SPY CLASSROOM

SHORT STORY COLLECTION 04 No Time for Goodbye

Takemachi

ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari



SPY CLASSROOM

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

04

No Time for Goodbye



SPY CLASSROOM

code name
PANDEMONIUM





code name
FOOL

code name
DREAMSPEAKER





code name
FLOWER GARDEN


No Time to Stand Still



SPY CLASSROOM 04

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

No Time for Goodbye

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ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari

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Klaus

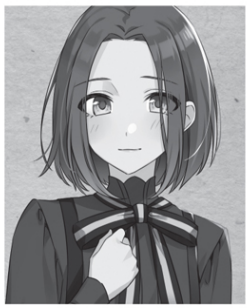
Lamplight's founder and the Greatest Spy in the World.



Flower Garden

Lily

A naive girl from the backcountry.



Daughter Dearest

Grete

A quiet girl and the daughter of a major politician.



Pandemonium

Sybilla

A brave girl and the daughter of a gangster.



Ashes

Monika

An arrogant girl born into a family of artists.



Dreamspeaker

Thea

An elegant girl and the only child of a major newspaper company's president.



Meadow

Sara

A timid girl whose parents run a small restaurant.



Forgetter

Annette

A simple girl with no memories. Her origins are unknown.

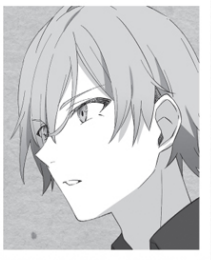


Fool

Erna

An unlucky girl who frequently gets into accidents. Also a former aristocrat.

Team Avian



Flock

Vindo



Glide

Qulle



South Wind

Queneau



Cloud Drift

Lan



Lander

Vics



Feather

Pharma

The CIM from the Fend Commonwealth

Hide—CIM Leadership

Cursemaster
Nathan

Magician
Mirena

Three Others

Belias—Hide's Personal Counterintelligence Unit



Puppeteer
Amelie

Lotus Doll, Disintegrator Doll, etc.

Vanajin—CIM's Largest Counterintelligence Unit

Armorer
Meredith

Swordsmith
Miné

Other

Silhouette
Luke

Tracker
Sylvette

Jester
Heine

Tunekeeper
Khaki

Team Inferno

Hearth	Firewalker	Soot
Veronika	**Gerde**	**Lukas**
Scapulimancer	Flamefanner	Torchlight
Wille	**Heide**	**Guido**

Team Serpent from the Galgad Empire



	White Spider	Blue Fly
	Silver Cicada	Purple Ant
Green Butterfly	Indigo Grasshopper	Black Mantis

Prologue

No Time to Leave

The brisk sound of a typewriter echoed through the room.

When you push a typewriter's keys, it makes a light clackity sound with every letter it impresses upon the paper. When played at a steady rhythm it has a wonderfully relaxing effect, not unlike listening to rain fall. Quieter models had been developed, but they'd failed to gain much traction with consumers. All one had to do was listen to that clacking to understand why.

In the dining room of a palatial estate known as Heat Haze Palace, a group of nine girls were gathered around typewriters of that very sort.

The petite blond girl with features as lovely as a doll's—"Fool" Erna—paused midway through typing and sighed as she stretched out her arms. "I can't believe how many mission reports we still need to write."

"This is what happens, I guess. Our last big mission was so hectic, we didn't even have time to think."

The reply came from a brown-haired girl wearing a newsboy cap—"Meadow" Sara. Her right hand was wrapped in a bandage, but she was deftly typing away with her left.

The girls were members of the spy team Lamplight, and they'd just returned from a brutal ordeal in the Fend Commonwealth.

Upon learning the elite Avian team had been wiped out, they rushed to Fend and found themselves embroiled in a battle of deception against its intelligence agency, the CIM. After surviving the betrayal of "Glint" Monika and an epic battle against Serpent, they

managed to complete their mission by the skin of their teeth and return home. That was how they'd gotten to where they were now.

The first order the girls received after getting back was to write a massive number of mission reports.

"But if anything, this is kind of perfect." Sara continued diligently typing as she smiled. "We're all pretty badly wounded right now… We needed to stay away from fieldwork for a bit anyway."

"Yeah!" Erna agreed. "And once we're done, we get to go on a vacation!"

"Right? Let's all buckle down! There are fun times waiting for us just around the corner!"

Their last mission had been so significant that just about everything they'd been through was going to get classified. It was going to take days just to write it all up.

The Lamplight girls sat in the dining room and continued clacking away on their typewriters. The morning light streamed down on them as they immersed themselves in the task. It was important that each of them record the events from their own point of view.

"This is boring, and I hate it, yo!"

However, "Forgetter" Annette was sick and tired of writing. She had a large eye patch and ash-pink hair tied up in messy pigtails.

"Aha! Perhaps if I make myself look impressive, it will open doors for me in the future!"

Meanwhile, "Dreamspeaker" Thea's ambition drove her to add some unnecessary flourishes to her report, though she did take care to keep her exaggerations to a minimum. She was a dark-haired girl with curves in all the right places.

"I just hope that the boss's deeds will live on for future generations…"

Then there was "Daughter Dearest" Grete, whose depictions of her boss Klaus and her interactions with him could have easily been mistaken for a romance novel. Grete was a slender redhead who looked as fragile as a glass sculpture.

In other words, everything was business as usual for Lamplight with the exception of a single foreign element.

That was right—there were *nine* girls in the dining room.

"Hrmm, if I could but move my fingers, 'twould make my typing a good deal faster…"

That foreign element had a name—and that name was "Cloud Drift" Lan.

Lan was a girl with dark red hair tied back behind her head and sharp, angular features. She'd suffered grisly fractures to all of her fingers and was nimbly hitting the typewriter keys with an implement affixed to her right hand.

"""""""""""""……"""""""""""""

The moment the words left her mouth, the dining room went dead silent. A moment later, three of the girls stood up in unison and stepped out of the room.

One of the people gathered in the adjoining hallway was "Pandemonium" Sybilla—a girl with white hair and a keen look in her eyes. The next was "Ashes" Monika, formerly "Glint"—a girl with an asymmetrical cerulean hairdo. The last was "Flower Garden" Lily—a girl with silver hair and a noticeably ample bosom.

Once the three of them were assembled, Sybilla, Monika, and Lily shared a hushed conversation.

"L-look, I hate to be the one to ask, but…," said Sybilla.

"Yeah, it's been bugging me, too," Monika agreed.

Lily nodded. "It's a question that really does need to be answered."

The three of them spoke as one.

“””“When exactly is she planning on leaving?”””

At the moment, Lamplight had a big problem.

No matter how long they waited, that girl—that was to say, “Cloud Drift” Lan—showed no signs of departing from Heat Haze Palace.

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Now that they thought about it, Lan had spent basically the whole mission working alongside them.

She’d been left isolated in the Fend Commonwealth, and after Lamplight took her under their protection, she’d been participating as a de facto member of the team. She’d even handled the key task of delivering their secret weapon, code name Insight, to the final battle against White Spider.

When they got back to Din, she’d followed them back to Heat Haze Palace.

“…I, um, I know ’tis an immodest request,” Lan said timidly on the day of their return. “But could I stay the night here? ’Twould be no easy task returning with my hands as they are.”

“Of course! After that mission we went through together, we’re not gonna just hang you out to dry!”

On hearing that, Lily was all too happy to lend Lan her room.

“You know, this is where Avian and Lamplight spent much of our time together before the mission.” On their second day back, Lan spent most of the day hanging out in the lounge looking mournful. “I wish to bask in the memories a bit. Prithee, might I stay a little longer?”

"Yeah, for sure. Take as long as you need."

Lan had just lost her entire team, and Sybilla consoled her with a gentle pat on the shoulder.

"Gahhh, the trauma of losing my teammates!!" The girls were about to talk to her on the fourth day after their return when all of a sudden, Lan clutched her head. "D-Dame Monika. I hate to ask this of thee, but I cannot bear to be alone now. I wish to sleep here tonight, surrounded by the sound of people. Could you find it in thyself to permit that?"

"……Yeah, fine."

Lan's anguish was so pronounced, not even someone as harsh as Monika could bring herself to voice her grievances.

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It had been five days since they got back now, and Lan was still in Heat Haze Palace.

The thing was, Heat Haze Palace was Lamplight's base of operations, so they couldn't exactly let an outsider stay there in perpetuity. Avian's stay had been a special exception.

"Hmm," Lily said as she crossed her arms. "When she busts out the all-my-friends-just-died card, it makes it pretty hard to tell her that she needs to skedaddle."

That awkwardness was the reason none of the girls had pressed the issue. Aside from Lan, everyone on Avian had met tragic deaths. That gave the Lamplight girls, who by some miracle of fate had all survived, some hard-to-define feelings of deference toward her.

Sybilla grimaced as well. "But, like, we can't just let her casually hang around forever."

"Look, there's really no point in us worrying about it." Monika let out a small sigh. "I'm sure Klaus has it all worked out. Surely he's

talked things over with her."

Realizing that she was right, Sybilla and Lily nodded.

Klaus was Lamplight's boss and the master of Heat Haze Palace. There was no way he didn't know about the Lan situation.

With serendipitous timing, Klaus himself came walking down the hallway.

"Oh, perfect," he said. "I was just looking for you."

"Hey there, Teach," Lily said with a wave.

The girls' superior—"Bonfire" Klaus—was a tall, handsome young man with long hair. He called himself the Greatest Spy in the World, and he was so talented it was almost unnatural.

Klaus gave the girls an inquisitive look. "I've been meaning to ask—when exactly is Lan planning on leaving?"

""""No one has any goddamn clue!!""""

The three of them were aghast at the unexpected revelation.

In perfect lockstep, Lily, Sybilla, and Monika marched back into the dining room.

Inside, Lan let out a listless sigh and turned to Sara. "Dame Sara, I know this is an imposition, but would you be so kind as to bake a cake? I yearn for the flavor of the ones Avian and Lamplight shared… 'Twould be so nice to have some with tea as I grieve for my fallen brothers and—"

""""ALL RIGHT, THAT'S ENOUGH!!""""

"___?!"

"When are you gonna get out of our hair?!" "You look pretty damn recovered to me!" "And your requests are getting more brazen by the minute!"

Lan groaned in chagrin. "Gah, my acting hath finally failed me!!"

By the look of it, she'd already gotten over her sorrow. The fact that she was willing to take advantage of her loss to demand cake spoke volumes about the shamelessness of her character.

The three girls surrounded Lan to show her that there was no escape.

Realizing that she was beat, Lan chose not to resist and looked over at Klaus, who'd just entered the room. "Sir Klaus, I have a request of thee."

"What's that?"

"Might I join Lamplight as one of its members?"

"…That's an awfully big request to be making so casually," Klaus said dryly. He sounded downright appalled.

He gave his reply promptly.

"And the answer is no. Eight headaches is enough as it is."

"Prithee, why?!"

"Lamplight is a team that completes Impossible Missions. We constantly brush shoulders with death, and as things are, I'm single-handedly in charge of keeping eight girls alive. I can't be responsible for a ninth."

They'd just finished a perilous mission where, among other things, Klaus's failure to watch over the girls had allowed one of them to turn traitor. Expanding the roster simply wasn't feasible.

"Then I suppose there's naught for it…"

Lan frowned in dismay.

"…Thou shalt simply have to fire one of the others."

"The absolute fuckin' audacity!!" Sybilla roared.

Unsurprisingly, Lan's suggestion earned her some loud protest from the Lamplight girls. Even Sara, who'd been looking at her sympathetically just moments before, let out an offended laugh.

"Anyhow," Klaus said gently before things could get out of hand, "I'm going to go speak to the Foreign Intelligence Office management about your future. I'm going to try to talk them into giving you as much latitude as possible. Do you have any idea what it is you want?"

It was an extremely generous offer. With Klaus negotiating on her behalf, she could probably get just about any request granted.

The Lamplight girls all turned to look at Lan.

After hesitating for a beat, her lip trembled.

"I want naught…," were the first words out of her mouth.

When the girls cocked their heads in confusion, Lan shouted at the top of her lungs.

"NO MORE DO I WISH TO WORK! I SHAN'T LEAVE, I SHAN'T! I SHALL FORSAKE THE DREADFUL WORLD OF ESPIONAGE AND ENJOY MY LAYABOUT PARADISE RIGHT HEEEEEERE!"

"""""""""""""WHAAAAAAT?!"""""""""""""

The girls' cry echoed through the room.

Taking advantage of their moment of bewilderment, Lan fled the dining room.

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There was a barricade erected in front of the Heat Haze Palace lounge.

Despite her hands being out of commission, Lan had nimbly used her legs to pile up furniture. Her plan was to seal the room and hole herself up in there.

Seeing the bulwark earned a variety of comments from the girls. "Should I blow it up, yo?" "Has she become one of those shut-ins I've heard so much about?" "So, I guess she wasn't planning on actually doing any work, even if she did end up joining the team…" On Grete's instructions, though, they left and reconvened in the main hall.

"…We have orders from the boss."

Once they were all gathered, she dispassionately relayed the news.

"He wants us to find somewhere new for 'Cloud Drift' Lan to work."

"""Ugh, that sounds like pain…"""

"I understand why it might be difficult to get motivated, but we still need to come up with suggestions together."

Notably, Klaus was nowhere to be found here. Having decided that he wanted no part in this, he'd gone straight to his room. He, too, had mission reports he needed to write.

The girls began racking their brains.

Exasperated as they were, they couldn't bring themselves to just kick Lan out. They'd battled their way through a mission together, and not a single one of them held any legitimate antipathy toward her.

The fact of the matter was, they were worried about her.

Lamplight had more than its fair share of cranks, so none of them voiced their concerns outwardly, but after the way Lan had just lost her beloved teammates, all of them wanted for her to find happiness.

"You say that, but nothin' is exactly speakin' out to me…" The first one to speak up was Sybilla. "Like, what's the normal thing to do here? I don't know shit about what spy career paths are supposed to look like. This field of ours has too many damn mysteries."

Unlike normal jobs, the secrecy necessary for espionage meant spies didn't get to interact with their colleagues much. With how low in the Foreign Intelligence Office pecking order they were, they didn't have anything close to a complete picture of what the organization even looked like. Klaus didn't tell them anything beyond what they absolutely needed to know.

At that point, Lily and Thea both spoke up.

"Though, if you're asking for suggestions…"

"Yes, I think the answer all but speaks for itself."

As the person heading up the meeting, Grete urged them to go on. "You have an idea?"

"W-well, I actually ran into one recently," Lily said awkwardly, and Thea nodded with confidence. "Why, what a coincidence. I got to know one myself not too long ago."

The two of them spoke in unison.

"She could become a spy academy teacher."

"She could become a member of another spy team."

"Sounds like you two need to get on the same page," Monika pointedly commented.

Chapter 1
The Spy Academies' Case

The winds blew fierce.

Over in a remote, desolate building deep in the mountains, Peggy felt the warning signs of a storm.

Peggy was the principal of a Din Republic spy academy. She'd once made a name for herself as a talented operative in the Naval Intelligence Department, and after getting poached by the Foreign Intelligence Office, she'd taken over management of one of the nation's twenty-seven spy training facilities.

She stood by the window of the principal's office and observed the strong winds buffeting it.

A storm was coming. Up there in the mountains, the weather could change in a heartbeat.

The wind grew ever more tempestuous, as if it was mirroring her own emotions.

"I never thought this day would come."

She thought back to the missive that had arrived at the academy that morning.

"But the problem child is returning to the academy."

◇◇◇

The world was awash in pain.

The Great War's end brought about an era where nations fought viciously, using plots and schemes carried out by spies, and the

small Din Republic was no different. They, too, founded an intelligence agency and deployed their operatives across the globe.

One such group of spies was Lamplight. They were a team made up of one man and eight academy washouts. Under the leadership of Klaus, their boss, the girls completed incredibly difficult tasks called Impossible Missions.

For a time, they spent a honeymoon of sorts deepening their bonds with another team called Avian. The two groups motivated each other and pushed each other to greater heights, but after a month, that period came to an end.

The following events took place immediately after the Avian honeymoon.

Before long, the girls would be departing for a brutal battle of wits in the Fend Commonwealth.

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Rewind to forty-eight hours ago, and it was a gorgeous morning with nary a cloud to be seen in the sky. Over in a lavish manor called Heat Haze Palace, the Lamplight girls' voices were filled with joy.

The girls were in the lounge on the manor's first floor. The room was a bit too cramped for all eight of them to fit inside comfortably, but the soft couches and wood stove made it pleasant all the same. The girls had gathered there in celebration.

"After far too long, the day's finally coooooooome!"

The person shouting the loudest and most excitedly was "Flower Garden" Lily. She spun in the center of the room and cheered at the top of her lungs. "Adios, Avian!! We successfully drove them out of Heat Haze Palace!"

All of Avian's belongings, which until the day prior had been lying around the lounge, were gone.

Avian was another spy team that was sort of like a big brother to theirs. The two groups met in a country called Longchon, and after

returning, Avian came to Heat Haze Palace and spent a month occupying Lamplight's space. They'd spent the whole time throwing their weight around, but that morning, they'd departed for their new mission in the Fend Commonwealth.

It was hard not to respect Avian, but they were also kind of a pain in the ass. Now that they were gone, the girls were downright exultant.

"I-if I'm being honest, though," said "Fool" Erna in embarrassment amid the cheers. "I'm a little sad. It feels like such a short time we had."

When she hung her head, "Dreamspeaker" Thea spoke up to console her. "Oh, I doubt this is the last we'll be seeing of them. Once they get back from Fend, I'm sure this place will become a madhouse again in no time."

The lounge was finally available for the girls to use freely again, and they spent the next short while enjoying it to its fullest.

"Wait, they can't seriously be thinkin' of stayin' here again. Goddammit," Sybilla groaned. "I'm gonna demand souvenirs from them next time, yo," Annette said. "Oh, I'm sure they'll bring us some of that famous Fend Commonwealth tea or something," Sara insisted. "We should charge them a usage fee for the lounge. It's not like we ever spend much time here ourselves, but still," suggested Monika.

As they chatted away carelessly, "Daughter Dearest" Grete spotted something.

"There appears to be some sort of envelope." She picked up the manila envelope sitting in the corner of the room. "It has 'Apology Letter' written on it…and the sender is listed as 'From Avian.'"

""""""""""Huh?""""""""""

A cry of surprise rose up.

Considering how self-centered Avian acted, the whole concept of apologizing seemed incredibly out of character for them.

The girls looked at each other in shock as they tried to process the freakish reality they were being confronted with.

“Shit, I didn’t know they had it in ’em,” said Sybilla.

“I guess even they feel bad for the way they devoured every scrap of food we didn’t nail down,” Monika added.

“If they want to offer us an apology, then I’ve got a big enough heart to accept it, yo!” Annette crowed.

None of them ever thought they would live to see the day.

“You know what? You’re right.” Lily scratched her cheek in an attempt to hide her embarrassment. “They might’ve been jerks, but we really did have a lot of fun together. They didn’t have to go and get all formal on us by writing a big fancy letter just to apolo—”

As she spoke, the girls opened the envelope and checked its contents.

“We forgot to give you your homework. Go do it. —Avian.”

‘‘‘‘‘‘‘‘‘‘‘‘.....’’’’’’’’’’’’

Inside, there was nothing even remotely resembling an apology.

Instead, there was a single sheet of paper whose message radiated arrogant condescension. In addition, there were also a couple of smaller envelopes with the word “assignment” written on them.

After the girls froze up, Lily was the first to take action. “All right,” she said, then shot the others a look. Then, she grabbed a matchbook from the shelf, struck a match, and brought it over to the envelope. “We’re just gonna pretend we never saw this.”

“You really think that’s going to fly?”

A pithy rebuke came from over by the lounge’s doorway.

It was Lamplight’s boss, Klaus. He strode over to Lily, snatched the envelope away from her, read its contents, and nodded. “Ah, I see. They even went so far as to come up with assignments.”

By the sound of it, he had a pretty good idea of what was going on.

Lily slumped her shoulders and furrowed her brow in annoyance. "I don't like where this is going one bit, but what's going on here?"

"They're expressing their love, in their own sort of way," Klaus replied. "The whole point behind your exchange period with Avian was for the two teams to clash and drive each other to become stronger. I was training Avian, and Avian was teaching you. It was essentially a joint training exercise."

"""""""What?"""""""

Many of the girls yelped in surprise, though Monika, Grete, and Annette didn't blink. They'd already more or less deduced that had been the case.

Klaus matter-of-factly continued his explanation. "Lamplight lost to Avian. You've hit a plateau training solely with me. If I wanted Lamplight to get stronger, I needed to find someone else to help hone your skills."

Avian had once crushed Lamplight in a battle with Klaus on the line, and Klaus had clearly taken that defeat seriously. Even before they ran into Avian, the girls had constantly been screwing up on their missions, and their growth had stagnated.

Lily looked at him in exasperation. "And you never considered, I dunno, trying to get better at teaching?" she joked.

Klaus winced. "…I'm trying, but it's a hard nut to crack," he replied.

He really was giving it his utmost. However, his educational skills weren't the sort of thing that could be fixed in just a month or two.

That was why Klaus had invited Avian over, and Avian had taught the girls all sorts of skills while they were training with him—all according to plan.

"But remember this," Klaus declared after pulling himself together. "Avian isn't an invincible monolith. They're a wall to be overcome. Next time we run into them, we need to have improved even more than they have." After lighting a fire under the girls, Klaus doled out the small envelopes. "I want you all to spend some time focusing on the assignments they left you. I'm sure they'll help you learn skills I

could never have dreamed of teaching you. I'll handle all the missions in the meantime."

"When you put it like that, I suppose running away really isn't an option…"

Thea was the first to take her envelope, and the rest of the girls followed suit with tense expressions on their faces.

Inside, each one listed who had given the girl their task.

"Ugh, mine's from the obnoxious dude," grumbled Sybilla. "Wait, this is just normal strength training."

"Me and Erna got ours from the mask guy, yo," chirped Annette.

"We have to live on the street for a week… This sounds kind of rough…," said Erna.

Each of the girls had a different reaction to their assignments.

Klaus took the final envelope and handed it to Lily. "Yours and Sara's is from Vindo."

"Well, that's terrifying."

Lily fearfully checked the task that Avian's boss had assigned them.

Beside her, "Meadow" Sara gave a tense gulp.

"Go back to school."

""AHHHHHHHHHHH!""

In unison, the two of them crumpled to their knees.

◇◇◇

The Lamplight girls had storied relationships with their spy academies.

Each and every one of them had been branded as washouts there, and many of them loathed the academies so much it bordered on

trauma. To them, getting scouted by Klaus and offered a provisional graduation had been a godsend.

Despite their dramatic departure, though, they now found themselves having to return.

The logistics were pretty simple. All Klaus had to do was let the Foreign Intelligence Office know, and Lily and Sara's reenrollments were immediately approved. Sara's former academy was kind of far away, so she ended up getting reassigned to the same academy as Lily.

Thus began their week of trainee hell.

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The wind was billowing extra fierce on the evening that Lily and Sara arrived at the Foreign Intelligence Office's seventeenth spy training facility, the school run by Peggy.

The two of them stood in the principal's office, dressed in their academy uniforms for the first time in ages.

"—and that's why I'm back. Flower Garden, once again at your service."

"A-and I'm Meadow! Pleased to meet you, ma'am!"

The academy Lily used to attend was a boarding school for female students. For the next week, she and Sara were going to be joining a hundred or so other youths and training as students.

Peggy was wearing a suit that looked a little tight atop her plump frame, and she greeted the two of them with a soft smile. Lily hadn't seen her in a full ten months.

"It's been a while, Flower Garden." Peggy lowered her voice to a whisper. "Now, Lillian the Devil of Mitario—that was you, right?"

"Ack! That's, uh, classified."

Lily hadn't expected that embarrassing bit of history to come up, and she hurriedly dodged the question. That moniker had been

forced on her when they were covering their tracks after an Impossible Mission.

"Oh, I'm sure it is," Peggy replied with a satisfied nod. "It's a rare thing for me, getting to reunite with one of my pupils like this. Given our line of work, not all of them even survive."

Once she was finished speaking softly, her smile vanished.

"But that's precisely why I can't afford to let my emotions influence the training."

The air in the room shifted. Just moments ago, she'd carried herself like a friendly aunt, but her expression now was that of a stern instructor.

"I know it's only for a week, but you two are trainees now. Things are different here from ordinary schools. We have a policy not to get involved when conflicts arise between students."

"I understand, ma'am," replied Lily.

"Your old room is still available, so that's where you'll be sleeping. It has a bunk bed, so Meadow will be staying there, too. You'll take part in the training starting tomorrow."

With that, their reenrollment was complete.

The academy was primarily made up of two buildings. There was the training building where the lecture halls and principal's office were, and there was the dormitory where the students slept. Both were simple two-story wood structures. Aside from that, the school also had a detention cell, a storehouse, and an outhouse.

Lily and Sara went over to the dorm. On their way there, they heard gunshots and the sound of excited student voices. By the sound of it, they were doing shooting drills.

"You know, I never actually asked you," Sara said as they entered the musty dormitory, "but what were things like for you as a student, Miss Lily?"

"You're gonna want to brace yourself."

Sara let out an involuntary gasp.

Lily had a colder look on her face than Sara had ever seen. Her eyes usually gleamed so bright it was like they were packed full of

stars, but now they were clouded and lifeless, like she despised everything in her field of vision.

It was an expression Lily had never once worn during her time on Lamplight.

Lily headed into the dorm room closest to the entrance and tossed her luggage onto the bed she'd once used.

There were messages scribbled in large letters on the wall beside it.

"shit-for-brains" "warning: sleeps with teachers" "↓ a girl who uses her boobs to avoid expulsion sleeps here" "GTFO" "go die, you attempted murderer" "worst grades in the school" "cow" "hey, teach me how you use your tits to pass exams"

The graffiti was positively dripping with spite.

On seeing Sara's eyes go wide with shock, Lily scratched her cheek in annoyance. "…The truth is, I got bullied something fierce."

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A mere ten months wasn't enough for the academy student body to change that much. The majority of the students remembered Lily, and after they'd finished training, a couple of them made snide comments when they saw her hanging out in her bedroom. "Ugh, seriously?" they said, and "Huh? Why'd *she* have to come back?"

Not only did they say rude things out in the hallway, in fact, but some of them even came and mocked her to her face. "Hey, Flower Garden. Is that story about you provisionally graduating and getting recruited to some spy team actually true? Then what're you doing

back here, huh? What's wrong? Didja get fiiiiired?" they asked with cruel smirks.

Lily couldn't divulge anything about the situation with Lamplight, and when she insisted on keeping mum, the girls drew their own conclusions. "Aw, you poor thing," they said, smiling faintly before they left.

Then another student came by with a blanket, no doubt on an instructor's orders. The blanket stank to high heaven, and it was clear that it had intentionally been covered in soup. Lily would have to wash it.

When she headed to the cafeteria for dinner, someone dumped a glass of water on her food.

The simple meal of wheat porridge and jerky hadn't been much to write home about to begin with, but now it was even less appetizing. The student who splashed it said, "Ooh, sorry about that," without sounding apologetic in the least, and a round of snickers rose up around them.

The welcome Lily received from the other trainees was so harsh, it was like the past ten months had never even happened.

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"Okay, wait, hold on! This is messed up!!"

Sara let out a cry of indignation at the constant stream of harassment.

They were in the middle of eating their porridge off in the corner of the cafeteria. Lily used her water to clean out her hair as she silently scooped up spoonfuls of food, Sara raised her voice in a rare display of anger.

"Why are they doing this to you, Miss Lily?! It doesn't make sense!"

"I mean, I have given them plenty of reason to hate me. I made a bunch of stupid mistakes during training that made everyone's lives

harder, and even though my grades were below passing, the school didn't want to expel me because of my weird constitution…"

Lily's tone was level. She was clearly used to this.

She didn't even sound particularly angry when she said, "Plus, I might've gotten mad one time and put poison in everyone's canteens."

Sara's eyebrows contorted in alarm. "It still doesn't feel right," she mumbled.

All she had to do was strain her ears a little to hear people badmouthing Lily all across the room. For whatever reason, nobody had a single nice thing to say about their returning classmate.

Lily withdrew an item resembling a round pouch from her pocket. "Don't worry about it. This time, I've got a talisman to protect me."

"Wait, what is that?"

"Teach gave it to me before one of our missions."

It was a wooden sculpture just large enough to fit in the palm of her hand. It had been carved into the shape of a flickering flame.

Lily held it up with pride and raised her voice.

"That's right! 'Bonfire' Klaus, the Greatest Spy in the World, made this talisman especially for me! No matter what hardships I face, as long as I have this testament to his faith in me, I can rest easy. And once this week is over, I'll be heading right back to that top team. This talisman is physical proof of how much Teach relies on me!"

"A-and you're choosing to assert dominance loud enough for everyone to hear, huh…"

The gazes directed at Lily from around the cafeteria grew even harsher.

As an aside, that bizarre positivity of hers was another thing they all hated her for.

Lily herself didn't seem concerned in the slightest, and with a smug smile, she put away her finished dishes. She then invited Sara on a post-meal stroll, and the two of them left the cafeteria together.

When they exited the dormitory, the first thing they saw was the sprawling training ground in front of them. Perhaps calling it a

training ground was giving it too much credit, as it was little more than an empty field with a pile of shooting targets in the corner.

They looked up at the night sky and saw the stars twinkling above them. They were up in the mountains, so the air there was far clearer than the port city where Heat Haze Palace was situated.

"Honestly, it used to be way worse," Lily said as she nonchalantly gazed up at the stars. "Back when I actually went here, there were these people called Mayfly and Flagmaker who totally hated my guts. Luckily, they aren't here anymore."

Sara's eyes went wide. "Oh, did they…"

"Yeah, their grades were the one thing they had going for them. What happened was, they—"

"—already graduated. And unlike you, they did it the proper way."



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A rude voice cut in.

When Lily and Sara whirled around, they found a broad-shouldered student standing there. The gaze peeking out from beneath her messily cut bangs was piercing and intense.

She stood menacingly in front of the two of them and stared at them with scorn. "'Mayfly' Richlind and 'Flagmaker' Sarfe—half a year ago, they passed the graduation exam and are out working on the front lines. They're not cowards like you who snuck out without even taking the exam."

Lily gave her an uninterested frown. "Katja."

Behind her, there were four other students. They stood in a row with Katja at their center, surrounding Lily and Sara and puffing up their chests a little.

"So, all the competent people left, and now you're the top dog here, huh? And you brought your little lackeys to push me around." Lily's voice was ice-cold. "The little errand girl's moving up in the world. Good for you."

Katja slapped her across the face.

A sharp *crack* split the air. There wasn't a shred of hesitation in Katja's movements, and it was obvious at a glance that she'd had plenty of practice hitting people. "Watch yourself, washout. You need me to beat some sense into you again?"

"Oh, Katja. Combat training was the one thing you were ever good at."

Lily glared back at her without so much as pressing a hand against the spot where she'd been slapped.

Upon seeing that Lily had no intention of backing down, Katja gave her lips a sadistic lick. "You cocky little shit. You think that some random provisional graduation makes you better than us?" She grabbed Lily by the collar. "I'm gonna make you drink mud, just like we did back then. Remember how you used to go back to your dorm

room every day and puke up your guts in pain? How about we do that again so your little brown-haired friend has a chance to see you —”

As the situation got increasingly volatile, a shrill cry cut into the tension. “S-stop it!” Sara grabbed Katja’s arm. “C-could you please cut it out…?”

“Huh? What the hell are you—?”

“Otherwise, I’m gonna get really mad.”

Sara shot a fierce glare at Katja from beneath her newsboy cap.

There were a few different animals lurking in the trees that surrounded the training ground. The girls could hear branches cracking. Up in the mountains, the sound of mysterious creatures racing around at night was an ominous one indeed.

Katja’s lackeys went pale.

“You’re not very bright, are you?” However, Katja herself didn’t blink. “How’re you supposed to *do* anything with your legs trembling so much?”

“……”

Sara’s face went bright red.

After snorting in triumph, Katja let go of Lily’s shirt. “But hey, have it your way. We’ve got training tomorrow anyway. We’re gonna teach you titmongers some manners.”

With a cruel laugh, she turned and headed back to the dorms with her lackeys in tow.

Lily and Sara were helpless to do anything but watch them go. They could hear the girls chattering with glee like they’d just found a wonderful new plaything.

The two of them had targets on their backs now.

“You should take another minute to brace yourself, Sara. This next week is going to be rough.”

Lily’s face was devoid of emotion.

That, too, was an expression Lily had never shown them back at Heat Haze Palace. Despite realizing that, though, Sara couldn’t come up with anything to say.

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From the next day onward, Lily and Sara were public enemies number one, just like Katja had promised.

