Takemachi

ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari

09



SPY CLASSROOM

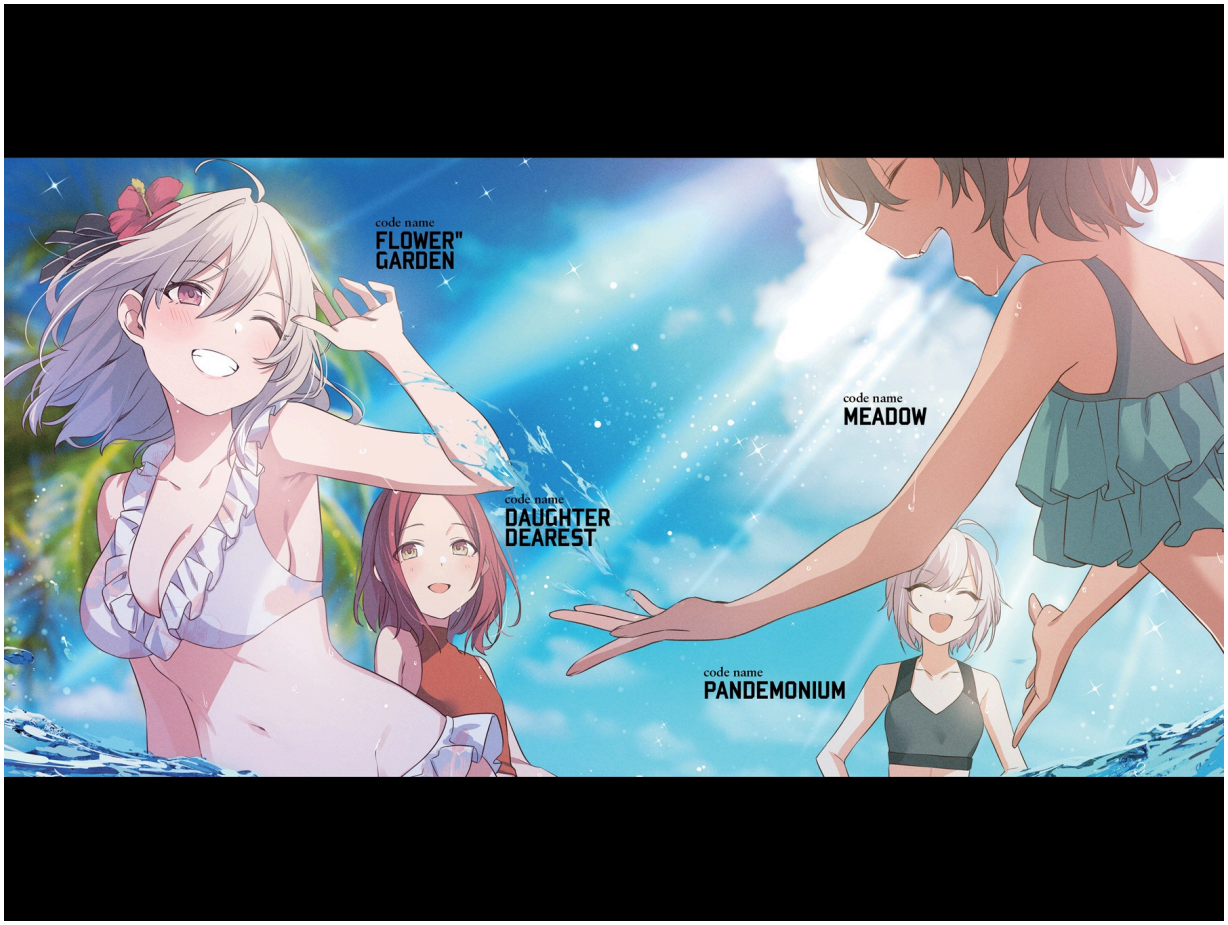
Annette and Her Many Knickknacks

SPY CLASSROOM 09

Annette and Her Many Knickknacks






code name
FLOWER"
GARDEN
code name
DAUGHTER
DEAREST
code name
MEADOW
code name
PANDEMONIUM


A Girl Undercover...?





SPY CLASSROOM 09

Annette and Her Many Knickknacks

Takemachi
ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari

YEN ON
New York

COPYRIGHT

Spy Classroom, Vol. 9
Translation by Nathaniel Thrasher
Cover art by Tomari
Assistance with firearm research: Asaura This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SPY KYOSHITSU Vol. 9 <<GARAKUTA>> NO ANNETT
©Takemachi, Tomari 2023
First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2025 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 6th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: July 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Anna Powers
Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names:
Takemachi, author. | Tomari, Meron, illustrator. | Thrasher, Nathaniel Hiroshi, translator.
Title: Spy classroom / Takemachi ; illustrated by Tomari ; translation by Nathaniel Thrasher.
Other titles: Spy kyoushitsu. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021021119 | ISBN 9781975322403 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975322427 (v. 2 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: | CYAC: Spies—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.T343 Sp 2021 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021021119

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9150-8 (paperback)
978-1-9753-9151-5 (ebook)

CONTENTS

SPY CLASSROOM

Specialized lessons for an impossible mission
Code name: Knickknacks

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

The Thirteenth Day (Part One)

Chapter 1

The Islanders

Chapter 2

The Navy

Chapter 3

The Pirates

Epilogue

The Thirteenth Day (Part Two)

Next Mission

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

CONTENTS

Character Profiles

Prologue

The Thirteenth Day (Part One)

Chapter 1

The Islanders

Chapter 2

The Navy

Chapter 3

The Pirates

Epilogue

The Thirteenth Day (Part Two)

Next Mission

Afterword

[redacted]

CHARACTER PROFILES



Bonfire

Klaus

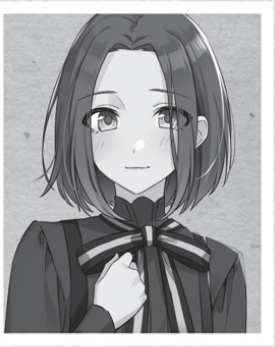
Lamplight's founder and the Greatest Spy in the World.



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.

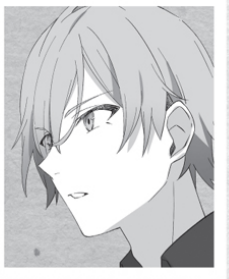


Fool

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

Team Serpent from the Galgad Empire

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



Prologue

The Thirteenth Day (Part One)

"Marnioce is an island that sits to the northwest of the Lylat Kingdom.

"Kuat Harbor is a three-hour train ride from the nation's capital, Pilca, or just a short trip by bus from the Regiane Airport. Once you reach the harbor, a one-hour ferry ride will get you right to Marnioce.

"The island's history is a vivid representation of the shifting power balance between the Galgad Empire, Fend Commonwealth, and Lylat Kingdom. It sits right between the three mighty nations, and with every war, the island gets passed between their hands, much to the dismay of the islanders.

"It was the Galgad Empire that held control up until the Great War, but during the war, it was seized by Vice-Admiral Grenier of the Lylat Kingdom. Now, under the terms of the post-war treaty, the island remains as Lylat Kingdom territory.

"Its biggest attractions are the Confezza Beach, a sandy dune where angels are said to dance, and the Queronne Caves, a series of labyrinthine caverns that legend holds were once used as a pirate hideout.

"The island has a small population of just under two thousand, but due to its aforementioned history, the Lylat Kingdom has a naval base there, and the area around the base is full of establishments designed to cater to those serving there, including a restaurant that serves wonderful appetizers made from local seafood and a nightclub so classy, it puts those in the Lylat capital to shame. No

matter how long you spend there, you'll never get bored. (Details can be found on the following page.)

"Whether you're looking to have your heart cleansed by Mother Nature or to paint the town red, Marnioce has you covered. Anyone who visits is sure to enjoy unparalleled relaxation. Book your trip today!"

The above was an excerpt from *A Travel Enthusiast's Guide to the World: Lylat Kingdom Edition*.

◇◇◇

Klaus sipped some iced tea from his deck chair as he watched the evening sun make its descent. The travel guide described the Confezza Beach as being a place where angels danced, and it sat before him looking even more beautiful than the reviews had made it sound. Before his eyes, the sea that had been a nearly transparent shade of blue that very afternoon slowly took on hues of black and purple.

Before long, a woman with colorfully dyed pink-and-yellow hair sat down beside him. That, combined with her heavy layers of eye shadow, gave her a rather distinctive look. It was unclear how old she was. However, the fact that she could sneak into any country in the world with an appearance as flashy as hers was a testament to her immense skill and technique.

"I guess you really will come anywhere, Roaring Sea."

"Your girl's got a job to do, y'know?"

The woman replied to Klaus's comment in the hoarse voice of someone who'd had a bit too much to drink.

She worked as a messenger for the Din Republic, which meant that she was in charge of hand-delivering intel to agents operating abroad. She usually held her conversations while blending in with the hustle and bustle of the city, but there on the private beach with

no prying eyes around, she was able to just go up to Klaus without the need for such subterfuge.

"We finished decoding Gerde's legacy," Roaring Sea said. "They said that most of it was unsalvageable from the rainwater, and that only a small part was legible. Most of it is the stuff you've already read."

Gerde's legacy was a classified document that Lamplight had tracked down in the Fend Commonwealth containing information that "Firewalker" Gerde, a member of the legendary Din spy team Inferno, had collected before her death.

Unfortunately, rainwater had seeped into the basement where it was stored, and the majority of the ink was too blurry to read by the time Klaus and the girls found it. Lamplight had handed it over to their nation's decoding and restoration team and asked them to glean what they could from it, but the team evidently hadn't found much success.

However, the one bit they did decipher contained an invaluable piece of intelligence.

"It was the Lylat Kingdom that proposed the Nostalgia Project."

The words came straight from Roaring Sea's mouth.

That was one of the details listed in Gerde's legacy.

- Soon, there would be a financial crisis so bad, they called it the "Great Depression."
- Many nations regretted the war and sought international harmony, but that would force them to quickly shift their policies.
- Powerful figures from across the world had sensed the tides shifting and were putting a plan into action.
- A second world war was going to break out.
- The Nostalgia Project was how they planned to prepare for it.

It read like some sort of bleak prophecy, but sadly, it wasn't just something they could laugh off. In all likelihood, that project was related to the destruction of Inferno and the founding of Serpent, a group that had inflicted major blows to the global intelligence community. The Fend Commonwealth was the second-strongest superpower in the world, and the assassination of their crown prince was probably connected as well.

Plus, that wasn't all that Gerde's legacy said.

- There were three nations thought to be involved: the United States of Mouzaia, the Fend Commonwealth, and the Lylat Kingdom, with representatives on the level of heads of state, monarchs, and commanders-in-chief.
- It was likely the Lylat Kingdom's prime minister who suggested it.

The Lylat Kingdom bordered the Din Republic, and the two nations had historically shared a close relationship. During the Great War, Lylat had defeated the Galgad Empire alongside the Fend Commonwealth, and even to that day, it had colonies throughout the world.

Klaus nodded. "Lylat, huh…? I've dropped by on a number of occasions, and I never heard anything of the sort."

"Oh, and here's a report for you." Roaring Sea offered him a piece of paper. "Our friends over at the JJJ finally managed to squeeze some intel out of our captive. Turns out, Purple Ant was originally a Lylat spy. His code name was Deimos."

"…So he was from another organization as well."

Purple Ant was a spy that Klaus himself had defeated. He was a vicious man who'd squirreled himself away in the Mouzaia capital of Mitario and murdered spies one after another over the course of a prolonged economic conference. His specialty was his ability to torture ordinary civilians into becoming assassins, and he used it to churn out a nigh-endless supply of hit men to mow down spies in droves.

"I did think it was odd," Klaus went on. "During the massacre at the Tolfa Economic Conference, the Lylat Kingdom spies suffered hardly any casualties…"

"Maybe they figured it out, y'know? They might've realized that Mitario was becoming a kill zone."

That was certainly a possibility.

Hearth from the Din Republic had died, as had the entire Fend Commonwealth team Retias. But while the Bumal Kingdom and United States of Mouzaia had lost infamous spies as well, Klaus hadn't heard any such reports coming from the Lylat Kingdom.

Roaring Sea continued giving her report. "The thing was, Serpent wasn't about to leave a major player like Lylat unchecked. They sent another operative in to get the job done."

"What do you mean?"

"I got word from one of our undercover agents in Lylat. Apparently, some big guy with three right arms did some serious damage to Lylat's intelligence community."

With features that distinctive, there was only one person she could have possibly been talking about: Black Mantis.

Black Mantis was a Serpent member who'd butchered the Din spy team Avian and slaughtered spies from the Fend Commonwealth's CIM by the truckload. Klaus had heard that the man's modified arms were capable of releasing shock waves strong enough to repel bullets. With power like his, there probably wasn't a person alive who could survive a fair fight with him.

"I'm realizing all over again what a truly dangerous team Serpent is," Klaus said with a sigh. "Any single member of theirs can prove a threat to an entire nation's intelligence community."

"Tell your girl something she doesn't know. We don't even have a bead on that Black Mantis guy's position."

"He did lose, though, right?"

"Hmm?"

"It doesn't matter how strong Black Mantis is, you'd have to be a madman to attack the Lylat intelligence head-on. At some point, he

must have been forced to flee."

"Look at you, Bonfire. How'd you figure that one out?"

"It wasn't hard. Not with *that* woman still in Lylat."

Klaus had never met her in person, but her reputation spoke for itself. Spies were prized for their ability to operate covertly, so a well-known name was generally viewed as a mark against them. It also rarely happened. Even "Bonfire" Klaus's name had only begun gaining fame over the last few years.

Hearth had been hailed as the Finest Spy in the World, but there was another operative whose notoriety rivaled even hers.

"Code name Nike, the counterintelligence Goliath who rules over the Lylat Kingdom."

It was said that her weapon of choice was a sledgehammer taller than she was.

It sounded like it couldn't possibly be real, but allegedly, she could wield it with ease, smashing away bullets and pulverizing safes and the skulls of her foes. She was single-handedly responsible for the destruction of dozens of groups that opposed the government.

It was unclear just how powerful Black Mantis was, but there was no way he was a match for Nike.

Klaus hated to admit it, but he said it aloud nonetheless. "Her combat techniques are on par with my mentor's, 'Torchlight' Guido's, and she was at least as insightful as my boss, 'Hearth' Veronika. That monster of a woman made quite a name for herself during the Great War."

Roaring Sea gave him a somber nod. "They have a new name for her now—the Invincible Tactician God."

"The Tactician God, huh?" Klaus murmured.

His thoughts turned back—back to the order that C had given him just before Klaus's vacation.

◇◇◇

After Klaus returned from his mission in Fend, his superior, C, summoned him to the headquarters of the Din Republic's intelligence agency, the Foreign Intelligence Office. Klaus sending Gerde's legacy over had caused quite a stir. The Republic's leaders had gotten involved, and they and the intelligence top brass had gotten embroiled in a heated debate. It had taken them a full week to reach a verdict.

When Klaus arrived in the director's office, C—a man with silvery-gray hair and keen eyes not unlike those of a bird of prey—gave him an unusually stern look. It was at that point that C would normally be offering him a cup of atrocious coffee, but luckily for Klaus, there was no time for such mischief today.

"This was my first time hearing about the Nostalgia Project. I showed the documents to the prime minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Commander of the Navy, and they were all just as shocked," C said.

Inferno's boss, "Hearth" Veronika, must have known about it, but it would appear that she'd concealed that information from her superiors. According to C, though, she had a habit of acting on her own judgment, so that was certainly in character for her.

C let out a long sigh. "I would prefer not to believe any of it, but the intelligence comes straight from 'Firewalker' Gerde. I doubt she was mistaken. It's disquieting to think that three nations as powerful as Mouzaia, Fend, and Lylat were carrying out a joint project to prepare for another world war."

"It's hardly a surprise, though. There isn't a nation in the world that doesn't plan for the worst."

"True enough. And we're no different, of course. Even as we reduce our armaments, we still make sure to keep enough in reserve to be ready for emergencies."

"Not to mention the bioweapon the numbskulls over in our military developed."

The bioweapon in question was Abyss Doll, and it was a fiasco that Klaus would just as soon have rather forgotten about. The Galgad Empire had once stolen it, and while Inferno had apparently been scattered across the world at the time, the mission to retrieve it was where they had died.

Despite the scars the Great War had etched in the nations of the world, there were still those who were preparing for another one.

Thinking back now, the Abyss Doll incident should have served as a reminder of that fact.

"They played us for fools," Klaus said as he glared at the world map hanging on the wall. "The great powers had us watch the Galgad Empire for them, and all the while, they were scheming behind our backs."

As an espionage powerhouse that both pumped out talented spies and bordered the Galgad Empire, the Din Republic took it upon themselves to keep an eye on the Empire. They'd secured substantial international financial backing in exchange for their intelligence, but the point stood.

"Do these nations' intelligence organizations know about the project?"

C's question earned him an honest "I don't know" out of Klaus. "Though if nothing else, there was a high-ranking woman in the CIM who had no idea about it. Given how little we've been able to glean about the project, I have to imagine that it's being carried out by only a select few."

Klaus thought back to Amelie, a spy also known as Puppeteer. Despite holding a relatively high position in the CIM, she'd been none the wiser about anything involving Serpent or the Nostalgia Project—though ultimately, she'd ended up learning everything and deciding to side with Serpent.

"We can't just sit here and wait," C declared. "The world is in the midst of a major upheaval, and the Din Republic can't afford to get left behind. Go out and get me the full details on the Nostalgia Project, Bonfire. That's an order."

Klaus was more than happy to acquiesce. He was so close to reaching the truth about Inferno's fall, he could taste it. Backing down now wasn't an option, not if he wanted to help safeguard the homeland that Inferno loved so much.

"If you want a surefire way for me to do that—"

"Don't even think about it," C said, cutting Klaus off. *"Do not fight Nike."*

Klaus shot C a look of protest.

If he wanted to learn what exactly the Nostalgia Project entailed, the most efficient way to do that would be to investigate the Lylat Kingdom, where it originated from. According to Gerde's hypothesis, it was likely the Lylat Kingdom's prime minister who suggested it. Klaus was prepared to go through anyone who stood in his way, even if that person was Nike.

"I assure you, I won't lose. I'm the Greatest Spy in the World."

"That's precisely the problem. We can't afford even the slightest risk of losing the Republic's best card."

"……"

"The Republic's going to get dragged into this chaos at some point, and when that happens, we're going to need you. Losing you in a reckless fight against Nike would put the entire nation in jeopardy."

There was a part of Klaus that flared with indignance, but the logical side of his brain realized that C had a point.

The fact was, they didn't have any hard proof. Could "Bonfire" Klaus actually defeat Nike? The two of them had never actually fought, and that meant there were variables they might not be accounting for. There was no way to be absolutely certain.

"That's a condition I'm placing on this mission," C said, to drive the point home as Klaus stood in silence. "I appreciate that it's going to make your job a lot more difficult, but I trust you'll find a way."

◇◇◇

After reminiscing on his discussion with C, Klaus turned his attention back to the sea laid out before him. He couldn't actually see it, but the Lylat capital lay just beyond its expanse. It was a gorgeously refined nation with townscapes that resembled works of art.

That was to be the site of Lamplight's next mission—just so long as Klaus could accept the condition C put forth.

Doubts plagued him. The world was changing, and the ground was shifting beneath their feet. As spies, they had a duty to learn what shape that change would take, but despite knowing that, he hesitated all the same.

How was Lamplight supposed to deal with an opponent like the Invincible Tactician God?

"You look conflicted, Bonfire." Roaring Sea let out a raspy laugh. "And there's nothing your girl loves more than a handsome young man in distress."

"That's information I could have just as soon done without."

"The truth is, I'm a fan of yours. That's why I came so far to see you."

When Klaus glanced to the side, Roaring Sea rose from her deck chair, gave Klaus's shoulder an intimate rub, and slung her arm around his head in an embrace. She stank of booze.

