
NOVEL
9
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I'M THE EVIL LORD OF AN INTERGALACTIC EMPIRE

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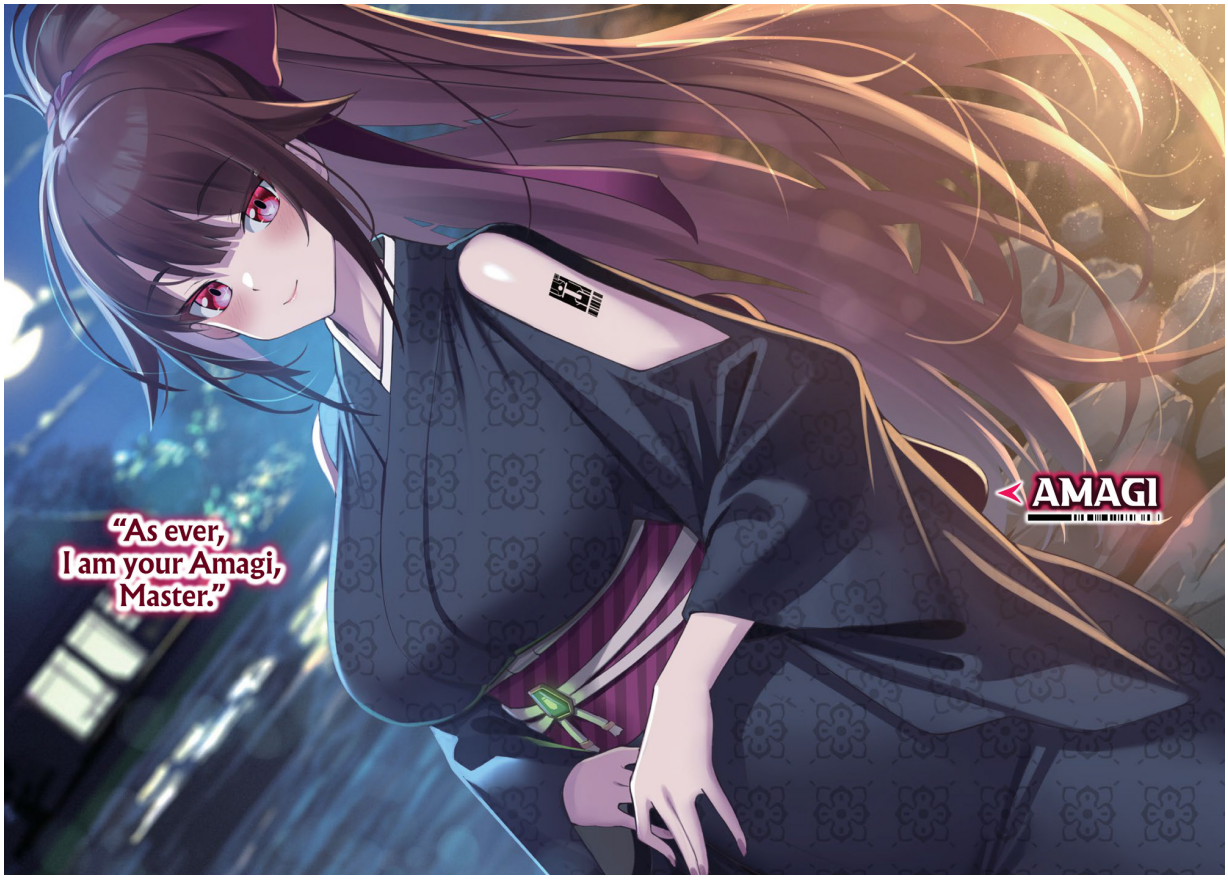
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My chest is flat...
ELLEN
"Getting hit in the back was your own fault!"
"That idiot Fuka let you manipulate her!"
FUKA
RIHO


"As ever,
I am your Amagi,
Master."
AMAGI


AG003-M099D
VIVIAN'S
VALRHONA
VIVIAN
"Yes, Lady Rosetta..."

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9

WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY

NADARE TAKAMINE

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

ORE WA SEIKAN KOKKA NO AKUTOKU RYOUSHU! Vol. 9
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Prologue

TEN YEARS HAD PASSED.

In the early morning, a young-looking girl with short red hair was outside swinging a wooden sword. She was repeating basic movements of the style called the "Way of the Flash." With every swing of her sword, sweat flew off her; it was a chilly morning, but she dripped with perspiration regardless.

The girl's wooden sword was heavier than it looked. The average adult would've had trouble swinging it at all, but each of the girl's swings was precise, as if the sword's weight meant nothing to her. Though she was concentrating, she didn't count her swings. She simply repeated the movements until she was satisfied.

Her name was Ellen Tyler, and she was the apprentice of Liam Sera Banfield, head of House Banfield and an official master of the Way of the Flash.

When Liam first took Ellen in, she'd only been five, but now she was fifteen. She'd grown a bit since then, but her appearance was still rather childish.

Ellen had taken the initiative to perform this morning training on her own, and she swung her sword with single-minded focus even as heat radiated from her sweaty frame.

"A little more… Just a little more…"

She continuously adjusted her movements bit by bit until she could feel satisfied by the way she swung her sword. The Way of the Flash's signature move, the Flash, was attention-grabbing, but the

style's practitioners mostly trained to master basic movements down to the finest detail. The Way of the Flash was about slashing so fast that it looked as though you hadn't even drawn the sword from its sheath. Anyone who heard that the style's training revolved entirely around basic movements—although practitioners needed only one real technique—would be baffled. However, Liam and his sister apprentices faithfully followed their master Yasushi's instructions and practiced the basics every day.

Ellen did so too, dutifully following Liam's directions, though she couldn't yet perform the Flash herself. She was at an age when she should only have been concerned with enjoying her youth, but she'd already spent most of her childhood focused entirely on improving her swordplay.

Large droplets of sweat pelted the ground around her. However much time passed, Ellen simply continued swinging her blade, giving off an impatient air.

"Stronger… I want to be stronger. I *need* to be stronger…"

When Liam took Ellen in, he'd brought her to House Banfield's mansion. Ever since, she'd undergone training that would've shocked the average knight. She was in the incredibly privileged position of being trained personally by Liam himself, and Liam and everyone around him looked forward to Ellen becoming a proper swordsman trained in the Way of the Flash. She *had* to produce results that met their expectations. The Flash wasn't a technique one could learn in a day or two, but Ellen wanted to at least improve enough for her

master to be proud of her. That was why she used all her free time to train: so that she could pull off the Flash even one day sooner.

At the same time, however, Ellen had realized something… She lacked an element that was crucial to a swordsman.

When did training stop being fun? Now, if I'm not practicing… I just feel so anxious.

All Ellen could do was throw herself into her training to distract herself from what was missing. She was terrified that, if she couldn't make up for her shortcoming, Liam would abandon her.

"Miss Ellen, Master has requested your presence," a robotic voice called out to her while she performed her practice swings.

Ellen stopped and turned to see one of House Banfield's mass-produced maid robots watching her. Those mass-produced maids were identical, so they were impossible to tell apart by looks alone. This one had a gold bracelet on her left wrist, though. Only one unit wore that particular accessory: the maid Liam had dubbed "Shiomi."

The maids were all expressionless, speaking and acting as if they possessed no emotions. But according to Liam—whom Ellen deeply respected—"They've all got their own individual charm." Since he was so fond of them, Ellen showed them respect as well.

"Thank you, Miss Shiomi. Did he happen to tell you why he wanted me? I thought my training today would start in the afternoon."

Ellen's mentor was a swordsman who far surpassed first-rate. He was powerful enough to have taken down a Swordmaster acknowledged by the Empire itself.

Unfortunately, in addition to being a swordsman, he had to wear several other hats. For one thing, he was the head of House Banfield—a count with significant power and responsibility within the Algrand Empire. Furthermore, he backed Cleo Norah Albareto, third in line to the throne, in the Empire's succession conflict. Liam served as the leader of the faction vying to land Cleo on the Imperial throne.

Frankly, Liam was far too busy and far too crucial to spend his time on something like swordsmanship. Receiving personal training from him during his limited free time was a dream that even high-level nobles or royalty within the Empire couldn't have hoped to achieve. Liam was so busy that he hardly ever spent the entire day training Ellen.

Since this was one of the rare days when Liam had time to train her in the afternoon, Ellen found it strange that he'd want her for something in the morning. She cocked her head.

When she did, Shiomi explained in her flat voice, "During his early-morning training, Master became enthusiastic, and he called Lady Satsuki and Lady Shishigami to the high-gravity dome for practice. He said that this was a good opportunity for you to watch them train." Liam must've thought that Ellen could learn something from seeing the three students of the same master practice together.

"I should hurry, then! Thank you!" Ellen told Shiomi, then ran off for the high-gravity dome.

She bounded away, picking up speed, and was soon far from Shiomi. All her sword training meant that she left small craters in the ground where her heels dug in. Shiomi bowed deeply until Ellen was

out of sight… Then set about filling the holes the girl left behind when she ran off.

***

The high-gravity dome inside House Banfield's mansion resembled a sports arena. It didn't match any of the surrounding architecture, which made it stick out like a sore thumb. It wasn't as if I'd built it simply to be ugly, though. I'd had the facility constructed after determining that it was necessary to my training.

After all, my mansion was huge. It was stupidly huge; ridiculously, ludicrously huge. Shrugging off the vast expanse of empty space that had previously been here by terming it a "courtyard" had felt wasteful, so instead I'd had the dome built to get some use out of the space.

As its name suggested, the high-gravity dome allowed for training in a space with a harsher burden of gravity than the outside world had. That made for a more efficient training ground. Only the high cost of the facility's construction offset that efficiency; it was the kind of training area only someone wealthy could make use of.

But every day had just twenty-four hours. You could extend your training's duration, or increase its difficulty level, but either way you'd hit a wall eventually. If I could get closer to my master's level simply by spending some money, it was well worth the cost.

I'd also been wearing a set of training armor lately; the black-and-blue suit covered everything from the neck down. Nowadays, I put it on anytime I trained.

Finishing my high-gravity warmup, I murmured, "She's here."

Near the entrance of the dome, my apprentice Ellen stood with her head bowed, panting. “Sorry I’m late!”

I could tell from how hard she was breathing that she’d rushed here. Her apology wasn’t necessary, though. “Don’t sweat it. I was the one who had Shiomi go get you. I figured I could finish warming up in the time it’d take you to get here.” All warmed up, I told my student to remain beside the wall and observe. “Just stay over there and watch us for a bit, Ellen.”

The pair I would face had seemingly finished their warmups too. Riho Satsuki was wielding a different longsword than usual. She had long, straight dark-blue hair with pink highlights. Clothes that had a slightly Japanese flair garbed her slender figure. If they’d been actual Japanese garments, of course, they wouldn’t have revealed the sideboob they did.

Riho’s personality was belligerent, and her cute face usually sported a cocky expression. She spoke as though trying to pick a fight with anyone and everyone, and when she got excited during our sparring matches, she was quick to use a tone she really shouldn’t have with me. She normally acted as if she respected me otherwise; that said, I had no idea what she actually thought of me. Besides me and Master, she was probably the person most serious about the Way of the Flash.

“You really want to have a match with us?” she said. “Considering the conditions you set, I can only assume you’re *trying* to die.”

Beside Riho—who was giving me an exasperated look—stood another girl who didn't appear satisfied with this state of affairs. That was my other sister apprentice, Fuka Shishigami. She'd tied her bright-orange hair behind her head, and she wore the same Japanese-style clothing. On her, the outfit exposed a lot of cleavage. She was curvier than Riho, and despite her stern expression, her personality was lively and open. She was an energetic, cheerful girl, but she had a tendency to squat in a rather unladylike manner.

Fuka's most unique characteristic was that she used a dual-sword-wielding style, despite being a practitioner of the Way of the Flash. One sword was more than enough to execute the style's signature move, but she employed two. According to the girl herself, she did so because "It's cool!" I could hardly believe Master permitted her the extra blade for a reason like that.

Still, she pulled off the two-sword style well. Most of the time, she appeared deceptively sloppy, but her swordplay was actually more precise than Riho's. Her Flashes always utilized the exact amount of strength needed. Employing just the right level of power to cut her opponent was her special talent.

Fuka was also kinder than Riho; she spoke in just as rough a manner, but she was nicer about it. Of course, that was just in comparison to Riho. But either because of that, or for some other reason, Fuka could be a bit cowardly. From the pair's appearance, you'd think Fuka was the type to take charge, but Riho was more strong-willed and impulsive.

Fuka's eyes were both exasperated and angry with me. "You're gonna hold back against the two of us? *Do* you want us to slaughter you? We can still call this off, you know."

She was clearly angry at me for taking them lightly, but I sensed concern for me as well. That was both Fuka's strength and her weakness. Standing before the two reluctant girls, I drew my special training sword from its sheath and took a stance to ready myself.

"The way you two are now, this is enough to fight you. Hurry up and come at me."

Both girls trembled, eyes wide. They must've thought that I'd underestimated their ability.

That's right. Get angry.

It was only natural for Way of the Flash practitioners to win fights; the only time they had an excuse for losing was in a fight with another member of the school. Thus, these two had never lost to anyone but me. They weren't used to being defeated, and they didn't intend to *get* used to it.

Riho drew her sword and flew at me. "I'll *kill* you!"

She unleashed a single slash—quiet, smooth, and full of malice.

"That's the spirit. But you don't really think that's enough to kill me, do you?"

When I provoked her that way, Riho's impatient personality led her to strike at me with another slash even more vicious than before. While I deflected her attacks, Fuka moved behind me and launched her own attacks at me.

Her voice came a split second before her strikes. “Don’t take us lightly!”

“What kind of idiot yells while they make a surprise attack?!” I deflected her dual swords’ many strikes with just the one sword of my own.

It was an opportunity Riho wouldn’t miss. With a crescent-moon grin, she slashed at me ruthlessly. “Aha! Your back’s wide open!”

Fighting off three swords with one put me at a bit of a disadvantage, so I sent Riho flying with a kick to the stomach. Then, in the split-second when I had an opening, I deliberately closed the distance between me and Fuka, lashing out with a heavy blow. Fuka blocked it, crossing her swords in front of her, but she couldn’t stop the attack’s momentum and went flying back too.

I looked down at my sword. “Yup. Real swords actually *do* make training feel more effective. Wouldn’t you two agree?”

I sheathed my sword flashily. The other two did the same, correctly taking my gesture as provocation. They positioned themselves standing opposite one another with me between them, taking stances with their swords still sheathed.

Playtime’s over. Things get serious now for the Way of the Flash. “I’ll take both of you at once.”

As soon as I said that, Fuka moved. “I’ll cut you!”

In that moment, she unleashed hundreds of Flashes. Of the three of us, she could use the most at once. The floor around me was a mess of slashes an instant after her attack.

Opposite her, Riho looked at me with murderous eyes. “Die.”

Riho couldn’t launch as many Flashes simultaneously as Fuka, but Riho’s were focused on power, so they left deeper, longer slashes in the floor. None of their Flashes reached me, though, since I’d deflected each and every one with Flashes of my own. The two girls looked at me as if they couldn’t believe what they saw.

“This can’t be. Against both of us, he…?”

“He deflected all my Flashes…”

Both were surprised and frustrated.

“Let’s make this a test of endurance,” I suggested. “Who’ll give up first—me or you?”

The girls took combat stances immediately and once more began unleashing Flashes. The floor was now being shredded underneath me, although I’d had it specially made. The space directly around me was fine, but as Riho and Fuka kept attacking, the slash marks near where I stood got closer and closer. The untouched area around me, which started out three meters across, shrank to two meters. As they fired off Flashes, my two opponents approached me step by step.

“Guess this is it for our brother apprentice!” Fuka cried. “Don’t worry… I’ll carry on the Way of the Flash! I’ll look after Ellen too.”

She seemed to think they already had me beaten. Getting too cocky was a bad habit of hers.

Riho neared me from the other side, getting ready to settle the match. “This is what you get for underestimating us. I don’t hate you,

so I'll do you the favor of remembering you after I kill you! Die!"

For Riho, losing control when she got excited was as much a strength as a weakness.

The two looked like they were in their late teens; in terms of my former life, they had the appearance of high-schoolers. As they approached me, slinging Flashes my way, an observer would likely only have seen them walking toward me. We *looked* as if we were doing nothing but were actually exchanging Flashes all the while, sparks flying every time our swords clashed. There was no pause in our attacks, so I felt as if I stood in the midst of bursting fireworks.

My safe zone continued shrinking little by little. This was almost the moment I'd been waiting for.

"A little more… Just a little more…!"

My body screamed in protest. If I let my guard down, I'd be dead in an instant. My focus was wearing away, my body being driven to its breaking point.

"A little more, and I can surpass my limits!"

I couldn't beat Master Yasushi. That said, I didn't think I could lose to anyone but a fellow practitioner of the Way of the Flash. I'd created this deadly situation for myself because I was dissatisfied with my current abilities. Fortunately, my sister apprentices' presence meant I'd been able to do so.

At this point, their Flashes had reached me, and I was getting scraped up. Their blades were close to taking my life.

"Just a little more…!"

Before I reached the state I'd been aiming for, however, the tools we'd been using shattered. First, the swords in Riho's and Fuka's hands crumbled; then the one I held broke apart too.

That wasn't all: I also heard an electronic warning from my special armor. *"Training armor limits exceeded. Removing restraints."*

"W-wait!"

I tried to stop the armor from turning off. Before I could, though, steam and smoke shot out from several spots. All of a sudden, the resistance I'd felt as I moved was gone. Now that it had overloaded, the armor began leaking fluid in a number of areas.

"Damn it!"

I'd thought that I was about to grasp something, but just before that happened, it all nosedived. I slammed my fist into the ground, accidentally forming a crater.

A second ago, Riho had radiated bloodlust, but now she tossed her broken longsword aside in boredom as if all her motivation had evaporated. "Aw. Broke another one. How many does that make now?"

Fuka hurled her broken swords into one of the facility's trash cans. She had so much confidence in her aim that she didn't so much as watch them go in. "I don't even remember. Anyway, we sliced up the training area even worse than we broke our swords. With all the repairs they'll need to do in here, we won't be able to train like this again for a while."

Making it this far had taken me a ton of trial and error. I'd given myself armor that restricted my movements and had a special heavy sword crafted for myself. Each time my training facility was wrecked and became useless, I'd made improvements. Yet I still hadn't hit what I aimed for.

"However much money I spend, I just can't do it."

My sword and armor hadn't been intended to make me more powerful. If anything, it was the opposite. I'd used them to make myself *weaker*. I'd ensured that it was tougher to move, and I'd carried an extra-heavy sword too. I'd wanted to create an environment in which I could barely budge, then have a serious fight with my fellow apprentices there. That could hardly have been called a "match," really; if I'd made a single mistake, I would've been killed. But I'd planned on surpassing my limits before that. I'd thought I could finally get stronger than I was currently, but this still hadn't been enough.

I looked down at my right hand, which trembled with fatigue. "Why can't I get there? What'll it take to make it to Master's level?"

I felt pathetic. No matter how much I trained, or how much real-life experience I accumulated, I nonetheless couldn't get anywhere near that level. I *still* couldn't replicate the slash I'd seen in my childhood, when it looked as though Master really hadn't even unsheathed his blade. My Flash was a far cry from his.

Fuka came over to console me. "You're stronger than us, so you'll probably get there one day, right?" That must've been her way of being considerate.

It seemed Riho didn't agree with her, though. "Are you stupid? He doesn't need you to cheer him up. Nothing we say would mean anything anyway. You've seen Master Yasushi's strength too, haven't you? Is *his* strength anything like Master's?"

I didn't want their consolations anyway. It was just humiliating, since we all knew how powerful our master was.

Fuka looked away awkwardly. "Th-that's not what I meant! I just think he'll probably get there one day!"

To me, the reason she'd looked away was obvious: My strength really didn't measure up to Master's, and she knew it.

Now Fuka made excuses. "I know neither of us can match Master Yasushi. I mean, we can't even gauge his full strength, can we? So you shouldn't be able to either."

It wasn't just the two of them. I was in the dark about our master's full strength too. The difference in our abilities was simply that great.

Riho puffed up in irritation—evidence that Fuka was right on the mark. "That goes without saying! I mean, all the two of us really know is that Master Yasushi is truly amazing."

Amazing… There was no way else to put it, really. Master normally didn't look like even a beginner swordsman, but when he drew his blade, no one could beat him. I'd pictured fighting him myself several times, but I could never imagine winning. I'd beaten a man acknowledged by the Empire as a Swordmaster, yet Master Yasushi was the one person I never saw myself winning against.

In other words, I was a worthless disciple who could never hope to surpass his master. A sword style was supposed to improve over successive generations, evolving, or it would stagnate. An apprentice's *duty* was to surpass his master. Spreading his teachings to more and more people was also important, but in my present state, I couldn't even do *that*.

"What am I missing? What don't I have yet? Have I reached my limits…?"

Would I never get any stronger? That fear threatened to crush me. I was terrified that I'd learned the strongest sword technique in existence but would never master it because I simply didn't have the talent.

I'd only gotten where I was as an evil lord thanks to the Way of the Flash. It had helped me more times than I could count. For a simple villain, I was more than powerful enough, but I wanted to be stronger. I *had* to be stronger. The Way of the Flash, which I'd inherited from my master, was the one thing I wanted to carry reverently with me on my villainous path.

Ellen, who'd been watching all this time, ran over to me. When I first took her in, she'd been tiny, but now she had roughly the appearance of a ten-year-old. "Are you all right, Master?! Please don't move. Let me treat your wounds."

Watching her take out a first-aid kit, I was impressed that she'd managed to grow into such a thoughtful girl.

"Have you got something to drink?" I asked her.

"Yes. Right here."

I took the beverage from her and let her treat my wounds until she was satisfied.

As she worked on me diligently, I asked, "How old are you now, Ellen?"

The sudden question surprised her, but she quickly answered, "Fifteen."

I was glad that she'd developed such sweetness and consideration. I'd been a bit worried that she'd get twisted from growing up around an evil lord like me. Since Ellen would be inheriting the Way of the Flash, I didn't want her to follow in my footsteps as a villain, though I knew that was just my selfish wish.

"Wow. Fifteen already, huh?" Now I regretted keeping her on such a short leash all this time.

Watching us, Fuka and Riho seemed to realize what I was thinking. Fuka sighed, scratching her sweaty cheek. "You're too overprotective."

Riho, though, seemed to have lost interest in the conversation. She'd taken out her tablet and was updating her social media. As a hobby, Riho had become a social-media idol. That didn't seem to suit her personality one bit until you learned that she was called "the bloodiest idol in the universe." Then it made perfect sense.

"I'm not going to tell you how you should teach your student or anything," she said. "But if you don't do something soon, Ellen won't ever be a Way of the Flash swordsman."

Although surprised by Riho's words, Ellen quickly pulled herself together and responded, "Are you making fun of me? I've trained for ten years under Master! I can at least do the basics at this point, th-though I can't use the Flash itself yet…"

Right now, I was just making sure that Ellen focused on basics. After all, it had taken me over twenty years to use the Flash.

Riho moved her eyes from her tablet to Ellen, her expression cold. Ellen flinched at the bloodlust in her gaze, but Riho went on heedlessly, "That's not what I'm talking about."

Ellen hung her head. It seemed she had an idea of what Riho meant.

When she didn't say anything in return, Fuka filled in the blanks for her. "You haven't cut anyone yet, have you? You can't even call yourself a real swordsman at this stage, let alone a practitioner of the Way of the Flash or anything else."

Ellen ground her teeth and clenched her fists.

To call yourself a real swordsman, you had to kill someone in a serious fight. That seemed a bit outlandish in a universe of intergalactic nations. But although we had spaceships and mechs, people still killed each other with swords here. It was a hard fact to swallow, but it was unavoidable if you chose the path of the sword.

I stood and put a hand on Ellen's shoulder. "It's my fault. I'll find you an opponent soon. Just get yourself ready before then."

"Yes," Ellen said quietly, head still bowed. She'd answered dutifully, but from her demeanor, it was clear that she hadn't wanted

to. She must’ve had trouble imagining breaking the taboo of murder. In addition to being considerate, she’d also grown to be mild and gentle, unfortunately; those qualities weren’t important for a swordsman.

I clenched my fists in front of her, feeling utterly inept.

Chapter 1:
A Flash of Insight

IN A SMALL ROOM in a cheap apartment, a man sat with folded arms, deep in contemplation. Just how had he gotten himself into this mess?

It was no exaggeration to say that this situation stemmed entirely from his own lies, yet the small-time crook had no desire whatsoever to reflect on his actions. The lie that had escaped the unrepentant man's control had grown so large now that he could no longer do anything about the situation himself.

The man's name was Yasushi. He was Liam's master and the father of the Way of the Flash. He'd also somehow earned himself the moniker "Sword God," and therefore, all kinds of people were pursuing him. He'd fled the planet he'd lived on previously, now residing on a border planet with his wife and child.

Yasushi resented his current situation, and voiced how he felt about it: "This is a nightmare."

As Yasushi sat before the meager meal on the table in front of him, his wife Nina frowned, misinterpreting his mutterings. She thought he was complaining about the food. "You should be grateful you can eat at all. Who do you think makes money to put food on the table in the first place?!"

With her long black hair and glasses, Nina had an intellectual look. She was a beauty who was exactly Yasushi's type. Still, when

she glared sharply at him, he trembled.

"Eep! N-no, that's not what I meant. I wasn't complaining about the food… I just can't take the situation we're in right now."

Nina sighed, evidently unsatisfied by his groveling excuses. "Whatever… Just hurry up and eat, would you? I can't clean up."

"I'm sorry…"

As they resumed their meal, Nina's small son pleaded to her, "Mommy, I want to eat more."

It hurt her heart that she couldn't feed the boy enough. "I'm sorry. I'll get paid soon, so just hang on until then, okay?"

Unlike Yasushi—who couldn't hold down a job—Nina was a responsible woman who'd supported him and their son up until they had to flee. Before, she'd been making money and had a fair amount saved besides; unfortunately, she'd been unable to find a full-time job on the planet they'd moved to. These days, she worked part-time and chipped away at her savings to support her family, but they barely made ends meet.



Nina wished she could find a full-time position, but there was no good work on the planet where they now resided. To make matters worse, citizens there were heavily taxed. However hard Nina worked at her part-time job, almost all her earnings were taxed away from her. The whole planet was poor due to its ruler's tyranny.

Nina glared at Yasushi. "Why'd you pick this planet anyway? It's in the middle of nowhere, it's undeveloped, its economy is terrible, and there are no jobs here. Not to mention the taxes are so heavy we can barely afford to eat."

It was Yasushi's fault that they'd found themselves on this terrible world.

"What was I supposed to do?! If we went somewhere too developed, they'd have found me! I don't want to live on a crummy planet like this either, but…because of that damn Liam…"

Liam had led Yasushi to move to this subpar location.

The electronic newspaper on the table contained an article about an official statement the G'doire Autocracy had recently made, accompanied by a video. As Yasushi played that video, a voice came from the paper: *"We of the G'doire Autocracy would happily welcome Lord Yasushi of the Way of the Flash into our palace as a sword instructor! We will reward anyone who can provide us with information on his whereabouts, and we are prepared to pay handsomely for the delivery of Lord Yasushi to the Autocracy!"*

The G'doire Autocracy desperately wanted Yasushi to serve as a sword instructor. The reason why? Yasushi's apprentice Liam had defeated their crown prince, Isel. That battle made the Way of the

Flash known in Isel's homeland. In the Autocracy, where might made right, they'd been thrilled to learn of a new sword style they hadn't known anything about—one that was purportedly the strongest. Their obvious conclusion was that they needed to practice the Way of the Flash themselves, but they couldn't employ Liam, a count of the Empire. They then of course concluded that they simply had to employ Liam's master Yasushi instead.

"Why do I need to have the Autocracy after me? They're even mobilizing other nations to chase me! This is just ridiculous…"

Something else made this situation even worse. Power was everything to the Autocracy, and hearing that a sword style existed that the Autocracy would go to any lengths to acquire had led, not just the Algrand Empire, but other intergalactic nations to take action as well. Not only were countless countries and nobles offering to roll out the red carpet for Yasushi, all kinds of warriors aspiring to greatness were after his head to prove themselves. Yasushi had fled to this planet because it was a place no one would willingly come to, even to hide.

"What did I do to deserve this? Sure, I may not be a great person, but was anything I did *that* bad? This is all that damn Liam's fault!"

As he complained about the count, Nina just looked at him coldly. "That all just sounds like nonsense to me. It's hard to believe you taught some Imperial noble anything in the first place, Yasu."

Yasushi had been a street performer who made a living performing cheap tricks, but somehow or other, he'd then become

Liam's sword instructor. The "Way of the Flash" he'd taught the boy had been nothing more than a lie. Yasushi himself was worse than third-rate with a sword, yet somehow his lie led to the ascent of that monster Liam and the crystallization of his deceit into the Way of the Flash. Since Yasushi himself was weak, he'd even raised two assassins to try to get rid of Liam, but in doing so he instead managed to create *three* monsters total.

"I can't believe it either, but somehow he learned *something*! And the pair I trained after him only turned into another couple of monsters! Just where did I go wrong?"

Tormented by his lies, Yasushi had been forced to flee to this faraway planet. He'd hoped that no one would ever suspect this was his hiding place, but now he was regretting his choice.

"Haaah… We can barely afford to eat here."

His strategy had paid off in that, since moving here, he no longer had assassins after his life. He could rest easy in that sense. Yet the family had so little money here that he'd simply traded fear for his life for fear for the future.

His grumbling disgusted Nina. "Why don't *you* try working too, then?" she said icily.

"Ugh!" Yasushi looked away. "W-well, I, er… Sorry."

Yasushi had, in fact, started several part-time jobs, but he hadn't been able to keep any of them for long. If he were capable of honest work, he'd never have found himself in this situation in the first place.

"What hurts is that we can't make any money even if we *do* work…" Yasushi added.

With this planet's heavy taxes, it was hard to find motivation to work anyway. After those taxes were subtracted from a day's labor, a worker went home with only about a third of their earnings. On top of that, the hourly rate for part-time work was low, and people were worked to the bone. Under those circumstances, Yasushi wasn't the only one unmotivated to work.

"I shouldn't've run in the first place… This is all Liam's fault! He just had to spread word of the Way of the Flash around…" he complained.

Meanwhile, Nina finished eating and began cleaning up the dishes. "So you can teach someone, even if you don't have the skill yourself, huh? If you're that good at teaching, why don't you open a dojo? That is, if this story's even true." She just wanted him to stop complaining and do some work, for their child's sake.

Her words made Yasushi raise his head. "Dojo?"

He looked surprised, so Nina sighed and explained, "If you can teach this thing to people, you should run a dojo. The Way of the Flash is all the rage right now, so I'm sure lots of people would pay good money to learn it. If you've had three successes already, you could probably have more, right?"

Somehow or other, Yasushi *had* managed to train Liam, Riho, and Fuka, which proved his ability as a teacher if nothing else. At this point, he'd only had three students, yet his success rate thus far was

one hundred percent. Did he actually have a talent for teaching? Yasushi was only realizing this now.

It was like a divine revelation.

"That's it! If I train more students, I'll have bodyguards…and money too! No, wait… If I do that, people will find out I'm here, so it'll all be for nothing…" Muttering to himself, Yasushi reached a simple conclusion. "I just need to change my name! I can say the dojo teaches the 'Original Way of the Flash' or something and do business under a fake name. All kinds of dojos pop up teaching styles with names like that these days. People will simply think it's more of the same!" As the Way of the Flash's name spread, there were more and more fake practitioners of the style.

Nina wondered whether teaching martial arts in that fashion was right, but if doing so meant that Yasushi was finally motivated to do something, it didn't bother her that much. "I'm sure you can do it, Yasu. I'll help you!"

"If you're with me, I'll feel like I have a hundred people at my side!"

Nina was a woman who, as they say, got things done. She was hardworking, diligent, and talented, her only flaw being her attraction to worthless men like Yasushi.

Thus, a dojo for the Original Way of the Flash opened on the ruined border planet.

***

"Food you don't have to work for is the most delicious."

As my maid Amagi and butler Brian both waited on me, I partook in an extravagant breakfast.

Spread before me was simple fare. The meal included dishes comparable to a fried egg, toast, salad, and soup, in my former life's terms. Why did I call it "extravagant," then? That had to do with the ingredients used, not the dishes' appearance. Each and every item used in the meal was of the highest quality produced in my domain, so the simple meal contained ridiculously expensive ingredients. I had an omelet made with eggs that would no doubt go for tens of thousands of yen each in Japan, and the yogurt was specially made by a company Brian's family owned.

First-rate chefs I'd scooped up from within my domain had prepared the meal for me. In my previous life, they would've worked at five-star restaurants, but it was my privilege as an evil lord to have them take turns preparing my meals. A live band was even playing music for me in my spacious dining hall, yet this was an everyday breakfast for me.

Clearing my empty plate, Amagi questioned my statement. "What do you mean by that, Master? You perform your duties diligently every day, do you not?"

Even Brian gave me a worried look after what I'd said. "Is your excessive daily training starting to get to you? I'm worried about you, Master Liam. Perhaps you should take the day off to rest?"

Apparently, I was busy enough that the pair were worried about me. What I did couldn't really be called "work," though. After all, it was all for my own sake; none was for anyone else's benefit

whatsoever. I labored for personal gain. You wouldn't consider that work. And I did it because I wanted to; I couldn't complain about it.

So what was giving Amagi and Brian the wrong idea?

"What—do you think I've got my nose to the grindstone? The stuff I do is basically fooling around."

Amagi was as expressionless as always, but she seemed to take issue with what I'd said. "It was my understanding that you recently ceased your play villainy to focus on diligently running your domain."

"To me, it's fooling around. More importantly, right now, I want to get stronger in any way I can. I wish I could blow off work and focus more on my training, if anything," I sighed.

"Regardless of whether your work is 'fooling around' or not, it is indeed like you to wish to train more than anything else."

"Lately, I really feel my limits as a swordsman. But if I cap out here, I won't be able to face my master. And…" I swallowed what I was about to say—it wasn't something to talk about with these two—and looked over at Brian.

He was frowning grimly. "I do wish you'd prioritize House Banfield above all else, Master Liam. You hardly *need* better swordsmanship at this point." He didn't like that I spent all my time training with my blade. "Besides, we now have plenty of skilled personnel. There's no need for you to go fight on the front lines anymore, Master Liam, so I don't see why your skills need to be any better than average. Actually, if you ask me, you're already far stronger than you have any need to be."

Things now were different from when I'd first taken over House Banfield. I now had a powerful military and government officials I could trust. My domain was stable enough that there was no reason to push myself to get stronger than I was. Then again, I wasn't trying to get stronger for anyone else's sake.

"I disagree. And this is a personal matter, so I'm not interested in your opinion."

I felt close to breaking through a huge wall in my swordsmanship, but at the same time, I thought I might've reached my limit. At this point, I couldn't figure out what I needed to do to get stronger.

As I ate my dessert of yogurt, Kukuri appeared from my shadow. A large man who wore all black and masked his face, he commanded House Banfield's underground operatives.

When he appeared, Brian grimaced. "Mr. Kukuri, Master Liam is in the middle of a meal."

Even when Brian cautioned him, Kukuri didn't back off, so I figured there must be some kind of emergency. "I understand that Master Liam is busy, and that this is one of his few precious moments of rest. However, Master Liam himself commanded me to attend to this matter with the utmost urgency, so I thought I should report as soon as possible. Master Liam, I apologize for interrupting your meal." He knelt and bowed his head.

Meanwhile, I continued eating. "Progress?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

I stopped eating and faced Kukuri, waiting for his report. "You found him, then?"

I'd asked Kukuri to look into Master Yasushi's whereabouts. I wanted my master's help in getting through the plateau in my training, but I had no idea where to find him.

"So? Where is he?" I pressed. "I'll head out to see him right away." As things stood, I'd never overcome the barrier in front of me. If I had to, I was prepared to cast aside my pride as an evil lord and beg for Master's help.

All my enthusiasm dried up, though, when I heard what Kukuri said next.

"We have not located him."

"What?"

"So many people claim to be Lord Yasushi of the Way of the Flash that we have not located the individual in question. We are attempting to narrow the search, but it's slow going with the number of people we have working on the matter."

My disappointment quickly turned to rage. "People are pretending to *be* Master Yasushi?"

"Indeed. I suspect these imposters emerged due to how widespread the name of the Way of the Flash has become lately."

The members of Kukuri's organization were incredibly skilled. The only drawback was that there were few of them, which meant I couldn't solve a problem they'd encountered by simply throwing more

operatives at it. If the sheer number of imposters was too large for Kukuri's team to sift through quickly, there was nothing they could do.

I told Kukuri, "I'll give you more people to investigate with, then. You can use them however you like."

"Unfortunately, I don't think that will be enough. Some of these fakes have been employed by other nobles, so it would be difficult for anyone other than us to approach them."

"You don't mean *Imperial* nobles?"

"There are indeed imposter Yasushis serving Imperial nobles as well, according to the information we have uncovered thus far."

Kukuri projected several holographic screens around me, displaying the information he currently possessed. I hadn't expected people stupid enough to claim to be Master Yasushi would be staying with Imperial nobles. I couldn't allow any imposter Master Yasushis to exist in the first place!

"These imposters think they can do whatever they want…"

Among the imposters onscreen, there were even obviously suspicious people advertising things like the "New" Way of the Flash and the "Original" Way of the Flash.

"These assholes are picking a fight with me! Kukuri, go get Tia and Marie right now!"

I couldn't let this stand. Wanting to take action immediately, I called for that duo, even though they were still in the middle of their punishment.

"As you wish." Kukuri sank back into my shadow.

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A blonde beauty in a maid uniform gave me a stunning smile. "Lord Liam, I'm so happy you called for me—meow!"

Mewing, Tia stood in a cutesy pose with one leg raised.

Meanwhile, bunny ears twitched atop a purple-haired beauty's head. "Marie's happy too—hop!"

In her own maid uniform, Marie imitated a rabbit.

As finishing touches to their looks, their uniforms had been modified. Tia's included cat ears, a tail, and some other feline accoutrements, while Marie sported rabbit accessories including bunny ears and a tail. Dressed in those pointlessly high-quality cosplay outfits, they clasped hands and rubbed their cheeks against each other's, tossing away all pride.

"Lord Liam's maid Tia, here to serve you—meow!"

"Lord Liam's maid Marie, here to serve you—hop!"

They were perfectly in sync, as if they'd practiced their greeting for me over and over. Until just a little while ago, these two had been trying to kill each other, but now—since I'd ordered them to—they even pretended to get along.

My head knight Claus stood beside me, awkwardly averting his eyes from his utterly changed former superiors. Marie and Tia had once been knights representing House Banfield, but it was hard to even look at them now that they wore these odd maid costumes.

Back when they were still embarrassed by it, I'd had fun seeing them this way. But now that they'd abandoned their shame, I couldn't bear to watch them anymore. I was sure they'd worked hard to make it this far—but I didn't care about that. What I cared about was the Way of the Flash!

"Will you quit the meowing and hopping already?!" I snapped at them. "Are you trying to mess with me?!"

They both panicked.

"Huh?! Was something wrong with that—meow?!"

"Should we be wearing fur suits instead—hop?!"

I had no problem with them sucking up to me, but there was no time for that. Right now, all I wanted was to deal with imposter Master Yasushis, so all I could do was pull this pair out of their punishment and utilize them.

"You two are dismissed from maid duty. You're back on knight duty."

I'd expected them to cry tears of joy if I reappointed them as knights, but their reaction was…strange.

"Huh?"

"N-no!"

For some reason, Tia seemed surprised, and Marie had turned white with shock.

"What the heck kind of reaction is that? You're not happy about being knights again?" I asked irritably.

Tia revealed her true feelings with some embarrassment. "I'd rather serve you directly, Lord Liam."

Marie covered her face with her hands. "I'd rather die than be unable to experience your ridicule, Lord Liam."

I'd known these two were bad, but were they beyond saving at this point? If I didn't know they were worth their paychecks, I'd have fired them on the spot. All House Banfield's knights were skillful, but they were also all too damn weird.

"Don't complain. And cut out the meowing and hopping already! It's annoying! As of this instant, you two are back on duty as knights. Claus!"

"Yes, sir?!"

I gave Claus his orders on what to do with them. "Have Tia protect our border with the Autocracy. I know she's got problems, but she can at least do that work. Send her out with ten thousand ships."

My directions made Claus realize why he'd been called here too. "She's taking my place? Understood. I'll make the arrangements right away."

Up until now, my right-hand man Claus had been looking after that border. He really could handle any situation.

Claus looked relieved, but Tia gave me a pleading look. "You'll accompany me to the border, right, Lord Liam? Right?!"

Why would I have to go to the border? "Are you stupid? Why should *I* have to go deal with those Autocracy freaks? I just want Claus back here, so I'm sending you in his place."

"Nooooo!" Tia cried out and clutched her head upon hearing that she'd head off to the border alone.

I gave Marie her orders next. "Marie, I'm putting you in charge of a small but elite fleet."

"Of course, my lord. Are you sending me somewhere as well? I'd prefer to be by your side, or Lady Rosetta's, if possible…" As she asked where she'd be sent, she shot glances at Tia freaking out beside her.

"You'll be guarding me. I'm taking a bit of a trip."

Marie smiled like a flower blooming. Then, as Tia collapsed beside her, she gloated, "All *right*! Sorry about that, ground meat woman. Guarding Lord Liam is a job for *me*!"

Tia ground her teeth. "You fossil… I swear I'll kill you one day."

One laughed loudly, and the other wept blood, both outfitted in their bizarre maid cosplays.

Claus leaned in. He hadn't gotten wind of these plans before. "Lord Liam? I haven't heard anything about this! I don't mind if you want to change some personnel deployments, but what do you mean, you're 'taking a trip'?!"



When I said I was leaving House Banfield's domain, he'd panicked. It was funny to see him flustered, since he was normally so calm.

"I'm going on a journey to find my master. You'll be in charge for a bit, so I'm leaving everything to you, Claus."

"Huh…?" Even Claus was shocked to hear that.

I wasn't changing my mind this time, though. "Time to do what I've got to do as a swordsman of the Way of the Flash."

Chapter 2:
Before Setting Out

ONCE LIAM DECLARED that he was going on a journey, preparations for his departure began immediately.

Though she'd cried and protested, Christiana Sera Rosebreia had been shipped off to the border with the Autocracy. When her fleet left just a few days earlier, there'd been no sign of the famed "Princess Knight" in the woman who needed to be dragged aboard her ship by her subordinates.

On the other hand, Marie Sera Marian—who'd also been reinstated as a knight—couldn't have been more pleased. "Lord Liam's decisive as ever, buying new ships for the fleet I'll command."

Marie had received brand-new vessels constructed by the Seventh Weapons Factory, all painted her preferred purple. The fleet was even put together according to her tastes.

Marie's adjutant, a knight named Haydi, gave his boss an ambivalent look when she returned to the job. Haydi was a scruffy guy who wore his uniform in a somewhat disheveled manner. Still, he was more than skilled enough to serve as Marie's adjutant.

"Sorta feels like you're back to work a little early, considering the crap you pulled," he told her.

"I wanted to serve for longer as Lord Liam's maid myself."

Seeing Marie's disappointed expression, Haydi sighed wearily. "Think about how *we* felt, having to see you dressed like a maid. Gave

me shivers. The bossman really *is* determined, if he's working with you again after that. In his place, I'm sure I'd run the other way."

"What was that?" Marie glared at Haydi.

Her adjutant turned to face their visitor instead. "Anyway, we've got a guest, right? Everyone's favorite employee of the Seventh Weapons Factory."

Nias Carlin—"everyone's favorite"—floated toward them in the zero-gravity area. She approached with a big grin, unaware of how Haydi had just sarcastically described her. "Thanks for your business! I'm here to introduce the cutting-edge models you've purchased from the Seventh Weapons Factory!" Apparently Nias was pleased by the sale, having been involved in the production of these new ships.

Seeing her dopey smile, Marie sighed and got down to business. "I didn't think we'd have to rely on the Seventh Weapons Factory. Did you really build these ships? The interiors are so normal, I can hardly believe that."

Marie looked up at the 1,500-meter-class ship she'd be boarding. Despite its size, it was too small to qualify as a superdreadnought. Its specs enabled it to compete with one, however. Not only could it lead a ten-thousand-ship fleet, it rivaled a superdreadnought in firepower as well. Marie wasn't fond of superdreadnoughts, so this ship was a little large for her tastes. Still, she was satisfied with its capabilities—not to mention with the fact that the ship actually looked normal inside. The infamous Seventh Weapons Factory had actually put enough effort into the interior that it reached all the way to an "average" standard.

Nias's cheek twitched. "Y-you won't be able to call us the 'specs-only Seventh' forever, you know. Anyway, where's Lord Liam? I wanted to ask him about delivering his additional orders."

As Nias glanced around for him, Marie heaved a sigh. "Lord Liam hardly needs to attend to such trivial matters personally. I'll handle it."

"What…? Well, I guess that's fine…"

Seeing how obviously disappointed Nias was, Haydi realized what she'd been after right away. "You want to sell the bossman something else, don't you?"

Nias's eyes darted this way and that. "Of course not! How could you think that? I just thought he might want some of our products for Lady Rosetta's new security force… Wait a second!"

The impudent engineer was suddenly distracted by an optional unit that had been prepared for Marie's ship. It wasn't something the Seventh Weapons Factory had built, having instead been prepared by House Banfield. This addition, which covered the ship from middle to stern, wasn't meant to improve its performance. On the contrary, it would just impede the vessel.

"That's a special living area prepared for Lord Liam," Marie explained indifferently. "It's a little ugly, since it includes a special hangar for the Avid. But it won't be a problem."

