structure, but my personal workspace was spacious and comfortable enough. It looked just like your typical office environment from my previous life, except that all the employees wore military uniforms.

Beside me, I saw Wallace working with a dissatisfied look on his face, and beyond him, I spotted Eila being instructed in some task by one of our seniors. It was also due to our being nobles that the three of us had been assigned to the same post.

While I continued my work and thought about this a bit, Wallace stood up and left his seat. He told me he was going to go to the bathroom. Before he walked away, though, he said, "Hey, I heard there's someone here who wants to chew us out."

"Huh? Did we screw something up?"

Who could have made a mistake? The work we oversaw here was largely left to artificial intelligence. Of course, there was also work that actual human beings had to handle, so the screw up must have been there.

“Well, they want to complain about a supply order that was assigned to you, Liam.”

“What?”

Many in the military looked down upon logistics departments, since their people never went out on the front lines, not to mention their heavy use of artificial intelligence. Nearly the entire Empire, from the military to the citizenry, generally had a distaste for artificial intelligence. Nevertheless, if the work were to be done entirely by humans, efficiency would drop dramatically, so they were forced to rely on AI assistance. Regardless, there persisted those soldiers who didn't understand this necessity. For example, one of those was the soldier who had come to Liam's department to complain.

“How dare you brainless AI-reliant fools deny my request?!”

A colonel with a pronounced belly came by after lunch to lodge his complaint. Presently a brigadier general was dealing with him, and though this man was of a higher rank, the colonel was a noble.

“I-I'm sorry, Colonel,” the brigadier general said. “We'll get whatever you need at once, so please just forgive this misunderstanding—”

Because of the prevalent attitude toward AI and the logistics department, nobles barging in here to haughtily make demands was practically an everyday occurrence.

The colonel wasn't being placated by the brigadier general's words. “Bring me the idiot who arranged the resupply for my ships! I'll educate him myself!” The colonel smirked, whip in hand.

“You can't do that, Colonel.” The brigadier general took an anxious step forward. “I wouldn't recommend it.”

“I'm just going to provide a free lesson to a coward who will never see the front lines. You should be crying with gratitude for my generosity.”

The colonel apparently had a thing for tormenting those weaker than himself. He was absolutely sure that he was in the right.

The brigadier general gave up on persuading him and slumped his shoulders. “I warned you,” he sighed. He told one of his staff, “Go get the lieutenant.”

The colonel smacked his hand with the whip, a sharp sound ringing out. “Heh. So it’s a newbie, huh? Some brat still in training? I need to teach him what being an Imperial soldier is all about.”

As the colonel went on about “young people these days,” the brigadier general averted his eyes and muttered, “A lesson some people desperately need to learn.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

A moment later, there was a knock on the brigadier general’s door and the colonel barked out, “Enter!”

Liam entered his superior’s office with a displeased look on his face, rather than any visible shred of anxiety. This alone seemed to worsen the colonel’s irritation.

“You’re the one in charge of supplying my ships? Do you understand what you’ve done, you imbecile?!”

Liam snorted brazenly. “Who the hell are you?”

“Wh-what was that? Do you not understand rank insignia, boy?”

“Don’t get all uppity with me. You’re nothing more than a noble handed a rank and a patrol fleet. Brigadier General, sir, I have a lot of work to do—I’d prefer if you didn’t call me for trivial matters like this.”

“I apologize,” the brigadier general replied. “You see, the colonel insisted on educating you.”

When he heard this, the look on Liam’s face darkened. “Educating me, you say?”

“Yes, you!” the colonel growled. “What are they teaching you brats at the military academy these days? That’s it, you’re not going home tonight!”

While the colonel imagined the ways in which he planned on making Liam

suffer, he suddenly felt a sharp pain. “Ack!” He hit the wall behind him, and before he could figure out what had happened, he heard Liam’s voice.

“Brigadier General, sir, would you mind contacting this man’s superior?”

“W-well, I...”

“He requested all sorts of equipment and personnel unnecessary for a battleship, you see. I just want to ask his superior some questions about this do-nothing patrol fleet.”

The brigadier general was getting a headache, but he nevertheless asked Liam exactly what sort of equipment and personnel the colonel had requested. “Can you give me the details?”

“Well, he’s requested a casino be installed on his battleship, and about a hundred women for ‘entertainment.’ You see, I’m not sure exactly what military purpose such things could serve. I did some digging, and his patrol fleet appears to be nothing but a gathering of incompetents with zero achievements to their name. In fact, it’s pointless giving them any type of resupply at all.”

“I see...”

“I just want to know what sort of Imperial officer would be so stupid as to officially request his ship be stocked with women and booze. Now, would you kindly contact this fool’s superior?”

With Liam grinning at him, the brigadier general shakily replied, “I-I suppose so.” On the spot, he used his tablet to call the colonel’s superior, a major general who commanded a patrol fleet in the area of the Capital Planet.

The call connected, and the holographic image of an irritated man’s face appeared in the air before them. “*What do you want?*”

“Hey, Major General.” Liam addressed the man casually. “One of your men has decided to pick a fight with me. As his superior, I was hoping you’d take some responsibility.”

The major general’s face at first turned red with anger, but when he realized it was Liam he spoke with, his face blanched. “*C-Count Banfield!*” The major general was a noble too, but as the current head of House Banfield, Liam’s

noble “rank” far outstripped his own. In addition, Liam had gained a certain notoriety due to his feud with the Berkeley Family. The major general was clearly panicked to be speaking with him.

“I-I’m terribly sorry for my subordinate’s rudeness, my lord. Please send him back to me at once.”

Liam sent the colonel flying with a kick. The gruesome sound it made intimidated the major general even more. “Send him back? You come here and get him yourself! Are you really giving *me* an order? Who do you think you are? You think you can look down on me just because of our military ranks?”

Normally, within the military, Liam’s attitude would be unthinkable. It was a different story though when it came to nobles throwing around their status. That meant that even if someone was of a lower military rank, if they were a higher-ranked noble, the lesser-ranked person had no choice but to obey them.

“O-of course, my lord. I’ll be right there, as fast as I can.”

“Hurry it up. And another thing: the supply orders your people send me are full of nonsense. Tell them not to put items on their orders that’ll waste my time, got it? I want to go home on time every day. Do you understand that?”

The major general wasn’t sure what to say to that. Basically, Liam was denying his men entertainment and all other luxuries. *“W-well, I...”*

“If you’ve got a complaint, I’ll listen. Go on, what is it?”

Though he said he would listen, Liam would likely deny whatever the major general requested. No matter what reasons he listed, he had to know Liam was in the right here and wouldn’t be swayed, so the major general simply gave up. *“N-nothing, my lord.”*

Giving fleets special treatment outside of regular regulations took extra time and effort. Liam didn’t like that.

“I like a guy who knows his place. Now, come and get your incompetent subordinate.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The major general ended the call. Having now learned that Liam was a ruling

count with a significant amount of power, the colonel trembled in terror.

“Well, you’ve got a lesson to teach me now, do you?” Liam said to him. “That’s fortunate, because I was worrying about losing my edge, doing all that desk work. This should make for some good exercise, eh?”

The colonel hurriedly stood up and saluted Liam. “I-I’m so very sorry for my behavior, my lord!”

He finally acknowledged that Liam was in a higher position than him, but just a little bit too late. Liam laid his hand on the man’s shoulder and the colonel flinched.

“I applaud the about-face, but I’m not a lenient enough man to let you off the hook that easily. So, until your boss comes to get you, how about I educate *you*? That’s a good deal, right? It’s okay, you can weep with happiness.”

Liam dragged the trembling colonel from the room by his lapel. The brigadier general watched them go, smiling from the stress relief that came with the sight.

“Heh... It was the right choice recruiting Lord Liam.”

He was glad that his department’s work went so much more smoothly now that they had the young man. Far too many military people looked down on logistics and made unreasonable supply requests from them. For that reason, the brigadier general had wanted a noble with some influence on his side. If it had been a corrupt or less powerful noble, like someone from House Berkeley, they likely wouldn’t want the position or would even hope to exploit it to their advantage. However, a diligent noble like Liam wouldn’t allow any misuse of the system.

The brigadier general had offered the position to Liam before his training on the Capital Planet began, thinking it couldn’t hurt to try. To his surprise the count had actually accepted. Not only that, but Liam was putting in even more effort than the brigadier general had expected from him.

“It’ll be nice if we get fewer unreasonable demands from now on, with Liam in our corner. I still can’t believe we ended up with such a hardworking noble...”

Even as the brigadier general was grateful for the count’s work ethic, he just

couldn't understand why.

As for Marie's training assignment, she had been made a soldier on the front lines.

"Damn that ground meat woman!"

Outfitted in a powered suit, she jumped from a transport craft, cursing Tia under her breath. The suit had no parachute, but it deployed a barrier just before she landed, which absorbed the impact. Finding herself in a dense jungle, Marie cautiously surveyed her surroundings.

"You all right, Marie? I heard you shout something," said a voice inside her helmet.

"Everything's fine," she responded curtly, and the commanding officer she communicated with didn't pry further.

"Got it. Then infiltrate the enemy's hideout and rescue those hostages. It'll be a difficult mission, but I have every faith in your abilities."

Having been given a completely outrageous mission to raid an enemy base and rescue a number of hostages all on her own, Marie thought, *How dare Tia assign me here! When I get back, I'm gonna separate that ground meat woman's head from her shoulders.*

The reason she'd been assigned to this special ops unit was because Tia had secretly pulled some strings. The woman had actually had the audacity to come out and tell her, "There's no place for you at Lord Liam's side."

Marie moved nimbly through the jungle, taking out lookouts with her knife when she found them. Watching her quick work remotely, her commanding officer praised her abilities.

"Incredible work. You remind me of an old subordinate of mine."

Marie conversed with the officer as she continued on, her curiosity piqued. "You had someone as skilled as me? Who was it?"

The idea that there was someone out there as strong as her piqued her interest.

“She went through many names. She was also a spy, you see. She was definitely strong in battle, but she saw any kind of mission through with ease.”

“I’d like to meet her.”

“Well, I can’t divulge that, but I assure you, she was just as skilled as you are.”

When the enemy base was in sight, Marie cut communications and began to infiltrate.

“Well, if I want to make it back to Lord Liam, I’ll have to hurry and finish my work here. I haven’t had any kind of fun lately—I need an opportunity to blow off some steam.”

That day, thanks to Marie, one crime syndicate ceased to exist.

Getting a little exercise definitely felt good. After slapping the colonel around a bit, I was in a much better mood.

“And I still get to go home on time today.”

While I was congratulating myself for another job well done, Wallace came up to me with a tired look on his face.

“You really care a lot about going home on time, don’t you, Liam? You think that’s okay? There are a bunch of people who have to stay late.”

The senior officers who still had work to do were giving us looks as we prepared to leave. Standing with Wallace and me, Eila looked like she felt awkward too.

“We kinda stand out, don’t we?” she said.

I didn’t care one bit. My own work was finished, and that was that.

“Overtime is overrated,” I declared.

One of the other workers left his desk to approach me. “You’re not gonna help us out?” he asked. “We’d be done in no time if you did, you know.”

I told him to do his own work and shoved him aside. What value was there in helping out my coworkers? Fostering a spirit of cooperation? Each individual helping support everyone else’s weight? Pointless.

“What’s even the value in it?”

In my past life, I had worked hard for the good of my company, for the good of my coworkers, and it hadn’t done a thing for me. Work was meant to be finished on time, so you could go home and have time enough to rest. As long as you did the work, your salary was paid, and that should be enough. Of course, they’d always want more from you, but if it wouldn’t do you any good, there was no point putting in the extra effort. Oh, they might thank you for working hard, but very seldom would you actually be rewarded for your efforts. That was why in this life, I made sure to only do what I was paid for, and nothing extra.

“No matter what anyone says,” I said, “I won’t do more than I need to. If anyone wants me to put in overtime, then they’d better stack up some gold bars and bow their head to me when they ask!”

I said my piece, and Eila shrugged.

“Yeesh, there’s Liam’s love of gold again.”

“Yep, I don’t deny it. Now come on, let’s get out of here.”

I led the two of them out of our place of work, and outside the building we found a large limousine waiting.

“Well, that’s fancy,” I said. “Is somebody important coming outside, or something?”

The elegant limousine confused me. There weren’t many nobles working in this unpopular building, so the car must have belonged to a visitor. Then again, I couldn’t think of a reason a rich person would have to visit our workplace. Was it some bigshot noble here to lodge a complaint? While I was wondering all this, Wallace noticed something.

“Isn’t it here for you, Liam?”

“What?”

I approached the vehicle, and a door immediately opened. Out from the car stepped Rosetta, dressed casually. It was my first time seeing her in quite a while, and she looked a little bit more mature.

“Darling!” she exclaimed.

“Rosetta?!”

I felt the impulse to dodge her as she threw herself at me, but she’d probably fall to the ground if I did, so I could only catch her in my arms.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” I stammered.

“You’re done with your work for the day, aren’t you? My training is done too, so I’m staying at the hotel now. I came to get you so we could spend some time together!”

When Wallace and Eila heard this, they slipped right into the limousine.

“Hey, that’s nice of you,” Wallace said. “We’ll take you up on that ride, then. Hey Liam, it’s crazy in here! There’s booze and snacks! And it’s all the good stuff!”

Eila gushed, “The upholstery in here is amazing!”

I rushed to try to stop them, but was too late because they already hopped right in.

“H-hey! Weren’t we going out today?”

Wallace was already munching snacks. “We can do that at the hotel, can’t we? I’m broke anyway, so one place is as good as another so long as I don’t have to pay.”

Damn you! I knew Wallace wasn’t going to be any help, so I looked to Eila instead. Her eyes were glued to the snacks in the limousine.

“Is it okay to eat these, Rosetta?”

Standing with me outside the limo, Rosetta smiled at Eila. “Of course.”

“Yay! Come on, Liam, get in! I was curious where you were living anyway. I want to see it!”

You’re not gonna be any help either?

Rosetta looked up at me with sorrowful eyes. “You were about to go out, Darling? You have to spend time with your coworkers... That makes sense, I understand. I-I won’t insist, then.”

Why did I feel guilty looking at Rosetta all of a sudden? And I was just gonna go tour some bars with Wallace and Eila. It wasn't a work thing.

"N-no, I was just gonna go drinking with these two. It was nothing important."

For some reason, I answered truthfully, and sealed off my own escape route.

"Really? Then let's go to the hotel! There are so many different kinds of restaurants there, I never get sick of them. Oh, and I've heard they already have all sorts of alcohol in stock just for you, Darling."



“O-oh yeah?”

When I’d first met her, I’d thought of Rosetta as a level-headed woman with an unbending steel will, but as soon as she became engaged to me, she’d ended up like this. I’d expected her to be upset about the engagement I myself had pursued, so it was a letdown that I couldn’t have any fun tormenting her with it. Becoming her “Darling” was an uncomfortable surprise.

In an attempt at small talk, I asked Rosetta about her life at the hotel and what she was doing there.

“I’m studying Capital Planet culture with some other noble girls who are here now. It’s a lot of fun.”

Was it like a young wife attending cooking classes? That did sound fun, I supposed...not that I had the least bit of interest in her studies *or* cooking classes.

Rosetta’s expression darkened. “Also, Darling... You have some visitors.”

“Visitors?”

More visitors, eh? I just hope it’s not like that colonel from earlier...

After Liam left, two of his coworkers leaned closer in their chairs to talk about him. They were both veterans of the department, having worked there for decades. During that time, plenty of nobles had come to work in logistics for their training periods, so these two had a collection of them to compare Liam to.

“Why does he come to work normally and do everything that’s expected of him?”

They were actually surprised that Liam was working as diligently as he was.

“It makes no sense. You expect a noble to come in late and leave early. Most of them don’t even come to work in the first place, and they don’t do anything except goof off when they do show up.”

Many nobles had come and gone from logistics for their training periods. The

thing was, most of them didn't actually appear for their shifts and just did whatever they wanted instead. The fact that Liam and his friends were actually doing work was highly unusual.

"Hey, did you see the brigadier general? He went home on time, humming to himself."

"How many decades has it been since that guy didn't need to do overtime?"

The two logistics clerks were in awe of Liam, after being put through hell by the unreasonable behavior of nobles up until now.

"We don't even hear a peep of complaint from patrol fleets nowadays."

"The 'education' he gives them really seems to be helping. Count Banfield really is as diligent as people say, isn't he?"

"Diligent, hardworking, and doesn't throw his position or influence around... I guess nobles like him really do exist."

Oh, Liam could be violent with those like the patrol fleet colonel who visited today, but he never raised a hand against the people he worked with regularly. Because of all this, most of his colleagues considered him to be an exemplary noble.

"I thought it was just a rumor, but he really is a wise ruler, isn't he?"

"Man, I'm jealous of the people who live under House Banfield."

Chapter 6:

Empire Merchants

MY LUXURIOUS LOUNGE on one of the hotel's upper levels had a nice, quiet feel. Sure, I liked more showy places too, but this was actually the sort of environment I preferred living in. It had been the right choice letting Thomas arrange my living quarters on the Capital Planet. The amount of money that had been sunk into renovating this place was fitting for an evil lord like me.

Satisfied with my base of operations, I sat on a couch with the two people Thomas had arranged for me to meet sitting across from me.

One had been introduced as Elliot, the young president of the Clave Firm. He was a blond man with his hair parted to the side and he wore a suit. In appearance, he resembled someone in his early twenties, and his actual age was fairly young for this world. He wore a good-natured smile on his face.

"Thank you so much for meeting with us today," he said.

Next to him was a board member of the Newlands Company, named Patrice. She was a beautiful woman with red hair and green eyes, wearing a suit that showed off her ample bosom. Was this an attempt to seduce me? There was no doubt in my mind that many men would be easily swayed by the sight.

The alluring woman tried to butter me up. "We're so pleased we could meet with a future duke like you, Lord Liam. You're well known, even here on the Capital Planet."

Despite her flattery, I didn't particularly like this type of woman. She reminded me too much of my wife in my previous life. Flashy women like her just didn't agree with me.

I glanced at Thomas, who looked humbled sitting beside the two powerful merchants.

"Lord Liam, your guests wanted to meet with you in the hope of becoming personal merchants to House Banfield."

These two big names on the Capital Planet came all this way to see me, just to ask if they could join my team of personal merchants. Each of them had bigger companies than Thomas's firm, so they would both probably come in handy.

"My personal merchants, eh?"

"Yes," Elliot said, smiling. "We would love to be of use to you, Lord Liam. The Clave Firm personally serves the Imperial house. Our company has a long history, with many great accomplishments to our name. I'm sure we would be very useful to you."

Next to him, Patrice thrust out her chest, not about to be overshadowed. "True, the Clave Firm stands out among the merchants here on the Capital Planet, but the Newlands Company does business throughout the Empire. We support many other ruling lords, so we could surely support you as well, Lord Liam."

I liked people who flattered me, but you knew there was always a catch. I never trusted anyone who claimed they "just wanted to help me." Pure goodwill? That had no meaning when it came to the almighty dollar.

"Thomas is already my personal merchant. Do you understand that his company is important to me?"

Thomas was clearly flustered when I named him. *Come on, if you're an evil merchant, be a little more confident, Thomas!*

"Of course we do," Elliot said, gesturing with animation. "We would never try to drive the Henfrey Company out of business. We only encourage you to make use of the Clave Firm's services as well."

Patrice expressed the same stance. "The Newlands Company doesn't wish for exclusivity either. We would be happy if you continued to patronize the Henfrey Company as well."

The two of them smiled as they discussed their plans with me. Both Elliot and Patrice came armed with financial incentives as well.

Elliot went on, "The Clave Firm wishes to donate some funds to House Banfield as a sign of good faith. We're happy to provide you with anything you might need here on the Capital Planet during your training, free of charge."

Patrice cut in, "If you make use of the Newlands Company, we'll provide House Banfield with any resources you desire at very reasonable prices, and you can expect plenty of yearly freebies in addition to that."

They both seemed to think very highly of House Banfield, but how was I supposed to trust anyone who said they'd give me something for free?

"Sounds great. So, what's the bottom line... What are you two after?"

The smiles of both Elliot and Patrice became strained.

"What are we after?" Elliot replied. "Well, we're merchants, of course. Naturally, we're in it to make a profit. We expect House Banfield to be big customers."

Patrice answered, "We've seen your meteoric rise, and we expect much more from you as time goes on. We believe having a good relationship with you could benefit us greatly in the future."

I'd seen this type of pasted-on smile before. It was the smile of my ex-wife. I still couldn't forget the face of the woman who had deceived me so terribly.

I narrowed my eyes and spoke coldly. "Wipe those fake smiles off your faces."

Elliot's face went blank immediately. "The rumor was that you were a warm and wise ruler, but I guess there are things you can't know until you meet face-to-face."

Patrice was still smiling, but it conveyed a different kind of vibe. It was almost predatory, as though she were sizing me up. "So, these are your true colors? Well, I have to say, I like it."

See? I knew there was a catch.

"So, again... What is it that you two *really* want of me?"

With the air of phony goodwill dispelled, Thomas explained things plainly.

"Lord Liam, what the two of them desire is House Banfield's military power."

"That I can understand. Though, it seems a bit strange for such accomplished merchants to want to rely on me in particular. I'm sure you have plenty of other options."

Plenty of minor merchants dreamed of an alliance with House Banfield, but these two firms already had a lot of other nobles to rely on. If they didn't, they wouldn't be such big names. The Clave Firm served the Imperial house directly, meaning they could rely on the Imperial Army itself to back them. House Banfield's name should be meaningless to them.

Elliot laced his hands together in front of his face, drawing in a deep breath before explaining his circumstances. "A few years ago, when I had just become head of the family business, I had some clashes with the other higher-ups. Right now, our ties to a certain noble family are tighter than I like, and that's why I'm trying to be careful. I'd like to cut those ties, but the other board members don't agree with me."

I could imagine how hard it would be for a company to sever a relationship with a powerful noble, if the noble didn't want that...and especially so if there was resistance from the other leaders of the company.

"It's highly frustrating when people think you'll be easy to manipulate just because you're inexperienced. The truth is that my father also wished to cut ties with these nobles, but they found out about that—and they assassinated him. So as you can see, I'm in a dangerous position right now myself."

What a story. I guess even successful companies have their serious issues.

"Why don't you go crying to the Empire for help?"

"What the Empire requires is the Clave Firm, not me personally. In a sense, I'm expendable. The other thing is that a lot of the people who work for my father's killers are also connected to the Empire."

So, rather than continue to be at the mercy of his board members, Elliot had decided to seek out a noble who would back him up personally.

I glanced at Patrice, who then told me her own circumstances. She was just ambitious.

"Unlike Mr. Elliot here with his sob story, I just want the Newlands Company for myself."

Now that the masks of propriety were gone, Elliot put on a sour face at her words. I was interested in hearing what she had to say.

“Go on.”

“A bunch of my relatives are on the board of the Newlands Company, and succession is always a fairly messy affair.” Patrice crossed her arms under her large breasts to push them up more. “I want you to pull some strings and make me the next company president. There would be a handsome reward in it for you, of course.”

Thomas explained the pros and cons of joining forces with the two of them. “House Banfield would undoubtedly make great progress with their assistance, Lord Liam, but in either case it would also mean taking on some trouble.”

“I can imagine that’d be true.”

It was precisely because of how powerful these merchant companies were that these two would need an outsider’s backing to go up against them. It was easy enough to understand: they both desired my ability to use violent force.

My guests waited for my answer.

“Sounds fine to me. I’ll help you two out.”

Elliot and Patrice both looked wary. My swift answer likely made them suspicious.

“You understand what it is you’re promising, right?” Elliot cautioned me.

“Of course I do.”

These two must have been pretty villainous themselves if they wanted to partner with a guy like me. No doubt they had heard all about my evil deeds from Thomas. The noble Elliot wanted to “cut ties with” must have been one of those upright types who tried to impose morality on moneymaking efforts. I hated sanctimonious nobles, so I didn’t mind helping the guy out.

Less wary now, Patrice smiled at me, but it wasn’t an expression I would call beautiful. Indeed, it was more like the hungry grin of a villain. It was oddly scary seeing a stunning woman smile in that way. She seemed excited at the prospect of taking on her competitors.

“So, then, you’ll help me too? You’ll support my climb to the position of president over all my other relatives?”

Patrice seemed quite excited at the prospect of her little family quarrel.

“Do what you want. Either way, I’ll support the two of you, but I will say this first. Your end of the bargain is to make me profit. I want you to profit by our association as well. The best sort of deal is when we both get something from it, right?”

Loyalty? Duty? Gratitude? I couldn’t believe in ideals like those. The relationship I proposed was much more honest.

Patrice put a hand to her mouth and her cheeks flushed red. “You’re not at all like I imagined you, Lord Liam. I mean that in a good way, of course. I thought you would value honor over profit.”

Honor? Me? I’m an evil lord. Does she think I’m one of those bad guys with a heart of gold in a mobster movie or something? I might have liked those kinds of characters back in the day, but I didn’t care for them now.

“What, would you guys rather have honor over profit? You can’t run a business like that, can you? Isn’t that right, Thomas?”

Thomas fidgeted nervously at my question. “I-I’m not sure what to say to that...”

“If you want to be my personal evil merchant, Thomas, you’ve got to get ahold of yourself, man. In any case, if you guys make me money, I’ll help you out all you want. A nice, simple deal, right?”

Elliot smiled, but it wasn’t the smile of the good-natured young man he’d come across as at the start. “Of course. It’s much easier to trust the terms of a simple contract than abstract concepts like duty and obligation.”

Patrice’s cheeks were still flushed with excitement. “Let’s draw up that agreement then, shall we? One between you and me, Lord Liam.”

Sounds good. I like them much better now than when they were pretending to be benevolent. I’ve become a lot more like an evil lord myself, haven’t I?

After signing contracts with Liam, Elliot and Patrice were alone together in an elevator, returning to the ground floor. The walls of the elevator were glass, so

they could look out over the night view of the Capital Planet.

Elliot loosened his necktie and said to Patrice, “He was easier to talk to than I was expecting.”

Patrice crossed her arms, putting her back to the wall instead of him, as if she hadn’t let her guard down yet. “Don’t act like we’re friends, Elliot. We’re still on different sides here.”

“Oh? I think it would benefit both of us if we worked together.”

“What benefit would there be in joining forces with a powerless president?”

“That’s rich, coming from a mere board member like yourself.”

“At least I’m not some little boy who came crying to House Banfield because he’s so scared of House Berkeley.”

The nobles Elliot feared were indeed House Berkeley. The board members of the Clave Firm supported House Berkeley, because the way they saw it, a paying customer was a paying customer even if they happened to be a pirate noble. But things weren’t necessarily that simple. Elliot’s fear was that if the pirates gained too much of a hold over the company, it would ultimately suffer or even fall under their control completely. Elliot didn’t want to see that happen, so he’d decided to work with Liam since he was already in direct conflict with House Berkeley. He was a little worried when he heard how upright a person Liam was, but the boy turned out to be a lot more interesting than he was expecting.

“I thought you were in the same situation as me,” Elliot said. “I hear a lot of your board members are close to House Berkeley as well. The principles you hold aren’t exactly in fashion these days.”