"Y'know, one of the sections we were able to make out in Gerde's legacy was her complaining about a very particular pair of *twins*."

"What do you mean?"

"They're a couple of weirdos," Roaring Sea cheerfully explained. "Apparently, they were in Lylat when Inferno went down. No idea what they were doing there, though."

Klaus was astonished. It was obvious what twins the passage had been referring to: "Soot" Lukas, the games master who'd won a thousand matches straight; and "Scapulimancer" Wille, the fortune teller who could see the future laid out plain as day. The two of them had been members of Inferno since the Great War and together served as Klaus's de facto older brothers.

"They were operating in Lylat?"

That was a surprising bit of news.

Klaus had been in a whole different country than Inferno when the team got wiped out, and he knew nothing about what the twins had been doing at the time. This was the first he was hearing about them having been in Lylat.

As Klaus gasped, Roaring Sea grinned like she'd been looking forward to seeing his reaction. "The United States of Mouzaia is living large right now. Its corporations are borrowing more and more money from its banks, and they're buying up resources and raw materials from across the world. But before too long, it's gonna come crashing down, and all the countries that have grown dependent on the United States will go down, too. There's gonna be a global financial crisis."

The look in her eyes was uncharacteristically serious.

"The deadline's getting closer. As your humble messenger, I just ask you to make choices you'll be able to live with."

With that, Roaring Sea left.

◇◇◇

All of Lamplight had come to Marnioce together. For them, it was a holiday—getting to spend two weeks on a remote island.

During their mission in the Fend Commonwealth, the team had been put through the wringer both physically and emotionally, and all of them had had close shaves with death. Klaus himself had wounds on his legs that had yet to heal. Lamplight badly needed to put their spy duties aside for a moment and spend some time resting up.

Klaus was the one who'd chosen the destination.

For him, though, the vacation held a different significance. He needed to make doubly sure of his decision, and he needed some downtime to tell the girls about it. While he was relaxing on the island, he spent the whole time racking his brains.

Thirteen days passed by, and before they knew it, it was the night before the final day of their trip.

As the sun finished setting, the Lamplight girls gathered on the beach.

All of them had enjoyed their vacations to the fullest, and many of them bore happy smiles. There were a few people whose shoulders were slumped with exhaustion, but even they'd been using their time well.

Right when their six PM meeting time rolled around, Lily came scampering over. She looked completely drained, but when she saw her teammates, her face lit right up. "Hey, we're all together again!"

She spun around, offering smiles unsparingly to all the others. The rest of the team eagerly welcomed her and clapped her on the arms and shoulders.

"This is our last night here on the island, so let's make it a good one!"

"""""""""Whoooo!"""""""""

Lily's arrival really put the group in a partying mood.

The plan was for them to all have a barbeque together.

Klaus fixed an intent gaze on the girls. He needed to tell them before they got caught up in the festivities. It was a painful decision to make, but it had to be done.

It was time for them to learn where Lamplight was going. That, and what the true purpose behind the vacation was.

Right when he opened his mouth to break the news, though, something else caught his attention.

"Wait, where's Annette?"

"""""""""What…?"""""""""

All he got were seven people's worth of confused replies.

He looked back and forth, but he and the seven girls were the only ones there on the beach. The ash-pink-haired girl who could always be found wearing an artificial smile—"Forgetter" Annette—was nowhere to be seen, and the meeting time had long since come and gone.

"Huh?" Lily said, cocking her head. "Did she forget where we were gonna meet or something?"

"I doubt it. It's not the kind of mistake she's liable to make."

The thing was, Annette's memory was outstanding. She never forgot anything she saw or heard.

Klaus and the girls scoured the area around the beach, but they still couldn't find her. They shouted at the top of their lungs and tried to lure her out with candy, but to no avail.

Annette wasn't in her guesthouse, either.

A full hour passed, and she still didn't show up.

They tried asking the islanders, but nobody had seen her since the night prior.

At that point, there was only one conclusion to draw.

"""""""""ANNETTE DISAPPEARED?!"""""""""

"Forgetter" Annette was officially missing.

Klaus massaged his temples. "I swear, that girl is going to be the death of me…"

He had some important announcements he needed to make, but it hardly seemed the time for that anymore. Finding Annette needed to be their top priority.

However, the island wasn't small, and combing over the whole thing was an inefficient proposition.

The team headed back to the beach for a moment and sat down around the table they'd set there.

"Well, there's nothing else for it," Klaus said. "We need to start by pooling our information. I want everyone to take turns describing where they saw Annette the most over the course of their vacation."

Lily let out a strained laugh. "Th-this has taken kind of an odd turn, huh?"

Klaus couldn't have agreed more. "You're telling me."

The story of Lamplight's vacation was packed full of love, danger, and adventure.

Thus began the tale of the missing girl's whereabouts, and the tale that would determine Lamplight's future.

Chapter 1
The Islanders

It was the very first day of Lamplight's vacation, and the girls let out a cheer at the spectacle laid out before them.

"""""""""""IT'S THE BEEEEEEACH!!"""""""""""

The Confezza Beach sat on Marnioce's west coast. Its sand was as white and soft as fresh-driven snow, and beyond, there was a beautiful ultramarine sea glinting in the sunlight. The sand was dotted with large parasols hanging over wooden deck chairs and barrels loaded with cans of fruit juice chilled with ice water.

For the first day of their vacation, Lamplight had reserved an entire section of the beach all to themselves.

After whooping with glee, the girls stripped off their outerwear and dashed out dressed in the swimsuits they'd been wearing underneath.

The first one in the water was "Flower Garden" Lily. She was a silver-haired girl with a charming face and sizable chest, and she hurled herself headfirst into the waves, wearing a white bikini with a floral pattern.

"Hrahhhh! C'mon in, everyone!"

"Yo, I've never been to the beach before!"

“M-Miss Annette, your wounds haven’t healed yet, so you need to remember to take it easy!”

The next ones in were Annette and Sara.

“Forgetter” Annette was a girl with ash-pink hair, a large eye patch, and a messily tied-up pair of pigtails. Her swimsuit was a neatly fitting black one-piece, and she plunked her head under the salty water.

“Meadow” Sara was a girl with naturally curly brown hair and big round eyes like those of a woodland creature. She’d taken off her trademark newsboy cap and was dressed in a swimsuit adorned with frills. A hawk and a dog followed along after her with great excitement.

Lily and Sara cheered as they splashed water at each other. The water’s temperature was perfect. Thanks to the blazing sun, it was even a little warm.

A moment later, a cry of “Oop!” rose up from Annette’s direction.

“Yo! I can’t swim!”

“”Wait, what?!””

“I can’t move right ’cause of my injuries! This is the biggest mistake of my life, yo.”

Bubbles rose as Annette sank below the surface, and Lily hurriedly hoisted her up. “Vacations are supposed to be restful!” Sara scolded her.

While some of the girls were enjoying the water, Thea smiled in exasperation from back on the beach.

“Dreamspeaker” Thea was a girl with long, glossy black hair, curves in all the right places, and a mature air about her. She gave a small nod as she readjusted the string on her risqué off-the-shoulder bikini with hardly any fabric at all. “They’re enjoying themselves entirely too much. They really ought to put on some sunscreen before they destroy their skin.” She took a bottle out of her

waterproof bag and smiled. “Now, time for things to get hot and heavy.”

“In what way?!” cried “Pandemonium” Sybilla as she dutifully played off Thea’s typical antics. Sybilla was a girl with a gaze as sharp as a knife and a lithe, toned physique. Her tank top bikini left her prominent abs exposed.

Still holding the bottle, Thea glanced around. “Where’d Teach get off to?! How could he abandon me like this right at the moment I’d been waiting for?”

“Oh, just lie down. I’ll put your damn sunscreen on.”

Not intending to take no for an answer, Sybilla gave Thea a swift kick to the rump to force her onto the ground. She snatched up the bottle, but right when she was about to squirt some into her palm…

“Oh, I wouldn’t touch that if I were you. It has an aphrodisiac mixed in.”

“Then why the hell’d you want it on *yourself*?!”

With that, Sybilla took the bottle and sprayed its contents directly onto Thea’s back.

Monika had promptly left the beach, and she soon began rock fishing over on the bluffs beside it.

“Ashes” Monika, formerly “Glint,” was a girl of average height and weight who had few distinctive features, save for her asymmetrical cerulean hairdo. She was wearing a hoodie over her swimsuit with its hood hung over her face. “It’s nice to take a load off like this every now and then,” she said.

“I’m gonna reel in a big one.”

By Monika’s side, “Fool” Erna was sniffing at the air. Erna was a petite blond girl with skin as fair and pale as that of a delicate porcelain doll. She was wearing a cutesy swimsuit with a flared top made from patterned cloth, and she, too, was dressed for the water and clutching a fishing rod.

After raising and lowering her rod a couple times, Erna felt it catch on something and quickly yanked it up. "I got a bite!"

Hooked on the end of her fishing line was a leather boot.

"…How unlucky."

"Wait, that old cliché actually happens?"

As Monika let out a chuckle, Erna puffed up her cheeks and cast out her line again.

"I got another bite!"

When she reeled it in, she found that her line had caught yet another boot. What's more, it was the exact same model and size as the first one.

Monika goggled at her. "Wait, that's actually impressive!"

"D-does that count as…lucky? I can't believe I actually completed the pair!"

Aside from the water they'd taken on, the boots were practically brand-new. Erna made up her mind to try them on, but alas, they didn't fit her.

After taking them off and lining them up side by side, she presented them to Monika.

"These are for you, Big Sis Monika."

"……Thanks."

Monika was deeply unsatisfied by the whole turn of events, but she had little choice but to take them.

MONIKA got LEATHER BOOTS!

Meanwhile, as the rest of the group made merry across the beach, one redhead gazed quietly at them.

The redhead was "Daughter Dearest" Grete, a girl with slender arms and legs and a glass-like fragility to her. She ducked under a parasol and spoke to the man sitting in the deck chair beneath it. "… Aren't you going to swim, Boss?"

"My right leg isn't done healing yet. I'm just here to keep watch."

That man was Klaus. He had foregone his usual suit for once and had gone instead with a breezy combo of a shirt and shorts. There was something oddly seductive about the way his collarbone peeked out from beneath his shirt.

Klaus was sitting with his legs stretched out on his deck chair and sipping the iced tea he'd arranged for in advance. The look on his face was uncharacteristically relaxed, and there was the faintest of smiles on his lips.

"I'm going to take a short nap. It's been years since the last time I got to take a proper holiday like this."

As the greatest spy in the Din Republic, Klaus had more than his share of mental fatigue. He'd been busy even before Inferno was destroyed, and he'd had few, if any, opportunities to take an entire day off since.

He quietly closed his eyes and began drifting off to sleep.

"……"

Mixed emotions swirled within Grete as she gazed upon her beloved.

She was happy he was getting some rest, but it would have been nice if he'd—

"You know, Grete."

He opened his eyes for a moment.

"That swimsuit looks lovely on you. While we're here, why not go for a swim?"

"____!!"

Those were exactly the words she'd been hoping to hear, and her whole body shivered.

The swimsuit Grete was wearing was a shade of orange as bright as the sun. It was on the modest side, with a high-necked design that covered her chest and a pareu tied around her waist. She'd gone out right before their vacation and excitedly bought it so she could show it off to Klaus.

He closed his eyes again and drifted softly off to sleep.

Boss…

Perhaps he found her needy, the way she was fishing for compliments. The concern crossed her mind, but the feeling was far overpowered by the warmth filling her heart.

"~~~~~~~~~~♪"

She very nearly even started humming.

I knew it! Perhaps my feelings for the boss are requited after all!!

The truth was, there was no Lamplight member more full of joy than she was.

The impact of what Monika told her was starting to make itself clear.

"Out of everyone on the team, you're the one Klaus loves the most."

During their mission in Fend, Monika had betrayed the team for a time, and she'd kidnapped Grete knowing that that would give Klaus the biggest shock. Grete was overjoyed that that was why she'd been chosen.

I understand that it's nothing more than a theory…

She cast her gaze over at Klaus's restful face.

…but if Monika of all people believes it, then surely it must be true!

On an intellectual level, she knew better than to get her hopes up. Klaus had once rejected her and told her that he wasn't interested in that kind of love. It would be little wonder if someone like that regarded her continued displays of affection with revulsion.

Despite knowing that, though, she couldn't contain the exhilaration welling up inside of her.

"~~~~~~~~~~~~~~♪"

The blazing sun and vibrant sea were melting her rationality away.

In her great wisdom, Thea taught me that heat like this draws men and women closer! We can spend all day playing on the beach,

then eventually watch the sun set and have our hearts swell with the poignance of it all. We'll take each other's hands as we sit side by side, and when night comes, oh my…! The next morning, we'll wake up wrapped in the sheets and bashfully tell each other, "I had a really nice time yesterday." That's what vacations are all about!

However, as Grete's amorous delusions continued to unfold—

"Huh? Feels like I'm being watched, yo!"

—she heard Annette let out a hysterical shout.

The other girls were surprised by her outburst as well. When Annette cried "It's him!" they all looked where she was pointing.

The man standing there couldn't have looked shadier if he tried. He was standing right on the edge of the section they'd reserved, wearing a T-shirt, sunglasses, and an obscene smirk.

Annette puffed up her cheeks in discomfort. "That guy gives me the heebie-jeebies, yo."

"Heh, can you blame him?" Thea said with a shrug. She was covered all over in lotion. "This is simply what happens when you gather a bunch of lovely young maidens on a beach. Perhaps he's mistaken us for undines."

"…You're right, that is creepy. I'll go drive him off."

After opening his eyes, Klaus gallantly rose to his feet.

He put his nap on pause and strode over to the sketchy man. When the man saw Klaus coming his way, he winced in panic and quickly fled. He must've been some pervert trying to sneak a look at teenage girls in swimsuits.

"I swear. And on this precious *first day* where we're *all together*, no less."

Klaus sighed the words as much as spoke them, sending Grete's heart astir.

That's right. I mustn't let my excitement get the better of me.

She looked down at Klaus as he went back to sleep in his deck chair.

The boss is grappling with something important *right now.*

She gazed at his slumbering form and squeezed her hand in front of her chest.

Grete wanted to use the vacation to understand Klaus a little better.

She wasn't just some besotted little girl. Her desire to support him as a spy was near and dear to her heart, and it was obvious that Klaus had an agenda for their vacation beyond mere recreation.

◇◇◇

On the morning of the first day of their vacation, while they were on the ferry to Marnioce, Klaus gathered the team in his room. The girls were champing at the bit to disembark, and they exchanged confused glances with one another as they assembled.

The look on Klaus's face was uncharacteristically somber. "We're going to be starting our remote island vacation today, and I have one rule I'd like you all to follow."

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

"The only times you can all be in one place are days one, thirteen, and fourteen."

The girls looked at him in bewilderment, and it was hard to blame them. They hadn't put together specific plans for how they were going to spend their time yet, but even so, the restriction made little sense to them. The fourteenth day was the one they were departing on, so that functionally only left two days for them to spend time together as a full group.

Lily took it upon herself to give voice to what everyone was thinking. "L-look, I get that there's no need for everyone to hang together all the time, but…why?"

"I have my reasons," Klaus said, "and I'll tell you them on the thirteenth day."

"……?"

Grete could hear a hint of darkness in his voice. He averted his gaze from the girls as though to avoid any follow-up questions. The sight had yet to fade from Grete's mind.

◇◇◇

Nighttime fell on the first day of their vacation in what seemed like no time at all.

After leaving the beach, the girls staggered their way to their lodgings with their backs hunched over in exhaustion. Most of them could barely even stay upright and looked ready to keel over at any moment.

Of the group, Lily was the most listless of all. "I-I'm so tired…"

"This is what happens when you spend all day swimming," Grete replied. She was carrying Lily's bag for her.

In the end, the Lamplight girls had spent the whole time from noon to sundown playing nonstop. They held swimming contests, played Beach Flags, and tried out surfing, and before they knew it, it was nighttime.

Their mission in the Fend Commonwealth had really done a number on them. Now that they finally had a chance to cut loose, they'd seized it with both hands.

Lily continued dragging her feet along lifelessly—

"But wait!!"

—but when she caught a glimpse of the boardinghouse, her back straightened right up.

"This night's just getting started! GROUP DINNER, WHOO-HOOOOOO!!"

"…Are you really going to be able to keep this up for fourteen days?" Klaus said in disbelief as he walked at the front of the group with the aid of a cane. He hadn't bought into the girls' manic excitement, and his expression was composed.

Lily skipped up to Klaus. “C’mon, Teach. How am I supposed to not look forward to dinner?” She gave him a broad grin. “I mean, we’re talking about a meal from a boardinghouse with the Inferno seal of approval! This place is gonna be awesome. Rgh, if I hadn’t drawn that short straw, I could’ve even been staying there!”

Due to the size of the available accommodations, the plan was to split up into groups of four and five. Klaus, Grete, Annette, Erna, and Sara would be staying at a boardinghouse that Inferno once used, whereas Lily, Sybilla, Monika, and Thea would be staying at another equally respectable establishment.

“Saying that it has the ‘Inferno seal of approval’ is an overstatement. It’s just a normal boardinghouse,” Klaus said in exasperation. “We stayed there during a mission six years ago, that’s all.”

As they continued walking, a building with a balcony came fully into view. It was about the size of a larger house, just like Klaus had told them. The second floor was available to be rented out by tourists, and the family that ran the place lived down on the ground floor.

Out in front, there was a young girl waiting for them in an apron. Her brown, suntanned skin stood in stark contrast to her canary-yellow wolf cut hairdo. She had the hearty build of a girl who spent her time running around in the great outdoors.

“Hmm.”

As Klaus reacted, the girl noticed them in turn, and her entire face lit up as she came running over.

“Mr. Klaus! It’s been too long!”

“Hello, Raftania. You’ve really grown up.”

She and Klaus seemed to know each other.

The cheeks of the girl that Klaus had called “Raftania” went red with delight at being reunited after so long. “Sure have. But you’ve gone and gotten pretty big yourself.”

“I suppose that’s true. What are you now, sixteen?”

"Hey, you remembered! Heh, we sure have changed. You used to be so surly, but now you talk like a right proper gentleman. Six years is a long time."

The people from the island had a distinct accent, and Raftania's intonations differed from the way the Lylat Kingdom's language was usually spoken.

Then she stared in confusion at the Lamplight cohort standing behind Klaus. "…Hmm? Who're these, then?"

"They're my students. I teach at a seminary these days."

"Well, I'll be damned! Look at you, fancy teacher man. I'm Raftania, and I work here at the boardinghouse. Pleasure to meet y'all!"

Raftania gave the girls a courteous bow. "It's nice to meet you," they said as they returned her greeting.

Their first impression of her was that she was a bright, cheerful girl.

At that point, they had no idea how massive an impact that young islander would have on Lamplight's vacation.

The meal Raftania's boardinghouse had prepared for them was a seafood barbeque with loads of locally caught marine life. The United States-style barbeque, eaten while sitting on the balcony overlooking the sea, was packed full of shellfish, shrimp, and fish of all sorts. Raftania, alongside her father who owned the boardinghouse, deftly completed all the preparations.

The grilled seafood was topped with garlic, paprika, and other fancy spices, and the girls wolfed it down in great quantities. "This is so good!" they cried between each eager mouthful.

As Lily and Sybilla immediately began stealing food from each other, Erna spilled some sauce on her clothes, and Sara had to console her. Annette tried to flee from the vegetables as Thea tried to gently coax her into eating them, and Klaus scolded Monika when she tried to sneak some wine.

"This right here, this is what it's all about," Lily said with a big sigh right when the festivities were reaching their peak. "Vacations are great. Feels like I just died and went to heaven."

"I'm glad you've taken such a likin' to our little island," Raftania said, moving the cooked items off the barbeque and onto plates with deft tong work to prevent them from burning. "But I wouldn't go ascendin' after just one day. This place has more things to see than you can shake a stick at."