Nias couldn't let that slide. "It'll be a *massive* problem! The ship won't perform as well if you've attached that huge thing to it! Aren't there already accommodations for nobility on board?!"

"Those didn't satisfy Lord Liam. Anyway, do *you* really think he could stay on a ship with interiors on the low end of average? Put in a little more effort, why don't you?"

"These interiors *are* the result of our efforts! And comfort *can't* come at the expense of performance!"

"Oh, shut up! I wish we could've bought ships from the *Third* Weapons Factory instead, but they declined—they're busy putting together Lady Rosetta's security force right now! We went with your high-performance ships because we had no other choice!"

"How could you?! I thought you *picked* my ships!"

"We *did*, so be grateful!"

As Marie and Nias bickered, Haydi just sighed.

***

Ellen had finished preparing for her journey, and now wore a large sword across her back. She'd received this decorated blade with its red sheath from Liam when they first met, so she treasured it.

She'd gone to pay Liam a visit, but found Ciel Sera Exner standing with her back to his door. Ciel was a noble staying with House Banfield to learn etiquette. Liam was friendly with House Exner, so Ellen was careful about interacting with Ciel.

"Lady Ciel? Is Master in his room?"

Ciel sighed. "He is, but he's busy."

Ciel's behavior wasn't the best, for a maid, but Ellen knew it wasn't her place to say anything about that. Since Ciel was here, Ellen guessed Liam was busy with his fiancée.

"Is Lady Rosetta inside as well?"

"Yeah. That jer—*ahem*—Lord Liam is leaving, so their wedding's getting put off. That's what they're talking about."

Ellen might've been young, but she was observant enough to realize that Ciel didn't show Liam adequate respect. Liam himself apparently didn't mind that, and since he left it alone, there was nothing Ellen could say about it. Still, for that reason, she didn't really like Ciel. Thus, she tended to keep her distance from the other girl.

"I see. I'll wait here as well, then."

Having someone to wait with now, Ciel spoke up to kill time. "You've got it rough too, don't you? Undergoing a sword-training journey at your age? How can you stand it?"

"I owe Master for taking me in. It's not a burden at all," Ellen said.

"I think you could complain a *little* bit."

"I have nothing to complain about."

"Why is a good girl like you training under Liam anyway?" Ciel appeared not to think badly of Ellen herself. If anything, she seemed almost worried for her, as if she were a pitiful child whom Liam was deceiving.

Ellen resented her concern. After a pause, she said, "My master is the strongest swordsman in the universe."

That wasn't a lie, since Ellen truly believed it, and she *was* proud to be Liam's student. Still, it was precisely why she wondered, *Am I* really *good enough to be the student of such an amazing master?*

***

"Darling, I heard you're going on a trip. How long do you think you'll be away?"

Early in the morning, Rosetta had paid me a visit to discuss our wedding. Now that we were finished with our noble training, nothing stood in the way of the ceremony any longer. Thus, everyone assumed we'd get married sometime in the near future. It wasn't only my run-of-the-mill subjects—even those in the mansion gossiped about just when the wedding would happen. Brian pestered me to pick a date, and Amagi seemed fed up that I refused to make any plans. If you asked me, everyone was being way too impatient.

"I don't intend to come back until I find my master," I told Rosetta.

"I-I see. But you're a rather important person, Darling. You can't leave your domain unattended for long, can you? And you'll need to visit the Capital Planet sometimes too, won't you?"

The succession conflict with Calvin was still ongoing, but Prince Cleo had taken the lead following the recent conflict with the Autocracy. That didn't mean there was nothing at all to worry about, but as long as no one did anything stupid, Prince Cleo would become *Crown* Prince Cleo sooner or later. Therefore, I felt I could leave them be for now.

"I'm handing the Capital Planet over to Claus, so there won't be any problems while I'm gone. Besides, Calvin just lost to the Autocracy. He should be too busy reassembling his faction to have time to start trouble."

I was being a bit careless, but if I missed this chance, finding another opportunity to go look for Master would be difficult. Thus, I had no time to worry about the wedding or succession conflict right now. Yeah—there was a *reason* I couldn't get married right now. It wasn't like I was just running away.

Rosetta looked conflicted, but in the end managed a smile. "I suppose you're right. You must prioritize things, Darling. Right—I'll support you, then! We can always get married when you return."

This softhearted Rosetta wasn't the woman I'd once pursued. Back then, she'd been proud, with strong convictions. I'd wanted to force her into a marriage she would have to accept despite hating me, aiming for a humiliate-the-haughty-princess scenario. So why had I ended up with a lovestruck maiden instead? It broke my heart.

"Suit yourself…"

As I pictured the smiling face of my coworker Nitta from my former existence, Rosetta's tablet received a call. She looked at me, so I nodded to indicate that she could pick up.

"What is it, Miss Eulisia?" Rosetta asked, regaining some of her earlier composure.

"There's something we need to discuss about your security force," Eulisia said apologetically. *"Or, rather, there's a problem."*

"A problem? I just received a report that everything was going smoothly."

"You see, the problem is Nias from the Seventh Weapons Factory…"

Just from hearing that much, I had an idea of what might be happening. "Oh, yeah," I mused. "Nias was supposed to come here today, wasn't she?"

I was certain that she was just trying to get Rosetta to buy stuff from the Seventh Weapons Factory for her security force.

***

Having finished her call to Rosetta, Eulisia Morisille was dealing with an annoyance in the office she'd been allocated for the sake of establishing Rosetta's security force. She sighed, her current problem seated across from her.

Needless to say, it was Nias, who—despite being an engineer at the Seventh Weapons Factory—was forced to make sales as well for some reason. She'd recently become the Seventh's exclusive liaison to House Banfield, but you couldn't call her a skilled saleswoman by any measure.

It was still early in the day, but Eulisia was already exhausted.

"There… I called Lady Rosetta. Lord Liam was there as well, so I was informed of his decision on the matter." Eulisia scowled in irritation.

Meanwhile, Nias—wearing her usual work clothes—clasped her hands joyfully. "See? He's going to purchase things, like I said!

Nothing's impossible, given the bond between me and Lord Liam!"

Liam had been dealing with the Seventh Weapons Factory since he was young, which was a fruitful relationship for both parties—so much so that other weapons factories envied the connection. After all, House Banfield spent an incredible amount of money on its military. Many skilled salespeople regretted not getting ahead of the Seventh Weapons Factory, partly because it frustrated them greatly to be outdone by a failure of a saleswoman like Nias.

Scoffing at Nias, Eulisia revealed the decision Rosetta and Liam had made. "Too bad—they decided to go through me to the *Third* Weapons Factory for the security force. We already ordered ships and mobile knights, with plans for everything else in the works as well. There's no room for any interference from the Seventh!"

Eulisia waved her hand to shoo Nias away, but Nias leaned forward, clutching the desk. "No way! I was ready to develop next-gen craft for them!"

Nias's plan was obvious to Eulisia. *She's just trying to use Lady Rosetta to get development money.* She corrected the engineer's mistaken assumption. "We don't even *want* next-gen craft. Current-gen is just fine for our purposes."

Nias couldn't let that go. "Current-gen craft are practically already outdated! They're treated as old-fashioned in the field!"

"Don't act like the standards at a weapons factory are the same as anywhere else! Do you know how many next-gen vessels are out there in the field?! It's less than ten percent of the craft! Less than *ten percent*!"

"Ten percent's more than enough! The only reason next-gen craft aren't used more is because people cling to their old machines, even when they're outdated!"

To Nias, it was unthinkable that people continued using old craft when newer models had already been developed. Yet the rest of the world seemingly didn't feel that way.

Eulisia looked at the ceiling, one hand on her forehead in exasperation. "The next-gen craft are still only in early development. It's too soon for them to be in general use already, however you look at it. Besides, we're giving the security force Valrhonas, so they'll be fine."

When Eulisia mentioned the current-gen Valrhona mobile-knight model, Nias gave her a cold look. "The Valrhona's just the old version of the Nemain, isn't it?"

"Don't call it the old version! It's in the same family as the Nemain, but the Valrhona is a late-current-gen mobile knight—a refined model that performs well!" As far as Eulisia was concerned, Valrhonas would still have plenty of use in the current market.

Nias looked away, muttering, "You're just trying to get rid of old stock, aren't you? Jeez. This is why you shouldn't take a former saleswoman as a mistress. It's totally obvious that you're just using old connections to live the good life."

As a fellow member of a weapons factory, Nias knew the story behind Eulisia's current situation, and her interpretation of things wasn't entirely wrong. Eulisia *had* made the deal for the security force with the Third Weapons Factory thanks to her old connection to the

latter. And, since that had been a major order, the Third had offered her a customary bonus for landing it.

However, Eulisia hadn't accepted that bonus. That wasn't out of benevolence or a guilty conscience; she simply didn't need the money. Her position as a potential concubine was an unexpectedly weighty one within House Banfield, so they treated Eulisia very well, and she wanted for nothing. There would only have been disadvantages for her if she'd earned Liam or Rosetta's ire by accepting some payment from the Third. She didn't want to tell Nias any of this, however.

"You have no right to disparage me when you're trying to make sales through your 'bond' with Lord Liam or whatever! What's wrong with current-gen models anyway?! Their specs are more than good enough! You Seventh people always just make things that are way higher-performance than necessary!"

"You just say that because you can't beat us in performance!"

"And you're just whining 'cause you couldn't get a contract!"

The two continued to badmouth each other, smiles on their faces, for the next several hours.

***

House Banfield had what might be called a mascot: a demihuman named Chino. She was employed as a maid, if only technically. Unlike the fake accessories worn by Tia and Marie, however, Chino's ears and tail were authentic. She also possessed the distinctive silver hair of the wolf tribe (recently redubbed the dog tribe).

Small, cute Chino was currently napping in the shade of a tree in the courtyard.

"Hwaaah… Wonder what'll be for lunch today…"

At one point, she'd called herself a proud warrior, the daughter of a warrior father, but there was no sign of that girl anymore. She had been thoroughly tamed.

Having finished the few tasks assigned to her, Chino had nothing to do until lunchtime. Thus, she'd started relaxing in the shade of this tree, and she'd been drifting off to sleep when something approached her.

The dog spirit that watched over Liam made no sound as it trotted through the brush. It brought its face close to the dozing Chino and moved it as if sniffing at her. Chino didn't notice, so the dog glanced around for a moment…and then entered her body.

Now inhabited by the dog spirit, Chino opened her eyes and leaped up. On all fours, she glanced around, then dashed toward the mansion. As soon as she entered it, she ran into Serena, the head maid.

"Do not run inside the mansion. Walk on two feet."

Chino normally didn't get along well with Serena, who was harsh when it came to etiquette. However, that had nothing to do with the dog, who ignored the head maid and ran off.

For her part, Serena noticed that Chino was acting a bit differently than usual, but all she did was tilt her head and sigh. "If only Master Liam would teach his pet some manners."

Using her nose to guide her, Chino raced through the mansion. Eventually, she came upon Liam, who was embroiled in an argument with Brian in the middle of a hallway.

"Master Liam, just what do you mean that you're going on a training journey before you've even held your wedding?! You only just became a full-fledged noble!"

"I'm still half-baked as a swordsman, though. I need to train."

"Think of your position! You can send others to search for Mr. Yasushi!"

"I can't just summon Master here as if I own him."

"Someone who is about to become a duke of the Algrand Empire shouldn't worry a bit about summoning a man like that anywhere! Besides, I've always had my doubts about that Yasushi character…"

"You just don't get it, you old fool! This has nothing to do with my noble title or anything like that. I want to go see Master myself because I *respect* him! Can't you understand that?"

"I won't say you're making a mistake as a human being, but it's absolutely a mistake in terms of your position! At any rate, Master Liam, I beg you…*beg* you…to prioritize your marriage to Lady Rosetta! If I die before it happens, I won't be able to rest in peace until I see your heir!" Brian wept, clinging to his master.

Liam shook him off. "Don't say something so foreboding! Anyway, I'm bringing Amagi with me, so… Chino?"

The dog inhabiting Chino's body had clamped her teeth into Liam's pants. She tugged them, looking up at him. The look seemed

to indicate that she wanted him to take her along as well.

Liam wasn't sure how to react. "What's up with you? Do you want to come too?" He looked a little happy at the way Chino gazed up at him, clinging to his pants. "Well, er…I guess I don't mind, but… this kind of brings me back. My old dog used to ask to go on walks by doing that."

Liam unthinkingly reached down and stroked Chino's head. The dog rubbed against him at the familiar sensation, flopping down to show Liam its belly.

Liam and Brian were both thrown by Chino's strange behavior.

"She's asking me to rub her belly, right…?"

"It certainly seems that way. However, I'm not sure this is exactly the appropriate place for such activities. Feel free to enjoy yourself in a nearby room, though I must once again state that I wish you'd prioritize Lady Rosetta or Lady Eulisia." Brian seemed to think Liam had indecent intentions toward Chino.

Realizing this, Liam huffed in irritation. "Just what do you think the situation is between me and Chino? Anyway, I'm going on this trip, and that's final. I've left everything important in Claus's hands."

Realizing that Liam wasn't going to compromise, Brian hung his head. "Well, if Lord Claus is in charge instead of those other two, it's unlikely that we'll encounter any trouble like we did previously. Please just come back as soon as you can, Master Liam…"



Liam didn’t even look at Brian. “I’ll do what I can.”

To the dog who’d known Liam in his previous life, the count’s expression looked like one he’d worn when he didn’t want to return home, so the dog cocked Chino’s head.

Chapter 3:
Playing the Part

THIS PLANET WAS RULED by an Algrand Empire noble, but it existed in a location of no particular interest to the Empire. It was what was commonly known as a "border planet."

The world wasn't particularly developed, and the baron who ruled it had no interest in governing. From the way his subjects lived, it was hard to believe the planet even belonged to an intergalactic nation. Not even the area where the baron himself resided was very developed; aside from the most important places, the buildings were all made of wood.

At dusk, a girl in a uniform ran through that antiquated townscape. She had long, chestnut-brown hair, and her body was toned from her membership in an athletic club. In a busy shopping district, she burst into a restaurant crowded with customers.

"Oh! Welcome!" the girl said cheerily.

The regulars all laughed at her greeting. "You don't say 'welcome' when *you* come in!"

"Yeah! You gotta say 'I'm home'!"

The girl's family ran this restaurant. It was a small place, and almost all its customers were familiar to her. As she dashed into the back of the restaurant with her things, her mother—who wore an apron and carried some dishes—stopped her.

"Sorry, Yuri, can you help out a bit? We're busy."

"Of course," the girl called Yuri said, smiling. "I'm just going to get changed, so give me a second."

She hurriedly put her things away and put an apron over her uniform, then headed back out into the dining room. Her father watched her happily from the kitchen. He was pleased that his daughter was helping out, but couldn't show that in front of the customers.

"Carry these plates out, would you? After that, clean up the open tables."

"Gotcha!" Yuri replied cheerfully. She was a cute girl, and was very popular among the regulars.

"You love seein' your adorable kid help out here, don't you, boss?" one customer asked Yuri's father.

Her father concentrated on his cooking, though he replied, "You don't need to flatter me."

"Aw—but I mean it! The young guys are all after her, aren't they? She may not be able to work here much longer!"

At those words, her father's expression hardened. "I'm not giving my daughter to any old kid."

The customer burst out laughing, not having expected those words from the normally stoic man. "You really are a dad, aren't you?"

Yuri gave the pair an exasperated look. "Since when do you get to decide that, Dad? I'm going out with someone at school, you know."

"What?! I haven't heard anything about that!"

"Of course you haven't; I didn't tell you," Yuri teased him, amused by his shock. Her father remained frozen for several moments until the restaurant door opened.

Yuri turned around. "Welcome…" she began, but her cheery greeting petered out.

A group of men in kimono—all with swords at their waists—had entered. Yuri wasn't the only one stunned silent by their appearance; all the customers also went quiet when they noticed the men.

As a hush fell over the bustling restaurant, a man with a rugged face said toward the door, "That's the girl, Master Sword God."

A thin man with curly hair and a scruffy face entered. Despite his appearance, it was clear to everyone watching that all the other men showed this one deep respect. This man, then, was Yasushi; the "Sword God" was the subject of many rumors, mostly throughout the Empire.

Putting his hand to his chin, Yasushi approached Yuri and looked her over appraisingly. "Just as pretty as the rumors say. You don't belong in this shabby little restaurant. Come with me… I'll show you a good time. What do you say?"

This "shabby" restaurant was one her parents had put their blood, sweat, and tears into opening. Yuri didn't like him badmouthing it, but no one on this planet could argue with Yasushi. The rumors said that practitioners of the Way of the Flash could kill someone just by looking at them.

As Yuri stood there, trembling, her father flew out of the kitchen and prostrated himself before Yasushi. “Pl-please wait, Master Sword God! Anything but my daughter, please! How about a free meal instead? Please, please!”

Yasushi looked down at the man with disinterest. “You really think I’d eat in a place like this? You think such slop could satisfy me? Ridiculous! Boys?”

At a sign from Yasushi, his pupils began wrecking the restaurant. Customers jumped up and fled as the men overturned tables and chairs. Food flew to the floor, dishes shattered, and the men’s swords sliced up the decor.

People outside the restaurant picked up on the commotion. When they saw the men in kimono, though, they averted their eyes, not getting involved. Yasushi wasn’t the only reason no one could stand up to them.

Arms folded, Yasushi sneered at Yuri’s parents, who were huddled in a corner of the restaurant. “This is what you get for defying the baron’s personal sword instructor. If you’d just handed your daughter over, you wouldn’t have had to get your restaurant trashed. Idiots.”

Seeing her family’s business ruined, Yuri couldn’t take it anymore. She mustered her courage and shouted, “Stop! Stop it! We treasure this place!”

Yuri grabbed at Yasushi, but he threw her to the floor easily. For a moment, she couldn’t even understand what’d happened.

"Well, since you're cute, I was gonna be nice. But now you've pissed me off," Yasushi said. "I hope you're ready for what's coming to you. Come on, boys, let's get back to the castle."

Yasushi turned his back and left the restaurant. His pupils followed, one carrying Yuri over his shoulder. The girl's mother and father were left weeping.

"Yuri!"

"I'm sorry… I'm so sorry…"

Yuri did her best to be strong in front of her parents. "I-it's okay. I'll come back… I swear I will!"

Just like that, the group made off with Yuri.

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In their destroyed restaurant, Yuri's parents continued sobbing. They'd never heard of a girl taken away by Yasushi returning. They wailed that their own daughter would likely never return either.

As they lamented their powerlessness, a commotion suddenly came from the front of the establishment. "It's mackerel in miso… I smell mackerel in miso! I never thought I'd smell something like that here!"

Now *another* group in kimono entered. This group's members, however, were younger; there was even a little girl among them. The child, who had distinctive red hair, carried a sword that looked too big for her body. A black-haired young man held her hand, making them look like siblings.

The red-haired girl looked up at the young man. “Master, is this really where you want to eat?” It was clear to her that the restaurant was in no state to serve customers.

The two swordswomen who entered the shop after the girl and young man seemed to have no interest in the restaurant themselves.

“Let’s eat somewhere else.”

“I agree. I mean, this place isn’t even open, is it?”

“Sorry,” the young man replied, “but my stomach’s set on mackerel in miso, so this is where we’re eating. Hey, boss, clean this place up and cook me something.”

But the married-couple owners were in no state to clean up, however arrogantly the young man ordered them to.

“I’m sorry, but under the circumstances, we can’t make you anything. Please leave…for tod…ugh…”

When the owner started crying about his daughter, the young man looked utterly irritated. He was evidently truly keen on eating the restaurant’s food, however, and asked what the problem was. “Just tell me what happened.”

The girl’s mother and father exchanged a glance, unsure what to do. In the end, they decided to tell the stranger, although that would likely do no good.

***

Marie and company were the ones who wound up tidying the wrecked restaurant.

“Hurry up, Haydi. You’re delaying Lord Liam’s meal.”

"What the hell are *we* cleaning for? Shouldn't we bring the guys who did this back and make *them* do it?"

"Complain any more, and I'll sew those lips of yours shut."

"Yeah, yeah… Sheesh. I don't know what idiots are responsible for this, but I swear I'll find 'em."

Since I had so many knights, the cleaning went nice and fast when I ordered them to straighten the place up. Meanwhile, I sat at the counter, Ellen and Amagi at my sides. Chino sat next to Amagi, happily finishing a bowl of something left behind in the ruckus.

"This is good. I've never tasted this before!" Wagging her tail, Chino lightened the mood a bit amid all the gloom.

Amagi just sat quietly, but I saw her sneak glances at the cleaning efforts every so often. She asked me with her eyes if she should help, but that kind of grunt work was best left to Marie and her men.

Speaking of Amagi… I'd gotten her a kimono to wear so that she'd match the rest of us. I wasn't a fan of how she had to expose her shoulders in it, but otherwise, it looked good on her. That dark blue suited her perfectly.

Well, I could've stared at Amagi all day, but I was getting hungry. I decided to move the conversation with the owners along. "I see. The baron's personal sword instructor wrecked this place and stole your daughter, eh? And that sword instructor is the rumored…"

The owner sniffled, head bowed. "Sword God of the Way of the Flash. No one on this planet can stand up to him."

I glanced over at Fuka and Riho, who had gone from looking disinteresting to appearing full of bloodlust, eyes wide. Master Yasushi would never have gone around randomly kidnapping young townswomen; the destruction in the restaurant also made it clear at a glance that this had been an imposter. That fraud had supposedly had students with him, but their slashes had been all power and no finesse. I couldn't imagine that anyone who would do this was really a swordsman of our school.

Riho stood. "I'll kill him."

"Wait." I gestured for her to sit back down.

"Really?" Fuka asked me. "We can't just leave at this point!"

I didn't want to leave the imposter unchallenged either. Still, there was a proper procedure to these things. "Who said we were leaving? This just calls for a lighter touch. But we'll crush him thoroughly, so he has no chance to escape." I couldn't let someone besmirch the name of the Way of the Flash—let alone *Master's* name.

While I considered exactly what to do, a woman wearing a mask slid up out of my shadow. "Master Liam."

"Kunai. Done investigating?"

"Yes. I looked into the baron and sword instructor. It was exactly as you suspected, Master Liam."

"That baron must be blind." I felt a little sorry for the guy, who'd been fooled by a fake.

When my knights finished cleaning and the restauranteur resumed cooking, I straightened up in my chair slightly. Amagi and

Ellen gave me surprised looks.

"Is something the matter, Master?"

"You don't often react like that to things."

The nostalgic scent I'd caught a whiff of when we'd walked past this establishment now had my heart in a viselike grip. Regret I'd almost forgotten welled up in me, and I was possessed by a powerful craving for mackerel in miso. Unfortunately, that dish seemingly didn't exist in this universe. There were similar foods and dishes that tasted really comparable, but none was perfectly identical, so I'd never felt like I was actually tasting the dish I longed for.

My mouth watered, and I swallowed with an audible gulp. Based on appearance alone, the dish the owner was making was undeniably mackerel in miso.

I sat back down, trying to remain calm. "Boss… I'll take a large serving," I told the restaurateur gravely.

Riho and Fuka both gave me odd looks, but they must've been hungry themselves.

"I guess I'll have the same thing as him," Riho said. "A large serving for me too, thanks."

Fuka thought for a moment, then ordered what Riho had. "Yeah, I'll have the same, then. 'Mackerel in miso,' is it? Never tried it before, so I'll take a large serving as well."

I hadn't expected them to order the same thing I had. I looked at Ellen, who was seated beside me. "Order whatever you want, Ellen."

"I'll have the same thing you ordered, Master," she answered right away.

All four of us had ended up ordering mackerel in miso, but that was fine by me. "Four large servings of mackerel in miso, if you would, boss."

When I ordered, the owner gave me an awkward look. "Er…this isn't 'mackerel in miso.' I figured this dish was the one you were talking about, so I started making it, but are you sure it's what you want?"

Apparently, despite this dish's similarity, it was called something else. "Yes, I'd like that fish you're simmering—I'm sure of it. We call that recipe 'mackerel in miso' where I'm from."

"Oh. Is that so?" the man said awkwardly. I couldn't blame him for his demeanor, since he was probably worried out of his mind about his daughter.

His wife brought our food out to us. With the mackerel in miso sitting in front of me, I found that my hand was shaking.

Amagi looked at me oddly. "There is no dish called 'mackerel in miso' on your planet, Master. Are you certain you are not confusing it with something else?"

I dug a piece of mackerel out with my chopsticks and brought it to my mouth. The taste of miso and ginger spread over my tongue. Even the mackerel had the same flavor as in my past life. The taste, the texture, the scent… All of them were spot on.

I'd finally reunited with a dish I thought I'd never taste again. Many times in the past, I'd asked chefs in this universe to cook it, but since the ingredients differed, it'd never turned out perfectly. The slight differences only ended up annoying me even more than if they'd prepared another dish entirely. For a time, I'd considered trying to make the dish myself, but I gave up on that idea because I had a more important goal—mastering the Way of the Flash.

Why was I so obsessed with mackerel in miso, you ask? Well, because of my previous life. Back then, I'd been tricked into shouldering debt, and toward the end of my life, I couldn't eat well. There had been days when I didn't eat anything at all.

I still remembered the simple but wonderful eatery I'd pass by, hungry, on my way home from work. I couldn't forget the mackerel-in-miso aroma I always smelled when going by. Sometimes, I was so hungry that the scent alone was painful, and I began to drool from the smell of miso.

I'd hear the voice of someone inside the shop calling the customer who'd ordered the mackerel in miso. Then I'd check the money I had in my pocket, but it wouldn't even add up to a hundred yen. I felt so miserable walking away from that place, clutching the few ten-yen coins in my pocket. I'd even had a little dream that, one day, I would try that place's mackerel in miso. In the end, though, I'd never had the chance before I died.

But today…I finally had my chance. I'd finally found the perfect mackerel in miso! I smiled instinctively. All of a sudden, I felt like maybe it wasn't so bad to act like a hero every so often.

"Boss, as thanks for sating me, I'll rescue your daughter," I declared.

In response, the restauranteur just gave me a confused look. "Er, did you hear what we said earlier? The Sword God took her, and the baron has no interest in helping the likes of us. If you offend them, who knows what they might do to you…?"

I sighed at the man. He was afraid of an imposter of Master and a mere baron. "Don't worry; it'll all be over before you know it. Marie?" I turned around.

Marie—who was standing by, now that the knights were finished cleaning—came to my side. "Yes, Lord Liam! Your loyal Marie, at your service!"

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, we're going on a raid."

At those words, Marie's gaze sharpened. She smiled faintly. "As you wish, my lord."

***

In a room in the baron's residence, Yasushi was about to lay hands on the girl he'd abducted. "Heh heh heh. Call myself 'Yasushi of the Way of the Flash,' and I can do whatever I want! I've hit the jackpot!"

From how the man spoke, Yuri realized that he was a fraud. But with her arms and legs bound, she couldn't move.

"You're a fake?!" she demanded.

That was the wrong thing to ask him. "Watch what you say! Whatever else I might be, I'm a knight. Don't forget that I can kill a

girl like you whenever I want."

The imposter was reaching toward Yuri when the room's door slammed open.

"Master Sword God—intruders! Someone's infiltrated the castle! No one can stop them! Please lend us your strength! Also, Master Sword God, they seem to be looking for *you*…"

Hearing that, the fake clicked his tongue. "Some idiot's trying to challenge us to a fight?"

He couldn't believe anyone was stupid enough to break into the baron's residence. Still, the imposter wasn't worried. "You contacted the army?"

"Yes, of course."

"All right. I'll buy them time. 'Course, it might all be over before they get here." The fraud had nothing to worry about, since the baron's army would protect him. "Gwah ha ha ha! Let's see the faces of these idiots picking a fight with me! Maybe I'll capture 'em and slice 'em up for some fun!"

As the cruel fake left the room, Yuri wept. "Mom… Dad… I want to go home…"

***

In the castle's audience hall, I sat on the baron's throne with my sword resting on my shoulder, looking down at my sister students. A furious Riho was mercilessly kicking the fake Master Yasushi, who'd curled into a ball on the floor.

“How dare you try to pass yourself off as Master when you’re so weak!”

The imposter had undergone full-body alterations to copy Master’s face and body structure. He was now a dead ringer for Master externally, but of course, his skills didn’t measure up at all. This fraud had apparently been a first-rate knight at one point, but when he fell on hard times, he’d decided to pass himself off as “Yasushi of the Way of the Flash” to regain some of his lost glory. In terms of the universe in general, his sword skills were more than impressive, but they were nothing compared to ours.

Her hair practically standing on end, Fuka slammed her sheathed sword against the fake. “How dare you sully Master’s name like this?!”

The fake’s students lay around the two overexcited girls in puddles of their own blood. Riho and Fuka had even cut down the baron’s guards.

As I looked down at them, Ellen watched the ghastly scene from beside me, her face pale. “Um, M-Master…”

I guessed what she wanted to ask. “You wonder why I’m not stopping them, right?”

“Yes.”

I understood how Riho and Fuka felt about the fraud besmirching their beloved master’s name like that, but they *were* a little lacking in class. It wasn’t that Ellen wanted to stop them because

their behavior disgusted her, but just that she didn't want to see any more of it.

"Just leave them be. I've got business over *here*." I turned to the baron. "Now…any excuses?"

The baron had prostrated himself before me. "I had no idea you were visiting my territory, Lord Liam. I'm so sorry for the trouble I caused you. We'll deal with these criminals and see firsthand that they're punished. I beg you to please have mercy on me…"

Kunai had found out on my behalf that the baron in front of me was apparently part of Cleo's faction. But, even if this fake had tricked him, it was still a problem that he'd invited Master Yasushi here in the first place. He knew I was a swordsman of the Way of the Flash, so if he knew anything about Master, it had been his duty to inform me.

"Not happening," I replied. "You should've said something to me before inviting Master Yasushi here."

"B-but that's ridiculous!" The baron raised his head to protest. "Why should I have to tell you who I invite to my territory?! That has nothing to do with what occurred here today!"

He had a point, but that was all he had. "You're right. I don't like a small-time noble like you standing up to the leader of your faction, though. So I'm removing you from that faction."

"Wha—?!"

To me, the baron's name and face weren't even worth remembering, but he couldn't say the same about me. I might've let him go if he'd tried a little harder to get on my good side. "You

requested financial aid from House Banfield, correct? We'll scrap that application as well."

The baron hung his head, fists shaking. The next time he looked up, his face was red with rage. "Don't underestimate me, you brat! This is my domain! The territory *I* rule! I don't care who you are—you can't win against me with so few people!"

He must've come in prepared for trouble, because he raised his right hand and snapped his fingers. A second later, a mobile knight came crashing through the wall. Rubble and dust fell from the ceiling, so I pulled Ellen close, shielding her. Then I sliced up rubble and blew away dust, leaving her and me unscathed. Riho and Fuka glared at the mobile knight.

Now that he thought the tables had turned, the baron got chatty. "Behold the mobile knight I was able to obtain! A next-generation craft that surpasses the Moheive—the Zohei!"

Moheives were mass-produced mobile knights that were even easier to stock up on than pilots. They were cheap and easy to maintain in exchange for being low-performance craft that offered little protection for their pilots. The Moheive model had once been widespread and had been mockingly referred to as a "masterpiece."

The craft described as the Moheive's next-gen successor had a simple design. Its head and body comprised a single block, and it had thick, powerful-looking limbs. It was probably decently tough, but comparing it to a Moheive just made it sound weak.

Riho and Fuka stepped forward. However, before they could make a move, a blade appeared from the Zohei's chest. My sister

apprentices seemed to think it was the mobile knight's weapon, but I could tell what was really happening.

"You're late, Marie."

"I apologize."

The pierced Zohei was pulled away, and one of House Banfield's Teumessas replaced it. The Teumessa was a mobile knight with a vulpine head. It probably belonged to the same generation as the Zohei, but its specs apparently beat the other craft's.

Seeing the Teumessa, the baron panicked. "You brought a mobile knight into my domain?! What were you thinking?!"

I was the one who could technically get in trouble for bringing such a weapon to another noble's realm without permission. I'd majorly breached noble etiquette…but just who would actually hold me accountable for doing so? "Correct; I've infringed on your rights. So, who will you go crying to? All you need to do is say Liam of House Banfield picked a fight with you."

The baron trembled as I smiled cruelly at him. It seemed that he was speechless. For an idiot, he caught on pretty fast.

Following the conflict with the Autocracy, Cleo's faction already had the upper hand over Calvin's. Our faction might still have lower numbers, but people looked at us differently now. We'd pulled ahead in the race—so now, without any support, it would be pretty much impossible for Calvin to punish me for my actions.

Before the baron could say anything, the Teumessa retreated. Through the hole it had broken in the wall, I saw the scenery outside.

Out there in the castle town, mobile knights were engaging in battle. The Zoheis from the baron's defense force were using flamethrowers indiscriminately, as if simply wanting to do as much damage as possible.

I pulled Ellen over to the hole, and Marie's Teumessa deployed a defense field around us in case any stray bullets flew our way.

"Jeez. They're really going at it. You trying to turn your domain into an empty field?"

The Zoheis fought in a way that spared absolutely no thought for any casualties they might cause. The Teumessas, on the other hand, took out each Zohei one by one with melee weapons. Both sides could slide over the ground using their hover functionality, but the Teumessas were clearly faster and lighter on their "feet." They were worth the high cost I'd paid for them.

A Teumessa wove through the tightly packed buildings, then jammed the large blades in its hands through a Zohei's cockpit. It lifted the unmoving Zohei and tossed it aside.

I could hear the transmissions of Marie's forces from their craft.

"This'll take some time. Permission to use firearms, Marie?"

Marie's adjutant Haydi was requesting that she permit them to use guns. That guy's input should've been pretty important to her, but Marie's response was cold.

"What'll you do if a stray bullet flies at Lord Liam? None of you need guns to handle enemies like this. Just shut up and finish them already!"

I couldn’t tell whether Marie was actually angry, or if that was supposed to be her way of encouraging them. Either way, the Teumessas hurried to deal with the Zoheis more quickly than they had been. The way they leaped on their prey and destroyed the cockpits made the Teumessas look like beasts attacking humans.

As I watched them work, I received a report from Marie. *“The baron’s space fleet has surrendered, Lord Liam. We’ve won in space as well.”*

This area on the planet’s surface hadn’t been the only battlefield; we’d also engaged the baron’s forces off-planet. A small, elite fleet—again commanded by Marie—had easily crushed the baron’s paper-tiger space force.

For some time now, the baron had been trying desperately to contact his private army on his tablet. But since he couldn’t get through to them, he’d given up.

I handed the baron his sentence. “The sin of trying to kill me is a heavy one. You’ll be executed, and your family will be stripped of their noble rank and banished from the Empire. Don’t worry, though… I’ll make good use of this planet.”

The baron collapsed to his knees. He hadn’t said so, but I assumed that he hadn’t accepted the fake Yasushi as his sword instructor just for power. If the baron had believed the fraud was the real Master Yasushi, he would’ve felt that he was in a good position to negotiate with me. I’d probably have given him financial aid from my own pocket if I knew he was harboring the real Master Yasushi.

I figured the man must have some specific ambition. I didn't know what his ultimate goal had been, but I assumed that he wanted to use the Way of the Flash to get ahead somehow. I pitied him a bit for having fallen for a fake instead.

I heard the imposter's screaming coming from behind me. "Please forgive me! Forgive me! I didn't mean anything by it! I won't try to pass myself off as Master Yasushi again, I swear, so please don't kill me!"

As the fake cried and begged for his life, Riho and Fuka had not a drop of compassion. Riho's hands shook as she drew her sword and held it at the fake's neck. "I'll kill you slowly."

Her eyes were bloodshot, and she seemed ready to start cutting into him at any moment, so I stopped her. "Not yet, Riho."

"Huh…?" Riho was so worked up that she glared at me, so I glared back and repeated myself.

"Don't kill him yet. Are you going to defy me?"

Cowed, Riho looked away and sheathed her sword. The girl was more emotional than she looked, and she had a bad habit of picking fights with anyone and everyone, regardless of the difference in their strength.

"G-got it," she said, her voice trembling in fear.

Seeing the other girl piss me off, Fuka laughed. "Idiot."

Riho shot her a glare, but didn't say anything. She probably thought that, if she made a scene, I'd snap at her again.

I took Ellen by the hand and approached the fake, who seemed to think I was going to spare him.

"Thank you," he babbled. "Thank you so much! I swear I'll change my ways and live an honest life from now on."

"Whatever. Where's the girl you abducted?"

"Girl? The one from the restaurant? She's in my room—"

The imposter looked up at me, and I smiled, flicking my sword out of its sheath. There was a quiet *clunk*, and the man's head fell to the floor. His body followed shortly after. Ellen trembled as she watched blood spurt from his severed neck.

I looked down at the fake's head. "You don't get a next chance. Go ahead and live an honest life if you're reborn somewhere."

At this point, the battle outside seemed to have ended. It was quiet. Pulling Ellen by the hand, I got ready to go liberate the kidnapped girl. "Come on. Let's find her."

Coming up beside me, Riho and Fuka looked down reluctantly at the fake.

"Aw," said Riho. "I wanted to cut him."

"Actually, shouldn't you have let *Ellen* cut him?" Fuka commented casually.

Crap, I thought in response, but I didn't say it out loud.

***

"Mom! Dad!"

The rescued girl ran to her parents, and the family shared an embrace.

Her father was crying. "I'm so glad you're back."

Yuri's parents asked her what had happened.

"Those people saved me. They're an amazing group who defeated the Sword God, and the baron couldn't stand up to them."

Her father bowed his head low in gratitude. He had never thought these strangers would actually rescue his daughter. "I don't know who you are or where you came from, but thank you for this, truly."

"Don't worry about it," Liam told him. "I already know how I'll get you to thank me."

That statement made the family a little nervous. Liam glanced at each member before his eyes settled on the father. Had Liam spent just a little more time looking at the man's daughter? Or was that her father's imagination?

"Um, I'll do anything in my power," Yuri's father said. "But I can't imagine that anything I could do would satisfy a person like you…" Someone like him surely couldn't offer anything that a man capable of raiding the baron's castle would want.

Yuri's father was dreading what Liam would demand of him when the count extended an invitation to the family. "No need to be afraid. I just want you three to move to my planet."

"You mean, to your domain? So you *are* a noble."

Yuri's father had suspected as much. If this young man owned a planet, he was surely an aristocrat; thus, the baron—another noble—hadn't been able to defy him.

Behind Yuri's father, the girl's mother held her, terrified that yet another noble was about to take their daughter away. This time, there'd be nothing they could do about it. This was a man whom their own ruler had been powerless to withstand, so what could *they* possibly do to resist him?

"I'm sorry, Yuri… I'm sorry…"

Her mother was crying, but Yuri wasn't really frightened. She might even have felt somewhat attracted to the noble who'd saved her.

"It's okay, Mom. I…I don't mind."

Her father was conflicted about the situation. Believing that they'd accepted his proposal, however, Liam moved things right along.

"Just get ready to move," he told them. "I'll prepare your transportation and ensure that we're ready to receive you on our end. Oh—and I'll prepare a restaurant for you as well."

Yuri's father was sure of Liam's ulterior motive now. All he heard was, *"I'll treat you well, so hand over your daughter."*

He clenched his fists. "I can't accept this…"

The man was doing his best to resist, but Liam wouldn't back down. He set his hands on the restaurateur's shoulders and stared into his eyes.

"It's no trouble, honestly. I just really crave that dish sometimes. I'm looking forward to eating it again, okay?"

It turned out that Liam's passionate invitation was meant primarily, not for Yuri, but for her father.

The man was flabbergasted. "Huh? *Huh?!* Me?! Not my daughter?!"

Liam cocked his head. "What reason do I have to want your daughter? Oh—you don't have to worry about her, though. She can attend a school in my domain, and I'll waive the tuition. I…I'll be satisfied as long as I have you."

Yuri's father broke into a cold sweat. Turning around, he saw his wife speechless as well. As for Yuri, she gave him an envious look.

"I lost to my *dad*…?" she muttered, looking totally frustrated.

Thus, the family was invited to House Banfield's home planet in Liam's name.

***

Returning to Marie's ship, the Purple Tail, I smirked to myself in the living area attached to the hull. That area, designed specifically for me, was furnished with every comfort you could want on a long journey. In one spacious room was a circle of couches where I sat discussing my latest acquisition.

"I didn't expect to find something like that on a planet we only stopped by to hunt down an imposter. I never thought I'd find mackerel in miso in this reality." I basked in the feeling of finally finding a long-sought treasure.

As I did, Fuka—lying on another couch—asked about what would come next. “I’m happy for you. So what are we gonna do now? Do you want to find Master Yasushi or prioritize hunting down imposters?”

To be honest, I wanted to get to Master as soon as I could. I had no idea where he was, though. All I could say was that he was as impressive as ever, given his ability to evade even House Banfield’s intelligence network. At any rate, all we could do was go through each possibility one by one and cross them off the list.

“We’ll crush all the fakes proclaiming themselves teachers of the Way of the Flash,” I replied. “And if we meet Master on the way, then we’ll see him. But even if we don’t find him, ridding this world of some trash will feel good, right?”

Riho looked bored by my proposal. Sitting cross-legged on a couch, she puffed her cheeks in irritation. “Those fakes are all weaklings, though. That guy today was so easy to beat that fighting him wasn’t even any fun. A person would have to be stupid to try to pass themselves off as Master when they’re that feeble. I’m all for cleaning up trash, but I don’t want to be bored.”

I sighed at my selfish sister apprentice. “Just enjoy this as a vacation, then. If we *do* run into someone strong, you can pick a fight with them and get some training in.”

Dojo-crashing at some famous schools of swordsmanship while we were out and about didn’t sound bad. It would be pretty damn evil-lord-like. My own villainy impressed me.

Fuka jumped up, latching on to what I'd said. "Sounds fun! If we find anyone strong, I'll fight them first!"

Riho grabbed Fuka's arm for trying to beat her to the punch. "You mean *I'm* gonna fight them first! I need to stream some fights anyway. My viewers are starved for blood lately. They're so annoying, commenting 'kill, kill' all the time."

What was it she was called—"the bloodiest idol in the universe"? Riho wanted to stand out; her reputation as a streamer was on the line. I was just surprised there was a streaming site that was okay with users killing people on their feed.

I attempted to mediate between the two to prevent a battle from breaking out. "You can take turns fighting them. And Ellen…"

Ellen, who sat next to me drinking juice, straightened up. "Y-yes?" She appeared to lack her usual energy. It *really* seemed like she didn't want to kill anyone.

Though I now regretted how cautiously I'd raised her, I informed her that she'd be involved in all this as well. "If we come across someone of a suitable skill level, you'll be fighting too. So get yourself ready, okay?"

"Yes…" There was no enthusiasm in Ellen's response.

Riho and Fuka also seemed to notice her hesitance. They kept quiet, not wanting to butt in on my training methods. Still, I couldn't help feeling that my competence as Ellen's master and their senior apprentice was in question.

Chapter 4:
A Grave Miscalculation

YASUSHI AND HIS WIFE stood before their newly completed dojo. It was just a cheap-looking prefab hut, and its sign was a random piece of wood Yasushi had found and scribbled "Original Way of the Flash Dojo" on. Still, this was a day for the couple to celebrate.

In front of the structure, Yasushi spread his arms wide and laughed. "My dojo's finally complete!"

"It's wonderful, Yasu!"

Nina had purchased the land and overseen the construction, but it was Yasushi's dojo. He hadn't contributed a cent; the only work he'd done was writing the dojo's name on the sign. Still, if he could do anything, it was make the dojo look legit. Having donned the new kimono Nina bought him for this day, Yasushi really looked like a swordplay instructor.

Her husband's old kimono had gotten pretty worn out, so Nina was smitten to see him in a new one. "You look amazing in that, Yasu. You come off as a first-rate swordsman from every angle!"

Yasushi wasn't really doing anything remarkable. Still, he was capable of giving off a "first-rate" vibe simply by trying to.

"Just leave it to me," he replied. "Looks are everything to people. Looking like this, I can play the part of a first-rate instructor, no problem." This was his chance to put in the effort to become a *real* instructor, but Yasushi would only ever choose half measures.

As Yasushi held his head high, spouting really cheesy lines, Nina was once again smitten. Yet she wasn't the type to grind to a halt when charmed. Having emphasized Yasushi's strong points, she voiced her worry about him actually running the dojo as a business. "Will just creating the right mood really be enough, though? You aren't skilled yourself, Yasu. Won't you have trouble attracting students?"

Nina's concerns were more than reasonable, but Yasushi was confident about his strategy. "Well, I'll start by teaching neighborhood kids for free. After all, I already have experience from teaching those three monsters. I'm confident that I can make some kids pretty strong, even if they don't become more monsters themselves."

"You'll teach them for *free*?!"

"Hey, I don't like it either, but I need to establish an initial track record. Don't worry, though… I did get practice training Liam and the girls, and if I prove my skills through the kids around here, people will come from near and far to learn the Original Way of the Flash. That's when we'll start turning a profit! We'll charge a high monthly rate and make up for everything we did for free!" Basically, his plan was to use local children as bait to attract high-paying students.

"I love how underhanded you are!" As always, Nina was head-over-heels for everything that made her husband terrible.

Yasushi was determined to make things work this time. *Since I escaped House Banfield, it's been failure after failure. But now I'll ensure this dojo succeeds so that I can live an easy life!*

He didn't doubt his ability as an educator. It was true that he'd trained three swordsmen in the Way of the Flash: Liam, Riho, and Fuka. As the saying went, though, poverty dulled the wits. Yasushi was so focused on making money to escape poverty that he forgot one important thing.

As Yasushi hung the Original Way of the Flash sign, a man approached the dojo, holding one of the flyers they'd distributed beforehand. The man was large, with a low voice and a face that looked as if it belonged to a small-time crook.

