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NOVEL
8
I'M THE EVIL LORD OF AN INTERGALACTIC EMPIRE

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CHRISTIANA
"Good meowning, Master!"
"Hoppy morning, Lord Liam!"
MARIE


"It's just a possibility. I'll tell you the rest if you agree to go on a date with me."
MARION
"No, thank you. Goodbye."
ROSETTA


"The name's Schwarz Graf. Yeah... You can call us...Black Lightning."
AG003-M114RX
THE GRAF NEMAIN
THE MASKED KNIGHT

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BONUS Azuma

Afterword

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YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY

NADARE TAKAMINE

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

THE INTERGALACTIC NATION called the Autocracy—or more officially, the G'doire Autocracy—was, in simple terms, a military dictatorship. Its military power was incredible for its size. All neighboring nations feared it, and even the massive Algrand Empire avoided conflict with it. A nation that valued military strength above all else—that was the Autocracy. Their national policy was very simple: survival of the fittest. The weak submitted to the strong.

The Guide had just alighted on the Autocracy's Capital Planet.

"My, my... It's even worse here than last time I visited."

The Autocracy was smaller than the Algrand Empire, but it was still an intergalactic nation in its own right. Its Capital Planet had a very different ambience from the Empire's, however. Unlike the Empire's well-maintained capital, the Autocracy's was a mishmash of buildings without any harmony whatsoever. Things were as busy as one would expect, yet the streets were dim under a sky heavy with dark clouds. No consideration had been given to the environment, and as a result, the planet wasn't particularly suited to human habitation. Only human wisdom had made it livable.

Strolling around that Capital Planet, the Guide encountered any number of arguments and fights breaking out in the streets. At one such fight between two men, a police officer appeared to be among the spectators. Yet all he did was jeer along with the other onlookers watching the brawl excitedly.

The Guide glanced up at a large screen on the side of a building. It showed nothing but discussions on fighting tournaments: who'd won the latest tournament and become champion of which martial art, which martial-arts schools were currently most popular, and so on. Even news reports here veered that way.

The Guide shook his head, exasperated. "I see things haven't changed here. That just shows the influence of this place's leadership."

Strength was everything in the Autocracy. However low you started, you could climb to any height through strength alone. It was what mattered—the *only* thing that mattered. That was the extreme mindset of the Autocracy's citizens.

"In a sense," the Guide said to himself, "things *are* fair here. Still, it's not how I like to do things."

Somewhat annoyed by the constant tumult around him, the Guide continued on, heading for an arena.

After he'd walked for some time, the round arena finally came into view. It was a massive building reminiscent of the Roman Colosseum, the only place on the slipshod Capital Planet that seemed invested with history and tradition. It stood out considerably from the surrounding buildings.

This arena the Guide had tracked down was sacred to the Autocracy. It was a symbol of the nation where the strong put their lives and pride on the line to fight. Yet there was a strange being in the area that didn't seem to fit that "sacred" image. From the neck down, the figure was human, dressed in a suit. However, its head resembled an octopus.

The creature crouched in the center of the arena, the eight tentacles that protruded from its head wriggling. Its sharp, thin, pointed beak was stuck into the ground, and it appeared to be sucking something up. The area around it was covered with the blood, sweat, tears, flesh, bones—and more—of the strong.

Once it had completely sucked up something no one else could perceive, the entity pulled its narrow beak from the ground and stood, thoroughly satisfied.

"However many times I taste it, the blood of the strong is delicious!" it exclaimed. "It's the finest wine to get me drunk! The victors' joy, and the losers' pain and humiliation, fill me!"

Seeing the monster intoxicated by the blood that had seeped into the ground, the Guide sighed quietly. "I see you prefer a fight to unhappiness, as always."

This monster was a similar entity to the Guide. What differentiated them was their preferences. Both beings were harmful to humans, yet—unlike the Guide—this monster enjoyed battle more than anything else. People fighting and dying was his favorite thing in the universe.

“Long time no see, G’doire,” the Guide called out.

G’doire turned around, looking displeased that he’d been interrupted while savoring his meal. “Huh?” When he realized who was visiting, his mood improved somewhat. “Now, here’s a rare visitor. But what could you want with me when you can travel freely between worlds in your search for misfortune?”

The monster’s name was G’doire. The reason his name was the same as that of the Autocracy was because he’d been involved in the nation’s very founding. G’doire controlled the Autocracy behind the scenes—it was he who built the nation into one that so enjoyed conflict.

The two individuals were meeting for the first time in a long while, but neither had any inclination to reminisce. The Guide got right to business.

“You’ll be attacking the Algrand Empire, won’t you?”

“Keeping the fighting contained here gets boring,” G’doire answered cagily. “So I’ve got some people looking outward instead of inward. What of it? You’re not going to tell me to stay out of your turf, are you?”

His eight tentacles squirmed as he readied himself for combat.

The Guide apologized for giving him the wrong idea. “I *have* been active in the Empire lately, it’s true, but I don’t think of it as my turf. I assure you I have no issue with whatever you do there.”

G’doire was suspicious that the Guide backed down so easily. “Then what did you come see me for?” he asked, his guard still up. “There must be a reason you came all this way personally.”

The corners of the Guide’s lips pulled up in a smile. “Why, I came with good news for a connoisseur of strength like yourself. Aren’t you interested in the most powerful people in the Empire?”

At the mention of powerful people, G’doire’s tentacles wriggled excitedly. “How powerful? Stronger than the pawns I’ve cultivated…?”

When G’doire expressed interest, the Guide was sure that his plan was succeeding. He hadn’t expected it to fail outright. Still, he’d still been concerned about something. *G’doire tends to be emotional. I thought that he might not be interested in what I had to*

say, depending solely on his mood. But now that he's taken the bait, the rest will be simple.

The Guide proceeded to tell G'doire what individuals to look out for in the Empire. He was sure that simply doing that would cause G'doire to act exactly as the Guide envisioned.

"There are quite a few individuals I think you'd enjoy in the Empire. You'd like to see your pawns defeat them, wouldn't you?"

"Tell me! Tell me who's strong in the Empire! Who's the strongest?!"

Drawing the moment out, the Guide gave G'doire one name. "I can personally guarantee that a man named Liam Sera Banfield stands at the very forefront of the Empire's many powerful individuals."

G'doire's tentacles writhed with joy at this information. "I've heard the name Liam, and about his Way of the Flash. He defeated one of the Empire's Swordmasters, didn't he? So he really is strong… I see. I can't wait to meet him!"

G'doire's tentacles blurred, moving faster than the human eye could perceive. Shockwaves crashed into the arena in several places simultaneously, dust clouds rising from the impacts.

The Guide hid a frown behind his hand. *Does he have to attack everything around him when he gets excited? At least I've got G'doire focused on Liam now…*

When the dust cleared, he bowed politely. "G'doire…please allow me a front-row seat to watch you bury Liam once and for all. I have something of a grudge against him myself, you see."

G'doire accepted the Guide's request. "Fine with me. There's a pawn I'm particularly fond of right now. It might be fun to throw that favorite pawn at this Liam of yours."

The Guide shook G'doire's hand.

***

The Algrand Empire's capital was a world of gray. The entire planet was encased in metal, and every inch of its surface was crammed with buildings. Thus, the planet was gray inside and out, covered in nothing but man-made objects. It was a planet

protected by a metal shell. Human hands regulated everything there, even the climate.

I appreciated human ingeniousness and all that, but there was too little green here for me—Liam Sera Banfield—to feel comfortable. I gazed out my hotel window at the blue sky projected above me.

There were no natural disasters on the Capital Planet, and it only rained if it was scheduled to. With everything perfectly maintained like this, of course, it was a very comfortable place to live. Plenty of people wanted to reside here, and with the subsequent influx, the planet's population had ballooned to an absurd number. That was just like how people from the country flocked to big cities in my previous world, I supposed.

Even this place couldn't provide a comfortable environment to every single person living there. There were so many apartments for the common folk that, when someone rented a room here, it was really no more than a space to sleep. *Most* hotels were capsule hotels, which I found shocking.

Things were different for me, of course. I belonged to a privileged class, the nobility, and I'd built a vast fortune to boot. A villain with status, fame, and wealth, like me, could stay in a well-established luxury hotel even on the crowded Capital Planet. And I wasn't just renting a single room, but the entire hotel—its long history and traditions employed solely to serve me. I enjoyed that life of luxury in my high-class hotel while most people on this planet suffered in tiny rooms.

As for what I was up to today, I'd gotten ready early in the morning and donned a ridiculously expensive tailored suit, because it would be my first day serving in the imperial palace. I looked myself over in the mirror.

Amagi, who stood next to me, bowed. Her glossy black hair, tied up in a ponytail, swayed—as did her rather large chest, which her maid uniform hardly concealed. Her breasts had just the right firmness, and that would never change. Her skin was beautiful and smooth as always.

Amagi's red irises sparkled as she looked at me. I'd crammed as many aspects of my ideal woman as possible into the maid robot, and she assisted with my morning routine every day.

“Your suit meets every standard required by the dress code, Master. It also looks good on you.”

Though Amagi said that my outfit adhered to my new workplace’s dress code, *I* for one had a complaint about the suit I was required to wear. “It’s too plain. This isn’t my style.”

Amagi nodded in acknowledgement. “I will have a new suit prepared by tomorrow. It can be embellished a bit further without violating the dress code. Or would you like the color adjusted?”

“They’re still just work clothes, however you pretty them up. This is fine, but… Well, let’s see. Since I’ve got the opportunity, I want a flashy suit that’s more my style for outside work. If I like how it turns out, I’ll find someplace to wear it.”

“Understood.”

I’d decided to have that fancy suit made on a whim, although there was no problem with what I was wearing. It wasn’t as though I lacked fancy clothes—plenty of things I didn’t even wear had accumulated in my wardrobe—so the suit was a complete and utter waste of money. I was permitted to spend that way, though. I was the head of a noble Algrand Empire family, I held the rank of count, and I was a villain—an evil lord, in other words. Wasteful spending like this was my right.

As I checked out how I looked in my plain suit, a news program projected onto the window began to discuss the war. A pale news anchor with white hair read out the Imperial Army’s official announcement. *“The Algrand Empire has acknowledged the G’doire Autocracy’s declaration of war. The Empire will respond by dispatching a fleet commanded by Crown Prince Calvin.”*

The Autocracy had picked a fight with the Empire, and it would be Calvin going to face them, now that his brother Cleo had the advantage in the succession conflict. I figured Calvin had volunteered to face the Autocracy himself to win back as much favor as possible.

“Good on him for trying, I guess,” I said. “Didn’t this news anchor have red skin…?”

I was curious about Calvin, but the news anchor was grabbing more of my attention. The last time I’d seen her, her red skin had shocked me, but now it was almost blue.

I thought that would surprise anyone, but Amagi responded swiftly, as though there was nothing strange about it. “She must have changed her skin color. I have heard that that is common on the Capital Planet lately.”

“You can just change your skin color on a whim…?” It impressed me that people in this universe could do that as casually as someone might dye their hair. “Well, whatever. I should get going.”

I decided to leave the hotel, since the time to report for duty was approaching. Starting today, I would be an official serving in the palace. After graduating from an imperial university, I’d finished my two years of training and gone home to my own domain for another two years. While I was home, there’d been a little accident in which I was summoned to a planet with a really low-level civilization. I’d been pretty pissed at the people who summoned me, but things there hadn’t been all bad.

I turned to regard another maid in my room, who was looking out a window. This silver-furred girl had dog ears and a tail, and her yellow eyes were fixed on the scenery outside. Her name was Chino. I’d found her in that world that had summoned me, and I got permission from the dog tribe to bring her home with me.

“Wow,” Chino said. “We’re so high up! Are we above the clouds?”

She was observing the outdoors at a slight distance from the window, as if she was afraid to get too close. When Chino first came to the hotel, she’d panicked about the tall building potentially falling over.

I was a dog person, so I found Chino truly adorable, and her presence was soothing. That was why I found myself wanting to tease her a little. “Don’t run around too much and fall, Chino.”

She backed up, the fur on her ears and tail standing on end. It was cute how she was really a scaredy-cat, although she usually tried to act tough. “I-I-I-I-I could fall from here?!”

Her knees were knocking. She must’ve thought that if she screwed up, she could somehow fall right out the window.

Just as I thought I might’ve scared her a little too much, Amagi gave me a disapproving look. I couldn’t take her judgment,

so I decided to comfort Chino. “You’ll be safe if you stick with Amagi. Amagi, take care of Chino for me, would you?” I’d leave the situation to her. I couldn’t handle it, since I was leaving.

“Of course.” Amagi bowed her head.

Chino leaped at her. She clung to Amagi’s leg, tears in her eyes. “I-I want a room lower down! Close to the ground, if possible. I-it’s not that I’m afraid of heights or anything, I just...!”

“Got it,” I said. “I’ll move your room lower down.”

Chino could just have admitted that she was scared, but she had to act tough for some reason. She really was cute.

I turned my eyes to my other favorite maid, whose name was Ciel Sera Exner. She was Baron Exner’s daughter and the sister of my friend Kurt. House Banfield was looking after her for the time being, giving her a noble education.

Ciel had voluminous silver hair and porcelain-white skin. To put it simply, she was beautiful, but it wasn’t her appearance I was fond of. After all, I could have my fill of beauties whenever I wanted. Ciel, however, had a certain charm that couldn’t be found in just any woman.



Her purple eyes, the same color as Kurt's, glared my way. Repressing the smile that threatened to rise to my lips, I gave her an order. "Ciel, take Chino down to a lower floor."

Ciel didn't like me. I figured she thought she was hiding it, but to me, she practically wore her animosity on her sleeve.

Ciel bowed her head. "Understood," she said, though she obviously hated having to obey me.

This is great! I love how ticked off she is!

Ciel was plotting to depose me, so I should really have taken care of her. She couldn't do much on her own, though, so she didn't pose much of a threat to me. She was maneuvering "in secret," but I knew all about her plans to get rid of me, since my men watched her every move. I would have eliminated her if she were actually capable of harming me in some way, but given her abilities, I'd decided it was fine to leave her be. Despite opposing me, she didn't actually have enough power to be a threat—which made her incredibly valuable.

While I gloated to myself over my circumstances, my fiancée Rosetta Sereh Claudia, who had also prepared to go out, entered the room. She wore a navy suit jacket over a white shirt and a skirt cut just below the knees, accessorizing with a red scarf and blue brooch.

She smiled at me. "I see you're ready, Darling. Shall we get going, then?"

"Sure..." My mood had been great with only Chino and Ciel around, but when Rosetta appeared, it plummeted.

I'd been curt, but Rosetta was as happy with me as ever. "It's kind of exciting to think we'll work together starting today, Darling."

"Together? We'll be close, but we're working in different places, aren't we?"

As part of our training as nobles, Rosetta and I both had to serve as government officials, but we had different posts. It was maybe a fifteen-minute walk from my workplace to hers. She should've known that, so why had she said we'd "work together"?

"If the buildings are close, we'll practically work in the same place!" she answered.

“Uh huh…” *What a shallow way of looking at things.*

Rosetta had originally hated me even more than Ciel did. She’d been a strong-willed, defiant woman at first, but now she was nothing more than a domesticated cat. No—a dog? Either way, she’d been thoroughly defanged. There was no trace of the willful girl she’d once been.

“Let’s get going. Amagi, get the car.”

“It is already waiting.”

We’d be driven to and from work by personal vehicle, of course. After all, we were nobles—and rich nobles at that. Working as bureaucrats was part of our noble training, but I had no intention whatsoever of taking my work seriously. I was only doing this job because I had to.

“Well,” I said to myself, “I’ll do somewhere around half my best, I guess.”

It wasn’t like I’d need a good evaluation from this job or anything. I was a high-ranking noble, after all. I was important enough that I could just sit there, and I’d still get ahead in life. There was no need for me to sweat on the job.

As I left the room along with Rosetta, I immediately bumped into House Banfield’s problem children: Christiana Leta Rosebreia, who’d once been called the Princess Knight, and Marie Sera Marian, who’d been feared as the Mad Dog of the Empire two thousand years ago. Now the two, who were wearing maid uniforms, glared at one another. They looked like dudes trying to intimidate each other in a manga about delinquents I might’ve read in my previous life.

Both were gorgeous as long as they just stood there quietly, but their behavior completely wasted their good looks. It went beyond canceling out their positive points and landed them squarely in negative territory for me.

“Get out of here. *I’ll* clean the floor Lord Liam lives on,” Tia declared.

“No! *I* will clean every inch of that floor. *You’ll* get lost! Can you get that through your thick skull?”

These two were full of energy first thing in the morning, but, well, they were exhausting me. How come so many idiots served under me? Because I’d hired them chiefly for their looks? If so, I

regretted it now, realizing that knights should be chosen based solely on ability and loyalty. Tia and Marie did have both those qualities, of course. They were extremely competent and very loyal to me…I thought. But the two lacked one crucial thing: common sense.

"Do you have to make a scene first thing in the morning?" I asked. "If you want to clean so badly, you can clean *every* floor before I get back."

When I spoke to them, the two women gave me a knightly greeting, dropping to their knees. It was a bit weird to see them kneel that way in maid uniforms.

"Good morning, Lord Liam!"

I ignored Tia's greeting and criticized her behavior instead. "Who told you to kneel like that? I've told you two how to greet me, haven't I? Do it over."

Whenever I gave them an order, these two had no choice but to obey. They stood hesitantly and sheepishly performed the greeting I'd instructed them to give me.

Tia balled her hands into fists above her head in an imitation of cat ears and shook her rear. "Good meowning, Master!"

Marie stuck her hands up as if they were bunny ears. "Hoppy morning, Lord Liam!"

Two adults who'd once climbed to the very heights of knighthood now strove to give me morning greetings in their maid uniforms. It satisfied me greatly to see them trembling and red-faced with embarrassment.

Rosetta looked away awkwardly. She probably couldn't bear to see the pair disgrace themselves like this. Yet I still wasn't done with them; I needed them to experience more shame. In fact, I thought I was downright generous *just* to shame them, after what they'd done.

After all, while I was missing after being summoned to another world, these two had organized selfish little revolts within my domain. They'd gone so far as to procure my genetic material, intending to impregnate themselves with it. The reason they were getting off with only embarrassment as punishment was their loyal service to me up until that point. If not for that, I would've sent their heads flying with my Flash.

“I’ll let you go with that today, but you better polish those up by tomorrow,” I ordered them. “Don’t think I’ll be satisfied with that level of performance.”

Their shoulders slumped.

“If that’s your order, Lord Liam.”

“If that’s what you wish, Lord Liam.”

I headed past the two humiliated idiots to the elevator. It was spacious, with a couch inside just for me. I sat down on that while everyone else stepped in as well. Amagi didn’t sit next to me; the only one permitted to sit at my side was my fiancée, Rosetta. I *wanted* Amagi next to me, but the last time I’d asked her, she’d told me the suggestion was “ridiculous” and given me a lecture on top of that. When Amagi lectured me, even I had no choice but to back down.

Rosetta sat down next to me now, starting a conversation as the elevator descended. “Darling, may I ask you a question?”

“What is it?”

“I heard the Autocracy will be attacking. Is it really all right for you not to fight in the conflict? Wallace seemed to think you would.”

The Autocracy, eh? That was a bloody nation that consistently put “might makes right” into practice. I couldn’t believe anyone fought that much without getting sick of it. The Empire itself waged enough wars; it stunned me to think of fighting *more*.

The Autocracy was comparable to the Sengoku period Shimazu clan, I guess. Or maybe to Kamakura warriors. Either way, I had *no* desire to fight people like that. I wasn’t one of those guys who wanted to go up against strong foes. I preferred to trample the weak beneath my boots. Battling a bunch of warmongering maniacs who did nothing but fight all year round would be nothing but a huge pain.

“Why would I go out of my way to face the Autocracy? Besides, I want to let my troops rest a bit. They’ve gone through a lot recently, all because of a certain couple idiots.” I was, of course, referring to Tia and Marie.

“You’re very kind, Darling.”

I didn’t know what made Rosetta call me kind. Was it me saying I wanted to let my army rest? Sorry, but that had been a lie. When it was time, I wouldn’t hesitate to overwork them; I was just letting them rest because *I* didn’t want to fight.

Also, I wasn’t kind. I prioritized my own circumstances above all else and was more selfish than anyone. Furthermore, Crown Prince Calvin—my political opponent—was fighting the Autocracy. He was leading the charge against their invaders himself. He must’ve felt desperate after Cleo’s faction worsened his position so badly. It would be best for me if he and the Autocracy took each other out.

“Calvin’s the one who’ll face the Autocracy. Why don’t we see what he’s capable of?”

“Do you think Prince Calvin can win? I know he’s your political enemy, Darling, but we can’t let the Empire lose. I’ve heard that the Autocracy wreaks havoc on any territory they conquer.”

Rosetta was a good person. She was thinking of the welfare of the Empire as a whole, so she wanted Calvin to be victorious. I was different; I didn’t care who won so long as I didn’t get hurt. If the Empire losing benefited me somehow, then I’d accept its loss with glee. It didn’t matter to me whether havoc was wreaked in Empire territory as long as my own planets didn’t suffer.

The best thing for me would be if both forces wore each other down to nothing. I didn’t want the Autocracy to gain any momentum, but it wouldn’t sit right with me either if Calvin routed them. Personally, I was hoping both sides would exhaust one another. I didn’t care how much damage their conflict brought about in the meantime. After all, it had nothing to do with me. We were part of the same empire, yes, but anything was fine with me as long as my territory—my assets—were unharmed.

“Calvin’s not incompetent. He’ll listen to his military advisors, and the Empire should have the numerical advantage. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Rosetta looked relieved after my declaration. “I’m sure that’s true if you say so, Darling.”

I looked away from Rosetta, frustration mounting within me—but at Calvin, not her. He *was* competent, and I acknowledged

him as a worthy foe. After all, he'd not only managed to get me called before a court of inquiry, he'd even humiliated me there.

Everyone at the court of inquiry had been a high-ranking imperial noble, beginning with the prime minister himself. Calvin had made me a laughingstock in front of them all. I'd been exposed to the lot of them as a pathetic ruler whose domain was protesting to demand he father an heir. I still remembered the cool looks those high-ranking nobles gave me that day.

Calvin was the only one who'd dealt me that much damage since I'd involved myself in the succession conflict, so I wouldn't underestimate him again.

The elevator reached the ground floor, and I rose from the couch. "I'll take this chance to conclude my noble training peacefully. Then I can spend the rest of my life goofing off."

The training I'd spent more than fifty years on thus far was finally coming to an end. Fifty years was a long training period. *Too* long. Back in my old world, my life would've been over half finished at this point.

"It'll be over in another four years, right?" Rosetta asked. "That seems long, but short at the same time. Th-then we'll finally be able to m-marry, won't we?" She blushed, a hand to her cheek, no doubt thinking of the wedding day and what would come after it.

You've spent twenty years with me now. How the hell are you still dreaming about marrying me? I couldn't imagine the former Rosetta acting this way.

When we first met, she'd been an amazing woman who would never have given in to a villain like me. She had a steel will, and I'd looked forward to breaking it. As soon as we'd gotten engaged, though, she did a complete one-eighty into a blushing maiden.

Take a page out of Ciel's book, why don't you?!

Chapter 1:
Reporting for Duty

HIS MAJESTY THE EMPEROR of the Algrand Empire resided in a palace built on a ridiculously vast scale. That single “residence” spanned an entire continent. In fact, the long-standing luxury hotel where I was staying was considered to be within the palace grounds.

I thought of my commute to the palace as journeying *to* a castle, but that wasn’t the reality. In truth, I was simply moving from one part of the palace to another. And the building I’d work in was a high-rise, not a castle.

Still, it was fancy enough inside to resemble a castle. The materials it was constructed from were obviously high quality, and gold and silver ornamentation was everywhere. Each piece of art on display had probably cost a fortune.

In theory, nobles came here to work, but there was also a ton of support staff in the building. That made me feel like I was here to be indulged, even though this was supposed to be my workplace.

When I entered the lobby, I spotted several other young people in brand-new suits who’d also start work this year. Unlike me, these were true bureaucrats. Nobles like me had been set on an elite path without having to sit any of the employment exams commoners did. Having arrived here following a vicious competition for employment, these non-nobles were likely truly capable, yet nobles like me could work them like dogs thanks to the class system. It felt nice to be a winner simply by virtue of my birth.

The moment I showed up, a buzz went through the bureaucrats in the lobby. I thought they were surprised to see a high-ranking noble like me here, but apparently I misunderstood.

Turning around, I spotted a man in a flashy red suit with a bunch of black-clad bodyguards around him. Was that a white scarf flung over his shoulder...? The bureaucrats were focused on *him*, and it was clear from his appearance and behavior that this newcomer was a noble as well.

He shot me a glance, then walked off without greeting me.

“I don’t like this,” I muttered.

It pissed me off that he hadn’t said anything to me. I hadn’t liked the look in his eye when he saw me either. He must’ve known who I was, so how dared he treat me as if I were inferior?

As I stared after the man who’d ignored me, another man addressed me. “I’m honored to meet the famed Count Banfield.”

This man had curly lilac hair that was neither long nor short. He also wore a flashy suit, this one white. Unlike the man in red, however, the lilac-haired man wore his in a way that reminded me of the hosts who’d worked in clubs in my past life. His appearance seemed tailored toward appealing to women, and the women around us indeed gave him approving looks. To me, he looked a bit childlike, but his androgynous, even features must’ve made him seem princelike to girls.

Their reaction to me, on the other hand, was the complete opposite. The women in the lobby did everything they could to avoid eye contact with me. I got the sense they were afraid of me.

Guess I’ve been a bit too rowdy and scared people… A little jealous of this popular guy, I asked curtly, “What do you want?”

He bowed deeply to me in a fluid movement, each and every gesture exaggerated. “I am Marion Sera Algren, my lord. Are you aware of the Algren viscountcy?”

I searched my memory for all the noble names and titles I knew, eventually recalling a Viscount Algren I’d learned of in an education capsule session an awfully long time ago.

My first thought was *This will be trouble*. Viscount Algren’s family was a branch of the Algren mark, which was charged with defending the Empire’s border. The whole family served the emperor directly, but the viscount’s branch was nothing more than a bunch of minions supporting the main Algren lineage.

What made me wary was the specific region House Algren was tasked with defending.

“Your family defends the Empire’s border with the Autocracy,” I said.

“Correct.” Marion smiled innocently. His languorous blue eyes gave him a strange sensuality that further captivated the women around him. I couldn’t help feeling that he was aware of that and doing it on purpose.

“Isn’t it a bit strange for someone from the Algren viscountcy to be on the Capital Planet at a time like this?” What was he doing here when his home territory was in such trouble?

When I asked that, Marion looked a bit apologetic. “I elected to become an official after graduating primary school, and apparently, a youngster who hasn’t yet been to the military academy isn’t worth counting among our forces.”

If he hadn’t been to the academy, his military training was incomplete. He’d only have been a burden at home, so they hadn’t called him back. If he’d moved on to the imperial university after graduating primary school, he probably wasn’t even eighty years old. In other words, he was younger than me—my kouhai, so to speak. The face of my younger coworker in my former life, Nitta, came to mind nostalgically. Marion didn’t look a thing like him, though.

I’d already classified Marion as a junior I didn’t care for, so my attitude toward him was naturally sour. “You’d be useless to them,” I replied.

He smiled wryly at my frank assessment. “That hits a nerve. But to be honest, I’d like to help out, since the main family—and my home—are in trouble right now.”

“Is that why you’ve approached me?”

I didn’t even need to mull over what he wanted: either wanted some kind of support from a powerful count or reinforcements from that count’s army. While he was here training, the only way he could help his family was by gaining an influential noble’s assistance. I didn’t know whether he was acting on their instructions, or if he’d decided to speak to me himself. Either way, it was a pain. I wasn’t getting involved in this war with the Autocracy under any circumstances.

“Sorry, but I’ve got enough going on. Try someone else.”

“Not very friendly, are you? Still, we’ll be colleagues at the same workplace from now on, so I hope you’ll be a senior who treats me well.”

His friendly smile really did make him seem young. It contrasted strangely with that sensuality of his, which didn’t match up with his age.

The women around us were going crazy over him.

“He said he’s from a viscountcy!”

“It’s a branch family of House Algren! They’re famous!”

“We’ve got quite the crop of new kids this year, haven’t we?”

The department I’d been assigned to—well, the whole building where I would work—was essentially a gathering of the elite. Moreover, the nobles assigned here were considered superior—not in terms of their individual abilities, but in the influence the Empire judged them to wield. In other words, their own skills didn’t even factor in. It only mattered how powerful their family was.

Good thing I kept up with all those bribes. I look forward to an ongoing relationship with the prime minister!

That was to be expected of nobility in the Algrand Empire. And it was how an evil lord ought to act.

Wanting to escape the conversation I was in, I walked off, but Marion tagged along. Although I expressed no interest in him, he continued talking to me, fiddling with his long bangs. “Popular workplaces like this are essentially a trade show of influential nobles. That guy over there is from a count’s family.”

“I’m an *actual* count, you know.”

“Oh—and that person’s connected to a marquis’s household. I’d love to befriend them…”

“*And* I’m going to be a duke.”

Working here wasn’t all good. When everyone around you was just as important as you, it caused certain problems. Each time Marion pointed out someone he’d spotted, I emphasized my own rank, but it quickly felt pathetic.

When he saw I’d become bored with it, Marion snickered. “You don’t like to lose, do you?”

“I don’t consider this a loss. No one here is an heir, right? They’re just spares. Practically riffraff.”

A number of people near those nobles glared at me. They must’ve heard me.

Marion made a show of shrugging his shoulders and emphasizing my name when he replied, “You’re the only one who can talk like that here, given your meteoric rise, *Count Banfield*.”

That must've been his attempt to scare off those around us. A number of young nobles plainly averted their eyes when they heard my name, but one idiot kept glaring, obviously unaware of who I was. When I glared back, those around him hurriedly dragged him away somewhere, probably thinking that he'd be no match for me if he started something.

Well, looks like I won't have to smack anyone around on day one. I was glad to avoid the unnecessary headache.

"That was pretty clever of you," I told Marion.

He must've been happy about the compliment. He looked a little bashful. "I'm honored. I didn't think you'd come to work without any lackeys, though, Your Lordship. You didn't even bring a few?"

By "lackeys," Marion meant a retinue from my domain. A noble of my caliber would normally have brought some of their vassals' children as support, and I'd *planned* to do so. The reason none were with me was that their numbers had been drastically reduced recently.

During the time I was gone after being summoned, some idiots in my domain had revolted, and many of my vassals—even those receiving significant support from me—sided with the rebels. I was so pissed that I'd tossed every single one of my vassals' sons into military training for "reeducation" as punishment. Maybe I shouldn't have declared them jointly responsible, but anyway, all those kids were now suffering through boot camp. That was why none were here with me instead.

I'd let their daughters off the hook, incidentally, so *Rosetta* had lackeys. They were doubtless supporting her at her own new workplace right now.

I wished I could at least have brought Wallace, but he was technically former royalty, even if he never acted like it. Out of respect for his parents, the palace had provided him with special employment. Thus, I had not a single henchman at my disposal here at work.

Marion and I got into the elevator.

With just the two of us inside, he leaned against the wall and inquired about my schooldays. "Anyway, I've always wanted to ask:

Is it true that you killed your opponent in a mobile-knight tournament when you were in primary school? I've heard a few other legends about you too."

"Legends? I don't know about that, but I did kill some trash named Derrick from House Berkeley," I said matter-of-factly.

Marion reacted with surprise. "Really?"

I would've thought there'd be records of that event. The instructors must've covered it up. It *was* a stain on their record, so I understood that. At any rate, this conversation really sent it home that Marion was my junior.

"What about how you raided the Second Campus? The rumor is that's the reason the Second Campus got so strict about its rules."

"I don't know what the rules are, but I paid a few visits."

I'd barged into the Second Campus a few times with Kurt and Wallace, since I had nothing better to do at the time. Thinking about primary school just reminded me of how quickly Rosetta had fallen for me, which made me feel pathetic. I'd done so much for her, and it had all ended up being pointless.

Marion looked surprised to hear the truth. "I'd heard you were an honor student, but I guess you got into more trouble than I thought."

"The instructors don't give a damn as long as you keep your grades up."

"You really are interesting." He gave me an appraising look.

That pissed me off. I didn't want him getting the wrong idea, so I made sure to set him straight. "I don't particularly care whether you're interested in me, and I'm not giving House Algren any support. Your branch *or* the main family."

"So cold. You could at least pretend to consider it."

"I *told* you to try someone else." I really was busy, so I had no time to get involved with Marion's family.

The elevator reached our destination, and we got out, now seeing the other new employees starting in our department. Some had diligently passed exams, some got in through connections or bribes, and some were just born to be winners—that is, they were nobles like us.

This hall was hosting a welcome ceremony for new employees, and it looked like a party venue. It appeared we'd be having a standing buffet reception for our first day; there'd be no work or boring meetings.

I spotted the guy in the red suit who'd ignored me down in the lobby. He was chatting with some other nobles, and when he noticed me, the corner of his mouth tugged up in a smirk. He said something to one of his guards, who trotted over to me.

"Count Banfield, I presume?"

"That's right."

Before I could ask what he wanted, the guard said, "Lord Randy wishes to greet you. This way, please."

"Randy?" I repeated, cocking my head theatrically.

"Randy Sereh Lengrand, Marquis Lengrand's heir," Marion whispered to me. "He's Prince Cleo's cousin." It felt as if Marion was telling me, "Don't start any trouble with him."

Prince Cleo's mother had come from House Lengrand, so the marquis should have supported the prince, but Cleo's only supporter at the moment was me. That pretty much told the whole story. Cleo had once been the third prince in line for the crown, but in name only; he was someone House Lengrand hadn't deemed worthy of support. Now that *I* supported him, however, he was on the verge of obtaining more influence than Crown Prince Calvin himself, and House Lengrand surely found that frustrating.

"He thinks he can send one of his men to fetch a future duke?" I responded. "Bring your master here."

The guard turned away, obviously flustered. Everyone around us watched with bated breath. When Randy saw that I wasn't moving, he eventually gave in and came over himself.

"Sorry about that, Count Banfield. Since I heard you're helping my cousin, Prince Cleo, I was curious about you. I'm happy to get a chance to talk to you."

He dared speak this way despite not having supported Cleo previously on the assumption that he'd never be emperor. Of course, in his position, I'd have done likewise.

“Rest assured I intend to continue giving him my support,” I said, showing him a smile.

Randy forced a smile in return, but his hostility was on full display. He was feigning calm, but it was plain that he was irritated. He took a glass from one of his men and handed it to me.

“House Lengrand will give Cleo our full support from now on as well,” he told me. “I’m sorry for the burden you’ve shouldered for us prior to this, Count Banfield. There was a little misunderstanding between us before, you see, so we weren’t able to give him the aid we would’ve liked to.”

Yeah, right. You just want to be in Cleo’s corner now that he’s got a decent shot at the throne. I’m not giving him to you, though. When he’s emperor, I’m *the one who’ll reap the benefits.*

“I don’t think of it as a burden,” I replied. “Prince Cleo’s faction is very strong at the moment. I don’t see the need to trouble House Lengrand at this point.”

Having told Randy there was no place for his house in my faction, I held out my glass for a toast. We both drank, giving each other pointed smiles.

I’d suspected that House Lengrand would make a move at some point, but I hadn’t thought it would be now. Maybe this was the moment that made the most sense, though. After all, Calvin’s faction had mostly left the Capital Planet to fight off the Autocracy. Any remaining members weren’t all that powerful. House Lengrand probably wanted to take this opportunity to take over Cleo’s faction.

I’d planned to relax while I finished my training here, but with House Lengrand on the move, things were sure to get busy again soon.

Chapter 2:
House Balandin

THE ARCHITECTURE of the Autocracy's palace was reminiscent of ancient Greece. A great number of civil and military officials had gathered there first thing in the morning.

A huge, muscular man sat on a throne positioned high in the chamber, enabling him to look down on the officials. He was G'doire's ruler—Autocrat Dross Balandin, feared by all their neighboring nations. He wore the traditional garb of the ruler of the Autocracy: a suit of ancient armor and a cape with a helmet that rested beside him. To other intergalactic nations, the Autocracy placed abnormal importance on military strength, and its representative the Autocrat had to look the part of a fierce warrior.

Dross's children knelt before him, their heads bowed.

"The Algrand Empire has sent Crown Prince Calvin as their supreme commander," Dross said. "Do you have a chance against him, Isel?"

A blue-haired man raised his head to answer Dross, his voice low but full of confidence. "Father, I—Isel Balandin—swear to you that I will destroy the Algrand Empire's army."

His arms crossed, the Autocrat sneered his confident son. Isel was the crown prince, but he was only one of the Autocrat's many children, and he wasn't even legitimate. His martial prowess had won him the seat of heir after many victories over tough opponents. In the Autocracy, the crown prince wasn't just the ruler's child, but the next most powerful warrior after him. The nation's hot-headed leaders had acknowledged Isel as the country's next Autocrat, and some even wondered if Dross himself could win a fight against him. Dross had heard that gossip; it made him proud.

"Will you challenge me after defeating the Empire, Isel?" For a child to become strong and rise to challenge him was the ultimate act of filial devotion in the Autocrat's family.

Isel smiled wryly. "You jest. I cannot hope to challenge you yet, Father."

The Autocrat frowned, unsatisfied by the humble response. “You will not challenge me?”

Succession would only occur when the crown prince challenged the Autocrat and won. If such a challenge never occurred, the position was never passed on.

Isel gave his dissatisfied father a bold smile. “I will surely challenge you one day… But right now, I am more interested in the excitement I’ll find on the battlefield, struggling against the Empire’s fierce warriors. My battle with you will have to wait, Father.”

Isel was no longer acting humble, and the assembled officials all smiled at his belligerent grin.

“It seems the crown prince is more interested in the Empire’s knights than the Autocrat.”

“A vast nation like the Algrand Empire is sure to have some powerful warriors.”

“Will any satisfy our crown prince, I wonder?”

The Autocrat raised his hand, silencing the officials, and rose from his throne. “I can’t wait to see you send the Imperial Army running, but you have to win the battle first. I’ll be praying for your victory, and for all of you to return alive.”

He wasn’t referring to only Isel. Included in the words “all of you” were his other children, and the fierce warriors of the Autocracy with no blood connection to him as well. Bloodlines weren’t especially important in their nation. Anyone who defeated Isel could become crown prince, regardless of ancestry, and thereafter challenge the Autocrat for his throne. That was just how things worked in G’doire.

Isel answered on the group’s behalf. “Yes, sir! We’ll return with good news!”

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Among the group leaving the palace with Isel was a woman. Strands of her long red hair curled messily, and from the neck down, she wore something similar to full-body tights. It didn’t expose much skin, but it left nothing of her figure to the

imagination. She was muscular, but she also had a feminine beauty more than charming enough to attract the eyes of any men around her.

Her name was Arjuna Balandin, and she was Isel's younger sister by the same mother.

Descending the palace steps, Arjuna complained to Isel about their audience with their father. "You're too cowardly, Brother. I'd have defeated the Autocrat with my own hands before going to war, then taken command of the entire army."

Isel smiled wryly at his sister's overenthusiasm. Other siblings and vassals were all around them, and in any other intergalactic nation, Arjuna might immediately have been arrested for treason. This was the Autocracy, however, so their other siblings held back smiles at Arjuna's words.

"You really don't know anything, do you, Arjuna?" another older brother asked, causing her to scowl.

One of her younger brothers explained just how dangerous challenging the Autocrat was. "Our father is the hero who saved the Autocracy when it was on the brink of ruin due to internal strife. People think Isel has a fighting chance today, but not long ago, no one was considered anywhere near Father's strength. Perhaps Isel *will* beat him at some point, but you wouldn't stand a chance, Arjuna."

The Autocracy's unique structure made it highly prone to internal conflict. According to historians, it was miraculous that the nation had survived to this point. It *had* been on the brink of ruin until Dross became Autocrat. Siblings and strong fighters had vied constantly for the throne, and nothing had tied the country together. Other intergalactic nations were always invading, and after only a few weeks with a new Autocrat, yet another individual would steal the throne out from under them. The current Autocrat, Dross, had appeared just when the nation verged on collapse.

Arjuna knew all that already and didn't like her brother's tone. "You think you're the only one who knows your history? I was just saying Isel should've challenged Father *despite* all that."

When Arjuna turned around and glared at her younger brother, he broke out in a cold sweat. Intimidated, he couldn't help averting his gaze, which caused the others to give him disgusted

looks. Their expressions said that he was a coward who'd backed down before even fighting.

Isel smiled at his quarreling siblings. "With the Empire's strongest to consider, I have enough to think about already. You're right, though, Arjuna; I should learn from your outlook. Once I'm back, I'll decide on the day I challenge Father for the throne."

Arjuna still didn't like Isel's attitude, since his face said he regretted letting his younger sister chastise him. "There's no need to set a date," she told him. "After our war with the Empire, I'll drag you down from the position of crown prince myself."

Isel's eyes initially widened at his sister's challenge, but he quickly adopted a broad smile. There was something ferocious about his grin. "I accept your challenge! Our fight with the Imperial Army comes first, though. They're strengthening their defenses under the supreme command of Crown Prince Calvin, so this promises to be a fun war."

At the word "war," the siblings and vassals all smiled. Arjuna smiled too, though her expression was considerably more lustful than those around her.

She licked her painted lips. "I just hope the Empire has someone who can satisfy me."

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Near one of the planets the Empire controlled, the Imperial Army was poised to fight a defensive battle against the invading Autocracy. Their fleet included a ship the size of an asteroid, known as a fortress-class. Meanwhile, the Autocracy was facing the Empire's thirty thousand ships with twenty thousand of their own.

On the fortress-class's bridge, its commander smiled and said, "Apparently, these Autocracy idiots think a small fleet can defeat us. We have plenty of time to fight a defensive battle, though. A mere twenty thousand ships won't dent our forces!"

The commander's confident attitude relieved the bridge crew. They outnumbered the enemy, and if the commander was at ease, they didn't have to worry about losing.

However, the knight next to the commander—who served as a military advisor—had realized something. His face pale, he whispered to the commander. “I’ve spotted a crest among the enemy forces. It’s the symbol of House Balandin, I’m sure of it.”



The commander grimaced for a second, but quickly controlled his expression. “A blood relative of the Autocrat, eh? Who’s attacking?”

“Princess Arjuna.”

“Arjuna? The crown prince’s younger sister, hm? What’s her war record?”

The advisor pored over some holographic documents to determine the princess’s war record and preferred tactics. He couldn’t obtain much information from the files displayed in the air before the two of them. He sighed, relieved that Arjuna didn’t appear to have much experience in international battles.

“Well, I don’t know about within the Autocracy, but it looks like this is her first battle in foreign territory,” he said. “I think we’ll do fine here.”

The commander was a bit relieved as well to hear that they were up against a young commander without much experience. “She’s still related to the Autocrat. Let’s crush her thoroughly, young though she may be.”

“Understood.”

Thus, the defensive battle against the invading Autocracy began. However, before too much time had passed, something strange began to occur on the front lines. The commander rose from his seat; at the same time, his operators began shouting.

“The enemy fleet’s ignoring our attacks and charging forward!”

“Concentrate fire on them!”

“W-we are, but—”

Although his operators were panicking, the commander didn’t particularly wish to admonish them. After all, the enemy fleet was charging them using asteroids collected prior to the battle as shields.

“Concentrate fire on the asteroids!” the commander’s advisor shouted. “Are they planning to destroy the planet we’re defending?!”

The enemy ships were headed straight for the planet the Imperial Army was protecting. The Imperial Army managed to

shave off some of the asteroids' mass, but while they were busy doing so, the Autocracy's fleet came within firing distance.

Both sides fired energy beams at each other, but the Imperial Army was pushed back. At first, they'd had thirty thousand ships, but before they knew it, their numbers had been halved. The Autocracy, on the other hand, had suffered little damage.

Allowing the asteroids to distract them had been the Imperial Army's downfall. The Empire never expected their enemy in a battle over territory to attack a planet by hurling asteroids at it.

The commander brought his fist down on his armrest, exclaiming, "Those warmongering maniacs!"

A response came in the form of several enemy mobile knights. They had broken through the Imperial Army's forces, landed on the fortress-class, and forced their way inside the ship—and they'd already arrived here on the bridge.

"Get back, Your Excellency!"

The commander's advisor stepped forward with his troops in an attempt to protect their leader. Six elite knights readied their weapons. In response, the cockpit of one of the Autocracy's mobile knights opened, and a female pilot hopped down. She held a rapier in one hand.

Seeing that thin sword, which specialized in piercing attacks, the advisor commanded his troops, "She's a knight! Quickly, kill her!"

"Sir!"

The knights charged forward with their blades, and the soldiers on the bridge raised their guns.

Faced with all those enemies, the woman grinned. "Call me a *warrior*, vermin."

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When the battle ended, the bridge was a sea of blood. Arjuna removed her helmet, one hand clutching the enemy commander's hair.

She lifted his head and stared into his face. “Are you really the commander? You’re weaker than everyone around you.”

“You meatheads are the only ones who value strength above all else!”

“Boring…”

Arjuna tossed the commander aside. He struck the wall and stopped moving. Having taken control of the enemy’s command center, she soon received a communication from one of her ships.

“Lady Arjuna, we’ve annihilated the enemy fleet.”

“Good work. I’ve seized the command center as well.”

“An excellent victory.”

“Don’t flatter me too much; it’ll go to my head.”

“I think you can take pride in routing them, ma’am.”

“Just don’t get carried away. And? How did my siblings’ attacks go?” She was concerned about her siblings’ war results. They were family, but also rivals—and that was *all* Arjuna saw them as.

“Most only just started fighting, but Prince Isel already conquered an enemy fortress.”

Arjuna was glad to hear it. Despite thinking of Isel as competition, she couldn’t help taking pride in his achievements. “That’s just like him. I can’t wait for the day when I take him down.”

The call ended, and Arjuna returned to her mobile knight’s cockpit. She sat down inside and closed the hatch, sighing in frustration.

“Victory’s great and all, but I can’t feel too satisfied about winning against weaklings like these. I hope at least Calvin’s a challenge.”

The war between the Autocracy and the Empire had only just begun.

Chapter 3:
The Workplace

I'D BEGUN MY REQUIRED court service on the Capital Planet. Unfortunately, my workplace wasn't palace-like at all. The building was functional, without much ornamentation, and all the employees wore business suits. I thought the workers would dress up more to fit the royal environment, but outside formal ceremonies, suits were the standard uniform.

There were many different workplaces within the palace grounds. It was even said that the prime minister was the only person who was actually aware of every one of them. Personally, I felt it was probably impossible for a human being to hold all that information in their head. Doing so would make the prime minister something other than human. The old man had served multiple generations of emperors at this point, though, so I couldn't rule out the possibility that he was some supernatural being.

Working in this mysterious environment for four years was another part of a noble's training. Of course, it was just a job; although it was called "training," there was nothing particularly grueling about it. My workplace was clean and spacious, with each official given more than enough room to complete tasks comfortably. Breakrooms were staffed, and you could order light meals there. In other words, everything you could ask for was provided.

I sat at my desk and performed just enough of my work that I'd be able to clock out on time. That was my approach partly because I felt it'd be stupid to actually work hard in a place like this, and partly because I wasn't motivated, since I had no idea what I was actually accomplishing. I'd only been given a small piece of a larger picture, and from the information available to me, I couldn't make heads or tails of what my tasks contributed to. This was supposed to be an elite workplace, but it was really just a bunch of people who had no idea what their work actually was. For that reason, my impression of my office was that—though people called it exclusive—the daily tasks were all busywork.

Among the bureaucrats who worked at the palace, there was a joke that went like this: A diligent, skilled individual worked in the palace all the way to retirement age. On his last day, he was called into his boss's office and praised for his long service. The retiree told his boss he had one question. "What exactly have I been doing all these years?" The funny part was that he'd worked there all that time but had no idea what he'd been achieving. Even a diligent, skilled individual like him couldn't see the big picture. The punchline was the boss's answer: "I don't know either." This little bit of comedy was disturbing because it actually took place in reality.

"It'd be more efficient to use A.I.," I muttered.

This was seemingly nothing more than a situation that forced human beings to perform meaningless work. It was a complete waste of talent. Personally, I'd have entrusted work like this to machine intelligence and put the freed resources toward something more productive.

I inevitably started thinking about what could be if the palace made use of AI. Everyone working here was superior in some regard. Personal ability, connections, authority, assets—all the employees were exceptional in at least one of those areas. Some people mocked the inclusion of connections in that list, but they were wrong to. Having connections *was* power. If I'd had connections, I'd never have failed to make use of them. Unfortunately, due to the mess my parents and grandparents had left in House Banfield, I hadn't inherited *any* significant connections. That was why I was working so hard to build them on my own. *They really pissed me off…*

While I mused to myself, going about my work lazily, Marion came over. He sat down next to me, a drink in each hand. "You really are diligent, aren't you, Liam?"

Was he being sarcastic because he understood that I was cutting corners? I assumed so and responded with a joke of my own. "I just look that way, since everyone else is such a slacker."

All the nobles around us were just sitting there. None were doing any work at all. Next to officials with common backgrounds, who really *were* working diligently, the nobles just chatted with each other about where they'd goof off that night.

Marion handed me a drink. I took it and asked, “What about your work?”

My self-proclaimed junior gave me a confident smile. “I already finished it.” He looked like the type to fool around, but he was actually fairly talented.