"Ooh, I like the sound of that. We don't actually have any specific plans for how to spend the rest of the trip."

"Fair enough. Then if you'd like, how 'bout I tell you about our most popular sights?"

Intel from a local was priceless, and the Lamplight members all turned their gazes to her.

Raftania cleared her throat in embarrassment. "Our most famous spot is Confezza Beach, over to the west. I know you spent the afternoon there, but remember that gorgeous sea? Just ask, and I can hook you up with a boat so you can do some offshore fishin'. There's also some shops by the beach, if you'd rather take it easy and just walk around."

An excited round of applause rose up.

Erna thrust a fist in the air. "This time, I'll actually catch something!"

"Then there's the area 'round that huge naval base," Raftania continued. "Us islanders don't much care for it, but it's true that whole zone's been doin' well since the base went up. Clothing stores and restaurants from the Lylat mainland do good business there. Just don't stick around too long. They're starved for women over there, and they'll catcall ya somethin' fierce."

The relationship between the islanders and the navy was a fraught one, but it could still be fun to do a little tourism.

"Dear me, that does sound intriguing," said Thea, and Sara gave her a haggard nod. "I'm wiped from playing on the beach all day, so I think I'll go check that out tomorrow."

"Last up, there's the caves over to the south." Raftania's voice swelled. "Back in prehistoric times, this whole island was a volcano. Don't know if it was the lava or what, but the whole south side is like a big ol' maze. It's got grottos and hot springs all over. It's a bit dangerous, but ya can't do much better if you're lookin' for adventure. There's even a local legend 'bout those parts."

The corner of her mouth curled upward.

"The legend of the Great Pirate Jackal."

"""The Great Pirate Who?"""

"He lived two hundred years ago and found a city of gold over in the New World. Every land under the sun wanted his treasure, but they never got it. The man didn't show no quarter to those who tried to steal his wealth. He bore the legendary scimitar Bellmoon in his left hand and a hook on his right. He slew all who opposed him and fed their eyeballs to his pet parrot. Oh, he was terror incarnate. His tall tricorne and bloody cloak caused any who saw 'em to tremble, and they say that light shone down from the heavens when he stood atop his ship's prow. In his twilight years, though, he grew weary of killing his foes. Instead, he took all his treasure and hid it away in the twisted caves of a cavernous island."

After a dramatic pause, Raftania dropped the bombshell.

"Accordin' to the legend, Jackal's treasure is somewhere here on Marnioce."

Three people immediately reacted.

Lily's hand shot up. "Whoa! I wanna go looking for pirate gold!" she shouted. Sybilla clenched her fists, eyes twinkling. "Hell yeah, I'm in! There ain't nothin' that gets the blood pumpin' like the thought of treasure!" Monika coolly nodded. "Huh, sounds interesting. Adventure calls."

Raftania shrugged. “But hey, it’s probably just a tale. I been on this island a long time, and I ain’t never seen it.”

With that, most of the group had their plans for the following day locked in. Erna was going to hit up the beach, Sara and Thea were going to check out the area around the naval base, and Lily, Sybilla, and Monika were going to the caves.

The trio heading to explore the caves sounded especially excited, and they got right to work chatting about logistics. “We gotta buy us a map.” “We’ll need proper expedition gear, too.”

Erna, on the other hand, looked anxious. “H-hey, Annette. At this rate, I’m going to be all alone. Can you come with me?” she pleaded, but Annette shot her right down. “I don’t wanna. I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

Grete spent a moment in thought, then settled on a solution. “What if I were to accompany you to the beach, Erna?”

“Th-that would be great! Thank you, Big Sis Grete!”

Her worries assuaged, Erna snuggled up to Grete like a spoiled child.

Grete patted her head and shot a look over at Klaus. She did feel bad for Erna, but there was a much bigger reason she’d chosen to go to the sea. “Would you care to join us, Teach?”

She couldn’t very well call him “Boss” around Raftania, so she went with “Teach” instead.

Klaus readily agreed. “That’s not a bad idea. Sure, I’ll tag along.”

Internally, Grete did a little fist pump.

Klaus couldn’t go spelunking, with his legs still wounded, and taking it easy on the beach was a much better option for him than heading all the way over to the distant naval base.

Just as I expected! Now my perfect scheme is as good as enacted!

She began fantasizing about the whirlwind romance they were going to have—

"Hmm? Now hold your horses there."

—but an interjection cut her right off.

The remark came from Raftania. She tilted her head in puzzlement and looked at Klaus. "Spendin' time on the beach is all well and good, but I can't have you takin' Mr. Klaus. He's got a million things he needs to get done."

Why was she interfering with Grete's plan?

It didn't make a lick of sense.

"But why—?"

"Ain't that obvious? For the wedding. Mr. Klaus has arrangements that need makin'."

"The wedding? Between whom and whom?"

"What's goin' on, Mr. Klaus? Did you not tell 'em?"

Raftania set down her tongs and strode over to Klaus's chair. Then, out of nowhere, she grabbed Klaus's arm and pulled it in close.

"I'm Mr. Klaus's fiancée."

"……"

Raftania affectionately wound her arm around Klaus's and gave them all a self-assured smile.

The Lamplight girls were so captivated by the sight, all their conversations trailed off. The fact of the matter was, none of them had seen anything like this coming.

Grete could feel her veins bulging. "…I beg your pardon?"

◇◇◇

It was the second day of their vacation, and a storm rolled into the island. Heavy rain and fierce winds buffeted Marnioce as though

reflecting the tempest raging in Grete's heart. It was rare for the island to get rain that torrential. There was even a landslide on the mountain to the west, forcing some of the islanders to evacuate.

The owner of the boardinghouse Grete was staying in was busy all day, aiding the evacuees, and Raftania left to help out as well.

As the storm raged on, Grete charged into the dining room where Klaus was taking a load off. "I would very much like an explanation, Boss! What's this about you having a fiancée?!"

Klaus set down his coffee cup. "Settle down. I'm a little unclear on that point myself."

The dining room was small, with little more than a table for four to its name. The beach they'd been playing on yesterday was visible through the window, but the sea was roiling from the storm and had taken on an ominous shade of gray.

Klaus gestured at the chair across from his for Grete to sit in. "Last night, I asked Raftania to fill me in on the specifics. By all accounts, she has every desire to marry me. She was going on about us getting engaged six years ago…"

"A-and did you…?"

"We most definitely did not."

Klaus waved his hand back and forth to reassure her, then let out an exasperated sigh.

When the shocking news about Raftania the Fiancée came to light the night prior, the Lamplight girls had descended into a panic and forgotten all about the barbeque. After urging them to calm themselves, Klaus went to get the details from Raftania, and the group had dispersed for a time.

The next morning—which was to say, today—Grete, Erna, and Sara all gathered around him.

As for the rest of the girls, they'd already lost interest. "This is Klaus we're talking about, so I'm sure it's all just a misunderstanding," they said, and, "This ain't even the first time we've had to deal with him bein' married."

"C-can we start from the beginning?" Erna timidly raised her hand. "What exactly happened between you and Raftania, Teach?"

"Yeah. Were the two of you really close enough to get engaged six years ago?" Sara asked worriedly.

Klaus shook his head. "Nothing important happened at all. I spent about a month in this boardinghouse. We got to be on friendly terms over that time, but that was all."

Then he went ahead and told them what had happened.

◆◆◆

Six years ago, Klaus visited the island on one of his Inferno missions.

Accompanying him was a man named "Soot" Lukas and a man named "Scapulimancer" Wille. The three of them were there to investigate the local naval base. They spent their nights making contact with the navy seamen, and during the day, they masqueraded as ordinary vacationers, so as not to draw suspicion.

It was then that the young girl from the boardinghouse—Raftania—got attached to him.

Believing him to be nothing more than an average tourist, she took it upon herself to show him all around the island. She was ten at the time, and Klaus was fifteen. Due in part to how close their ages were, she was quite taken with him. Wherever he went, she would follow. She knew a lot about the local sights, so Klaus never bothered driving her off, and the two of them explored everything from beaches to caves together.

When they parted ways, Raftania broke down sobbing. She ignored both her parents' scolding and clung to Klaus's leg. *"Don't go, Mr. Klaus! Take me with you!"*

"No. I don't wanna."

"Snff… Well, I won't let go till you agree!"

"You're in my way. What do I have to do to make you unhand me?"

"…How's this! If we meet again, will you make me your wife?!"

"No. Who'd marry you*?"*

"You're a meanie! I'm not lettin' go unless you promise me!"

"Okay, fine. I'll think about it. Now, could you please get off me?"

Klaus held no special feelings toward Raftania, and he'd put next to zero thought into his reply.

Those were the full details of his history with the girl.

◆◆◆

By the time Klaus finished his story, Grete's eyes were wide. "So you did promise to marry her!!"

The Klaus from back then had a roughness to him that the present Klaus lacked, but much as her heart was fluttering, she felt it was rather important to point out that when Raftania had asked if he would make her his wife, Klaus had told her that he would "think about it."

"Look, I understand how someone could potentially take it that way." Klaus frowned in embarrassment. "…But even so, it's a bit of a leap to go from that to calling herself my fiancée, no?"

"Y-you have a point there…"

"I won't deny that I chose my words poorly. Still, Raftania was ten. I wasn't going to take anything she said while throwing a tantrum seriously. Nobody else did, either."

Sara and Erna agreed with his interpretation. "You have a point. Plus, you mostly just dodged the question." "Yeah. She's being unreasonable."

It was true that Raftania's parents had both been present, as well as a pair of Inferno members who were basically Klaus's family, but at no point had he actually agreed to marry her. There was a big leap between that and actual betrothal. On top of that, even if the ten-year-old Raftania did hypothetically misunderstand Klaus and innocently believe them to be engaged, it was hard to imagine her persisting in that belief all the way to age sixteen. The original conversation had started with Klaus rejecting her.

"Just to be absolutely certain," Grete prefaced her next question, "but have you and Raftania exchanged any sort of correspondence over these past six years?"

"We haven't done anything of the sort. This all came out of nowhere." Klaus furrowed his brow. "I have to imagine that she had some sort of change of heart during that time."

Not once during any of their missions had he ever looked so conflicted. He clearly felt a lot of guilt about the effect of his careless remark on a young maiden's emotions—even though objectively, he hadn't done anything wrong.

"I've been digging through my memories, but nothing in particular springs to mind."

So that was why he was drinking coffee in the kitchen.

On closer inspection, he was drinking it with milk, something he never did. He had a little jar of sugar, too. He'd hoped that drinking the same kind of café au lait he did six years ago would jog his memory.

"I'm surprised." Erna broke into a small smile. "I didn't realize you were so immature six years ago."

"…I used to do a sloppy job of just about everything," Klaus said with a shrug. "In any case, I'll be sure to explain that she has it wrong tomorrow. That should resolve everything."

On hearing that, Grete, Sara, and Erna all breathed sighs of relief.

The storm made them loath to go outside, so the four of them decided to amuse themselves playing a board game. The game had been passed down over generations of islanders, and they all had such a blast, they completely forgot about the Raftania matter for a time.

After they'd played for a bit, Klaus told them that he had to go pay an acquaintance a visit and stepped away.

None of them had any idea just how rapidly the situation was deteriorating.

◇◇◇

It was the third day of their vacation, and the change became clear in the morning.

The storm had come and gone, and Grete invited Klaus out on a morning walk. Sara and Erna were still sleeping, and Annette had disappeared off somewhere. The two of them stepped out of the boardinghouse to spend some time together at their leisure.

Upon doing so, they ran into a man delivering milk.

When he spotted Klaus by the boardinghouse entrance, a light bulb went off over the man's head. "Ah. You must be Klaus, then, eh? You're just the looker I done heard," he said in a thick islander accent, before flashing them a hearty smile. "Be good to our li'l Raftania, y'hear?"

Before Klaus had a chance to ask him what he meant, the man rode off on his bicycle.

They pulled themselves together and made for the beach when an old woman islander called over to them.

"Oh-ho, it's you. You're the one Raftania is marrying." She looked at Klaus's face and nodded in delight. "Best of luck with the wedding in ten days. The poor lass has had a rough go of it. Nice to see something good come her way, I says. I was so glad when I heard about it last night."

"…Ten days? This is the first I'm hearing of any of this," Klaus replied, but the old woman was hard of hearing, and she simply went back inside her house.

As the gnawing feeling in their guts worsened, they came across a man carrying a fishing net on his way to the sea. Upon spotting Klaus, he strode over and clapped Klaus hard on the shoulder. "Huh,

ain’t you Raftania’s fiancé? You keep walking ’round with other girls like that, people might think you’re two-timing. Better be on your best behavior till the ceremony, son.”

“You all seem to be misunderstanding something.” Klaus was starting to get seriously annoyed, and he denied the man’s whole premise. “Raftania and I don’t have that kind of relationship. There’s not going to be a ceremony of any sort.”

“Whoo, that’s one hell of a joke.”

“I assure you, I’m not—”

The fisherman raised a hand to cut Klaus off. “Say no more. I get wantin’ to fool around, I really do. But a man’s gotta draw a line in the sand sometimes, y’hear? I’ve known that girl since she was knee-high to a grasshopper.”

“Right…”

“And you’d best remember this. I know it ain’t likely, but if you’ve been toying with our poor little Raftania and try to ditch the wedding…”

The man hoisted his fishing net up onto his brawny arm and dropped his voice to a low growl.

“…then you and your students ain’t getting off this island in one piece.”

“……”

Realizing that reasoning with this man would be an exercise in futility, Klaus merely lapsed into silence.

“Is it just me, or have things gotten well and truly out of hand?!”

“I can’t believe I got caught so badly off guard.”

The more they walked around the boardinghouse, the clearer it became that people were treating Klaus and Raftania’s wedding as a matter of accepted fact. The locals had all been doting on Raftania for years, and the wedding had everyone’s blessing. When Klaus tried to deny that it was happening, people just assumed he was joking or began making veiled threats.

The wedding invitations were contained to the area on the west side of the island, around the boardinghouse, but a full thirty households had already received them. Klaus's appearance and the details of how he met Raftania were common knowledge now, and a wildly exaggerated story of their romance had begun spreading as well.

"When did these machinations even begin? From the way they were looking at us, it doesn't seem as though they'll give us a boat home unless you marry her…"

"Yeah, there wasn't a hint of this on the first day. It's all happening too fast."

"From the way everyone was talking, they all learned about it either today or yesterday."

"There's no way Raftania could have pulled this off on her own. This reads like the work of a first-rate operative."

They continued dissecting the situation all the way back to the boardinghouse.

When they reached the entrance, they walked in on Raftania and another girl sharing a delighted conversation.

"Ms. Annette, I finished getting all the helpers we'll need."

"Good work, Sis! I just worked out a deal with a florist from the fourth arrondissement, yo. They'll have an awesome bouquet ready for you the day before!"

""…I'm sorry, what?""

The girl standing beside Raftania was none other than Annette, who was hopping up and down with her hands stuffed full of wedding invitations.

At that point, Raftania noticed that Grete and Klaus were standing there in a daze. "Ah, Mr. Klaus. What're ya doin' here? Look-see, there's a million things that need doing before the wedding."

“I have…a question.” Klaus let out a long sigh. “What do you think you’re doing, Annette?”

Annette gave her reply without a moment’s hesitation “I’m helping Raftania get married, yo!”

“That’s right!” Raftania said, then grabbed Annette by the shoulder. “Ms. Annette is handling everything. She went and delivered invitations, she locked down a venue, and she did it all for us!” She patted Annette’s head in adoration. “She’s like an angel!”

Annette grinned, looking rather pleased with herself.

It would appear that she was the mastermind behind the situation’s rapid progression. Manufacturing romantic vignettes of Klaus and Raftania and winning over the islanders would be child’s play if she brought her full talents to bear.

However, why was she helping Raftania?

With that question yet unanswered, Raftania lovingly threw her arms around Klaus. “It’ll be a wedding to remember, Mr. Klaus!”

Annette clapped her hands together in celebration for her. “I’m a real wedding planner now, yo!!”

“”_____”””

Klaus and Grete were shocked at how completely they had been outplayed.

The narrative Annette had crafted during their brief moment of negligence was a masterstroke.

◇◇◇

It was the fourth day of their vacation, and for Grete, it was like a day straight out of hell.

As Raftania and Klaus engaged in their prenuptial flirting, there was nothing she could do but tail them and watch from afar.

Raftania tugged at Klaus’s arm and dragged him around town.

“Mr. Klaus, we need to get you fitted for your tuxedo. As your bride, I’ll be right there with you.”
“…Uh-huh.”

At times, the two of them talked about moments from the past that not even Grete knew about.
“Should we go to that special place, Mr. Klaus? The one where we made our first memories together?”
“…You mean the spot where you followed me all on your own and then begged me to buy you ice cream?”

Then the two of them shared the physical intimacy that Grete herself never got to have.
“Hee-hee. We’re going to be wed, so we should have no problem linking arms.”
“…Can you get off me? It’s hard to walk like this.”

Each and every thing she saw chipped away at Grete’s sanity.
“~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~!!”
It took everything she had not to scream in anguish.
Grete could have avoided all that pain by just not following them, but she did so anyway. In disguise, she watched over them from a distance where Raftania wouldn’t spot her. It was unambiguously the behavior of a stalker, but she couldn’t afford to care about appearances.
What shook her to her core was how obediently Klaus was going along with Raftania.
He had explained the situation beforehand, of course.
“If nothing else, the islanders meant every word of it when they told me not to skip out on the wedding. If we rock the boat now, it

could put the rest of the team in danger when they're trying to enjoy a nice, peaceful vacation."

However, everything about that, including Klaus's reaction, was exactly how Annette had drawn it up.

Klaus wanted to give the Lamplight girls an opportunity to relax. He didn't want them to run into any trouble with the islanders because of him. For now, his plan was to play along and wait for an opening to present itself.

Grete understood that he was just playing his part. She understood that, and yet…

I—I just have to be strong.

She ran his words back through her head over and over to force herself to accept them. If she didn't, the jealousy was going to tear her apart.

Klaus and Raftania were walking with arms linked like lovers and talking about the past before her very eyes. It was a friendly conversation, one about how gorgeous the sunset they'd once seen was.

As they went on arm in arm, Raftania nonchalantly pressed her bosom against Klaus.

"~~~~~~~~~~!!"

Another wave of agony washed over Grete. She knew that it would take far more than that to seduce Klaus, but that didn't stop it from infuriating her. She couldn't bear it.

Against her better judgment, she found herself comparing how flat her own chest was with how sizable Raftania's was.

"~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~!!"

She fainted in anguish all over again.

◇◇◇

It was the fifth day of their vacation, and the island was abuzz.

After being haunted by nightmares from the mental damage she'd suffered on day four, Grete slept in until she was woken up by the

sound of angry shouting. There was a man reading someone the riot act right outside the boardinghouse.

"Quit your damn whining! I wouldn't have to be here if you people would just tell us the truth about what happened last night!"

It was the exact kind of person that Grete was worst at dealing with.

As she instinctively clamped her hands over her ears, she heard an old man give his feeble reply.

"B-but I already told you the truth. I don't know anything."

"That's funny, see, 'cause a little birdie told me that you'd been going around town complaining about the navy."

"Th-that…that doesn't have anything to do with last night…"

"Oh, forget this shit! You're going on the list of suspects!"

Some sort of dispute had broken out.

By the time Grete got up and quickly finished her morning routine, the argument was over. There were fifteen-odd islanders gathered on the road, all glaring at the navy sailors as the latter group left. When the sailors disappeared from view, the islanders began offering words of sympathy to the terrified old man. The quarrel had been between the islanders and the navy.

"…What happened?" Grete asked a nearby old woman.

The woman let out a big sigh. "There was a murder."

"What do you mean?"

"They found the body of some important person from the navy base called Ensign Mercier this morning. We don't know the details yet, but they said he'd been hacked to pieces."