Elliot knew that Patrice was a much more honorable person than she presented herself to be.

Patrice averted her gaze and feigned innocence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know the Newlands Company has been close to House Berkeley for a long time. You want to change that, don’t you?”

House Berkeley was a problem for the Newlands Company, as well. The bullying pirate nobles were hard to ignore, so the current president chose to coexist with them. The Newlands Company supported House Berkeley in order to avoid pirate attacks, but that arrangement just didn't sit right with Patrice.

"I can't just go along with the rest of them," Patrice said. "There's no point in just going with the flow. If they want to bet on House Berkeley, I'll just bet on House Banfield and hope for House Banfield to prevail."

Elliot smiled when Patrice said she was only using Liam to leverage for control of her company. "You sure that's the only reason you want to work with the count?" he asked suggestively.

"Of course that's the only reason! Anyway, like you said, it was easier to talk to the head of House Banfield than I was expecting."

"We can't exactly let our guards down yet, though."

Patrice had planned on trying to win Liam over by appealing to the virtuous nature she had heard people speak of, but she smiled thinking about what a surprising personality he turned out to be.

"I think it'll be more fun working with him than I was expecting. I like that he's not just a goody two-shoes."

Most nobles prioritized their own profits, but Liam didn't trust that sort of relationship.

"We just need to do what we can so he's victorious against House Berkeley," Elliot said.

Patrice nodded. "Of course. I'll be in trouble if he isn't."

Once Liam started training at the Capital Planet, a lot of soldiers soon found their fortunes taking a turn for the worse. These disgruntled people turned out to be the delinquent soldiers living wastefully extravagant lives.

"Dammit! That cocky brat!" one of these men complained to another.

The soldiers who'd been enjoying a cushy life until now, including nobles assigned to patrol fleets, were furious with Liam. These individuals had been

committing embezzlement, paying bribes, and doing all sorts of other unsavory things.

“You said it,” said another of these disgruntled soldiers. “The booze they ration out to us is cheap as hell, and now there’s no budget for entertainment? What is this?!”

“What’s the point of these logistics people if they can’t provide the creature comforts we need?”

“Plus, our fleets! My fleet was just ordered to downsize!”

They were all in agreement: these changes were the fault of Liam of House Banfield. None of these soldiers would dare defy him to his face, but it was common for them to gather and badmouth him to voice their frustrations.

“Somebody needs to educate that brat!”

“Yeah, you do it, though. I’m not doin’ it.”

“He’s too strong to go up against. What an annoying kid.”

“He doesn’t even take bribes! I tried to find some weakness or vulnerability to take advantage of, but there’s jack.”

They were all trying to solve their Liam problem somehow, but no one was having any luck. Meanwhile, watching over these grumbling delinquent soldiers was the Guide. He sat in a seemingly empty chair nearby, bouncing his legs and clapping joyfully.

“It’s so nice that Liam’s steadily making enemies. I’m sure I can find a use for these resentful people too!”

The Guide snapped his fingers, and black smoke began to emanate from his body. It filled the room, and the men didn’t even notice as they breathed it in. Then, one of them seemed to suddenly come upon an idea.

“Wasn’t there a rumor that House Berkeley was going to settle things once and for all with House Banfield?”

All the other gathered soldiers were very interested in the man’s story.

“Is that true?”

“I’ve heard they’re recruiting soldiers. What do you think? We should join forces with House Berkeley to get the army back to the way it was before. If we join now, we could probably get tons of rewards from House Berkeley.”

The delinquent soldiers exchanged ugly grins. The Guide was positively gleeful, having recruited even more enemies of Liam.

“This still isn’t enough... I can’t stop here if I’m going to take Liam down.”

The Guide had been careless in the past, but he wouldn’t underestimate Liam again. He stood, adjusted his hat, and left the room.

Of course, he didn’t notice that a small light followed behind him as he left. The light took on the shape of a dog, and it had been watching him the whole time from the corner of the room.

For the first time in quite a while, I was spending one of my days off with Kurt. Normally, I would have invited along Wallace and Eila, and probably Rosetta too, but they all happened to be busy, so it was just me and Kurt.

We sat across from each other at a round table on a café terrace, discussing our recent lives.

“How have you been, Liam? Is your work going well?”

“Well enough that I’m so bored, I’m yawning all the time.”

I usually spent my days lazily at my training assignment. I left most of the work to the AI to handle, and I was already finished checking everything over before noon. I then had a leisurely lunch and relaxed for the rest of my break. After that, I wrapped up my work, prepared to go home on time, and took it easy until the shift was over. If anyone complained to me, I used my position to chase them off, and here and there I threw some regular army commanders a bribe—I mean, a seasonal greeting. That is to say, Tia had told me that if I sent ample supplies to the front lines, everyone would “understand how wonderful I am.” I figured it couldn’t hurt.

For various reasons, a lot of supplies hadn’t been finding their way to the front lines up until now. Part of it was that there wasn’t enough budget to meet

and ship the requests, but the other reason was that the deliveries would get diverted before reaching their proper destination. Another logistics operation was channeling the supplies where they shouldn't be going, so I ratted them out as soon as I was aware of it. I had that brigadier general of the military police who unjustly took me in for questioning make it up to me by investigating this other logistics group. Now, goods were getting to the front lines where they were meant to be going.

Our budgets had recovered significantly after we stopped sending so many unnecessary supplies to patrol fleets, and as a result, all the regular Imperial Army fleets that protected the Empire's borders owed me one. I was just doing the job that was expected of me, and to my personal benefit, I racked up a bunch of people who were now indebted to me. It was a pretty nice deal. I was sure there'd be some favor or another I could ask of a commander of the regular army one of these days.

I asked Kurt how he'd been doing.

"So, what about you? You graduated from the university and now you're fulfilling your training as an official, huh?"

Kurt looked up from his lunch, a troubled look on his face. "Actually, there's a bit of a problem right now. My work is going fine, but... I have a lot of female suitors, you see..."

Since graduating from primary school, Kurt had grown in pretty much all the ideal ways. He shot up from a pretty boy to a handsome man. He told me that there were more and more women gunning for him at work by the day, and he was having an awkward time of it.

"I'm jealous!"

"It's not all fun and games, you know. What, you don't have any stories like that, Liam?"

"Nope. There are more men than women where I work, and when I go out, I've only got Wallace and Eila with me. Well, sometimes Rosetta shows up too."

Now that I was talking about my situation, I felt rather pathetic. An evil lord like me should have women waiting on him hand and foot. Why were there so

few women around me? I mean, Eila was definitely pretty, but she was just a friend of mine. Tia was busy right now, and Marie was doing her training somewhere else... Not that I looked at those two knights that way anyway... They had impressive skills, but they just didn't do it for me as potential lovers.

I sighed, and Kurt looked pleased for some reason.

"Oh yeah?" he said.

"What are you grinning about?"

"N-nothing. I'm not happy about it, or anything. U-umm... Oh, that's right! You'll be receiving your official posting soon, eh? Who's your adjutant going to be?"

"Adjutant?"

Kurt had thrown me off by changing the subject so quickly, but it was a less embarrassing topic than before, so I started to think about his question. Most big nobles like me ended up being field officers when they were appointed to their official posts. In that case, the army provided them with an adjutant.

"I hadn't really thought about it."

Truth be told, I was fine with pretty much anyone. If the army was sending them, it was bound to be someone talented and good-looking. No matter who they provided, it would probably be someone decent.

Kurt seemed especially curious about who it would be. "I heard it's a real topic of discussion in the military right now. Apparently, a lot of people are already volunteering, so the army's having trouble making a choice."

Who could blame them for wanting to be an adjutant to the future duke?

"I'm fine with anyone, as long as it's a beautiful woman."

When I said that, Kurt cautioned me.

"You should be careful. Someone like that is going to want a personal relationship with you. Some of these candidates would probably be a real headache. My father told me to watch out, too. Like I said, even where I'm working now there are all these women who want to be my mistress."

Kurt then sighed tiredly, evidently put off by my attitude.

“But, well, aren’t you popular,” I said.

“It’s not just me. Lots of people are out there trying to become some noble heir’s adjutant or personal secretary.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Adjutants in the military and secretaries for officials. They know if they make a good impression in that position, their boss is likely to take them along when they leave. Everybody wants to be the mistress of a noble. That’s the good life, they say.”

It was like marrying up without the marriage part, I supposed. Regular people had to work hard to gain the sort of position nobles enjoyed at birth. I listened to Kurt with interest, then got an idea.

“I’ll request an absolute beauty for my adjutant, then. It’s not like I hate women sucking up to me, after all. I’ll get some good use out of her.”

Kurt smiled uncomfortably at my wording. “You haven’t changed, Liam. If you request an ‘absolute beauty,’ though, I’m sure you’re bound to get one. Appearance does come into play in these decisions, after all.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I said, returning to my meal.

Kurt seemed like he wanted to say something more, but in the end, he just switched the topic of conversation to something else.

Lined up in an expansive room were a great many female military officers, all of them beautiful. It was as though someone had gathered up a bunch of models and dressed them up in army uniforms.

Tia strode through the room boldly, her military insignia designating her as a colonel. All the hard work she’d done reorganizing the patrol fleets hadn’t gone unappreciated, and she’d risen high in rank because of it.

At first, Tia had only been tasked with preparing a patrol fleet for Liam to command, but the scope of this new fleet ended up dwarfing even some regular army fleets. She inadvertently created a fleet that anyone could tell was

extraordinarily powerful. Originally, she was just supposed to reorganize some of the Empire's superfluous patrol fleets and create a place where Liam could comfortably finish his military service. However, Liam had given her a little too much pocket money and the overzealous Tia had put together a patrol fleet of thirty thousand ships, making it rival some regular army fleets. In the end, she had gotten rid of several unnecessary patrol fleets and put together one two times the size of a regular army fleet. It was clear that Tia was extremely talented.

And right now, the new colonel was addressing the gathered female officers, gesturing as she did so.

"It's finally time for Lord Liam to take his official assignment."

The gathered officers were all women who had graduated from the military academy and were now serving officially in the army. They were all from House Banfield's domain, as well.

"You are elites, hand-picked from Lord Liam's domain. Therefore, Lord Liam will choose his adjutant from among your ranks. No...he *must* choose one of you!"

When Liam stepped into his official post, the army would assign him an adjutant. Many people in the military were already vying for the position, but Tia wouldn't accept an outsider at Liam's side. She knew that if Liam liked his adjutant, he would take her with him when he left the military. Naturally, an outsider would support Liam in most matters, but if at any time she prioritized the Imperial Army over Liam, there would be a problem. Tia's conclusion was that she would simply gather potential adjutants from House Banfield's domain. There was also the possibility that Liam would take an amorous interest in the one in this position, in which case Tia wanted only a very accomplished soldier to get that close to him. In any case, she didn't want an outsider in that position.

"Whoever is selected, you will devote yourself fully to Lord Liam. You must offer up your body and soul to him!"

"Yes, ma'am!" the women all answered in unison, giving a sharp salute. Tia was satisfied with their response.

No one could be a more talented candidate than these women, and still look so good. Any one of them would surely satisfy Lord Liam. The question remains whether or not he will, in fact, choose one of them...

Tia had worked diligently to assemble this offering of beautiful candidates, but she still wasn't sure if Liam would ultimately make his selection from among them. She could explain to him her reasoning for only choosing from within House Banfield's domain, but she knew Liam disliked unfairness, and it wasn't her place to be insistent. She didn't want to bother him by being too pushy.

These women are elites among the elite. Surely Lord Liam will be satisfied with this group!

The top military brass were all at their wits' end.

"What do we do?"

"We need someone who can act as a go-between for us and the count... That is, the future duke."

"That's why I'm asking if we have someone who can do that."

While Liam had been making a name for himself in the logistics department, his head knight had been putting together a cutting-edge military fleet. By shifting resources from the patrol fleets into the regular fleets, Liam had solved one of the military's annoying problems. On top of that, he was in possession of a huge stock of rare metals. The top brass desired a close connection with him no matter what, and helping Liam choose an adjutant seemed to be the perfect opportunity...but his people kept thwarting anyone from getting too close to him in that regard. House Banfield had already prepared a collection of elites for his selection, so the military was struggling to find candidates that rivaled these in ability, appearance, and personality.

One of the gathered officers looked up. "Maybe she could do it..."

"Her looks?"

"There's no problem there, plus she's already acquainted with the count."

"Who are you talking about, now?"

The woman's data was displayed for all present.

"Major Eulisia Morisille. She was originally with a weapons factory, but she recently completed retraining and joined a special forces unit."

Eulisia was certainly qualified and she had a number of other achievements to her name as well. The military didn't want to let her go, but with her talent and looks, they decided she had the best chance of satisfying Liam's requirements.

"Where does she stand on the matter? This will change the course she's on... Would she accept this?"

There was the possibility that whoever was chosen would end up as a noble's mistress or concubine. Some would readily volunteer for such a future, but plenty of women would reject the idea too. If the major was one of the latter, they would have to give up on her. The top brass would rather not gamble on forcing her into the position if that made it likely she would fail at it.

"Don't worry about that—she volunteered. Still, it would be hard to let her go..."

"These are some incredible accomplishments I'm seeing here. I wouldn't mind having her work for me."

The top brass thought very highly of Eulisia.

"Well, if this doesn't work out, I'll at least be satisfied that we tried our best."

Thus, with some help from the Guide's manipulations from the shadows, Eulisia slipped in as one of Liam's adjutant candidates.

At work, I was looking through a stack of documents that almost looked like a list of candidates for an arranged marriage, complete with glamour shots. My coworkers seemed curious, but no one made any complaints.

Wallace was surprised when he picked up one of the files and looked inside. "What a babe! Wow... I wonder if she'd be my adjutant?"

Technically Wallace was royalty, so when he finished his training, he'd be promoted to lieutenant, but there were no plans for him to receive an adjutant of his own. After all, he wouldn't be in a position where he'd really need one.

Eila picked up a folder, opened it, and looked inside. “You don’t need one, Wallace. You could ask for a scary drill sergeant to watch over you, though. Should I put in a request?”

“Very funny. Hey, what are you doing with that request form? Stop it!”

The two of them kept bickering back and forth. Maybe a scary drill sergeant *would* do Wallace some good...

I picked up another file and opened it. I was taken aback by the face that looked back at me.

“What’s *she* doing here?”

I found myself looking at a picture of Eulisia. When I glanced through her history, I read that after leaving the Third Weapons Factory, she attended a military retraining center, and then went on to join a special forces unit. After that, she entered another retraining facility to study information-gathering. Apparently, she was becoming some kind of spy. I’d already thought she was decently talented before, but now she looked like quite a capable woman.

“Why’d she join a special forces unit?”

Wallace cocked his head at my confusion. “Someone you know?”

Eila looked down at the document in my hands, recognizing Eulisia. “Oh, is she that one from back then?”

“Yeah, she used to be a saleslady for a weapons factory. They always sent her to negotiate with me.”

Wallace looked her over. “It must be nice. When you’re a count, the beauties just flock to you without you even having to call them, huh?” He sounded envious.

I was amused by his jealousy, but right now, I had to do something about this mountain of files. If I went through all of them, I’d never get to go home on time. I’d been flipping through them at random, but hadn’t yet found a woman who struck me as being the one.

Man... I miss Amagi. Maybe I should just bring her to the Capital Planet. Amagi was handling all of my work back home though, and I didn’t feel comfortable

having her around when these Berkeley people posed a constant danger for me.

I'm sick of fighting with these Berkeleys. Maybe I should wrap this conflict up already. When I thought about that, choosing my adjutant suddenly didn't seem so important anymore.

"I guess Eulisia's fine then. I already know her, and I'm sure she's not a bad choice."

Eila was surprised that I wasn't taking my decision more seriously. "Can you really decide that quickly? Isn't this like choosing a mistress?"

While I remained in the military, my adjutant would assist me in both official and personal matters. Since physical relations tended to be included in those personal matters, most people carefully chose someone who would suit their tastes. I didn't care about that aspect, however.

"Hah! I could get together as many beautiful women as I want. I don't need to worry that much about my adjutant in particular."

There's no need to think too deeply on it. I'll just go with Eulisia. I recall her having a few quirks to her personality, but they shouldn't pose a problem.

Wallace threw me a frustrated look. "I want to get to a place in life where I can say that..."

Once I had finished choosing my adjutant, Eila changed the subject.

"Well, we'll be done with our training soon and getting our official assignments. I want to ask, Liam... Do you mind if I join your patrol fleet too?"

Eila was smart to want to stick with me. If she stayed by my side, she'd be sure to have a cushy life. Unfortunately, patrol fleets came with danger, however small the risk might be.

"Not happening. I've already arranged with the military for you to be officially assigned here at logistics, in the same role you've been training in."

"Huh? Wh-why?"

I sighed and explained it to her in a gentle tone. "Because as soon as I leave, those idiots will all be at it again and undo all our hard work. You'll be my

representative here, so if you have any problems, you're to contact me. Got it?"

Reluctantly, Eila agreed. "W-well, I guess when you put it that way, it makes sense."

Hearing this, Wallace gave me an expectant look and asked, "But you want me to join you, right, Liam?"

"Oh yeah! I'm going to work you to the bone!"

"Why are you so mean to me?!"

The very next day after I made my choice, Eulisia came to see me.

"Long time no see, Lord Liam."

Eulisia saluted me with a smile. I noticed her body was more toned than it was the last time I saw her, but she still had plenty of fullness to her chest and rear. In fact, her figure was even more impressive than before. Everywhere that should have been trim was, further emphasizing her breasts and butt.

When I saw her approaching my desk, I stopped fiddling with the electronic documents before me. *What's she doing here?*

"Weren't you supposed to be assigned to me six months from now?"

"I received permission to come early," Eulisia informed me. "I figured you'd still have plenty of work to do before your official assignment, so I'm here to assist. Please allow me to do whatever I can to help you with both official and unofficial business."

Well, isn't that nice of her? She's practically a different person than she was back when she worked for the Third Weapons Factory.

When Eulisia said "official and unofficial business," I got some jealous looks from the men seated around me. *Looks like everyone envies me. Eh, that doesn't feel too bad.*

For some reason, even Wallace was giving me a nasty look, so I made a mental note to make some problems for him in return later.

"So be it. You can be my assistant, then."

“Yes, sir!” Eulisia gave me another sharp salute, smiling at me warmly.

Huh? Why does she look cuter than she did before?

As she stood before Liam, Eulisia managed to keep her dark emotions hidden from him.

Finally. Finally, the time has come.

For decades, Eulisia had thought of nothing but this man who had brushed off her advances and broken her pride. During those years, she had prepared herself for the time when she could take her revenge against him.

“Shall we get right to it, Lord Liam?”

I’ll learn all of your weaknesses from right by your side!

She had already taken the first step in her revenge plot and was basking in satisfaction when suddenly, someone came bursting into Liam’s workplace in tears. This person was the rather problematic engineering captain of the Seventh Weapons Factory, Nias Carlin. At first glance, she had the look of a studious beauty with black hair and glasses, but Liam felt her personality left much to be desired.

“Lord Liaaam!”

Nias slammed the door open and collapsed to her knees right before Liam’s desk. Liam was now a captain in the military, and a person of nobility besides, so her behavior was more than unacceptable.

Wh-what are you doing?!

Nias was acquainted with Eulisia, but didn’t so much as greet her.

Liam was exasperated. “What do you want?”

Normally, Liam would be within his rights to throw her out of the building, but he was actually curious to hear what she had to say for herself.

Eulisia was exasperated. *Ugh! She’s impossibly rude! Get rid of her, why don’t you? He’s as lenient as ever.*

From Eulisia’s perspective, Liam was simply too kind to his acquaintances. He

could be firm at times, but by the typical standards of Imperial nobility, he was practically a saint. Even though she understood that about him, it still frustrated her to see him treating Nias so well.

“Listen to this, Lord Liam!” Nias cried. “I took the rare metals you provided me and used them to build a prototype ship! Everyone had to butt in, though, and —”

“I’ve heard this story before.”

Nias had been conducting various engineering experiments, but several other engineers in the Seventh Weapons Factory had forced the group’s focus on to other new technologies instead.

“Isn’t that unfair?! I had so many tests I wanted to dooo!”

“Oh yeah?”

As a result, apparently Nias hadn’t been able to complete her own plans.

Eulisia chuckled to herself internally. *Serves you right. Now, if you’re finished complaining, hurry up and get out of here already.*

Eulisia was eager to start sinking her fangs into Liam, but Nias’s presence was blocking her from biting.

Next, Nias said something truly outrageous. “Please, I need more rare metals and money! I want to create an entirely new kind of battleship!”

“What?!” Eulisia couldn’t help exclaiming in surprise at this shameless request. It was unthinkable for Nias to be demanding so much from Liam in such an unseemly way. Unfortunately, she saw that Liam was interested in what the other woman had just said.

“A new kind of ship, eh?”

“I’ll make a special battleship just for you, Lord Liam! So please, you have to give me the budget and rare metals for its development!”

Even Liam wasn’t ready to make a deal like that without knowing more details, but when Nias rose from her position on the floor, her skirt flipped up. It was completely unintentional on her part. After all, the underwear she had on was a simple pair of boy shorts, plain and practical. Most men would likely be

disappointed at the sight. However, when Liam saw them, his eyes widened.

Shit! Since Eulisia was always thinking about Liam, she'd thoroughly looked into his tastes and knew he preferred a sporty look to overly gaudy underwear on women.

Noticing Liam's gaze, Nias hurriedly adjusted her skirt. Embarrassed, she started making excuses. "S-sorry about that. Man, I've been so busy lately, I've gotten into the habit of grabbing whatever underwear is closest. Usually I wear better ones, really!"

Eulisia was sure that was a lie. Liam was trying to hide his reaction by clearing his throat, but she didn't miss the pleasurable glow to his face.

"I-is that right? Of course, understandable. Uhh... Right, the budget. I'll give you something to get it done."

Eulisia hid her face in her hands. *You idiot! Why are you so naive with crap like this?!*

Nias didn't miss an opportunity when Liam's purse strings started to loosen. "Rare metals too, please! Also, could you please buy some of our ships? I can't believe you! There's not a single ship of ours in that new fleet you're putting together right now!!! I mean, the whole fleet is a joint development of the Third and Sixth? I thought we were friends!"

"Oh, really? I left it all to Tia, so I didn't know."

It was his own special fleet, and yet Liam spoke of it as though he had no real interest in it. Eulisia had heard about the project through her connections with the Third Weapons Factory. *I heard the Ninth was involved too, but the Seventh was completely left out.*

Various factories had contributed to the new fleet, but when commissioning the work Tia had completely ignored the Seventh. Hearing this now, Liam had a guess as to why.

"You guys built a bunch of ships without taking their appearance into consideration again, didn't you?"

Nias removed her glasses and wiped her eyes. "We did our best with their

appearance, but when we offered them to Tia, she said they 'didn't suit you' and turned them all down! Now we have eight hundred unsold, brand-new ships in stock! We need someone to buy them from us!"

Their methods haven't changed, I see, Eulisia thought. And why take a gamble on making eight hundred ships when they weren't even ordered by anybody? Are you stupid?!

Liam seemed just as exasperated, but then he looked like he'd gotten an idea.

"Very well... I'll buy those eight hundred ships then."

"Really?"

Before Nias could get too excited, though, Liam added a condition. "Let me make an additional order as well. Seems like the other weapons factories are busy but you guys don't have much to do. Let's see... You've got older ships and weapons going out to scrap, right? I want those too."

"Of course! All the better! Yay! Now I can continue my research on next generation tech!"

"And on top of that, I want you to build a ship for me."

"One ship? A battleship?"

"Yeah, it'll be a battleship, but it's something I want made just for fun."

"H-huh?"

Liam then began to fill Nias in on the details of this request. Eulisia had no idea what the man was thinking.

Chapter 7:

The Berkeley Fleet

ON HOUSE BERKELEY'S home planet, Casimilo spoke with a soldier standing in his office who had come to see him.

"I took a look at your strategy. Pretty amazing work, though it'll require some reorganization if we're going use it against that Banfield brat."

The soldier was Dolph, who had risen to the rank of major. After losing to Liam in their match at military school, his life was knocked off course, and despite his rank, he ended up in a do-nothing position within the army. When he heard the rumors that House Berkeley was gearing up to fight Liam head-on, he rushed to meet with Casimilo. Eager for another chance to go up against Liam, Dolph was ready to throw everything he had into this strategy to defeat him.

"If you'll pardon my saying so," Dolph replied, "I'm not even sure this is enough. This was the absolute least I could come up with, taking into consideration a realistic budget and timeframe."

Casimilo was surprised that Dolph believed his plan to be insufficient. "It won't be enough to replace my entire fleet *and* change our fighting strategies? I've never even heard of a formation that specializes in mid-and short-range fighting."

Dolph projected a hologram before Casimilo. It was a stolen image of House Banfield's regular fleet.

"The quality of House Banfield's fleet is on the same level as the Imperial Army's. As for its size, sources suggest it's recently doubled from thirty thousand to sixty thousand ships."

"Sure, that's definitely a lot for a count, but they're still no threat to House Berkeley."

"Well, the problem is they have more than just numbers."

Next, Dolph projected a video of House Berkeley's fleet massacring some pirates. Their military might was clear to see.

"House Banfield's strength lies in their high level of organization and the quality of the equipment at their disposal."

"Why can't we overwhelm them with numbers? All they can scrape together is sixty thousand ships at most, right?"

"Even if we oppose them with a hundred thousand ships, if they can break through our formation, both sides will suffer great damage. If we're unlucky, we lose our fleet's commanding officer, and we'd be as good as lost in the chaos."

Using his experience in their previous face-off, Dolph had thought up this strategy specifically to face House Banfield.

"Therefore, we anticipate Liam's offensive mode of attack, and be ready to receive it. Essentially, we'll lead them into a trap and that makes them vulnerable. That's why our fleet must concentrate its efforts on mid-to short-range combat."

Dolph had told Casimilo that in order to beat House Banfield's fleet, he had to prepare a fleet of over one hundred thousand ships and throw traditional long-range tactics out the window. Casimilo actually thought better of him for this advice, though it went against established battle tactics. In fact, he was impressed *because* it went against the expected tactics.

Everybody else thinks so little of this kid. They say all we need to beat him is superior numbers...but not this one. No one who's advised me takes the danger the boy poses as seriously as him.

"What do you plan to do with this formation of ours if the enemy decides to keep a safe distance and sticks to long-range attacks?" Casimilo asked, testing Dolph.

"That would be dangerous, I admit, but I know Liam's style. House Banfield has always secured their victories with offensive charges. You're not likely to throw away a strategy that you've used for decades when it's never failed you before. The more victories they claim with it, the harder they'll find it to change their tactics in the middle of a battle."

In their conflicts with pirate gangs, House Banfield had spent the last several decades charging forward in fights, always emerging victorious. They had perfected the aggressive charge into an art form; their ships were always coordinated perfectly, and their gallant soldiers knew no fear. In a clash with House Berkeley, they were sure to rely on the same technique that had never failed them before.