Lily, in particular, was the target of endless pestering.

Spy academy class covered a wide range of subjects. Studying several languages was a given, and female spies were also obligated to learn the cooking, music, and dance skills required to blend in anywhere they might need to. It was also imperative that they learn soft skills, pickpocketing, and even hand-to-hand combat and marksmanship for emergencies.

Katja and her minions obstructed Lily's progress in all of them.

They interfered with her performances during the music and dance lessons, and during combat training, Katja hounded Lily, waiting until the instructors were looking the other way so she could wallop her. The only brief reprieves Lily got were during lectures.

When she staggered back to the dorm once classes were over, she discovered that her bed and her bed alone was soaking wet. The rest of the students looked on and giggled.

All the while, they were being oddly nice to Sara in an attempt to cause a rift in her and Lily's friendship. After publicly humiliating Lily, Katja and her entourage turned to Sara alone and said, "You should come eat with *us*." Naturally, Sara wasn't about to fall for their tricks.

"It takes skill to do what she does," Lily said, calmly analyzing Katja's harassment. She and Sara were taking their lunch break. "In the world of espionage, using bullying to control a situation can be a powerful tool. That's why the instructors don't get involved. She's using basic violence to instill fear and make me into a public target, and on top of that, she's trying to goad us into fighting amongst ourselves. She's a crafty one, that Katja."

"A-are you saying it's like what Purple Ant did…?"

The comparison to the way that man had taken hundreds of civilians and molded them into assassins earned a dry laugh from

Lily. “Sort of, but that was on a whole different level. Feels kinda wrong to lump the two things in with each other.”

She cast an idle look over at the training building.

“This sure is a weird world we live in, huh?”

After staying late at training, Katja and her lackeys summoned them.

It should be noted that it was their fault that Lily and Sara had to stay late in the first place. The assignment was to take apart and reassemble a collection of the most common handguns used across the world. If not for Katja’s interference, Lily would have finished the task on time, and Sara wouldn’t have had to wait around for her.

As an aside, Sara’s recent solo lessons with Monika were paying dividends, and her fundamentals had improved dramatically. There were still some areas she needed to shore up, but as far as regular classwork went, she was fully capable of keeping up with the other students.

In any case, Lily and Sara found themselves accosted by Katja’s group as soon as they set foot outside the training building. “C’mere, titmonger.”

The two had no particular desire to follow her, but they were already surrounded.

The group of girls led them to the outhouse at the far end of the training ground. It was an old-fashioned brick building with five toilets and a pair of washbasins. There was a small window in the wall for light and ventilation, but it wasn’t particularly good at providing either. The building was dark and reeked of ammonia.

What’s more, its floor was completely covered in mud.

Someone had clearly spread it there on purpose. There was no other way it could have gotten stuck on the walls, too.

Lily glared at Katja. “Why would someone go and do something that obnoxious…?”

Katja shrugged like she had no idea. “Hey, beats me. But as you can see, this place is a mess. The teachers told me to get someone

to clean it up."

"And?"

"That someone is you, Flower Garden. Get it done by tomorrow, all right?"

After giving her some overly familiar thumps on the shoulder, Katja and her crew left.

The sadistic look in Katja's eyes made it clear what kind of violence awaited Lily if she defied her orders. Lily didn't stand a chance against her in any sort of fair fight.

Once they were alone, Lily heaved a big sigh and grabbed the scrubbing brush from the locker. "All right, let's get this thing over with."

Sara squeezed her nose in discomfort. "Ugh… It stinks…"

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Four days after Lily and Sara returned to the academy, an unexpected visitor dropped by Peggy's office.

It was Klaus.

Peggy was familiar with the man who'd just dropped by her academy without making an appointment ahead of time. Back when he was putting Lamplight together, he'd come there to scout Lily.

Peggy was a lowly spy academy principal, so she didn't know any specifics about him. However, rumor had it that he was secretly a member of Inferno, the Din Republic's top spy team.

"It's you," she said.

"I had a mission in the area, so I thought I'd drop by," Klaus replied by way of an excuse. "And? How are my agents doing?"

Peggy ordered one of her subordinates to bring some tea, then let out a small sigh. "They're certainly throwing themselves headfirst into their training. It's just…"

"……?"

"It's like I told you before. Flower Garden was bullied quite badly by the other students, and the intervening months don't seem to have changed her situation. She's getting hazed out on the training ground as we speak."

Klaus stepped over to the window.

The detention cell was visible across from the principal's office, but it was the training ground beside it that he was interested in. He could see students holding blunt training knives as they diligently went about their combat drills.

Lily and Katja were fighting one-on-one. It was obvious at a glance what a disadvantage Lily was at. Katja distracted Lily with her knife, then sent her flying with a kick to the stomach. As Lily scrabbled on the ground, Katja stomped down on Lily's arm with abandon.

"Urgh…!"

Lily cried and clutched at her right arm.

The instructor in charge admonished Katja, but Katja casually talked her way out of it. "She's being dramatic. I didn't even step on her that hard." The girls standing around them all chuckled.

It hardly made for a particularly pleasant sight.

Peggy fought back her remorse. "Flower Garden is trying her best. She's carrying around that talisman you gave her like her life depends on it."

"…I see."

"From what I saw, though, it's going to take a few days for the pain to subside."

Sara looked like she was about to burst into tears as she treated Lily's injury. She applied ice to Lily's arm, then skillfully bandaged it up.

Peggy kept watching as Lily limply slumped her head. "Was there really any need for her to come back here?"

"Oh?" Klaus regarded Peggy's comment with amusement. "That's an interesting position for the school's principal to take."

"The fact of the matter is, we weren't able to draw out Flower Garden's skills." She let out another sigh. "I was happy when I found out how well she'd been serving her country as a spy, but I was ashamed, too. You succeeded in realizing her latent talents. That's something we never managed to do."

"……"

"But in the end, what mistake did we actually make? As an institution raising the spies that will determine our nation's course, we need to maintain a certain degree of strictness. I stand by our educational philosophy."

Peggy had turned a blind eye to Lily's bullying, and it was entirely because the girls were training to be spies. Being an operative meant having to infiltrate hostile nations and engage in subversive activities solo. People who couldn't resolve their own problems had no future in their line of work. It was the instructors' jobs to guide their pupils, not to coddle them.

At the same time, though, it was undeniable that very ideology had quashed Flower Garden's potential.

As a result, Peggy found herself conflicted. Perhaps the way she did things *was* wrong.

"By the way," Klaus asked softly, "what sort of position does an academy principal hold?"

"What?"

"I imagine it affects your reputation if you fail to produce quality spies."

Peggy shot him a harsh glare.

This man doesn't understand a thing, she thought in exasperation. None of what she'd just said had been about trying to protect her pride.

"While I suppose that's true, what I'm saying is that—"

"The one thing I'll say is don't jump to conclusions." Klaus gave her a cold look, then turned to leave. "You don't understand a thing. And eventually, that's going to bite you."

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Their final training exercise was an all-night endurance run.

The students were placed in cars and dropped off at a site one hundred miles away from the academy. From there, they needed to return on foot to the academy deep in the mountains. They weren't allowed to bring any money or water, so they had to acquire sustenance and lodging using nothing more than their wits.

Lily and Sara got started around dusk, and working together they managed to reach the base of the mountain the next morning. On their way there, they had run into a nice elderly couple, and by helping them out of a bind, they had managed to secure themselves food and somewhere to sleep.

However, the final stretch of pre-dawn climbing was harder than they'd expected. The mountain road was shrouded in eerie darkness and surrounded by leaf-laden trees, and they had to proceed carefully so they wouldn't tumble off a cliff. Waiting for the sun to come up wasn't an option if they wanted to make the six-AM deadline.

Lily used a branch in place of a walking stick to press onward as Sara checked their map using the lantern they'd borrowed from the couple.

"Miss Lily?"

"Hm?"

"That's the wrong path. That's a cliff there."

"Oh, oops."

Right before Lily went careening over a dead end, Sara grabbed her by the arm and guided her the right way.

Lily grinned in embarrassment. "Having you here was a lifesaver, Sara. It's kind of amazing how you always manage to swoop in right before I muck something up."

"I had a lot of practice on Lamplight."

"I'm kind of bummed that it's almost over. I'll bet that if we teamed up, we could have gotten surprisingly decent scores on our

exams."

For the next little while, the only sound on the mountain road was that of leaves getting crushed underfoot. A light mist rose up, dampening their skin. The lantern's flame swayed in tune with Sara's steps. The smell of burning lamp oil mingled with that unique mountain scent of rotting trees, causing the air to take on a saccharine fragrance.

"You know, now that I think about it," said Sara, "these academies really are kind of strange environments."

"You can say that again," Lily agreed cheerfully. "Remember Mayfly and Flagmaker, the ones I mentioned earlier? There were another four people who graduated alongside them, and back then, they were incredible. They were so well-rounded, they completely put Katja to shame. But at the graduation exam—"

This was the story Lily had been about to tell her on their first day there.

Katja had interrupted them at the time, but Sara already knew how it ended.

"—Miss Pharma completely annihilated them."

That was one of Avian's members—"Feather" Pharma.

During Avian's exchange period with Lamplight, Pharma had told them about what happened during her graduation exam. The task itself was simple. All they had to do was steal a classified document from their own nation's Cabinet Office. During the test, some of the other participants came to Pharma and suggested that they team up.

"And it's like, they were all boasting about how strong they were. Flagmaker, I think her name was? She was bragging about this washout at their academy that they liked to lord over. It was some pretty revolting stuff. And on top of that, they even tried to use it as

an excuse to come in hot during the conversation. They were like, 'help us out, or else.' There were six of 'em in all."

She hadn't gone into any more detail, but she'd clearly been talking about Flagmaker's bullying. However, not even Pharma herself seemed to realize that the victim in question had been Lily.

"I didn't like that one bit, so I made sure they aaaall got left in the dust."

Her victory had been overwhelming.

That was the reason Pharma had scored a lowly fifth place on the graduation exam—she'd prioritized crushing the other participants over the test itself.

Upon hearing that, the Lamplight girls had no idea how to react.

Against the truly elite, not even top academy students stood a chance.

Every member on Avian had triumphed over the strongest students at the Lamplight girls' academies. Vindo and Vics went without saying, but even Lan had beaten them.

Sara remembered how lost for words she'd been. "Remember what the boss always says—that we shouldn't get hung up on what narrow-minded institutions think of us."

"Yeah, he says that a lot. It's like how Vics always makes fun of us. He said we've got tunnel vision."

"It's odd, isn't it? Avian is so talented, but it's like they don't care about grades at all… I mean, I know they're probably right not to, but…" Sara smiled in self-deprecation. "At the time, it felt like life or death to us."

"……"

"It was so embarrassing when I couldn't keep up with everyone else, and I was so miserable feeling like everyone was always

laughing at me that I would go hide in corners, curl into a ball, and cry my eyes out… Those emotions I felt were all so painfully real."

"……"

Lily hadn't responded for some time.

The two of them kept their eyes straight ahead on the trail as they continued putting one foot in front of the other. The lantern's light swayed unceasingly.

"You're right," Lily eventually said softly. "So, we need to face those emotions head-on and settle this."

At that very moment, the mountain trail ended and deposited them in an open field.

They'd reached their destination: the academy. There was no gate. They'd arrived directly at its training ground.

The two of them hadn't been slow getting there, not by any stretch of the imagination, but there were still a few people who'd beaten them to the punch. They stood there like they'd been waiting for Lily to show up.

"Hey, you." Katja cracked her knuckles from the front of the group. "What do you say we have one last match, here at the end?"

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"You and me, one-on-one. I'm gonna beat you down with my bare fists."

Katja beckoned Lily and Sara back onto the mountain path. The four lackeys followed along. Given how fast they'd made it to the academy, they were clearly top students as well.

The reason they left the training ground was to escape the instructors' watchful gaze. Although the school tacitly allowed fights and bullying, there were still times when the teachers intervened in conflicts between students. Namely, when the students were in danger of getting seriously injured.

Katja was leading them there to imply that that possibility was on the table.

"Miss Lily," Sara insisted, "you don't have to do this. Your arm isn't even healed…"

Lily's right arm was wrapped in a thick bandage.

Lily shook her head. "No, I'm not backing down." She pulled out her wooden talisman and grasped it in front of her forehead as though in prayer. "I'll be fine. I've got Teach right here with me."

She followed Katja and her four lackeys, leaving the training ground and heading back to the mountain overgrown with evergreen trees. Sara went after them.

After a short walk, they arrived at a clearing large enough to move around freely in. It was about fifteen by fifteen feet and completely free of trees. It kind of resembled a boxing ring.

The sun had yet to rise, and there was a faint chill in the air.

Katja and Lily squared off.

"It'd be boring just whaling on each other." Katja limbered up her shoulder and smirked. "If I win, you have to give me that talisman. You got it from some Foreign Intelligence Office hotshot, right? Your boyfriend, maybe? You seemed pretty smug carrying it around."

"…That's not happening."

"Oh, you're handing it over whether you like it or not. What, did you seduce him with those massive cow tits? I'll bet you're the team bicycle. You'd have to be, or there's no way they would have let you out of the academy and onto the front lines." Katja's tone grew harsher as she went on. "After all, this school's filled with people leagues more talented than you!"

Her fists were trembling.

Sara was watching over on the sidelines, and her eyes went wide. Katja's voice had some genuine passion in it.

In contrast, Lily's reaction was ice-cold. The look in her eyes was devoid of any emotion. "Hey, Katja. I've just got one question."

"The hell's that?"

Lily was composed as could be. "Why're you so desperate?"

Katja's eye twitched. "OH, SHUT THE *FUCK* UP!!"

Lily had gone and poked the bear.

With a furious roar, Katja barreled forward and wound her right fist all the way back. It was the most telegraphed punch imaginable, but that just made it clear how much raw power was behind it.

She put her entire weight into her fist and swung it like she was trying to smash straight through Lily's face.

"I concede."

However, Lily was faster on the draw.

She raised her hands to signify her surrender. She even spread her fingers to show that she wasn't holding anything.

That was the last thing Katja had seen coming, and her fist froze inches away from Lily's face.

"Huh?"

Everyone's mouths hung agape in shock. None of them could process what they'd just witnessed, and a strange silence descended on them.

The bandage wrapped around Lily's raised right arm fluttered in the air.

Having lost its target, Katja's fist simply quivered.

"I, 'Flower Garden' Lily, offer you my unconditional surrender," Lily said emotionlessly. "I lost. You crushed me. And you were right about everything. The only reason I was able to become a spy was because I seduced a man named Bonfire with my breasts. I spend every day servicing my team. In a fairer world, someone else would have taken my spot. I admit it. I'm just Lily, an insignificant little nobody."

"……" Katja ground her teeth. "Are there no lengths you won't go to mock me?!"

She was so enraged her face was red all the way back to her ears.

At the same time, though, she realized there was nothing to be gained from hitting Lily once she'd already surrendered. Her parade thoroughly rained on, she huffed through her nose and lowered her fist.

Then, she thrust her hand into Lily's training uniform and grabbed hold of the wooden talisman.

"This is mine now. I don't ever want to see you at this academy again, titmonger."

After giving Lily a shove and sending her tumbling onto her butt, Katja called, "Let's get out of here," to her cronies and turned to leave.

"Miss Lily…," Sara said in concern.

After landing on her behind, Lily simply hung her head in exhaustion for a bit. Once Katja and her entourage had started walking away, though, she let out a long exhale and slowly rose to her feet.

"Hey, Katja."

Katja stopped in her tracks and looked back.

Lily wiped the mud off her backside. "I hate your guts, you know. But not to the point where I want you to die. Do your best, all right? You graduating and working hard as a spy, well… It's in our nation's best interests, so it's what I want, too. I don't like it one bit, but I'm big enough to suck it up."

"Huh?"

"So, here's a tip from yours truly. The world's a big place."

The unexpected advice earned a series of confused blinks out of Katja and her posse. They cocked their heads in suspicion.

Lily went on. "The stuff that happens here at the academy doesn't really matter. I know you get a sense of superiority and security from frantically pushing people around so they can't look down on you, but it isn't actually good for much. And on the flip side, getting bullied for a single measly week doesn't matter much either. You can force me to clean the outhouse I *intentionally filled with mud*, you can laugh at me after I lose a fight, you can steal the talisman I

whipped up myself and pretended to have gotten from Teach, and at the end of the day, it's all just part of this one tiny corner of the world."

"Wait, you made it yourself?"

"Oh, but I do have to ask—"

Lily jabbed her index finger in Katja's direction.

"—how much longer should I keep playing along with this game?"

The talisman split in two in Katja's hand and began spewing out gas with the force of a sprayer, sending fine purple particles straight into Katja and her entourage's faces at point-blank range.

It was tear gas. The girls writhed in pain as it assailed the mucous membranes in their eyes. They thrashed around in agony, unable to even peel open their eyelids.

"You filthy coward!" Katja roared.

"Cowardice is nothing to be ashamed of," Lily replied disinterestedly. "Not when you're a spy."

"There's a sink in the outhouse!" one of the followers shouted. Katja and the others still couldn't open their eyes, but urged on by the cry, they began making their way over.

The outhouse wasn't far away.

The girls were desperate to wash their faces, and they shouted and cursed the whole way there.

When they arrived at the outhouse sink, though, the next trap went off. The moment the five them went inside, Sara flipped a switch.

A wooden board sprang up and blocked the outhouse entrance.

The girls let out little shrieks.

"You gave us plenty of time to set this all up. It was a huge help, the way you stuck us on cleaning duty just the way we expected you to."

Lily and Sara had muddied up the outhouse on purpose, and when Katja forced them to clean it up, they took that opportunity to hide the board and some posts behind it. When Sara slid the posts into some holes they'd dug ahead of time, it formed a makeshift barricade. Naturally, they'd sealed off the window, as well.

The outhouse had become a perfect locked room.

"Every time you picked on me, you did it outside. This is exactly what you were trying to avoid, right?" Lily said as she stood before the barricade.

"I'm code name Flower Garden—and it's time to bloom out of control."

Lily's special paralytic gas sprayed up all through the room.

It wasn't long before the entire outhouse was filled with poison, and eventually, the girls' screams died out.

"All righty."

After robbing her tormentors of their consciousness, Lily went on.

"Let's enact us some vengeance."

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Peggy furrowed her brow when she heard a noise outside her office.

Is it just me, or is there some sort of commotion going on outside?

She thought she heard shouting coming from the training ground, but when she went and checked her window, she didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Perhaps some of the students got into a fight after getting back from their long-distance run. Being passionate was all well and good, but she did hope that they would refrain from any needless bloodshed.

More than a little concerned, she went back to her paperwork. Then she heard a knock on her door.

"Hey there, Ms. Peggy."

When she gave permission to enter, Lily and Sara hopped inside. The two of them had backpacks on and were wearing the exact same outfits they'd arrived in.

Lily gave her a wave with her bandaged right arm.

Today was the last day the girls were slated to be there. There wasn't any training after the endurance run, so they were doubtless planning on leaving.

"Oh, are you stopping in to say goodbye?" Peggy stood up to greet them. "You've both worked hard over this past week. If you ever want to work on your fundamentals again, I would be more than happy to—"

"Oh, this isn't a social call. We're here to threaten you."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"At this moment, we hold the lives of five of your top students in our hands."

Peggy was bewildered. That word—*threaten*—wasn't something she'd expected to hear.

She could tell from Lily's tense lips that this was no joke. Rather than smiling jovially, she was carefully watching Peggy's reaction and carrying herself with an uncharacteristic coldness.

Lily closed the office door behind her without turning around and locked it from within. "Katja and four others are locked in a room full of poison right now. If they don't detox, they'll either die…or if they survive, there'll be some brutal aftereffects."

So, that was what those screams were about.

Lily was a spy who specialized in poisons. She'd sent countless other students to the infirmary before.

"What are you hoping to achieve here?" Peggy said, her voice grim. "You attacked your own countrymen. If you think you're going to get away with this scot-free, I'm afraid you're wildly—"

"I'm not the same girl I used to be, Ms. Peggy," Lily said with a dismissive wave. "I'm a member of a team that completes Impossible Missions. Plus, I'm in the good graces of Bonfire, the strongest spy in the nation. No one's gonna kick up a fuss over me punishing a couple of academy students."

"……"

Lily was absolutely right.

Peggy could report Lily's misdeeds to their superiors all she liked, but what kind of punishment would actually come of it? Lily wasn't one of her students anymore, nor was she a member of the general public bound by criminal law.

She was a spy with the powerful backing of Bonfire.

Bonfire had far more authority than an academy principal. Sweeping the incident under the rug would be child's play for him.

"It's pretty awkward, huh?" By Lily's side, Sara's voice was no less triumphant. "Your graduates from last year had the lowest scores of anyone on the graduation exam. They shouldn't have even passed, but Din was so desperate for personnel that they waved them through anyway."

"…You're awfully well-informed."

"Who're you supposed to send to the graduation exam this year if you lose your five best trainees? You could try sending other students, but they wouldn't be able to put up decent results. And if that happens, *it'll call your qualification as the head of the academy into question*."

The girls were hitting her right where it hurt.

As Klaus had also pointed out, Peggy had her position as the school's principal to consider. Her job was to produce talented personnel. If she failed to send skilled trainees out into the field, it put her job in danger.

Last year, "Projection" Pharma had demolished all her graduates.

Now, Lily and Sara were threatening to kill this year's batch of hopefuls.

When Peggy looked at her former pupil standing across from her, she felt a chill.

…To think that she would extort an academy principal.

For a trainee, that had to be completely unprecedented.

It defied all norms.

I imagine I have that man's influence to thank. I swear, what kind of spies is he raising over there?

An image of Bonfire flickered through her mind. Now that she thought about it, he'd been alluding to this development all through their last conversation.

Peggy didn't know what the girls were after, but she refused to be coerced. Her pride refused to let her lose face to two students like that.

"Ah, but Lily. Aren't you forgetting something?"

Peggy smiled as she grabbed the fountain pen from atop her desk. She spun it around in her hand, then popped the cap to reveal the pointed tip beneath.

"You really have to give me some credit. Because you see—I, too, fought on the front lines as a spy!"

She bore down on Lily using an assassination technique she'd learned in the Naval Intelligence Department.

If she could capture Lily and get her pen to the girl's throat, she could turn the situation right on its head. What's more, she knew that Lily's arm was still wounded from when Katja stomped on it.

Firm in her belief, she chose to target Lily over Sara—

"Don't go pushing yourself, Ms. Peggy."

—but Lily reached out with her right arm, grabbed Peggy's collar with ease, and swept her legs right out from under her.

With a gentle throw, Lily tossed her to the ground in a way carefully designed not to injure her.

"You're no spring chicken anymore," Lily said warmly. "You can't compete against people who spend all day training like we do."

Peggy sighed. Sure enough, she was out of practice. It had been nearly a decade since she'd left active service. She could feel her belly getting flabbier by the day.

However, there was something else she found truly surprising…

"What happened to your injury?"

"Oh, I faked it. I haven't gone all out during my training a single time this week."

Lily unraveled the bandage on her arm. The skin beneath was fair and unblemished.

Beside her, Sara gave Peggy an awkward, knowing smile.

Peggy thought back to what Katja had said when she stepped on Lily's arm during that sparring session.

"She's being dramatic. I didn't even step on her that hard."

Apparently, she'd been telling the truth. Lily wasn't wounded at all. Ever since they arrived at the academy, she and Sara had spent the whole time fooling everyone around them.

"…Looks like you've got me licked." Peggy sighed. "You've gotten strong, Lily."

Lily released Peggy's collar.

Peggy rose to her feet, and after smoothing out her outfit, she posed a question to the girls. "What are you two after? What is it you want so badly you're willing to threaten me to get it?"

"Diplomas."

Lily stuck out her tongue a little.

"Teach gave us his seal of approval and says we're worthy of graduate status, but on paper, all we've got is that provisional graduation. We were hoping to make things all nice and official."

For a moment, Peggy was a little taken aback by the strange demand.

Then, she let out a giggle. "Well, that's silly. I feel this should go without saying, but spy academies don't issue diplomas."

"WHAT?!"

Lily’s eyes went wide. Beside her, Sara stared at Peggy in blank shock.

What followed was a token graduation ceremony.

Spy academies didn’t generally hold such events, with the teachers usually just offering the graduates a few words of encouragement. However, Lily demanded one so fervently that Peggy decided to play along. She called out the girls’ names, then gave each of them one of her favorite knives as a memento before announcing their graduation.

As an aside, the paralytic poison that Katja and her stooges got hit by didn’t have any malignant aftereffects whatsoever. Before long, they would probably wake up and break through the barricade all on their own. Considering how arrogant they were, Peggy decided getting knocked down a peg might not be the worst thing in the world for them.

“Would you mind if I asked you one question?” Lily and Sara were all smiles by the end, and Peggy called to them as they tried to leave her office. “What exactly has Bonfire been teaching you? I’m dying to know.”

She had to find out what he’d done to inspire such rapid growth in those former washouts. There had to be some trick to it known only to first-rate spies.

Lily and Sara looked confused for a moment, then answered in unison.

“”He hasn’t taught us a thing.””

“What?”

“All Teach has given us are like-minded teammates and an environment where we get to constantly practice in situations that resemble live combat. The man isn’t capable of teaching us any practical skills,” Lily said with a hint of embarrassment. “Everything I know, I learned right here.”

The girls revealed that the only thing that had changed was that they were able to properly take advantage of the fundamentals the academies had drilled into them. Klaus hadn't taught them a thing about handling firearms, interacting with targets, or anything of the sort.

After admitting that, Lily looked away in vexation. "But you know, even so, I can't stand this place one bit! Bleugh!"

She mimed vomiting.

Beside her, Sara offered an apologetic nod. "I have a lot more negative academy memories than positive ones."

—Don't jump to conclusions.

Peggy was reminded of the advice Klaus had given her.

He was right—she had been jumping to conclusions. It was true that the academy's policies ran the risk of crushing talented seedlings. However, that didn't mean that everything she was doing was wrong.

There was something she needed to remember.

Her circumstances were different from most educational institutions. Yes, the spy academies could be cruel places. However, driving away untalented students and letting them live peaceful lives far away from the world of espionage was an act of kindness. And it was an act of love, making sure that the elite few who stuck it out had the skills necessary to stand up to a world awash in pain.

"In that case," Peggy said, "then change the world, 'Flower Garden' Lily and 'Meadow' Sara. Lead us to a better future where academies like this one aren't necessary anymore."

"You don't have to tell us twice. We're gonna smash every academy 'til there isn't a single one left. That'll be our revenge."

On their way out, Lily and Sara delightedly raised their middle fingers high.

""This place can eat shit!!""

The morning sun had finally begun to rise, and the girls' wide grins gleamed in its light.

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When Lily and Sara descended the mountain, they found a familiar face waiting for them on the road below.

"Teach." "Boss."

Klaus was standing by a four-seat automobile and idly turning a key over in his hand. "I just happened to be in the neighborhood, that's all." The girls hadn't even asked, yet he sounded oddly defensive. "I'll give you a ride home. We can stop off for breakfast on the way, too."

Lily and Sara high-fived.

Now that they thought about it, they'd been walking through the woods all night and hadn't eaten a thing that whole time. They leaped into the back seat and started discussing what to get.

Klaus started up the car. "How was your academy homecoming?" he asked, keeping his eyes on the road. "To be honest, I don't know that much about the academies, and I had my doubts about you actually getting anything out of going back."

After a brief pause, he went on.

"But seeing you, it looks like it's taken a weight off your shoulders."

In his own way, he'd been worried about them.

Lily and Sara exchanged a glance, then burst into laughter.

"Yeah, I guess it did," Lily said as she did a big stretch in the back seat. "It's like, ten whole months have passed since I left the academy. At this point, getting called a washout or whatever doesn't really bother me."

"For sure," Sara agreed. "It feels like I'm not quite so self-conscious about it anymore."

That was a level of positivity on the subject the girls had never shown before. They sounded refreshed, like they'd been released from a curse that had been binding them for a long time.

"Mister Vindo must have given us that assignment in order to teach us that."

Klaus smiled ever-so-slightly at Sara's comment. "Magnificent." Then he furrowed his brows in chagrin. "Avian's taught you a lot, haven't they? I feel as though my position as your teacher might be in danger."

"Oh, I'd say that ship has long since sailed," Lily replied.

"…You've got me there. I'd like to spend a week attending an academy myself. Maybe then I could learn how to do a decent job teaching you. I suppose I could pull some strings and get myself enrolled—"

It sounded like he was legitimately considering it, and his tone gradually dropped as he began talking to himself.

The girls could picture it now.

When Klaus enrolled at the academy, he would become a student the likes of which it had never seen. He would deliver instant karma to the people who tried picking on the newbie, shatter the pride of top students, give lessons to all the teachers, then ultimately cause every other examinee to fail the graduation exam…

Their cries echoed into the morning sky.

""Please don't! We would feel so bad for the academies!""

Chapter 2
Another Spy Team's Case

The building listed on the note wasn't far from the station.

Lieditz Central Station served as the gateway to Din's capital, and the building in question was a five-minute walk away. It stood proudly amid the bustling brokerage firms, banks, and other office buildings in the middle of the city's financial district. Structurally, it was a standalone building with white walls and a red, triangular roof. The residence stuck out like a sore thumb compared to the boxy buildings that surrounded it. It was modest, like what you might find out in the suburbs. That would have been one thing if it was a restaurant or coffee shop leaning into an aesthetic, but it was just a regular old house. It was bizarre to see something so pedestrian taking up an entire plot of land in the heart of the capital, an area that had the most expensive real estate in the nation.

Thea and Grete stood in front of the building in shock.

"I guess this is the place…"

The two of them were wearing their seminary school uniforms in order to blend in.

"You know," Thea said, "I know we haven't interacted with other spy teams much, but it occurs to me now that not all of them cohabitate the way Inferno and Lamplight do."

"If anything, I suspect having an entire team living under one roof is the exception rather than the rule," Grete replied.

"I guess at the end of the day, they're just coworkers. They probably don't even tell each other where they live."

"Avian generally sleeps over at Qulle's apartment, but from what I understand, even they all have their own places. They just haven't revealed that fact to Qulle."

Thinking about it, it was a logical safeguard. Otherwise, you might get attacked in your sleep if one of your allies ever leaked your intel to the enemy. Even within friendly borders, spies tended to keep their addresses secret.

However, that was only the general rule.

"People as strong as the boss are a special case," Grete said. "There are some people who intentionally reveal where they live in order to lure in assassins."

Due to an Inferno member's betrayal, Heat Haze Palace's location had been leaked to the Galgad Empire. The reason Klaus stayed in place in spite of that was because he was confident in his ability to apprehend anyone who approached it. By capturing them and interrogating them, he could gain valuable intel about Galgad. And Galgad was well aware of that, so by and large, they gave the manor a wide berth.

The mighty had a logic all their own.

Thea understood that, and she gulped. "In other words, Holytree is a spy on that same sort of level."

Grete nodded.

That was the man they needed to meet—code name Holytree.

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"We forgot to give you your homework. Go do it. —Avian."

It all started with a letter.

After their honeymoon with Lamplight, Avian gave the girls a set of tasks. They'd analyzed what each Lamplight member was lacking and given some serious thought as to how best to plug those holes.

Just as Lily and Sara had headed for the academy, Thea and Grete had received an assignment as well.

"Yours is from Pharma."

Thea gulped as she took the small envelope from Klaus. "Oh goodness…"

Thea and Grete had a special connection with Pharma. Everything she said and did helped serve to illustrate how incredible she was.

Pharma's specialty was infiltrating groups.

Using her special Persuasion ability, she would head into hostile organizations, then make contact with a key player with the intensity of a woman in love so she could get them under her control. Then, she would mold them into a puppet who was completely dependent on her and would do whatever she said.

Thea and Grete would have loved to be able to learn how she did it.

Just imagine if Thea could sneak behind enemy lines and make scores of allies.

Or imagine if Grete could sneak behind enemy lines and perfectly assume someone's identity.

It wasn't hard to picture. Having Pharma's techniques on their side would be a huge asset for Lamplight.

"Let's do this, Grete."

"Yes, let's."

The two of them exchanged a quick glance, then unsealed the envelope from Pharma.

The short message on the paper inside was written out gorgeously.

"I'd like you to fulfill one request from code name Holytree—my big brother."

Apparently, their homework was to play errand girls.

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The girls talked it over for a while, but they weren't able to make any headway.

They wanted to get started on their assignment right away, but the problem was, they had no idea who Holytree even was. The fact that Pharma had a brother came as a complete shock to them.

After deciding that asking Klaus for advice was probably allowed, they showed him the paper. He gave it a glance, then said, "Ah, I see," sounding rather impressed.

"What kind of person is he?"

"He's the leader of a team called Summit who hunts spies around our capital. He's an incredibly talented man with superb deduction and combat skills."