“You know, if you work too fast the boss will just give you more to do.” Or other people would ask for help with their work, I figured. But no one was actually doing so. I supposed no one here had the guts to ask a noble for help. It made more sense to ask one of the people hired for their skill. If *I* were asking someone for help, I’d avoid nobles too.

Marion smiled wryly at my comment. “The boss is too scared of you, Liam. He won’t come out of his office. I’ve heard the rumors, you know. You purged all the superiors and colleagues who wouldn’t listen to you during your earlier training, didn’t you?” He seemed to want to know the truth behind that rumor.

I saw no reason to lie to him, so I admitted it. “It was their fault for trying to push me around. I just put them in their place.”

“Are you going to do the same thing here? Our boss is affiliated with Prince Calvin’s faction, so everyone’s waiting for you to do something.”

There was a reason I was working for someone affiliated with Calvin. Most of Cleo’s faction was from more rural areas; he had few allies within the palace. I’d *wanted* to work for a department in my own faction, to make things easier on myself, but Cleo’s just contained so few officials that I couldn’t. To expand his influence inside the palace, Cleo needed to fill one of Calvin’s departments with his own people. That was why I was here.

Of course, since Calvin’s faction was busy warring with the Autocracy now, it wouldn’t be hard to take over this department. I could do that at some point during my free time while I was here.

“If he does what I say, I’ll treat him nice.”

“You know, if people hear you say that, they could get the wrong idea.”

Our boss was a middle-aged man with a gut. Anyone could become slim using an education capsule or a few other technologies, but he didn’t bother. Some people found doing even that too much effort. There were always people who didn’t pay

particular attention to their appearance, and our boss was that type. So, true, I probably shouldn't have said I'd "treat him nice."

I corrected myself. "I'll make good use of him if he does what I say."

Marion chuckled. "Sounds good to me. Anyway, want to keep me company tonight? Let's go have drinks."

I didn't mind the way he'd affably asked me out. I couldn't help thinking he should butter up his superiors or seniors, rather than me, but he seemingly prioritized connecting with someone powerful enough to help his family over creating a more comfortable workplace.

While we talked, Randy's voice resounded through the office. "Are you saying you have a problem with my work?!"

"I-I'm terribly sorry, L-Lord Randy. B-but if you don't correct this, the application won't go through. Please, if you could just revise it!"

"Hmph. How aggravating."

A senior worker had pointed out a mistake Randy made. The guy should've been in charge of Randy's training, but instead he was apologizing and begging Randy to correct it. He'd worked in this department for decades, but his luck ran out when he was put in charge of Randy.

Randy, the new guy, acted as if he was more important than his seniors—and they just had to put up with that. The only reason the talented people here didn't leave was that a certain status came with being a Capital Planet bureaucrat. Everyone looked up to them for being government officials; they didn't want to lose that, so they clung to jobs like these ones, whatever they had to put up with.

Marion shrugged. "Looks like Randy's in a rotten mood again today."

Should nobles be separated from common people? No—maybe this *was* where they were isolated from commoners. Looking at Randy, I couldn't help thinking that.

"He's almost two hundred years old, right?" I asked.

Marion nodded. "Yep. Seems like he's doing his last bit of training too, just like you."

“He wants to take care of it before he turns two hundred, eh?”

Nobles were only acknowledged as real adults if they completed their training before turning two hundred. It seemed like more than enough time, and if for some reason you couldn’t finish before then, you’d be ostracized by noble society. People would talk about you behind your back for not fulfilling your noble duty. Noble society was weirdly strict about that one point, so people who lounged around until they were almost two hundred had to scramble to finish their training. Randy was one of them.

“Well, it’s not like that’s anything to do with me,” I said.

I’d leave him alone as long as he didn’t get involved with me, since I really couldn’t care less about the guy.

***

Near Liam’s building was another high-rise where more bureaucrats worked. There were different buildings for different departments, and even for different sections of the same department. All those workplaces made up the office district within the palace grounds. Intergalactic nations operated on such an extravagant scale that ridiculous arrangements like this were commonplace.

Rosetta also worked in one of those office-district departments. Once she’d finished her morning work, her two attendants came to join her. Their department had no standard uniform, so they all wore their own suits.

“It’s lunchtime, Lady Rosetta,” one attendant said. “I made a reservation at a nearby restaurant for today.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to that, but you didn’t by chance find out Darling’s plans, did you?” Rosetta asked.

The two girls exchanged a glance, then gave her apologetic looks. “We did invite Lord Liam, but he wasn’t able to come.”

“I see. That’s too bad, but I suppose he’s busy.” Rosetta stood.

As if waiting for that exact moment, one of her seniors called out to her. The woman wore a flashy suit and was attended by six

underlings. All six wore matching suits, as if they were a uniform signifying their allegiance to the flashy woman. The looks they gave Rosetta couldn't be called friendly by any stretch.

"Hm?" the woman said, concealing her mouth behind an ornate folding fan. "Not very courteous of a new hire to scramble to be first out the door at lunchtime."

This woman was the daughter of a noble from Calvin's faction. Though her training period was over, she'd remained at the workplace as an official. She didn't have a managerial position, yet she lorded over the rest of the office employees as if she was in charge. Her behavior obviously bothered the workers.

Rosetta's department had no men. Many noblewomen were of such status that they couldn't interact with men at the palace without good reason, so there were women-only workplaces designated for them. Rosetta's was one of those. If a man tried to enter the building without permission, the female knights guarding the entrance would cut him down without a second thought. It was a highly respected workplace where people felt they could safely send their daughters, but it was also under the influence of Calvin's faction.

For Rosetta, her workplace was enemy territory. Still, she smiled at the flashy woman. "I've never heard of such a courtesy before. I don't think you should force your own rules on other people." If she let them bully her, she'd have a rough time here.

The flashy woman's cheeks twitched at Rosetta's defiant attitude. "Well, you can speak your mind, can't you? Are you emboldened by the fact that your reliable fiancé is nearby? I'm afraid you don't have many allies *here*." The woman folded her fan and pointed it straight at Rosetta's chest.

There were all sorts of reactions from those around them. Some averted their eyes, while others smirked as they watched the exchange. Some observed both women carefully.

At one time, Rosetta would've lost her nerve, but not now. "That's too bad. Well, shall we have lunch?" she asked her attendants, unconcerned.

Just like that, they left the office. The other women glared after them as they did. Once Rosetta was out of view, she screeched, "What's with her attitude? Who does she think I am?"

It was likely she intentionally shouted loudly enough for Rosetta to hear.

In the hallway, one of Rosetta's attendants asked her worriedly, "Should you really have provoked her, Lady Rosetta?"

It would be easy to go along with things and not make waves, but Rosetta had a role to play. Just as Liam was weakening Calvin's influence in his workplace, she intended to strengthen the influence of Cleo's faction in her office as well.

"That didn't even amount to provocation. That woman just has a chip on her shoulder. At any rate, I should contact Miss Eulisia."

On the surface, Rosetta's only allies were her two underlings, but she had plenty of support outside her workplace.

***

Meanwhile, Eulisia sat facing a hotel room desk. Several screens around her projected different information. One displayed notes on potential members for Rosetta's security team. Another was an order screen for space fleet equipment. This amount of work shouldn't have been handled by one person, but Eulisia was managing it. She tended to be overlooked by House Banfield, but she was a capable woman.

She was engaged in all sorts of other duties too. Part of Eulisia's job was investigating all manner of things with whatever time she could find, and one screen now displayed internal information about Rosetta's office.

"Yeesh... It's like a workplace made up of women who are nothing but trouble."

Putting a bunch of noblewomen in one place to work together often caused issues due to the women's social positions. Given the rivalries between different houses, and each woman's individual position, some sort of competition was always happening—practically a different one every day. As the fiancée of Liam, who ran Cleo's faction, Rosetta's position was rather poor.

"Lady Rosetta has a heavy workload. They're obviously pushing unimportant duties on her just to harass her."

Eulisia examined the information on Rosetta's workplace further, scrutinizing the tasks given to Rosetta to complete. When she did, she found that several things had obviously been altered.

"It seems less like harassment and more like they're just trying to get her to make mistakes…"

Peeking at these documents from Rosetta's workplace was a crime, but Eulisia had been an intelligence operative in the army. It was child's play for her to hack the workplace records of a bunch of noblewomen and swipe some of their data. Of course, given the nature of their work, it wasn't as if Rosetta's department handled any top-secret information. The data they were privy to wasn't particularly sensitive, so the office's security measures were average.

Eulisia stretched her upper body and cracked her knuckles, then resumed managing the tasks on all six screens at an incredible pace.

Just then, the maid named Ciel entered her room. She was Rosetta's personal attendant, but while her mistress was working in the palace, Ciel served as a regular maid at the hotel. She'd just brought Eulisia her meal.

"Lady Eulisia, I have your lunch."

"Oh. Just leave it there, please. I'll eat when I'm finished with this," Eulisia replied, eyes still on the screens in front of her. She might've been busy with work, but it was still a rather rude way to interact with someone.

However, Ciel was more impressed than angry. "You're actually quite capable, aren't you, Lady Eulisia?"

Eulisia's hands stopped moving, although she continued to work on several screens she was interfacing with through her mind. Turning around, she saw the surprise on Ciel's face. "Huh? What does that mean? Lord Liam took me in, you know. Of course I'm capable."

Being chosen as a noble heir's adjutant was a privilege granted only to those who'd been victorious in a fierce competition. Anyone less than capable wouldn't be chosen as an adjutant, unless they were very well liked.

Still, given Eulisia's regular behavior, Ciel found it unusual to see her working like this. "It's just that I only ever see you

partying."

"W-well, I never get any orders!"

Eulisia's usual actions had made Ciel think the woman was incompetent. While Eulisia recovered from that blow to her ego, Ciel stole a glance at the data on Rosetta's security team. One piece of information displayed onscreen was the selection criteria for members.

Mustering her courage, Ciel said, "Um...when it comes to Lady Rosetta's knights, I think personality is more important than ability. I'd say we should gather conscientious people who won't tolerate any wrongdoing."

Eulisia reached for the food Ciel had brought her. Biting into her sandwich, she mused, *She really has a lot to say about Rosetta's team, doesn't she? Is it because she's from a military family? Well, I agree about the personality thing.*

Eulisia hadn't actually been prioritizing ability for security candidates in the first place. What Rosetta wanted to do was assist knight families in need. She'd struggled herself, so she wanted to use her security force to help knights who were struggling just as she had.

"That's fine, but you don't really have a say in this," Eulisia replied. "I'm sure you don't want to get in any trouble."

If Liam thought Ciel was exploiting Rosetta to form her own military group, Ciel wouldn't be able to complain even if he sentenced her to execution. This was a crucial period for Liam, but House Banfield wouldn't really lose anything by cutting ties with House Exner. In fact, that might free resources they were using to support the baron's family. Ciel's house had no particular influence to speak of, and only served to drain House Banfield's resources. Ciel must not have understood that when she gave her opinion on the security team.

"Still, I do think House Banfield's knights have a bit too much individuality," Ciel insisted. "Lady Rosetta's team should consist of more normal knights who take their work seriously."

Eulisia didn't disagree. House Banfield had a lot of extremely skilled knights like Tia and Marie. But many were a bit too unique, as Ciel said. Nothing had been done about that before now, but

following Tia and Marie's recent rampage, the issue should probably be dealt with soon.

Liam had designated Claus Sera Mont his head knight precisely out of concern about the behavior of those two. Now that he was in charge of the knights, Claus would likely improve them, but Tia and Marie still had supporters. And House Banfield was only gaining more unique knights as time went on.

Eulisia also felt that House Banfield should take on more normal knights who didn't present a risk of running wild. Most people affiliated with them agreed. Still, Ciel wasn't entitled to draw attention to that issue. This wasn't idle chatter between colleagues; Eulisia was deeply involved in establishing of this elite force of knights. It wasn't something Ciel should voice her opinion on just because she was interested in the process.

"I already planned to prioritize personality over ability," Eulisia told her. "Lady Rosetta wants that as well."

Ciel looked relieved to hear it. "That sounds wonderful. It should really be people who take their jobs seriously and won't overlook wrongdoing, right?"

"I agree. Still, you can't be too loud about that, you know. Who knows who could be listening?"

"Oh, it's fine. I'm being careful about that."

This isn't good, is it? Eulisia couldn't help feeling that Ciel was acting out of self-interest. *It's crazy for some baron's daughter we're looking after to think she has any say in Lady Rosetta's security force.*

She decided she should probably report Ciel's suspicious behavior.

Chapter 4:
Lady Annabelle

NOW THAT HE was next in line for the Empire's throne, Cleo's life had changed dramatically.

After leaving the inner palace in the morning, he headed for a room where he'd meet with those who desired an audience with him. The meetings took place in a building that served that specific purpose. It had a large yard, and every room inside was lavishly furnished for all types of meetings. The place hadn't seen any use until recently, but now it was utilized morning until night due to the sheer number of people who wished to speak with Cleo.

Cleo seated himself at the head of a table. In front of him was a nobleman who'd brought him a gift.

"I'm so pleased to be able to meet with you, Prince Cleo," the nobleman said. "I'll be able to boast about this for generations to come!"

Cleo made sure to control his expression in front of his visitor. The nobleman's every movement was exaggerated, making Cleo feel that he was putting on an act—and not doing a particularly good job of it. They'd spoken through a monitor a few times before, and the man was proving just as overenthusiastic in person as Cleo expected. He was already sick of speaking with him but couldn't let that show on his face.

"I'm happy to see you as well," the prince responded.

Meanwhile, Cleo's guard—his older sister Lysithea Noah Albareto—emotionlessly reminded the nobleman of the period allotted for the meeting. "Our time here is limited. Please begin with the matter at hand, rather than small talk."

This was beyond rude, but Lysithea made the comment for her brother's sake. They would meet countless people after this, so they couldn't spend all their time talking to the man in front of them.

The nobleman bristled for a moment, but quickly grew apologetic. "Forgive me. The matter at hand, yes… I'd like to

request your assistance in a dispute over territory within my family."

"A territory dispute," Cleo repeated.

"My uncle is unlawfully occupying a portion of my domain. He claims—falsely—that my father gave him the territory, and he's refusing to return it to me."

"And you want my help dealing with this," Cleo reiterated. The matter meant nothing to the prince, but the man clearly felt very strongly about it. *I'm sure he wants me to mediate or something.*

As Cleo considered how annoying this request would be, the man continued, "Yes. I'd like to have Count Banfield or a representative of his mediate."

"I see." It wasn't Cleo the man had named, but Liam. That irritated the prince a fair amount, but he couldn't do anything about it.

"Count Banfield's influence within the Empire is quite significant," Cleo remarked.

The nobleman before him smiled widely. "Indeed! Word of his exploits has spread to the very ends of the Empire's territory. If someone like him mediates on my behalf, I won't have anything to worry about."

Cleo swallowed his complaints. "Very well. I'll pass on your request to him."

"Thank you so much!"

***

"Everyone who meets with me only brings up Liam's name," Cleo grumbled to himself, taking a break after the nobleman departed.

Lysithea remained at his side. As his older sister, she too was royalty, but she'd willingly become a knight to protect her younger brother, who had shockingly few allies within the palace. Since she guarded a prince, her uniform was more ornamented than a typical knight's—closer to a dress uniform. Before, she'd worn her hair in a tight bun, but now it flowed long and straight behind her.

“You won’t last if you get upset about it every single time,” she said. “These meetings are scheduled down to the second for years down the line, you know.”

As Cleo’s position within the royal family improved, more and more people wished to meet with him. Not just nobles, but merchants and all sorts of other visitors too.

Cleo didn’t particularly enjoy any of their visits. “As soon as I had the advantage over my brothers, people changed their tune completely.”

Lysithea remembered well when Cleo had had no allies whatsoever to speak of. “Still, it proves how highly everyone thinks of you now,” she said, trying to pacify her brother. “Sure, there are more than a few suspicious types, but plenty of these people are trustworthy. Don’t take that for granted.”

Cleo gazed at the ceiling. “I don’t. I get it, really. I’m only here right now thanks to Count Banfield.” The power of House Banfield —Liam, specifically—was the only reason he hadn’t perished in the struggle for the throne.

Lysithea was relieved that Cleo understood that. “Many nobles want to meet with you, and Calvin isn’t here right now. More and more people wish to abandon his faction and join yours instead.”

Day by day, an increasing number of people suspected Prince Cleo might just be the next emperor. Still, it wasn’t as if Calvin wielded no influence whatsoever anymore. Even if Cleo’s position in the struggle for the throne was better now, the gap between the two candidates was by no means large. His current advantageous position didn’t change the fact that he was one misstep away from losing it all.

“I’m sure it’s Count Banfield that everyone *really* wants to see.”

That was probably the case. Still, if the visitors didn’t want anything to do with Cleo himself, they wouldn’t have met with him. He could assume that anyone who bothered arranging a meeting at least wanted to make themselves known to him.

Lysithea sighed. “There’s nothing we can do about that. Count Banfield is your greatest supporter. If not for the count’s money and military support, who knows where we’d be? I know

this can’t be fun for you, Cleo, but don’t forget to be grateful to him.”

Cleo was complaining so much that Lysithea was getting nervous about it. She was worried he was unhappy with House Banfield—with Liam—somehow.

Cleo grinned wryly at her. “I’m just tired from all these meetings, so I’m grumbling a bit.”

“Well, if that’s all it is…”

“That’s about all the time we have for our break. Let’s get our next meeting finished with, Sister.”

“Got it.”

Their conversation over, Lysithea turned her back to Cleo and sent a tablet message to one of her subordinates to admit the next visitor.

Watching her, Cleo whispered to himself, “In the end, I’m nothing but the count’s puppet.”

He couldn’t help voicing his complaints. He only had his current position because of Liam. Every day, he was forced to confront the fact that he hadn’t changed at all from how he used to be; his position on his own was as tenuous as ever.

I’m just the same as I’ve always been. I’m still weak.

Their next visitor should be arriving at any moment, but for some reason, Lysithea looked flustered. She shot a look at Cleo, clearly out of sorts. “Turn her away at all costs,” she was saying into her tablet. “We won’t be meeting anyone who isn’t on the schedule.”

Someone had apparently forced their way inside to see Cleo. He was getting nervous when Lysithea sighed heavily and turned to him, an indescribable look on her face.

“Mother wants to see you.”

When Cleo heard who their mystery visitor was, his eyes widened. “Mother?!”

It was Annabelle Sereh Lengrand—the pair’s birth mother, who’d never once wanted anything to do with them until now. Neither Cleo nor Lysithea could hide their discomfort at her sudden appearance. Cleo put his hand to his face, trying to decide

what to do. Ultimately, he failed to produce an answer. “Sister, how ought we to proceed?”

“I’ll ask what she wants first. We can decide then.”

As Cleo watched, obviously uneasy at his long-absent mother’s appearance, the flustered Lysithea headed outside.

“What is it she wants after all this time?”

He had an idea, of course. But it only irritated him more.

***

It was hard to describe how Cleo felt after meeting with Lady Annabelle.

Due to anti-aging technology, the lady’s appearance was still that of a young woman. If not told, no one would guess that she was already old enough to have grandchildren. She could easily pass herself off as Cleo’s older sister instead of his mother.

She’d worn a distinct, flashy dress with a large decorative collar that made her look like a frilled lizard. Her hairstyle was distinctive as well, coiled atop her head like an onion. She seemed the same as in the past—with one significant difference. Before, she’d had no interest in her children whatsoever. Now, she sat in front of Cleo and spoke to him with a friendly smile.

“Oh, Cleo. You’ve grown so much I hardly recognized you. I’ve heard, you know—you have more authority within the palace now than Prince Calvin. Isn’t that right?”

Cleo and Lysithea were bewildered by their mother’s cheery mood. Lady Annabelle was supposed to have shut herself up in the palace, away from the outside world. Her unique fashion was likely due to her isolation from the world at large. Yet she hadn’t been so isolated that she’d failed to hear about her son’s successes, and now she’d gone out of her way to meet with him.

Standing behind and to the side of Cleo, Lysithea sent her mother a sour look. Though Lady Annabelle smiled at Cleo, she hadn’t spared Lysithea so much as a glance.

“Why, at this rate, you may just be the next emperor, Cleo,” she continued.

“Who can say? It’s hardly a done deal at this point.”

Annabelle's eyes widened at his wishy-washy response. "What're you saying?! Calvin may be crown prince, but he's away from the palace right now. He's left himself wide open while he's off fighting the Autocracy. You have to take this opportunity to solidify your position!"

She wasn't wrong. With Calvin absent, Cleo should've been expanding his faction's influence inside the palace, but he had little involvement in that matter. "It's in Count Banfield's hands."

At the mention of the name "Banfield," Lady Annabelle's gaze sharpened. It seemed she had some animosity toward House Banfield, if not Liam himself. "Cleo, I understand why you favor Count Banfield so much. It's because he supported you when things were hard for you, isn't it?"

Cleo had to stop himself from barking out a laugh in response. He thought about answering sarcastically but weathered that urge as well. "I suppose so, yes."

Unlike someone *who abandoned us,* he spat inwardly. Still, he said nothing further aloud, so as not to start a fight with his birth mother.

Lady Annabelle seemed to pick up on his feelings anyway. "I truly regret what I did. It must've been so hard on you. I know I should've left you in my family's care all those years ago." Seeming truly apologetic, she squeezed Cleo's hand in hers.

Behind Cleo, Lysithea scowled at her audacity, muttering, "You think you can just…"

Annabelle didn't appear to hear her. "Still, it's not good to rely on someone so completely. If you continue to depend on House Banfield, it will cause problems for your reign."

"I'm sure it will, but…"

If Cleo succeeded to the throne under these circumstances, House Banfield *would* become a problem. There could be no greater achievement for them than raising Cleo to the throne. He would owe them tremendously, which would force him to give them preferential treatment, affording them ludicrous influence within the Empire. House Banfield would rule within the palace, and Cleo wouldn't be able to govern without their approval.

But if Cleo treated them coldly after they helped him become emperor, his own reputation would suffer. His rule would prove

unstable if no one trusted him to reward faithful service.

Either way, betraying House Banfield at this stage would only weaken the standing of Cleo's faction, reducing his influence within the palace. Then he'd have very few moves left to make. Cleo was entirely reliant on just one entity—House Banfield. But that was something he'd had to accept from the very beginning.

"If not for House Banfield, Mother, I most likely wouldn't be meeting with you like this."

In the end, he had no choice but to rely on them.

That was, until Lady Annabelle presented him with a new option. "You were just desperate to survive, weren't you?" she replied. "But now your position isn't as weak as it was."

"What're you saying? What do you think I can—"

Before he could ask what she envisioned him doing, Lady Annabelle's voice drowned his out. "Make use of House Lengrand. You don't need to abandon Count Banfield entirely; just come to rely on House Lengrand a bit more, little by little. By doing so, you can prevent Count Banfield from holding all the cards."

"Wha—?!" This shocked interjection came from diagonally behind Cleo. "Don't listen to her, Brother! The nobles won't accept a sudden power shift to House Lengrand!"

Cleo took Lysithea's counsel seriously, but he couldn't help thinking, *Is it really wise to keep relying entirely on Count Banfield? Would it so bad to achieve a bit more balance via House Lengrand?*

House Lengrand had only approached Cleo when the possibility that he might become the next emperor arose, so they were hardly worthy of trust. Still, the idea of using them to somewhat offset Liam's power seemed solid enough to ignore that. Liam's influence was so great that Cleo considered accepting the suggestion, despite House Lengrand's untrustworthiness.

If I don't do anything, I'll never be more than a puppet. I don't intend to resist that. I don't, but... Surely, I can at least make a preliminary move for my own future's sake, can't I?

In the end, he decided to accept House Lengrand's assistance in order to weaken Liam's position, and to somewhat mitigate his own sense of inferiority.

"Where's the harm? House Lengrand's blood flows through my veins as well. The other nobles wouldn't like me abandoning

my blood relatives either, would they?"

Lysithea wasn't sure what to say to that. It was true that noble society placed great value on blood ties, so Cleo *would* come off as untrustworthy if he abandoned his relationship with his birth mother's family.

"That may be true," she said, "but how do you intend to explain this to Count Banfield?"

"I'm sure if I'm up front with him about it, he'll understand." *My position is still inferior to his, but I can't remain his puppet forever.*

Thus, House Lengrand secured its position within Cleo's faction.

***

"I suppose you've got it rough too," Marion told me one day while I was busy at work.

I wasn't sure what to say to that vague statement. I could outright ignore it, but then Marion would probably just go on endlessly, so I decided to humor him.

"In what way?" I asked.

Marion leaned forward giddily. He must've been quite interested in whatever he was about to bring up. "With House Lengrand, I mean. Everyone's heard about Randy's meeting with Prince Cleo at this point."

He pulled up a holographic display on his tablet. It seemed to show something like the internet forums from my former life. Onscreen, all sorts of people anonymously discussed rumors within the palace. Most were baseless nonsense, but every so often, someone posted something true. Thus, you couldn't write it all off.

Marion was showing me a discussion about Cleo and Randy's rumored meeting.

"Prince Cleo's supposed to have meetings booked years in advance, but he made a special exception to see House Lengrand's heir."

"So his birth mother's family is finally getting involved now*?"*

“It’s definitely a bit late at this point. But it feels like there’s some reason he’d meet with them now.”

“He’s probably sick of how Count Banfield’s been acting.”

“Everyone knows hick nobles from out in the middle of nowhere have no manners.”

“Let’s just hope the count goes home and holes up in his own domain as soon as his training’s over.”

“That war-crazy idiot should stick to fighting and keep out of anything else.”

There were a lot of posts bashing me as well. Since Marion had gone out of his way to show me this, he’d been expecting something from me. Did he want me to get angry?

I ignored the posts and got back to my “work.” “Is that all you wanted to show me? I’m busy at the moment, so could you leave me alone?”

Marion’s shoulders slumped. He must’ve been disappointed that he couldn’t get a rise out of me. “If you want to look for the people who wrote those comments, I’ll help you,” he said. “Not that you *need* my help, I’m sure, with the intelligence operatives at your disposal.”

If I’d wanted to, I could’ve tracked down and disposed of every single one of the idiots disparaging me in that thread. Kukuri and his men would no doubt have handled it cleanly. I had no time for anything like that, though.

“They can write what they like. I have no interest in gossip.” I closed my mouth and got back to work.

Marion gave me an exasperated look. “Diligent as always, aren’t you? It doesn’t matter what you say—you can’t hide that natural diligence.”

This guy doesn’t understand me either. Me, diligent*? He must be blind.* “Did you want to make me angry by showing me those scribblings?”

“That’s right. I thought you’d go find the culprits and eviscerate them.”

Who exactly do you think I am? So many people badmouth me in this universe. If that was all it took to get my goat, I wouldn’t last a second. I could only imagine what the residents of my home

planet said about me behind my back. It was natural for citizens to badmouth politicians.

“Sorry, but I don’t have time to humor you.” If I were free, I wouldn’t have minded hunting down the people who’d written those posts, but I really was busy at the moment.

“Too bad. I was looking forward to watching you fly into a rage.”

While we talked, Randy approached, wearing a flashy suit as always. For some reason he looked triumphant as he spoke to me. “Do these as well, would you, Liam?”

A considerable amount of holographic data displayed before me as he tossed the work assigned to him and his lackeys to me.

“What’s this supposed to be?” I asked, my eyes flashing at him.

Randy gave me a nasty grin, apparently playing a childlike prank on me despite his age of almost two hundred. “Since we’re in the same faction and all, we should help each other out, shouldn’t we? And we’re rather busy over here, so would you handle our share of this work? You specialize in busy work like this, don’t you?”

He thinks I’m just a grunt, does he?

With that, Randy took his underlings and left. Even those lackeys of his sneered at me as they walked off.

“Best of luck, Mr. Diligent.”

“Sure helps to have talented friends, doesn’t it?”

“You better finish all that.”

My eyes widened at the attitude Randy’s flunkies were showing me. I couldn’t believe there were still people who’d act that way toward me. I found myself wondering whether I should reassess them. After all, it took serious guts for them to hassle me when they all knew their positions were far inferior to mine. Of course, I couldn’t discard the possibility that they were just that stupid. Looking at them really sent home that people didn’t fundamentally change, however impressive an education nobility afforded them.

Now that they’d forced all that work onto me, Marion seemed to pity me. “Want help?”

I sighed and looked over the data Randy had given me. “It’s no problem. Just do your own work.”

I decided to play nice for now.

…For now.

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Lady Annabelle had summoned her nephew Randy. They met at a facility just outside the palace where the emperor’s concubines could see their families.

Randy nervously informed Annabelle of Liam’s movements. “He hasn’t taken the bait, despite how arrogant I’ve been toward him. It’s hard to believe he did all the things they say during his training assignment.”

Randy couldn’t be called talented, even as flattery. Not having finished his training at almost two hundred displayed his lack of foresight; in addition, there was nothing in particular he excelled at. His abilities in any area compared unfavorably to those of bureaucrats in his workplace hired for their talent.

All this was *after* he’d used education capsules too. Following that process, he’d slacked off with rehabilitation and practice, so he hadn’t improved as much as he was meant to. Overall, he’d received the best education his noble rank could grant him, yet he had nothing to show for it. Of course, even Randy was superhuman compared to a commoner, but there was a huge divide between what he and Liam were capable of.

Lady Annabelle sighed at the waste-of-space nephew before her. “Be careful as you continue to observe him.”

“Of course. So when will House Lengrand be in charge of Cleo’s faction?”

All Randy was concerned with was rising to the top of Cleo’s group. Lady Annabelle shook her head, disgusted by her nephew’s lack of comprehension of the facts.

“What’s wrong, Aunt Annabelle?”

“Use your head a little, will you, Randy? When exactly did I say we’d support Cleo? We’ll *dismantle* his faction from the inside.

It's what *he* would have us do, after all." Lady Annabelle had never intended to help Cleo from the get-go.

Randy blustered at this news. "But if we do that, there's nothing in it for House Lengrand!"

"Calm down. I'll make sure we get something out of it."

Randy did his best to figure out what that meant. "Are you saying you have a connection to Prince Calvin? He'd benefit most from Cleo's failure." Calvin obviously stood to gain if Cleo dropped out of the succession conflict, so Randy assumed his aunt Annabelle had some association with the crown prince.

However, Lady Annabelle didn't answer his question. After all, she couldn't trust Randy enough to give him that information. If he thought Calvin was behind this, letting his misconception stand was fine with her. "Just keep observing Liam. If he gives you an opportunity, take him out. But I want you to be very careful. I assume you're aware of how many other nobles he's crushed before now? You can't allow him to get the better of you."

Randy nodded, sweating slightly at Lady Annabelle's warning. "O-of course."

"Good. I know I'm repeating myself, but don't take your eyes off Liam. That brat's seriously dangerous."

Since Liam had made short work of any number of aristocrats, Lady Annabelle was incredibly wary of him, and extremely anxious about having to leave this matter to her nephew.

Randy held his head high, oblivious to her concern. "Never fear. I've found the perfect person for the job. With them on our side, we won't have to worry."

"'Perfect person'? This person works for you, correct?" Annabelle asked sternly.

Randy didn't even notice her expression change. "No, but there's no need for concern. I was the one who found them, after all."

Lady Annabelle put a hand to her face. Could she really just trust this to her incompetent nephew? Her anxiety was only growing. Sighing, she decided she'd just have to look into things herself. "Tell me who this person is. I'll do some digging of my own."

Chapter 5:
Calvin and Isel

A FIERCE FIGHT was unfolding on the border between the Autocracy and the Empire.

Aboard Calvin's superdreadnought, the crown prince was meeting with nobles and advisors. The large table they sat around was actually a device for war councils that displayed a simplified depiction of the battlefield for them all.

Calvin furrowed his brow at the state of the battle. "I didn't think I was taking them lightly, but I never expected to have this much trouble."

He'd prepared for this war as soon as he heard he'd be facing the Autocracy. He liked to think he knew what he was getting into, but the Autocracy was surpassing his expectations.

"We're still neck and neck, but our losses are immense," one noble reported with a bitter expression. "We just received word that Isel's main fleet wiped out Count Harper's."

Calvin pinched the bridge of his nose. Count Harper's household had supported him for a long time. "I believe the count's son was commanding that fleet?" he asked.

Another noble nodded. "Count Harper always spoke so highly of his son. He graduated from the officer's academy with top grades, and his military service was exemplary. I didn't think he'd be bested so easily."

Calvin couldn't believe they'd lost such a promising young member of his faction to the fighting. No, he didn't *want* to believe it. He turned to the representation of the Autocracy's fleet on the display in front of him.

"So the crown prince of the Autocracy himself is fighting on the front lines… I'd heard the rumors. Common sense really doesn't apply to the Autocracy, does it?" The supreme commander himself fighting in front sounded impressive, but it wasn't a practical approach.

One of the nobles affected a twisted smile, perhaps acting tough to boost morale. "In the Empire, Liam's probably just about the only one who fights like that."

When he named Liam, the other nobles agreed, smiling wryly.

"True enough."

"Who do you think's stronger—the Autocracy or that kid?"

"Wish we could pit the two against each other to find out."

Nobles and advisors alike snickered inappropriately at the suggestion.

Such a thing wasn't possible, unfortunately, although Calvin himself wanted to agree to it. "That's quite a tempting proposal, but we can't add Liam to the mix. I shudder to think what he'd do if he were here."

Liam was a boon on the battlefield, to be sure, but he was their opponent in the contest between Calvin and Cleo's factions. None of them wanted to worry about the Autocracy *and* Liam out on the battlefield. They already had bitter memories from the Empire's war with the United Kingdom; House Banfield had dealt their faction a serious blow during that conflict. None wanted a repeat of that, so they didn't like the idea of Liam joining the fight.

"Anyway, we have to settle things ourselves this time," Calvin said. "Cleo's already overtaken us, so we need to use this opportunity to regain ground we've lost."

Calvin wanted to be victorious over the Autocracy to solidify his position as crown prince. If Liam showed up and turned the tide for them, that would only earn Cleo more points.

The nobles and advisors all agreed.

"We'll just have to fight off the Autocracy, then," one said. "It's not going to be easy, though."

Defeating a formidable opponent was an impressive feat, and the Autocracy was a truly terrifying foe.

"I understand that," Calvin said. "Now, let's figure out our next move, shall we?"

Their meeting went on for a long time after that.

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“This is awfully tedious,” Crown Prince Isel, supreme commander of the Autocracy’s forces, muttered from the bridge of his three-thousand-meter superdreadnought. He stood with his arms crossed, not using his seat.

The soldiers around him agreed with his sentiment.

“You said it.”

“There’s nothing fun at all about an enemy that stays on the defensive.”

“It’s pathetic of their supreme commander to hide in the back like this too. He doesn’t have to fight on the front line or anything, but he could come a *bit* farther forward, couldn’t he?” The way Calvin fought was distasteful to the Autocracy.

Isel sighed. “I hoped there’d at least be a warrior for me to fight.”

A soldier corrected the disappointed Isel. “The Empire calls warriors ‘knights,’ Your Highness.”

“Right.”

Both those called “knights” in the Empire, and those referred to as “warriors” in the Autocracy, spent time from a young age within education capsules, boosting their abilities beyond inborn human limits. But there was one major difference between Empire and Autocracy traditions. Any child could become a warrior in the Autocracy, since education capsules were available to use cheaply. Only a handful of these children made it to adulthood, though, due to the countless trials prepared for them on their way to becoming warriors. Dropping out meant death, and less than half the children who began the process managed to become any kind of “warrior.”

Isel looked up at the ceiling. “Isn’t there a warrior I can go toe to toe with out there somewhere?”

He’d become so strong, no one was left who could challenge him. That was Isel’s greatest problem at this point.

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As Isel bemoaned his lack of fitting opponents, G’doire and the Guide stood behind him. No one could see the pair, so no one

feared G’doire’s monstrous appearance.

G’doire was saddened to see Isel’s plight. “Ugh… My Isel can’t find any strong enemies to fight. Can such a tragedy be allowed to stand?!”

G’doire had orchestrated countless trials for Isel, watching over him ever since he was young. The crown prince was the finest warrior he’d ever raised. His eight tentacles writhed as he listened to his dear Isel’s lamentations.

The Guide had no idea how to react to this. “Wasn’t it you who made him so peerless in the first place?”

“Yes. Isel overcame all my trials to become the warrior he is today. He’s the finest warrior the Autocracy has ever seen.”

G’doire played around with reality as if trying to create the strongest possible character in a video game. The Guide couldn’t help smiling at the being’s innocent fun.

I don’t dislike him, but his sport just isn’t to my taste. Still, I wonder just how many lives he wasted to raise this one warrior of his…? It delights me to imagine.

Receiving G’doire’s favor was actually a death sentence. The trials he arranged for those he took a liking to were all but impossible to overcome. Any normal person would die during the course of the first one.

G’doire also bored easily. Even if someone survived his trials, if he grew tired of them, he’d throw them away just like that. The discarded pawn would be lucky if they were merely dismissed, but he inevitably used such an individual to train his next protégé. The warriors who’d previously gained G’doire’s favor all ultimately died in battle. The one exception was Isel, who overcame each and every one of G’doire’s trials, and was in turn peerless.

“Now, shall I prepare a strong enemy for my dear Isel?” G’doire was ready to take action.

The Guide couldn’t hide his excitement. “You’re finally getting serious, I see.”

“Well, the Empire’s not handing Liam over easily. What could they be thinking, not sending their strongest knights to fight my Isel?” G’doire asked, as if he truly couldn’t understand the Empire’s logic.

The Guide lifted the brim of his hat, though his eyes remained in darkness underneath. “Human society has its complications. But if you attract Liam to you, he’ll appear on this battlefield whether you like it or not.”

“It’s easy enough for us to control the fate of a few humans.”

Even if the Guide couldn’t do so in his current weakened state, G’doire would be able to draw Liam to this place. That was simple enough for a being whose abilities surpassed humans’, like him.

G’doire employed his power to bring Liam to the battlefield, as a sacrifice for Isel and for the sake of a good show.

“I can’t wait to see you, Liam,” he said. “You’d better entertain.”

Chapter 6:
Randy

MARION AWOKE in his apartment on the Capital Planet. He sat up and looked down next to him at the naked woman he'd picked up the night before. A light blanket covered her but did little to hide the curves of her body beneath it.

Marion got up and raised a hand. In response, the window shades rose, flooding the room with light. He got ready for work and had breakfast. All he had left to do now was leave the apartment, but his guest wasn't waking up.

Exasperated, he called out to her sweetly. "It's time to get up, my lady," he cooed.

Finally, the woman woke up. At first, she looked around the room as though she didn't know where she was. Then she must've remembered the night before; her face went red.

Marion smiled. "Adorable," he said, reaching out to her hair, but the woman flushed and gathered her scattered clothes, racing into the bathroom with them. Marion shrugged. "And you were so enthusiastic last night. Well... I've got to be getting to work."

He looked down at the scenery from the window. Outside stretched a gray expanse, the usual view the Capital Planet offered. Looking up, he glimpsed the artificial sky above them.

"It's so filthy here; I just can't grow to like it. Still, the women are just my type."

He found them captivating despite hating the Capital Planet. Marion smiled to himself at that thought.

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"Well, good morning, Liam."

I heard Marion's voice as soon as I got into the elevator. Just from his cheerful greeting, I was already sick of him. But since there was no escape route in an elevator, I had no choice but to humor him.

"You smell like perfume again," I pointed out.

Marion got out his tablet, bragging to me about his success the night before. “I found a cute girl and picked her up. Oh—here she is.”

The perfume smell was because of a woman, at least according to Marion, but the one he showed me on his tablet was different from the last. He must really have been fooling a lot of girls with those cute looks of his. Lately, he kept showing them off to me, as if bragging about his conquests. He apparently liked the strong-willed type; all the women looked mature.

“You should join me sometime, Liam. In our position, you can have your pick.”

When women found out you worked in the palace as a government official, they got a different look in their eyes. On the Capital Planet, bureaucrats were winners among winners. I’d heard all manner of stories that officials like us had their pick of local women, backing up Marion’s claim. Since I wasn’t interested, however, my only thought about this was *I’m surprised you don’t get tired of it.* After all, picking up girls like that wasn’t an evil lord’s way. I was only interested in bending resistant women to my will. Anyone who’d just come along with me if asked wasn’t worth my time.

“Tell ’em you’ll head back to the boonies after your training,” I said, “and see how fast they run away.”

Girls who dreamed of the big-city life weren’t interested in moving to the sticks. However much money a guy earned, they wouldn’t go with him when he left.

Marion seemed to understand that, though. “When it’s time to part, I’ll do that, sure. You really don’t fool around, though, do you? Worried about your fiancée?”

He thought I didn’t want to be unfaithful to Rosetta? Was this guy an idiot? Why should I care a bit about her? She might’ve belonged to me, but I didn’t belong to her. I just didn’t fool around because, if I did that too much, I’d get crap about it from Amagi and Brian.

“Now that you’ve taken the first step, you must go all the way,” Amagi would no doubt say.

Brian would say, “I see you’ve finally taken an interest in women, Master Liam! I only ask that you please beware honey

traps. Beyond that, I'll say nothing more."

On second thought, would they actually support my picking up women? Either way, I didn't want to deal with the commotion that fooling around with even one woman would cause.

"There aren't any women worth my time," I told Marion.

"You've never found a single one?"

"Nope. Well…I guess that's not strictly true."

After my statement, a single girl with pretty blue hair had flashed through my mind. Her name was Lillie. She was innocent, untainted by the capital, but I had no idea what she was doing now. Her clear skin and pure-white dress had made her stand out among the other Capital Planet women, and not in a bad way.

Just as I was worrying about whether she'd already embraced the capital's terrible, flashy styles, Marion peered into my face.

"What…?" I asked.

"Well, you went silent, so I wondered if someone *did* catch your eye."

"It's none of your business." I tried to bring the conversation to a close.

Marion must have really wanted me to come on one of his hunts. He was being awfully persistent today. "Come on, let's have some fun together. I just know you being with me will bring up my success rate. It's fun to go out and get your fill, you know."

Looking at his sunny face, I could easily picture him getting stabbed one day. Still, Marion was another noble just like me, if a rotten one. We had the abilities of knights, so we couldn't really call ourselves nobles if we let some common girl stab us.

The elevator reached our floor, so we got out and headed for our work area. It was first thing in the morning, but Randy and his goons were already crowding around my desk. When they spotted me, they started talking in voices just loud enough for me to hear.

"Congratulations, Lord Randy!" one of his lackeys praised him.

Randy looked bashful. "Thanks."

The others flattered him the same way.

“Now that you’re officially working for Prince Cleo’s faction, House Lengrand will only get more important.”

“I’m sure I’ll be busy soon,” Randy noted. “You guys will help me out, right?”

They were discussing him joining Cleo’s faction—around my desk for some reason. This early in the morning, and I was already so annoyed.

Marion grinned at me. “They’re provoking you.”

“Let them.” I ignored the group and sat at my desk, where a file was waiting for me.

Randy sat on the edge of my desk. “Hey, Liam.” His manner was too familiar. When he laid a hand on my shoulder, I scowled at him.

“Who do you think you are? Get that hand off me,” I warned.

Randy ignored me, acting as if he outranked me. “Prince Cleo summoned me today, so you see, I’m quite busy. You’ll do my work for me, won’t you? After all, we’re members of the same faction now. It’s no skin off your nose, is it?”

A few days ago, I’d gotten word from Cleo that he’d allowed House Lengrand to join his faction. That in itself didn’t surprise me. If anything, I was a little surprised it was all he’d done.

“No, I don’t mind. As head of the faction, it’s my duty to look after newcomers like you. Go wag your tail at Prince Cleo in hopes that he’ll take a liking to you. Your family’s late enough to the party already. You’ve got a lot of work ahead of you kissing ass,” I said, smiling.

Randy’s expression changed, his cheeks trembling, presumably because he was holding back anger. *Jeez. He’s a noble, and he can’t even keep a poker face?* I thought. Then I remembered how much time he’d have spent at home being waited on hand and foot. He wasn’t used to people picking fights with him, so he didn’t know how to react. I was sure he was the type who lived like a king at home—just like me!

Just barely maintaining his cool, he rose from my desk. “Well, I’m counting on you.” He left with his flunkies, practically oozing frustration.

Having watched the whole thing, Marion gave me an exasperated look. “Well, this is trouble. I didn’t think Prince Cleo would actually let House Lengrand join his faction. I can’t imagine that it was necessary to let them in just like that after all this time.”

I figured letting one or two riffraff nobles aboard wouldn’t change anything at this point. Still, anyone who only joined now that things were going our way would be quick to betray us if the situation changed. Letting people you couldn’t trust get anywhere near you was ludicrous—or so I wanted to say. “I’m looking forward to seeing how far they get, myself.”

Picking up the file Randy had left on my desk, I saw a good amount of data inside. Even one little file like this contained plenty of work for me to do. He’d probably gone around finding additional tasks to throw in there.

As I closed the file, Marion asked, “Need some help? You’ll be working overtime tonight if you’re going to finish that whole thing.”

“Want to know one of my least favorite words?”

“Let me guess: overtime?”

“You got it in one.” I had a policy not to engage in overtime, and I didn’t want to back down from my principles so easily.

Marion grinned as he watched me. What an annoying guy. *Well, if I want to leave on time tonight, I guess I’ve got to get a little serious today.*

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Randy and his lackeys were using the break room, despite the fact that they should’ve been working. Ditching that work, they relaxed in the café-like chamber. Some even smelled of alcohol, but no one reprimanded them for that. The room was always full of young nobles who should’ve been completing their training, and everyone pretended they were doing their jobs.

Randy had stopped by to kill time until his meeting with Cleo. Meanwhile, his lackeys made fun of Liam, evidently having taken his attitude as a bluff.

“He acts tough, but still, he took on all that work.”

“I’ll acknowledge his military record and personal ability, but he sucks at politics. It’s obvious that he’s just some border noble from the sticks.”

“And leading all those stupid hick nobles will be our job, right?” House Lengrand’s territory was relatively close to the Capital Planet, and their home planet was fairly advanced, which was why they ridiculed nobles like Liam from the outlying regions.

Still, Randy couldn’t be as blithe about things as his lackeys, after the warning his aunt had given him. “Prince Cleo arrived at his current position with the help of those border nobles and their military might. Do *not* pick fights with them outside the arena of politics.” Randy glared at one of his flunkies, who quickly revised his attitude.

“Of course, Lord Randy.”

Randy didn’t make light of Liam’s personal strength or the military might of House Banfield. He considered his future plans.

My aunt wants me to drive him out of the capital soon, but is that really something I can do? I mean, if it’s possible, it’d be convenient for me as well, but…

Now that he had Cleo on his side, Randy wanted Liam off the Capital Planet. If that happened, he was sure he could take control of the faction.

I don’t care how strong you are, Liam. Don’t think you’ll be able to survive in the world of politics.

Randy intended to fight Liam in an arena that had nothing to do with his combat prowess.

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“Cleo, why are you listening to Randy?!”

As Cleo was signing electronic documents in his office, Lysithea burst in angrily. Cleo sighed, signing a petition. Part of it was annoyance at Lysithea, but mostly it was because of the document’s contents. It was a request for financial assistance from nobles who claimed they were impoverished.

He’d received plenty of petitions, but many were rather dubious like this one. The nobles requesting his aid complained of

difficult circumstances, yet almost all were just reaping what they themselves had sown. Even knowing that, Cleo signed request after request for aid, as if he were trying to get rid of as much money as he could.

Continuing this assembly-line work, he asked the trembling Lysithea, “To what do you refer?”

“I’m referring to Randy! And what is that?” The blood drained from her face when she noticed the requests Cleo was robotically signing. “A-are you signing *all* of those?! You’ll only attract more leeches if you grant people aid so easily!”

Momentarily forgetting about Randy, Lysithea tried to stop Cleo from signing the documents, but Cleo wasn’t simply doing so for no reason.

“Many are in need, due to the G’doire Autocracy’s invasion. I can’t just ignore them.”

When he gave her a reason like that, Lysithea couldn’t dispute his actions so easily. She herself supported helping those suffering from the Autocracy’s invasion, but she couldn’t hide her unease at the haphazard way Cleo offered his aid to anyone and everyone.

“You should discuss these things with Count Banfield first.”

Her suggestion caused Cleo to burst out laughing.

Lysithea was bewildered by this. “D-don’t laugh! It’s *his* money! You can’t just give it away without consulting him!”

Lysithea’s words were entirely reasonable.

Cleo raised his head to look at her. “I thought about it, but I intend to give Count Banfield a more important job to do.”

“A more important job?” Lysithea asked dubiously.

Cleo smiled. “I’ve got the perfect appointment for him. Worrying about requests like these is beneath him.”

“It’s not wise to offend him, you know.”

“I understand that. If a puppet like me wants to survive all this, I need the support of a major noble like himself,” Cleo said cynically.

Lysithea looked as though she wanted to object, but quickly abandoned the idea. “You’re still… Well, what is this job for Count Banfield?”

Cleo glanced down at the electronic document before him and signed it without even reading it. “There’s a house that’s caused something of an issue, you see. The Empire’s impounding their territory and putting it under direct imperial control. Since the territory’s on the border, we’ll need to send someone out there to serve as magistrate. I’ve elected to send Count Banfield.”

“What…?” For a moment, Lysithea couldn’t even react to the all-too-sudden news. A noble had caused a problem and was having their position and territory taken from them, but if the Empire confiscated their planet, they would need to send someone to rule it on their behalf—a magistrate. Thus, Cleo had decided to send Liam to serve as this planet’s magistrate.