The woman told Grete everything she knew. The night prior—so from Grete's perspective, the fourth day of her vacation—Ensign Mercier had slipped out of the barracks and headed into town, but he never returned. That morning, a mangled corpse had been found by the water's edge at the southern tip of the island and identified as Mercier's by its personal effects.

"Ah, and so they want to find the culprit as quickly as possible. That certainly does sound like a murder…"

"It's Jackal's Curse."

"…I beg your pardon?

"It all started when those seamen got greedy. They drove off the islanders to build their base, and even now, they're plotting to expand it. Them showing up was when everything went bad. Those who harm our island get cursed. The great pirate seeks to protect his treasure, and his hatred lingers on the island to this day." The old woman's body trembled in fear. **"Once every three months, someone on the island gets brutally murdered."**

According to the woman, the tragedies had started three years ago. Every three months, someone would die an unnatural death. The victims ranged from islanders to tourists to navy sailors. No one was safe. However, the one thing all the bodies had in common was the fact that they were shredded, contorted, and mangled in freakish ways.

Grete found it all rather hard to believe, but the woman meant every word of it.

The woman trembled once more. "You be careful now, missy. These are scary times we live in," she said, before leaving.

Pirate curses and murder investigations were interesting and all, but none of that had any direct connection to her.

For the time being, she decided to go relax at the beach to take her mind off things. Tailing Raftania and Klaus would do nothing but continue the psychological damage, and she knew it. She decided to put her trust in Klaus.

Together with Erna, she began scouring the sand for seashells.

Whenever she found a nice-looking one, she put it in a clear glass jar with some sand. At first, she was afraid it would be boring, but once she gave it a try, she discovered a handful of shells that gleamed like gemstones and found that she was actually enjoying herself.

Meanwhile, Erna found an adorable peach-colored seashell of her own.

"Big Sis Grete, look at how cool this shell is!"

"That's lovely. The whole thing is intact, and that mother-of-pearl is gorgeous. That's quite the treasure you found."

As the two of them shared a smile, they heard a cry of "Hrahhhhh!" from across the beach and spotted Annette holding a cylindrical implement. She made a mad dash across the beach, scooping up sand like a bulldozer as she went.

"I'm gonna collect up the shells, yo!"

"YEEEEEEEEEEEP!"

During her charge, she ran Erna right over.

At that point, Annette stopped and inspected the shells gathered in her cylindrical device. From the look of it, it was designed to dig through sand and collect only the shells. "Ooh," she said with a pleased nod. "This should be plenty to decorate the wedding venue with."

She was taking her job as a wedding planner pretty seriously.

"Good morning, Annette."

"Hmm? Oh, hey, Grete! What's up, Sis?"

"I was just wondering why it was you were helping Raftania."

Annette chucked her excess seashells into the sea and gave her a toothy grin. "That's a secret, yo."

"I see…"

"Why do *you* think I'm doing it?"

Grete hadn't expected to have the question turned back on her.

When she found herself at a loss for an answer, Annette got right up close and peered at her face. "What would you do if I said it was to give you a push?"

"…I'm sorry?"

Grete froze, and her eyes went wide.

Annette nodded in satisfaction again, then said, "I'm kidding, yo," stuck out her tongue, spun around, and ran off again. "I'm still

waiting for an apology!" Erna shouted from where she'd fallen on her backside, but Annette paid her no heed.

As always, it was impossible to get a read on that girl.

It was unclear what Annette's objective was.

Joking or not, though, her words had lit a fire in Grete's heart.

No matter which way you sliced it, the fault for their current debacle lay largely with Raftania. The way she was using a dubious betrothal from six years ago to strong-arm Klaus into marrying her was absurd. What's more, Grete didn't care one bit for the implied threats to the Lamplight girls' safety and the way Klaus was being forced into inaction.

If Annette wanted to give her a push, then Grete was more than happy to take it.

She squeezed her fists tightly, and upon returning to the boardinghouse, she found Klaus and Raftania in the dining room.

Raftania was wearing an apron and beaming as she carried some food over. "Hee-hee, Mr. Klaus. I cooked today's dinner specially for you. It's hamburger steak made from aged beef raised right here on the island! Dig in!"

"…If you say so."

Making no effort to hide his discomfort, Klaus stared at the steak garnished lavishly with cheese and an egg.

Sara was sitting in the next seat over, but the fact that hers was topped with nothing more than some plain sauce made it clear where Raftania's priorities lay. All Sara could do was awkwardly laugh it off. "Ha-ha…"

Grete felt that that was hardly professional behavior. "Excuse me, Raftania?"

"Hmm? What is it? The steaks might look a little different, but it's just a trick of the—"

"There's something I think I ought to tell you."

Raftania raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Grete held her head high and made her declaration with pride.

"The truth is…I'm betrothed to Teach as well."

If Raftania was going to spout nonsense about fiancées, then Grete was going to fight bullshit with bullshit.

Seeing Klaus's tiny frown gave her a little bit of pause, but when Raftania dropped her plate of hamburger steak in shock, Grete felt a touch relieved.

An unkind smile spread across her face. *This time, it's your turn to lose your composure.*

◇◇◇

It was the sixth day of their vacation, and Klaus was livid.

"What exactly were you hoping to achieve by making the situation even messier?"

"…I'm terribly sorry. I couldn't help myself."

Raftania's reaction the night prior had been exhilarating to watch. The girl had flown into a complete panic.

"Wh-what do you mean?! M-Mr. Klaus is a two-timer? N-no, no, you're just making things up! I—I can confirm this with Ms. Annette, you know. B-but if it's true, my whole life is ruined! I-it can't be… IT CAAAAAAAAAN'T!"

After freaking out more than Grete had ever expected, Raftania knocked over the table in the middle of the room and stormed out.

It was sad seeing all that steak she'd made fall on the floor and go to waste, but in Grete's eyes, that was an acceptable sacrifice for how much better she felt.

Klaus had his own reservations about the situation, so he chose not to scold her any further. He'd called Grete to his room that morning in order to discuss their plans going forward. "Your methods

aside, I'm glad you were able to rein in Raftania. She took what you said pretty hard, and she's cooped up in bed. That should buy me room to operate freely for the next day or two. Thank you for that." He gave a firm nod, then shot a glance over at Grete. "All that said, I did bring this on myself. I want you to understand that you're under no obligation to be part of this."

"No, I want to help. After that full declaration of war last night, it's too late for me to back down."

"Magnificent. Understood. Then we're in this together until the wedding is off."

"I would love nothing more."

With the two of them now fully on the same page, Klaus crossed his arms. "Now, if I were to apply myself, shutting down a wedding would be child's play."

"…I don't doubt it."

"But if at all possible, I'd like to find a peaceful resolution here."

The main reason he wasn't taking overt action was to protect the other girls' vacations, but he did care about Raftania's well-being, too. Grete had mixed feelings about that, but if that was what Klaus wanted, she had no choice but to respect his wishes.

"There's something I want to look into on my own today, so I'm going to be flying solo, but leave your schedule open tomorrow," Klaus instructed her. "I need to dig into Raftania's past."

◇◇◇

It was the seventh day of their vacation, and when Grete came down to the dining room at the scheduled time, she found her housemate Sara slumped over on the table. She was using her trademark newsboy cap as a pillow and weeping into it silently. Her breakfast sat next to her, cold and untouched.

"I—I can't, I can't take it. I don't want to think about it anymore… I don't even want to go outside!!"

"What happened?" Grete asked with concern.

Sara shook her head. "…I got shouted at by a bunch of perverts."

"How did *that* happen?!"

It sounded like Sara was having problems of her own—problems bad enough to make her break down crying.

Eventually, Klaus came down to the dining room and shot a quick glance over at Sara. He nodded sympathetically before walking over to Grete.

"This is just a rumor I heard," he whispered in her ear, "but some woman they call the Raven-Haired Succubus is the talk of the island."

"…Right."

"It appears that Sara's gotten caught up in that mess. I feel for her."

Grete had no idea what to make of that, but they soon had to quit the small talk anyhow when the person they were waiting for showed up.

A man with a thick beard came walking out from the back of the dining room carrying a tray of coffee cups. This wasn't Grete's first time meeting him. He was the owner of the boardinghouse, the Seagull House, as well as Raftania's father. The man's name was Kerrich.

"Raftania's been gone all morning, if you were wondering," he said.

Klaus had asked Kerrich to make some time for them. Sara was still in a daze, so after nudging her over to a different corner of the room, the three of them gathered around the table.

"I'm really sorry about this, Mr. Klaus. I don't know what's come over my girl."

Kerrich's speech lacked the unique islander accent, and he worded his apology courteously.

"I was surprised, too. All of a sudden, she started going on about us getting married. Did you know about this?"

"Not at all. It came out of nowhere," Kerrich said with a pained smile. "I knew my daughter was fond of you, but I didn't realize to

what an extent."

Not even her own father had seen it coming.

Grete fumed in silence. *Some fiancée you are.*

"I imagine this is a sensitive topic, so I was trying not to bring it up…" Klaus paused for a moment in hesitation. "But I'm told that the island is under 'Jackal's Curse.' Once every three months, there's a brutal murder."

"Ah, so you heard about that."

"Forgive me if I'm mistaken, but was your wife—that is to say, Raftania's mother—?"

"She was killed, yes. Three years ago."

Grete let out an inadvertent gasp.

Now that she thought about it, Klaus's stories about Raftania's past had featured *both* her parents. However, Grete hadn't seen anyone around the boardinghouse who could plausibly be Raftania's mother. So that was why the other islanders had described her as having had "a rough go of it."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," Klaus mumbled in shock. "Can I ask what happened?"

"It was one of the serial unsolved murders, the so-called pirate curse. My wife was the second victim," Kerrich said slowly. "One spring morning three years ago, she was found mangled at the bottom of the cliff just behind this house. Her limbs had been torn off, and her face was crushed so horrifically, they could hardly even identify the body. Raftania was the one who found her." He bit down on his lip and shook his head in frustration. "They still haven't found the killer."

"What do the police think happened?"

"Oh, they're at a complete loss. There's something not normal about these murders. All the bodies turn up in bizarre states. There are people covered in burns in the middle of the road, people drained of all their blood… Some of them get hacked to pieces like that navy officer from the other day. What can they do but write it off as a curse?"

Kerrich clearly wasn't satisfied with that explanation.

Tears welled up in his eyes as he thought back to the futility of it all.

"Us islanders have been doing everything we can to help the police and find the perpetrator, but we can't catch them. Half the people who live here are seamen from the navy base. Some of us have tried pointing out how shady they are, but the island police can't lay a finger on them. If they're sheltering the killer, then there's nothing we can do."

"…I see."

"It was around then that Raftania grew to hate the island." Kerrich's tone harshened. "She started begging me every day to leave the island. But to my great shame, I always assumed she would take over the boardinghouse someday, so I never thought to get her any special qualifications or put her through school. She doesn't have the education to get off the island."

At that point, he looked up and gazed at Klaus with an intense look in his eyes.

"For Raftania, that promise she made with you was the one ray of hope she had."

"…And that's how things ended up like this," Klaus said. It all made sense now.

Just as Klaus had suspected, Raftania hadn't seriously been planning on marrying him six years ago. But when the investigation into her mother's murder went nowhere, she grew disillusioned with the island, wanted to leave, and latched on to her promise with Klaus. Now she was viewing their past through rose-tinted glasses.

"I recognize that none of this is your responsibility. As her father, I offer you my sincerest apologies," Kerrich said with a bow. "But you're the only way she has to get off this forsaken island. Is there anything I can do to convince you to marry her? Please, make my daughter happy."

They were the words of a man who cared about his daughter as only a father could.

Klaus returned Kerrich's fervent plea by giving him a quiet look. He offered the man no answer as such, but his expression was pensive nonetheless.

◇◇◇

It was the eighth day of their vacation, and once again, Klaus said, "I have something I want to look into on my own," leaving Grete with nothing to do. She and Erna started making their way to the naval base, but it started raining on their way there and forced them to hurriedly turn back. The rain was fierce, and they were afraid it would turn into another storm.

When Grete got out of the shower, she found Raftania waiting for her.

The girl's feet were caked in mud. "I was getting the venue ready," she explained. "Ms. Annette and I talked it over, and I wanna have an open-air ceremony. We'll set up chairs on top of a hill, decorate the whole thing, and have an elegant garden wedding."

She'd been spending the last two days in bed, but by the look of it, she'd made a full recovery.

"It's impressive, seeing the bride put in so much legwork herself."

"You heard about what happened from my Pa, right?" Raftania asked with a small shrug. "I ain't looking for pity. I'm gonna marry Mr. Klaus, and I'm gonna get the hell off this island. That thing about you being his fiancée was just a bluff."

"…So you realized."

Grete's lie was never going to survive a check-in with Annette. It had been nothing more than a hollow trick.

All of a sudden, Raftania tossed her something. "Here, this is for you. Take it."

"Hmm……?"

"I know I'm bein' unreasonable, the way I'm pushing this through. Consider that a token of apology."

The present was a small burlap sack. It was just over a foot deep. There must have been some sort of machine inside, as the sack had a serious heft to it.

"It's a good luck charm," Raftania explained.

"I…see…"

"I ain't backing down, you know. After Ma died, I started remembering my time with Mr. Klaus. He was surly, but he always slowed down enough for me to keep up, and he bought me drinks even when he didn't want to… All those memories are precious to me now." The words spilled from her mouth, as much for herself as for anyone. "Looking back, that was the happiest I've ever been…"

"In other words," Grete said with a gasp, "you're saying that your feelings for Teach are genuine?"

"Darn tootin'," Raftania said with a merry laugh. "I wouldn't just marry any old fella."

Hers were the eyes of a maiden in love.

◇◇◇

It was the ninth day of their vacation, and Raftania and Klaus's wedding was just four days away—in other words, it was scheduled for day thirteen.

An idea struck Grete, and she headed into town to buy up large amounts of fabric. She also managed to convince the islanders to lend her a sewing machine. She didn't have much time left to make her stand against Raftania, but there was something she desperately needed to make.

On her way back to the boardinghouse, she spotted a familiar trio on the beach.

It was Lily, Sybilla, and Monika. They were sprawled on the ground like they'd just been washed onto shore.

Worried that they might have fainted, Grete quickly rushed over.

"Whatever happened to you three?"

Fortunately, they were simply lying down.

However, Monika and Lily lifelessly shook their heads.

"I can't. Just leave me be…"

"We don't have the strength to make it back to our boardinghouse, so we're taking a little rest…"

Grete couldn't believe how tired out they were.

As she recalled, they'd been planning on going spelunking and looking for pirate treasure. Perhaps they'd gotten carried away in their search. They looked exhausted down to their marrow.

Sybilla had the most stamina left of the three, and she gave Grete a friendly wave. "What about you, Grete? Enjoyin' your vacation?"

"…I'm not sure I know how to answer that question."

"Huh?" "Hmm?" "What?"

"It's just, I'm locked in a battle I can't afford to lose. Just another day in the life, you know?" Her three teammates still looked perplexed, so she told them the truth. "It's about the boss, you see."

That was all the explanation they needed. They gulped, nodded, and looked at Grete with eyes full of compassion.

"Look, Grete." Monika rose to her feet, then laid a sympathetic hand on Grete's shoulder and looked her square in the eyes. "I don't know all the details, but I've just got one piece of advice for you."

"……"

"If something's important to you, make sure you don't lose it."

Grete could hear the passion creeping into Monika's voice. This wasn't just an empty platitude. Monika was speaking from experience, and a glimmer of sorrow flickered in her gaze as she tightened her grip on Grete's shoulder.

Lily and Sybilla nodded in embarrassed agreement.

"She's right. There's nothing sadder than only realizing what you had once it's already gone. All you're left with are regrets, and you spend every night sobbing into your pillow…"

"But no matter how hard you wish, you can't make time turn back. Don't you go fuckin' your thing up, Grete."

"Thank you, everyone…"

When she heard those words of encouragement, all the world's colors started looking just a little bit brighter.

Sybilla sprang to her feet and wrapped Grete's shoulder in a hug. "Now, let's go play our hearts out to pray for Grete's success!" she said, then raced off across the warm sand she'd been lying on just moments before.

"What, you mean now?" ""But I'm not done resting yet…,"" Monika and Lily protested, but Sybilla held firm. "Nah, screw that!! We're on vacation, remember?!" The other two gave her a pair of exhausted smiles, then dived at Grete.

All three of her teammates grabbed her, and though Grete cried, "Wait, what?!" and tried to resist, they dragged her across the beach and into the water. They didn't even give her a chance to change. It took everything she had just to remember to let go of her bag full of fabric.

"Let's play like there's no tomorrow!" "Preach it!" the three strangely enthusiastic girls cheered as they splashed Grete with seawater and continued screwing around all the way to sundown.

◇◇◇

It was the tenth day of their vacation, and as thanks for spending the day with her yesterday, Grete gave Sybilla some of the fabric she'd bought. Grete figured that they might be able to use it in their spelunking, and the girls had gratefully accepted it.

Grete still had plenty of fabric left, and she immediately got to work constructing her desired item.

Thankfully, Erna had volunteered to help her out. Grete hadn't been able to hang out with her like she'd promised on the first day, but as Erna put it, "A lot's been going on, but I've been having a great time!" During Grete's absence, she'd been walking all over the island, gazing at the sea, and spending her time relaxing. The islanders adored her, and she'd been enjoying a traditional island vacation.

The two of them cooped themselves up in a boardinghouse bedroom and got to work.

"There's something I think about sometimes," Erna said idly as she handled the cloth-cutting job Grete had assigned her. "The truth is, I love Teach, too."

Grete froze. "You…don't say…"

"Yeah. But I think it's pretty different from the way you do, Big Sis Grete." Erna gave her an affectionate smile. "So that's why…I want to help your love come to fruition!"

A feeling of warmth spread through Grete's heart. "I really appreciate it," she said.

The other Lamplight girls were far too kind to her.

It wasn't the first time Grete had realized that, and she couldn't contain her smile. She had no idea how she was ever supposed to repay them for all their kindness.

As the two of them made brisk progress on their work, they heard someone loudly tromping in the hallway outside. There was only one person whose footsteps would sound so noisy.

"Huh? Annette, is that you?"

When Erna opened the door, she found Annette standing right outside, tilting her head and going, "Hmm?"

Erna immediately clamped down on her nose. "Something stinks!"

"I just went to a hot spring, yo!"

Her entire body reeked of sulfur. That was right—Raftania had mentioned there being a hot spring on the southern side of the island. However, it didn't sound like that had anything to do with the wedding.

"And how are your duties as a wedding planner going?"

When the question fell unbidden from Grete's lips, Annette gave her a booming reply. "I got bored of that, yo!"

"What…?"

Grete was struck speechless at the capriciousness of Annette's answer. She'd gone to such lengths to throw Grete's and Klaus's

vacations into disarray, but now she'd simply hung Raftania out to dry.

Annette squeezed her fists tightly. "I found something even more interesting," she said, then noisily scampered down the stairs. "I gotta go investigate, yo!"

Without letting Grete and Erna get so much as a word in edgewise, Annette abandoned them and took off like a one-girl storm.

◇◇◇

It was the eleventh day of their vacation, and thanks to the encouragement from her teammates, Grete was able to use the time she spent engrossed in her work to steel her resolve.

Now all she had left to do was face Raftania.

The girl was sleeping in. According to her father, she'd been out late last night. Then, when she finally woke up, she immediately left to go shopping, and Grete didn't get a chance to talk to her.

After waiting until midday, she finally heard Raftania's voice over by the back of the house.

"Excuse me, Raftania, would you mind if we—?"

Raftania was carrying ingredients through the back door. When Grete saw her, the words got caught in her throat.

There was a purple bruise all over her left cheek.

"……!"

Grete instinctively reached up and covered her own cheek. The bruise was risen and swelling against Raftania's skin.