Few people could earn that kind of unreserved praise from Klaus.

Klaus looked like he'd just connected some dots. "Ah, so Pharma is his sister," he muttered. "My condolences."

"Have you ever met him, Teach?"

"Too many times to count." Klaus neatly folded the paper up and handed it back to Thea. "…When my mentor turned traitor, the majority of Din's spies got their intel leaked. A lot of excellent people had their weaknesses exploited and lost their lives."

Thea could hear the sadness in his voice.

"Holytree was one of the unique few," Klaus declared, "who managed to weather that storm."

It wasn't the most direct way of putting it, but what he was getting at was thus: This was a man whose requests would take razor-sharp skills to complete.

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Klaus got an appointment for them.

Holytree set a date and time and invited Thea and Grete over. The plan was for them to meet him where he lived in the capital.

Now, the two of them were there.

Thea and Grete took some deep breaths in front of the building, then opened the door to Holytree's house. They'd been informed there was no need for them to knock or ring the doorbell.

Much like its exterior, the residence's interior was as generic as could be. Once they got past the entrance, the first thing they found was a large living room. The couch and table sitting within were perfectly ordinary.

The one surprise, however, was the wall covered in bookshelves.

"That's so many books," Thea couldn't help but remark.

The place was packed full of them from the floor to the ceiling. There had to be over a thousand volumes there, with everything from textbooks to mass-market fiction. If anything was overrepresented, though, it would have to be thick, bulky reference books. All the history books, field guides, and the like made it feel almost like being in a college library.

However, while owning a thousand books in and of itself was hardly a rarity for wealthy bookworms…

"These illustrated reference books weren't published domestically," Thea said.

"You're right," agreed Grete. "It would appear that he's gathered books from all across the world."

The weird part was that many of the books were written in languages not even spoken in Din. Not even the most hardcore of bibliophiles could have collected that many foreign books. Some of them looked pretty rare, too.

How in the world did he acquire all those?

"Hello, Bonfire's agents. Taken a liking to my collection, have you?"

"——?!" "Huh?!"

All of a sudden, they heard a voice from behind them.

There was a man leisurely reading a book on the couch in the middle of the room. They could have sworn it was empty just moments earlier, yet he was sitting there like he'd been there the whole time. He must have snuck past them unseen while they were being awed by the bookshelves and completely muted his presence right up until he spoke.

The man was wearing a pair of jet-black sunglasses and a grey motorcycle suit to boot. It was a strange outfit to be wearing indoors, much less while reading, yet the detached, otherworldly air he carried himself with made it all seem perfectly logical. Due to the sunglasses, it was hard to get a read on his age.

His voice was gravelly. "It's really not that impressive. Summit makes active use of double agents. We brainwash captured spies, send them back to their home countries, and have them send us intel. When they do, they send us books and the like as tribute with codes written in invisible ink." He closed his book and slid it back into its space on the shelf beside the sofa. "This bookshelf is filled with offerings from our moles."

The girls were so overwhelmed, they couldn't even squeeze out greetings.

It wasn't just the bizarre energy he was giving off. It was the raw talent behind his words. Just how many people must he have turned into double agents to accumulate that many books?

The man turned his back on the girls. "There's a different collection room upstairs. We'll talk up there."

There was a staircase over in the back of the living room.

"Are you Holytree?" Thea asked as the two of them followed him up.

"Just Dugwin is fine. That's the alias I'm using at the moment." Clearly uninterested in extended pleasantries, he spoke swiftly. "Bonfire gave me the details," he said. "Pretty brazen of him, no? Inferno produced a traitor, and scores of our people died for it. I

never imagined that the team's survivor would have the nerve to come asking me for a favor."

The annoyance in Dugwin's voice was palpable.

Thea glared at him. His anger may have been directed at Klaus, but she refused to sit back and let him slander Inferno like that. "… You have every right to be mad. But a single mistake doesn't just erase all of the great things Inferno accomplished."

"True. I owe a fair bit to them myself." Dugwin's tone was unchanged. "I used to hand the spies that Summit couldn't handle off to Torchlight. That man's capacity for violence was so tremendous, he was like a living storm. And Firewalker trained me and my people once. All the others tapped out and had to spend a few days in the hospital, but I didn't respect her any less for it. They had pains in the neck like Soot and Flamefanner, but no one can deny that Inferno was the strongest team around."

"……"

"That's why it's so frustrating, and why it's so sad."

There were clearly some complicated emotions going on behind his rage.

Once Thea realized that, there was nothing more she could say. Behind her, Grete made no comment either and simply stared at his back.

Dugwin let out a small sigh. "Anyhow, I would have refused if my sister weren't involved."

They'd arrived at the door to a room on the second floor. It was important enough to have five locks on it, and Dugwin carefully got to work removing the elaborate security system.

Thea squeezed her fists tight by her sides. "Pharma tasked us with fulfilling a request you have for us."

"Pharma, huh? Hmm, so that's the name she's using these days."

"So, what exactly is it you want us to do?"

"I'm not going to ask you for much. You're friends with my sister, right? I wouldn't make any outrageous demands of you."

After undoing the fifth lock, Dugwin threw the door open.

Much like the living room below, the room was large and spacious. He'd described it as a collection room, and sure enough, it was full of glass cases.

Resplendent beneath the glass were clothes—girls' clothes.

The entire room was packed to bursting with them. There were outfits displayed ornately within glass cases and others hanging from hooks on the wall. Then there were the eight clothing racks over in the back of the room, all of them crammed full of colorful garments.

"My goodness…," Grete murmured.

As a master of disguise, she knew a lot about clothing. This was enough to shock even her. The collection had items from labels beloved by celebrities the world over as well as folk costumes the likes of which she'd only ever seen in reference books. There were even accessories gleaming away in the display cases. The only thing that all the items had in common was that they were designed to be worn by young girls.

It was a veritable museum of female attire.

"It boggles the mind…," Thea stammered. "Just how many spies would you need to subdue to amass a collection like this…?"

Those, too, were offerings from the double agents Dugwin had brainwashed. Every article of clothing represented a piece of intel he'd wrenched from another nation.

Dugwin ignored the girls' disbelief and reached for one of the items of clothing. It was a name-brand skirt with gold thread embroidered in its many frills.

"Put this on."

""…What?""

"I have but one wish. One lone desire that supersedes all others," he said in that husky voice of his. His expression was dead serious. "Become my new little sisters."

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“TEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEACH!”

That night, after returning from the capital to their Heat Haze Palace headquarters, Thea marched up to Klaus’s bedroom and shouted at the top of her lungs as she stormed in.

Klaus was sitting at his desk and cleaning his gun. “What’s wrong?”

“There was a pervert there!” Thea roared.

“I’m surprised he showed his true colors so quickly.” Klaus nodded. Evidently, he knew exactly what she was talking about. “I’m sorry about that. It’s information that could make him vulnerable, and I knew he would never actually harm you, so I chose not to reveal any more than necessary.”

“Poor Grete was horrified.”

The moment Dugwin ordered them to become his little sisters, all the blood had drained from Grete’s face. *“I’m going home, Thea. I’m terribly sorry about this, but I simply cannot deal with this man.”*

Meeting Klaus had gone a long way toward improving her androphobia, but unrepentant perverts were still a bridge too far. She’d left immediately.

Thea slumped her shoulders dramatically. “And look, I’m no stranger to deviants. But I have to say, the whiplash I got… He came across as such a fine, upstanding member of society…”

“This is something you’ll learn as you get more experienced, but our line of work has more than its share of eccentrics.”

Coming from someone as unbelievably airheaded as Klaus, that was saying something.

“‘Holytree’ Dugwin.” This time, Klaus gave her the full rundown. “He’s a man who swiftly captures any spies who set foot in our capital, then remakes them into slaves desperate to serve his sister—our sister-crazed gatekeeper.”

He was an eminently talented counterintelligence agent, that much was beyond dispute. The reason he’d set up his house right in the heart of the capital was so he could apprehend all enemy spies who went there. Thanks to his tremendous powers of observation

and intuition, he snatched up any spies unlucky enough to blow their cover within his sphere of influence and brainwashed them into becoming double agents who worshiped his sister.

Hearing all that was enough to paint a picture of a truly terrifying individual.

"So, what do you think? Are you going to be able to complete his request?"

Klaus turned his gaze on Thea, and she let out a small gulp. "That's going to be tricky…," she mumbled as she thought back to what had transpired that afternoon.

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Grete fled early, so it was just Thea and Dugwin. Seemingly unfazed by Grete's departure, Dugwin boasted about his collection with obvious delight.

"Five years ago, I captured a spy from the United States of Mouzaia," he said, walking around the room as he spoke. "I prefer not to torture people with pain. All I did was lock him in a room and spend ninety-six hours telling him how perfect my sister is without letting him sleep. I told him about everything from the moment of her birth through to how dazzlingly toothy her smile was when she first called me Big Brother, and from there, how wonderful it was watching her grow up. In the end, he agreed with me and sobbed so hard it was like his tear ducts had burst. Wouldn't you say that's a more peaceful, loving way to do things?"

"That just sounds like ordinary torture."

"After I released him, he started giving our messengers fashionable clothes for girls and women, as well as prepackaged sweets every time they made contact with him. With internal information on the JJJ, of course." Dugwin picked up a blouse woven from fine silk. "He sent us this one just the other day."

"…I have several questions."

Seeing that Dugwin wasn't going to stop boasting any time soon, Thea raised her hand to interrupt him.

"Like what?" Dugwin replied in annoyance, to which Thea replied, "You said that you wanted me to become your new little sister. But don't you already have Pharma?"

"…She disowned me six months ago."

"Well, that's no surprise!"

"She even called me 'disgusting' to my face. My dear, sweet little sister said that to me."

If anything, Thea wanted to commend Pharma for sticking it out as long as she had.

Dugwin's behavior went far beyond anything one could reasonably describe as familial affection. Getting sent presents once a month would be one thing, but seeing a collection that vast would be enough to turn anyone's stomach. The love on display there was simply too much to bear.

After sadly slumping his shoulders, Dugwin spread his arms out wide.

"There you have it—that's why I need someone new to pour all of this bountiful love into."

The good news was Thea understood what he wanted now.

Dugwin's problem was that he didn't have someone to accept the clothes, books, and sweets he was receiving from across the world. It made perfect sense that gathering all that stuff and not having anyone to enjoy it would make him sad.

Thea smiled as warmly as she could. "All right. Then in that case, I'll go get changed."

She wasn't one to falter in the face of deviants. She'd known for ages that some men were into that kind of thing, and there were

plenty of fetishes out there that were far more extreme. Wanting a little sister was downright vanilla.

If anything, this assignment was right up Thea's alley.

She took some clothes matching her size and had Dugwin go wait on the first floor.

Her outfit of choice was decidedly tantalizing. She put on a frilly white blouse and a checkered jumper skirt. The way her voluptuous chest rested right above the spot where the two met was entirely intentional. She finished the ensemble with a belt that emphasized how slender her waist was, a lovely ribbon tied around her neck, and a pair of thick-soled black boots. For the finisher, she tied her hair up in pigtails.

On the first floor, she leaped out at Dugwin and gave him a submissive smile. "How does this look, Big Brother?"

"GOOD!!"

Dugwin struck a dramatic pose.

He raised his arms up to the ceiling, and cried, "VERRRRY GOOD!!" again. He even went so far as to crumple to his knees.

Dugwin was clearly overcome with emotion.

In Thea's opinion, any woman who would intentionally wear something so suggestive was out of her mind, but he didn't need to know that.

"Oh, my dear new sister." Dugwin lifted his sunglasses a little and wiped at the corners of his eyes. The man was actually crying. "I have so many sweets for you. Let me go get them. They're from all around the world, of course."

He hummed to himself as he went into the back to fetch the candy. His delight was all too obvious.

Thea had no complaints about how things were going, so she kept up the act. "I'm so happy, Big Brother. You're just the kind of person I've been desperate to find."

"GOOD! VERY GOOD!!"

Dugwin hopped up and down.

All that dignity from before was gone without a trace.

"Oh, I need to do something to thank you for the sweets. How about I cook you dinner tonight, Big Brother?"

"GOOD! VERRRRRRY GOOD!!"

Once again, Dugwin was overjoyed.

Thea figured that spending a couple more hours with him would probably count as finishing the assignment. She'd successfully granted his request, after all. It had been far too simple a task for her. For Grete, on the other hand, it was likely to be a challenging ordeal.

She decided to double down and improve his mood even further. "You're so incredible, Big Brother. Someday, I want to be an amazing spy just like—"

"We're done here."

"Huh?"

Out of nowhere, Dugwin's voice went ice-cold. He let out a deep sigh and shook his head like he'd just been shaken out of his reverie.

He shot a look at Thea over the top of his sunglasses. "You're no sister of mine. Get out of my house."

She'd made some sort of colossal blunder.

All of Dugwin's exultation was gone without a trace, and his attitude was now blunt and disinterested. He returned the sweets he'd gotten out to their shelf and expressionlessly strode past Thea. He wouldn't even speak to her anymore.

Thea didn't have a clue what had triggered the shift.

However, she wasn't about to just back down without a fight.

"Oh, um," she said coyly as she subtly lifted up her skirt a bit. "If tonight doesn't work for you, then I can go. But, Big Brother, could you at least help me change? Getting this outfit on is easy, but getting it off can be tricky…"

"Out."

Dugwin began reading on the sofa without even looking her way.

"And don't be crass. Sisters are to be doted on, and any brother who lusts after his little sister is scum."

Thea was boxed out on all sides.

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After running back over what had happened, Thea buried her head in her hands and let out a long breath. "I would be lying if I said I wasn't shocked. To think that *I* would fail to wrap a man around my little—"

"Did you not try to look into his heart?"

She gave Klaus's question a shake of her head.

Thea had the unique ability to learn the desires of anyone whose eyes she peered into. She was confident she could control anyone she used it on, but now that Dugwin had closed his heart off to her, he wouldn't even look her way anymore. On top of that, he also wore sunglasses. The whole thing was a nonstarter.

As it turned out, this assignment was going to be a challenge after all.

Thea was embarrassed for having underestimated it.

Running away isn't an option. What would I do if a situation like this came up in an actual mission?

There were sure to be plenty of times going forward where they ran into weirdos the likes of Dugwin. Thea knew full well just how varied people's desires could be. It was essential that she be able to fulfill those wishes so she could get those people on her side.

She needed to become Dugwin's ideal little sister.

She had to discern what it was he truly wanted, then deliver it to him.

That was the test Pharma had given her. The task was important enough that it was worth giving it as many tries as it took.

"Hey, Teach?"

"Yes? You're sounding awfully formal."

Thea pursed her lips tight and bowed her head low. "Please! I need your help training to become the perfect little sister—"

"No."

His response was swift and decisive.

Without even glancing in her direction, Klaus continued diligently polishing each and every one of his gun's components. "I have nothing but doubts about this training of yours," he said as he peered down its barrel.

"……"

She hadn't expected to get shut down like that.

Thea thought for a moment. She cocked her head and stared intently at Klaus. A solution presented itself to her. She forcefully grabbed his hand and gave him a smile. "Thank you so much for agreeing to help me, Teach!"

"You're refusing to take no for an answer?!"

It was rare to see Klaus so astonished.

However, Thea realized on some level that he was begrudgingly going to assist.

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Thus began Thea's training to become the best little sister possible.

The morning after they made their arrangement, Thea sensed someone beside her as she lay rolled up in her blankets. She opened her eyes to find Klaus standing there looking down at her.

There was something both embarrassing and novel about waking up to see his face.

Still clad in her negligee, she sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Huh? Do I really have to get up already, Big Brother Klaus?"

"You do. Up and at 'em."

"Aww, at least let me have another hour. I was up so late last night reading …"

"I want you up in the next minute."

"You're so mean… But why, though? Is there something special happening today?"

"No, but you're blocking the hallway."

Sure enough, Thea had been sleeping smack-dab in the middle of the Heat Haze Palace corridor. To be even more specific, she was directly in front of Klaus's room. She'd dragged the mattress over from her own room the night prior. While doing so, she ran into Monika, who clicked her tongue and called her a nuisance, but Thea had endured it.

Her motive was simple—she'd wanted Klaus to be the one to wake her up.

"I misread the situation," Thea said, not budging from her blankets. "These days, useless little sisters who need to be taken care of are getting just as popular as little sisters who look after their big brothers."

"That's nice, but my bedroom door can only open halfway because of your mattress."

Thea ignored Klaus's complaint and flopped back down on her mattress. She stuck just her head out from under the blankets and shot Klaus a spoiled look. "What do you think? Behold, a difficult little sister who sleeps in the hallway. Would you call that magnificent?"

"I'd call it annoying. Also, you've always been difficult."

"Hey, Big Brother Klaus." Thea waved her hand back and forth. "Make me some breakfast."

"……"

Klaus looked like he had a handful of different things he wanted to scold her about, but he eventually descended to the first floor before returning fifteen minutes later with a tray. On it was a simple meal of vegetable-and-herb soup and rye bread.



Thea continued lying in the hallway and opened her mouth up wide. “Feed me, Big Brother. Ahhh.”

“……”

Klaus stared at Thea and didn’t move for a good long while. He did pick up the rye bread for a moment, but rather than tear off a hunk of it, he simply let go of it and dropped it back in the basket on the tray. “…Good news, Little Sister.”

“Hm?”

“We just got the funds for our mission deposited, so let’s go to an illegal casino tonight and double those bad boys up.”

“Where’d that come from?!”

“Also, I’m in the mood for some fruit, so be a dear and go buy me some. You have five minutes.”

“But the closest greengrocer is ten minutes from here each way!”

Thea had no idea what to make of the rapid-fire shifts in Klaus’s tone.

He gave up and moved the tray in front of her. “I don’t know how to interact with a younger sister.”

“Huh?”

“All I’ve ever known are people who were like older siblings to me. I don’t understand how Holytree’s perspective works. I don’t think I’m the right person to help you train.”

He crossed his arms with a glum look on his face.

Just as Thea had been trying to act the part of a little sister, he too had been trying to act the part of an older brother.

“Can I at least ask what that was just now?”

“That was my imitation of my big brother Lukas and my big sister Heide.”

If that was the case, then “Soot” Lukas and “Flamefanner” Heide must have been a truly outrageous pair of siblings to have. Come to think of it, she recalled Dugwin having described them as “pains in the neck,” but she decided that Klaus was better off not knowing that.

Klaus sounded apologetic. “You might have better luck asking someone else for help.”

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The current headcount in Heat Haze Palace was low. Most of its residents were off taking care of their assignments from Avian. Lily and Sara had gone back to the academy, and Erna and Annette were out living on the streets. Monika was out and about, too.

Fortunately, that still left someone who was sure to set Thea in the right direction. She got out of bed and went and talked to a girl lifting weights.

“Wait, huh? Am I seriously the only person on Lamplight with a little sister?”

Namely, Sybilla.

Out of everyone on the team, she was the only actual older sister of the group. They didn’t know each other’s full backstories, but most of them had confirmed that they were either only children or the youngest in their families. Thea, Sara, and Lily were in the former group, and Grete, Erna, and Monika all exclusively had older siblings. Annette was a question mark.

That left Sybilla as the only one with lived experience as an older sibling.

“You are, and I need your advice. To you, what would the perfect little sister look like?”

Sybilla cocked her head at the question. “I dunno, I never really thought about it.”

She was dripping with sweat out in the Heat Haze Palace courtyard. Klaus was out on a mission, so Sybilla had taken advantage of his absence to pop open her shirt and lie down dressed in little more than her underwear. She was hard at work on a harsh training regimen of her own.

She puzzled things over for a bit, then said, “Oh, here’s an idea,” and sat up. “Why don’t you stick with me today?”

“Huh?”

“It’d be way easier just showin’ ya. You can come meet my little brothers and sisters.”

She started toweling herself off and clapped Thea on the shoulder.

Sybilla’s plan had been to spend the afternoon recuperating.

After showering and changing into a clean outfit, she took Thea on the large motorcycle Lamplight had expensed and blasted off down the freeway. It was classic Sybilla, the way she drove like a lunatic yet constantly asked to make sure Thea wasn’t too cold. Midway through the trip, they made a pit stop at a shop with dirt-cheap prices. “I found this place while I was on a mission,” Sybilla explained as she bought up huge amounts of groceries before getting back on the motorcycle.

Their journey took them all the way to Leiditz, the nation’s capital.

Sybilla brought them to a stop beside a building on the edge of town. Its walls were a stark shade of white. It was clear from how boxy and unelaborate it was that speed had been the priority in its construction.

The building had a small front yard, and a gaggle of children were kicking a ball around.

One of the girls spotted Sybilla and smiled. “Big Sis Sybilla!!”

“Heya, Finé. How you been?” Sybilla gave her a wave and a cheerful grin. The girl ran over, and Sybilla patted her on the head. “I brought some more flour and butter. We can bake us some bread or somethin’.”

She showed off all the ingredients she’d jammed into the motorcycle’s luggage rack.

The rest of the children rushed over as well and vied for her attention along with Finé.

"Thanks for always helping out, Sis." "Hey Sis, I learned how to read and write!" "Huh? Who's your friend, Sis?"

In the blink of an eye, she was surrounded by a double-digit number of them.

There was nothing Thea could do but gaze on in astonishment.

Could those children be…

She hadn't seen it go down per se, but Thea had been involved with the incident, too.

These were those child thieves who'd been living in the slums.

The name Finé definitely rang a bell. She was a girl that Lamplight had run into during a mission shortly after the team's founding. A former soldier with indirect ties to a Galgad spy who had been abusing her and forcing her to pick pockets.

From what Thea had heard, the children had been taken in by the police and sent to an orphanage.

As she stood there in shock, an amiable-looking woman emerged from the facility. "Are you a colleague of Sybilla's?" she asked. "I'm the director here."

"Oh, um, yes. More or less."

"Well, thank you for coming all the way out here. Sybilla's done so much for us."

If the woman was introducing herself as a director, then this really must be an orphanage. Judging from what she was saying, it would seem that Sybilla was a frequent visitor.

The director cast a warm look over Sybilla and the kids messing around. "She always brings us food or money when she drops by, and she plays with the kids, too. As the director, I can never thank her enough."

"Hey, the senator's pullin' his weight, too." Still being mobbed by children, Sybilla grinned in embarrassment. "I visit the old geezer sometimes to shake him down and tell him he needs to increase the subsidies they give out to places like these, but every time, he just kicks me out and tells me he doesn't need me remindin' him about what he's already workin' his butt off doin'."

She was talking about Uwe Appel, no doubt. Uwe was a politician who advocated for child services and served as the vice-minister of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Sybilla had come to know him during one of her missions.

Sybilla turned her head their way as Finé continued dragging her around by the hand. "But the thing is, they just don't got the cash. That's why I gotta pop in and make deliveries every now and then."

She smiled bashfully.

Sure enough, all the clothes the children of the orphanage were wearing were faded and threadbare. They must have had to wear the same thing day in and day out. Considering the way their eyes lit up at the honey and butter Sybilla bought, they clearly weren't getting pricy ingredients on the regular.

All the while, the kids continued pestering Sybilla.

"But Big Sis Sybilla, the oven is broken!"

"Welp, you gotta do what you gotta do. I'm gonna teach you how to fix it, so make sure you're watchin' close."

"Huh? You know how to do that, Sis?!"

"Who do you think you're talkin' to? C'mon, help me get these groceries inside."

The youngsters enthusiastically followed Sybilla's instructions.

There was no way she and they were linked by blood, yet to Sybilla, they were akin to little brothers and sisters all the same.

However, that raised a question—*where were Sybilla's actual siblings?*

While Thea was debating whether or not to ask, Sybilla turned around. "Oh, right. Hey, Thea."

"Huh? What is it?"

"I figured out the answer you were lookin' for. About my ideal little sister. Turns out, the question was dead easy." Sybilla looked her square in the eye and gave her reply. "_____"

As soon as the words reached her ears, Thea found herself shocked at what a perfect response it was.

That right there was an answer she and Klaus would never have been able to think of. Only someone who actually had little siblings could come up with that desire.

"Since you're already here, how 'bout you gimme a hand?" Sybilla called over to her, to which Thea replied, "You got it," and went over and joined the kids.

Of the children, some of the girls stared at Thea's silky locks with awe. She decided that perhaps she could teach them how to take care of their own hair.

In the end, the two of them stayed at the orphanage all the way through the evening.

By the time they finished making their absolutely heavenly bread, night had already fallen.

After returning to Heat Haze Palace on Sybilla's motorcycle, Grete was thoughtful enough to brew them some tea. Now that Thea thought about it, she hadn't talked much with Grete since they'd parted ways at Dugwin's house.

Was Grete going to end up giving up on their homework? Thea had yet to actually ask.

As curiosity welled up inside her, it was actually Grete who spoke. "To tell you truth," she said, "…I just got back from finishing the assignment."

"……"

Thea felt silly for ever having doubted her.

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How to best Holytree in three incredibly easy steps—by Grete!

Step 1: After disguising yourself as "Feather" Pharma, get cozy with Klaus. If he objects, insist that it's crucial for your training and take a photograph with your arms intertwined.

"We need to link arms, Boss."

"You're getting very close."

"Please don't try to run away… The photo is in three seconds. All right, say cheese."

Step 2: Give the photo to "Holytree" Dugwin.

"Dugwin, I caught Pharma and the boss going on an intimate date."

"I'LL KILL THAT RAT BASTAAAAAARD!!"

Step 3: At that point, suggest that you could fulfil a request of his.

"Tell me where Bonfire is. I'm going to kill that man dead. How dare he toy with my sister's emotions."

"…Of course. If that's your request, I would be more than happy to grant it."

And just like that, the assignment is finished. Try it at home!

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Grete described the whole thing in succinct detail.

Although it was a plan that hinged on her being a master of disguise, Thea got the feeling that it was Dugwin's gullibility that had really made it possible. Perhaps that was what Klaus had been hinting at when he said that Dugwin's little-sister mania made him vulnerable.

"I didn't want to cause any trouble for the boss, so I had no intention of giving Dugwin his actual location. My plan was to tell him that the boss was deep in the jungle, then wait to fill him in until after he'd had time to cool off…"

"Well, now I just feel bad for Dugwin."

"…but then, the boss told me, 'I'd love to get a chance to fight Holytree,' so I went ahead and told him the correct spot."

"Well, now I feel even worse for him!"

She had to imagine that even someone like Dugwin's odds of winning against Klaus would be slim. Right now, he was probably getting walloped, then having his pride torn to shreds as Klaus explained what had happened. She felt a twinge of sympathy for the man.

"Do you want to try finishing the assignment the same way?" Grete pumped her fists. "I'd be happy to help provide as many fake date photos with the boss as you need!"

Thea sensed some ulterior motive at work, but she decided not to voice that thought aloud. As Grete's love guru, she did want to help bring Grete's romance to fruition, but she shook her head all the same. "I'm sorry. It's a lovely plan you came up with, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to decline."

Grete's scheme was impeccable, of course. The way she'd reframed the problem was ingenious. By choosing to treat it not as a matter of granting his wish but of making him harbor a wish she was capable of granting, she'd finished the task in no time at all.

She'd gotten the result she was looking for at the lowest possible cost.

As someone who often came up with plans alongside her on the Intel squad, Thea was downright jealous of Grete's talents.

However, her philosophy was a little different.

Grete gave her a warm, unsurprised smile. "…Of course. I imagined that was what you would say."

In other words, it was just as she'd suspected.

"That's right," Thea said, laying a hand on her chest.

"Me, I want to face Dugwin's desires head-on and actually grant them without running away."

It meant rejecting Grete's plan, but Thea wasn't about to stray from her course.

She was, in all things, intent on delivering the best performance she could.

Thea was determined to save everyone, even the ones who were at odds with her. She refused to waver on that principle.

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After having devoted a day to preparation, Thea headed once more to Dugwin's house.

The door wasn't locked, so she went straight in without ringing the doorbell. She didn't knock, either.

When she first heard about the rule, she came up with a number of theories ranging from "he's confident in his ability to defeat any would-be assassin who comes after him" to "it's a measure designed to quickly identify people who aren't Din Republic spies," but in all likelihood, the actual answer was that "little sisters generally don't ring the doorbell when they come home." It was ridiculous, but she still played along.

"What?"

Dugwin was down in the first-floor living room wrapping a bandage around his head. It took a lot of dexterity to press a dressing pad against his own head and secure it like he was doing.

Those must have been the injuries he got in his fight against Klaus. When fighting against people far weaker than him, Klaus was

able to knock them out without leaving a single scratch, so that was a testament to Dugwin's combat prowess.

"I'm in a bad mood right now. I have no time for someone unfit to be my little sister."

There was an edge to his voice. He was being even more unpleasant than during their first interaction.

Thea was going to have to be the one to break the ice.

"There's something I wanted to confirm. Specifically, the exact reason why your sister Pharma severed ties with you."

On hearing that, Dugwin's shoulder twitched.

She ignored him and kept going.

"I was curious about what exactly could have sparked it. At first, I assumed that it was because of your sister mania, but as I recall, you said she only disowned you six months ago. You've been gathering your collection for ages. That overbearing love of yours couldn't have been the direct cause."

Six months ago—Thea knew exactly what happened to Pharma around that time.

It was something that marked a major turning point in her life.

"Then, I went to an acquaintance of mine. I asked her what it was that a big sister wants out of their younger siblings."

She borrowed Sybilla's words verbatim.

"I don't want 'em to die before I do."

Thea had no idea what emotions Sybilla had been going through when she said that.

However, Sybilla had made one thing very clear—that what she wanted for her little siblings was for them to live out their days in peace and safety.

From there, Thea made a deduction. She figured out what had caused the rift between Dugwin and Pharma.

"You didn't want Pharma to become a spy, did you?"

"Of course I didn't," Dugwin readily admitted. "My father is an impoverished stonemason. The reason I transferred from being a soldier to a Foreign Intelligence Office spy is because the pay is better. I wanted my family to be able to live in comfort."

He slammed his book shut.

"But in spite of that, my sister goes and says she's going to become a spy and put her life on the line—how am I supposed to approve of something like that?"

Dugwin made no effort to hide the anger in his voice as he went on.

He described how Pharma had always preferred to live life in the slow lane. When she realized that she was more talented than the people around her, though, a sense of duty flared up in her, and she enrolled in a spy academy.

Even back then, Dugwin had been against it. However, he figured that his lazybones sister would soon drop out, so he didn't push back too hard.

"I never thought she was actually going to graduate," he sighed. "When I demanded that she resign, she broke off ties with me. She snapped and told me that I was stifling her. But what choice did I have? If someone's going to rush to die before their big brother—then I refuse to accept them as a little sister."

"Oh, screw you." His complaints were so selfish, Thea couldn't help but lash out. "All you were doing was forcing your own self-centered ideals onto her!"

"That's really how you see it?"

"You'd better believe it is. You talk a big game, but all you were doing was trying to micromanage your sister's life!"

What Dugwin was trying to do was rob Pharma of the ability to choose her own line of employment. At no point had it looked to Thea like Pharma was working as a spy begrudgingly. She could be careless at times, sure, but she was going on those missions of her own volition. Dugwin had no right to deny her that.

“Avian is an honorable team,” Thea said, name-dropping the group that Pharma was part of. “It was built hastily out of rookies because our nation was in trouble, and yet they’ve completed loads of missions! Pharma is proud to be one of its members.”

“Now who’s making a mockery of who?”

Dugwin pushed the bridge of his sunglasses up his nose.

“I KNOW THAT BETTER THAN ANYONE!!”

His roar was intense enough to rattle the windows.

Thea was shocked to discover he was even capable of raising his voice like that.

Dugwin hung his head, perhaps embarrassed at his overt display of emotion. His back seemed uncharacteristically limp for a spy who’d defended his country as fervently as he had.

“I know perfectly well that she genuinely wants to be a spy. I have no idea what it is that changed that lazy little sister I knew, but she has this determination burning in her heart.”

“……”

“And yet, even knowing that, I still didn’t want her to become a spy,” he said softly. “I would’ve rooted for her in any job she chose, just so long as she was safe. I would have supported her with everything I had. As long as she came back every now and then to rejoice at the clothes and sweets I gathered for her, I would have been happy. So sure, I pushed my ideals on her. She was my one and only little sister.”

Hearing the sadness in his words made Thea realize something new.

Dugwin understood that Pharma wasn’t coming back there anymore.

His desire was for a new little sister. At no point had he ever demanded she help him make up with Pharma or convince her to

stop being a spy. He'd already accepted that no one could make those things come true.

"…I can't be the one to fulfill your wish." Thea shook her head. "I, too, decided to become a spy. I'll never be the kind of little sister you're looking for. Before long, I'll doubtless be off in some other country, risking my life to change the world."

"Yeah, I realized that," Dugwin said, unimpressed. "That's why I kicked you out."