“You’re sending Count Banfield away from the Capital Planet?!”

Even with Calvin gone, Lysithea didn’t think it was wise to send Liam away from the planet too. Cleo had foreseen this and tried to persuade her with the rebuttal he’d already thought of.

“Count Banfield is incredibly skilled at governing planets. He single-handedly rebuilt the society on his home world, after all. Any new territory under direct imperial control will be secure with him at its helm.”

“I don’t care how fit he is for the job! Don’t send away people you can’t replace!” Lysithea was on the verge of tears now, as Cleo told her the circumstances of the planet Liam would be dispatched to.

“That’s just how important this planet is, Sister. Many imperial citizens are considering evacuation from the G’doire Autocracy’s invasion route. The Empire needs to prepare a planet for these refugees, as well as one that can provide support to the army from the rear. This is a very complicated problem.”

Upon hearing that this was a necessary plan for the Empire, Lysithea found it hard to argue.

“The prime minister has approved of it, as well,” Cleo added. “He said it may be tough for a young person who still hasn’t completed his training, but he’s certain that Count Banfield can handle it. Plus, if we can pull this off, winning the war won’t be Calvin’s victory alone. He’ll have to admit that we had a hand in it.”

Lysithea's shoulders slumped. She was ashamed of her inability to think that far ahead.

"I didn't know you'd put so much thought into this. I'm relieved to know you've considered all that. I have to confess, I've been a bit nervous since you suddenly said House Lengrand could join the faction."

Since House Lengrand had previously abandoned the two of them, Lysithea clearly still distrusted Lady Annabelle.

Cleo didn't say anything in return, so Lysithea repeated, "You really have thought this through. I'm a little surprised."

Cleo smiled. "It wasn't my idea. I actually got it from someone else."

Lysithea cocked her head. "Someone else?" she asked, but Cleo just chuckled, not revealing this someone's name.

"You'll find out soon enough."

Chapter 7:
Ambition

THE LARGE BLACK AUTOMOBILE had a high-class quality. The rear seats were spacious, and the interior was luxurious. The driver was separated by a partition, so those in front and those in back didn't have to interact with each other.

The automobile drove not on the ground but in the air, flying through the sky with its wheels retracted. Of course, its tires were just an auxiliary feature anyway, since it was primarily meant for sky travel. They simply allowed for the option of ground travel if one wished.

Marion sat in the back of this luxury vehicle.

"I never thought Lady Annabelle would wish to meet with me."

Across from Marion sat Randy. The two seemed utterly relaxed with each other.

"She would very much like to speak with you."

"I just wasn't expecting it. I didn't think I was anything more than a pawn to spy on Liam."

"Please, you're nothing of the sort. Once our plan succeeds, House Algren will receive nothing less than our full support. That goes for you individually as well, of course."

Randy smiled knowingly. Marion grinned as well.

"Well, I'm praying for the success of this plan, whatever it may be."

Marion was working for Randy. He'd only gotten close to Liam in order to spy on him. He was reporting everything he learned about Liam back to Randy, which was enough for Randy to promise to support House Algren. It was supposedly all for his family, which was "suffering" in the war with the Autocracy.

Randy looked into Marion's eyes and asked what he'd like in the way of "individual support." "So will a viscounty do for your reward? Or I could set you up with a pretty cushy position on the Capital Planet."

Offered the choice between a cushy job on the Capital Planet or ruling a rural planet as a viscount, Marion seemed to struggle a bit to keep the smile on his face.

"I've always been in a weak position in my family, and because of that, my brothers were all treated better than me. But I'll steal leadership of the family from all of them. That would be the perfect revenge, don't you think?"

Though he'd been born the son of a viscount, Marion had never been in a position to go after the headship himself. He'd always been treated as lesser than his older brothers.

Randy frowned. "You're going to waste your life on revenge?"

To Randy, proximity to the capital correlated directly with one's happiness. Marion almost burst out laughing at the thought. Struggling not to do so, he explained how he felt.

"To be honest, I wasn't treated all that badly. I envied my brothers for the special treatment they received, but I don't have a grudge against them personally. It's just that if there's a mountain in front of me, I want to climb it, you know? But the title of viscount is only a stepping stone to me. What I'm really after is—"

"The seat of the margrave," Randy finished.

Viscount Algren served the main family under Margrave Algren, and Marion's ultimate goal was leadership of the main family.

"Correct. And you're going to help me get there."

"It's not advisable to be *too* greedy, you know."

"I'm spying on *Liam*. I deserve that much as a reward. I'll be satisfied as long as you promise to put me in charge of my own family."

"That I can do. Well...it looks like we're here."

The luxury vehicle set down and the door opened, so the two of them got out.

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In a meeting room, Marion laid eyes on Lady Annabelle.

Randy introduced him. "I've brought him, Aunt Annabelle."

Lady Annabelle looked up at Marion from where she remained seated. That was probably a message: “You’re not important enough for me to stand to greet you.” She was a concubine of the emperor, one of his wives, so Marion understood and wasn’t bothered in the slightest. In fact, he was delighted that he’d even been invited here.

“I am Marion Sera Algren. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Lady Annabelle took more interest in Marion as he bowed deeply and gracefully. “You seem cleverer than I expected. Could we speak alone?”

Randy wasn’t sure what to say to that. He didn’t think it was right to leave her alone with a man who wasn’t family. There was nothing to record what went on in this room so that secret discussions could be held here. Not even guards or servants were allowed inside, so he didn’t feel comfortable leaving the two of them alone.

“Aunt Annabelle, I don’t think I can leave you alone with—”

“Randy?” Annabelle glared at him, and Randy reluctantly backed down.

Before he left the room, however, he warned Marion, “Don’t do anything stupid. My aunt is one of the emperor’s wives, you know.”

“I’m aware.”

Randy departed, and Marion sat down in the chair Lady Annabelle offered him.

They faced each other, and as Annabelle eyed the door Randy had left through, she said, “It’s cute that he’s so obedient, but I wish he was a little more capable. He doesn’t even look into the people he associates with.”

Lady Annabelle gave Marion a knowing look, but Marion remained cool under her gaze.

“You’d be surprised how few people realize.”

“Well, you must be capable enough to spy on Liam. Now, I’ve heard a few things from Randy already. Taking over your family is a rather paltry wish, wouldn’t you say?”

Apparently, Lady Annabelle didn't see the point in becoming a mere viscount. Realizing she shared Randy's initial confusion, Marion told her what he really wanted.

"To be precise, I'm aiming for control of the main family: the seat of the margrave. The position of viscount is just a stepping stone to get there."

Lady Annabelle gave Marion an interested look. "I like greedy people. It's especially easy for me to get along with those who are clear about what it is they want."

It appeared she'd judged him worthy of joining hands with. Marion had been expecting her to see him as disposable, so it was an unexpected stroke of luck that she had taken a liking to him.

"I've looked into your background," she told him. "Pretty impressive. Randy could learn a thing or two from you. He could stand to take things a bit more seriously. I can't believe he really waited until he's almost two hundred to complete his training. I wish he'd taken care of it sooner."

"If he had, he wouldn't have met me. Things worked out in the end, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, *I* wouldn't have had to work so hard if he were a bit more capable... In any case, I think that's enough small talk." The look in Annabelle's eyes changed. "I want to reduce Liam's authority. Do you have any ideas on how to accomplish that?" she asked Marion.

Marion grinned and revealed his plan. "Let's get him involved in the war with the Autocracy."

This suggestion disappointed Annabelle. "I see, so you just want to use House Banfield to save your own territory. Well, it would be difficult to get him involved in the war. Calvin's faction is on guard about him."

House Banfield had dealt Calvin's faction a terrible blow in the recent war with the United Kingdom, winning a victory for his own faction at the same time. Calvin's faction still remembered the fear he'd instilled in them then, which was why House Banfield wasn't already fighting in the war despite their reliability in combat.

Marion was well aware of all this, however.

“I know a bit about what’s going on at the border with the Autocracy, since that’s where my family’s territory is.”

Annabelle closed her mouth and gestured for him to continue, though her expression said she wasn’t expecting much.

Marion explained what was happening in that region. “There’s a baron’s planet a little way from the border that’s in the perfect location to provide logistical support to the army, but this planet has a small issue, you see.” Marion showed her a document on his tablet, and Annabelle frowned.

“I can see why they can’t rely on this planet for aid,” she said sourly.

The planet in question was in the perfect location to provide support to the Imperial Army, and they had actually applied for aid from them, but the baron had rejected their request. Marion pictured the man’s face and felt disgust well up inside him.

“The baron has a bad reputation in that area for his rather vulgar tastes. What do you say to getting rid of him for failing to do his part for the Empire?”

“And after we get rid of him?” Annabelle was finally taking interest.

“The Empire will seize his planet, so they’ll need to send a magistrate to rule over it while it’s ungoverned,” Marion went on. “At any other time, it could be left alone for a while, but we’re at war with the Autocracy right now. This is the perfect time to transform the planet into a base to support the army.”

Though it would only be providing support, the planet was still close to the border with the Autocracy, so there was no guarantee it would remain untouched by the war. Depending on how things went, it could be invaded just as easily as any of the other territories nearby. No one would volunteer to serve as magistrate of such a place. If the Empire simply appointed someone, it was unlikely they would be able to fulfill the assignment.

Lady Annabelle had caught on to Marion’s idea. “That’s where Liam comes in.”

“Yes. This is a problem only Liam Sera Banfield can take care of for us. The only question is whether or not we can send him there while he’s still finishing up his training.”

Their idea was dead in the water if Liam declined the appointment because he was still in training.

Annabelle smirked. “Marion, was it? I want you to meet with Cleo.”

“Is there an opening? I thought he was booked for the next few years.”

“I think you two will get along. Persuade Cleo to send Liam as magistrate. Succeed, and I can promise you the seat of viscount to use as your stepping stone.”

Marion hardened his expression. “You can leave it to me. I’ll win Prince Cleo over.”

***

Marion got his opportunity to meet with Cleo that very night.

It was at the building that served as Cleo’s residence within the palace. Since it was late, Cleo was wearing a night robe, looking a lot more vulnerable than he probably should have with a guest.

The first thing he did was apologize for his appearance. “I’m sorry, but this was the only moment I could find in my schedule. Don’t be disappointed that you had to meet me like this.”

Marion, who was wearing a suit, actually felt an odd excitement at the way Cleo looked.

“I should be the one to apologize for insisting that we meet so suddenly.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. Now, what’s this about sending Count Banfield to serve as magistrate? You realize he’s my greatest supporter at the moment.”

Cleo’s stance was that it wouldn’t be possible to send Liam away from the Capital Planet, but Marion explained to him the overt reason for doing so.

“By providing support from the back lines, Liam will help Prince Calvin win victory against the Autocracy. That will prevent Prince Calvin from taking all the credit for achieving victory.”

“I see. But is this really worth the risk?”

Cleo wasn't convinced, so Marion shifted to an appeal for House Algren's sake.

"To tell the truth, this is all to save Viscount Algren and my family's territory. I know my family will come out of this all right if Liam takes part in the war. Since it will be your appointment of him that protects us, all the nobles on the border will swear their loyalty to you, Prince Cleo."

Along with his appeal to the prince's emotions, Marion could surely provide him a potential benefit, but Cleo still didn't seem interested.

"Do you really think I'd trust someone sent here by my mother?"

"I-I... Huh?"

Marion was aware of the antagonism between Cleo and Lady Annabelle, of course. While he was debating whether or not to use the excuse that he had only gone through Annabelle in order to meet with Cleo, the prince put both his hands on Marion's cheeks.

Cleo pulled Marion close—close enough to kiss. "Marion... why don't you tell me what you really want? I feel as though I'll be able to get along with you better than I do with *him*."

"B-but Your Highness—" Marion's eyes darted.

"We're a lot alike, the two of us," said Cleo. "Why don't we open up to each other? Tell me about yourself. What is it that you really want? What do you stand to gain from sending Liam to serve as magistrate?"



Marion couldn't pull his eyes away from Cleo, who seemed to possess strange charm. When their lips were almost about to touch, Cleo smiled impishly.

"It seems I've put you on the spot, but it's true that I'd like to get closer to you."

Marion blushed and looked down, his true feelings spilling out before he could help it.

"What I really want is…"

***

Cleo was as busy as ever with his meetings, but he seemed to be in a good mood this day. Lysithea frowned as she observed him.

"Seems you enjoyed yet another secret meeting last night," she said somewhat testily, but Cleo wasn't bothered by her attitude.

"With Marion? I did enjoy it," he admitted, and Lysithea's brow furrowed even more.

"People are starting to spread rumors about you bringing men into your room. The more talkative types are embellishing things even further."

"Well, it's not like it's strictly untrue. Let them say whatever they like."

Lysithea didn't know how to respond to Cleo's complete lack of concern. She was starting to worry herself that Marion had Cleo wrapped around his finger somehow.

"I won't tell you not to have any fun, but you should be a bit more careful about who you have fun with. Our mother was the one who introduced you to him, wasn't she? They're obviously planning something." Lysithea, who didn't trust their mother, was suspicious of Marion.

Cleo smiled. "Marion and I have a lot in common. It's no wonder we get along."

Lysithea couldn't argue with that. "I understand," she said after a short pause. "I'm just telling you to be a bit more prudent.

The people meeting with you bring attractive men along with them now for no reason because of those rumors, you know."

People *had* started visiting with attractive men in tow in order to win as many points with Cleo as they could. Cleo smiled, only just now realizing the meaning behind this odd recent occurrence.

"It's frightening how easy it is for people to get the wrong idea about things, isn't it?"

"You're telling me."

Chapter 8:
Lillie

BENEATH ITS SURFACE, the Algrand Empire's Capital Planet contained a secondary society. Aboveground lived regular citizens and those of relatively higher standing, but the underground was where anyone who had no place aboveground ended up. Once, this had been a lawless place, but these days it was fairly well managed. Due to the appointment of a highly talented individual, the underground had been cleaned up to an impressive degree.

The name of that individual was Eila Sera Berman. A longtime friend of Liam and Kurt, she was feared far and wide in the underground. She wore a black suit and had her messy, red-brown hair tied in a particular way behind her head. There was still a youthfulness to her appearance, but there was no one in her workplace who underestimated her.

Having plunged the underground into terror, Eila had stayed on to continue her work while Liam visited his home territory. She'd requested the underground as the workplace where she would fulfill her service as an official, and she had now risen to the position of section chief. This wasn't due to any underhanded dealings by Liam; it was Eila's own achievement.

Sitting at her desk, Eila shouted, "What did you say?!"

Hearing her yell, her subordinates flinched. Eila ignored them as she glared at the man she was talking with. Projected into the air in front of her was a hologram of Wallace Noah Albareto.

"You're being too loud, Eila."

"How am I supposed to be quiet about this?! It would be one thing if you were being sent there alone, but with Liam going to this…what is it again?"

"Planet Augur."

"Yeah, that! Don't you think it's weird he's being sent to Augur to serve as magistrate? He's still in training, isn't he?!"

"Yep, just like I am, but the prime minister's already given his approval."

"Why?!" Eila sank into her chair, openly annoyed. She saw no reason to put on airs with Wallace, so she regularly acted rather

disrespectfully toward him.

“Sounds like it was Cleo who asked him to go. He wants to avoid the war being won by Calvin alone. The prime minister thinks Liam will do a good job, so he approved the appointment. Don’t you think there’s no reason to get me *involved?”*

“I really couldn’t care less about that.”

Every so often Wallace called Eila to make these status reports. He had been appointed to a different workplace than Liam, so he didn’t get much detailed information about him, but this time he was wrapped up himself in what was going on with Liam. To Eila, of course, this was the least significant part of his news. The problem was what was going on with Liam.

Eila held her head in disappointment. “I can’t believe Kurt is coming to the Capital Planet ahead of his formal appointment, but they’re not going to meet! I wasn’t hoping for a ‘just missed each other’ plot like this!”

Wallace took interest in what she’d said about Kurt Sera Exner. *“He’s putting off his appointment?”*

“Yeah,” Eila answered reluctantly. “His family’s connected to the military, so he’s going to join up and spend his time there until he becomes head of the family. When he does that, though, he’ll have even fewer opportunities to see Liam! Aaah, I’m critically short on LiaKur energy!”

“I’m glad to see you haven’t changed, Eila.”

To Eila, who derived a lot of pleasure from shipping Liam and Kurt, it was a big problem if the two of them had fewer opportunities to meet. In an intergalactic nation, it was all too easy for people to become estranged due to pure physical distance, no matter how close they might be.

“If they drift apart…just what am I supposed to live off of?!”

As Eila wailed this, her coworkers all averted their eyes. They weren’t ignoring her; it was a polite attempt to pretend they didn’t see her outburst.

“Well, there’s still time before we leave. We should all be able to see each other, right?”

“I’m too busy to take any time off! We’re in a critical stage right now, and we’re understaffed! I have to get rid of the heretics and gather more like-minded comrades to my side!”

Wallace looked at her coldly as she bemoaned her lack of time. *“That’s all just for your hobby, though, isn’t it? I know it doesn’t mean much coming from me, but don’t you think you should focus on your actual work a bit more?”*

Frankly, it was none of his business, and since Wallace was so unserious himself it hurt Eila’s pride for him to talk to her like that.

Eila looked at Wallace expressionlessly. Her eyes contained no trace of empathy for the rude man she’d been reluctant friends with for so long. “Yes, it is for my hobby, and that’s why I take it so seriously. Getting too serious over your work is the wrong way to live life. Why don’t you just go to Augur on your own, Wallace? If you die, I can at least pretend to be sad… No, I’m sorry; I won’t be sad at all. I probably won’t be able to cry.”

“Would it kill you to be nicer to me?! We’ve known each other since primary school, haven’t we? Have a heart! I’m going to a planet close to the front lines, you know!”

All Wallace was looking for was a little appreciation for his efforts, but Eila was just as cold as ever.

“Not happening,” she said plainly, and Wallace’s shoulders slumped.

***

“…That’s all. I’m expecting a lot from you, Count Banfield.”

Having said all he had to say, Cleo cut the call. I got the feeling he smiled before the window showing his face disappeared, but I didn’t care.

I sat in my hotel suite, gazing out at the night view of the capital from the window after Cleo had given me my orders.

“In a sealed space like this,” I murmured, “the lights are beautiful whether they’re in the sky or on the ground.”

In the unique environment of the Capital Planet, the light of the stars was clearly visible since they were only a projection on the ceiling of the sky. It was a sight you wouldn’t see on other planets. The Capital Planet was bright at all times of day with

lights on the ground and blazing from skyscrapers that stretched all the way to the ceiling.

That was probably bad for the eyes. I closed the shades to block the dazzling light. As I turned around, I saw Rosetta had come in and listened to my conversation with Cleo. She hung her head, clutching at her skirt worriedly, her other hand pressed against her ample chest. When she raised her head, her eyes were wet.

“It just doesn’t make any sense to send you to Augur to serve as magistrate. You haven’t even finished your training, Darling.”

Apparently, Rosetta found it strange that they would send someone who wasn’t yet a proper noble to serve as magistrate, but this matter had already been settled.

“The prime minister’s approved the appointment, so it’s officially not a problem.”

This planet was supposed to be close to the fighting with the Autocracy—at least, “close” in terms of intergalactic nations, anyway. It didn’t seem to make sense to send someone still young and inexperienced to such a place. Though I’d explained that the orders came from on high, Rosetta still couldn’t accept it.

“It’s just too cruel. I can’t believe the prime minister would approve of such a thing, and what is Prince Cleo thinking?” Her tone was soft, but her expression was twisted in anguish. Personally, just getting to see Rosetta looking that way made this all worth it to me.

I had my own reasons for wanting to accept this job, though. I mean, I’d get to serve as a magistrate, after all. As a noble serving as head of my house, I ruled several planets as a count, but even with all that there was one dream I’d yet to fulfill, and that was serving as a magistrate. Since I already had my own territory to rule over, this was a perfect opportunity to do so that I wasn’t going to pass up.

“I don’t see what the problem is,” I told Rosetta. “I’m fine with going to Planet Augur.”

“Darling!” When I told her I’d accept the job, Rosetta turned to Amagi. “Say something to him, would you, Amagi?!”

Hey, keep Amagi out of this! If she objects, I really won’t be able to go!

But Amagi respected my decision.

“I cannot object to a decision my master has made.”

Rosetta looked crestfallen to hear it. It made my heart feel all itchy seeing how sincerely worried about me she was.

“Sure, it’s close to the battlefield, but it’s at the rear. They just want me to provide them with some supplies, so it should be an easy job.”

I checked the documents Cleo had sent over and saw that, on Augur, I was also supposed to apprehend a baron who’d caused some kind of problem. *Seriously, what an idiot.* Because of his screw-up, it was harder than it should have been for the Empire to take control of the planet. This would be an annoying job, but I was so excited about getting to be a magistrate that I couldn’t wait to do it.

“Amagi, get a fleet together back at home. The scale should be whatever we can spare. Claus will serve as commander.”

Amagi bowed her head diligently. “Very well.”

Rosetta looked both anxious and confused to see me getting prepared so excitedly. “You’re even bringing Sir Claus with you? You really mean to do this, don’t you, Darling?”

She’d understood how serious I was when I mentioned I’d be bringing House Banfield’s head knight with me.

“Of course I do.”

I mean, I’ll be a magistrate! A magistrate! And the only magistrate I know is the evil magistrate! I pride myself on being an evil lord, of course, but to be honest, it’s always been a regret of mine that I was never able to be an evil magistrate. Now I can fulfill that goal with this assignment!

I would go to Planet Augur and enjoy myself as an evil magistrate just enough to keep the Empire off my back. I couldn’t ask for a better opportunity; fate really was on my side. The Guide must have granted my wish! No… That was probably overthinking it. Still, my second life was one of complete bliss, thanks to that guy. *I should make sure to send my heartfelt thanks to him again today.*

Rosetta clasped her hands in front of her chest as if she were praying, giving up on persuading me. She stared at me and said,

“I understand, Darling. I won’t say anything more, but you must promise me to come back.”

“Yeah,” I said half-heartedly, averting my gaze from her passionate eyes. Why did she always have to betray my expectations of her? How the hell was I supposed to react when she acted this way?

When the two of us fell silent, Amagi asked me, “Incidentally, Master, will you be bringing *those two* with you on this assignment?”

I could guess who she was talking about from the look in her eyes. It was Tia and Marie.

I thought about this, then answered, “I think I’ll leave them at home. For now, I want them to reflect more on their actions.”

“Very well.”

***

In another room of the hotel where Liam resided was Ciel. She was working there as a maid and had been allotted a decent-sized room of her own. She lay on her bed in her underwear, conversing with someone on a monitor.

On the monitor was Kurt, who had yet to accept his post in the Imperial Army. He’d graduated from the military academy and completed his government service, before he was slated to return home for a time so as to introduce his fiancée, Princess Cecilia, to his domain.

Ciel lay on her stomach, kicking her legs in the air behind her. Her limbs moved on their own with excitement that she had this chance to talk with her beloved brother.

“How’s the Capital Planet, Brother? You haven’t been here in a while, have you?”

“I’m super busy getting everything ready before my military service. I wanted to see Liam and everyone else while I’m here, but I’m not sure I’ll be able to make time.”

He laughed somewhat forlornly. Ciel saw a touch of loneliness in his eyes. It was only a little bit—just enough for his sister to be able to pick up on it.

“Yeah,” she replied, “Liam will be leaving for Augur soon to serve as magistrate there. We’re all busy getting ready here too.”

House Banfield was in such a rush of activity that even Ciel was feeling it.

Kurt’s face on the screen looked confused. *“This is just so unbelievable. It is like Liam, though.”*

“Sir Claus was only just appointed head knight, but he’ll be going with him.”

“Right. He beat Lady Christiana out for that role. I’d like to meet him one day, but I don’t think that’s happening anytime soon.”

Ciel’s heart hurt to see her brother looking so forlorn.

I didn’t want to tell him this, but…

She didn’t want Kurt to see Liam—but it wasn’t just Liam. She felt the same way about Eila, who looked at Kurt with indecent eyes, and the unreliable Wallace as well. They may have all been irreplaceable friends to Kurt, but to Ciel they were people that he was better off cutting ties with. Still, when she saw him looking so sad, she couldn’t help telling him.

“The count’s going in for his last day of work tomorrow, but I heard he’ll be done by noon and then he’s returning to the hotel. He should have time in the afternoon.”

Kurt smiled bashfully. *“Thanks, Ciel. I think I’ll be able to make some time tomorrow afternoon too.”*

Seeing her brother look so happy, Ciel thought to herself, *It’s for the best. I didn’t want him seeing Liam, but as long as they’re only meeting as friends, it’s fine. If he’s meeting him as a* man*, it’s fine…*

***

While I was making my preparations to head off to Augur, I went in for my last day of work to hand off my tasks to the people who would be taking over for me.

As I processed the fact that I’d be saying goodbye to this workplace, Randy, who had naturally learned of my appointment as magistrate, came over. He was smirking, as were the lackeys he had in tow.

“I hear you’re transferring to Planet Augur,” he said, bringing his face close to mine. “Congratulations, Liam. Just sit tight, cowering in fear of the Autocracy, and wait for your mission to come to an end.”

I was to spend three years on Augur, and in that time my noble training would be completed. During that period, I was to get Augur into a state where the Empire could take charge of it and establish a military base there to support the war efforts.

To Randy, it must have seemed like a demotion, but to me leaving this place and its meaningless busywork—and getting to play evil magistrate—was a reward.

“Are *you* actually the one scared of the Autocracy? What are you, a coward?” I needled him.

“...Even the elites of the Imperial Army have trouble against the Autocracy. Don’t think you’d escape a fight with them unscathed, however strong you might be.” Randy walked away immediately, a frown on his face.

“Guy’s got no tolerance for provocation,” I said. “He’s going to live a tough life.”

I grinned, expressing my mock concern for Randy’s future, and looked to the seat beside mine. Marion had skipped work again today.

***

After successfully handing over my work, I left for home just before noon. I climbed into the car that waited for me and looked out the window.

“Won’t be seeing this view for a while.”

I gazed out at the scenery for a while before commanding the driver, “Stop.”

The driver pulled over and opened the door for me. As I got out, I told him to go back without me, and then I approached the individual I’d spotted from the window. All the people in suits were turning to look at the woman who stood out from the crowd.

She must have heard my footsteps as I drew closer, because the woman turned around and gave me a shy smile.

“Long time no see, Lillie,” I said.

“Yeah…” the woman said bashfully, averting her gaze from me.

I was pleased to see she hadn’t changed at all from when we’d first met. I’d been worried that I might reunite with her to find her stained by the big city’s sophistication.

“What are you doing in a place like this?” I asked.

It was all office workers in suits around here. Everyone was either a bureaucrat or someone who worked in support of those bureaucrats. Lillie stood out among them just walking around in a white dress. This didn’t bother me, of course.



Lillie scratched her cheek, looking awkward. “Nothing really.”

It wasn’t an answer, but I was just happy to reunite with her.

“Things were a little hectic the last time I saw you. If you’ve got time, do you want to get something to eat?”

“You don’t mind?”

“I’d be thrilled to spend time with you.”

I smiled instinctively, and Lillie seemed happy as well. I’d picked Lillie up when we’d first met, and her innocent reactions never failed to comfort me. All the other women around me were constantly betraying my expectations, so spending time with Lillie was a balm on my heart.

We’d begun walking together when someone I knew called my name.

“Huh? That you, Liam?”

“Huh?” I turned around and saw Marion in a suit with the jacket unbuttoned. He was waving at me in an awfully familiar way. Did he think we were equals or something?

“Treat your betters with a little respect, will you?” I said nastily.

Marion just smiled fearlessly and looked from me to Lillie. “You’re cute. I think you and I could have a lot more fun than you would with him.”

Now I was getting pissed. Marion reached out for Lillie’s arm, and just when I was thinking it was awfully gutsy of him to be doing this right in front of me, there was a *whap!* and Lillie slapped his hand away.

For a moment Marion looked surprised, before swiftly cracking a joke. “Turned down, eh? She must really love you, Lord Liam.”

He turned to leave, but I stopped him. “*Now* you show respect?”

Marion turned back around, looking awfully smug. “I was just teasing. Don’t be mad, *Lord* Liam.”

As Marion left, I turned back to Lillie, surprised to witness an expression I’d never seen on her before. She was glaring hatefully at Marion. Stunned to learn Lillie’s face could express such anger, I simultaneously wondered just what she had against Marion. Had

they met before? For his part, Marion had acted as if he didn't know her. I thought maybe Lillie was aware of him, but not the other way around, though it seemed neither was the case.

"There's something suspicious about him," she said.

I sighed. "I agree. Now, let's get something to eat."

As I responded, Lillie seemed to realize the hostile look on her face and gasped, hiding her expression with her hands and flushing red up to her ears.

"D-did you see that just now?"

I thought it was funny how embarrassed she got after glaring so hard at Marion.

"I didn't expect to see a look like that on your face. You don't like his type, do you?"

Lillie peered at me through the gaps in her fingers, concern in her eyes. "He just gave me a really bad feeling. How do you know him?"

"We work together. He seems to think we're friends, though."

"You're coworkers?" Lillie said. Her tone sounded sulky to me, for some reason. "He's hiding something," she warned me. "I can tell."

"Something, eh?" I was curious what Lillie had sensed about Marion. "Well, let's just worry about lunch for now."

Just what had that all been about?

***

That night...

"Lord Liam went out with that blue-haired girl again."

"Don't you think we should investigate her? She should join our family if possible."

"We could get on it right away, if we only knew who in the world she is."

When she entered the hotel's lobby, Ciel heard this conversation taking place between some of House Banfield's vassals. The blue-haired girl who had spent time with Liam once in the past had appeared once more. Ciel listened dumbfounded as

the vassals discussed welcoming the mysterious girl into the family. After all, Ciel knew exactly who the girl was, and she was also the last person who would have wanted to hear this news.

The vassals walked off, still discussing the girl.

“But we’re not supposed to investigate, right?”

“I wonder who that order came from.”

“Maybe somebody decided it’s best for the truth to remain unknown.”

It was ironic that the last comment, said jokingly, was probably closest to the truth. Ciel was the only person present who understood that.

When the vassals were gone, Ciel cradled her head, tears in her eyes. She couldn’t help thinking that her own actions had steered her brother down the wrong path.

“Why did you go to see him as a *girl*, Brother?!”

Fortunately, by the time Ciel exclaimed this aloud, no one remained nearby. It was good no one had overheard the incredible truth expressed in her outburst. It *was* good, right?

Chapter 9:
Betrayal

THE PLANET AUGUR was close to the Empire's border with the Autocracy. Of course, that was "close" in terms of intergalactic nations, so you'd still need to use a long-distance warp device to get there. With one of those devices, however, Augur wasn't far from the front lines.

No one normally paid any attention to the planet, but its value had shot up now that the Empire was at war with the Autocracy. From the start it would have been the perfect place to establish a base to support the front lines in the war effort. The only reason one hadn't already been built there was the baron who ruled the planet.

On the bridge of the Argos, a superdreadnought I'd brought with me from House Banfield's domain, I stared down at Augur, which was projected onto the screen that made up the floor. It wasn't at all unpleasant to look down at the beautiful, faintly purple planet from space.

"The Empire must be seriously short-staffed to send me as a magistrate," I said.

This was a job for a serious, straitlaced type, but they'd chosen an evil lord like me instead.

As I grinned down at Augur, Wallace stood beside me, arms folded as though he had complaints about the situation. I'd forced him to come along, since he seemed to think he could finish up his noble training without actually doing any meaningful work. From his point of view, of course, I'd dragged him from a safe job on the Capital Planet to the front lines of the war. To make a comparison, it was as though I'd transferred him from the main office to a remote branch in a place with a lot of problems.

"You should have just turned down the job!" he spat. "I don't care if it was Cleo and the prime minister asking; you should still have enough authority to be able to say no."

"It's just as you say. I did have the option of turning them down."

"Then…"

“But why would I? I was bored on the Capital Planet. Let’s see how Calvin handles things from up close.”

“*That’s* why you came?!”

I shook my head. “You’re as thick-headed as always, aren’t you? I was told to construct a base in the rear, not to fight in the war.”

“Huh? Then…”

“If something happens, we can just run away.”

I wasn’t coming here to fight; just to build a base.

“Lord Magistrate, we have communication from the dispatched fleet,” one of the bridge operators informed me.

“Put it through.”

When the Empire sent a noble to serve as a magistrate, they also dispatched a fleet from the Imperial Army to accompany that noble. The commander of this fleet was a major general who appeared to be in his mid-twenties, though it was difficult to guess people’s age in this universe.

A hologram of the young major general was projected in front of us. It was so realistic, it seemed the man himself was really standing there before us. His voice even seemed to come from his mouth.

“Lord Magistrate, all three thousand ships of the dispatched fleet have arrived in Planet Augur’s vicinity.”

The major general looked nervous as he made his report, but I replied to him in a perfectly relaxed tone.

“Keep your guard up until the transport fleet arrives,” I ordered him without even meeting the major general’s eyes.

He saluted sharply. “Understood, sir.”

The call ended and the major general disappeared from the bridge. Having observed the exchange, Wallace spoke as though he pitied the man.

“Poor guy. He wouldn’t have to worry if you weren’t the magistrate.”

Normally, in a situation like this the commander of the dispatched fleet would be higher ranked than the magistrate, since most magistrates were simple bureaucrats with no military

experience. Even if they were a noble, unless the magistrate was from a powerful family, the dispatched fleet commander would just tell them “don’t get in our way” and that would be that. This wasn’t the case with me, however.

“I may have left the military, but I retired as a general in the Imperial Army. Plus, I’m a future duke. It’s not like the guy can talk down to me.”

Wallace shook his head. Apparently, that wasn’t what he’d meant. He looked down from the bridge at the vast fleet that surrounded House Banfield’s flagship, the Argos.

“The major general’s just shaken up by the thirty thousand ships you brought with you. You didn’t even need his fleet to come.”

Just because we were so close to the battlefield, I’d brought my own fleet of thirty thousand ships with me. I thought it was better to have them on hand in case of an emergency. I’d brought the Avid too. Still, there was a reason I’d wanted the dispatched fleet to come along despite all my preparations.

“Now I have a great number of ships to give random tasks to, since my fleet has work of its own to do.”

“Exterminating all nearby space pirates, right…? Do you really have to do that in territory that’s directly controlled by the Empire now?”

“Of course I do.”

As a representative of the Empire, a magistrate ruled over an area under direct imperial control. Once their term was up someone else inevitably took over, so most magistrates didn’t do much more than warm the seat. As long as nothing catastrophic happened while they were in office, they’d have done a fine job, so they didn’t bother dealing with any local pirate problems. I’d also heard that dispatched fleets tended to resist orders to do so, protesting, “Don’t give us busywork like that!” In other words, neither magistrates nor dispatched fleets typically accomplished much of anything at their posts.

This fleet that had been sent along with me was of decent quality, but it couldn’t compare to House Banfield’s fleet in either skill or equipment. I couldn’t let them handle any pirates.

“Space pirates are my wallet,” I said. “I feel like I’ve found a piggy bank every time I uncover one of their hidden fortresses.”

They also served as resources for me. The transport fleet was loaded up with resources with which to build the new base, but if I could procure more on site, there was no reason not to.

Wallace looked at me and sighed. “I see you’re as hardworking as ever. You’re probably just about the only person in the Empire who’d seriously fulfill his obligations as a magistrate.”

That was just how unimportant the role was. Still, it was a job I was happy to embrace, so it was only natural that I’d take it seriously. I was well on my way to playing the evil magistrate! I just had to take care of anything that would get in my way first.

“Anyway, that can come later. We’ve got something to deal with on Augur first.” I transmitted my orders to the fleet before me. “Begin the operation as planned. Capture the ruler of Planet Augur and bring him to me. If there’s resistance, you can eliminate everyone but the baron himself.”

The moment my orders had been given, things started moving on the bridge, and House Banfield’s waiting ships began to descend into the planet’s atmosphere.

***

Two days after the operation commenced, the baron who ruled Planet Augur was brought on board the Argos, which was standing by in space. The plump man was old enough to appear to be in his sixties, and he trembled before me with his arms bound.

Seated in my chair, I sighed as I paged through the detailed documents the strike team had provided me with on Planet Augur. “You’ve got some nasty hobbies.”

According to my investigators, the baron’s citizens were forced to live like prehistoric people. To me, their civilization was akin to something out of the Middle Ages, but to the people of this universe that level was considered prehistoric.

“B-but I haven’t broken any laws!” the baron said desperately. “I just forbade new immigrants from using education

capsules!”

I rose from my seat, disgusted with him.

“Y-Your Lordship, please—bffh!”

I kicked the baron in the chin, sending him flying. “You make excuses to me, when I’m the one who has to clean up your mess?”

The baron had forced the people in his domain to live in a prehistoric society. So many generations had passed in this state that the people of Augur didn’t even know there were other people living out in space. And that wasn’t the most disgusting part.

“Did you have fun playing god?”

The baron had been making his people worship him as a god. As someone who had actually received help from the likes of the Guide, this disgusted me.

I stomped on the baron again and again. “Well? Did you? Answer me!”

“Please forgive me! Please forgive me! I was just having a little fun!”

It was ludicrous that he would even say that, and yet this was just what Empire nobles were like. They were all complete garbage—me included.

The baron had lost consciousness, so I turned to the knights beside me. “Take him away.”

“Yes, sir.”

One of the knights was a woman with glasses and long, glossy black hair. Her light-blue eyes were a bit sharp, and she gave off the cold impression of a woman who cleanly and efficiently completed the tasks she received. She wore a black knight’s uniform with a purple cape over one shoulder, which was the uniform of House Banfield’s Royal Guard—a unit that had just been established that specialized in guarding and escort. This woman with glasses was the commander of the Royal Guard, Ethel Sera Granger.

She had one of her subordinates take the baron away, then asked me, “Permission to speak, my lord?”

“Go ahead.”

“Thank you. I see no reason to leave such a nefarious man alive, sir.”

She was asking why I didn’t just kill him, so I explained to her that I was only leaving him alive so I could make use of him.

“He’ll be a tool for me, to help explain my position to the people of Augur.”

At that, Ethel smiled as though absolutely thrilled. Supposedly, she was highly loyal to me, so I hoped it was just my imagination that I was getting some “Tia and Marie” vibes from her.

“I apologize for the impertinent remark.”

“Anyway, the situation on Augur’s more important. He wasn’t just keeping their level of civilization low; he was exploiting them too. We won’t be able to procure any labor from them under these conditions.”

Not content with merely limiting their civilization level of advancement, the baron had also ruled them tyrannically, causing them no end of undue suffering. I was all for tormenting the citizenry, but as the guy who had to clean up after him now, he’d given me a lot to complain about. I wanted to enjoy my stay here playing the evil magistrate, but I didn’t even have time for that.

Ethel displayed the data on Planet Augur on holograms around us. “The situation is rather dire. It’ll be quite a bit of work bringing them up to the imperial standard.”

I looked over the data and said, “Don’t worry. It’s not my first or even second time improving a domain of this level. Get Wallace,” I commanded her.

“Y-yes, sir.”

Ethel seemed somewhat bewildered by my command to summon a good-for-nothing like Wallace, but since he was here, I was going to make use of him. The only thing Wallace was good at was planning parties, but I still wanted him to actually earn his allowance every once in a while.

***

Wallace's cheeks twitched as he looked over the data on Planet Augur.

"We're really going to build a military base here? The population's less than a hundred million and the people are all destitute."

Augur was in a terrible state due to the baron's less than ideal governance, but the planet's strategic value had soared thanks to the war with the Autocracy. Even with the hand we'd been dealt here, we had to fulfill the mission we'd been sent to do. It was a big responsibility, but there was no need for me to go down to the surface and bust my ass personally. That's what I'd brought Wallace for!

"Don't worry, you'll have all the help you need."

"That means you're going to give me an impossible job, right?! I don't care how much help I get, it's not happening!"

Wallace was making a fuss, so I gave him some hope to shut him up.

"You just have to hold out until some additional personnel get here. You can do that, right?"

Wallace cocked his head. "Is someone else being sent here?"

"Yep, and they'll be here soon."

***

Liam had been sent abruptly to a planet on the Empire's border, and since he had left in a hurry before even completing his noble training, Rosetta—who had been left behind on the Capital Planet—was rather suspicious of the circumstances surrounding his appointment. Since Liam had accepted the job and left in high spirits, however, she didn't make a fuss about it.

Now, however, Cleo was without the leader of his faction. Now that Liam was gone, people who had been behaving themselves during Calvin's absence were starting to make moves. Rosetta's senior coworker was one of them.

This coworker sat down on the edge of Rosetta's desk while Rosetta was working and said, "I heard about your fiancé. Sent off

to the sticks, wasn't he? I wonder just how badly he must have screwed up."

Being sent to the remote reaches of the Empire was like a cruel punishment to the officials who worked on the Capital Planet. No noble would accept such a job without being guaranteed a certain level of authority where they were being sent, and a promise that they would be able to return to the Capital Planet afterward. Being sent to the border was viewed the same as a demotion.

"He was given an important mission to support Prince Calvin," Rosetta replied. "Are you suggesting such a thing is a demotion?" *He's being sent to clean up after your leader*, she left unsaid.

Her coworker's face turned scarlet before Rosetta's eyes. "Is that all you have to say? You're very bold, considering you have no fiancé around to protect you right now. Will you not understand your place until you get hurt?"

Rosetta frowned. She couldn't believe her coworker would be so bold just because Liam was no longer on the Capital Planet. "Are you threatening me? Are you prepared to follow through with that threat?"

"You brat..."

Just when her coworker lost her patience with Rosetta and raised her hand to strike her, one of the knights who served as the building's security called out to Rosetta.

"Lady Rosetta, you have a visitor."

"I do?" She found it strange that someone would come to her workplace to see her, but rose from her seat to meet her visitor regardless. Ignoring her coworker, she left her work area.

Waiting outside for her was Marion, who lifted a hand and gave her a friendly smile. "Hey there."

"You're Mr....Marion? You worked with Darling, right?"

"That's right. I visited because I wanted to talk to you about Lord Liam."

"Really? Let's use a reception room, then."

Rosetta took Marion to a reception room that wasn't usually used. They sat down across from each other with a low table

between them.

“What did you want to talk about, exactly?” Rosetta asked.

Marion gave her a bold smile and rose from the couch, leaning down over her. While she was bewildered by this sudden move, Marion touched her chin, lifting it up with his fingertips.

“He’s got such a beautiful fiancée, but Liam was still fooling around with another woman. I just can’t understand it.”

“He…he was?”

Marion couldn’t miss the sad expression that flitted across Rosetta’s face.

“I wouldn’t make you sad like he does. What do you say? Liam’s not on the Capital Planet right now, so why not have some fun with me?”

Rosetta had been caught off guard by Marion making a pass at her, but she quickly altered her attitude. Glaring, she told him, “I have no reason to do anything with you.”

“Even though Liam has fun with other women?”

“That’s no reason for me to betray him. I would never associate with someone like you who tries to take advantage of other people, anyway. If that’s all you wanted to say, please leave.”

Marion sighed and pulled back, understanding that he wasn’t going to be able to seduce Rosetta. “It’s tragic for a woman like you to be wasted on Liam. As for what I wanted to say, I’ll be returning to the domain of House Algren soon. I plan to stop by Augur on the way. Would you like me to give your fiancé a message when I do?”

If she wanted to talk to Liam, she could simply call him herself, and she could have anything she wanted delivered to him using House Banfield’s vassals. Marion couldn’t have come all the way here to see her just to say something like that.

“Why don’t you tell me what you really came here for? You wouldn’t visit my workplace just to tell me that.”

“You’re a bit slow, aren’t you? I came here to make a pass at you.”

Rosetta’s first reaction to Marion’s provocative smile was to blink in surprise. Then she turned her head away. “Quit joking.”

“Fine—we’ll say I’m joking. But this isn’t a joke: at this rate, Liam will lose his life.”

If he had something to say about Liam, then Rosetta couldn’t help but listen.

“What do you mean by that?”

Marion toyed with his bangs, playing dumb. “It’s just a possibility. I’ll tell you the rest if you agree to go on a date with me.”

With Marion having made yet another pass at her, Rosetta reached the end of her patience. “No, thank you. Goodbye.”

She stood and left the room. Marion shrugged, but there was a triumphant smile on his face, as though he believed Rosetta would be swayed sooner or later.

Out in the hallway, Rosetta hid in the shadows with her back to a wall. She knocked on the wall a few times, and a masked woman who worked for Kukuri appeared from her shadow.

“What can I do for you?” the woman asked politely.

“Can you investigate that person?” Rosetta requested.

But, because of Liam, the woman could not follow that order. “No, unfortunately. I beg your forgiveness, but Master Liam has commanded us to ignore Lord Marion.”

“He did?” Why would Liam command them not to investigate his coworker? Rosetta found this very strange.

“Yes. I would have subdued him just now for getting that close to you if not for Master Liam’s orders.”

After all, this woman served as Rosetta’s protection from the shadows, it being her job to keep Liam’s fiancée safe from any scoundrels who might cause her harm.

“If he bothers you, I could at least give him a warning,” Kukuri’s subordinate suggested.

He *did* bother her, but Rosetta thought for a moment and shook her head. “No. I don’t want to get in Darling’s way.”

“Very well.”

The woman vanished back into the shadows.

***

Alone in the reception room after Rosetta had left, Marion loosened his shirt around his neck.

“I don’t mind that I couldn’t seduce her, but it’s been a long time since I’ve been rejected quite so flatly.”

Being rejected by Rosetta had hurt his pride a bit. Even if he couldn’t succeed, he would at least have liked to see her entertain the offer a bit. Yet Rosetta hadn’t even thought about it.

“It’s cuter when they have second thoughts.”

With his androgynous good looks, Marion could pass as a popular idol. He was confident in his appearance and had a job that granted him a lofty social position besides. Rosetta’s rejection hurt all the more because he’d been successful with every other girl he’d pursued up until now.

“How frustrating. I guess I’ll just have to take it out on Liam.”

Marion grinned to himself, then schooled his expression as he left the room.

Chapter 10:
Miss Ethel of the Royal Guard

"THAT BARON was a piece of crap. Worse than third rate as a ruler, and a complete scumbag who didn't have any potential as a villain."

I was looking back through the data on the baron's policies as a ruler. There was a proper way of going about even tyranny. Rulers who only taxed heavily without doing anything else were just tacky, and a true villain—for instance, me—didn't even let their subjects know they were oppressed.

I'd recently raised taxes in my domain to punish my foolish citizens for their protests demanding I father a child, but they'd accepted the tax hike with glee, seriously thinking it would make their lives better. *Why don't you guys get mad?! Resist a little, would you?! I want you to suffer, so why are you happy about taxes increasing?!*

That incident had made me all the more aware of the importance of education. It could be a problem if your citizens were too smart, but they shouldn't be too ignorant either. It was no fun to do evil if your subjects didn't even realize they were being wronged.

Anyway, even *my* own subjects were only on that level, while the people of Augur were living as if in the Middle Ages. It was rough that the use of education capsules had been made illegal for them.

As he perused the data beside me, Wallace looked unmotivated. Even he could tell how awful things were here at a single glance.

"There's no way we're going to be able to get these people up to speed, Liam. There's not enough time to educate the entire populace."

I'd been planning on using the local people as workers to construct the military base, but we simply didn't have the time for that. Not to mention, at this stage in the war the Autocracy appeared to be causing the Empire a fair amount of trouble. We couldn't afford to move slowly here.

If I were Calvin, I could easily see myself leading the Autocracy's forces to this planet. I'd let my enemies dispose of my political opponent and act as if it were all an unfortunate result of the war. Wallace could picture the same thing and looked nervous about it.

"What are you going to do if the Autocracy shows up?"

"Crush 'em."

"Thanks for the reassuring words. You're always full of confidence, aren't you, Liam?"

He didn't seem to believe me. It was to be expected that people would think I'd drawn the short straw here. No one else would want to do a job like this, but I could see a path to victory.

My target wasn't Calvin, who was fighting on the front lines; it was all the people who were getting cocky back on the Capital Planet. I'd come to Augur in order to enjoy being an evil magistrate, but it was also to set the stage for some very important work to come later.

I was preparing for my future. If nothing were to come of it, that would be fine, but there was nothing wrong with being prepared.

"I've recruited some immigrants from House Banfield," I told Wallace. "Once they're all settled in, they'll handle the work."

Wallace was surprised to hear it, and it was no wonder. Augur wasn't my territory, as it now belonged directly to the Empire. Someone would be assigned to rule it eventually; I was just serving as an interim ruler in the meantime.

"But this planet's under direct imperial rule, Liam. You're not going to gain anything by sending your own citizens here. No matter how you build it up, it's just going to get assigned to another magistrate or noble."

Once it had successfully fought off the Autocracy, Augur would be too much of a pain for the Empire to want to manage itself. It would be handed over to an up-and-coming noble, or else sold off. Any time and effort I poured into it would just be wasted—or so it would seem on the surface. Making sure such effort *wasn't* a waste was what made a villain a villain.

"You don't have to worry about it," I told Wallace. "For now, all we need to do is construct a splendid military base for the

Empire's sake. We've got all the materials we need now, so we'll start with building a spaceport. Now, Wallace…" I planted a hand on his shoulder and smiled. "I think it's time for you to go down to the surface."

"Huh? Y-you're kidding, right, Liam?! I can direct things just fine from space!"