As she stood there speechless, Raftania gave her a chilly look. "Oh. It's you."

"What happened to your face…?"

Raftania flashed her a playful grin. "Huh? I took a hit last night, that's all. Ain't nothing special."

The girl was obviously putting up a brave front, and Grete was at a loss for what to say. As far as anyone on the island was concerned,

she was a bride whose wedding was just around the corner. Hitting her would be unthinkable.

"Who did that to you…?"

Raftania hung her head in hesitation, then let out a small sigh. "… It was them navy punks."

"……"

Grete couldn't believe it. She knew there was tension between them and the islanders, but how could they raise a hand against a teenage girl like that?

Raftania covered up her cheek in embarrassment. "I can't take it… I can't live on this island anymore…"

She bit down on her lip. As she squeezed her eyes shut in distress, faint tears began welling up in their corners.

Seeing her tremble, Grete was struck by a sudden urge to comfort her.

After listlessly dropping her hand from her cheek, Raftania got to work unloading the groceries from her handcart. "But I'm right as rain now. My wedding's in two days. I'm gonna marry Mr. Klaus, and I'm gonna get off this island for good."

"Raftania…"

The joy in her voice was clear.

After her mother died, she'd given up on the island that had failed to find her killer. That was what had drawn her to Klaus, a man from outside it, and the hope she found drove her to marry him by any means necessary.

Grete sympathized with her to a certain degree. That said, she couldn't condone Raftania's actions.

"Are you sure there isn't something you're losing sight of?"

She took full advantage of the words Monika had left her with.

Raftania grabbed some carrots and glared at her. "What're you on about? Your threats ain't gonna—"

"I'm talking about Teach's heart." Grete held her head high. "You've done a stellar job of using an ambiguous promise from the

past to bulldoze through every obstacle in your path, but have you ever once stopped to ask Teach how he feels?”

“What?”

“It looks to me as though all you’re doing is running away.”

“…So, what, you think you know me?” Raftania hurled the carrots back in the handcart and glared daggers at Grete. After looking her up and down, she said, “Ha-ha, I think I got the gist,” with a hollow laugh. “You’re sweet on Mr. Klaus, too. That’s why you’re so flustered an’ all.”

“You’re right. I’m in the same boat as you are.” Grete didn’t deny it. Her thoughts had been turning that whole time she’d been observing Raftania, and this was the answer she’d arrived at. “I suspect the two of us have a lot in common… We’ve both overlooked something important.”

Grete had put her own desires above all else and had made passes at Klaus over and over. As someone who’d continued coming on strong to the point of being a nuisance, how was she any different from Raftania?

Realizing that filled her with pain.

“Just like you, I haven’t asked—haven’t been *able* to ask—how Teach really feels.”

It wasn’t right to keep running away.

“Out of everyone on the team, you’re the one Klaus loves the most.”

If she wanted to check the veracity of what Monika told her, then her only option was to ask him directly. Staying in love with him without bothering to find out the truth was no less foolish than clinging on to an engagement for six whole years.

Raftania’s eyes went wide.

She knew what Grete was about to say. She could feel the weight of Grete’s conviction.

“I asked Teach to meet me at your wedding venue tomorrow.”

Raftania flinched, and Grete pressed on.

"What do you say we both summon up our courage and face his feelings together, Raftania?"

It took a good long while for Raftania to reply. Grete had thrown down the gauntlet, and Raftania had no immediate answer. Her eyes darted back and forth, and she stammered, "I, I, uh," and, "Tomorrow?" trying to find a way to avoid the question as her face grew progressively redder.

Grete understood her hesitation painfully well.

In all honesty, she was scared herself.

Ultimately, though, Raftania ended up nodding. "Okay…"

Now there would be no more running away.

◇◇◇

It was the twelfth day of their vacation, and despite having insisted that she was "bored" with her job, Annette still carried out the bare minimum of her duties. The outdoor venue she'd set up was elegant in its simplicity.

There was an installation resembling a gate stationed atop a hill with a great view. That was where the bride and groom were going to pledge their love to each other. It was painted white and decorated with beautiful seashells and leaves from the island. The bell hanging from its top was likely there for dramatic effect. When the newlyweds rang it together, its chime would sound out across Marnioce. There was also a set of wooden benches sitting in front of the installation. They were little more than shaved-down logs, but even they had a certain appeal to them.

Ultimately, though, the biggest draw the location had to offer was the landscape. The hilltop had a clear view of the sea, and an invigorating sea breeze blew over it. The sky was overcast that day, which was unfortunate, but tomorrow, the sea was expected to be brilliantly blue.

For a homegrown wedding ceremony, the whole thing had an unmistakable charm to it. It was obvious how much passion Raftania had poured into it.

In the end, though, her love was unrequited.

When Klaus arrived, she poured her heart out to him. She told him just how much she loved him and how much comfort her memories from six years ago had brought her. She knew that there was still a lot they didn't know about each other, but she politely reminded him that they would have all the time in the world to rectify that.

Grete watched over the whole thing from a short distance away.

"I—I got this bouquet for the ceremony."

Raftania pulled out a bundle of white flowers. Grete remembered Annette mentioning something about that.

Raftania bashfully held the flowers up. "Will you escort me and my bouquet tomorrow?"

Once she was done saying her piece, Klaus leaned in toward her ear. "Raftania, here's what I have to say to you…"

Grete couldn't pick up the rest of what he told her, but he must have made his position crystal clear. Klaus had prepared a statement precisely for this moment that would shatter her heart to pieces.

Raftania's eyes went wide with shock, and her legs wobbled as the strength drained from her body. She took a step backward. Then, after wiping the corners of her eyes with her sleeves, she turned her back on Klaus and fled from him.

By the time she got to Grete, her face was drenched with tears.

"I failed… He shot me down in the worst way…" Her smile was one of self-loathing. "Looks like my fate is set in stone…"

She wiped her eyes dry again, then ran off before Grete had a chance to stop her.

Grete's romantic rival had just had her heart broken, but that brought her little joy. If anything, she was filled with sympathy at how valiantly Raftania had fought.

Now it was her turn.

Klaus remained motionless atop the hill for a long while after Raftania left. He didn't turn to see where she'd gone, instead fixing his gaze on the fog rolling over the sea. There was no emotion on his face. He looked equal parts lonely and exhausted.

The girl who was supposed to be his bride had left the wedding venue, and now he stood there alone.

The humidity in the air was climbing. It was liable to start raining soon. Grete took another look at Klaus's expression. They needed to get going before that happened.

Klaus said nothing; his eyes were melancholy.

It was impossible to say how much time passed.

Grete spent the entire time watching him, and eventually, he turned toward her. "You did a good job egging her on, Grete," he said, sounding detached. "The wedding is off. She's going to tell everyone that it's been canceled."

"…What did you say to her?"

"That I knew her secret. It's nothing you need to concern yourself with."

In other words, he'd found a way to blackmail her. It felt a little cruel, but it was the most peaceful way for them to stop the wedding.

Without saying any more than was necessary, Klaus began walking. "Come on, Grete. There isn't much of it remaining, but we are still on vacation. We should spend what's left of it relaxing."

Grete called to him from behind. "…Would you mind waiting a moment, Boss?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm quite adept at changing quickly."

After giving him the briefest of explanations, she headed for the tree line.

In her hand, she was holding a large bag. She'd prepared its contents specifically for that moment. She hadn't had much time to construct it, so she'd just modified a dress she already had. It had taken sleepless nights and Erna's help to get it done in time.

After hiding behind a nearby tree, Grete got to work changing. Disguises were her specialty, so she'd long since mastered the art of swiftly swapping outfits, and she was already wearing the corset.

After donning the pure-white dress, she revealed herself.

"…That's a wedding dress," Klaus said softly.

"I wanted to see what standing by your side with this on would feel like."

It was an A-line dress, one that was fitted at the hips and had a large skirt that flared out by her feet. Grete wasn't fond of showy ornamentation, so its sole adornment was a simple decoration in the shape of a white rose on her chest. She had a silver tiara on and a veil that covered her face.

Klaus gave his response without hesitation. "Magnificent."

A heart-soaring happiness rushed through her body.

Vacations were for making memories, so this was something she'd desperately wanted to wear. She did feel a little bad for Raftania, but with a venue like that already prepared, it would be a shame to just let it go to waste.

She wondered if Annette had foreseen this, though she knew that any attempt to figure out what that girl was thinking was doomed to failure.

"Boss," she said before the installation modeled after a chapel. "There's a big decision you're trying to make on this vacation, isn't there?"

"You noticed, did you?"

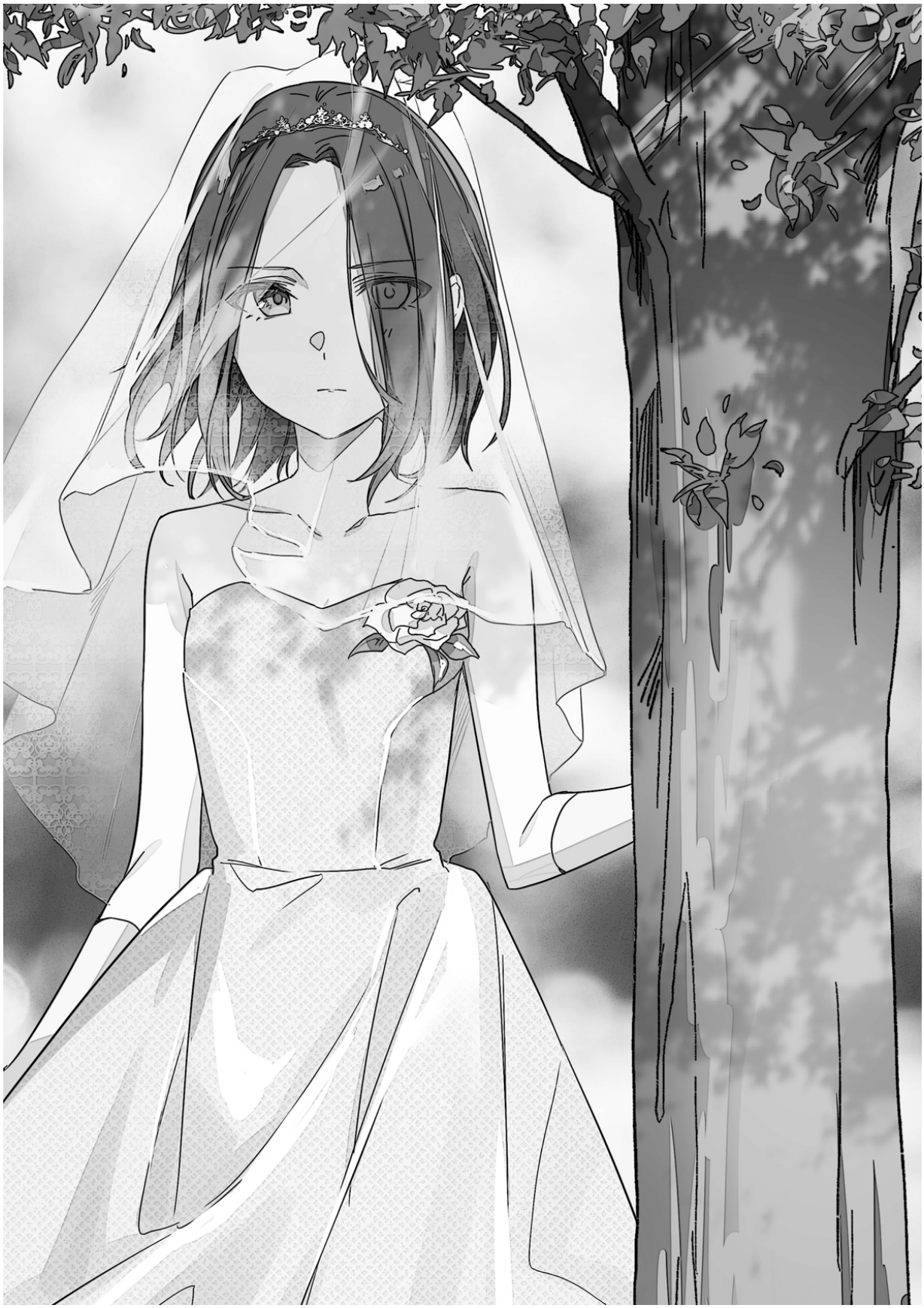
"That's why I wanted to take this moment to ask about your feelings as well."

Klaus gave her a small nod and stepped closer.

Once he was right in front of her, Grete spoke. “I told you once that I was in love with you, and you replied that you were unable to reciprocate my feelings. I’m aware that you might very well give my next question the same answer.”

The torrent of emotions surging within her made her want to cry, but she fought back the urge and pressed on.

* * *





"But even so, I have to ask…would it be too much to hope that you'd changed your mind?"

Nine months.

That was how long it had been since the day Grete and the others had beaten Corpse's coconspirator, Olivia, and since Klaus had told her about how he felt. Despite accepting that her love was unrequited, she'd pined after Klaus, and her feelings for him had refused to fade ever since.

During that time, she'd begun fantasizing. Begun getting greedy for him to change his mind—for her love to come to fruition.

"……"

It took her a long time to get her answer.

Klaus slowly reached up to lay a hand on his own face and sank into contemplative silence before sluggishly lowering his hand back down and turning his focus to Grete.

"I suppose I need to be honest with you, don't I?"

Klaus chose each word deliberately.

"…There are times I'm conflicted."

"……?"

"It's not that I don't want it… The idea of falling in love with a woman someday, getting married, having children, and building a happy family… It does strike me sometimes…"

His voice was so soft, she nearly missed it.

"I would be lying if I said I didn't dream about it."

"What…?"

Klaus was looking Grete straight in the eye. Grete could see herself, bated breath and all, reflected on his eyes' inky surfaces.

Not once had he ever shown her such uncertainty. To him, she'd always just been one of his spy team subordinates. One of his pupils. Either that, or a beloved family member—something akin to a little sister.

Had something changed?

Had some transformation begun taking place in Klaus, one that not even he himself could have envisioned?

Grete was so astonished, she forgot to breathe.

"No, it's not fair to you for me to phrase things so inconclusively. Forgive me. I really am no good with words." Klaus apologetically averted his gaze. "It's just…I have these selfish dreams, and they fill me with this feeling of emptiness."

"……"

"Because I know that that's all they are—a fantasy."

He let out a resigned sigh, and Grete felt her heart tighten.

She understood exactly what he was saying. It was his job as a spy to save his nation, and the responsibility of that rested heavily on his shoulders. He needed to carry out the duty he'd inherited from his beloved Inferno and protect his homeland. He needed to uncover the full details of the Nostalgia Project that had led to Inferno's ruin.

He had no time to waste getting distracted by love.

But most importantly, he—

"……"

The things she wanted to say to him surged up in her heart like a torrent.

I want you to be unfair to me. And I want to be unfair to you. After all, we're the same. Our emotions are at the mercy of the fantasies our weak, cowardly hearts show us. We knew they can never come to pass, but try as we might to fend them off with resigned smiles, we kept on trying to grab hold of them. Like hunting down fragments of a dream. It's an unsettling sort of feeling, but I want to bask in it forever. I want you to impose on me so much, I feel like I'm drowning. I want you to keep clinging to those fantasies.

All those tumultuous feelings melted together within her, and she couldn't find the words to express them aloud.

Right as her frustration at that fact began mounting, she spotted something bizarre out of the corner of her eye.

"Is that a *pirate ship*…?"

"What?" Klaus said in a rare display of genuine bafflement.

The whole thing happened so abruptly.

It arrived out of nowhere, with no warning whatsoever.

However, she could definitely see it. Behind Klaus, floating in the water to the southwest of the island, *there was a pirate ship*. Between the clouds covering the sun and the white fog rolling in, she couldn't get a great look at it. That said, the ship, with its three sky-piercing masts and tattered black sail, was slowly moving.

There was no way that ship had been built any time recently. It was a bona fide pirate ship.

Klaus whirled around. "Wait, how is that possible—?" he stammered.

Not even he could make sense of what he was seeing.

The two of them stood there in shock, and before long, the pirate ship vanished onto the foggy seas. All that remained was water so tranquil, it was like the vessel had never been there in the first place.

"…Perhaps it was a trick of the light," Klaus murmured in bewilderment.

That was the most logical explanation. The light could have simply made a passing warship or ferry look like a pirate ship. It was what any reasonable person would conclude.

However, Grete refused to accept that.

"It doesn't have to be…!" she insisted.

"Just because you think something is a fantasy doesn't mean it can't be real!"

Grete's claim rang with conviction.

She was so shaken that tears began welling up in her eyes. She wanted to scream that the pirate ship was real.

She needed him to admit it. She didn't want to dismiss it as a mere fantasy.

There was still a chance her love would bear fruit.

After all, hadn't a two-hundred-year-old pirate ship just appeared before their very eyes?

"It's not…a fantasy…"

Her vision grew blurry with tears, making it impossible to see Klaus's face. She clutched at her pure-white dress, and as she trembled, she repeated "It's not a fantasy" over and over again.

Chapter 2

The Navy

It was the fourth day of their vacation, and one girl's name was spreading across the island like wildfire.

The girl in question stopped by the fanciest bar in Marnioce.

After starting off at a counter seat, she hit it off with the proprietor and got invited to the VIP area in the back. Between her elegant dress and the air of allure she gave off, no one would ever have guessed her age. When she seductively crossed her legs, it demanded the attention of every man in the bar. Captivated by the sight of the thighs and fair bosom peeking out from beneath her dress, they came over to her table one after another to make their shot.

However, they knew there was too much competition for them to have any hope of wooing her empty-handed. They bought up necklaces and rings from the island's jeweler and presented them to her. The girl delighted in each one even as she craftily played on the men's rivalries and drew the competition to even fiercer heights.

Not all of the bar's patrons were so taken with her, though. "Bah, what's so good about a whelp like her?" some of the men tutted. However, the girl herself went out of her way to approach her naysayers. "I'm so sorry about all the fuss," she would say as she held their hands. They would catch a glimpse of her breasts through her dress when she gave them a slight bow, but more than that, they would see how beautiful her eyes were. As the men sat there, captivated, she would feed their egos so deftly, it was like she knew

their deepest desires. “You really know a lot about liquor. Would you mind giving me some pointers?”

Thus, even her staunchest detractors would fall head over heels for her and join the growing ranks of her fans.

One rumor begat another, and scores of men began piling on and becoming the biggest reverse harem the island had ever seen.

After spending her nights like that for a full three days straight, the girl—“Dreamspeaker” Thea—let out a booming laugh.

She was wearing a dress she’d been offered in tribute and sauntering through the town at night as though she owned the place.

“Heh, I’m in my prime right now! It’s like there’s a mysterious power welling up within me!”

Marnioce might have been a remote island, but the downtown area around the naval base was prosperous all the same. Store owners came all the way over from the mainland to open stores catering to off-duty sailors, and there was a strip over three hundred feet long of them all using the island’s distinctive white brick design. Orange lights filled the street at night, and it featured all sorts of unique eateries, from stores where people could enjoy cheese and wine imported from the mainland, to barbeque joints serving fresh local ingredients.

Thea strode down the street with her arms spread wide, like the world was her oyster.

“This right here, this is my golden age!”

Around her, she was being escorted by a gaggle of men. They all wanted to spend time with that beautiful girl who so deftly played with their male heartstrings, and they’d banded together to make that a reality.

Thea chuckled to herself as the men led the way. “It’s incredible how nice it feels to have my pride back,” she muttered quietly enough that the others wouldn’t hear her. “The Fend mission really

did a number on my mental health. Betraying Lamplight alongside Monika and building up the Fires of War as an underworld organization was all well and good…but then Monika double-crossed me and left me looking like a fool. Seriously, how is that fair? Not ten minutes after I boasted that I was her one true partner in crime, she goes and stabs me in the back. After that, the CIM locked me up and left me forgotten and irrelevant during the big finale. I was cut off from the mission, and I was so bored that I spent every day tearing up newspapers and piecing them back together like jigsaw puzzles just to amuse myself."