The reason he'd turned her away during their first meeting was for the exact same reason. It was because she'd started to tell him that she wanted to become a spy just like him.

"Holytree" Dugwin had gone into the perilous field of espionage for the sake of his family. However, having his beloved sister follow in his footsteps had caused him to lose his purpose.

"It all feels so pointless," he said sadly, pushing up his sunglasses. "What have I even been protecting this country for if it was all going to come to this? All I have left are books with no one to read them, clothes with no one to wear them, and sweets with no one to enjoy them. Am I going to be forced to spend the rest of my days surrounded by them as they get chewed through by bugs, grow moldy, and rot away?"

"……"

"I want a little sister. My heart yearns for one. I need someone to fill this hole inside of—"

"Big Brother Dugwin?"

The voice didn't come from Thea.

Pharma had left the Din Republic, and she definitely hadn't come back, either.

There were a dozen or so children standing by the room's entrance. It was the one holding a football and standing at the head

of the group who'd spoken—Finé.

Beside them, Sybilla was there as a chaperone.

Dugwin's eyes widened in surprise. "Who are those kids?"

"They're from an orphanage," Thea explained. "Just ordinary children who live in the country you've been defending. They've been shielded from harm, and it's all thanks to your efforts."

She whispered quietly enough that only Dugwin could hear as she walked over to Finé and the rest of the children.

"So tell me, Dugwin. Do you think you could cherish *them* like little sisters and brothers?"

She stood behind Finé's back and rested her hands on her shoulders.

"You just asked what you'd been protecting this country for. Couldn't these smiles be reason enough?"

Dugwin remained frozen with his eyes wide.

Finé gave a small nod and approached Dugwin. "Big Sis, um, told me that you were sad living here all on your own," she said, stumbling over her words. "Do you want to play together? Big Brother Dugwin?"

She went up to him and held out the ball.

Behind her, all the other children shot anxious looks at them.

Thea hadn't told the kids about Dugwin's backstory, of course. All she'd done was made a request—told them that there was a man who was all alone despite working harder than anyone, and asked if they wanted to come meet him.

The children had been more than happy to agree.

"……"

Dugwin stared intently at the ball in Finé's hands.

Perhaps he was conflicted. All Thea's suggestion would do was paper over his loss, nothing more.

Her hope was that actually meeting the children in person would be enough to make his heart waver.

After completely burying his face in his hands, Dugwin removed his sunglasses for a moment to rub his eyes. He let out an exhale,

then put the glasses back on.

"You know," he said, "my little sister once idolized me that very way."

"I never realized Pharma was ever like that."

"You'd never guess it."

It was hard to even picture.

There must have a sizable age gap between Dugwin and Pharma. The sunglasses made it hard to be certain, but it looked as though his expression was softening, like he was reminiscing on the distant past.

Dugwin looked up. "Thea, was it?"

"That's right."

"I understood, you know. I knew that being fixated on the sister I lost wouldn't do me any good. And I couldn't fasten my wagon to someone who throws themselves into peril like you, either." He nodded. "But this, I can allow. They shall be my new little sisters and brothers."

The moment the words left his mouth, Finé turned around and gave Thea a delighted smile.

Thea returned it with one of her own. The other children grinned as well, and to the side, Sybilla pumped her fist.

Unaware of what they were doing, Dugwin went on in satisfaction. "You're right. After getting cut off by my biological sister, the only thing that could fill the hole in my heart was—"

"All right, everyone, he agreed!"

"Huh?"

Dugwin looked at her in confusion.

Thea ignored him and gave the children the order. "We don't need to play innocent anymore! Go get those clothes and sweets from Big Brother Dugwin!!"

"""""YAAAAAAAY!"""""

They rushed off in a mad scramble. Their good behavior from moments earlier had been completely replaced with shouting and romping around. They rummaged through the kitchen cabinets and

shouted, "I found the candy!!" before running up to explore the second floor. "She told us there'd be loads of cool clothes up here!"

Dugwin blinked. "What…?"

"Come now, don't be surprised. Those children aren't just tools for soothing your heart," Thea said. "As their big brother, you should be willing to help your little siblings out. Besides, weren't you just going to throw those sweets out and leave those outfits to rot on shelves anyway?"

"…Maybe so, but would it kill them to have a little, I don't know… decorum?"

Dugwin was flabbergasted by the way his house was being ransacked.

A round of frustrated cries sounded from the second floor. "This door's locked!!" They must have found Dugwin's collection room.

That was when Sybilla slipped by Dugwin's side. "Nicked this for ya," she shouted as she tossed the stolen key upstairs.

The color drained from Dugwin's face, and he took off at a dash. "WAIT, WAIT, WAIT, WAIT, WAIT!"

He raced up to the second floor with the desperation of a man trying to restrain an enemy spy.

Thea stayed on the first floor and strained her ears to listen to the voices coming from above.

The children had breached the collection room. "Whoa, this is so cool!" and "I bet even a guy could pull this outfit off," they cheered in glee.

Then came Dugwin's shrieks. "D-don't touch that! That's a famous outfit with a long history behind—"

"Whaaat? That doesn't make any sense." There was zero shame in Finé's voice. "What's the point of showing off clothes if you can't wear them?"

"Damn you! That's an affront to collectors everywhere! That's just how some things are!"

"Well that's duuumb."

"No means no! Please, at least… At least only wear it on special occasions or something—"

Finé and Dugwin's argument raged on.

Everything about how Finé had been behaving earlier had been an act. Thea had coached her on how to pretend to be the perfect little sister for Dugwin.

As she nodded in satisfaction at her success, she found Sybilla glaring daggers at her. "Look, I'll let you off the hook just this once, but you can't go puttin' weird shit in those kids' heads."

"I—I know that."

"Seriously, it's no bueno. Ever heard of somethin' called the orphan industry? It's a serious issue 'round these parts."

Sybilla's concern was entirely legitimate.

There were some people out there who made orphans play up how pitiful they were to solicit donations from tourists and philanthropists. Doing so allowed them to cover their living expenses for a time, but when children grew up never learning how to do anything but accept handouts, it left them ill-equipped to deal with the trials of adult life. It was an exploitative practice that sacrificed the children's futures.

If Thea had made one false step, she would have been doing the exact same thing.

As such, it was important that she explain herself. "This time was special. Dugwin is the kind of person who understands that stuff."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because he didn't just gather up dresses and sweets to pamper his sister with. He made sure to get reference books and academic material, too. He was a big brother who made sure to think about his little sister's future and education."

Up on the second floor, Finé and Dugwin were still arguing.

"H-hold on, now. Your balance is all off. You have to take some of the books I've collected, not just the candy and clothes."

"Ugh, but those books look really complicated."

"Rgh… Fine. Then I'll teach you how to read them myself."

"Studying sucks!"

"No, it doesn't! Not knowing your history is the whole reason you can't appreciate the value of those clothes. But now, listen here. I, in my abundant love, am going to school you properly. I'll have you looking forward to studying in no time."

By the sound of it, the two of them were getting along like a house on fire.

Sure enough, it didn't seem like there were going to be any problems on that front. Dugwin knew how to handle children—when to be soft on them, and when to be strict.

"It won't be long before that orphanage is positively pumping out elites."

Thea laughed, and Sybilla gave her an amused clap on the shoulder. "Not bad, hero."

Being surrounded by so many smiles moved Thea in the strangest way.

It's odd, you know. All I did was deceive people, and yet…

Thea had urged the children on and gotten them to trick Dugwin. However, she hadn't told the kids the truth about Dugwin, either.

She'd spread lies every which way, and it had given rise to something incredible.

Could this be…a form of deception all my own…?

She didn't have a perfect grasp on it yet.

However, she felt as though she'd uncovered a major clue.

This was her strength as a spy. A way for her to combine lies and technique to achieve results many times more powerful than she was ordinarily capable of—her liecraft.

She let out a long breath.

Tell me, Pharma. Was this what you were looking for?

Dugwin and the kids eventually came back down to the first floor, and upon spotting them, Thea's thoughts turned to the young woman who'd given her the assignment. What emotions had she experienced when she'd tasked Thea with granting a wish for her estranged brother?

Meanwhile, Dugwin and Finé were still bickering.

"Look, it's right there in the book! That's from my collection!"

"Wow, you're right. It really was a famous outfit."

"See? When you study, you deepen your understanding of the world around you."

"Huh. Maybe I shouldn't sell off this reference book after all, then."

"YOU WERE GOING TO SELL IT?!"

It made Thea want to ask Pharma directly. Was this the future Pharma envisioned? Was this what she was trying to guide Thea toward?

She didn't know why. There was no way for her to describe it but as a feeling in her gut, yet in that moment, Thea desperately wanted to see Pharma. They'd only been apart for a few days, but Thea wanted to talk to her more than anything.

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All of that took place a few days before the Lamplight girls would learn that Avian had been annihilated.

Soon, the whole team would be pushed to their limits in a brutal contest of plans and schemes.

Interlude
Intermission ①

"…Those both sound like excellent options for Lan's future," Grete remarked.

The rest of the girls nodded in agreement at Lily's suggestion of having her teach at a spy academy and Thea's suggestion to have her join another team.

"Her personality aside, it's true that she has experience taking part in missions during her admittedly brief time on Avian," Grete went on. "That would make her a compelling candidate for an instructor job. And if Lan has any desire to return to active service, a counterintelligence team would be a strong fit."

"There's no way she would make a decent teacher." "I mean, she is skilled…" "And the academies are short on staff, yo!" a few of the other girls chimed in, but the fact remained that they were solid choices.

As the discussion grew lively, Thea alone hung her head and sighed. "I wonder how Dugwin is holding up…" He must have been informed by now that his sister Pharma had passed away.

After writing the ideas down on a blackboard, Grete moved the conversation along. "Did we have anyone else?"

A pair of hands went up from Erna and Sybilla.

"I have an idea, too!"

"Yeah, same. Though honestly, I dunno if mine actually counts as a real suggestion."

With that, the two of them began their stories.

They described other options for "Cloud Drift" Lan—new paths she could walk as a spy.

Chapter 3
The Foreign Intelligence Office Management's Case

The Fend Commonwealth Battle of Deception.

The mission that Lamplight would go on to dub thus ended up being far more involved and brutal than their initial projections. Every member on the team ended up having to dodge countless bullets, both literal and figurative.

The mental strain of that took its toll on many of them.

Aside from "Cloud Drift" Lan, the entire Avian roster had perished.

When the girls learned the news, several of them found themselves unable to eat. The only thing that let them fight through their anguish and see the mission through was their staunch determination to avenge their comrades. That, and the encouragement of the ever-dauntless "Flower Garden" Lily.

They went on to use the skills they'd inherited from Avian and demonstrated just how valuable their honeymoon had been. After taking down Belias—the Fend Commonwealth's CIM counterintelligence unit that had attacked Avian—Lamplight went on to expose the mastermind pulling their strings.

However, it wasn't long thereafter that Lamplight was beset by a new disaster: "Glint" Monika deserting the team.

After turning against her own team, she attacked Annette, Thea, and Erna, kidnapped Grete, and vanished alongside a suspected member of Lamplight's bitter enemy, Serpent.

Without so much as a moment to catch their breaths, Lamplight found themselves needing to track Monika down.

The hunt for Monika took place across the Fend Commonwealth capital of Hurough.

Unsurprisingly, it was Lamplight's boss—Klaus—who headed up the efforts. He spread maps and newspapers out across a table in the apartment they were using as their base and groaned. "The chaos is spreading."

"With five shootings in a single district last night, I must agree…"

"What do you make of it, Amelie?"

"Something like that would never happen in peacetime, to be sure. However, it would be premature to assume that Monika is there. That area has long been a stronghold of a mafia group called the Zinc Family that supports the royal family."

"You're saying that the assassination may have caused other violence to break out?"

"I should think so. The group is intensely xenophobic. I have to imagine that the nightly attacks on the Mouzaian restaurants on Meke Street must have been their handiwork."

"That's fair, but I'll still need to confirm it."

By Klaus's side, there was a woman.

Her choice of garb was peculiar. Much of it was black, with frills everywhere from the hem of her skirt to her collar. It was a prime example of the girlish Gothic Lolita style of fashion. Even back in the Middle Ages, the only members of the aristocracy you would see dressed like that were little girls. It was downright bizarre to see an outfit like that worn by a gloomy woman in her mid-twenties with dark bags under her eyes.

That was "Puppeteer" Amelie. Belias was a counterintelligence unit that answered directly to the CIM's Hide leadership, and she was the team's boss.

Klaus had called on her assistance while he searched for Monika. After taking all her agents hostage and forcing her to comply, he brought her to the apartment and forced her to eat and sleep under the same roof as him.

They made for an odd pair of roommates, those two enemy spies.

This is the tale of the Lamplight girl who helped enable that arrangement.

Of friendly bonds and tranquil days meeting a sudden and decisive end.

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"I'm stepping out for a bit. Erna, you're in charge of keeping an eye on her."

"Will do."

It was early in the morning when Klaus gave her some brief instructions before leaving the apartment. His gait was quicker than usual, and she could sense how restless he was.

After waving goodbye to him, Erna exhaled.

…I've never seen Teach look so tense before.

At the moment, Lamplight was short on functional personnel. Grete was missing, and Annette had been hospitalized. Plus, Sara was busy watching over their Belias captives alongside Lan.

They were trying to operate with barely half of their usual roster, and Klaus was the one picking up the slack. His expression was dour, and he pushed himself without rest.

However, the news of Crown Prince Darryn's assassination threw the city of Hurough into such turmoil as to stymie his every effort. There were boycott movements against foreign businesses, fringe groups demonstrating against the government, and constant

incidents of violence that would never have occurred under normal circumstances.

Trying to locate Monika amid the chaos without even knowing her goals was all but impossible.

As Erna cheered him on for never faltering in spite of that, she heard an annoyed voice from the living room behind her. "Why, I never. There he goes, sneaking off without me."

The voice was Amelie's.

Klaus had chosen not to bring her along that day. The two of them generally operated as a pair, but there were rare times when Klaus went off alone, likely because there were elements of his search that he didn't want her privy to.

When Klaus wasn't there, the task of guarding Amelie fell on Erna.

Now, Erna and Amelie were alone in the room together.

Even considering how short on hands Lamplight was, it made for an odd pairing.

Amelie sat in the living room and sifted through information from the radio and the newspapers Erna had gone out and bought in advance. She was forbidden from going outside without Klaus.

Erna decided to make some breakfast.

Taking care of housework like that was part of her task. Klaus was far too busy to concern himself with chores or doing the shopping.

She quickly fried an egg and laid it atop some lettuce she'd washed with cold water. Erna liked to eat her toast loaded up with cheese. She hesitated a moment while deciding if she should put the bacon on it, too, then chopped the bacon into thin strips, fried it, and sprinkled it over the salad as a garnish.

Once she'd paired it all with the special vegetable soup she made the night prior, the meal was complete.

She'd prepared enough for two.

"Breakfast is ready."

"Ah, much appreciated. Perhaps it's time I took a break."

Amelie looked up and came over to the dining table. Upon seeing the finished spread, she beamed. "This all looks lovely."

They sat around the table and ate their breakfast.

The apartment was far too messy for them to eat separately. The table was the only place with enough space for a meal.

The two of them moved their knives and forks in silence until Amelie asked a question. "…Are you making sure to feed my people, too?"

She stared at Erna with unease.

Erna gave her a small nod. "Of course."

Lamplight was currently detaining twenty-five of her agents and keeping them under constant supervision. Sybilla and Lily were delivering food, and Sara and Lan were looking after them.

Amelie continued staring at her. "Some of them were injured in the battle against you. Have they been given proper—"

"There's nothing I can tell you," Erna answered briefly. "As long as you obey Lamplight's orders, we can assure your agents' safety. That's all I'm allowed to say."

She couldn't give out any more information than necessary.

Lamplight and Amelie's current relationship existed on a razor-thin balance. Lamplight being a foreign spy team meant their animosity was a given. By taking her agents hostage, though, Lamplight had forced her into submission for a time.

That said, it was hardly enough to afford them any real peace of mind.

After all…

Erna gave Amelie a quiet look.

…there's always a chance she'll choose to sacrifice her twenty-five men.

If anything, it was her duty to do so.

Her counterintelligence team served as the Fend Commonwealth's bulwark. If she wanted to carry out her duty, what she needed to do was abandon her agents, murder Erna, and deliver a sitrep to her colleagues.

Instead, though, Amelie was obediently staying by Lamplight's side.

…Because she doesn't fully trust her bosses at Hide……?

That was the excuse she'd given them, but it was impossible to know what truly lurked in her heart.

She and they were enemies who had a temporary alliance. That was the most succinct way to describe their relationship.

As Erna thought once more about just how strange their cohabitation arrangement was, Amelie finished her breakfast. She drank down her post-meal tea as well, then exhaled. "I'm feeling a little itchy."

"…Yeep?"

"I suppose I'd best use this time while Bonfire is away to take a shower."

Amelie brought her dishes to the sink before turning toward the bathroom.

Erna was still in the middle of eating, but she followed along after Amelie. "I'll be waiting close by."

"Must you? You should really feel free to enjoy your meal at your leisure."

"I can't do that." Erna shook her head. "You could send a coded message out the bathroom window. I can't let you out of my sight."

Amelie blinked in annoyance, then headed into the bathroom without saying anything, towel and makeup case in tow.

"……"

Erna didn't offer her a shred of warmth.

Aside from just her innate fear of strangers, there was a massive gulf that existed between the two of them. Every time she thought of Amelie, there was one fact she was forced to recall.

Belias had attacked Avian.

Sure, they were just following orders. And sure, they too had been duped by Serpent. But excuses like those weren't enough to satisfy

Erna's emotions.

While it was Serpent that ultimately killed most of Avian, her grudge against Belias remained.

One of Avian's members—"South Wind" Queneau—had died at their hands.

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"South Wind" Queneau wasn't what one would call sociable.

Queneau was a large, quiet man who wore an unsettling white mask. The girls thought of him as something akin to a big old bear statue. Of all the Avian members who'd swooped in and invaded their lives, he stood out among the group. Aside from that one time he planted a vegetable garden in the Heat Haze Palace courtyard without permission, he'd been more or less harmless.

However, he and Erna had something of a connection.

Erna and Lily were the ones he'd imparted his skills upon. His was the art of hiding oneself without letting out so much as a breath in order to take a target down. Queneau didn't like to draw attention to himself, making it the perfect talent for someone like him.

During the latter half of Lamplight's time with Avian, he shared a strange piece of information with Erna.

"……"

"……"

"……"

"……"

As Queneau watered his vegetables, Erna watched him from behind.

Sadly, her shyness meant it took time to work up the courage to talk to him.

"……"

She was still motionlessly shadowing him when Queneau suddenly turned around.

"…Query. What is it?"

"___?!"

She timidly stepped out from her hiding spot.

There was something she badly needed to ask him.

"I—I heard from Annette."

She could feel her heartbeat quickening, and she cast her gaze downward.

"Big Brother… Queneau… Are you a killer…?"

Queneau's throat quietly rumbled.

There had been a few days when her friend Annette had been emotionally unstable. Annette had snuck into Erna's room each night, then huddled under a blanket and moaned, "Olive…," as nightmares assailed her. She talked in her sleep, and amid the vague mumblings about black cats and gang activities, the term "murderous masked bastard" popped up. Either she was talking about Queneau, or there was some other murderer loose in the city…

It looked as though Queneau trembled, but the mask made his expression unreadable. "…Aye. I am."

She gasped.

Queneau resignedly confessed from behind his mask. "I've killed thirty-four people since I was sixteen. And five of those were before I became a spy." There was no emotion in his voice. "Don't ask me why. It's simply in my nature… But you're right. I try to be selective about my targets, but there can be no denying that I'm a killer…"

"……"

"Aye. Was that what you wanted to ask?"

He sounded almost hurt.

Erna shook her head. She wasn't there to judge or accuse him. She just wanted to check.

"But," she said sympathetically, "you don't seem like a bad person."

She meant it genuinely.

The fact of the matter was the rest of Avian trusted him. From what she'd heard, they gave him large amounts of latitude during their missions and allowed him to operate solo.

"……"

Queneau looked straight at her. It was hard to tell through the mask, but his silence implied he was observing her.

"Ah," he finally said when she tilted her head in confusion. "You're the kind of person who's drawn to those of my ilk… But I'm of no mind to judge you. I cannot fulfill your desire for self-flagellation or ruin…"

"Yeep?"

"Now I understand how you get along with her so well…"

Queneau harvested one of the items from his vegetable garden. It was a radish. It had only had a short time to grow, yet its root was already large and plump.

"Take care of 'Forgetter' Annette."

He wiped the dirt off the radish and presented it to Erna.

She didn't know why he was concerned about Annette's well-being. However, the two of them clearly shared a bond understood by them and them alone. Maybe there was a side to Annette that only a killer could understand.

Queneau's body quaked a little.

"…Nay, I guess it's not my place to ask."

Despite the mask obscuring his face, something told her that he was smiling.

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Amelie never tried to strike up conversation with Erna as they went about their days, and the day she took that shower was no different.

Time passed them by with nary a word exchanged. Amelie was tracking down "Glint" Monika, and she had no time for small talk.

Erna didn't speak to Amelie either, and by the time she got done sorting through the reports from Lily and Sybilla, it was already evening.

Klaus returned looking exhausted. "I'm back."

Given how downcast he looked, he must not have found any leads on Monika's whereabouts.

He beckoned Erna into the bedroom and lowered his voice to a whisper. "How has Amelie been? Has she been behaving herself?"

"She's been fine…" Erna flung her hands in the air as she made her complaint. "But it's so awkward!!"

"I don't doubt it."

Klaus gave her an understanding nod.

She felt bad for bringing it up when he was already so tired, but she wouldn't have been able to get anything past him anyway. "I'm no good at communicating with people. For someone like me, the silence is too much to bear. My breath gets caught in my throat, and it feels like I'm choking…"

"There, there. You've been doing great."

When Erna sidled up to him, Klaus obligingly patted her head. She took a moment to savor the feeling of his slender fingers and set her nerves at ease. "I think it's pretty clear that I'm not cut out to stand watch over people."

"I am sorry about this. I'll get a special reward for you once the mission is finished."

"I want it to be some of that cheesecake we got that one time!"

"Very well, then."

"And I want it to be a reward just for me!"

Once she'd been properly doted on, she sighed and flopped onto the bed.

Times when Klaus was by her side were the only opportunities she had to let her guard down. There was no telling when Amelie might change her mind and attack Erna in order to make her escape.

After closing her eyes for exactly ten seconds, she pulled herself together and sat back up. "I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't be acting like a child when we're in the middle of an emergency…"

"No, it's fine. It helped calm me down, too. It's just been one disaster after another."

Klaus loosened his necktie and gave Erna a quiet look.

She stared absent-mindedly back at him. "Ah, I see," he said softly. "You're worried about the Avian situation."

"I-it's like you read my mind!"

"I like to think I understand you pretty well."

Thanks to his honed intuition, he'd sensed what was bothering her.

Klaus wasn't omniscient, but he was expert at figuring out what was on his allies' minds. That was precisely why Monika's desertion had come as such a shock.

He shot a glance over at the wall between them and the living room. Even now, Amelie was hard at work on the other side.

"I-I'm honestly kind of mixed up about it." She'd hesitated to even bring it up, but she timidly let the words spill out. "I know it's not uncommon for spies to have to kill foreign spies. Sometimes, I wonder if it's even right to blame Amelie for attacking Avian…"

"It's a legitimate question to have—"

Klaus's tone darkened.

"—but Belias crossed a line no matter how you slice it."

"Yeep…"

"Murder is no taboo in the world of espionage; that much is true. However, it needs a proper justification. Society can't abide people who kill for no reason."

Did spies have a code of ethics? It was a murky question, but the answer wasn't a hard no. For example, people on Lamplight didn't just go around killing people willy-nilly. Erna hadn't actually checked with them, but she had to imagine that few if any of them had ever actually taken a life.

"That said, figuring out what justifies killing someone is a fine line to walk. You can't just spin up reasons to kill whoever you want."

"Teach…"

She could feel her throat growing hotter.

"…what would be enough to make you kill an enemy?"

"Rather than kill them, I would capture them alive to squeeze information out of them."

After saying that, he stopped himself. "No, I'm just dodging the question," he said shaking his head. "If detaining them wasn't an option, and if they were threating the lives of my allies or our citizens, or if there were state secrets in jeopardy—if they fulfilled one of a few conditions, then I would probably kill them. From what I gather, most spies operate under a similar set of principles."

After thoughtfully laying it all out, he added, "Galgad agents are all too happy to drag innocent civilians in and kill them, too," in irritation. "But the CIM's people follow those same guidelines."

"Then, when they killed Avian, did they—"

"Avian did nothing to justify being murdered." There were daggers in his voice. "Does being a counterintelligence unit mean they can just write foreign reporters off as spies and kill them? Can they punish random tourists for espionage just for snapping a few photos? At the very least, the CIM should have started by telling them off or bringing them in for questioning."

Erna had to agree.

All Avian had been doing was investigating what an old Inferno member named "Firewalker" Gerde had been looking into before she died. None of them had any intention of bringing harm to the people of Fend.

However, they'd been falsely accused of trying to assassinate Crown Prince Darryn and killed all the same.

"Avian was a group of trained spies, that much is true. But killing them just for that was crossing a line." Klaus nodded. "We're not letting them off the hook for that. All we're doing is using her, nothing more."

He hadn't forgiven Belias for what they'd done, either. All he was looking for out of Amelie was her value to him as a spy.

Klaus got a sheet of paper out of the bedroom cabinet and wrote something down on it. “Come to think of it, the more time you have to spend alone with Amelie, the more complicated your emotions are likely to become.”

“Yeep?”

“If you ever find yourself in a position where you have to make an important decision—”

Klaus folded the paper up small and tight enough that it wouldn’t open easily.

“—I want you to open this.”

Erna gulped and crammed it deep in her pocket.

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Her conversation with Klaus helped to enforce the notion that in the grand scheme of things, she had every right to hate the person she was dealing with. The idea that she had justice on her side was as sweet as any drug, and her heart felt a great deal lighter.

Considering how stressful this situation was, she was grateful for the way that sedated her nerves.

All that said, Erna wasn’t the kind of person who would blindly welcome that notion from the bottom of her heart. She wasn’t so self-indulgent as to believe she was entirely good and innocent.

In the end, the awkwardness between her and Amelie remained.

“I was thinking of brewing myself some tea,” Amelie said. Would you care for a cup?”

“…I’m fine. I’ll make my own,” Erna replied.

It was a few days later, and Klaus had taken off on his own again and left the two of them alone with each other.

Even after evening had fallen, there was still no sign of him.

“Brewing for two is hardly more effort than brewing for one, you know.”

Amelie was starting to get comfortable with their living arrangement, and she'd started helping herself to the cooker and tea leaves. She spooned two servings' worth of leaves into the teapot.

Erna paused work on the covert op she was doing to get funds to her teammates and observed Amelie.

"This actually reminds me, Erna. That redhead on your team—I believe you all call her Grete? The tea she made was really quite exquisite. Does she often make the tea for the group?"

"……"

Although Amelie was right, Erna couldn't tell her that.

It was true that Grete generally made the tea for them, and that she was the one who made it best. Grete had made a habit of bringing some to Klaus in his room each night. She worked night and day to extract every ounce of flavor she could from the leaves.

However, Erna had no desire to reveal that information. Trivial as it was, her lips were sealed.

Amelie sighed. "I can see that you don't care for me much."

"Of course not."

"Well, no matter what emotions you harbor within—"

Amelie took the teacup she'd just filled and offered it to her.

"—wouldn't you say that being able to communicate without revealing them is what being a spy is all about?"

She was being condescending, and Erna didn't like it one bit.

Erna understood that Amelie was right, and she understood that Amelie was a stronger spy than she was. Yet even so, Amelie was the last person she wanted telling her that.

The two of them were just fundamentally incompatible.

"I'm going to go make dinner."

Erna averted her gaze and rose to her feet.

After walking right past the proffered teacup, she replaced Amelie in the kitchen.

Erna cut the vegetables.

She took two onions and chopped them lengthwise into thin slices, then diced a clove of garlic and some parsley. The sound of her knife against the chopping board resounded through the apartment, a steady rhythm of *thunk, thunk, thunk*.

Next, she cut a tomato, some carrots, a cabbage, some potatoes, and some bacon into bite-size pieces.

The mood really is dreary in here.

After filling the frying pan with a generous splash of olive oil, she started off by sweating the garlic and parsley over a low heat. Right when they were getting fragrant, she took them out to avoid burning them, replenished the olive oil, and dumped in the rest of the ingredients.

I hope Teach comes back soon…

She was staring vacantly at the vegetables as they heated up when someone came up behind her.

"I have to ask—"

"YEEP?!"

It was Amelie.

Erna had been spacing out so badly she hadn't even noticed her approaching. She hurriedly turned off the heat. "Please don't sneak up on me," she demanded, to which Amelie replied with a wave.

"I assure you, I wasn't trying to startle you," Amelie said with an awkward smile. "It's simply that the soup we had for breakfast the other day was so wonderful, it piqued my interest. Do you have some secret recipe you use?"

"I…"

Amelie must have been referring to the vegetable soup Erna had made the other day.

Thinking about it made a sharp pain shoot through Erna's chest.

"I use a recipe that Big Brother Queneau taught me."

"South Wind…"

Amelie gasped. Her surprise seemed genuine.

That man was the very reason for the awkwardness between them.

Right when Erna was about to mumble something bitter, Amelie gave her an intense look. “Would you be willing to teach it to me?”

“Huh?”

Erna hadn’t expected that, and she cocked her head.

Amelie was dead serious. “It’s a piece of information that endures beyond him, is it not? You might think it brazen of me, but I too wish to pay respect to his legacy.”

“……”

Erna was torn.

It was true that she’d inherited that recipe from Queneau. However, sharing it with the woman who killed him would be too ironic to bear.

Still, espionage was a profession about entrusting knowledge to others.

If the information Queneau had left behind could be of use, then what was the harm? It wasn’t like it was classified or anything.

“…It doesn’t use any special seasonings.” Erna turned the burner back on and heated the frying pan back up. “But before you simmer the vegetables, you have to build up grill marks at high heat. The trick is being patient and holding the frying pan really still.”

“Fascinating… Don’t the vegetables burn, though?”

“It takes a lot for vegetables with high water content to burn. If anything, it makes them sweeter.”

Garlic did burn easily, so you had to remove it before you got started.

Then, without rushing, but without taking your eyes off it, either, you had to stir the vegetables just enough to turn them over every so often.

“Once you have your sear marks, you want to move the vegetables and oil to the pot and add cold water.”

All the ingredients ultimately ended up in a deep-bottomed pot. After transferring the vegetables, it was important to add water to the frying pan to pick up the charred bits on the bottom. Then you

added them, along with the set-aside garlic and parsley, to the pot as well.

Amelie cut in midway through jotting down the recipe. "*Cold* water? But wouldn't it be more efficient to simply boil it in the pot ahead of time?"

"It feels like heating the water up slowly helps the vegetables release more of their flavor. That part's kind of subjective, though."

Amelie's pen raced across her notepad, and she nodded intently.

The soup took a long time to prepare, so it was best to work on it alongside other dishes. Erna popped some bread in the toaster. They didn't need an entrée. With how many ingredients had gone into the soup, it would more than suffice.

The pot slowly began bubbling.

"You don't have to remove the scum. Vegetable scum just adds flavor."

All she'd used for meat was the bacon. The only thing left to do was let the soup simmer.

She carefully regulated the temperature to keep it just shy of boiling, then added some salt to taste. With how well she'd drawn out the vegetables' essence, that was all the seasoning she needed. The tomato diffused through the soup as it heated and brought all the flavors into harmony.

The deluxe vegetable soup was complete.

At that point, Erna suddenly remembered who it was she was talking to, and her face went red. What was she doing, trying to show off to a foreign spy? This was the person who'd murdered her comrades she was— "Yeep?!"

"Look out!!"

Erna's arm smacked the side of the pot, sending the large vessel careening to the side. The searing-hot soup would have spilled all over Erna if Amelie hadn't caught the pot at the last minute.

"That was awfully careless. I thought I might have a heart attack."

"Yeep…"

Erna stared blankly at Amelie.

"You aren't injured, are you?"

"……"

Amelie smiled sympathetically.

Erna looked up at her and nodded. "…I'm okay."

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Even when night fell, Klaus didn't return.

Erna ended up eating the dinner she'd prepared alone with Amelie.

"Queneau must have been quite the chef," Amelie said as she sipped her soup.

When Erna looked at her warily, afraid that Amelie was probing for something, Amelie gave her a dry laugh. "I'm not trying to get information out of you. I was simply curious. I want to be able to remember him better."