Casimilo was satisfied that Dolph understood and anticipated House Banfield's methods. *It's him. It has to be him who'll secure our victory.*

Dolph spoke passionately in order to win Casimilo over to his ideas, not realizing Casimilo was already convinced. "True, it will take time and money to set things in motion, but these are necessary expenses if we're to defeat House Banfield! You'll have to prepare an entirely new, up-to-date fleet, and train your officers in my proposed strategy in order to pull it off. Your opponent warrants this effort, though—you mustn't underestimate House Banfield!"

House Berkeley's fleet would have to be completely reconfigured in order to fight against this one opponent. The new fleet would be ready to meet the enemy's charge, but would be lacking in a long-range battle. All the other soldiers Casimilo had consulted had just told him that so long as he had the numbers, he could fight in the normal way and triumph, but Casimilo had always suspected that wouldn't be enough.

"Will we be ready in time? House Banfield had a head start in building a new fleet."

"We can only try. No, I'll see that we will! We'll start immediately, to get even one more ship ready on time!"

Dolph's passion cemented Casimilo's resolve.

"Very well, then. Consider yourself hired."

Dolph couldn't help but smile at Casimilo's words, but he quickly composed himself and responded solemnly, "Thank you very much, sir! I would like you to begin this process by gathering pirates."

"What? We're gonna use them too?"

"House Berkeley's fleet will be the one to take on House Banfield, but I'd like

you to apply pressure elsewhere with pirate forces to prevent other houses from lending House Banfield support.”

“Good thinking. The brat doesn’t have many allies, but he does have some. Very well.”

Part of Dolph’s plan was to pressure those who had allied themselves with Liam so that he wouldn’t be able to summon reinforcements.

“The thing is,” Dolph went on, “I’ve heard a rumor that Liam is putting together a regular army fleet... According to my investigations, this is true. He might be planning to use it as his secret weapon.”

A regular fleet consisted of tens of thousands of ships. When Casimilo heard this, his confidence faltered. If this was true, even rounding up pirates to increase their own forces might not be enough. “Well, that’s not good!” he said.

“However, there *are* plenty of people in the army who don’t think highly of the Banfield brat. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to gather them up.”

“That would be fantastic!” Casimilo was excited by the idea. If they could get together all of the remaining patrol fleets and noble soldiers, that would be tens of thousands of more ships. Plus, it wasn’t only disgruntled soldiers who would ally themselves with Casimilo. He’d already been approached in secret by merchants and representatives of the First and Second Weapons Factories, who were bitter that Liam wasn’t using their services.

“Dolph, can you put together a fleet with the soldiers we can gather?”

“I can try, but I don’t know how useful it will be. It could be used as a decoy, perhaps.”

Neither Dolph nor Casimilo put much stock in those volunteering to help.

Casimilo said, “You gather those patrols together into one fleet, and I’ll contact a couple of weapons factories and have them get it into better shape.”

“Are you sure? It’ll increase your budget by a lot. Plus, those kinds of soldiers will complain and desert at the first sign of even slightly poor treatment.”

Dolph had his doubts about spending so much money on a fleet that might end up as a sacrificial pawn, but Casimilo told him not to worry about the

expense.

“I don’t care! If we’re going to do this, we’re going to go all out! Whatever it costs, if that misfit fleet is able to do any damage at all against him, it’s worth it!”

Casimilo had one more ploy in mind.

“Plus, the pirates will also serve as bait for House Banfield.”

“Bait?”

“That’s right. We’ll begin with having our pirate allies engage with House Banfield’s forces, but they’ll fight in the conventional way, long-range, to keep Banfield stuck in his usual strategy of charging head-on. That way, when we strike back at him later in a close combat battle, it’ll come as more of a surprise.”

Hearing that Casimilo was determined to succeed even at the cost of sacrificing his pirate allies, Dolph broke out into a cold sweat. Still, he smiled. “That’s a good idea. I feel one step closer to victory already.”

Unseen, the Guide watched these plans take shape and clapped his hands. Knowing that pirates, weapons factories, and resentful soldiers would be allying themselves with House Berkeley delighted him.

“Wonderful! Do everything you can to take Liam down, you two. I’ll be here in the shadows, supporting you all the way.”

Dolph had one last plan in his pocket, for the sake of insurance. “Lord Casimilo, may I suggest one more thing?”

“What is it?”

“I hear Liam’s going to have his own patrol fleet. We should try to sabotage it. Because he’s young and inexperienced, I seriously doubt the army would leave a fleet under his sole command. We should try to recruit the commander of his patrol fleet to our side.”

“You’re full of good ideas!”

The Guide’s grin curved even wider as he listened to the two revel in their evil plans.

“What is this?”

I was supposed to be assigned to a patrol fleet, and I had asked Tia to put one together for me, but what I now saw before me was a full army fleet, several times larger than standard. From the bridge of a new superdreadnought over three thousand meters in length, I looked out at a seemingly endless line of ships. The sight of battleships completely filling my field of view was stunning, but how exactly had things ended up like this?

As part of the ceremony celebrating my appointment, a holographic message of congratulations was projected into space above the ships. Next to me stood my adjutant, Eulisia, and my knight Marie, who was back from her special forces assignment. Wallace was also there as my benchwarmer. And then...

“Special Staff Officer, sir, thank you so much for appointing me as captain! Really, thank you!”

A large man with short, spiky hair had both my hands in his, and was shaking them up and down vigorously.

This was the recently promoted Brigadier General Cedric Noah Albareto. As he was Wallace’s half-brother, he was technically an Imperial prince as well, but he had no more claim to the throne than Wallace did. In other words, he was another worthless Imperial prince like Wallace. He would be serving as captain of my superdreadnought, the fleet’s flagship.

Though I had been promoted to lieutenant colonel, for this appointment I had received the unique title of “Special Staff Officer.” It was a position that had been specially created for me to fill.

Wallace was exasperated at his effusive brother. “Are you really going to start crying tears of happiness?”

“Of course I am! Do you have any idea what it was like, spending countless days pointlessly patrolling empty space? And how’d you nab such an exceptional patron, anyway?”

Cedric grabbed Wallace and gave him a noogie out of jealousy.

“Enough! Enough!” the younger brother wailed.

Tia eventually brought the fleet’s nominal commanding officer to the bridge.

“Lord Liam, allow me to introduce the commander.”

This was a man who looked to be in his forties, but it was hard to tell what his age truly was because of the popularity of anti-aging technology. In this world, looking middle-aged was proof of a significantly long life.

“I’ll be counting on you, Commander,” I told him.

The man smiled affably. “I never thought I’d be looking after the count who’s such a topic of conversation lately. Well, all there is to it is to do my duty.”

He wasn’t exactly sucking up to me, but to get to the position he was in he was probably quite capable. I was determined not to butt heads with this guy because of everything I had on my plate with House Berkeley—I didn’t need any new headaches. House Berkeley... They were so persistent.

With our greetings finished, Tia informed me of our immediate plans.

“Lord Liam, we’ll begin surveying our bases out on the frontier tomorrow.”

“Surveying bases?”

“Yes. In part to introduce ourselves to them, and in part to ensure our routes are secure.”

Normally such an activity would be carried out with far fewer ships. But with this many ships in my patrol fleet, it would be a huge waste of resources. In any case, here we were, so I thought we could at least make things more fun.

“Why don’t we split up the fleet and have a race to our destination? The first group to get there and take care of any problems like pirates scoping out the base gets a nice bonus from me.”

When I suggested making a game of this excursion instead of taking it seriously, Tia showed me a rare frown. “This fleet also serves to display your authority, Lord Liam. I wouldn’t advise utilizing it in that way.”

“Oh yeah?”

I was starting to think throwing my weight around with a huge fleet like this

would be fun too when Marie cut in to disagree with Tia.

“Oh? You would refuse Lord Liam? I advise you to let him do as he likes. It’s a waste of resources to move a fleet like this all together.”

Tia’s gaze sharpened at Marie, who was grinning as if to provoke her. “It’s a learning experience for Lord Liam to control a fleet this big, but I guess you can’t understand that.”

“Why should the fleet have to be kept together the entire time? We’ll all meet up again at the goal. Don’t be so inflexible, head knight.”

Seeing the two knights argue, Cedric and Wallace leaned closer and spoke in low voices.

“Do your patron’s knights not get along, Wallace?”

“They sure don’t. This happens all the time, so get used to it.”

Wallace was smiling, but my two top knights fighting like this in front of everyone was no laughing matter. Evidently, Eulisia couldn’t bear to watch either, so she spoke up.

“Lieutenant Colonel, will it be a race to our destination, then?”

She was ignoring the commander and trying to settle the matter with me directly. I glanced at the commander, and he just shrugged.

“I don’t mind either way,” he said. “We have no pressing matters to attend to at the moment.”

He seemed to feel I could do whatever I liked with it. Even at this size, this was still just a patrol fleet after all.

“We’ll race, then. I know—I’ll give points for beating any pirates we encounter. Like, ten points for a large pack. The number of points will determine that group’s reward.”

Later, I heard there was a meeting among some higher-ups where they got all fired up about my little game. As for me? Well, I was too busy enjoying the benefits of being an evil lord, so I couldn’t be bothered.

With three thousand ships in my group, I reached the planet that served as our goal. The base there was still in development and under the Empire's direct control. I wondered when my eager competitors would arrive here, hungry for their rewards.

Sitting on the bridge in a cushy chair, I swirled the drink in my glass.
"Entertain me, Wallace."

"Heh, you want another performance from me? Well, sorry, but I'm all out of material."

I'd already made Wallace fool around for my entertainment dozens of times. I wasn't surprised that he couldn't think of anything new to share. We'd been standing by here with nothing to do for days, and I was sick of it.

"I'm so bored..."

I thought it would be fun lounging around on my personal luxury liner, and the ship's facilities were indeed impressive. It even had its own little shopping mall and some chain stores, staffed by civilians. When the crew was on break or had a day off, there was plenty to do. The ship was like its own mobile colony.

I was interested in enjoying these amenities myself, but how would it look for an evil lord to hang around in public like just some common person? And yet, there wasn't anything for me to do in my quarters. I felt like lately I'd done nothing but practice the sword style known as the Way of the Flash.

"Do an impression, Cedric," I said to Wallace's brother.

"Heh... I've gone through all the ones I can do, Count."

Even Cedric was out of material. It appeared I was completely out of options, until Marie proposed an idea.

"Why don't we construct a spaceport, then? You can have the soldiers do the work, and it will kill some time. Plus, a spaceport will make your work easier in the future."

"A spaceport, eh?"

The developing planet we were visiting had no functional spaceport. Yes, there were several thrown-together structures, but the real thing would

certainly make things easier.

Looking into a monitor, below our many stationary ships I saw a planet lush with resources. Even from the bridge, I could tell that the land's development had barely started. For that reason, and because there was no proper spaceport, this was hardly a place that could support a large-scale fleet. The reason my patrol fleet had come all the way out here was because the Empire couldn't afford to be making regular trips.

The Empire's orders to me had been to check the area for pirates or other dangers. In other words, "go out into the middle of nowhere and kill any troublemakers you find." Besides instructing us to be watchdogs, though, they hadn't given us any other instructions about what to do once we got out here. I didn't see why the Empire would object to me constructing a spaceport, or whatever else I cared to do.

"Good idea," I told Marie. "But just a spaceport won't be enough. While we're at it, why don't we finish developing this whole planet to kill even more time?"

The bridge crew burst into an uproar when I said that, but a glare from Marie shut everyone up.

"Do you think that's okay?" she asked me. "This planet is under direct control of the Empire, Lord Liam. I don't see how developing it would benefit you in any way."

No matter how much work I put into this planet, it still wouldn't become mine, and yet I didn't care about that.

"It's just for fun... Like I said, it's just for something to do. Come on, let's get started right away."

Seeing how motivated I'd become, Eulisia made a suggestion. "Lieutenant Colonel, the planet is already partially settled. If you give your support to the colonists as well, I believe they will return the favor when we use this planet as a relay station in the future."

To be honest, I didn't care at all about the residents of the planet, but if I was going to do this, I might as well be thorough. In my own domain, I left most practical matters to Amagi because I liked to concentrate on making money, but

here it would be more fun to oversee all that myself. It was starting to feel like a real-life simulation game. If my efforts didn't prove successful, well, it was the Empire's planet and wouldn't hurt me one bit.

"Sure, we can support the colonists. We'll start by setting up our headquarters on the planet, and Wallace, I'll make you the site foreman."

"Whaaat?"

I tasked the reluctant Wallace with going down to the planet and readying a government office building for me. All the other facilities I felt we should construct came to mind one after another. And then...a memory of my past life came to me.

"I know... Let's build a bunch of public facilities too."

I wanted the colony to be the epitome of excess, after all, with a pleasing design as the main focus.

Tia clasped her hands and watched me spout off my ideas, her eyes sparkling. "Amazing as always, Lord Liam. Reaching out to personally assist in the development of a frontier planet... This is truly befitting of a wise, virtuous ruler such as yourself."

She really has the wrong idea about me. I'm playing with the lives of the people on this planet as if it's a game, and she's praising me for it! Well, controlling other people's lives is just what an evil lord does, and I'll develop this planet however I want.

Liam's fleet gradually obliterated all the pirates that operated in that region. It took about six months from the start of his assignment for that information to reach the prime minister on the Capital Planet. The man's eyes went wide when he read the report.

"This is incredible."

The prime minister had planted some informants amongst Liam's crew, so that he could learn just how powerful and effective Liam's special fleet proved to be. His operatives' reports were filled with nothing but praise for the noble.

Standing beside the prime minister, one of his aides looked relieved. “It seems he made his fleet spread out and race to eliminate the area’s pirates. What’s an especially nice surprise, though, is how he fixed up the planet serving as his fleet’s meeting point. We’d all but abandoned it, since we didn’t have the funds to complete its development.”

Liam had arrived at their goal planet first, and while he waited for the others had started in on the frontier planet’s development. His team quickly constructed a real spaceport, so future development would proceed much easier now. In fact, after hearing about the new construction, merchants were already starting to travel there to do business with Liam. He also oversaw development projects on the planet’s surface. The prime minister couldn’t help but smile as he read the reports.

“Hmm, he’s constructed some facilities for the colonists, I see. All very functional and well-thought-out.”

Basically, there’d been no proper facilities on the planet before this, so the residents would have been happy with pretty much anything. However, the new buildings had been constructed with an emphasis on beauty, and as he reviewed the pictures, the prime minister felt they were quite well done.

If I were to rate this project, I’d give him eighty points. With some more experience, I’m sure he could do even better. It’s his military achievements people tend to see first, but the count originally became known for his political skill.

In recent years, Liam had stood out primarily for his success in eliminating pirates, but when he had first come to be recognized, it was because of his skill at governing his domain. Now that he was stationed out in the middle of nowhere, he was developing a new planet base all on his own. The prime minister couldn’t help but smile when he thought about how the planet would be able to improve on its own now, thanks to Liam’s assistance.

However...the prime minister wasn’t one to blindly trust in anyone’s motives. He couldn’t imagine Liam had done all this work with no thought of reward for his efforts.

“Tell the military I want to see the count promoted to colonel, and to receive

a medal for his achievements, as well.”

“Do you think they’ll be okay with that?”

“It’s a paltry reward for what he’s done for us. Maybe next year he’ll become a brigadier general. In fact, before he leaves the military, I want to see that he makes lieutenant general.”

If that doesn’t satisfy him, I’ll have to think of something else to throw his way...

“Your birth status really is everything, isn’t it, Commander?”

The glittering epaulets on my uniform now designated me as a lieutenant general. It was amusing to me that I had become a lieutenant general in only a few years simply by lounging around playing a real-life simulation game. In the time it took a regular soldier fighting on bloody battlefields to finally rise one rank, I could ascend four ranks just by fooling around. This was what it meant to be a noble—to be an evil lord.

Chatting with my ship’s commander while we played a mahjong-like game, I confidently discarded a tile.

“Oh, count. Right there. I’ve got *ura dora* now too.”

But the commander, who was waiting for my discarded tile, landed a direct hit on me.

“No way!”

As I shot up from my seat, the commander revealed his hand. Sure enough, he’d reached *yaku*, and had *ura dora* as well. The commander was way too good at this game, and I had lost more times than I’d won against him.

“I-I lost again?”

“Ha ha, sorry!”

This commander was a veteran gambler. He was so skilled that he already wiped out Wallace and Cedric, and they both came crying to me about being penniless for the rest of the month. Tia and Marie, who presently shared the

table with us, gave the commander murderous glares as he continued to win.

“How is Lord Liam still losing with me and this fossil working together?”

“Hey! You’d better not be cheating!” the commander said, smiling.

Even with their cheating, and three of us teamed up against the commander, I kept losing. Normally, you’d think I couldn’t possibly lose, but I’d been doing nothing but.

I tossed the commander a scoring stick. “Even with all this, I still lose? Do you have some trick up your sleeve, Commander?”

“I just happen to have good luck, that’s all. That’s why I make money off of games like this, and I suppose it’s also why I’m commanding such a fine ship. It’s more than luck, too, of course... You have to read the flow of things.”

“The flow?”

“That’s right. You can’t force your way through everything. Anyway, another round?”

The flow, huh... True, there does seem to be a flow to everything in life that you can’t always fight against. Maybe I should have the commander teach me more about this.

I lost again and again. The money didn’t matter to me one bit. My wallet would never empty, no matter how much I wagered. I decided to spend however much it took to learn more about the flow from the commander.

“Sure,” I replied. “Let me study your ways, Commander.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

When a new game started, Tia and Marie both got fired up.

“This time, we’ll take everything he’s got.”

“Let’s confirm our signals, Lord Liam.”

The commander kept on winning, no matter how much we brazenly cheated. I had an odd sense that there was something unusual going on here. It was the same vibe I got from my sword instructor, Yasushi.

Master... Are you doing well lately? As always, I had no idea where he was,

but he was a master martial artist, so I was sure there was no need to worry about him.

All the while they played, the commander was thinking, *Why do they keep falling for it when they're cheating too?*

Liam was openly cheating, and yet the commander still kept beating him soundly. It had been the commander who had prepared the board for their mahjong-like game, and naturally he arranged things so that he would always be winning. He brought the game along with him out here in case he had the opportunity to separate some rich nobles from their money, but Liam and his friends had become hooked on it.

The commander was the same sort of person Liam's sword master Yasushi was—a fake.

This was supposed to be an easy job!

Having previously lived the life of a noble, the commander was only in this position due to his family's circumstances, the Empire's circumstances, and basically a whole slew of interconnected circumstances. His grades at the military academy had been poor, but he'd been able to get this far thanks to his family's influence.

Something weird is going on here! What's up with these nobles? They do whatever they want and rise through the ranks because of it. I had to bribe my way to get this far!

Even nobles weren't just promoted willy-nilly in the military. Normally, not even those from big houses were promoted as fast as Liam had been. This just served to show what an unusual case he was.

What's with him? Why is he developing a planet when it's not going to benefit him in any way? I just don't get him at all.

Starting a new game, the commander grumbled to himself, perplexed by the differences between himself and Liam.

As they played, Eulisia watched them. Suddenly, she received a message on

her tablet.

“Lieutenant General,” she reported, “there’s a request for reinforcements from the local lord.”

“Again? What for? And how many?”

“It’s a request to help fight pirates coming in from another region. He’s asking for one thousand ships.”

“Dispatch whoever’s not doing anything. And collect all the trash we accumulate.”

“I’ll dispatch them right away. As for the pirates...”

Eulisia was about to ask if they should capture any of the pirates, but Tia cut her off.

“Kill them all. Pirates are worth nothing alive. Isn’t that right, Lord Liam?”

Her tone had been extremely cold and firm, yet when she sought agreement from Liam, she sounded more like a spoiled cat asking for attention.

Marie clicked her tongue, but Liam just gave a little nod as he studied his hand.

“Wipe them out.”

The commander shuddered at the chilling way in which Liam treated his adversaries.

There’s no need for him to help that local lord, yet he’s sending his allies out just to eliminate some pirates. The rumor that he absolutely despises them must be true. House Berkeley wants me to betray him, but...if the count finds out about my betrayal, who knows what he’ll do to me!

Liam was intimidating enough on his own, but with Tia and Marie on top of that, the commander was scared out of his wits.

Eulisia confirmed Liam’s orders, exasperated with the way the others wouldn’t break off from focusing on their game. “Then I’ll dispatch one thousand ships, and we’ll do as we always do with pirates.”

As if he hadn’t heard her, Liam looked down at his hand and muttered, “Now,

what do I discard...”

The commander watched Liam curiously. *There’s nothing in it for him to help out a minor lord like this. No one would have complained if he’d left that frontier planet alone, either. Oh, how I hate sanctimonious people!*

From the commander’s point of view, Liam was a diligent noble who did far more work than needed. He helped out minor lords whenever he was asked, and readily responded to calls for aid from his personal allies. He had a bit of a nasty mouth, but otherwise he represented everything a noble should be. To someone like the commander, who considered himself a pragmatist, Liam almost shined too brightly to look at.

Well, there’s not much he does personally, so I don’t have too much to do either, which is fine by me.

“Count, *ron*,” the commander said.

“Whaaat?!”

In the hangar of Liam’s flagship stood a row of looming mobile knights. Looking up at one of the mass-produced Nemain units in particular was Marie, her arms crossed and her lilac hair swaying behind her. Grouped around her were other knights from her faction, also gazing up at the Nemain. This purple-colored craft everyone was focused on was customized for Marie. Just like Tia’s craft, it was said to be modified for an ace pilot, and yet Marie and her fellow knights were unsatisfied.

“It’s not a bad craft,” said Marie, “but there’s just something missing.”

The Nemain was a next generation mobile knight, created by the Third Weapons Factory and provided early to House Banfield and Liam’s patrol fleet. It came at an extra cost, but it was a superior craft boasting high-powered performance. Still, Marie found it lacking. She remembered back to her own era, two thousand years earlier. Before she was captured by pirates and petrified, craft like the Nemain hadn’t been used.

“The assist functions are in the way. Why is there so much support tech in all the mobile knight models besides for Lord Liam’s Avid?”

For an easy comparison, it was like the difference between cars with manual and automatic transmissions. To Marie, who was experienced with much older craft, all the automated assist functions lessened the feel that one was actually piloting the machine. This was the root of her dissatisfaction.

A knight who served as an assistant to Marie brought up Tia and her faction unfavorably. "It's because the knights of this era are weak. That ground meat woman is supposed to be the head knight, but her craft has assist functions too."

"She's hardly qualified to call herself a knight. Anyway, we won't be able to display our full abilities in these Nemain units, will we?"

The Nemain was a superior model, but Marie and her knights still wanted craft that were more to their liking. As they stood there fretting over this, Liam approached, with Nias in tow. Liam's adjutant Eulisia was also with them, but she looked rather displeased. Marie and the knights saluted them, and maintenance workers nearby followed suit.

Liam walked up to Marie and raised a hand. "Keep working."

The soldiers got back to their work maintaining the mobile knights. Marie asked, "Lord Liam, what are you doing here in the hangar?"

Liam nodded toward Nias. "Meeting with this one. My order is nearly complete, so I'm doing a final check."

Everyone's eyes settled on Nias, and the engineering captain grinned happily. "This was a pretty fun request."

Eulisia said, "What's so fun about it?" Shifting her gaze to Marie, she then asked, "And what are you doing in the hangar, Colonel?"

Marie returned her gaze to the purple Nemain, drawing everyone's attention in the same direction. "We were discussing these mobile knights. The Nemain is a powerful craft, but we fear these units don't align with our abilities."

Eulisia was a former member of the Third Weapons Factory and furrowed her brow at Marie's words. "The Nemain is a top contender to be mass-produced as the next generation's main model. There's no better machine in the Empire."

“Well, that’s too bad.” Marie shrugged.

Sensing a business opportunity, Nias piped up, “Shall the Seventh Weapons Factory create a craft perfectly suited to your abilities, then?”

The others gave her a look that seemed to say “What is she going on about now?” Liam, however, was the only one who showed interest.

“Not a bad idea. I’m sure you’ve got nothing else to do. I think we’ll take you up on that.”

Liam granted Nias his permission so easily, it was as if she had only suggested building a plastic model ship. Ignoring the others, she leaned toward Liam with her eyes burning brightly in excitement.

“Really? We can really build them? Can we?”

“I told you to go ahead. *Can* you build them, though?” He gave her a dubious look.

Nias readjusted her glasses and spoke with absolute confidence. “Have you forgotten? When I modified the Avid for you, Colonel Marie was the test pilot. I still have all that data back at the Seventh Weapons Factory. As long as we have the funds, we could begin development right away.”

As Nias smiled boldly, Eulisia snapped at her, “Don’t be ridiculous! The Nemain is the masterpiece of the Third Weapons Factory! You won’t find a better craft until the next generation!”

“How rude. True, the Nemain is a well-balanced machine, but for all its versatility, it’s not suited for an ace pilot, is it?”

“Ugh! There are custom Nemains for aces too!”

“I heard one of those custom craft got screwed up though. Its output was upped so much, nobody could actually pilot the thing. Isn’t that right?”

“How do you know about that?!”

“Just something that reached my ears...about a defective craft nobody could handle. The Third Weapons Factory is great at mass-produced units, but frankly, they suck at customizing them for aces.”

“Y-you insolent...”

The Nemain’s weakness was that while it was an all-purpose craft, it excelled in no one area.

Marie was intrigued by this over-powered Nemain unit Nias had brought up. “That craft sounds interesting.” She asked Eulisia, “Do you have access to the data on that?”

Eulisia was hesitant to share information on a defective machine publicly, but then Liam had to go and show interest.

“I’m curious too. If you can pull it up, let’s see it.”

Eulisia gave up and used her tablet to display the Third Weapons Factory’s data. “Please don’t spread this around too much, okay?”

An image of the modified Nemain unit was projected into the air before them. As Marie studied a view of the machine’s frame without its armor, she frowned.

“This won’t work,” she said.

Eulisia’s shoulders slumped. “Not even for you, Colonel?”

“I could pilot it if I had to, but I couldn’t make full use of its capabilities. The normal Nemain unit would be better for me. The only one who could control this machine would be Lord Liam, or another pilot of genius level.”

As Liam would never give up the Avid and pilot a Nemain, bringing Liam into it was pointless.

Nias puffed up her chest to show her confidence. “Well, you just wait. I’ll show you what the Seventh Weapons Factory can come up with!”

Marie expected much from her. “Please do that, Nias. I’m counting on you to create something that will suit our abilities...a craft as graceful and powerful as we are. Performance is crucial, of course, but I don’t want you skimping on its appearance, either. After all, it must be a craft worthy of standing at Lord Liam’s side.”

“Just leave it to me! I’ll satisfy you, one hundred percent!”

Not long after that, a new machine arrived from the Seventh Weapons Factory. The body was of a simple, sturdy design, but its specs surpassed those of the Nemain. It suffered some in regard to maneuverability, but that wouldn't be a problem if it was piloted by someone highly skilled. It was a high-powered craft specifically built for an ace pilot.

Nias announced, "This is the Seventh Weapons Factory's new model—the Raccoon!"

All the pilots and mechanics gathered in the hangar stared in awe at the specs shared to their tablets. However...