"This the Way of the Flash dojo?"

Yasushi hesitated before this sudden visitor. "Yes, it is. Can I help you with something?"

If this was someone who intended to challenge those at the dojo to make a name for himself, Yasushi could still pretend to be unconnected to it.

The thuggish man explained why he'd come, a serious look in his eyes. "I'm here to learn this 'Way of the Flash' that's all the rage these days. I need strength."

Hearing that, Yasushi changed his tune. "My first student! I'm surprised. You've come to the right place, though. I'm the instructor in the Original Way of the Flash."

He didn't tell the man his name, not wanting people to know that he was the "Sword God."

The man gave him a suspicious look. "You're the master of this dojo? Well, whatever. Have you got anything to do with that Count

Banfield guy?”

Still wanting to hide his identity, Yasushi lied, “We haven’t met personally, but he and I do belong to the same school. I suppose that makes us something like distant relatives.”

The man looked disappointed. “So you don’t even know him? Well, whatever… I guess that doesn’t matter, as long as this is the same sword style. Starting today, I wanna learn at this dojo.”

The man seemed arrogant, but that didn’t matter to Yasushi, who only saw him as a source of income. He welcomed his new student with open arms. “Glad to have you. You’re lucky, you know—I have a lot of confidence in my ability as an instructor. I swear to you that I’ll teach you the Flash.”

The man laughed loudly at Yasushi’s confident statement. “Well, good! Sounds like the perfect way to get revenge for my banishment! If I can use that move, I won’t have to be afraid of anything.”

Yasushi couldn’t help getting a foreboding feeling from the man’s words. “Huh? Banishment?” he asked in surprise.

The man explained almost as if bragging. “I was just playing with some of his subjects, and the count flipped out and banished me. I mean, what a tight-ass. The population would grow back eventually, right? So now, I wanna get revenge on the people who banished me.”

Seeing the man’s disturbing smile, Nina tugged Yasushi’s sleeve. “A-are you going to be okay, Yasu?”

At this point, Yasushi wanted nothing to do with the man, but he also didn’t want to earn his ire. “D-don’t worry. If he pays the tuition,

he'll be my valued student." He turned to the man. "A-anyway, you'll be my student from now on. Let's start with some etiquette—"

The man would have none of it. "Knights don't need etiquette! All they need is strength!"

"Y-you're exactly right! Th-th-th-then let's start training right away!"

"This is the sword style that made that Count Banfield so strong," the man mused. "I can't wait to learn it myself."

The very day Yasushi opened his dojo, he'd immediately gained a thuggish student, and his plans had gone off the rails faster than you could say "flash."

***

From above, two beings watched Yasushi's struggles: the inhuman Guide and G'doire.

"Yasushi…you're going to help me out too." The Guide grinned.

Beside him was G'doire, who looked like an octopus that had grown a human body. Like the Guide, G'doire was a being that fed off negative energy.

G'doire, who cherished war, looked down at Yasushi dubiously. "That's the Sword God? He doesn't appear to have any power at all." He wriggled his tentacles, cocking his head at the pathetic-looking Yasushi.

Thinking back in irritation on Yasushi's past actions, the Guide explained to G'doire, "You can't underestimate him. He himself may

be an utter weakling, but the skills with which he educated Liam and his other apprentices are very real."

"So he can only teach *other* people to fight. And…? You guided that other man here…?"

It was the Guide who'd directed that thuggish man to the Original Way of the Flash dojo.

"I can't do much myself right now," the Guide replied. "But I can at least lead bad-natured people with some talent for the sword to Yasushi."

The Guide planned to mass-produce swordsmen of the Way of the Flash. What would be crucial was that those individuals somehow opposed Liam. If they just went on to join up with Liam, as Riho and Fuka had, that would create even more trouble. So the Guide was picking people who already had a bone to pick with Count Banfield, or opposed him in some other way.

When he learned of the Guide's plan, G'doire took an interest in it. "Let me help, then. We just need to lead strong villains here, right? That should be easy."

"That will help, G'doire, but it'll take too much time on its own."

"What're you trying to say?"

"We can't wait decades or centuries for someone to grow strong enough to kill Liam. So we should give them our direct support—even if it ends up a little rough."

Liam and Yasushi's apprentices thus far had themselves taken decades to reach their current skill levels. So, if the Guide and G'doire

simply led people here, the new students would take a similar amount of time to achieve that level of strength. It would be too late by then. The Guide wanted to bury Liam as soon as he could, which happened to be an area G'doire already excelled in.

G'doire entwined two of his tentacles as if folding his arms. "This goes against my principles."

"Don't you want to see limbs fly and blood spurt in a battle between Way of the Flash swordsmen?" The Guide whispered to the reluctant G'doire.

G'doire wriggled his tentacles vigorously. "I do…I do! I want to see Way of the Flash warriors I prepared myself cut Liam apart for killing my darling Isel!"

Dark-red liquid spilled from G'doire's body, falling to the ground. It rained onto Yasushi's cheap dojo and was absorbed by the building. The ground around the dojo began to turn black, but the people living on the planet's surface didn't notice. Some particularly observant individuals felt a strange unease, but they didn't know where it originated.

Negative energy gathered around Yasushi's dojo, attracting evildoers. Thanks to that boost from G'doire's powers, those evildoers would surely improve rapidly by training there.

Spreading his tentacles, G'doire called out to the strong. "Powerful villains! I will give you the strength you seek! Your only task is to kill Liam!"

Now that G'doire was on board with his plan, the Guide clapped his hands, looking down at the planet's surface with a nasty smile.

“Thanks for opening that dojo, Yasushi. Now I have a way to kill Liam and his friends. Work hard for us!”

“Things are getting interesting in my country too. Still, I can’t wait to see Way of the Flash swordsmen killing each other.” G’doire seemed to anticipate the future eagerly. He wriggled his tentacles in glee.

G’doire always looked forward to battles between strong opponents. As for the Guide, he was satisfied that he’d obtain the greatest possible results from having extended the least possible effort.

As if he’d provided power to the spot too, he boasted, “With the two of us lending them our power, the new students will surely master the Flash in no time. I’m looking forward to it, G’doire.”

“Watching powerful warriors kill each other really gets your blood pumping. Liam may be strong, but he’s never faced a bunch of foes from the same school as himself before. I can’t wait to see him flail in panic.”

The Guide and G’doire’s creepy laughter echoed above Yasushi’s dojo.

***

On a certain planet, Riho faced off against a fellow swordsman.

That swordsman used a Western style with a high stance. Riho, on the other hand, wasn’t even touching her sword hilt. She stood with both hands up, gesturing as if to say “Come at me.” Her stance, or lack thereof, demonstrated absolute confidence in her victory.

"Hurry up and attack already," she demanded. "You're the strongest swordsman around here, aren't you?"

Her opponent was bald with a face tattoo, and he was reputedly the strongest swordsman in these parts. He was also famous for his misdeeds, being a small-time villain who'd used his sword skills to gather other baddies under him. His abilities were the real deal, though, and pirates occasionally hired him as a mercenary.

The man faced off against Riho with his sword drawn, but he was sweating bullets. His flunkies, strewn on the ground around him, lay in their own blood. They too were all swordsmen strong enough to work for pirates. Some had even served nobles as knights at one point. The group was actually stronger than some orders of knights; even the local lord was so frightened of them that he paid them off to keep them serene. This man, who'd stood at the top of the group's ranks, had gotten there on strength. Yet here he was, terrified of Riho.

"What's a practitioner of the vaunted Way of the Flash doing all the way out here?" he demanded. "You're only supposed to be making trouble around House Banfield's domain and the border with the Autocracy."

Liam had spread the name of the Way of the Flash so far that, by now, nearly the entire Empire knew of it.

Covering her mouth with her hand, Riho snickered. "Just killing time."

The man lunged forward, closing the distance between them. He'd been a knight at one time himself, so he'd honed his skills on

countless battlefields. Even after his fall from grace, he'd climbed back up and made a name for himself again.

I'm not losing to some little girl!

He felt that he couldn't lose, and put all his determination into his slash, but it only cut through air. He knew he'd been in range of Riho, yet when he looked down, he saw that his sword blade was broken at the base.

Jumping back, he realized that Riho held the blade and was casually toying with it. "Ugh. What a bore. I should have just gone with the others. I would've learned more watching my brother apprentice fight."

The man's face twisted into a grimace. "You're a monster!" He drew a gun from its holster and aimed at Riho, but all of a sudden, everything past his elbow was gone. "Wha—?!"

Ignoring the man, Riho tossed aside the broken blade and unsheathed her sword. Approaching her opponent, she pointed her own blade at him. "I'd heard that there was some strong guy living here, so I asked whether we could stop. But that serial killer I got rid of recently was better than you. At least I had fun with him."

The man's eyes widened as he held his bleeding elbow. "Serial killer? You don't mean Doneil? A little girl like you took out Seven-Sword Doneil?!"

The man had heard that someone had slain the serial killer terrorizing several nearby border planets. However, he hadn't realized that it was the girl standing before him.

Riho cocked her head. "'Seven-Sword'? Oh yeah, he had a nickname like that, didn't he? I expected more from him, since even nobles and knights were supposedly scared of the guy. But he wasn't anything impressive, really… I kinda played around with him." She wore a terrifying smile on her face.

Doneil had been a cunning man. Even with the Empire after him, he'd kept up his killing spree while fleeing his pursuers.

Suddenly, Riho's opponent remembered a rumor: Over the past few years, he'd heard about a swordsman who hunted evildoers. However, he'd dismissed that as nonsense. He thought that any villains who'd died were probably just killed by fellow villains. Yet now, he thought the girl before him might really be a Way of the Flash swordsman. And since she'd referred to her "brother apprentice," a certain man's name came to mind…

"Liam… Is Liam here? Why would Count Banfield be…" The man's words stopped there.

Riho raised an eyebrow irritably. "You think you have the right to say my brother apprentice's name?"

She slid her sword back into its sheath as the man's severed head toppled to the ground. As his body hit the ground too, Riho received a call on her tablet. She projected a small holographic window in front of her, and Fuka's face appeared.

"How long are you gonna take over there?" Fuka asked, annoyed.

Riho tucked her hair behind one ear. "Oh, shut up. I'm done. Are

you?”

“Well, Brother’s bored. He’s having Marie clean up here, so he wants you to come back.”

“Not very patient, is he?”

Riho walked away from the scene, striding toward the small craft that flew toward her to pick her up.

***

A fleet of over a thousand purple ships was currently chasing down a group of pirates. Commanding that fleet was Marie Sera Marian.

Once famed as a member of the Empire’s Three Knights, Marie had been kept in a petrified state for two thousand years. She’d sworn allegiance to Liam after he freed her. Now she stood on the bridge of the fleet’s flagship, the Purple Tail, issuing commands.

“Don’t leave a single ship flying. Lord Liam demands it.”

The pirate fleet contained over two thousand ships, so the enemy numbers were more than twice Marie’s own, but her craft were operated by House Banfield’s military. Furthermore, the fleet was made up of cutting-edge warships the Seventh Weapons Factory had developed. Their equipment, training, and morale were all in a league the pirates could never compete with, so Marie’s fleet tore through their enemies mercilessly.

An operator announced that they’d received a communication from the foe. “Commander, the pirates are still asking us to acknowledge their surrender.”

Everyone on the bridge rolled their eyes as if to say, "Not again."

Marie smiled. "We don't respond to pirates begging for their lives. Lord Liam's tired of this. Are you going to make him listen to the same drivel over and over? So that we don't dampen Lord Liam's mood even further, tell the pirates we won't accept their trite requests."

Behind Marie, Liam lounged in his personal seat. At first, he'd been excited about hunting some pirates, but he'd lost interest when he learned how weak they were.

The operator continued their report, despite looking reluctant to do so. "Well, they claim they're friendly with a certain noble. They're threatening to make trouble by telling that noble that Count Banfield's wreaking havoc in their domain."

"Oh? They're fairly observant."

This fleet wasn't marked with House Banfield's family crest, but the pirates had still managed to identify them. Marie turned around, her eyes asking Liam what he wanted to do.

"Do you think some small-time noble can defy me as I am now?" Liam asked bluntly. "If it's someone in my faction, I can shut them up with a bribe. If it's someone in Calvin's, I'll just destroy them. If it's a fence-sitter, I'll simply go visit them, and they can decide which side they're on. That said…this does sound a bit interesting, so connect me to the pirates."

"Yes, sir." The operator displayed the face of the pirates' representative on the monitor.

Liam addressed the pirate just as brazenly. "Who are you connected to?"

The pirate seemed to think that, since Liam was willing to negotiate with him, there was a chance he could make it out of this situation alive. He tried to feign calm so that he'd appear confident in their negotiations. *"Heh heh heh. I'm afraid I can't disclose that information. But if you're willing to back off, we can just forget this ever happened."*

The pirate probably believed that Liam wouldn't want a conflict with another noble. Though he'd warred with pirate nobles in the past, Liam was now the most prominent figure in the massive faction supporting Cleo's bid for the Imperial throne. Thus, the pirate was trying to use their self-proclaimed noble connection on the rationale that Liam's position would keep the count from acting.

However, the pirate's response caused Liam to lose interest. "Uh-huh. I'll just look into it after I destroy you, then. Cut the call."

The pirate went pale. *"Hey! Are you crazy?! You don't even know who we're connected to! You call yourself a noble?!"*

But Liam's attitude toward the pirate had never changed in the first place. This hadn't been a negotiation at any point; Liam was just killing time. "It doesn't matter whether they're an enemy or an ally. Who can stand against me as I am now? It's Liam Sera Banfield you guys are up against, you know."

The pirate couldn't believe what he was hearing. *"How come someone as big as you is going up against small fry like us anyway?!*

There are plenty of bigger pirate groups to go after!" His group never would've thought that House Banfield would come after them.

As the pirate panicked, Liam smiled. "Scale doesn't matter. I just like squashing pirates like you. When you're on a trip, you want to take detours sometimes, right? This is something like that."

"You're killing us all for a reason like that?!"

"Do *you* think about the feelings of the people you plunder from?" Liam asked the pirate, then said, "Cut the call, already."

The communication line was cut, and Marie went to Liam's side.

"Wonderful as always, Lord Liam. I was touched by your eloquence," she said, her cheeks flushed.

Liam just gave her a dubious look. "Oh yeah?" Then he glanced at Ellen, who stood by his side. "Anyway, there's no one of the right skill level."

Ellen straightened up in response.

Marie glanced at the girl as well, guessing what Liam meant. "'Of the right skill level' for Ellen to face? Shall we just capture one of the pirates anyway? If you just want her to experience killing, I'd say the other person's strength isn't that relevant." She said those chilling words with utter nonchalance.

"No," Liam said simply.

Ellen looked relieved. She then hurried to control her expression, but Liam hadn't missed the look on her face.

Marie shrugged. "You mustn't take comfort in that, Ellen. Killing is part of being a swordsman *or* a knight. You can't class yourself as a

real fighter until you've killed someone. In other words, swordsmen and knights who can't kill will always be half-baked, however strong they are."

Ellen hung her head. "I know. I-I'm ready…as soon as there's someone for me to fight."

"Of course you are," Liam said. "After all, if you can't become a real fighter, you aren't qualified to learn the Way of the Flash."

Ellen grimaced at his harsh words, perhaps imagining herself having to actually kill someone. She was wallowing in her own inadequacy, and Liam was acting unlike his usual self too. He was watching the destruction of the pirates on the screen with a far-off look in his eyes.

Marie was curious as to what was on his mind. "Is there a problem, Lord Liam?"

"No… It's nothing. Ellen, go back to your quarters for the night."

Marie frowned. The way Liam was letting Ellen retire for the evening seemed indulgent. "Lord Liam? You…"

"I know. You want to say I'm too lenient with her, don't you? This is between me and the Way of the Flash, though. I'm not looking for any outside input."

"Understood."

Liam's pompous attitude earlier was nowhere to be seen. As the count brooded, Marie turned her back to him.

Ellen's a sinful child to make Lord Liam suffer like this, isn't she?

Chapter 5:
Rosetta's Security Force

IT'D BEEN ALMOST THREE YEARS since Liam left on his training journey. During that time, the assembly of a large new fleet had been underway in House Banfield's domain.

Rosetta and Eulisia had arrived at a space fortress to observe that new fleet's progress. Behind them trailed Ciel.

Ships purchased from the Third Weapons Factory lined the space fortress's docks. Eulisia went into detail about those craft as the three women floated in zero gravity. Maybe because she was in work mode, Eulisia seemed like an entirely different person from her usual rather pathetic self.

"They aren't cutting-edge vessels," she said, "but these ship models are all currently in service."

At first, they'd planned to create a small but elite force, but their plans had shifted to better accommodate Rosetta's goal for the fleet. She wanted to help people who'd suffered as she had, so they were primarily recruiting knights and soldiers in difficult circumstances. Thus, they'd provided land to wandering people with nowhere to go, and offered those people the security force as one potential place of employment.

"These will fulfill your request, but are they really all right?" Eulisia asked Rosetta. "We didn't really prioritize the appearance of any vessels other than the flagship and its escort ships. Even the

flagship looks plain compared to those you'd find elsewhere." Liam's flagships, for instance, were always flashy.

From a noble perspective, Rosetta's security force *was* awfully nondescript. Rosetta had no regrets, however. In fact, she was proud. "Their appearance now is perfectly fine. I'd like to prioritize the fleet's practicality over its appearance. Its job isn't to look good; it's to help people in need."

Rosetta didn't want her security force to solely protect those close to her, but to help anyone on a planet in need.

"Darling's busy with the power struggle at the center of the Empire," she added. "I want to help out in the places he can't reach."

"Well, I understand your intentions. But at this scale…"

Eulisia admired Rosetta's determination, but the fleet's size made her head hurt. They already had over ten thousand ships, and they planned to add more. That was partly because a great many people were struggling with poverty, but also because House Banfield was always expanding its territory and accepting immigrants. A steady stream of settlers arrived on the planets the house was constantly developing.

"This fleet isn't the size of a security force anymore," she said. "I know Lord Liam approved it, but I can't imagine that House Banfield's army will be very happy about another force of this size."

It was as if Rosetta now had her own personal army alongside House Banfield's regular forces. Lord Liam might technically be at the top of the chain of command, but this was nonetheless a lot of power for Rosetta to wield. If the fleet had simply contained a few hundred

ships to serve as her guards, it wouldn't have been an issue. With Rosetta commanding over ten thousand vessels, though, there could be real trouble if she ever clashed with Liam. Even if things remained fine between them, their successors could always end up in conflict with each another. That was Eulisia's concern.

"I'm going to suggest to Lord Liam that we eventually reduce the fleet's scale, all right?"

Rosetta nodded. "That's fine."

Although Rosetta accepted Eulisia's suggestion immediately, someone *was* unhappy with it. *It'd be best if Lady Rosetta started gaining public support as soon as possible,* Ciel thought.

Of everyone in Liam's circle, Ciel was one of the few who knew the truth about him. She was aware that he'd proclaimed himself a villain, not the kind soul the world generally believed him to be. Ciel was engaged in her own secret struggle to keep a villain like Liam from securing any more power for himself.

"Lady Rosetta, once you've assembled your security force, I don't think training alone will be enough," Ciel advised her.

"Oh? It won't be?"

Rosetta had studied military matters to an extent, but she hadn't attended the military academy, so she wasn't the most educated person on that subject. Eulisia was at her side to fill in in those areas where Rosetta lacked.

Eulisia gave Ciel a suspicious look, but she didn't deny her claim, since it wasn't actually wrong. "Well, one can only do so much

training, after all," she explained. "Real combat will always be different. Ciel's right: If possible, it'd be best for your fleet to get some real combat experience as well."

Experienced knights and soldiers had received the fleet's more important positions, but the force would be made up mostly of those with little experience, which didn't inspire the greatest confidence.

"Why not exterminate some pirates, then?" Ciel suggested. "In your security force's present state, I think it could win against pirates pretty easily, Lady Rosetta."

Dealing with small-scale pirate groups, Rosetta's security force would be extremely overpowered. Thus, hunting pirates would be a ridiculously inefficient use of funds. However, it wasn't a bad idea for simply giving the force real combat experience.

Still, Rosetta wasn't exactly confident about personally mobilizing a force of such a size. "I have to admit, I'm a little nervous about just sending them out myself. I should get Darling's permission first, don't you think?"

"It'd be different if this were a normal guard unit, but the army might not appreciate us mobilizing a force this big," Eulisia agreed. "Even if a few hundred ships would be fine, we should get Lord Liam's approval before we deploy the entire fleet."

Rosetta had realized that the force was simply too large to mobilize on her own authority, and Ciel was surprised by Eulisia's astute observation. *This woman's usually totally pathetic. How come she has to be so sharp at a time like this? Oh—I know!*

Ciel tried a different approach to persuading Rosetta. "But aren't a lot of people suffering *because* Lord Liam isn't here right now? With him busy elsewhere, this is the perfect opportunity to use your security force, Lady Rosetta! Isn't this exactly why you made it in the first place?"

Ciel knew House Banfield couldn't respond to every petition for aid with Liam absent. In the meantime, Claus was in charge, but given his comparatively limited authority, he couldn't move as quickly as Liam. For better or worse, Liam's personal influence within House Banfield was rather significant. If he wasn't present, was it Rosetta's role to solve problems in his stead?

Rosetta couldn't easily deny such a suggestion. "You're right… Darling's working hard at his training right now, so I'd like to do what I can as well. We're receiving so many petitions for help at the moment. I'd like to assist Sir Claus. I don't think we can handle any major tasks, though."

There were bound to be tasks outside the capabilities of a newly established force like this one.

Ciel smiled brilliantly. "Of course! Let's help whoever we can with your fleet's strength, Lady Rosetta!" She wanted Rosetta to gain more allies of her own, if possible.

Of course, Rosetta was unaware of that, and was just happy to be of help to Liam. "Yes, let's!"

As the two pumped themselves up, Eulisia alone looked stoic, watching them.

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Away from the other two, Eulisia called out to the operative who was supposed to be watching over them. “Can you come out for a second?”

She had no way of knowing whether the operative had heard her. There might not even be anyone present. A moment later, though, a masked woman emerged from Eulisia’s shadow. She was part of Kukuri’s organization; he’d probably assigned a woman to the trio out of some kind of discretion.

Holding back the scream that rose in her throat when the woman slid out from her shadow, Eulisia proceeded to consult with her about Ciel. “It’s okay to leave her alone, is it? She’s obviously trying to use Lady Rosetta for something, though I don’t know what. Is it *really* all right to leave her alone?”

“Master Liam ordered us to do no more than observe her,” the masked woman stated.

Eulisia was obviously a lot more concerned about Ciel than he was. “What’s she really doing? I’m getting complaints from the military, you know. Does she understand how nervous she’s making people?”

Certain generals in House Banfield’s army were concerned about the security force’s size. They held the same opinion as Eulisia—that it

should be scaled back at some point—and had been discussing the matter among themselves.

"Master Liam has approved the force, so there is nothing the military can do either," the masked woman said flatly. "Not to mention Lord Claus is handling their complaints. There is no need to worry."

Eulisia was relieved to hear that Liam's head knight was managing any issues that came up. "I'm glad Lord Liam pulled him back from the border. If not for him, I think we'd already be having trouble with the army right now."

House Banfield had gotten rather out of control that time when Liam was summoned elsewhere as a hero. Remembering what'd happened back then, Eulisia was being all the more careful.

"If trouble occurs, we will simply purge those causing it," the woman said coldly. Kukuri's organization wouldn't think twice about eliminating anyone who defied Liam—even family.

Eulisia broke out in a cold sweat, reminded of just how dangerous this group was. "Yet even you are leaving that girl alone."

"That's Master Liam's order."

Their little chat over, the woman slid back into Eulisia's shadow.

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We were on our way to the next planet in our search for Master Yasushi. After my daily training, I washed up and considered the question that was becoming a commonplace conundrum for me, Ellen, and my sister apprentices.

"Well, what do we want to eat today?"

The longer you lived aboard a ship, the more dull every day became. Visiting all kinds of different planets was nice, but nothing changed from day to day aboard the ship itself. We needed some kind of stimulation, and we usually chose our meals as a way to get that. If we said nothing, the crew prepared luxurious dishes for us, but I felt like eating that fancy stuff too often gave me indigestion.

For some reason, I'd started to get nostalgic for the food I'd eaten back when I was struggling in my previous life, so I had the cooks prepare simple meals for us a few times. If it was only me deciding on the menu, though, it ended up a bit repetitive, so I'd begun asking Ellen and my sister apprentices for their suggestions too.

Amagi listed the items that would be on the menu if she received no specific instructions. "The kitchen staff will prepare fish to be served today if no other requests are made. There will be three courses: sashimi, grilled fish, and fish stew. Those will be followed by the *ochazuke* you devised, Master. Dessert will be ice cream."

I'd suggested tea poured over rice as a simple meal the crew could make, but the master chefs from my domain had taken my lazy instructions and created a super-fancy, delicious, high-class dish that didn't resemble simple *ochazuke* at all.

This wasn't what I meant! It's supposed to be something you just threw together! I'd thought when I first ate it, but it had been tasty, so I hadn't complained.

Riho and Fuka exchanged a glance.

Fuka apparently balked at multiple-course meals: "I hate only getting a bit at a time. I'd rather just have something over a bowl of rice."

"I don't mind," Riho said. "But having the same thing every day does get a little boring."

It seemed my sister apprentices were also tiring of fancy food.

"What about something you haven't had in a while?" I suggested. "Like something you ate as kids?"

Fuka thought back to her childhood. "I guess we had a lot of stew after Master took us in."

If I requested stew from the chefs, I was sure they'd come up with something elaborate again.

"Anything else?" I asked Riho and Fuka. "It could be cheap. What'd you eat before you met Master?"

I should've chosen my words better, apparently. Riho crossed her arms. "Yeah… We were dumpster-diving before we met Master. Can't say we've got many good memories from back then."

Fuka nodded repeatedly. "Right, right! If we could find any food that wasn't rotten, it was a feast!"

I'd stepped on a landmine. I could normally have wielded my authority in a conversation like this and just said not to talk about depressing crap like that in my presence, but I couldn't speak that way to my precious sister apprentices. I'd decided to keep my evil-lord ambitions separate from my Way of the Flash pursuits, so I couldn't be cruel to these two. Anyway, I'd dug through the trash a few times

myself in my previous life, and I had no desire to repeat that experience.

"*After* Master took you in, then."

Riho thought hard. "It's hard to say what was good. We were just thrilled to eat at all."

Fuka mulled it over as well, putting her hands behind her head. "Yeah. *Everything* seemed good. Even the burnt fish Master made."

Since they couldn't decide, I looked to Ellen instead. "How about you? Any ideas?"

"Er…well, um…no."

From the way her eyes wandered, I was sure she was lying. "Don't fib. You've got something you like, don't you? Just say it. If you don't, I'll pick all the stuff you *don't* like."

I was determined to make up for my mistake with the other two, and my threat proved effective. It seemed that Ellen decided to be honest. "Eep! Umm, well, er…" I figured she must've had trouble naming the food she liked with us watching. Finally, she hung her head to avoid our eyes and said quietly, "I want to eat my mom's cooking."

Another landmine. Ellen was a child who looked about ten years old, so it was no wonder she missed her mother out on this training journey. I was making nothing but mistakes today.

"You got anything else?" I asked the other two, hoping for a lifeline, but they didn't catch on.

"Anything edible's good with me."

"As long as I can take a picture or video of it, I don't care what it is."

"Anything" was the most unhelpful answer possible.

I was still brainstorming when Fuka remembered something. "Oh—I'd like bread."

"Bread? As in Western food?" I leaned forward, hopeful that we were finally getting somewhere.

Fuka described a happy memory. "When we first met Master, he gave us bread. It was cheap, but we'd never tasted it before." She wore a nostalgic look as she recalled its flavor.

Riho had a similar expression; she blushed with a hand on her cheek. "That bread was really good, wasn't it? Someone else was after the same garbage as us, and he was trying to kill us, so we turned the tables and killed him first. Then Master showed up. He was nice to us and gave us bread."

Fuka frowned and cocked her head. "Wait. Is that how it went? I thought he saved us when we were in trouble."

"Whatever; who cares?"

Weren't their memories a little *too* vague? Well, they'd met Master when they were really young, so maybe it was only natural they'd have trouble remembering.

Anyway, that had decided today's dinner. "Okay, I'll have the chefs bake bread. What kind of bread?"

Fuka and Riho both answered enthusiastically.

"Sweet bread!"

"I want bread with jam in it!"

Thus, we'd eat a meal of sweet bread that evening.

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That same day, the head chef of the ship Liam was traveling aboard awaited his orders.

Even among the chefs who worked for noble families, preparing Liam's meals was considered quite an honor. Only someone with superior abilities would be selected for that role, and prestige and fame were just as important if a candidate wanted even to be considered.

The chef, a highly skilled individual with plenty of pride, waited for his instructions from Liam.

"Head Chef! I've got Lord Liam's order!"

The head chef gave his subordinate a glare. "Simmer down! Whatever the master wants, I'll prepare it perfectly."

"U-um…he wants you to make bread."

The head chef had been irritated with the younger man's nervous demeanor, but when he heard what Liam had ordered, confusion replaced his annoyance. "Something that goes well with bread…? That's a bit vague, but it's not a problem. I can do plenty with that. In fact, it's a great opportunity to show off my skill." At that point, the head chef was already raring to go.

However, his subordinate hadn't finished his report yet. "No, he wants bread. *Just* bread."

"Hmm…? What are you saying?" The head chef had no idea what to make of that statement.

"Er, well…he said sweet bread, specifically."

The rest of the kitchen's chefs were just as wooden as the head chef. These men was at the very top of the culinary field in House Banfield's domain, and they'd just been told to make sweet bread.

"H-he gave me this as a reference." The younger cook showed the head chef a picture of the kind of sweet bread you could buy cheaply anywhere.

The head chef was utterly confused. "What is this? Is he testing me? Does Lord Liam want to see how I can perfect this idea? That's it, right?!" He was becoming desperate now.

The younger man shook his head. "His orders were to replicate the original item's cheap essence as much as possible."

The head chef wobbled as if about to collapse, and the other chefs rushed to support him. Finally, he pulled himself together and gave the others their orders. "Br-bring me ingredients. If that's the master's order, I'll reproduce the food he requested perfectly. E-even if it's just cheap sweet bread."

And so Liam's team of crack chefs put their absolute all into making cheap sweet bread.

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When our sweet bread arrived, Riho and Fuka bit into it with gusto.

"Ahh! Yeah, this is it!"

"It's not as good as I remember it being, but it was probably something like this."

Seeing the two enjoying it so much, Ellen bit into hers as well. She looked my way. "Master, this sweet bread is tasty!"

"Yeah? Eat as much as you want, then."

"Yay!"

I felt bad about what I'd said to the three of them earlier, and I kind of wondered whether this cheap sweet bread was really enough to make up for it. I mean, it was good, but…it just felt like something was off about this.



Chapter 6:
The Evil Magistrate

A NOBLE FROM CLEO'S FACTION ruled the planet we were visiting. In that viscount's lavish mansion, we stood before him and his family, all of whom pressed their foreheads to the floor in front of us.

"What you've been doing is rather underhanded, isn't it?" I looked down at the viscount threateningly.

He trembled. "M-my sincere apologies!"

"I hope you don't think an apology is getting you out of this."

"Eep!"

Just like several others had been, this viscount was harboring a so-called "swordsman of the Way of the Flash" as his personal instructor. This time, the fake proclaimed himself "the Sword God Yasushi's best pupil," and called his school the "True Way of the Flash." He was passing off a simple trick with a couple props, of all things, as the Flash. You could hardly even call that trick sleight of hand, but when we went so far as to meet with the imposter ourselves, he'd had the gall to call us "fake Way of the Flash practitioners" and try to kick us out.

As a result, Riho and Fuka had snapped. Even I had felt as if he'd dirtied the Way of the Flash's special move.

"Reducing our style's secret technique to some kind of stunt for a street performance… You were picking a fight with us, right?"

"Count Banfield, I beg you to have mercy on us! We couldn't see through the man's tricks!"

"You couldn't tell the difference between a supreme sword technique and a street performer's act? Are you blind?"

To be honest, I kind of respected this viscount. The wealth disparity on his planet was harsh; the nobles lived lavish lives, while the common people suffered. I thought of the viscount as an evil-lord compatriot, so as a favor to a friend, I'd just intended to warn him that the guy practicing the "True Way of the Flash" on his planet was a fraud. Yet…

"Worse, your knights and soldiers pointed their blades at me!" I continued. "Do you understand that? You threatened me—the head of the faction you belong to!"

"Please forgive me! Forgive me, Count Banfield! I never thought a man of your standing would ever visit my humble domain!"

Well, he had a point there. I had crashed his planet without submitting a formal request to visit. Still, I didn't care about that. *I* was the one with the power, and *he* needed to suck up.

At any rate, killing a single viscount wouldn't impact Cleo's faction at all. That faction didn't depend on the viscount's house in any way, and it was blatantly obvious that the viscount had only joined it to enjoy the benefits of belonging to a large political faction.

I didn't blame him for that, and if he'd provide whatever small support he could, I would've preferred to join hands with him. I had a lot of sympathy for the guy as a fellow evil lord.

As soon as he saw me, though, the viscount had cried, "There's no way Count Banfield's here! He's a fake!" He'd gotten the help of the man who called himself Master Yasushi's student, then tried to kill me. I couldn't forgive him for that.

In the mansion's grand hall, Riho and Fuka kicked around the man who'd called himself Master Yasushi's student.

"Master Yasushi's best student?! I've never seen you before in my life!" Riho kicked the man in the gut.

He choked out an apology. "F-forgive me…"

Fuka stomped on his head, looking down at him with bloodshot eyes. "A fake calling *us* fakes? You've disgraced not only us and our brother apprentice but our master as well! You really thought you'd get away with that, didn't you, swindler?!"

Her foot pressed down, and a grinding sound came from the man's head.

My sister apprentices were absolutely furious with this man for disgracing the names of the Way of the Flash and our master. Every time we heard a new rumor about the Way of the Flash, and they innocently wondered whether we'd finally get to meet up with Master this time, I felt sorry for the pair.

"This morning, those two were so excited, thinking they might be able to see Master Yasushi. And you've…" I trailed off. "Don't think you'll get away with this."

Head still bowed, the viscount responded, "I hardly think it's fair to blame their misguided expectations on me…"

"Do you want me to cut you?"

"O-of course not, my lord!"

The viscount was exactly right, though. We were blaming him for our own disappointment. However, I didn't sense any guilt from him or his family. He could make all the reasonable arguments he wanted, and I'd still feel like punishing him, just because he was one of the idiots sullying the name of the Way of the Flash.

"You're out of the faction," I spat at the viscount.

"Th-that's a bit harsh, isn't it?" Raising his head, he pleaded, "Please…please, have mercy!"

"If you want help, you can go to Calvin for it. It's what you get for pointing your weapons at us."

"Had I known you were the real Count Banfield, I'd never have done so, I swear! Please—another chance!"

"You're not getting back on my good side. If you don't like it, we can wage war over this anytime."

I'd looked into the viscount's circumstances—hence my laid-back attitude. In terms of his realm's economy, military, and similar factors, this guy was a total nobody in the Empire. Normally, no faction would even have looked at him, but he'd managed to get into Cleo's camp back when we were looking to increase our numbers and hadn't been considering anything beyond that.

In a way, he'd been lucky, but his luck had run out when he'd pointed weapons at me. If I kicked him out of the faction, no one would care, and if we went to war over it, I'd crush him. I could

probably beat him using Marie's escort fleet alone. It was poised above the planet right then, ready to destroy the viscount should I give the order.

The viscount had curled up on the floor, sobbing. In the face of my overwhelming might, he couldn't do anything to resist. Although I'd have crushed him thoroughly if I had time, I decided to wrap things up so that we could move on. It was truly disappointing.

"Next time you cross me, I'm destroying your entire life. Don't forget that."

The rest of the viscount's family nodded, likewise terrified. I really did enjoy using my overpowering strength to tyrannize people.

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On the Imperial Capital Planet, the prime minister listened to a report from his spy in House Banfield's territory—Liam's head maid, Serena.

What the prime minister heard utterly baffled him. "The count's *still* on his trip?"

After finishing his noble training, Liam had immediately set out on a journey to advance his sword skills. Serena had reported that to the prime minister when the excursion started, but since Liam showed no sign of returning to his domain, the prime minister was unsure what to do.

Serena continued her report. *"His most recent stop was the domain of a noble in his faction. It seems that he observed the state*

of that noble's domain, determined him unworthy of the faction, and therefore removed him from it."

"As soon as he finishes his noble training, he's off practicing swordplay and bettering the world? Is he serious?"

Cleo's faction currently had the upper hand over Calvin's in the succession conflict, so it was true that they now had a little breathing room, but Liam had almost disappeared from center stage within the Empire. Since no one was there to put pressure on them, Calvin's faction was beginning to recover.

Serena didn't seem to think that Liam's absence was entirely bad, however. *"He's likely performing these inspections to strengthen the faction's connections. It's a fact that, since his journey started, many nobles in the faction have shaped up."*

"Well, yes. Anyone would be nervous if they thought the count might secretly show up in their domain one day. He can't just wander around forever, though. How's House Banfield's home planet faring?"

From the prime minister's perspective, Liam was a sensible, talented noble. The prime minister didn't care whether it was on his own home planet, or on the Capital Planet, but he wanted Liam to settle somewhere and buckle down. That wasn't just out of goodwill, of course. The prime minister naturally had the Empire's best interests in mind. He thought highly of Liam because the count was such a useful pawn to the Empire.

"He left Sir Claus in charge of his domain and is focused on developing his expanded territory."

The prime minister frowned. "I'd heard that Claus was pulled back from the border with the Autocracy. With Christiana taking his place, I'm sure things will be fine. To be honest, though, I'd have preferred to leave the border in Claus's hands."

"You think very highly of him, don't you, sir?"

"Well, he's the count's right-hand man. If a man like him was out there, and no one even knew his name, space truly is vast. I almost wish he served the Empire directly so that I could post him somewhere important myself."

The prime minister thought so highly of Claus that he wanted to poach him from House Banfield.

"The count has so many talented individuals serving him, it makes me jealous," he continued. "One might even say *too* many… Serena, I don't suppose Sir Claus would come work for me?"

It was all well and good for House Banfield to have more and more talented knights in their employ, but if they hired too many outstanding individuals, that would eventually prove a problem for the Empire. The prime minister was evidently already thinking about nipping the issue in the bud.

"He's an extremely loyal individual," replied Serena. *"I feel that poaching him would be difficult."*

Highly loyal knights were a problem that way. Of course, you had to be wary of the pragmatic type betraying you, although they'd stick with you so long as you fulfilled their needs. Loyal knights, however, wouldn't easily change employers.

"Well then, if I want to poach him, I'll just have to make a concerted effort."

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"It's not right… Something's not right here…"

Claus—House Banfield's head knight—sat in his office, clutching his head. In keeping with his current position, he'd been given a lavish office complete with servants assigned specifically to him. He'd dismissed the servants for the moment, but several knights stood outside his door as his guards.

Everywhere Claus went, he was received like a VIP, and it was starting to get to him. Before he came to serve House Banfield, he'd always been treated poorly. Now that he was so highly valued, he didn't know what to do with himself.

His current worry, however, had nothing to do with his treatment. Rather, he was concerned about the fact that an offer to work directly for the Empire had come his way. It was a fairly important post, at that. In terms of everyday Japan, it was like he'd obtained an important position in a company's branch office, only to be offered an executive position at its headquarters.

Apparently, though, the Empire didn't want to simply take important personnel from House Banfield. This was an offer, not a demand; they would respect Claus's decision on the matter. They'd even offered to compensate House Banfield should it lose him.

Everyone's overblown opinion of Claus terrified him.

"Not long ago, I wasn't even an officer. Now they want me to serve the Empire directly? In such an important position too…? No way. There's no way. I can't take on a post like that."

His current position was already too much for him; there was no chance he could serve in an even weightier role.

"How come everyone's opinion of me is so inflated anyway? I guess I'll just politely decline…"

Claus had no idea how he'd gotten where he was. As he decided to consider the Empire's offer a simple mistake, someone barged into his office without knocking. Only one person would enter without permission, so Claus sighed and thought, *Again?*

"Chengsi, how many times have I told you to get permission before entering?"

Ignoring his admonishment, the disgruntled Chengsi told him why she was there. "I'm going crazy sitting around. Give me someone to fight."

Without changing his expression, Claus mulled over that request from House Banfield's most dangerous individual. Even with Chengsi in front of him, he'd no doubt have appeared completely calm and collected to an observer.

Claus knew why Chengsi was bored. Liam, who'd defeated her in combat, and his fellow wielders of the Way of the Flash—all the individuals powerful enough to kill Chengsi—were currently absent from House Banfield's domain. Without them around, this place was of no interest to her.

"Again? Just recently you said that same thing, then forced yourself into a pirate hunt."

Chengsi scowled at the reminder. "Those cowards fled as soon as they saw House Banfield's crest. We chased them and hunted them all down, but that didn't relieve any of my stress."

She truly appeared to be reaching her limit, her eyes bloodshot and her breathing heavy. Claus was terrified that if he left her like this, she'd go on a murderous rampage one day soon.

I can't just tell her to calm down. If I keep her here, she's bound to start a fight within our own forces. I don't want her causing trouble here, so should I send her elsewhere?

At that point, he had an idea. "People have been petitioning Lord Liam for help with pirates."

"Pirates again?" Chengsi looked blatantly unenthusiastic about the prospect of chasing more pirates around.

"Just listen. You'll hunt them, not as forces from House Banfield, but as mercenaries."

"Why?"

"Because the petitions are from nobles in Calvin's faction, so House Banfield can't act on them publicly. Instead, you can gather some people itching for a fight and go as 'mercenaries' to take care of the matter."

The nobles who'd requested aid must've wanted outside help because they weren't confident that their own faction could assist them right then. Claus wanted to accept their requests, if that would

help break up the opposition, but he had to consider the possibility that the petitions were actually tricks. But it seemed like sending Chengsi would be the perfect move if that was the case.

"I don't care about politics," Chengsi said, "but if I can wreak havoc, I'm down."

"Are you sure? A petition might turn out to be trap."

"Then I'll just destroy the trap. Acting as a mercenary, I could make as many messes as I want for a little while, couldn't I? And you'd have my back, won't you, Claus?"

"Of course."

Chengsi wasn't really one for running a tight ship. Left to her own devices, she'd likely destroy even her own mercenary unit.

She turned around and waved. "I'll take it. Let me go round up some people champing at the bit to fight."

Claus rubbed his stomach. One problem had been solved, but he felt as though he'd only have caused himself more trouble in the end. "Was that a good idea? I didn't just create an even bigger problem, did I?"

He'd given some restless knights an opportunity to shed blood, but he couldn't help feeling anxious about the whole thing.

***

Yasushi was in trouble.

He knelt on the floor of his prefab-hut dojo, surrounded by his fierce-faced pupils. After that first one arrived, Yasushi had for some reason gained a steady stream of similarly scary-looking men who

wanted to join his sword school. Though he was nominally their master, all these men were—of course—stronger than Yasushi, and being surrounded by them terrified him. Still, he never forgot to at least feign composure.

Ringed by his fearsome pupils, Yasushi was entertaining a troublesome visitor to the dojo.

"I never thought you'd visit a humble place like this, Lord Magistrate." He addressed the man with a smile, but inside, he was panicking. *Why did this evil bigwig come to my dojo?! Get out of here!*

Yasushi's visitor was the planet's magistrate, a tall young man with a strong physique who appeared to be in his mid-twenties. He stood before Yasushi brazenly, with a noble's typical pompousness. "I had the chance to see a demonstration of your pupils' sword skills. I had no idea there were real swordsmen of the Way of the Flash here in my domain. I figured I'd execute you if you were fakes."

Yasushi folded his arms, thinking about what to do next. "I'm flattered that you think so highly of our school." *What do I do? What do I do?! How'd these guys all learn the Way of the Flash so fast anyway? Am I surrounded by geniuses?! Even Liam took a few decades to figure it out, but these guys had it down in a few years. Are they all monsters?!*

The Original Way of the Flash dojo had opened only three years earlier, yet nearly all Yasushi's students could already perform the Flash. That at least proved that his teaching abilities were the real deal. The problem was the character of his followers. Yasushi's frightful pupils had ingratiated themselves to the powerful magistrate;

his first student, Gideon, had been thrilled to be hired by the man directly.

Gideon, a muscular man with blond hair tied behind his head, said, "The lord magistrate has invited you to serve as his personal sword instructor. You'll accept, of course—right, Yasujiro?"

"Yasujiro" was Yasushi's alias. If he went by his real name, there was a good chance Liam would track him down, so he'd come up with a pseudonym. For some reason, though, his students all called him by that name without a title. Yasushi wanted to complain about that, but his students were all so intimidating that he was too frightened to do so.

"Oh? I'm honored you would choose one such as myself for so prestigious a position," he told the magistrate. *Ahhh… I want to get out of here. I want to abandon it all and run. But if I become this guy's sword instructor, I'll never get away! Damn it! What am I supposed to do?!*

The magistrate, whose name was Chester, was extremely interested in the Original Way of the Flash. "You are the real thing, aren't you? After watching your students, I'm sure of it."

By now Yasushi had thirty students, almost all fearsome fighters who could already use the Flash. As they were now, even a team of knights might be unable to beat them. If Yasushi had wanted to, he could probably have taken his three best students and defeated a band of knights employed by a noble. The problem was, all the dojo's students were thugs. Yasushi couldn't even imagine the villainy they might get up to if they joined an evil magistrate like Chester.

"There's no need for you yourself to possess such physical prowess, Lord Magistrate."