"…Do you remember all the people you've killed?"

"I make sure never to forget a one."

Her voice was pregnant with gloom.

She came across like she had nerves of steel, but apparently even she was capable of feeling guilt.

"This whole situation is wearing on us all." Amelie's expression was soft as she raised her spoon to her mouth. "Shall we try to at least relax a bit while we're eating? Carrying on like this is taking its toll."

"……"

Still holding her own spoon, Erna bit down hard on her lip.

Just as she herself had been feeling uncomfortable, Amelie had been nervous as well.

She felt a little bad for never having considered that might be the case.



“I can tell that when Bonfire—or rather, I suppose I had best call him Klaus here. When he isn’t around, you get anxious.” Amelie smiled with a hint of color in her cheeks. “But for me, the times he isn’t here are far more relaxing. There’s no guarantee he won’t change his mind and dispose of me at any moment, after all.”

She crooked her neck a little in embarrassment.

Erna brought her spoon to her lips.

The first thing that filled her mouth was the sweetness of the tomato and onion, followed shortly thereafter by the complex flavors of the other vegetables. Even after drinking it down, the rich smell of garlic still lingered. There was hardly anything in the soup besides vegetables, yet when she swallowed, its heat spread down her throat and esophagus and filled her insides with warmth all the same.

She had used a dead man’s soup recipe, and even when shared with the woman who killed him, its flavor was just as uniquely gentle as always.

“If you don’t get rest when you’re supposed to be resting, you’ll cause problems for Teach,” Erna said. “I’ll try to be a little less on guard.”

Amelie laid a hand atop the notepad that had been sitting beside her that whole time.

“Then this recipe will be a memento of when you opened up to me.”

“I never said I opened up.”

That was the one thing Erna was unable to admit, and she shook her head from side to side.

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From that day on, there was a visible change in Amelie’s demeanor. Namely, she began pestering Erna with abandon.

Once again, Klaus was out.

"Wh-what's even going on…?"

"Mmm, I knew it would look fantastic on you. It's an old one of mine that I modified a bit."

Erna was dressed in a Gothic Lolita dress. And not just any dress, but one with an elaborate aqua-and-pink design. The outfit Erna used for her spy work was frilly as well, but the number of ribbons on this thing was off the charts. They were massive, pastel, and dotting everything from her back to her skirt.

It was the exact kind of thing Amelie adored.

"Heh, I'd been hoping to get you to wear that for some time. I had so many other dresses for dolls back at my base. Ah, it's such a shame they all burned up."

Now that Erna thought about it, Belias was a deranged group whose aides wore things like top hats and nun habits. Perhaps they had their boss Amelie to thank for that.

"I—I never agreed to all this!!"

"Yes, well, moving right along."

"You're not even listening to me?!"

Amelie selected the next outfit for Erna to put on. During her last outing with Klaus, she'd returned carrying a large bag. Erna had assumed it was full of clothes, but she never expected that she would be the one wearing them.

"…This really isn't any time to be playing around," Erna sighed in exasperation.

They were in the middle of an incredibly tense situation for Lamplight and Belias both.

"I've had so many missions this past month that I haven't had any time to relax." Undeterred, Amelie set about adjusting the next outfit's size. "I've stretched myself too thin, and my performance has suffered for it. But worry not. I've trained myself to be fully refreshed by indulging in my hobbies for an hour or so."

"…Huh. That's kind of incredible."

"Perhaps so. I understand it's a skill that Klaus is sadly lacking."

Erna felt that perhaps she had a point. The Klaus she knew was the kind of person who completed his missions by working himself to the bone. At one point, he'd left himself so exhausted that he let his nemesis White Spider slip between his fingers.

Even now, he'd been working nonstop since Monika's betrayal came to light.

"I think I'll dub you 'Savant Doll.'"

"You're just randomly giving me a new code name?!"

Another day came.

Once again, severe looks adorned Klaus and Amelie's faces as they undertook their mission.

"This is the name of the person I need to get in contact with, Amelie. Set up the meeting for me. I need to focus on the investigation."

"I'm not one of your subordinates, you know."

"Less talking, more doing."

The duo had keen looks in their eyes, and they carried themselves with pride. The two of them were at the top of their game, and they were so intense that just watching them work was enough to send a trickle of sweat running down Erna's back. The moment they stepped outside, though, that intensity vanished like a switch had been flipped, and they melted into the city like unassuming civilians.

Th-they're incredible…

Two hours after Erna saw them off with bated breath, Amelie returned with a full smile and her hands laden with paper bags. "I brought us some scones to go with our tea!"

"I'm getting emotional whiplash here!"

When Amelie relaxed, she was the kind of person who relaxed hard.

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During that period, Klaus didn't have the capacity to pay Erna very much attention. Not even he had infinite resources at his disposal. Monika betraying them was the greatest crisis Lamplight had ever experienced, and his brain was already running at full throttle. Trying to track down a single girl in a city of millions while that same city descended into madness was like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

However, Klaus didn't give up. He pieced the facts together one after another.

Like it or not, the whole situation reminded him of the way Inferno was brought down from within. He desperately wanted to avoid a repeat of that, and he was willing to wear himself as ragged as he had to prevent it.

That was precisely what White Spider, the mastermind behind it all, was hoping for.

If Klaus had just had a little more breathing room—if Grete hadn't been kidnapped, for instance—if he'd been able to insert himself into more of Erna and Amelie's interactions, for instance—then things would have played out differently.

But he didn't, and they didn't, and the ball got rolling beyond where his gaze could reach.

Little by little, Erna and Amelie were getting closer.

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"Eek!"

Amelie's voice came from the bathroom.

"Yeep?" Erna said, rising from her position on standby outside. If something had happened, she needed to act fast.

The cry had been uncharacteristically unbecoming of Amelie. Had there been an accident? Was Amelie using the drainpipes to get a coded message to the outside? Or was she trying to get Erna to think she was in order to lure her into a trap?

Regardless, Erna needed to start by getting the lay of the land.

"What happened in—YEEEEEEP?!"

As soon as she entered the room, her foot landed on a bar of soap on the floor, and she was sent tumbling. She very nearly smashed her head into the wall, but Amelie reached out and caught her at the last second. Even so, the momentum sent Erna sprawling onto her backside.

"There was just a bug, that's all. You really ought to be more careful."

Amelie sighed. Despite being naked, with her toned body fully exposed, she didn't seem particularly bashful. Her biceps were visible under her skin, as were her abs.

Erna looked around, but there was nothing visibly out of place. Just a lone moth sitting apologetically on the wall.

"Why, look. You've gone and gotten your clothes all soggy."

"Yeep…"

The water from the wet floor had seeped into Erna's outfit. Everything that had touched the floor, including her cuffs and rump, was totally drenched. She could even feel the water's tepid warmth in her undergarments.

Realizing that she needed to change, she headed for the door when Amelie reached out and grabbed her arm again.

"Let's bathe together, shall we?"

Before she knew what was happening, she was soaking in the tub with Amelie.

WHAT THE YEEP IS GOING ONNNNN?! Erna screamed internally as she tried to process the situation.

While she was still freaking out at Amelie's proposition, Amelie had stripped her of her clothes, showered off her sweat, tied up her hair, and plopped her in the bath.

Now, the two of them were facing each other.

The tub wasn't even particularly large. Their bodies were all but stuck together. Erna trembled when she felt Amelie's legs against her thighs.

For as frozen in fear as Erna was, Amelie seemed pleased as punch. "Ah, that really does hit the spot."

Erna tried to stand up to leave, but Amelie grabbed her by the shoulder and dragged her back into the water. At that point, she stopped even trying to resist. She just sat there and put up with it like a rabbit caught in a trap.

"There's really no need to be so on edge," Amelie said warmly. "I was just thinking, you know. If I hadn't become a spy, then I might very well have had a daughter not unlike yourself."

"Huh?"

Amelie stared at the hard-water residue on the walls as she spoke.

When Erna looked closely, she noticed that Amelie had a scar on her collarbone.

"I had a boyfriend once. If I had taken his hand back then, then I might have married him while continuing to research psychology. It's easy enough to imagine. My father and sister would have been overjoyed for me, and I could have lived a peaceful life in a flat by the university."

"……"

"It would have been nice to go on an annual vacation by rail. I do love to photograph trains. And for the rest of my days off, I would have made dolls, then brought them to the end-of-year market to sell."

"……"

Erna bit her lip. This sudden outpouring didn't sit right with her.

"Why did you become a spy, then?" she asked.

"I got greedy," Amelie replied without missing a beat. "I wanted to serve my country directly. I wanted it more than research work, more than marriage. When I saw the calamity the Great War wrought, I knew it was my calling."

Erna bit down harder. Sure enough, it all came back to that.

The Great War, the biggest war in human history, had left all the nations of the world in pain. Even as one of its victors, the Fend Commonwealth had still suffered tremendous damages. If you included all of its vassal states, the Commonwealth's casualty count was well over a million.

"…Is it okay for you to be telling me that?"

"Oh, of course. It's all just made up." Amelie gave her a small smile. "None of it is actually true, so there's certainly no harm in sharing it. All of my personal information is highly classified. Please, don't believe a word I say."

Amelie shook her head. The water's surface rippled in tune with her movements.

Erna got the sense that it would be best not to press her on that. Besides, there was an emotion welling up in her far more intense than her desire to ascertain the truth.

She hugged her knees tight. "…Then I wish you just hadn't."

"I beg your pardon?"

Amelie blinked in confusion at the words Erna hadn't even really meant to say aloud.

By the time Erna realized the way her feelings were shifting, though, it was too late to stop them. "I wish!!" she shouted, her voice booming through the bathroom. "That you never even became a stupid spy!!"

Amelie gasped.

Erna used the bathwater to wash away the deluge of tears. No matter how hard she wiped, though, they refused to stop coming. "I wish you didn't kill them…"

She stopped rubbing her eyes and glared straight at Amelie's face.

"I wish you didn't attack Big Brother Queneau. I wish you never became a spy in the first place and just lived an ordinary life!"

Once she said it aloud, it all finally clicked into place for her. She should have turned that anger outward ages ago.

Erna blasted all her emotion at the woman across from her. Driven by hatred for the way her compatriots had been killed, she took

Amelie to task for her crimes.

After all, it wasn't like she would have been able to hide how she felt.

"Screw you!!"

She slapped Amelie hard across the cheek.

Amelie made no attempt to dodge. She didn't move an inch, even as the blow connected.

Erna's palm had been wet with bathwater, and the sound of the slap was harder than the actual slap itself.

"I have no excuses," Amelie said sadly. "I shouldn't have killed them. Words can't express how sorry I am for that."

"……"

"I lost sight of myself when I became a spy more than I realized. I told myself that I was just following orders, and that our righteousness was absolute, when all I was doing was becoming a puppet myself."

She stared back at Erna, not reaching up to touch her stinging cheek.

A self-deprecating smile spread across her face.

"How ironic that the people who beat me were a group like Lamplight who wore their passion on their sleeves. It was the greatest possible proof of what a mistake I'd been making."

"……"

"In my eyes, the way you shed tears for your brethren was nothing shy of radiant."

Erna slowly lowered her body back into the water.

Instead of getting defensive or shouting back at her, Amelie had simply apologized and opened up to her. Being faced with such a tranquil response calmed Erna down in turn.

She sighed. "I'm sorry for hitting you," she said, rubbing her hands together underwater.

The only thing her outburst had given her was a heartrending sense of despondency. Amelie didn't need Erna spelling things out

for her to be bitterly aware of what she had done. Still, it was kind of nice being able to confirm that.

Amelie wasn't a bad person. Her heart was telling her that was true.

Upon realizing that, Erna thought back to what Klaus had told her. She couldn't forgive Amelie. However, she couldn't keep lambasting her for it, either.

The two of them were quiet for a short while.

"Erna, would you mind if I made one selfish request?"

It was Amelie who broke the silence.

"I want to make amends to Queneau."

Amelie got out of the bath and offered a succinct explanation as she got dressed.

The long and short of it was, there had been something strange about "South Wind" Queneau's corpse.

"We never told this to any of you," Amelie revealed quietly, "but his index finger was covered in blood. Which was peculiar, because we never wounded it."

"He was writing in blood…"

"Precisely. I suspect he might very well have left behind a code of some sort. Perhaps you all would be able to find it."

After Belias left, Queneau could have bitten his finger and scrawled something in blood somewhere. It was perfectly plausible. Vindo had left a message behind in his dying moments, and Queneau could easily have done the same thing.

"I neglected to mention it because I didn't feel that doing so would serve my nation's interests," Amelie pursed her lips, then went on. "But I think I have a duty to tell you. Not as a spy, but as a human being. It's the one thing I can do to atone."

If that was true, then they needed to check the scene soon. It wasn't clear where the message was, but there were all sorts of ways for blood writing to get wiped away.

Erna quickly put on her clothes and fetched her weapon from the safe.

She wanted to leave right that minute, but there was something she needed to check first.

"Let me just give Teach a call."

"Oh, I don't think that's such a good idea," Amelie said calmly. "As I'm sure you've noticed, he's downright haggard. He's desperate to find Monika. It hardly seems appropriate to go bragging to him when we've yet to find out if the message even exists or not."

"Ah…"

"Unlike me, that poor man hasn't gotten a moment's rest."

Erna nodded as Amelie's words sank in.

Despite the state of emergency they were in, Amelie had stolen moments of respite whenever she could find room for them. Even first-rate spies needed their downtime. It was hard to imagine how anxious Klaus was when he'd been scurrying around that whole time.

"Why don't we just pop out? We can be back before he even returns. If we find any useful intelligence, we'll pass it along to him, and if we don't, he never has to know. As I see it, it's the cleanest option we have." Amelie laid a hand on Erna's shoulder. "It has to grate on you, being cooped up inside and not being able to help."

It was like Amelie had read her mind.

Lily, Sybilla, and Thea were all gathering intelligence across the city, whereas Erna spent most of her time stuck in the apartment watching Amelie. She had work she was doing, sure, but most of it amounted to little more than passing along messages and other odd jobs, leaving her with loads of pent-up energy and nothing to do with it.

Erna wanted desperately to rush out at once.

Knowing Queneau, he could have left them an essential piece of information. The situation had left Klaus at an impasse, and this might be able to turn it all around.

She squeezed her fists tight. "It might even give us a hint for saving Big Sis Monika."

"That's the spirit, young lady."

Amelie thumped her on the back, and Erna headed straight for the doorway.

It was an odd feeling, working side-by-side with a CIM agent she'd been fighting against not too long ago. However, she didn't mind it. In a way, Queneau was the one who'd brought them together.

Erna's skirt swayed as she walked with a pep in her step.

Then she heard the sound of paper fluttering.

It was the letter from Klaus she'd stowed in her pocket.

Oh, now would be a good time to open this message from Teach.

Perhaps Klaus had actually foreseen this coming. He'd told her to open it if she ever had to make an important decision. What could be more important than this?

Moments before she removed the lock fastened on the front door, she unfurled the paper.

Amelie is going to bond with you in order to try to escape.

All at once, her blood ran cold.

Erna froze as if a switch had been flipped inside her, and Amelie lightly pressed her shoulder. "Shall we be off, Erna?" she said warmly.

Amelie's fingers caressed Erna's back.

She was silently urging her to unlock the door.

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Erna shook Amelie's arm off her back and whirled around.

"…You're lying."

It was like someone had just poured cold water over her to wake her up.

The pounding of her pulse was obnoxiously loud in her ears. All the gentle warmth that had been swaddling her heart froze over in a flash, leaving her feeling terribly, terribly cold.

Amelie's smile didn't waver. "Whatever do you mean? Lying about what?"

"That whole thing about Big Brother Queneau leaving a message was a bald-faced lie."

"What are you—?"

Amelie stopped mid-sentence.

Her gaze had fallen to the paper in Erna's hand.

"Ah." She clicked her tongue ever so slightly. "He's a clever one. He saw my move before I made it."

It felt like someone was clamping down on her throat.

So, it was true. Amelie had been trying to deceive her.

The only reason Amelie had been friendly to her was to get Erna to do her bidding. She'd shown herself relaxing and differentiating herself from Klaus solely to emphasize how tired Klaus was to keep Erna from calling him.

She'd been gambling everything on that one moment.

Amelie turned around in a huff. Her frilly skirt bobbed along behind her. "It was a cute trick, using a letter to give you a warning with a built-in time delay. If he'd told you in advance, I would have picked up on it and been able to work around it, but he really did get me good."

She sneered in resentment of Klaus's foresight.

It was a stark departure from the affectionate smiles she'd shown Erna.

"You were just pretending?" Erna spluttered. "When you learned Big Brother Queneau's recipe, and when you apologized for killing him, it was all just an act to escape the apartment?"

She didn't even know what answer she was hoping for.

However, if it did turn out to be nothing but lies, then Erna would probably…

"Dear me, no. I meant it all. I truly do mourn for him."

When Amelie looked at her, Erna could tell. This wasn't an act.

However, Amelie's next words came with renewed force.

"But as a spy, protecting my nation comes above everything."

There was an unshakable conviction burning in her eyes.

It hurt, seeing how resolute she was.

No matter how good a person—how much of a patriot—Amelie was, she could never be anything other than Erna's enemy.

Spies could work together, but they could never be friends.

Erna had always known that, yet she wanted to burst into tears all the same.

"Please, Erna. I'm asking you to open that door. I have a duty that I need to carry out."

"…You really shouldn't. There's a traitor in the CIM's leadership."

"It would certainly seem that way, yes."

"You're just going to become a puppet dancing on their strings again!"

"That can be a problem I solve after I get out of here."

The two of them were never going to see eye to eye.

Erna was still at a loss for words when Amelie went and picked up the radio lying in the living room. It was secretly a disguised transceiver. On it were recordings of reports from Lily and Sybilla. Amelie pushed a button, and their confident voices sounded out from its speaker.

Amelie gave a sad smile. “I want to find a new way of doing things.”

“……?”

“I want to become a different kind of spy, one that doesn’t blindly do what my superiors tell me to. I’m through with being a puppet. But I can’t do that while I’m stuck under Bonfire’s thumb.” The look on her face was bold and undaunted. “I want to carve out my own path—just like Lamplight does.”

“……”

“Please, Erna, you have to release me.”

Was this an act? Or was it genuine?

Erna didn’t know. She didn’t have the skills to figure out when a first-rate spy was lying to her. All she knew was that her instincts—something deep inside her—were screaming at her to let Amelie go. She believed that Amelie could do it. She could lead both their nations to a brighter future.

But then again, if she was wrong…

After agonizing over it all she could, Erna made her decision.

“I can’t.”

She drew the gun she’d gotten out of the safe and pointed it at Amelie.

“Get back, you phony!” she shouted with all the force she could muster. “You’re not setting one foot outside this apartment. You lost!”

It felt like she was undoing everything they’d shared.

Amelie bit her lip in frustration, but that was the extent of the emotion she showed before turning back.

From that day on, Erna and Amelie never spoke to each other one-on-one again.

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That night, Erna reported what had happened to Klaus.

Once she was done telling him everything, she headed for the bedroom in an exhausted daze. She collapsed head-first onto the bed and moved no more. She was out like a light. All the energy had drained from her body.

Klaus was worried she was going to suffocate, so he rolled her over and laid a blanket over her.

Out at the dining table, Amelie was snacking on nuts and washing them down with whiskey on the rocks. During all their time together, it was the first time Klaus had seen her drink.

"I hear you've been making a proper ass of yourself."

"Why is it, I have to wonder, that you sound so oddly excited whenever you find an opportunity to mock me?"

Amelie gave him an icy glare, but Klaus simply ignored her and went and got some ice and a glass from the cupboard. It seemed like an appropriate time for him to take a load off, too.

When he sat down across from Amelie, she poured him some whiskey. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Of course not. You're still valuable."

They clinked their glasses against each other.

"Now, if you'd harmed Erna, then I would have given you a very different answer."

"That wasn't a risk I was willing to take."

Klaus nodded. That was no hollow threat he was making. If any injury had befallen Erna, he would have shot Amelie without a moment's hesitation.

Amelie drank her whiskey. "What an embarrassing display that was." She heaved an animated sigh. "To think that I would fail to

properly control a single young lady. Some Puppeteer I am."

She seemed legitimately broken up about it. Much of the bottle of whiskey was already gone. Amelie had been hitting it hard in the time it had taken him to return.

Klaus would have been perfectly happy leaving her to wallow, but he realized that letting her morale degrade could cause problems for the mission going forward.

He decided to tell her the truth.

"Not at all. You had Erna completely on your side."

Amelie looked at him in confusion.

"You passed her tests."

"Her what?"

"She told me all about it. Do you remember those times you saved her when the pot nearly dumped soup on her and when she tripped in the bathroom?"

"I do, I suppose. She's really quite clumsy, that girl—"

"Both of those were on purpose."

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's what she does. It's like when a child acts out for attention. She engineers accidents and subconsciously attracts misfortune to gauge the reaction of those around her."

Much of what Erna did was reflexive, so it was hard to be certain of anything, but when she wanted to learn about Amelie—whether she was a good person or a bad person—she'd turned her destructive talents inward.

"Erna cared a lot about you. Your attempts to win her over were completely successful."

"B-but why, then…," Amelie was unconvinced. She sounded agitated. "Why didn't she let me out? Why did she threaten me with a gun and force me to stay in—"

"Because I put a curse on her."

"What do you mean?"

"I told her what it would take for me to kill a spy."

Either they had to be endangering his allies or countrymen, or Klaus had to be protecting state secrets.

Klaus had told that to Erna just a few days ago, so it would still have been fresh in her mind. She knew what would happen if she let Amelie go and Klaus decided that Amelie was a threat to the team.

"Erna was trying to save your life."

That was why she'd kept Amelie locked up.

There was no way Amelie could have escaped if Klaus was making a serious attempt on her life, so Erna had shouted in desperation and brandished her gun to force Amelie to stay without giving her a chance to talk her way out of it.

"…*That's* what happened?"

Amelie's voice was trembling.

Her glass was empty, and Klaus topped it off with whiskey for her. "You won, Amelie. You had Erna completely fooled."

Looking back now, her mistake was that she'd gotten Erna to care too much about her. Her escape attempt had very nearly succeeded.

"Though if you think about it, the fact that I saw it all coming means that I trounced you all over again."

"…Has anyone ever told you what a horrid lout you are?"

In order to hide her face, Amelie downed her glass in one go.

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If you had to describe the relationship between Lamplight and "Puppeteer" Amelie in a word, that word would be *complicated*.

Of all the girls, though, Erna was indisputably the one who got closest with her, and she saw many sides to Amelie that the others never knew.

In a sense, it was a very Erna way for things to play out.

At the end of the day, hers was the unluckiest, most painful role of them all.

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After their mission in Fend came to a close, the Lamplight girls ended up getting hospitalized for a while. They made their recoveries in the rooms they'd been assigned in a CIM-run hospital.

Prince Darryn's funeral procession was visible from their windows.

Countless state guests mourned as they followed along after the coffin. The sheer number of guards surrounding the procession was a testament to the greatness of the man being interred. Newspapers and TV stations across the world would report on the funeral's particulars.

And Erna knew.

She knew about the spy who had died in obscurity.

Her wound ached. From what she'd been told, it was Amelie who'd protected her and secreted her to the hospital after Erna got shot by the CIM during the Dock Road battle.

Right as the funeral procession disappeared from view, a woman came into her room.

"Do you have a moment free?"

The woman was dressed in a nun's habit. The outfit stuck out like a sore thumb in the hospital, but she wore it with pride.

That was Lotus Doll, one of the Belias aides.

"I was hoping to give this to you…"

It was unclear why, but she was carrying a dish of food. And it wasn't hospital food, either.

"Yeep?"

"Considering how she sided with Serpent, I doubt the CIM will grieve for Amelie. And I imagine you all must resent her as well."

She carefully set the tureen down on the table in front of Erna.

"But please, I want to at least share this with as many people as I can…"

Confused, Erna took a spoon and scooped up a mouthful of food.

"Where did you get this recipe?"

"It was in Amelie's pocket when she passed away, carefully folded up."

Nobody could possibly know if that, too, had been part of an act. The time Erna and Amelie shared had been so steeped in lies, there was no telling what of it had been true.

However, the taste of the warm soup in her mouth was unmistakably real.

Erna's soul would never forget its saltiness.

Chapter 4
A Life Outside of Espionage's Case

"Ooh, I can smell smoked meat."

"That sounds like harp music. They must be putting on a concert."

The village sat on the edge of a lake. It was a fishing village with a population of only a few hundred. The lake was large and round, and the village had been built on its shore. Between the fishing business made possible by the lake's bounty, and the tourists who came to enjoy its tranquil natural splendor, the entire village economy was built around that lake. When they held their biannual summer and winter festivals, thousands upon thousands of visitors descended from the cities and filled the village with bustling rows of tents.

The event the village held in the summer was called the Lantern Festival. For three days each year, they lit the whole place up with lanterns as soon as the sun went down. As the sky shifted from blue to violet, the local fishermen brought in their boats to grill fish in front of their houses, play music, and pray for a good summer while lighting lanterns outside their homes.

Numbering among the village's visitors were the girls of Lamplight and Avian.

"It looks like the lanterns come in different shapes from house to house," Sara remarked.

"Indeed," Lan said. "I have heard tell that they make them themselves, then release them into the sky on the festival's final eve.

We had best not miss it tomorrow."

The girls walked through the village full of warm light while the sun continued its descent. They cheered in delight upon spotting a stall selling chiffon cake, listened spellbound to a harp and flute performance, and gawked at the locals' strange folk costumes. They even found a lantern stand and thought about buying some as souvenirs. Events like this didn't come around every day, and they were determined to make the most of it.

It was all so peaceful, one would hardly believe they'd just completed a deadly mission.

Nah…

However, "Pandemonium" Sybilla shook her head.

She watched her gleeful teammates from the back of the entourage.

There's still some shit that ain't settled.

The Lamplight girls, alongside Avian member "Cloud Drift" Lan, were enjoying the festival to its fullest.

However, one person who should have been there was conspicuously absent from Sybilla's view.

"Glint" Monika was nowhere to be seen.

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The mission Lamplight completed in the Fend Commonwealth had been brutal.

None of them had seen "Glint" Monika's betrayal coming, but Klaus and Erna had worked hard to shed some light on the situation.

It turned out that Monika had left Lamplight in order to trick Serpent. Then, she took the blame for the assassination of the Commonwealth's crown prince in order to put an end to the unrest. Although she went and fought the CIM, fully prepared to die, she ended up surviving by the skin of her teeth.

Thanks to some hard work from “Meadow” Sara, Lamplight settled the score with Serpent and completed their mission. They even managed to rescue Monika.

However, some of their problems remained unsolved.

Monika was still reviled the world over as a fiendish assassin. The official report was that she was already dead, but it was going to be some time before it was safe for her to be out in public.

The Lamplight girls had taken the utmost care on their way back home and made their way there via a nation called the Duchy of Newayk. Newayk was a country far to Din’s north that had escaped the Great War’s ravages, and when Klaus told the girls that it just so happened to be holding a famous festival, they happily agreed to stop there.

During the journey, Monika had traveled separately from the rest of the team. Their boss, Klaus, had protected her and helped her stay absolutely hidden.

To that day, the girls had yet to spend any meaningful time with her.

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A barrel rolled in front of Sybilla as she was thinking about their absent teammate.

Immediately after tumbling down from the top of a hill, it crashed into a brick storehouse wall. The nearby tourists shrieked, then grumbled, “Well, that was dangerous,” and shot worried looks up at the top of the hill before breathing sighs of relief and walking off.

There was a series of inns at the top of the hill.

“Did someone just drop it or something?” Sybilla wondered, but she decided to just ignore the whole thing and write it off as

unimportant. Her group had gone on without her in pursuit of the fish skewers whose aroma they could smell wafting through the air.

When she thought she heard a voice from inside the barrel, though, she stopped in her tracks. "Huh?"

She looked over at the smashed barrel.

An ash-pink head of hair was peeking out from beneath the pile of oaken planks.

"Unnnnngh…"

"Annette?!" Sybilla yelped.

"Forgetter" Annette had been inside the wayward barrel. She was looking up in pain from the impact of having slammed into the storehouse.

She'd been with them not long ago. How could this have happened?

Upon hearing Sybilla's cry, some of the nearby girls —"Dreamspeaker" Thea and "Meadow" Sara—came rushing over.

Thea cleared away the splintered barrel and helped brush the dirt from Annette's clothes. "You really have to stop being so reckless. Your bones haven't finished healing yet, you know."

As part of Monika's betrayal during the previous mission, she'd attacked Annette and left her gravely wounded. One of her broken ribs had punctured her lung, and she'd been bedridden for some time. Even after spending a month recuperating in Fend, she was still far from being fully recovered.

Clutched in Annette's hand was a stun gun.

Sybilla immediately realized what had happened. "Did you go up there to attack Monika?"

The inn where Monika was staying sat at the top of that very hill.

"Yep. I went up there to murderize her," Annette pouted, "but when I got there, she beat me up and left me in this sorry state! I'm very unhappy, yo!"

She puffed up her cheeks and swung her arm around menacingly. Ever since their mission in Fend, she'd stopped bothering to mask her bloodthirst.

Thea sighed in exasperation. “I don’t suppose you could just find it in yourself to forgive her?”

“No can do! She called me a *runt*, yo.”

“I mean, sure, but…”

“Plus, she damaged my toy and broke my ribs!”

Annette puffed her cheeks up again for emphasis.

Thea looked to Sybilla for backup, but Sybilla just shook her head. The fact that Annette had a legitimate reason for her anger made it that much harder to talk her down. They obviously couldn’t let her *kill* Monika, but it was true that Monika had hurt her deeply.

Incidentally, the “toy” Annette was referring to was Erna.

Sybilla turned to Sara. “Can’t you do anything to stop her?” she whispered in her ear.

“Well, actually, about that.” Sara looked down apologetically. “Miss Monika actually told me that we shouldn’t bother.”

Sara had actually seen Monika a couple times already.

The look in her eyes was one of profound anguish.

“She said that Annette has every right to be mad at her.”

Sybilla let out a long sigh.

They’d completed the mission itself, but there was still a mountain of unfinished business they needed to deal with.

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The day they left the Fend Commonwealth, Klaus explained to the girls how they were going to be handling the Monika situation.

Lamplight had spent nearly a month in Fend after their mission’s completion, but they’d kept Monika’s existence a closely guarded secret the whole while. The only other person who knew she was alive was “Cursemaster” Nathan from the CIM’s leadership. He was the one who’d arranged for her to get treated in a sanitorium in the woods far from the city.

"*Monika and I will be traveling separately from the group*," Klaus opened his speech. *"We'll be taking the same route back as you all, but we'll be staying in different ship cabins and hotel rooms. Monika is an international terrorist now. The safest thing to do is have me act as her chaperone."*

He went on to describe the boring logistics.

On paper, "Glint" Monika would be dead. She was definitely coming back to Lamplight, but she'd be doing so under a different code name. It would be several years before it was safe for her to walk around in public.

It reminded them of just how many sacrifices she'd made.

"Now, I'm sure you all have a million things you want to say to her —"

Klaus's tone went stern.

"—but you need to keep your contact with Monika to a minimum."

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Sybilla thought back to the order he'd given them as she walked through the festive night.

Annette had recovered in no time and vanished back into the village throng. She looked steady on her feet, so despite their worries, the others had gone back to sight-seeing.

Sybilla split off from the group and headed off alone down a small road lined with lanterns. She found someone selling bottles of ice-cold lemonade, so she bought two on a whim.

The way the boss said it… He was tellin' us that we should *go chat with her in moderation, right?*

He hadn't come out and said it, but the girls could read between the lines.

They'd even been told what inn Monika was staying at. By the sound of it, Annette and Sara had already been there. It was fully possible to go see her.

However, Sybilla had yet to pay Monika a visit. She'd been dragging her feet.

There was one big reason for that…

It blows, havin' the usual life of the party fully outta commission.

Right as she was scratching the back of her head, she spotted the person she was looking for.

"Flower Garden" Lily was sitting on a wharf and vacantly staring out across the lake.

This was the exact kind of event she usually loved. She would always be the first one in, shouting about how she was so hungry she could eat a horse and walking around with more food than she could even carry.

Today, though, she was empty-handed and being unusually reserved.

Aside from Lily, there was nobody else nearby.

Sybilla walked up behind her and pressed a bottle of lemonade against her cheek.

"Hyeeeek!" Lily shrieked.

Amused by Lily's reaction, Sybilla plopped herself down next to her. "That one's for you. I picked 'em up on my way over."

"Th-thanks, I guess…"

After handing over the lemonade, Sybilla did a big stretch. She tried to follow Lily's example and gaze out over the lake, but the sun had set, and the lake looked like little more than an inky morass. She popped off the lemonade's cap with her knife and chugged its contents.