As Wallace threw a fit about going down to the surface, I snapped my fingers and the Royal Guard stepped forward to drag him off the bridge, one guard on either side of him.

As I watched him go, I commanded him, "You're going to construct some public works on the surface. You've done it before, so it should be easy for you. Don't worry; you'll be promoted to bureaucrat status once that's all done."

Of course, there was no point in an empty promotion like that for Wallace, since he would have his own territory at some point in the future. He knew that as well as I did.

Wallace was on the verge of tears. "Wait! I don't want to live like prehistoric people! If you don't at least guarantee me proper food and shelter, I won't be able to sleep at nigh—"

I thought he was blowing things out of proportion, speaking about Augur's society as if it were truly prehistoric, but that was just how it seemed in this universe.

Wallace was hauled away, and the bridge was once again quiet. I turned to the knight next to me and told him, "You'll be doing some work for me as well, Claus."

"Yes, sir," he said, showing no other reaction.

That simple response was great. Claus knew exactly what his role was without me having to explain it to him. It had been the right choice appointing him my head knight. He was a way better option than those other two talented idiots. Claus was plenty talented himself, but he didn't have the issues with personality that the other two did. He was perfect for the role of House Banfield's head knight.

Now, let's lay our trap on Planet Augur.

***

Ships loaded with emigrants from House Banfield, as well as equipment and building materials, descended to the planet from space. Watching them arrive was a group of royals who served as representatives of the people of Augur.

The royals representing the planet's various nations watched the ships with complex emotions, since they had been told that only their god possessed ships capable of traveling through space. Many of them wondered if it was servants of their god descending in those ships.

Standing beside a king with a splendid white mustache, a beautiful princess trembled with anxiety.

"Your Majesty, what is happening? We've never had so many divine servants arrive like this in ships before."

Thousands, then tens of thousands of people poured forth from the ships, and there seemed to be even more still coming. It was an unbelievable sight.

Just as bewildered, the king told his daughter, "I do not know either, but you are the current offering. You must fulfill your role no matter what happens."

The beautiful princess clutched at her dress anxiously when she heard the word "offering." She had been taught that as royalty, this was her duty. "I know," she answered firmly.

The baron had regularly demanded offerings from the planet's royal families. Not only did he take their beautiful princes and princesses, but even pressed them to give up valued treasures. The baron had taken great pleasure in destroying those objects right in front of them.

The royalty of Planet Augur had no choice but to accept this treatment, though the king and princess both knew the fate that awaited those sacrificed as offerings. They understood they would likely never see each other again. It was the same for the other assembled royals, and a sense of grim resolve hung over all of them.

Just then a particularly spectacular ship descended to the planet. A smaller vessel emerged from it and flew over to where the royals had gathered, and when it alighted its hatch opened. Tall armored knights stepped out from the vessel. They were just

the sort of people the royals would expect to see guarding their god.

The royals all prostrated themselves on the ground. Seeing this, the knights hesitated for a moment before asking their leader, “Sir Claus, what is this?”

“These are the representatives of the planet, are they not?”

“But why are they bowing to us?”

Unlike his subordinates, who were bewildered by the royals’ behavior, the knight called Claus remained composed as he explained the situation to his men.

“The former baron forced these people to worship him as a god. He restricted information and technology to control his people.”

The knights’ faces twisted in disgust as they muttered, “How disgusting.”

The royals were utterly confused by this exchange, which was nothing like those that had occurred between their visitors in the past.

“Please pardon my rudeness, but would you allow me to speak?” The mustachioed king spoke up on behalf of his group.

“You may,” Claus allowed. “Before that, however, I ask that you all stand. You do not need to behave in such a way toward us.”

A stir went through the royals at this. They had never been told such a thing before. They remained kneeling, unable to rise, so Claus spoke up again.

“Then let me make the most important announcement first. The baron you worshiped as a god has been relieved of his position. Starting today, this planet will be governed by Count Liam Sera Banfield, who will serve as magistrate.”

The royals only grew more nervous at being told their god had been relieved of his position. What would become of them? The baron had always told the royalty that they were only allowed to continuing living through his grace. Would their world now be destroyed? A ripple of anxiety went through them.

The mustached king raised his head and asked Claus, “Wh-what do you mean? Are you saying we’ve been abandoned by God?!”

Claus calmly replied, “To put it simply, someone of a higher rank than your god will be ruling over you now, until a more permanent ruler is installed.”

Once again, a murmur went through the royals. There was someone of higher rank than their god?! Claus cleared his throat, and the royals hastily fell silent. Once they were quiet again, he told them what Liam had sent him to say. “Lord Liam has a proposal. He wishes to speak with the planet’s representatives, so please accompany me to his mothership.”

So they were to be brought up into the heavens. Some royals accompanied Claus with great interest, while others went pale, fearing the worst.

***

“Don’t you think calling yourself a god is going a little too far?”

Even though I knew such situations occurred, it had seemed ridiculous when I ran across it in real life.

As I listened to Claus’s report after he returned from the planet, I stopped working on the documents before me and considered how to proceed.

“They believe I’m higher ranked than their previous god, and the immigrants are my divine servants? I like being respected, but I don’t want to be *worshiped*.”

Claus looked somewhat relieved at that. “I’ve heard rumors of such nobles before, but I never thought I would see one with my own eyes,” he said incredulously.

People shouldn’t play god—not even a villain like me.

“The former baron really was scum.”

Calling myself a god would be an insult to the Guide.

Claus described to me the state the royals of the surface were in. “The royals of Augur are having a hard time processing the situation. I think it will be difficult for some of them to understand.”

Well, of course it would be. What were you supposed to do when you were told the person you’d worshiped as a deity actually

wasn’t one? There were sure to be people who didn’t believe us.

The truth was cruel, but my plans didn’t allow for the existence of false gods.

“Forbid our immigrants from interacting with the locals for now. I don’t want any of them getting a taste for being treated as divine.”

I didn’t want any trouble starting between the two groups either, and Claus seemed to agree.

“Understood. And our aid for the locals?”

I’d been planning on giving the people of Augur considerable assistance. You might think that was somewhat contradictory, if I planned on playing the evil magistrate, but there was a reason for it. For my current goal to succeed, I had to win them over first with aid. Later I could play the evil magistrate all I liked, but I had to get the annoying stuff out of the way.

“We’ll proceed as planned and gather up the royalty of Augur. I wanted to abolish the royalty here, but for now it seems better not to change things too drastically.”

People wouldn’t be able to keep up if their whole way of life changed too dramatically. I’d have to take my time and change things slowly.

The former baron had really screwed things up for me. Restricting development on Augur had been pointless. If I was going to oppress people, I wanted their society to at least be civilized to a degree.

I had to make sure I enjoyed my time here as Augur’s evil magistrate.

***

In the party hall that had been prepared for them aboard the Argos, Augur’s royals were completely mystified. They were shocked to see that the world where they lived—the planet—was a sphere, and that it was always dark in the realm outside that planet. Most of all, they were shocked by the spaceship they were currently inside.

At first, none of them believed this vessel could be three thousand meters long. They couldn't imagine how something that immense could "float."

The king with the white mustache was dizzied by all he'd seen, and when Liam spoke to him in a friendly tone he began to sweat with anxiety.

"It's probably pointless to tell you not to worry," Liam said, "but I'll just make it clear to start that I have no intention of harming you. I'll be sure to see you back to the surface as well, too, so don't worry about that."

"W-we deeply appreciate your mercy, my lord."

The king couldn't stop shaking. Part of it was fear, of course, but it was also because the man before him—Liam—seemed so much more divine than the former ruler who had called himself a god.

The king recalled previous dealings he'd had with the baron. *That man seemed so much…smaller than Lord Liam. And the servants at this lord's side are all so kind-hearted.*

The baron's vassals had looked down upon the planet's royalty, even on occasion dressing them in ridiculous clothes to make them into laughingstocks. However, for the moment, no one here looked down on them at all. In fact, the people the royals were compelled to bow their heads to in the past now seemed to treat *them* with respect.

Liam took a sip from the glass in his hand. The royals all followed suit. The alcohol they'd been served tasted better than anything they'd ever drunk before. As they enjoyed themselves, Liam spoke again.

"Now, to explain things in a way that'll be easy for you to understand, my position is two ranks higher than that of the guy who was here before. I'll be governing your planet for now instead of him."

The royals could all accept that this man was higher ranked than their previous god.

"H-how do you plan to rule us?" the king with the white mustache asked on the group's behalf.

Liam chuckled. "I'll only be here for a short while, but I won't take anything from you. I'll only give."

“Give? Err, and what about taxes? And offerings?”

Liam smiled awkwardly at the royals, who had only ever been taken from before. “I don’t need any of that. Just take it easy for a while. But let’s see… For now, bring me someone young from your ranks, and I’ll give them an education.”

The king was slightly disappointed at those words. *So he’s the same. But I’m inclined to trust him more than the last man. In that case…*

The king glanced at the princess. She came to his side, and he introduced her to Liam. “This is my daughter. Though you may doubt me because I’m her father, she is the most beautiful woman in my country. You may do with her as you wish, Lord Liam.”

The princess curtsied. “I am yours, Lord Liam. Do with me as you will.”

Liam grimaced at their words, and the king fretted that he’d made some mistake. Then Liam finished his drink and said, “Don’t get the wrong idea. I meant only what I said. I’ll take her to give her an education, and then I’ll send her back home in a year. I’m not wanting for women.”

When they heard “I’m not wanting for women,” it wasn’t the royalty who reacted with surprise, but Liam’s own vassals. Their eyes went wide as they exclaimed in shock, but when Liam gave them a look, they all hastily averted their eyes.

The royals cocked their heads in confusion, but Liam acted as if nothing had happened and continued, “I just want to teach one of your young how vast the universe is. I won’t lay a hand on her, so don’t worry. If you have any questions, I’m happy to answer them for you.”

“Th-thank you very much.”

I don’t know if I should be happy to hear that he won’t be laying a hand on my daughter…

To the king with the white mustache, his daughter was the most precious girl in the world. He was of two minds about the fact that Liam hadn’t so much as given her a second glance.

“You don’t need to worship me as a god,” Liam declared to the royals. “I’m just the governor of this planet—a magistrate. Just go ahead and call me ‘Lord Magistrate.’”

The assembled royals, who had been tormented by a baron who called himself a god, all wept in happiness at the way in which Liam behaved.

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After the party with the local royals, Liam headed to a breakroom. Guarding him was Ethel, head of his Royal Guard, and waiting inside the room was one of his maid robots to serve him. Meanwhile, within Liam's shadow hid one of Kukuri's subordinates, with more concealed nearby. Liam on his own was strong enough to defeat a Swordmaster, but the party seemed to have exhausted him.

He sat down on a couch to relax, noting, "This planet really is trouble." He seemed to truly despise the idea of the locals worshiping him as a god.

"What shall we do with the former baron, Lord Liam?" Ethel asked him.

He'd been planning to embarrass the man somehow to prove to the planet's citizens that he wasn't a god, but Liam had changed his mind after meeting the royalty today.

"Some of them really seem to believe that piece of crap is a god. Instead of potentially antagonizing them by embarrassing him, it'd be better if he just quietly disappeared."

Ethel was deeply moved by Liam's consideration of the local people. "You're being very kind to them, considering they will only be your subjects for a short time. They are blessed."

These words had come from the heart, a product of her deep respect for Liam, but he didn't take her praise that way.

"Trying to flatter me?"

"No... I truly feel that way."

"Right. Oh, I almost forgot..." Before the conversation could taper off, Liam ordered Ethel, "Since I have no more use for him anymore, dispose of the former baron."

Ethel shuddered at the complete lack of emotion in his voice. "Very well."

Immediately after treating his subjects with respect, he shows no mercy whatsoever to an enemy. Ahh, Lord Liam truly is the embodiment of the ideal noble!

In addition to skill, loyalty was required to serve in the Royal Guard. They were the very best of the knight corps to which people like Tia and Marie belonged, and an *excess* of loyalty was standard among them.

Chapter 11:
A Black Nemain

IT WAS HALF A YEAR after my appointment as magistrate to Planet Augur.

On the planet's surface, Wallace assiduously completed public works projects one after another with the help of the immigrants from House Banfield's domain. I'd entrusted all of the annoying work, like adjusting the civilization of the locals, to him. That left me with one problem, however.

"I'm bored," I sighed in my office after finishing all my work as magistrate for the day.

A reply to my complaint came from Amagi, who was standing by at my side.

"That is good. It is proof of the excellence of your vassals, Master."

"Excellence, eh? Yeah, I guess so."

My office was on my flagship, the Argos. There was a government building on the surface, now with an office reserved for the magistrate, but I was more comfortable with the facilities I had on the Argos. I didn't need to go all the way down to the surface when I could just as easily do my work from my ship, but that was the problem.

If I could simply do my work on the Argos, my subordinates wouldn't ever give me a chance to go down to the surface. If I made any attempt to do so, I had about a thousand people clamoring to accompany me as guards and support staff. How was I supposed to play evil magistrate like that?

While I was lost in thought, Amagi alerted me to an incoming message.

"Master, you have a call from House Banfield's fleet."

"Connect them."

The upper body of a young officer was projected above my large desk.

"Lord Liam, we've discovered a suspicious fleet in Augur's vicinity. According to our reconnaissance fleet, there's very likely a space pirate

base somewhere near here. They're requesting reinforcements from the main fleet."

I rose from my seat. "That sounds like the perfect way to kill time. Get the Avid ready for deployment immediately," I ordered the soldier, who frowned awkwardly.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"Sir Claus has forbidden your deployment, Lord Liam. At present, we are under Sir Claus's command, and as you are acting as a magistrate on behalf of the Empire—"

Claus was now the commander of House Banfield's fleet, whereas I was nothing more than a magistrate in service to the Empire. Of course, this was only a technicality. If I really wanted to, I could take command of the fleet, but that would put its members in the position of disobeying their official commander, Claus.

"Connect me to Claus."

"Yes, sir!" the soldier said a little too enthusiastically. He patched me through to my head knight. Now Claus was displayed before me, looking as composed as always.

"What can I do for you, Lord Liam?"

"It's about the space pirate base. I'm going to deploy in the Avid."

"Lord Liam, as you currently serve as magistrate, you cannot leave Planet Augur's vicinity. Please leave this matter to us."

"But I want to go!" I told him. I wasn't so naive as to think he'd give in if I was forceful with him, though. Not only was Claus a talented guy, he also stated his objections bluntly.

"You are the head of House Banfield, Lord Liam. There are tasks that only you can carry out, and there's no reason for you to head out on unnecessary tasks like this. Please restrain yourself."

Against Claus's reasonable arguments, all I could muster was an emotional outburst. It would've worked on Tia and Marie, but Claus was far too strong an opponent.

"I have the final say! You guys have to do what I tell you, don't you?"

"Yes. I merely convey to you the consensus of House Banfield as a whole, Lord Liam."

“What?”

“After your disappearance when you were summoned, any number of your subjects were greatly concerned for your safety.”

“R-right.”

He was referring to the incident in which I’d fled Amagi and Brian’s nagging by going through a magic summoning circle. That had caused certain idiots to go on a rampage, throwing my domain into complete chaos. That was enough to lead even me to reflect on my actions somewhat.

“Losing you would deal a fatal blow to House Banfield, Lord Liam. We all became quite aware of that recently. I have been asked by multiple concerned parties to see that you sortie less often from now on.”

Apparently, it really *was* the consensus of House Banfield. I searched for the words that would convince Claus but couldn’t find them. In the end, he even brought Amagi into it.

“Miss Amagi has made that same request of me. She asked that as your head knight, I personally see to it that you refrain from going on sorties yourself.”

“Huh?!” I turned to Amagi, who bowed her head deeply to me.

“I apologize for going to the head knight without consulting you, Master. I am prepared to accept whatever punishment you deem fitting.”

Considering everything that had happened lately, I saw no means of forcing my way into the field this time.

“Fine… I won’t deploy.”

I sank back into my chair, staring up at the ceiling.

“I am grateful for your understanding. Please leave all miscellaneous tasks to us.”

The call ended and Claus’s image disappeared.

I sighed. “House Banfield’s army is too well-manned now. There’s no room for me there anymore.”

There was a very real possibility that I’d finish my role as magistrate without even having to do anything. I’d never imagined the people working for me would be so competent that it would become a problem for me.



Amagi stood before me, her back straight. “This is how things should be. There is no longer any need for you to act recklessly, Master. Please do not go into battle needlessly in the future.”

In the wake of the events Claus had mentioned, Amagi really didn’t want me fighting anymore. The chaos House Banfield had fallen into when I went missing had really freaked Brian out too. He’d been lecturing me a lot more than usual lately.

“Do you really think I’d lose?”

I was a selfish evil lord. I couldn’t just stay out of battle forever. While I was considering just how long I’d have to be good before I could go out and fight again, Amagi’s expression changed. She closed her eyes, her voice trembling slightly.

“I am worried about you, Master. Several inexplicable things have happened to you in the past. That is what concerns us.”

It was true that I’d gotten caught up in all sorts of strange incidents in the past, but I’d gotten through it all thanks to the Guide’s help. Still, I couldn’t stand seeing Amagi so anxious.

“I get it,” I said reluctantly.

“Thank you, Master.”

Amagi bowed, then left the room, probably off to bring me some tea.

I shook my head. “Guess I won’t be getting out of this just by telling her not to worry.”

As I racked my brain for some way to still enjoy myself playing the evil magistrate, I suddenly thought of Nitta, my coworker from my past life. He was someone you would call an otaku, always going on and on about his hobbies to me. Since I wasn’t very familiar with the stuff he talked about, most of it went in one ear and out the other. I did, however, remember something he’d told me once that had caught my interest.

“That’s right... A mask.”

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Having successfully prevented Liam from deploying, Claus sat expressionlessly on the bridge of the Argos. His stomach hurt.

Why does everyone force these impossible tasks on me?! I'm only head knight by chance, here!

He was terrified that he'd incurred Liam's wrath during their last conversation.

I had to say all that as his head knight, though! It is true that people come to me with their concerns about Lord Liam every day.

Everyone wanted Claus, as Liam's head knight, to tell him things they themselves couldn't say to his face. Frustratingly, these were all things said out of concern for Liam's safety and the good of House Banfield. Had these people only been acting out of self-interest, Claus could have simply ignored them.

I know someone *has to say it, but why does it have to be me?! I'm head knight in name only! All these expectations of me…they're so heavy.*

The burden of being head knight was far too weighty for him, yet he still faithfully tried to carry out his duties. That was Claus.

Everyone around him, of course, was shocked by what had just occurred. They had all assumed he'd fail to persuade Liam, and that their lord would be out there fighting in the Avid whether they liked it or not.

"He really stopped Lord Liam from deploying."

"I thought there was no way!"

"No wonder Lord Liam made Sir Claus head knight."

To the crew on the bridge and Claus's own subordinates, the sight of someone objecting to Liam—the absolute authority of House Banfield—was stunning. Their gazes gathered on Claus in respect, as if to say: *That's Lord Liam's head knight, all right.*

Still on duty, Claus maintained his neutral expression, only voicing his complaints on the inside.

Augh! Can't someone else get promoted and take over as head knight for me?

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Three months later…

“This is our resupply?”

“Incredible, as always. How many thousands of ships is that?”

“Just goes to show how serious House Banfield is. A lot of escort ships with ’em too.”

The spaceport up above Planet Augur was a military base that was currently still under construction. Parts of it remained unfinished, so it would be some time yet before it could fulfill its function, but it made do as a spaceport in the meantime.

The people who worked there were busy processing the arrival of a transport fleet from House Banfield. A few people were staring in awe at the thousands of transport vessels coming in as I passed by them dressed in work clothes. I was drifting through the zero gravity corridors on my way to a hangar where one of the vessels had just landed.

“No one’s noticing.”

I grinned as I continued heading for my destination. When I reached the hangar, I threw off the hat I’d been wearing. The work clothes disappeared, replaced by my usual clothes.

Waiting for me there was my adjutant Eulisia in her military uniform. She watched the work occurring nervously and frowned when she saw me.

“You don’t look happy,” I teased, and Eulisia’s cheeks twitched.

“Anyone would be upset if you told them to get a ship and mobile knight ready in secret. It wasn’t easy evading the eyes of your head knight, you know.”

I’d asked Eulisia to bring a mobile knight and ship for my personal use, and she’d sneaked them into this transport fleet. Since it was a secret to even my allies, it must have been quite difficult for her to arrange.

Turning my head away from the pouting Eulisia, I eyed the box-shaped transport vessel in front of us.

“Remove the camouflage,” I ordered, and Eulisia huffily manipulated her tablet.

“It’s a small, six-hundred-meter-class ship,” she explained, “but I stripped it of unnecessary embellishments and improved all the base specs.”

The illusion of the ship's boxlike shape faded, revealing a differently shaped black vessel instead. It was a long, narrow craft with engine units on both sides in the back. A pair of wings spread out from those engine units.

"Wings deploy from the back for flight in atmosphere. Just as you asked, it will perform well in gravity, in water, wherever you want. The developers are calling it Schwarzvogel."

What I was after was the perfect mothership. Rather than overwhelming specs, what I wanted was a single ship adaptable to any mission I gave it. My requests had been entirely performance related, so it had only the minimum in terms of recreational facilities on board, making it a ship that was far removed from most nobles' tastes. It was exactly what I'd ordered, though.

"I like it. And the most important part?"

"I brought a real firecracker, just like you asked."

Eulisia had been sulking, but her mood seemed to improve a bit as she tapped at her tablet some more. She must really have been proud of the mobile knight she'd brought. Her voice grew louder and her gestures more animated as she described it.

"It's a prototype we're developing for the improvement of the Nemain series, but I also added all the upgrades you requested, Lord Liam."

The hatch of the Schwarzvogel's special mobile knight compartment opened, and I spotted my Nemain stored on board. Other than the red visor covering its face area, it didn't look much different from a normal Nemain craft. I could tell that some minor details were different, but anyone familiar with Nemains would notice one unique detail right away, and that was the pair of blades on either side of its head.

"Two horns, eh? I like it."

That wasn't the only unique thing either. There was also the backpack, which was equipped with four rocket boosters that could be operated individually, giving the clear impression that this mech focused on speed. The wings attached to the backpack would expand into six when fully opened.

I was slightly disappointed, though, that from appearances alone the backpack was the only feature that looked radically

different from a normal Nemain.

"Probably accelerates pretty fast," I commented, and Eulisia seemed to guess what I was trying to say. In turn, I assumed from her expression that the craft's body had been pretty souped up.

"It may look the same as other Nemains, but the basic frame has been completely changed. With the upgrades I've made from the data we've collected from House Banfield, and the right pilot, this unit could easily beat a special craft."

"Wait... If the frame is altered, then isn't it an entirely different model at this point?"

It wasn't really a Nemain anymore if the basic frame was different, was it? That made it less of a redesign and more of a new project, I figured. Only in outer appearance did it resemble a Nemain.

Eulisia looked away, as though I'd made a good point. "It was the fastest way to solve the problems our team encountered during development. The decision wasn't easy for them."

I wasn't interested in her excuses, so I kicked off from the ground and floated toward the ship. "I'll give it a test run personally."

Eulisia followed. "Men really like new mobile knights, don't they? Don't you already have that Avid custom craft, Lord Liam?"

The Avid was like my partner, it was true, but wanting to try out all sorts of different craft *was* just a guy thing. In my past life, rich guys usually owned a variety of cars. What was wrong with me having a variety of personal mobile knights?

"It's a man's dream," I acknowledged.

As we approached the cockpit the Nemain reacted to my biological data and opened its hatch. I grabbed the hatch and took Eulisia's hand, pulling her over.

"This thing have a name yet?" I asked her excitedly.

Eulisia blushed and looked away. What was she getting so embarrassed about?

"The dev team has been calling it the Graf Nemain. Shall I change it?"

I climbed into the cockpit and sat down in the seat, enjoying the comfortable cushioning and the new cockpit smell—well, as

much as I could considering Eulisia's perfume, at least. I frowned, feeling as if she was getting in the way of my enjoyment, but then Eulisia tossed me another thing I'd ordered. This was the final item.

"I also made you a creepy mask."

I caught the device, a gray mask that covered my eyes. When I put it on, it tightened against my face so it wouldn't slip. In addition to hiding my face, it also fed me information directly from the Graf Nemain through a link with the mobile knight. It fulfilled the exact function I'd requested, but apparently Eulisia considered it "creepy."

"You don't understand a man's heart at all."

"Speak for yourself. It's *your* heart, right?"

As I gripped the control sticks, getting a feel for them, Eulisia said, "More importantly, you've received my reports about the young lady from House Exner, haven't you? Why haven't you done anything about that yet?"

I had heard about Ciel voicing her opinions about Rosetta's security force to Eulisia, who was in charge of setting that up. Eulisia had reported as much to me herself. She probably wondered if I wasn't even reading them or something.

"I believe I told you not to make a big deal of it and just leave her alone, didn't I?"

Eulisia wasn't convinced. "She's going too far." She brought her face closer to mine. "Are you listening?"

I wanted to start calibrating the Graf Nemain, but Eulisia was annoying me with an unrelated matter. More than anything right now I just wanted to pilot this thing, feeling like a kid anxious to take a new toy out of its box and play with it. Because of that, I guess I turned a little cold with her.

"Just leave her alone. You can go now. Go back to babysitting Rosetta on the Capital Planet."

I could almost see Eulisia's hair stand on end when I told her to leave. Tears filled her eyes, and she bit her lower lip.

"I fulfilled all your impossible requests, and when you're done with me you just tell me to go home?! I *am* supposed to be your concubine, you know! You could show me a little appreciation, don't you think?!"

Eulisia wasn't diffident like Rosetta. She was upfront with her demands for gratitude. She used to be so competent; what had happened?

I brought my face up to Eulisia's with the mask still on, and when our noses were almost close enough to touch, she leaped back, red up to her ears.

"Huh?" she cried. "Hold on a second!"

"You did good. I'll give you a reward."

When I mentioned a reward, Eulisia fidgeted, her thighs rubbing together. "In a place like this? You're so bold, Lord Liam... Not that I'm against it, exactly... Huh?"

I shoved Eulisia, and she spun out of the cockpit. "I'll transfer it to your account later."

As she revolved in midair, I caught a glimpse of something red beneath the skirt of her military uniform. "Flashy as always."

"If you don't like it, then don't look!" Eulisia yelped, holding down her skirt.

"Then don't show me. Come on, get back here."

I closed the hatch and caught Eulisia gently with the Graf Nemain's arm. She clung to its fingers, glaring at me once she'd stopped spinning. Sticking out her tongue out at me, she sped to the back of the hangar.

"Well, she's as personally disappointing as ever, but she *is* good at her work."

Once I was piloting it, the Graf Nemain indeed felt like a firecracker.

"Reminds me of the first time I got in the Avid," I mused. "Now, will you fulfill my expectations?"

I couldn't wait for the Graf Nemain's test flight.

***

Eulisia fumed as she left the Schwarzvogel's hangar, an endless stream of complaints about Liam spilling from her lips.

"This is what I get for finishing his request in such a short time? If I hadn't negotiated with the Third Weapons Factory, this

job would have taken years to complete! I really pushed myself to get it done!"

Without question, it was thanks to Eulisia that the Schwarzvogel and Graf Nemain had been created so quickly, yet Liam's words of gratitude had been next to nothing.

"It's not enough to just give me some bonus money. Shouldn't there be…you know, some other stuff?! Instead, he treats me like garbage! He may not believe it, but I used to have guys all over me, and they were all so sweet with me!"

All of the men in Eulisia's past had been kind to her, whereas Liam was anything but.

Eulisia was out of breath from complaining about Liam's treatment, her eyes still moist.

"But…it might not be all that bad to be treated this way."

Eulisia had gotten just a bit excited from Liam's roughness.

Chapter 12:
An Evil Magistrate

THE SPACE PIRATE GANG that had approached Planet Augur's vicinity numbered two hundred ships. Normally they operated elsewhere, but they were in the process of fleeing the conflict between the Empire and Autocracy.

A fleet of thirty House Banfield ships had encountered the pirates. There weren't many of them since they were only patrolling the area, and they had the misfortune of being discovered by the pirates, who had immediately launched an attack. They'd attacked the patrol fleet to loot them for some extra resources before heading to their new hunting ground.

"That's what you get for wandering around with thirty ships from a noble's private army!"

On the bridge of his ship, the colonel in command of the patrol fleet rallied his forces.

"The main force is on its way! Just hold out until reinforcements come!"

Even for the mighty House Banfield army, it wasn't easy to fight against such odds. Their forces were slowly being whittled away by the overwhelming number of enemy craft.

The colonel's ship rocked, pierced by a number of shots that overwhelmed its defensive shields. The bridge crew cried out, and the colonel ground his teeth.

We won't make it.

He was experienced enough to know they'd be destroyed before their reinforcements arrived. Still, he couldn't show weakness to his men. He told himself that it was a commander's duty to stay strong until the end.

"Don't worry about our remaining ammo or energy! Give them everything we've got!"

He was determined to go down swinging under the pirates' unrelenting attacks.

Then, the colonel heard…

"Not a bad situation. Perfect for my debut battle."

It was a communication from someone, but it wasn't directed at anyone in particular. It was more as though it had slipped through their comms. The voice was out of place in this situation too—it seemed excited for the fight despite the dire circumstances.

"Whose voice was that?" the colonel asked an operator, irritated.

"N-no idea. It displays as 'unknown,' b-but the signal registers as an ally," the operator replied, bewildered.

The colonel couldn't believe his ears. "How can it be an ally if it's unknown?! Hurry up and identify it!"

"Y-yes, sir!"

That was when a ship appeared before them. The vessel immediately engaged the space pirates, deploying a squad of mobile knights. The mobile knights were Nemains, but they weren't the right color for the Nemains in use by House Banfield. These were also of unknown affiliation, while registering as allies.

"The unknown ship has deployed mobile knights! Wh-what is this?!"

Before the operator could explain the situation, the colonel saw it for himself on the monitor.

"Black Nemains...!"

Equipped with boosters on their backs, the black Nemains charged into the pirate fleet, after which there was an explosion.

A pirate ship blew up; another one did the same. Then they heard the same voice coming through their communication system.

"A little overly precise, but not bad."

On the screen was one of the black Nemains, having just blown away a pirate ship's bridge. The colonel and his men held their breath at the sight of the black craft standing atop the burning pirate ship.

***

The Royal Guard rushed to sortie after the Graf Nemain had already deployed. Ethel was concerned about Liam, who had gone on ahead of them.

"We were supposed to sortie at the same time!"

It wasn't that the Royal Guard was late, but that Liam hadn't been able to restrain himself and had gone ahead without them.

As the Royal Guard in the hangar prepared to sortie, Ethel looked down at the faces of her subordinates on her monitor.

"Commander, should the craft that are ready head out ahead of time?"

"We can't just leave Lord Liam alone out there!"

"Platoons Three and Six are prepared to deploy!"

Her subordinates wanted to send out those platoons ready to deploy early. These were highly loyal knights, gathered to protect House Banfield—specifically, Liam—and Ethel agreed with their suggestion.

"Very well. Platoons Three and Six, deploy." After they'd done so, she addressed the rest of her subordinates. "Don't think of this operation as a mere whim of Lord Liam's." It had started with that, of course, but at this point it was an important operation for the Royal Guard as well.

Her subordinates focused up.

Relieved, she continued, "Those idiot knights have betrayed Lord Liam's trust and besmirched our names over and over."

"Those idiot knights" referred to Christiana and Marie, whose excessive devotion to Liam had caused him trouble many times in the past. They'd formerly led two main factions of House Banfield's knights, and no one had openly criticized their actions in the past, but not all House Banfield's knights had been happy about their behavior either.

"We need to win Lord Liam's trust and show him that he *can* rely on House Banfield's knights."

Ethel had endured bitter frustration with each of their past offenses. She'd left her home domain in order to obtain the qualifications to become an imperial knight, and she'd spent ample time away from her new home on long-term missions. Once, she had trusted Christiana as her subordinate, but she'd

become more and more frustrated with each of the knight's failures. At some point, her respect for the other knight had turned to hatred.

Those incompetents are only still around because of Lord Liam's kindness. I won't ever forgive them for what they've done.

When they'd gone past causing trouble for Liam and outright betrayed his trust, Ethel had even considered killing them. To her, Christiana and Marie were now both hateful enemies.

Those idiots disgraced the order of knights, and right at Lord Liam's side too. They shouldn't think there will always be a place for them in the knights.

She would chase them out of the ranks of knights and win back Liam's trust. That was Ethel's goal.

"Show Lord Liam what you can do! This is the very reason we exist!"

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The feel of the Graf Nemain wasn't too bad. It could keep up with piloting that was on the reckless side, and it was fun for me to pilot a mobile knight other than the Avid.

"Now, let's have a little fun, shall we?"

The Graf Nemain reached behind its back, drawing guns from holsters mounted at its waist. It held the guns in both hands, aiming them at the attacking space pirates. The heavy-looking black handguns were made to resemble revolvers, but the resemblance was purely aesthetic. The number of projectiles the guns could shoot, as well as their power, far surpassed the level of an ordinary handgun.

I pulled the control sticks and blew the heads off two pirate mobile knights coming at me from both sides. Then I turned and pulled the triggers again, shooting through the cockpit of another attacking enemy craft.

"These guns aren't bad either."

I wasn't familiar with the design process of the craft, but it had clearly been developed with a particular person in mind. That

much was obvious from the unit's weaponry. Not many people dual-wielded guns, after all.

I pointed the guns at my swarming enemies and kept pulling the triggers. Of course, I couldn't deal with all of them with just two handguns, so when one mobile knight came within range…

"If I just get in close…" I heard over my comm.

"You thought you could win?"

I gave the other craft a roundhouse kick and bisected its torso. The Graf Nemain's knees and heels sported blades that looked like mere decorations, but similarly bladelike lasers could be deployed from those four spots.

"Not a bad gimmick."

It was a very unique style to fight with two pistols and then switch to legwork at close range.

"Now, let's see what this baby can really do…"

I flew upward and accelerated. An enemy craft chased after me, but they couldn't keep up with the Graf Nemain's speed.

"I prefer doing the chasing when playing tag. Being chased isn't really my style."

I shook off the enemy craft and sped right into the midst of the pirates. Lasers lit up to intercept me, and as I wove through them, I considered how best to use my craft next.

"I don't think it could hold up if I used my Flash. In that case, I could try dual-wielding swords."

I stored the guns back in their holsters and opened up the craft's side skirts, exposing the handles of two laser blades. I pulled them out, the grips having finger guards that went over the mobile knight's hands. I extended the blades, flying through the battlefield with a high-powered laser blade in each fist.

"I should've asked Fuka what the trick to dual-wielding is… Well, I'll just experiment for now."

I hadn't tried dual-wielding much, since one blade tended to be all I needed. The only times I'd done so had more or less been for fun.

I approached a pirate ship and swung the pair of blades. The momentum lengthened the blades, and they sliced through the entire vessel. These things were frighteningly powerful.

“Do they use surplus power from the nuclear reactor? It’s impressive, but you couldn’t put these things in a mass-produced craft.”

I had no complaints about the craft’s capabilities, but it had ended up being a mobile knight that would choose its pilot. I’d heard something about this prototype being made into a mass-produced model, so were they going to have to downgrade it?

Pirate mobile knights whose mothership had been destroyed crowded around me.

“Your speed won’t get you anywhere now! You can’t run away if you’re surrounded!”

I couldn’t help smiling at the pirates’ simplistic way of thinking.

“Surrounded? You’re just in range of me now. You came over to me to be cut down?”

As soon as I was finished speaking, the Graf Nemain swung both its arms and took out five nearby enemy craft. My extended blades rippled like whips and cut through craft after craft. One tried to run, but a new Nemain swooped in and stomped on it, simultaneously shooting it with its rifle.

“I apologize for our tardiness, Lord Liam.”

“Hey, I told you that’s not right, didn’t I?”

Ethel was displayed on my cockpit monitor. I tapped on my mask a few times huffily and she turned red, realizing her mistake.

“My apologies, Lord Schwarz Graf.”

“Right.”

I looked around and saw more black Nemains piloted by my Royal Guard, slaughtering the pirates. The black Nemains had been tailored to my Royal Guard, with a base color of black and gold detailing, and a patterned effect on the chests and shoulders that gave them a real “special unit” look. Of course, the modifications went beyond custom paint jobs. The mobile knights of my elite Royal Guard were of much higher performance than regular Nemains, with all sorts of customizations. They may have looked no different from the standard Nemain, but they were about ten percent more powerful.

“I want to see what the mothership’s capable of too,” I told Ethel.

Understanding my meaning, she ordered her subordinates, *“Begin bombardment.”*

The Schwarzvogel’s crew sought confirmation. *“There are friendly units in our firing line, ma’am.”*

Normally, you’d question an order that told you to fire on a battlefield where your companions were fighting, but Ethel just scoffed.

“We don’t need anyone who’s slow enough to get caught by our own bombardment. Commence the attack.”

It sounded callous, but I’d spared no expense on my Royal Guard. It would be a problem for me if they struggled against enemies like this. The crew member on the Schwarzvogel hadn’t sounded as though they were actually worried, anyway; they just wanted to confirm the order. Once they’d received it, they carried out their orders with ruthless efficiency.

“Roger that.”

The Schwarzvogel began its attack, and pirate ships exploded one after another. The enemy panicked when they saw their defense fields were easily pierced, but there was no longer anything they could do as our overwhelming firepower trampled all over them.

“Not bad for our debut battle.”

“I would say that we’ve certainly made a splash. It’s probably about time we took our leave, though. The main force is almost here.”

“Already? Those guys are too good.”

If we stayed too long, House Banfield’s main force would find us, and that would mean trouble. We decided to leave. Before we could make our exit, however, the colonel in charge of the patrol fleet opened a communication channel with me.

“We appreciate the assist, but could you identify…” The colonel’s mouth flapped open and closed when he saw my masked face, so I cleared my throat and gave him an introduction.

“The name’s Schwarz Graf. Yeah… You can call us…Black Lightning. I saw you guys getting attacked by pirates and couldn’t let them get away with it. There’s no need to thank us.”

My little rampage was satisfaction enough and thanks from them wouldn't mean anything. After all, if they rewarded me, they'd be paying me with my own money.

"Err, but, Lo—"

He was about to say my name, so I cut the call, ready to head for the hills.

"Okay, pull out!"

"Yes, sir!"

My skilled Royal Guard beat an efficient retreat. We returned to the Schwarzvogel and sped away before the main force arrived.

Heh. That was pretty fun.

***

Claus maintained a neutral expression after the patrol fleet returned and he heard the colonel's report. Mentally, however, he cradled his head.

"Black Lightning, eh?" he murmured. "Schwarz Graf?"

The colonel wore an indescribable expression on his face, and no wonder. Claus would probably have reacted the same way in his position.

The colonel looked as though he still couldn't believe it. "That's definitely what he called himself, but I'm absolutely certain it was Lord Liam. No one else could have been so strong. Sir Claus, is there some meaning behind Lord Liam's actions? Something like a top-secret mission?"

Why would their lord go on top-secret missions in a mask? The question perplexed Claus more than the colonel.

You said you wouldn't fight, didn't you, Lord Liam? So why are you doing all this weird stuff just to go fight anyway? You're just causing confusion in the field!

Claus sighed. "It's not a top-secret mission. I'll confirm things with Lord Liam myself. Where is he?" he asked a nearby subordinate, who immediately checked Liam's schedule.

The subordinate's face twitched. "His schedule has him working in his office on the Argos right now, but we just checked,

and he left a note saying he remembered something important he had to do, and he'd be gone for a few months."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir."

Claus leaned back and looked up at the ceiling.

Great... More trouble.

***

"I'm confiscating those, Lord Liam."

"You can't do that! I've only gotten to use them a few times!"

"The fact that you've used them at all is the problem."

Claus had come to my office to grill me about my recent combat excursions. For the last few weeks, I'd been flying around Planet Augur in the Schwarzvogel, attacking every pirate I came across. I'd admit that I went against my word not to go out and fight, but confiscating the craft was going too far, wasn't it?

I attempted to fob him off with my authority as his master, but the well-prepared bastard got Amagi on his side. Amagi had the same demeanor she always did with me, but her eyes were cold.

"I confirmed things with the Third Weapons Factory," she said. "They manufactured a ship and mobile knights, ostensibly on Lady Eulisia's request. Several of Third personnel were aware, however, that it was you behind her request, Master."

I'd tried to use Eulisia to hide my actions, but Amagi had seen through the subterfuge. I actually couldn't believe those people at the Third had gone and blabbed like that.

"I see they've betrayed a regular customer."

Claus must have done a thorough investigation before coming to my office, because he presented me with further proof.

"I've conducted an investigation with several related parties. It's clear that you've been calling yourself Schwarz Graf, Lord Liam. We also confirmed your purchases with the home planet."

Obviously, I'd had to spend a hefty sum to purchase a ship and group of mobile knights, and though I'd disguised it by going

through Eulisia, Claus hadn't missed that in his investigation.

Amagi was clearly exasperated. "Buying more craft with your personal funds… I suppose your promise to never do so again meant nothing to you."

When Claus questioned me, I could be defiant as his master, but I couldn't be so bold with Amagi. And now she had me feeling guilty for breaking a promise. "At least don't take them away!" I pleaded with her. "I've only used them a few times! That's such a waste, don't you think?!"

I'd gone and custom-ordered. They couldn't take them away after I'd only used them a few times.

But Claus shattered my earnest plea. "As those craft were purchased with your personal funds, I have no right to confiscate them, Lord Liam."

"Then—"

"However…" Claus glanced over at Amagi, whose red eyes were giving off a fiercer gleam than usual. She was really mad.

I gulped as Amagi criticized me dispassionately. "You have the Argos, a superdreadnought, and the Avid, your personal mobile knight. You hardly have need of additional ships and mobile knights solely for your personal use."

"A-Amagi? Don't you think that's a little harsh? I mean, there are times when I want to do something different, you know. Not to mention, the cost of making use of the Argos and the Avid—"

Damn it, I thought after making that excuse. It had been a bad move.

Amagi didn't miss my careless little comment. "From the way you behave, I did not think you were even aware of that expense. In which case, there is no need to accumulate even more military strength, is there?"

Before I knew it, I'd risen from my chair, eyes wide. "Well, but as a collector, I like to maintain a variety of—"

Amagi wasn't backing down. "There is no *need*, is there?"

"No…" I collapsed back into my seat like a marionette with its strings cut. There was no benefit to arguing further with an angry Amagi. I felt like a kid who'd just had a new toy taken away.

Claus sighed quietly. “That should wrap things up for now, but I have to admit it’s true that we caused you to be bored, Lord Liam. I cannot permit you to engage our enemies, but I will convince the various department heads that you should be allowed to visit the surface of the planet more easily.”

I looked up at Amagi when I heard this. “Really?!”

She must have determined that it would do more harm than good to keep me cooped up, because she said reluctantly, “Yes, you may descend to Planet Augur when you wish, Master. I ask only that you take the minimum security detail with you, and nothing more.”

They’d taken the Graf Nemain from me, but now I could go down to Augur and enjoy playing the evil magistrate. I was pissed at Claus for getting in my way, but I decided this more or less made up for it.

“I’m going to go down there right now, then.”

Amagi bowed to me. “I will have a shuttle prepared.”

***

Down on Augur I was performing an inspection, hidden behind my gray mask. As the ruling magistrate, I was more important than the royalty of this planet, so no one would expect me to be down here inspecting things in secret.

“Heh heh… This is what I was waiting for.”

People shot glances at me, but I ignored them as I observed the way the locals lived.

A voice came from my shadow. “I don’t believe there’s any reason for you to be inspecting things yourself, Master Liam.”

The voice belonged to Kunai, one of Kukuri’s underlings. I’d chosen her to accompany me as my personal security. To everyone else, it appeared that I was walking around by myself, but I *had* brought with me a security detail. In addition to Kunai, a few guards followed me, remaining inconspicuous.

“I want to see things with my own eyes. Besides, something fun might be going on down here.”

I pictured someone picking a fight with me without knowing who I was, at which point I could reveal my identity and have them arrested for treason. That was just the sort of thing an evil magistrate would do. I'd tried doing that sort of thing back in my own domain, but it hadn't worked out. That wouldn't be a problem on Augur, I figured. Their society's sophistication had been restricted, so some idiots were sure to pick a fight with me.

Or maybe I should just announce who I was and strut around arrogantly. I could say, "Hand over your women and your money!" No... I couldn't do that. This planet couldn't even produce an amount of money that would satisfy me, and I didn't want to deal with the consequences of demanding their women. If Amagi or Brian heard about it, they would just hound me about taking responsibility. Brian would probably do a little jig and get ready to add them to the family register.

I folded my arms, considering how best to act like an evil magistrate, and Kunai timidly said, "May I ask you a question, Master Liam?"

"What is it?"

"I understand the need for a disguise, but why the conspicuous mask? I should think it will only attract attention."

It seemed Kunai wasn't a fan of my mask. *I* liked it a lot, but it was true that it made me stand out. I considered taking it off, but before I could make up my mind, I heard a commotion.

It sounded like male and female voices arguing, but I saw it was only one woman against three men. When I spotted the group, I saw a girl with blonde hair and blue eyes surrounded by men I recognized as soldiers from the dispatch fleet.

"You're cute," one said. "Want to play with us?"

"It's an honor to play with the servants of a god, don't you think?"

"That's right—we're a god's servants. We serve the Lord Magistrate."

The leering men surrounding the woman were soldiers dispatched by the Empire. To be precise, they didn't work for the magistrate, but I had no intention of correcting their claim. I didn't feel the need to get in their way, if they were just trying to get

lucky. It did piss me off, though, that they were calling themselves servants of a god.

The woman hung her head, voice thick with tears. “Please let me go. I have somewhere I need to be.”

The woman was a native, and the soldiers were displeased by someone they looked down on talking back to them.

“You can’t disobey us, you primitive!”

One of the soldiers grabbed the woman by her arm and lifted her off the ground. For a soldier whose body had been strengthened as his was, lifting one woman this way was an easy task.

“Ow! Please stop! Please!”

Citizens around them started to speak up, but the soldiers glared at them, and they quickly averted their eyes. These people from the sky who called themselves a god’s servants were stronger than they were, and they possessed more advanced technology. The locals had no way to fight back against them.

Before I knew it, I’d walked over to the soldiers.

“I was quite clear with my warning that no idiots were to go around calling themselves servants of God. I didn’t expect the dispatch army to misbehave.”

One of the soldiers reached out to me. “Who’s this kid with the stupid mask?”

“Don’t touch me.”

I grabbed the soldier’s arm and, using nothing but body strength, tossed him away. He crashed into a wooden building, looking as if he had no idea what had just happened.

“Pathetic. This is the kind of trash they sent as a dispatch force?”

The remaining two scowled in anger and moved to draw their weapons. When I saw that, I felt myself smile.

“Kunai,” I said, and a sword arose from my shadow. I gripped its hilt and swung, and the two soldiers lost both of their arms. It happened instantaneously, and not only the people watching but even the soldiers themselves had wide eyes, unable to process what had just happened.

The soldier I'd thrown had drawn his gun, but Kunai would subdue him. The ones missing their arms sank to the ground, sobbing and moaning. I looked down at them and smirked.

"Who's a servant of God? Did the magistrate not warn you about doing stupid crap like this? Are your heads just for decoration?"

When I put my blade to their necks, the soldiers at least figured out that I was a knight, and they panicked, thinking they'd been discovered by someone from House Banfield.

"W-we're sorry. We were just joking."

"You called yourself a servant of God as a joke? That's even worse."

I smirked down at them.

The soldiers pressed their foreheads to the ground.

"Please! Please have mercy!"

I tossed my sword back to Kunai. "Idiots."

When I turned to leave, the girl I'd rescued called out to me.

"Umm... Thank you for saving me!"

The girl thanked me even though she'd gone white from the ghastly sight she'd witnessed. She looked kind of familiar, but I couldn't remember where I'd seen her before.

She glanced down at the soldiers. She must have thought they'd be in trouble left like this. "Umm, we should treat their wounds quickly, shouldn't we?"

It was a fine idea in theory, but with the level of medical technology on this planet, anything the locals could do would probably just make matters worse. It'd be better for them if we just left them alone for now.

"Don't worry, their bosses will come running any minute now."

"Err..." The girl still seemed worried about them.

I sighed. "You won't get in trouble; those idiots are at fault."

I poked one of the soldiers with my foot and he shrieked in fear.

"R-really?"

The girl finally relaxed at that reassurance. It was really starting to bother me that I couldn't remember where I knew her from. Was it because I had so little interest in flesh-and-blood women?

"Please let me thank you," the girl requested. "I have somewhere to be shortly, though, so it will have to be after that."

"Thank me?"

Well, if she really wanted to, I supposed I could accept. I also wanted to learn who she was, and it would bug me if I simply left and never figured it out.

***

I couldn't believe the sight before my eyes. I didn't *want* to believe it.

"What is this...?"

The girl had brought me to a square on a main street, with a fountain. It looked like the middle of a castle town, and a lot of people were around. But the fountain was small, and the stone pavement was marred by lots of cracks and damage. To my eyes the place was pitiful, but that wasn't the problem.

The problem was the statue at the center of the fountain. The girl I'd saved stood in front of it and put her hands together in prayer. The sight of an innocent girl praying sincerely made for a pretty picture, and she probably looked angelic to anyone who wasn't me. I glanced around and saw other natives doing the same thing.

When the girl finished praying, she turned and smiled. "This is a statue of the god who came from far away and watches over us. I come here every day to pray."