As Yasushi tried to talk his way out of his position, Chester said a single name. "Liam."

"Urgh!" Yasushi's eyes widened.

Ignoring him, Chester continued, "Liam Sera Banfield learned the Way of the Flash and restored his ruined domain, thus rising to his current status. He used his physical prowess to rule over his planet and ascend to a powerful position."

"That he did…" *Even on a planet like this, his name keeps coming up! Liam, how much will you have to torment me before you're satisfied?!*

Evidently Chester wished to imitate Liam. "I belong to the family of the count who owns this territory, but I have dozens of brothers in more important positions, so I'm stuck serving as this destitute planet's magistrate."

The young Chester, brimming with ambition, wanted to master the Way of the Flash as Liam had to make a name for himself. Liam's rise to glory was becoming the envy of the Empire's young nobles; one reason there were so many fraudulent practitioners of the Way of the Flash was because so many people admired Liam.

Complaining to Liam inwardly, Yasushi addressed Chester. "So you wish me to teach you My Way of the Flash abilities?"

"That's right. I won't let things end for me on this planet. I deserve to rule over a much bigger, more bountiful world—and I need

the Way of the Flash to make that happen."

Yasushi nodded along as he listened, but partway through, he realized that there was something strange about what the man was saying. *Uh, this planet's only poor because you sucked all the life out of it. If you want it developed, it's your job to develop it. That brat Liam at least understood that.*

Chester himself was the obstacle that kept this planet from developing. Frankly, Yasushi didn't want anything to do with him, but he wasn't brave enough to stand up to the planet's ruler.

Giving up, he bowed his head. "Then allow me to offer you what little help I may."

"I appreciate it. Starting today, you're my personal sword instructor. I'll take your apprentices on as my personal knights as well."

Yasushi's students cheered.

"Did you hear that? We're knights!"

"We'll all gain power together, Lord Chester!"

"With the Way of the Flash on our side, we've got nothing to be afraid of!"

Watching his students crowd around Chester in excitement, Yasushi couldn't help thinking about just why this had happened. *All this is Liam's fault. Curse you, Liam Sera Banfield!*

While Yasushi was busy cursing Liam, Chester held out a hand to him. "I'll be counting on you, Yasujiro."

Just as Yasushi reached out to take the magistrate's hand, his son Yasuyuki appeared out of nowhere, looking as if he couldn't contain himself. "You're all mean! Dad's name isn't Yasujiro! Don't call him that!"

Yasuyuki, who was still just a child, must've thought that they were all addressing Yasushi by the wrong name deliberately.

Panicked, Yasushi held out his hand to stop his son. "Wait, Yasuyuki!" *Don't! I'm hiding my real name! If it gets out, it'll be bad!*

Ignorant of his father's panic, Yasuyuki boldly told the fearsome men, "Dad's name is Yasushi! Don't get it wrong!"

As Yasuyuki's voice finished echoing through the dojo, the look in Chester's and the students' eyes changed.

"Yasushi…Yasushi the *Sword God*?!" one student muttered.

Chester grabbed Yasushi's shoulder as if he wouldn't let the man escape. "So you're Yasushi! Man, am I lucky or what?"

Chester grinned deviously, and Yasushi couldn't stop the sweat from pouring down his back. *Somebody save meeeee!*

Chapter 7:
Followers of the Way of the Flash

OUR JOURNEY TO FIND MASTER Yasushi and crush the Way of the Flash's pretenders continued. By now, I'd become pretty used to life aboard the ship. By ship time, my day began in the early morning, when Amagi would visit my room.

"It is morning, Master."

I sat up in bed and stretched. "Morning already, eh?"

As I got up and changed, assisted by a few mass-produced maid robots, Amagi adjusted the chamber's lights with a couple flashes of her red eyes. All of a sudden, it felt like early morning in the room instead of night. Sunlight poured in between the curtains, and sounds like birdsong even played in the space.

When I'd finished changing, Amagi said, "You were awake before we arrived, Master. Do you really require our assistance to get up each morning?"

True, I had been awake before the maids entered. I didn't want them to stop coming in, though. "Don't be so cold. My morning only begins when you wake me up. Why do away with something that makes me happy?"

To AIs like Amagi and the other maids, awakening me seemed like an unnecessary action, but humans enjoyed the unnecessary. As an evil lord, I especially enjoyed being wasteful.

"If that is your preference, then so be it. However, I would ask that you remember that you are currently living aboard a ship."

"It's a noble's right to enjoy the same life aboard a ship that they can in a mansion. That's why I loaded this special living area up with luxury facilities."

I'd live a lavish life no matter where I was. That was an evil-lord fundamental.

Amagi seemed simultaneously exasperated with me and somehow happy too. "As you wish, Master. Now, could you check your schedule for today? First, you have early morning training with the girls, then breakfast."

"As soon as I'm up, I can get right to training. It's not like that at my mansion."

"After that, some digital documents from House Banfield's domain require your signature. I ask that you please look these over today."

"There might be fewer of those than at home, but only annoying stuff gets escalated all the way to me. Well, I got it. I'll finish those by noon."

"Thank you. The fleet will also change out some ships today. We will be resupplying for some time, so we will have to remain in this area briefly."

"It's already that time, eh?"

However disciplined an army was, its performance would naturally fall off with time. To maintain a consistent quality level,

soldiers had to be given leave and retrained with some regularity. Even the elites in Marie's small force had to be swapped out on occasion to maintain peak performance.

Of course, performance wasn't the only reason to switch out ships. Displaying the fleet's current status, Amagi explained the situation to me. "We will add another three hundred ships to the fleet this time."

"It's getting pretty big now."

Marie might be a total problem child most of the time, but she really was great at commanding a fleet. She probably did a better job than some generals would have. She had experience commanding fleets of millions, so having her simply guard *me* was a bit of a waste. She apparently felt that she had too much free time as well, so she'd suggested bringing in personnel for training when we switched out soldiers, and I'd given her the okay.

"At this rate, I believe we will soon be able to support three thousand ships," Amagi predicted. "I would like to say that is too large a force to serve as a simple escort, but…" She gave me an accusatory look. "If you plan to incite more trouble, perhaps even that will not be adequate."

I'd been going around rooting out fake practitioners of the Way of the Flash, but those frauds were often connected to local rulers or magistrates. When we started things with the phonies, the trouble often grew, depending on who they were attached to.

"I'll tell Marie to add some more forces." I looked away from Amagi.

She moved on to my future plans. “Rather than expanding your escort force, I would prefer that you return home soon. Brian is beside himself with grief.”

It wasn’t just Brian. Multiple retainers back home, such as Claus, had been urging me to return home. But this was one thing I wasn’t going to back down on. “No… I want to get stronger.”

Perhaps sensing that I wouldn’t be swayed, Amagi dropped the subject. “I will follow your orders, whatever they may be. However, I ask that you not forget to contact Lady Rosetta.”

One person hadn’t been pressuring me to come home: Rosetta. For whatever reason, she alone told me things like, “I’m looking forward to the day you achieve your goal.” It really threw me off.

“U-uh-huh.”

When I got awkward about the subject of Rosetta, Amagi narrowed her eyes. “Why do you lose all your confidence when the topic turns to Lady Rosetta?”

“I can’t deal with her…”

“You yourself invited her to become part of House Banfield, Master.”

“I know. I know that, but…” What I’d wanted then was a girl with a steel heart who would never submit to me.

While Amagi and I had this discussion in my bedroom, I was visited by Ellen, who had changed into athletic clothing. “Master, I’m here to get you!”

"Yeah, I'm coming," I replied. Looking at her, I put my hand to my chin thoughtfully.

Ellen appeared uncomfortable under my scrutiny. "Wh-what is it, Master?"

"Nothing… Just wondering whether you'd grown a little. Come on, let's go to the dojo."

"Oh—yes!"

I set off, and Ellen followed slightly behind me.

***

When they finished that day's training, Ellen wiped the sweat from her body. The Way of the Flash's training was harsh, and she always had new injuries.

"Ow…"

Ellen was forever covered in scrapes, cuts, and bruises. She'd undergone this training since she was very young, so she was used to it; still, one thing concerned her somewhat.

I've trained so much, but I still can't use the Flash. Master tells me I have talent, but do I really…?

She was happy that Liam took time out of his day to train her, but she felt bad about it too. It frustrated her that she still couldn't produce results.

She was suddenly distracted from her thoughts by a scream from Riho. "That stiiiiings!"

Turning around, Ellen saw Riho with her back turned to Liam. Her top was pulled down so Liam could treat a bruise with a liberal

application of expensive ointment.

"It's your fault for leaving yourself open. If you get hit in the back, you've only got yourself to blame."

When Liam pointed out her mistake, Riho turned her head to look behind her, covering her chest. With tears in her eyes, she protested, "It was because that idiot Fuka let you manipulate her!"

Fuka was wiping away her sweat when she heard Riho's comment. Her top was down, baring her chest, but she was too annoyed over Riho disparaging her to care about that as she pointed back at her sister apprentice. Fuka covered what she could, but her huge breasts threatened to spill out from behind the one arm that hid them.

"Getting hit in the back was your own fault!" she exclaimed. "You can't make everything my fault! You're all talk, Riho!"

When Fuka said that, Riho reached for her sword. "What was that? You want me to cut you down right now?"

Fuka picked up her own swords as well. "Let's do it. I'll take you on."

The two were ready to kill each other, and their chests were now fully exposed.

Liam sighed, his eyes closed. "Will you cover yourselves up? That's indecent. We're done with training today. You can pick this up again tomorrow."

Riho dropped her sword and sat down.

Fuka spun to face away from Liam, looking a little sheepish. To distract from her own embarrassment, she began teasing him. "Why do you have your eyes closed anyway? Are you interested in our bodies or something?"

Ellen looked down at her own chest. She touched it with both hands. Her own mounds were small; comparing Fuka's magnificent chest to hers, she was a bit depressed.

My chest is flat…

As calm as ever, Liam answered Fuka with exasperation. "I don't see you that way; I'm just being polite. A little common courtesy never hurt anyone, you know," he said, with some emphasis.

Riho and Fuka just cocked their heads.

"What's that mean?"

"I don't know. I kind of feel like Master might've mentioned it a few times, though."

Disgusted at the pair's lack of shame, Liam went on treating Riho's bruise. "Whatever. Just let me finish this."

"Yes, siiir."

Part of the Way of the Flash training was to go about your daily life with your eyes closed. Ellen hadn't done that yet, but Liam had mastered it, so he could treat Riho's injury without opening his eyes. Riho's face contorted as Liam slathered cold, stinging ointment on her back, but Ellen thought she looked a little happy too.

Liam must have noticed that as well. "What's up, Riho?"

Riho smiled, her back still to Liam. "I'm just remembering when Master did this for us. He only used cheap treatments, though. Still, we spent time this way after training on occasion."

Riho looked happy when she reminisced about her training, but there was sorrow in her smile too.

"We'll…meet Master again, right?" Fuka asked.

Space was vast. When two people were on different paths, the chances of them reuniting if one didn't know where they could expect to find the other were astronomically low. Soon, Fuka was giving Liam the same despondent look as Riho.

Ellen could guess exactly how they felt. *They want to see their master, but they know they might never track him down again.*

They'd traveled so long in search of him, but still hadn't been able to find him. It was beginning to make the pair lose hope.

Liam finished treating Riho's injury and pulled her clothing back over her shoulders, then turned to Fuka. "You're next, Fuka. You hurt your arm, right?"

"Huh? Y-yeah."

Fuka sulked a bit that Liam hadn't answered her, but she nonetheless shuffled over to him and held out her injured arm. Liam took what he'd need from the first-aid kit, eyes still closed, and set about treating her arm.

Riho still had a despondent look on her face. She'd interpreted Liam not answering the question as his answer in itself. The two girls

were usually rough and violent, but their desire to see their master was real.

Bandaging Fuka's arm, Liam said, "I ran into Master just once."

Fuka and Riho looked up at him.

Eyes still closed, he went on, "I met him coincidentally while I was learning in another noble's territory. I remember it well, because when I met Master, he was unarmed."

For a man now called the Sword God, it seemed odd that he'd been walking around without his weapon.

"Well, that's not important," Liam said, getting back on track. "Considering the timing, that must've been before he started training you two. I just bring it up to point out that I've met him before without even trying to."

Riho and Fuka cocked their heads, confused.

Liam smiled wryly. "In this vast universe, I ran into Master by chance. That means your chances of meeting him aren't zero either."

Fuka's eyes widened, and she stood up. "Really?! We could meet him again too?!"

Liam nodded, smiling. "Of course you could. On top of that, a god of good fortune watches over me. I'll pray to him that you can reunite with Master."

When he said that, the three girls recalled something—that Liam always brought a gold statue with him onto any ship he boarded. He called that object the "Guide."

Fuka wasn't so sure about this "god of good fortune," however. "You mean that gold statue you're always praying to? Does that thing really work?"

Normally, a comment like that would've enraged Liam. But since it came from his sister apprentice, he let it slide. "Of course it does. Okay, I'm done dressing your injuries. Put your clothes back on."

"Yeah, yeah." Fuka had a smile on her face as she slipped her arms back through her sleeves, as if all her doubts had been washed away.

Ellen looked down at her own body. She was covered in cuts and bruises herself, but she hadn't said anything, since she didn't want to take advantage of Liam's kindness. She also felt reluctant to get between the members of this trio, who all shared the same master.

Opening his eyes, Liam beckoned her over. "You're last, Ellen. Come here."

"Huh?! O-oh, okay!" Ellen hurried over to Liam.

He checked over her injuries. "Lately, you're getting wounded more… That shows that you aren't putting your all into your training."

"I-I'm sorry." Ellen hung her head.

For some reason, Liam looked a bit upset himself. "No… That's my failure as your teacher. I'll reconsider your current training regimen tomorrow."

"Master?"

Ellen looked into Liam's eyes. He seemed to be mulling something over.

***

After getting her injuries treated, Ellen sat on the bed in her personal quarters. For some reason, Chino was also in the room, resting on Ellen's lap.

"Am I not good enough to be Master's student after all?"

Traveling with Riho and Fuka, Ellen saw how much fun Liam seemed to have with them, which just left her feeling more and more inadequate.

"I want to stay with Master. I'm prepared to undergo any training, however tough, but I don't understand how to be ready to kill someone."

She was ready for all the harsh training in the world, but she still felt a strong aversion to killing. Ellen knew that made her half-baked as a swordsman, which pained her.

She stroked Chino's hair while the other girl dozed on her lap. Chino sighed happily at having her head stroked, but offered no solutions to Ellen's problem. Still, it helped somewhat just to have someone to talk to.

"You haven't got any answers, huh? Well, thanks anyway."

Ellen cried, and her tears fell on Chino's cheek. Chino woke up and licked them away. At first Ellen was embarrassed and tried to pull back, but she gave in when she realized that Chino was trying to comfort her. She let it all out, weeping.

"I still want to be Master's student…"

***

"Haaah…"

Having finished my daily training, I was spending some time relaxing before I turned in for the night. To keep me company, Amagi would remain in my bedroom until I fell asleep.

"You have sighed more often lately, Master. Is something troubling you?"

I figured I couldn't hide it from Amagi. Knowing that she paid so much attention to me made me happy, but it also left me feeling a little conflicted. "I'm always so pathetic in front of you, Amagi."

"You have matured into a fine man, Master."

"Have I? I feel like I'll never make it to where Master Yasushi is."

As I looked down at my clenched fist, Amagi told me graciously, "Swordsmanship is not everything. You have achieved much in many different fields, Master. I would not be surprised if human society remembered you as a hero."

I was always happy to get Amagi's praise, but it wasn't a hero that I was trying to be. "A villain like me being remembered as a hero would be pretty funny."

"You will be remembered as a great figure; not just within House Banfield, but in the Empire as a whole, Master."

"A great figure, eh? If only I could be a half-decent teacher to Ellen at the same time." She was the subject of my current woes.

Amagi cocked her head curiously. "I do not see any problems in your relationship with Miss Ellen. As a knight or swordsman, she far exceeds her peers. I do not understand what troubles you, Master."

It was true that Ellen was skilled compared to others her age. "Yeah, I'm proud of her as my student… It's just that I've never been able to show her a true Flash."

"Excuse me…? Have you not mastered the Flash, Master?"

By all accounts, I *had* achieved mastery of the Way of the Flash. Master Yasushi himself had acknowledged my Flash as legitimate. Still…I could never forget the sight of my master's Flash as I'd witnessed it that first day.

"I still think about Master's Flash every now and then. It was so quiet, as if he was totally one with his surroundings. When he performed the move, it was like the logs he'd slashed were already cut beforehand… His Flash was in a totally different dimension from mine."

Once I could actually use the technique, I'd been forced to realize the truth: My Flash was forced, whereas my master's was completely natural.

"I haven't shown Ellen that perfect Flash yet. When I can't even do that at this point, is it really okay that I'm teaching a student? Ellen has talent; I'm sure of it. With me teaching her, though… I worry that I'll cause that talent to rot."

The more I seriously examined myself, the more I questioned whether I deserved to be Ellen's teacher. My confidence was flagging.

Amagi rested a hand on my shoulder. “If you cannot teach her, then I doubt anyone else could.”

One other thing bothered me. I laid my hand atop Amagi’s. “Ellen’s such a good girl too, isn’t she? By encouraging her to walk the path of the sword, I’ve also made her walk the path of murder. Back when I first met her, I wasn’t even thinking about that, but I can’t stop thinking about it now… I really am pathetic.”

I’d warped someone else’s life for the sake of my pursuit of the Way of the Flash. I hadn’t thought anything of it when I’d first made her my apprentice, but I’d become attached to her over all this time. More and more now, I regretted that decision.

“Sometimes I think she should be living a normal life instead,” I added.

Amagi embraced me. I buried my head in her chest, taking comfort in her arms around me. “I cannot speak to your decision’s validity, Master, but I believe that Miss Ellen will accept whatever you choose.”

“You think so…?”

Amagi tightened her embrace. “Whatever you decide, know that I hope for both you and Miss Ellen to be happy, Master.”

I wrapped my arms around Amagi’s waist and held her. “You’re too good to me.”

“As ever, I am your Amagi, Master.”

Chapter 8:
A Journey to Right Wrongs

THE KNIGHT HAD LONG HAIR tied behind his head and Japanese-style clothing; he looked to be roughly in his thirties. He had a rugged, handsome face, but the crowd of women around him in this hostess-club-like place negated his dignified good looks.

Reclining on a sofa with a woman in each arm, he boasted to me, "You know, I belong to the same sword school as Liam Sera Banfield. You could say I'm his brother apprentice. You kids must not know fear if you're challenging *me* to a fight."

The man sipped a drink from a glass one woman held for him. The attire he was decked out in was rather loud. The sword at his waist was a saber, for some reason, and also decorated rather ostentatiously.

"Liam's your brother apprentice, eh?"

I'd referred to this "Liam" by his first name, and the man took offense at that. "Hey, watch your mouth, kid. Lord Liam's an Imperial count. Plus, he's pretty fond of me as his brother apprentice. I looked after him a lot back during his training, you know."

As the man bragged, the women around him sang his praises, but I was still stuck on how ridiculous all this was.

"I didn't think Liam *had* a brother apprentice," I told him. "But enough about that. Will you step outside already? I don't want to make a mess of the place."

Turning my back, I headed for the door to get rid of this fake, then sensed the man taking hold of his saber.

"Don't show your back to your opponent in a real fight, you idiot!" The man sounded downright gleeful over pointing out my mistake.

As I turned back around, I unleashed a Flash. Before the man could lunge at me, his saber's blade snapped off at the hilt and spun into the air, embedding itself in the floor. The man didn't seem unable even to comprehend what'd happened.

I heaved a sigh. "Not only are you a fake, you're second-rate… No, third-rate. You don't even know anything about the Way of the Flash."

Now he looked frightened. "Wh-who are you?! You know, Liam won't let it pass if you kill me!"

I didn't understand how he could even keep the lie up at this point. "I don't remember ever having a brother apprentice like you."

I loosened my sword in its sheath, then snapped it back in, and the man's head went flying with a satisfying sound.

"At least wear a katana," I added. "I couldn't even *find* the fake because your sword looked like that."

A moment later, the women's screams resounded through the club. I ignored them as I left.

***

"Another bust, huh?"

From the monitor room I'd had prepared in my ship's living area, I watched the Purple Tail leave the planet's atmosphere. From this room, I could see in every direction around the ship, enabling me to enjoy the view as we came and went from planets. It was a wholly - unnecessary addition to the living area, but I loved excess, so I'd been more than happy to get it installed. I probably hadn't used this room even ten times since we'd set off on this trip.

As we left the atmosphere and entered space, I could see the ruined planet well from my vantage point. This one had been ruled by a fallen count who'd hired a supposed "master" of the Way of the Flash as a knight.

Fuka clasped her hands behind her head in irritation. "I seriously don't get how that guy could go around calling himself our brother apprentice. Did he not even know the rule about only having three apprentices?"

The Way of the Flash *did* have a rule about taking three apprentices, but Fuka didn't quite understand it. Riho corrected her without taking her eyes off the game she was playing on her tablet.

"You're so stupid, Fuka. The rule is about training *at least* three apprentices. Nothing says that you can't train more. You're seriously such an idiot."

Fuka's face flushed red with embarrassment. "O-oh, shut up! Three's enough, right?! Isn't it enough?" She turned to me for backup.

"I could probably only manage three myself." I was having so much trouble just teaching my first student that I didn't think I'd have time for four or five. Besides, despite my behavior, I was a busy guy.

Ellen was next to me; her shoulders twitched when the conversation turned to apprentices. After all, if I acquired more pupils, they'd be her sibling apprentices. "Do you…want new apprentices, Master?"

My own opinion didn't factor into it, since "at least three apprentices" was a rule of our style, so I answered bluntly, "I can't handle more right now, but I think I'll go looking once I have time."

"Right… Yes, that makes…sense." Ellen nodded, but she didn't seem to agree.

When Riho hit a "game over," she screeched and threw her tablet. It bounced off the wall, and she picked it up, tucking it away in her pocket. "Anyway, where are we going next? I'm getting sick of all these frauds. Can we at least run into some *real* Way of the Flash users sometime?"

Since Way of the Flash swordsmen had to train at least three students, Master Yasushi must've had at least two sibling apprentices of his own somewhere out there. And if you went back further than that, there should've been plenty of Way of the Flash users leading up to Master Yasushi. I'd been hoping that we might run into some people who'd learned the style from someone other than our master, but we hadn't yet come across any on this journey.

Fuka was also disappointed. "I was hoping to meet other Way of the Flash users too. But we've been all over the place, and we haven't found any yet. It's kind of weird, isn't it?"

Even Ellen was giving the matter some thought. "It's unnatural for such a strong sword style to be so obscure."

That was true. Folding my arms, I thought about other Way of the Flash practitioners. "I bet there's a good chance they're secluded somewhere, honing their skills. But facing off against a Way of the Flash wielder means death, so it's equally possible that rumors don't spread simply because no one is alive to spread them…" I realized something then and hung my head.

Ellen tugged my sleeve, obviously curious about the sudden change that had come over me. "Is something wrong, Master?"

"Well, I was just thinking… What if the Way of the Flash was *supposed* to remain hidden, but I brought it into the open?"

Maybe our style was meant to be passed down without coming into contact with the outside world. If so, then what I'd done had been nothing but a bother to the other practitioners.

"I'll need to ask Master about that too…" I decided.

Just when I'd found another reason I needed to locate Master Yasushi, Amagi entered the monitor room. Chino followed her, peering around curiously at everything in the chamber. Chino was usually pretty noisy, but at times she went strangely quiet, and this appeared to be such a time.

I spread my arms, welcoming Amagi wholeheartedly. "What's up, Amagi? If you needed something, I would've come to you, you know." I was only here in the monitor room to kill time.

Amagi narrowed her eyes slightly at my warm welcome. She didn't seem angry, but something about her attitude felt different from

usual. "No maid robot would summon her own master unnecessarily. Besides, your presence in the monitor room is convenient."

Amagi clapped, and the monitor room's scenery swiftly changed. Now the screens displayed my loyal retainers back home, Brian and Claus in the foreground.

This was giving me a bad feeling. "What do you want…?"

Brian was the first to speak. Well, to burst into tears, really. Wiping his eyes with a white handkerchief, he sobbed, *"Master Liam, it's been six years already."*

"Huh?"

"You left on your trip six years ago, and you haven't been back to House Banfield's home planet once in all that time!"

I'd already been out looking for Master Yasushi for six years. People's lives were so long in this universe that my sense of time had gotten all screwed up. It had only felt like two or three years to me, but I'd apparently left my domain unattended for kind of a long time now.

"No wonder I'm so used to life aboard this ship."

For obvious reasons, it was a lot more cramped than life in my mansion, but anyone would've gotten used to it after six years. Plus, it wasn't that tedious, since we got to stop and sightsee along the way.

"I've watched over you ever since you were small, Master Liam!" Brian wailed. *"Considering how diligently you've worked all this time to govern your domain, I was willing to turn a blind eye to a certain amount of selfishness, but I simply can't take any more!"*

"You're pretty damn rude, you know that? I hope you realize that any other master would've had you executed by now."

A butler held an important role, managing the lord's entire mansion, so it wasn't easy to find a replacement for one. And given House Banfield's size, any butler of mine needed character to match his skill. I let Brian get away with a little rudeness because he wouldn't be easy to replace, but he really did get on my nerves sometimes.

Brian's eyes widened. *"We are well aware of the impropriety of our actions, Master Liam. Everyone here is fully willing to accept punishment if it means you will return home."*

I'd wondered what they were calling about. So they wanted me to come home.

I turned to Claus. "Is there some kind of problem?"

My head knight gave me his status report. *"Everything's peaceful here, sir. What trouble does crop up is within our means to handle ourselves."*

He displayed several incidents on the monitor, but none seemed particularly pressing. The one that stood out most to me showed Tia, who was stationed on the border with the Autocracy, throwing a tantrum about wanting to see me. *What the heck is she doing?*

"Then why are you calling?" I asked.

"We simply wish you to return, Lord Liam. As a knight, I understand your desire to improve your skills with the sword, but you are the ruler of House Banfield."

Reading between the lines, Claus was saying that improving my sword technique wasn't as important as going home and doing my job.

I glared at him. "Would you like to formally register a complaint about my conduct?"

I'd thought that, if I threatened him, he'd either back down or adjust his demands. However, this *was* a knight I myself had chosen. *"I am fully aware of the impropriety of my actions. In fact, this was my suggestion, and I take all responsibility for it. I'm prepared to surrender the position of head knight and all its accompanying privileges, of which I am woefully unworthy."*

Claus was willing to throw away all the glory he'd earned climbing to the top of House Banfield's order of knights just for me.

"Are you serious? I could make you a rank-and-file knight right now if I wanted to. You haven't forgotten what I did to Tia and Marie, have you?"

Those two were so strong that they'd fought over the head knight role for a while before they earned my ire, and I demoted them to maids wearing animal ears. Everyone present was aware of their fate, and when I mentioned it, I watched them all flinch.

All of them, that is, except Claus. *"I am ready to resign from my post immediately. Shall Lady Christiana or Lady Marie serve as my replacement?"*

Damn you! Do you think I'm not serious?! Feeling seen through, I decided to demote Claus temporarily. "Fine. Starting today, you're—"

Amagi interrupted me before I could say "demoted." "Master, I must ask that you cease further willful behavior."

"Amagi…?"

Someone who wasn't familiar with her expressions might have thought her face looked the same as always, but I could tell: She was mad.

"Do you intend to continue this journey for years—for decades—until you locate Lord Yasushi? Have you forgotten the great responsibility you currently bear, Master?"

"I-I haven't forgotten. You mean, uh, in the succession conflict, right?"

"I am thrilled that you remember. In that case, you must also understand how beneficial these last six years have been for the opposing faction, yes?"

This had been more than enough time for Calvin's faction to find its footing again. I wished I could simply say, "I won't lose, however much strength they've built up!" Since Amagi was mad, though, I had to choose my words a little more carefully. "I've left the succession conflict to others for the time being. It's not like Cleo's faction has been wheel-spinning all this time."

"There is a marked difference between what the faction can accomplish with you personally at the helm and otherwise. You must be more aware of your worth."

I closed my mouth, and my eyes wandered to the faces of my retainers on the monitor room screens.

"Please return, Lord Liam." Claus drove the point home.

I hung my head and bargained with Amagi. "Just let me stop at one last place. I'll end my search there and return to my domain."

Amagi curtsied. "Your prompt decision is much appreciated, Master… As for Sir Claus, he may remain in the head knight role for the time being, correct?" She smiled emphatically. It seemed she'd caught on to what I was about to do earlier.

"Claus remains head knight, and no one else on this call gets punished. Is that good enough?"

"Thank you very much, Master."

Everything was wrapped up, and Brian turned to Claus. *"We did it, Sir Claus! I expected no less from our head knight! You had me worried, though, when you volunteered to give up your position. Simply no one else is as fit for the role as you!"*

"…I'm really no more than your average knight. I don't think any problems would arise if I resigned right now."

It almost seemed like Claus had been *hoping* for a demotion. I was probably just imagining that, though.

In any case, I could only visit one last location, so I'd have to make my selection carefully.

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After my conversation with Brian and Claus, I remained in the monitor room to choose our next destination. Many planets were still rumored to harbor Way of the Flash practitioners; finding the one planet among them all that Master Yasushi was on wouldn't be easy.

"Where are you? Where do I choose?"

I'd displayed all the candidates on one wall screen, and I even had holograms floating in midair besides. I summoned Kunai to help me look through them, but even her secret organization couldn't pinpoint Master Yasushi's location.

"I apologize, Master Liam. Even narrowing the possibilities down still leaves us with dozens of options."

"If you guys couldn't do it, then nobody in House Banfield could."

"The boss has sent out as many operatives to search as he can, but…"

Standing beside the bowing and scraping Kunai was Marie, reading a report on the investigation with a frown on her face. "I wouldn't be surprised if your master knows how to lie low. A knight or swordsman with a reputation gets targeted by those looking to make a name for themselves, after all. Still, for House Banfield to mobilize so many people and still be unable to find him is…"

With his abilities, my master would be in no danger even if he didn't lie low, but I knew he didn't like to make a show of his strength.

Riho sighed quietly. "Come to think of it, Master always said that you shouldn't throw your weight around. He constantly made a point of not standing out too much."

Fuka likewise thought back on their time studying under him. "He always bowed his head to any weakling who came to pick a fight

with him. I mean, he could have just killed them, but he said stuff like, 'If I did that, there'd be no end to it.'"

I crossed my arms, admiring my master's character. Unlike an evil lord like myself, he never made a show of his power. I wouldn't be capable of bowing my head to a weakling picking a fight with me merely to hide my strength. "I'd just kill the guy."

Riho and Fuka felt the same.

"You think so too?"

"Right? If someone picks a fight with a swordsman, they're risking their life, aren't they?"

Anyway, the next destination I chose would be our last chance. Amagi had stayed here in the monitor room, keeping an eye on me.

"Geh…" I muttered. "I guess, if it comes down to it, I'll just need to have Riho and Fuka continue the search on their own…"

Being unable to accompany them on the search for Master Yasushi would pain me, but if I spent any more time on that, who knew what Amagi and Brian would do to me?

Marie gave me a worried look. "Um, Lord Liam? If that does happen, I'll return with you to the home planet, of course…right? Right?"

"What? You'll continue the search too, obviously."

"How could you?! I'll break into tears if I can't work under you, Lord Liam!" Marie covered her mouth and began to cry.

I ignored her, returning my focus to choosing our next destination. "Where…where is Master? Hmm…?"

As I looked around the room, I spotted the quiet Chino desperately reaching out toward a certain planet. She stretched, trying to touch it, so I was curious about which one she was looking at.

I reached out and brought the hologram closer. “What’s this planet?”

Amagi’s red eyes scanned the planet, and she described it for me. “An inhabited world owned by House Farnham. Records show that the count’s relative governs the planet as its magistrate.”

I noticed Chino still staring fixedly at the hologram planet I’d brought over.

“Well, it’s not like we’ve got any better clues… Let’s bet on Chino’s intuition. I’ve picked our last destination.”

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In her quarters, Chino opened her eyes and looked around, checking her surroundings.

“Th-this is my room, right?! It’s not somewhere else, is it?!”

Lately, she’d been waking up in all kinds of places she didn’t remember going to sleep in. She’d awoken in Ellen’s room recently with no idea how she’d gotten there.

“Ugh…I keep losing my memory now. Is this something I should go to the doctor about? Doctors give you shots, though, so I’m scared of them…”

As Chino shivered, utterly perplexed by her situation, something watched her apologetically from a corner of her room. It was the dog spirit.

Sensing someone's presence, Chino turned toward the corner. "I-is someone there?!" she shouted.

She got on all fours on her bed, ready to fight, yet there was no one in the corner.

"Am I imagining things? Maybe I really should see a doctor… Wait! Wh-wh-wh-what if it's a ghost or something?! Somebody Marie killed is probably nursing a grudge! I-I have to get someone to exorcise it!"

Chino had now lived with Liam for so long that she'd almost completely forgotten her days as a wolf tribe priestess and her powerful spiritual abilities.

***

A passageway extending from the body of the Purple Tail connected to a fifty-meter passenger ship. That ship was Liam's way of getting down to a planet without causing a scene. They planned to use it this time too; they'd head to the local spaceport, where they'd undergo landing procedures. However, this time around, there was a little problem.

Liam walked through the passageway, irritated. The reason for his displeasure? He was unable to take Amagi down to the planet.

"No entry permitted for robots with AI? Shows the brains of the guy running this place."

"There is nothing that can be done," Amagi said reasonably. "This planet belongs to Count Farnham's house, so we must abide by their rules."

It wasn't just Amagi who'd be unable to descend. As a beastgirl, Chino was unlikely to be allowed on the surface either. From the procedures they'd looked into before arriving, this planet seemed to have a lot of rules about visiting.

Liam sighed. "Pretty disappointing for *this* to be our last stop. I wanted to sightsee with you." He wasn't happy about not being able to have Amagi at his side.

"Your sentiments are enough for me, Master. Besides, I have been with you on this trip for six years already."

Liam's wedding with Rosetta awaited him back home; this would probably be his last jaunt as a single man.

When Liam didn't respond to Amagi, she suggested, "Why not enjoy a honeymoon with Lady Rosetta after this?"

"I-I'll…think about it." Liam answered awkwardly, as he always did when it came to Rosetta, but he didn't reject the idea outright.

If Master would just take one step forward himself, I would not have to worry about their relationship, Amagi thought.

They reached the passenger ship, where Ellen, Riho, and Fuka were already waiting. The trio waved at them.

Amagi stopped, bowing deeply. "I shall await your return, my master."

"I'll leave the ship to you."

Liam boarded the passenger ship, and the hatch closed behind him. Then the passageway hatch also closed. The passageway slowly retracted into the Purple Tail, and the passenger ship sailed away.

As Amagi watched the vessel head toward the spaceport, she thought she noticed a faint light pass by her. She attempted to scan it, but was interrupted by static in her field of vision.

"What was that?"

She put a hand to her temple to diagnose the issue. This time, she saw a black fog she couldn't identify overlay the planet. Something unusual was certainly occurring, but before suspecting an anomaly on her part, Amagi experienced what a human would describe as a sense of…foreboding.

The black fog had only been visible for a second, and Amagi's system check came back all green.

"What did I just see…?"

She checked her recorded data, but the fog was nowhere to be seen. Amagi clenched a fist and held it over her chest. The maid robot's expressions were usually unreadable, but at that moment, there was unease in her face that anyone could've recognized easily.

***

When we landed, we found the planet in a sorry state, just as I expected. As I walked with Riho, Fuka, and Ellen at my side, all I could think regarding our surroundings was, *Not this again.*

The town we visited had no vitality, and it was clearly struggling financially, the citizens' eyes downcast. The magistrate ruling this planet obviously did so in the same manner as all the small-time villains on the other rundown planets we'd visited.

I'd initially been excited to meet other evil lords like myself. After visiting so many of these planets personally, however, I'd figured something out: These guys were morons.

"Every single one of them is just a small-time bully satisfied to squeeze whatever they can out of their subjects," I said to myself.

If I'd learned one thing on this trip, it was that not all evil lords were made equal. Simply exploiting your citizenry made you worse than second-rate. First-rate villains made their subjects wealthy before exploiting them.

Fuka peered curiously at the residents' faces before turning to give me an impressed look. "You really are amazing, aren't you?"

"How's that?"

"The faces of people in your domain are totally different. There's life there, you know? On almost all the other planets we've visited, everyone's looked pretty gloomy, like there's no light in their eyes or something. They've got dead-fish eyes, you know?"

Their eyes were dead because they understood that they were being exploited. That was why second-rate villains were second-rate.

"Well, after all, my subjects are idiots who don't even recognize that I'm exploiting them." Sometimes I was frightened by their idiocy, but I at least knew I was doing a better job than the magistrate here.

As we walked along, Riho played a game on her tablet. "More importantly, how are we gonna find Master?" she asked. "This is the last planet you'll look on, right? Have you got some kind of plan for it?"

I'd promised Amagi that I would stop my search after this, and I couldn't just break that promise. I felt no qualms about betraying other humans, but I didn't want to betray Amagi or the other maid robots. "Well…I hope to at least find a clue here. Let's head for that dojo where rumors said people practiced the Way of the Flash." Supposedly this planet had a school for the style.

Riho paused her game and looked up. "It'll be another sham, won't it? I can cut them down, right? Hey! You're messing my hair up!"

I'd put my hand on Riho's head and tousled her hair. "No, you can't. Sorry, but I'm taking the reins on this one. I really need to find someone Ellen can face this time."

I *still* hadn't picked out an opponent for Ellen, partly because no one had been of suitable strength, but partly because Ellen herself still didn't seem ready.

I gave her a look, and she seemed to catch on. "I-I'll do my best."

"Yeah."

We headed for the dojo with a Way of the Flash sign. A fake here reportedly taught the "Original Way of the Flash," and the school's students were said to be incredibly strong. Recent information said that the magistrate had made them all knights of his.

Riho turned back to her game. "I'm sure they're just fakes here. They'll probably be perfect for Ellen to take on." She seemed to have

already given up on this group being legitimate, even before we saw them.

Fuka felt the same way. "Are there really even other people who use the Way of the Flash? Maybe we're the only ones left."

We'd traveled to a bunch of planets along this journey, but we'd only come across fakes. We hadn't yet found a single other true practitioner of the Way of the Flash. I understood why the pair were starting to doubt whether they even existed.

"I hoped to run into some people from the same school too," I acknowledged. "It feels like there has to be a reason we haven't yet." If we found any peers, I wanted to connect with them.

Riho had all but given up. "We traveled on our own too, but we never found any Way of the Flash users. I think Master might've been the last one left before us."

Fuka, on the other hand, still held a bit of hope. "Well, I want there to still be some others out there. I'm curious about what they'd be like. What do *you* think?" she asked me.

The answer was obvious. "Well, Master is the virtuous sort, so other people of the same school would be like that, wouldn't they? We might just be unable to find them because they're holed up somewhere, focused only on their training."

It was totally possible that while we were out gallivanting like this, others of our school were devoted entirely to honing their skills. If that was the case, I really admired them.

We walked through the town a bit more, seeing the sights, until Ellen stopped. She was focusing on a wall. “Master, there’s something strange about this building.”

“Hmm? Yeah, the color’s a bit off, isn’t it?”

I looked at the wall and noticed that it had two distinct shades. I thought maybe that was just the way it was built, but it looked like a horizontal line went through it; the wall’s color was slightly different on either side of that line.

Fuka was looking at the ground, but Riho focused on our surroundings. The listless citizens watched us warily. At first, I just thought they were scared of us because we carried weapons, but they looked too freaked out for it only to be caused by weapons in general. It was specifically our *katanas* they seemed frightened of.

I traced the line with my finger and got the distinct impression that the wall had been repaired after being *cut*. “It couldn’t be…” Maybe, on our last stop, we really had finally found a clue.

Just as I thought that, a child rushed out in front of us, holding a rock. “Gimme back my dad!”

The child threw the rock at me, but Ellen stepped forward and cut it with her sword. It was more of a quick draw than a Flash, but Fuka clapped.

“Hey, good job! I think you might be able to use the Flash soon, Ellen.”

As for Riho, she had a hand on her sword hilt, her eyes looking dangerous. “That’s fine and all, but…we need to punish this kid for

throwing a rock at our brother apprentice, right?”

As always, my sister apprentice had a short temper, but she and Fuka hadn’t actually drawn their swords against the child. They both seemed like they might do so at any moment, but their blades weren’t unsheathed, so things were still salvageable. Ellen had only drawn hers to protect me, which was fine.

Now that this kid had made a scene, I was curious to see what everyone else would do, so I looked at those nearby for their reaction.

“Did you see that? Even that little girl can do it…?”

“They’re the magistrate’s knights. That poor kid…”

“Don’t get involved—you’ll just get yourself killed.”

I wasn’t sure what their reactions meant exactly. Why did they think we were knights of the magistrate? Ellen’s skills might still be unpolished, but ordinary people still shouldn’t have been able to follow her actions with their eyes. They’d normally have been surprised, wondering what exactly she’d done. Had they guessed what happened, although they couldn’t see her blade swing?

The answer to my questions was becoming increasingly clear to me.

I approached the boy who’d thrown the stone. “Hey, why’d you throw that rock at me?”

“’C-cause you took my dad away!”

It pissed me off that the kid was being so defiant, but I could at least commend his bravery. Besides, he was providing a valuable clue.

Ellen glared at the boy. “You won’t get away with throwing a rock at my master.”

The way she looked at him seemed to frighten the boy.

“Are you gonna kill him, then?” I asked Ellen.

Ellen appeared surprised. She averted her eyes. “N-no.”

As I thought, she was just too sweet; killing an innocent citizen would wound her heart. This was my fault for coddling her. She’d gotten too strong without having experienced killing, and now if I just forced her to kill people who couldn’t fight back, it would scar her forever. That was why I’d had such a hard time finding someone for her to fight.

I glanced at Riho and Fuka, then told them to search for information. “I think we may have found an actual clue on this planet. You two go ask around. I’ve got some questions for this kid.”

Riho and Fuka looked as though they wanted to say something to me, but they kept quiet and went off to carry out their instructions.

I shot a sharp look at the boy. He seemed to be trying not to cry, so I wasn’t sure how to carry on. “I don’t know what to do with boys. Let’s see here…”

My own child in my past life had been a girl; the one I looked after in this life, Ellen, was female as well. I considered how to approach talking to the boy.

“Look, I’ll let you off the hook for throwing a rock at me if you tell me what’s going on around here. So tell me, kid—what’s happening on this planet?”

The boy stared back at me, still holding back his tears. He seemed pretty gutsy.

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I told the boy to take us somewhere where we could get the full story, and he led us to a small apartment.

When I saw it, the first thing I experienced was nostalgia. The apartment was a lot like the one I'd lived in at the end of my former life. It felt crazy to me that people in this reality could live in the same kind of place while also being able to space-travel. Apparently this planet's residents were limited in terms of what technologies they could use.

"Yasuyuki! Why'd you throw a rock at a knight?! I'm so sorry, Sir Knight. I beg you, please spare his life!"

The boy's mother was named Nina. She'd just come back from her part-time job; she must've rushed home after hearing a rumor about her son. She was ashen-faced as she apologized, thinking that her son had hurled a rock toward a knight. If he had, that would've been an offense warranting death.

However, I was more concerned about the possibility that there were real leads to be found on this planet. "Rather than an apology, I'd like some information from you."

"Information? I'll tell you anything if I'm able to." Nina seemed relieved that they wouldn't be immediately killed, although she also looked pretty worn out.

“Your son told me to give him his father back. What’d he mean by that?”

Nina hung her head, then looked up at us, seemingly assessing our sincerity. She was probably desperate to find a way to survive a situation in which she could be killed at any moment.

I decided that, before continuing, I should first assuage her fears. “Don’t worry. We’re just visitors to this planet. We only got here yesterday.”

When he realized we weren’t the magistrate’s knights, Yasuyuki hung his head. “Sorry. I threw that rock at you because I thought you were with them.”

It seemed it really had just been a misunderstanding.

“So?” I said. “Who are they?”

Reassured by my attitude, Nina finally began to speak. “The magistrate’s knights took my husband away a few days ago.”

“This planet’s knights? Why were they after your husband?”

“W-well, they…”

Since Nina had clammed up again, Yasuyuki stood and explained things to us. “The Original Way of the Flash guys took Dad away!”

“Y-Yasuyuki!” Nina tried to stop him.

However, Yasuyuki went on. “It’s true! Why’re you hiding it? They took Dad away. They’re violent, and everyone’s scared of them. I’m worried about Dad!”

“It’s okay, Yasuyuki,” Nina told him. “You don’t need to say any

more!”

Yasuyuki had a child’s black-and-white view of right and wrong, and Nina didn’t know what to do with him. As for me, I’d gotten the information I came for, so I was satisfied.

“Master, do you think the Original Way of the Flash might actually be the same school as ours?” Ellen asked.

“There’s certainly a chance…” A lot had stood out to me about that slash in the wall. Could other Way of the Flash users really be on this planet?

Yasuyuki wiped his tears with his sleeve and started pleading for our help. “Dad… They took him. They said he’d been fooling them all this time.”

“Fooling them? Did your dad do something bad?”

I glanced at Nina and noticed her react to my question, if only subtly. I thought that maybe Yasuyuki’s father had done something to the magistrate to have the knights sent after him.

Yasuyuki clarified, though. “Dad didn’t do anything wrong! He’s not very good at many things, but he was always a good dad to me!”

“So why’d they take him?”

Yasuyuki’s next words took me completely by surprise. “When they saw my dad, they said something like, ‘I can’t believe the Sword God’s here.’”

“Sword God?!”