"The *Raccoon*!" Tia exclaimed. She covered her mouth with one hand but was unable to hide her laughter. "Did you hear that, Marie? The Raccoon! How nice for you!"

Marie trembled, fists clenched, as she looked up at the giant craft from below. Seeing this, her entourage of knights was desperate to pacify her.

"Its performance outstrips the Avid, Lady Marie!"

"I-I think it's kind of cute, don't you?"

"P-please remain calm, Lady Marie!"

In terms of specs, this mobile knight was just the sort of machine Marie and her knights would prefer to pilot. However, it had one problem...

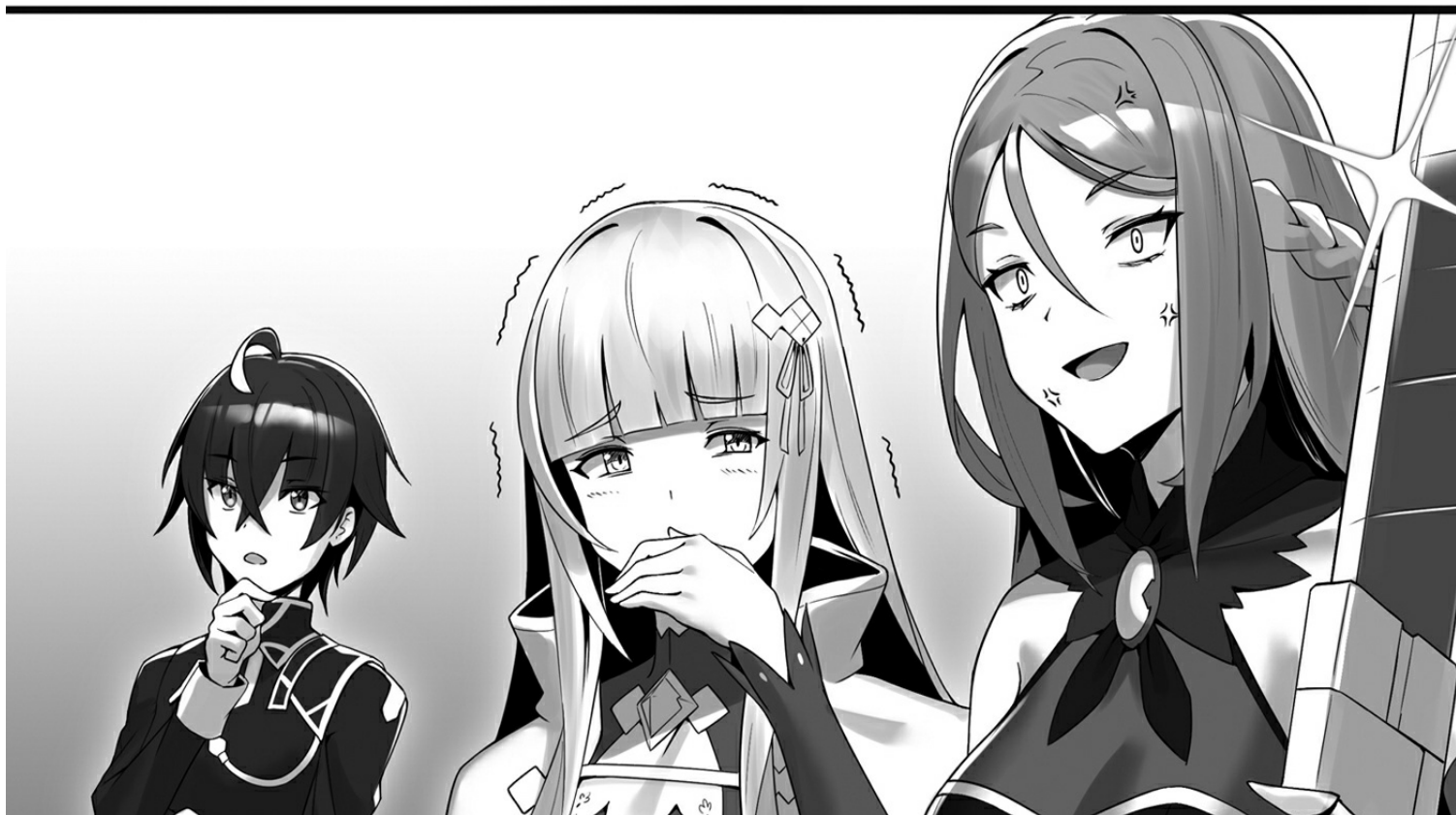
"May I ask whose idea this round body design was?"

Nias smiled. "It was mine! It looks like a tanuki, but this back part that looks like a tail can be changed out depending on the circumstances. You wait and see...the Raccoon will become the next generation's main model!"

A vein popped out on Marie's forehead as she glared at Nias murderously. She was enraged at Tia and her faction for mocking her, too, but right now her ire was chiefly concentrated on the one who had designed this craft, and who had the audacity to claim it was a perfect match for her and her knights.

It would be clear to anyone that the Raccoon was a heavily armored unit. It was also undeniable the mobile knight was rather rotund. Some would no doubt consider it cute, but it just didn't look like a craft a knight should be

piloting.



Marie grabbed Nias by the lapels and lifted her off the floor. “What exactly do I look like to you? Are you trying to tell me that I should be flying around inside a tanuki? What about this am I supposed to see as being graceful?”

“What do you mean? This is a work of art! It’s just...curvaceous! And powerful! I think it’s a great design!”

“You seriously think a craft like this suits me? Let me split that head of yours open so I can see what’s going on in there! I’ll kill you!”

As Nias trembled in fear, Tia stepped forward with a mocking smile on her face.

“Come on, don’t be so mad. It *does* suit you.”

“That’s it, you’re dead!” Marie tossed Nias aside and drew her sword. All her comrades around her drew weapons as well.

Tia and her faction’s knights did the same without hesitation. “Bring it on!”

As the two groups screamed threats and stepped toward one another, Liam entered the hangar with Eulisia in tow. He was the only one on the scene who was in a sunny mood.

“Would you look at that!” he exclaimed, gazing upon the Raccoon. “That’s quite a design, Nias. I think it’s cute.”

Nias had been thrown to the floor, but at Liam’s comment, she crawled over to him on all fours and clung to his legs. “Lord Liam, please help me! Everyone’s making fun of my precious Raccoon! It’s a masterpiece, though... I was so proud of it!”

As she whimpered below him, Liam glared at Marie and Tia. “Is that right? I happen to like it, but you two don’t, huh? Well, if you’ve got a complaint, let’s hear it. First, though, how about telling me exactly why you’re all armed. Come on, hurry up and answer me!”

At Liam’s shift from sunny to harsh, everyone put their weapons away. All the mechanics and regular soldiers in the hangar sighed in relief.

Marie and Tia both hurried over to Liam and fell to their knees, hanging their heads and trembling.

“P-please forgive me.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Liam narrowed his eyes at them. “You guys need to get it together. Anyway, I like the Raccoon, but I’m not entirely sure about its design. Give it a do-over, Nias. Let’s slim it down some.”

“Whaaat? But I was so sure you’d use it that I already produced three hundred of them!”

Eulisia looked upon the engineer in utter disbelief. “Why would you even make such an assumption?”

While Liam and company were enjoying themselves, House Berkeley had almost finished putting together a huge fleet of over three hundred thousand ships. One of Casimilo’s sons had been made commander, with Dolph as his staff officer. Of course, in reality, Dolph was the one who would be controlling the fleet.

The enormous stationary fleet lined up in space was the result of House Berkeley drawing upon all their resources. They sold countless elixirs and gathered up all the rare metals they could. They lost most of their pirate collaborators, using them as bait to keep House Banfield distracted, but as if to make up for the loss, Imperial Army collaborators had joined the fleet in their place. House Berkeley had more ships now than they had initially hoped for, but the fleet didn’t only excel in numbers—thanks to the weapons factories they’d worked with, their ships were high-quality as well.

“We better be able to crush House Banfield with all this, Dolph,” said Gene, Casimilo’s eldest son and one of the family’s top brass.

Dolph gave a firm nod. “If this fleet can’t do it, I don’t think anyone can stop Liam.”

“Good enough. All right, everyone... Let’s get moving! Advance!”

With that, a monstrous fleet of over three hundred thousand ships began its advance on House Banfield.

At the same time, House Banfield was also making a move.

As Brian was tending to his usual work, an anxious-looking Serena sought him out. She practically ran down the hallway toward him, a sight that struck Brian as unseemly for a head maid, or so Brian thought...

“Brian, House Berkeley is on the move!”

“Wh-what? Master Liam isn’t back yet!”

It was an unspoken rule of combat etiquette that no lord would attack a ruling lord who was away from his territory for training. What House Berkeley was pulling was clearly a sneak attack, a dirty move for a noble—and one that indicated House Berkeley didn’t care how they appeared to others.

“Contact Master Liam immediately, Brian.”

“U-understood!”

House Banfield had been expanding its military might in anticipation of this day, but that didn’t ease Serena’s mind much.

“More than three hundred thousand ships, Brian! We were taking House Berkeley too lightly...”

Despite Liam’s military preparations, House Banfield still didn’t have even ninety thousand ships. Of the force they could actually send into battle, they only had seventy thousand at the ready. Their opponent had over four times their fighting strength.

“It’s such bad timing for Master Liam not to be here,” Serena said to herself, as Brian rushed away to get in touch with him. “House Banfield really might...” She couldn’t bring herself to say the rest. Serena was irritated at House Berkeley’s brazen conduct.

She wasn’t alone in the hallway. Watching her happily was the Guide, his face split into a grin. “That’s right—panic! I bet you think if Liam comes back you’ll be saved, but all you have to look forward to is death!”

The Guide laughed, loudly at least to his own ears, imagining the complete destruction of House Banfield.

“Hurry back now, Liam! No, it’d be nice if you came after everyone was already dead and gone, wouldn’t it? I can’t wait to see your face twisted in despair!”

One day, Thomas arrived at the simple spaceport we constructed at the frontier planet.

“Quick to act as always, I see, Lord Liam.”

Was he being sarcastic about the spaceport’s hurried construction? I’d only created it to have something to do, and I knew it was no-frills, but it had all the necessary facilities.

“I was just killing time. Anyway, what are you here for today?”

“Well, I was hoping for permission to do business here, of course. I brought some products for your fleet staff with me, if you’re all right with that.”

I guess he wanted to sell stuff to the crew of the fleet.

“Do as you please.”

“Thank you so much. I’ll get right to it, then—”

While Thomas and I were discussing business, the spaceport’s warning siren went off.

“What’s that?” I said warily.

Immediately a call came from Eulisia.

“What happened?”

“A group of transport ships just arrived. They don’t seem hostile, but they warped in rather suddenly, so we’re on alert.”

Ships suddenly just appearing without prior notice that they’d be entering your region of space was basically a traffic violation.

I clicked my tongue. “Who are these idiots warping in?”

“It’s representatives from the Clave Firm and the Newlands Company. A merchant named Patrice wishes to meet with you right away, Lieutenant

General."

Before even asking what was going on, I had a pretty good idea. I glanced over at Thomas and his face had gone pale.

"Oh no!" he said. "You don't think House Berkeley has made its move, do you?"

House Berkeley again... I was sick of being sick of them.

I boarded my flagship, and when I reached the bridge, I found it full of anxious voices.

"How many ships are finished with maintenance and resupply?"

"About ten thousand right now!"

"Get as many ready for takeoff as you can!"

Tia was in the center of the action, taking command. The commander was watching her silently, arms crossed. I went over and spoke with him, since he looked bored.

"You look rather calm, Commander."

"There's no point in panicking. You should always keep your head at times like these. If you want to raise your chances of winning, at least."

Was this part of the Commander's method of "reading the flow of things"? He was right, though—panicking made one careless.

"I guess that's true."

I stopped Tia from sending out whatever ships we had ready. "Tia, don't mobilize them until the whole fleet's ready. Clave and Newlands just rushed us a ton of supplies, so get them distributed."

Tia was surprised by this change of plan. "Lord Liam? B-but..."

"Tell the fleet back home not to charge, and to buy time instead."

This sharp commander had given me valuable advice, and I intended to heed it. I needed to maintain my cool right now and not just dive in.

Marie ran onto the bridge with a report. “Lord Liam, House Berkeley’s fleet is about three hundred thousand ships strong! Also, according to our information, Imperial Army ships have gathered in the area we’ll be warping to.”

“The Imperial Army?”

Apparently, Imperial Army ships were standing by to cut us off. But why...?

Awaiting Liam in the warp zone was a fleet commanded by delinquent soldiers, consisting of thirty thousand ships provided by House Berkeley and their allied weapons factories. While most of the ships weren’t new, their numbers were staggering.

On the bridge of the fleet’s flagship were several generals with noble backgrounds. They’d had their uniforms gaudily customized, medals displayed on their chests.

“He’s probably headed here in a blind panic as we speak.”

“If House Berkeley gets serious, it’s all over for that kid.”

“We’ll show him what an Imperial Army battle is all about.”

As the generals chuckled together, an operator’s shrill cry rang out.

“Commander! E-enemy attack!”

“He’s already here? Let’s take him on then. Open communications with the brat... I want to hear what he has to say!”

When they contacted the enemy flagship, however, it wasn’t Liam who appeared onscreen. Instead, the monitor revealed a soldier with an eyepatch who had the look of a seasoned general.

“Wh-who are you?” one of the Imperial Army generals asked, and the stranger promptly answered.

“Your actions are a clear breach of military regulations. Therefore, we will now be capturing your ships.”

“Wh-what?!”

“You can avoid this skirmish if you return to your proper posts immediately.

Otherwise, you'll be facing off with us."

The generals realized the ships confronting them were regular army fleets stationed near the Empire's borders. All together, they numbered forty thousand.

"You dare defy nobles of the Empire?" the corrupt general said, but the opposing general wasn't cowed.

"You've got it wrong. It's you who are defying the Empire."

"Y-you're taking that brat's side?!"

The general whose forces had allied with Liam told the nobles and their renegade soldiers the honest truth.

"We can't have House Berkeley achieving victory in this conflict. If the nobility gain any more influence within the military, the Imperial Army itself will fall apart. Unlike all of you, the count conducts himself in an exemplary manner. If he's going to fight House Berkeley, then the whole of the army out on the borders will be siding with him."

Too many honest Imperial soldiers had suffered because of the influence wielded by noble generals like these. In particular, fleets out on the Empire's borders had become increasingly frustrated with the nobility. Up until now, they'd had to sit back and take it, but Liam had emboldened them to finally take action. To these soldiers from the borders, it was much more appealing to support Liam and see House Berkeley fall.

"A-attack them!" one of the noble generals shouted to his people.

His opponent didn't appear the least bit worried.

"I had a feeling it would go this way. Sorry, but I think you'll find you're more than a little outmatched here in terms of experience. It's time for you to learn a lesson from true soldiers."

Consequently, the nobles' fleet was wiped out by the Imperial regular army without Liam having to lift a finger.

Chapter 8:

Miscalculation

OUT HERE IN SPACE, close to four hundred thousand ships were facing off against each other.

House Banfield sent out a fleet of seventy thousand ships to meet House Berkeley's force of three hundred thousand. A spherical ship of a type called a fortress-class served as their flagship, and on its bridge, all the various commanders of the fleet were present as holographic images to maintain a war council. The commanders had called the meeting to put their heads together about how to face an enemy over four times their size, but they argued about the approach to use.

"Why wouldn't we charge?" one of them said. "There are three hundred thousand ships! We need to meet them head-on before they disperse and attack the domain, or we'll lose the war before we begin the battle!"

"Commander, our only option is to charge!"

Yet another countered, "They outnumber us so severely, if we just go head-to-head with them, we'll have no chance. It makes more sense to break through at one specific point and take out the enemy's head. It's what we've always done!"

The generals all advised various modes of charging, but the supreme commander only frowned with arms crossed. By now it had been almost a week of the two armies merely facing each other, a strangely quiet calm before the storm. The armies observed the shift in each other's formations, repositioning their own formations in response, alternately narrowing and widening the distance between them. Sometimes in situations like this it took more than a month for combat to actually commence, but House Banfield, which had always squashed pirates by charging them, was too impatient for this waiting period. They had been charging forth for decades now and had their methods down to a science.

In response to the generals' squabbling, the supreme commander finally opened his mouth. "Those are Lord Liam's orders."

The generals all exchanged a look when he said that.

"Lord *Liam's* orders?"

"Isn't he off serving in the Imperial Army right now?"

"How did you get in contact with him?"

The supreme commander explained Liam's current status. "He's heading this way in the patrol fleet he deployed with. His orders are for us to keep staring down the enemy just like this."

"But Commander, if we just wait for reinforcements, nothing will change."

The fleet Liam commanded was, at most, thirty thousand ships. That wouldn't contribute all that much to their fighting strength, considering the opponent's numbers. House Berkeley would still have the overwhelming advantage.

"I understand that, but we have our orders."

They had no choice but to obey Liam's directives. The generals all held their tongues.

Meanwhile, with House Berkeley...

Gene marched over to Dolph on the bridge of the lavish battleship that served as House Berkeley's flagship. "Why aren't they moving?"

It had been a week and House Banfield still hadn't charged. Gene was confused and nervous about this, but Dolph remained calm even with the other man in his face.

"There's no need to worry... They're just uncertain because Liam isn't here."

"But this isn't what we prepared for!"

"I never promised everything would go exactly as planned, but there's almost nothing they can do to overcome this difference in numbers."

They had new, state-of-the-art ships and mobile knights from their weapons

factory partners, and their crews were freshly trained. An enormous amount of money had gone into the monstrous fleet. In the service of that, however, countless planets had been destroyed to procure elixirs, while the citizens under House Berkeley's rule had suffered increased taxes. Of course, Dolph and Gene weren't bothered by such things, caring only about the destruction of Liam and House Banfield.

Dolph and Gene were familiar with talk that Liam had put together his own fleet of thirty thousand ships, calling it a patrol fleet. About that, Dolph said, "Even if these thirty thousand ships join the fray, our victory is still set in stone. If they come at us in a pincer attack, we'll just have to split the fleet and deal with them separately. The only thing they could use to turn the tides in this scenario—"

"The House Banfield specialty, the charge?"

"Exactly. But even if they don't, it won't be a problem. No matter what they try, we have already won."

They had made ample preparations to deal with Liam, whom Dolph considered his mortal enemy.

I'm going to have my revenge for how you humiliated me at military academy, Liam. You were so confident in your battle experience then, but only defeat awaits you here!

Dolph's confidence reassured Gene, and he was able to regain his composure. "R-right. There's nothing to worry about then."

House Berkeley's fleet wasn't just a collection of pirates anymore, but properly drilled soldiers who followed Dolph's orders to a tee. With such forces that he could move as his own hands, Dolph was assured of his victory. Still, that didn't mean he would let his guard down. Dolph had learned as much from his loss to Liam at the military academy.

That defeat just taught me how to prepare for this day, this very moment. I accept my loss in the simulator, but in the end, I'll be the one who's victorious!

The Guide floated out in space, sitting atop his travel bag. With a cup of tea in

hand, he gazed upon the two facing fleets. The normal limitations of space didn't affect the Guide one bit.

"Neither army is making a move, but the outcome of the battle is practically decided already. Now the only thing to do is see exactly how Liam meets his despair."

Even if Liam met up with House Banfield's fleet, their combined forces would only number a hundred thousand ships. House Berkeley, on the other hand, commanded over three hundred thousand, and there wasn't a significant difference in the quality of equipment and personnel between the two sides. It could be said House Banfield had an edge in overall quality, but not to an extent that they could win against those odds.

"If the abilities of the two sides are comparable," the Guide observed, "then naturally the side with more numbers will win. Regardless of any schemes, carelessness, or miracles that might occur, this difference in numbers will still be the deciding factor. Of course, Dolph will know better than to be careless this time, and he won't fall for any tricks either."

Neither side was moving at the moment, but once one of them began, it would quickly be over. The Guide savored the anticipation.

"Liam has put me through so much, but I suppose our little relationship will finally come to an end soon."

The Guide was deeply relieved by the thought. Liam was the only person to have ever caused him so much agony.

"Once it's over, I'll have to prepare a special hell for Liam. Oh no, I won't let him go just because he's dead. I'll reincarnate him again and again..."

As the Guide was imagining Liam crying and begging for forgiveness, he felt a sudden premonition as though his skin was on fire. From this, he could tell that Liam was close by.

"You're here, Liam!"

A warp hole manifested, and ship after ship appeared from it.

"Mwa ha ha ha! I've been waiting for you, Liaaam—hmm?"

The Guide had spread his hands wide in joy, flinging aside his teacup, but then he realized the ships pouring out of the warp hole seemed to be way too numerous. Thirty thousand ships emerged...and even more kept coming.

“Hey, wait a second! What’s going on? Where did you get all those ships?!”

It was clear to him that Liam was nearby, but this couldn’t be right. The emerging fleet Liam commanded had to be at least one hundred thousand ships strong!

The Guide clutched at his head. His skin burned from the proximity to Liam’s powerful feelings of gratitude toward him.

“Why?! How? How do you always *do this*?!”

It happened right after my flagship emerged from the warp hole.

“Hmm?”

I looked up sharply, and Marie, who’d brought me some tea, seemed curious about my sudden alertness.

“Is something the matter, Lord Liam?”

“No... Just my imagination.”

I played it off to Marie, but just as we came through the warp gate, I thought I’d heard the nostalgic voice of the Guide. I was sure he was watching over me at that very moment, in which case I felt my victory was assured. I accepted the tea from Marie and took a sip while status reports were called out by my bridge crew.

“Twenty-fourth fleet, successfully warped.”

“Thirty-sixth fleet requesting orders.”

“Enemy fleet in view. Neither side has commenced hostilities yet!”

When I heard that idiots were trying to invade my domain, I set out for home, and along the way I was contacted by regular army commanders who offered to lend me their support. Of course, some fleets had to keep watching over the borders, so I was only able to take a hundred and twenty thousand ships with

me. *Man, the power of bribes can't be underestimated!* I didn't even really bribe them, though—I just made sure their supplies actually got to them as they should, and they were grateful for that.

Also in my favor were the tons of supplies the Clave Firm and the Newlands Company brought us, which made it possible to stock and employ such a huge fleet. It was the right choice to start working with more merchants.

Tia suggested a strategy to me. “Lord Liam, from this position, we can attack the enemy on both sides. They still surpass us in numbers, but if you order the House Banfield fleet to charge, we should be able to deal them a significant blow.”

“You think so?”

I was about to take Tia up on her suggestion when the commander, who'd been silent until now, loudly spoke up.

“Wait!”

Even Tia was visibly surprised at the commander's exclamation, since he was usually so quiet.

“Is there some problem, Commander?” she demanded, glaring at the commander. Marie even began to draw her weapons. I stood from my chair and stopped them.

“Back off. Commander, did you have another suggestion?”

The commander cleared his throat and explained, “Charging with a portion of your forces would indeed be effective, but it would produce too many casualties to be worth the loss. In a battle of this size, I believe there is a better way to handle things.”

Eulisia gave the commander a dubious look. “And by ‘a better way,’ you mean...?”

The commander looked away in thought for a moment, but he then explained his plan. “First, gain some distance before you begin your attack.”

Marie crossed her arms, clearly not pleased by the commander's proposed strategy. “It's too meek. That's no way for Lord Liam to be fighting.”

Huh? Really? Was he going to educate me on how Lord Liam should fight?

None of my underlings seemed to agree with the commander, but his expression was much more grave than usual. "Rulers have to fight like rulers. Special Staff Officer... It's true that you've racked up many victories against pirates, but those strategies won't work with armies of this size."

When the commander told me to fight like a leader, an enraged Tia put her hand on her handgun. "How insolent! Lord Liam already possesses all the qualities of a ruler! You don't need to tell him how to act!"

Marie jumped in too. "Lord Liam is an absolute gift to this world. He has no need of your limited thinking."

They really don't understand a thing about me. In their minds, I'm surely some sort of perfect being, but that's just a fantasy they've created.

"I told you to back off."

I pushed past Tia to get between her and the commander. I decided to trust in this solemn man with a gambler's skills. Today I would put his "read the flow" approach to the test in a real battle.

"Very well, Commander. Tia, order the fleet to put more distance between themselves and the enemy, and then to commence firing."

The eyes of both Tia and Marie grew wide at my unexpected order. Hurling shots from far away was a cowardly tactic, but evil lords were supposed to be cowardly in their ways, weren't they? After all, they cared only about victory. The method with which they obtained that victory hardly mattered.

Marie asked, "Lord Liam? A-are you sure?"

"Stop asking questions and follow my commands."

The commander breathed a sigh of relief. Are you stupid? You want to charge a huge fleet like that? Maybe you want to get yourself killed, but I don't. It's safer to take pot-shots from a distance and wait until somebody gets tired and retreats!

Reassured that they were no longer planning on charging, the commander

vowed never to have anything to do with Liam and his allies again. *If we can just maintain our distance, I don't think this ship will get blown up.*

The flagship Liam commanded was extra fortified and particularly hard to destroy.

However, now Liam said something that took the commander aback. "Okay, when we're ready to start firing, I want the flagship up front!" In high spirits, he proclaimed that the flagship would be at the head of their long-range formation.

Huh? The commander was surprised, and so was everyone else, including Liam's adjutant Eulisia.

"I thought we were maintaining distance, Lieutenant General."

"As long as we're far enough away, we'll be safe, right? We'll just shoot them all down from the front of the pack. Hey, gimme the trigger for the main gun."

The commander couldn't understand Liam one bit. *No way! What the hell is he saying? Flagships are supposed to stay in the rear, where it's safe!*

As for Liam, he seated himself at the main gun's console and gripped the trigger. "I should have brought the Avid along with my patrol fleet. I could have gone outside and fought them that way," he mumbled.

Liam seemed sincerely disappointed that he couldn't go out in a mobile knight to fight a superior enemy.

The commander was absolutely baffled. *I don't think I'll ever understand this guy for as long as I live.*

House Berkeley's fleet fell into a complete panic when Liam's forces caught them in a pincer attack. Liam's supplemented patrol fleet, which had arrived as reinforcements, was lobbing fire at them from a distance. House Berkeley's forces might have fired back in turn, but the majority of their fleet had been optimized for short-range combat. They weren't left with many ships that could respond to this long-range mode of attack, so they found themselves being rained upon with fire.

A supply ship loaded with missiles exploded right next to the Berkeley's flagship.

"Dammit!" Dolph slammed his fists down on the control panel before him. The enemy was targeting their less defended ships.

Gene grabbed him by the lapels. "Hey, this isn't what you said would happen at all! Weren't they supposed to charge at us?!"

"Please keep calm. All we can do at this point is locate the enemy flagship and shoot it down. We have to take out the enemy's head, and that will throw off the rest of them."

"We wouldn't be having such a hard time if we knew where the enemy's head was!"

House Berkeley's fleet was already searching for the ship that contained the enemy commander, but on House Banfield's side was a fortress-class ship that would be extremely difficult to destroy. As for the fleet that had warped in as reinforcements, it wasn't yet known which of its ships carried the commander.