"……"

Lily said nothing and squeezed her bottle tight.

Sybilla realized that it was on her to break the ice. "Before I ask this, I want you to know that I'm not messin' with you, I'm just legit concerned."

"Okay…"

"What're you gonna do about Monika's confession?"

Lily's entire body quivered. "You're seriously just going to come out with that?! Just right to my face?!"

"It's obviously on your mind."

"Well, yeah, of course it is!"

Lily's face went bright red, and she buried it in her hands in embarrassment. Her lemonade bottle dangled precariously between her fingers.

Doesn't look like this is gettin' resolved anytime soon, either…

Sybilla stared at her best friend's head and took another swig of lemonade.

It was what Monika had said that was forcing Lily to rack her brains like that.

"I'm in love with you."

Faced with all-but-certain death during their mission, Monika had revealed her feelings with uncharacteristic softness and sincerity in her voice. All the girls had been shocked at the secret she'd been so fervently hiding, and they were struck speechless when they realized that it was the reason she'd been driven into a corner the way she had.

Happily, though, Monika ended up surviving.

However, that left her confession dangling unresolved.

After the mission was over, it was the subject of much debate among the girls. "Maybe she meant, like, as a friend?" "Or maybe she just wanted to express how much she appreciates you?" were two of the opinions held, but in the end, they all generally agreed that, "No, she definitely meant *love* love."

That had broken Lily.

She started talking way less, and every so often her face would go red like she'd just remembered, after which she would totter around

and start headbutting the wall. Then she would leap into bed and kick her legs back and forth as she buried her face in her pillow.

It was clear just how torn she was about the situation.

"I figured I needed to talk to you about it." Sybilla snatched the lemonade bottle back from Lily and popped its cap for her. "Just so you know, Thea's over the moon about the whole thing. She's goin' around sayin' she's gonna be Monika's number one supporter."

"…Why am I not surprised?"

"I was gonna shut her up, but I figured it wouldn't be right to make a move without loopin' you in first."

Lily took the lemonade back and drank the whole thing down in a single go. She'd been downright parched. There was sweat cascading down her forehead.

After a long silence, she gave her head a limp shake.

"……I'm still thinking things over."

"Gotcha. Then I won't lift a finger."

Lily still needed time to sort things out.

Sybilla hadn't ever spent much time discussing romance with Lily. She could tell that Lily preferred to avoid talking about anything related to love or sex.

She's got giant tits and the kind of face dudes go for, so I bet she's had plenty of trouble with guys.

Sybilla didn't have much to base that off of, but it felt like a safe guess.

On one hand, Lily had spent much of her youth sequestered away in a spy academy in the mountains. However, the nature of their profession was such that they must have done a fair bit of training in the town below. Lily was objectively attractive, and she must have gotten hit on a lot when she walked down the street.

As Sybilla shot another look at Lily's chest, Lily slumped her shoulders. "I—I know that right now, more than ever, the team needs its leader to have her act together."

"Sorry, what?"

"B-but for once, it feels like I can't get my head to stop spinning… I've let you all down as your leader."

"Wait, *that's* what you're worried about?"

"Of course it is! I'm the team leader!"

"On paper, maybe."

"And no one can take that away from me!"

After her outburst, Lily flopped onto her back.

"…What I should really be doing is getting everyone in the right mood to welcome Monika back."

Still lying prone, she turned and stared over at the village. The festival was in full swing, and they could hear cheerful laughter and chipper flute music playing without end. It even felt like there were more lanterns hanging from the eaves of the houses than there had been before.

Her gaze was fixed on the roof of the inn where Monika was staying.

Sybilla clapped her on the forehead.

"Owie!"

"I read you loud and clear. Besides, looks like there ain't anyone else for the job."

Sybilla took a big stretch and rose to her feet.

"You just leave it to me. Your substitute leader is on the case."

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The inn that Monika was at was supposed to be the best one in the village. Its walls were all reinforced with white plaster, and its roof was made of azure tiles. It may not have been a match for the finest the big cities had to offer, but it still felt plenty luxurious—especially to Sybilla, who'd been forced to borrow a tent and sleep outside with the others.

Monika's room was on the corner of the second floor. Its window was close enough to the building next door to jump across. Klaus

had chosen the room knowing that there was a slim but non-zero chance they would need to make a quick getaway.

Sybilla knocked on the door and gave the prearranged password.

It immediately swung open.

Inside, Monika was in her loungewear. Displeased that Sybilla was visiting, she gave her a listless look and headed over to the chair in the back of the room.

"You been cooped up in here this whole time?" Sybilla teased her. "This place is so far out in the boonies, they don't even got radios. There's no way your wanted posters have made it here. Didn't the boss already give you the go-ahead to go out at night?"

"My wounds are in bad shape."

"Bullshit. You're well enough to beat Annette back, ain'tcha?" She offered Monika a gift in a paper bag. "Here's some fish from the lake. I got it grilled on a skewer."

"…I'll pass."

"More for me, then."

"Get out."

"What, and let it get cold?"

Sybilla ignored Monika's glare and took a seat on the windowsill. The night wind gently brushed her collarbone.

When she stuffed her cheeks full of the fish, the smell of its plentiful herbs and charred skin tickled her nose. Its fatty juices practically spilled from her lips. She licked them up and took a gander at Monika.

It had been about a month since the last time Sybilla had seen her. Monika was reading a heavy technical book in silence as if Sybilla wasn't even there.

Has somethin' about her changed? Like, her aura or somethin'?

A chill ran down Sybilla's spine as she gulped down the fish, bones and all.

The girl wordlessly turning pages across from Sybilla felt like a completely different person than the one she knew.

…Is it just me, or does she feel more like the boss now?

It was hard to describe, but if she had to put it into words, it was that Monika seemed more *detached* now. Monika's skills had always been a cut above the rest of the girls', but they'd progressed even more dramatically during their previous mission. It felt like the raw intensity she was giving off had gotten stronger than before.

Sybilla couldn't help but stare, and Monika snapped her book shut in annoyance. "It just makes me feel worse, having you get all worried about me."

Monika had interpreted Sybilla's gaze as concern.

She wasn't exactly wrong, and Sybilla waved her skewer at her. "Then don't gimme a reason to be."

Monika rose to her feet and grabbed the paper bag away from Sybilla. Down at the bottom, there was still one skewer left. "Fine, I guess I'll have some."

"I knew you'd be starvin'."

Monika offered her no reaction and bit into the fish's back.

"There's tons of good stuff down there," Sybilla told her. "They've got fish, sure, but they're famous for their honey, too. They put it in cookies and shit."

"Go get me some, then."

"I ain't your delivery girl. Go out there and buy 'em yourself."

"……"

Monika chucked the finished skewer back in the bag, then took a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her mouth.

"I can't bring myself to do it," she said flatly.

"Huh?"

"I attacked Erna, bashed up Annette, conned Thea, held Grete prisoner, and fought Klaus to the death."

"Yeah, but you were doin' it all for Lamplight and Lily. We get that."

"That doesn't make it okay. There are some things that just can't be forgiven."

That was why she hadn't gone and rejoined the others yet.

If Sybilla pressed the issue, all she was going to get back was more self-deprecation. The look on Monika's face made that abundantly clear.

"Thanks. For the fish." Monika took the paper bag and tossed it into the corner of the room. It landed effortlessly in the trash can a good dozen feet away. "But you're going to have to go."

Sybilla sighed and stood up. "Fine, I guess I'll do that. But I'll come back."

"You really shouldn't."

"Actually, could I borrow your shower first?"

"Leave."

Monika was giving her the cold shoulder. "All right, I'm goin'," Sybilla replied. She knew how to read a room. With how Monika was feeling right now, being around other people for any amount of time had to feel suffocating.

Damn, she's all up in her head. And she was already a handful to begin with.

Annette aside, none of the Lamplight girls held what Monika had done against her—not even Grete, who'd been left drained in body and soul after being held captive for over two weeks. However, Monika had yet to forgive herself. She'd always been hard on the people around her, and it looked like her exacting standards applied to herself, too.

"See you later," Sybilla said as she made to leave the room.

When she opened the door, though, she ran into something.

"Huh?"

There was a girl crouching behind it—Annette. She had a giant machine, and she was using a screwdriver to hook it up to the outlet in front of Monika's room.

"Shhh, Sis." Annette held her index finger up to her lips. "I'm unveiling my new silent bomb, yo. Now I'll be able to blow up the entire room that Monika is—"

She got interrupted mid-sentence.

When Sybilla had gone to close the door, a rubber ball had come whizzing through the gap. It had a metal core, and it made a dull thudding noise with every wall and floor it ricocheted off of before slamming into Annette's forehead with pinpoint precision.

"ANNETTE?!" Sybilla yelped.

Annette groaned and keeled over backward.

Sybilla shot a glance back into the room where she saw Monika looking uninterestedly at a hand mirror. That was how she'd spotted Annette and aimed her projectile.

"It's no use even trying," Monika said coldly. "I can see you no matter which way you come from."

There were mirrors hung up all around the room.

Annette clutched her forehead with tears welling in her eyes. "Owwwwwwwww!"

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Annette was in no condition to walk, and Sybilla was the only one there who could carry her off. She hoisted the groaning girl onto her back and headed down the hill road. Annette had contraptions stashed all over her body, so she was a good deal heavier than she looked. Sybilla needed to watch her step to avoid falling over.

Unaware of the lengths Sybilla was going to for her, Annette thrashed around in frustration. "That marks ten straight losses, yo!"

She flailed her arms to demonstrate how indignant she was. It wasn't until Sybilla warned her, "If you don't calm down, I'm gonna drop you," that Annette went still.

Sybilla repositioned Annette on her back and continued walking down the busy path. The people they passed by gave Annette looks of sympathy. They probably assumed she was a child who'd tuckered herself out enjoying the festival too much.

"Annette, I'm beggin' you here. You can't go makin' problems for us."

It would be bad news for everyone if she set off an explosion somewhere so crowded.

Annette clung to Sybilla's back. "But I'm so frustrated, I can't take it."

"Yeah, you were the biggest victim here. Hard to blame you for that."

"And I even gave Lily a weapon so she could kill her for me. But she went and tapped out after just beating up that White Spider asshole! I'm very cross with her, yo."

Annette's displeasure had levels to it.

Annette had designed a weapon specifically for Lily—Last Code: Paradise Lost. Paradise Lost had played a big role in helping them complete their mission, but it sounded like it had originally been built for the purpose of beating Monika.

"Yeah, I dunno if that's a basket worth puttin' your eggs in," Sybilla replied.

"Hey, Sis." Annette lowered her voice. "Don't you ever get depressed?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, you're weaker than Monika, right?"

"Rgh, way to just come out and say it…"

Sybilla groaned. Annette had hit her right where it hurt.

She and Monika both acted as Lamplight's combatants, but Monika's skills far outstripped hers. The way Monika had widened that gap during their time in Fend didn't feel great, either. Back in the room, Monika had been giving off the same kind of detached energy as Klaus did.

There were certainly times when Sybilla lost heart over that, but…

"Oh hey, lanterns."

"Oh?"

As Sybilla was struggling to come up with a reply, she spotted a street stall that was far brighter than the others.

The entire stand was covered in lanterns. They were made of thin paper stretched around a wooden frame with candles flickering

within. What separated them from normal lanterns was the way they were shaped like small balloons.

These were sky lanterns—lanterns designed to fly through the air.

On the final day of the festival, it was tradition for the villagers and tourists to all go to the lake and release their lanterns at once. The locals attached paper bags to the lanterns hanging from their eaves to let them fly, and the out-of-towners bought theirs from street vendors.

"They're for wardin' off evil."

Annette gave her a quizzical look. "Huh?"

"That's what the festival's about. They take all their illness, disasters, hardships, and pain, burn 'em up, and drive 'em out," Sybilla said, repeating the explanation she'd gotten from Grete.

The village's Lantern Festival first started over two hundred years ago. Back then, the villagers had a custom of lighting fires throughout the night to smoke their fish to prevent them from rotting in the summer heat. The practice had died out as advances in food preservation technology introduced better ways to prevent food poisoning, and eventually, all that remained was a festival dedicated to lighting fires.

"It'd sure be nice if we could just dump all our worries into the sky."

Sybilla shot an idle look up at the night sky.

Then, she realized just how thoughtless what she was saying was, and her face went red. "But hey, what the hell do I know," she muttered as she hastily walked past the lantern stand. "Anyways, Annette, you hungry? You've been so busy chasin' Monika around all day, I bet you haven't eaten a thing."

"……"

Sybilla didn't get a response back.

When she turned and looked back in confusion, she got an up-close view of Annette's mouth hanging open in surprise.

"Y'know, Sis…"

"Hm?"

"…you really are sisterly, huh?"

"……"

The comment had come so far out of left field that Sybilla let out a little gasp. She flinched, stopping in her tracks and very nearly dropping Annette.

"Where'd that come from, all of a sudden? You nearly gave me a damn heart attack."

"The thought just crossed my mind, yo."

The look on Annette's face was cheerful.

It didn't sound like Annette was trying to butter her up. That would have been out of character for her, anyhow.

"I mean, I guess I don't mind." Sybilla was able to say that honestly. It didn't get her fired up, nor did it stress her out. "That right there, that might be my answer to your question."

"Hmm?"

"I do get depressed sometimes, and I get jealous, too. But I don't let it get me down. After all, I'm a big sister. I'm all of yours."

As soon as the words "big sister" left her mouth, she couldn't help but grin.

Now, she realized that was a perfectly fine way to look at things.

Monika was still sixteen, and that meant she was a full year younger than Sybilla. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to play the age card every now and then. If she thought of Monika as a sulking little sister, it was actually kind of cute.

"Hey, Annette."

Sybilla looked at Annette, who cocked her head in blank puzzlement.

"What would you say if I told you your big sis had an exciting idea for you?"

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After Sybilla and Annette left the inn, Monika took a shower.

She closed her eyes and let the warm water crash against the back of her neck.

That was the only way she had of escaping the loud excitement of the festival outside. Even when she closed the window, she could still hear the sound of flute music and people celebrating. The village's lantern lights fought back the darkness, and the festivities continued well into the night.

Only when the sound of running water filled the bathroom did it finally drown out the background noise. Now, Monika couldn't hear anything but the sound of water striking tile.

However, while the sound of the festival wasn't able to reach her, the memories swirling through her head refused to vanish.

No amount of water could wash them away.

The journey from the Fend Commonwealth to the Duchy of Newayk took three days and two nights by ship.

Monika and Klaus spent that time sharing a cabin, with Klaus handling all the food arrangements so Monika wouldn't have to directly interact with any of the crew. As long as she was with him, she didn't have to worry about running into any trouble.

However, that was a long time to go without feeling like she could breathe.

It was the first time she'd been alone with Klaus since the end of the mission. Up until then, Monika had been getting treatment in a remote sanitorium.

"I have to wonder—"

As the two of them sat opposite each other in the cramped cabin, it was Klaus who broke the ice.

"—what are good teachers supposed to do at times like these?"

"Hey, don't ask me."

She sounded sarcastic, but halfway through her sentence, her voice cracked.

The last time that Monika and Klaus had interacted in any meaningful capacity was back at the abandoned church in Hurough —namely, when the two of them fought to the death. Klaus had had no intention of killing her back there, and killing Klaus hadn't been Monika's goal either, but the leaden storm of bullets that had defined their battle meant that calling it anything other than a fight to the death just didn't feel accurate.

"…What would you have done?" Monika asked. The silence was too much for her. "If you were in my shoes. Would you have sent Lamplight to war against the CIM, or would you have tried to shoulder it all on your own?"

Those were the options Monika had recently been presented with. Turning traitor and joining Serpent had never been on the table, but that left her with one ultimate decision to make, and she'd chosen to deal with everything on her own. She'd fought a fierce battle against the CIM, got away by the skin of her teeth, and had very nearly perished in the process.

"Probably the latter," Klaus said. "If I were in your position, I would have made the same choice you did."

"Yeah, I figured."

"But you should have chosen the former. You made the wrong call."

Monika's smile vanished half-formed.

There was a reproachful hardness in his eyes.

"That's not fair. It's literally the exact same—"

"It's because I'm your boss, and you're my subordinate."

His firm tone left no room for rebuttal.

Unable to bear the weight of his gaze, Monika covered her face with one hand and looked down. She couldn't stand to keep looking him in the eye.

"You did an excellent job protecting Lily and teaming up with Thea to trick Green Butterfly. However, I can't condone your decision to push me away and take on the CIM on your own." The words spilled from him, raw and honest. "I just can't do it."

Monika had never heard him sound like that before. His voice carried a complex mix of emotions. It had a warm, enveloping gentleness, but it had a cold, biting edge to it, as well. Then, there were the notes of relief underscoring it all.

Monika couldn't find the words to reply.

It hurt, knowing that she'd forced that voice out of a spy as collected as Klaus. It made her realize just how grave an error she'd made.

"But there's one thing I want to stress. I'm glad you made it back. That part was magnificent."

With that final quiet comment, Klaus stood up. He was probably going to step out of the cabin to check up on the other girls. Either that, or he was trying to give Monika some space.

In his hand, Klaus was holding a cane. He still couldn't walk right after the wound Monika had dealt him.

Right before he reached the door, he turned back around. "If you'd like, I could help you meet up with the others. What do you think?"

"…I'm good."

She shook her head.

She had no idea how she was supposed to face her teammates. There were a million things she needed to explain to them, and she knew it. However, she was too ashamed to even meet with them. Nothing she said would change the way she'd betrayed the team.

"Understood," was all Klaus said.

He would help keep the others away for a bit, no doubt. Minimizing risk would make for a convenient excuse. Realizing how thoughtful he was being filled her with an agonizing sense of discomfort.

"Hey, Teach?"

Klaus's back was turned.

"……I'm sorry."

Monika had no idea how Klaus reacted to that.

She couldn't raise her head, and her vision was blurred with tears.

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The night came and went, and Monika stayed holed up in the inn.

The Lantern Festival had reached its final day, but that was none of her concern. As long as she kept on reading, lifting weights, and stretching, the time would pass by all on its own. She ordered a meal via room service and had them leave the sandwich outside her door.

Even Annette, who'd come by pretty much daily to attack her, was nowhere to be seen. Maybe she'd finally given up. Their fights had been decent workouts, so Monika was honestly a little disappointed.

Before she knew it, it was evening, and there was a knock on her door.

Monika used the mirror she'd affixed outside the window to get a view outside of her room. Her visitor this time was neither Annette nor Klaus.

"What, it's Sara's turn?"

She opened the door, and Sara gave her an apologetic bow. "I-I'm just here to bring you a little something, that's all…"

The smell of honey wafted up from the paper bag she was carrying. Sara had gone out of her way to buy Monika some sweets made with honey.

Monika didn't have any appetite, but she couldn't just rebuff Sara's kindness, either. Nor could she leave her hanging out in the hallway, so she invited Sara in.



"You went through some rough stuff because of me."

Monika tore the chiffon cake in two and handed half back to Sara, who took it with both hands and gave her a little nod. "I didn't mind. Not when I was doing it for you, Miss Monika."

"Oh yeah?"

"After all, you're usually the one who has to look after me."

There was a distinct note of confidence in her expression.

Monika had been told had happened. The MVP in taking White Spider down had been none other than Sara. Klaus had been cornered, and in order to protect him, Sara had fought White Spider all on her own. It was even the information she'd gotten out of White Spider that had let the team rescue Monika.

As Sara's mentor, hearing about it after the fact from Klaus had filled Monika with an indescribable sense of elation. "I always knew she had it in her," she'd said, but despite her efforts to feign nonchalance, she couldn't stop herself from breaking into a grin.

"Fair." Monika returned Sara's nod. "You did good, Sara."

"I had to do my mentor proud, you know."

The chiffon cake Sara had brought had huge amounts of honey worked into its dough. Its sweetness wasn't sharp and in-your-face, but rather a mellow sugariness that slowly spread through her whole mouth.

As Monika ate her cake in silence, Sara hesitantly spoke up. "What would you say to getting a little bit of fresh air, Miss Monika?"

"I dunno, sounds like a hassle."

"It doesn't have to be with me. But it's not good for your body or your mental health to stay locked in your room all day. Wouldn't it be nice to at least fly a lantern?"

Sara peeked tentatively at Monika to gauge her reaction. It was obvious that she was worried sick about her.

When Monika realized that, she let out a big sigh. "…Yeah, okay, fine."

The other girls aside, Sara was the one person she couldn't bring herself to say no to.

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After hiding her cerulean hair beneath a hat, Monika quietly slipped out into the festive village.

She would be lying if she said she wasn't worried about how many pairs of eyes there were around, but as Sybilla had pointed out, it would be too early for her mug shots to have reached a village too rural to even have radio. No one would ever consider that a dead international terrorist would have snuck into their local festival.

It was the festival's final day, and people were even more excited than before. There were more tourists there, too. Every year, the village's population ballooned from a few hundred to over ten times that. The streets were packed with people, all of whom had gathered to try to catch a glimpse of the lanterns that were going to be released that night.

Monika descended the hill road from the inn and ended up in the town square. Toward its center, villagers were dancing in turn to jaunty flute and harp music. Many of them were women. They were wearing crowns woven from grass and waving around bouquets of yellow flowers as their white dresses fluttered in the breeze.

Among the dancers was Thea.

She looked perfectly at home among them. If anything, her dancing was even more elegant than the locals'. She drew the gaze of countless male festivalgoers and shot them merry winks.

Looks like the slut's having the time of her life…

Monika had no desire for Thea to strike up a conversation with her right now. She hurried over to an alley before Thea could spot her. The sun had begun setting, plunging the village's side alleys into darkness. That was just fine by Monika.

As the music from the square grew more distant, something caught her eye—a lantern stall.

The festival was reaching its finale, and the stall only had a single lantern left. It had a remarkably intricate design. A floral pattern shone out from its dyed paper.

Monika was well aware that those lanterns were supposed to be the highlight of the festival.

"Could I get that lantern and some matches?"

"You got it, miss."

The shopkeeper knew it was his last lantern, and he sold it to her at a deep discount. He even cheerfully told her how to release it.

"You know the time and spot?" he asked, to which Monika replied, "Of course," with a nod.

The system was that all the villagers and tourists would release their sky lanterns in unison by the lakeshore when the wind was blowing toward the lake. The rules had to be strict to prevent any fires from starting.

Monika had no plans of following them.

She took her sky lantern, casually averting her gaze whenever she passed by a tourist as she looked for somewhere she could be alone. She ended up bumping into a couple of people, each time lamenting her decision to go outside when the festival crowds were at their peak.

After heading in the direction where the crowds were thinner, though, she eventually found a seafood processing facility. That was where the villagers smoked the fish they caught. The building had that distinctive aroma of oak wood. The plant had been shut down for the festival, and there was no one around.

Monika nimbly bounded up to the roof and checked the wind direction and distance to the lake. The wind was blowing down the hill toward the water, and the lake was about sixty or seventy feet away. She had plenty of height.

Guess I'll get a little jump-start, then.

Once she was sure it was safe, she set the lantern she'd bought down on the roof.

It was time to take all the malice, all the calamities, all the maladies, and all the melancholy that had built up in her chest and return them to the sky. Monika had heard about the festival tradition, and with how she felt right now, it seemed perfect for her.

She would love nothing more than to just dump everything into the sky.

"……Huh?"

However, when she reached into her pocket, she realized that something was off.

Where are my matches?

The matchbook she'd just purchased was gone.

Could she have dropped it somewhere, she wondered? Down in the dumps or not, she wouldn't have made a mistake like that. She wasn't Lily, after all.

As she puzzled the matter over, she sensed someone behind her.

Someone was coming up onto the roof.

"Hey, if it ain't Monika. Didn't realize you'd gone for a walk."

It was Sybilla. She shot Monika a friendly grin to impress on her what a coincidence it was and tossed her a lighter. "Here, you can use this."

"……"

Monika caught the lighter and looked at it.

It was a perfectly ordinary kerosene lighter, the exact kind you could find anywhere. When she gave it a light shake, though, it felt unnaturally heavy.

"Yeah, that's not happening." She threw it back.

"Wait, what?!"

"I lose my matches, and you just *happen* to walk by? I'm not dumb enough to fall for a trap that obvious."

Monika let out a deep sigh and sat down on the roof.

The vanishing matches had been Sybilla's handiwork. She must have disguised herself among the crowd and picked Monika's pocket. Monika was embarrassed that she hadn't noticed, but perhaps it was no wonder considering how refined Sybilla's technique was.

Sybilla stowed the rejected lighter in her breast pocket and sat down next to Monika. "Well, you're no fun."

"Annette made that, right? Why are you helping her out?"

"I was thinkin' we could capture you and drag you around to see the sights."

"Well, could you not? I'd rather you just dropped it."

A parent and their child rushed past the plant, smiling as they made for the village center. At no point did they notice Monika and Sybilla up on the roof.

As Monika watched them go by, she found herself asking a question. "Hey, Sybilla. What was that lighter, actually?"

"One of Annette's chili bombs. You flick the switch, and kablooey."

"What'd you do with the matches you stole off me?"

"Huh? Annette wanted 'em, so I gave 'em to her, why?"

"Well, now I can't light my lantern."

Monika laid a hand on the lantern that had been sitting beside her that whole time. With no fire, it had been reduced to a regular old ornament.

She picked it up and held it in front of her face. "But you know, maybe that's for the best."

"Hm?"

"It'd be too selfish to try to forget everything and return it to the sky like nothing happened."

There were some things you couldn't part with so easily.

She realized that maybe this was fate's hand at work. She wasn't allowed to unburden herself like that. Klaus and the others could forgive her, but that didn't mean her crimes were erased.

She'd betrayed Lamplight. She'd attacked her friends. She'd fought Klaus to the death.

No matter what circumstances had led her there, it didn't change the fact that all those things were true.

Failing to confront her sin meant she would be liable to make the same mistakes all over again. If that happened, her Lamplight teammates really would give up on her. Their patience would run dry, and all of them would reject her.

And the girl she loved would be no different.

As soon as Monika visualized it, she felt like her entire heart had rusted over. She couldn't accept their forgiveness yet. She mustn't take advantage of Sara and Sybilla's kindness. She needed to remind herself of that.

She had no right to return that lantern to the sky.

Pain raced through her chest as she stared at the lantern in front of her.

"I fuckin' swear," Sybilla said, sounding exasperated.

Monika looked over and found Sybilla giving her a suspicious smile. "What?" Monika asked.

"Lemme guess—you're bummed 'cause the boss chewed you out."

"_____?!"

Monika's face went red-hot.

Sybilla slapped her knee in amusement. "Nah, like, I totally get it!" Her whole body quivered as laughter sprang up from deep within her, and her voice rang heartily into the night air. "It's like, hey, welcome to the club! It makes sense the boss would get mad at you, and you ain't used to that happenin' to you, so it's no wonder it's got you down."

"…I guess I can't argue with that."

"But y'know, the boss doesn't understand *shit*. The guy takes himself too damn seriously." Sybilla wiped a tear from her eye. "And you, you're no better. Neither of you get it. Man, remember that one time when Thea was sayin' there weren't any big sisters on the team?"

"What are you talking about?"

"If any of you had little siblings, the answer woulda been right there in front of you."

Monika arched an eyebrow at Sybilla's know-it-all tone.

It was downright conceited of her to think she'd stumbled upon some truth that neither Monika nor Klaus had been able to grasp.

"If you've got something you want to say, then say it," Monika snapped, to which Sybilla replied, "See, me, I know what you need."

Before Monika could get a word in edgewise, she went on.

"You need a proper punishment."

Sybilla snapped her fingers.

"We're code names Forgetter and Pandemonium—and it's time to put it all together and clean 'em out."

The lantern Monika was holding grew hot, and she didn't have to time to let go of it before a sprayer blasted her from within.

The intense smell of chili powder assaulted her nose. That was Annette's trademark tear gas spray. Monika had smelled it many times before, though that was her first time taking a direct hit. It stung more than she'd ever imagined. Her eyes felt like they were on fire, and they hurt too badly for her to see anything.

She collapsed on the roof and lapsed into a coughing fit. Her inability to steady her breathing left her unable to get her body to obey her.

Monika had been completely overpowered, and she didn't understand what was even going on.

She heard a cheerful voice from overhead. "Dang, that got you good."

Sybilla had escaped the blast. She must have used Monika's body as a shield to avoid taking a direct hit.

"That lantern was always the main event. You really are out of it, huh? But hey, it's all good."

The lighter had been a decoy.

However, it still didn't make sense. Monika had never let the lantern out of her sight. When did they have time to booby-trap it?

"The hell's going on?" she coughed. It was hard to even talk. "Was the shopkeeper in on it?"

Now that Monika thought about it, she'd gone for a walk on Sara's suggestion, and she'd turned into that alley to avoid the part of the town square where Thea was dancing. Sybilla must have used her teammates to lead Monika to the lantern shop.

However, that wasn't enough to explain it.

"But he never—"

"Gave up the game? There's no way he woulda gone along with it if I just went up and told him, 'hey, sell this to a blue-haired chick.' And there's no guarantee his actin' would've been up to snuff, either."

"But how, then?"

"I swapped out his merch in secret."

Now, Monika finally understood.

That was something that had come up in the debriefing Klaus gave her. In the final stages of the Fend mission, Sybilla had discovered a new way to fool people—Replacement. It was a liecraft that required the help of her allies while taking full advantage of Sybilla's talent at larceny. For her, taking advantage of a distracted shopkeeper to swap the real lantern out with Annette's invention would have been child's play. She was probably the one who'd bought out the rest of the shop, too.

Then, she'd distracted Monika with the lighter before going in for the kill.

She'd caught Monika completely off guard.

"Now, you're comin' with me."

As Monika continued letting out throat-scraping coughs, Sybilla took a length of rope and tied her up. She showed Monika no mercy, binding her so tight the rope dug into her skin, to make sure Monika didn't give her the slip.

"Wait, hold on—"

"You lost, girl. No talkin' back."

Monika wasn't emotionally prepared to get dragged in front of all her teammates.

When she tried to squirm away, though, Sybilla gave the rope a firm tug to stop her from fighting back. “This here ain’t kindness or concern.” Sybilla flashed Monika her pearly whites. “Didn’t you hear me? You’re gettin’ your just deserts. Now, quit your struggling.”

“……”

Despite Sybilla’s insistence that she wasn’t acting out of kindness, her voice was overflowing with warmth.

Monika went limp. Trying to resist would just make her feel even more like an idiot.

“My just deserts, huh?”

“Yup.”

“…Then I guess I’d better take my licks.”

“That’s what I’ve been tellin’ you.”

The teammates she’d betrayed had come to punish her, and when they came bearing a pretext like that, retreat wasn’t an option. This wasn’t like with Annette, who’d legitimately been trying to kill her.

The whole time they were coming down from the roof, Sybilla kept asking, “You okay? You’re gonna make it down all right?” In no way did she seem like she was there to reprimand Monika.

Before heading back onto the main streets, Sybilla adjusted the rope so it was hidden under Monika’s clothes. To any onlooker, they would appear like nothing more than a pair of sisters holding hands.

“Look, I might not be able to beat you solo—”

As they walked, Sybilla spoke up with frustration in her voice.

“—but I’m pretty sure I ain’t useless, either. Don’t go tryin’ to do everything on your own.”

“……”

Monika knew that full well, but she couldn’t say a thing.

Klaus had told her about what Sybilla had done—she’d taken down “Armorer” Meredith.

In order to save Monika and Klaus, and in order to escape the CIM’s surveillance, Sybilla had put her life on the line and battled a high-ranking member of the CIM’s leadership. Monika knew all too

well what a nasty opponent Armorer could be. She herself had been unable to do anything but flee from him.

Sybilla had gotten stronger, too; so much so that Monika was startled by it. The rope binding her was a testament to that fact.

However, saying all that out loud would only earn Sybilla's ire. "Spare me the flattery," she would snap.

Sybilla dragged on the rope, steadily pulling Monika forward, and Monika surrendered to her strength.

There was a field just outside the village that they lent out as a campground for tourists. There weren't enough accommodations in the entire village for everyone who visited, so many of them had to sleep outside. The Lamplight girls had rented tents in advance and set three of them up out in the open.

"Hey, I got Monika."

"""""""""Wooo!"""""""""

When Sybilla showed up with Monika in tow, the girls in the tent all cheered. Bizarrely, they even greeted her with a round of applause.

It was the first time Monika had been back together with the whole team, and she took a deep breath to hide how awkward she felt. "Uh… Well, I know we have a lot to talk about…"

The others turned gentle gazes her way.

Monika gave them a small bow. "…but I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused."

She'd been dragged there without warning, and she hadn't finished getting her feelings in order. There were so many things she wanted to thank them and apologize to them for. She had no idea how long it would take to get through it all.