At first, I saw red, furious that some man who wasn’t Master Yasushi would call himself the Sword God. Something was strange

about that, though. There was no sign that any kind of swordsman lived in this apartment. It really looked like any old family home, not the kind of place where someone calling himself the Sword God would live.

"They were calling my dad Yasujiro, but Dad's name is Yasushi, so I told them they had the wrong person. After I said that, though, they got really excited and took him away."

Before I knew it, I was on my feet. Ellen rose as well, waiting for my next words. When I opened my mouth, I think my voice was shaking. "Ellen, go get Riho and Fuka."

"Y-yes!"

***

Meanwhile, Riho and Fuka had learned from their information-gathering that people on this planet purportedly practiced the actual Way of the Flash.

Riho glowered at her surroundings. "I can't believe we'd finally find someone from the same school on our last stop."

Fuka walked along casually, eating some skewered dumplings. "Yeah. What's the style called here—the Original Way of the Flash? I wonder how its users are connected to us."

She couldn't wait to find out how she and Riho, who'd learned from Yasushi, were related to the Original Way of the Flash's practitioners.

Riho stopped and turned around, smiling. "Well, why don't we just ask them?"

Standing before them was a man in an extravagant kimono with a katana at his waist. He apparently had some confidence in his skills, because he was giving Riho and Fuka a disdainful look. A number of ruffians hung around him as if they might be his lackeys.

"You the ones who've been sniffing around about us?"

The men's faces wore vulgar smiles, and all the nearby civilians hurried to make themselves scarce. Everything went silent as night, although it was midday.

"Are you users of the Original Way of the Flash?" Riho asked them.

"That's us. Master Morio, High Disciple of the Original Way of the Flash, at your service."

The tall man who'd put "Master" in front of his own name wore his hair in a ronin topknot—that is, the crown of his head was unshaven. Since he called himself a "high disciple," he had to be one of the school's more skilled members. Putting aside his appearance and behavior, both Riho and Fuka could tell he was indeed strong.

Fuka bit the last dumpling off her skewer and tossed the stick into a garbage can. "So we finally found someone from the same school as us. It's not very classy of you to walk around with flunkies like that, though."

Morio crossed his arms. "These are *my* disciples, and they pay steep tuition for the privilege. Each of 'em is from a noble or merchant family."

At that, Fuka closed her mouth, and Riho raised an eyebrow.

"You're using the Way of the Flash for money?"

The idea of teaching the Way of the Flash to the rich simply for profit incensed them both. They'd looked forward to meeting someone from the same school, but now that they knew these people had fallen from the true path of the Way of the Flash, they figured it would only be honorable to put an end to Morio's group themselves.

Riho let a Flash loose, and Morio stared at her in shock. He soon smiled, though, as sparks flew up in front of him. He'd blocked Riho's Flash.

"Hunh… You really are legit." Riho's wariness increased.

Meanwhile, the pupils behind Morio gaped.

"Was that the Flash?"

"Th-these two are students of the Original Way of the Flash too?"

"I've never seen them before!"

Morio's pupils started to panic before he shouted at them, "Calm down! You think a high disciple like me could lose?" He turned back to Riho and Fuka. "You'll regret making me draw my sword, girls."

Riho's face went blank. "You talk too much. You may also practice the Way of the Flash, but your style seems awfully cheap."

Fuka's eyes were enraged at the sorry example Morio set for someone supposedly from the same school as them. "I'll kill you."

A second later, sparks flew between the three. Since the clash was two against one, Morio was at a disadvantage.

"Ugh…! There're people even more powerful than me out there?!"

As the girls pushed him back, he hurried to gain distance from them.

However, Fuka followed. "You think you're getting away?! Tch…!"

A moment later, though, both she and Riho leaped backward. Cracks erupted in the ground and across the buildings near where they'd stood only a second ago.

Fuka looked up and noticed men in kimonos on the roofs of the surrounding buildings. "Do all these guys use the Way of the Flash?"

The men on the rooftops wielded katanas. Looking down at Riho and Fuka, they'd unleashed Flashes at the pair.

"I never thought I'd see someone else who practices the Way of the Flash out in the sticks like this!" one man called down to them. "You want to keep going or what?"

The man seemed assured of his group's victory, which irritated Riho to no end. "Don't you dare look down on us. We'll take you all—"

Fuka cut her off. "That's enough."

Riho glared at Fuka as if about to cut *her* head off. "What? You want to run away with our tails between our legs? In the Way of the Flash, you don't show your back to the enemy. I'll kill *you* here too!" She was ready to slaughter anyone who disgraced the Way of the Flash, even the girl raised as her sister.

However, Fuka had her own reason for stopping Riho. "We've received new orders from our brother apprentice. The situation's

changed, and we're supposed to go back right now."

Even with blood rushing to her head, Riho was willing to back off if *Liam* ordered her to. Though it clearly pained her, she let go of her sword hilt, instead clenching her fists hard enough that the bones cracked.

"I swear I'll kill all of you…"

As the two girls retreated, Morio laughed loudly and called out orders to the other men.

"Running away, huh?! Do you really think you can get away from us?!"

Chapter 9:
Yasushi in Chains

HOW HAD THINGS come to this?

Yasujiro—Yasushi, rather—sat on his folded legs in a cell. His expression appeared calm, but inside, he was incredibly nervous.

On the other side of the cell's bars was this planet's magistrate, Chester Sera Farnham. Chester had black hair down to his waist, and his yellow eyes blazed with ambition. He looked as though he was enjoying himself, despite having been deceived by Yasushi.

"I never suspected you could be the real thing, Yasujiro. No… Sword God Yasushi."

Yasushi had thought that using a fake name would be enough for him to escape detection, but unfortunately, his son's naive sense of right and wrong had foiled his plans.

Chester had found the records from when Yasushi moved to the planet. "When you immigrated, you used your real name. You did such a sloppy job of hiding your identity that I thought it was a joke at first."

His face still placid, Yasushi thought, *I came up with it on the spur of the moment, so what do you expect?! If I could fake my identity properly, do you think I'd hide on this crappy planet in the first place?!*

Chester sighed to relieve his irritation, then smiled. "Well, we'll forget about the pseudonym. After all, with you here, I can learn how

to cut a battleship in half just like Banfield did, right?"

Liam *had* cut down a ship in front of a great many witnesses on the Capital Planet. Word of that incident had spread across the Empire, and the Way of the Flash became known as the sword style that enabled you even to chop a battleship in two. Chester seemed entranced by the absurd notion of a human emerging victorious in a battle against a ship.

To Yasushi, of course, that story was nothing but a bother. *What do you mean, 'cut a battleship in half'?! No way could a human being do that! Have some common sense!*

In his mind, no human could halve any ship. To him, Liam, Riho, and Fuka were all something other than human.

Chester went on excitedly, ignorant of the panic churning behind Yasushi's composed expression. "I'll have you teach me everything. First, all the secrets of the Way of the Flash."

He said "teach me everything," but Yasushi had already taught the magistrate everything he could. After all, Yasushi himself couldn't even use the Flash; on top of that, his only teaching strategy was to make his students practice the basics. Even if he'd wanted to teach Chester more, he couldn't have. And "secrets of the Way of the Flash" didn't exist in the first place.

"I'm not the kind of man who should be called a Sword God," Yasushi replied, "and I've already taught you everything I can. The rest will all depend on your hard work, Lord Chester."

He was trying to weasel his way out of things, but he was dealing with Chester, not Liam. This was a true villain, with none of

the strange kindness or diligence that Liam possessed.

The smile vanished from Chester's face. "Yasushi, I hate hard work. If there are secrets to learn, I want you to teach them to me right now. To me, martial arts are nothing more than a tool. I only want the Way of the Flash as a means to one day achieve the same glory Banfield has."

Facing Chester and his glassy eyes, Yasushi couldn't stop sweating. *That's not happening! If you could get by in this universe with nothing but a sword, no one would have any problems!*

Yasushi might've been less than third-rate as a swordsman, but he knew how real life worked. If you became a Swordmaster, could you then defeat the emperor? Most everyone asked that question would answer no. Mastering the sword in no way equated to success as a noble.

Chester was too different from Liam in the first place. When Liam was saddled with a ruined planet, he'd made an effort to develop it himself. He wasn't the same kind of noble as Chester, who exploited his subjects and did nothing else.

Yasushi considered how best to break this to Chester. "Well, er, Lord Chester…? If it's glory as a noble that you wish for, perhaps there are means you should consider other than the Way of the Flash. Why not make an effort to develop your domain?" *Our lives here suck because of you! Do your job as magistrate already!*

Yasushi was trying to convey that mastering the Way of the Flash alone wouldn't earn Chester prestige, but Chester just gave him an exasperated look. "My family owns this planet; it's not mine. It only

makes sense to get whatever I can out of that situation to benefit myself, doesn't it?"

It seemed that Chester didn't see the advantages of developing a planet that didn't belong to him.

Yasushi wasn't sure what to say. "Huh? But, well, er…you know… merely exploiting your people won't do your domain any good. How will you earn any glory if you don't develop the planet you govern?" *Try letting your subjects* make *a little money before you take it all! Are you trying to kill us?!*

Still, Chester saw no worth in what Yasushi said. "This place will develop on its own either way. All I need to do is make whatever money I can off it. Who cares how many people suffer or die in the meantime?"

"My lord! Your subjects are living people too, are they not?"

"A planet's population is just a number. Nobles are the only *true* people. My subjects might as well just be insects crawling on the ground."

Hearing Chester compare his subjects to insects, Yasushi feared that there was no getting through to him. All he could do was try the next approach that popped into his head. "Well, what about after you've mastered the sword and become the head of your family, Lord Chester? At this rate, you'll exhaust your domain, which will mean less profit for you in the long run. Therefore, you must value your citizenry."

Even Yasushi thought he'd said something clever, but Chester just wasn't listening. "The role of count is nothing more than a

stepping stone to me. I plan to make it much further than that, and anyone I trample on my way there should see it as an honor, if anything. It's only right that my subjects cry with gratitude at the opportunity to help me on my way up."

Chester was full of confidence, as if he truly believed his words.

Yasushi gazed at the noble before him, thinking, *A noble among nobles, this one.* And when it came to Imperial nobles, Liam was an outlier among outliers.

"The value of anyone who isn't a noble stems from whether they can be of any use to me," Chester explained. "The rest are just garbage. Do you value garbage, Yasushi? You don't, do you?"

Yasushi was terrified of this man who, by and large, didn't see people as people. *It's pointless. There's no getting through to him. I'd take Liam over this guy any day!*

"You have a family, don't you, Yasushi? I've got some ideas about what might happen to them if you don't teach me the secrets of the Way of the Flash."

Even Yasushi couldn't maintain his cool after that. "Wha—?! Pl-please, don't! Anything but my family!" They were too important to him to maintain his calm facade.

When the color drained from Yasushi's face, Chester grinned cruelly. "Well, next time I come visit you, I'll hope for a better response."

Chester took his leave, and within his cell, Yasushi hung his head. *There aren't any secrets in the first place! I made up the Way of*

the Flash! It kills me that, at this point, no one would believe me if I told them…

Yasushi's half-baked lie had been so successful that no one would even accept the truth.

***

Riho and Fuka arrived at the small apartment looking awfully displeased, but if I'd called them away from a fight with other Way of the Flash users, their irritation was only natural.

Riho was clearly enraged. "How can we call ourselves practitioners of the Way of the Flash while showing our backs to the enemy?! You're too soft, Fuka! You may as well die right here!"

As Riho took her anger out on her sister, Fuka glared back at her just as sharply. "What's that supposed to mean, huh?!"

Sparks flew between the pair in the tiny apartment, and Ellen sent me a pleading look. "Master…"

I was probably the only one who could calm them both down. "Riho, since when can you talk back to me?" I asked in a low voice.

She flinched, if only for a second. "Y-you understand what I'm saying, don't you?! We turned our backs on an opponent in a fight! *I* did! I, Master's apprentice, had to run from an enemy! I'm not backing down about this, even to you!" She protested with tears in her eyes, angry and scared all at once.

Riho's anger was understandable. If someone had told me to run from enemies right in front of me, I'd be just as enraged. Fuka

had followed my orders reluctantly, but that was probably eating her up inside too. She didn't look happy with the decision.

I stood and placed my hand on Riho's head. "Don't worry. We'll kill all our enemies, whether they're fellow Way of the Flash users or not."

Riho looked surprised to hear that we'd wipe out other Way of the Flash practitioners. "What do you…?"

"Those Original Way of the Flash guys abducted Master Yasushi."

Riho and Fuka clamped their mouths shut, their eyes widening. They were probably too surprised even to say anything.

"This planet's magistrate is a student of the school as well," I continued. "He hired all the guys from the dojo as knights, and they've been throwing their weight around."

Fuka was ready to run out the door right then and there, but I stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. She glared at me with bloodshot eyes. "Let me go! I'm gonna kill all of them and get Master back!"

"Calm down. I'm curious about a few things, and you two should stay and listen too." Having pacified Fuka, I turned to Master Yasushi's wife Nina and sat before her respectfully. "Ma'am, how did those men from the Original Way of the Flash take Master away? Shouldn't he have been able to resist?"

At my question, Nina's gaze wandered. "I-I think Yasu…my husband Yasushi is a different person from the one you're thinking of, with the same name. After all, he's not strong…"

Though she suggested we had the wrong person, I had my doubts. “Have you got any pictures or videos of your husband?”

“H-here.”

Nina displayed some files on her tablet for me. The man in the images was definitely Master. Riho and Fuka leaned forward to see, becoming excited when they recognized him.

“It’s Master! Maybe he’s lost some weight?”

“It’s definitely him. It’s Master Yasushi. But he does look like he lost weight…as if he’s more frail than usual… Huh? Did he really look like this?”

The Master in the pictures looked smaller than I remembered as well. Was that just because *I’d* been small when he trained me? In my memories, he’d always seemed more formidable, but I was sure he was the same man as in these pictures and videos.

Ellen cocked her head. “Master, is that man really Lord Yasushi?” she asked.

“Of course. We would never misidentify our master.” I was sure of it.

However, Ellen remained doubtful. “He does look like he practices swordplay, but his movements in these videos don’t seem very much like an exceptional swordsman’s. Is he really a master martial artist?”

She didn’t think he moved as such an individual would, but we protested.

"You don't see how amazing Master is?" Riho huffed. "I-I know he looks weak at a glance, but…he's *my* master, you know!"

"He definitely does look weak, but he's *my* master too," Fuka agreed. "If we still can't imagine ever beating him, he can't actually be weak, can he?"

"Ellen, there are some things you just shouldn't say," I told her. "H-he does look pretty weak now, granted. B-but I feel like he didn't look like that before…"

Though we protested, something clearly felt off to us three as well. We exchanged glances, cocking our heads and wondering whether something had happened.

Master's wife seemed not to know how strong he truly was. Furthermore, it was strange that he'd let the Original Way of the Flash guys take him away without resisting. Had something happened to Master? Regardless, there were more important things than figuring that out right now.

"Anyway, our master has clearly been abducted by Original Way of the Flash users, and we need to get him back," I said. "To do that… we'll kill anyone who has anything to do with the Original Way of the Flash."

Hearing how determined I was seemed to calm Riho and Fuka down. They sat up straight, then bowed deeply to Master's wife. After that, their eyes settled on Yasuyuki, who stood beside his mother.

They seemed curious about him, so I introduced him. "This is Yasuyuki, Master's son."

Fuka broke into a wide smile, her wild hair seeming to puff even more. “Yasuyuki, if you’re Master’s kid, that makes you my little brother! I’m Fuka Shishigami, but you can just call me Fuka!”

Riho shoved Fuka aside to introduce herself. “I’m Riho Satsuki! Starting today, I’m your big sister, so you can rely on me for whatever you need!”

As the two fought to talk to him, Yasuyuki himself looked on in utter confusion. I’d been a bit worried about what might happen at this point, but the girls seemed to accept the boy quickly as family. I’d been prepared to knock some sense into them if they got jealous of him for stealing their master away or something, so I was relieved.

Ellen gave the overjoyed sisters an exasperated look. “You know that kid threw a rock at Master, right?”

Was she still holding a grudge about that? “Let him off the hook. He’s Master’s son, you know. Besides, Ellen…nothing of the sort happened.”

“Huh? B-but…”

“I certainly don’t remember it, so it’s not something he can or should be punished for. Right, Kunai?” I asked my own shadow.

My shadow wavered as a response emanated from it. “As you say, Master.”

I’d sensed some bloodlust from her as well earlier, when Yasuyuki threw the rock at me, so it was a good idea to nip that in the bud.

I clapped my hands and brought the conversation to a close. "Okay. That's that. Now we should prioritize rescuing Master."

Since the Original Way of the Flash had picked a fight with us, we needed to finish things with them.

Ellen gave me a worried look. "We'll be fighting other practitioners of the Way of the Flash? What'll happen, Master?"

"The same thing as always. We just need to raid the magistrate's mansion. Simple, right?"

We'd done that several times already on this trip. Nothing would be different about it.

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At that same moment, Chester's knights of the Original Way of the Flash were visiting him at his mansion.

Chester had been practicing the style by himself, so he wiped his sweat away while listening to their report. "What? There are more Way of the Flash users here?"

"Yes. They identified us as Way of the Flash users too. But they also said they couldn't let us get away with disgracing the school's name."

"Disgracing it, eh? Wait… I feel like I heard a rumor about this."

Chester recalled something he'd gotten wind of lately. It was a ridiculous rumor that Liam was traveling around punishing cruel nobles, or something to that effect. Chester hadn't believed that at first, thinking that whoever spread a rumor like that was an idiot. After all, there was no way Liam would do something like that when

he currently headed a huge political faction. However, Chester also knew that evil lords and magistrates all over *were* being punished, and sometimes destroyed, by someone lately. Even if the rumor about Liam wasn't true, the facts made it clear that *something* was going on.

"What did these Way of the Flash users look like?"

"They were women, but they mentioned a brother apprentice, so I'm sure at least one more is here somewhere."

Chester drew his sword and looked into the polished blade as if it were a mirror, smiling. "When you think of the Way of the Flash, the only names that come to mind are Yasushi and Banfield. Maybe those rumors weren't wrong, after all…"

He chuckled to himself. If the rumors were true, then Liam and his friends planned to raid his mansion.

"It'd be pretty stupid to just sit here and wait for him," Chester mused. "Connect me to the main planet. Let's inform my old man that we've got a chance to kill Liam here."

The knight Chester spoke to was surprised. He must've known that Chester didn't have the best relationship with his father. "Are you sure, sir?"

Chester was ready to use whatever means were at his disposal to get what he wanted. "House Farnham is part of Calvin's faction, and every other noble in these parts is either the same, or on the fence. There are no allies of Cleo's here. If we can box Liam in and take him down here, I'm sure Prince Calvin will be appreciative."

Chester practically trembled with excitement at the prospect.

"Looks like my luck is turning around. If I defeat Liam here, my future is all but guaranteed."

As the magistrate made plans to turn the tables when Liam attacked, he swung the sword in his hand. The move lacked finesse, but ten meters away, a log split in half.

"You've improved so much in such a short time," said the knight. "Incredible work, sir."

Chester raised his sword. "I'll defeat Banfield and successfully rise to power myself. There's nothing that he could achieve that I can't!"

He began formulating his counterattack against Liam.

Chapter 10:
The Magistrate's Mansion

THE PLANET CHESTER governed had one moon. Behind that hid Liam's escort fleet, commanded by Marie. At around the same time Liam had descended to the planet, the fleet was accepting supplies sent by House Banfield.

Liam's personal merchant, Thomas Henfrey, had brought the goods. They were making use of the man and his merchant ships because it would've been too conspicuous for another family's supply and escort vessels to travel so near House Farnham's territory.

Thomas himself was present to deliver the goods. "Lord Liam's actions always surprise me, but he's made several of our trade routes much more secure. These days we merchants can do business with more planets without fear."

Thomas beamed, thrilled by the reduction in space pirates in the various areas where Liam had recently rampaged. Each time Liam moved between planets, he obliterated all the space pirates he encountered on the way. Rumors of his presence would spread, and the pirates in that area would either move or flee outside the Empire altogether. That was a boon for merchants like Thomas.

Marie, who was personally receiving the supplies, replied, "Lord Liam has what it takes to be a true ruler."

Thomas let her statement pass without comment. In the wrong ears, "true ruler" could've started some trouble. Then he asked Marie,

"Say, do you know when Lord Liam will return to his home planet? I have to say, it's making me a little nervous that he hasn't been around for such a long time. Prince Calvin's faction is making all kinds of moves on the Capital Planet. I know they wouldn't say anything about it, but Mr. Elliot of the Clave Firm and Ms. Patrice of the Newlands Company aren't happy about his absence either."

Even the people who simply worked with Liam were uneasy about his absence.

Marie herself was wary of the actions taken by Calvin's faction. "Didn't his influence wane after the conflict with the Autocracy?"

"Even so, he *is* still the crown prince. If Lord Liam isn't around to rein him in, he can do whatever he wants on the Capital Planet. Mr. Elliot and Ms. Patrice anxiously await Lord Liam's return."

Merchants didn't like it either if a backer went away on vacation indefinitely.

Marie sighed. "What's Prince Cleo doing? With him there, there shouldn't be any problems, even if Lord Liam isn't present."

Liam was the real power behind the faction, but Cleo was still its nominal leader. Even if he couldn't measure up to Liam, the prince should've had more than enough influence to keep things under control. In fact, Liam's absence was the perfect opportunity for Cleo to exert his own influence over the faction.

Marie was a bit irritated that he seemingly wasn't doing so—and she also found it odd. *It's hardly something I'd suggest to his face, but isn't this Prince Cleo's chance to increase his own sway within the group? What could he be thinking?*

However, she rethought things after hearing what Thomas said next. "Even Prince Cleo is making moves that are a bit suspicious. Inviting new nobles and knights into the faction at his own discretion and such. Of course, there's nothing questionable about that in and of itself, but he's only reaching out to nobles with no influence."

"…How charitable of him."

"He's also throwing around a lot of money without much hesitation."

When Marie heard that Cleo was making large donations to powerless nobles to indebt them to him, she narrowed her eyes. She'd complimented his actions verbally, but that wasn't how she felt about them inside. After all, House Banfield was the source of Cleo's funds.

"It sounds like he enjoys indebting powerless nobles and knights to himself at House Banfield's expense," she noted.

Thomas broke out in a cold sweat at the ominous air Marie was starting to radiate. Yet he couldn't just keep his news about the Capital Planet to himself, so he steeled himself to keep going. "Well… yes. It seems he's requested quite a bit of funding from House Banfield for one reason or another…"

Recruiting new supporters might've been a necessary step toward Cleo becoming crown prince, but again, he was only bringing in nobles and knights with no pull. If they'd be of some use in the palace, it'd be one thing, but numbers alone were only so helpful. In fact, nobles and knights with no strength to offer would only hinder him. If Cleo poisoned the faction from the inside, Liam could only do so much to repair it.

This would've been a good time to dispatch skillful House Banfield knights to the Capital Planet, but they were busy safeguarding the border with the Autocracy at the moment. Not many knights could act with politics in mind like Tia and Claus, and since House Banfield's territory was always expanding, they were always shorthanded at home.

Marie didn't revere Cleo; if anything, she hated the prince. After all, he descended from the fool who'd petrified her and her men. "And if he just stayed quiet and hindered Calvin like he should, his future would be guaranteed," she grumbled to herself.

Fearful of irritating Marie further, Thomas changed the subject. "A-anyway, you've heard about the exploits of Lady Rosetta's security force, right?"

Marie smiled widely at this new, more lighthearted topic. "I have! She's established quite the force to deal with problems Lord Liam can't address right now, hasn't she? It would be even more formidable if I'd been able to lend her my expertise!"

Marie was very fond of Rosetta, and she was always doing what she could to help her. She'd been close with Rosetta's ancestor two thousand years earlier, before she was petrified; thus, she adored the young woman who bore a striking resemblance to the progenitor Marie knew long ago.

If Rosetta had asked her for help with the security force, Marie would've done anything in her power to be of assistance. Of course, Rosetta hadn't wanted to burden the busy Marie with additional trouble, but her consideration only made Marie a bit despondent.

That said, Thomas was relieved that Marie's mood had improved. "Lady Rosetta is slowly making a name for herself in House Banfield's domain. Many of its citizens await her marriage to Lord Liam impatiently."

"I'd like to say those people are being disrespectful, but truthfully, I feel the same way. I must confess, I was under the impression that the wedding would take place immediately after their noble training concluded."

Marie couldn't rest easy until Liam married and gained an heir. His subjects were all eager for his wedding to be held, but Liam had prioritized this journey over marrying Rosetta. To make matters worse, he refused to listen to advice on the matter.

"Mr. Brian and Amagi can try as much as they like to persuade him, but he just won't listen," Marie sighed.

Thomas hung his head. "I have to admit, I also hope to see Lord Liam married as soon as possible. I wonder whether anything can be done to persuade him?"

Marie thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No, I doubt it."

It could've been considered detrimental that Liam held so much individual power within House Banfield. It was why no one had been able to keep him from going on this trip; proof of his absolute influence, but also proof that no one could stop him. If Claus had needed to prepare to give up his role as head knight simply to ask Liam to return home, then the voices of any average knight or retainer likely wouldn't even reach the count.

In the middle of this conversation, Marie suddenly grew agitated. "Oh—it's time for Lord Liam's regular check-in! Please don't interrupt, Mr. Thomas. This is my duty, after all. Yes, my incredibly… precious…duty!"

Thomas nodded. Marie was obviously *quite* excited for her call with Liam. A small window appeared in midair, displaying the count.

"Lord Liam, it's time for your regular repor—eeeeek!" Marie shrieked.

What he saw onscreen shocked Thomas as well. "Lord Liaaaaam!"

Even the merchant screeched when he witnessed Liam…washing dishes.

"Oh, hey… You're there too, Thomas? Anyway, I'm busy with these dishes, so I'm hanging up now," Liam said, obviously annoyed by the prospect of continuing the call.

Marie brought her face as close as she could to the window to confirm her interpretation of what was unfolding on the other end. "No, Lord Liam! You mustn't do such a thing! Lord Liam, you're this empire's—huh? Lord Liam? Lord Liaaam?!"

The call had cut off.

When she saw Liam doing dishes, Marie had gone white as a sheet. "Nooooo!"

Thomas covered his ears as she continued to scream.

***

Master's wife treated us to dinner. We finished the meal without letting any of the food she'd so graciously prepared for us go to waste. Afterward, I pitched in on the cleanup.

"Sorry to make you help with the dishes." Nina was apologetic.

The way I looked at it, though, she was the wife of a man whom I had the utmost respect for. I couldn't be rude to her, and helping out with something so trivial was the least I could do.

"Don't worry about it. I'm used to washing dishes." In my past life, I'd lived alone at times, so I could easily handle such a chore.

Outside the kitchen, in the living room, Riho and Fuka clowned around with Yasuyuki.

"Just think of me as your big sister, Yasuyuki."

"Is there anyone you don't like, Yasuyuki? Your big sister will cut 'em down for you!"

The two were obviously delighted to have a new family member. Yasuyuki, on the other hand, seemed rather overwhelmed by the pair. Still, Master's son was already something like a little brother to Riho and Fuka. Ellen was a bit more like a niece to them; they were fond of her, but it was only natural that they'd spoil a little brother rotten.

As for Ellen, she watched the three with a dissatisfied look. "Did you two forget that we're raiding the magistrate's mansion tomorrow?"

Wearing an expression that said *"So what?"*, Riho rolled over to face her. "We'll just do the same thing we've done this whole time, right?"

"Except this'll be against fighters who can use the Flash!"

"Maybe. They're hardly worth worrying about, though. They can't really call themselves practitioners of the Way of the Flash."

"That's right," Fuka added, holding Yasuyuki on her lap. "If we lose against them, it'll just mean that we were too weak."

Weaklings couldn't realize their own idea of justice, and we planned to raid the enemy's stronghold in part to demonstrate our own righteousness. We'd cut them all down to prove our superiority.

Finished with the dishes, I wiped my hands and joined the conversation. "I'll contact Marie later. She'll take Master's family into protection, and we'll begin our raid first thing in the morning. Be ready."

Riho and Fuka's eyes sharpened, but they were still smiling. As Way of the Flash fighters, they were probably raring to go. Until now, we hadn't run into anyone worth our time, but our new foes were fellow Way of the Flash users, corrupted though they might be.

I was a bit excited myself. "They laid their hands on our master. I'm sure he's safe…but we have a score to settle with them. Keep the fooling around to a minimum, all right?"

Excited as I was, I also boiled with anger that these people had dared take my master away with them. I wanted to have fun with them, but I was more concerned about ensuring that they knew exactly who they were messing with.

As for the tuition fee for that lesson… It would be the life of each and every one of those so-called "Original Way of the Flash"

fighters.

***

The Guide and G'doire sat atop a tall building. They held wine glasses full of the citizenry's blood; after all, this planet was flooded with the blood of the subjects Chester tormented. Absorbing the negative energy that blanketed the world, the pair waited for the beginning of a spectacular show.

"Mm…I prefer despair that's matured a bit longer," said the Guide. "The freshness of this is quite nice too, though. This Chester shows promise."

Chester was a villain through and through—a true evil magistrate. He tormented his subjects with heavy taxes, not even seeing them as human beings. He killed anyone who stood up to him, and sometimes killed simply for fun, whether or not his victims had done anything to defy him. That was the man to whom the Guide and G'doire had given the Way of the Flash.

G'doire was just as pleased with how things had turned out. "Once Chester and his knights master the Way of the Flash, I'll have them fight my pawns as well. Then I'll create a style that can triumph over the Way of the Flash."

A complete accident had produced the Way of the Flash, and neither entity accepted it as legitimate. It was a ridiculous sword style that had come out of nowhere and had no history. It wasn't to G'doire's liking, and the Guide considered it something that had only caused him suffering. Once they were finished with it, both desired only to see it stamped out.

"Sounds good to me," said the Guide. "As long as Liam's dead, I won't have any complaints. This place really is nice, though. It's a cesspool of negative emotions." He sighed with a mixture of relief, bliss, and several other sentiments.

G'doire looked down into his glass with delight. "Chester is from a fine lineage. His whole family is pretty rotten."

It wasn't as if the magistrate was uniquely evil; House Farnham was full of people who were the epitome of rotten Imperial nobility.

"Once Liam's dead, perhaps I'll give them my support, and crumble the entire Empire from inside," the Guide mused.

He hoped that Chester would take everything that belonged to Liam. He'd steal everything Liam had built up, and with all that power, usher the Empire into a dark age. The Guide's lips curled into a smile as he imagined the surge of negative emotions such circumstances would bring about.

"To Liam's death!" he cheered, raising his glass.

But G'doire didn't join him. "Why're *you* leading the toast? I'm the one who put in all the work on this plan. *I* gathered formidable villains here, and *I* made sure they learned the Way of the Flash quickly."

"Huh? Oh, um, right."

Liam had stolen too much of his strength for the Guide to stand up to G'doire right now. All he could do was agree, allowing G'doire to think that the whole thing had been his idea. The Guide gauged G'doire's mood carefully as he boiled with rage inside.

All this is Liam's fault! I should be more powerful than G'doire! I can't believe I have to bow and scrape to him just to get rid of Liam!

The Guide's pride had been torn to shreds, but he endured that in order to bring Liam down.

I swear I'm going to kill you, Liam.

The Guide, who burned hot with the flames of vengeance, couldn't wait for the next day to come.

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Meanwhile, Chester was in contact with the head of House Farnham—his father.

"Liam's still on that planet you manage?"

"Yes, Father," Chester said, pasting a subservient smile onto his face. He had to play nice with his father now, although he hated the man for rejecting him as his successor. It was all in order to get ahead later.

"The military's ready to move. For Liam to enter our territory accompanied by such low numbers… I can only imagine that he's come out on top in war and politics too many times, and due to that, has grown arrogant."

"What sort of numbers were you able to gather?"

"I got other local lords on my side and put together a force of sixty thousand. We'll also send thirty thousand of our own ships."

"Thirty thousand, eh? Wonderful. From what I hear, Banfield's got something like three thousand ships from his personal army with him. I think this will work out nicely for us."

Inside, however, Chester clicked his tongue.

I know I didn't give you much time to work with—but only thirty thousand, you lousy old man? I guess that's about what I expected, though. House Farnham's forces are all for show. I should consider myself lucky that he was even able to mobilize thirty thousand ships, I suppose.

The local lords were in more or less the same situation, but they'd gathered twenty times Liam's numbers to face him. However experienced Liam was when facing greater numbers, he couldn't easily triumph against a force so much larger than his own.

This was also the territory of House Farnham and the other local lords. They'd have the advantage. Liam couldn't use the tactics he normally relied on either. In his battle with the Autocracy, he'd forced the enemy to retreat after taking out their commander—but Chester's father, Count Farnham, wouldn't participate in this battle. There would obviously be a fleet commander, but if they were taken out, another person could easily serve as their replacement. That gave Liam's side more difficult conditions for victory.

I wanted more numbers on our side, but this is within expectations. I'll kill Liam and use this as my first step to success.

Liam would be surrounded, with nowhere to run.

***

The next morning, we made sure we were ready and stood in front of the grounds of the magistrate's mansion. For a unified look, we were all dressed in Japanese-style clothing.

In contrast to the rest of the impoverished planet, the magistrate's mansion was lavish. I would ordinarily have considered that praiseworthy, but I was in a bad mood at the moment.

"You guys ready?"

Fuka wore a smile, but it was the kind of look you might see on a vicious, feral beast. "Anytime! We'll take Master back and bathe the rest of 'em in their own blood!"

Riho's smile was cold. "The lineage of the Original Way of the Flash ends here. *Our* Way of the Flash will be the one to survive."

Riho and Fuka would show no mercy to the enemy, whether they were fellow Way of the Flash wielders or not. Their ferocity encouraged me. I'd been a bit worried about their immaturity on this trip, but it seemed that they'd grown more than I'd thought.

Ellen alone was nervous, which I couldn't bear to see. "Ellen, this'll be your first battle, so stay by my side, okay?"

"Y-yes!" She quickly bowed her head.

Riho and Fuka spared her only a glance. They'd leave her to me and focus on killing our enemies.

Before the large, heavy outer door leading to the mansion, I unsheathed my sword slightly. That movement sliced the door to pieces; it crumbled to the ground with a great crash.

"Let's go. Begin the attack."

Chapter 11:
The Original Way of the Flash

STEPPING OVER THE WRECKAGE of the thick door, we entered the mansion's grounds. Though I called it a mansion, this *was* a universe of intergalactic nations. The building's scale was enormous, but it was actually small compared to a count's mansion like House Banfield's. Maybe that was a bad comparison, though; it was definitely too big for a group of only four people to raid.

The mansion's architecture was basically in a classical Western style, but the current owner's bad taste was on full display, since half-nude statues of women were positioned here and there throughout the grounds. The place didn't exactly scream "part of an intergalactic Empire" to me. Still, it was kind of neat how the building's external walls changed color depending on how the light hit them.

We were making our way across the yard toward the mansion when the ground began to move, exposing numerous unmanned weapons. They looked like automatic guns meant to target intruders. Those guns all fired lasers at us simultaneously, but we just countered the lasers with Flashes.

Fuka, in particular, had a fearsome grin; she could fire off more Flashes at once than the rest of us. "Ha! Those are pointless! I can cut 'em down as fast as they can pop up!"

Each Flash she unleashed destroyed trees, statues, and other features of the mansion grounds.

Then Riho stepped forward, putting her hand on her sword hilt. I glanced up to see a sniper on the roof just as Riho's Flash deflected a bullet from his gun. There wasn't just one sniper, but as the group fired on us, Riho swatted down each and every bullet.

"You think you can kill us with toys like those?" she sneered as she continued to deflect the snipers' attacks.

My eyes wandered over the mansion, as I had the feeling that we really were facing stronger enemies than usual this time.

"They were waiting for us," I noted. "Guess they've got pretty good ears."

I couldn't see or sense noncombatants inside the mansion, so they must've been evacuated before we arrived. Instead, only hired thugs—or were they soldiers?—awaited us.

"Here they are!" one thug cried. "We kill 'em, and we'll be set for life!"

They broke through the mansion's windows, all carrying their preferred weapons.

Fuka stepped forward, unleashing her double-sword Flashes. "Stay out of this, small fry. We're only after those using the Original Way of the Flash."

In an instant, all the thugs and soldiers had been cut down.

Showing no interest in them whatsoever, Riho pointed in another direction. "I'm going this way."

Riho had indicated the right side of the mansion, so Fuka drew her swords and pointed toward left. "I'll go this way, then."

I sensed the Original Way of the Flash students inside the mansion observing us. I knew they'd likely take action themselves if they saw us split our forces.

"Do what you want," I said, "but tell me if you run into the instructor. If I don't finish that one off myself, I won't be able to face Master."

Fuka scowled when I used my position as their older-brother apprentice to demand the best foe. "Can't we just do first come, first served? I want to go after the instructor too."

Riho agreed. "It's not fair if you get him all to yourself."

I was an unfair guy, though. "Do what your brother apprentice tells you. Got it?"

I smiled at them, and they reluctantly agreed. With that out of the way, I brought Ellen with me into the mansion.

"Now, let's teach this trash what the real Way of the Flash is."

***

From above, the Guide and G'doire watched Liam's crew charge into the mansion.

"Looks like the show's getting started." The Guide spread his arms, thrilled that Liam was running right into his trap.

Thirty Way of the Flash users waited inside Chester's mansion. The Guide did fear that Liam might break through them all, but a huge army of his enemies was also headed for this planet. Even if he beat Chester and everyone else, Liam would still be a rat in a trap here.

G’doire’s octopus-like head was red with glee at the prospect of witnessing a fight between Way of the Flash wielders. He spewed steam in his excitement.

“Fight! Spill blood! Entertain me with conflict! Your lives have worth only when you risk them for my enjoyment!”

Humans were nothing more than entertainment for G’doire, and he couldn’t wait to see how Liam would die.

For his part, the Guide would be happy so long as that happened, however it occurred. After the day’s battle, his fate would finally no longer be tied to Liam.

“There’s nowhere to run, Liam! You die today!”

***

Having parted from the rest of the group, Fuka explored the left side of the mansion, defeating unmanned guns and hired thugs along the way. Enemies simply fell to the ground around Fuka as she walked; an ordinary person watching her would’ve had no idea what was going on.

One thug crawled on the ground with an arm cut off, crying, “You’ve gotta be kidding me! If I’d known there’d be monsters like you—” Before he could finish, his head went flying and rolled off along the ground.

“Tch…missed one,” Fuka grumbled, continuing to walk along.

Suddenly she stopped, looking up at the mansion’s roof. Just a few centimeters in front of her, several unleashed Flashes slashed

across the ground and wall powerfully enough to furrow the ground. If Fuka had kept walking, it would've been her that was slashed.

There were students of the Original Way of the Flash up on the building's roof. One was Morio, the high disciple they'd met the day before.

"Only the four of you are breaking in? You're either reckless or just plain stupid. Well—either way, you'll be dying today, so I guess that makes you stupid regardless."

The Original Way of the Flash students with Morio guffawed.

Smiling slightly, Fuka cut into her surroundings with her two swords. However, she was up against fellow Way of the Flash users. Her slashes were repelled with Flashes of their own, and not one of her opponents fell to her initial assault.

Until now, one Flash had been enough to kill almost all of Fuka's enemies, but that wasn't so with these foes. Fuka wasn't surprised by that, however. She simply glared at the Original Way of the Flash students.

Once he'd parried Fuka's Flash, Morio seemed assured of his victory. "I see… It appears you do have some skill. You're probably almost as good as us. You don't seem to have a mind for tactics, though."

Morio had ten other students with him. Even if they were all weaker than Fuka individually, their power as a group would be overwhelming.

Morio grinned at the silent Fuka. “You must be a bunch of bullheaded brawn-over-brains types to split such a small group. Or are you just overconfident ’cause you never met anyone who could match you in a fight before?”

When Morio called her overconfident, Fuka drew her dual swords and held them at the ready, although the Way of the Flash had no prescribed stance.

As Morio gave her a dubious look, Fuka smiled despite her disadvantage. “You talk too much,” she said. “Hurry up and come at me, you third-rate punks!”

She let loose her Flashes. The group of students tried to block them, as they had before; several couldn’t manage it, erupting in sprays of blood.

Morio looked over at his fallen comrades, shocked, and saw that even their swords had been slashed through. He looked back at Fuka, grinding his teeth.

She, on the other hand, just appeared disappointed. “That attack only got three? That’s fewer than I thought I’d get.”

Seeing her assume a stance again, Morio shouted to his comrades, “Everyone attack her at once! Don’t let her counterattack!”

Now that her enemies had finally started taking her seriously, Fuka grinned fearlessly. “That’s what you should’ve done from the start.”

***

After entering the mansion, Riho walked down a long hallway on her own. Of course, for a hallway, it was rather vast. The ceiling was three meters high and the walls six meters apart.

A man eventually appeared from the darkness at the far end of the corridor. He was large, with blue eyes, and his blond hair was tied behind his head.

"Just one for me?" Riho mused. "Guess I picked the wrong direction."

The man introduced himself to Riho, who was disappointed to face only a single opponent. "I'm Gideon, the Original Way of the Flash's first apprentice. Don't lump me in with the other riffraff."

This intimidating man had referred to himself as the "first apprentice," and he brimmed with confidence, which did pique Riho's interest a bit. She tested him with a Flash, which Gideon parried without concern.

"Wow… Pretty impressive." Having acknowledged her opponent's ability, she began throwing more Flashes at him.

Again, Gideon easily matched them. "You're pretty full of yourself for a little girl."

Sparks flew between the combatants—but not *halfway* between them. They were actually closer to Riho, who was being pushed back.

"I guess you really are the first apprentice," she said.

"And you're pretty good for a girl. It'd be a waste to kill you, so I could make you my apprentice, if you want."

At Gideon's suggestion, Riho saw red.

Because of Riho's long, silky-straight blue hair and well-groomed appearance, people tended to think that she was rather innocent. Fuka dressed more loudly, and Riho looked like her opposite. But Riho was actually the more emotionally unstable of the two.

Her face went blank. "You scumbag. For me, there's only one master in this world!"

Riho sent a death glare at Gideon, her blue hair whipping the air behind her as Flashes continued to fly between them. The mansion's tense air chilled all at once.

Even faced with this change in Riho, Gideon kept up his confident smile, apparently still convinced that he was stronger than her. "You're not bad-looking, so I was thinking of making you my woman. It's a pity."

Sparks flew between them once more as their Flashes crashed against each other. Slashes appeared in the hallway; glass broke, and walls and doors went flying, hacked to pieces. Gouges covered the ceiling and floor.

Gideon gained a small step forward, and Riho took a step back, a sour look on her face.

Scowling, Gideon barked, "I don't let anyone stand against me. Girl or not, you'd better prepare yourself!"

He took another step forward, and Riho stepped back. Her expression was tense, cold sweat dripping down her back.

***

I stopped before a large door. "Ellen, wait here."

"Why, Master?"

I sensed strong fighters throughout the mansion, but a particularly large number of them waited behind this door.

"There are nineteen people in the next room," I explained. "Considering the number Riho and Fuka are facing, the person farthest back must be the magistrate, somewhere deeper within. I want you to stay away from here."

"B-but…!"

Ellen had been determined to stick with me, but when she began to protest, I had to dissuade her. "As you are now, you'll only hinder me."

I glared down at her, and Ellen hung her head, her fists clenched. "Yes, sir…"

When I saw how upset she was, I thought I might've gone too far. Under these circumstances, though, I'd had no choice. Even I couldn't relax against this many foes.

Despite sensing strong Way of the Flash users behind the door, I stepped through on my own. Waiting for me on the other side were nineteen students of the Original Way of the Flash. The large door swung shut behind me, and I heard the clank of metal on metal; it must've locked itself.

"How pointless." I couldn't understand why they'd bother locking me in here when a single Flash could blow away any door in my path.

As I faced the group, a man stepped toward me. He wasn't that tall, but he had long, thick arms. The gut on him told me that his

training style had been somewhat unbalanced, but he at least projected a formidable aura. He certainly seemed stronger than the others in the room.

"We've been waiting for you, Sir Liam. I'm Jeff, a high disciple of the Original Way of the Flash. I suppose I'm not even worthy of introducing myself to you, but I'm pleased to make your acquaintance nonetheless."

Jeff seemed rather obsequious. His long hair wasn't styled in any particular way except to hide his face, which gave him something of a sullen look.

"It's *Lord* Liam."

I didn't even want to see these poor excuses for Way of the Flash fighters. Fuming, I squared off against them. The fighters grouped behind Jeff scowled, obviously annoyed at my attitude.

Jeff, however…laughed. "Kee hee hee hee! My apologies. I heard that you were a great ruler, but it seems you're arrogant and narrowminded in person. That makes you seem a lot more human."

This man clearly looked down on me, and I was curious about whether his confidence was feigned. Still, since he'd called me narrowminded, he had to be a fairly good judge of character. Not a good judge of *ability*, however.

"Enough talk. Why haven't you come at me yet?"

Smirking, Jeff offered to bargain. "That's simple. I've got a deal for you, if you want us to spare your life."

"I'll at least hear what you have to say."

"Our lord—the magistrate—really admires you, Sir Liam. If you'll join forces with him, he's willing to let you off. Well, I suppose it'll be more like you work for him from now on. Kee hee hee hee!"

I'd wondered what kind of deal they had to offer me, but it turned out not even to be worth hearing. The magistrate *admired* me, though? I was a bit interested in Chester now. Still, I didn't like the way he was patronizing me. Besides, did they really think someone like *me* would work for a mere magistrate? What a joke.

"Worthless. Now let my master go."

"I'm afraid that's not happening. I called that a deal, but you see, we have the overwhelming advantage—don't you think it'd be to your benefit to cooperate?"