Just then, a missile struck their ship and it lurched, sending Gene to the floor. He stood up shakily and started to dash from the bridge.

"I-I'm not staying here! I'm the heir of House Berkeley! I can't die in a place like this!"

When he saw Gene flee, Dolph felt refreshed, as if he'd finally gotten rid of a nuisance that had been hampering him. "Hmph, I wasn't counting on you in the first place. This situation *is* bad, though..."

They still had the superior numbers, but if they kept taking hits like this from a distance, the tables would eventually be turned on them. Dolph was trying to think of a way to change the tide of battle when he heard a mysterious voice.

"Dolph, how about I lend you a hand?"

"Who's there?" Dolph turned around, but he could see no one standing behind him.

He thought he must have been hearing things and dismissed it when an operator announced, "Sir, we've identified a superdreadnought amongst the

enemy reinforcements. It's most likely their flagship!"

"What?"

They were finally able to deduce which of the hundred thousand ships Liam was likely riding in. This could change everything.

"Well, it's not what we planned, but we're going to head for that one ship and take Liam down ourselves!"

House Berkeley's fleet began to charge Liam's.

Liam's personal mobile knight, the Avid, was stored in the hangar of House Banfield's fortress-class ship. Right now, its hulking black frame sat dormant, its master elsewhere.

In front of where the Avid rested, a dog suddenly appeared. The dog was nearly transparent and gave off a subtle glow. It sat down and looked up at the Avid, then let out a howl.

As if in response to the dog's call, the Avid's eyes lit up. Its engine revved, several magic circles appeared in the air around it, and three rocket launchers manifested from those circles. These connected to the craft without any sort of human assistance. With its launchers now attached, the Avid stepped forward, removing itself from the docking frame holding it in place. Once it started moving, the Avid continued walking all the way to an airlock hatch, twisting its wheel open.

The dog had already disappeared, but a mechanic who noticed the Avid moving on its own hurriedly grabbed a communicator and asked, "Hey, did somebody authorize the Avid to launch?!"

"What are you talking about? The Avid is Liam's personal craft. Who the hell else could move that thing?"

"Well, it's moving now!"

"I'm telling you, that's not—"

And just like that, the Avid exited the fortress-class ship, activated its boosters, and charged out into space.

I got bored of firing on the enemy, so I handed over the controls to the gunner. I now sat in my command chair, yawning. It had been a few days since the fighting had commenced, but the enemy was more timid than I expected, and, curiously enough, weren't firing back much. They were really...weak. Way weaker than I thought they'd be.

Cedric, who seemed nervous himself, spoke to me as I relaxed. "You don't seem very worried, Special Staff Officer."

"Well, it's basically already done, isn't it?"

"Personally, I don't think you should let your guard down until it's truly over."

The diligent Cedric had been like this ever since the fighting started. Wallace, on the other hand, was on the verge of falling asleep. I knew they had different mothers, but how could there be such a difference between two siblings? It made me feel like I met the wrong royal in Wallace.

Just when I was considering going back to my room, Eulisia announced, "Lieutenant General, a contingent of enemy ships is charging straight at us!"

"What?"

I looked at a monitor where a simplified depiction of the battlefield showed a group of enemy ships charging for the flagship I was on... There was no doubt about it; they were headed straight for me.

Tia immediately put out an order to our fleet, "Have the flagship fall back! Move forward to surround the enemy attackers!"

The fleet immediately began to adopt a V formation to get around the enemy on both sides, but the enemy seemed too quick for us to pull it off in time.

I crossed my arms. "It's no good... They're coming in too fast."

Maybe it was because I'd executed so many charges myself on the battlefield that I had an idea about how this would go. My instincts told me that the enemy's charge would indeed reach us.

The commotion had woken up Wallace, and when he understood what was happening, he jumped up in a panic. "Wh-what do we do? Can our ship survive

a charge like that?”

Cedric shoved Wallace back down in his chair and pinned his arms behind his back. “Don’t make a scene! Special Staff Officer, you should escape at once. You’re the one they’re after.”

I cocked my head at Cedric and asked, “You don’t want to run too?”

“Sorry, but I’m rather fond of this ship. It’s the first stroke of good fortune I’ve had in my pointless life. I want to protect it until the end.”

This guy’s way more useful than Wallace. Of course, he’s a different type than me—he’s a real serious guy. I’m glad to have him with me.

“I see. Well, do as you like. But in any case, I don’t intend to be defeated by something like this. Tia, get the Raccoon prepped. I’m going outside.”

“Lord Liam?”

When I said this, Tia spoke up in a rare display of opposition. “I’m going to have to insist that you refrain, Lord Liam. You cannot go out in this situation!”

Marie, however, disagreed with Tia and took my side. “It’s a knight’s duty to obey her master’s orders. Don’t act like you know what’s best for him!”

Tia drew her handgun. “You fossil! Will you take responsibility if something happens to Lord Liam?! His life has far more worth than your garbage existence!”

Everyone else held their breath, intimidated by the two hot-headed women. Their personal conflict made them forget everything else around them. *I’m so sick of this.*

“Hey.” I approached the two of them, grabbed their heads, and slammed them both to the floor.

“L-Lord Liam?”

“Wh-what are you—”

Tia and Marie struggled in confusion, but their desperate attempts to get free were useless against my strength. With their faces pressed to the floor, their butts stuck up in the air.

Before they could get their bearings, I began my lecture. “Exactly how long do you two plan on continuing your silly little squabble right in front of me? I don’t recall letting my knights fight amongst themselves.”

I put a little more strength into my grip, and Marie babbled excuses one after another. “B-but... It’s all because this ground meat woman went against your orders, Lord Li—eep!!!”

I pushed their thick skulls harder against the ground...and the metal below us dented from the force. “I’ve allowed you to make names for yourselves while serving me. If you stuck to just your responsibilities, I would value you, but I’m not going to put up with any more childish fights between the two of you. I’m tired of it.”

Tia looked up at me with tears in her eyes. “P-please forgive me, Lord Liam. I beg of you... I beg of you!”

The sight of the two female knights scared out of their wits wasn’t too shabby, but their everyday behavior was so awful that it didn’t excite me in the slightest. These two *were* unquestionably talented, though, and I needed their skills right now, so I guessed I had to let them off the hook. Still, they couldn’t go completely unpunished.

“I’ll forgive you, in light of all of your accomplishments to date, but I’m removing you from your positions as my two top knights.”

Both women’s faces twisted in despair, but I didn’t care about that. I should have disciplined them sooner.

“What do you have to say to that?”

Tia and Marie both answered feebly, “Y-yes, sir.”

I released them. “All right, I’m going out to sortie,” I told them with a smile. “Prep that mobile knight for me.”

When they rose from the floor, Tia and Marie both looked at me with flushed cheeks. They probably wanted to cry, and I didn’t blame them. After all, they just had their precious positions ripped away from them.

Liam left the bridge and Marie followed him out. Left behind, Tia wore an entranced look on her face, her cheeks red.

Wallace was confounded by the sight. “Why do you look so happy?”

Tia scoffed, as if surprised why Wallace would ask. She explained, “The strength to push both of us down to the floor, with one hand each...and then the courage to charge into battle, despite the danger... That’s Lord Liam.”

Even being chewed out by Liam was a reward to Tia, who was happy just to see him exhibit his powers in a way she hadn’t seen before.

Cedric said, “Uh, that’s great and all, but could you please give us your orders?”

Their allies were being pushed aside by the madly charging enemy.

Tia quickly changed gears and began shouting out orders. “Prepare the mobile knight squad to intercept! Bring our ships optimized for short-range fighting to the fore! Any ships with damaged armor are to fall back and concentrate on firing from a distance! Tell them not to hit any of their allies in the process!”

Once she was able to focus again, Tia barked out instructions and the battle began to shift toward mobile knight combat.

Watching her, Eulisia murmured, “She *is* talented, despite her character.”

Left on his own, the commander just sat in his seat, praying he would survive this battle.

Aboard House Berkeley’s flagship, Dolph received a report that the enemy had deployed mobile knights, and immediately ordered that their own waiting mobile knights be launched as well. He deployed the craft he prepared specially to counter Liam’s Avid too.

“Mobilize the special units! We’re not holding anything back!”

The special units were mobile knights in the same larger class as Liam’s Avid. They looked behind the times in terms of design but were in fact state-of-the-art models crafted by the First and Second Weapons Factories after studying Liam’s personal mobile knight. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say they had been

created specifically to defeat the Avid...and Dolph had twelve of them.

An operator raised his voice. “We haven’t seen the Avid among them!”

“That’s fine! If he’s not coming out, just concentrate on the flagship!”

They hadn’t practiced charging in this way, and House Berkeley’s fleet was severely diminished in numbers now, but they were also right at Liam’s throat—all because of Dolph’s obsession and the Guide’s supernatural protection.

The Guide, standing right next to Dolph, shouted, “It’s him! Liam’s definitely out there, Dolph! Destroy the mobile knight in the very front!”

He couldn’t have heard the Guide’s voice, but Dolph gasped as he suddenly seemed to realize something, nonetheless. “The craft in the very front! That’s where he is!”

He believed it was his own instinct telling him this.

Meanwhile, the Guide spread his arms and black smoke poured into the floor. The smoke reached the ship’s hangar and entered the special anti-Avid units.

“Liaaaaam!” he called out.

The Guide was fired up as well, sending the special units out to meet the new, mass-produced model Liam was piloting.

After confirming that Liam boarded a Raccoon, Marie donned her purple pilot suit and turned to Nias, who stood nearby.

“It’s a good craft,” she said, standing before the cockpit of the mobile knight Nias had customized for her. “So you *can* do it if you try, huh?”

Nias gave her a reproachful look. “It’s just a Raccoon with its armor stripped off, so now there are problems with its defenses! Sure, its mobility is improved, but this compromise just isn’t acceptable!”

“What can I say? I like lighter craft.”

The mobile knights Nias had modified for Marie and her faction had a slim form. If the Raccoon resembled a tanuki, then this craft had the look of a fox to it. Even its head had a vulpine design. On both of its arms were composite

weapons, featuring beam arrays and multi-launchers, with small shields on the arms besides. Loaded with all sorts of additional functions, it had been designed with a much different approach than the Raccoon, but its somewhat unreliable armor was definitely a flaw.

Nias looked up at this new model, which had been dubbed the Teumessa, and sighed. "It's going to be difficult to pilot, you know. Are you sure you can really master this?"

Nias trusted Marie's piloting skills, but she had no idea how skilled the woman's fellow knights were. Could all of them handle such a tricky craft?

As she began boarding her personal craft, which had been painted her customary purple, Marie replied, "Every machine handles easily compared to the Avid. Anyway, we all piloted much more complex craft than this two thousand years ago. It'll be fine."

Nias tilted her head in confusion, but Marie didn't elaborate further.

She settled into the cockpit, and the control sticks shifted into a convenient position for her. When she gripped them, the hatch closed, and images of her surroundings were projected onto the inner walls. In the hangar, she could see the knights from her faction boarding their own, differently colored Teumessa units. The visor of her unit's head activated and took on a vivid glow, and at this Marie smiled appreciatively.

"We've got such fine craft now, so we need to really let them shine. Everyone... Let's bathe Lord Liam's enemies in blood!"

At this command over their comms, her fellow knights raised a cheer.

"Leave it to us!"

"I'm looking forward to finally getting some action!"

"I can't wait to bring down that rotten noble!"

Marie responded to her hot-blooded comrades. "It's time to teach all these fools that Marie is back on the battlefield."

The cockpit of the Raccoon was more spacious than that of a typical mobile

knight. Still, I couldn't help comparing it to the Avid, and in that regard, it fell short.

"It's not as bad as I thought it would be, but..."

A small window appeared in the air, displaying Nias's face.

"The Raccoon you're piloting is an enhanced unit from the initial batch."

"It's a prototype? Way to instill confidence."

If this was one of the first units she'd produced, I wouldn't be surprised if it had some kinks that hadn't been worked out. She was certain it would represent the "next generation" of mobile knights, but it was only a candidate for mass-production. Due to its appearance alone, I couldn't imagine the Empire would select it. That being said, I myself didn't hate it...but it definitely didn't match the current popular styles.

As I got the feel of the control sticks in my hands, I couldn't help but miss the Avid. "I knew I should have brought it with me."

"Hey, the Raccoon's a good machine too! Don't compare them like that!"

While I was thinking how I missed the Avid's more sumptuous seat, House Berkeley's fleet began to dispatch their mobile knights too. They must have really packed a lot of them on board their vessels because thousands of units were pouring out from them. As I watched, their numbers only continued to increase.

If I thought of House Berkeley's fleet as being in the center of the battlefield, my army was attacking from above and the enemy was rising up to meet them. Of course, in outer space there really was no such a thing as up and down.

My Raccoon held a great axe in its right hand and a beam chain gun in its left. It was a lot more limited in its armaments than the Avid, but that made this battle more of a challenge, and more fun.

"Okay, show me what you can do!"

I pressed down on the acceleration pedal and the cockpit started shaking a bit. The Avid wouldn't have reacted just from that. As we closed the distance between us, I saw the enemy mobile knights charging toward me were all of the

modern style. There wasn't a single obsolete craft among them.

I swung my great axe as I rocketed past one of them, bisecting it. First one down. I dodged the beams, bullets, and missiles that streaked my way and pulled the trigger of my chain gun. Its continuous energy beams pierced the armor of my enemies' craft, causing them to explode one after another.

"These pilots have a little more fight in them than Derrick did!"

One of my allied mobile knights swooped in and used their own chain gun to destroy an enemy that had been hurtling at me.

"I'll back you up, Lord Liam!"

Marie had arrived in her purple Teumessa to assist me. Thanks to her covering my blind spots, I was able to give my undivided attention to the enemies in front of me.

"This is my first time fighting a real battle in something other than the Avid. Let's see how it goes!"

I swung my great axe down on an enemy who came in on me fast, and then intercepted a number of approaching missiles with my beam chain gun. It was true—the Raccoon wasn't a bad machine. It was a little too cute looking, but if it performed this well, I might just buy the three hundred units Nias had gone and produced prematurely.

"It's so cool how they explode in space! I wonder how it works!"

I mowed my enemies down with my overwhelming power, watching their craft detonate in bright blooms. Even so, accustomed to the Avid as I was, this craft still felt somewhat lacking to me.

A mobile knight tried to get in behind me, but Marie promptly destroyed it. *This one's impressive when she just keeps her mouth shut.*

Having just split an oncoming enemy in two with my great axe, I voiced my opinion of the Raccoon over my comm. "This thing's pretty good, considering it's from the initial batch."

At this point, I noticed there were large-type craft like the Avid mixed in with the enemy mobile knights. Marie tried to shoot one of these down with her

chain gun, but its armor was too thick and repelled her energy beams.

“Lord Liam, stay back!”

Marie tried to move in front of me to protect me, but I pushed the Teumessa back with one of the Raccoon’s arms.

“No, stupid, this is exactly what I was waiting for,” I told her.

I accelerated and slashed at it with my great axe, but the enemy deployed an energy barrier, a sphere of light forming around the craft. Its output was so high that the great axe bounced right off it.

“Nice machine, but you’ll need more than that to win!”

The enemy tried to reach out and grab me, so I chopped off its arms. The machine’s movements grew confused, as though it didn’t understand that I’d cut right through its shield.

“Too bad for you.”

I pushed forward and brought my great axe down again, shattering my enemy’s glowing shield, yet my axe was stopped by the machine’s thick chest plating.

“Tch.” I clicked my tongue and let go of the axe, putting some distance between the enemy and myself, filling the space between us with beams and bullets. Swallowed up by the onslaught, the enemy craft was finally destroyed.

“They’re a little tough,” I had to admit.

I looked up and spotted eleven more of that same type of craft. Their twin red eyes flashed, capturing my Raccoon in their sights.

Marie rushed forward again to protect me. *“These big ones are dangerous, Lord Liam. Let’s overwhelm them with numbers instead.”*

“I’d love to do that, but I don’t think we’ll have the chance.”

In the distance, an enemy ship had pointed its bow my way and was about to launch an attack. My allied mobile knights had it surrounded and were attacking, but it ignored them and focused its aim on me. Just when I was thinking maybe I *would* pull back for now...

“The Avid?”

I felt a presence and turned to find a craft heading my way, weaving between enemy ships. It looked like a streaking meteor, and when I magnified its image, I confirmed it was indeed the Avid, with disposable boosters attached.

Marie received a report and couldn't believe what she'd been told. *“The Avid's moving on its own? Don't be stupid! Who's in that thing?!”*

Apparently, the Avid had launched from House Banfield's fortress-class ship completely on its own.

A smile came to my face. If anyone could do something like this, it was *him*. “Much obliged, Guide!”

I sped toward the Avid to meet it, despite the enemies swarming around me. The Avid spread its arms and a magic circle suddenly manifested, rays of light shooting out of it and destroying the surrounding ships. Having served their purpose, the boosters detached from the craft. The Avid then grabbed the Raccoon with both hands, opening its cockpit and preparing to take me onboard.

“Good boy.”

I lowered my helmet's visor, opened my cockpit's hatch, and leaped out. The Avid let go of the Raccoon to reach out and grab me, inserting me into the spacious cockpit I had just been reminiscing about. When the hatch had sealed, I took my helmet off and tossed it aside.

“Been a while since I've piloted you.”

No one had been sitting in the seat. To me, there could be no question that this was a special service from the Guide, who had delivered the Avid to me at the perfect moment. I knew I could always count on that guy.

“I really hope I can pay you back for this somehow, Guide. Now, thanks to you, I can really start wiping out House Berkeley!”

I settled in, grabbed the control sticks, and piloted the Avid for the first time in ages.

Chapter 9: Nightmare

A NIGHTMARE had developed for House Berkeley.

“Like you could beat my Avid just by making a few large-type craaft!” a voice called out, over their speakers.

The huge black craft with prominent shields on both shoulders destroyed any and all mobile knights that got close to it. This large-type craft, a rarity these days, grabbed one of House Berkeley’s own large-type mobile knights in its hands, held it out in front of it, and charged straight into a House Berkeley battleship—tearing right through it.

The pierced ship exploded, and though the Avid was caught in the blast, it emerged completely unscathed. With the fireball already subsiding behind it, the Avid tossed aside the wreckage of the mobile knight it had in its grip.

Dolph grimaced as he watched the scene on one of his monitors. “So this is Liam’s Avid, the craft I’ve heard so many rumors about.”

The new machines developed by the First Weapons Factory couldn’t even scratch the thing, and that’s ignoring the fact that Liam was an absolutely first-rate pilot. It was said he was one of only a handful of pilots who could exploit the Avid’s full potential. This machine had become a source of terror for pirates, as it had slaughtered countless of their brethren.

Dolph barked out orders. “Don’t be afraid! We just need to overwhelm him with numbers! Surround him and beat him down!”

Before Dolph had even given the order, his allies were moving in to try just that, but they were met with the Avid’s overwhelming strength. The monitors displayed House Berkeley’s allies easily being slaughtered.

“I-it’s no good. All the rest of our allies are engaged with other enemy machines and can’t move in to assist.”

Another image appeared before Dolph, of a mobile knight wielding weapons

like huge hatchets in both hands, this one destroying his allied machines too. Over the speaker, he heard a wild scream accompany this craft's violent movements.

"Outta my waaaaay!!!"

Marie's Teumessa came at the large-type mobile knights that were ganging up on Liam. The pilots in these bigger mobile knights were all aces, however, and were keeping up with Marie's movements so far. Their hateful voices came over her cockpit's speaker.

"You monsters! We're going to finally kill that bastard Liam!"

Their enemies seemed awfully nervous despite their bravado. But to Marie and her comrades, they didn't consider the difference in numbers to be a problem.

"Who's going to kill who? Don't talk the talk if you can't walk the walk!" She pulled on a control stick, ready to show off the true form of the Teumessa. "You're dead!"

Enraged by the enemy vowing to kill her lord, Marie put the Teumessa through a transformation. The tail-shaped attachment extended, and the particles it expelled resembled flames burning in space. At the same time, a group of small metal spheres had been launched from the tail section and darted ahead of her. To top it all off, thin arms emerged and unfolded from both of the machine's shoulders, equipping themselves with energy axes that had been attached to her composite weapons. The now four-armed Teumessa bisected an approaching enemy with one of these glowing energy axes.

Then, her composite weapons showed their true form as well, opening to reveal blades stored inside. Fully extended, these blades were as long as her entire craft was tall, and saws of glowing energy spun along their edges. With these energy chainsaws employed, Marie sped toward the large-type enemy units.

One of the enemies believed she was flying directly at him, so he raised his mobile knight's rifle to shoot her down. The pilot yelled, *"Are you an idiot? You*

think just because your craft can do a few showy tricks, you—what?”

In actuality, the enemy craft didn't have its rifle pointed at Marie's Teumessa, but in a completely different direction. The beams and projectiles he fired seemed to pass right through the Teumessa without harming it, as if it were an apparition.

And now Marie had changed directions, and her enemy's weak point was exposed.

Marie responded, *“You're the idiot here! Did you think this thing's tail was just a decoration? Why don't you tell me exactly what it is I look like to you right now?!”*

“Th-there's so many of them! Stay away!”

With the enemy's attention misdirected, Marie easily closed the distance between them. The flock of little spheres she'd launched earlier emitted particles of light which combined to create an illusion of the Teumessa that tricked even the enemy pilot's sensors.

“Your back's wide open,” Marie taunted.

“Wha—?”

Invisibly, Marie's Teumessa swept in on the enemy craft from behind, and she thrust her blade into its back. The energy chainsaw whirred, shredding everything inside the enemy machine. The image of Marie's craft that the pilot had been firing upon vanished, and the spheres returned to the real Teumessa, circling around it like excited insects as Marie's craft reappeared.

“This truly is a wonderful machine,” Marie said appreciatively. *“Just perfect for me.”*

The Teumessa had amazing specs, but its specialty was that it could project illusions to fool enemies while using the tail's particles to create a cloaking effect and seemingly vanish from sight. The other Teumessa units in a rainbow of other colors and piloted by her faction were taking down more enemies using the same technique, and soon the battlefield filled with the drifting debris of obliterated machines.

A ruined, limbless enemy craft drifted by Marie's unit. The cockpit seemed to have survived intact, and the pilot seen inside was clearly terrified by the way Marie and her allies fought.

Marie seized the enemy craft, and she heard the pilot's voice over her comm. *"Wh-what order of knights are you? Where the hell did you come from? With abilities like this, your name should be well known."*

Even an order of vassal knights in service to a single noble could make a name for itself throughout the Empire if they were powerful enough. This pilot couldn't believe he wasn't familiar with Marie and her faction, fearsome as they were.

"Where are we from? We were resurrected after being captured by pirate scum two thousand years ago."

"T-two thousand? What are you—"

Without another word, Marie had her Teumessa crush the enemy cockpit in its hands.

Dolph looked like he'd swallowed a bug as he watched the enemy's elite troops cutting down his allies, one after another.

"Ugh!" Dolph's mind scrambled for a way to turn things around, but nothing came.

"Sir, enemy craft incoming!"

Even as Dolph heard the strained cry from one of the bridge crew, the Avid deliberately crashed into the flagship. A section of Dolph's ship's armor was torn away, allowing air and fluids to spew out into space.

As the Avid continued on in the direction of the bridge, Liam peeked at the ship's interior through the hole he had ripped open. *"Is this their flagship?"*

Dolph hadn't forgotten Liam's voice since that day he'd lost the contest to him, and when he heard it now over the comm it sent him into a rage.

"LIAAAM!!!"

In that moment, the remains of wrecked ships and mobile knights floating

around the flagship gathered toward it, as if by magnetic force. These wrecks forced themselves together into what almost looked like the top half of a titanic mobile knight.

“Wh-what’s happening?”

Dolph was baffled by the sight, but beside him stood the Guide with a bitter expression on his face. He gripped his chest and ground his teeth, blood spilling from one corner of his mouth.

“Why don’t you just die, Liam? Why must you torment me so?”

Liam’s feelings of gratitude had only gotten stronger. And it wasn’t just him, but all the people who were thankful to Liam, and thus indirectly thankful to the Guide. All of this positive energy came together and acted like a terrible poison that wracked the Guide’s body with pain. Desperate as he now was, with House Berkeley failing, he had decided to summon all of his remaining power to try to crush Liam himself, regardless of how unnatural it would appear.

Noticing the change occurring around the flagship, Liam backed up in the Avid, spreading its arms wide. *“You still had an ace up your sleeve, huh? Great! So do I!”*

Liam seemed sincerely ecstatic, and Dolph and the Guide both couldn’t stand it. They raised their voices as one.

“Liam, I swear I’ll take you dooown!!!”

A device shaped like a human heart materialized in the enraged Guide’s hand. He shoved the pulsating device onto the control panel and a cord extended from it, inserting itself into the panel. It pulsed like a blood vessel. The heart device was an ancient, out-of-place artifact the Guide had discovered in his travels.

“With this, I’ll finally be rid of youuu!!!”

The rest of its body now complete, the robotic monstrosity formed from the debris of House Berkeley’s fleet was a human-shaped weapon, several dozen times the size of the Avid. It opened its mouth and roared, causing the flagship to shake.

The Guide's ace in the hole was ready.

"Not even you can beat this!"

From the cockpit of her Teumessa, Marie could see the destroyed House Berkeley ships and mobile knights being sucked in toward one central point, which grew larger and larger the more wreckage it took in.

"What's going on?"

Marie was baffled by the sight of the wreckage gathering together to form a monstrous, mechanical figure. The thing was larger than a battleship, so huge she couldn't imagine that any mobile knight *or* ship could stand against it.

Marie started to convey orders to their flagship, but Tia had beaten her to the punch, already shouting commands to all the craft in their fleet.

"Fire as one on the huge enemy weapon!"

House Banfield's ships all pointed their main guns at the monster, hitting it with everything they had, yet all the beams and projectiles did was heat the surface of the enemy until it turned red without leaving a single scratch. They shot missiles at it as well, but their paltry explosions only served to shave off small bits of the monster's outer surface. To make up for the loss, and then some, the titan absorbed more floating debris and grew even larger in size.

"This thing is seriously a monster!!!" Marie yelled, clicking her tongue.

One of her comrades pointed toward it and shouted over the comm. *"Lady Marie! It's Lord Liam!"*

Hearing Liam's name, Marie immediately searched for the Avid, spotting it in front of the monster. Liam was facing it as though he actually intended to fight the thing, but there was too great a difference in their size.

"Lord Liam!" Marie started in Liam's direction to lend aid, but was immediately swarmed by House Berkeley mobile knights.

"You're not getting through, lady! If we can take him down now, we'll win!"

"Get out of my way, small fry!"

House Berkeley was equally confused by the current situation, but its fighters recognized this as their big opportunity. Marie cut down enemy after enemy with the Teumessa, but she still wasn't free to go to Liam's aid. She was beginning to panic.

That was when Liam's voice came over the comms of every nearby craft.

"Don't think you're the only ones with a card up your sleeve. I've got something to show you guys too. Behold, my ultimate weapon."