"And look, I want to promise that I'll—"

"Oh, quit being so damn mopey." When Monika tried to go on, Sybilla clapped her on the shoulder. "We figured out a way better way to settle the score."

"Huh?"

"How many times do I gotta tell you? You're gettin' a *proper* punishment."

All of a sudden, Thea and Sara leaped at her. Monika was still bound, so there was nothing she could do to resist.

Thea grabbed her right arm and gave her an apologetic smile. "I am sorry, Monika. But Annette was really quite insistent," she whispered. "I-I'm really sorry about this…," Sara stammered as she grabbed Monika's left arm. "I'll try to make sure they don't aggravate your wounds…"

What was about to happen to her?

As dread left Monika unable to speak, she caught sight of the person grinning with glee behind her.

"I know a fun trick, yo. If you heat up spices, they get even more fragrant!"

Annette was holding a frying pan over a lamp. The matchbook Monika had bought was lying nearby.

"Chili peppers… Coriander… Black pepper…"

She took her toasted items and moved them to the blender beside her.

Then she started tossing all sorts of other food items in.

"Horseradish… Garlic… Goat milk… Raw eggs with the shell on… A stinky can of fermented herring… A different stinky can of cheese…"

Each time Annette popped the lid off a can, a brand-new foul odor attacked Monika's senses. The rest of the Lamplight girls were already pinching their noses. With her arms not only bound but held down by her teammates as well, though, Monika had no choice but to let the smell wash over her.

Annette turned on the blender. After the ghastly sound of solid food getting ground up was done filling the air, Annette poured the finished concoction into a cup.

"If you drink my special drink, then I'll forgive you for everything, Sis!"

"…Excuse me?"

Annette raced over and held the cup under Monika's nose.

The smell was so rancid, Sara and Thea let out little groans from beside her. Even as they each used one hand to clamp their noses shut, though, they continued using their other hands to hold Monika fast.

Sybilla shrugged in resignation. "For the record, this is *after* we talked her down. I told her we'd help her catch you, but she wasn't allowed to actually kill you or nothin'."

The details of the bargain the two of them had struck were becoming clear.

In fairness, Monika herself had concerns about Annette continuing to make attempts on her life. Apparently, that same line of thinking had led to this brutal ordeal.

Still, if this was all it took for her sins to be forgiven, then maybe she was getting off easy.

"…Look, I-I'll drink it, but this is gonna be pretty rough—"

"Through your nose."

"Huh?"

"You gotta drink it through your nose. That was one point she wouldn't budge on."

Monika assumed she'd misheard her.

Rather, she *prayed* she had misheard her.

Annette leaped up, all smiles. "I get to watch you drink it through your nose, Sis! I can't wait!"

Monika took a long look at the burbling cup filled to the brim with hellish liquid.

Is this stuff even safe to drink?

And wait, isn't there raw egg and eggshell in there?

However, she lacked the composure to voice her comments aloud. All the blood drained from her face. "H-hold up a minute! This is deranged! I made those decisions with my back to the wall, so you've gotta cut me a little slack—"

She kicked her legs in a panicked bid for freedom, but a new pair of girls pinned those down as well.

"But I still wish you would have talked to me about it!" Erna said far louder than usual as she clung to Monika's right leg. Meanwhile, Grete calmly pinned down her left leg. "You really mustn't go making choices like that on your own."

All of Monika's limbs were being restrained, and she lay on the ground faceup.

"Could you hurry it up? We're gonna miss the lanterns."

Lily took no part in the bondage, and she looked a little uneasy about the entire thing, but her tone remained nonchalant. Beside her, Lan gave an unimpressed shrug. She wanted no part of this.

Monika wanted desperately for someone—anyone—to come save her, but all the other tourists had already taken off. There was no one left to hear her screams.

Annette hopped onto Monika's stomach and beamed. "Let's start by sticking a funnel in your nostril, yo!"

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

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After checking in on the boisterous girls, Klaus quietly took off. He slipped in among the crowd and made his way toward the lake, walking slowly on account of his cane.

All the people heading to the lake were carrying lanterns, and Klaus had one tucked under his arm as well. It was the one Monika had bought and then carelessly left at the seafood processing plant.

It smelled faintly of chili powder, but once he removed Annette's contraption from within, it still looked perfectly functional.

Klaus had seen the whole exchange between the girls.

I never would have come up with that idea. Good going, Sybilla.

He was a little frustrated with himself.

A book on teaching he'd once read had said to avoid outright punishing students. His old team, Inferno, had operated similarly. Whenever he botched a mission, he would either get scolded or consoled. There were times when he got beat up with little ability to defend himself, but that only ever happened during training.

Not once had Klaus ever considered punishing people who messed up.

As a teacher, he didn't think it was an appropriate tool to use. Right now, though, it might have been exactly what Monika needed. She needed it more than consolation or sympathy. It might not have been "right" from a pedagogical standpoint, but if that was what it took to save Monika's heart, then maybe that was just fine.

"It doesn't look like they're going to make it in time to watch the lanterns after all."

When Klaus arrived at the gathering point by the lake's shore, the girls were still nowhere to be seen. He had assumed they would come rushing after him, but they must have gotten distracted bullying Monika. It was a little disappointing that they were missing the climax of the festival, but what was done was done.

It looked like Klaus would be releasing the sky lantern alone.

The sound of a bell ringing came from atop the hill. The wind was blowing in the right direction. All the thousands of people gathered lit their sky lanterns in unison.

Buoyed by the heat, the lanterns swelled up and began gently floating away as their owners released them. They rose like they were being sucked upward, quietly spinning and casting their orange light as they joined the other lanterns and dyed the sky in their colors.

The crowd cheered.

All the thousands of lanterns drifted slowly over the lake as they ascended.

"…Festivals, huh," Klaus murmured as he stared up at the night sky.

He recalled what an Inferno member had once told him.

He had been taught what festivals were for.

"They bring the kind of mania that people need to move forward."

Klaus had brought Lamplight there because he felt that was something they could use, and he hoped it had served its purpose.

"I doubt that this healed all the wounds their hearts have suffered," he said, clasping his hands together.

"But I pray that those lamplights will help drive away the darkness biting at our heels."

Interlude
Intermission ②

"…I think that getting her a management position in the Foreign Intelligence Office might be tricky."

"Yeep?!"

The suggestion that Erna had so thoughtfully put out was cruelly rejected.

The girls didn't know any of the specifics, but Klaus occasionally mentioned "the leadership," so they knew there was some sort of structure in place. However, it was hard to imagine Lan getting a job there.

A few other comments were piled on, as well. "Besides, we don't know what the org chart even looks like, so there's no telling what positions even exist there…" "It does make sense that an intelligence organization would have its secrets."

The girls then turned their attention to Sybilla's idea of having Lan build a life outside of espionage.

In other words, retiring.

If she stopped working as a spy, she could live out her days as an ordinary teenage girl.

"Honestly," Monika said coldly, "retirement is looking like a prime candidate for her."

She shot a quick glance in the direction of the door to the lounge.

"Being a spy means that danger is never far away. It doesn't make sense to force someone to do it if they don't want to."

Cruel as it was, she had a point.

Monika had never been particularly passionate about working as a spy, but she did it for the sake of self-actualization. Nobody had ever held her there against her will. Lamplight also had Sara, who'd only become a spy because it was the only job she could find, but even she was there of her own free will now.

But what about the girl on the other side of that barricade?

Retirement could be a perfectly legitimate option for her.

It was clear that no matter how much longer they talked things out, they weren't going to come up with any new ideas. At the end of the day, it was about what Lan herself was going to choose.

"I don't know—"

Lily mumbled a few words.

"—are we really sure that Lan's lost her passion for espionage?"

Chapter 5
No Time for Goodbye

By the time they were done discussing Lan's options, it was already midday.

Thea, Grete, and Lily were sent out to run an errand for Klaus, and the remaining girls threw together a simple lunch. The menu for the day was a firm baguette and a lettuce-and-ham salad. Sara made them a special dressing loaded with cheese.

Sara had been spending the past few days taking cooking lessons directly from Klaus. The dressing smelled of anchovies and cheese and tasted so exquisite the girls felt like they could have kept on eating salad forever.

Sybilla poured some dressing on her baguette, too, and crammed it in her mouth. "Retiring, huh…"

Midway through the meal, the conversation once again circled back to Lan's future. After all their discussion, they'd concluded that if Lan had lost her motivation, then they had little choice but to have her retire.

Sybilla looked at the blackboard they'd written their verdict on and sighed. "Honestly, this doesn't sit right with me. And I'm the one who suggested the stupid option." She grimaced in regret at having ever brought it up. "I snapped at her earlier and told her she looked pretty damn recovered, but there's no way that's actually true. I think I might've been kind of an asshole back there. She's probably hurtin' real bad."

"Yeah. I bet she's really depressed," Erna agreed with a nod as she nibbled her baguette. "I mean, just look at us…"

She didn’t have to elaborate for everyone to know exactly what she was talking about.

The girls had no time during their mission to mourn Avian’s deaths, but that didn’t make the news come as any less of a blow. Even now, their hearts ached whenever they thought about it.

The mood turned somber as they thought about how Lan must be feeling.

“I get what you’re saying,” Monika grumbled. She wiped her mouth, having already finished eating. “But we can’t just let her hang around here forever. This isn’t a sanatorium.”

Sybilla gave her a reproachful look. “Damn, that’s harsh.”

“You were literally just trying to kick her out yourself!” Monika snapped back. “Look, fine.”

She stood up from her chair and headed over to the blackboard still standing in the kitchen.

“I can think of a million better things to be doing, but I guess we could figure out where she could work after she quits.”

No one had any objections to Monika’s suggestion.

Erna had been completely turned around on the matter. “Uh-huh, you’re right. It’s up to us to find the perfect job for Big Sis Lan!” she agreed.

Annette, who was sneaking the vegetables she didn’t like onto Erna’s plate, piped up in amusement as well. “She made a great test subject for me, yo!”

They quickly finished their meal and dove right into their next discussion.

The ideas came out one after another.

“She could just go to university.” “She might surprise us all and get married. Imagine her as a housewife.” “She’s really athletic, so she could do professional sports.” “I hope she opens a store here! Then I could go shake her down!”

With chalk in hand, Monika filled the blackboard. *Beautician. Doctor. Pâtissier. Maid. Artist. Student. Factory worker. Waitress. Scientist. Tax collector. Childcare worker. Test subject. Athlete.*

Hostess. Fashion designer. Housewife. Actress. Novelist. Watchmaker. Police officer.

Once they got started, there was no end to the options. Lan hadn't been high on the Avian pecking order, but she was still an exceptional spy. Her memory and powers of observation were impeccable, and her physical abilities left nothing to be desired either.

Right when the blackboard was getting completely full, Sybilla let out a little, "Huh," like something had just dawned on her.

"What's up?" Monika asked, to which Sybilla replied with a contemplative smile.

"Nah, it's just, I got to thinkin'—"

Her voice had the gravity of a full-bodied sigh.

"—and there's nothin' stoppin' us from changin' jobs, too."

"""".....""""

Monika, Erna, and Annette all turned to look at her.

They bowed their heads in near-perfect unison. """"Thank you for your service."""""

"I'm not sayin' I *am* retiring!!" Sybilla bellowed. She hurriedly waved her hands in denial. "Seriously, that ain't it. It was a thought, that's all. Just an option on the table!"

The other girls all nodded as they came to the same realization.

All those jobs listed on the blackboard were things they could work toward, too. Lan wasn't the only one with a world of possibilities at her fingertips. Things were different now from when they'd first come to Lamplight. The girls had completed quite a few missions and collected generous completion bonuses. They could stop being spies without having to worry about going hungry any time soon.

They still knew more than their share of state secrets, and with world affairs as unstable as they were, quitting would be easier said

than done. Still, taking steps toward living out their days in peace was an option available to them.

Annette gave her a teasing laugh. "I think you're letting that punk Lan influence you, yo!"

"Hey, you're not wrong," Sybilla admitted in embarrassment, "but I feel for her, y'know? That's a pretty brutal way to get reminded that even elites aren't invincible. That's gotta rattle a girl. It's no wonder she wants to run away."

"Mm…"

"She's sad, and she's scared. That'd make anyone think about retiring."

Sybilla gloomily rested her chin on her hands atop the dining room table.

She could still remember what Lan had shouted just before barricading herself away.

"I SHALL FORSAKE THE DREADFUL WORLD OF ESPIONAGE AND ENJOY MY LAYABOUT PARADISE RIGHT HEEEEEERE!"

She'd been expressing the fear she felt toward their line of work.

Theirs was the harsh world where their lives were in constant jeopardy. It was the plain truth, and none of the girls could deny it.

A tense silence fell over the dining room. "You know," Erna said, "maybe that's what Teach wanted us to think about when he gave us that order."

Klaus was the one who'd instructed them to find somewhere new for Lan to work, and it was hard to imagine him assigning them pointless busywork.

"Seriously? You think he wants us to retire?" Monika laughed. "No way. You're overthinking things."

"But it's a really important topic to consider."

"You're not wrong, but still. It'd be a pretty major bummer if Klaus was telling us to quit."

Their exchange was starting to get heavy, and Sybilla cut in to lighten the mood. "Hey, let's not forget why we're here. We're talkin' about Lan right now," she said with a grin.

Won over by Sybilla's positivity, the girls eventually got back on topic, and the conversation circled back to Lan's future. She talked about things in the abstract, like it was just a fun thought experiment, and the rest of the girls joined in and brought up various ideas for new careers Lan could take up.

The rest of the girls, with one exception—"Meadow" Sara.

"……"

Sara didn't take part in the discussion.

Instead, she sat off to the side and sadly ran her fingers along her newsboy cap's brim. She said nothing, simply watching her teammates in silence.

Monika shot a quick glance at her, but didn't press the issue.

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As it so happened, it was at that point that "Cloud Drift" Lan made her quiet escape from the lounge.

Life behind her barricade was nice and all, but she hadn't secured any provisions, and she was famished.

After leaping out the window to the Heat Haze Palace courtyard, she headed down the secret passageway that led to the town. The manor was cut off from the outside world, so you needed to use special underground tunnels to get in and out.

Lan shivered from the tunnel's chill. She let out a long sigh as she advanced through the darkness.

…'Tis about the time they drive me out, I daresay.

Even holed away in the lounge, she got the feeling that Lamplight was starting to get fed up with her. Lan was an optimist by nature, but she wasn't blind to the realities of the situation. There was a limit to how long she could continue taking advantage of their hospitality. It wouldn't be long before Klaus came and chewed her out.

When he did, she could imagine what he would propose—that she join a spy team that was neither Avian nor Lamplight. And the higher-ups would order her to take up a new post, as well.

But, I…

She bit her lip.

The fires of purpose no longer burned in her. Things had been fine during the mission. Then, she'd been driven by a desire to avenge the comrades who'd been taken from her. Black Mantis had been leagues stronger than her, yet she'd faced off against him without a moment's hesitation. Her entire body had been buzzing.

She'd been ready to kill him, even if she had to follow him into the depths of hell to do it.

Her rage back then had been true and genuine. Once the mission was over and she came back to her senses, though, terror had welled up within her.

Could she really throw herself back into a world that had chewed her Avian teammates up one after another?

Could she really compete with a man like Black Mantis who'd mowed through the CIM's finest agents like they were nothing?

The logical part of her brain was telling her that *she couldn't do it*. She would simply perish. The life her teammates had worked so hard to preserve would get tossed aside like so much garbage. Surely, Klaus would carry out her vengeance for her.

When Lan thought about going on another mission, her knees started shaking so badly she couldn't help it. An endless well of fear was crushing her heart like an empty can.

'Twould seem I've no choice but to flee the world of espionage for —

Right when she was reaching her verdict, she heard a man shouting at her. "Hey, Cloud Drift."

"Hm?"

"If you don't have anywhere to go, then I've got a job for you."

She looked up.

She'd just emerged from the tunnel that led from Heat Haze Palace—which was to say, she'd entered Garmouth Seminary. It was situated right off of Main Street in the port city of Arranq, and the room facing the road had a small desk labeled "reception." There was a listless young man looking at her from the other side of its window.

He looked to be in his early twenties, and he had the pretentious air about him that had been popular with the youth as of late. His hair was combed down and slick with product. Despite how lazy and unreliable he looked, there was something unmistakably likable about the smile he was giving her.

Lan asked the first question that came to mind. "…Who're thou?"

"Gahhhhh, I KNEW that's what you were gonna say!!" the young man roared, leaping straight over the desk and marching at Lan with spittle flying from his mouth. "Like, gimme a break! We've met like a gazillion times! Literally every morning you come through here!"

"I—I mean, thou hast certainly entered my sight before, but…who exactly art thou?"

"Rrgh! Just think about it for, like, three seconds. You know how Heat Haze Palace has this whole-ass building here to keep up the 'Garmouth Seminary' front? Who do you think runs it?!"

"…I know not. Sir Klaus, I suppose."

"You want them to stick the best agent our country has behind a seminary school reception desk? You think he handles paying the water bill? Taking deliveries? Driving off the students who wander in trying to enroll? Who do you think it is that takes care of the Heat Haze Palace flowerbeds when all the residents are off handling missions?"

The young man jabbed a thumb at himself.

"I'm code name Nebula, alias Rage—and I handle all the admin 'round these parts."

Rage might not have stood out much, but he was the one who'd been supporting Lamplight from behind the scenes. He hadn't had any direct interactions with the girls since that very first day when he told them, "In the back," when they first arrived at Garmouth Seminary's reception desk, but he'd been propping the team up in secret ever since.

Part of Lamplight's work involved counterintelligence ops where they captured foreign spies who'd infiltrated their borders, so they kept their identities secret even on home soil in order to fool their enemies. Their information had been leaked to Galgad intelligence, so the strategy was of limited effectiveness there, but it worked wonders against spies from anywhere else. Their cover story about being students and faculty of Garmouth Seminary played a key role in allowing Lamplight to move through the city unnoticed and detain foreign spies, and it was an agent named Nebula who made sure the school itself passed muster.

"Most fascinating," Lan said with a nod. Then, she cocked her head. "And? What is this job thou speakest of?"

"Helping me manage Heat Haze Palace. This probably goes without saying, but it's a pretty low-key gig. Nothing too exciting or flashy. A lot of people who step back from the front lines end up in support roles like mine."

"Ah, I see. I suppose thou art a proper member of the Foreign Intelligence Office in thine own right."

"You're damn right I am. So, what do you say? You're on pretty good terms with Lamplight, right?"

"……"

Lan furrowed her brow and gave it some thought.

This Rage character seemed to know how Lamplight and Avian's last mission had ended. He might very well be worried about her.

She wouldn’t be leaving the world of espionage behind altogether, but the danger to her life would be slim. She would even get to keep spending time with Lamplight, a group she’d grown rather close to.

It wasn’t a bad offer.

In fact, she suspected it was the best one she would ever get.

“Well? If you want, you could start on a temporary basis right now.”

To Lan, nodding in agreement to Rage’s casual offer seemed like the obvious thing to do.

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At two in the afternoon, Thea, Grete, and Lily all gulped.

They were at a residence sandwiched between the office buildings of central Lieditz. Compared to Lamplight, who tried to blend in as a seminary school, the residence took the polar opposite approach of being as conspicuous as possible to intimidate foreign spies. It would take a madman to be willing to sleep there every night.

The three girls straightened their outfits in front of the entrance.

“You really didn’t need to come, Lily.”

“No, I did. As Lamplight’s leader, it’s my duty to be here.”

Thea offered Lily an out, but Lily remained resolute.

It all started when Thea had been reminded of “Holytree” Dugwin earlier. She’d been worried about him, so after the girls were done talking about Lan, she went to Klaus’s room. “Is Dugwin doing all right?” she asked.

When she did, Klaus gave her a small nod, then entrusted her with a task. “Actually, I’m sorry to have to ask, but would you mind checking in on him?” he said, then gave her a few other instructions.

Lamplight had been involved in the mission that had taken his sister’s life. Avoiding him wasn’t an option.

As usual, the girls went straight inside without knocking. Dugwin didn’t need them to. He could sense any visitors the moment they

crossed the threshold.

Dugwin was in the living room next to the wall-to-wall bookshelves. He was slumped back on the sofa reading a book. The dark sunglasses he was wearing left his expression unreadable.

He turned his head in their direction. "You lot." He closed his book. "Could you have a word with Finé and the rest of the children for me? I've told them time and again that this house is dangerous, but they keep on coming back to play. I'd capture anyone in a heartbeat if they tried to lay a finger on my little siblings, but still."

The lively pitter-patter of footsteps was audible up on the second floor. It sounded like there were children playing in Dugwin's collection room. It had once been so important to him he'd kept it carefully locked up, but now he was letting the kids come and go as they pleased.

The house was full of children's laughter, yet there was no life in Dugwin's voice.

"Oh, Dugwin…"

As a pang shot through Thea's heart, Lily took a step past her. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Flower Garden from Lamplight." The look on her face was uncharacteristically serious. "Our boss Bonfire has injuries in both legs, so I've come today in his place. Lamplight was in close contact with Avian until just before the end, and as the team's representative, I'm here to tell you about Pharma's last—"

Dugwin cut her off. "You don't need to say another word."

He buried his face in his hands, shades and all. Between his fingers, the girls could see that he was biting down on his lip hard enough to draw blood.

"My stupid sister… I told her. I told her…!"

He'd already heard the news.

Thea knew just how much he'd loved his sister, and she hung her head. She had no idea what to say to him. Maybe he'd been right all along, and it would have been better if Pharma had lived out her life far away from anything to do with spies.

Grete bowed her head. “My condolences for your loss…,” she said, sounding pained.

All of a sudden, Dugwin exhaled. “I’m retiring.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t maintain the passion anymore. I’m going to become their tutor or something.”

He looked up toward the second floor where the children’s voices were coming from.

Letting his little sister live without want, protecting the nation where his family lived—those were the things that had once driven Dugwin. Now that he’d lost his beloved sister, though, there was no reason for him to keep working as a spy. The children from the orphanage could never hope to fully fill that void in his heart.

Thea had seen this coming, but it hurt all the same.

“So, I’m asking for a going-away present. Think of it as a retirement match, if you would—”

Dugwin stood up and faced the girls head-on.

“—but I need you to let me fight Bonfire to the death.”

Lily stared at him in confusion, and Grete inhaled sharply.

Dugwin tilted his shades down ever so slightly, revealing the deep green of his eyes that was usually hidden. There was an intense hatred flickering beneath their surface.

What he was emitting was the raw hostility of a man who’d brought countless spies to ruin.

“…May I ask why?” Thea said.

“I read the report. Bonfire was looking after my sister until just before the op, right? He was the one training her, and he didn’t give her the skills she needed to survive her crisis.”

He pushed up the frames of his sunglasses and reseated them on his nose.

"Death is better than he deserves."

"……"

All Dugwin was doing was lashing out.

Anyone could see that he was misplacing the blame. The list of people at fault here started and ended with Serpent and the CIM.

By all rights, the girls should have turned his request down. There was no good reason for them to indulge him.

However, Klaus had given them a very specific order.

"If he demands a duel, I want you to accept."

Perhaps there was something at play here that only first-rate spies could sense. Thea had no idea what that might be, but it was important enough that Klaus had no choice but to accept Dugwin's challenge.

"…And you're sure about this? You understand what it means, going up against Bonfire—"

"I don't care. I've always hated that guy's guts."

The man's resolve was firm. His expression didn't so much as waver.

It was a rare spy who could maintain that level of burning confidence when they were going up against Klaus.

"Very well, then. I'll pass the message along to him."

Thea ignored Lily and Grete's shock and gave Dugwin a clear nod.

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"""""""They're having a DUEL?!"""""""

The girls who'd stayed at Heat Haze Palace soon heard about the "'Holytree' Dugwin vs. 'Bonfire' Klaus" showdown that had been announced, and they reacted to the news with shock and astonishment.

Normally, they wouldn't have had any reason to oppose it. If anything, they would have just laughed. It was obvious that Klaus

would emerge the victor. Dugwin had fought Klaus before, and Klaus had mopped the floor with him.

Now, though, the situation was completely different.

"We need to stop them! Teach's legs are still hurt…"

"Yeah, and from what I hear, that Holytree guy is one of the top combat agents in the country."

Erna and Monika both raised legitimate causes for concern.

Sure enough, Klaus's legs were so injured he had difficulty walking without the aid of a cane. His thigh had been wounded in his fight against Monika, and Amelie had fired a bullet straight through his right calf during his battle with White Spider. Any sensible person could see that he was in no condition to be fighting. The girls usually spent their days attacking Klaus, and even they'd chosen to hold off for the time being. With the state he was in, it wouldn't make for decent training.

"Even so, the boss intends to fight him nonetheless."

Grete sounded conflicted.

The truth was, she wanted to stop the fight. It was written all over her face.

"Might I be so bold as to ask you all for help? We need to attend the showdown, and if things get out of hand, to step in and stop it, even if the boss doesn't want us to!"

Not a single person objected.

The duel was slated to start in an hour. It was going to be held in an unused warehouse down by the port.

The girls grumbled about how there was really no rush, but they got ready to leave all the same.

"Um, everyone!"

Then, one of them spoke up at a strikingly loud volume.

Everyone turned to look. It was Sara who'd just shouted. Her cheeks were taut with conviction. "Would it be all right if we brought Miss Lan along?"

"Why?"

"I want her to see. To watch a spy retire."

Next, she addressed them all.

"In fact, how about we all take this moment to really give it some earnest thought? To consider what it means to quit working as a spy."

The rest of the girls looked at her quizzically. "?"

Sara still hadn't told them yet. They didn't know that after the Fend mission, she'd begun considering life after espionage. They didn't know that her dream was for them to all retire peacefully together. None of them knew it, but that was why Sara was the one who'd been taking this whole situation more seriously than anyone. She was the one spy on Lamplight who was actively thinking about retirement.

She wanted to learn. To see what quitting being a spy looked like. By watching the path Lan took, she could use it as a model for her own future.

For Sara, nothing could be more important.

However, the vast majority of the girls knew nothing about her situation, so all she got back were a bunch of half-hearted grunts.

Grete was the only one to sense that there was more at play, and she nodded. "Very well. In that case, we should divide ourselves up into two groups," she said, quickly taking charge. "Some of us will head straight to the site and observe the duel. Meanwhile, the rest of us will fetch Lan. Shall we split up and get a move on?"

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, the girls sprang into action.

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"This is hardly low-key!!"

As the sun began setting, Lan sat at the Garmouth Seminary reception desk-slash-office and wailed.

She'd had her doubts about how much she could actually do with both of her hands out of commission, but once she got started, she found that she didn't even have time to catch her breath. The reception telephone seemed to never stop ringing, and it was her job now to answer it. Each time she picked it up with what few fingers she could still move, there was someone new screaming in her ear.

"'Twas yet another complaint! 'Last night, a girl wearing your school's uniform set off some sort of bomb in the city!' they cried! How in the devil am I meant to—"

"Deny, deny, deny. Tell 'em they must have been mistaken."

Rage sounded unconcerned, like he'd heard it all a million times already. For Lan, though, this was all new, and she couldn't help but feel overwhelmed. "B-but then what of the next caller, who said, 'A brown-haired girl from your school helped me out in a pinch. I'd love to enroll my daughter there.' What am I supposed to—?"

"If anyone's being a pest, just say that our faith forbids it."

"And for matters where neither are sufficient?!"

"Worst comes to worst, we can always pressure the cops and papers into sweeping stuff under the rug. For now, just note down every call. We'll compile 'em all and give Klaus a report later."

While Rage was answering her questions, he continued moving his pen and addressing envelopes. After writing out over twenty of them without so much as looking, he tossed them in a box. Then, after scooping up the mountain of receipts lying in the corner of the office, he tallied them up in a flash and recorded the sum in a ledger.

Lazy as the young man looked, his skills were the real deal.

When they heard the sound of an engine out front, he looked up. "Oh, nice, that order of bullets and truth serum came in. Get out there and collect it. Oh, right, and if Klaus happens to come by later, tell him that the roof'll be fixed next week."

"P-prithee tell, why? Why is there so much work that needs doing?"

"Well, it was a little better back in the Inferno days." Rage sighed with a faraway look in his eyes. "But ever since it became Lamplight, the building repairs and incidents out in town have started multiplying…"

That made a lot of sense.

From what Lan could recall, Klaus and the girls had a habit of going on rampages both in Heat Haze Palace and out in Arranq. They'd once fired a weapon called the Human Hurling Apparatus over in a distant corner of the city. It made sense that not all of their antics had gone unwitnessed.

Rage was the one who made those problems go away.

The manor's repairs were similar. While the girls could handle minor fixes themselves, any time there was major work that needed professionals, Klaus told Rage, and it was Rage who dealt with the contractors.

"…Hm? 'Since it became Lamplight,' thou didst say?"

A question dawned on Lan as she continued making her way through her pile of work.

"I take it thou hast worked reception since Inferno was here, then?"

"Just for two years, but yeah. We called ourselves Cleaning Services, Inc. back then. People said that with one phone call, we could make the nation's garbage disappear."

"Color me jealous. 'Twould be an honor, getting to deal with such legendary spies."

"Oh, sure. They always got me souvenirs and made small talk with me. A lot of them were easier to get along with than ol' Klaus, that's for sure."

"Thou hast no love for Sir Klaus?"

"Doesn't he kinda scare you? I can never tell what that guy's thinking. I still get nervous talking to him."

Rage grinned, his hands never once stopping.

He didn’t mean any harm by it. Klaus wasn’t the most sociable man around, so it was little wonder that they hadn’t bonded much.

“The rest of the team used to invite me out for meals and stuff. Only just once or twice, but still.” Rage smiled as he reminisced on the past. “Firewalker—Gerde, that is—probably did it the most.”

That was a spy who’d made an impact on Lan, too.

She was the battle-hardened old woman who’d trained Avian’s Vindo and imparted her techniques to him.

“…I see.”

Thinking about her old teammate sent a dagger through her heart.

She went back to her paperwork and picked up a file to try to clear her thoughts.

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Klaus used his cane and comparatively better-off left leg for balance as he made his way down the twilit road. His cane clacked every time it struck the cobbled street.

The children going down the road gave him pitying looks before getting scolded by their mothers. It made Klaus realize just how much pain he was showing. He let out a small exhale. It had been a long time since he’d last been injured so badly. He’d even had to use a wheelchair for much of his stay in Fend.

To be quite frank, there was nothing he wanted more than to let his injuries heal so he could be ready for his next mission.

Yet he headed to the dueling grounds all the same.

He and Dugwin were hardly close, but as a spy, this was a conversation he needed to have.

The memory running through Klaus’s head was from back when he was just thirteen, when “Firewalker” Gerde had been training him.

Gerde like to spend her nights getting sloshed in the Heat Haze Palace lounge, drinking the night away all on her own and putting away row after row of beer bottles. The other residents couldn't stand the way it made the hallway reek of booze and tobacco. They got worried about her from time to time, but all her medical checkups said that she was the picture of health, so the rest of the team could do nothing to stop her and only trembled in fear of the immortal old bag.

One time, Klaus hung out with her on one of her binges.

As part of his training, she forced him to make her a vast spread of snacks.

"I always see you drinking, Granny G. Is beer really that good?"

"Let's just say you'll understand when you're older, sonny."

The elderly woman's body was plated in muscle, and she gave him an amused smile as she held a beer bottle.

Klaus reached for a bottle as well out of curiosity, but Gerde smacked his hand. She wasn't about to let him have any.

"Inebriation is a sacred thing, you see," she said.

"What?"

"It's not just beer. There are all sorts of cultures that regard drunkenness as divine, and there are loads of ways to get there. Cannabis is outlawed these days, but there are some places that used to use it in holy rites. Some people smoke and drink, some go to saunas, others play and dance to music all through the night. Mania and intoxication, that's the stuff. There are some states you can only reach when you've thrown all reason to the wind."

"……Huh."

"When you get to be my age, your dead friends start outnumbering the living ones. When I drink, it lets me talk to the people I've lost, and it gives me the strength to face tomorrow."

At the time, Klaus had understood less than half of what she was saying.

What she said next, though, had lingered on in his heart.

“For people to move forward, they need intoxication and mania—they need festivals.”

Her voice had been spellbound, and her expression was one of rapture.

Those weren’t the nonsensical ramblings of a drunk woman. There was something beautiful about watching Gerde drinking straight from the bottle.

Klaus felt a little ashamed of his own prejudice. “You can have a festival just drinking some beer?” he asked teasingly, which earned him a roar of laughter from Gerde. “When’d you get such a mouth on you, Little Klaus?”

Visions of that moment he’d shared with Gerde filled his mind as he walked.

Then, right when the salty sea breeze hit his nose, a warehouse came into view. It was supposed to be a temporary holding site for containers from overseas, but due to an importing firm suspending business, it was currently sitting unused. The structure was so big, you could fit an entire house in there and have room to spare.