"What?" My anger built as the enemy claimed to have the advantage.

"Sixty thousand ships are converging on this planet," Jeff explained. "All part of Calvin's faction, mind you. I can't wait to see what they'll do with you when we hand you over to them."

Jeff clearly had a twisted personality to match the smile on his face. His boast enabled me to decide what I'd do with this group.

"I see. All right, then, I'll kill you and rescue Master myself. That's all there is to it."

His offer was clearly never going to work out in the first place, but still, Jeff shook his head theatrically.

"I guess the deal's off, then," he said.

The Original Way of the Flash students all unleashed attacks at me at once. This room must've been especially sturdy, because their multiple Flashes left only scrapes on the walls. One struck right next to me, scoring the floor.

"Nineteen people attacking me at once is quite a spectacle."

Slashes rained down on me unseen, since the Way of the Flash focused purely on killing one's enemy without any kind of show. As gouges etched the room all around me, Jeff grinned. Did he think of himself as a beast who had his prey cornered? A hunter?

"Ready for more?"

"Of course," I replied.

I took off running, and Flashes followed after me. Slashes hacked the floor behind me, and if I'd stopped, I surely would've been next. I fled through the room with no regard for shame or honor. Sparks flew around me as I deflected only the attacks that threatened to strike me. It was a strange sight—as if I were being followed around by a shower of sparks.

As Jeff watched me, he pointed and laughed. "You won't win just by running around like that! Guess it doesn't take much to beat a Swordmaster, huh?"

I knew from experience that fights between Way of the Flash wielders weren't straightforward. Still, I hadn't known that I'd have so much trouble facing off against this many opponents at once. Individually, none of these students was as strong as Riho or Fuka.

Against nineteen of them, though, I was still in more danger than I ever had been before.

"Tch!"

I ran up a pillar, then jumped off to sprint horizontally along the wall, feeling as though I'd become a ninja or something. My foes could still attack me at their leisure, and I had my hands full just defending myself; I was at a complete disadvantage.

As I continued to run, the room became a mess of gouges. The Original Way of the Flash students laughed at me.

"*This* is the fearsome Liam?!"

"We've proven that we're tougher!"

"The Original Way of the Flash is the strongest sword style out there! We'll take Liam's head as proof!"

"I'm taking his head!"

"No, I am! I'm getting the reward from the magistrate!"

Now these idiots were jockeying to see which of them could kill me—fighting over my head, all for whatever meager reward the magistrate could grant them.

Before I knew it, slashed rips covered my kimono.

"I didn't think I could be cornered so easily," I said bitterly, disgusted by my own powerlessness. How could I master the Way of the Flash like this?

Drawing my sword, I went after one man in particular, noticing something off about his movements. He blocked my blow, but his face had lost all its confidence; he instead looked nervous.

"Eep!"

My foe was afraid, but I didn't have time to finish him off. Flashes were already flying my way once again, so I sprinted away once more.

"What're you doing, you disgrace?!" Jeff yelled at the man I'd attacked.

"S-sorry!"

Would a swordsman capable of using the Flash really get so flustered just because his opponent got close to him? I knew I was stronger than the man, but the way he'd reacted still seemed strange. I was curious about it, but for the moment, I had no time for idle thoughts. I needed to focus on the fight.

"Just a little more… Just a little more…"

I was reaching my limit. It was getting hard to breathe, and my body was screaming. I ran right through my opponents' Flashes, dodging them only by hairs' breadths. My clothes were being shredded, and I'd been grazed on one cheek, but I didn't let the blood dripping down my face distract me.

"A little more… A little more, and I…"

My enemies were growing impatient, and they seemed to decide to surround me.

"How long do you think you can run from us, you coward?!" Jeff demanded, then shouted instructions at his group. "Everyone—encircle him and beat him down!"

The students split up and unleashed Flashes at me from all directions. I had nowhere to run, and I couldn't deflect them all in time, so I finally took some damage.

"Geh!"

After that, more and more of the enemy's Flashes struck me. I hadn't seen my own blood fly through the air like this since my harsh training with Master.

My foes' voices came from all around me.

"We did it! We beat Liam!"

"Not yet! His wounds are shallow!"

"No—he can't move anymore. I'll go take his head!"

As my blood sprayed, I fell to my knees, my consciousness growing hazy. I thought back to those hard, painful days of training. Yasushi's face suddenly flashed before my eyes. I saw him smiling as he told me something.

"That's right," I mumbled. "Back then, he…"

Master Yasushi had said something to me then. It was right after I first became capable of using the Flash, and I was practicing that move alone over and over. I'd asked him how I could get my Flash to be more like his, but Master wouldn't tell me. Instead, he'd said something else.

"Lord Liam, it's important to stop and think sometimes as well."

I'd cocked my head at that. *"Stop and think?"*

"Right. There's not necessarily only one truth out there. Everything can seem different depending on how you look at it.

Martial arts are about doubting that which you've always believed and striving to improve. When you hit a wall, you must first doubt yourself."

"Doubt myself?"

"Yes! First, doubt yourself! Have you got it? You've got it, right? Just because you can use the Flash now, you mustn't become full of yourself!"

I felt like he'd been awfully insistent about doubting things.

As I remembered that moment with my master, time seemed to slow around me. Doubt what? Myself? The Way of the Flash? I could never surpass my master, so was something fundamentally wrong with how I was doing things? Had I been wrong from the very beginning?

I pictured the Flash my master had shown me…and my eyes opened wide.

"Wait… Master never unsheathed his sword in the first place?"

I'd arrived at the truth.

While I knelt there, unmoving, the Original Way of the Flash students were racing to reach me first. One drew his sword, holding it up high to remove my head.

At that same moment, I heard the electronic voice of the training armor I wore under my kimono. *"Training armor limits exceeded. Removing restraints."*

Freed from the restraints that had held me back until now, I unsheathed my sword and cut the man closest to me without even

using the Flash. My sword drew an arc as I pulled it from its sheath, bisecting the man and ending his life.

Jeff and the rest of his group backed up, surprised that I hadn't been finished off yet.

I stood and looked at the ceiling. "The truth sure is cruel."

I'd finally figured out the truth of the Way of the Flash.

Chapter 12:
Liam's Awakening

GIDEON HAD DRIVEN RIHO UP against a wall. A portion of her beautiful long hair had been cut away, and blood seeped through her clothes. She was out of breath. To anyone watching, it would have been clear that she was losing.

Gideon looked bored, as though he'd had enough of the fight. "This is the Way of the Flash, the strongest sword style in existence? But you're weak…too weak. I suppose it really was the Way of the Flash that was impressive, not you guys."

Wordlessly, Riho deflected his Flashes.

Gideon seemingly wanted to bring the battle to an end. "I'm the only one who needs to use the strongest style. I'll kill you, Liam, and everyone else who knows about the Way of the Flash. Then I'll *become* the Way of the Flash myself!" He planned to kill even the magistrate, commandeering the strongest sword style for himself and himself alone.

Gideon lunged forward, unleashing a Flash with all his strength behind it…

But at that moment, Riho lunged too, deflecting his Flash—and pushing him back.

Gideon reared backward from the force of both Riho's blow and his own shock, his eyes widening. He couldn't believe his full-strength Flash hadn't made it through to the girl.

Riho sighed quietly. “I’ve been watching your movements. Frankly, I’m disappointed. And all that stuff about being the only one who’d use the Way of the Flash? So childish.”

Gideon flushed bright red at Riho’s provocation and tried to unleash another Flash at her. “You can’t even beat me!” he yelled. “What do you know?!”

Riho’s Flash landed before Gideon’s did. He touched his face, feeling the cut there. Having taken her attack, Gideon must have realized something. He started to tremble.

Disappointed by his fearful reaction, Riho hung her head. “I wanted to see how the Original Way of the Flash built on the style, but it’s really just complete garbage that doesn’t involve anything but the Flash. I can’t even laugh at that. You’re lacking in every way. Not even your Flash is polished.”

Gideon could indeed use the Flash technique, but that was it. The Original Way of the Flash, then, was a style that focused on learning that move and absolutely nothing else.

In front of Gideon, Riho took a quick-draw stance. He tried to deflect her attack with a Flash. A second later, though, he was split in half down the center, his two sides falling to the left and right.

Blood spread around Gideon’s two halves as Riho gazed down at him. There was no respect for a worthy opponent whatsoever in her eyes.

"You have no right to call what you do the Way of the Flash," she muttered, walking off in search of her next foe.

***

Facing off against seven adversaries on the mansion's lawn, Fuka was covered in wounds, her clothes torn to shreds. Nevertheless, she laughed as she fought the foes around her, who were all throwing Flashes her way.

The sight of her flabbergasted Morio. "How can you keep dodging them?! Why won't you go down?!"

How was she still fighting? The men far outnumbered her.

On the other hand, while battling them, Fuka had realized something. Where Riho had figured it out through cool analysis, Fuka learned it more through instinct. "You guys really can't do anything *but* the Flash, can you?"

When she ridiculed them, the students scowled and unleashed more powerful Flashes at her.

Fuka just danced through them, though. "That's pointless. They're just stronger than before, right? You use the Flash like *this!*"

She swung her two swords, cutting down three of the less skilled students.

As everyone else gaped at her, Fuka shouldered her swords. "Your Flashes are fake," she proclaimed.

Morio drew his blade and pointed it at her. "They're not fake. This is the real Way of the Flash—the strongest sword style in the Empire!"

"No. They're fake. With everything else stripped away like this, Flashes are worthless. Watching you guys, I can see how impressive Master and my brother apprentice really are."

While she was disappointed with the Original Way of the Flash, she was grateful to be reminded of just how frightening her master and Liam were, although that was all. These were strong enemies, and they made her realize what she herself lacked.

"I understand now, after seeing you guys. The Flash alone isn't enough. No wonder my brother apprentice prioritizes the basics so much."

As Fuka mused to herself, Morio slashed at her, panicked. His instincts told him to fear Fuka, and to finish her off before she did whatever she planned to do next.

Fuka merely narrowed her eyes without moving, but as Morio charged forward, he was cut to ribbons. When the other students saw that, they turned their backs and ran.

Fuka's mouth widened in a smile. "Hey now, you can't do that! In the Way of the Flash, if you turn your back and run from the enemy…you're better off dead, right?"

Fuka leaped into the air and closed the distance between them, shooting Flashes at the scattering students. She twisted her body, sending the Flashes in different directions with the force of her momentum.

"Devour them, Flash…!"

Fuka attacked them with her specialty: a great number of Flashes only just strong enough to finish off whoever they struck. She slashed through the students' vital points with incredible precision. By the time her feet hit the ground again, she'd finished off all her opponents.

Sheathing her swords, Fuka took a deep breath, assessing her injuries. It had been a long time since she'd been covered in so many wounds and so much blood.

"Well, it's not as bad as when I fought my brother apprentice."

Victorious in her battle with these Original Way of the Flash students, Fuka set off to find her next adversary.

***

"The truth sure is cruel."

My kimono was tattered, and the training suit I'd worn underneath had purged itself, unable to continue functioning.

I took off my top so that I wore only my hakama. Blood oozed from my cuts, but none of the wounds were fatal, so I ignored them. Sheathing my sword, I looked up at the ceiling. Its lights were so bright. I was deeply ashamed of the misunderstanding I'd labored under this whole time.

"Master never took his sword out of its sheath in the first place…"

Around me, Original Way of the Flash students continued shooting Flashes at me as though they had no regard whatsoever for my revelation.

I nudged my sword out of its sheath with my thumb, then pushed it back in with a satisfying click. That was all I did. I didn't draw it, and I didn't use magic to create a blade. Even so, that was enough.

Seventeen of the students, High Disciple Jeff included, were cut to pieces, dropping to the floor in a bloody mess. There was no spray of blood; their bodies simply fell, blood pouring out of them a moment later.

I hadn't unsheathed my blade. I'd only made that sound with the guard. That alone had sliced apart seventeen people and covered the room in a mess of slash marks.

The secret behind the Way of the Flash—which I'd finally realized after so much harsh training—was a state of mind I couldn't reach through power, skill, or magic. The techniques I'd used up until now were nothing but imitations of the *true* Flash.

"No wonder Master doesn't carry a sword. You don't *need* a sword."

Now that I thought about it, when I ran into him in Viscount—now Baron—Razel's domain, Master hadn't carried a sword either. It wasn't just that he didn't have it with him—he hadn't needed it in the first place.

When I understood the level at which Master existed, I trembled. Right now, I didn't think I could use the Flash myself without a sword. I felt that, if I tried, I'd probably fail.

The true Flash wasn't so easily achieved that I could use it whenever I wanted; there was always a chance of failure. Still, it was

way more powerful than the technique I'd used up until now.

"So that's the true Flash," I murmured, looking toward the one foe who still remained.

The lucky guy who'd just happened to avoid my Flash was Jeff. He stood covered in wounds, looking as though he had no idea what had just occurred.

"What was that Flash just now?" he demanded. "It wasn't the Flash we use. Why? How?!"

He didn't want to accept what had happened here.

As I approached him slowly, Jeff trembled and flung a terrified Flash toward me. He couldn't even aim it properly, so I didn't need to dodge. The closer I got to Jeff, the more he seemed to lose his mind.

"St-stay back! Stay baaaaack!" he wailed.

It felt pathetic that he was a member of the same school as me.

When I reached him, he fell to the floor. An ammonia-like reek came from the puddle forming under him, but I ignored it.

"Where's your master?" I asked him.

"Huh?"

"The instructor of the Original Way of the Flash. What's his name? Where is he? And my master better be safe."

I'd finally learned the true Flash, but I couldn't control it well. Jeff's survival proved that. Right now, though, I considered that good luck. Since one person from his group was still alive, I could ask questions.

"Answer me. Where's your master—and my master?"

"W-with the magistrate—"

I hadn't sensed anyone strong near the magistrate, but that was enough information for now. With a normal swipe of my sword, I sent Jeff's head flying.

As I returned my sword to its sheath, I clicked the guard against the sheath's mouth. When I did, a thick door blocking the path deeper into the mansion crumbled into pieces.

I'd been wrong from the beginning. The true secret of the Way of the Flash was to cut without drawing your sword at all. I was almost a hundred years old, but I'd only just figured that out. I was embarrassed by how I'd spent all the time prior to now.

"Okay… I should get Ellen and head deeper in."

Having overcome one of the major obstacles before me, I decided to fetch Ellen and move on.

Now I just needed to rescue Master Yasushi.

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"What do you mean, you don't even need to draw your sword?!"

The Guide couldn't make heads or tails of what he was witnessing. The secret to a sword style was not to draw your blade? He couldn't believe what Liam was saying. He didn't *want* to believe it. He'd never thought that someone could seriously cut through things without even using a sword.

G'doire felt the same way. "Sure, some people say that winning without drawing your sword is the best tactic—but that's not what

they mean! How are you even doing that?!”

A slash technique that wasn’t swordplay or magic? Both the Guide and G’doire were baffled by the answer Liam had derived. To take him down, they’d prepared plenty of enemies who could use the Way of the Flash, yet he’d defeated them all and become even stronger in the process.

This was a nightmare for the Guide.

“G’doire, at this point—eep!”

He’d been about to suggest his next plan, but found that his companion was bright red and steaming. Right now, Liam didn’t just bother G’doire—he was the object of the entity’s utmost hatred.

“I expected a bloodbath, but not *this*! That man’s inhuman! I need to crush him… I *will* crush Liam here!”

Liam’s Way of the Flash wasn’t even a sword technique anymore. Recognizing that, G’doire latched onto the Guide with his octopus tentacles. He began strangling the Guide, taking out his anger on him.

“St-stop! I can’t breathe!”

“This is all because of youuu! What did you even create that thing fooor?!”

Without the Guide’s interference, Liam would never have grown as strong as he was now—that was true. Still, the Guide didn’t know how he could possibly have predicted it.

“You’re being unreasonable!”

But Liam had set off all G'doire's alarm bells. "Whatever I have to do, I'll bury Liam here! He can't be allowed to live! His blade could reach *us*!"

The steam coming off G'doire turned black and spread out around them. It reached space and drew Liam's enemies toward it.

The Guide watched this as he choked. *Liam's done the impossible, but it's got to be over for him now. G'doire's serious about this, after all.*

The Guide could put up with a little strangulation if it finally meant the end of Liam.

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Two evil entities were determined to kill Liam.

Black steam rose into space, spreading but remaining invisible to humans.

Observing this from the planet's surface was the dog spirit who still chased after Liam. It glared up at G'doire and the Guide and growled.

Unable to leave the two evil entities be, the dog howled at the sky.

Its howl passed through space itself.

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"Hmm? Thought I just heard a dog howl. Well, whatever."

In the room Chester had prepared for battle was a small cell with Yasushi inside. The cell was in a prominent position, almost as if

it displayed a prize. In that case, the prize would've been Yasushi—but who would want him?

At any rate, Chester was acting strange. A moment ago, he'd been full of confidence, but now he looked nervous.

"Everyone lost? All thirty skilled members of the Original Way of the Flash school?!"

As Chester received this report from his subordinates, Yasushi scoffed. *Oh? Guess an enemy's attacking. Good, good. Take them all out and rescue me! Is God answering my prayers?*

Ever since Yasushi's capture, he'd prayed to God every day: "Please have someone come save me." After all, he couldn't do anything on his own, so he could only rely on divine intervention. Now he was blissfully thinking that his prayers had been answered. If Chester's enemies were attacking, then they might rescue the magistrate's captive, Yasushi.

With that faint hope in his heart, Yasushi suddenly felt a chill. He shuddered as the cold sensation raced down his spine. *Am I getting sick?* He decided to warm himself up and get a good sleep that night.

While he distracted himself with such thoughts, the door to the room was sliced apart. *Oh, my savior's finally… Huh?* As Yasushi's eyes gleamed with hope, two figures emerged from the wreckage of the destroyed door. His savior…was Liam.

A grown man now, Liam was brawnier than Yasushi remembered. Spotting Yasushi, he called out, "Master, I'm sorry I'm late! I'm here to rescue you!"

When he saw Liam covered in wounds, Yasushi sat up straight. He attempted to feign calm, but inside he was screaming. *Not* him*, God! Anyone but hiiim! Take it baaack! Liam's the one person I didn't want finding meeeee!*

Of all people, the man he'd least wanted to track him down had come to liberate him.

Behind Liam was a young red-haired girl who called Liam "Master." She told him, "I don't see the instructor for the Original Way of the Flash, Master."

"We can just ask the magistrate there." Liam addressed Chester. "Now, I take it you're the one who abducted our master. I hope you're ready for the consequences."

Liam's voice was awfully low as he threatened the magistrate, and heavy silence descended on the room. Was that pressure produced by Liam's aura as a swordsman or something? In any case, it was hard for Yasushi to even breathe, and cold sweat poured down his back too. Yet that wasn't the end of his problems.

"Wait. You beat me here?"

The next person to appear through the doorway was a ragged-looking Riho. As soon as she entered the room and laid eyes on Yasushi, she broke into a big smile.

"It's Master! Masteeer!" Riho waved.

Then Fuka raced into the room behind her. She also was covered in wounds, and teared up when she saw Yasushi. "Finally… we've finally found you! We're here to save you, Master!"

Yasushi did his best to smile at the four who'd come to his rescue, giving them a small nod. "I'm glad to see you all too." *I never wanted to see any of you again! I sent you two to defeat Liam, so why are you two and him together?!*

This was just about the worst situation possible for Yasushi, and he missed whatever important thing Chester was saying, but the magistrate held some kind of detonator switch.

"Don't come any closer! If you take even one more step, your master will be blown to—wha—?!"

The moment Chester showed them the detonator, it was cut to pieces. Then people started to appear out of the floor and walls near Yasushi. These masked figures had to work for Liam.

"Master Liam, we've disarmed the explosives," said one of the mysterious strangers. "No traps remain."

Liam only nodded in response, then turned to the trembling magistrate.

The thick aura coming off Liam terrified Chester, who drew his sword. "Y-you monster!"



He threw a Flash at Liam—if a crude one—but Liam parried it. When he saw sparks burst between them, Chester must've realized that he'd failed. He fired as many Flashes as he could at Liam, but Liam blocked them all.

As Chester went into a full panic, Liam turned to the red-haired girl beside him. "This is perfect. Ellen, you'll face him."

"Yes, sir."

Ellen stepped forward to oppose Chester.

Chapter 13:
Swordsman of the Way of the Flash

TO SAVE MASTER YASUSHI, we'd busted into the magistrate's mansion. Upon reaching the room where the magistrate awaited us, we found Master Yasushi in a cell. Seeing how Chester had treated my master enraged me, but when he started throwing ersatz Flashes at me in a panic, I realized that this was a perfect opportunity. Chester's abilities and character were both ideal for the task I had in mind.

"Can you do it, Ellen?" I asked.

She responded in a calm voice. "I can."

Her expression was determined, but I saw her hands shaking. She was trying to suppress her aversion to killing through sheer willpower. Her breathing was unsteady; she was clearly pushing herself because she was in front of me.

"Ellen, I won't be upset if you want to run away."

"Huh?" Ellen looked up at me, too surprised to say anything else.

"I saw potential in you, so I took you in as my student. But there's no turning back after this. If you kill him, you'll never be able to return to an ordinary life."

I was the one who'd pulled her into life as a warrior, but this late in the game, I was now having second thoughts. I'd cared for her too

long… I'd developed almost a father's love. I knew that was pretty pathetic of me, but…

Riho and Fuka were too preoccupied with the sight of our master to notice the pathetic things I was saying. Either that, or they just pretended not to hear me.

I put my hands on Ellen's shoulders. "I want you to make this decision for yourself. I won't criticize your choice, no matter what it is."

What I really wanted to tell her was to choose something other than the path of the sword. But I had the feeling that, if I did, she'd listen because she respected me, not of her own free will.

When I told Ellen to make her own decision, she looked as if she was about to cry.

"I've…I've never regretted choosing this path, ever since I was small. It's just… I thought maybe it was selfish of me to keep learning swordplay merely because I wanted to be with you, Master. That made me feel so bad, I…"

Ellen began to cry, no longer able to hold back the tears. That must've snapped Chester out of his shock, because he resumed firing faux Flashes at us.

"How long are you going to chat in front of me?!" he demanded.

Riho and Fuka blocked his Flashes.

"Hey! Don't interrupt!"

"This is an important conversation! If you want someone to play with, we'll happily cut you up ourselves!"

Under their intense glares, Chester flagged, and once more I turned to Ellen. "Choose whatever path *you* want."

Ellen wiped away her tears and put on a brave face. "I'll be a swordsman of the Way of the Flash. I'll…I'll be your foremost student, Master!"

My eyes widened, and I took my hands from her shoulders. "I see. Then he's all yours. We'll observe your first real fight."

Ellen nodded and turned her back to me, walking toward Chester. I knew that she was nervous, but there was no strange fervor to her demeanor or anything. My eyes grew hot as I saw that a student of mine had grown up to be so strong.

Chester's gaze darted wildly as he tried to figure out what was happening. He was awfully wary of the child approaching him. "Wh-what's the big idea?! What're you trying to make me do?!"

Ellen gave no response, so I answered him myself. "My pupil hasn't yet taken a life. She's still half-baked as a swordsman, so I figured we could use you to get her some experience. After all, we've basically rescued Master already. You're no more use to us, so this is the perfect way to deal with you."

Riho and Fuka watched Chester coldly, so I called out to ask them to observe Ellen. I even bowed my head politely to them. "I want to show Master Yasushi my student. Riho, Fuka…will you act as her witnesses?"

My respectful attitude seemed to surprise them.

Riho shrugged. "You don't need to ask. Of course we will."

Fuka looked excited to see how Ellen would fight. “Don’t shame Master or our brother apprentice, Ellen!”

I looked over at Yasushi, who closed his eyes and slowly reopened them. At that point, they were focused on Ellen. To him, she was something like a granddaughter apprentice. In my opinion, I’d been training her hard, but I had to wonder how she looked through his eyes. Thinking about that, even I got a little nervous.

“Ellen, your opponent’s not experienced, but he can use an approximation of the Flash,” I called. “He’s just about the best opponent you could ask for.”

Overall, since Chester could use a version of the Flash, you could call him a stronger fighter than Ellen. Even against a superior opponent, however, Ellen remained calm. She made no attempt to draw her sword.

“I understand.” She had focused, and now she was just waiting for my word to begin.

Chester himself, however, didn’t seem ready for the match. “You’ve gotta be kidding me! When did I say I’d fight this kid to the death?! Guards! Guards, get out here!”

After he called for the guards waiting beyond this room, Kunai slid up from my shadow, chuckling. “If you’re referring to the guards stationed outside this chamber, they’ve already made their way to the afterlife. I expect that, right now, they’re waiting at the gates for you to join them.”

Kunai wasn’t at Kukuri’s level, but she was more than capable of the job I’d given her. *I really have some reliable subordinates,* I

thought with some relief. They couldn't all be wild cards like Tia and Marie. "Good job saving me the effort, Kunai."

"I am honored by your praise, Master." Kunai bowed to me reverently.

Chester crumpled to the floor. Planting both hands on the ground, he pleaded with me. "Count Banfield! L-let's make a deal." Since I didn't answer, he must've thought that I was listening, but then he just blabbered, "My family and the other local lords are sending sixty thousand ships to this planet. I-I'll let you go if you spare me. I'll help you flee so that no one spots you!"

I sighed. I disliked the traces of arrogance that still poked through in the way he pleaded with me. "Marie."

When I said her name, a small screen appeared before me, displaying Marie's flustered face. *"It's true, Lord Liam. A large fleet is approaching the pla… Wait. Lord Liam, you're covered in wounds! W-we need to treat your injuries!"*

"Don't worry about those right now."

Chester must've believed that he could negotiate, because he stood and pointed at me. This guy and his friends really seemed keen on bargaining. "Well? What're you going to do, Count Banfield?! Will you strike a deal with me or not?!"

I didn't like people who made assumptions. Did he truly believe he could change my mind?

"Who do you think you're pointing at?" I retorted. "Do you really think I'd ever strike a deal with the likes of you? Just shut up and

become fodder for my pupil. It's an honor to be a stepping stone for a *real* Way of the Flash practitioner, wouldn't you say?"

"Huh?" Chester said dumbly.

I shook my head, then asked him, "A fleet of sixty thousand? What of it?"

From the small screen, Marie broke in, *"Lord Liam, please escape immediately!"*

"Don't interrupt me."

"Ugh!"

"Marie, send the Avid down to the planet."

"B-but…!"

"Don't make me tell you again."

"I-I apologize." It was obvious from Marie's tormented expression that the situation didn't look good. She must've wanted us to flee as soon as possible.

"If you like, you can take the ships and flee on your own. I'll just catch up later in the Avid. Losing you all in a place like this would be a waste."

When I told her to run with the fleet, Marie scowled. *"That was a joke, I presume. I'm not the kind of disgraceful knight who'd leave her lord behind and flee."*

The call ended, and I smiled wryly at Marie's fierce loyalty. If she didn't pull so many crazy stunts, she'd have been the perfect subordinate. It really was a shame.

Chester was giving me a look that said that he couldn't believe I'd turned down his offer. Still, I found it hard to believe that a punk like him had really planned to let us go in the first place. If he'd seen an opportunity, he would've betrayed us in a second.

"How long are you going to sit there?" I snapped. "Stand up."

As I glared at him, Chester's mouth flapped open and shut.

Ellen had been quiet all this time, but now she spoke up. "Even if you're a villain, I don't want to kill someone who can't fight back. At least show me your pride as a swordsman."

At those words from a girl much younger than himself, Chester took his sword in hand and rose. "What do you take me for?! Liam is one thing, but I can easily kill some kid! If I'm going down here, I'll take your student with me, Liam!"

Did he really think that a mere magistrate could get away with addressing me by name? I almost killed him just for that, but I stopped myself for Ellen's sake. Chester really was the perfect adversary for her.

Peering at him, I gave my appraisal. "I'd normally never let someone like you call me 'Liam,' but I'll let you off the hook just this once. You're the perfect fodder for Ellen's growth right now. You used your position to torment your subjects and harbored ambitions above your station. Of course, your worst crime was abducting Master Yasushi."

Chester gave me a fearless smile. "You can't forgive me for tormenting my subjects? I heard that you were naive, but you're even more of an idiot than the rumors say. Exploiting your citizens is what

rulership is about. You may spew platitudes, but how different from me are you really? You act like you care about your subjects, but I know how you really feel!”

He and I were cut from the same cloth? I was about to be sick. “Don’t compare me to yourself. We aren’t anywhere near on the same level. It’s impudent even to contrast us… Anyway, we don’t have any more time to chat. Hurry up and begin.”

How self-important could he be, comparing a small-time villain like himself to a serious malefactor like me?

“Go ahead and play the tough guy,” Chester retorted. “It’s over for you! I’ll kill this brat and find a way out of here!”

Before I’d even signaled Ellen to begin, Chester shot a Flash toward her, aiming at her neck. She blocked it with her sword.

“D-damn you! Damn you!”

Chester sent Flash after Flash at his opponent, but her drawn sword blocked every one of them.

The sight of Chester’s attacks disgusted Riho. “You consider that a Flash? You must be mocking us.”

Fuka had lost interest in the match. “He’s just throwing slashes at her. I can’t believe anyone would even call that a Flash.”

I crossed my arms and watched Ellen. Chester really was the perfect adversary for her, being the epitome of an evil magistrate who tormented his subjects. When he ran out of breath, she returned her sword to its sheath.

Chester seemed to think that meant that she was letting him go. "A-are you going to spare me? Thank you… Did you really think I'd say something like that, you idiot?!"

Then he tried to surprise Ellen with a Flash, but she bent low and rushed straight at him, again drawing her sword. She got right up next to Chester and lay her blade against his neck, now positioned to cut his throat at any moment.

Riho and Fuka frowned, but I shot them a look to keep them quiet. This was the moment. What mattered was what Ellen chose to do at this point.

Chester trembled, his face pale at the touch of the blade against his neck. "I-I'm sorry! I'll do whatever you want. Just let me go! I'll never do anything bad again! I'll be nice to my subjects, I promise!"

Ellen watched expressionlessly as he pleaded for his life with words he clearly didn't mean.

"It's a little late for empty promises," she told him. "Not only do you lack the will to keep up your evil ways until the end, you have no desire to reform yourself either."

When she finished speaking, Ellen swung her sword and separated Chester's head from his neck. His head rolled across the floor as his body collapsed in a pool of blood.

Ellen whipped the blood off her sword and gazed down at him. "I can't forgive any of the things you said about my master, but I'll at least thank you for turning me into a real swordsman."

Riho and Fuka gave her some halfhearted applause.

"Guess you're one of us now, Ellen."

"In a couple decades, you'll probably be able to spar with us."

Ellen had survived her first real battle, but as I ran over to her, I noticed something off about her. She was still gripping her sword and staring down at the man she'd killed. Her breathing was unsteady, her limbs trembled, and her face was as white as a sheet.

"Ellen?"

"M-Master…have I become a real swordsman now?" She tried to sheathe her sword, but her hand wouldn't leave the weapon's grip. "H-huh? Huh…?!"

"Just calm down." As Ellen panicked, I gently pried her fingers off her sword hilt the way Amagi had once done for me.

Once the sword had left her hand, Ellen looked up at me, trying to say something. She seemed ready to burst into tears at any moment. "Master, I…I…"

"This was the path you'd needed to go down one day ever since deciding that you wanted to be a swordsman. You were prepared for this, weren't you?"

If you didn't want to kill anyone, then you didn't need to be a swordsman, but it would've been ludicrous for a student of the Way of the Flash never to kill another person.

Ellen hung her head. "I'm sorry I'm so pathetic."

But I couldn't be cold toward my student—not when she'd pulled through such a fight.

"No… You handled that better than I did."

Ellen looked up at me in surprise, but I didn't elaborate, instead heading for Master Yasushi's cell. Kunai had gone ahead and destroyed the bars, and Master Yasushi stood waiting for me.

"Master!"



"You've grown, Lord Liam."

"It's all thanks to your teachings, Master."

I got down on my knees and bowed to him.

Master addressed me in a voice so cheerful that it was hard to believe he'd been imprisoned here. "Rise, Lord Liam. You're a fantastic swordsman of the Way of the Flash. With an apprentice of your own, you need to stand tall."

I stood and turned toward Ellen. "Master, this is Ellen, my student. How does she look in your eyes?"

Master Yasushi stroked his scruffy beard. "To me, she seems a fine swordsman with potential."

Hearing my prized student praised, I was filled with relief and pride. "Thank you. She's my first student."

At those words, the color returned to Ellen's cheeks, and she bowed her head to Master Yasushi with tears streaming down her face.

"Yes, I'm Master's first student…Ellen Tyler!"

***

As Liam stood in front of him, Yasushi panicked inwardly.

There's more of theeem!

At some point, he'd gained a granddaughter apprentice, and that thought terrified him. Liam was frightening enough, but Yasushi saw that Ellen was a first-class swordsman. Realizing that she could easily kill him should they fight, he was beside himself with fear.

The way Ellen looked at him was another problem. *Th-the kid suspects me!*

Liam, Riho, and Fuka had nothing but stars in their eyes; they didn't doubt him whatsoever. That was scary in itself, but what was scariest was Ellen, who seemingly suspected him.

Liam calling her his first student had brought her to tears, but then she'd given Yasushi an appraising look. Her eyes told him that she didn't trust him unconditionally, which scared the hell out of him. Yasushi could just picture her exposing all his lies, whereupon Liam and those two sisters would surely kill him.

"Ahem!" Clearing his throat exaggeratedly, Yasushi considered just how to escape from this situation. If he stayed here, chances were that his lies would come to light. After all, Yasushi himself had started the Original Way of the Flash and mass-produced fighters who could use the Flash. In truth, he'd been a coconspirator of Chester and his friends, and if that was revealed, he'd only be cut down as mercilessly as the others.

"I'm delighted to see that you've all grown so strong," Yasushi said, "but I think it's about time that I move on to the next planet—"

Just then, Liam looked at the ceiling. "Looks like we've got an interruption."

Before he could take in what Yasushi had said, several screens popped up around him, showing that weapons belonging to the planet's security force had surrounded the magistrate's mansion.

"Apprehend the criminals who killed the magistrate! Permission

to kill them if capture is impossible!”

Battleships poised outside were visible as well. Sirens sounded, and citizens in the vicinity were being evacuated.

A-are they going to blow the whole mansion away?!

Armed forces in Chester’s employ surrounded them, obviously ready to slaughter them, but in response Liam only sighed.

“Avid… Do it.”

Immediately after he said those words, the ground around the mansion shook. Simultaneously, Chester’s security forces were shot down by lasers, cut through with beams, and bathed in flames from missiles. The flames illuminated a single mobile knight, its two eyes glowing ominously amid the destruction.

Hwah?! Yasushi somehow kept the exclamation from leaving his mouth. *What? Is that the same mobile knight from back then? How is a beat-up old mobile knight like that so strong?!*

The mobile knight he’d told Liam to repair on a whim long ago now appeared in front of him as a ridiculously powerful weapon.

The mansion’s ceiling shook as Riho and Fuka demonstrated their own Flashes. They blew away the roof, and the Avid slowly descended into the building. The mech knelt before them. When its cockpit hatch opened, Liam instructed everyone to get inside.

“Master, we should evacuate from here for now,” he told Yasushi. “We can speak more later.”

Fuka clasped her hands behind her head. “Whaaat? We’re running?” she whined.

Liam scolded her in response. “Don’t be stupid. We’re going back to the ship and getting our fighting power together. Then we’ll crush the enemy.”

Yasushi did his utmost not to tremble at Liam’s reply. *Sixty thousand ships are coming! How comes he wants to come back here and fight?! Wouldn’t a normal person run, you idiot?!*

He might’ve called Liam an idiot in his mind, but he’d never have said it aloud. Yasushi was a small-minded man, after all. Liam was stronger than he was, so Yasushi could never speak out against him.

Just then, however, an entity that might prove Yasushi’s savior appeared. It was an ominous figure with the body of a man dressed in a suit but the head of an octopus. This head was red, its tentacles writhing, as if it quivered with rage.

“You cannot be allowed to exist,” the thing said. “I cannot let you leave here. It simply must not be!”

For a second, Yasushi had thought he was saved, but the ominous, murderous rage the creature emanated was directed at him as well. *Huh? What is this? What’s this thing?!*

Steam poured from the octopus’s mouth as if from a kettle. It even whistled. “The Way of the Flash is unnecessary! It must not exist in this universe! Your existence ends today!”

The strange being’s head swelled, absorbing the body beneath its neck and transforming into a huge octopus. The steam spouting from its mouth blackened, obscuring the area in thick mist.

Riho and Fuka assumed fighting stances against this bizarre newcomer.

"What is that thing?!"

"I can't stop trembling!"

In Yasushi's eyes, those two weren't even human any longer, yet *they* were scared. Meanwhile, Ellen had collapsed to the floor in fright.

Yasushi's instincts told him one thing: *Ah…I'm dead.* At the overwhelming presence of the creature before him, he went right past terror and cycled back to calm.

Only one member of the group reacted differently: Liam, who raised an eyebrow suspiciously at the creature.

Chapter 14:
Enemies of the Way of the Flash

A GIANT OCTOPUS HAD APPEARED out of nowhere and told us we "must not exist." I just wanted to know what the heck the thing was.

I looked around and saw my sister apprentices trembling with fear. They still instinctively held their weapons, but their swords shook in their hands. Ellen had fallen to the floor, drained of any will to fight. I wished I could say that it was pathetic for a student of mine to behave that way, but I couldn't really blame her.

Kunai reappeared from my shadow. "Master Liam, please flee!"

Her judgment was sound, but I couldn't just run away. "Fall back," I told her.

"But…!" Even the normally calm and collected Kunai was panicking.

"I said fall back!"

She obeyed my command and vanished.

I turned to Master, who gazed up at the giant octopus. "Master?"

He looked at the octopus boldly, without trembling, and I sensed neither fear nor anger in him. "Do you suppose you can beat that thing, Lord Liam?" he asked me.

At first, I wanted to ask whether he should face it himself, but then I wondered if he wanted to assess my capabilities by making me

face it instead.

After that, the octopus lunged at us. From behind us, the Avid deployed a maximum-strength defense field to protect us.

Something about the strange octopus creature was incredibly sinister. The magistrate's mansion crumbled away at its touch. The black steam coming from its mouth looked toxic, withering and killing any plant it came into contact with.

I'd never encountered the likes of this enemy before. That time I'd been summoned away as a hero, I fought something calling itself a demon lord, but this creature was much more sinister and repulsive than even that.

"This'll be tough…"

This giant octopus was a much more daunting foe than anyone from the Original Way of the Flash. At a glance, I wasn't sure I could beat it. I sensed that my Flash wouldn't be enough to kill the thing.

"Then I'll have to ask you to face it," Master implored me. "I… cannot fight anymore."

"Huh?"

Master Yasushi couldn't fight? What did that mean?

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Wearing a far-off look, Yasushi entrusted what little hope he had to his pupils.

I don't know where the hell this monster came from, but these guys aren't human themselves anymore, are they? They can probably handle it.

He glanced at Riho and Fuka, but they looked too frightened. They even gave *him* pleading looks.

Are you two stupid or what?! I'm weaker than you! How the hell am I supposed to beat something that scares you*?!*

Liam was just looking at him curiously. How composed the boy was irritated Yasushi to no end.

A moment ago, the Avid had seemed unimaginably powerful, but now its hands were apparently full just keeping the octopus at bay with that defense field. The octopus pushed the field back, growing even larger as it did so.

"The Way of the Flash will perish here!" it cried. "You too… Liam…and Sword God Yasushi!"

For some reason, the monster seemed even more intent on killing *him* than Liam. *What did* I *do?! Sure, I can't exactly be proud of my life, but I didn't do anything to be this despised over!*

Yasushi had told Liam that he couldn't fight anymore as a spur-of-the-moment fib to survive. He didn't want anyone to make him battle the monster because they thought he was simply hiding his true strength. So all he needed was a *reason* he wasn't able to fight.

"I'd like you to show me what you're capable of now, Lord Liam."

All he could do was rely on Liam to get him out of this situation alive.

Liam gave him a wide-eyed look in response, then nodded curtly and stepped forward. "Understood."

God! Yasushi prayed. *Please help Liam, if only in this moment! If you can get me out of here, I'll make it the rest of the way on my own!*

So long as he managed to survive the day, Yasushi still planned on fleeing Liam.

***

As G'doire revealed his true form, the Guide watched from the sky.

"Good, G'doiiiiire! You're just the beeeeest!"

G'doire was facing off against Liam's group with no concern for what they saw. The Avid's defense field appeared to be keeping him at bay, but in reality, he was having trouble approaching Liam because of the young man's own power.

Liam's power stemmed from his subjects' belief in him—that, and the gratitude of the people on the planets he'd saved up until now. The emotions of all of those people, and the presence of the world tree in House Banfield's territory, protected Liam. They were amplified by the rare metals composing the Avid, turning its defense field into a holy barrier.

To the Guide, it was as if G'doire were leaping into a raging fire. This was something the Guide himself would never have done. He wouldn't *want* to. Even if G'doire beat Liam, the injuries he sustained now would need many long years to heal. It was possible they'd *never* heal.

Despite all that, G'doire had reason to kill Liam.

"Whew… I never thought Liam would set foot in our realm because of some kind of misunderstanding like that. Even if it was only one step, he simply cannot be allowed to grow capable of harming us."

Although only his fingertips had gone across the threshold, Liam had reached the doorway to the Guide and G'doire's realm. All Liam's misunderstandings, and his striving to reach new heights, had led him there.

"Quite a level to reach starting from a simple sleight-of-hand trick," the Guide mused. "But this is as far as you go, Liam! Now, G'doire, I'll lend you my assistance, so you'd better be victorious!"

Black smoke spewed from the Guide as well, carrying his support to G'doire. The octopus creature grew even larger, but when he tried to swallow up Liam's group by force…

"Wha—?!"

The Guide saw light collect behind Liam. It formed the shape of a human torso even larger than the Avid. The musclebound form looked like some kind of war god. It was shirtless, and a warrior's mask covered its mouth; in its hand was the kind of ancient sword that appeared in myths.

The giant of light looked around. Spotting the Guide, it glared at him fiercely.

"N-no way! It noticed me—eep!"

The giant drew its sword. Below it, Liam looked up at the Guide too.

"He found meeeee!"

The Guide panicked and fled, abandoning G'doire.

***

I looked up at the sky and saw the Guide departing.

"I've already won…"

It seemed I'd received the Guide's support in this fight—no, probably in this whole adventure. He'd now stuck around to provide follow-up support for so long after my reincarnation that my gratitude was almost apologetic at this point. With the Guide's support, I didn't need to worry about the Original Way of the Flash guys, nor that fleet on the way either.

Feeling as if things had already reached their conclusion, I handed my sword to Ellen. She still lay on the ground, unable even to stand at this point.

"M-Master?" With her eyes, she asked what I planned to do.

I looked up at the Avid without answering. "Avid, my sword."

A blade flew from the Avid's cockpit. I raised my hand into the air and caught it. This was my favorite sword, the one I'd used ever since destroying Goaz's pirate crew.

The giant octopus coming toward me had bloodshot eyes wide with rage. "Th-that sword?! That couldn't be—"

The monster seemed to panic, as if it somehow knew this weapon. Apparently, my gut feeling that this sword could cut the creature hadn't been wrong. It seemed I'd nabbed quite a weapon from Goaz. Yet another thing I owed to the Guide.

"This is the best sword I own," I proclaimed. "With this at my side, I'm sure my attacks will reach you. No… I'll *make* them reach you!"

I placed a gentle hand on Ellen's head.

"Ellen, I've never shown you a real Flash until now."

"Huh?"

"I can finally call myself your master without shame."

I stepped forward, holding my sheathed sword before my eyes. Pulling the blade out of the sheath about thirty centimeters, I saw my purple eyes reflected in it. They appeared to glow faintly in the reflection on the blade.

"I can't say that I don't need a sword, so I'm aware that I'm not yet at Master's level… Still, I've finally mastered the *real* secret of the Way of the Flash."

The octopus seemed to puff up even larger in fear. It was trying to absorb the Avid's defense field.

"I knew it…!" the thing cried. "That blade is made of true gold—Divine Gooold!"

I couldn't make out most of what the octopus was saying through his screams. I took a deep breath, then muttered…

"Flash."

Instead of drawing my sword, I returned it to its sheath, ringing the sword guard against the sheath mouth. My Flash cut into the octopus, bisecting it vertically. Black smoke poured from either side of the monster, and it shrank back down.

It let out a terrible howl. “Eeegyaaaaagh! If I…had known…I would have…killed you…long…”

The octopus’s body vanished, and the black smoke dissipated, leaving behind shimmering gold beads in the air.

What exactly is this phenomenon? It’s kind of cool. Actually, I really like it.

Enjoying the rain of gold, I turned around and tucked my sword through my belt.

Riho looked at me in astonishment. “Wh-what was that…? A-are you…?”

Fuka had dropped her twin swords and fallen to the ground. Tears spilled from her eyes, and her cheeks twitched as she laughed. “That scared meee…! What the heck was it? I’ve never seen anything like that before… You’re, like, incredible now. I don’t even know what’s going on anymore…”



Ellen held my sword with both hands as she gazed up at me, crying. “C-congratulations, Master. I couldn’t even see your Flash, but…but I’ve burned the sight into my brain anyway!”

A move you couldn’t see. Its essence wasn’t simply to slash so quickly that the eye couldn’t follow, nor to create a magic blade. Was it a supernatural phenomenon, then? Maybe that was accurate. But it was a technique you couldn’t use without each and every one of those elements. In any case, after mastering them all and breaking down a wall beyond even that, I’d at last reached the realm of the true Flash.

“Master, I finally reached the secret behind the Way of the Flash.”