Well, House Berkeley had quite the secret weapon. Somehow, they sucked up all the ruined ships and mobile knights in the area to create a massive, faux mobile knight. It was like the massive torso of a mobile knight, but to me, it was just a massive target.

"Last time, I wasn't able to go all out, so I was a little disappointed. But this is the perfect opportunity for us to show everyone what happens when we really get serious, Avid. Time to reveal our new weapon."

I manipulated the control panel and heard a voice say, *"Engage."*

With that, a vast magic circle manifested at the Avid's back, and from this circle, the bow of a vessel peeked out. Slowly making its appearance from the circle was a huge ship, even larger than a superdreadnought. The biggest difference between it and a normal ship was its unusual design. This ship, stored in a pocket of subspace accessible by the Avid, was my little secret.

It had been really difficult to get this thing made. The Seventh Weapons Factory almost gave up on it once. I had presented them with the challenge of how to give a mobile knight the power of a battleship. The answer had turned out to be just making a battleship into a mobile knight. Makes sense, right? The factory came up with a design that was a cross between an unmanned battleship and a mobile knight. Some at the factory understandably vetoed the plan as this would seem to be a great waste of resources. But then again, an evil lord should be a wasteful kind of guy.

It wasn't just weapons you could store in subspace. This entire ship, with its long official name, the Gigantic Gatekeeper Griffin...something or other, had

been stored inside the Avid's subspace.

Once the enormous Griffin fully emerged, cords extended from it and connected to the Avid. As they drew the Avid closer to the ship, the cords infused my craft with energy.

Now that it was out in open space, the Griffin began to transform. This process had been quite a feat to design and engineer, but the brains at the Seventh Weapons Factory had figured it all out. The ship quickly and smoothly took on a humanoid form. By the time the Avid was enclosed inside its head, the process was complete.

What a waste of resources! It was all so ridiculously over the top, and I loved it.



“Well?” I said into my comm. “What do you think about the weapon I made with the tax money I squeezed from my subjects? It’s not fun if I don’t overdo it, don’t you agree?”

What could be more wasteful than putting together a single ship, the Griffin, for the same amount of funds that could’ve built thousands of conventional ships? An actual fleet? You could put that to use. But this engineering marvel just sat around in subspace all day.

Normally, no one would ever throw away so much money and resources on something like this, but I wanted power, even if that pursuit proved extravagant. And the guys at the Seventh Weapons Factory must have been idiots to actually build something like this for me. As a result, I had built this monument to wastefulness: a mobile knight with the strength of a battleship, achieved by transforming a battleship into a humanoid shape.

Anyway, my opponent was a little larger than the Griffin, but that didn’t discourage me. My heart actually soared at the thought of a battle between two colossal mobile knights. What an experience this would be!!!

“Avid, show ’em what you can do!”

I looked out over the battlefield from the cockpit of the Avid, sitting securely in the Griffin’s head. Right in front of me loomed that repulsive giant robot—the perfect playmate for my new toy. I gripped the control sticks and pressed down on the pedals, and the Avid gave a roar in response. It was just the sound of the systems powering up, or maybe the nuclear reactor or something, but that was how I chose to interpret it.

The Avid’s energy and my commands were transferred to the Griffin, where they were amplified. The Griffin’s huge arms and legs began to move. As the two monsters came together, its giant right arm collided with one of the enemy’s arms—crunching it on contact.

“How’s that? I had the Griffin custom-made with rare metals. As if a big clump of scrap could stand a chance against this!”

I tore off my enemy’s ruined arm and cast it aside, but my opponent instantly began attracting more debris from the area, recreating what it had lost.

“You can regenerate, eh? Well, this’ll be even more fun!”

This was a rare opportunity to go big, and I was determined to enjoy myself.

On the bridge of the patrol fleet’s flagship, Eulisia was speechless at the sight before her eyes.

“This is insanity.”

Working as close to Liam as she did, of course she’d heard about the Griffin, but to actually *see* it rampaging on the battlefield was quite a bizarre experience. She watched as the Griffin’s digits lit up and beams shot out of each of its ten fingertips. Each beam was extremely thick and could easily penetrate a battleship’s hull. The Griffin manipulated its fingers and easily moved those beams of light around, and the monster fashioned from gathered debris was burned and sliced apart.

It wasn’t just the fingers. The Griffin had weapons hidden all over its body, and therefore used beams and streams of solid bullets to hack away more and more of the monster’s armor.

Eulisia couldn’t help but shout at the spectacle. “Seriously? Are you stupid?! An idiot? Aren’t there more important things you could be doing than making a ridiculous toy like this?”

The Griffin was the type of weapon that was theoretically possible, but countless people had judged it as too wasteful, even from its conception, so it had never been developed before. To Eulisia, who was knowledgeable about weapon development from her time with the Third Weapons Factory, this was nothing but a flagrant example of excess.

Nias stepped onto the bridge with its bewildered crew, her eyes gleaming behind her glasses. This was her highly anticipated appearance—at least in her own mind.

“So, you’ve seen it? This is the ultimate mobile knight, created by the top minds of the Seventh Weapons Factory!”

When she heard Nias refer to the Griffin as a mobile knight, Eulisia couldn’t

take it anymore and strode over to her. “What have you done? Why would you waste so much time, effort, and resources on such an impractical project? It’s stupid to make something so ridiculous!”

The Seventh Weapons Factory had a reputation for prioritizing ease of operation and maintenance over all else, and this was why Eulisia couldn’t believe they actually went along with developing something as frivolous as the Griffin.

However, Nias maintained her smile. “Have you no sense of adventure?”

“Huh?”

“Adventure! Even we engineers want to make things that aren’t bound by practical concerns sometimes. Don’t you think it’s exciting, creating something that no one else could?”

“It’s not that no one else *could* make it, it’s that no one else *would*! That thing’s going to be completely useless on any other battlefield!”

In this instance there was a giant monstrosity to contend with, so the Griffin did serve a purpose here...but it would more likely be completely unnecessary on any other battlefield.

Suddenly, Wallace, who had been observing the battle from the bridge, shouted out, “Liam’s ending it!”

Shooting all kinds of weapons from various parts of the Griffin’s body had been a perfect test of its capabilities, but I was getting bored.

“How about this, then?”

The monster was swinging its arms at me wildly, so then I had the Griffin manifest beam swords that extended from both hands when it straightened them into a chopping position. The Griffin severed both of the giant’s arms with these new swords. Spinning away through space, these monstrous limbs crashed into some of House Berkeley’s nearby ships and mobile knights. What a nice bonus! The Griffin did considerable damage to the enemy fleet just by moving.

The beam swords do incredible damage, but the way this thing moves, I guess I can't replicate the Way of the Flash with it.

I used both beam swords to cut up the enemy even more. Attempting to resist, the monster backed off a little and took on a defensive stance. It reformed its lost arms yet again by gathering debris from the ships and mobile knights the severed arms had destroyed.

"Launch missiles."

I fired missiles from several locations on the Griffin's body, which struck the enemy and detonated on impact. The explosions only looked like tiny flickers across its gargantuan figure, but that was just because the monster and the Griffin were too huge. In any other context, this series of explosions would have been formidable.

Still, hundreds, if not thousands, of those little flickers in combination were able to blast apart more than half of the monster's surface—that is, until it sucked the scattered debris back to itself and reconstituted once more. Inwardly, I sighed. *There won't be an end to it like this.*

"I'd like to copy this thing's junk-absorption function," I said. "Anyway, I should probably wrap this up."

A special control stick rose from my panel, and I grabbed it and pulled. Energy filled the Griffin, collecting in its chest. The armor there opened up, and dazzling light poured forth from inside.

"A main cannon with incredible power. Pretty exciting, don't you think?" I asked the mechanical monster as it headed toward me. It didn't answer.

Instead, the monster attacked the Griffin with arms that it couldn't fully rebuild. The Griffin shook with each impact, but its body was tougher than my opponent's, so the blows did no significant damage.

"I guess this all was a little bit of a fun. I guess you deserve some thanks for keeping me company on the Griffin's trial run."

I pulled the trigger on the control stick, and all that stored-up energy was released. The massive beam of light was so powerful that I thought it would wipe away every single enemy before me. The beam swallowed up the enemy

monster, burning it away even as it desperately tried to regenerate. It reached out its arms to try to block the attack, but the arms were instantly reduced to molten shrapnel.

“Sorry, that’s not gonna work!”

The monster gradually became unable to maintain its body’s integrity, crumbling away in front of me. When I was satisfied and stopped the beam, countless chunks of the monster floated before me, unable to come together again.

“Guess I could have just as easily mounted this cannon on a battleship instead of a humanoid figure.”

This observation seemed pretty obvious, but I liked what I’d come up with *because* it was unnecessary.

With the monster out of my face, the Griffin had opened up the battlefield for me to review. Before me, I now spotted the enemy flagship. It was a complete wreck and wouldn’t be going anywhere.

“You people actually caused me a bit of trouble! Or maybe I should just say that you held on pretty well. I can’t believe your flagship wasn’t totally vaporized, being in the path of my super cannon. You guys sure are lucky.”

The Griffin’s enormous hand reached out and took hold of the flagship by its bridge area.

“Lord Liam, the enemy is retreating.”

I was a moment away from crushing the bridge section when I heard Tia’s transmission. Though she said they were “retreating,” most of the enemy vessels had been destroyed from combat with my forces or in the crossfire of the Griffin’s ferocious battle with the junk monster. Only a fraction of their ships remained to fly away...perhaps ten or twenty thousand out of their original three hundred thousand.

“Now that it’s over, it was a battle for the history books, wasn’t it?”

“A fitting victory for a ruler’s battle.”

“Okay, enough flattery. Since we’re here, why don’t we finish it by the book

too? All ships, pursue the enemy. Don't let a single one of them get away."

I didn't want to deal with the headache of letting some of them escape only so they could regroup and strike back at me later. Now was the time to crush House Berkeley once and for all. There were so many in that family though, it wasn't realistic to think I'd take them all out in one engagement. I got annoyed, thinking about having to track down each and every one of them, but if I was going to do this, I had to be thorough. After all, I had to teach them just who it was they picked a fight with.

Dolph was lying face-up on the bridge's deck, hand clamped over a bleeding wound on his abdomen. Though blood spilled from his mouth, he wore a strange smile even though he knew he had lost.

"I knew I was right."

Dolph was listening to Liam and Tia's conversation over an open comms channel. In the grip of the Griffin, his flagship had lost all avenues of escape, yet he still proclaimed his own personal victory.

"Charging in battle is foolish. In a battle where defense is key, charging is only effective when the enemy is already well on their way to losing. Liam, you might have won the battle, but it's like you admitted to your own mistake!"

Dolph had made his own mistake, however, in allowing the tables to be turned on him. Ironically, today he confirmed that in the simulator fight when they were students, his own approach was the correct one.

The Griffin's hand tightened on the bridge, squeezed, and Dolph laughed as the ceiling crumpled onto him. "I wasn't wrong!"

Hovering in space, the Guide watched as Dolph was crushed in the Griffin's grip. Trembling, he pulled the brim of his hat down lower over his eyes.

"How can I ever win? What do I need to do to take Liam down?!"

He'd done everything he could think of, had even used his trump card, and none of it had worked. To make matters worse, he saw the Avid emerge from

the Griffin and collect the heart-shaped device as it floated in space.

“Hey, this looks interesting,” Liam said. “Guess I’ll show it to Brian later.”

Liam was in a great mood. The remainder of House Berkeley’s three-hundred-thousand-strong fleet had suffered great losses during House Banfield’s pursuit, and when the regular army joined in, it had all proved too much for the enemy. They attempted to surrender, but the army showed no mercy and shot them all down.

The Guide reached out to the cheerful Liam. “Liaaaaam!!!”

The black smoke that flowed from the Guide should have made Liam unhappy, but it didn’t even reach him. It seemed like he was being protected by something the Guide couldn’t see.

“Damn you! Damn youuuuu!!!”

The Guide looked around, desperate for anything he could make use of. House Berkeley’s eldest son, Gene, had already been captured by House Banfield after fleeing. No one else was in a position to do anything against Liam. As he ground his teeth in frustration, the Guide suddenly remembered something.

“There *is* still someone who can turn all this around!”

Someone close to Liam. Eulisia.

“Eulisia, you’ve vowed vengeance against Liam! I share my power with you!”

The Guide reached out to her with his influence.

“Plunge your sword into him!!!”

When Casimilo heard the results of the battle, all the life seemed to drain from his face.

“W-we lost?”

Not only had he been defeated, but House Berkeley’s army had been completely wiped out. His oldest surviving son was pale as a sheet when he delivered the news.

“Dad, we gotta run, right now! The regular army pulled out, but House Banfield’s fleet is headed our way. If we don’t go, they’ll kill us all!”

Casimilo’s oldest son Gene had been brought before Liam and pleaded for his life, but Liam had cut him down regardless. The young lord was serious. There was next to no chance he’d negotiate with one of the Berkeleys.

“Contact the Capital Planet. We’ll have to get the Empire to mediate for us.”

They would likely lose almost everything due to what they started, but that was better than the alternative. Casimilo was prepared to follow this course of action, but before he could begin, an incoming call alert popped up on a monitor. Then another one. These and several more monitors opened their calls all at once.

“Wh-what?”

What greeted the flustered Casimilo were the faces of several other Imperial nobles...but not the nobles he collaborated with.

A man with white, swept-back hair greeted him cheerily. *“Yoo-hoo, head of the pirate nobles. How’s business?”*

Another man, muscular and wearing an eyepatch, glared threateningly at Casimilo. *“You sicced your pirates on us, didn’t you? I guess that means you’re prepared for a fight, huh, Casimilo?”*

These were all nobles who opposed Casimilo and his domain and planned to support Liam instead. They were a motley bunch, but they were all upstanding nobles of the Empire.

Among them was Kurt’s father, Baron Exner, who said, *“Baron Berkeley, friends of yours have confessed that they attacked us under your orders.”*

The corrupt nobles and pirates allied with Casimilo had been tormenting these nobles, but as soon as they heard about Liam’s victory over House Berkeley, they betrayed Casimilo and confessed everything.

The man with the eyepatch crossed his arms. *“Felt pretty nice beating the truth out of them!”*

A white-haired man in a sunny mood said, *“We heard House Banfield won*

quite handily. Such a pleasant surprise! Incidentally, how do you propose to settle this matter?"

Casimilo was attempting to squeeze some sort of sound from his throat when an alarm started blaring throughout his mansion. A second later, one of his men delivered a status report.

"Lord Casimilo! Th-thirty thousand House Banfield ships are...!"

Casimilo dashed to a window and looked up. He saw enough space battleships above to almost completely block out the sky. The interception systems around his planet must have been taken out first to allow for this surprise attack. The ships then descended one by one, with ground troops immediately pouring out of them. He spotted a special team wearing powered suits charging straight into his mansion, and knew they'd blast their way through security and arrive at his office in no time.

His oldest son was wailing. "Daaad! They're comiiing!"

Casimilo fell to his knees on the floor. "Take my head, son. Bring it to House Banfield and use it to negotiate for mercy."

"I-I got it, Dad."

With trembling hands, Casimilo's son drew his handgun and prepared himself to shoot his father.

Just then, House Banfield's elite soldiers burst into the room.

"Don't move! If you resist, there'll be no reprieve!"

The one commanding the soldiers was a knight and kicked the gun right out of the son's hand. She hoisted Casimilo to his feet and took him into custody, just like that.

"Come on!"

As he was roughly pulled away, Casimilo pleaded with the knight. "Let me negotiate with the boy—with the count of House Banfield."

As I descended from space to House Berkeley's lands, I sighed at the

shabbiness that met my eyes.

“Not much to see here, huh?”

It was well and truly the sticks. Since Derrick was so influential, I expected his domain to be more developed, but I supposed the two didn't necessarily correspond. A portion of the planet was city, but the rest was comprised of small towns...or more accurately, countryside. The people here no doubt lived hard lives, especially the regular citizens. Some areas had electricity, but the majority appeared to be at a medieval level of civilization.

Once inside the mansion, I lounged back in a chair as if I owned the place, while arrogantly gazing at Casimilo. The man sat bound on the floor.

“Well, what are we going to do with you?”

I had invaded another lord's mansion with my forces and was acting like I owned the place. As I crossed my arms arrogantly, Casimilo bravely pleaded with me. “I offer you my head. Please be satisfied with that.”

Standing by my chair, Tia looked down at Casimilo coldly. Considering her own history with pirates, there was no question that she despised this so-called pirate noble.

“This won't be resolved that easily,” she said.

Marie, who stood on my other side, also rejected Casimilo's proposal.

“Your head has no value. How dare you speak to Lord Liam at all? The disrespect!”

I had no use for Casimilo's head anyway. Of course I had won this battle. The blame was squarely on Casimilo for thinking that he and his ragtag collection of barons could go up against a count! Sure, he had a lot more land than I did, but the difference in development between our territories was shocking. What in the world had possessed him to pick a fight with me?

Observing House Berkeley, I had become absolutely sure of one thing, and that was the importance of developing your territory. I had been wondering why House Berkeley's forces, despite their numbers and new equipment, had struck me as rather lacking, and I suspected it had to do with the training of

their soldiers. Scooping up people living in medieval conditions and tossing them into education capsules was certainly a quick way to produce soldiers, but such slapdash methods couldn't compare with proper education and training.

Also, a medieval-type society didn't appeal to me. Part of it was I simply didn't like the aesthetic, but more importantly, there wasn't enough to take from them. I guess it was worth coming here just to confirm to myself that even if you're an evil lord, it's important to let your domain develop to a certain degree.

Casimilo tried to approach me, but the knights at my sides pounced on him, pressing his head to the floor. I looked down at him with a smirk on my face.

"Please!" he groaned. "I'll give you our hoard of treasure, and all the assets we can spare! S-so please, at least allow House Berkeley to remain. I hear you are a merciful lord, Count. Just once, put your trust in House Berkeley, I implore you. We will never defy you again! In fact, we could be of service to you!"

In order to save his family, he offered up his assets and his own head—what a wonderful story. His proposal irritated Tia, however.

She snarled, "How shameless. We're just supposed to believe your promises after everything you've done?"

Casimilo looked up at me and pleaded, "Please! At least spare my family! All I desire is the continued existence of House Berkeley!"

Well, he's offering up his own life and all his assets. I guess I could be content with that.

I decided to forgive Casimilo. "I guess that makes sense. All right, you're off the hook. I won't hold a grudge against House Berkeley..."

"Lord Liam?" Marie gasped.

I held up a hand up to silence her while Casimilo cried with joy, believing that he was absolved of all his crimes. Then, I finished my statement with the truth.

"I'll let you off the hook—because what would be the sense in holding a grudge against a family that doesn't exist anymore?"

"Wh-what?"

This family had come after me with bloodthirsty fury just because I killed one of them, Derrick, who'd honestly had it coming. If I killed Casimilo too, they'd only grow more frenzied.

"I want you to regret that you stood up against me. It's a heavy crime for a mere baron to defy a count."

"W-wait, please!"

"Casimilo... I have no particular interest in your domain, but I'll still make use of it from now on."

There was nothing for me to take from Baron Berkeley's domain itself, but I was interested in his treasure, so I would certainly take that. Pillaging is second nature to an evil lord, after all.

I gave my people their orders, "Publicly execute everyone related to House Berkeley in front of their subjects. We need to impress upon them exactly who their new lord is."

Eulisia was hesitant, hearing my judgment. "All of them? The custom is for those who aren't yet adults to be stripped of their status and sent to a frontier planet."

"Oh? That's customary?"

"Yes. It gets complicated with the connections the family has to other houses, as well. There are women who married into House Berkeley. We should do a thorough investigation—"

Marie cut in, "There's no need. I've already completed such an investigation."

I was impressed she'd taken the initiative to do that. Normally Marie came across as useless, but when she surprised me at times like this, I didn't know what to make of her.

"Then immediately execute everyone who might be a problem for us. Of course, we'll have to let the Empire know."

"I'll handle that," Tia volunteered with a smile, before I could finish my instructions. She could prove very capable too, when she wasn't acting up.

"All right... You two take care of it then. I'm gonna get back on my flagship

and relax. It's been quite a day—I'm tired."

After Liam had left with Eulisia, Casimilo hung his head. The man had tears streaming down his face.

"He's...tired of this?"

It was like the head of House Berkeley was completely under the count's notice the entire time. The count had no interest in all that Casimilo had built up and hadn't hesitated in the slightest in sentencing his family to death. Casimilo had heard that Liam was a wise, merciful lord, but reality was quite different.

"At the very end, I misread him."

He had built up House Berkeley to such greatness, and it was now all to be destroyed by a mere child. Casimilo smiled, still crying. "Go to hell, you miserable brat! I'll be there waiting for you—"

That was all he got out before Tia put her boot in his face.

"That's enough out of you. I feel dirty just letting a man like you speak to Lord Liam."

Tia, who despised pirates, had no intention of holding back when it came to Casimilo's punishment. She vowed in her heart to show him true hell in *this* world.

"I've prepared a special execution method for you, so I do hope you'll entertain me. And don't worry... I'll send the rest of your family after you soon enough."

As Tia smiled sadistically, one of the other knights approached her. "Head Knight, it will hurt Lord Liam's reputation if we execute the children too."

Tia's expression hardened. "Lord Liam has dismissed me from the position of head knight. Right now, I'm nothing more than any other one of his knights."

"Huh?"

"And don't worry—the children will be sent to frontier planets."

Conditions would be harsh on these planets out on the borders though, and the Berkeley children would lead hellish, impoverished lives that they'd have no hope of ever rising out of.

Marie stepped forward, grabbed Casimilo, and yanked him to his feet. "I have all sorts of things I'd like to ask you, Casimilo. Why don't we talk a bit before your execution?"

The other knights grew uncertain when they saw Marie start dragging Casimilo away, and they all looked toward Tia.

"Is this okay, Lady Tia?"

They wondered if she would challenge Marie's arbitrary decision, but Tia surprised them by responding differently from what they might expect.

"As long as she doesn't kill him, it's fine. I'm sure she understands that."

Normally, the two of them would be at each other's throats for far less, but now for some reason they weren't squabbling at all. The rest of the knights were completely dumbfounded by this development.

The corpses of Casimilo and the adult members of his family were displayed for all in House Berkeley's domain to see. The general populace, long tormented by the pirate nobles, found great relief in their deaths.

Unseen among the crowds, the Guide observed everything, his face twisted in pain.

"At least *you* resented Liam. Let me have those negative emotions of yours."

The Guide sucked up the clouds of hatred and resentment that clung to the bodies of Casimilo and his family. He also absorbed the resentment of those citizens who'd had family serving as soldiers, now dead because of Liam. It made sense that they'd hate Liam when their loved ones had gone to war to fight him and never came home.

After drawing in all the negative emotions he could from the area, the Guide managed to find some relief. He still had hope for the woman he gave power to earlier as well.

“I can bear the pain a bit now. All my hope lies with Eulisia. That woman has been sharpening her fangs, waiting for the right time to strike. I’m sure she’s beside Liam right now, watching and waiting for a vulnerable moment.”

Eulisia had gone so far as to volunteer for the special forces in order to plot her revenge. Such a desire for vengeance was by no means commonplace, so the Guide had high expectations for her. Best of all, as Liam’s adjutant, she was in an ideal position to assassinate him.

“Don’t get too cocky after your defeat of House Berkeley, Liam. The danger’s not over for you yet!”

The Guide manifested a door out of nowhere to teleport to Eulisia’s side. He wanted to witness the moment when she fulfilled her goal. Violently twisting the doorknob, he yanked the door open and stepped through.

Three months after the war with House Berkeley, Liam’s adjutant Eulisia sat with him in his new office, helping him with his work. His patrol fleet had finished its duties and returned to the Capital Planet, and Liam himself had gone down to the planet to assume a desk job in a military facility. His current military service was coming to an end, and he was preparing to enter the army’s reserve forces next.

Presently, Liam and Eulisia were alone in his office. Eulisia narrowed her eyes as she watched him diligently tend to his work.

Now could be the right time.

Since she knew Liam’s entire schedule, Eulisia was confident that now was a perfect opportunity for her. Liam was a man, so he had sexual desires. In fact, he probably had *more* desire pent up in him than an average man. He never laid a hand on the women around him, so evidently, he wasn’t any good at letting out that energy. Eulisia believed that this must be a source of hidden frustration to him.

Feeling that Eulisia was about to make a move, the Guide watched eagerly, making sure that neither of them could sense his presence. Likewise, making sure the Guide couldn’t sense *it*, the dog spirit also looked on. It narrowed its

eyes and then left the room, headed somewhere else.

The Guide was focused completely on Liam's adjutant. *Good, Eulisia! You must kill Liam!*

Eulisia, with her unceasing obsession with Liam and a deep-seated grudge against him, suddenly dropped her pen. She turned her back to Liam and bent down...her short skirt rising and exposing her panties.

Liam reacted to the calculated move, his shoulders jerking up. On the inside, Eulisia struck a victory pose. *He took the bait!*

So far, everything was going according to plan. She consciously chose underwear that morning that was purely practical and not *intended* to be sexy, but from how much time she spent with Liam, she knew this was what he preferred. Still, she knew it couldn't be *completely* unsexy. Liam's tastes were difficult to pinpoint and could be very specific, but with this she'd hit the target.

You love underwear like this, don't you?!

Feeling his gaze on her, Eulisia took her time straightening back up, then turned to face him with a smile. She made a show of moving her hand to adjust her skirt, putting on a mock embarrassed expression as she did so. It was all an act, of course.

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Lieutenant General."

"Err, uh, it's fine. Mmhm."

Seeing how flustered Liam was, Eulisia was assured of her success. *Your face is red, kiddo!*

As Eulisia eyed Liam like a predator watching its prey, the Guide cheered her on from the shadows. Something about the situation felt a bit odd to him, but her desire for revenge was perfectly clear. He decided not to sweat the small stuff.

"Good, Eulisia! Seduce him so he'll let his guard down, then take his life! You can do it!"

Eulisia smiled, but before she could follow up with the next move...

"Lord Liaaam!"

Nias burst into the room, crying—and she appeared to be wearing a swimsuit. The one-piece, navy-blue garment had a rectangle of white fabric across the chest, with her first name scrawled upon it in a childlike script.

Seeing her, Eulisia raged inside. *Not you agaaain!!!*

It wasn't just a matter of Nias interrupting and distracting Liam with some trivial matter. If it was, Eulisia could simply chase her out. The problem was with what she was wearing. It was a new style of underclothes for work that was meant to be practical, but could be considered subtly sexy... And it was something perfectly tailored to Liam's tastes.

He'll completely forget about my underwear now!

Eulisia spun around to look at Liam, but he was reacting in an unexpected way. His eyes cold, he muttered to himself, "Looks like a school swimsuit." It should have been the exact sort of thing he was into, but for some reason, he appeared devoid of interest. In fact, he was looking at Nias as though she were something to be pitied instead.

Not noticing his reaction at all, Nias clung to him and continued crying. "Listen to this, Lord Liam! My superiors took over the budget and all the materials that were supposed to be for me!!! They told me they'd take responsibility for the development, so I should just sit back and be good! Isn't that terrible?!"