Dugwin was already waiting for him.

Duel or not, those sunglasses never left his face. His hands were empty of any visible weapons. He wanted to keep his cards close to his chest for as long as he could.

When Klaus came in under the harsh glare of the lights affixed to the warehouse ceiling, Dugwin turned his gaze on him.

Klaus reflected on that conversation with Gerde again.

I know I was at a beautiful event not too long ago, but—

The way the paper lanterns had filled the night sky up at the northland fishing village Lantern Festival had been downright magical. It wasn’t hard to see how releasing those innocent flames into the sky was an act akin to prayer.

However, Klaus had found that it was missing something.

What he was looking for was fiercer mania. Deeper intoxication.

"—will our battle be a more beautiful festival still?"

They exchanged no other words.

Dugwin charged at Klaus without warning, and the deathmatch began.

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The girls had split up into two groups: the ones rushing straight to Klaus's side, and the ones bringing Lan.

The latter group immediately got to work destroying Lan's barricade with blasting powder. When faced with a problem, their default strategy was to bulldoze straight through it. (It went without saying, but the damage they caused was far too severe for them to fix on their own. Once again, they'd made more work for Rage.) When they realized that Lan had escaped out the window, they immediately began a manhunt. They quickly confirmed that Lan was at Heat Haze Palace's gateway—the Garmouth Seminary reception desk—and moved in to capture her. "Prithee, why?!" Lan cried as the girls tied her up with rope, tossed her onto a flatbed trolley, and carted her off. Rage's screams ("She still has tons of work to do!!") never reached them.

They dashed all the way over to the warehouse by the port.

"How's the fight going?!" Sybilla asked as she rushed in with Lan in tow.

"They only just got started…," replied Grete, who'd been watching the fight from inside the warehouse the whole time.

The girls all had their eyes on the battle unfolding in the middle of the storeroom.

"…but as of right now, Dugwin is winning!"

Klaus and Dugwin were going at each other hard.

Dugwin's weapons of choice were concealed armaments. Every time he lashed out, something gleamed at the tip of his fist. He'd affixed some sort of bladed instruments to his nails, and it was safe to assume they were coated in poison. He made the majority of his strikes with his fists using military-style close-quarters attacks, but he also managed to weave needle throws in between his rain of punches.

Those were counterintelligence assassination techniques—moves designed to eliminate an enemy with as little impact on the people nearby as possible.

Meanwhile, Klaus was using his cane to fend off Dugwin's attacks. It didn't look like anything more than an ordinary aluminum walking stick, yet it was blocking Dugwin's fierce blows unerringly. It must have been made from an alloy designed for self-defense weaponry.

Still, it was obvious to anyone looking that Klaus was on the back foot. His legs still hadn't healed, and each one of Dugwin's punches sent him skidding backward. He never quite fell over, but every time he lost his balance, Dugwin followed up with a merciless rain of steel needles, and Klaus had to devote his full attention to knocking them out of the air.

Klaus was in trouble in more ways than one.

On a number of occasions, he'd already had to resort to blocking the needles with his arms. Several were still protruding out of his sleeves. It was unclear if any of them had pierced his skin, but if they had, their poison was probably coursing through his veins that very moment.

Erna had just gotten there. "I-is Dugwin really that strong?" she asked with wide eyes. Even Annette, who could never be found without a smile plastered on her face, seemed breathless for once. "I can barely even track his movements, yo."

Now, if Klaus had been in peak condition, there were any number of ways he could have countered Dugwin's assault. Even so, none of the girls had expected Dugwin's fighting skills to be quite so honed.

"Y'know, I fought a CIM officer once," Sybilla said in shock, "and I think Dugwin might be on that same level."

The CIM was the Fend Commonwealth's intelligence agency, and the man she was talking about—"Armorer" Meredith—was the leader of Vanajin, its largest counterintelligence unit. His saber skills had been enough to overpower Monika, and he'd nearly driven Sybilla to the brink as well. She'd defeated him on paper, but he hadn't been fighting all-out, and even so, she'd essentially gotten crushed.

Now, it was becoming clear that Dugwin's skills were on par with a management-level operative from one of the world's great powers.

The girls fixed their attention on his movements.

Dugwin stepped back, putting some distance between himself and Klaus—then revealed it to have been a fake-out and closed back in. From there, he made it look like he was going to charge at Klaus head-on, but that was a feint as well. When Klaus braced himself, Dugwin slid around to his blind spot and lashed out with his leg like a sickle cleaving through wheat.

Lily shuddered. "Wh-what am I even watching? That speed of his can't be real…"

"No, we've seen that before. We know those moves," Monika answered calmly.

Thea was standing beside her, and on seeing Monika's reaction, she too reached the same conclusion. Dugwin had told her about it himself.

"Firewalker trained me and my people once. All the others tapped out and had to spend a few days in the hospital, but I didn't respect her any less for it."

She gulped as the memory came back to her. "……"

That footwork was enough to overwhelm even Klaus.

Monika was right, they had seen it before. It was a movement technique designed to evade bullets, slip past attacks, and leave opponents with no room to breathe. The stance combined offense and defense into one and granted its user the power of immortality.

"Dugwin was trained by Firewalker, too."

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Meanwhile, Klaus was also sensing the depth of Dugwin's talent.

He'd fought the man once before, but Dugwin hadn't been thinking straight at the time, and Klaus had caught him in a trap and easily trounced him. Now, though, Dugwin was offering no such openings.

The thing that made Dugwin such a nasty opponent were those jet-black sunglasses he wore. Klaus had wondered what they were for at first, but after fighting him, he realized that they were there to obscure where Dugwin was looking. After carefully observing his foe, Dugwin always threw his needles at the moment when their focus was most lacking. The sunglasses were there to conceal when Dugwin was about to strike.

Having clashed with Holytree in earnest now, Klaus was certain of it. That man was, without a doubt, one of the finest agents their nation had.

His heart stirred.

I suspected as much, he thought with a nod in between parrying blows.

Klaus swung his cane at the side of Dugwin's head to try to keep him at bay, but Dugwin dodged the attack with ease. Klaus's swing went wide, and Dugwin wasn't the sort of man to let an opening like

that slip by. Dugwin poured his entire weight into an elbow strike, and the force of the hit sent Klaus reeling backward yet again.

Klaus would have keeled over if he hadn't slammed his cane into the ground at the last minute to keep his balance. Although he got ready to launch a counterattack, he knew that he couldn't afford to carelessly rush at an opponent like Dugwin.

He's polished those moves. I suspected that Granny G had been forcing people to take her training based on what happened to Vindo, but I had no idea that Dugwin was one of them.

Inferno had made sure to impart their techniques upon their countrymen. Klaus had felt a hint of sadness upon learning that he wasn't the only one, but he'd gotten past those childish feelings and now saw it as a point of pride. Guido had once trained Captain Welter Barth from the Military Intelligence Department, Veronika had placed her hope in Thea, and there was a chance that the rest of the team had taken similar steps as well.

Inferno wasn't going to disappear quietly. Countless people had inherited their embers, and Gerde had been the most proactive of all about passing them down.

Maybe she realized that her time was up.

What must it have felt like for her to grow old and wither away?

Klaus wished desperately that he could see her just one more time and ask.

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The girls watched the duel in silence.

The murderous passion with which Dugwin was trying to strike Klaus down was so intense they'd forgotten all about stopping the fight. They were all frozen in awe at the man's prowess.

"Gerde passed her technique down to Teach and Vindo," Thea said in a hoarse whisper as they stood there, "and Vindo passed it to Monika."

None of the Lamplight girls had interacted with Gerde themselves, but they'd all heard the legends.

"Even after they pass, spies leave all sorts of information behind…"

Thea felt that keenly. "But we already knew that," Erna followed up. "Our big brothers and big sisters on Avian gave us so much."

Lan had simply been watching from the back, and she pursed her lips tight. "……"

The duel had gone on for more than long enough. Both combatants had been pulling out all the stops, and it was getting to the point when even experts got tired.

Klaus was no exception, and with a pained look, he skidded to a stop.

Sensing an opening, Dugwin fired off a powerful punch.

"I have to ask—"

Klaus's lips moved.

"—how much longer should I keep playing along with this game?"

It was a surprise attack, and a brutal one at that.

Klaus had been staggered, having run out of steam, but he swapped his cane to a backhand grip and slammed it right below Dugwin's jaw. Dugwin lurched forward, and Klaus blasted him away with a cross-counter thrust.

"""""_____!!"""""

The girls watching all knew what had just happened. Klaus had used his favorite trick—waiting for his opponent to show their whole hand, then turning the tables on them in one fell swoop.

Had all his struggles up until then just been an act?

"Teach is finally making his counterattack…" "I knew he was holding back!" "He can fight just fine!"

Klaus wasn't about to stop at that one attack.

Dugwin had only taken a single blow, but he was already choking. The hit to his windpipe was making it hard for him to breathe.

As he lapsed into a coughing fit, Klaus swung his cane at the side of Dugwin's head. Dugwin hurriedly leaped back and tried to put some distance between them, but Klaus didn't let up.

He fired off six attacks in rapid succession.

After smashing his cane into Dugwin's undefended gut, he waited for Dugwin to crumple before delivering a knee strike to his face. From there, Klaus lashed out with his cane, swinging it from right to left, then back to right. His targets were the backs of Dugwin's hands, and the weapons Dugwin had been hiding all spilled out. Finally, once Dugwin was unable to fight back, Klaus hooked Dugwin's legs with his cane and toppled him off-balance. Then, right as Dugwin crashed face-first into the ground, Klaus drove his cane into the back of Dugwin's head.

Dugwin's nose and sunglasses made a dull sound as they shattered.

"Ah…"

One of the onlooking girls let out a squeamish groan.

Those weren't the considerate blows Klaus used when dealing with the girls. The violence Klaus had just inflicted was designed to crush his opponent's body and spirit alike.

In just a few seconds, the fight had been decided.

Both of Dugwin's hands were injured. Klaus had hit them hard, and even if Dugwin could still move them, there was no way he'd be able to use his concealed weapons like before. That wasn't even accounting for the fact that said weapons were strewn across the ground, and there was zero chance Klaus would give Dugwin an opening to collect them again.

And yet Dugwin stood up anyway.

After swatting away Klaus's cane, he bounded off like a shot and promptly righted his stance. He tossed aside his broken sunglasses and wiped away the blood dribbling from his crooked nose.

He still just barely had the will to fight, but he couldn't even clench his fists properly. There was no way he could compete with Klaus like that.

"Dugwin, that's enough! Just call it off!!" Thea cried as she rushed over. "There was never any meaning to be found in this duel. If this goes on, one of you might actually—"

“Stay out of my way!!”

Dugwin’s bellow echoed through the warehouse.

“Keep your impudent logic out of this. Spare me your flimsy reasoning. You would stop me for THAT?!”

“……!”

Thea froze in her tracks.

As Dugwin howled, his eyes burned with hatred and overflowed with sorrow.

“You think those hollow words! Can fix the grief burning in my heart?!”

His was the intense, feral roar of a wild beast.

As it echoed off the warehouse roof, though, it struck the Lamplight girls right in the heart. Was he shrieking? Wailing, perhaps? No, those words failed to capture the anguish in his bellows.

“BONFIRE!!” Blood streamed down Dugwin’s face as he glared at Klaus. “Why weren’t you there with her?! Why didn’t you become Avian’s boss?! If you did, that whole tragedy could have been prevented!!”

“That’s hindsight talking.” Klaus was stone-faced. He looked at Dugwin calmly, not once mocking Dugwin’s unfounded attempts to shift the blame. “You can keep coming at me for as long as you need to.”

With a fierce yell, Dugwin barreled at Klaus again. He held his fists aloft, throwing out one violent punch after another and leaving him wide open the whole time.

“You haven’t even!! Avenged my little sister yet!!”

With every attack, he let out a tearful cry.

Klaus wasn’t bothering to counterattack anymore. He was the picture of serenity as he watched Dugwin flail his fists.

“And why!! Did my sister have to die?!”

Still Dugwin howled.

Upon seeing his reaction, the Lamplight girls finally understood what the duel’s true purpose had been.

Dugwin didn’t actually hold a grudge against Klaus.

“Why!! Did she have to get erased from this world?!”

All he wanted was somewhere to direct the grief of losing his beloved sister. He needed one, or he wouldn’t be able to go on. Thea had already told the others just how much love Dugwin had poured into Pharma.

Now, Klaus was taking that pain for him. After all, he knew what it felt like to lose the people he loved more than anyone else.

As comprehension dawned on the spectators, one of them broke out of the group at a dash. “Lily?!” Sybilla tried to caution her, but Lily continued her charge.

Everyone assumed that she was trying to stop the fight, but that wasn’t it at all.

“Dugwin! I’ve got your back!”

She fired off a gorgeous dropkick at Klaus.

“He’s RIGHT!!”

When Klaus parried her attack with his cane, she let out another yell.

“Shouldn’t you have known, Teach?! With that freaky intuition of yours?!”

“I’m not some god.” Klaus remained calm, like he’d anticipated Lily joining the fray. “There are plenty of things I don’t know.”

“But you’re supposed to be the Greatest Spy in the World! I guess you really did just make that title up for yourself, huh?!”

Lily hit him with harsher words than she ever had before and lashed out with her blunt training knife. She was shouting the same

things Dugwin was, because she also needed someone to blame for her overflowing sorrow. Her accusations were nonsense, yet she shouted them all the same. Her eyes were wet with tears, too.

The rest of the girls pursed their lips at the spectacle.

That was just the thing—Dugwin was by no means the only person lamenting those senseless deaths.

"I'm comin' in, too!" "Me too!" "Likewise."

The next ones to come dashing in were Sybilla, Erna, and Thea.

Sybilla was the first to reach Klaus, and she fired off a front kick. "That's right!! Screw you! You shoulda ditched us and gone with Avian!"

Erna came in next with a teary headbutt. "Or you could have just become both team's bosses at once!"

Klaus didn't flinch. He held his cane sideways and blocked both attacks simultaneously. "As I recall," he said calmly, "none of you managed to save Avian, either."

Thea had finally caught up, and she tried to slap Klaus hard across the face. "That's because you didn't train us well enough!! Some teacher you are!!"

The tables had once more been turned.

Dugwin could still just barely move, and Lily, Sybilla, Erna, and Thea fell into formation to back him up. It was five against one now, and their waves of attacks put Klaus on the back foot. He was too busy defending himself to do anything else.

Even so, the girls kept shouting at him without letting up. "It's all your fault, Teach!" "You could have saved them!"

Right when they were about to force Klaus all the way back to the warehouse wall, though, one of the other girls made her move.

"Please, everyone! It isn't right to keep blaming the boss like that!"

Grete took off at an angry run and shoved Sybilla and Lily aside from behind.

As the girls' coordination fell apart, Annette charged in as well and hit Thea with a hip check. "The way I see it, Klaus couldn't leave Lamplight on its own because you all were too weak, yo!"

"Oh, be quiet!" Thea shot back, undaunted. "You think you're so much cleverer than us?!"

"Hrm?!"

"We *are* weak! And we've known that!! All along! Teach should have just abandoned us ages ago!"

Thea took Annette's attack head-on, then hurled her off to the side. "Ohhh?" Annette cried in surprise before making a beautiful landing.

Lily picked herself back up and shot a harsh glare at Grete. "Stay out of our way, you love-crazed nincompoop!"

"What did you just call me?!"

"This is the PERFECT time to get mad at Teach!"

"…Have you completely taken leave of your senses?"

Grete and Lily began grappling. Lily would normally have trounced her in any contest of strength, but with the shoulder wound she'd taken during their last mission, the two were evenly matched.

A fierce battle began unfolding.

Annette rammed Thea again. Erna grabbed Annette from the side and pinched her cheeks. As they all sparred, Sybilla put her tremendous powers of teamwork to use carefully helping Dugwin box Klaus in. Grete tried to protect Klaus, but she couldn't manage to break through Lily's interference.

Everyone was taking their sadness and using it as a bludgeon.

"Why did Vindo have to die?!" "Why didn't you save Vics?!" "I wish Big Brother Queneau had survived!" "I wanted to spend more time with Qulle, so why?! Why should I never get to see her again?!"

They released all their pent-up screams and mercilessly slapped whatever cheeks happened to be in front of them. The slapped party would then return the strike twice as hard. With each hit, another person's tears went flying through the air and mixed with everyone else's.

"It's because we're weak." Klaus's forlorn voice echoed through the frenzy. "We don't have the experience we need to change this world awash in pain!"

“You think that’s an excuse?! THAT’S NOT GOOD ENOUGH!!”

Then Dugwin’s bloodstained fist swooped in and tore Klaus’s words to ribbons.

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Friends were trading blows with friends, and as things in the warehouse got completely out of control, Monika and Sara spectated the whole thing from the sidelines.

“That’s quite the brawl, huh. Glad they’re enjoying themselves.”

“I—I guess…”

Monika sounded so nonchalant, all Sara could do was laugh in astonishment.

This was no duel between Dugwin and Klaus anymore. It was complete chaos. Lily and Sybilla had joined in to help Dugwin, but then all of a sudden, they started hitting each other. Similarly, Klaus’s backup of Annette and Grete began shoving each other around as well. There were no allies or enemies, just an all-out melee. Even Grete, who never let her modest demeanor slip, was no longer hiding her emotions.

Lan watched the unfolding chaos in horror. “Sh-should we not stop them?!” she called over to Monika and Sara, who were calmly chatting. “I daresay this could—”

“It’s probably fine. Beating each other up is basically business as usual for Lamplight.”

Theirs was a team that had spent days and nights attacking their boss, Klaus. As Monika and Sara saw it, a big fight between teammates was nothing to freak out about. If anything, this was a necessary ritual. Just like Dugwin, the members of Lamplight still craved targets to dump their grief onto.

“Hey, Sara,” Monika said as she continued watching the scuffle.

“Yeah?”

“You’re thinking about retiring, right?”

Sara gasped at how accurate Monika's callout was. She went red as she looked over. "I, um, I don't… B-but how?"

"You seriously thought you could hide it from me?" Monika grinned in amusement. "Don't worry, I get it. You're not trying to retire just yet, right? You're thinking about the future, for when you've got your feelings and your house in order. And when you do, you're hoping the rest of the team comes with you, with everyone having survived —do I have that about right?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much exactly what I was thinking…"

All of Monika's guesses were on the mark, and Sara gave Monika a resigned nod. She'd been planning on getting Monika's advice about it at some point, and while she hadn't expected Monika to see right through her, that was her second teacher for you.

"Makes sense. That's why you wanted everyone to think about what it meant to retire."

"Exactly. I just think it's a fair option to have on the table."

"Yeah, true… Guess I can't deny that."

"But seeing *this* made me realize something."

Sara took another look at her clashing teammates and laughed despite herself.

"It isn't time for us to retire yet."

Her voice was firm.

"We need to overcome our sadness, take all the things we've been entrusted with, and move forward with them. And someday, we'll entrust someone else with the proof that we lived as spies!"

"Yeah, true that."

Monika nodded as though that was what she'd wanted to confirm all along.

Neither of them had ever been particularly attached to the field of espionage, but now both of their hearts were full of purpose. They wanted to protect their friends and to change the world. They wanted to avenge the comrades they'd lost.

Make no mistake, there were sure to be times when they were tormented by more agony than they could bear. They would spend

countless nights dispirited and disheartened.

But when that happened, all they had to do was let those lamentations out.

"Screw you," they could shout at each other, and "This is all your fault," they could wail, just so long as they kept moving forward—moving forward until the day they could entrust someone else with the evidence that they, too, were there.

Monika chuckled. "Well, if we want to get over our sadness, we'd better get in there."

"That's right, the others need our help!"

With that, the two of them took off in tandem and launched a pair of dropkicks at Klaus, who was still fighting Dugwin.

They bellowed their own grievances, "Why am I never going to get to see Miss Pharma again?!" and "And what's up with that 'magnificent' crap?! There you go, always trying to play it cool!!" as they dove into the madness.

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Festivals and violence were more linked than one might think.

There were events around the world so extreme that people died at them, and even setting those aside, there were plenty more where people got hurt year in and year out. There were festivals where great crowds all ran down steep slopes, festivals where fistfights were allowed for just that one day, festivals where they set heifers loose in the streets, and festivals where everyone threw produce at each other.

Their origins all differed, but sociologists held that they were all designed to give people release.

In the warehouse, the spies were giving in to their mania, too.

As people who lurked in the darkness and did all their work behind the scenes, this was a festival that shouldn't have been possible. They'd cast aside their usual reason and were raising hell the way

beasts did. They even took the complaints about their teammates they generally kept suppressed and laid them all out in the open as they cursed the world's callousness.

Lily hit Klaus's shoulder while crying her eyes out, Grete and Thea slapped each other as they sobbed, Sybilla and Annette shouted themselves hoarse with obscenities, and Erna let out a wordless scream as she pounded on Sara's chest. Monika smiled provocatively as she punched Dugwin, and Dugwin dodged her attack and shot a verbal assault back.

Being weak was agony, and they hated how cruelly the world had ripped Avian from them.

That rage turned into violent feelings of, "Screw this!" and there was nowhere for them to direct those emotions but at the person across from them. "Why?!" they wailed as they blindly swung their fists side-to-side.

Eventually, though, the spies' mania reached its end.

Many of the girls had suffered grave injuries during their time in Fend, and they collapsed one after another as their strength failed them. They lay on the cold warehouse floor, chests heaving as they tried to catch their breath. Sweat dripped from their entire bodies and soaked the floor beneath them.

One of them went so still it was like they were unconscious, then another. Adrenaline from all the excitement was the only thing that had kept them going, and as soon as they stopped once, they could no longer so much as lift a finger.

Amid it all, the last ones standing were Dugwin and Klaus.

Dugwin had yet to treat his broken nose, and he glared at Klaus with raw hostility in his eyes. Klaus, in contrast, was still just unflaggingly calm.

"Don't push yourself," Klaus said. "If you keep going, you'll make that injury worse."

"BONFIRE!"

Klaus's composure only stoked the flames of Dugwin's wrath. Though he was barely standing, he summoned up the last of his strength to raise his fist.

"You bastard!! If you just had your act together—"

Then, an unexpected figure stepped in to stop his final attack.

"Prithee, stop this."

A loud clap rang out as they blocked his punch with their palm.

Lan's bandaged hand wrapped itself around Dugwin's fist.

With a defeated smile, she looked at Dugwin with sympathy in her eyes. The voice that spilled from her mouth was achingly gentle. "The fault lies solely with Serpent. Blaming each other will bring us naught but misery."

"……? Who the hell are you?"

"I am 'Cloud Drift' Lan. The final member of Avian."

Dugwin's shoulder twitched.

He knew all about her. She was the girl who'd been closer than anyone when Pharma died. The sole survivor, the one that Avian had saved.

Lan kept her gaze fixed on Dugwin, not reaching up to wipe the tears flowing from her eyes. "I, too, have shed tears till I could shed no more. Verily, my heart lay in tatters. But I understand now. And I wish to give voice to my feelings…"

She wept as she cried out.

"Thou'rt right! Why *should* my Avian brothers and sisters have to die?!"

After releasing Dugwin’s hand, she bowed her head low.

“I beseech thee, allow me to join Summit!”

The madness the girls brought about had given birth to an urge in her.

Theirs had been a grand banquet, with reason cast aside and true selves laid bare, and getting sucked into that heady maelstrom had allowed her to see her feelings clearly.

She was so scared she couldn’t bear it, yet even so, she wanted to keep moving forward as a spy.

She wanted to change the shape of the world that had stolen Avian’s lives.

Dugwin didn’t so much as flinch at Lan’s sudden request. He stared at her, then stared up at the warehouse ceiling and let out a sigh of exhaustion.

“What’s it going to be, Holytree?”

Dugwin wasn’t saying anything, so Klaus urged him on.

“Are you really going to retire? My legs may have been injured, but even so, there aren’t many spies who could actually wound me.”

Dugwin’s attacks had genuinely landed on Klaus. The damage amounted to little more than scratches, but each one represented a moment where Dugwin had exceeded Klaus’s expectations.

It would sting to let a man like that simply leave.

“Are you really satisfied that you’ve done all you were meant to?”



"I just told you." Dugwin scooped his broken shades off the warehouse floor. He must have felt ill at ease without them, as he immediately slipped them on again. "It's not good enough. Not good enough to end on."

"I see. Magnificent."

That was all that needed to be said.

Dugwin turned to Lan much more quietly. "I'm going to be testing you later. Come by once your hands are healed," her ordered her, to which Lan replied with a brisk, "Understood."

"And don't think I'll go easy on you just because you were friends with my sister. You need to at least be able to call me Big Brother, or you'll never become the object of my affection."

"Hm…? I understand not. Is that part of the test, pray tell?"

"Also, drop the silly speech pattern. It's obnoxious."

"What?! I—I shall do no such thing!"

The two of them continued chatting as they left the warehouse.

They weren't giving off any of the sorrow they had been before. They'd let it all out. They wouldn't be able to forget everything that had happened, but this had given them an opportunity to get their feelings in order.

"The things I have to do sometimes."

Klaus heaved a heavy sigh as the tension drained from his body.

Holytree retiring would have been a heavy blow to the Din Republic. That battle just now had been a necessary measure to keep him from quitting.

However, Klaus hadn't foreseen that it would reignite Lan's spirit as well. The girls had done a fantastic job bringing her there.

Lily was still lying sprawled out on the ground, and she shot him a grin. "Heh… Looks like everything…turned out for the best…"

"I do have some thoughts about the verbal abuse you were dishing out back there," Klaus said.

"Urk…"

"But maybe it's best to let bygones be bygones. It was important that we get this chance to let it all out." He ordered the girls to get

back on their feet. “Since we’re all here, how about we stop by a restaurant? It’ll be my treat.”

The instant he made the offer, the girls erupted into a cheer. “““Woohoo!””” they cried, eyes gleaming as they lent each other hands getting back on their feet. It was hard to believe their smiling faces belonged to the same people who’d been screaming at each other just moments ago. “We should go somewhere with good meat!” “No, seafood!” they said and began picking out where they wanted to go.

The girls eventually started walking, and it was Sara who stood at their rear. As she watched her teammates take big strides, she clenched her fist in front of her chest and spoke with confidence to remind herself of the decision she’d just made.

“It’s no time to say goodbye yet.”

The girls weren’t going to resign.

They were going to overcome their sadness and keep moving forward.

Bonus Short Story

The day after the whole debacle about Lan's departure and retirement, as the girls were lounging in the main hall, Erna came running in all flustered. "I have big news!!"

Not a moment after she opened the door, her foot got caught on a snag in the carpet. "YEEEEEEEEEEP!!" After tumbling into a gorgeous headfirst slide, she slid all the way to the center of the room.

"What's got you all worked up?" Lily asked.

"Y-you won't believe what I just found at the bookstore!!"

Erna had kept a tight grip on the magazine she was holding all through her fall, and she held it out as she pressed down on her aching face.

Its title read: *"Shocking! An Unabridged Guide to World's Weirdos, Vol. 1"*

It was an incredibly trashy publication, a gossip rag for the masses filled with all sorts of dubious information. It wasn't good for anything but sparking conversations at the bar.

The girls opened it up and all gasped in unison.

Inside, there were some oddly familiar names.

"Lillian the Devil: Responsible for Thirty-Four Mitario Murders! The Vilest Fiend in Human History!!"

“High Priest Erina: The Radiant Messenger of God who Alighted on a Luxury Liner!!”

The two-page spread featured exaggerated depictions of a pair of events Lily and Erna had been involved with.

The first was the time when, back in the United States of Mouzaia’s capital, Lily had taken the blame for a series of Purple Ant’s murders in order to keep the situation under control. All the rumors about her had been wildly embellished, making her out to be a villainess of the highest order. Some people held that she was still alive, and her specter hung over the United States to that day.

Then, there was the time when Erna had—for reasons unknown—been installed as the leader of a cult during a seajacking on a luxury liner headed for Mouzaia. She’d become something of a mentor to the Sun Attendant Order, and after they parted ways, the Order had made a big splash in the Mouzaia film industry. Whenever its members got interviewed, they always told tales of the blond angel they’d run into who changed their lives.

The girls always knew they’d made a stir, but seeing a spotlight on it was something else entirely. The portraits on the page bore little resemblance to their real-life counterparts, but their hair colors and general builds were accurate.

Thea and Monika doubled over with laughter.

“I have some serious concerns about your ability to continue working as a spy, considering your newfound fame.”

“Oh my god, that’s hilarious! Ooh, there’s more stuff in here. Let’s have a look-see, shall we?”

The two of them smirked as they turned the page.

The next spread featured another two characters.

“Moni-Moni, Criminal Supreme: The Terrorist who Shook the World by Killing Prince Darryn!!”

“Don Theatika: The Legendary Fires of War Secret Society and their Ravishing Leader!!”

“”.....””

The two of them gawked in horror.

Considering the scope of the situation they’d caused, though, that was a foreseeable enough consequence. Monika went without saying, as she’d willingly framed herself for murdering the Fend Commonwealth’s crown prince, and Thea had made an international name for herself by manipulating public opinion in the ensuing chaos and being the first to identify the killer.

The good news was, so much of the information in the articles was wrong that it was unlikely to have a meaningful impact on their spy work going forward. The names were eerily close to being accurate, but that was all.

As Thea and Monika found themselves at a loss for words, the peanut gallery chimed in with thoughts of their own.

“I’m disappointed in you all, yo! You suck at being spies!” said Annette.

“Lucky bastards. Why don’t I get a cool nickname?!” asked Sybilla.

“Oh, dear. There are so many problems with this…,” Grete mumbled.

“I—I guess Lamplight’s quite the team, huh? We’ve got a Devil, a High Priest, a Criminal Supreme, and a Don,” noted Sara.

The girls were still sharing their opinions when Klaus happened to come in. They handed him the magazine, and after glancing at it, he let out a long sigh.

“Please don’t give them cause to write any more of these.”

Those words came from the bottom of his heart.

However, the magazine had described itself as “Vol. 1,” which presupposed the existence of a sequel.

None of them wanted to think about what “Vol. 2” might look like.

Afterword

Takemachi here. It's been a while.

This here is *Spy Classroom*'s fourth short-story collection and the coda to the harsh series of events that was its second season.

First off, I'd like to explain myself. I suspect some of you readers are thinking, "What the hell, Takemachi? SS3 came out in October 2022, Volume 9 was basically an intermission and came out in January 2023, and now with SS4 in March, the main plot hasn't progressed at all!" To that I say, you're absolutely right. I'm very sorry.

The reason that happened is because I wanted to have books 7 and 8 come out as close to each other as possible, so I begged my editor to delay the short story collection to make that happen. The short stories come out in *Dragon Magazine* once every two months, and a lot of them had built up by the time season two finished, so that's why the release schedule was so short-story heavy for a bit there. Things will be moving at a breakneck pace when Volume 10 comes out, so I hope you'll forgive me.

Now, I do have a couple notes on each short story I'd like to share.

The Academies' Case, ft. Lily: I could fill a whole book with stories about going back to the academies. It's really quite a pickle.

Another Spy Team's Case, ft. Thea: This one was heavy on the comedy. Out of all the short stories this time around, this one was my favorite.

The Foreign Intelligence Office Management's Case, ft. Erna: Klaus and Amelie are so darn scrawny. Go eat more!

A Life Outside of Espionage's Case, ft. Sybilla: So many Lamplight members owe her so much.

No Time to Leave/No Time for Goodbye: He actually appeared back in Volume 1, but Rage hasn't appeared since. He's the Heat Haze Palace manager, and working with him was one of Lan's top options through the very end.

Next, I have some people I'd like to thank. When I was writing this book, there was a really helpful comment that the anime's script supervisor, Shinichi Inozume, made shortly after Volume 6 came out. "Are you really done digging into Pharma?"

"You're so right!" I thought, and as soon as I gave her a brother, SS4 really came together. Thank you so much for that.

Also, I know I keep saying it, but I really am grateful to Tomari. I know that doing all that work on the anime must have been taxing, so thank you for the wonderful illustrations. That group shot of Avian is something I've been dying to see.

……I'm probably not going to get many more opportunities to write about Avian, am I? That's sad to think about.

The next short story collection is going to be a little bit special. It's finally time to tell the story of the spy team you've all been dying to see. That said, Volume 10 will be coming out first. The *Spy Classroom* anime is airing right now, so I hope you watch it while you wait. Until then, that's all from me.

Takemachi

First Published

The Spy Academies' Case

***Dragon Magazine*, May 2022 edition Another Spy Team's Case**

***Dragon Magazine*, July 2022 edition The Foreign Intelligence Office Management's Case *Dragon Magazine*, September 2022 edition A Life Outside of Espionage's Case**

***Dragon Magazine*, November 2022 edition Everything else newly written**

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