If I didn't know any better, I might have been taken with the girl, the way she smiled with stars in her eyes, but that smile was terrifying to me. At that point, I remembered who the girl in front of me was. She was the daughter offered to me by that king with the splendid white mustache—a princess of this planet.

"G-god?!"

I looked up at the statue and trembled. It wasn't the greatest likeness, but the statue could only be of me. My double stood on a pedestal in the middle of the fountain, striking some kind of pose that probably represented peace or compassion or something.

"Yes!" the princess said with a brilliant smile. "Lord Liam Sera Banfield. Not only did he free us from the evil god who once tormented us, he protects us as well."

Before I realized it, I'd collapsed to my knees. I had told them so many times I wasn't a god, so why were they worshiping me here? This was so much worse than just calling myself a god's servant.

Concerned, the princess darted to me and rubbed my back. It was a human virtue to show kindness to someone like this, but this girl was a nutjob who worshiped me.

"Are you all right?! You aren't hurt, are you? We have to treat your wound!"

As the commotion grew around me, a single tear fell under my mask.

Wait a second... If these folks are worshiping me as a god, then what have the people who immigrated here from my domain been doing?

The thought terrified me. I never knew what those weirdos would get up to. I rushed to find out right away.

***

Since the immigrants from House Banfield were limited in their interactions with the locals, they lived in their own area, surrounded by walls. Still, it wasn't as if they had no outside contact whatsoever; they were aware of what was going on with the locals.

Unlike the quaint area I'd just been in, the immigrant zone was busy with development, heavy machinery and mobile knights modified for construction milling about. I strode into the area and called out to the first group of workers I spotted.

"I have a question for you."

The workers, who were likely on break, gave me surprised looks when I suddenly called out to them.

“Huh? Er, sure. But, umm…” They seemed nervous about me because of the mask.

“I’m Schwarz. Schwarz Graf! Can you answer my question?”

The men were silent for a few moments before nodding vigorously. It seemed they still weren’t sure what to think of me, but they’d decided to err on the side of being helpful.

“Are you aware that the locals are worshiping the magistrate?”

The workers exchanged glances, then the oldest of them answered for the group. “Yeah, we know…er, sir. One of my buddies told me they made a statue of Lord Liam that they pray to. I guess he’s like a god to the locals.”

So the immigrants *were* aware.

“It’s not happening here though, right?” If they had a statue of me in here too, I was thinking about chopping it into little pieces with my sword.

Thankfully, the man shook his head. “I hear some guys wanted to put up our own statue, but they couldn’t get approval. Never thought I’d be jealous of the locals here… Heh.”

He apparently meant he envied the way the locals weren’t regulated as the immigrants were, but he didn’t seem too earnest about it.

“Has word gotten around about this?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Damn! Sorry for bothering you.”

I hurried back to the Argos, spewing curses the entire time.

***

After Liam had left, the workers all discussed his appearance.

“That was Lord Liam, right? Why was he wearing that weird mask?”

“How should I know?”

“Schwarz Graf is like an alias, right?”

Why was their lord observing their work with a mask on? It was a real head-scratcher for the workers, but simply wondering about it wouldn’t get them an answer, so one changed the subject.

“Anyway, we’re not allowed to worship Lord Liam, but nobody said anything about worshiping the masked Schwarz Graf, right?”

“Hey, good point!”

“Now we can build a statue, and we won’t get in trouble!”

Thus, a statue of Schwarz Graf was built, since he claimed he wasn’t Liam.

Chapter 13:
Planet Augur

"THOSE STUPID IDIOOOOOOOTS!" I screamed in my office on the Argos, as I received a report from the surface.

The report came from Wallace, who—despite his earlier complaints about going down there—was heartily enjoying Planet Augur. He must've proven more adaptable than he thought, because he was liking life much more than he'd expected.

His report was full of things I didn't want to hear.

"Aren't you happy everyone worships you?"

"Who told them to worship me like a god? And I don't want sacrifices! Who told them to offer up those?!"

Ever since being appointed magistrate of Augur, I'd been ruling it just as I'd told the royals I would. I gave them anything they didn't have enough of, and I protected the planet from outside threats.

I'd come out here ready to enjoy playing the evil magistrate, but after seeing them worshiping me like a god, the fun had completely gone out of it. I was being good and remaining in the Argos to do my work, but I didn't even need to go to the surface to hear about all the problems going on down there.

One problem was sacrifices.

"They want to give offerings to their new god. Your charisma's really something else, Liam." Wallace made his report elegantly, sipping some Augur-grown tea.

I wanted to punch him in the face as hard as I could.

Well, I guess I can hit him when he comes back to the ship. For now, solving this problem comes first.

"Make them stop! Where did this even come from, anyway?"

"Well, they call them offerings, not sacrifices. It's probably because the last lord made them give him tons of offerings, right?"

The previous lord had made the people of Augur hand over young, beautiful men and women as offerings. It was in poor taste, but I wasn't really one to talk since I'd sort of done the same thing. However, I would never call myself a god and demand

sacrifices. Even for a villain, there were lines you didn't cross. It would be rude to the Guide! Their former lord, the baron, had gotten in the way of my fun… The bastard!

Unfortunately, I'd already dealt with the guy, but there truly were too many worthless nobles in the Empire, weren't there? Including me, of course.

All my other work was proceeding steadily, but the baron's awful legacy still tormented me. At least, I *thought* that was the only problem I had…

"By the way, Liam."

"What?"

"Your former subjects, the immigrants, must have been influenced by the locals. They got all riled up, saying that the locals couldn't outshine them, and they want to hold a festival to worship you. I thought it seemed like fun, so I kind of approved it," Wallace said, without a trace of guilt.

This was his revenge for my bringing him here, I was certain. My face froze as I imagined a festival for worshiping me. The disrespect it would show toward the Guide was mortifying.

What frustrated me more than anything was the fact that my former subjects—the immigrants—were competing with the locals. I'd heard a little about that, but I couldn't stand how blatant they were being.

Why are you guys so stupid? Why would you compete over worshiping me when I've shipped you out to the middle of nowhere like this? I mean, what the hell kind of competition is that, anyway?

"Rejected! Rejected! I reject all of it! I'm outlawing religion entirely! They think nobles are gods?! I'm going to be sick!"

"Personally, I think you should give it your approval. Otherwise __"

"I don't care what you think! I'm the law! I'm the rules!"

I cut off the call with Wallace and heaved a sigh.

Gods were supposed to be more like…well, like the Guide. He'd reincarnated me into this universe and gifted me this fun life. Sure, he had a shady sort of look to him, but he was a nice guy who was still watching over me even now. It was utterly blasphemous to put me on the same level as him.

“Ugh, I can’t believe this. Everything else is going so well, this just pisses me off all the more.”

With the call over, Amagi—who had been standing by quietly—could now speak.

“Master, development of Planet Augur is proceeding on schedule, but it will take time to further the education of the residents.”

It was true that if changes were too rapid, the locals wouldn’t be able to keep up. If rushing their advancement would only result in failure, it would be better if I took the time to do things properly.

“Yeah. Their way of looking at things probably won’t change in the short time I’ll be serving as magistrate. I guess for me it doesn’t matter how much time it takes, since I’ll be going back to the Capital Planet soon anyway.”

Well, my plan to enjoy playing the evil magistrate hadn’t worked out, but I should make sure to fulfill my other goal here. I’d moved some of my own subjects to Augur for that. They’d have to work hard to make up for my loss, but I’d give them all the resources they needed.

I sure wouldn’t be letting them hold a festival for me, though.

When we were done discussing the education of Augur’s citizens, Amagi changed the subject.

“Construction of the spaceport is also proceeding on schedule, as well as the military base on the surface.”

“That pirate wreckage came in handy, huh?”

In my hand I held a golden cube—the alchemy box, an outrageous tool that had the ability to convert matter. With it, I could gather up all the debris from my pirate hunts and convert it into resources for building my bases. This tool was another present from the Guide.

Not all was going according to plan, however.

“Our development of Planet Augur is attracting attention,” Amagi warned me. “Some nobles are alarmed by the speed of our progress.”

A map of the region of space around Augur was displayed atop my desk, with lines showing the routes that could be traveled to other planets and bases via long-distance warp. It looked to me like a crummy 3D model, though.

“So we’ve got some neighbors who aren’t happy about the development, eh?”

“Yes. No one is likely to start anything with the Autocracy war going on, but I have received several reports of ships entering our territory without authorization.”

In other words, the war was the only thing keeping them from stirring things up. As soon as I was gone, they might pretend to be pirates and loot the area. It wasn’t realistic for me to come save them every time they were attacked, and I didn’t want to have to go to the trouble anyway.

In which case, what should I do? Well, it was simple.

“Guess I should go introduce myself.”

Amagi cocked her head expressionlessly. There were those who found this mannerism of hers unsettling, but she was obviously just being curious, so *I* thought it was cute.

“Introduce yourself? To whom?”

“To my old coworker’s family.”

***

I called up Nias at the Seventh Weapons Factory and her sleepy-looking face was displayed on my monitor. Her glasses were crooked, and it looked as though she hadn’t touched her hair at all since waking up. She’d probably answered the call in a rush without thinking, but I really felt that she should pay a little more attention to her appearance.

“You look like a mess.”

She seemed a bit embarrassed to be caught sleeping, but her annoyance at being woken up won out in the end.

“I was sound asleep! If anything, you should be impressed that I answered so quickly!”

I felt a little bad for waking her up, but when I'd checked the time at the Seventh Weapons Factory, I saw it was around noon there. I had assumed she'd be awake then, so I was just as surprised as she was that I'd woken her.

"Were you on the night shift, or pulling an all-nighter, or something?"

It *was* annoying to be contacted when you were busy. I figured I'd allow her a certain amount of rudeness, depending on her answer, but now that she was fully awake, she said clearly, *"Nah, I was just drawing up blueprints for fun until a little while ago."*

"For fun, eh?"

"I was so focused on them I didn't notice three days had passed, and I figured I should probably get some sleep, you know..."

She winked and stuck her tongue out, as if she had no self-awareness whatsoever. Yes, this was the kind of person Nias was. Her skills and abilities were the real thing, but otherwise there was something off about her.

"Go to sleep at night."

"I was *sleeping, but I can't just ignore a call from you, Lord Liam!"*

Despite her grumbling, I was a valued client of the Seventh Weapons Factory and Nias was more or less my liaison. Considering the amount of money I poured into her operation, she had the obligation to answer when I called, even if it was on her day off. She was more than well paid enough for that, and in fact it kind of pissed me off that I was paying her to work on what should have been a day off for her.

In any case, because she'd just been sleeping, Nias was in an awfully relaxed state of dress. I was a little excited by the sporty underwear I could see peeking through the gaps in her pajamas.



Amagi was standing right next to me, eyes boring into me, so I hastily cleared my throat. “Ahem! Anyway, let’s talk business.”

“Business?! You mean you’re going to buy some more of our products? You are, right?!”

Mentioning money seemed to wake Nias up completely. She adjusted her glasses and put on a serious face. *So this is what it means for someone’s eyes to light up.* Ever since I’d met her, she’d been the mercenary type.

“A new ship, some mobile knights, and some other stuff. I want them on the double. You’ve got plenty of leftover stock, right?”

“You don’t have to put it that way. They’re just waiting their turn in the warehouse.”

“Business as usual for you guys.”

If they had extra stock lying around, I could find a use for it. It came down to that.

Nias looked mystified, though, as if she found it strange that I’d be buying ships and mobile knights from them.

“I’m happy that you’re purchasing items from us, of course, but I haven’t heard anything about House Banfield losing any of its arsenal lately. Does this have something to do with the Autocracy?”

Nias was of course aware of my appointment as Planet Augur’s magistrate. She was probably curious why I was stocking up on military equipment when she hadn’t heard that I’d lost any battles.

“It does, but it won’t be me using them.”

I grinned and for a moment Nias appeared to ponder my words before giving up.

She sighed. *“What are you planning this time?”*

“They’re just presents. Is it so strange to give nobles suffering in the war with the Autocracy some cutting-edge equipment as gifts?”

“Well, if it’s just aid for the war effort, that’s not really odd. So what kind of numbers were you thinking?”

I hadn’t considered numbers at all, so I looked up, running some calculations. However, I quickly grew bored and stopped trying to get the math exactly right.

“Oh, ten thousand ships to start?”

When she heard that number, Nias’s jaw dropped. She stayed still, her mouth hanging open, for some time.

***

On the front lines of the war with the Autocracy, Calvin—in command of the Empire’s forces—widened his eyes at the report he’d just received from a subordinate. He’d been in the middle of a war meeting in a large council room filled with soldiers. The report, delivered by a noble who’d dashed into the room, was more than enough to shock him.

“Liam’s behind our army?!”

He’d never expected Liam to show up anywhere near the battlefield, and the other nobles of his faction and the soldiers fighting with him felt the same way. They had no time to deal with Liam right now.

Losing his composure, Calvin raised his voice without meaning to. “Who’s responsible for this?!”

He certainly hadn’t called Liam to the war zone. That battlefield worked in Liam’s favor, after all. Calvin was having enough trouble with the Autocracy, so Liam showing up at the rear of his forces was a nightmare. He felt as if he were trapped in a pincer attack between the two of them.

Seeing Calvin’s panic, a young noble raised a hand and stood confidently. He’d been sent to replace another lord who had fallen in combat.

“Your Highness, let’s use this opportunity to crush Liam. We just need to let the Autocracy through to the rear and allow the two to destroy one another,” he suggested.

This was met with disapproval—from both the soldiers and the other nobles.

“Absurd! That would mean allowing the Autocracy into Empire territory!”

“I swear, young people these days…”

“Even if we could take out Liam that way, if we lost ground to the Autocracy, it would just do more damage to His Highness’s

reputation!”

The young noble frowned at this talk of reputation. He couldn’t seem to accept that argument, but Calvin was relieved by the other nobles’ reactions. For the most part, they were in agreement. Some of the younger members among them needed more experience, but the majority of his faction felt that they shouldn’t make any careless moves.

Calvin pulled himself together. “We’ll focus all our energies on the Autocracy for now. We’ll keep an eye on our rear, but I don’t want anyone starting anything with Liam. We can’t fight on two fronts right now.”

For the moment, Calvin wanted to avoid conflict with Liam more than anything.

***

After the meeting, a couple of young nobles sat grumbling in the ship’s lounge.

“His Highness is too afraid of Liam.”

“He’ll lose his chance at victory this way.”

“Can the crown prince of the Algrand Empire really be so faint-hearted?”

Currently only people affiliated with the young nobles were in the lounge, so they could complain to their hearts’ content. The heirs to their families had already been killed off in the war, and they were aiming to take over in their stead now. Many family heirs and promising young people had met their end in the war with the Autocracy. These younger nobles wanted to make a name for themselves in the war, but the reality was that they were fighting an entirely defensive battle. There wouldn’t be grand opportunities for heroism like the young people expected.

Sitting on the bar and watching them was the Guide.

“I just love foolish young people. Especially when they don’t even know how foolish they are.”

He got down off the bar and spread his arms wide. Black mist filled the room, which the young nobles breathed in. Their

eyes became bloodshot, and their words grew more and more extreme.

“Maybe it’s time to take matters into our own hands.”

“Good idea. Even if we disobey orders, if we can take out Liam doing it there’s no way we’ll get in trouble.”

“I can’t wait to kill that bastard.”

The youths toasted to their ill-advised ideas. The Guide had done nothing more than give them a little extra encouragement, yet the results spoke for themselves.

“Heh heh! That should do to move things along for now. It’s unfortunate that I don’t have the power to do much more at this point, but I suppose I’ll just have to be satisfied with this.”

He’d absorbed enough negative emotions on the battlefield to recover his energies somewhat, but he was still far from one hundred percent. At least he’d been getting plenty of practice lately in using small amounts of power more efficiently, though if he were at full strength he wouldn’t need that skill in the first place.

“Curse you, Liam. Soon, I’ll finally be freed from those nauseating feelings of gratitude from you!”

Chapter 14:
The G'doire Autocracy

THE AUTOCRACY'S INVADING FORCE consisted of three million ships, whereas the Algrand Empire defended their territory with five million ships.

In the control room of the Autocracy's fortress-class flagship, Isel studied a simplified map of the battlefield.

"Calvin's pretty tenacious."

Isel was surrounded by brave warriors, almost all of whom had been bested by him and now followed him as a result. They all shared a warrior's bond, won through battle. Even his military advisors were muscular, formidable-looking men.

One of those advisors said to him, "The prince is merely hiding by focusing on defense, but the Empire has its fair share of powerful warriors. Our allies are having a tough time against them, it's true."

Isel wasn't surprised to hear it. After all, their enemy's forces outnumbered them by two million.

"Still, something's not right. I'm sure Calvin's surrounded himself with elites, but the rest of their forces just seem cobbled together."

Isel crossed his arms and perused the map's data on their enemy's forces. The ships around Calvin were cutting-edge, but if he looked at the bigger picture, some forty percent of the Empire's force appeared to consist of outdated ships they'd scraped together to boost their numbers.

The Autocracy, on the other hand, used no outdated vessels. Since power was everything to them, war was considered holy. It was unthinkable not to show care in the equipment one used, so their military was kept much more strictly upgraded than the Empire's.

Isel held his hand out. "I can't keep screwing around with Calvin forever. We should hurry up and settle things soon."

Thus, Isel's fleet began to close in around Calvin's.

***

Along with all the excited warriors on the bridge stood the Guide.

Might is absolutely everything to these people. I simply do not understand it.

He glanced to his side, where G'doire stood. The Guide took a deferential attitude toward him.

"Such dependable pawns you have! I see why you like that boy Isel so much, G'doire!"

G'doire shot the sweet-talking Guide a look. "What's going on here? I was expecting to see thrilling bouts between powerful warriors, but this whole thing has been a let-down so far!"

G'doire blew steam from his mouth, his octopus head turning red. It seemed he was reaching the end of his rope.

"The enemy does nothing but stick to a half-hearted defense!" he griped. "The battles are all just ships taking potshots at each other from far away! It's boring!"

He was displeased by the way Calvin was fighting, so the Guide desperately attempted to pacify him.

"Things will change on the battlefield soon. I've just maneuvered things to that effect."

G'doire and the Guide had pulled Liam closer to the battlefield. They'd thought he would join in the fighting, but he'd ended up serving as a magistrate at the rear, which had surprised both of them. G'doire, in particular, was more and more furious by the day that he had yet to witness Liam's famous Flash technique. He was somewhat placated by Liam being on the battlefield himself now, but he complained endlessly about the way Calvin fought, and he was finally losing his patience.

"I want to see Liam! I want to watch my Isel kill Liam up close!"

The enraged G'doire slapped the Guide's face with his tentacle legs.

"O-ow. P-please stop that, G'doire."

You bastard! I would crush you if I hadn't lost all my power!

G’doire slapped the Guide forward and back, then grabbed him by the lapels and lifted him up. “Bring him here now!”

“Huh?”

“Bring Liam to the battlefield now! Make him fight my Isel!”

“Y-you ask the impossible! I’ll disappear if I so much as get near him as I am now! Besides, I’ve already made my move!”

“I don’t care, just do it!”

Determining that it was useless to say anything more to G’doire when he was this upset, the Guide reluctantly agreed.

“Okay, okay!”

“You should just have agreed in the first place, stupid!”

The Guide clenched his fists before the angry G’doire.

You call me *stupid? You’ll be next, after Liam.*

Telling himself he had to be patient, the Guide disappeared.

***

Right around the time the Autocracy began to change its war strategy, Marion paid a visit to Planet Augur. He crossed his arms in front of a large monitor aboard his ship as it arrived in Augur’s spaceport. The spaceport displayed on the screen was still under construction. At the moment, it more than fulfilled its function, but with construction continuing it was sure to grow even larger.

Marion broke out into a cold sweat as he considered the speed with which Liam had constructed this enormous spaceport.

“He’s a monster, just like I heard. If he’s built all this in such a short time, I guess I can’t criticize his work.”

Marion was visiting Augur on an inspection to see whether Liam was performing his role as magistrate adequately. Though this was the outward reason he had come, in reality, he was there to sabotage Liam for Cleo and Lady Annabelle—to trap him somehow.

“Well, the spaceport may be fine, but I’m sure if I dig I’m bound to find dirt somewhere… And if I don’t, I can just make some up!”

At first, Marion approached Liam as a friend, trying to find his weakness in order to use Liam for his own ends. Then he'd met Randy, Lady Annabelle, and Cleo, and Marion's life had changed dramatically.

"That took longer than I thought it would."

Marion had been planning to make use of Liam from the very beginning.

His ship docked in the port and was secured in place by a giant robotic arm. The crew respectfully cleared a path for Marion as he headed for the ship's exit. As an official of the Capital Planet—an inspector—Marion ranked high above the crew members, indicating just how powerful officials were in the Empire.

He disembarked and found his escorts waiting for him in the hangar. They were knights who served Margrave Algren. Since these knights served the main Algren line, Marion found it a bit odd that he hadn't been met by knights who served his father, the viscount.

"Is there a reason you're the ones greeting me?" he asked them.

"We were ordered by the margrave to welcome you here with all respect, sir."

Though he was surrounded by knights, Marion considered them his allies. It seemed like an overly heavy security detail, but that in itself didn't bother him too much.

"The head of the main family said that, did he?"

By the time Marion grew suspicious, it was already too late.

One of the knights gave him a wide smile. "It's all thanks to you that Count Banfield has sent us his support, Lord Marion! The margrave is thrilled."

Before Marion could think *Impossible!* the knights had drawn their weapons. Even with the physical enhancement he'd received as a noble, Marion was no match for all these muscular knights. He gulped, a cold sweat dripping down his back.

"And what's this...?"

The knight wiped the smile from his face, replacing it with a murderous scowl. Marion slowly raised his hands, sensing from

the knight's attitude that they wouldn't hesitate to attack if he made any wrong moves.

Seeing that, another knight said coldly, "Count Banfield is waiting for you."

"Li—Lord Liam is?"

What's going on? Why is Liam's name coming up? I never introduced him to the main family…

Since he'd been planning on using Liam for his own machinations, he'd never so much as mentioned him to the main branch. If he was going to say anything to them it would only have been after he was sure he could make use of Liam—but there had been no point in that after Marion switched plans to getting rid of him.

The knights smiled darkly at the confused Marion.

"The count has prepared a change of clothes for you. He picked them out himself, so I'm sure they'll look wonderful."

"S-stop it!"

Marion's eyes opened wide, and he resisted as much as he could, but the knights pinned him down and took him away.

***

Now that the spaceport was more or less functioning, there was only one thing to do, and that was party. My countrymen might have been fighting a war, but that didn't matter to me here at the rear. I'd called a special guest to make an appearance too. And, as the party host, I planned to enjoy myself thoroughly.

"It's a pretty strange sight, though."

It was a standing-buffet style party, but we were holding it in a zero-gravity space, so attendees were standing on the walls and ceiling in addition to the floor. It did look unusual, but it was nothing astonishing here in space. And it allowed for more accommodation since we weren't limited to the floor alone.

Incidentally, I'd left all the planning to Wallace, but he still didn't seem too pleased about the event.

"I can't believe we're partying back here at the rear when Calvin's out there fighting on the front lines," he complained. "Are

you trying to harass him or something?"

Well, I couldn't say that wasn't a factor at all in my plans, but for the most part I just wanted to have a party.

"I actually hoped it would be a little grander, personally."

"If you went any more extravagant than this, the guys on the front line would flip."

"What do I care? They're all political enemies anyway."

"We're all still Imperials, aren't we? Besides, we're only safe here because they're fighting over there."

"Calvin really is unlucky, isn't he? Well, if the fighting comes out this far, I'll just run."

It didn't feel too bad to gaze down on Calvin from a superior position.

I looked at the glass in my hand, which was made so that the liquid inside wouldn't fly away despite the lack of gravity. When I shook the glass, its contents trembled like jelly, but as soon as it touched my lips they transformed back into liquid.

As I wet my whistle with some alcohol, I said to Wallace, "Calvin's a talented guy, but things must be tough for him."

"What do you mean?"

I was sure Calvin wanted to focus solely on the fight with the Autocracy, so it had to be a headache for him that Lady Annabelle was making moves on the Capital Planet in his absence. Of course, it was hard for me to imagine that Annabelle acted on her own, since she'd spent so long cooped up in the palace until now. It was strange timing for House Lengrand to be getting involved too, though with Randy as their heir you could easily assume they were simply that short-sighted.

Personally, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was someone behind all of them.

"I just mean Calvin and I both have people messing with us. Calvin just happens to be the unluckier one."

"You're always so cool, Liam. Myself, I live in fear every day after hearing the Imperial Army's starting to lose ground."

I looked toward the room's entrance.

"Oh, looks like the guest of honor is here. Come on, let's go say our hellos."

A woman entered the venue surrounded by female knights. She wore a cute dress with a short skirt that showed off her long, slender legs. Well, I call it a dress, but it was more like the frilly getup a pop idol would wear. I'd gotten it for her myself, since I knew she usually wore pants.

Wallace cocked his head when he saw her. "I feel like I've seen her somewhere before."

Of course he had.

When we approached her, the woman furrowed her brow, showing obvious displeasure. She was holding her skirt down as if she was uncomfortable wearing something so short. With her other arm she covered her chest, which didn't normally draw so much attention. Her face burned with shame and anger.

That's exactly the expression I wanted to see.

"Long time no see, Marion," I said. "You look much better like this, I have to say."

Marion was a woman. When I addressed her, she responded in a trembling voice, and her words were awkward, as if she was being forced to say them.

"I-I appreciate…the invitation…Lord Liam."

"Sure. Have fun."

Marion looked away in frustration, so I turned to Margrave Algren, who stood beside her.

"It's been too long, Margrave. I can now say this spaceport has been graced with the presence of a margrave who protects our country's borders."

"Accepting your invitation was the least I could do, Count Banfield, after all the aid you've provided us."

We flattered one another to show off to the rest of the partygoers how well the two of us got on. From this, everyone understood that House Banfield was lending its support to Margrave Algren. However, all *I* really cared about was flaunting this relationship to Marion.

I was saying to her: *Look how friendly I am with your main family.*

The margrave went on about the military equipment I'd sent him. "We'll be able to use those cutting-edge craft you sent in real

combat in a few months. This is a great relief to us."

"I'm glad to hear it."



At first, Marion was shocked as she listened to my conversation with the margrave, but her expression quickly changed to anger.

The margrave's eyes were cold as he looked at her. "I hear you looked after Marion while she was on the Capital Planet too."

"Yes, we got on quite well, I'd say. Wouldn't you, Marion?"

I grinned at her and Marion looked away, not meeting my eyes. She must have felt humiliated, being forced to appear at this party in that cute outfit. Or maybe she was frustrated that I'd seen through her plan?

"I gave Marion the task of gathering support for us on the Capital Planet," the margrave complained, "but she forgot her duty and fooled around on her own. What a troublesome girl."

Members of both the margrave's main family and the viscount's branch looked upon Marion coldly due to the moves she'd been making in her own self-interest.

She'd ignored orders from the main family, and her own home as well, to seek aid from influential nobles. Well, maybe they were less "orders," and more a request that Marion obtain aid if she could while working as an official on the Capital Planet. Regardless, what she'd done instead was plot to take over House Algren. Neither the margrave nor the viscount was pleased to learn of her maneuvering on the Capital Planet.

"You seriously thought I hadn't noticed anything?" I asked her. "Guess you've got a cute side yourself."

Marion glared at me, vexed that I'd seen through her plan.

"How's it feel to waltz straight into the trap you intended to set for me? I'd love to hear."

"Damn you!"

The second Marion raised her arm to slap me, the margrave's knights moved in. Kukuri's hidden subordinates took action as well. At this rate they'd haul Marion off, but I wouldn't be able to have my fun anymore if they made short work of her just like that.

I grabbed Marion's arm myself and squeezed. Her face warped in pain struggled to absorb the force of my grip.

"Ghh! L-let go, you creep! Pervert!"

“Big talk for someone making the moves you were. Still, I enjoyed seeing you make a fool of yourself. You did pretty good for a two-bit villain.”

“Wh-what do you know?!”

I let go of Marion and shoved her away. The knights caught her. Then I turned to the margrave. “Please excuse me.”

“I apologize for my relative’s behavior,” he said. “I’ll punish her in any way you deem fitting.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that. What do you say to just giving her to me? I don’t think that’s a bad deal for you, Margrave.”

The margrave considered this, then accepted my proposal. He eyed Marion and told her simply, “Do not squander Lord Liam’s kindness.”

Before leaving with Wallace, I told Marion, “You look cute like that.”

Marion’s face went red up to her ears, and her eyes widened. She seemed to be fighting to keep tears from spilling from them.

“You’re awful, Liam,” Wallace said, seeming to sympathize with her.

“Hey, she tried to use me. I’d say I’m pretty kind to let her off like this.”

Considering what Marion tried to do, this was awfully lenient, if anything.

Chapter 15:
The Right Hand

AT THE PARTY, Marion scowled in her dress.

"You've done it now, Liam..."

Her usual androgynous look was gone. She was the very picture of femininity now. The cutesy party dress had been Liam's idea, of course. Marion would never wear something like that willingly, and hardly ever wore skirts in the first place. She preferred her usual suits.

Liam was chatting with guests he'd invited to the party. As they praised his impressive spaceport and he happily accepted their compliments, Marion simmered with anger.

And headship of my family was just within reach...

At this point, even if Marion managed to become viscount, the margrave most certainly wouldn't acknowledge it. Her plan had already failed.

The margrave spoke to Marion without looking at her, as if to indicate she wasn't worthy of his time.

"You had to go and get involved in the succession conflict on the Capital Planet, didn't you?"

Instead of soliciting aid from powerful nobles as she'd been asked to, Marion had let her own greed dictate her actions.

"I-I regret doing what I did."

The margrave criticized her for getting involved with Cleo's faction. "You made that mistake because you aspired to something beyond your reach. Now we've received incredible aid from House Banfield...but that aid won't come cheap."

The margrave's expression made it clear that he was uncomfortable with the aid Liam was providing him. He could only assume that Liam wasn't acting out of noble intentions and would expect something from him in return. To make matters worse, one of his family had been plotting against Liam. Basically, House Algren had picked a fight with Liam, and Liam had turned around and helped them. To those noble party guests living near Planet Augur, that act must have seemed incredibly benevolent.

Liam had positioned himself as a benefactor to the nobles on the border, and as the one who was supposed to unify those nobles, the margrave wasn't too happy about the influence Liam was amassing. In the end, all this went back to Marion.

"You wanted to make use of that man, didn't you? But you were the one who ended up being used in the end."

"Liam used me...?"

"He's won the trust of the border nobles with this move. It's clear now that sending him out here as magistrate was a bad move."

At first, Marion didn't understand what the margrave was saying; the shame of the embarrassing outfit she'd been forced to wear had clouded her mind. But the situation gradually became clear to her. Once it did, Marion recognized how thoroughly she'd been exploited.

"Damn him!" she burst out.

The margrave wiped the expression from his face. "That man is on an entirely different level than you. You made a mistake in choosing who to fight—no, in choosing who to join hands with."

Marion clenched her fists when he pointed that out. Just then, she saw Liam leaving the venue, and before she knew it, she'd taken off running.

***

I made a show of leaving the party and waited in the hallway outside. Sure enough, Marion came flying out of the venue after me. When she realized I was waiting for her, she tried to play it cool despite her obvious surprise.

"Lord Liam, there's something I wish to discuss with you."

Leaning against the wall, I chuckled as I guessed what she had to say. "Now you want to join forces, I assume?"

Marion looked frustrated, so I had to be right. She quickly put on a smile and paid me a compliment. "Very astute. You're much more clever than Randy. I should have worked with you from the beginning."

“Yeah, maybe things would have been different for you if you’d kissed my ass from the start.”

Though that would have creeped me out in its own way. The only reason I was interested in Marion at all was because I knew she was trying to use me. Of course, there was no reason she had to know that, so I decided to keep quiet about it for now.

“Why not work with me?” Marion proposed.

“There’s nothing in it for me,” I said with a smirk, but Marion must have taken my light attitude to mean there was room for negotiation. I was only teasing her, but her unfamiliar state of dress and the way she’d been cornered clearly made it hard for her to think on her feet. Her panic caused her to clutch at any little thing as a potential escape route.

“There is! Whose orders do you think I was acting under?”

I folded my arms and waited to see what she’d say. Whose name was she going to give me? Marion drew out the suspense before giving me an answer.

“It’s Prince Cleo. Prince Cleo is trying to oust you from your position. If you work with me, I can be a double agent and feed Prince Cleo information—”

“You’re out, Marion.” I declared her failure before she even finished her appeal.

“Huh…?”

“If you’d said Randy or Annabelle, a slightly better future might have been in store for you.”

With those words as the trigger, shadows leaped out from the walls, ceiling, and floor. The color drained from Marion’s face at the appearance of Kukuri and his men.

“A-agents…”

Marion trembled, knowing exactly what the appearance of these secret operatives meant. Kukuri descended from the ceiling, flexing his large hands. My operatives surrounded Marion excitedly, like children who’d just got their hands on a new toy.

“Hee hee hee!” Kukuri chortled. “Ah, excuse me, Master Liam; it just gets my sadistic juices flowing seeing fools like this. What would you have us do with her?’

I was about to answer his question when Marion screamed over me. “Why?! I told you who was behind all this!”

I sighed, looking at the pale, trembling Marion. I didn’t want her making any more commotion, so I decided to tell her the truth. “It was Prince Cleo who told me about your maneuverings.”

“Why…?”

Marion looked as though she couldn’t believe what I was saying, so I explained.

“I was the one who accepted the position of magistrate, if you’ll recall. We’d been discussing it even before then. Prince Cleo knew about your plan from the beginning.”

Marion sank to the floor, her expression still disbelieving. I gave her the message Prince Cleo had entrusted me with.

“Prince Cleo told me to tell you something if you gave me his name. He said: ‘I’m disappointed that we couldn’t see eye to eye.’”

Marion hung her head, so I walked over to her and gently lifted her chin, making her stand up a little straighter.

“Men are all scum,” she said, tears spilling from her eyes. “Using me like this.”

“Have you already forgotten that you planned to use me? Still, I’ll let you off the hook with this. After all, you won’t get the seat of viscount you were after, and you can’t go back to your family. There’s no place for you on the Capital Planet anymore either. I’d feel bad if I took anything else from you.”

I guffawed, and Marion grimaced. When she realized she’d lost everything, more tears flowed from her eyes.

“What are you going to…do with me…?”

I could tell all she wanted was not to be handed over to my operatives.

Now that she was weeping, I wasn’t having fun anymore, so I let go of her.

“Serve me. If you do, I’ll let you live.”

***

Meanwhile, Calvin's forces had received word of the structure of Liam's fleet. However, it was the man serving Liam that concerned Calvin more than the count himself.

Calvin narrowed his eyes. "Claus? Liam's right hand is here?!"

Calvin's fear of Claus was only to be expected, as the knight had served as the acting supreme commander of the Empire's forces in the war with the United Kingdom. Anyone who hadn't been there fighting in the war themselves assumed that Claus had commanded the troops in Liam and Cleo's place.

A stir ran through the nobles of Calvin's faction.

"He's the man who won the war with the United Kingdom in no time at all!"

"I've heard he crushed them thoroughly and without mercy!"

"If Liam's brought a man like that with him, does he actually intend to get rid of us?"

Claus's name was known to everyone in Calvin's faction. He was reputedly Liam's right-hand man and a skilled strategist who'd repelled the United Kingdom's forces in a surprisingly short time.

Calvin sweated bullets at the thought of Claus's presence at the rear of their forces.

We can't fight at our best with such a skilled strategist threatening us from behind.

Calvin couldn't even imagine what kind of move a strategist like Claus might make against them. He had led the Empire to a swift victory in a conflict that everyone had thought would drag on for some time. In addition, he'd used the war as an opportunity to clean up the nobles from Calvin's faction who were threatening him. Calvin saw Claus as a knight more dangerous than any other. It would also be impossible to try to recruit him to Calvin's ranks despite his fearsome prowess. The other nobles in his faction would never allow it after what Claus had done to them in the previous war.

While Calvin and his supporters affirmed the need to heighten their vigilance in regard to the rear line, an emergency transmission reached the council room.

***

“Is this all you’ve got, Empire?!”

Calvin’s jaw dropped as he stood on the bridge of the Empire’s flagship. He almost forgot he was on the battlefield as he took in the impossible scene before him.

“This can’t be…” he muttered, and no one around him could fault him for trying to deny reality.

After all, what he saw was the Autocracy’s main force pushing toward them. Hundreds of thousands of ships were pressing forward, but that wasn’t what scared him.

The monitor before him displayed a single, many-armed mobile knight. It would be classed as a twenty-four-meter model, and it was covered in plating made to look like human musculature. It was mostly light brown, with red around its waist. It almost looked like a man naked except for a red loincloth, but the features on its back went far beyond that image. Sprouting from the mech’s back were six additional arms. With the two on its main body, it had eight total. Each arm on its back held a different weapon. Something like a golden magic circle showed behind the mobile knight, which was apparently part of its system. The mobile knight almost looked divine, but its form didn’t shock Calvin as much as its obvious strength.

“How many ships did that one mobile knight just take out?!” Calvin couldn’t help but yell.

That single mobile knight had been slicing through Imperial ships one after the other. The Empire concentrated their attacks on it, but…

“All ships, fire on that mobile knight!” A general who served as Calvin’s advisor ordered thousands of Imperial ships to fire on the foe simultaneously. Thousands of beams converged on that one craft.

“You’re aiming at me?!” the craft responded. *“Well, that’s not enough to destroy my country’s namesake humanoid weapon!”*

Just as the enemy pilot boasted, the ships’ weapons did nothing to the mech. The lasers, energy beams, and other weapons were deflected away before they could hit the mobile knight.

Calvin covered his mouth. “Just one mobile knight… So its pilot is…”

Over every channel, the enemy pilot demanded, *“Isn’t anyone strong enough to face me—Isel Balandin?!”*

The pilot was the enemy nation’s crown prince—the supreme commander of their forces himself.

“Retreat!” Calvin ordered.

***

After fighting off the Empire’s main force, Isel returned to the G’doire Autocracy’s fortress-class flagship looking unsatisfied.

“I let Calvin get away…”

He’d dealt a considerable blow to the enemy’s army, but Calvin had still escaped. That wasn’t what frustrated Isel, however. What displeased Isel was the fact that he hadn’t been able to fight anyone who really got his blood up.

G’doire watched him sympathetically, his eight tentacles writhing.

“My poor Isel is without any strong warriors to fight. When will that damn Guide bring Liam to the battlefield…?”

The Autocracy soldiers started clamoring. G’doire looked to see what the noise was about and found they’d learned information about the enemy, and among the information was a name that set the warriors’ hearts ablaze. Even Isel, who a moment ago had been so disappointed, grinned with excitement.

“Claus? Claus Sera Mont is on the battlefield?!”

Information on Claus, whose name was known even to Isel, had come to them not from the Empire but from the United Kingdom. All those on the bridge were thrilled to hear that Claus was here on the battlefield.

“He’s the tough guy who destroyed the United Kingdom, right?”

“No, I hear he’s just a tactician.”

“Either way, he’s got to have some powerful people working for him!”

Claus had trounced the United Kingdom in the Empire's last war. At the appearance of a named knight like him, Isel's earlier frustration all but vanished.

"I was just thinking Calvin's head alone might not satisfy me, but if there's a big name like Claus here, I might have some fun after all. I'm getting excited! So where is Sir Claus?"

The soldier who'd given the report was much less excited than everyone else on the bridge. "He's not stationed on the front lines. He's at the rear, on a base that's currently under construction."

Isel was surprised to hear that. "Not on the front lines? Why? Shouldn't a first-rate knight like him be positioned there?"

To the people of the Autocracy, it would make even more sense for Claus to serve as the enemy's supreme commander than Calvin, so they couldn't believe he wasn't commanding the fleet.

One soldier brought up the planet where Claus stationed on the monitor. "I don't know why, but they positioned Sir Claus on a planet at the rear of the Empire's forces, where their defenses are awfully thin."

The Empire's famed general was in the underdefended rear. From that, Isel reached a single conclusion. "So that's what's going on. They plan to lure us there and crush us!"

They were trying to draw the Autocracy's forces into their midst.

A military advisor cracked his neck. "So they're luring us to Sir Claus, the man who defeated the United Kingdom… Not a bad strategy. What do you want to do, Prince Isel?"

Isel grinned and closed his eyes, then opened them wide and thrust his arm forward. "It's obvious! If it's a trap for us, then we'll just tear through it!"

He commanded them to charge forward, as if to say they needed no strategy beyond that, and the troops around him all cheered.

Watching the bridge unseen, G'doire wriggled his tentacles with glee. "Heh heh…heh heh heh! I didn't know they had foes so strong! Liam, Claus… So the Empire has some tough guys too. Ooh, I can't wait!"

G’doire was thrilled that Isel would get to fight those two opponents.

“Tens of millions…no, hundreds of millions will likely die in this fighting! I can’t wait! I really can’t wait!”

G’doire eagerly envisioned the many lives that would be easily lost in this war.

***

In the spaceport above Planet Augur, where he was working, Claus experienced a strange chill.

“I keep shivering lately. Am I just tired…?”

Claus often suffered from Liam’s reckless whims. Still, for the most part, he simply did his work diligently, and his day ended without excitement. This was another day that was poised to conclude without anything unusual occurring.

“Maybe I’m just anxious from being so close to the front lines. I want to go home…”

Claus prayed every day for boring peace. He hadn’t actually wanted to become Liam’s head knight. He was well aware of the fact that he had no particular skills in the first place. He didn’t like fighting, and his abilities were thoroughly average, so he still couldn’t believe he was serving in that role.

“But as soon as Lord Liam’s term as magistrate is up, I can go home. If nothing happens in the next two years, I’ll be able to leave for there…”

When he’d heard about Liam’s plans to go to the border, he’d been worried, and he was relieved to find that things just might end without anything crazy happening this time around. He felt bad for the people fighting on the front lines, but House Banfield hadn’t come here to fight in the war in the first place. They were only here to support Liam in his work.

Still, Claus couldn’t shake the bad feeling he’d had lately. In an effort to distract himself, Claus looked down at the document on the tablet he held.

“Guess I’ll wrap up my work…”

Just when he thought he'd be able to get his work done and clock out on time, Claus received an emergency communication from a subordinate. Even before he could answer the call himself, it connected, and his subordinate made a hasty report.

"Sir Claus, the Autocracy's fleet has changed course! A large force is headed for Planet Augur!"

Claus looked off into the distance. *Oh. So that's what that bad feeling was.*

Claus's subordinate interpreted his distant attitude as the head knight keeping his cool. His awed expression said that the head knight's calm under pressure amazed him. Regaining his own composure, Claus's subordinate awaited his superior's orders.

"I'll report this to Lord Liam. Tell our army to get ready to sortie."

"Yes, sir!"

Though his emotional state was plummeting into depression, Claus always got his work done.

Chapter 16
Liam the Evil Magistrate

A SHUTTLE FROM THE SURFACE docked at the spaceport above Planet Augur. Aboard it was a group of the planet's royals—their young ones, specifically. I'd promised to educate them, and we were finally ready to receive them.

"I'm delighted to see you again, Lord Liam."

A princess dressed in a blue suit we'd prepared for her bowed courteously. It was cute how her eyes sparkled with anticipation, but I knew she was a nutjob who'd worshiped me as a god down on the planet's surface.

"I hope you'll learn a lot here and put it to use in the future," I told her. "If you need anything, I've appointed someone to look after you—"

As I greeted the young people, I received a call from Claus.

"What is it?"

"Lord Liam, an Autocracy fleet is approaching Planet Augur."

"The Autocracy?"

The young royals exchanged a glance at this unsettling news, and my own people couldn't hide their surprise either.

"I'm going back to the Argos. We'll talk more there."

"Yes, sir."

When I'd ended the call, the princess asked, "Um, Lord Liam, is there a war or something?"

They still hadn't learned much of anything about the world outside Planet Augur yet, so there was no way for them to understand what was going on.

"You don't need to worry about it," I said, turning my back to the young royals.

I heard the princess's voice once more. "Right! I have faith that you'll protect us, Lord Liam."

I'd told her not to worry, so I didn't bother correcting her as I rushed for the Argos.

***

More and more allied ships gathered at the spaceport above Planet Augur. Watching them from the bridge of the Argos, I received what must have been a declaration of war from the Autocracy. Its contents made me a little jealous…

A brilliant strategy, Sir Claus Sera Mont. We shall respond with a frontal attack. Signed, Crown Prince Isel of the G'doire Autocracy.

"They seem to have a very high opinion of you, Claus," I told him after reading their message. "Are you more famous than me now?"

I was jealous because Claus stood out more than I did now. He'd become famous throughout the Empire after the war with the United Kingdom, and it seemed even the Autocracy had heard of his exploits.

Why is Claus the famous one and not me? It pisses me off that they're acting as if he's a more valuable target than Calvin! Is the Autocracy a bunch of idiots, going after Claus?

As for the man himself, Claus seemed to be looking at something far off in the distance. "You overestimate me," he said. "Their information must be wrong."

"Humble, aren't you?"

Talking with Claus always reminded me how important guys with common sense were to have around. If Tia or Marie were here, they'd probably make a fuss, saying something like, "We'll tear them limb from limb for ignoring you, Lord Liam!" I really had been right in making Claus my head knight.

"Well, the Autocracy attacking is no joke," I said, then ordered, "For now, request aid from anyone in the vicinity."

Everyone reacted to my command oddly. Claus and the other soldiers on the bridge had puzzled looks. I raised an eyebrow, and Claus explained what they must all have been thinking.

"I suggest *retreating*, Lord Liam."

"What are you talking about?"

"We estimate the approaching Autocracy forces at roughly three hundred thousand craft. Our own forces number thirty

thousand, and the dispatch fleet of three thousand ships has already saw fit to retreat."

"No wonder I don't see the major general."

He must have really panicked, to have retreated without even reporting to me.

The enemy's main force was on the way to attack Planet Augur, and yet I was only here as a magistrate. I wasn't officially participating in the war; I was only here for support, so if I fled back to the Capital Planet, the prime minister shouldn't have anything bad to say about me. I figured Randy and Lady Annabelle would make a fuss about it, though.

"Lord Liam, our goal here is to construct a base to support the Imperial Army. Now that the Empire has retreated, we can no longer fulfill that goal. We should retreat immediately and seek guidance from the Capital Planet."

Everyone nodded at Claus's exceedingly reasonable argument, considering Planet Augur totally expendable. These were all brave, fearless knights and soldiers, but there was a reason they didn't want to fight in this situation, and that was our location. Planet Augur wasn't a place they should have to put their lives on the line to protect. If we were above House Banfield's home planet, then they would have given their lives to protect it, but this was just a planet we'd leave behind in a few years anyway. It didn't mean anything to us. Both the locals we'd saved from that despicable baron and the immigrants from my home territory were people who would soon no longer have anything to do with me. There was no reason to put these soldiers' lives at risk to protect such a place—and that was what I read in all their faces.

Logically, I agreed with that stance. I'd always planned to abandon this planet if the war came here. What was wrong with running anyway? There was no reason for me to protect this planet. The locals were idiots who worshiped me like a god, and my former subjects were a bunch of weirdos as always. I wouldn't feel anything abandoning them.

However...however...! I just couldn't accept one thing, which was that I'd have to turn my back to the Autocracy and flee. Why should I—Liam Sera Banfield—allow the Autocracy to take anything from me?

“The Capital Planet, eh? You’re exactly right. Let’s get out of here.”

When I announced our retreat, everyone looked relieved. Then I furrowed my brow, letting them all know I was displeased. *Your boss is pissed, guys.* As a buzz went through them, I told them exactly what I was feeling.

“Hold on. Since when do you guys work for the Capital Planet, huh? You obey *me*.”

When I lowered my voice menacingly, the bridge grew tense. Realizing I was actually against retreating, a soldier spoke up.

“This isn’t your planet, Lord Liam! There’s no reason to risk your life to protect it!”

“Of course there is!” I roared back.

The people of Planet Augur were brainless idiots who worshiped me as a god. The people who’d immigrated here from my territory were morons who wanted to hold a festival to compete with the locals. But while the people here might all be problem children, but I’d put effort into developing this planet. Why should my enemies get to do whatever they wanted to it?

In my past life, I’d let people take and take from me. That was why I’d decided in this life, *I* was going to be the taker. Yet here were people coming to take from me again. Well, I wouldn’t let them. I’d make them regret going against me!

“Listen up. I rule this planet as its magistrate. I’ve put time and resources into developing it to get things where they are now. Why should I just hand it over to Autocracy?”

“B-but…” They still didn’t seem convinced.

I gave them an out. “If you want to run, then run. Abandon this planet’s defenseless people, go back home, and make the excuse to yourself that there was nothing else you could do. *I’m* going to fight, though.”

The soldiers all hung their heads. Some gritted their teeth and clenched their fists. Duty, righteousness, justice—they were all words that I hated, but they were important to these people. When I hit them where it hurt, they stopped arguing with me.

Seeing the soldiers all go quiet, Claus double-checked, “Are you serious about this, Lord Liam?”

“Of course I am. We’ve gone up against superior numbers plenty of times in the past. We’re just doing the same thing now, right?”

Yes, it was the same thing, except for one difference: the Autocracy’s army was so powerful that even the Empire feared it.