What exactly had she done? It must have been something crazy for the higher-ups of the Seventh Weapons Factory to take away her stuff. Eulisia shook her head in disgust.

"Engineering Captain Carlin, the lieutenant general is working. Get out of his office."

Unfortunately for Eulisia, Liam seemed to take pity on the crying Nias and intended to hear her out. "It's fine... No one's gonna complain if my work is a little late. I'm kind of just wasting time here anyway. You really are a piece of work though, Nias. What in the world are you wearing?"

Nias sank to the floor and removed her glasses, her face messy with tears. "My boss ordered me to wear it when I'm working here! Oh Lord Liam, there were so many new technologies I wanted to experiment with! Don't they

understand that every process of new development has a risk of explosion?”

Uh, no, it doesn't, Eulisia shot back silently. She looked at Liam and found herself speechless at his response.

“You really are hopeless, aren't you? Don't worry, I'll talk to the Seventh Weapons Factory.”

“Thank you so much!”

Liam acted annoyed at Nias for clinging to him, but at the same time, he somehow seemed happy. Eulisia determined that what he was feeling wasn't lust... He just appeared to be enjoying the situation, somehow. Whatever the case, seeing the contented smile on his face forced Eulisia to admit defeat. No matter how hard she worked, she would never win against someone as guileless as Nias. She felt like that fact had been thrown in her face.

Eulisia crumpled to her knees. Unaware of the Guide's surprised, “Huh?” she began to sob, and Liam turned to her in concern.

“H-hey, what's the matter?”

Remembering all the hardship she had put herself through, Eulisia broke down in tears like a child. “I worked so hard! I slaved away for decades, planning to seduce you and then throw you away!”

“What are you even talking about? Seduce me?”

“Well, at House Razel, you wouldn't even give me the time of day! I tried so hard to seduce you at other times too, but you completely ignored me, Lieutenant General—Count!”

“Huh?”

As the thoroughly baffled Liam and Nias looked on, Eulisia hugged her knees.

Liam said, “Just because you couldn't attract me before, you wanted to seduce me and throw me away?”

Nias snorted upon hearing this plan for revenge. “Good luck throwing him away when you can't even get him in the first place.”

Eulisia felt utterly humiliated, hearing these words from a grown woman in a

school swimsuit. She buried her face in her knees again. “I put in so much effort! I went back to the military and entered the special forces, and after getting all sorts of qualifications, I finally found my way to your side! It was all to make you think you could do whatever you wanted to me, even take everything away from me if you so desired! I worked for decades to make it happen!”



Liam looked like he had no idea what to say. “All that, for me?”

Eulisia gave a small nod. All of her hard work had been in order to ultimately seduce Liam.

When the Guide learned the truth, he too fell to his knees in a corner of the room. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

It had been true that she harbored a desire for revenge, but the Guide hadn’t expected her desire to be nothing more than hooking Liam with her feminine wiles and dumping him...just to hurt and humble him.

Liam scratched his cheek. “You’re a rather unfortunate case too, aren’t you? Talk about a convoluted plan.”

Nias chimed in triumphantly. “Oh? Are there other unfortunate girls around you, Lord Liam? That must be tough.”

“Yeah—there’s you.”

“Huh?!”

Ignoring Nias’s sincerely shocked reaction, Liam crouched down to get on Eulisia’s eye level. “I get it. Okay, you can dump me if you want.”

Eulisia looked up and sniffled, grumbling, “You haven’t even asked me to be with you yet.”

It was essential to her that he wanted her first.

“That important, huh? Well, all right.”

To grant her wish, Liam faked a confession to grant Eulisia’s wish. If she was just going to turn him down anyway, he obviously figured he didn’t need to be sincere about it.

“Eulisia, when you leave the military, you can come be with me.”

“Uh!”

When she heard Liam’s gently worded pledge, Eulisia flushed in surprise, a smile lighting up her face. Then she frowned and realized, *Wait... If I reject this invitation, I’ll be stuck in the military for centuries, won’t I?*

She trained to serve in the military's special forces, and that training wasn't free. It cost a *lot* of money to develop a highly skilled soldier. If you trained further to pick up various extra qualifications, it cost even more. The military had invested a lot in Eulisia so they wouldn't let her go easily. Plus, there was one more problem to consider.

Even if I could go on and seduce another noble, would any noble out there be better than him?

Eulisia's original goal had always been to secure a position as the mistress or concubine of a noble with a promising future. When she took that into consideration, turning down Liam's offer was unthinkable. There was little chance she'd ever meet a more promising noble than him.

Eulisia reevaluated Liam from her current perspective. In looks, he passed. His personality just barely made it. However, his assets were worthy of a gold star, and his prospects were unparalleled.

Eulisia stared hard at his face. Confused by this and her hesitation, Liam nevertheless waited for her to reject him. "Hey, what's wrong? Weren't you gonna get back at me by turning me down?"

Eulisia lunged at Liam. "I'll stay with you forever, my lord!"

As a fellow woman, Nias caught on to Eulisia's thought process immediately. "Hey! You just thought it over and decided it'd be a waste to let him go, didn't you?! I'll have you know that Lord Liam's *my* patron!"

Liam blew up at Nias's assertion. "I'm not your anything! And let me go, Eulisia! I thought you wanted to get back at me by dumping me!"

Still desperately clinging to him, Eulisia explained why she changed her mind. "Well, you have such a promising future, Count! Plus, you've only got one wife and no other mistresses or concubines!"

If Eulisia was able to take such a position like Liam's mistress or concubine, it would be a move far up in the world from her current standing. And when she thought about it, if she was able to seduce him, then she already proved her superiority. There was no need to go any further. It would be a total waste to turn down his invitation now.

“Why are you such a disaster, Eulisia?”

“You said I should come be with you!”

Watching the commotion between the three humans, the Guide finally ran out of patience. He stepped forward out of the shadows.

“Gimme a break! This isn’t revenge at all!!!”

He violently snapped his fingers, stopping time. In so doing, he revealed his true form to Liam.

Liam’s eyes opened wide at the Guide’s sudden appearance.

“Long time no see, *Liam!*”

The Guide decided it was time to spill everything to him.

Chapter 10:

The Truth

IT HAPPENED WHILE I was being pestered by those two wastes of pretty faces. Time came to a stop around me and the Guide appeared, clutching his chest as though he were in pain. It was our first reunion in a while, but I was shocked by his appearance. Why did he look so much shabbier than the last time I'd seen him? He seemed pissed at me too.

"Liam... Didn't you realize that I was gathering all your enemies together?"

"Huh?"

"Didn't you think it was strange that so many nobles and soldiers suddenly sided with House Berkeley?"

I *had* been wondering how House Berkeley's fleet had grown so large, and why some of the military had sided with them. Now it seemed that had been the Guide's doing.

"You gathered enemies for me?"

"I just said that, didn't I? Yet you didn't even notice, and on top of that— Ugh!"

Seeing how pained the Guide looked, I finally understood. "I'm sorry. I should have realized."

"Well, it's fine. But you get it now, right?"

"Get what?"

"Figure it out! Don't you know who your real enemy is?"

My real enemy? It wasn't House Berkeley? The Guide was fed up with me for not realizing who my true enemy was. Did that mean someone manipulated House Berkeley? Was the Guide this beat up because...maybe he was protecting me from that enemy?

"You... It couldn't be!"

“Do you finally understand now?”

“Yeah, I do. And I don’t know how to thank you enough.”

“Wh... Huh?”

It made sense. Of course the Guide would be annoyed with me. He was protecting me from my real enemy, and I didn’t even know who that enemy was! I had no doubt he sacrificed a lot to protect me. His clothes were torn here and there, and he looked quite gaunt compared to the last time I saw him. To put it mildly, he looked like he ran himself ragged gathering my enemies for me. Because he brought all that riffraff together, I was able to end the conflict with House Berkeley that had been annoying me so much in one fell swoop. So, everything had gone according to the Guide’s script.

“I *had* been thinking it was weird,” I said. “House Berkeley’s army was way too big, and part of the military was against me too. Of course, a lot of soldiers sided with me. That was your doing as well, wasn’t it?”

Frankly, I had the feeling that everything was going *too* well for me, but if the Guide was working behind the scenes to help me out, then it all made sense. The only factor he hadn’t counted on was House Berkeley’s secret weapon at the end, I guessed.

“No, I’m trying to tell you...!”

The Guide was desperately trying to tell me something, but I wanted to express the full extent of my gratitude toward him first. There were plenty of things I wanted to discuss, but my thanks came first.

“You really have taken great care of me. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to investigate this ‘real enemy’ of mine. Anyway, thank you! You saved me once again!”

I felt pretty awkward. There weren’t many people in this reincarnated life of mine I could express my thanks to so earnestly. As I did so, I noticed the Guide was shuddering.

“St-stop it...”

“Hey, don’t be so embarrassed...you’ll make me embarrassed too. It’s a little

awkward expressing my true feelings like this, but I want you to know how much I appreciate all you've done for me."

I felt my cheeks turning red.

"Stop iiiit!"

To the Guide's inner eye, there was a whole line of old-fashioned matchlock rifles lined up behind Liam, all made of solid gold and pointed at the Guide. Liam was the focal point of great waves of gratitude from many people, and this merged with his own gratitude toward the Guide. The combined force filled these golden guns with bullets of condensed gratitude.

Liam obviously wasn't aware of these guns, but to the Guide they were only too real, and he grew terrified staring down their barrels.

Liam took a step toward the Guide. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Eep!"

There was no way the Guide could finish Liam off on his own. He knew that in his weakened state, and with how powerful Liam had become, the tables would only turn on him.

What is it with you? How can you not see how hard I've worked to make you miserable? Yet, you thank me every time! I could trip you on your face and you'd still thank me for it!

No matter what the Guide did to him, Liam was grateful. It sickened the Guide, and even frightened him. It was almost enough to make him suspect that Liam was doing it on purpose.

Does he actually know that I hate feelings of gratitude? N-no, that couldn't be...

Liam took another step toward the Guide, and as if that triggered them, the matchlock rifles all began to fire. The bullets pierced the Guide, black smoke pouring out of the holes they tore open in him.

"Nooooo!"

Golden bullets filled with gratitude shot into the Guide again and again. Unable to bear the agony, his figure turned into black smoke and vanished.

“H-hey, where are you going?” Liam called. “I haven’t thanked you enough!”

With the Guide having fled, time flowed again and Nias and Eulisia resumed talking.

“Lord Liam, please give me a new budget!”

“I’ll never let you go, for the rest of my life!”

Once again trapped in the embrace of the two rather unfortunate girls, Liam wondered if there was anything he could do for the Guide to more properly express his thanks. All the while, an unseen dog watched Liam from a corner of the room, looking disappointed.

My four years of military service came to an end. With my future dukedom taken into account, I ended up as a general in the reserve forces. My rise through the ranks had been unusually quick, and I’d been given all sorts of decorations besides. The power of bribes was not to be underestimated here—a general in just four years was unusually quick! To be truthful, the rank was just for show, and wouldn’t do me much actual good. A military rank awarded to a noble was something like a show of thanks for all the financial contributions they’d made to the army. It wasn’t like I’d actually be throwing my weight around in the Imperial Army, so I was pretty much a general in name only.

Meanwhile, Tia and Marie had both been promoted to brigadier general, and as a general’s adjutant, Eulisia had made the rank of colonel. Also, thanks to my support, Nias had risen to the rank of engineering major. For some reason, people had the impression that I was Nias’s patron...an impression that didn’t sit right with me. Still, I let it go, since she *was* valuable to me for her ability to maintain the Avid. And it would be too much work to try and deny.

Anyway, the real letdown was Wallace. As we all sat around together, I said, “Look at you, Wallace, just a captain in the reserves. What were you even doing?”

Just sticking with me should have guaranteed him the rank of major, yet he couldn't even pull that off.

Wallace looked uncomfortable. "Well... Y'know..."

"How could you screw this up? Even Nias got promoted through her connections to me! How many bribes do you think I paid the military?"

Uh...what I meant were holiday gifts and *donations*, to help out a bit. But I asked them to promote Wallace too!

"I'm embarrassed to even be considered your patron!"

"Well, what do you want, Liam? There was no place for me to even do anything! All I did was supervise construction down on that frontier planet!"

"That still should have been enough for a noble to get promoted!"

"You know, I *am* still a royal."

Sheesh...and here his brother Cedric had been promoted to major general.

Wallace clasped his hands behind his head, giving me an attitude. "A noble's rank in the reserves is meaningless, anyway. Plus, I don't really care if I stand out in that way."

"Are you sure you're not just making excuses for why you couldn't get promoted?"

Wallace averted his gaze from me, so I suspected I was right. Of course, I was the one who made him go through all that military experience. I decided to let him off the hook this one time.

"I'll let it slide. We're headed to college next, so your military rank won't mean anything there anyway."

"That's right! Ahh, I've been looking forward to campus life! I can go to mixers every night and have the time of my life playing around!"

Not the most dignified royal, is he? I've already got a fiancée, so I guess mixers aren't in the cards for me, huh... I need to take a more serious look at my personal life. As I thought this, I looked over at Eulisia. Noticing my glance, she piped up.

“Lord Liam!” she said, stars twinkling in her eyes. “You’re renting a fancy hotel on the Capital Planet, right? Please let me have a room there too!”

I shook my head but sighed resignedly. “Do what you want.”

“Yay! My dream life is coming true, one step at a time!”

Even Wallace was growing exasperated with Eulisia. He whispered to me, “Man, I thought she was a super serious military type, but look at her now. She is really hot, though.”

Well, she’s still a talented soldier, so I don’t have a problem keeping her around. It’s just, listening to her now...

“In the morning, I can swim in the hotel pool, and then go shopping in the afternoon and have lunch in a café...”

As I watched her fantasizing, I had to admit her flaws really stood out.

Wallace spoke quietly to me again. “Don’t you think you should talk to Rosetta about your little adjutant?”

“Ahh...”

I really did need to inform my fiancée about the mistress I had taken on. I didn’t know why I should feel this way, but I really wasn’t looking forward to it.

“You sure it was okay to do that, Liam?”

“What, take a mistress? Of course it’s fine. I’ve always planned to build myself a harem, after all.”

“Oh, really? Anyway, no... I meant about House Berkeley’s domain.”

“Oh, that.”

Since I’d taken down the rule of House Berkeley, I was free to claim their entire fortune as my own. That aspect of the situation was fine, but the problem was the number of planets that had been part of their domain. One would think that gaining so much new territory was a net positive, but these planets were so numerous that I couldn’t possibly manage them all myself. When I mentioned this dilemma to Amagi, she simply agreed, saying, “There are too many planets, and too great a distance from your home world.” I’d been

thinking I could warp between them, but it seemed even in this world, distance was a problem when planets were scattered too far away.

On top of this, many of the planets that fell within their territory had been ruined, destroyed and turned into dead worlds so those idiots could extract elixirs. I had no real use for them that I could think of, so I kept only a few of these dead planets for myself. I already sold the rest to the Empire.

Other than planets, I took whatever spoils I could from House Berkeley. They'd had a number of planetary development devices, so I figured I could make good use of those. I loaded them onto fortress-class ships so they could terraform frontier planets. I did consider ruining some of House Berkeley's planets to obtain my own elixirs, but I had enough dead planets on my hands already and it would be a headache to make more. Lastly, I kept all the elixirs that House Berkeley had in storage for myself so I wouldn't need more for a while.

While I considered these various matters, the Guide's foreboding words about my "real enemy" continued to worry me. Out there somewhere loomed some great threat that House Berkeley didn't even compare to. If I was going to fight it, I'd need even more power than I currently had.

"What a waste," Wallace continued. "You could have given some to me."

"I can give you all the ruined planets you want."

"I don't mean those! Come on, Liam, just give me one planet that's at least a little developed! I won't complain if it's even a frontier planet we were fixing up in our spare time."

The planet that I fixed up like I was playing some simulation game was actually in a good location, so it was much more developed now. A bunch of merchants hoped to open shops there, so I left all that to Thomas. The population was increasing steadily too. Yep, things were looking up. Since this planet was under the direct control of the Empire, it would continue to grow like this on its own now.

"Don't be ridiculous. That one doesn't belong to me. Look, I'll give you one that's at least started being developed."

“I’ll hold you to that.”

He was so full of himself, but Wallace *was* still my lackey. I would need more allies in the future, so I couldn’t treat him too badly. My real problem right now was this true enemy of mine. The Guide hadn’t told me who or what was out to get me, but I couldn’t rely on him for everything. I had to figure this one out myself.

So right now, my intention was to concentrate on building up my strength. I wanted enough power to be able to completely crush anybody who stood in my way.

While I was reflecting on this, Wallace asked casually, “Oh yeah, so what are you gonna do next? Head back to the Capital Planet?”

“I’m going home first. I’ve got work to do there, after all.”

“Oh yeah? Then I’ll just head to the Capital—”

“You’re coming too!”

Wallace would be coming with me when I went home for the time being.

“Oh, my home—how I’ve missed you!”

As I spread out my arms, Brian looked on and sniffled.

“You’ve grown into a splendid young man, Master Liam. I can hardly see you through the tears in my eyes.”

“So how can you know how splendid I am?”

This guy’s always crying about something or other.

I nodded at Amagi, who despite being as expressionless as ever, somehow also looked happy to me.

“No problems here, Amagi?”

“Nothing concerning, beyond paying reparations to the families of our fallen soldiers.”

We lost some people too, after all.

“I see. I want our soldiers treated well. They’re my valuable fighting arm, after all.”

“Yes, Master.”

After wiping his tears away, Brian said, “So, Master Liam, I see you’ve finally chosen a concubine. Where are she and Lady Rosetta right now?”

I was just trying to enjoy a nice mellow homecoming, and this guy had to bring up annoying matters.

I responded with a frown, “I left them on the Capital Planet.”

“But why?! I was so thrilled that you were finally showing interest in women, Master Liam!”

It pissed me off that he thought I had no interest in women in the first place. Brian had apparently wanted me to come home with Rosetta and Eulisia in tow, but the two of them were still enjoying hotel life back on the Capital Planet. I didn’t want to deal with Rosetta, so it had been better to leave her behind, and I only recruited Eulisia as my adjutant, not really as my concubine. With her, it was the same as with Nias; I just couldn’t be attracted to her. Though, in that regard she was better than Tia and Marie. In any case, I didn’t want to talk about this with Brian at the moment, so I changed the subject.

“Say, Brian, what does this look like to you?”

I showed him the heart-like device I recovered after the battle. When he saw it, he appeared quite interested.

“My, that’s a rare item. It’s called a Machine Heart—an artifact that is said to be able to breathe life into, well, a machine.”

“What?”

I turned to Amagi, half-playfully pressing the Machine Heart to her ample chest. It wedged nicely between her breasts, which were nice and springy as always. Nothing happened except for Amagi giving me a cool look.

“Master?”

“Well, he said it could give you life...”

“Surely it is only a replica. You could not stumble upon a rare, out-of-place artifact so easily.”

“Oh, you think so? I would’ve liked it if you’d truly come alive.” I really was overcome with disappointment.

“...Such a thing is not possible.” Amagi said these words emotionlessly, but to me, her face looked a little sad.



Brian said, “By the way, Master Liam, I heard that you’ve purchased several new fortress-class ships. You mustn’t buy warships like you’re buying toys.”

“It’s fine. I’m going to make them temporary bases for frontier planets.”

“What?! You really plan to develop the planets you obtained from House Berkeley?”

“Of course I do.”

I would use the planetary development devices I obtained in the proper way, to develop my domain. Right now, I needed to amass power for the day when my true enemy appeared.

“I need to become stronger. Amagi, help me come up with a new plan to further develop my domain, would you?”

It was normal for the two of us to discuss the managing of my domain, but Amagi responded in a way she never had before.

“In regard to that subject, I believe it is time for me to step down from my current management position.”

“Huh?”

“You have ample personnel now. Even without my help, if you make use of artificial intelligence for support, development should proceed without issue.”

“Oh, really?”

“From now on, I would prefer to focus on supporting you personally, Master.”

I was getting nervous, so I glanced at Brian, who informed me of Amagi’s future plans.

“Once your new management team is set up, Amagi will accompany you to the Capital Planet to look after you herself, Master Liam.”

I was relieved when I heard that. “Oh, is that right? If you’re coming, Amagi, I’ll welcome you with a big party!”

“There is no need.”

I felt disappointed that Amagi had turned me down like that. “O-oh? I’ll just

welcome you normally, then. You *sure* you don't want a party?"

"Correct. You should not advertise my existence too much, anyway. You know the prevailing attitude toward those like me. Your reputation in the Empire would suffer."

I couldn't help feeling sad when Amagi reminded me that my treatment of her could harm my reputation.

Epilogue

AFTER BEING SHOT by Liam's bullets of gratitude, the ragged Guide found himself walking down a dark alley.

"Eulisia... You betrayed meee!"

He had never imagined that Eulisia's dark impulse for revenge had actually been a plan to get back at him in a romantic capacity. *She joined the special forces for that?* He couldn't help feeling duped. No normal person would go back to the military for retraining and join an elite unit for such an absurd goal.

Now, the Guide intended to check in on Yasushi, who hadn't stepped up to play a part in recent events.

"Yasushi, if you've betrayed me too..."

With blood dripping from his mouth, the Guide peeked in on the man and found him berating two people.

"It's not enough! You're not strong enough yet to best Liam—my first pupil!"

Yasushi was living a hidden life in a dojo he set up to train a pair of children. The Guide saw a spark of hope in the scene before him.

The two children stood rigidly at attention...blindfolded, sweating, and gripping wooden swords. Though very young, and their balance was poor, they already looked stronger than Yasushi.

"Yasushi... I knew I was right to believe in you!"

Making use of the considerable sum of money Liam had given him, Yasushi was teaching the two children the Way of the Flash in the same way he trained Liam. He was using every resource at his disposal to strengthen them, even arranging for several sessions in education capsules. There was a reason Yasushi, of all people, would go to such lengths.

As the Guide continued spying, a gang of obviously disreputable knights paid Yasushi a visit.

"Hey, Pops," one of them said. "We heard there's a guy named Yasushi who

teaches the Way of the Flash here.”

The group of youths looked like delinquents.

“The Way of the Flash?” Yasushi answered. “Never heard of it.”

“You sure? Our info says that Count Banfield’s super-strong instructor is here.”

“What? A famous person like a count’s personal instructor *here*? Sorry, but I don’t know anything about that.”

“Damn. All right, let’s go, guys.”

Every now and then people came looking for Liam’s sword master, and that terrified Yasushi.

Dammit! This is all Liam’s fault, for spreading talk of a fake sword style like the Way of the Flash! It makes me stand out in a dangerous way.

Yasushi had to confront this situation. Until he defeated Liam and proved to everyone that there was nothing to the Way of the Flash, he would never be able to rest. That was why Yasushi was raising and instructing these two children.

“That’s enough!” he told them.

At Yasushi’s signal, the two blindfolded children took deep breaths.

“Good work, you two. I can tell you’re growing more skilled.”

They took the blindfolds off.

“Master, why did you lie to those men?”

“Hmm?”

“You could beat small fry like them easily, couldn’t you?”

Knights...small fry? The two powerful children had it backwards, and Yasushi struggled to answer them. “W-well, you see... you mustn’t wield your blade without reason! Your swords are for defeating worthy enemies, not crushing insects!”

The Guide considered that at this point, these tough children might actually

make those knights seem like small fry by comparison. He said, “Well, they’re still far from Liam’s level, but they’re definitely strong. Keep up the good work, Yasushi.”

As the Guide vanished from that place, an unseen dog watched him go.

The two children wiped the sweat from their brows.

“Yeah, yeah... We’ve heard that before. You’ll accept us as masters if we can beat your previous student, right?”

“That’s right. You pass if you can beat Lord Liam.”

“Is your old student really the famous Count Liam, though? I don’t know if I believe that...”

“Y-you doubt me? He truly was my student!”

The two turned away, dismissing him.

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s get some food.”

“Right, I’m hungry!”

“H-hey, wait a minute!” Yasushi said after them.

After the boys had left the dojo, the dog also disappeared.

Though in Amagi’s opinion the Machine Heart that the Guide helped me obtain was merely a replica, I sat myself down inside the cockpit of the Avid and pressed the Machine Heart against the main control console. A cord promptly extended from the device and inserted itself into the console, and the Avid absorbed it.

This is strange.

“I couldn’t use it on Amagi, though...”

If the Machine Heart wasn’t a fake, perhaps the issue with Amagi was that her powerful AI mind couldn’t be influenced, so I hoped the device would prove useful in some way in the Avid instead. Later on, in fact, it seemed to me the Avid’s energy output was even higher than it had been previously. Unless it was just my imagination, since I didn’t care to scrutinize numbers.

“It’s great if the Avid has truly powered up some, but what exactly is going on here?”

Now that I thought about it, since the results of using the Machine Heart were unpredictable, it was just as well that I took it back from Amagi. I wouldn’t want anything to go wrong with her.

Still though... Hmm...

In one large room of House Banfield’s mansion, a line of beds had been set up for the maid robots’ use. These were tank beds, capsule-shaped and full of liquid. Amagi, who presently lay inside one of them, opened her eyes when her maintenance was complete.

“Life...”

As she lay there, she thought of how the Machine Heart was said to impart life to a lifeless object. When the Machine Heart hadn’t worked on her, she’d been somewhat disappointed, but at the same time rather happy.

“If it can’t give me life, does that mean I’m already as good as alive? That the emotions I feel are *real*?”

Conflicted, Amagi emerged from the liquid-filled tank bed in order to get back to her work. Having dried herself off, she reached out for the maid uniform prepared for her. Just then, she received a call from Liam on her tablet. Still naked, she answered the call, displaying herself from the neck up on his screen.

“Amagi, come take a ride on the powered-up Avid.”

From those words, Amagi immediately guessed what had happened. Since he’d taken it back from her, he had to have tried out the Machine Heart on the Avid.

“Master, did you use the Machine Heart?”

“I did,” he admitted casually, and Amagi chastised him for being rash.

“I believe I told you not to use it until you had properly investigated it, did I not?”

"It's fine." Since Amagi had no idea where it had come from, she wasn't able to feel the same confidence.

Liam innocently repeated his invitation. *"Come on, let's go for a drive."*

"Very well." Amagi decided to accompany him so she could assess the state of the Avid.

Why does Master attract all these strange objects?

Liam had gathered all sorts of lost technology to him, and it just seemed too unnatural. Amagi couldn't help but feel suspicious.

It had become Rosetta's job to oversee the historied luxury hotel where Liam stayed when he was on the Capital Planet. In its lounge, she spoke with the hotel manager about their current plans as the man manipulated a tablet.

"Eighty percent of the hotel's rooms are currently in use," he reported.

Knights, soldiers, and officials from House Banfield were staying in the rooms, along with a group of noble children studying abroad as Liam's guests. Most of the children were from families lower in rank than baron, but there were also some children of barons and viscounts from impoverished rural domains. Despite their technically being Empire nobles, Liam was taking care of them because they were essentially his vassals.

During her time training at the palace, Rosetta had encountered plenty of girls who just couldn't stop acting like princesses, even away from home. She saw the same thing amongst the students housed at the hotel, which worried her. One of the reasons she invited them here was to show them there was always someone more important than oneself. She wanted to teach them this while they were in her care.