Whenever she thought back to those days, it gave her a splitting headache.

However, she shook off those memories. "But enough about that!" she shouted into the night sky. "Now my whole heart is full! This is the real me. Look out, world, here I come! All that suffering was just preparing me for—"

"SHUT YOUR STUPID PIEHOLE!!"

Someone came barreling in from the side of the road like a fierce gust of wind and socked her right in the gut. By the time she had a chance to gasp in pain, they hauled her off without the men even noticing and dragged her to an empty alley.

That someone was Monika, and for whatever reason, she was pissed.

"Do you have *any* idea how much of a scene you've been making these past three days?! You're an urban legend now, you know that?! They're calling you the 'Raven-Haired Succubus from the Mainland'!"

"I'm just enjoying my vacation…"

"Well, try to put yourself in your teammates' shoes for a half a second!"

Monika's voice rang with genuine annoyance. She planted her hands on her hips and shook her head in exasperation. Her hood hung low over her face.

"I have to ask, Monika, what's going on? What're you doing here in town?"

"Don't worry, I'm getting out of here the second I have what I came here for."

Monika might have been dead on paper, but that didn't change the fact that a mug shot listing her as an international terrorist had been making the rounds. She was really supposed to be avoiding places where people might see her.

"Have you seen Sara anywhere? I need to borrow one of her pets, ASAP."

"Oh, sure. She was here just this afternoon. The locals thought she was just adorable."

Thea had spotted Sara enjoying herself in the town by the naval base a couple times, as a matter of fact.

As she recalled, Monika's group was chasing down the pirate legend.

"I take it your treasure hunt has hit a snag, then."

"God, I *wish* it was treasure we were looking for."

"……?"

"Don't worry about it," Monika said, then quickly changed the subject. "Looks like you've been having yourself a nice time."

Over on the main street, the men were rushing around, looking for Thea.

"It's all about the gender ratio," Thea explained.

"Huh?"

"There were fewer than two thousand people who lived on the island, and the navy just about doubled their population. The vast majority of those sailors are men in their twenties to fifties. It's no wonder there aren't enough women to go around."

That was the secret behind Thea's immense popularity. Most of her suitors were single men affiliated with the navy. There weren't many female sailors, and the island didn't exactly have an abundance of young women, either. When it came to dating on the island, the women held all the cards.

In other words, that was why Thea was being treated like royalty.

"You can go ahead and call me Princess Thea."

"Shut the hell up, Slutcubus!"

After giving one last disdainful remark, Monika turned and left.

◇◇◇

It was the fifth day of their vacation, and after having finished her three days and nights of debauchery, Thea stared at her planner back at the boardinghouse. She would have been perfectly happy spending every night crashing at a different man's house than the last, but not wanting her teammates to get *too* appalled (though she felt that that ship might have already sailed), she was making an effort to stop by the boardinghouse at least once a day.

She furrowed her brows as she lay on her bed.

My schedule is starting to look pretty packed…

At the moment, she was trying to figure out how best to spend the rest of her time there.

The sailors she'd been hitting it off with had invited her out on all sorts of dates, offering her experiences that most people could never dream of having. "I can show you some special caves and hot springs that only the navy is allowed to visit," they said, and, "Want to see what the deck of a warship is like?"

"Hmm," she grumbled.

What I'd really like is to get together with the others and paint the town red, but…

Doing so would be a blast, but there was a reason she couldn't, at least not to the extent she wanted to.

"The only times you can all be in one place are days one, thirteen, and fourteen."

Klaus had instituted a strange rule back at the beginning of their vacation, and because of it, Thea couldn't get the whole gang together. She was capped at just inviting a few people.

Why did he do that, I wonder?

She didn't understand what his goal was, but at the same time, she doubted he would restrict them like that without any reason.

He was splitting them up, but to what end?

It's almost as though he's having us do a dry run *of—*

Midway through her deductions, she got interrupted.

"Shut your traps and listen up, scum!!"

What's that shouting?

It sounded like someone was shouting threats out in front of the boardinghouse.

The voice sounded familiar, and Thea quickly rushed outside.

There was a large plaza in front of the boardinghouse she was staying at, and that plaza was full of anxious-looking islanders. There were three men from the navy standing in the middle, with their voices raised.

"Ensign Mercier was found dead in the early dawn this morning. With how disfigured the body was, it could only have been murder!! We know you islanders have a bone to pick with the navy," the men bellowed. "If anyone has any idea who the killer might be, you'd better get talking, fast! Otherwise, we're gonna interrogate each and every one of you!"

Thea frowned. This was hard to listen to. It was clear that some sort of incident had taken place, but there was no sense in arbitrarily deciding that the islanders were to blame. They were trying to brute-force their way into finding the culprit without a shred of actual evidence.

"They're being absurd…," Thea muttered. The islander standing beside her was of the same opinion. "They've been going around all morning and doing this in every arrondissement," he told her in exasperation.

The people gathered in the plaza exchanged concerned looks with one another. *We don't have what you're looking for*, they mutely insisted.

The plaza was silent, though the sailors' faces were still red.

"There ain't no killer," someone said in a hushed voice. "It's the pirate curse. You lot didn't care one whit 'bout investigating it, and now you're paying the price."

"Hey! What the hell'd you just say?!"

One trigger-happy sailor reacted immediately. His eyes bugged out with rage, and he shoved his way through the crowd and made his way to one of the women so violently, it appeared he might be about to start throwing punches.

"Defying the navy, are we?! That's pretty damn suspicious! You're coming with us!"

It was straight up tyranny.

However, the islanders were helpless to resist the brawny sailors, and there was no one who could come to the woman's aid. All they could do was watch things unfold in pitying silence.

"Please, no…," the woman said in terror as the sailor closed in on her.

"Don't even think about fighting back! Get your ass over here right this—!"

Thea couldn't take it.

She quickly cut in and moved to obstruct the sailor's path.

"Why, if it isn't Nicola! Thank you so much for last night."

The moment the man stopped, she circled around to his side. Rather than face him head-on, she slipped her arm around his and whispered coaxingly in his ear.

"What's going on? Why all the shouting?"

The man was someone Thea knew. When he noticed her clinging to him so suddenly, his voice went squeaky in confusion. "Th-Thea?! I'm in the middle of work right now—"

"Come on, don't be like that. Remember how you promised to show me around the base?" she whispered quietly enough that the islanders couldn't hear. "Can't we go now? I'm dying to see what your room is like… I'm a busy girl, you know. And I'll be leaving in just a few days. Just think what we could be missing."

"_____"

The man visibly gulped. His mouth was dangling half-open.

Then, with a start, his eyes went wide, and he hurriedly peeled Thea off of him. "N-now's really not a good time… But I'll finish up here soon. Soon, okay?"

He was stammering a mile a minute, and Thea gave him a small head bob.

The gesture was enough to set his heart aflutter. He quickly averted his gaze.

Instead of conducting any full interrogations, the sailors gave the islanders a few harsh warnings, then moved on to the next arrondissement.

Thea had successfully prevented things from coming to blows, but she still had questions about why the sailors were being so oppressive. Right as her curiosity swelled, she happened to spot a familiar-looking girl walking briskly down the street.

"Why, if it isn't Raftania."

Having recognized her, Thea called out.

Raftania worked at the boardinghouse Grete's group was staying at. She was the one who'd told them about all the island's attractions back when they first arrived.

"Hmm… Hmm? Ah, you're one of Mr. Klaus's girls." Raftania furrowed her brows in annoyance for a moment, but she quickly remembered who Thea was. She'd seen Thea's handiwork just now,

and she gave an appreciative nod. "I got a glimpse of what you did. I was impressed at how you handled him, but I had no idea you were one of Mr. Klaus's students. Consider me impressed."

"I have a bit of a knack for that sort of thing."

"I have to ask—what'd you whisper to him?"

"Oh, he has a shoe fetish. That was me inviting him to help me make a shoe that fit my foot *just so*."

Raftania let out a confounded sigh. "I ain't even gonna begin tryin' to understand that."

At that point, Thea noticed what she was wearing. "Goodness me, that's quite the load you have there. I'm sorry, am I interrupting you while you're working?"

Raftania showed her the large basket she was carrying on her back. "I'm just on my way back from buying some meat and veggies from the market. I was thinkin' I could offer Mr. Klaus a nice home-cooked meal tonight. Everything here is fresh from the island."

Thea gave her an awkward smile. For reasons unbeknownst to her, Raftania was insisting that she was Klaus's fiancée. She was almost certainly misunderstanding something, and Thea wasn't sure how best to point that out.

She decided to change the subject and shot another look off in the direction the sailors had gone.

"I have to say—"

She lowered her tone to a hush.

"—they were being pretty nasty back there. Do they always treat the islanders like that?"

That was the question she'd stopped Raftania to ask in the first place. That whole exchange just didn't sit right with her.

Raftania shrugged. "Eh. The islanders and sailors have been butting heads for ages."

"Is that so?"

"They're tryin' to expand their base, and they want to drive the islanders out to do it. You ask me, they deserve to get cursed."

With an annoyed sigh, she explained about the string of unexplained deaths and the pirate's curse—the strange phenomenon where someone on the island was brutally murdered once every three months. The number of victims was in the double digits, and the culprit had yet to be found.

That's horrible…

Thea gasped at how grisly it all was. Even just hearing a brief summary was enough to make her quake with rage.

What the navy is doing is strange, too. Ever since the Great War, the Lylat Kingdom has been reducing their military spending, albeit not by much. Why, then, would they be expanding a base out here in the middle of nowhere?

If nothing else, it clashed with Thea's understanding of the situation. The Lylat navy's budget had been dropping year over year, and there were international treaties restricting how many warships they could own.

As a Din spy, she had an obligation to look into this.

Something is off about the navy. And between that and the tragedy that's taking place here…

All of a sudden, an idea flashed through her head.

She'd just been trying to figure out how best to spend her vacation, and she'd already had her fill of the island's nightlife.

Plus, more importantly…

She could still see the islanders cowering from the sailors. The sailors were going and spewing their abuse all across the island, and the locals could do nothing but shrink back in fear.

A feeling of duty welled up within her as she spoke. "Perhaps I'd best go get myself involved. The case isn't going to crack itself."

"What?! But why would *you*—?" Raftania cried in astonishment.

From her perspective, it was a logical question. Why *would* a regular old tourist go and suggest something like that?

What she didn't know, though, was that Thea was no ordinary vacationer.

"Well, we can't very well just let the culprit do whatever they want, can we?"

"I mean, no, but…"

"And wouldn't you say I'm the best person for the job? If the island police can't lay a hand on the navy, then what you need is an outsider—and I just so happen to be the Raven-Haired Succubus."

Thea laid a hand on her chest and licked the area around her lips.

"Heroes don't leave anyone behind. Not even people from foreign countries, and not even when they're on vacation."

With that, Thea got to work.

She'd appointed herself as a mediator, and she was determined to solve the case of the mysterious deaths and quell the tensions between the islanders and the sailors.

◇◇◇

It was the sixth day of their vacation, and after laying all the groundwork she needed to begin her investigation, she decided to enlist the help of a specific teammate of hers. In Thea's opinion, she was the perfect person for what they needed to do.

That afternoon, she called the girl in question to the boardinghouse and laid out the situation.

"And there you have it, Sara. Can I count on you to back me up?"

"Of course! I'm happy to lend a hand."

The girl Thea had selected as her partner was Sara.

After giving Thea a hearty nod, Sara turned to the hawk and pigeon sitting beside her and lovingly patted their heads. "The people here have been really good to us. They're always offering these little guys food and playing with them. If someone's been going around killing them, I can't let them get away with it."

Sara had largely spent her past few days either running through nature or walking through town alongside her animals. Hers had been a peaceful vacation, and considering that she felt she owed the islanders a favor, she'd clearly been enjoying herself.

Thea was relieved at how easy it had been to get Sara on board. "I'm so glad to hear it. I do apologize about pulling you away from your holiday like this."

"Not at all! If you chose to come to me for help, I'm not going to let you down."

Sara beamed happily, and Thea returned it with an even bigger smile still. "Well, of course I chose you. That was some fine work you did there in our last mission."

"Hm? Hee-hee, th-thanks for saying that."

"*That's* the person I want on my side—the star pupil of 'Ashes' Monika, who took down White Spider, the terrorist of the century. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if you'd earned yourself some international renown."

"Y-you're giving me way too much credit! I-I'll do my best, though!"

"You're sure? You'll put everything you have into this?"

"Of course! 'Meadow' Sara, ready and reporting for duty!"

"Great—now I need you to become a hostess."

"Sure! That's no problem at…… Wait… What?"

A promise was a promise.

Thea grabbed Sara's hands tightly to make sure she couldn't run away.

"…I'm sorry, a hostess……?"

The color started fading from Sara's face, and her expression froze as it grew steadily paler and paler.

Undeterred, Thea gave her hands a firm shake. Then she threw open her closet and revealed the gorgeous nightgown she'd selected. "Now, on we go to the salacious world of the night. Don't you worry, Sara. I'll have you making big money in no time."

"~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~!!"

Sara screamed, and Thea began her investigation by forcibly holding her down.

The reason they needed to infiltrate the nightclub was to gather information, of course.

The island's nightclub catered to sailors and was in a gorgeous building no less impressive than those back in Lylat proper. The mainland owner opened it in order to be able to work while on holiday.

Inside the dimly lit club, there were a series of U-shaped couches so that several women could attend to each group of male patrons. The building was filled with indirect lighting, illuminating the space in a light-blue glow. In Thea's experience, those were the exact kinds of establishments that tended to loosen men's tongues.

She'd already talked things over with the proprietress. Thea's reputation preceded her, and she'd been able to secure employment that very day for both herself and Sara.

"Go on and make that drink, Sara. Now, if the customer pulls out a cigarette, you have to immediately offer him a light. And make sure there's always a clean ashtray. If the customer drops his cigarette butt in one, you need to have a replacement ready to—"

"THIS ISN'T FAAAAAAAAIR!!" Sara wailed, with her face bright red.

Sara was wearing a white blouse and a short pencil skirt. Thea had realized that anything too flashy would be a poor fit for her, so the outfit's color scheme was relatively tame, but Sara's shoulders were completely exposed, and the skirt didn't even reach her knees.

"You set me up! If I had known that this was what you were asking, I would have turned you down on the spot!" Sara moaned. "*Snff*… Why are you making me do this…?"

She was sitting on the end of one of the couches and trembling as she put ice in a glass. All she was doing was moving an ice cube over from the ice bucket, but her fingers were quivering so badly, her last few attempts had ended in failure.

Thea and Sara were already at work serving a trio of men. All three of them had stared spellbound at Thea's black open-chested dress, but when their gazes fell on Sara, who was scared stiff, they looked at her with confusion.

"Is your friend okay there, Thea? She's kinda sweating bullets."

"Oh, she's fine. She's just not used to spending time around men."

"J-just for the record, she is an adult, right? And, like, her working visa's all squared away—?"

"Hee-hee, don't you worry about that."

There were some serious legal and ethical issues with what they were doing, but given that they were there doing spy work, Thea wasn't too concerned. She had ID papers and work visas all forged up for them.

She turned back to the men and smiled to get them to see things her way. "What do you think? There's a certain charm to showering an innocent, panicking rookie with love, wouldn't you say?"

Comprehension dawned on the men, and they nodded, before turning their gazes back to Sara.

Sara's face was downright scarlet, and it was taking everything she had just to move a single ice cube. She managed to get a decent grip on the ice tongs for once, but she soon dropped them again in a stunning display of clumsiness.

The men were starting to realize something—how absolutely adorable she looked when she was flustered.

"Hey, Sara! Make me a drink!" "Me too!" "Me three!"

They ganged up and began making demands of her.

Sara squeaked and practically jumped out of her skin at the sudden requests. "O-of course. Just give me a second here…"

"What kind of guys are you into?" "Have you ever been with a man?" "Who was your first crush?"

"I-I'm not sure I really want to answer that…"

"Strike a pose for us!" "Give us some peace signs!" "Yeah, and twist your hips! We wanna see you from all sides!"

"I, um, I don't… Y-you mean, like this…?!"

"Now, call me names!" "Slap me!" "Step on me!"

"Wait, am I surrounded by perverts?! There's perverts! Perverts!!"

Despite the men's teasing, Sara did her best to continue waiting on them. It was obvious that she wasn't cut out for this line of work, but her innate diligence drove her to do her best to avoid upsetting her customers.

Thea smiled internally.

She's doing a lovely job of getting their guards down.

This was all part of Thea's plan. She herself came off as too experienced with men, and with how much of a name she'd made for herself, any overt moves she made were liable to draw unwanted suspicion.

Now then…

Those oddly carefree sailors were the ones working with the local police to investigate the latest murder. The trio consisted of the brawny sailor leading up the investigation team, a slender man who seemed a little timid, and a third who was downright corpulent.

Thea had arranged things with the proprietress so that if the three of them came in, they'd get directed to Thea's table.

"You know, I heard this rumor going around," she said, once the trio had had time to start getting a little tipsy. "Is it true that they narrowed down the culprit in that nasty business earlier? One of the sailors from your neck of the woods was boasting about it yesterday…"

"Huhhh? Thea, honey, that's bullshit. He was talking out of his ass," the investigation leader replied without a moment's hesitation.

"We really shouldn't be telling outsiders about how the investigation's going…," his portly companion scolded him, but the first man was in no mood to listen. "What're you, dumb? I dunno who this jackass is, but he's going around talking a big game to try to win Thea over. We can't let her fall for his big-mouthed bullshit!"

Intentionally sharing wrong information was a quick way to get people to correct you even when they weren't supposed to.

After he was done with his outburst, the leader turned and gave Thea a gentle look. "Fact is, the investigation hasn't been going too hot. We know it's connected to the string of weird deaths, but that's about it. We don't have a single damn lead." He pounded down his booze in frustration. "There are never any witnesses, and the bodies are always so mangled, it takes us ages to even ID them. This killer, I swear… The body we found yesterday was in absolute tatters. Our boys have been combing the coast ever since it turned up, and there's still bits and parts we haven't found."

"…Are you saying they defaced the body to cover their tracks?"

"That's what we're thinking. But the thing is, we can't even figure out what kinda tool they used to do it. All we know is, the backwater cops here are outta their depth. It's on us to solve this thing."

"Because of how unusual the tool used for the murder was?"

The leader chugged down his drink. "Yeah, we're dealing with a deranged weapon freak. Worst comes to worst, we're gonna have to break into every house on the island looking for it."

Thea wanted to tell him that that was a terrible idea and that he was taking things too far, but the sailors didn't have any other options at their disposal. The exhaustion on their leader's face made that all too clear.

However, doing so was only going to exacerbate the rift between the islanders and the navy.

"…Maybe this whole curse thing is real."

The slender sailor who'd been silent all through the conversation finally spoke up.

He must have been pretty sloshed, as his face was bright red. With tears in his eyes, he shot a pleading glance over at Sara. "That's what the islanders keep saying, right? That this is all because we're trying to expand the base."

The other two sailors gave him a look that said, "C'mon, man" and "Not you, too."

However, the skinny man kept right on moaning. He was a weepy drunk, and he began sobbing as he pestered Sara. "Saraaaaa, I'm

scaaaared."

Sara awkwardly tried to soothe him. "L-let's get you some water, okay?"

After deciding to leave the crying man to Sara, Thea turned her gaze back over to the leader. "Why *does* the navy want to expand the base anyhow?"

"It was all the vice-admiral's idea."

The answer she got was incredibly specific.

"Dunno what he's after, though. And I sure as hell don't know how he's selling the mainland on it. No one has any clue what the guy's thinking."

There was the intel she needed.

Vice-Admiral Grenier was the man responsible for managing the Marnioce Naval Base. He'd remained on the island ever since the Great War, and the locals despised him.

The slender sailor clung to Sara again. "Ensign Mercier, the dead guy, was one of the vice-admiral's favorites. It *must've* been the curse that killed him."