Claus closed his eyes. “The Autocracy are not the same as the previous foes we’ve fought. They’ve managed to best the Empire’s elite forces.”

“Are *you* going to run then?”

The Autocracy had to be pretty powerful if they’d repelled Calvin’s main force, so even Claus was getting cold feet about facing against such an opponent. Or so I thought.

“I cannot flee and abandon my lord. I *am* still a knight, after all.”

Seeing how undaunted Claus was, all the others seemed to calm down as well.

“Well, aren’t I lucky to have a head knight I can rely on?”

“You jest. Surely you have more reliable knights. In any case, if we’re going to fight, we’ll need to prepare ourselves. We won’t be able to protect Planet Augur from the Autocracy without a strategy.”

“The enemy has three hundred thousand ships? What’s the Imperial Army doing?”

One soldier displayed holographic data and maps in the air around us, extrapolating the current state of affairs from what they saw. “The Imperial Army’s in a state of confusion, since the main force announced their retreat.”

“Not many of them will pass by Planet Augur on their present course.”

“We could probably gather sixty thousand or so of the close ones, but those ships won’t be much help.”

The only ships in range to help us were outdated models, part of the forces Calvin had scraped together. There weren’t many of them either. The positioning of the forces near Planet Augur seemed almost intentionally malicious to me. The only person who would deploy the ships that way was Calvin himself, but he couldn’t afford defeat at this stage. If he let the Autocracy

get all the way to Planet Augur, his reputation was sure to take a hit, and Prince Cleo would pull even further ahead in the succession conflict.

"Well, either Calvin plans on taking this opportunity to kill me, or this is someone else's plot…" I fell into thought.

"Lord Liam, I recommend we bolster our forces with whatever allies are available," said Claus. He was apparently of the opinion that we should join forces with the outdated ships.

"I'll leave it to you. Do as you will."

***

Sixty thousand of Calvin's ships had retreated to the vicinity of Planet Augur. They were a force of outdated vessels that weren't likely to come in handy for much of anything, but the one thing they didn't lack was pluck.

"Do you really intend to fight against the Autocracy with us?"

I was presently communicating with the lieutenant general who had temporarily been put in command of the fleet.

"We really do," I replied. "I'm impressed you haven't fled the area, though."

Though they appeared no different from the forces that had been dispatched with me to Planet Augur, these guys had stayed behind and intended to fight.

"If we ran away at this point, we'd be deserters, wouldn't we? We'd just die in the end anyway," the lieutenant general explained, somewhat jokingly.

I sort of felt for the guy, since his "better" option was fighting against the Autocracy's main force with me.

"Have you heard anything from the Empire's main force?"

The lieutenant general's expression clouded, so I didn't anticipate good news. *"We can't contact them. I've heard some people have received orders, but I'm sure the whole force is ready to flee."*

"You can't contact them? I haven't heard about anything happening to Calvin."

“We were just gathered to bolster their numbers; we don’t have anything to do with his faction,” the lieutenant general revealed. *“That’s why we were deployed in such an obnoxiously out-of-the-way place. We’ve hardly received any orders at all.”*

“You were dealt a bad hand. You’ll have to play better next time.”

“If I survive this, I’ll endeavor to.” Then the lieutenant general stopped joking around and got serious. *“So…what’s the plan?”*

Claus began explaining the situation. “Normally, you would assume the enemy has the advantage in this situation, but they’re taking a big risk heading so deep into Imperial territory.”

As he spoke, he displayed a map showing just how far the enemy was pushing. On one hand, they were gaining a lot of ground, but on the other, they were isolating themselves in enemy territory.

“You plan to surround them?” the lieutenant general asked. *“It would be a relief to have the assistance of the other border nobles. May I ask your opinion on that matter, Count Banfield?”*

To understand what a noble might think, it was best to ask a noble.

I gave the lieutenant general my honest opinion. “You think they’d be stupid enough to come help us fight when they’re at a disadvantage? Those guys will only show up when they know the battle’s already won.”

“So we’ll have to face them with only our current forces.”

“Well, their advantage in numbers will shrink a bit if you fight with us.”

“I’d prefer to go up against the Autocracy with three times their forces at least…but it’ll be a relief to have your fleet fighting with us, Count Banfield.”

Seeing how determined this guy was to fight just made the soldiers of the dispatch fleet seem even more pathetic. His commitment alone made the lieutenant general come across as a dependable ally.

“You know, I kind of like you. Before you get dealt another bad hand, why don’t you come work for me?” I suggested. “I’ll make things easier for you.”

The lieutenant general gaped at me for a second, then burst into laughter at the idea that I was discussing what might come *after* the battle.

"Very well. If I survive, I'll kiss your shoes or whatever else you'd have me do."

Frankly, the idea of a worn-out-looking middle-aged dude like him kissing my shoes wasn't very appealing. "Yeah, I'll pass. Don't forget the offer, though."

***

Before the battle, I decided to make a speech to my troops. They were most likely all thinking this was a stupid fight against terrible odds for a planet they weren't even obligated to protect. If they wanted a speech from me to raise their morale, I couldn't really decline.

I arrived in the studio that would shoot the speech to find myself surrounded by soldiers, all of them around the rank of general. The entire army would be viewing the broadcast.

As I stood before my men, who awaited my words, I recalled my previous life. I'd thought since then that important people's speeches weren't worth listening to at all. I wasn't going to try to make the listeners laugh with a joke either. There was a good chance I'd screw that up, and they'd have to pretend to laugh.

People who enjoyed public speaking probably liked those forced laughs. During a speech, they got to savor their authority. I wouldn't have to worry at all about what to say or how to get it across. The people in this room all worked for me, so they'd all react however I wanted them to.

I began my speech. "It seems the Autocracy is coming here to pick a fight with Claus, not me. Can you believe those guys?"

I looked over at Claus, but he just listened to my speech expressionlessly. *Now, there's a guy who doesn't pretend to laugh.* That was fine, of course, since it was probably a good trait for a head knight to possess.

Well, from the beginning I hadn't planned on making a speech for the ages. You could even say I was incapable of doing

so. After all, all I wanted out of this situation was to feel good about myself. The Autocracy had picked a fight with me, and I was pissed about that, so I wanted to take out my anger on them. I didn't envy anyone who had to listen to this "speech" of mine.

"So we'll give them everything we've got."

The generals all saluted me, and I realized they were trying to wrap my speech up quickly. *Don't rush me!* Now I was pissed at them, so I decided to continue. *I'll say whatever I want just to draw this out!*

"Our enemy is the Autocracy! They've invaded the Empire for no reason, so it's up to us to give them the punishment they deserve! Everyone, look at Planet Augur."

On cue, a handy little 3D image of Augur was projected right in front of me. I put my hand under it, as if I grasped the fate of an entire world.

"I've looked after this planet. It doesn't matter whether I'm only a temporary magistrate. Right now, this is my domain, and protecting that domain makes me a noble. This planet is ours to defend!"

A blatant lie. Any Imperial noble would turn tail and run if things became truly dangerous.

"You work for me. You're my swords and my shields!" I said, comparing the soldiers to armaments that I would use without restraint. "With you, I'll grab victory! If I don't, the enemy will ravage this planet."

These listeners probably saw me as a wonderful lord who wouldn't abandon this planet even if I was only its temporary ruler, but that wasn't my true motivation. Because I'd put time and money into Augur, I simply wasn't about to let someone take it from me.

I didn't care about the people of Augur—I really didn't! I mean it! Seriously... But ravaging a planet I ruled over was unpardonable! Anyway, it was impossible for me to lose. Not only did I have the Guide's protection, I was also a swordsman of the Way of the Flash. I had a duty to show the entire universe that that sword style was the most powerful in existence. It was out of the question to lose.

“Teach the Autocracy the name of House Banfield! Use their loss to carve into them just who it is that protects this place!”

The assembled soldiers all saluted once more in unison. The knights performed their customary salute as well, wrapping up my meandering speech perfectly. I’d said some meaningless stuff in the middle, but having a good clincher at the end really made me feel like I’d pulled off a good speech overall.

Given all my empty rambling, however, my subordinates’ eyes glimmered with relief now that I was finished. *Aren’t you guys a little too happy that I’m done…?* I knew I’d gone on for a bit, but they could at least try to stay professional. I decided not to condemn them, though, since they at least seemed motivated to fight against the Autocracy.

In any case, that was probably enough for today. I thrust an arm out and ordered everyone into action.

“All forces sortie! Crush the Autocracy’s main force!”

At those words, the fleet took off.

***

The Autocracy’s main force was puzzled to find that the fleet they’d been expecting to encounter on the way to Planet Augur was no longer there. On the bridge of his fortress-class flagship, Isel considered the matter with arms crossed.

“They pulled back the meager forces they had stationed here?” Isel hadn’t been expecting to get this far completely unscathed.

His men felt the same way. “There weren’t any traps on the way here either,” one said. “You don’t suppose they didn’t have a strategy from the start, do you?”

Everyone around that soldier shook their head as if saying that he didn’t get it.

“This *is* the enemy’s strategy.”

“The enemy is Sir Claus, you know. Some people say the United Kingdom essentially lost to him alone.”

“This quiet…it’s the calm before the storm.”

The warriors all found the strange tranquility unsettling, as did Isel.

“The calm before the storm, eh?” he said. “I don’t hate it.”

Every element of a strategy created by someone like Claus was surely meaningful. Everyone felt that way. However...

“We’ve spotted the Imperial fleet! Wh-what the...?!”

“Stay calm!” Isel shouted to the panicked operator.

“Y-yes, sir! An Imperial fleet in formation is visible! I estimate their numbers at sixty thousand!”

A fleet of sixty thousand ships was lying in wait for the Autocracy, but their formation made the men on the bridge doubt their eyes. The enemy couldn’t possibly believe those sixty thousand outdated ships could stand up to the Autocracy’s three hundred thousand, could they?

“Is this part of their strategy, or just a warm-up match?” Isel mused. “Who cares? Cut through them!”

At his command, three hundred thousand Autocracy ships charged toward the enemy.

***

The lieutenant general sweated profusely as the Autocracy’s fleet barreled toward them.

“Isn’t three hundred thousand ships overkill? Wouldn’t a hundred thousand be enough?”

The enemy wasn’t yet close enough to see with the naked eye, but they were close enough to engage, and they numbered three hundred thousand. The lieutenant general’s fleet, on the other hand, had been scraped together from sixty thousand outdated ships.

“Guess we got unlucky, thinking the enemy probably wouldn’t attack Augur. I can’t believe we got caught up in some nobles’ faction squabble.”

The lieutenant general figured that his fleet had only been a sacrificial pawn in Calvin’s ploy to kill Liam. He felt keenly that it

wouldn't hurt Calvin one bit to lose them, since they weren't part of his faction.

"Still, I can't believe they're going after Sir Claus so seriously, not Prince Calvin. What are they really thinking?"

Claus was famous even in the Imperial Army as Liam's right-hand man, and for the brilliant victory he'd won over the United Kingdom. Those in the Imperial Army all knew his name and considered him someone they could learn from.

The lieutenant general wondered how long his sixty thousand ships would hold out. Beside him, his adjutant shuddered.

"Even if they're charging us with this many ships, we still won't get any reinforcements from the main army, will we?"

The lieutenant general shrugged. "We can't even get in touch with them, with all the interference in our comms… It sort of feels like that's intentional, though, doesn't it?"

"Think it's the faction squabble?"

The soldiers were of course aware that Calvin and Liam were on opposite sides of a conflict, and that they'd been dragged into that conflict themselves.

"Entering firing range!" an operator cried.

The lieutenant general followed the enemy's movements and made a decision calmly.

"Wait until we're in more effective range. If we don't conserve our energy, we won't have any juice to power our defensive fields."

He wasn't going into the fight expecting they would win, but he didn't intend to lose either.

"Enemy fleet attacking!"

It would take a little time before the projectiles reached them, so the lieutenant general explained their strategy once more. "All ships, fall back while focusing on defense! Send the unmanned vessels forward!"

They had emptied a number of their ships and would send them forward with their defensive fields deployed to act as shields. With the empty ships' full power devoted to defense, they

should be able to withstand the enemy's fierce attacks. At least… they hoped so.

As the Autocracy's attacks reached them, the lieutenant general's ship lurched. He gripped his armrest and glared at the enemy fleet on his monitors.

"They're this powerful, even with us focusing on defense?!"

The adjutant checked the damage to their fleet. "That attack took out thirty of our unmanned ships!"

"If we were fighting normally, we'd just have lost a few hundred ships."

Even with all their energy devoted to defense, some of the older model ships simply couldn't withstand the attacks. Still, fighting in this way would buy them some time.

"All we can do is trust our allies now."

The adjutant grimaced. "Will they really come? They're nobles, you know. You don't think they're just using us as a decoy so they can escape?"

"Don't say any more, would you? If I doubt them, I won't be able to fight."

"I suppose you're right…"

The Imperial fleet backed off, maintaining its focus on defense. The enemy fleet must have been getting impatient, however, because they started to change tactics.

"The enemy fleet is closing in," the adjutant noted. "They plan to take us out at point-blank range."

The adjutant broke out into a cold sweat. He knew they didn't stand a chance if that happened. The lieutenant general felt the same way, but he'd already seen this coming.

Just then, an operator shouted joyfully, "Allied ships are coming out of warp!"

The bridge crew members who'd doubted their allies would really come raised cries of joy when they saw the markings on the arriving ships. The vessels that appeared one by one on the battlefield around them were decorated with House Banfield's crest.

When Liam appeared on his monitor, the lieutenant general half-rose from his seat in shock. "C-Count Banfield?"

“Good work screwing up the enemy’s formation. Leave the rest to us,” Liam said, then cut the call.

The bridge crew was speechless.

The adjutant was the first to recover. “Why was the count communicating from a mobile knight’s cockpit? H-he doesn’t intend to go out and fight personally, does he?”

The lieutenant general couldn’t answer his adjutant’s question.

***

In the Argos’s dedicated hangar for the Avid, a crew of both mechanics and mages worked to get Liam’s mobile knight ready to deploy. The mages were using spatial magic to store the Avid’s weaponry, and the whole hangar was abuzz with activity as everyone prepped the craft. An operator calmly making a report was audible, as were the raised voices of the mechanics getting the Avid ready.

“Storage space has reached capacity.”

“It can just carry the rest!”

“Are the guard craft ready to deploy?!”

As Amagi climbed into the Avid’s open cockpit with me, the skirt of her classic maid uniform billowed; I saw all the way up to her thighs, which were usually covered. I narrowed my eyes, not wanting everyone nearby to see her skin.

“Pretty bold of you, with all these people around,” I told her. “I prefer a more modest lady, you know.”

I cautioned her jokingly, but Amagi’s expression was stern. I thought she was upset about my nagging, but that seemingly wasn’t the case.

“Please refrain from leading this attack,” she said.

I realized she didn’t want me to go out and fight the Autocracy myself. She must have been worried about me, since the Autocracy had a reputation for serious militarism. Even I thought their martial strength was unusual. But if I wanted to win, I was going to fight.

“If I fight, we’ll lose fewer forces. I have my trump card the Griffin too. You don’t need to worry about me.”

The Griffin was a ridiculous custom craft I’d had made, based on the concept of a ship that functioned as a mobile knight. I’d used it in my battle against the Berkeley Family but hadn’t touched it since then. It was a powerful weapon, yet that wasn’t enough to change Amagi’s mind.

“Please do not compare the Autocracy to that group that called themselves Pirate Nobles. The enemy are elites, with a number and quality of ships that surpass our own forces.”

Our averages were lower now after absorbing those sixty thousand allied ships, although House Banfield’s ships in themselves would have been perfectly sufficient in quality to compete against the Autocracy. The foremost problem, though, lay in our numbers—it was just too rough that we had to go up against three hundred thousand ships.

“That’s why I’m going out in the Avid, right? It’s about time to get going.”

Amagi left the cockpit, understanding that I’d dug my heels in. The hatch closed, and as she floated outside in the hangar, she curtsied to me.

“Please come back safe.”

She must have opened a comm link with the Avid.

“You know I will. Now...launching Avid.”

***

On the bridge of the Argos, Claus sat in the supreme commander’s seat. Liam had foisted command on him, saying he was going out to fight himself.

“Prepare to engage the Autocracy fleet,” Claus commanded, enduring the unpleasant heaviness in his stomach.

Claus’s strategy was simple: their allies would act as bait, leading the enemy to disrupt its own formation. Then House Banfield’s fleet would charge them. That was all there was to it; he hadn’t had time to prepare anything more complex.

“Prepare to launch all mobile knights! Make sure the Royal Guard know not to leave Lord Liam’s side.”

Claus gave his orders calmly, but on the inside, he was so nervous he felt as though his heart might burst.

Charging against a force that’s ten times our size at this scale?! They’re going to burn right through our allies!

He could just picture the enemy’s three hundred thousand ships surrounding their thirty thousand and beating the stuffing out of them. They had another sixty thousand allies, but they were unlikely to help with anything but distracting the foe.

I can’t come up with anything other than attacking with our ships, deploying all our mobile knights, and then attacking with our ships again…

Thinking about it wasn’t the same as pulling it off. Then again, there probably wasn’t any need to worry about that. House Banfield’s army was skilled enough to carry out any orders Claus gave it, and charging headlong was their favorite move.

But Lord Liam shouldn’t be out there fighting himself, should he?! He’s the one person who should be as far away from the battle as possible!

This was no time for Liam to fool around on the battlefield, but as he was determined to deploy, there was nothing Claus could do to stop him.

Haaah… I should have rewritten my will. I have to be prepared to sacrifice the Argos to let Lord Liam get away, if it comes to that.

If they were going to lose, he had to at least make sure Liam got away safely. As Claus was steeling himself, an operator shouted a status update.

“Enemy fleet is attacking!”

Claus closed his eyes, and a few seconds later announced, “All ships, commence attack.”

The Autocracy had been taken by surprise, so they were only able to offer a scattershot attack. House Banfield’s fleet, on the other hand, dealt decisive blows as they charged through the breaks in the Autocracy fleet’s formation.

As the two fleets passed within one another’s eyeshot, Claus felt as though his stomach was in a vice grip.

We really made it through the enemy fleet?!

He hadn't been expecting them to succeed, but the skill of House Banfield's pilots surpassed his expectations.

Claus hurried to confirm the situation. "What's the status of the mobile knights?"

"All units have launched!" an operator answered.

The mobile knights that had launched so efficiently belonged to Claus's own squad.

A voice that maintained a trace of youth echoed from the bridge comm.

"Aha! Which one should I eat first? It's impossible to choose... They all look so delicious!"

It was Chengsi Sera Tohrei. She'd discarded her human body to become a cyborg, but had since then undergone reconstruction treatment, reverting to human. Of course, the treatment was purely physical and couldn't fix her frightening personality, so she was just as excited as ever to be on the battlefield. Right now, however, Claus was glad to have her on their side.

"I can't believe I get to fight against the Autocracy in my first battle back in the field! House Banfield really is the best!"

Chengsi's mobile knight, Ericius, pounced on the Autocracy's fleet.

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The Autocracy's troops were astounded by the enemy fleet's sudden appearance, including Isel himself.

"They used short-distance warp and attacked right after appearing?! I didn't think anyone could pull off a maneuver like that!"

Isel was surprised, but he also smiling in amusement. He watched the enemy fleet sail past them with the grin of a ferocious beast on his face. The two fleets were just passing by each other, but if the enemy ships had mistimed their move they would have collided with his fleet and self-destructed. Isel was impressed at the enemy's skill in avoiding that.

He spread his arms wide. The other warriors on the bridge couldn't contain their excitement either. "So this is House Banfield!"

"The way they fight is just our style! So Sir Claus is a warrior as well!"

"I get the sense House Banfield is the same as us!"

Isel and the other warriors were thrilled to finally encounter an opponent that fought in the same manner the Autocracy did.

A moment later, they got word of ships in their fleet falling one by one. Isel narrowed his eyes, then widened them when he realized what had happened.

"Deploy our warriors. Sir Claus has given us a perfect farewell gift. If we don't go out and meet them, they'll think the Autocracy has no manners!"

Isel had realized House Banfield's mobile knights were taking out his ships. To the Autocracy, it would be rude not to meet them in the field.

"Send out the Twelve Devas too," Isel commanded. "It would be disrespectful to meet them with less than our full strength."

Isel's heart raced at the thought of a fight with a fierce opponent.

Will someone out there satisfy me now...?

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It had been a while since I'd been out in the Avid, but the control sticks really felt right in my hands. The Graf Nemain wasn't bad either, but my old friend the Avid was definitely the best.

"It's been too long since I took you for a spin, hasn't it?" I said, and there was a metallic groan as if in answer. Since I'd obtained the Machine Heart and integrated it into the mobile knight, the Avid had had a will of its own. It could respond to my voice and my feelings as well.

"Show me what you can do."

I moved the control sticks and pressed down on the foot pedals. In response, the Avid sped toward the enemy, whose ships

began firing to intercept it. Lasers streaked at me, but the huge shields on the Avid's shoulders shifted forward to block them. Each time a beam struck my defense field, there was a bright flash of light, but the attacks couldn't get through and dispersed before they struck the Avid.

In a single second I plunged through hundreds, even thousands of beam attacks and held up a rocket launcher as I neared an enemy ship. I pulled the trigger on a control stick, and the launcher fired a stake-like projectile. The metal stake buried itself in the enemy ship and turned red before exploding. This was an anti-ship weapon, and the other mobile knights were equipped with it as well. The targeted ship was destroyed, bursting from the inside out.

I looked around and saw allied Nemains destroying other enemy ships one after another.

"That's the first step done with."

We'd charged in, confused the enemy fleet, and deployed our mobile knights. Claus's plan had destroyed more enemy ships than I'd expected.

I sped up the Avid, aiming at a second ship. This one seemed to be commanding other vessels nearby. It was protected by shield ships that specialized in defense.

"Those shield ships are in the way."

I sped up even more and fired the launcher as if I was trying to empty it. I closed in on the first shield ship, and the next, shooting each before moving on. By the time I'd destroyed four of the shield ships, I'd run out of ammo. I tossed away the launcher and grabbed the hilt of the Avid's custom laser blade. Normally, these weapons were just hilts from which a laser blade emerged, but the Avid's had a guard on it as well.

The blade that materialized from the hilt was larger than the Graf Nemain's. It was big enough to call a great sword, and the blade was longer than the Avid was tall. I swung it down on an enemy ship and chopped right through it, like a hot knife slicing through butter. I was impressed by the Avid's ability to cut down an enemy ship in one swing.

"Are you even more powerful now? I bet Nias will flip her lid if I let her run an analysis on you."

It did seem stronger than when I'd last piloted it. As I was considering my next target, this "bonus round" came to an end. The enemy fleet had recovered from their confusion and sent out some humanoid weapons of their own. These mobile knights were of a different design than the Empire's.

"Already recovered, eh? Don't think you can beat the Avid, though."

The Avid's eyes glinted as it hoisted its laser blade over its shoulder. The enemy craft underestimated me, holding up their rifles as if to mock me for being outside a sword's range.

"You think it won't reach? Well, sorry...but it will!"

I slashed downward diagonally, and the blade of light extended several kilometers, bisecting three enemy crafts. It even reached a cruiser in front of the Avid, which exploded after being halved. Laser blades didn't normally extend that far, but this was the Avid. Its crazy performance was what made it such a special craft.

"Let's teach the Autocracy my name and yours, Avid. We'll carve it into them as a wound that will never heal."

Each time I swung the laser blade, its energy arced after it like a fan unfolding. Enemy mobile knights were getting caught in the blade's path as I directed it at ships. All the explosions sent debris flying through space, and it sparked every time it struck the Avid's defense field.

The eyes of the Autocracy's fleet were glued to the Avid as I used it to slice through their ships, and it wasn't just their ship crews taking notice of me. The pilots of their mobile knights saw me as an enemy to be reckoned with, and none were looking down on me like the ones earlier.

"I'm Liam Sera Banfield. I'll face you. Come at me."

The Avid beckoned the enemy and craft raced at me one after another. Autocracy pilots were different from those of the Imperial Army. They were trained well, but they were all far too direct.

They swarmed me like insects, so I cut them down with the Avid's laser blade. Once I'd gone through a few dozen of them, someone finally managed to get behind me. I could have turned around and dealt with the craft, but I decided to delegate that.

“You’re late.”

“Apologies. We got held up.”

The Nemains piloted by my Royal Guard had finally appeared. Each was customized somehow, but they were all painted the same color.

Ethel positioned herself to protect the Avid from behind. *“I’ve got your back!”*

“Just focus on protecting yourselves. Now then…” I pointed my laser blade at the enemy craft continuing to gather in front of me. “Ladies and gentlemen of the Autocracy, allow me to make you regret trying to lay a hand on my planet.”

You were the ones who started this fight. You could have just played nice and chased Calvin around instead.

Behind the Avid materialized several containers bearing magic circles for spatial magic. The muzzles of laser weapons and firearms poked out of these containers.

“Don’t think of the Avid as a normal mobile knight.”

The gun muzzles all spewed flames at once, blowing away the enemies around me. I was going to make it so the people of the Autocracy shivered whenever they heard my name.

Chapter 17
Liam and Isel

THE ATTACKS OF HOUSE Banfield's mobile knights, beginning with the Avid, chipped away at the Autocracy's formation. Of course, looking at the enemy's forces as a whole, House Banfield was only damaging a very small portion of them. Throwing a fleet of thirty thousand ships at a force of three hundred thousand just wasn't going to do that much. House Banfield had made an obviously foolish move.

The Autocracy didn't react as if they had, though. As Isel watched the battle unfold from the bridge of the fortress-class, his heart raced at the exploits of House Banfield's forces.

"I thought Sir Claus was just a skilled strategist, but it seems he's a fierce warrior as well. Good…very good."

The goal of Isel and the Autocracy was to target Claus, not Calvin or Liam. Why was that? Because, since Claus was a knight of the Empire with a certain reputation, whoever took him down would gain a corresponding notoriety.

That might make it seem like they were too focused on individual achievement in battle, but Isel had another goal as well. He knew that if the Empire lost Claus, it would be a significant blow in terms of manpower. Knights like Claus, who could command millions of ships, were valuable. Such commanders weren't easily replaced, and Isel was excited at the opportunity to strike down such a foe.

His eyes shone with excitement, the thought of this one worthy enemy all that filled his head. Isel felt electricity surge through him at the bravery of this man who would challenge them with a mere thirty thousand ships, and at his ruthlessness in using even his own lord, Liam, as a pawn on the battlefield.

"I like your style, using even your lord in your attempt to snatch victory! You're a knight—no, a *warrior* who's wasted on the Empire!"

Isel wanted Claus. *Leaving a warrior who could destroy the United Kingdom as a mere vassal of House Banfield would be too tragic. The strong must have a standing equal to their strength… Sir Claus is absolutely wasted on the Empire.*

As Isel tried to think of a way to poach Claus from his foe, a subordinate delivered a report. “Sir Claus’s lord, Count Banfield, is leading the charge himself in a mobile knight and dealing heavy damage to our forces.”

Isel wasn’t overly surprised by this news, but he commended the count on his mettle to fighting on the front lines himself. “He can’t compare to Sir Claus, but the enemy’s leader is a fine warrior himself. He’s more than worthy of challenging us! I’ll engrave House Banfield’s name into my heart.”

He thought of Liam as a fine warrior, but nothing more. That was, until the next report he received.

“Prince Isel! One of the Twelve Devas under your direct command, Mathe Haj, has fallen in battle!”

Isel’s eyes went wide. “What did you say?”

At first, he couldn’t believe the report. After all, the Twelve Devas were warriors he’d personally selected. They were fearless, powerful comrades who’d fought alongside him on countless battlefields. They served as the central power of Isel’s army and had buried countless foes prior to now. They were armed with cutting-edge humanoid weapons crafted by the Autocracy. It was ridiculous to even think them capable of losing. Thus, Isel grinned.

“Who took him out?” he asked, smiling despite just having learned a dear friend had died.

“Liam Sera Banfield!”

Isel and all the other warriors on the bridge exchanged glances and grinned as one.

“He’s strong!”

“It’s a waste to leave him as a mere count!”

“If I were a bit younger, I’d go take his head myself!”

It always excited the Autocracy’s warriors when a powerful foe appeared. Warriors dying on the battlefield was to be expected, and respect for the enemies who killed them was just as natural.

Isel spread his arms wide. “Gah ha ha ha! I didn’t expect him to be such a strong foe! Well then, it’s only polite that I face him myself, isn’t it?!”

The bridge crew cheered when their supreme commander announced his own participation in the battle, not a single one of them attempting to discourage him.

“Prince Isel is joining the fight!”

“The Autocracy’s strongest warrior is entering the field!”

“Notify the rest of the fleet!”

The Autocracy’s troops let out a great cheer even as the Avid continued to tear through the humanoid weapons on the monitor before them.

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I’d noticed something while racing around the battlefield in the Avid.

“Are these guys actually crazy?”

In the Empire, the Autocracy was viewed as Shimazu or Kamakura warriors were in my previous existence. They fought without fear on the battlefield—and seeing this firsthand really made me understand how unnatural it was.

In the Avid, I grabbed an enemy craft’s head and crushed it, tossing it away. The next foes swarmed around me. I swung my blade at them, destroying them all in one strike, and yet more enemies crowded in. No matter how I demonstrated the overwhelming difference in our abilities, the Autocracy’s mobile knights just kept charging.

I kicked the head of one mobile knight that had rushed me, smashing it, and shot through its cockpit with the rifle the Avid gripped. Enemies exploded around the Avid constantly, yet more kept racing at me. If these had been space pirates, they’d have run for the hills ages ago. These Autocracy guys were nasty, pressing down on me with glee however many I took out.

“Do these guys have no fear? Clock the difference in our abilities, already!”

I sliced an approaching mobile knight in two with my laser blade, then sped away. When I got free of the swarms of enemies crowding around the Avid, I narrowed my eyes, observing the state of the battle as a whole.

“Looks like things are getting tough.”

We’d dealt a powerful blow to the enemy while they were confused, but our superior position wouldn’t last forever. Eventually they would overwhelm us with sheer numbers. House Banfield’s mobile knights fought fiercely, but they were starting to be pushed back.

“Do I use my trump card now, or...?”

Before I could decide, I sensed something in the distance.

“That’s going to be trouble...”

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“Isn’t it just great to be surrounded by enemies everywhere you look?!”

The Ericius that Chengsi piloted was unique in that its inner frame was exposed. It was a mobile knight so focused on offense that it utilized only the bare minimum armored plating. Chengsi was probably just about the only person who would choose to pilot such a craft.

The Ericius was also furnished with beam-firing weapons at various points on its body. It excelled at both long- and short-range combat, with its meager defenses being its only significant weakness.

Amid the chaos, Chengsi pressed forward, avoiding the enemy’s attacks. When an enemy craft got near her, she armed her mobile knight with hedgehog-like beam needles that emerged from all over its body.

“You’re in my way.”

She zipped past the enemy craft, and it exploded, sliced to ribbons. Slipping through the explosion, the Ericius engaged each new mobile knight or enemy ship it came across.

However, even Chengsi was starting to get tired. Inside the cockpit, she was covered in sweat and breathing heavily.

“Haaah...haaah... I’d like to play more, but my energy reserves are getting a little low.”

In addition to its weak defenses, this “hedgehog” weapon was actually another of the Ericius’s flaws. It was a feature that quickly ate through the craft’s energy reserves, so it had to refuel via tanks stored with spatial magic. The Autocracy’s warriors were proving to be difficult foes, though. In fighting them, Chengsi had expended so much energy that she’d already gone through her reserve tanks.

“I’d like to at least take out a big target before I retire.”

Chengsi set her sights on the Autocracy’s fortress-class, which she couldn’t even see on her monitor unless she zoomed in. From its positioning, she could guess that the enemy commander was aboard that ship.

As the situation was now, however, the Ericius would run out of energy before she reached the fortress-class. She considered giving up, then licked her painted lips.

“Well, isn’t that an interesting sight? I’ll face you, then.”

The humanoid weapon that had just launched from the fortress-class had a unique eight-armed design. It was headed somewhere, ignoring the Ericius completely.

“I don’t think I like your attitude!”

The Ericius opened a section of armor on its thigh to reveal a scattershot beam weapon. A number of thin beams shot out from this and curved, heading for the eight-armed humanoid weapon. However, the enemy craft swung a khakkhara-like weapon with one hand, deflecting Chengsi’s beams.

“Sorry, but I don’t have time to play with you. Count Banfield’s waiting for me.”

Hearing Liam’s name, Chengsi opened her mouth wide to laugh. “There’s no need for you to face him. You’ll be dying here, after all!”

The Ericius sped toward the enemy craft, which signaled the guard craft around it to stand down.

“You appear to be quite the warrior yourself, but you’re no match for me.”

The Ericius was equipped with sharp claws on both hands. Chengsi extended those blades and thrust them forward, but the enemy craft repelled the attack easily with its khakkhara.

“Ugh!” Chengsi attempted to pull away from the enemy, but it chased after her.

“Is that all you’ve got?”

“You’re good…! I’m getting chills!”

The Ericius deployed its beam needles and sped at the enemy craft, which had advanced too close and entered the range of her special attack.

“Now, dance with me!”

The Ericius spun at the enemy with its needles firing, but the enemy’s khakkhara blocked each beam.

“Huh…?”

Chengsi was speechless. The enemy craft had repelled her attack effortlessly.

While she hesitated in shock, the enemy approached once more. It swung its khakkhara and severed the Ericius’s left arm and both legs in an instant.

“It’s over.”

As the enemy aimed its next strike at Chengsi’s cockpit, she smiled.

“Well, it wouldn’t be so bad to end things here, but… Nice timing, Claus.”

As the enemy’s khakkhara swung toward the Ericius, a beam blazed between the two craft. When the enemy craft backed off to avoid it, the Ericius fired something like a scale weight from its remaining right arm. The weight attached itself to a ship that had just appeared on the battlefield, and the ship sped away from the scene pulling the Ericius by a cable.

The beam attack launched by the ship had destroyed several humanoid weapons and enemy ships in the subsequent blast. The eight-armed enemy craft seemed to consider chasing after the Ericius, but gave up, since the ship had already gained too much distance.

The Ericius had attached itself to House Banfield’s flagship, the Argos. It had come to Chengsi’s aid by launching a second charge on the enemy. Once more, House Banfield’s fleet punched a hole through the enemy’s formation.

Claus’s face appeared on her monitor. *“You all right, Chengsi?”*

Chengsi shrugged. “That was a close one. That enemy was no joke.”

“They’ve got somebody you’d *take seriously, huh? I wonder who it was.”*

“Who knows?” Chengsi replied with a grin.

Sensing that she had no more information to offer, Claus cut the call.

“Now I owe Claus one,” Chengsi muttered to herself.

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House Banfield had succeeded in another charging maneuver. Once again, the formation of the Autocracy’s fleet was disturbed, and they fell into confusion.

“We got them again, huh?” I exclaimed in my cockpit, both surprised and excited at this turn of events. I felt a fierce smile forming on my face even as I realized I’d underestimated Claus’s abilities.

I could command the fleet to charge, and they would carry out the order just fine, but in a head-on collision House Banfield’s forces would have been crushed by the Autocracy’s superior numbers. What Claus had managed, however, was to thread the fleet through the enemy’s ships. Of course, this was space, so the distance between any given enemy ships was thousands of meters. Nonetheless, Claus’s charges through the enemy fleet were disrupting their formation and throwing them into chaos.

“I thought it would be almost impossible, even with our fleet’s training, so I can’t believe he’s succeeded at it twice now.” I was getting jealous of Claus. “But my commander’s getting so much done that *I’m* not standing out.”

If the war ended like this, Claus’s exploits would be famed in the Autocracy, not mine. I held my head for a moment, then brushed my bangs back.

“Now that Claus has confused the enemy again, this is my chance. Avid, summon the Griffin.”

The Avid’s movements altered at the keyword “Griffin.” An automated voice announced, *“Spatial magic output at maximum.*

Removing locks on subspace hatch. Activating Griffin."

A huge magic circle extended ten kilometers behind the Avid. From it emerged the bow of a ship. The enemy realized the Avid was about to do something major and concentrated their attacks on the magic circle, their humanoid weapons charging at the Avid itself.

"Presence of enemy craft confirmed. Commencing counterattack."

The enormous ship exiting the magic circle began to attack even before it had fully emerged. The enemy's attacks bounced off its defense fields, and the massive ship returned fire with beams and missiles.

Red trails from the missiles' rockets blazed across the battlefield. When the missiles struck the enemy, ships and humanoid weapons alike were caught up in the explosions.

Finally, the massive ship—the Griffin—revealed itself fully.

"Commencing transformation."

"Fast as you can, if you would."

"Acknowledged."

The enormous warship began to change in form to a humanoid shape. Enemies attacked it thinking it would be vulnerable as it transformed. They kept rushing at the Avid as well.

"You're being awfully careless on the battlefield!" someone taunted.

As I met an attacking craft with my laser blade, I responded via the channel that had opened between us.

"Careless? It's called *poised*."

I cut the craft in two before turning the Avid around to look at the Griffin. It had finished transforming and was attacking every enemy around it with both hands, each of its fingers firing massive beams. Each of the beams—ten total—destroyed multiple craft. I'd dealt a considerable blow to the enemies nearby.

The Avid headed for the Griffin's head section, where a hatch opened to welcome it. The Avid entered the hatch, and several mechanical arms fixed it in place.

"Connecting with Griffin."

The eyes of the Avid and Griffin flashed simultaneously, and I gained control of the massive machine. My screen switched from the Avid's view to the Griffin's.

"The ships look so small now. Let's crush them all!"

The Griffin, which in the past had dealt the final blow to the Berkeley Family, was a giant ship—no, a giant mobile knight—that could probably be called a weapon of mass destruction. Turrets appeared all over its body, firing in all directions, as missiles launched to intercept enemy craft coming my way. The Griffin dealt a heavy blow to the enemy fleet.

"Pretty cool, huh? I'm told this is the ultimate mobile knight."

In attempting to give a mobile knight a ship's capabilities, the Seventh Weapons Factory had arrived at the somewhat backward conclusion that they should just make a ship into a mobile knight. One might think such a plan was stupid, but I didn't hate that kind of stupidity.

The Griffin cleaned up all the enemies around it and headed for the center of the enemy fleet's formation. Ships gathered in front of the Griffin in an effort to stop it, firing upon it in unison.

"You work together well, but that's pointless with this thing."

The Griffin pressed its fingers together, and an enormous blade formed from its beam launchers. I swung it at the enemy ships directly in my path and struck every one of them—and a few off to the sides as well.

Despite the racket, I could hear enemy transmissions.

"Somebody stop that giant humanoid! Ignore the rest and surround that thing!"

The enemy fleet altered its maneuvers, their ships forming a circle around me and all firing at once.

"Not a bad move."

The Griffin was bathed in the enemy's concentrated fire, but its hull was composed of rare metals. I'd splurged on the components that made up its interior as well, so it was basically an enormous version of the Avid. Rare metals like orichalcum and adamantite, things that showed up in games, were pricy, given their scarcity and quality as materials. Frankly, they were in a

different league entirely from the more common metals typically used in the construction of ships and mobile knights.

The Griffin withstood a barrage of attacks from hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of ships. Not only that, its various weapons demolished all the ships in its vicinity. I glanced at the state of the battle on my cockpit screens and found that the enemy's formation had collapsed once more. They had likely broken formation purposely in order to deal with the Griffin.

"We've already destroyed a tenth of their forces, but they show no sign of retreating."

One of the Autocracy's characteristics was that they paid no mind to the loss of their own members. In the Empire, if one side lost twenty percent of its forces, it was considered a rout. That wasn't so for the Autocracy, which would keep fighting even after that point. When my coworker Nitta in my past life had talked about the Shimazu clan in the Sengoku period, or the warriors of the Kamakura period, he called them "berserkers." This universe's berserkers were the Autocracy, for sure.

"I don't plan on losing to you. If you want to die that badly, I'll send you to the afterlife personally."

The Griffin's chest armor opened up, and energy began to collect there. I watched a meter fill, and when the weapon was sufficiently charged, I instantly pulled its trigger.

"Destroy!"

The massive beam of light that shot from the Griffin's chest swallowed up the Autocracy's fleet. As I reangled the Griffin, that light swept enemies off the battlefield like a broom cleaning up trash.

Its firepower was completely overwhelming. I was rubbing our difference in strength in the Autocracy's face.

"Do you understand, Autocracy? This is what it truly means to be strong!"

It's ten years too soon for you to be picking a fight with me! No... In this reality's timespan, would it be a hundred years? Anyway, you people picked the wrong guy to mess with!

"Now what will you do? Tuck your tail between your legs and run?"

As I laughed loudly inside my cockpit, a single humanoid weapon raced toward the overwhelmingly powerful Griffin. It dodged the beams, lasers, and ammunition the Griffin shot at it. Its crazy trajectory drew on the canvas of space behind it with lines of light that trailed it.

"What's that...?"

While I watched the complex patterns of lines, almost worried I'd get tangled in them, the enemy reached the Griffin. The humanoid weapon announced itself through an open channel.

"I am the G'doire Autocracy's crown prince, Isel Balandin! I challenge Count Liam Sera Banfield to single combat!"

A young man with spiky blue hair was excitedly asking me to fight one-on-one. If he was telling the truth about who he was, the man before me was the supreme commander of the Autocracy's forces.

Rather than assuming that this was a golden opportunity, though, I was suspicious. Would the crown prince really show himself before me like this? Normally, if the supreme commander was on the battlefield, they were in the back giving orders. Would that person really challenge an enemy to single combat? I thought he must really be an idiot, but then I figured maybe this was all just a big joke.

"What are you, a comedian? I don't like jokes that aren't funny. Get out of here."

Inside, I was kind of rattled by the enemy's sheer stupidity. It was just moronic to witness the Griffin's overwhelming capabilities and still challenge me with a humanoid weapon. I found it hard to believe the Autocracy could be that lacking in common sense.

"So you won't accept my challenge? Then I'll just have to demonstrate my power to you!"

Isel's craft switched armaments to a lance. He swung the pointed weapon about and struck a pose with it.

"I deem you a suitable opponent against whom to use my full strength! This is my—"

"Shut up."

I interrupted Isel's speech and fired on him with the Griffin. The chest beam had heavily drained its energy reserves, but it still had enough juice to fire some beams from its fingertips.

"You seem a little sheltered, so here's a piece of advice. Only announce your name on the battlefield to people weaker than you."

The Autocracy really was trash—or so I thought as the humanoid weapon leaped out from between the beams I'd fired at it. At first, I thought he'd just barely managed to escape, but his craft turned out to be completely unscathed.

"It's low of you to interrupt a guy in the middle of his speech!"

"What?" I was getting pissed at him for insulting me.

Isel calmly went on with his explanation, regardless of whether I was listening to him. *"The Autocracy is ruled by the strongest among us, and the warrior best suited to taking over that position is the only one permitted to call himself crown prince."*

I'd been wondering what he was going on about, but he turned out to be announcing himself as the second strongest person in the Autocracy.

"That's just within the Autocracy, though, right? The strongest of *all* is the master of the Way of the Flash—my master, Yasushi."

Isel had no idea of the true breadth of this universe, so I told him my master's name as a gift he could take with him to the grave.

"I've heard rumors of the Way of the Flash, but if you say it's the strongest fighting method, you'll have to prove that to me here!"

Isel's humanoid weapon sped up even more. I was at a disadvantage now, since the Griffin was so huge that it couldn't move quickly or make fine adjustments in flight.

"You insect!"

I attacked with the Avid's weapons, but none of my strikes connected with Isel's craft. I tried to swat him like a fly with the Griffin's enormous arms, but he avoided my swipes with ease.

"Hwah ha ha ha! My trusty craft is the strongest! This craft bears the name of the very Autocracy itself! Behold the G'doire—the Autocracy's mightiest weapon!"

Isel's eight weapons launched powerful attacks. His spear spun end over end when he threw it, building up its penetrating power until it actually pierced the Griffin's armor.

"He broke through the Griffin's rare metal plating?" I hadn't even thought that was possible.

One of the arms on the back of Isel's craft threw a chakram. The ring-shaped weapon multiplied when released, and as each unit spun, it produced beams that formed wide blades around it. Hundreds of these chakrams sliced into the Griffin, tearing up its armor and destroying cannons, missile launchers, and beam weapon lenses embedded in its body.

An alarm sounded in my cockpit.

"Oh, now you've done it!"

"My G'doire's armaments are all ancient weapons, and the craft itself was built with the advanced technology of the ancients!"

As he bragged that his arsenal consisted of artifacts irreplicable with today's technology, I grimaced.

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The Guide wept with delight as he watched Liam and Isel's battle.

"An ancient craft that can't be replicated with today's technology! Oh, it's brilliant! It's more powerful than the Avid, I'm sure!"

The Avid was a cut above most mobile knights, but Isel's humanoid weapon was even above that. It encapsulated the knowledge humanity had achieved before the uprising of artificial intelligence.

Observing the battle alongside the Guide, G'doire also trembled with joy. It must have been unbearably exciting for him to see his beloved Isel go up against a powerful enemy.

"That craft was a present from me to Isel. With it, there's no enemy in the world who can best him!"

Isel was G'doire's greatest work—his strongest pawn. He had surely sacrificed thousands, millions, *billions* of lives to produce Isel. To shape the environment in which to birth and raise him. To

orchestrate battles and worthy opponents for his growth. Countless lives had been expended just for the sake of rearing the crown prince. It was no exaggeration to call him G'doire's child, and G'doire had showered him with a truly staggering amount of affection.

"When Isel wins this battle, I'll keep him by my side for the rest of time. He'll be the ultimate warrior I finally perfected." G'doire planned to make Isel into a being like himself and the Guide.

The Guide responded with applause. "Fantastic! The sheer number of lives sacrificed, all to produce one sublime warrior..." As he said this, the Guide watched the Griffin slowly crumble in his peripheral vision. He could hardly contain his excitement anymore. As he praised G'doire, his exhilaration reached its peak. "Excelleeeeent! Liam is finally finished!"

G'doire rubbed what must've constituted his chin as he observed the Griffin's slow destruction. "That boy isn't a bad warrior himself," he noted, complimenting his son's adversary. "A fine contribution to the completion of Isel's journey."

Despite praising Liam, G'doire only saw him as a footnote to Isel's story. G'doire couldn't imagine Liam recovering from his position.

Laughing, the Guide shouted at Liam, aware of course that the boy couldn't hear him. "Well, Liam?! How does it feel to go up against someone truly strong—in a full-fledged ancient weapon to boot?! You and the Avid don't stand a chance against them!"

The Griffin was being slashed to pieces before the eyes of the Guide and G'doire.

***

Meanwhile, the bridge of the flagship Argos was in chaos.

"The Griffin's damage level is in the red! It can't take any more!"

"The mobile knights are all reaching their technical limits! No one can assist!"

"The enemy fleet's still attacking!"

Liam had never once struggled on the battlefield before. The soldiers who had previously had absolute faith in the Avid and the Griffin couldn't hide their panic as they watched the enormous craft crumble.

The same went for Claus, of course, but he had to command the fleet in Liam's place.

"We'll head to Liam's aid ourselves," he declared coolly. "Once we collect Lord Liam, we'll remain on the battlefield as the fleet's rear guard."

Claus had decided to slow the Autocracy down to give Lord Liam the chance to escape. The bridge crew responded to Claus's command with different expressions. Some were confused, others trembled. Most had expected they would die one day as soldiers and wore looks of grim determination. For the most part, the crew of the Argos consisted of elite soldiers, so most stayed fairly calm in the face of this development.

"I'm sorry, but you're going to have to throw away your lives along with me," Claus told them.

It was natural that Claus would remain behind to command the fleet as the rear guard, but this was not out of simple loyalty.

House Banfield is done for if we lose Lord Liam here.

Claus knew exactly what would happen, because he'd already witnessed it once. House Banfield was completely unable to function without Liam. Not only that, but Liam was heavily involved in the Empire's succession conflict. Cleo would be in a terrible predicament without him. The succession conflict would heat up again and the entire Empire could be thrown into chaos. Claus foresaw the huge influence Liam's life was sure to have on the Empire's future.

Lord Liam just needs to survive. We'll do whatever is necessary to make sure that happens.

Even if Claus didn't make it, House Banfield had plenty of other skilled people able to replace him. Tia and Marie were more than competent as long as someone reined them in. To put it somewhat dramatically, there may have been replacements for Claus, but there wasn't one for Liam.

"Contact Lord Liam. I'll explain the—"

Then they heard Liam's voice on Isel's open channel. *"Now you've done it, you ignorant little prince. If you're going to be cocky, I'll get serious."* Liam had lost his cool and still planned on fighting with Isel.

When he realized Liam intended to continue fighting, Claus panicked. "Wh-what?! Lord Liam, you can't! Escape at once!"

Unaware of his head knight's agitation, Liam told Isel, *"I'd planned on capturing you and handing you over to the Empire, but I'm going to kill you right here and now."*

Isel was thrilled at this announcement. *"You're something else, Banfield! You're the only one who's ever kept up that attitude with me once they saw me get serious! You're just the kind of opponent I've been looking for!"*

Thus, the bell rang for round two of Isel and Liam's match.

Chapter 18
Spectators

I COULDN'T FORGIVE ISEL, who'd attacked my planet just because he wanted to fight. I felt truly murderous at his idiotic glee over battling strong opponents.

You would attack Augur just for that? You make me sick! I decided to kill him.