With the battle over, I bowed my head deeply to my master. I understood now why he’d been unable to explain things to me in words. If not for his and the Guide’s guidance, I’d still have been under the same misconceptions as the half-baked users of the Original Way of the Flash.

I couldn’t laugh anymore about that Swordmaster I’d ridiculed in the past. The foolish Swordmaster I’d once fought was so fixated on strength that he’d trained in a completely ludicrous way. However, I’d been just as misguided in my own training methods. I felt stupid for having developed that suit that strained my muscles, and for focusing so much on building physical strength.

Master was kind to me, though. “Splendidly done, Lord Liam. You’ve surpassed me now. There’s nothing more to say.”

“D-don’t be ridiculous. I’m still nowhere near your level, Master.”

The Flash I'd seen him perform when I was a child was still burned into my mind's eye. Surely *that* had been the truest Flash possible.

"No… You're the best there is, Lord Liam!"

"No, I still could never beat you, Master."

"No, no, I mean it… You're number one, Lord Liam!"

"Well, to me, you'll always be number one, Master!"

"I'm telling you it's *you*, Lord Liam!"

"And I'm saying—"

While Master and I argued, a small window appeared in the air. From it, Marie reported, *"Bit of a situation up here, Lord Liam!"*

"What is it? If you're struggling, I can head up—"

"N-no. But a portion of the enemy craft have begun firing on their own allies."

"They're firing on each other?"

"Yes. It seems that a mercenary group they brought is betraying them."

Marie's bewildered look got me interested in what was going on out there in space. Was this more follow-up support from the Guide? With him watching over me like this, I could never lose!

"Well, you could say heaven's on my side. Don't be surprised—that just means I win because I'm meant to. Now get back to your job."

"Y-yes, sir!" The call ended.

I now turned my focus to evacuating everyone in earnest. “Well, there’s plenty I’d like to talk about, but right now we should get out of here. I’ll take you up to my mothership, Master.”

“No, there’s no need for that. My family’s here on this—”

Before he could finish, Ellen interrupted. “Master has seen to your family’s safety, sir. They should be on the flagship already.”

“Huh…?”

I’d evacuated Master’s wife and little Yasuyuki so that we could fight on this planet without worrying about them. I felt a bit guilty for involving them in all this, but there wasn’t much else I could do.

“Don’t worry, Master! We’ll win the battle and protect them, I swear it.”

For some reason, when I said that, Master got a far-off look in his eyes. “I-I see.”

***

Meanwhile, Marie’s fleet had engaged the enemy in space.

“What’s going on out there?!” Her voice resounded through the bridge.

Her subordinates couldn’t tell her much, though. “A section of the enemy forces seems to be rebelling,” an operator reported, “but we aren’t sure of much more at the moment.”

A three-thousand-ship force, apparently a mercenary unit, had begun firing on the enemy from behind them. That attack confused the fleet of the magistrate’s father, Count Farnham, just as much as Marie’s force.

Marie wiped sweat from her forehead, seeing hope in what had been a rather inferior position. *It's just as Lord Liam said… Heaven is on his side.*

How many times now had he seized victory in a situation where defeat was all but inevitable? Something imperceptible to humans seemed to watch over him.

"We've retrieved the Avid!" another operator shouted. "We can withdraw anytime!"

"Break through the enemy!" Marie commanded. "Protecting the flagship is the highest priority! We'll get Lord Liam out of here, even if we have to die to do it!"

They'd have to risk their lives to push through their foes' forces and escape, and they'd probably lose a lot of their own forces. If Liam made it out okay, though, that was all that mattered.

"The enemy formation is crumbling! Get ready to break through! Protect the flagship with shield ships!"

As Marie doled out orders, Liam appeared on one of the bridge monitors. *"The flagship will be on the front line. I'm going out there too."* Though covered in wounds, he smiled fearlessly.

Marie rejected his orders. "Even coming from you, Lord Liam, that's an order I cannot follow. I'm getting you out of here, even if I lose my head for it."

"Who do you think you're talking to…?"

The bridge fell silent at Liam's low tone, but Marie held her ground, acting on her own loyalty in the way she felt was right.

"House Banfield can keep going as long as you survive, Lord Liam. But if we lose you here, it'll never recover. I won't change my mind on this matter."

Liam smiled. Evidently he liked her answer. *"I commend your loyalty, but you're awfully lacking in faith. You seem to have decided that I'll lose, but I'm a man who will always seize victory."*

The figure of Liam, absolutely confident in his victory, was suddenly overshadowed by an incoming message from the mercenaries' leader.

It was Chengsi, of all people, commanding the group. *"Long time no see, Lord Liam."*

Marie glared at the woman onscreen dressed in Chinese-style clothing. "I-it's you!"

"I'm here commanding a mercenary force," Chengsi revealed. *"We've betrayed our employers for the time being, since our allegiance is to House Banfield, but…I was just thinking that this could be a good opportunity to challenge you, Lord Liam."* She smiled bewitchingly as she entertained the idea of fighting Liam's forces, rather than his enemies.

Marie's expression soured. *Our most extreme contingent is joining the enemy of all things, eh?*

Marie was rather extreme herself, but she couldn't hold a candle to Chengsi. Chengsi and the people currently with her were the type who only felt alive while fighting. They experienced the utmost bliss when facing strong opponents, so they'd have more fun battling Liam.

Liam narrowed his eyes at Chengsi's suggestion. *"I don't need mutts who can't follow orders. If you're going to attack, then do it. I'll crush every last one of you under my boot."*

Chengsi's cheeks flushed red at Liam's uncompromising response. *"Isn't this the part where you're supposed to say that you want us to help you? We wouldn't mind falling in line if you just asked for our assistance."*

Chengsi's words were the height of arrogance. If Marie could've killed her then and there, she would have.

Liam's response was calm, though. *"I don't need it. I'll win with or without your help."*

In the face of his unshakable confidence, Chengsi relented. *"This is why you're so much fun. Very well… My forces are yours to command."*

"They're in disguise, but they're all ships from House Banfield's army!" an operator announced as Chengsi's three thousand ships joined Liam's forces.

Marie began to consider solutions to their current predicament. *We have fewer enemies and more allies now, but the difference in numbers is still…*

That was when another noble's forces entered the battleground. This new fleet of twenty thousand ships bore a crest other than House Banfield's; when Liam saw them, he lost all the confidence he'd had a moment earlier, falling into panic.

"H-how?!" This was an unexpected development, even to him.

The new fleet opened communications with them. *"I'm here to help, Darling!"*



Chapter 15:
A Losing Battle

A LITTLE EARLIER, a large fleet had been making its way through space: Rosetta's security force.

Unlike Liam's cutting-edge fleet, this one consisted of craft with reliable current-gen weapons. Moving in unison, those twenty thousand ships emblazoned with House Claudia's crest made for quite a spectacle.

Watching them from the flagship's bridge, Rosetta sat somewhat uncomfortably in her personal chair. Since she was Liam's future wife, the chair was as majestic as one an empress would sit in—not just in terms of its appearance, but in its features as well.

"Was it all right to assemble such a large force?" Rosetta wondered, a hand on her cheek.

Standing beside her in a maid's uniform, Ciel reassured her. "It's fine. It just proves that lots of people adore you, Lady Rosetta!"

Watching Ciel with a sour expression was Rosetta's military advisor, Eulisia. "Well, we did have the budget for it, but I still think it's too big. It was supposed to be a security force, but it's more like a standard fleet accompanied by a security force. How did that even happen?"

The fleet had grown so large that the actual security force was merely a subset of it. Only a small number of the twenty thousand ships Rosetta had assembled were actually tasked with guarding her.

"You're right," Rosetta said apologetically. "It's a little too big, isn't it?"

Eulisia corrected her misunderstanding. "It's not just a *little* too big. This is more firepower than some counts have at their disposal."

Rosetta shrank back. "Can we really go out like this for training? It costs a huge amount of money just to move a fleet of this size, doesn't it?"

Their current plan was to mobilize the entire force for the first time. In a way, it would be a show of Rosetta's military strength. And it was Ciel's suggestion.

"There's no problem," Ciel responded. "We'll be showing everyone how incredible your security force—huh?" She suddenly stopped and looked around.

Eulisia folded her arms, giving Ciel a cold look. "What is it?"

"N-nothing. I just thought I heard a dog howl."

Eulisia sighed, exasperated. "If you're thinking of Chino, she's with Lord Liam."

"No." Ciel shook her head. "It sounded like a real dog!"

Her protest was cut off by the clamoring of operators.

"Lady Rosetta, we've received a distress call from a House Banfield fleet!"

Composing herself, Rosetta questioned, "Distress call? From which fleet?"

"Well, their data's in our system, but it's not giving me any

details…”

“Use my credentials.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The decoded data revealed that the fleet was a special force that Liam had put together personally, commanded by Marie Sera Marian.

“This is…Lord Liam’s escort fleet!”

“Darling’s?!”

The operator explained the situation. “It’s battling a fleet belonging to nobles in Calvin’s faction. The Banfield fleet is facing over sixty times their number!”

The bridge erupted into commotion, and Eulisia began contacting all the relevant parties.

“Hurry and forward the distress call to the home planet!” Rosetta’s flagship commander called out.

Rosetta rose from her chair. “The security force will go to Darling’s aid.”

“Lady Rosetta?!” Shocked, the commander began to argue that the security force should return to the home planet at once.

Rosetta shook her head, however. “This is my decision. We go to his aid.”

Relenting at Rosetta’s determination, the commander ordered the fleet to proceed and lend Liam assistance.

H-huh? Ciel thought. *Wait. Is all my meddling actually* helping *Liam in the end?*

As she realized that her plan had backfired, Rosetta turned to the head of her security force. "Vivi, your mobile-knight squadron might have to deploy as well, depending on the circumstances."

The knight Rosetta had called "Vivi" was a woman over one hundred and ninety centimeters tall. She stood with her shoulders hunched and a glum look on her face; there was a folded, spear-like weapon on her back.

"Yes, Lady Rosetta…" the woman responded in a quiet, weak voice.

The head of Rosetta's security force was named Vivian Sera Sanders.

***

This was all wrong.

Faced with the twenty-thousand-ship fleet that had just appeared before my craft, I almost wanted to complain to the Guide, even though I knew he was just trying to help me.

"N-no! This missed the mark, Guide!"

I'd cut my call with Marie, and inside the Avid's cockpit, I clutched my head in my hands.

"Why has Rosetta shown up at a time like this?! Couldn't you have sent someone else?!"

I'd never imagined that she of all people would come to my aid. I squirmed in agony for a bit, then took hold of the control sticks.

"Fine… I'll just take it out on the enemy!"

I hastily deployed the Avid so that I could take out my frustrations on the nobles in Calvin's faction, who were bearing down on us.

"Marie, prepare the Avid for launch—immediately!" I commanded Marie.

She started babbling, flustered. *"W-wait, Lord Liam! I'm still considering our battle strategy at the moment!"*

Her tone was frenzied, but she was still being relatively polite, so she hadn't lost *all* her marbles yet.

"Hurry and come up with your plan, then."

"R-right away, sir!"

***

On the Purple Tail's bridge, Marie was confirming precisely how many allied ships were now at their disposal. Liam had ordered her to come up with a winning strategy, and she wanted to fulfill his expectations. Even with their numbers bolstered, however, their forces weren't exactly cohesive.

"Our forces have increased, but they're spread all over the place." She sighed.

Her adjutant, Haydi, was thinking the same thing. "If the enemy concentrates their fire on us, we'll never be able to protect the boss. We need to meet up with other friendly ships."

"I understand that. You don't need to remind me."

"Well, since you aren't cursing yet, you must still be pretty calm, Marie." Haydi gave her a relieved look.

Meanwhile, Marie opened communications with the twenty-thousand-ship fleet that must've been Rosetta's security force. "This is Marie Sera Marian, the escort fleet's commander. May I speak to whoever's in charge? Uh, the commander, I mean…not Lady Rosetta."

Marie would've loved to chat with Rosetta, of course, but right now they were in battle. Squashing her desire to speak with Liam's fiancée, she focused on discussing tactics with the commander.

The security force's commander appeared on her monitor. *"Er… Lady Marie, is it? My information indicates that you're a knight without rank, yet you command the escort fleet. Is that correct?"*

Marie frowned, but put up with the commander's limited understanding of House Banfield's military situation. "That's correct. Anyway, I'd like to ask you to bring your fleet toward ours. The enemy's after Lord Liam, and he's House Banfield's highest priority, so I'd appreciate it if you bolstered our defenses."

I heard that Lady Rosetta was recruiting people from anywhere and everywhere to her security force. They don't seem very knowledgeable about our circumstances. She was a bit worried.

However, the commander seemed to understand quickly enough. *"We have similar orders from Lady Rosetta as well. We'll follow your command. Please direct us as to how we may best defend you."*

"An enemy fleet is positioned between our two forces, right?

We'll pincer them and merge our fleets. Ready the charge."

That suggestion was obvious to Marie, but the commander apparently hadn't expected to hear it. *"Pincer? Charge? What are you saying?"*

Marie's eyes widened at the commander's reaction. "Huh?"

"Huh?!"

The two seemed not to understand each other.

Beside Marie, Haydi smacked his forehead. "Oh yeah. Lady Rosetta's fleet isn't part of House Banfield's military, is it? These guys are probably used to fighting in completely different ways."

Beginning to tremble, Marie finally snapped at the commander, "Just shut up and charge them in a pincer attack with us! We'll back you up, so get moving, you idiot!"

Liam's life was at risk here, so every minute, every *second* counted. If she had to force her allies into action, she would.

"Don't be ridiculous!" the commander shouted back.

"Let's just see if it's ridiculous after we try it, why don't we?!" Marie had completely discarded her normal polite tone, no longer having energy to spare for it.

That was when Rosetta cut in. *"Marie?"*

"Lady Rosetta?! There…um…there's simply no choice if we want to save Lord Liam—"

Rosetta wasn't even listening to her justification. *"We just need to charge and meet up with you?"*

"Huh? Well, yes…"

"Understood. Commander, please advance the fleet. Vivi, your mobile-knight squadron will sortie as well," Rosetta ordered someone on the other side of the screen.

At the sight of her, Marie teared up. *Lady Rosetta has grown.*

***

In the hangar of the superdreadnought Rosetta was aboard, mobile knights of a model that was a precursor to the Nemain prepared to deploy. These craft, called Valrhonas, were like slimmer Nemains with removable boost skirts for high maneuverability. The security-force craft had been given a predominantly red color scheme.

These units were the pinnacle of current-gen models, but they didn't quite measure up to Nemains, which had been developed as next-gen craft. The fact that they were current-gen, though, meant that they were optimized for contemporary manufacture and maintenance, and their performance was supported by ample data gathered from their use.

Vivi, who had wavy green hair, approached her personal craft sullenly. "Aw… I don't wanna sortie… I wanna go home and stay in," she muttered. "If I run away now, though, I'll be kicked out, right? Actually, that'd be deserting under enemy attack, so I'd be executed, wouldn't I? I don't want that…"

Vivi spoke in a manner no security-force head should have. She was tall, but self-conscious about her height, so she always slouched.

From the way she spoke, her personality was obvious: She was a glum shut-in. Still, her abilities as a knight were formidable.

Vivi's personal Valrhona wielded a weapon she specialized with: a beam axe shaped like a halberd. On top of that, the craft's left shoulder sported a cape-like add-on that could produce a barrier. That specialty part afforded the craft a defense specialization, since the security force's purpose was to protect Rosetta.

In the craft's cramped cockpit, Vivi stretched her long limbs.

"Ahh…I love the feeling of a small space. This one's even tailored to my size, since it's my personal craft and all. I just wanna hole up in here…"

Her spirits lifting, Vivi reached out and gripped the control sticks.

"Well, guess I should do my job so I don't get kicked out… I don't wanna go back to living on the street, after all…"

***

"Lord Liam, we'll merge our fleet with Lady Rosetta's security force. To do so, we'll charge the enemies between us in a pincer attack, enabling our two fleets to meet."

In the Avid's cockpit, I listened to Marie's plan. She spoke of eliminating the forces between the two fleets as if it would be simple. Such a plan would normally be difficult to carry out, but all House Banfield's forces were elite, particularly the escort fleet Marie commanded. If there was a force that could best them, it would probably only be the fleet I'd first commanded.

"Shouldn't be impossible for you guys," I told her. "All right. I approve the plan."

It was the kind of strategy that would normally have been vetoed for its recklessness, but since Marie was the one who'd proposed it, I accepted.

However, even she couldn't be completely confident about the plan's success. *"I apologize for only bringing this up after you've already given your approval, but…there's an uncertain element to this plan."*

"Uncertain element? Are you going to tell me that your fleet's not big enough to pull it off?"

"No. It's Lady Rosetta's fleet I'm worried about."

"They've got twenty thousand ships. What's there to be worried about?"

With Rosetta's ships, the enemy would have only twice our numbers, which was well within House Banfield's usual odds.

"Most of her forces are completely unconnected to House Banfield's army, so they're unfamiliar with our fighting style. The commander didn't seem enthusiastic about a frontal assault strategy… I doubt he'd even have agreed to my plan if Lady Rosetta hadn't forced him to go along with it."

I now understood Marie's nervousness. "That idiot Eulisia! Have her pull some officers from my army to get that fleet functional."

"I had the same idea. House Banfield's army is still expanding, though. Skilled officers are a precious commodity among their ranks

right now."

Expanding my territory and military had backfired.

Just calm down… I told myself. If I looked at this from another angle, numbers were all Rosetta's fleet had going for it. So, if she betrayed me at some point, it wouldn't hurt a… *Twenty thousand is a lot, though. That's too many ships, isn't it?!*

Even if Rosetta's force had no skilled commanders or knights, it was crazy that she was running around with twenty thousand ships under her personal command. Who'd told her to make her security force so huge?! Was it Eulisia?!

"When I'm back, Eulisia's getting a beating…"

While Marie and I talked, her adjutant Haydi cut in. He was yelling—but not at me, at his boss. *"Marie! Lady Rosetta's security force is already charging!"*

From Haydi's panicked tone, it seemed that Rosetta's fleet had screwed up.

"Those morons! You're supposed to match our timing, you amateurs!"

Marie had dropped her polite act. The way she clutched her head and tousled her hair was amusing, though, so I let it slide.

I sighed. "If they're already attacking, there's nothing we can do. I'll go support them in the Avid, so cover me. Avid, we're deploying."

"Huh?!" Marie squawked before I cut the call.

Dismissing her, I moved the Avid to its catapult. The simple hangar was narrow and lacked the usual facilities.

"I'm pretty much alone down here," I grumbled.

Then, however, Amagi's face appeared in a window on my screen. *"I will provide assistance for your deployment, Master. Please sortie in one hundred and twenty seconds."*

"Lucky me. Just having you with me lifts my spirits, Amagi."

After that quip, Amagi stared at me through the monitor. *"You are going out there to help Lady Rosetta, are you not? Please at least refrain from any recklessness."*

I shut my mouth and kept quiet until it was almost time to launch.

"Twenty seconds to launch. I will begin the countdown. Fifteen, fourteen…"

"I still can't handle Rosetta."

"Ten, nine, eight…" Amagi just kept counting down without acknowledging what I'd mumbled.

"She jumps straight into danger she's not at all equipped to handle. I'm so worried, I can't bear to see it."

Amagi smiled. *"Then you will have to watch over her, Master. Three, two… Commence launch."*

"Go, Avid!"

I pressed down on the foot pedal, and the Avid accelerated, blue-white flames bursting from its thrusters.

We shot into space, where I saw Rosetta's security force engaging the enemy. Her ships were so close together that, if they weren't careful, accidents might occur. Their proximity to each other painted a clear picture of the fleet's lack of training.

Thanks to Amagi's careful timing, I launched without getting struck by enemy fire or crashing into an allied ship or mobile knight.

"Tch! The enemy's barely attacking over here."

At this point, my escort fleet had charged in as well, but the enemy was only putting up a minor counterattack. That meant that Rosetta's fleet on the opposite side was taking the brunt of the enemy's fire.

I accelerated and got ahead of Marie's fleet, magnifying the distant battlefield with the Avid's twin eyes.

"They screwed up the timing of their charge, and now they're taking concentrated return fire."

The way Rosetta's fleet had faltered in its charge made me scowl. They'd skidded to a stop awkwardly, and now the front ships were taking heavy damage from enemy counterattacks. Her forces seemed utterly mediocre in terms of training and capability.

"I'll push my way through and meet up with them first. But at this rate, Rosetta's fleet might crumble…"

I accelerated the Avid, forcing the craft through the enemy's ranks. Naturally, I came under heavy fire, but none of the enemy's attacks pierced the Avid's thick defense field. The mobile knight would

be fine; what really mattered was drawing the enemy's attention in order to save our allies.

"Let them know that it's us they should fear, Avid—not Rosetta's fleet!"

The Avid's engine roared in response as several magic circles formed behind the craft. From those circles emerged unmanned weapons like the top halves of mobile knights, equipped with weapons in each hand. I checked my monitor and saw that the Avid was locked on to an enemy ship despite not holding any weapons of its own. It locked onto a dozen, then a hundred, targets; then I pulled the trigger on my control stick.

"Let's see a show."

Optical weapons and missiles fired into the enemy, engulfing dozens of ships in flame…but the enemy fleet still wouldn't focus on me.

"They're concentrating on Rosetta's ships 'cause they're going down so easily."

As I contemplated heading straight for the enemy flagship, the Avid detected something strange underway on Rosetta's side of the battlefield.

I magnified the image on my monitor and saw a contingent of mobile knights called Valrhonas charging onto the front lines.

***

"That's…five."

Inside her cockpit, Vivi counted enemy ships calmly, her usual nervousness nowhere to be seen.

That was partly due to the calm she felt in her cramped cockpit, of course. Still, if she wasn't capable, she wouldn't have been chosen as the head of Rosetta's security force. Vivian Sera Sanders was indeed a proficient knight.

In a particularly capable current-gen Valrhona model, swinging around the weapon she was most proficient with—her halberd—Vivi defended Rosetta's fleet. Around her were subordinates in similar Valrhonas.

"Captain, enemies are all over the place!"

"Captain Sl… Captain, I don't think we'll be able to handle this on our own!"

"You seem a lot more like a real captain than usual, Captain Slouch!"

Listening to her subordinates' reports, Vivi realized something.

"Huh…? You guys call me 'Captain Slouch' behind my back? What the heck? I can't believe that…"

Still reeling from this shocking revelation, Vivi avoided a charging enemy Moheive, swinging her halberd and taking the Moheive out as she went past.

"You're strong, Captain Slouch! I'd expect no less of the first head of our security force!"

Vivi couldn't be all that happy about her subordinate's compliment.

"Huh? Hold on a second… Do my people not like me?"

***

I used my credentials via the Avid to pick up chatter on House Banfield's comm lines. Rosetta's security force sounded like it was made up of oddballs.

"Who the heck is 'Captain Slouch'?"

I was slightly regretting leaving Rosetta in charge of putting the force together, but I'd at least give them passing marks in ability. Her mobile knights specialized in defense over offense, but that "Captain Slouch" had pulled ahead of her allies to shield them. She had her subordinates wielding large weaponry and attacking enemy ships, and she got in a few hits herself with that halberd she wielded. She didn't have the outstanding abilities of someone like Tia or Marie, but I sensed potential in her.

"Doesn't seem like she has much experience, but she's doing well. I bet she'd shine if you polished her, though I doubt she'll get many opportunities to fight in the security force."

Her only other issue was her personality, which seemed uniquely incongruent with knighthood. Still, from how she acted out there, her skill at least appeared real.

I tightened my grip on my control sticks. "Rosetta made the right decision sending them out. It bought us some time."

Marie's fleet was already right behind the Avid, and our mobile knights had deployed as well.

I spread the Avid's arms wide. "Now let's get this party started! Men…devour the enemy fleet!"

After that declamation, my ships and mobile knights descended on the enemy.

***

A former mobile-knight pilot who'd fought in Count Farnham and the local lords' army was later asked about the battle with House Banfield.

He and another man sat at the counter of a rundown bar. The former pilot stared at his change on the countertop, then took a swig of cheap booze.

"I still see that day in my dreams… My nightmares, that is."

The pilot had been shot down before Liam joined the battle, and he'd drifted through space for the rest of the fight. Fortunately, his cockpit escaped destruction, and he floated away from the rest of the battle. It'd been lonely out in space, but he'd been relieved not to be caught up in the worst of the fighting.

"My cockpit monitor was still functional, so I watched the whole thing unfold. But no one believes me when I talk about that battle. I can hardly believe it myself. I don't *want* to believe it."

He still had recorded footage of the fight, but whenever he shared it, it was disparaged as manipulated or faked. That was just how hard it was for someone to believe what had happened out there.

"That craft called the Avid would zip by, and in its wake, all my allies would explode. Their craft were all slashed up, and when they

blew apart, the explosions would catch nearby units. It was like he left a trail of explosions in his wake."

The pilot ordered more cheap booze, downing it as soon as it arrived. He returned the empty glass to the bartender and ordered another. He couldn't keep telling the story without it.

"Count Farnham's fleet tried to retreat, but the mercenaries who'd betrayed us cut off their escape route. From my cockpit, I heard them surrender…but what do you think the other side said?"

A female knight had apparently told the surrendering fleet the following: *"We don't accept your surrender. You die here."*

The pilot burst out laughing and covered his eyes. Tears dripped from under his hand.

"Crazy, right? Even after the mercenaries' betrayal, we had over fifty thousand ships on our side. The enemy had half that. We outnumbered them two to one, but they still crushed us completely. And…and all I could do was watch it happen."

The man who'd asked the pilot about the battle then asked why the conflict occurred in the first place. How come House Farnham had fought House Banfield in the former's territory? Both counts were distant from their own domains, so what caused House Banfield to invade and destroy House Farnham's forces?

The former pilot didn't seem to know.

"Why we fought? 'Cause the guys up top made us. How am I supposed to know? All I heard was rumors. Something about the count's idiot son abducting Liam's master. You know, the Sword God of

the Way of the Flash. That enraged Liam, so he invaded. That can't have been it, though, right?"

No one believed that rumor. At the time, Count Banfield was one of the Empire's most important nobles, so there was no way he'd have invaded some border planet for a reason like that. There had to be some other rationale…so the former pilot seemed to think, anyway.

"One of the more plausible rumors is that House Banfield wanted to get rid of House Farnham because they belonged to Calvin's faction. I mean, culling an enemy faction sounds more believable, doesn't it? Huh…? House Farnham wasn't that important? Well, how should I know? I'm not in any position to hear what goes on at the top."

The former pilot drank his cheap booze for a while longer before returning to the story of the battle.

"I saw allied ships exploding all over, but no enemy ships were blowing up. Our ships might've been paper tigers, but I didn't think they were *that* weak. We were all sure we could win so long as we had greater numbers on our side."

The glass in the pilot's hand shook as if he remembered that day vividly.

"House Banfield had these crazy knights. I'd heard about them, but I didn't believe the stories until I saw them on the battlefield myself. Their skill was one thing, but what was really chilling about them was how they went into this battle trance. People who aren't scared to die are the scariest, you know? The named knight who showed up halfway through was the worst. It was Chengsi—the

Bloody Devil. Have you heard of her? There was a time in the past when she'd cut down anyone on the battlefield, enemy and ally alike. Under Liam, though, she was a loyal retainer. Can you believe that?"

Liam was a star of the battlefield, having emerged victorious from inferior positions countless times. Many skilled people served under him too, one of the most famous being Claus Sera Mont—the Empire's strongest knight. With Claus as his right-hand man, Liam was feared even back then.

When the former pilot was asked whether he'd known that at the time, he raised his voice.

"You think I'd have been out there that day if I believed those rumors?! I thought it was just battlefield gossip! Exaggerations, because the guy was pretty strong! And when the battle started, we had twenty times their number. We were careful, so we shouldn't've been destroyed like that."

The other man asked the pilot about Liam on the battlefield.

"Liam? I'm sure that he's a great ruler to House Banfield's people. I could cry, I'm so jealous of them. *Our* lord was a terrible man."

Was—past tense. What had happened to him?

When asked, the former pilot glanced around furtively before lowering his voice. "He died. When the survivors of that battle got back to our domain, the count and all his heirs were already dead. I heard rumors that it was to keep them quiet, but we don't even know what happened. I heard that the way they were killed was pretty gruesome, though."

The other man had more questions, but the pilot rose from his seat.

"That's enough, isn't it? I don't want to remember any more. I never want anything else to do with House Banfield or Liam. I've seen all kinds of stuff out there on the battlefield, but…that was a real monster."

***

Following the battle with House Farnham's forces, I sat relaxing in the special living area attached to the Purple Tail…or, at least, I wished I could relax. It was more like I sat there letting a sobbing Marie have her way and treat my wounds.

"There are…wounds…wounds on your body, Lord Liam… My own incompetence disgusts me! Will my death be enough to atone for this?!"

"Are you stupid? Would you just treat my injuries already?"

I knew that Marie's loyalty-addled brain interpreted my words as a wonderful show of forgiveness, or something like that. Her corporate-drone mentality was sickening. I'd been a corporate slave myself in my past life, so I hated people like that. It was best just to keep things simple. I didn't expect anything of my employees but their labor, and I simply paid them what that labor was worth. That approach was for the best.

When Marie finished treating me, I adjusted my clothes and knelt on the living area's tatami. Riho and Fuka were already seated, and Ellen knelt after me. Opposite us were Master and his family.

"I apologize for the wait, Master. I'm so glad you're safe."

I bowed my head, and Riho and Fuka followed suit. Ellen alone seemed reluctant, for some reason… I'd have to scold her for that later. Yet Master Yasushi just smiled, forgiving Ellen's rudeness.

"No, no… I must thank you for saving me."

I raised my head, grateful for my master's magnanimity.

Fuka spoke next. "Master! How did those Original Way of the Flash guys capture you?! Couldn't you have taken them out with one sword slash?!"

She'd asked what I wanted to. How had Master been captured?

"And what do you mean, you can't fight anymore?!" Riho was worried about him. "You were really strong, so how come?!"

I added one more question to theirs. "Unfortunately, Master, we let the instructor of the Original Way of the Flash get away. I thought he'd be with the magistrate, but I had Kunai and her operatives search for him. Yet even they couldn't find him…?"

Master listened to all our questions with his arms folded and his eyes closed.

"Then there's that monster," I added. "He seemed to have a grudge against the Way of the Flash. Do you have some history with him?"

I was curious about the huge octopus too; Master had acted as if he understood what it was. I certainly didn't think I'd ever met the monster before, yet it had known me. No—it knew the Way of the Flash. It had attacked us viciously, saying that we couldn't exist.

Master Yasushi opened his eyes and unfolded his arms, giving us a serious look. It seemed that he—and the Way of the Flash—still had secrets.

"It appears the time has come to inform you of everything."

Master began to tell us of the secrets of the Way of the Flash.

Chapter 16:
The Purpose of the Way of the Flash

YASUSHI PROJECTED CALM externally…but inside he was screaming. He had no idea what to do anymore.

What now?! What's my play here?! If I don't get through this and escape them, they're going to kill me one day!

For some reason, Liam's group seemed to think that Yasushi and Yasujiro were different people, and to believe that the Original Way of the Flash was a corrupted splinter school originating from their own sword style.

Then there was that octopus monster. It had shown up out of nowhere, saying it was going to kill them. Yasushi naturally had no idea what it had been.

How come a monster's after the life of a mere street performer like me? Now that I think about it, though…these four are also monsters, just in human form. How do you cut something without drawing your sword? That wasn't a magic trick, was it? Yasushi's brain ran at full speed, spewing abuse as it did so. *Calm down. All I need to do is get through this. If I just get through this, a peaceful life awaits me once more!*

Yasushi would rather be targeted by the Autocracy and idiots who wanted to make names for themselves than remain with Liam and friends. That was when he came up with an idea to escape destruction.

I know! There's not necessarily just one of those octopus monsters. So can't I just make these *monsters go after them?*

Yasushi wouldn't exactly sleep well at night if more giant octopi were out there…but if that was the case, he just needed Liam and *his* fellow monsters to take care of them. Excuses, and more fabricated Way of the Flash "lore," popped up in his head.

Meanwhile, behind Yasushi, his son Yasuyuki and his wife Nina gave him concerned looks.

"You really taught a noble, Yasu?" Nina asked. "Counts tend not to bow their heads to many people, right?"

Liam smiled at the nervous Nina. "It's true that I don't do that often, but I make an exception for my master and his family. Master Yasushi is the teacher who passed down the Way of the Flash to me. I greatly respect him."

Nina was relieved to see Liam's smile, but Yasushi knew the truth. *If somebody* told *him to bow his head to them, he'd cut* their *head off! He's dangerous! Damn it. If he finds out that I'm Yasujiro, and the Way of the Flash is a made-up style, he'll kill me too!*

Yasushi put on a solemn expression and began to speak. "I must tell you the purpose of the Way of the Flash, Lord Liam."

Liam looked back from his polite conversation with Nina. When he saw the look on Yasushi's face, he straightened up. "Purpose?"

"Yes. You witnessed that fearsome monster, didn't you? The Way of the Flash…is a sword style created to fight creatures like that."

"What?!"

Riho and Fuka widened their eyes behind the likewise-surprised Liam.

"Those things are our enemies?!"

"Now that you mention it, it does seem like other sword styles can't really compete with ours."

The two girls turned to each other, seriously considering his lie.

Meanwhile, Yasushi struck a victorious pose in his mind. *All right! This is going to work! They're buying it! The sole problem is…* He glanced over at Ellen, the only one who gave him a dubious look. *Th-this one still doubts me! I can tell. Those eyes don't trust me at all!*

Cold sweat dripped down his back. After all, from Yasushi's perspective, Ellen was as monstrous as the rest of them. Sure, she was weaker than Liam and the girls, but that just meant the *potential* threat level she gave off was perceptible even to Yasushi.

Ellen opened her mouth. "Master Yasushi, may I ask a question?" Her eyes and tone were probing.

"Y-yes?"

"If the Way of the Flash was created to fight those monsters, why do some of its forms so closely resemble those from other sword styles? Isn't it illogical that it includes techniques for facing other humans?"

Yasushi had cobbled together the Way of the Flash's forms in imitation of other styles. When that fact led Ellen to voice suspicions, he panicked.

However, Liam scolded her for her question. "Ellen! How can you speak that way to Master Yasushi? Do you doubt his words? Do you doubt the Way of the Flash?"

Ellen seemed to respect Liam and winced when he scolded her. Despite her fear of Liam, though, she gave Yasushi a dirty look. "Wh-what I believe in is *you*, Master, and *your* sword style. People have always badmouthed the Way of the Flash, saying it steals other styles' moves, so I was just curious about that."

In fact, Calvin had spread those rumors to sow suspicion about Liam.

Riho and Fuka shot murderous glares at Ellen, yet they too seemed curious. Eventually, Liam, Riho, and Fuka were all looking to Yasushi for an answer.

Quit looking at me like that, all of you! So you're *curious about that too?!*

Although Liam had scolded Ellen for her rudeness, he must've wondered that himself, since he was awaiting Yasushi's answer.

That answer was simple: The Way of the Flash was all made up. The style had been cobbled together and was full of holes; if you asked too many questions about it, all its flaws became obvious.

Yet Yasushi didn't panic. It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that he'd gotten this far in life through nothing but talk. In other words, his mouth was the only thing he could rely on. This moment, though, was when his skills would really be tested.

Yasushi put everything he had into one big gamble. “That’s because all other sword styles trace back to the Way of the Flash. No—all martial arts stem from the Way of the Flash!”

When he made this grand, fictitious proclamation, question marks seemingly appeared above Riho and Fuka. They cocked their heads, apparently uncomprehending, while Ellen’s gaze only grew colder.

Liam alone fell into thought. He must’ve believed that there was some additional meaning in what Yasushi had said, and voiced his interpretation of his master’s words: “So the Way of the Flash is the ultimate form of martial arts as a whole?”

“Yes, that’s it exactly!”

Following Liam’s helpful assistance, Yasushi proceeded to pile on the lies.

“Why are people pulled toward martial arts? Toward the sword? There are many different weapons, but people have always been uniquely drawn to the sword… That’s because their instincts point them toward something beyond mere conflict between human beings. Many more monsters like the one you faced today are out there in the universe!”

I wonder if they are…? I mean, if you looked, you’d probably find them, right? If they aren’t, I could just say these guys haven’t been able *to find any.*

Yasushi went on, working in things he felt he might’ve heard at one time or another. “The Way of the Flash resulted from polishing the skills necessary to fight those monsters! The style is itself a sword to

protect the weak from them! It was created to fight beings stronger than humans. That's the truth of the Way of the Flash."

While Yasushi sweated, wondering whether his lie would be effective, Liam nodded crisply. "To tell the truth, I suspected something along those lines… The Way of the Flash is just too powerful. In that case, though, is it okay to shrug off the degraded Original Way of the Flash? Also, how come those men abducted you in the first place, Master?"

When the topic turned back to the Original Way of the Flash, Nina twitched behind Yasushi. He immediately turned around, telling her with his eyes, *Keep quiet about me being the instructor!*

Got it, Yasu!

That kind of communication was a feat only possible for a husband and wife whose very hearts were connected. Nina picked up Yasuyuki, covering his mouth so that he couldn't say anything unnecessary. Impressed by Nina's considerateness, Yasushi turned back to Liam and company.

"The Original Way of the Flash is all but destroyed now. The instructor was killed by the magistrate, Chester, when he tried to flee."

"That's what happened? I'm surprised his other students let Chester get away with that."

"They were blinded by greed, no doubt. Truly regrettable."

That was an awful excuse, considering that Yasushi had started the Original Way of the Flash himself when *he* was blinded by greed.

"So then, why were you abducted?"

"…They'd lost the teachings about the Way of the Flash's purpose and wished me to help them revive the secrets of the art. After all, I'm rather well-known now, thanks to a certain someone."

Even with a terrifying foe like Liam in front of him, Yasushi couldn't help making that caustic jab. He was just that sort of petty person. Then he hurried to bring the conversation to an end so that they wouldn't realize that he himself was Yasujiro.

"They were preoccupied with hedonism, and blinded by the technique of the Flash itself. I doubt they could've fulfilled the Way of the Flash's true purpose."

Liam had made his judgment of the Original Way of the Flash as well. "True. There was no bite to their Flashes. I suppose you'd say they were superficial. I sensed that they were of lower quality than our Flashes."

Liam was being as blunt as he liked in front of that very style's founder. Furious inside, Yasushi nevertheless sucked up to him.

"It's impressive that you picked up on that. I'm sure your Flash has surpassed mine already, Lord Liam."

"No, I still have a long way to go compared to you, Master. I'll keep up my practice so that one day I can produce a Flash like yours." Liam bowed his head bashfully, as if delighted by Yasushi's praise.

You'll practice, eh? Yasushi thought. *But* you're *the founder of the style. No one could possibly be better at it than you.*

Everything was going rather swimmingly until Liam's expression suddenly changed. "Oh. Before I forget… Kunai."

When he called that name, a masked woman emerged from his shadow.

So this is one of those dark operatives I hear about, Yasushi thought casually.

Meanwhile, Liam gave Kunai a ruthless order. "I can't imagine that Count Farnham wasn't involved in Master Yasushi's abduction. I'd like you to investigate…but when you're done, I want you to show those responsible what happens when you mess with the Way of the Flash. Make an example of them."

"Hee hee… As you wish, Master." Kunai faded back into shadow, looking rather gleeful as she did so.

Yasushi felt like his spine had frozen solid. *Wh-what were you two talking about just now?! Th-that wasn't an assassination order, was it? No, it couldn't be. It couldn't be, right?!*

After Kunai disappeared, Liam's posture changed. "I'd like to know one more thing. Why can't you fight anymore, Master? You could've defeated that giant octopus yourself, couldn't you?"

This is it, Yasushi thought. Up until now, he'd been evasive about displaying his true strength, but he'd finally found a way to solve that problem once and for all. "The reason I can't fight anymore, eh…? It's this."

Yasushi pulled his kimono open, showing off a long diagonal scar across his chest. The sight shocked Liam and company.

"What's that wound?!"

Yasushi closed his eyes, laying it on thick as he lied, "I faced a powerful enemy and couldn't measure up."

"Y-*you*, Master?! Something stronger than that octopus?" Liam possessed incomprehensible confidence that Yasushi could also have defeated the giant octopus he'd beaten.

If something more powerful than that was out there, it'd definitely be scary. I guess I'll just say this… Yasushi quickly put together a lie he felt could fool Liam. "Oh, yes. My foe was a much more frightening monster. My defeat by that enemy rendered me unable to fight."

Recognizing the scar, Nina blinked in surprise behind Yasushi, but quickly feigned sadness instead. They were truly a husband and wife team to be feared.

Liam studied Yasushi's scar gravely. "It looks like an incredibly sharp blade produced the cut. I almost sense some kind of grudge in it. So…that wound is why you can't fight? In that case, I'll have an elixir readied immediately. Marie—an elixir!"

"Yes, Lord Liam." Marie, who was waiting at Liam's side, stood and produced one from her pocket. She probably had it with her to treat Liam.

Yasushi panicked when he saw the potion. *These people just walk around carrying those things?! No, that's not what's important right now…*

Collecting himself, Yasushi shook his head and pulled his kimono closed.

"Lord Liam, I was defeated. Somehow I survived, but I cannot use the Flash anymore. It isn't a matter of simply healing my physical and mental wounds. It's not that sort of injury."

"We'll fix this! I have plenty of skilled doctors. I'm sure they can do something about it!"

If you fix it, that'll be a problem for me! It doesn't hurt anymore anyway! The only reason he still had the wound was as a reminder not to try fleeing Nina again.

Yasushi hung his head. "This is what facing those monsters means. No amount of medical treatment will return me to the way I was before."

"B-but that's…"

When Liam hung his head in despair, Yasushi was sure of his victory. All it would take was one more push. "My Flash wasn't enough to win, and I doubt I could beat that foe in the future either… So please, let me entrust you with the Way of the Flash and its purpose, Lord Liam."

"M-me, Master? But…"

Yasushi was firm. "Why are you getting cold feet now?! You're my successor, Lord Liam! You've inherited the true Way of the Flash!"

Liam nodded quietly, vowing to fulfill the purpose of the Way of the Flash, which Yasushi had just invented on the spot. "Very well… I'll carry on your goal, Master, and the goal of the Way of the Flash."

"That's a relief to hear. I no longer have any regrets. I suppose I can set off on my journey once more and enjoy the rest of my days in

__”

He’d done it. Yasushi basked in the feeling of a successful lie. Now he only needed to escape. Or so he thought, until he was stabbed in the back…and holding the knife was Nina.

“Oh…I don’t suppose you could do something for Yasuyuki, my lord?”

Yasushi rounded on her. *Wh-what’re you thinking?! Are you insane, asking him for something?!*

Nina might have been Yasushi’s wife, but she was also Yasuyuki’s mother. She didn’t mind suffering a little hardship herself, but she didn’t want her son to suffer if she could help it.

Sorry, Yasu, Nina thought, then asked Liam to provide for Yasuyuki’s future. “D-do you think that’d be possible? I’d like him to get a good education somewhere. Could you put us up on a better planet?”

Liam thumped his chest. “Just leave it to me, ma’am! I’ll have a place prepared for you on my home planet. Furthermore, I still have room for two more students of my own, so I’ll train Yasuyuki into a fine warrior of the Way of the Flash!”

After Liam’s declaration, protests came from behind him. They were voiced by Riho and Fuka, who’d kept silent so as not to interrupt.

“Wait a second! I’m ready for a student too, aren’t I? I’ll take care of Yasuyuki! After all, he’s my little brother!” Riho said.

Fuka wasn't remaining quiet either. "You'd rather have me teach you, right, Yasuyuki? Two swords is way cooler, right?"

They both wanted to take Yasuyuki as their own student.

Liam wasn't having any of it, though. "No. Master's precious son will be *my* apprentice."

As Riho and Fuka continued to complain, Ellen watched with a complicated expression.

Everyone was getting passionate about this topic, but it was no laughing matter for Yasushi. *Come on. I know I'm rotten, but I'm not letting my son become something inhuman! Whatever it takes, I'll protect Yasuyuki!*

Yasushi had at least some sense of fatherhood, and mustered it all to protect his son. He knew that if he left Yasuyuki in Liam's hands, his son could well reach the same monstrous realm as the rest of them.

"Your graciousness is enough for me. Yasuyuki has no talent, and I'd like him to live a normal life."

The shoulders of Liam and the girls drooped with disappointment. They couldn't say anything about persevering despite a lack of talent, not after seeing that octopus. Having realized that practicing the Way of the Flash meant fighting creatures like that, they seemed to give up on making a monster of Yasuyuki.

When he learned that he couldn't take Yasuyuki as an apprentice, Liam put a hand to his chin in thought. "Shall I entrust him to the knight I have the most faith in, then?"

I'm telling you that I don't want him doing anything dangerous, so how come you're trying to make him a knight?! Yasushi screamed at Liam internally. *What're you planning to do with my little boy?!*

At Liam's suggestion, Marie spoke up. "Then that's a job for me, your right-hand woman, Lord Liam. I'll train Lord Yasuyuki into a splendid knight."

Liam gave Marie quite the icy look. "Not you. You'd be bad for Yasuyuki's education."

"Wh-whaaat?!"

Yasushi held his head in his hands. *What do I do? What do I do?! Leave Yasuyuki behind and run? That'd be too awful of me as a parent, right? No—would Nina even be willing to live apart from Yasuyuki?*

He turned around and saw Nina discussing everything with Liam. "Oh my! Can we really stay on your home planet, my lord?"

"I'll have a mansion built for you immediately. Do you have any requests?"

"Oh, it doesn't need to be anything big. But I think I'd like a yard. I'd appreciate it if you could refer me to a job as well."