Plenty of the islanders were talking about it—the curse that the Great Pirate Jackal had placed to protect his treasure. Fantastical as it sounded, no one could deny that once every three months, someone on the island got brutally murdered.

"All those who invade the island are cursed…"

There was a strange vividness to the way the slender sailor's sob lingered in their ears.

After getting ahold of the information, the two of them quickly finished up their hostess work.

The two of them headed back to the western side of the island where their boardinghouses were. Sara was staying at a different one, but the path to get there was the same. They massaged their aching shoulders as they walked along the seaside road.

"I suppose we'll need to find someone a little higher up the chain of command to get all the details."

"I'm so tired…"

Sara was dead tired. Her shoulders were slumped in dejection, her back was hunched over, and her stride was lifeless.

"Why don't you tell me a funny story, Sara?!"

"Don't you start on me, too, Miss Thea!"

Thea tried pushing her luck, but Sara wasn't interested in playing along anymore. All those memories must have just flashed back through her head, as she let out a sudden scream. "AHHHHH! I'm sick and tired of helping you with your investigation!" she yelled, and with that, she ran off in the direction of her boardinghouse.

In no time at all, she was completely gone from sight.

"…Perhaps I asked too much of her."

After that, Thea was going to have to give her at least a day off.

Still, the investigation's only just getting started. I need to crack the case before our vacation is over.

As she continued planning out her next moves, she arrived at her boardinghouse.

Thea's room was up on the second floor. Monika, Sybilla, and Lily were all staying in the same house as she was, but none of them appeared to be back yet.

When Thea opened her door, she was greeted by a bizarre sight.

Her entire room was flooded.

"……Excuse me?"

Her brain froze.

She couldn't process what it was she was seeing.

There was water trickling from the ceiling and huge puddles pooled on her floor. The walls were soaked like someone had

dumped a bucket out on them. Her bed was knocked over, her closet had been flung open, and all the clothes inside it were soaking wet.

"Wh…?" Before she knew it, she let out a scream. "WHAT'S GOING ON IN HERE?! How does something like this even happen?!"

It didn't make sense.

The one thing she did know was that there was a stinging smell in the air. She squeezed her nose shut.

…Is that saltwater?

It smelled like the sea.

Sure enough, the water filling her room was seawater. There were strips of seaweed stuck to the walls.

It was almost like *some creature had come up from the sea and gone on a rampage.*

"This is creepy… Seriously, what's going on?"

Her door had been locked. The window was fully intact. How was her room in that dreadful state?

"Is this…the curse…?"

Unable to comprehend the situation, she could only stand there.

It was abundantly clear that a strange shift had just befallen her peaceful island trip.

◇◇◇

It was the seventh day of their vacation, and after spending the night in a different room, Thea woke up the next morning and began inspecting the scene. She hadn't had the energy left to check it out the previous night. She reported the incident to the boardinghouse's owner, of course, but due to his advanced age, all he did was mumble "Well, I'll be" on repeat, and he offered little in the way of actual help.

Thea decided to turn to another islander for assistance.

"What do you think, Raftania? Are there any creatures on the island that could turn a room inside out like that?"

She and Raftania had interacted a few times, so that was who Thea called for backup. Raftania had an oddly haggard look on her face, but she agreed to take a look, then screamed "Ack!" upon seeing the ghastly state the room was in.

After taking a look around, she gave Thea a sorry shake of the head. "I mean, we've got monkeys and boars up in the mountains… but I ain't never heard of them drownin' a locked second-floor room in seawater."

"That figures. This must have been the work of a human."

"Did they steal anything?"

"No, nothing."

All her valuables were still in her safe, so it wasn't the work of a burglar. She'd actually been wearing most of her jewelry while she worked at the nightclub last night, so it hadn't even gotten damaged.

"Doesn't look like there's much for you to do but tell the cops," Raftania grumbled.

"I'll let the owner decide whether or not he wants to get them involved. I find it hard to imagine them figuring out anything we couldn't."

Not looking at all satisfied with their findings, Raftania opened up the room's wardrobe.

When she did, all the seawater inside came pouring out and splashed her in the face. She let out a wordless shriek as she fell on her backside.

"This…," she rasped. "This all gives me the heebie-jeebies."

Thea agreed. "I'm going to throw out all my clothes. This is too creepy for me to ever wear them again, even after I wash them."

Ultimately, though, that was the extent of the damage.

They'd gathered all the information they could, but no answers presented themselves.

It's completely baffling. Why bother carrying seawater and seaweed all the way up to the second floor?

It was possible that someone was harassing her, but it seemed unlikely. Thea's rampant philandering could easily have earned her some jealousy, but carrying that much water up to the second floor would have taken ages.

As she tilted her head in puzzlement, she noticed that Raftania was acting oddly.

"……"

Raftania was still on the floor, lying on her back in a daze. She didn't even move to wipe the seawater off her face, and her face was deathly pale.

"Is everything okay, Raftania?"

"…Yeah, I'm right as rain." Raftania slowly rose to her feet. "It brought back memories, that's all. 'Bout my Ma. The blood got on my face just the same—"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's nothing. Forget I said anything… But this here, it's like the room was attacked by a pirate."

The comment about Raftania's mother aside, Thea agreed that it made one think of pirates. Her bedroom looked like it had been ravaged by something that had crawled up from Davy Jones's locker. It was impossible not to think about the curse. The lengths the pirate had gone to in order to protect his treasure. The way someone on the island got brutally murdered every three months.

Thea bit down hard on her lip and shook her head. "I assure you, there's no way it was anything so fantastical!" she declared, trying to encourage herself. "Mark my words, it was an ordinary human who did this. There's a homicidal maniac lurking on this island. I was getting too close to the truth, so they decided to send me a message."

If that was true, then the killer had made a poor move.

Thea's spirits were higher than ever. When someone picked a fight with her, she wasn't the type of girl to take it lying down.

◇◇◇

It was the eighth day of their vacation, and Thea decided to leverage the connections she'd made and employ a bold new strategy: *infiltrating the naval base*.

At the end of the day, that was going to be the fastest way to investigate. The idea that the culprit behind the serial killings was a member of the navy was a popular theory among the islanders, and Thea was curious about whether there might really be a connection between the murders and the plan to expand the naval base. It was time to get her answers straight from the source.

Sara had taken a break from the investigation due to emotional stress, but fortunately, she made a full recovery.

"N-no more making me do that kind of work! I'm begging you here!" Sara pleaded, her face red with embarrassment.

On top of that, they had one other helper who'd gotten the details from Sara.

"I wanna check out the naval base, yo!"

Namely, Annette. Her eyes glimmered at the thought of getting to visit an off-limits facility.

"I thought I heard something about you helping Raftania with her wedding," Thea said.

"The base sounded more interesting."

"I see you're as fickle as ever…"

At any rate, those were the three who chose to sneak into the base.

It didn't take them long to find an off-duty sailor.

The man was in his thirties and had a face that looked like a monkey's. It had been five years since he'd first been stationed there on the island. He was a junior lieutenant, and when Thea came to him with her proposal, he readily agreed.

"Oh, gosh, I can't believe you really want to come visit our base. It'd be my honor to give you a tour. You and your friends Sara and Annette are going to love it."

With a sappy, lovestruck grin, he showed them into the naval base.

It was a blatant violation of military regulations, but he was simply that desperate to win Thea's affection. She found his earnestness a touch endearing as she went farther into the base.

The naval base was composed of several facilities, including a central headquarters, an exercise yard, some barracks, a watchtower, and a repair shop. Naturally, it was the headquarters that Thea was most interested in. She coiled her arm around the sailor's. "Can you show us what's in there?" she asked, to which he whispered back, "Okay, but just this once," and let them right in.

The headquarters was a massive five-story structure. That was where all their key command and control departments were stationed.

The floor plan inside was oddly complex. Military bases were supposed to have layouts that were easy to memorize so people could get around quickly in emergencies, yet this one's hallways were full of turns that made it difficult to tell what shapes the rooms were.

"It's like a labyrinth, yo," Annette murmured. Thea tended to agree.

Something was definitely weird about this base.

As that fact was becoming clear to them, the monkey-faced sailor began breathing heavily. "I—I think that should do it for the tour. Do you want to head back to my bunk, Thea?"

"Sounds like a plan. Why don't you go on ahead? We'll be right behind you."

"Huh? I really shouldn't be leaving you here unsupervised…"

The sailor frowned, and Thea leaned in and whispered in his ear. "I have some things I need to prepare first—you know, like my lingerie."

"Oh, uh, of course. Well, the bathroom's right over there. I'll see you soon."

The man's eyes went wide in panic, and he scampered off. Despite his age, he clearly had little experience with women. That was a big part of why Thea had chosen him.

After resolving to give him an extra-special reward later, Thea quickly changed gears.

"Sara and Annette, we should start with—"

"The reference room, right? Yeah, let's go." "I've got the whole layout memorized, yo."

The three of them took off at a dash. Their sailor friend had already shown them how to get there.

Thea had picked the time of day when all the rest of the sailors would be out on patrol, and the girls managed to reach the third-floor reference room without running into a soul. The room had two locks on it, but Annette made short work of them.

They closed the door behind them as they went in.

The reference room was full of bookshelves that stretched all the way from the floor to the ceiling. That was where they stored the files they'd received from their superiors back on the mainland and the like.

"Photograph every document that catches your eye. We have fifteen minutes in here, tops. We need to be finished before then."

"Understood." "You got it, yo."

They didn't have time to actually read anything.

After getting out the miniature cameras designed by the Din Republic's Foreign Intelligence Office, they snapped photos of anything that looked like it might be important. Once they developed the film, they would know what it was the navy was plotting.

One of these files must describe the motive behind the expansion…

The string of strange deaths was shrouded in mystery, and that might very well be the key to shedding some light on things. Their hopes were high as they rapidly clicked their shutters.

"I found a hidden safe, yo."

Midway through the proceedings, Annette slid one of the shelves aside to reveal a strongbox.

It was a brilliant find. "That's amazing," Sara praised her, to which Annette revealed her trick. "The dust had settled funny around it." If there were big secrets lurking there, that was where they were going to find them.

All told, there were eight files within.

Thea took the top one and opened it up.

"_____!!"

It was a blueprint.

It looked to be a new device that had been developed there on the naval base. However, what shocked her was its shape.

What am I looking at here?!

Beside her, Sara and Annette opened up files of their own and let out similar gasps.

This is obviously no ordinary weapon. Why, if I didn't know better…

At least for Thea, there was something very familiar about it.

One file detailed a handgun disguised to look like a watch. Another was a suitcase that exploded if you entered a specific password. There was a miniature knife you could store in your mouth. An umbrella that shot needles from its handle. A pair of stilettos with a compartment in their heel to hide a codebook.

Thea and the others had used such tools themselves…

"I can see that look in your eyes—you think they look like the kind of intelligence gadgets that spies would use."

The answer came from over by the entrance.

None of them had heard the door to the reference room open, but now there was a short middle-aged man with them.

The man was so portly that the buttons on his military uniform were in danger of flying off. Between that and his diminutive stature, his body was practically as round as a globe. There wasn't a strand of hair on his scalp, but his beard was terribly long, giving his head a sort of imbalanced look.

Thea knew who that was. His was the very first name that came up in her investigation.

"Vice-Admiral Grenier…?!"

There, standing in the doorway, was the supreme commander of the entire base.

"Heh-heh," he laughed in amusement, then stroked his beard. "So, you must be the Raven-Haired Succubus I've been hearing so much about."

The man was being straight and to the point. Thea had heard that he was in his midfifties, but he carried himself with none of the solemnity one might expect. However, that in and of itself only made the whole situation that much more unsettling.

What exactly is his deal?

The reference room didn't have any windows, and the only entrance was blocked.

All Thea could do was wait and see what he would do.

How did he know we'd sneaked into the base?

It made sense that he was still at the base. No commander worth their salt would leave their headquarters completely unattended. The question was, how had he figured out what the girls were up to when nobody had seen them get there?

She bit her lip. No, there was a more pressing question.

He knew we were here, so why did he come alone*?*

If all he wanted was to deal with some intruders, he could easily have just left that to his men. No, he wanted to meet them in person for some reason—and he wanted to do so without his subordinates knowing.

"…Not even a flinch, huh?" Grenier said softly. "Impressive."

Thea gave him a confident smile. "Why, of course not. I just found myself enchanted by a lovely gentleman, that's all."

"Follow me. *After* you put those files back."

When the girls stared at him, unsure of what he was playing at, Grenier gave them a cheeky smile.

"You're here to learn our secrets, aren't you? I'll give you the grand tour. Unless you have objections, that is."

Thea and the others followed Vice-Admiral Grenier through the naval base.

The kind of trespassing they were doing was the sort that generally got you shot, but that didn't appear to be on Grenier's agenda. They decided to go along with him without resisting.

The three girls continued down the base's many curved hallways. They didn't pass a single soul. Grenier had chosen their route to ensure that.

"I wanted to see what you were capable of." As they walked, Grenier hit them with an unexpected compliment. "It's no wonder they call the Din Republic an espionage powerhouse. In just a few days, you charmed one of my men after another and had them eating out of the palm of your hand. I have to say, that's some frightening stuff."

He stroked his beard and nodded in admiration.

Apparently, the cat was out of the bag about them being Din spies. That was odd. They'd been acting as ordinary tourists basically since the moment they got to the island.

"…You seem awfully well-informed about us."

Thea stared daggers at the man's back.

Grenier's gaze wasn't fixed on them, yet she couldn't sense anything even approximating an opening.

"Why is that?" she asked. "Your job is to guard the nearby coastal waters. There are supposed to be other people in charge of intelligence. Why were those blueprints—?"

Grenier flatly cut her off. “You would think that spies would be able to answer questions like that themselves.”

Thea could do nothing but hold her tongue. Getting into an argument with the vice-admiral would hardly be prudent.

Sara hadn’t said a word that whole time. She’d just been watching things play out in silence. Sweat cascaded from her forehead as she constantly looked back and forth for an escape route. Annette was quiet as well.

Eventually, Grenier came to a stop in front of a wall. The corridor was a dead end. There was nothing there but a shelf. After cautiously glancing around, he took out a knife and stabbed it into a crack in the wall.

With a dull rumble, the wall slid to the side.

Beyond it, there was a dark hallway. On Grenier’s urging, they followed him in.

“The only people who know about this are the scientists and a small handful of my men,” Grenier said when they reached the brighter area at the end of the corridor. “This is the Marnioce Naval Base’s secret laboratory.”

The room was large, about half the size of a football pitch. If anything, it looked more like a factory than like a laboratory. There were massive machines set up for metalworking, and the air smelled of paint.

At the moment, there were roughly ten people who looked to be scientists rushing about in a hurry. The laboratory’s tables were covered in the very same spy gadgets the girls had seen in the reference room’s blueprints.

Annette’s eyes lit up. “Yo, this is so coooool!”

“What in the world are you people doing here…?” Thea muttered.

It was obvious that they were keeping the mainland out of the loop. What exactly was the navy preparing for out here on Marnioce, away from watchful eyes?

“How do you like it? I would love to get some opinions from an active-duty spy.”

With a proud nod, Grenier called over one of the scientists. “Hey, Director.” However, not a single one of the scientists halted their work. A few seconds later, one of the men finally reacted. “Huh… Oh, right!” he said as he rushed over to Grenier.

“I swear, these eggheads always get so lost in their work.” Grenier shrugged, then took a small metallic pole from the R&D director. “What do you think of this one, for example? We call it the ‘Sinistre Piège.’ It looks like an ordinary metal rod, but once you activate it…”

“Ack!”

The moment Grenier swung the rod, Sara and Annette got yanked toward him. It took everything they had just to keep their footing.

Grenier gave the rod another swing and turned it off. “…it becomes a powerful enough electromagnet to move a human body. If you stuck some sort of blade on this thing, you’d have a weapon strong enough to tear through just about anything. You could slice up a body, and it would take people ages to identify it.”

“Th-that’s so inventive!” “You’ve got my full attention, yo!”

Sara and Annette were amazed. It would appear that it was their belts that had gotten pulled. The fact that the rod was able to do that from a full ten feet away was a testament to the power of its magnetic force.

Thea, on the other hand, shuddered, as a whole different realization dawned on her.

“…The serial killings.”

“Huh?” Sara said, not sure what she was getting at.

“You’re right on the money,” Grenier said with a grim nod.

“Those murders were carried out with prototypes stolen from this very lab.”

Several things all clicked into place.

The islanders and sailors had both mentioned how the murders could never have been committed with conventional weapons. That was because the culprit had used inventions developed in secret in the naval base's secret lab. The bodies had been disfigured by a weapon *designed* to mutilate corpses too badly to be easily identified.

Grenier let out a small sigh. "I have to say, I have no idea how the killer managed to get past our security…"

That was a fair point. As far as Thea could tell, the only way to get into the lab was with one of those keys disguised as a knife that Grenier had used.

However, there was a much bigger question that she needed to address first.

"…What exactly are you planning to do with all these weapons?"

"If you're curious, then why don't we make ourselves a deal?" Grenier put the prototype back on the table. "I want you to track down the person who killed Ensign Mercier. There's no one around who's better equipped to act as our spies and find out who the islanders really are than you all."

Deep down, Thea was impressed.

At this rate, there was little chance of the navy capturing the culprit themselves. They didn't have any real evidence, and they'd been reduced to going around and interrogating people at random. The deck had been stacked against Grenier, but when he discovered the girls brazenly marching into the naval base, he'd had the presence of mind to realize he could use that to his advantage.

Thea had no objections to the request itself—that had been her plan all along—but she was loath to accept it so easily. "…And what's in it for us?"

"If you capture the killer, I'll tell you what our goal is," Grenier said calmly. "I find it hard to imagine what more a spy could possibly ask for."

With terms that juicy, the girls couldn't find a reason to turn him down.

By the time they'd finished talking, another storm had hit the island.

As the rain came pounding down, Grenier thoughtfully said, "You had probably best stay here," and lent them a room in the women's barracks. The girls found his kindness rather suspicious, but they had little choice but to take him up on his offer.

No small number of male sailors tried to come visit them, but their female colleagues did a stellar job of warding them off. That was a godsend. The girls had a million different things they needed to think through.

Thea furrowed her brow in the three-person room they'd been given.

Things have certainly gotten messy, haven't they?

At no point had she expected to come face-to-face with the vice-admiral. That had come as such a shock, it felt like her heart was still racing.

Then there's that whole secret laboratory of theirs. I have my suspicions about what that's for…

Not only were they developing strange spy gadgets, they weren't even telling the mainland about it. The whole thing stank to high heaven.

"Annette, what did you make of those inventions of theirs?"

"I couldn't have built half of those." Annette was lying on one of the beds. "Those things were the real deal, yo."

That was high praise, coming from her.

"What are we going to do next?" Sara asked. "Are we really going to act as the navy's pawns and go around suspecting the islanders?"

"…Look, I understand how you feel. But the fact of the matter is, we need to catch this killer."

The first option they needed to consider was talking things over with Klaus. It was the safe thing to do. It pained Thea to have to ask

for his help on something that she'd gone and gotten herself involved in of her own volition, but she suspected that doing so would be the responsible choice.

Maybe the only thing to do was to go to him tomorrow and tell him everything…

The windows rattled in the wind. The storm was still raging.

Through the curtains, she could see darkness so deep, it was downright unsettling. The sound of the rain striking the windows was obnoxiously loud.

She looked up, thinking that it might be nice to have some tea as they mulled things over—and as she did, the room's lights blinked out.

"Huh?" "Oh?"

"Hmm… Looks like we lost power."

Perhaps the violent storm had knocked down an electrical line somewhere. However, the naval base was sure to have a backup generator to use in emergencies. The lights would be back on shortly.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

All of a sudden, they heard a woman scream from out in the hallway.

Thea took off without a moment's hesitation. She dashed out of the room and made for the corridor. She'd trained to be able to navigate even in total darkness.