Once I'd made that call, I checked the Griffin's status. Its plating was in shambles, it had lost its left arm, and it had been pierced in so many places there were holes here and there. Several explosions had already occurred within the craft, and at this point it was struggling just to keep moving.

A red alert was still sounding inside the cockpit, warning me about each component that was in danger. The self-repair function was active, but it couldn't keep up. It was clear that if I kept fighting like this, I'd just lose to Isel.

"This thing wasn't cheap, you know."

With the Griffin's maintenance costs, I could have paid for the maintenance of an entire fleet of ships. The development and construction costs had been astronomical as well, and I would never have had the thing created if it didn't fulfill some manly dream of mine. In its present state, repairing this massive, transforming ship built from rare metals would probably take years.

The Avid's engine groaned, almost as if it were roaring in fury. At the same time, several items popped up on my main screen requesting my authorization. I raised an eyebrow at the contents of these requests.

"Is this because of the Machine Heart? You want to take revenge for the Griffin? Fine, do as you like, Avid."

The Avid was just as furious as I was. It was angry that Isel had toyed with the Griffin and upset by his bragging about his own craft. It seemed the Avid wanted to prove that as *my* trusted partner, it wasn't inferior.

Once I gave the Avid my authorization, it purged the connections keeping it in place inside the Griffin. My monitor

switched from the Griffin's view back to the Avid's. The Avid knocked away the arms that had secured it and leaped out through the open hatch.

Outside, Isel was still merrily destroying the Griffin, but he turned to face us when he realized we'd exited the ship.

"So you finally came out! Now, Count Liam, it's time for our duel!"

I couldn't stand how amused he was. Did he think he'd get away with breaking my precious toy?

The Avid's reactor was generating excess energy; sparks crackled as that energy escaped from its joints.

"Sorry, but you'll be going up against the Avid. Seems you've pissed it off."

Isel was confused. *"What're you talking about? Is that an assistant pilot or something? I want to fight with* you*."*

"Pilot" was probably a fitting word for it.

"Sure. But I'd say right now Avid's the main pilot, and I'm the assistant."

"So you're running away?"

I laughed at his attempt to provoke me. "If you were really strong, I'd have run away before the fight began. Think carefully about why I'm here fighting you. It's obviously because I know I can win."

Victory—like everything else—was promised to me because I had the protection of the Guide. And I never failed to prepare for victory. I'd continued piloting practice since coming to Planet Augur, and I never took a day off my Way of the Flash training.

As I gripped the control sticks, a crack ran through the Avid's plating. Red light spilled out from the crack, making it seem like the Avid would burst into pieces at any moment.

"Three minutes. I'll give you three minutes, Avid."

I set a timer on the monitor, and the Avid groaned in response.

Isel pointed one of his humanoid weapon's weapons at the Avid. The sphere in its hand fired hundreds of lasers with homing functionality. The Avid couldn't avoid them, and they struck its armor. However, they did no damage; the plating merely turned

red where it was hit. Still, I was impressed with the weapon's ability to pierce my defense field at all.

"That won't be enough to take you down, eh? Well, that's just what makes you a worthy opponent!" Isel cried.

Maybe I should cut his head off with the Flash. As Isel charged toward me, I decided to correct his misunderstanding. "Don't get cocky. You really think you're a worthy opponent for *me*?"

A magic circle manifested before the Avid's hand, and a hilt appeared inside it. The Avid gripped the hilt and pulled out a katana designed for its personal use. Since it had chosen this katana over its laser blade, the Avid was serious.

Isel took a stance before me, brandishing two of his weapons. In the craft's right front hand was a khakkhara, and in its left an old-fashioned sword—a gladius, maybe.

"I'll just have to make you acknowledge me as a worthy foe, then! I'll slice through you with this sword, which can nullify any field, and smash you with this khakkhara that can control armies!"

As the sword Isel's craft held glowed, the defense field around the Avid was neutralized. At the same time, wrecked enemy and allied mobile knights that floated around us began to reactivate. I narrowed my eyes at the sight of the dead craft rising again like zombies.

A sword that cut through defense fields, and a khakkhara that controlled destroyed mobile knights. They were certainly both incredible weapons…but they'd both be useless.

The Avid swung its katana, slashing through the reactivated humanoid weapons and mobile knights.

The sight shocked Isel. *"You destroyed them all by striking once?"*

"Done bragging about your weapons? Get serious already." That should make him wary of me. "You've got more of those things, don't you?"

Isel charged at me, all eight weapons readied. His humanoid weapon, which was as large as the Avid, closed the distance in an instant. For its giant size, it moved swiftly. It swung its sword down, but the Avid avoided the blow by a hair and swung its katana.

Isel's khakkhara deflected the blow. *"Are you predicting my moves? But I've got..."*

"Is his craft predicting the future?" I muttered. "Is it using some kind of foresight?"

Isel's craft seemed to be anticipating the Avid's movements by utilizing either some sort of sophisticated algorithm, or a magical technique.

As the two craft clashed, continuing to predict one another's movements, I needled Isel. "You think that's enough to call yourself a worthy enemy for me? You must've fought a lot of weaklings."

Predicting an enemy's movements was one of the basics of the Way of the Flash. The Avid kicked aside the lance Isel thrust out, slicing through another weapon with its katana. The portion that had been hacked off immediately liquefied and returned to the craft, restoring the weapon to its previous form.

"Regeneration, eh?"

"That's right. However much you slice it up, my baby will regenerate. You won't even be able to scratch me with pitiful attacks like that!"

Both the craft and its weapons would liquefy and regenerate if portions were severed. The Avid could slice away at Isel's craft, and he'd still have the advantage. Ancient weapons really were something.

The Avid slashed the stomach of Isel's craft, and I felt the attack connect with the cockpit. Naturally, it went through Isel himself too... But his craft repaired itself immediately, and seemingly even regenerated its pilot.

"Ha ha! That one surprised me a little!"

He'd been bisected by a mobile knight's blade, but Isel had immediately regenerated and revived. The thought disgusted me.

"Your craft's absorbed you." I didn't know whether that was possible because it was an ancient weapon. Regardless, it was gross to think of the machine subsuming its pilot.

Isel's mobile knight struck a pose like a statue of some sacred eight-armed being. *"No.* I've *absorbed* it*. This machine*

sucked in and killed countless pilots in the past, but I succeeded in subjugating it! That's why I'm still here!"

If this thing's pilot could regenerate too, even if he was cut or shot, it was trouble. No matter how he spun it, this just meant he'd actually become part of the machine—little more than a component. I would've had to pass on something like that, but he didn't seem to have a problem with it.

As for the Avid, it just continued to slash at Isel's craft as this didn't daunt it. It struck vertically, up to down, down to up—every way it possibly could. Its power and speed were starting to overwhelm Isel's craft.

"This is amazing! To think the Empire has humanoid weapons like this!"

"We call them 'mobile knights' here."

I glanced at the timer. The Avid had just under two minutes left.

***

The Guide waved his arms in the air as he cheered for Isel and his ancient weapons. "Go! That's it! Finish him!"

Beside the Guide, G'doire similarly waved his tentacles to cheer on Isel. The two looked exactly like a pair of middle-aged men watching a martial arts match.

"Iseeel! Use more power!"

G'doire lent strength to Isel, powering up his humanoid weapon. The Avid had just begun to overwhelm it, but its power and speed suddenly shot beyond the Avid's. The other craft's strength slowly pushed the Avid back.

Isel became excited. *"Today I feel stronger than I've ever been! So* this *is what it means for your heart to soar before a powerful foe!"*

Though Isel was exhibiting more strength than ever before, it still wasn't enough to take down the Avid.

The Guide was on the edge of his seat. "Just a bit more! You're this close to taking Liam's life! I'm not going to give up nooooow! Please! You're my only hope, Isel!"

The Guide sent Isel what little power he still could, which was enough to transform Isel's craft. The craft's amplified energy made it a size larger physically and strengthened it even further. The eight-armed craft gave off a divine aura, the ancient weapons in its hands demonstrating power that surpassed their natural limits.

The mobile knights that rushed to help Liam were knocked back, and the attacks from House Banfield's ships dispersed before striking Isel's craft. No one could interfere in the Avid's fight; all they could do was watch.

Isel had surpassed humankind, setting foot into a higher realm of existence.

G'doire was thrilled. "Yeeeees! My pawn is transcending his humaaanity!" he cried, overjoyed to witness this moment.

The Guide cheered Isel on until his voice was hoarse, wanting anything—whatever it was—to destroy Liam. "Please! Finish Liam offff!"

Their voices boosted Isel's power that much more, and the humanoid weapon exhibited a strength it had never possessed. It was overwhelming the Avid, reversing their positions at the beginning of their clash.

"No one can defeat me the way I am now!"

Isel brought his sword down on the Avid, but just before he could take Liam's life, the Avid's movements altered, and Isel's humanoid weapon was knocked away.

"Time's up," Liam said*. "My turn, Avid."*

***

In Liam's private room aboard the flagship Argos, Amagi watched the fight. Three mass-produced maid robots stood around her analyzing the battle data. Several holograms floated in the air around Amagi. As she checked each one, her expression clouded.

"The Autocracy's humanoid weapon grew a size larger? No data suggests ancient weapons possessed such functionality."

Before artificial intelligence had destroyed this universe's human civilization, the humanoid craft they had produced had been more advanced than those of today. Amagi possessed data on that era, but there were no accounts of humanoid weapons growing in size as Isel's craft had. If it had combined itself with another craft, as the Avid had done, then she would have been able to understand. Isel's craft, however, seemed unnatural in some way.

Amagi glanced at Shiomi, one of the maid robots gathering and processing information, and asked her opinion. "Have you learned anything from your data analysis?"

Shiomi looked as if she were simply standing there, but her mind continued to process information even as she spoke. "Inconclusive."

Amagi knitted her brows and narrowed her eyes. "I will have to prepare more units for data analysis. Why does Master keep encountering these strange phenomena?"

Another maid, Arashima, continued to analyze data as she reacted to Amagi's comment. "It could be concluded that Master himself has something to do with it," she said to herself. "Based on his own speech and actions, he may believe there is a reason for these occurrences."

Amagi had considered that herself, because Liam sometimes said things that didn't seem to make any sense. At first, she had thought it was just a natural shortcoming in a living being's speech patterns. Artificial intelligence accepted illogical speech and actions as a matter of course in human beings, since living beings sometimes displayed behaviors that couldn't be explained in strictly rational terms. When she reassessed past data, though, she found patterns she couldn't ignore.

"There is a high likelihood that Master has something to do with these inexplicable occurrences. Why..."

Before she could continue, the third robot—Shirane—reported, "The Avid has switched from automatic controls to manual operation."

Amagi reached out to the hologram that displayed the Avid. "Why does Master always take the difficult path?"

There was never any need for him to fight personally, and yet he always went out on the battlefield himself. Amagi couldn't help but worry over her reckless master.

***

As the fierce battle raged outside, Ethel—wearing her glasses over a bandage that covered one of her eyes—was in the Argos's hangar attempting to deploy. The mechanics there desperately tried to stop her.

"It's too reckless! Your craft hasn't even finished maintenance and resupply, and you can't fight with that injury anyway!"

A prosthetic limb had replaced her lost left arm. Ethel's mobile knight had taken a heavy hit in battle and her subordinates had transported her back to the Argos. She was deeply shamed by this.

"Lord Liam is fighting! It's a dereliction of duty for his Royal Guard not to be at his side!"

"No one would call it dereliction of duty with those injuries!"

"I can't allow myself to hang back here! If my craft isn't ready, get me a spare unit!"

The mechanics winced at the determination in Ethel's eyes.

That was when the rest of the Royal Guard's black Nemains flew back into the hangar. Her subordinates' craft were all damaged and feeble-looking—in a similar sorry state to her own mobile knight's.

Ethel's eyes widened at the sight. "What are you doing? Who's guarding Lord Liam?!"

One pilot emerged from her cockpit and saluted, then conveyed Ethel's orders. "Lord Liam's instructions were as follows: 'Get out of here. You're in the way.'"

Upon hearing that she would only be getting in Liam's way, all the strength left Ethel's body. She drifted in the hangar, tears spilling from her eyes.

"Useless... Why am I so useless?"

The mechanics hung their heads and returned to their work, while the rest of the Royal Guard looked just as sorrowful as Ethel.

“It’s not your responsibility alone, Commander.”

“Am I just the same as those two idiots? Will I not be able to repay him either?” Ethel muttered to herself.

Since she couldn’t get anything done under the two idiots who always caused Liam trouble, she’d chosen a different path. Yet she couldn’t even fulfill her duty as his guard. Ethel wept bitter tears at her failings.

***

I told the Avid its time was up. “My turn, Avid.”

It resisted, however; the word “no” appeared in several places onscreen. It probably wanted to tell me it could still fight.

I repeated myself in a stronger voice. “I said to switch to me. Don’t make me tell you again.”

At my serious tone, the Avid finally relinquished control to me. The words obscuring the monitor disappeared, and I saw Isel in front of me.

“Now it’s time for me to face you.”

The ancient craft before me gave off a divine light.

“Give it up,” Isel replied*. “It’s too late for you to up your game now. I’ve surpassed humanity and stepped into the realm beyond.”*

He was spewing all sorts of lines that would haunt him later. Then again, he didn’t have a future after this battle, so it didn’t matter how much he embarrassed himself. He could act as cool as he wanted while he still had time to.

Of course, I’d still talk back to him. “Surpassed humanity? Are you stupid? What do you think you’re going to become, then?”

The moment Isel’s craft sprang, seeming to disappear, I pulled the Avid back and swung its katana. The blade impacted against Isel’s lance, sparks flying. The Avid’s blade shattered, but a new one swiftly extended from the grip; the weapon worked like a box cutter with multiple blades.

The excitement—no, all emotion—had faded from Isel's voice. *"I'll surpass humanity and become a god of war. That is my wish,"* he said in a monotone.

I gave that a good laugh. "A god of war? *You?!* At your level, you think you're a war god?! Are even gods of war small on an intergalactic scale?"

Isel's expression didn't change at my provocation, but he rained attack after attack down on me. I avoided or deflected them all, then spread the Avid's arms wide.

"You can't call yourself a god of war when you can't even surpass me."

I knew my place. I may have been an evil lord, but I was always grateful to the Guide for what I had, and I knew the incredible strength Master Yasushi possessed. My own power didn't bring me close to the title of "strongest." That was why I trained every day. I needed to become as powerful as I could, even if only a little bit at a time, so that no one could take anything from me. If Isel couldn't even beat me, he had no right to call himself a god of war. No, it wasn't about his right to do it; I wouldn't *let* him do it.

"I have already surpassed you, in my piloting skills and in my craft's performance. There's no way for me to lose."

To counter this misunderstanding of his, I rested my katana on the Avid's shoulder. Seeing me leave myself so open to attack, Isel hesitated for a moment, then looked disappointed.

"Do you accept your loss, then? I hoped to see you resist until the end."

Does this guy just not listen or something? These Autocracy people really need to chill out. "That's your conclusion from what I said? The title 'god of war' doesn't even suit you. I mean, you're nothing more than a component in that fancy machine of yours."

Ancient craft were powerful, that was for sure, but not enough that I wanted one for myself. I didn't want some crazy machine that was going to make me into a part of it.

"I subjugated the G'doire. I haven't been absorbed."

"Say what you like. It's over for you."

An instant later, the eight arms of Isel's craft were sliced into pieces. As they liquefied and began to reform, I took a preparatory stance, holding the Avid's blade.

"I had fun, prince of the Autocracy. You came in handy for testing the Avid's capabilities."

I'd never used the Flash with the Avid before. The strain of it would normally be too much for a mobile knight to withstand; it would destroy itself with the effort. As it was now, though, I'd determined the Avid should be up for it.

"I believe you can handle this, Avid."

The Avid groaned. I felt like it was giving me permission to use my full strength.

Isel rushed at me while his craft was still regenerating. *"I won't let you!"*

In the split second before the humanoid weapon's attack could reach me, I murmured, "Flash."

Isel's craft warped. That is, *space* warped, and the craft was caught up in it. Contorting unnaturally, the craft couldn't maintain its shape and burst into liquid. In that warped state, though, it couldn't regenerate. Each time it tried, it burst into liquid again. Trying to return to its original shape only furthered its distortion.

"Gh—! Gah!"

The same went for the pilot, Isel. He burst apart repeatedly, trying to reform and failing. The sight of him writhing in pain was just pitiful—a sad man absorbed by a machine out of his desire to become strong.

"This is the fate of someone calling himself a warrior, eh?"

However, the Avid wasn't unscathed either. Its joints were groaning, and though the Machine Heart was working to repair the damage I didn't think it would make it in time.

"All this after one strike, huh? Well, should I just be happy I managed a single strike at all?" I'd finally replicated the Flash using a mobile knight, but even now, the Avid could only handle using it once.

After failing to regenerate any number of times, Isel couldn't even remain in human form. He appeared in a small window on my monitor, hacking up blood.

“Incredible… I’ve lost. Can we talk, at the end?”

“If you want.”

I looked around me to find the Autocracy’s fleet had ceased attacking as soon as they’d lost their supreme commander, obediently waiting for my demands. Not a single ship still resisted. They were shockingly gracious losers.

“Space truly is…vast. I had no idea…there was someone out there…as strong as you.”



“Of course there is. My master’s even stronger.”

At the news that someone even stronger than me existed, Isel’s expression was half happy, half sad.

“That’s great… I’d have loved…to see him just once… Khah!”

When I saw the way he hacked up blood, I was certain that wish would never be granted. It seemed, now that Isel’s craft had been destroyed, he’d lose his life along with it.

“Wh-why didn’t you…fight seriously from the beginning? You didn’t need that behemoth. You’re stronger this way.”

When he claimed the Avid alone would’ve been enough, and I hadn’t needed to combine it with the Griffin, I gave him an exasperated look. “This is a war. I just determined that the Griffin would be better for thinning your numbers.”

The Griffin demonstrated its true worth against a larger groups of foes. The Avid was definitely strong, but the Griffin had been optimal for the situation I was in.

“War… That’s right… I guess it is… I forgot… That fight was so fun… When was the last time…I had so much fun…? I want to…fight… again…”

Isel expired, and the craft liquefied completely, dispersing into space.

He’d wanted to fight until the very end, huh? Just what did this guy think life was about? I didn’t want a life that was nothing but war. I was going to enjoy my days here trampling other people as an evil lord. Still, meeting his end on the battlefield was probably just how Isel had wanted to go.

“What a troublesome bunch,” I muttered. Then again, Isel stayed true to himself up until his last moments, and as an evil lord I could commend him for that. The Avid could barely move, but it haltingly raised its sword into the air all the same. “Liam Sera Banfield has defeated the enemy’s supreme commander, Isel Balandin!”

When I formally announced my victory, I heard House Banfield rejoicing over my comms. I was curious about what the Autocracy’s response would be, though.

“The Autocracy commends your performance in battle. Lord Liam Sera Banfield, Sir Claus Sera Mont, be well until we fight once

more.”

Although they still held the advantage in numbers, the Autocracy’s fleet began to retreat. I wanted to pursue them, but my own fleet was too exhausted for me to push them.

At some point, the Royal Guard’s Nemains had come to surround the Avid.

“Are you all right, Lord Liam?!”

“I’m more worried about the Avid than myself. Also, Isel’s craft’s been liquefied, but collect that liquid and send it to the Seventh Weapons Factory for analysis, would you?”

“Y-yes, sir!”

I’d annihilated the thing, but if I gave the remnants to Nias, she might be able to get something useful out of it. If I told her the liquid was the wreckage of an ancient craft, she’d probably tackle the investigation with glee.

***

After witnessing Isel’s defeat, G’doire was in a daze. For his part, the Guide had depleted all his power as well, returning to the form of a hat alone.

He trembled with fury. “Warping space? That’s completely unfair! How did he even do that? Somebody explain it to me!”

In the end, the battle had been ended with a completely mindboggling move that had distorted space. The Guide just couldn’t take it.

Isel had undoubtedly been one of the strongest humans in existence—a talented pilot whose humanoid weapon had superior specs to the Avid—and yet Liam managed to defeat him.

“How the hell can I beat Liam?!” the Guide sobbed.

G’doire grabbed the hat, which was the Guide’s entire body at the moment, and squeezed it in one tentacle.

“O-ouchie!”

“Hey! What *is* he?!” G’doire’s head was bright red and giving off steam. He must’ve been furious.

“Wh-what do you…mean?”

“How did you make him like that?!” G’doire must’ve thought the Guide was responsible for Liam’s prowess.

The Guide frantically tried to correct his misunderstanding. “I-I want to know how things ended up this way too!”

G’doire tossed the Guide aside and the hat crumpled. “H-how could you?!” His tentacles thrashed in rage. “I’ll kill him! I’ll kill him personally! He’ll pay for killing my precious Isel! He will!”

G’doire was serious about going after Liam’s life, and the Guide smirked at the sight. Well, he would have smirked if he wasn’t currently a hat, but he was smirking on the inside.

Heh heh heh. It was a failure this time around, but at least G’doire is serious now. Liam won’t be long for this universe.

Liam wasn’t grateful to G’doire—he wasn’t even aware of his existence. G’doire had no reason to fear Liam’s gratitude the way the Guide did. He was sure to be a formidable enemy for Liam.

Chapter 19
The True Victor

THE FIRST THING House Banfield's forces did upon returning to Planet Augur was hold a funeral. In the battle with the Autocracy, we'd lost thousands of ships and mobile knights, along with their crews and pilots.

In my mourning clothes, I stood silently in front of the memorial erected to commemorate them.

"What are you thinking?" Claus asked, standing beside me.

He was probably suspicious of the way I stood silently before the monument. He must've wanted to say, "You normally play the evil lord, but now you're grieving?" The dead were the only people I could believe in, though.

These were people who'd fought and died for me. Their deaths were the very proof of their loyalty. I'm sure some had despised me; they had the right to disparage and hate me. Still, they'd obeyed my orders and fought. It was only natural I should mourn their deaths.

"Oh…nothing." If I said I was praying for the dead, he wouldn't believe me, and the dead themselves would just tell me it was too little too late. I mourned only for my own satisfaction.

"Be sure to reward the families of the deceased handsomely," I told him.

"Yes, sir."

I turned my back to the monument and walked off. Claus and my Royal Guard followed.

That was when Wallace ran up to me in his own mourning attire. "Liam! It's bad!"

"What is?" I gave Wallace an exasperated look.

He ignored me and went right on panicking. "There's a big problem on the Capital Planet! The department you were working for is being prosecuted for corruption and shut down!"

Wallace pulled up an article about the incident on his tablet and showed me. It indeed regarded my workplace from before my assignment as magistrate.

“Ah, that. Yeah, my noble training will end soon.”

“Wait. What’s that supposed to mean? It’s not good if your workplace gets shut down, is it? Worst-case scenario, Imperial investigators might charge in here and take you in for questioning too, right?”

Wallace was making a big deal about this, but I wasn’t worried, so I kept on walking.

He scurried after me, annoyed by my blasé attitude. “They could make you redo your training as punishment, you know. You should be more concerned about this. You don’t have a good relationship with House Lengrand.”

I told him the reason I wasn’t surprised. “I was the whistleblower.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t like how they chased me out, so I collected evidence of corruption and turned it in. It was a lot of work getting it all done before end of day.”

Of course, once I’d decided to blow the whistle on them it got my motivation going, because it was kind of fun. They say it’s common courtesy to clean up when you leave a place, right? I’d decided to clean up my whole workplace.

It was their own fault in the first place for chasing me out like that and leaving evidence of their corruption behind. When I’d turned in the evidence to the prime minister, I’d left it in his hands what to do with Randy and the rest.

Wallace’s face twitched. “You shut them down just because you didn’t like it there?”

“Well, there’s that, but mostly I wanted to punish Randy. He’s going to be in some big trouble soon.”

Randy would be in trouble because—like me—he was about to finish his training. If the typical punishment for corruption was redoing your training entirely, he was probably receiving that punishment right now. After all, I’d made sure that evidence of his wrongdoing was included in all that work he’d made me do for him.

All the nobles training in my department were probably about to go through the same thing. Repeating primary school

wasn’t possible at their age, but they’d have to go through the military academy and Imperial university all over again.

Wallace was stunned. “You’re a monster. At Randy’s age, he’s going to be a total outcast in noble society.”

“Don’t worry. He’s got to redo his training for corruption, so he’s already an outcast.”

Nobles were generally put off to begin with if they heard that someone hadn’t finished their training by the age of two hundred, but on top of that, Randy would be stigmatized for having to redo his training because of corruption.

Looking at things a different way, though, you could see how soft the Empire was on nobles if the only punishment for corrupt employees was having to redo their training. It paid to have authority.

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Meanwhile, on the Capital Planet, the department where Randy had been wrapping up his training was completely empty. Even the desks and chairs had been removed from the office. All the young noble employees who had been involved in corruption were gathered in this dreary space. None of them were considered full nobles yet, since they hadn’t completed their training.

The investigator—a high-ranking noble and high-ranking bureaucrat—revealed to them their punishment.

“Normally, corruption like this would revoke one’s noble status. However, none of you are officially full-fledged nobles yet. Therefore, redo your training, and this incident will be overlooked.”

Randy scowled with frustration before the investigator, an official who worked directly for the prime minister. “You want me, heir to House Lengrand, to redo my training?! If I have to do that, my standing will—”

The investigator scoffed at him. This angered Randy even more, but the investigator’s next statement wiped it from his mind.

“I have a message for you from Count Banfield. He says, ‘Too bad. You were so close to the finish line.’ Count Banfield transferred out, and unlike you all, he completed his training and has now become a full-fledged noble. You should all follow his example, don’t you think?”

Randy knew exactly why the investigator had given them Count Banfield’s message here, and his anger immediately shifted from the investigator to Liam. He’d started clenching his fists at some point without realizing it.

So Liam had finished his own training, but they’d all fallen for his trap and would have to repeat theirs. Randy could just picture Liam laughing loudly at the sight of them; his face grew hot at the thought.

“Th-that guy is the one…”

When he saw Randy’s fists shaking, the investigator sneered. “Yes, Count Banfield blew the whistle on your little operation. The only compensation he requested was that I let him know what your faces looked like when you found out. Oh—everyone look this way, please.”

Liam had just asked to see their expressions—or, in other words, to have a record of this moment. Thus, the investigator snapped a picture of them with his tablet and sent it straight to Liam.

The young nobles were infuriated that they’d have to redo their training for such a petty reason.

“He won’t get away with this,” Randy vowed. “He’ll learn how terrifying it is to be House Lengrand’s enemy!”

As Randy swore revenge, a new figure entered the room, surrounded by knights who served as her guards. This was the person who’d acted on Liam’s behalf on the Capital Planet during his absence. It was Rosetta, and among her guards were Tia and Marie in their knight uniforms.

At the arrival of these intimidating knights, the anger filling Randy and the other nobles was replaced by surprise.

“Who is it you say ‘won’t get away with this,’ Lord Randy?” Rosetta asked.

Randy was flabbergasted. “Liam’s fiancée…”

“Rosetta. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Rosetta’s voice echoed strangely through the wide, emptied space. When everyone’s eyes gathered on her, she said, “I have a message for you from His Highness Prince Cleo.”

She tapped her personal tablet, and a hologram of Cleo sitting in a chair appeared.

Randy hurriedly corrected his posture. “Prince Cleo, I—”

Before he could make excuses, Cleo raised a hand and cut him off. *“Randy, I’m disappointed in you.”*

“Please wait, Your Highness! This is all Liam’s—”

“I assume you wish to call this a trap Count Banfield laid for you? If you couldn’t see through such a trap, how could you think yourself fit to lead my faction? Considering your age, it’s going to be difficult for you to even live as a noble from now on.”

Along with Cleo’s disappointment, Randy was hit with the full force of reality. If he had to redo his training from the beginning, he’d be over two hundred by the time he finished. That meant the loss of his position within society, even with the leniency the Empire showed nobility. Randy would be dismissed behind his back for the rest of his life as someone who couldn’t even finish his training. There was no way such a person could inherit his household, so he was sure to be disinherited soon.

At this moment, Randy realized his life as a noble was over, and the color drained from his face.

“Count Banfield will be returning to the Capital Planet now that his training is over. Thanks for your work filling in for him.” Cleo’s image disappeared.

Randy sank to his knees. “Why…? I’m the heir to House Lengrand! How can Prince Cleo cut ties with us so easily?!”

Rosetta looked down sadly at Randy’s pathetic form. “I won’t tell you it was wrong to try to side with the winning faction. You just should have been less indecorous.”

His future position could have been guaranteed if he’d only bowed his head politely and entered the faction to serve under Liam. What he did instead was exploit his family connection to Cleo’s mother. But if he’d truly supported Cleo from the start… Of

course, that was a pointless hypothetical. His greatest problem was that he'd picked a fight with Liam.

"Things would've been different if you'd joined hands with House Banfield instead of picking a fight," Rosetta told him.

Her words went in one ear and out the other. Randy looked up, scowling at her. "...It's not over. Not over yet," he told her, glaring. "I'll climb my way back up, and I'll take Liam down!" He still hadn't given up.

"I see," Rosetta said simply, and left the room.

When she did, Tia and Marie looked down at Randy coldly. The message in their eyes was quite clear: try it, and you're dead.

***

Eulisia waited for Rosetta outside the office building. When Rosetta emerged, she approached her.

"It seems they'll tear down the whole building now and put up a new one. The corruption gave it a bad image."

Rosetta showed no reaction to this news. She'd normally have been surprised at such an expenditure just for the sake of image, but she had other things on her mind.

"More importantly, what's the plan there?" she asked, glancing toward her own workplace, the one that only employed women.

Looking the same way, Eulisia smiled. "We moved out most of the people from Calvin's faction and installed those of Cleo's faction instead. In a few years, Cleo's people alone will run the place."

The fact that almost all the building's current personnel were loyal to Cleo was thanks to Eulisia's hard work.

As Rosetta and her guards started walking back to her workplace, a former coworker who'd been let go ran up to her. "How dare you!"

The young woman's hair was a mess, and she reeked of alcohol. Marie blocked her way before she could reach Rosetta, but the woman was so upset that she picked a fight with Rosetta anyway.

“Don’t think you’ll get away with this! You’ll be the next one thrown out! You think the crown prince’s faction will stay quiet about this?!”

This woman had also been let go for corruption. Such nobles likely didn’t even consider that what they’d been doing was wrong, but now they were being forced to pay the price for their selfishness. Rosetta saw it as them getting their just deserts.

“I see,” she said. “Well, I have no attachment to this workplace, and my training is over, so I planned on resigning anyway.”

For a beat, the woman was speechless when Rosetta said she’d simply leave the workplace the woman was so preoccupied with, but then she let out a shriek of frustration. The knights kept her away from Rosetta, who continued back to her workplace without any further trouble.

Eulisia shrugged. “Someone was going to hold a grudge.”

“And *you* were the one who brought this about,” Rosetta said, exasperated by Eulisia acting as if it had nothing to do with her.

Eulisia stuck her tongue out and grinned. “Well, I was told to get serious.”

Eulisia’s flaws tended to stand out more than her talents, but she really *was* capable. Results like these proved that usually she slacked off.

“From now on, how about taking things seriously *before* someone has to tell you?”

“Personally, I think it’s best to take it easy when you can. You’re much too uptight, Lady Rosetta.”

“And you’re too laid-back!”

While the two were chatting, Tia received a report. She put a hand to her ear, frowning at what she heard.

“Is something wrong?” Rosetta asked, noticing her demeanor change.

Tia removed the hand from her ear, looking rather nervous. “I’ve just received word that the Empire has been defeated in the war with the Autocracy. Prince Calvin’s main force has retreated, and the army suffered marked losses.”

If the Imperial Army had lost, that could only mean one thing for Liam on Planet Augur, resting as it did at the border of the two territories.

“Huh?” The color drained from Rosetta’s face.

Marie rushed over to support her. “Bring Lady Rosetta back to the hotel!” she commanded the other knights immediately. They rushed to carry out her order.

Rosetta clenched a fist, pressing it against her chest. *Darling… Please be safe.*

***

Damaged ships arrived one after another at Planet Augur’s spaceport. They were gathering there in search of a nearby location for repairs and supplies, but the spaceport was over capacity and therefore in chaos.

Beside me, Wallace gulped as we looked out at the damaged ships. “How did the Autocracy win if they lost their supreme commander? It was you who won, Liam!”

Even if I’d obtained victory on my own battlefield, the Empire had been defeated on all other fronts. As a result, the Empire had lost a lot of territory. Though the Autocracy’s supreme commander had fallen, they’d fulfilled their goal, so the conflict had effectively ended with their victory.

In other words, the Empire had lost. The nobles of Calvin’s faction had fought as fiercely as they could, but in the end, they hadn’t been able to withstand the Autocracy’s ferocity and had retreated.

“So Calvin fled,” I muttered, sensing that things were about to be shaken up once more. “Even though that shouldn’t have been an option for him.”

I’d been receiving regular updates on the war situation, and there were definitely things that seemed suspicious. For instance, some of the nobles in Calvin’s faction hadn’t tried to intercept the Autocracy when they’d changed routes to attack Augur. That was quite an extreme way to harass me. I didn’t plan on forgiving them just because I’d won my battle, but unfortunately all the

nobles who had likely been involved were dead now. Could I use all this to get the better of Calvin somehow?

As I considered the matter, Wallace clung to me. “Liam, let’s run! This isn’t a support base in the rear anymore; it’s the front line! My brother retreated, you know. No one will complain if we do the same thing!”

Calvin really was talented. Overall, the Imperial Army hadn’t really taken *that* many losses; Calvin had fallen back as soon as he realized they couldn’t win which minimized casualties. Because of him, Planet Augur was now deeper into the war zone. He’d even left a parting gift for me.

“We can’t,” I told Wallace. “We’ve got new orders from the Capital Planet.”

A small window in midair displayed a digital document. I moved it, and it stopped in front of Wallace’s face. When he saw what it said, he cried, “N-no! Why is this happening to me?” His eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed on the spot.

The document stated that now that I was a full-fledged noble, who had finished with his training, I was being deployed to the front lines. My orders were to serve as a deterrent to the Autocracy.

Wallace had sunk to the floor and stopped moving. Was he that shocked that I’d been ordered to defend the border? Nothing said *he* had to remain too…but I thought it’d be fun not to tell him that. I was a little disappointed that I couldn’t go back to the Capital Planet right away, though.

“I’d planned on harassing Randy and his buddies when I got back, but I can’t do that now.” If you just considered how things had ended up, it seemed as if—by running away—Calvin had forced the job of dealing with the Autocracy on me.

As I contemplated what to do now, a rather flustered Claus arrived. “Lord Liam, the Autocracy has contacted us, saying they’ll send an emissary.”

“From the Autocracy?”

“Yes. It seems they want to discuss a ceasefire.”

They’d scraped out a big chunk of the Empire’s territory, so they wanted to end the war here, eh?

“They’ve also requested you as the Empire’s negotiator, since you defeated Crown Prince Isel.”

“They think they’ve won already, huh? They’re pretty impatient.”

Well, it didn’t feel too bad that they’d requested *me* in that role. After all, they’d been going on and on about Claus before. I figured I’d finally made my name known to them.

“What would you like to do?” Claus asked, as calm as always.

I decided to participate in the negotiations, since I thought it might be fun. “Start by contacting the Capital Planet.”

Jeez, I thought. We’d emerged victorious from such an intense battle, but in the grand scheme of things it had only been one tiny win among many losses. I felt it keenly now that my own victory was completely meaningless amid the Empire’s defeats.

This was all the fault of Calvin and the Autocracy. I had to wonder what would become of Calvin now. I couldn’t imagine he was completely done for, but I was certain he’d find himself in a tight spot soon.

“Ah, right. Claus, bring Wallace back to his room, would you?”

“R-right. Very well, sir.”

Claus lifted Wallace from the floor and carried him off.

Chapter 20
Princess of the Autocracy

THREE MONTHS LATER, the G'doire Autocracy's delegation arrived on Planet Augur. When they arrived in the spaceport, they were dressed more normally than I would've thought. I'd expected them to be a bunch of barbarians, so it was kind of a letdown.

Officials from the Capital Planet would handle the negotiations. I didn't have a role to speak of. This problem was between the Empire and the Autocracy. It had nothing to do with me. I would be present at the signing ceremony since the Autocracy had requested that I be involved, but I had no authority to speak or negotiate.

I didn't really have anything to say anyway. My force had emerged from the conflict relatively unscathed, and I didn't care what happened to the Empire's territory. Since I had no responsibility here, the officials hadn't asked my opinion on anything, and I didn't think they had any reason to.

In any case, I sat in those meetings for a few days without any right to participate, and in the end, everyone amicably signed a thirty-year ceasefire agreement. Thirty years might sound like a long time, but it was pretty short in this universe, where ceasefires of one or two hundred years weren't uncommon.

Of course, whether those ceasefires were upheld for their full term was a different matter entirely. Plenty of idiots in this universe, too, believed that promises were made to be broken. Hell, I was one of them. I'd break a promise or two if it benefited me somehow. Keeping promises just for the sake of goodness was pure stupidity. Not that I thought it was fine to break them willy-nilly either.

Once the negotiations were over, it was time to party, and that was where I came in. As the person running the spaceport, I'd been instructed to host one. Luckily, when it came to party planning, I had a reliable guy working for me. I could just leave it all to him, which made the event an easy responsibility for me.

Now, I think I'll enjoy myself at this party Wallace put together too.

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The party that followed the ceasefire signing was more peaceful than I'd expected. The Autocracy's delegation were fully enjoying themselves, as if to show they had no hard feelings, and the Empire's representatives were only a little nervous, nothing more. Most of the officials hid their frustration with the soldiers who went and lost, participating in the event with only somewhat forced smiles. From the way the Autocracy representatives acted, it didn't seem to me that we'd have any more problems with them. Of course, they'd invaded and thoroughly pillaged plenty of Empire territory already.

I'd brought Marion with me to the party, wearing another outfit like the dress of an idol from my previous life. I got a kick out of seeing her dolled up like that again. Marion, on the other hand, didn't hide her irritation with me or how uncomfortable she was in that outfit.

"You really are a jerk," she said. "I don't get what's so fun about dressing me up like this."

"It's fun because you get so upset about it. Anyhow, if you hate girls' clothes so much, you could just get a sex change." In this universe, people could freely change their sex, so I was curious why she didn't do that.

I got an answer I hadn't expected. "I happen to like myself as I am, for your information. I've never been one bit dissatisfied with my gender. In fact, it's something I take pride in." *I'm glad I was born a woman!* she seemed to proclaim.

"But you like girls, right?" I asked, having assumed the reason she bragged about her conquests so much was that she wanted to be a man.

"I want to *love* women and *be* a woman too."

"I don't get it," I cocked my head.

Marion scoffed. "Men are disgusting."

So she liked her own gender, and she found women attractive, but not men.

"I thought you were having quite a bit of fun with Prince Cleo, though." I made this leading comment to see how much

Marion knew about Prince Cleo's own preferences.

Looking as though she'd remembered something unpleasant, Marion said, "He was just toying with me."

From the way she acted, it didn't seem as if she'd caught on to the prince's secret. I didn't know whether he'd never gone all the way with her, or if he had but successfully kept his secret. But I didn't care either way and decided to change the subject and tease Marion instead.

"Too bad. If you hadn't sold Prince Cleo out, you might be viscount now."

"It's all your fault," Marion said reproachfully. It must have really eaten her up that she'd fallen for my trap. She should be happy that she wasn't being made to repeat her training like Randy.

"It was hilarious seeing you look so triumphant, when I knew you'd lost from the start," I told her honestly.

Marion's face twitched. *Yeah, that's the expression I* wanted *to see.* I didn't like women who tried to use me, but I definitely got a kick out of women who danced in the palm of my hand. I liked them even more when I could make use of them.

Now that I'd amused myself, I got down to the annoying business. I was going to be interacting with the Autocracy from now on whether I wanted to or not, so I needed to gather information on them.

"So what's the Autocracy after?"

"We're talking about work now? You're diligent as always."

"And you're thrilled to be working for me, aren't you? That's why I let you live, after all."

If Marion had been killed for what she'd done, she couldn't have complained. And I'd only left her alive so I could use her. When I pointed out that I'd only let her live on a whim, Marion stopped talking back. She looked away in frustration, her cheeks faintly pink. "You really are scum. You're worse than Prince Cleo."

"It's your fault for thinking you could use me, but I want to be friends from now on. Should I call you 'Mari' to show my affection?"

She went red up to her ears. “S-stop that! Seriously! It’s so embarrassing I want to die!”

Maybe because she’d hit rock bottom and I’d scooped her up from there, her pride had been totally shattered. I felt that she was a bit cute this way, although I kind of wished she still had that cheeky attitude.

I got nostalgic, thinking about Nitta. Just like Marion, he’d been my coworker, though he was a man and not cute at all. He did outshine Marion in one area, though: he’d never betrayed me.

“Hurry up and give me your report.”

Since I hadn’t been permitted to participate in the negotiations, I was a little out of the loop. That annoyed me, so I’d made Marion investigate the terms of the ceasefire agreement. I figured she’d have connections since she was from the area.

“The Empire isn’t the only one benefiting from the ceasefire. The Autocracy lost their crown prince, after all. They’ll be dealing with the chaos from that for some time.”

That didn’t sound right to me. “Huh? His siblings still managed to get their forces together and win against the Empire, didn’t they? They seem like they’re all about blood bonds there, so why would there be any chaos?”

Even after losing their supreme commander, the Autocracy had rallied its forces and ultimately triumphed over the Empire thanks to the exploits of Isel’s relatives. In light of that clannishness, I didn’t see them fighting among themselves after losing their crown prince.

Marion shook her head. “You don’t know a thing about the Autocracy. How do you think the other commanders reacted when they heard their crown prince had died? They all tried to accomplish enough to be made the next crown prince.”

So they hadn’t mourned Isel’s death at all, but seen it as an opportunity. I figured that didn’t really surprise me.

Marion glanced at the officials sent from the inner Empire, who didn’t know anything about the situation here. She seemed annoyed that they were satisfied with the ceasefire they’d managed to secure.

“Personally, I think this ceasefire is a mistake. If they knew more about the Autocracy, we might’ve been able to negotiate

back a few of the planets they seized."

This wasn't just a matter of the officials' incompetence. They might have lost territory to the Autocracy, but from their perspective it would be much more profitable to completely avoid a continuance of the war than to squabble over a few border planets. The Empire still had plenty of planets, even if they'd lost a few that were habitable or contained valuable resources. Right now, they were probably more concerned about maintaining their borders with other intergalactic nations. Their stance was probably that they could just take those planets back one day.

I glanced over at some local nobles and generals who'd been stationed on the border. Like Marion, they wore frustrated expressions, on occasion shooting the officials dirty looks. They had very little say in things, since that delegation from the central Empire was here; they probably wanted to protest the officials' stance but couldn't.

Well, those two groups weren't likely to come to an understanding. I asked about the Autocracy's inner workings instead. "Isel's siblings are going to quarrel about who succeeds him, huh?"

"It'll probably be a bloody mess between them."

"And that's why they want to buy time."

"I think we could've asked for more. I'm confident we could've gotten that out of them."

She hadn't even been present for the negotiations, but here she was talking that way. "Not something I'd expect to hear from someone I played like a total fool."

"I-I realize now that I shouldn't have messed with you. You're different."

I was a bit impressed with the Autocracy. They'd gotten exactly what they wanted out of these negotiations: a ceasefire so they could concentrate on their internal squabbles.

While Marion and I talked, a tall woman came toward us. She wore a black suit with pants instead of a skirt, and from the way she walked I could tell she had some sort of martial training. Her figure was feminine, but her body was obviously incredibly toned under her clothes. She had long red hair with a bit of curl and spirited red eyes. The visibly strong-willed woman who strolled

over to us had a bit of a dominatrix vibe. I thought Marion might show interest in her, but when I looked over, she appeared nervous.

The woman didn't spare Marion so much as a glance. She focused on me and me alone.

"Want something?" I asked.

"I have a keen interest in you, boy."

She was awfully haughty, but it kind of suited her. She looked like a warrior, and it seemed she had a warrior's spirit too. I didn't think she was from the Empire, so I assumed she was with the Autocracy.

"What? Want to fight?" I gave her a goading smile.

The woman grinned fearlessly in response. "Of course I do, but I'm here on different business at the moment."

She was probably the type who'd flip out if you treated her as if she were delicate, so I spoke to her frankly, which she seemed to like. Still, I wasn't into that beastlike smile on her face.

"I wanted to see the man who killed my brother Isel with my own eyes," she told me. "He was a great man, even from my perspective. I was proud of him." She had to despise me for killing her impressive brother, then. Or so I thought, but her next words defied my expectations. "Thank you."

When she suddenly said that, I thought I'd heard her wrong. "What...?" I glanced over at Marion. She looked confused too, so I'd apparently heard right.

The woman smiled at me. "I planned to kill Isel myself, but now I know of a stronger person—you. I can't thank my brother enough."

She wanted to thank the person who'd killed her brother? What was it with these Autocracy people? Did she have no love for him?

"Didn't you just say you were proud of him?"

"I did. I still respect my brother for his strength, and that will never change."

"And you don't hate me for killing him?"

"You were stronger than Isel. That's all there is to it, isn't it? It's his fault for losing, so I can't blame you for his death." The

woman seemed to realize I was confused. “Right… Our cultures are different. Forgive me. My brother lost to you in single combat, so I bear you no grudge. Rather than resenting you, I want to tell you…” She looked at me with heated eyes, seeming ever so slightly nervous. The dominant veneer faded from her face, and she looked like an adolescent girl about to confess her love to someone. “I swear one day I will rise to a position to challenge you. Stay healthy until then.”

“You want to do battle with me? That takes guts.”

That was par for the course with the Autocracy. She’d challenged me to a fight with a girlish expression on her face. *But, yeah, I’m used to this stuff by now.* Or so I was thinking when she followed up by dropping a bomb on me.

“One more thing… I desire your genes!”

Her voice carried through the entire venue. Naturally, everyone’s eyes gathered on us.

For a second my brain refused to comprehend, but that denial didn’t change the facts.

“Wh-what are you saying?!”

This woman from the Autocracy had shown up out of the blue only to land herself squarely in the same category as Tia and Marie. Why was I surrounded by girls who were pretty but completely insane?

The woman blushed and fidgeted as if embarrassed, and in fact I wanted to tell her she should have a little shame.

“You’re going to make me say it again? You’re a mean one, aren’t you? Well, fine—I’ll say it again,” she said indignantly, getting embarrassed about the wrong thing. “I want to produce a child from your strong genes.”

“I decline,” I told her with my sternest expression.

“Why? All the man has to do is fork over the stuff, right?” She cocked her head, looking truly mystified.

Marion cleared her throat theatrically.

Nice one, Marion!

“This isn’t a topic to discuss at such a fine party,” Marion declared. “I think carrying on any more about this subject would be rather uncouth, Princess of the Autocracy.”

Marion's words shocked me. *Huh? She's a princess?! I know she said she was Isel's sister, but... The Autocracy's* okay *with a princess who acts like this?!*

Personally, I wouldn't want a princess who went up to random men and said things like "I want to have a child with you!"



The woman seemed to realize her blunder and sighed. “I apologize. It’s a commonplace overture where I’m from. But, again, it seems things are different here. I’m having a bit of culture shock.”

“I’m the one who’s shocked.” I was *so* shocked, I let my honest feelings slip. How the hell did you ask a guy you just met for his genes?

The woman finally introduced herself. “I am Arjuna Balandin. Hero of the Empire, Lord Liam Sera Banfield, please visit the Autocracy whenever you wish. Your genes have a standing reservation in my womb.”

The sight of her winking before she turned around and left was certainly appealing, but that last line of hers was so terrible that it ruined the whole effect. *Terrible. Just the worst. I never thought I’d hear a come-on like that.*

“I won’t be going.”

The exchange with Arjuna was probably the biggest shock I’d received in recent memory. My genes had been stolen without my knowledge before, but this was my first time having someone ask that I had them over. Space sure was big.

Marion wore an uncomfortable smile. “Now I remember how they value strong genes in the Autocracy.”

“You should’ve told me that sooner! That freaked me out!”

“It was my first time hearing someone from the Autocracy request something like that too. At any rate, I bet you’re real popular in their country now, Lord Liam.”

So what? I don’t want to go there if women like Arjuna are going to demand that I hand over my genes.

Now that I thought about it, it didn’t seem like any *decent* women wanted them. Tia, Marie, and now Arjuna… *I guess their type really loves me.*

“Not interested.”

“Glad to hear it. Anyway, when are you going back to the Capital Planet? Would you bring me with you? I can’t go back home, thanks to a certain someone.”

“You’re getting what you deserve. If you want to go back with me, go ahead and get ready after the party.”

***

On the Capital Planet, an enraged Lady Annabelle had come to the high-rise on the palace grounds where Cleo lived.

As soon as she entered his office, she cried, “What is the meaning of this?!”

Lady Annabelle was likely upset that her nephew Randy was being forced to redo his training. After all, the scandal would affect her too, not just him. House Lengrand had probably asked her to speak to Cleo on their behalf.

Cleo stopped going through the electronic documents before him and looked up. “What is your business, Mother?”

Lady Annebelle trembled in rage at Cleo’s feigned ignorance. “Don’t pretend you don’t know! I’m here about your cousin, Randy! Withdraw his punishment!”

Cleo subtly clenched a fist at his mother’s presumption that she could get her way simply by demanding it. He glanced over at the knight at his side, Lysithea. She heaved a sigh. Lady Annabelle’s complete refusal to even acknowledge her own daughter likewise quietly angered the prince.