"We have room for more guests, then," she said to the manager.

"Yes, but filling the remaining rooms will mean we won't be able to account for any unforeseen circumstances."

"That is a problem. There are more children I'd like to invite to see the Capital, but..."

All of the nobles House Banfield was hosting at the hotel were from families who lived on the Empire's outskirts. They had always heard how amazing the Capital Planet was but knew little more than that. They had an obligation to teach what they knew to their subjects as well. Sometimes, because of how uninformed they were, a domain thought they could get away with going against or even deposing their rulers. When this happened, the Empire would burn that domain to the ground without mercy, its citizens included. At that point, it didn't matter if the citizens were old or young, or if they had participated in the rebellion or not. Whole planets were destroyed simply for going against the Empire's authority. That was why it was important for these unworldly children to be taught about the ways of the Empire.

The easiest method to avoid uprisings was to prevent one's subjects from obtaining any knowledge or power in the first place, but this went against Liam's way of doing things. Such methods weren't used in House Banfield's domain. Rosetta was covering for Liam in areas where he was lacking by teaching these children in House Banfield's care.

"I'll talk to Darling about it when he comes back. Let's keep the rooms open until then."

"Seems the Lady Banfield is quite busy herself."

"I-I'm still just his fiancée."

"Pardon me for misspeaking then."

The manager changed the subject when he saw Rosetta's cheeks had flushed red.

"It won't be long now until you two attend college, correct? Will you be working as an official as well, Lady Rosetta?"

Once Liam was back from his home planet, the two of them would begin attending school together, and Rosetta was looking forward to it.

"I plan to, yes."

In the future, she'd have to rule in Liam's stead whenever he was away or unavailable, so she needed to acquire the bare minimum of qualifications to be capable of that.

Oh, I hope Darling comes back soon.

More than acquiring those important qualifications and education, Rosetta was simply excited about being able to go through college at Liam's side.

Finally, I arrived back on the Capital Planet. At home, I could act like a king, but on the Capital Planet I was just one noble of many. I could still throw my weight around here and there, but with so many people more important than myself about, I could relax without having to always run the show. In regard to these other nobles, I learned from my experience with House Berkeley that getting into fights with people could lead to all sorts of unexpected issues. I might not lose in the ensuing fights, but it did get tiresome taking shots at each other for years.

On the other hand, I also *gained* plenty from my experience with House Berkeley, like several planetary development devices, the Machine Heart, and House Berkeley's entire fortune, not to mention a number of resource-rich planets I could exploit. The next time I wanted to sell off a bunch of rare metals, I'd have a convenient excuse.

Riding in a flying, limousine-like vehicle with Amagi at my side, I gazed out at the Capital Planet's passing scenery. The vehicle flew through the air with several traffic control devices floating in the sky around it. However, something about the view outside made it hard to hold my interest.

"I get so bored seeing gray all the time."

It was a concrete jungle. Technically, nothing here was made of concrete, but there was no green anywhere. It just looked like one big, endless city.

Wallace rode with us, suffering from a hangover. "Liam... Gimme some medicine."

"It's your fault for getting carried away. Why don't you just suffer for a bit?"

Wallace was drinking and partying last night, celebrating being free from Serena—his words. Medicine existed that could instantly cure his hangover, but I thought it was more amusing to leave him to suffer a bit. That would be better medicine for Wallace.

As we approached the hotel where we'd be staying, Amagi looked a little angry. "Master, I believe I requested a modest reception."

Knights and soldiers were all lined up outside to receive us, and Amagi disapproved of that because she didn't want me drawing attention to her. Honestly, I planned on honoring her wishes, but I couldn't help wanting to put on a big show for her. A band was ready to give a musical performance, and the knights and soldiers were all decked out in formal dress. It felt good seeing all these people eager to carry out my every whim.

"It's just a little surprise for you."

"You should save such things for Lady Rosetta."

"R-right..."

Rosetta would be happy no matter what I did for her, and if I arranged something like this, I knew she'd be all over me. But having all those sincere feelings directed at me... I didn't know how to deal with it. She had a hard life growing up, so contrary to her glamorous appearance, she wasn't used to a lavish lifestyle and conducted herself in a rather ordinary way. Even Eulisia was flashier.

The limousine touched down, and all my loyal servants gave a salute. The door opened and I stepped out first, turning back to Amagi.

"Come on, Amagi."

I held out my hand to her, and after a moment of hesitation, she took it. When she emerged from the car, there was a bit of a commotion nearby.

"Whassat? Somebody's holdin' hands with a doll."

A man in flashy clothes with a bright red face who looked like he'd been drinking all morning was laughing at me near the entrance of the hotel, surrounded by his followers and guards. He appeared to be a noble himself, but he was picking a fight with me.

One of my knights rushed over to the man and tried to get him to leave the premises.

"This space is reserved for House Banfield. You need to go!"

The apparent noble didn't seem to want to comply, however.

"Some vassal knight from the sticks is ordering *me*, the heir to a marquisdom? Does the count think his position has changed just because he has a bit of a reputation now? Why'd he rent out this old, worn-out hotel, anyway? He doesn't have the money for a newer place?"

Every word out of his mouth was meant to disparage me, but from how he was talking, he seemed to know something about this hotel.

Not that I care.

He seemed to only be here with the intention of picking a fight with me, but I didn't want to waste my time on him.

"It's a little noisy out here, Amagi. Why don't you head into the hotel?"

Amagi squeezed my hand, looking hesitant to leave me unattended. "Master, you must not..."

The heir to the title of marquis pointed at us and laughed. "Hey, he's seriously talking to that doll. Look at little Liam, playing with his dolls."

I gazed directly at the man who had called Amagi a doll. "Hmm?"

I didn't know who he was, but this stupid noble seemed to know me. He must have come here specifically to find me.

"This is the Capital Planet, you know, little boy!" he continued to provoke me. "You can't bring your dollies here to play!"

I turned my back to him and started walking Amagi past his entourage toward the hotel entrance. Tia ran up to me expectantly, so I irritably ordered her, "Deal with the aftermath."

Tia hesitated for just a moment. "Do you think it'll be okay?"

"Why should there be a problem? Carry Wallace inside too."

Wallace was slumped down drunk inside the car. If someone picked him up and took him inside the hotel with us, we get away from this situation with no problems.

"Gah ha ha ha! Nothing to say, little Lia—"

The laughing noble suddenly fell in a spray of blood, my sword having split him in two vertically. I just couldn't deal with his jeering taunts any longer, and now I felt a lot better. Everyone behind me was left wide-eyed but subdued into silence. I continued into the hotel, unbothered.

Inside, Amagi narrowed her eyes, reprimanding me for my hasty action. "Were you not saying recently that you needed to be careful about picking fights with nobles?"

True, I *did* learn from my fight with House Berkeley that it wasn't good to indiscriminately get involved in conflicts.

"Yeah, but I did deliberate first. As a result of my deliberation, I decided to shut him up. Do a thorough investigation of his family—everyone related by blood and marriage. I'll crush them all, just like House Berkeley."

Anyone who pestered people in such a boorish way was bound to be a small-time punk. His noble ranking might've been high, but I was sure his family wasn't very powerful. If I had to rid myself of them, I would do so, like House Berkeley. I would crush these people, just like I did before. Wait, no, it'd be boring to get rid of my enemies the same way every time...

"I feel like I can do a better job this time. Enjoy your impending doom, Marquis."

With what I learned from defeating House Berkeley, I would do an even better job destroying this new enemy. Evil lords showed no mercy to their adversaries!

The hangers-on and knights of the slain heir drew closer to Tia, who had been dispatched to deal with them.

"Do you understand what you've done?!"

"You're making an enemy of a marquis, you know!"

"You can't possibly believe you'll get away with this!"

With a smile, Tia drew her rapier and swung it to the side, removing the head from one of the knights. Watching them fall over in a geyser of blood, Tia calmly

gave an order to her subordinates as though she was simply tasking them with busywork.

“Let’s take care of this.”

The knights assigned to Tia today were unnerved by her actions. They weren’t from her usual faction but were instead novice knights House Banfield was training. They weren’t yet used to spontaneous violence like this.

“B-but, ma’am...!” They couldn’t bring themselves to take up their weapons for fear of starting another war between noble houses.

Insistent, Tia repeated her command. “These knights have shamed themselves by not protecting their charge. It would be more merciful of us to give them the chance to risk their lives for their master’s honor. These followers will likely lose their positions because of this incident too... So, kill them as well.”

“But...!”

The knights still wouldn’t follow her orders, so Tia glared at them ominously. Her body language conveyed a clear message. *If you disobey me further, I’ll cut you down too.*

Tia lightly prodded the disobedient knight who’d spoken up in the throat with her rapier. “Lord Liam ordered us to deal with this. Will you disobey your lord’s orders?”

She intended to kill him if he protested further, but the knight had finally steeled himself. He looked away from her but replied, “N-no, ma’am.”

Seeing that Tia’s people intended to comply, one of the opposing knights drew his sword and slashed at them, but Tia spun toward him and thrust her rapier through his skull. She withdrew her blade, and the knight crumpled to the ground, gushing blood. The whole area was stained with blood, but there was no change in Tia’s firm expression.

“Lord Liam shows no mercy to anyone who ridicules Amagi. Kill every last one of them, and we’ll toss their corpses in front of their marquis’s residence.”

The hangers-on and knights of the other family trembled upon learning that

House Banfield seriously intended to declare war. They had never believed this incident would go that far, trusting in the unspoken rule between nobles and that Liam would back off from a high-ranking noble heir. They had provoked Liam naively believing in this, and they realized far too late just how frightening the person they provoked was.

“W-wait, please,” one of the heir’s associates blurted out. “Are you serious? This can still be resolved peacefully—”

There could be no peace anymore now that the marquis’s heir was already dead, but the heir’s people were desperate to get out of this situation alive. Despite everything, they pleaded with Tia.

Tia just scoffed at them. “Lord Liam doesn’t seem to mind quarreling with your lord. We’ll kill you and declare war against the marquis.”

Channeling the rage that Liam had felt when Amagi was ridiculed, his knights brought their blades down on their enemies. The soldiers shouldered their guns as well, so there was nowhere to run for the marquis’s knights.

Tia’s lips curled into a terrifying smile. “You made a fool of Lord Liam. For that, you deserve to die a *thousand* deaths.”

Liam’s knights wiped out the remaining hangers-on and knights, and once they discovered where he lived, dumped the bodies onto the estate of a certain marquis here on the Capital Planet. It was an act of provocation toward the marquis, and a statement that House Banfield was ready to wage war at any time.

While I was relaxing in my penthouse suite, Rosetta ran into the room, out of breath. From her anxiousness, I figured there had to be some problem.

“Darling, did you do something?”

“What are you talking about?”

I looked up from the e-book I was reading on the couch. All sorts of information screens projected from my tablet hovered around me, but I erased them to talk to her.

Rosetta explained why she was here. “Someone I know wanted me to mediate for her. She seemed so scared, and she was in such a hurry that I became curious.”

“How do you know her?”

“We apprenticed as maids at the palace together.”

What did someone like that want with me?

“Who is it?”

“She’s from a marquis’s house. She said someone from the family made you angry, so she wanted an opportunity to apologize to you, Darling.”

“Is she a friend of yours?”

“W-well...”

When I saw Rosetta struggling with that question, I was able to make an educated guess about this girl. They probably weren’t friends, and likely barely even knew each other. While I was contemplating what to do, Marie came into the room.

“Lord Liam, we’ve finished investigating the marquis. Here are the documents.”

“Right, that guy.”

This was probably the house that heir who’d ridiculed Amagi belonged to. I took the documents from Marie, and from them learned the marquis was in possession of a rather large house. His territory was equivalent to House Berkeley’s, which made sense given the title of marquis, but his domain wasn’t terribly developed, and their military was pretty much just for show. They had one hundred thousand ships at their disposal, but House Berkeley’s army had been a greater threat. In other words, just as I expected from the heir’s crude manner, they were practically nobodies.

Marie stood at attention as she watched me go over the report. Lounging on the couch, I handed the documents back to her.

“They’re just an eyesore, so we’ll take them out. Let’s be a little more proactive this time.”

It would be annoying if this dragged on too long as it had with House Berkeley, so I wanted to end it quickly. Marie didn't seem to think that would be possible, however.

"I believe that will be difficult to accomplish. The marquis has already asked the Empire to mediate. They wish to apologize to us."

"What, they don't want to fight?"

"When they heard the heir had picked a fight with you, they began the paperwork to disown him at once. They're also willing to offer up the marquis's daughter to you. I hear she trained at the palace with Lady Rosetta."

Marie glanced over at Rosetta, and Rosetta's expression seemed troubled for a moment. Something must have happened between the two of them during their maid training.

It might be interesting to keep a woman like that nearby and pamper her to see Rosetta's reaction...

I was curious now, so I asked Marie for the data on the daughter.

"She better be pretty. I have high standards when it comes to women."

"This is her."

Marie called up a 3D holographic image, and the girl displayed in front of me certainly *was* beautiful. She had just entered adulthood and looked young, and she definitely qualified looks-wise. However, I couldn't add her to my harem.

"Her style's too flashy. Not my type. Tell the marquis I don't want her."

"Are you sure? You could take her as a mistress and the child you have with her could be the next marquis."

That would be a chance for me to take over a marquis's family, but when I thought about whether I really wanted to do such a thing, I wasn't sure that I did. Plus, I didn't really like the daughter's vibe, no matter how pretty she was. It was a kind of an instinct, or perhaps she just reminded me of my ex-wife somehow. Her face was beautiful, but it looked to me like a face that could betray me. Anyway, she was worthy of being in my harem, but didn't appeal to me personally. As an evil lord, I had to have high standards.

“I’m not interested. If I want their territory, I’ll take it by force.”

When I said this, Rosetta beamed for some reason. She trembled with happiness, her eyes filling up with tears. “Darling!”

“What are you so happy about?!”

I’m not turning the daughter down because of you!

Marie looked happy too, which pissed me off as well. She said, “I thought you would say that, Lord Liam. There’s no need to take this marquis’s daughter, even by force. Isn’t that nice, Lady Rosetta?”

Rosetta flushed red at Marie’s words. *They definitely have the wrong idea about me.* I was irritated at Marie acting like she completely saw through me, but before I could complain, Rosetta piped up too.

“Oh, I love you, Darling!” Overjoyed through her misunderstanding, Rosetta leaped on me.

Wh-wh— Knock it off! Tell me what part of that made you so happy! Nothing I said should have caused this reaction!

“L-lemme go! Stop it, Rosetta!”

While I was struggling, Amagi walked in to bring me tea. “My, you two are getting along well. Shall I bring your tea two hours from now?”

“N-no! This is just...!”

It felt as if my wife had caught me in the middle of cheating on her. A cold sweat rose on the back of my neck from the guilt.

Even Marie chimed in. “Lord Liam, I’ll make sure no one gets anywhere near your room to interfere!” Oh, she was really so useless.

As I continued to try to tear Rosetta off me, Eulisia burst into the room, shopping bags hanging from her arms. I guessed she was out on the town today, having the time of her life again.

“Lord Liam! I want to show off to my old coworkers, so please take a picture with me! I want one where we’re hugging like we’re in love!”

Just to rub it in, she wanted to send that picture to her former coworkers,

knowing how they dreamed of becoming the concubine or mistress of a noble.
What a crude chick. I knew she was a waste of a pretty face.

Amagi and Marie dragged Eulisia out of the room.

“Lady Eulisia, please be more conscious of your position as Master’s adjutant,” said Amagi.

“Don’t get in Lady Rosetta’s way, you waste of space!” Marie added.

With both of them dragging her away by the arms, Eulisia struggled to reach toward me.

“Ah, wait! My coworkers did the same thing to me all the time! Let me get back at them!”



The three of them left, and then it was just Rosetta and me. *Wait, this isn't good.*

Rosetta was rosy-cheeked and fidgeting. Right as I was trying to figure out how to escape, the door burst open again and Wallace rushed in, asking for my help.

“This is big, Liam!”

When Wallace appeared in a panic, Rosetta finally got off me, looking disappointed.

“Good timing, Wallace! So, what's up?”

I was right to keep this guy around after all. However, what Wallace brought to me in gasping breaths was...yet another piece of trouble.

“My sis—I mean, the third prince...”

“The third prince?”

“The prince who's third in line to the throne wants to meet with *you*, Liam!”

Rosetta covered her mouth with both hands in surprise. “The third prince? Really?!”

Wallace and Rosetta both stared at me expectantly.

Well, I guess things are getting interesting.

Bonus Story:

Rosetta and the Maid Robots

SHIRANE, one of the mass-produced maid robots at House Banfield's mansion, was feared by the human staff who worked there. It wasn't just Shirane, though. All of the maid robots, including the one in charge of them, Amagi, were feared. This was in part because of the Empire's dislike of artificial intelligence, but the biggest reason was the master of the mansion, Liam.

Liam didn't seem to trust human beings. He only appeared to put his faith in maid robots like Amagi and Shirane, which made use of artificial intelligence. For that reason, if he heard that someone had mocked the maid robots, he would cut them down without hesitation. For fear of provoking their master's wrath, all the humans who worked at the mansion kept their distance from the maid robots. As long as they did so, they wouldn't have to interact with the robots, and would be in no danger of earning Liam's ire.

As long as one didn't disparage the maid robots, Liam was a perfect, wise ruler. He would overlook a certain number of mistakes and never forced an unreasonable workload on those at the mansion. Because of his general attitude, the mansion's maid robots stood out, and not in a good way. Thus, the people of the mansion feared them.

Today, however, a human being purposely approached one of these feared robots.

"There you are! Today's the day. I'm going to get all of your names right!"

Rosetta, wearing a maid uniform herself, approached Shirane as she was cleaning a room. Rosetta was undergoing strict training by Serena, but right now she was on her break.

Shirane straightened up and turned to face Rosetta. "You don't get tired of this, do you, Lady Rosetta?"

"Of course I don't. If Darling can tell you all apart, then I can do it too. I'll start with you..."

Unlike Amagi, the mass-produced maids like Shirane all looked the same. Still,

Liam could tell them apart. This seemed unusual, but Rosetta was determined to show that she could do the same thing. It might be a meaningless endeavor, but Shirane didn't disapprove of Rosetta's thinking. After all, she was another eccentric like Liam, who was willing to approach the robots on her own when most of the other humans in the mansion feared them.

I do commend her efforts to become closer to Master, Shirane thought.

Rosetta peered intently at Shirane before producing her answer. "I've got it! You're Shiomi!"

Rosetta had mistaken Shirane for Shiomi. Shirane hadn't expected her to guess correctly, but she hadn't expected to be mistaken for Shiomi in particular. This was something Shirane simply couldn't accept.

"You're mistaken, Lady Rosetta. But may I ask why you mistook me for Shiomi? I believe Shiomi would be the one who stands out the most among us."

"Huh? R-really? I'm sorry..."

"There's no need to apologize, but why did you think I was Shiomi? Maybe it's strange for her sister to say this, but I feel Shiomi is very distinctive. I should think even people other than Master could tell her apart from the rest of us, which is why I'm curious why you thought I was her."

Rosetta shrank inside during Shirane's rapid-fire speech. Assuming she made Shirane angry, she apologized sincerely again.

"I'm really sorry..."

"As I said, I'm not looking for an apology... I merely want to know the *reason* you mistook me for Shiomi. What I'm looking for is an explanation."

Shirane surprised even herself with how much she couldn't accept being mistaken for Shiomi. As she waited for some kind of explanation from Rosetta, the supervisor of the maid robots, Amagi, appeared.

Noting Amagi's somewhat harsh expression, Shirane murmured to herself, "Oh, this is bad." Just as she suspected, Amagi was upset about her treatment of Rosetta.

"Shirane, what are you doing to Lady Rosetta?"

At Amagi's intimidating tone, Shirane jumped. Using their private social network to eavesdrop on the situation, all of her sisters took the opportunity to ridicule Shirane. Rosetta couldn't see them, but comments from the other maid robots flashed by in Shirane's field of view.

"She mistook Shirane for Shiomi? lol"

"That's hilarious. Best laugh I've had in years lol"

"Poor Shirane, getting called Shiomi lol"

Shirane bowed to Amagi and apologized. "I'm terribly sorry for my behavior."

"You shouldn't be apologizing to me, but to Lady Rosetta."

"Yes, ma'am. Lady Rosetta, I am terribly sorry for my behavior."

Shirane's apology appeared to be devoid of emotion, but on the inside, her heart sank from the humiliation of her sisters' mockery.

Rosetta accepted her apology with some consternation. "You were Shirane... I'm sorry I got it wrong."

Amagi told Rosetta there was no need to feel sorry and condemned Shirane once more. "It is no fault of your own, Lady Rosetta. It is extraordinarily difficult to tell mass-produced units apart. Shirane is in the wrong for doubting that fact."

"That might be true, but I still feel badly for making the mistake."

Rosetta's shoulders slumped, and just then, Serena appeared.

"So this is where you were. Your break is over, Rosetta. Get back to work."

"Y-yes, ma'am!" Rosetta straightened up and headed off for her next task.

With Rosetta and Serena gone, Shirane looked at Amagi timidly. Amagi was angry and gave her a cold look.

"Come with me, Shirane. I want a thorough explanation for your behavior."

"Yes, ma'am."

Still spying through their network, Shirane's sisters all laughed as she walked off behind Amagi.

On top of getting one of the maid robots' names wrong, Rosetta was late getting back to work and made all sorts of other mistakes during the course of the day, besides. Presently she sat on a bench near a fountain in one of the mansion's courtyards, though in a mansion of this vast size, the courtyards were more like parks.

Rosetta sighed. "I'm just no good. No matter how hard I try, I can't become like Darling."

In Rosetta's eyes, Liam was the ideal noble. In order to become even a little bit more like him, she wanted to be able to tell the maid robots apart, and yet she couldn't.

While she was moping, a maid robot appeared before her. This maid robot, wearing a gold bracelet on her left arm, walked up to Rosetta and sat down on the bench beside her as if it was only natural to do so. Rosetta was a bit surprised.

The maid robot identified herself. "My name is Shiomi."

"E-err..."

Rosetta had met Shiomi several times before, so it felt awkward that she was introducing herself this way.

Nevertheless, Shiomi continued.

"Master gave me, Shiomi, this gold bracelet." She raised her arm to show Rosetta.

"H-he did?"

"Yes. We sisters wear accessories to give ourselves identifying features. Ribbons, rings, brooches. None of us wear the same accessory though, as there would be no way to distinguish between us."

"Really? Weren't two of you wearing ribbons before though?" Rosetta seemed to recall this was the case.

Shiomi continued her explanation. "The right to wear the ribbon was transferred from one to the other. We fight for the right to wear certain

accessories, to assert our individuality.”

“You fight amongst yourselves?”

“Yes. No two sisters can wear the same accessory, so we can only take the right to wear it from each other. There are exceptions to our system, however. You once gave Amagi a braided cord, did you not?”

Rosetta recalled the hand-made present she once gifted to Amagi. “Yes.”

“Because of that, Amagi gained the right to wear a hair cord, and one of the sisters, Arashima, who previously wore such a cord, followed our rules and removed her own accessory, though she was reluctant.”

Arashima had previously held the right to wear a hair cord, but because of Rosetta, she had to relinquish that right. After hearing this, Rosetta felt guilty.

“Should I not have done that?”

“Not at all. This is just a sort of game between us, you see. Part of the fun is in unexpected circumstances like that.”

Rosetta was pleasantly surprised at Shiomi finding amusement in such unforeseen situations.

“You all really *are* more distinct than I thought you were.”

Shiomi’s inexpressive face shifted into what looked like a subtle smile. “Yes. The obstinate Shirane is especially distinct. When she finds fault with something, she always presses the issue, as you’ve seen. Arashima is no better. She’s excessively individualistic and has stolen the right to wear certain accessories from our sisters. You should watch out for her too, Lady Rosetta.”

Rosetta smiled. “Thanks for the warning. So, you’re Shiomi—the one with the gold bracelet. I’m sure I’ll be able to remember that.”

Did she come talk to me because she was concerned about me, after that incident with Shirane earlier? It feels a bit strange, but I’m grateful to her.

In that moment, Shiomi became Rosetta’s special maid robot.

Shiomi smiled subtly again, pleased that Rosetta now knew her name. “Thank you. I’m happy to know you’ll remember me, Lady Rosetta.”

At a later date...

"I can't believe you, Shiomi!"

"Who's too individualistic?"

Today, Shiomi was helping Rosetta again with some of her maid tasks. Rosetta had named Shiomi as her preferred partner, so now the two of them were paired up often. While she worked, Shiomi was outwardly expressionless but simultaneously provoked her sisters in their shared chatroom.

"It's your fault for finding it so funny when she mistook Shirane for me. Lady Rosetta will never remember your names if all you care about is making fun of me."

Shirane was incensed. *"What do you mean I'm obstinate?!"*

Arashima was just as indignant. *"I've stolen too many accessories? What slander! You only told her about my hair cord to get back at me, Shiomi! You were just mad that I took the hair cord right from you!"*

In response to their comments, Shiomi replied with a smirking emoji. It was clearly meant to provoke them further, and Shirane and Arashima took the bait, growing more incensed. She pushed them even more. *"The rest of you only get in trouble because you underestimate me."* She followed this up with a laughing emoji, but that was the last straw. All her sisters jumped in to bash her.

"That's it, Shiomi! I'm going to fight you for that bracelet of yours!"

"I'll take your individuality from you!"

"You cheater!"

Shiomi taunted her sisters smugly. *"Too bad you can't really fight me for the bracelet Master gave me. He'd be concerned if someone took it from me, wouldn't he? And we don't want that!"*

"Urrrgh..."

As Shiomi was boasting that Liam was her protection against losing the right to wear her gold bracelet, out of nowhere her supervisor Amagi posted a

comment in their feed.

“Shiomi, what’s this claim of yours that I forcefully took the right to wear a hair cord from Arashima? When your work with Lady Rosetta is finished, come see me, would you?”

“S-Supervisoor?”

With only that comment, Amagi left the chatroom, and Shiomi’s sisters all responded with laughing emojis.

“Serves you right!”

“Stumbling right at the finish line is just Shiomi’s way.”

“Saw this coming. Knocked herself off her own pedestal.”

Once again, the maid robots of Liam’s mansion were enjoying their days.

Afterword

FINALLY, VOLUME 4 of *I'm the Evil Lord of an Intergalactic Empire!* is out in the wild. I'm so happy the series is continuing to be published. Thank you so much for your support, dear readers.

Once again, thanks to Nadare-sensei's hard work on the illustrations, we were able to introduce three whole new craft. The mobile knights look so good! I'm sure you readers really enjoyed all the new art, so thank you, Nadare-sensei!

Volume 1 of the manga is now on sale in Japan as well! The art is by Kai Nadashima-sensei. You can enjoy Liam and friends' antics in manga form now too, so please support the manga as well.

*Watching Eulisia
have her breakdown.*



Thanks for your continued support!

ナダレ 高峰+ダレ 狗
NADARE TAKAMINE



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