"No need to worry about your living expenses. I'll see that you're looked after."

"No, I want to work! It's my job to look after Yasu and Yasuyuki!"

"O-oh, really? In that case, I'll find a suitable workplace for you soon, ma'am."

"Thank you so much for everything—really. I still can't believe that Yasu's student is an actual count!"

A little overwhelmed by Nina's enthusiasm, Liam had ended up promising to figure out a job for her. She was already set on living on his home planet.

Yasushi let his head droop. He couldn't disobey his wife. *I-it's over. What was all that hard work for?*

Chapter 17:
Yasushi the Traitor

MY TALK WITH MASTER had revealed the truth of the Way of the Flash to me. I'd been surprised to learn the style had a higher purpose, but I was genuinely touched when Master called me his successor. That proved that he'd acknowledged me, unseasoned though I still was.

Still, I couldn't hide my shock that monsters like that giant octopus thing existed all over in this universe. Just where had they come from? The Way of the Flash having been created to fight them made sense. Thus far, the style had proven completely unequalled, although I'd never thought that was because it wasn't meant for fights against other human beings.

If I was going to succeed as an evil lord, I needed to take care of any trouble coming my way. I'd long ago vowed to cut down anyone who threatened my way of life…but the problem now was that there were enemies even Master couldn't handle.

Master was stronger than me, so there were definitely creatures out there tougher than that octopus I'd defeated. I would need a way to deal with them, but for the moment, I couldn't do anything except simply continue to train myself.

A style intended to exterminate monsters that threatened humanity… I'd never thought the sword school I'd become a student

of by complete chance would have such a shocking secret behind it. It was interesting, though.

If the style had been created to fight monsters, that pretty much guaranteed its complete superiority in the human world. I had to hand it to the Guide for arranging for me to learn such a style. At the same time, it felt a bit as if he'd saddled me with some epic destiny I hadn't asked for. That said, I still would've chosen to learn the style if I'd known everything from the beginning, so that was fine. I just wished I could brag to Nitta about the incredible sword style I'd learned.

"That's enough about the purpose of the Way of the Flash," I said. "The problem now is…"

My frown must've worried Marie, who was still concerned about my injuries. "Lord Liam, maybe you really should see a doctor before anything else."

She'd only administered simple first aid, and she wouldn't leave me alone now, still fretting over my health.

"I'm fine. I just want to get this over with, so let her in."

I sat in a reception room, prepared to see someone who'd requested a meeting with me. When I gave permission to let that visitor in, the door opened, and she appeared.

It was a red-eyed Rosetta. She must've been relieved to see me; she ran over with tears falling from her eyes. Just before she reached me, though, she apparently thought better of hugging me, no doubt also concerned about my injuries.

"I was so worried, Darling! I heard that you were hurt—are you all right? Maybe you should've seen a doctor before seeing me. You don't need to talk to me before caring for your own health…" From the way she went on and on, it was clear that she was beside herself with worry for me.

I still couldn't believe that Rosetta's security force, of all things, had come to my aid. I obviously appreciated the assist from the Guide, but…I wish he'd picked someone else for my rescue!

"You really helped me out this time. I appreciate it, Rosetta."

"I'm so glad I was there…"

I'd been sort of ignoring Rosetta's security force, so I had no idea it had grown twenty thousand ships strong. It was an average kind of fleet, and of decent quality, not put together for appearances alone. Rosetta's reinforcements had definitely assured my victory; still, she was the one person I was loath to owe anything to.

"I swear I'll repay this debt," I muttered, frustrated.

Rosetta just wiped her tears away happily. "As long as you're safe, Darling, nothing else matters to me. Besides, you've already saved me so many times, I'm just glad I could do something for you this time."

There was no prevarication in Rosetta's tearful smile. She was truly glad from the bottom of her heart. I found myself envying the pure *goodness* at her core; unfortunately, it didn't resonate with my black heart one bit. After the betrayal in my previous life, I'd given up on trusting people. Now I couldn't relate to Rosetta's feelings at all.

I hadn't expected to end up indebted to her, though. How would I repay her for this…? That was something I'd have to rack my brains over for a bit.

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Yasushi stumbled through the ship. He'd escaped from the infirmary and given Riho and Fuka the slip as well.

"It's over. My life is over. I'll never get away from Liam…"

Miserable, Yasushi imagined what things would be like from then on. There'd be no escape for him; his three apprentices would no doubt bother him for the rest of his life. After all, they were heading straight for Liam's home planet. Yasushi was convinced that he was about to start living a life in which he'd never know a moment of peace.

"If it were just me, I could get away… If not for my wife and son…"

His wife Nina would never let him abandon his family and flee. The last time he'd attempted to do so, she'd chased after him with a kitchen knife. He still hadn't forgotten the fear he'd felt when she slashed him across the chest back then.

Plus, he loved his son Yasuyuki, a good kid who adored Yasushi despite how pathetic he was. Yasushi's conscience wouldn't allow him to leave the boy with Liam. He felt as if his family had been taken hostage.

"Damn it… My life's ruined because of him! How the hell did a street performer like me become a Sword God? It's crazy, I tell you!"

Even if he could escape Liam's home planet, all that awaited him would be a life on the run. Plenty of people out there still wanted to take down the famous Yasushi to make a name for themselves. Then there were the Imperial nobles, the Autocracy, and even the people from other intergalactic nations who wanted to employ him because of his guise as the "Sword God." Even if he got away from Liam, he'd spend the rest of his life evading everyone else.

Still, he didn't wish to simply give up. "I want to at least get back at Liam somehow! I won't be satisfied unless I can harass him in some way that won't get him mad at me!"

Not only was he petty, he was also a coward.

The moment Yasushi swore to enact some small revenge on Liam, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. It had looked like a dog turning down a small corridor.

"Hmm? Was that a dog?"

Yasushi peeked into the hallway and spotted a girl at the other end. She wore a maid uniform, and she was clutching her head as if in some kind of pain. However, he didn't see the dog he thought he'd spotted.

As Yasushi thought that he must've been mistaken about the animal, the girl shouted, "At this rate, everything will go just how Liam wants! I can't simply let that happen!"

When he heard what the girl said, Yasushi peered down the corridor with greater interest. *I thought everyone aboard this ship adored Liam… But I guess* some *people don't like him.*

Having found this girl who hated Liam—Ciel—Yasushi grinned in a sinister manner. An idea had come to him. Schooling his expression, he approached Ciel and called out to her. He stroked his scruffy beard, making sure to put on his brilliant-swordsman act.

"Something seems to be troubling you, miss."

Ciel jolted when he called to her. Seeing who he was, she began to tremble. "Sword God! Sir…!"

The girl blanched, wondering whether this man—whom even Liam looked up to as more powerful than himself—had heard what she just said.

Yasushi was sure that he'd found an ally. *She's worried that I heard her badmouthing Liam. I bet if I work with her, I'll be able to get back at him somehow.* "No need to be afraid. I'd like to ask you some things about Lord Liam. You see, he's caused me a fair bit of trouble too."

Ciel gave him a suspicious look. It was no wonder. To outsiders, Liam and Yasushi appeared to have a very good relationship; that was just another thing that got on Yasushi's nerves.

"Aren't you the sword instructor Liam looks up to?" Ciel asked, wearing her distrust on her sleeve.

"Yes, and because of him, everyone now knows who I am. I was just thinking about how I might get back at him for all the inconvenience he's caused me."

Although Ciel was still suspicious, she must've thought that Yasushi had no reason to lie about something like that. She probably

also felt that having him on her side would be reassuring.

Thus, she told Yasushi all about Liam. "He's not the great ruler everyone thinks he is! Inside, he's evil! He mocks his subjects and raises taxes on a whim! I told him not to, because his people would suffer, but he just smiled and said they *should*!"

"O-oh?" *Hold on a second… That makes me feel like trying to get back at him would be dangerous. I'd at least have to be careful what I did if I tried it… I just want to get my own back a little. I don't want him holding a grudge.*

The fact that Yasushi still couldn't give up on his revenge *made* him Yasushi.

Ciel continued telling him the truth. "He's deceiving everyone, including his fiancée Lady Rosetta. She's a good person, but Liam tricked her into an engagement. And even though he has her, he refuses to marry her and fools around wherever he wants! I bet there's another person he loves somewhere else."

As soon as Liam's noble training had ended, he was supposed to have gotten married, but he'd selfishly extended his engagement indefinitely. It saddened Rosetta, but she pretended it didn't bother her, saying that Liam must have a reason for it. In Ciel's eyes, Rosetta was simply being tragically brave about it all.

"I can't forgive Liam for everything he's done!" she continued. "He deceived my brother and father too…"

As Ciel told him all this, Yasushi's blood boiled. *Not only is he running from his wedding, but he's fooling around with all kinds of other women too?! I'm so jealous that I can't bear it!*

That was when he came up with his revenge.

"Understood. Please let me assist you in this matter."

Ciel beamed as if she'd just gained the ultimate ally. "R-really?!"

Yasushi rested his hand on her shoulder. "Just leave the rest to me."

She nodded, tears in her eyes. "Yes, Master Yasushi!"

In appearance, if nothing else, Yasushi seemed as formidable as ever.

***

As Rosetta and I spoke in the reception room, Marie fumed next to me. The object of her ire was the knight who'd accompanied Rosetta.

"How long do you plan to hide behind Lady Rosetta, you cretin?!" Marie demanded.

Ever since Rosetta had entered the room, a knight had stood behind her back, practically concealing herself. Was it Vivian, the head of Rosetta's security force?

Despite that title, Vivian was currently slouching to cloak her tall frame behind Rosetta.

"Eep! Look, I'm a novice in this situation!" she exclaimed. "I have no experience in society! I'm not used to stuff like this, so can you let me off the hook?"

As the towering Vivian cowered behind Rosetta, a throbbing vein stood out on Marie's forehead. "I wonder just how a knight who's supposed to protect Lady Rosetta can justify hiding behind her… What

do you mean, you haven't experienced 'society'?! What kind of excuse is that?!" Marie's faux-polite act had completely vanished, proving that she must've been pretty upset.

"Eeek! Is this a hazing?! Am I being hazed?!"

"You want to see hazing?! Get over here, and I'll show you hazing!"

"Stay awaaaaay!"

Marie made a grab for Vivian, but the other knight began to dash around the room to escape her. As the two ran circles around Rosetta, I sighed, barely able to stand the sight of them. Rosetta heaved a sigh at the same time. At that point, we exchanged a glance, then both looked away awkwardly.

By then, Marie had caught Vivian and was trying to haul her out of the reception room. "I'll test you personally to see whether you're a suitable knight for Lady Rosetta!"

"Help me, Lady Rosetta! Someone scary is taking me away! This is unethical! Where's HR?!"

When she saw her knight clinging to the doorframe, wailing, Rosetta swooped in to mediate. "Just let her go, would you, Marie? Vivi simply doesn't know how things work here; she lived on the street before this."

Easily convinced by Rosetta, Marie released Vivian. "I suppose I can let her off the hook just this once if you say to, Lady Rosetta. But how does a knight end up on the street anyway? Just what did you

do?" There should've been any number of employers for a skilled knight, so Vivian must have quite a story.

Returning to her place behind Rosetta, Vivian confessed her circumstances. "Well, after I qualified as an Imperial knight, I started job-searching, but…I struck out on every single position."

I had an idea of why she hadn't landed a post. "That personality of yours ruined your chances, I'm guessing."

"Augh!" Vivian clutched her chest. "To see through to my weak point so quickly… I'd expect nothing less of the great Count Banfield."

"I'm pretty sure everyone figures *that* out when they first meet you."

"Well, that's what happened. All the rejection crushed my spirit, and I became a shut-in at my parents' house. Everything was peaceful for a while, until my brother took over as head of the family and said that I was a deadbeat. He kicked me out of the house."

Vivian shed a tear, which made Marie's cheeks twitch. "But you *were* a deadbeat, so isn't it your own fault that you were out on the street?"

"Hwaugh!" Vivian collapsed, still holding her chest, as if Marie had landed a critical hit on her spirit.

Rosetta looked awkward, so I asked, "Are you sane, putting *this* in charge of your security force?"

Eyes wandering, she answered, "Sh-she really is great at her job. She got top marks on her knight exam. And you saw how she performed in that battle, right?"

Now that I thought about it, this had to be the "Captain Slouch" from those communications I'd picked up in the Avid. Looking down at the woman who lay twitching on the floor, eyes rolled back in her head, I feared for the future of Rosetta's security force.

At that point, I was thankful to be mercifully distracted by visitors asking to come into the room. *"Lord Liam, Sir Yasushi and Lady Ciel request permission to enter."*

"Master and Ciel?" What were those two doing together?

***

Yasushi and Ciel marched into the reception room. Inside were Liam and Marie, as well as Rosetta and the knight who served as her guard. That knight was passed out on the floor for some reason. But if Yasushi let that bother him, he couldn't get his revenge, so he ignored her.

For a moment, the room's guards glared murderously at Yasushi and Ciel for interrupting Liam and Rosetta's precious time together. Yasushi broke into a cold sweat at their stares, but he maintained his calm exterior.

"Look at my master like that, and I'll kill you," Liam told the guards in a low voice.

"A-apologies, my lord. I didn't know that was the Sword God…" one responded. "Please forgive my rudeness."

After Liam's warning, the guards eased up. Realizing it was Yasushi they'd been glaring at, they apologized.

"Think nothing of it. Just doing your jobs, weren't you? I'm not upset." Yasushi forgave them, wanting to move the conversation along.

Rosetta curtsied to him in greeting. "I've heard so much about you from my fiancé, Lord Liam. My name's Rosetta. It's an honor to meet you, sir." She was showing Yasushi the utmost respect; she even refrained from calling Liam "Darling" as she usually did.

Upon seeing her, Yasushi thought, *A noble lady with blonde ringlets, eh? Not my type.* He was a fan of the dark-haired intellectual type, so Rosetta wasn't particularly appealing to him.

Liam looked awkward. "What is it, Master? If you had something urgent to discuss, you could've summoned me."

He was asking Yasushi what he wanted as if looking for an excuse to leave the room. Yasushi might've been a small fry, but he was better than most at identifying people's weak points. *I knew it… He's uncomfortable around his fiancée.*

Ciel had told Yasushi that Liam was marrying Rosetta to obtain her family's dukedom, so he figured their marriage was political and that no love was involved on Liam's part. Yasushi guessed from Ciel's talk of Liam running around to avoid the marriage that he was ill at ease with Rosetta.

Yasushi was firing on all cylinders; meanwhile, Ciel's eyes sparkled as she watched Liam behaving so awkwardly in front of his master.

Liam spotted Ciel behind Yasushi and blinked in surprise for a

moment, then grimaced. “Why is Ciel with you, Master?”

Seeing the suspicious look in Liam’s eyes, Yasushi determined that now was the time to get his revenge. “Oh, who cares about that right now? I’m here because of a certain rumor I heard about someone running around to avoid his wedding, Lord Liam!”

“Wha—?!”

Liam was the only one in the room who exclaimed aloud at what Yasushi said, but everyone else gave the Sword God a look of surprise. They were speechless at his sledgehammer-subtle approach. If it someone other than Yasushi had said that, Marie might’ve cut them down before Liam could even respond. Her face looked as though she was doing all she could to check her rage but failing spectacularly.

“Sir Yasushi, that is an extremely delicate topic in this household. I will not go so far as to call you an outsider, but could you please refrain from commenting on the matter?”

She was able to maintain her polite facade, but the expressions of everyone around her seemed to say, “How dare you bring that up!”

For better or worse, Liam held all House Banfield’s authority, so he was allowed to do whatever he wished. He could jaunt around avoiding his wedding all he liked, and very few people could express their opinion to him on it. He never listened to anything Amagi or Brian complained to him about, and Claus had needed to prepare to give up his position as head knight just to get Liam to listen to him. Opening this topic was the conversational equivalent of strolling into House Banfield’s living room with muddy shoes on.

Liam's gaze wandered, while Rosetta looked awkward herself. Since Liam respected Yasushi so much, he seemed to be considering how to answer his master. From how uncomfortable Liam appeared, Yasushi was certain that his plan would succeed.

It might've been impossible for you guys to do this, but it's nothing for someone like me, who's all talk!

From Liam's reaction, Yasushi could tell that he wouldn't get in trouble for raising the subject, so it was time to get his small revenge. Whether it became a big problem for House Banfield wasn't his concern. All Yasushi cared about was whether he could get away with it.

"I can't say it's very admirable of you to put off marrying such a wonderful young lady. I've heard that your noble training is finished, so there's nothing to obstruct the wedding any longer. Just what's giving you cold feet, lad?"

"But… You see, I was on a journey looking for *you*, Master…"

"That excuse won't cut it, son!"

"N-no, sir…"

In front of Yasushi, Liam's mask as a figure of absolute authority fell away. It seemed to the others as if Yasushi were scolding Liam for his own sake, but of course the reality was different.

I'm in the graveyard of my life after getting married myself, so why should you *be allowed to run around living the carefree single life?! You tie the knot too! Oh… Wait! If he settles down and starts a family, he'll stop messing with me so much, right? So will harassing*

him actually be productive? This is the perfect revenge! It's two birds with one stone!

Sure that his haranguing of Liam would succeed, Yasushi turned around and flashed Ciel a thumbs-up. When everyone else in the room saw that, they understood that Ciel had revealed House Banfield's circumstances to Yasushi and convinced him to "help."

Everyone—besides Rosetta, that is—glared sternly at Ciel, who stared at Yasushi and shook her head frantically. This *wasn't* what she'd intended, but Yasushi interpreted the gesture in a way convenient to him. He and Ciel were hardly husband and wife, after all. They were just a pair of strangers who each had no idea what the other was thinking.

What, that's not enough? I should go further? I'll lay it on, then!

Yasushi turned to Liam again, forcing Liam to look back and essentially cutting off the young man's escape route. "Lord Liam, where do you think you're looking?"

As Yasushi stepped in front of Ciel, Liam grimaced. "I-I'm sorry, Master."

Inside, Yasushi was having the time of his life. "This is shameful behavior for the successor of the Way of the Flash. You are to return to your domain at once and hold your wedding. How can you call yourself a mentor to other students like this?"

"N-no… But I, uh…"

"No excuses! I want you to tell me right now that you'll go back home and have your wedding!"

Cowed, Liam hung his head. "U-understood. I can't say it'll be *right* after I get home, but I'll return and begin preparations for the ceremony soon."

Someone in Liam's position couldn't just have a wedding immediately; Yasushi conceded that point, smiling down at Liam warmly. "Very good, my lord."

Everyone else in the room seemed to unfreeze.

"Lord Liam?!" Marie exclaimed.

For all her personality issues, Marie was nothing if not good at her job. She'd begun recording the conversation a short time earlier, and thus had a record of Liam's words, proving what he'd agreed to.

She strode to Rosetta. "Lady Rosetta, we must return to the home planet at once to prepare for the ceremony!"

"R-right… Huh?" Rosetta was utterly confused, unable to keep up with what was happening.

Yasushi turned around to see Ciel violently shaking her head at him. *That's still not enough? I mean, what more can I… Wait!* He had a revelation. *I need to make sure he's humiliated!*

He'd hatched a plan for his next prank on Liam.

Chapter 18:
A Curse or a Blessing

"DO YOU DISLIKE LADY ROSETTA, Lord Liam?"

"No… It's not that."

Master and I had moved from the reception room. We were on our own now; I'd had everyone else leave, since Master said that he wanted to speak with me alone. He'd asked me about my feelings for Rosetta.

"Then why have you been avoiding the wedding?"

"Well, I…I guess you could say she's not who I thought she was when I fell for her. I know she's a kind girl who cares for me, but…it's like there's something missing, I suppose."

Master folded his arms and nodded, as if he'd gotten something out of the vague answer I gave. "I suppose her affection for you did seem a bit smothering. But that's not all bad, is it? Once you settle down, you'll realize how wonderful it is to be married, Lord Liam."

Master didn't really understand my feelings about Rosetta. But I couldn't exactly tell him that I'd initially enjoyed watching her resist my torment of her, and now that she'd turned all subservient, I wasn't feeling it anymore. I wasn't gonna talk to the master I respected about my turn-ons, so I had to consider the matter seriously. Did I genuinely want to marry Rosetta?

Paying it some real thought, not many women other than Rosetta came to mind when I considered marriage. Sure, there were

lots of beautiful girls at my mansion. Amagi was the most stunning, of course, but there was also Ellen, Riho, and Fuka…and I guess Serena? Well, that was all I could think of off the top of my head.

I'd planned to fool around to my heart's content, but I had so little actual contact with women that one of the first who came to mind was an old grandma. That was kind of a shock.

It was another heavy blow to my ego when for some reason I pictured Kurt's face, along with Lillie's, while considering other women I might be interested in. *You're a dude! You're in a different section! Get out of here!*

Tia and Marie came to mind, but they were in a different group too—one firmly separate from any romantic possibilities. Nias and Eulisia were just disappointing. Chino? Ciel? I thought of them as cute, but not really as *women*.

Of all the feminine failures I was acquainted with, Rosetta was for some reason the only woman I pictured smiling.

"Master… Do you really think I should marry Rosetta?" I asked, as if I were suffering pre-wedding blues.

Master smiled at me. "Everyone has their doubts."

"My reason for marrying her is…impure. Is it still all right to do so?"

I couldn't tell him that I'd originally just wanted to marry Rosetta because I thought she'd be against it, yet Master seemed to catch some of my meaning.

"The matter of her peerage, correct? Nobles do have a few more things to consider, I suppose. But you don't dislike Lady Rosetta, do you?"

He didn't seem clear on exactly what my "impure" intentions were, but that was fine. Sometimes it was best that people not know the truth.

When he asked whether I disliked Rosetta, the first answer that came to mind was that she was better than my other options. To be perfectly honest, I'd realized that—somewhere on the inside—I was worried that Rosetta might one day betray me, just as my wife in my past life had done.

I felt pathetic for thinking that way. If I kept worrying along those lines, I'd never have a harem.

"It's less about how I feel toward her, and more that…I'm scared to face her."

"Then doing so is all the more important. Where did the Lord Liam who bravely faced powerful opponents go? You're much too timid in matters of romance."

Master smiled widely, his arms folded. I'd never thought that I'd talk to him about my love life, and I sensed my face turn beet red with shame.

"In fact, I think you should confess your interest to her *passionately*," Master told me. "You should marry for your own sake, not for your partner's. So say something like, 'Just shut up and come with me!' That's perfect."

"Huh? C-confess my interest…?"

"Bombard her with all your feelings for her, Lord Liam!"

***

After Master said that, I called Rosetta to my room, then waited nervously for her to show up.

"C-calm down, Liam," I told myself. "You're the biggest villain in the Empire. You're not scared of one woman. Just confess love to her like an evil lord would. Wait a second… What the heck does that mean?"

What would an evil lord's confession of love be like? My old friend Nitta, who'd been so familiar with manga and anime, had never told me about anything like that.

I'd also called Amagi to my room. She watched me pace around, confused. "Please calm yourself, Master."

"I-I am calm! I just want to walk a bit."

"Is that so? I shall take my leave, then." She attempted to depart before Rosetta showed up.

"H-hey! How come you have to leave?!"

"This *will* be a romantic confession to your fiancée, will it not? My presence will only be a hindrance."

"I don't need a woman who considers you a hindrance."

Amagi's expression became complicated. In it, I perceived happiness, disappointment, and exasperation all at once. "You wish to

confess your feelings with your guardian present? Wouldn't such a thing harm your dignity as an evil lord?"

"Ugh!"

That was true. With Amagi here, I'd essentially be confessing to Rosetta in another woman's presence. That was bound to make Rosetta feel awkward, and in the worst-case scenario, it might destroy my image as an evil lord completely.

Watching me deliberate, Amagi smiled. "Master."

"What?"

"Do you dislike Lady Rosetta?"

"I don't… She's one of those I like, among humans."

"For now, that will have to be enough. I beg you, please make her happy."

Amagi left the room, essentially trading places with Rosetta, who entered a bit later.

"U-um, Darling?"

She stood by the door, watching me nervously. It had been almost a century since I was betrayed in my past life. I was beginning to feel pathetic over having been shackled to the memory of my former wife for so long.

"When we get back, we're getting married," I stated. "I want the peerage House Claudia will provide me."

"R-right. Your master said so, after all. Yes, I'm in complete agreement! And—"

Rosetta had smiled somewhat sadly when I specified that I wanted her family's peerage. I'd also only agreed to marry her at last after Master told me to. She should've been furious, but instead put on a brave face and accepted it all.

"—the title of duke truly suits you, Darling. My mother and I will both be happy for you to receive it. I think my late grandmother would've been thrilled as well."

"Yeah. Your peerage will be mine."

Rosetta hung her head, unable to say anything more. She was probably depressed that our marriage was a political affair with no love involved. When the silence dragged on, though, she was the first to squeeze out more words.

"That's enough for me. Even if you're only interested in the title, I—"

"I'm…!" I interrupted Rosetta, gazing at the view of space projected on a monitor making up one of my walls. "I'm…greedy. I'm not satisfied unless I get everything."

"Darling?"

"So I will. I'll get House Claudia's title—and I'll get you too! D-don't think you'll be able to flee me. Y-you'll always…belong to me."

My voice had faded a little at the end, but Rosetta covered her mouth.

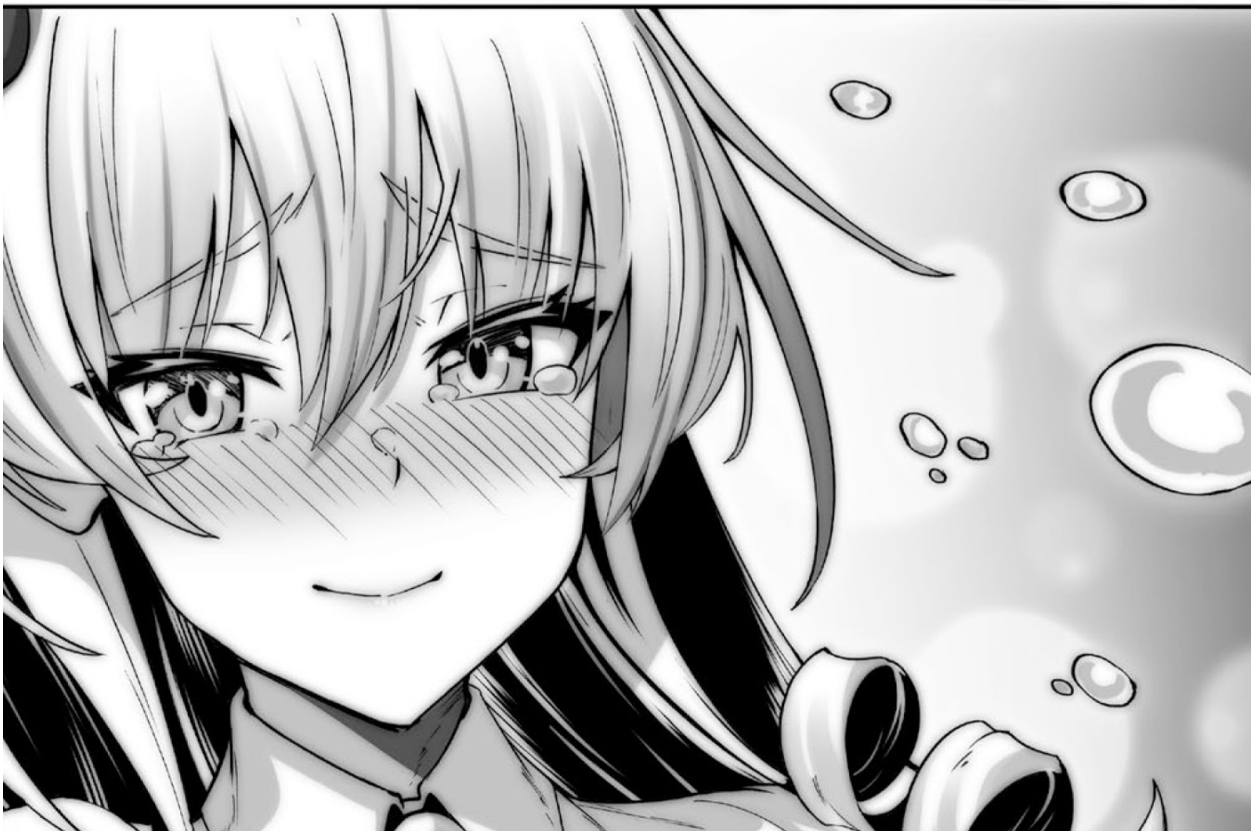
"I won't flee!" Her voice was tearful. "I'll never flee. I'll always be by your side."

I turned around and walked to the crying Rosetta, embracing her. *Th-that was a perfect confession for an evil lord. I think.*

***

After parting with Liam, Yasushi wore a refreshed smile. He must've found some alcohol aboard the ship, because he walked the halls with a drunken jauntiness. It was a perk of being Liam's master that he could get anything sold aboard the ship for free.





"Whew! That was fun."

He'd found out that Liam, of all people, was actually a coward when it came to love, and he'd put on a show as Liam's instructor in matters of romance as well. He'd said all kinds of things in the spirit of the moment, although they were all off the cuff. Getting to drink free booze on top of that just made this situation more delightful.

As he strolled down the corridor in bliss, Ciel ran up to him.

"Lady Ciel! Did you see my revenge—kah!"

Ciel jumped on Yasushi and grabbed his collar, shaking him. "That's not what I wanted you to do! Why'd you go make things worse?! Now they'll go home and get married, and everyone will live happily ever after! Why'd you convince him to hold the wedding?!"

"Huh?! What do you mean?! I just had a little fun with him!"

What Yasushi meant as simple harassment had turned out to be the greatest possible blessing for House Banfield, but that wasn't what Ciel had wanted.

"Lady Rosetta was over the moon when she came back from Liam's room! What do you plan to do if everything really works out just like this?!"

"What were you hoping I'd do?! Did you think I'd do something crazy?! This is *me*, you know!"

"You could get him to change his ways, couldn't you?!"

"Like hell I could!" he shouted in response to Ciel's ludicrous suggestion.

He was suffering now because he *couldn't* alter Liam, and he'd continue to suffer in the future.

Ciel had tears in her eyes. "I asked you to help me because you seemed so confident, you *traitor*!"

***

Back on the planet Chester had ruled as magistrate, a small octopus crawled across the ground.

"This can't be happening! Not to *me*!"

Now tiny, with a cute, childlike voice, G'doire wandered in search of negative emotions. He needed them to regain the power he'd lost.

"If not for that sword forged from Divine Gold, I'd never have been forced into this ridiculous form. It's all his fault!"

Footsteps approached G'doire as he crawled along the ground. It was the Guide, with a wine bottle and glass in hand. The bottle contained all the negative emotions of those people who'd died in the recent fighting on the planet and out in space. Resentment, pain, hatred—all concentrated in liquid form.

The octopus reached out a tentacle. "Give me that! It's all your fault that I—gyagh!"

As the Guide poured the liquid into the glass, he stepped on G'doire.

The liquid gave off a black vapor that smelled delectable to the Guide. He breathed the vapor in to relish its scent before sipping the liquid in the glass, looking down at the now-powerless G'doire.

"Now, why would I give you this after going to all the trouble of gathering it? Liam's even stronger now thanks to you, G'doire… You good-for-nothing!"

The Guide finished the liquid in his glass and tossed it aside, putting the bottle to his lips instead. He drank the entire bottle down and tossed that aside as well. Then, grabbing G'doire, the Guide opened his mouth wide.

"Wh-what're you doing?!"

The Guide tossed the panicking G'doire into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed him. "Mm…a little too bloody for my taste, but I'm finally getting some of my strength back now."

Black smoke poured from the Guide's body; he'd regained significant power by eating G'doire.

"I won't get it wrong this time, Liam! With my own hands, I'll—"

Lurking behind the Guide was the dog spirit. It glared at the Guide, resisting the urge to growl—then spun around in surprise. Through a tear in space, a giant figure made of light and wearing a warrior's mask peered out at the Guide.

The Guide, laughing maniacally, sensed something sinister and spun around. "Ha ha ha ha ha—huh?!"

By the time he noticed the giant of light, it had torn through the opening and was reaching out to give him something—to *force* it on him. Cold sweat poured from the Guide when he realized what it was.

"Y-you—! That's—! Eeeeek!"

Unconcerned with dignity, the Guide tried to escape any way he could, racing into space as if running up an invisible staircase. However, the giant reached out and grabbed him. Its touch seemed poisonous to the Guide, and its grip burned as if its hand were made of heated steel.

"Gyaaaaah! I'm burniiiiing!"

That had hurt badly enough, but now the giant of light was trying to force an orb of light in its other hand—Liam's feelings of gratitude—onto the Guide.

The giant of light had traveled there through space to deliver those feelings of gratefulness. The delivery was a bit more forceful than usual, perhaps because of Liam's complicated feelings toward the Guide this time around. The Guide sensed a hint of a complaint in the emotions; Liam had evidently been quite upset to owe Rosetta for her support in battle. Still, his gratitude far outweighed any of the other emotions comprising the ball of light. It was chock-full of what the Guide hated more than anything—Liam's thanks.

"W-wait. Wait! Not thaaat!"

The Guide sensed instinctively that these feelings of gratitude would be fatal to him. He cast aside most of his body, escaping with only his hat. His abandoned body took the hit.

It screamed as it vanished. "Eyaaaaawaaaaah!"

The Guide's body was charred black. It disappeared into Liam's feelings of gratitude without leaving behind even a speck of ash.

Separated from his body, his true form—the hat—sped into space, spewing flames as if it were a rocket.

"As long as this part of me still exists…!"

But the giant of light was watching the Guide from its tear in space.

"Eeeeek! He noticed meee?!"

After watching the Guide fly off, the giant of light disappeared as well. The dog spirit cocked its head and spun around a few times before sitting and gazing up toward the Guide.

The Guide, who'd fled deeper into space, yelled down at the planet's surface.

"I'll never give up! You hear meee?! Don't think this is over yet, Liaaam!"

Eventually, the Guide became a tiny speck in the sky. With a twinkle, he faded from view.

***

In a break room aboard the Purple Tail, Marie sat with her hands clasped and a big smile on her face.

"Heh heh… Lord Liam finally made his mind up to marry Lady Rosetta. Now we just need to get back home and make the preparations. Oh, what a wonderful day this has been!"

Beside the blissful Marie was her adjutant Haydi, who seemed a little creeped out by his commander's giddiness.

"There's a rumor the bossman confessed love to Lady Rosetta too," Haydi noted. "If that was the Sword God's doing as well, maybe

this six-year journey was worth it." Liam's journey had gone on for that long a stretch.

However, Marie looked back on the period as a time of bliss. "They were a fulfilling six years working at Lord Liam's side."

"I'm just beat from the lengthy mission. When this trip's over, I could use a long break."

As the two chatted, Nina entered the break room and apparently heard what they'd said. "I can't believe my Yasu actually gave the count romance advice. I'm jealous that the young lady received a love confession and gets to have a proper wedding."

Marie didn't miss that admission. "Oh? You didn't get a confession of love or a wedding, ma'am?"

Since Nina was the wife of Yasushi, who was so respected by Liam, everyone aboard the ship showed her respect as well. At first that had made Nina a bit nervous, but she was getting used to it on the trip back to House Banfield's home planet.

"I didn't. Can you believe it? No confession, no wedding. We didn't even register the marriage."

Haydi found himself sucked into the conversation too. "Hm? Why's that, ma'am?"

"When Yasu drifted to the planet where I lived, he wasn't paying taxes, so we couldn't legally marry. That planet's policy was that only taxpayers could marry."

Rules like that changed from place to place, and that had evidently been the law on the planet where Nina grew up.

After hearing Nina's story, Marie pitied her. "You must regret that. Oh… How about talking to Lord Liam about it?"

Nina politely declined. "No, I wouldn't want to bother him with something like that. He's already promised us so much aid, I couldn't ask him to help with my private life."

Marie would normally have dropped the matter after that, but she was in such a good mood that she found herself going to bat for the woman.

"Oh, don't worry about that, ma'am. I'm sure that finding out you have regrets will concern Lord Liam. Just leave this to me."

***

"Master and his wife haven't registered their marriage?"

When I heard Marie's report, I didn't know what she was saying at first. I couldn't understand how Master and Nina were living together with a child but weren't officially married.

"A law on her planet forbade non-taxpayers from marrying."

"That's what happened?"

Every planet had its strange little rules, and it seemed that that one had prevented Master from marrying his wife. For a moment, I wondered why he hadn't paid taxes, but maybe it was because his injury had laid him up for a long time. If so, it was rather tragic that he hadn't been legally allowed to wed.

"Well, once we're back on the home planet, I can have their marriage registered under my authority. But…I didn't realize he'd never confessed to her either, nor held a ceremony."

What must've been going through Master's mind when he told *me* to confess to Rosetta and marry, considering his own circumstances? As I crossed my arms and considered the matter, Marie tearfully imagined how it had been for the couple.

"Perhaps Sir Yasushi felt too guilty to confess to her, because of their situation, and they just never had the chance to hold a ceremony."

"That could be it, I suppose…"

Maybe Master had met his wife after he'd lost to that monster and gotten injured. She'd cared for him in his weakened state, and then they'd had a child together, eventually ending up in their current relationship. That was feasible.

"Do you think Master told me to confess and get married because he regrets being unable to do so himself?"

"It's certainly possible. Perhaps he was being considerate, not wanting you to be saddled with the same regrets he has."

Marie's opinion of Yasushi seemed to have improved dramatically, and she spoke well of him much more often now. I was happy about that in theory, though it frustrated me somewhat to hear her talk about Master's personal feelings.

"Master's regrets, huh…?"

***

I summoned Riho, Fuka, and Ellen to my room and explained Master and his wife's circumstances.

Riho looked ready to cry. “Poor Master! Brother Apprentice, you have to register his marriage to Miss Nina!”

Riho was normally nothing but bloodthirsty, yet was reacting like this—so Fuka was just plain weeping.

“Master lost and went through all that agony, and on top of that, he couldn’t even marry his wife? That’s just terrible! Brother Apprentice, let’s have a wedding for them! I’ll contribute my allowance!”

They were reacting exactly as I’d expected, so I started by getting them to settle down.

“I can have the marriage registered once we’re back on the home planet. The problem is Master. Do you really think he’d go ahead, confess, and have a wedding just because we fixed the legal issue for him?”

Ellen cocked her head. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“Ellen… Men have this thing called pride. Everyone else can throw a party for his sake, but how he feels himself is another matter.”

Ellen nodded a few times, listening to me with interest. “I’ll remember that.”

“You should keep that in mind when you get married in the future too.”

Ellen had grown a fair amount by now. To me, she roughly resembled a sixth grader. She’d continue to grow up, eventually falling in love and marrying, so what we talked about today was sure to come in handy for her then.

When I thought about Ellen getting married, I felt kind of frustrated, like a dad who had to give away his daughter.

As I keenly felt the passage of time, Ellen said awfully coldly, "No, that won't be necessary."

"Hm? Oh, you probably can't imagine that right now, huh? Well, anyway, I'd like to do *something* for Master and his wife. What do you guys think?"

When I asked for suggestions, Riho and Fuka both leaped to their feet.

"Master was the one who told you to confess and get married, right?! That must be because he wanted to himself!" Riho declared passionately.

Fuka followed up with a plea of her own. "What're you being so timid for?! Isn't this a chance to repay Master? You should be bold as always!"

After listening to the pair, my mind was made up. "I never thought I'd be the one learning things from you two. All right, just leave the rest to me. I'll clear up Master's regrets."

***

When the Purple Tail reached the spaceport above House Banfield's home planet, Yasushi disembarked surrounded by guard knights. Wearing a new kimono provided to him aboard the ship, he projected confidence, arms folded in front of him.

I've got to say, it's not bad getting the VIP treatment! I don't even have to do anything, and I get new clothes. Well…these are a

little flashy for my taste. I'll change back into my usual outfit later.

As he casually descended on the escalator ramp, Yasushi looked around. *Now, where could Nina and Yasuyuki be?* He was a bit worried about them, since he hadn't spotted them disembarking yet.

House Banfield's spaceport was ridiculously huge, even inside. As he got closer and closer to the port, Yasushi noticed something strange. A ceremonial hall had been prepared in the port for some reason; people dressed in formalwear were seated there. He spotted a bride at the altar, but the groom was nowhere to be seen.

Is it House Banfield's style to have ceremonies like this at the spaceport? I can't imagine getting married in such a place. I guess the groom ran off. Thought better of entering the graveyard of his life, eh?

After thinking that far, Yasushi noticed that the ramp he was on ended *in* the ceremonial hall for some reason. As he neared the space, a band started to play, and a spotlight shone down on him.

"Huh?!"

He reached the end of the escalator ramp; after it, a red carpet was laid out. The genteel-looking guests in the hall stood and began to applaud.

Riho and Fuka, who were waiting there for him, flanked Yasushi and tugged on his arms.

"Are you surprised, Master?"

"Our brother apprentice got a wedding ceremony all ready for you!"

"Ha…ha ha… I certainly am surprised." Cheeks twitching, Yasushi hurled abuse at Liam in his mind. *You're kidding me! Who said to throw* me *a wedding, you idiot?! Why don't* you *get married instead?!*

As Yasushi stewed in confusion for a moment, a handsomely dressed Yasuyuki ran up to him with a big smile. "Dad! They said you two are getting married here! Mom was so happy, she cried!"

The adorable Yasuyuki's words only made Yasushi feel more and more cornered. "W-well, I'm happy about it too…!" *At this point, who cares about a wedding?! I wanted to dissolve our relationship and run away as soon as Yasuyuki grew up! If we're officially married, it'll be even harder to get away!*

Yasushi was a piece of trash through and through, but even he had planned to stick around until Yasuyuki was an adult. Now that he was about to be legally married, however, things were different. Yasushi's identification would always show him as Nina's spouse; as his legal wife, she'd be able to find him wherever he fled in the Empire. That would be a terrible inconvenience to Yasushi.

Yasuyuki explained the ceremony gleefully to his father. "They say you kiss during the wedding, and when you do, they want you to confess your love to Mom in front of everyone!"

"Huh…?"

"It was the count's idea!"

"Wha—?!" Yasushi made an effort not to scream.

As he did, Liam appeared from behind him. "Master, the reason you were so insistent that I confess to Rosetta and get married was because you regretted being unable to legally marry your own wife, right? Well, as your first student, allow me to resolve that regret for you."

Yasushi shivered at Liam's completely unexpected interpretation of the events. *H-he's going to make me get married because of a misunderstanding? Is he getting back at me?*

Yasushi was suspicious of Liam's motives, yet there was nothing but sincerity in the young man's eyes. He seriously believed that Yasushi regretted having been barred from formally marrying Nina. *Who the hell filled his head with this nonsense?!*

Yasushi took a deep breath to regain his calm before saying, "Lord Liam…? I don't have any regrets…"

That was when Ellen appeared. With a superficial smile, she explained to Yasushi the events that had led to this moment. "Sir Yasushi, please allow Master to save face here. From your words, he recognized that you were saddened not to be able to confess your love and properly wed your wife. Therefore, you see, he selfishly put all this together. I don't suppose you could humor him?"

Ellen bowed her head; before she did, though, Yasushi saw in her eyes that she knew he was suffering internally. Once again, only Ellen was suspicious of Yasushi, and she clearly enjoyed seeing him driven into a corner like this.

That girl doesn't know everything, does she?! And hold on a second—does this mean that if I hadn't had Liam confess and get

married as payback, none of this would be happening to me?! This is all my *fault?!*

It was nothing more than his bullying of Liam coming back to bite him.

Nina had been waiting for him, dressed in a white kimono, but she couldn't take it anymore and ran up to him herself. "Yasu, we'll be a real married couple now!"

"Y-yeah…"

Although she wore an ear-to-ear smile, Nina's gaze suddenly sharpened. "Now you won't be able to flee. We'll be together the rest of our lives, okay?"

At her frightening words, Yasushi couldn't stop trembling. "I—I-I-I—I'd never flee! Never!"

"I'm looking forward to your confession of love to me!"

So saying, Nina returned to her place at the altar.

Yasushi almost collapsed to the floor, but Riho and Fuka held him up on either side.

"You've got nothing to worry about anymore, Master!"

"Heh heh… I'm kind of nervous myself! I never thought I'd attend your wedding, Master!"

Seeing their happy faces, Yasushi thought, *Well, I'm not getting away from here while these two have a hold of me. Just where'd I go wrong in life anyway?*

That day, Yasushi professed his love to Nina in front of a huge crowd. The loving couple had their wedding and were finally legally

married.



Afterword

YOMU MISHIMA HERE—excited about the anime adaptation of *I'm the Evil Lord of an Intergalactic Empire!*

The anime's important, but the books are just as important! Did you enjoy Volume Nine? This time around, I got to write a fairly straightforward story about the hero (Liam) getting beaten up while he saved the heroine from the bad guys, so I'm pretty satisfied. I revised the story a bit from the web version to focus more on Ellen and added a new character, so I hope you all liked it.

Now the anime's been announced. I never thought this series would get an anime (lol). That's not me being humble; it's because I was under the impression that robot stuff was pretty tough to do in anime too. I thought that if I wanted another anime, I'd have to try having a different series adapted, or write a whole new one. When I-shi, my editor, told me about the adaptation, I couldn't believe it.

Back when I was writing the web version of this series, I thought, *This'll probably be tricky to turn into a novel.* Then, after the novel version was published, I thought, *This'll probably be tricky to turn into an anime.* But I guess those were just biased assumptions of mine. It felt like, while I sat there thinking that X or Y would be tricky, everyone around me was helping to make it happen.

So, due to the support of my readers and everyone else involved with this series, it's finally becoming an anime!

I truly can't thank you all enough.

The guard stands behind her charge.



Thanks for your continued support.
Can't wait for the anime!

NADARE TAKAMINE



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