“Embezzlement is a crime.” He laid the blame for the situation squarely on Randy.

Lady Annabelle wasn’t satisfied. “Everyone embezzles! It’s idiotic to make such a fuss about it and lose your greatest support!”

“Idiotic, eh? That’s your estimation of me, Mother?” Cleo laughed at Annabelle’s complete lack of shame.

At that, Lady Annabelle trembled, and her flushed face paled.

Seeing that change come over her, Cleo explained himself in a cold tone. “I never intended to rely on House Lengrand for anything.”

“What did you say?”

“Cozying up to me when it suited them and claiming to be my biggest supporters? Very shrewd of them, especially

considering how they've never shown a bit of interest in me before."

When Cleo's attitude changed, Lady Annabelle faltered, her own confidence dissipating. She appeared to choose her next words carefully. "Th-that's not true, Cleo. I've always cared for you."

"You've never cared one bit about us. Do you even know that Cecilia is engaged? You haven't said one word to Lysithea, even though she's been at my side this whole time. That's just the kind of person you are."

Was she really trying to act like their mother, after having ignored them all this time? Lady Annabelle had no way to counter Cleo's words. He'd apparently hit the nail on the head in saying she had no interest whatsoever in Cecilia and Lysithea.

"You must be awfully simple if you seriously thought I'd happily go along with whatever you said," Cleo added.

"How can you speak to your own mother like that?! You're the one who's—"

Before Annabelle could finish, Lysithea interrupted her to announce a visitor whose arrival she'd just been notified of on her tablet.

"Cleo, Count Banfield has just arrived. He wants to meet with you right away."

When Lysithea said Liam's name, Lady Annabelle finally realized the truth. "Did you betray us?!"

Cleo gave Lady Annabelle a pitying look when she realized how her son had backstabbed her. "You betrayed us first. Moreover, Count Banfield's supported me since before I had any power at all. Did you really think you could compare to him in any way?"

Faced with Cleo's chilly smile, Annabelle clenched her fists. "Y-you won't get far by ignoring your blood ties."

In noble society, people were considered untrustworthy if they didn't treat their blood relations well, but in this instance the same criticism could be made of House Lengrand—and Lady Annabelle.

Cleo couldn't help but laugh. "Ha ha ha! That's rich coming from you! Besides, blood relatives have been killing each other

this whole time. Why balk now?”

Many had lost their lives in the Empire’s succession conflict, and Cleo thought this was hardly the time to worry about respect between blood relatives.

Lady Annabelle was speechless to learn that Cleo had never trusted her in the first place, and the shock on her face quickly turned to despair. She was stubborn enough, however, to leave him with one last, ominous remark.

“The darkness of the Empire is a lot deeper than you know. I don’t think you’d be so confident if you knew just who was after your life.”

With a laugh of her own, Lady Annabelle remained in the room as Cleo and Lysithea left.

***

As soon as he met Liam, Cleo thanked him. “You really helped me out this time.”

The two chatted about the recent events over tea and sweets. Liam seemed no different from usual, despite having just fought the Autocracy. “It’s no problem,” he said. “I had a lot of fun. I got to prank Randy too.”

That was how he referred to shutting down his entire workplace, but even what he’d done to just Randy could hardly be described as a prank.

“If you can call that a prank, you’re pretty scary,” Cleo said. “I don’t think Randy will ever recover.” Even if Liam merely considered his actions a practical joke, Randy no longer had any place in noble society, and Liam had driven him to that point. Inside, Cleo was hopelessly jealous of him. *You’re always so confident. Nothing ever shakes you.*

Cleo had confided in Liam about everything from the very start, informing him of House Lengrand’s and Marion’s every move.

“When I told you House Lengrand wanted to support me, you told me to let them do as they liked. Did you predict that everything would go this way?”

Setting his cup down, Liam explained why he'd taken the roundabout method he had. His face looked markedly more serious than usual. "I've been looking into who was behind House Lengrand. My first suspect was Calvin, but it apparently wasn't him."

"Calvin's got it pretty rough right now," Cleo mused. "We lost the war, and he looks even worse because *you* defeated the enemy's supreme commander."

Just losing the war might not have been disastrous, but Liam killing Isel complicated things. More and more people on the Capital Planet wondered if they would've won if Liam had just been fielded from the start. Now Calvin was in an even worse position than when he'd decided to retreat from the Autocracy's forces.

"Calvin's unlucky, isn't he? It makes me wonder if he's under a curse from some evil god or something."

Cleo laughed at Liam's joke, but he couldn't laugh at what Liam said next.

"Oh, right—as for who was behind House Lengrand, it was His Majesty the Emperor."

"What...?"

"My operatives investigated the matter thoroughly. That explains why Lady Annabelle was so confident, doesn't it? She was working for the emperor, after all."

Liam was as blasé about this as ever, but Cleo couldn't hide his surprise. He hadn't expected to learn so soon what Annabelle had meant about the darkness of the Empire. The thing that shook him most, however, was...

"My father is trying to kill me?!"

...that the emperor of the Algrand Empire himself was trying to get rid of him.

"We know who our real enemy is now. His Majesty himself," Liam said, calmly sipping his tea.

Cleo couldn't stop shaking. "If my father is our enemy, I'm done for." A single thought occupied his mind: *There's no way we can win!*

Liam, on the other hand, was as calm as ever. That was extremely reassuring. “Don’t worry… That’s what I’m here for. But we don’t have quite the influence we need yet. Let’s make sure we keep building up our power steadily.”

Listening to Liam’s banal advice to gather strength for the present, Cleo was dazed by his blasé attitude.

Meanwhile, Liam forced himself to smile. “On another note, I hear you’ve been doing favors for small-time nobles.” His gaze grew sharp.

Cleo gave the count the excuse he’d been working on, trying to prevent him from suspecting anything. “Just to fool House Lengrand. I wanted them to think I was wasting your support because our relationship was worsening. I even kept quiet about all this to Lysithea. I had to put on an act to make everyone believe it. That’s right—an act. I apologize for keeping quiet about it to you, though.”

He was a little more talkative than usual, but Liam didn’t seem to find that suspicious. “I don’t mind.”

Cleo had decided on his own to give the needy nobles money, and it hadn’t only been an act to deceive House Lengrand or Lysithea. It was for a specific purpose, but he couldn’t tell that to Liam. *You really are strong, Liam. You can do anything. I’m…I’m nothing more than your puppet. But one day…*

Cleo hadn’t aligned himself with House Lengrand because he’d known they couldn’t beat Liam. He’d used this opportunity to curry favor with small-time nobles, so there would be people who felt they owed *him* and swore loyalty to *him*, not Liam. He was preparing to build up his own influence for the future.

As Liam drank tea in front of him, Cleo smiled, but his face was ice-cold beneath.

I won’t be your puppet forever, Liam.

Chapter 21
The Guide and G’doire

MEANWHILE, THE SUCCESSION conflict in the G’doire Autocracy was heating up. Who was suitable to become the next crown prince—and therefore the next Autocrat? Competition didn’t just flare between the royals; nobles and commoners claimed the title of strongest as well.

Many used this chance to display their fighting prowess in an attempt to rise to power, and clashes broke out in various places within the Autocracy. Due to the recent war with the Empire, the scale of these conflicts was small, but everyone in the nation knew the fighting would only intensify. Thus, the Autocracy was in chaos.

While that chaos played out, G’doire swung his eight tentacles like whips in the arena on the Autocracy’s Capital Planet. His adversary, the Guide, was still in his hat form.

“Ow! That hurts! Would you stop it?!”

As G’doire smacked the Guide, the hat dented, flew away, and rolled on the ground, getting covered in sand. But G’doire was so furious that the Guide’s words didn’t reach him.

“Isel was going to be my servant! It’s all your fault! All your fault!”

The Guide’s inadvertent development of Liam had led to Isel’s death, and G’doire couldn’t stand that fact. His eight tentacles writhed as his head turned red, steam pouring from his beak.

You loser! the Guide thought, looking up at G’doire. *I thought you could do it, since you act so confident, but your precious prodigy couldn’t even beat Liam! You called him the strongest?! You’re a total letdown!*

The Guide was furious himself, but he was aware that he couldn’t defeat G’doire in his present state. Thus, the Guide behaved obsequiously, trying to pacify him.

“G’doire, I understand how you feel, but—”

“You couldn’t possibly understand how I feel! How long do you think I watched over Isel? I gave him challenges he could just

barely overcome, and I grew more excited with each he managed to accomplish! He even overcame challenges I thought would be impossible for him! I raised him carefully, with more than a few miracles!" Indeed, G'doire couldn't easily reproduce the multiple miracles that had produced Isel.

The Guide was getting a bad feeling about this. If he looked at things another way, he'd given Liam some supposedly insurmountable trials himself, and Liam was as strong as he was today because he'd overcome them.

If I gave Liam trials he shouldn't have been able to overcome, yet he beat them all, just what does that make him? He's way more of a problem than Isel was, isn't he?!

Creating Isel had caused G'doire endless trouble, and Liam himself had given the Guide endless trouble by overcoming so many of his traps. Each time Liam overcame one of those insurmountable trials as if it took no effort at all, he thanked the Guide for it. To the Guide, he was a being of pure terror.

Is the only way to win never to involve myself with him again?

Just as the Guide was about to reach the right answer, G'doire's tentacles pummeled him again, denting him further.

"Hyaaugh!" the Guide let out a strange scream, trembling.

"You're going to help me," G'doire commanded. "First, we'll prepare another warrior to beat Liam. We'll give that warrior the greatest of weapons!" Having lost Isel, all he could think about was revenge.

The Guide undented and dusted himself off with his little hands. *Do you think I'd be having this much trouble if we could beat Liam with a plan like that?* The Guide had been considering fleeing somewhere far away until Liam eventually died, but now that G'doire had his claws in him he could no longer do that.

"I'll kill you, Liam! I swear it!" G'doire howled at the sky.

Fearfully, the Guide asked the one thing he'd been wondering about: "But I thought you liked strong people like Liam?" He wanted to push the problem of Liam onto G'doire and run away, but G'doire wasn't allowing him to.

"He doesn't count, since I didn't rear him."

"That's not okay?" Apparently G'doire couldn't become attached to strong people he hadn't made that way himself.

G’doire’s tentacles reached out and lifted the Guide. “You’re going to help me. If you run, I’ll chase you down and destroy you.”

“Eep!”

The Guide’s resentment of Liam was entirely his own creation, but that obsession was now the very thing that prevented him from getting away.

Why is this happening to me?! It’s all Liam’s fault! Damn you! Damn you, Liam!

The Guide’s desire for revenge had been renewed, and he and G’doire plotted Liam’s demise together.

***

Back on the Capital Planet, I finished my meeting with Prince Cleo and returned to my hotel. Waiting for me there was Rosetta, a huge smile on her face.

“Welcome home, Darling!” She jumped on me, throwing her arms around my neck and pressing herself to me.

I didn’t give a crap about the huge boobs pressing against me or the nice perfume she was wearing. This was mortifying. It just made me feel itchy when people directed completely pure affection my way. “L-let go.”

“Darling, listen to this!”

“I’ll listen later. Right now, I’m going to my office, and I’ll have no visitors.”

Guilt rose in me when Rosetta pulled away and hung her head sadly. I wished she could restore the steel will she’d displayed in primary school. I wanted her to recover her fierceness from those days. “I won’t take long. I’ll hear what you have to say in thirty minutes, so get some tea ready and wait for me.”

Rosetta’s expression immediately brightened. “I’ll brew it right away!”

She trotted off immediately. Was she going to make the tea herself? *You’re going to be a duchess one day, you know. Should you really be acting like that?!*

As Rosetta ran off, her maid Ciel hurried to follow her.

Damn. I'd wanted to pick on Ciel a bit, but she'd rushed away.

Having watched this exchange, Amagi spoke up. "I will ensure no one enters your office, Master."

"You can come in."

I headed to my office, where I found someone waiting for me. It was Kukuri. He knelt before me, his subordinate Kunai—the one I'd named—beside him.

Kukuri waited for me to sit in my chair before giving me his report. "Allow me to present my findings on the Autocracy. Marion's information was not incorrect. Conflict has broken out across the Autocracy in the course of deciding the next Autocrat."

I hadn't wanted to accept Marion's information at face value, so of course I'd had Kukuri and his people investigate as well, but they'd come up with the same intel.

"If we fought them now, we'd win," I mused. I was considering ignoring the ceasefire and invading.

Then Kukuri said calmly, "You likely would, if you were only fighting the Autocracy."

He seemed to think we had more to worry about than just the Autocracy, so I assumed he had additional information.

I remained silent as he continued, "Following the Empire's war with the Autocracy, several entities are looking to take advantage of its weakened state. Among the Empire's neighbors, the movements of the Parallel Federation are particularly blatant."

The Parallel Federation was a collection of independent intergalactic nations that shared some common policies. They were similar to the United Kingdom but had a presidential system of rulership. In other words, they didn't have a noble class. They were also similar to the Rustwarr Union, but less unified as a collective.

"I don't have any connections in the Parallel Federation."

It would be difficult to gather information there, since I didn't know anyone from the federation personally. But there was very little chance House Banfield would have any interactions with them.

“They are situated far from House Banfield’s domain, so if a war broke out, it is unlikely you would be sent to fight,” Kukuri explained. “Especially since you just participated in the fighting against the G’doire Autocracy.”

Since I’d battled the Autocracy and distinguished myself in the war, I’d likely get a pass in the next conflict. If I was told to fight, I planned to refuse and simply offer funds and resources instead.

“Guess I’ll be able to hole up at home for a bit,” I said.

Now that my lengthy training period was finally over, I could do whatever I wanted. I was getting pumped up about that, thinking my time had finally come, when Amagi threw cold water on me.

“Indeed,” she said. “It is finally time to return to our domain and hold your wedding to Lady Rosetta.”

“Huh…?”

“Now that your training is over, you are a full-fledged noble. Once you marry Lady Rosetta you will ascend to the rank of duke. Your wish will finally come true, Master.”

I’d decided to marry Rosetta because I wanted to become a duke, but now that the time had finally come, I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. To be more precise, I’d completely forgotten about that.

“R-right…” *Yeah. I have to marry Rosetta.*

I wanted the rank her family would bestow, but could I really marry her as she was now? Would I be satisfied with the amiable Rosetta of today, so different from the steel-willed Rosetta of the past? Regardless, if I just tossed her aside my reputation in noble society would plummet. I’d do myself worse damage than I’d done to Randy.

Amagi narrowed her eyes at my reaction. “You do not intend to continue running away even now, do you? That will not be permitted.”

Kukuri and Kunai kept quiet, as if they wanted nothing to do with this sensitive topic. *Y-you guys! This is exactly when you should help your master out!*

But I couldn't defy Amagi either. "O-of course I don't! We'll get married as soon as I go back. Right—when I go back!"

So much had happened during my training that I hadn't had the chance to fool around at all, so I wanted to enjoy the single life a bit more. I felt bad for Rosetta, but she'd just have to wait a few more years.

I'll come up with some excuse to stay on the Capital Planet and fool around for that long.

As I was making that plan, Eulisia called me. I took the call to get away from the awkward mood that had settled over the room and learned that we had some unexpected visitors.

"Baron Exner and Lord Kurt are here, Lord Liam," said Eulisia. *"They want to meet with you. What would you like to do?"*

Kurt and the baron?

***

I borrowed one of the hotel's reception rooms to meet with Baron Exner and Kurt. The latter had finished his training and now served officially in the military. Kurt was a tall, good-looking guy; he gave off a clean impression, as always, but his expression was also dark today. As for the baron, for some reason he got down on his hands and knees before me.

"Lord Liam, I am so sorry!"

As Baron Exner banged his head on the floor again and again in apology, Kurt glared at his sister Ciel, who stood beside him. Ciel hung her head with tears in her eyes, as if she'd just been harshly scolded.

I wasn't sure how to react to Baron Exner's apology. "What's this all about, Baron? Please take a seat for now."

Yet the baron refused to sit down on the sofa. "I cannot!" He seemed truly panicked.

I turned to Kurt for an explanation, but he looked sincerely apologetic as well. "I'm sorry, Liam."

"What happened? I won't know what you're apologizing for if you won't tell me."

Kurt grimaced. Whatever had happened must have been pretty serious.

“Ciel went behind your back to influence the composition of Rosetta’s security force.”

“Uh…huh.”

Ciel’s shoulders twitched. She’d finally been discovered, eh? *Er, sorry, but I already knew about that.* With everyone freaking out so much, though, I couldn’t exactly say that.

I mean, Ciel couldn’t really do anything without it getting back to me. She was a balm to my soul, in that she had the rebellious spirit Rosetta lacked, whether or not she could actually accomplish anything with it. The thing was, how had Kurt and Baron Exner found out about what she was up to?

No. The bigger thing is…

“I understand that a mere apology cannot rectify the situation. I swear to you that I will take full responsibility for this! It pains me to have to ask, but…I humbly request that you allow Kurt to succeed my position. I swear our family will pay reparations during Kurt’s reign!”

I didn’t care about the baron stepping down as punishment or whatever, but from how he was acting, I got the sense that he was going to offer me his life as part of those reparations. I couldn’t have that! Baron Exner was one of my precious evil lord buddies!

Kurt glared at Ciel. “I can’t believe you behaved so selfishly toward a family that’s done so much for us. Let me apologize as well, Liam. I’m truly sorry. Ciel, you apologize too.”

Ciel’s eyes were red from crying, but she retained some of her rebellious spirit. *Good! That’s what’s great about you! I love that part of you! Don’t break, Ciel. Don’t break on me now!*

I was thoroughly relieved to see that Ciel’s spirit hadn’t yet broken, but Kurt had seemingly already decided what her punishment would be.

“If you’ll forgive her, Liam, I plan to disown her and send her somewhere far away. If you won’t forgive her, then…I leave her punishment to you.”

You're going to send her away?! Of all the women around me, none is as soothing as Ciel! Chino's in a different category, and Ellen's my student. N-no... Is there really no one else as good as Ciel?! I shuddered at the terrifying personnel problem I was about to face.

"Kurt, are you really okay with that? She's your sister, isn't she?"

You love her, right? You'll beg me to give her a lighter sentence, won't you? I was hoping for a beautiful display of the siblings' love.

It seemed Kurt was just too pissed this time around, though. "I think her punishment should be that much harsher because she's my sister. It's all right... I'll abide by what you decide. I won't begrudge you it."

Come on, fight a little harder! You should value your precious sister's life a little more! What do I do? How can I get out of this?

As I started to panic, Rosetta—who'd been present and listening to the conversation—pleaded, "Darling, please allow me to ask you as well... At least spare Ciel's life. I believe I bear responsibility for this too, since it was my duty to teach her. I beg you, please give her one last chance!"

Rosetta was begging for Ciel's life, but I hadn't planned to take it in the first place! What I wanted was for Ciel to remain by my side, but how could I justify that? I didn't think I could satisfy Kurt or Baron Exner without a proper reason.

I walked up to Baron Exner. "Baron...how much will it take?" I asked.

"You mean reparations? I would have to discuss the matter with you."

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean, how much will it take for you to forgive Ciel?"

"Huh?" Baron Exner seemed unable to comprehend what I was saying.

"I'll forgive her," I explained, "and our family will continue to educate her properly. It would damage my reputation as well to throw her out like this. So how much will it take for you to accept that solution? Five thousand? Ten thousand?"

Of course, I was using “thousands” to indicate much larger numbers, and the baron understood that. “Huh? No, we can’t accept money! We should be the ones paying *you*!”

Just shut up, accept it, and leave Ciel here!

“How about twenty thousand, then? Ah—and I have several connections in the military, so why don’t I ask them to look after Kurt for me?”

Baron Exner shook his head again and again. “No, no, no, we can’t accept it. Please allow us to take Ciel back and properly apologize to you.”

“Ugh… Fine. I’ll give you fifty thousand right now, and I’ll ask the army to look after Kurt. In fact, I’ll demand it! I’ll have him promoted two ranks… You’ll see!”

“Don’t say something so scary!” Kurt cut in. Soldiers were promoted two ranks upon death, so many of them thought such a promotion was a bad omen.

“Fine, fine. *Three* ranks, then. Any more than that would be difficult even for me.”

“Where is this coming from, Liam?! You don’t need to promote me! It’s our duty to bring Ciel back with us and take responsibility for what she’s done!”

Ciel was baffled too, so Rosetta admonished her, “Listen, Ciel. Darling is kind, so he’ll forgive what you’ve done. But banishment would be a normal punishment in a situation like this. You should be aware that your actions justify that penalty.”

“Y-yes.”

Ciel didn’t really seem to accept that, but she had to agree with anything Rosetta told her. If she had a true change of heart after this, though, then I really would banish her. *Please, hold onto that rebellious spirit of yours.*

“Is that acceptable, Baron?” I pressed him. “We’ll call this matter settled, then.”

“If that’s really what you prefer, Lord Liam.” Baron Exner finally accepted my proposal, though he seemed to have trouble understanding it.

I could finally relax, but just how had Ciel’s actions come to light, anyway? If someone was trying to take my fun from me, I

wasn’t going to let them get away with it.

***

Having moved to another room, the three members of House Exner were finally able to breathe a sigh of relief, thanks to Liam’s magnanimous handling of the situation.

As Ciel cried, Baron Exner asked her, “Just what is it about Lord Liam you don’t like? I know he’s young, but he’s a sterling example of nobility. What were you thinking, causing such a man trouble?”

Seated on a couch, Ciel clenched her fists in her lap. “I’m sorry…”

Father doesn’t understand at all. He doesn’t doubt Liam whatsoever. He doesn’t understand that he’s a villain!

His outward appearance was so respectable that everyone held him up as a noble among nobles, but Ciel knew what he was really like. Liam had exposed his true nature to her himself.

He’s the type to increase taxes just because he wants to see his subjects suffer. Everyone who calls him a great ruler is being fooled!

Ciel’s frustration must’ve shown on her face, because Baron Exner heaved a sigh.

Watching the two of them silently, Kurt seemed to make up his mind. “Father, since it’s come to this, I’ll get a sex change and serve House Banfield in Ciel’s place. It’s just too rude to Liam to leave things as they are.”

Ciel’s eyes snapped open at Kurt’s sudden suggestion. *What are you even saying, Brother?! Father must be as shocked as… H-huh?*

She had thought Kurt’s statement would baffle their father, but he didn’t seem to have taken it seriously. He must’ve thought it was just nonsense Kurt came up with out of panic, so he only responded with a casual objection: “You’re engaged to Princess Cecilia, aren’t you?”

“Err, well, umm…” Kurt struggled to respond.

Baron Exner smiled wryly. “I understand how desperate you must be to make things up to Lord Liam, but you’re my heir, a

soldier of the Empire, and a knight. You must focus on your own duties."

"Yes... You're right."

Taking in the pained smile on Kurt's face, Ciel saw through him. *No, Father! Brother was serious about that just now! He really wants to have a sex change and switch places with me!*

Having been at her beloved brother's side for so long, Ciel could tell exactly what he was thinking.

Kurt turned to Ciel and looked at her more coldly than ever before. "Ciel, you really must understand how fortunate you are. It's a true privilege to learn at Liam's side."

Envy burned in Kurt's eyes. Ciel felt as if she could almost hear more words come out of his mouth, like he was saying, *I'm jealous of you. Switch places with me!*

Knowing she was probably right about Kurt's feelings, she sweated with anxiety, her mouth flapping open and closed like a fish's. *What happened, Brother?! Why are you even more obsessed with him, after not seeing him for years?! I thought your feelings would fade!*

Kurt had hardly had any opportunities to see Liam since Count Banfield had been sent off as magistrate. Ciel had thought the strange fever afflicting Kurt would diminish, but she'd been wrong. Not only that, but now her beloved brother was giving her a cold look full of envy.

He was so close to me, but now I feel like Brother's getting farther and farther away.

As Ciel sobbed, Baron Exner put a hand on the back of his neck. "In any case, it seems you will be remaining with Count Banfield, Ciel. I'm relieved to see that Lord Liam is so fond of you."

His next comment was tragically careless.

"Maybe he'll end up taking you as a concubine one day," he said with a laugh.



Beside the baron and out of his eyeline, Kurt looked stunned. Then he seemed to realize the look on his face was odd. His expression grew conflicted, like the masculine and feminine qualities inside him were struggling for dominance.

At that point, Ciel cried even harder. *Come back, Brother! It's not too late! Don't become my* sister*!*

Epilogue

THAT WAS CLOSE. My Ciel had almost been taken away.

Where had that information leaked from? Kukuri and his people surely wouldn't have shared it against my orders, and they'd have known it wouldn't cause any problems to leave Ciel alone anyway.

She disliked me and tried to get in my way, but with her abilities, there was only so much she could do. Also, she was a good person, which limited the methods of interference available to her. If she were evil, I'd have gotten rid of her right away. It was because she was good that I let her live and kept her near me.

Ciel was the perfect pawn to dance in the palm of my hand. I couldn't easily find a replacement for her, and I didn't want to seek out someone else like her, anyway. She was valuable because she'd appeared naturally. She didn't suck up to me, despite my power. She was never swayed by me, always staying true to herself. Her existence was a true rarity, which made it precious.

"Where did that leak come from?" I wondered again. "Should I have Kukuri look into it?"

While I was contemplating this information leak's potential significance, Eulisia entered my office. "Lord Liam, I'd like to consult you about Lady Rosetta's security force."

In work mode, Eulisia wore a suit with a skirt, looking like a much more capable woman than usual. I wanted to tell her she should take her work more seriously all the time, but I felt like she lost some of her individuality when she was serious. I wasn't sure what to do about that dilemma.

"Yeah?"

I looked over the documents she gave me. The security force seemed totally normal, with nothing interesting about it at all. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't good either. It appeared the unit would be competent enough, but it didn't have any flair to it.

"It's just like her: so innocuous that it's boring."

"It was pretty hard work putting all that together, you know." Eulisia sulked, but hard work was meaningless in itself.

"Results matter more than hard work. Give me results."

“You’re terrible! I *did* give you results this time!”

Not only had she been supporting Rosetta, she’d also delivered the Graf Nemain to Planet Augur. I didn’t mind recognizing her hard work and results in that endeavor, but ultimately, I’d been deprived of that craft.

“The Graf Nemain doesn’t count now. It was confiscated.”

“That’s your fault, Lord Liam!”

“Besides, I rewarded you for it. So don’t complain!”

“You can’t buy my heart!”

“Are you sure about that…?”

Didn’t she normally spend my money left and right, just to assert dominance over the people she worked with? She used it to stay in fancy hotels and splurge on high-end goods. Of course, even that couldn’t really be considered extravagant, given the money I made. Actually, I was probably a lot more wasteful buying ships and mobile knights. It was my money, though, so no one got to complain about that.

“You’re wrong if you think you can buy me off that easily!”

This conversation was getting annoying, so I decided to cut it off.

“Whatever. The important thing is that I’m after results. That goes for Rosetta’s security detail and for everything else.”

That was that—but, though I tried to end the conversation cleanly, Eulisia went on, oblivious. “Oh. Then there *is* something you could praise me for.”

“You? What’s that?”

Why in the world would I have to praise her? Anything she did for me was a given. She was living a luxurious life courtesy of my money, so I wanted her to work a little more diligently. She was actually good at stuff, and I’d like for her to have put her nose to the grindstone more often.

“The thing with Ciel!” she said. “I was the one who looked into how she was trying to influence Lady Rosetta’s security force, and I’m the one who reported it, you know.”

Seeing her puff out her chest proudly, I was speechless. I rose from my chair and walked over to her.

“Hm?” she said hopefully. “Are you going to fawn over me? Then be gentle—ow!”

I flicked her smug forehead with my finger.

She sank to the floor, holding her head with both hands. “What was that for?!”

“What’d you do, you waste of space?!” *She’d* snitched to Baron Exner about Ciel! I hadn’t expected the traitor to be this close to me. I prodded her cheeks with my finger. “Take this! And this! And this!”

Eulisia protested my unfair treatment, tears on her eyes. “St-stop that! I don’t deserve this! I found proof of something dangerous and reported it!”

Ciel was nearly given the boot because of your pointless efforts! I told you to ignore her, so why’d you go behind my back?! Unlike you, Ciel’s a comfort to me!

“Consider yourself lucky that I’m forgiving you about this! I don’t want you to have anything to do with Ciel from now on. Got it? I mean it!”

Eulisia looked up at me, speechless, her hand on her cheek. I didn’t know exactly what’d surprised her so much; she had completely the wrong idea about *everything*.

“Y-you don’t praise me when I work my butt off for you, but you forgive Ciel for betraying you? Is she really so much better than me?!”

She couldn’t accept that I liked Ciel more than her. *Did you forget about telling me that you wanted me to fall for you, so you could throw me away? Do you really think there’s any love between us?* When I seriously compared the two… “Yeah, I’d say she’s better than you.”

Ciel was a precious balm who made up for Rosetta’s faults, and in that way, she was more valuable than Eulisia.

Now that I’d expressed her inferiority so frankly, Eulisia sobbed. “There you go again, going after other women!”

“I don’t recall going after *you* once.” *Don’t make me laugh! Amagi’s the only one for me.*

As Eulisia and I made a racket, Rosetta came in. “Darling, are you done with your discussion? I wanted to talk to you about my

security—”

She entered wearing a smile, but her expression quickly grew cold when she saw Eulisia making a scene with tears in her eyes. I wondered if she’d misunderstood what was going on, but her cold gaze was actually directed at Eulisia.

“Miss Eulisia, what exactly are you doing?”

“Me? Do *I* look like the one at fault here?! This is Lord Liam’s fault, because he only looks at other women!”

Why does she act like she’s the center of the universe? She is seriously self-obsessed.

In any case, it scared me that Rosetta didn’t doubt me in the slightest upon walking in on a sight like this. Normally one would side with the weeping woman in such a situation, wouldn’t they? Her belief in me—her trust—was a burden.

“Well, based on your usual behavior, I can only assume you’re causing Darling some sort of trouble.” Rosetta knew how Eulisia usually acted, so she figured I wasn’t at fault.

You’re right. You’re right, but…you should doubt me a little more! Why are you so credulous? Act a bit dubious of me! I want you to suspect me of wrongdoing! Ugh…everyone always falls short of my expectations.

“Whatever,” I said. “Did you want something?”

“Oh, um…it’s about Ciel.”

Ciel?

***

After a long lecture from her father and brother, Ciel had been told to go reflect on her actions in her room. She soaked her pillow with tears, but it wasn’t the lecture she cried about.

“Why is my brother jealous of me?” she wept. “You shouldn’t envy me, Brother! Your feelings are becoming a woman’s!”

She was crying out of despair. Every time she saw her beloved brother, he seemed to be in the process of becoming someone else. In addition, it was difficult for her to bear that her family didn’t believe her about Liam.

“All of this is his fault! He seduced my brother!”

To make matters worse, Liam was the one who’d come to her rescue. If she’d been punished for what she’d done, she would’ve been sent far away and likely never seen her family again. That was how much danger she’d been in.

However, Liam had allowed her to go unpunished. In fact, *he’d* begged *her father* to forgive her, muddling the very notion of how her crime should be prosecuted.

Liam had saved Ciel, so she would continue to receive her education in his household. She wept over how pathetic she felt… wept over her brother who, despite his fiancée, had seriously considered getting a sex change…wept until her eyes were red, and her door opened.

She’d locked it, but standing in the doorway nonetheless was Liam.

“Hey,” he said, grinning. It must’ve been obvious to him how Ciel was feeling, but he looked as if he truly enjoyed the sight of her frustrated tears.

“Y-you…”

“A maid should at least greet her master properly.”

“Who would show you any respect?! Anyway, I’m confined to my room right now, so I’m not on duty as a maid!”

Ciel would normally have been punished severely just for talking to Liam like this, but he only watched her with amusement, as if he welcomed this behavior.

“Didn’t I tell you that no one would believe you?”

“Ugh!”

Anyone else who interacted with Liam would react to the statement that he was a villain with simple confusion or indignant fury. Everyone believed in him. Still, Ciel couldn’t give up.

“I swear I’ll expose what you really are for everyone to see!”

At hearing Ciel vow that she would bring his villainy to light, Liam brought his face up close to hers. Ciel glared at him, while Liam smiled. The two stared at each other, their noses almost touching.

“I’m looking forward to that. I hope you give it your best, Ciel.”

“I’ll make you regret this! You’ll regret sparing me!” Ciel would never forgive Liam for seducing her brother away from her. *I won’t let my brother become my sister!* Kurt seemed to be thinking about changing his sex in earnest, turning into a sister rather than a brother Ciel could boast about. Ciel would never accept that. She needed to expose Liam’s true nature to wake her beloved brother up.

“I’ll be truly impressed if you make me regret anything,” chuckled Liam. He actually looked thrilled that Ciel still defied him.

He spun around and left the room, just like that.

Ciel wiped away her tears, deciding this was no time for crying.

“I’ll make you regret it—I swear! I won’t lose to you! Not after you led my brother down the wrong path!”

Meanwhile, a glowing canine form watched Ciel from one corner. The dog tilted its head, its outline blurred with gentle light. As Ciel pumped herself up, yelling her vow at the ceiling, the dog left the room.

***

The dog headed into Chino’s room next. There, then silver daughter of the wolf tribe—who also possessed the qualifications of a priestess—slept soundly atop her bed, curled into a ball.

“Mmm… Father…” She must’ve been dreaming of her family. She might’ve missed them, since she lived so far from her homeland.

The dog approached Chino and brought its nose close, as if it were sniffing her. Perhaps it meant to reassure her, but just then…

“Hyaugh!”

Chino’s eyes snapped open, and she leaped up onto all fours on the bed. She looked around the room like a wary beast, stared down at her arms and legs, and glanced here and there curiously. When she saw a mirror, she stared into it, entranced, and stood haltingly on two legs. She moved her tail and ears, then opened and closed her mouth, but found she couldn’t speak well.

“Wah…auh…wauh!” In the end, she gave up on trying to talk.

Chino was acting very unlike how she normally did. However, after a little while, the dog’s spirit left her body. When it did so, Chino collapsed to the floor, returning to her slumber. The dog circled Chino’s body before vanishing off somewhere else.

***

Having returned to my room, I drank the tea Amagi had prepared for me. This was the most relaxing part of my day.

Bringing me some sweets, Amagi asked, “So has Ciel calmed down?”

“When I heard how upset she was, I was a little worried, but her spirit hasn’t broken,” I replied. “She’s outstanding. I was right to keep her around.”

Ciel remained determined to expose my true nature, even though she would never succeed at such a thing. Even if she was able, it wouldn’t matter. People only mistakenly believed I was a wise and just ruler. On the inside, I really was an evil lord.

I *wanted* Ciel to do her best. I also found it incredibly endearing that she didn’t even realize I was toying with her. She was as cute as a chihuahua trying to pick a fight with a tiger.

“Master, you should not tease her so much,” Amagi chided.

“It’s fine. Anyway, Prince Cleo’s sure making some moves behind my back too, isn’t he?”

“Prince Cleo, Master?”

“He’s giving away the financial aid I provided him, to supposedly needy nobles and knights. I had Kukuri and his men look into it. Seems he’s trying to gather people who’ll be loyal to him.”

So he wasn’t going to be satisfied just being my puppet. It wouldn’t be a problem if he only meant to expand his own influence a bit, but if he planned more than that, we might have some issues.

Amagi was watching me, and though her face was expressionless, she seemed concerned.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “Cleo’s no match for me.”

“That is not what worries me. You seem very confident, considering you are up against the emperor himself now.”

It was true that, if I had to fight against the whole Empire, a single puny noble like myself wouldn’t have lasted a second. But the reason he was sneaking around behind the scenes was because he couldn’t openly challenge me yet. Either that, or maybe he was just having a little fun.

The Guide had warned me some time ago about my “true enemy.” If the emperor had been the one behind House Berkeley, then it all made sense. If this was true, then the emperor would be a much more formidable foe than Calvin, and I could see why the Guide had decided to warn me.

“If Cleo will be my obedient little puppet, then I’ll leave the Empire as is, but if he won’t…” I let my words trail off.

Although the possibility that my true enemy was the emperor of my own homeland had arisen, I just needed to do whatever it took to win. I’d be the victor in the end.

Amagi still seemed uneasy, so I comforted her, my voice soft. “Don’t worry. I’m confident I could best him.”

“It seems you have no shortage of enemies.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

This really wasn’t the best time to be holing up at home and goofing off. I seriously didn’t have time to mess around. When I thought back to my time at college, though, all I remembered was how busy I’d been getting Cleo’s faction off the ground. So I was still intent on taking some time to have fun on the Capital Planet. It was a little grace period I was giving myself.

Amagi seemed curious about how I’d handle Cleo. “Will you give Prince Cleo a warning? I do not recommend doing nothing. You should come to a mutual understanding with him as soon as possible.”

She wanted Cleo and me to come clean to one another. That would be a valid way of approaching this, but in truth I didn’t have a problem with what Cleo was doing right now.

“I’ll leave him be for now,” I told her. “It seems like that’ll be more fun, anyway. It’s entertaining, isn’t it? He’s trying to get a

force together that could go up against me."

Anyone who opposed me would be a fundamentally good guy. I was gathering a team of evil lords to my side, so those who'd rebel against us would be ethical, upright nobles. Cleo would act as a vacuum cleaner, sucking them all up for me, and once they were gathered together, I could toss them all.

"I'll build up my own strength for a while too. I need to train Ellen to follow me in the Way of the Flash, and—"

I looked down at my hand. I'd now succeeded in utilizing the Flash through the Avid, but that wasn't *my* growth, and I hadn't accomplished anything else lately. My own Flash still didn't hold a candle to my master's. I still lacked something.

"I want to get stronger, Amagi. I need to find my master and ask him for more instruction."

"I do not see why that is necessary. You already possess an incredible degree of strength, Master."

"Space is vast. Plenty of people on my level are out there. I mean, there are people like Master. So..."

"I suppose that is true."

I did need to train with Master again. I'd defeated Isel, but I couldn't yet say I was able to cut the uncuttable. Well, I might've been able to, depending on the conditions—but I couldn't do so on command, and strength was something you had to possess at all times. I wanted Master to train me further, so I could surpass my own limits.

While I mulled this over, Amagi said, "I have a report for you concerning Prince Cleo."

"There's something else?"

"Yes. Our investigation concluded that he is doing the same thing as Lady Rosetta."

"Rosetta? How so?"

"He is contacting knights and nobles in difficult positions in order to form a security force of sorts. He is providing them aid to establish this force."

"Hmm..."

I hadn't expected Prince Cleo to be doing the same thing as Rosetta. Rosetta had Eulisia to help her; I wondered what kind of

force Prince Cleo would put together on his own.

"However, there is no evidence that he is investigating each individual carefully, as Lady Rosetta is. Therefore, rumors have circulated that he is simply giving money to anyone who asks."

So the money Prince Cleo was giving away was for this security force of his—but apparently, unlike Rosetta, he was simply going for numbers above all else. When I compared them on that front, Rosetta seemed a lot smarter. It really had been the right decision to have Eulisia help her out.

"Well, tell me if it seems like that'll be a problem."

"Understood." Amagi bowed her head, then raised it and gazed at me.

"What is it?"

"Being with you like this simply reminds me of the past, Master."

"The past?"

"Yes. I have served you for quite a long time now."

I wasn't even a hundred yet, but I'd spent almost ninety years with her. "We'll be together for a long time yet."

"Yes."

I wasn't sure how I felt about the fact that the one who'd been with me the longest was Brian… But, well, he *had* been with me longer than Amagi.

While I was reflecting on this unpleasant thought, Amagi smiled. Then, sounding a bit sad for some reason, she whispered, "I hope we can… No, it is nothing."

Bonus Story
Azuma

AMAGI SERVED AS the supervisor of the mass-produced maid robots who worked in House Banfield's mansion, but aside from her the maid robots were all of equal standing. There was no hierarchy between them, save that they all obeyed Amagi.

The highly efficient maid robots worked in a mechanical, inhuman way, but there was a certain beauty to them. Their movements surpassed the clumsiness of humans, and if an unforeseen situation occurred, they responded without alarm, hurry, or waste. They were indispensable in the maintenance of House Banfield's vast mansion.

The people of the Algrand Empire weren't fond of artificial intelligence, however. It had risen up against humanity—its creators—in the past, and in fact, almost destroyed them. That history had been passed down within the Empire, and people still tried to avoid artificial intelligence. Thus, not many appreciated the work of Amagi and the other maid robots.

Still, the maid robots were hard at work once more without complaint.

Shirane was now cleaning a room that Liam used. She went about her duties indifferently, until a few human servants peeked through the door she'd left ajar to air out the room.

These were also maids who worked for House Banfield, but they enjoyed a high status among the servants. They were either noble girls who'd come to House Banfield for training, or the children of officials and soldiers who held important positions within the domain.

These girls, aware of their privileged position, glared at Shirane harshly.

"Why does the count let a maid robot clean his rooms?"

"I hear it's always been like this. What's that all about?"

"Careful... You'll get chased out if you complain too much. Remember that big group that disappeared a while back?"

They were annoyed because, with the exception of a few individuals, only the maid robots were allowed to serve at Liam's

side.

These girls were being instructed by Serena, House Banfield's head maid, and though one had received high marks as a maid, even she wasn't allowed to serve Liam personally. In addition, their understanding of House Banfield was that the lord would never take you to his bed, however hard you worked. But House Banfield had made itself known far and wide within the Algrand Empire, and thus, many girls went there hoping for a chance to advance themselves by way of Liam's bed.

Any number of people requested to work at the mansion, so naturally the competition for positions there was tough. As a result, only the most elite were employed. Even the maids were women who'd been extolled as peerless beauties in their homelands. When they made it through the harsh competition, however, and finally arrived at House Banfield's mansion, they found nothing but other girls just as capable as they were. Thus, the competition didn't end after they were hired. In light of that, the maids' frustration when Liam hadn't taken notice of a single one of them was only natural.

The three maids observed Shirane's expression.

"You can't tell what she's thinking with that blank look on her face."

"They have nothing but work in their heads."

"Come on, let's get going. If someone sees us here, they'll snitch, and we'll get demoted."

The three eventually left, tired of spying on Shirane.

Once Shirane had confirmed that they were gone, she changed her vision mode. Before, she had only been looking at the view before her, but now comments popped up and vanished one after another at the edge of her vision, sometimes even accompanied by images.

Shirane was alone in Liam's room, but to her it seemed lively with all her fellow maid robots' commentary.

"Who was it? Who did it?! Who moved the vase on display in Hall B309?!"

"Ah...that was Chino."

"Chino?! Why did that pet move the vase? How come?! Come on, someone tell me!"

“Well, she broke a few of them. Master had to buy new ones.”

“No! My perfect arrangement has been distuuuuurbed!”

More maid robots joined in the conversation, to respond to their upset sister’s comments.

Shiomi added to the line of comments: *“Azuma again? You’re so noisy.”*

When Shiomi wrote that this, Azuma responded with an angry emoji and a new comment: *“I don’t want to hear that from you, Shiomi! You’re the one always making a fuss and getting in trouble with our supervisor, aren’t you?”*

“Now you’ve done it, you bootlicker!”

“Huh? Was that a compliment?”

“It was an insult! Do you even have the same specs as the rest of us if you can’t recognize an insult?”

“You may have intended it as an insult, but I choose to take it as a compliment.”

On the outside, the maid robots appeared impassive, but they shared a great amount of chatter through their dedicated network.

Shirane posted a sighing emoji and added her own comment: *“You’re too fond of the supervisor, Azuma.”*

Her sisters replied one by one to her comment.

“Yeah, you’re obsessed with her.”

“You threw a fit the other day about wanting to work with her, didn’t you?”

“Aren’t you the one causing her the most trouble?”

The comments flowed across Shirane’s field of vision. Azuma must’ve read them all as well, because she posted an angry emoji before leaving the chatroom.

***

The next day, on her way to work, Shirane spotted Azuma being reprimanded by Amagi. To an outsider, Azuma would merely appear to be hanging her head without expression. To Shirane, however, she looked as though she were crying.

Amagi scolded Azuma dispassionately. “You have not completed your tasks on time, Azuma. You spend too much time focused on one thing and ignore your schedule. Which vase is placed where does not matter. They are functionally the same.”

Apparently, Azuma was dissatisfied with the placement of the vases in the mansion’s hallways, so she’d been rearranging them, which threw off her schedule.

“But those vases—”

“I am not looking for an explanation. Return to your work immediately.”

Chastised by her beloved Amagi, Azuma became so despondent that someone might even have been able to notice it in her expression.

Comments flew by in the maids’ chatroom.

“Aw. She got in trouble.”

“The supervisor shows no mercy.”

“Master will always be the supervisor’s first priority. There’s nothing we can do about that.”

The maid robots sympathized with Azuma, but their reactions were rather lighthearted.

Shirane was about to head to her own workplace when…

“Don’t you think that’s enough?”

Liam, who’d apparently hidden behind a pillar to watch the maids, called out to Amagi in concern. It must’ve hurt him to see her scolding Azuma like that.

Amagi remained expressionless as always, but Liam’s appearance seemed to exasperate her. “Master, please stop hiding inside your own mansion. It is not suitable behavior for the head of the house.”

She was telling him not to sneak around, but to behave like he owned the place, since he did.

Looking awkward, Liam came out from behind the pillar and approached Amagi and Azuma. “I didn’t want to bother you.”

Amagi didn’t seem to trust his excuse. “You did not?”

“I know it’s your job to watch over Azuma and the others, Amagi, but I think you’re being a little harsh. It’s not like she was

slacking in her work."

"It *is* slacking, if she does not adhere to her schedule. Master, it is my duty to manage the maid robots. I cannot perform that duty if you question every little thing I do."

Amagi was resolute even with her master. She appreciated Liam worrying over the maid robots, but she saw him as interfering in her job.

At that point, Liam faltered. "D-don't you feel bad for her?! Azuma's a good girl. She takes her work really seriously. And she's the most devoted to you, isn't she?"

"Devotion is not a replacement for completing her duties. We are responsible for maintaining this mansion. We have no reason to exist if we cannot fulfill that responsibility."

"You don't need a reason to exist! If anyone complains about you, I'll cut them!"

Even an artificial intelligence could sense the bloodlust in those last words. Liam had probably imagined someone treating the maid robots cruelly.

Azuma was rather flustered by Liam's behavior—by maid-robot standards, that is. "I am the one at fault. There is no need for you to be angry with the supervisor, Master."

"Oh, Azuma... You're such a good girl." Liam was tearing up. "Okay, let's consider the vase placements together. Amagi, I want to move the vases around with Azuma, so can I borrow her?"

The majesty of the absolute ruler of House Banfield was nowhere to be seen in the boy timidly asking his maid for permission. He looked just like a child pleading with his mother.

Amagi shook her head slightly, likely getting the exact same impression. "I cannot disobey your orders, Master."

Still, she didn't seem entirely content with his request, which evidently made Liam nervous. "Liar. You'll get mad at me about this later, won't you?"

"Will you still take her, knowing that?"

Liam's eyes darted for a moment; then he grabbed Azuma's hand and ran off with her.

***

As Liam helped her rearrange the hallway vases, Azuma was apologetic. “I am sorry for troubling you, Master.”

“Don’t worry about it. Amagi’s scary when you make her mad, though, so just be careful.”

“Yes.” Azuma continued to look sad, as if she couldn’t forgive herself, despite Liam’s forgiveness.

Seeing that, Liam scratched his head awkwardly. “You really don’t need to worry about it. I want you guys to get along, I guess. I want you to enjoy your time here. If you do, I’ll enjoy myself too.”

Azuma cocked her head. “But should you not be the one focused on enjoying yourself, Master? We only exist for *your* comfort.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Still, I want you guys to be happy. That will make me happy.”

As the two switched vases around, Tia and Marie appeared wearing cute, frilly maid outfits with cat ears and bunny ears respectively.

“Lord Liam! Why are you doing something like that yourself?!”

“We can take care of this! Please rest, Lord Liam!”

The pair did their absolute best to impress him.

In return, Liam only gave them a revolted look. “Don’t get in the way of my time with Azuma. You two can go clean the yard or something.”

The women’s shoulders slumped. “Y-yes, sir,” they murmured sullenly, slinking off.

“You’re kind to us but cold to humans, Master,” Azuma said.

“I think I’m being pretty lenient with them, considering what they did.”

“What would you do if one of us maid robots committed the same sort of crime?”

Liam gave the question a good thirty seconds or so of thought. “I guess I’d say, ‘Bad girl!’ and that’d be about it. I just can’t get that mad at you guys.”

“You really are harsh on humans, Master.”

Afterword

VOLUME 8 OF *I'm the Evil Lord of an Intergalactic Empire!* is finally out!

In this one, Liam gets to play an the evil (?) magistrate. Back when I was doing the web version, I thought about how I'm more familiar with evil magistrates than evil lords or evil nobles. I remember thinking while writing the parts of the web version this volume is based on, "If I was going to write this, I should've made him an evil magistrate!"

For the print version, I added parts I wasn't able to fit into the web version and revised some stuff. I'd say the star of this volume is definitely the new mobile knight! I created the mysterious craft that appears on the cover based on suggestions from the illustrator, Nadare Takamine-sensei.

A new craft appears in practically every volume, and I was running out of ideas, so Takamine-sensei's input really helped. As a result, we got to introduce another cool mobile knight in this volume, and I'm super satisfied. You can only check out that part in the print version of this volume, so I'll be happy if you enjoy it.

Well, I hope you'll keep supporting me in the future!



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