Out in the hallway, one of the sailors was trembling on the floor. She must have been too scared to move.

"What is that?! WHAT'S GOING ON?!!"

Realizing that something was very wrong, Thea rushed over to her. "Are you all right?!" she cried. "What happened?!"

"I—I don't know…," the sailor sobbed. "I don't understand. I can't move… None of us can, after we run into that thing…"

Down the hallway, there were tons of other sailors lying just as motionless.

Thea immediately grabbed the flashlight lying on the ground and shone it into the mess hall.

There they were—the countless skulking figures. They zipped around so fast, it was like they were flying. Their speed allowed them to evade Thea's flashlight beam, but for a brief moment, she caught one of them.

It was dressed in a black, tattered cloak.

The creatures were dressed in outfits as ragged and weathered as if they'd been abandoned for hundreds of years. The smell of saltwater wafted through the mess hall.

It was like *drowned pirates had risen from the deep after spending centuries at the bottom of the sea.*

"……"

"What's going on?" she rasped.

She tried to aim her flashlight to get a better look, but something came flying out of nowhere and broke it. It would seem that she was under attack.

That's weird. How did—?

It was all so sudden that Thea couldn't move. The sailors were all lying on the ground like they were petrified. She didn't have her gun. She had no idea what she was supposed to do.

Then another girl came valiantly rushing in.

"I'm code name Meadow—and it's time to run circles around them!"

A pigeon and a dog followed along after her and rushed the figures down. As they did, Sara brandished a broom she'd found and charged in to join forces with her animals.

"T-take that!"

The pirates that had been moving so nimbly just moments before froze in bewilderment.

After smacking them with her broom, Sara quickly spun around and fired off a gorgeous roundhouse kick.

"BEGONE WITH YOUUUUUU!"

The suspicious figures fled straight out the mess hall window. They vanished into the storm and were swallowed up by the darkness.

A massive hawk flew out the window as well to drive the nail into their coffin.

Eventually, the power came back on, and light returned to the mess hall. All that remained of the pirates was the sorry state they'd left the mess hall in and the rain and wind pouring in from the window they'd left through.

Over in the middle of the room, Sara was panting heavily, the broom still clutched in her hands.

"Is everyone all right?"

When she turned around, there was a confidence on her face she'd never before possessed.

Seeing her expression sent a great shock through Thea's heart.

◇◇◇

It was the ninth day of their vacation, and the night prior, the female sailors had recovered quickly from the attack. None of them were injured. Their bodies had simply gone limp as soon as the power went out and the pirates showed up.

The pirates had arrived with the storm, gone on a rampage, and left as quickly as they came.

Not even members of the military were immune to being afraid of something so clearly occult. "Were those ghost pirates?" they whispered to one another, with faces marked with fright. Annette seemed to have taken an interest in the situation, as she enthusiastically declared, "I'm gonna stay at the base a little longer, yo."

Thea and Sara were dead tired, so they decided to head back to their boardinghouses.

The storm was gone like it had never been there, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky above them. The calm blue sea filled their sight as they walked up the gentle hill road to their dwellings.

"I wonder what those figures were… I wonder if they're the same ones who destroyed your room, Miss Thea?" Sara said quizzically. "Mr. Bernard chased after them. I'm sure he's probably fine, but the fact he isn't back yet is a little worrying…"

Bernard was her partner, so it was natural that she would be concerned about him.

Thea stared at her back as she tried to find the right moment to mention something else entirely.

"Hey, Sara."

"Yeah?"

"That was an impressive display last night. Where did that come from?"

Sara looked back and bashfully rubbed the back of her head. "Oh, that? Miss Monika spends a lot of time teaching me how to handle myself in emergencies."

"……"

It really was a peculiar feeling.

Back when Sara first joined Lamplight, she would probably have reacted to a comment like that by modestly stammering, "I—I really didn't do anything special!" Now, though, she was able to take Thea's compliment with grace and genuine delight.

Sara's starting to grow up—and far faster than I'd realized.

Thea was well aware that Sara had played a crucial role during the final stages of their mission in the Fend Commonwealth. Perhaps that was what had triggered it.

She bit down on her tongue, taking care not to let Sara see.

Thea was embarrassed at how superior seeing Sara get flustered at the nightclub had made her feel. What a fool she'd been. She'd

been too dumbfounded to move last night, whereas Sara had carried herself with resolve.

As she took a moment to digest that fact, Sara gave her a friendly smile. "The thing is, I have a dream now."

"Huh?"

"I want everyone on Lamplight to be able to safely retire from being spies someday. And to do that, I need to stop cowering in fear all the time."

Sara stared out at the ocean, then spoke with resolve.

"I'm going to be Lamplight's guardian. That's the role I want to play."

"_____"

Sara had never had that sort of ambition or sense of purpose before.

It was something to be celebrated. In her head, Thea knew that. A moment later, though, her entire body went red-hot from the rage brewing within her.

"I'm sorry, *what*?"

"Huh?"

"Screw that! Retiring is the last thing I want to do. I inherited Hearth's will, and I'm going to devote my life to being a spy. You can leave me out of your dreams, thank you very much."

When Thea began shouting, Sara gasped. That wasn't the reaction she'd been expecting at all. She must not have realized it, but her dream and Thea's goal were directly at odds.

"I'm sorry. You're right, that was something I decided on my own. I didn't ask how anyone else felt about it."

For a moment, Sara cast her gaze down apologetically.

A moment later, though, she lifted her head in determination.

"But I'm not going to give it up, either! This is the one thing I won't back down on."

It would take more than that to make Sara yield. Thea pursed her lips.

The fact that Sara was sticking so firmly to her guns was yet another sign of how much she'd grown. That girl who was always too timid to voice her opinions was gone.

Thea was angry. However, she wasn't offended.

If anything, this was a good thing—her competitive spirit was flaring.

"Let me tell you what my goal is."

She looked Sara square in the eyes.

Until that point, she'd never explicitly told any of her teammates about her ambition.

"Eventually, I want to become Lamplight's boss. I want to be a hero who leads you all and saves the world."

Thea had the utmost respect for "Hearth" Veronika.

She was Thea's role model, and she was the person Thea aspired to be like.

Someday, Thea was going to steal Klaus's position as the team's boss. She didn't know how many years it would take her, but she was going to become the boss, take charge of the Lamplight girls, and face off against the forces of the world. And sorry, but she wasn't about to let her teammates just retire on her. They were her precious comrades, people she could trust.

Her goals and Sara's were *diametrically opposed*.

That said, Thea didn't mind. Teams needed people who thought differently from one another.

"I acknowledge you, Sara. You'll make for a fine rival."

"…I wouldn't have it any other way."

Sara didn’t stand down, either, and she returned Thea’s gaze in kind. It looked like there was sweat beading on her forehead, but that was nothing more than a detail.

Thea gave her a small smile and patted her on the arm to de-escalate the conversation. “Heh-heh, I suppose that makes you my fourth rival. Monika, Grete, and Pharma all beat you to the punch.”

“Th-that’s quite a star-studded roster.”

“…Though to be fair, I doubt Monika spares so much as a thought for me.”

“I don’t know about that… I think that might not be quite as true as you think…maybe?”

“Huh? Really?!”

“Oh, no, I’m not saying I know that for sure. That’s just what my gut says, that’s all.”

“Well, I appreciate it. You’ve given me a new perspective on things.”





Thea smiled a little as she basked in the sea breeze.

"Let's settle this, the two of us. We're going to crack every case on the island wide open."

Sara gave her proposal a firm nod. "Let's do it."

On second thought, Thea couldn't go bothering Klaus over a situation so minor. It would be an unacceptable indulgence for someone who was going to be Lamplight's boss someday.

◇◇◇

It was the tenth day of their vacation, and Thea sent someone a letter that read, "I know what you did."

She called them to Confezza Beach, the place where she spent the very first day of her holiday. Deciding it would be best to avoid having other people around, she set the meeting time for eight PM.

As night began falling on the beach, the person she summoned—Raftania—arrived.

"What's the big idea, draggin' me out here? I have to be up early tomorrow to pick up ingredients for the wedding."

Raftania had come straight from working at the boardinghouse, and she was dressed casually in shorts and a T-shirt. She stared impatiently at Thea, who'd been waiting for her.

Thea walked along the beach a little and led Raftania past some rocks, where they'd be fully obscured from view. Sara anxiously watched from the back to make sure Raftania didn't run away.

When they reached a spot flanked by a pair of large boulders, Thea turned.

Now she didn't have to worry about being seen from the path that ran by the beach.

"Let me cut right to the chase."

She grabbed Raftania's arm.

"I'm code name Dreamspeaker—and it's time to lure them to their ruin."

After yanking Raftania off-balance, she shoved her against the bare rock.

"H-HUHHHHH?!" Raftania cried in bewilderment, but despite her panic, Thea pinned her down firmly. The two of them stared into each other's eyes from point-blank range.

Eventually, Raftania twisted free and shoved Thea away. "Wh-what in tarnation do you think you're—?"

"I have some questions I wanted to ask you about those murders."

The stage was set.

After returning from the naval base yesterday, Thea and Sara had laid out all the new information they'd gained and had begun trying to make sense of the serial killings. When they did, one thing stood out to them—just how out of place a certain someone seemed.

Thea steadied her breath and took another look at the girl in front of her. "Here's a little tidbit for you. Apparently, they still haven't found all of Mercier's body."

"Huh?"

"It makes sense. After all, he got shredded into little pieces and dumped into the sea. It's no wonder there would be parts missing. I do wonder why the killer went and did that to him, though."

Pretending like they were just having a friendly conversation, Thea asked, "Do you have any ideas?" to which Raftania glared at her in displeasure. "…Why would I?"

"Well, it was the wrong tool for the job," Thea said. "The gadgets stolen from the lab were designed to help spies assassinate people, it's true. But the thing is, what the killer used was a weapon designed to delay the identification of its victims."

That was the concept behind the secret lab's Sinistre Piège, and the weapons used in the other murders were no different. From what Thea had heard, all the bodies had been mangled so badly, it

had taken extra time to determine their identities. Comparing them against missing persons lists was easy enough on an island, but in an urban area, that process could easily have taken ages.

However, the weapon used this time had a major flaw.

"However, it was no good at helping them move the body."

"What are you talking about?"

"When you shred a corpse too finely, collecting up all the pieces is easier said than done. If the killer wanted to dump the body into the sea, they should have chosen a different weapon."

It was a grisly thing to think about, but if they were planning on transporting the body, they should have stopped at simply beheading it and chopping off its limbs.

When Mercier was killed, the culprit had been using Sinistre Piège for something besides its intended purpose.

At that point in their deduction, Thea and Sara had asked themselves a question: What was a problem one might encounter if they did something like that?

"One could very well miss some pieces of the body that night, then find them the next morning at the scene of the crime."

That had sent the killer into a panic, no doubt.

In all likelihood, the murder had been carried out in a location that was tied to them in some capacity. That was why they needed to dump the body in the sea in the first place. If there were bits and pieces left at the scene of the crime, they needed to dispose of them posthaste.

Thea's voice became accusatory. "Tell me, what was it you were carrying the morning after Mercier died?"

"_____"

On the morning of what was the fifth day of Thea's vacation, she ran into Raftania. It was the same day that Mercier got murdered and the sailors began conducting their aggressive search.

"I—I told you back then, and I told you honestly," Raftania replied defensively. "It was meat and veggies I bought at the market. I wanted to treat Mr. Klaus to some fresh island ingredients."

"You're lying. You were carrying chunks of Mercier's body."

Thea stated it as a fact.

She waited to share the basis for her claim and watched Raftania's reaction. The girl was visibly flustered.

"You were in a real bind. What you wanted was to throw them into the sea, wasn't it? But by morning, the whole coastline was crawling with sailors. So you abandoned that plan."

The information about the huge number of sailors searching the beaches was something Thea had learned at the nightclub.

Raftania had given up on dumping the body in the sea. However, she still needed to get rid of it quickly, and if she buried it, there was a risk that someone might dig it up.

The idea she'd arrived at was a dreadful one indeed.

"Instead, you decided to turn the chunks into hamburger steak and serve them to your guests."

"You're jumpin' to conclusions! That's pure hogwash!" Raftania howled, her face beet red. "Why would you even say something like —?!"

"I heard about it from Sara. She told me that you tried to serve her a hamburger steak made from 'aged beef.'"

In a sense, it was the perfect way to dispose of a body. Burning or burying a corpse would still leave material evidence, but if you hid it in someone else's stomach, there was no way anyone would ever find it.

Fortunately, the food got thrown out without anyone ever eating it.

The problem lay in the fact that Raftania had called the beef "aged."

"Why'd you tell that lie? You went out of your way to go buy fresh meat that morning, yet you specifically described it as aged. That was to mask the odd flavor of human flesh, wasn't it?"

Raftania hadn't expected to get into a conversation with Thea on her way back from the market, and she'd accidentally been more candid than she meant to be. The fact that she'd then gone and lied to Sara and the others had been her downfall.

Thea delivered the finishing blow by asking one simple question.

"You're the one who killed Mercier, aren't you?"

"……"

There was a marked shift in Raftania's expression. A gifted liar she was not.

There were still loads of excuses she could have given, but Thea's bluff had paid off. Raftania's shoulders trembled as fury crept across her face.

"Why?!" she shouted. "That man got what he had comin'! Why go and expose what I did to—?"

"So you admit it was you."

"_____!"

"I get it. I even have a good reason to *sympathize* with you. All I'm doing is trying to get to the bottom of all this."

Thea took great care to suppress her emotions and calmly continue the interrogation.

Condemning the girl wasn't going to accomplish anything. She needed to learn the full truth.

Raftania had ready to lunge at Thea a moment ago, but she took a step back in embarrassment.

Eventually, she squeezed out a weak moan. "…You don't got any hard evidence, do you?"

"I see you've managed to cool your head a bit."

It was annoying, but Raftania was right. It would be a lie to say that they had any actual proof linking her to the crime.

That said, Thea had used her special talent and seen how Raftania really felt. She knew about the burning hatred Raftania felt toward the navy, and she knew about Raftania's faintly guilty conscience. Between that and her reaction a moment ago, there was no doubt in her mind that Raftania was guilty.

"But the thing is, that's *all* I'm missing. Not that it brings me any joy to go get it," Thea said, then quickly gave the order. "Sara, go search her house. I imagine the weapon is still there. As long as her fingerprints are on it, that should seal the—"

Right as she was about to say "deal," Raftania let out a low growl. "That won't do you no good."

Thea gasped. All the light was gone from Raftania's eyes, and she let out a hollow laugh. "I already took the weapon—and handed it off to Grete."

""……!""

Thea and Sara shuddered in unison.

What Raftania was describing was unthinkable, and Thea grabbed Raftania by the collar. "Please tell me you didn't—!"

"And I made sure to wipe off my fingerprints first. The island cops always side with their own. They'll listen to me way before they listen to a bunch of tourists like you," Raftania said. "You turn me over to the police, and it'll be Grete who eats those charges!"

Thea punched her.

She couldn't stop herself, and her fist moved all on its own.

"Miss Thea!" Sara scolded her.

Raftania pressed down on her punched cheek and nodded with glee. "More's the better. A fresh bruise'll make it that much easier to play the part of the maiden in distress. Maybe I'll say it was the soldiers who done it; that should turn Mr. Klaus's head some."

"You little…"

"I'm gettin' out of here, just you watch! Mr. Klaus is gonna marry me and take me away! Better to take a thousand punches than to live out my days on this *sick, twisted* island!"

Her face ran wet with tears as she gave her impassioned speech.

By the sound of it, she'd even made a plan to escape the island. It was full of holes, but the very fact that she'd done so ground Thea's gears.

"You're deranged!" Thea gritted her teeth. "I feel for your situation, I really do. But even so, flooding my room with seawater

and attacking the navy barracks while dressed like a pirate was beyond what anyone would ever—”

“What? What’re you on about?”

“Huh…?”

“I never did that.”

Raftania cocked her head in bewilderment, and it didn’t look like she was acting. She didn’t have the skills necessary to fake a reaction like that. Her mouth was half-agape in genuine confusion.

This time, it was Thea’s turn to be shocked.

She had assumed that those numbered among Raftania’s crimes, too. She didn’t know what sort of strings Raftania had pulled to make it happen, but she assumed Raftania had done it in an attempt to stop her investigation…

“That wasn’t you? But it had to be…”

Thea was flabbergasted, and when she repeated herself, Raftania’s mouth curled into a nasty smirk.

“Heh,” she said, chuckling in delight at Thea’s consternation. She trembled with joy, then clutched her sides and cried “Ah!” as she looked up at the sky.

“At last, I finally get it…” She gave her swelling cheek an enraptured squeeze, then let out a shout, with tears still welling in her eyes. “The curse does exist! May it fall upon you. May the great pirate’s wrath swallow you all!”

Her voice was so manic, Thea and Sara had no reply they could possibly offer.

◇◇◇

It was the eleventh day of their vacation, and Thea and Sara took the day off.

The two of them sat at the tables outside a café near their boardinghouses and enjoyed some fresh-squeezed fruit juice. The islanders had offered Sara some beef jerky, which she doled out among her pets.

For a good long while, they simply listened to the sound of the waves.

"What are we going to do?" Sara asked softly. "About Raftania?"

"What do you mean? There's nothing we *can* do but leave her be. It's not like her quest to seduce Teach is going to go anywhere, and once we're finished, her fate will be up to the vice-admiral."

In the end, they'd been left with no choice but to release Raftania.

However, that had been the plan all along. Any attempt Thea made to capture her and hand her over to the navy in person ran the risk of exposing the whole situation with the secret lab. Eventually, Grenier would have to quietly apprehend her on his own time.

No matter how things played out, there was nowhere for Raftania to run. All that awaited her was doom.

While they were taking their breather, they spotted a familiar face over on the path in front of the café.

"What are you doing, Miss Annette?" Sara said.

Annette was walking with a notebook clutched in her right hand and a pencil gripped in her left. She was muttering something to herself, but they were too far away to make out what that might be.

When Sara called out to her, Annette shot a quick glance in their direction. "I'm in research mode, yo! I'm conducting interviews about the local ocean currents, so leave me alone!"

"We have some sweets, if you'd like."

"I'll be taking those!"

Annette raced all the way over to the café, shoved two entire cookies in her mouth, and left with all the impatience of a one-girl hurricane.

"Well, at least it looks like she's enjoying her vacation," Thea said.

"Yeah, it does. But something about her feels a little different than usual…"

"Really? Like what?"

"She seems kind of restless."

Thea hadn't picked up on any of that, and she had nothing to offer back but puzzlement.

They continued relaxing, and eventually, someone from the navy came by, holding a letter. "This is from Vice-Admiral Grenier," they said succinctly, then left.

"Good, we've got our appointment."

The letter listed a time for them to visit the naval base the next day.

There, they would tell Grenier everything and put the situation to rest.

◇◇◇

It was the twelfth day of their vacation, and that evening, the girls used the designated secret route to get to the naval base's command room.

The room was situated on the top floor of the base's central headquarters and offered a full view of the sea around the island. The sun was beginning to slowly sink below the horizon, and fog was gathering over the water.

The only people in the room were Grenier, Thea, and Sara.

Grenier faced the two of them from across the table and rubbed his round belly as he smiled with joy. "All right, my Din spy friends. Have you found the navy's enemy?"

"Oh yes, we know everything. And we know about the pathology infecting the island, too."

Grenier arched one of his eyebrows at that.

Thea ignored his display of skepticism and gave it to him straight. "We figured out who was behind the serial killings. It was Ensign Mercier, wasn't it?"

"……"

Grenier's expression was unreadable.

That was the answer Thea had arrived at: that he—the navy man that Raftania killed—was the one who'd been causing the

unexplained deaths around the island.

"Everyone was working from the wrong premise. They all thought that Mercier got attacked by the serial killer, but the truth was the other way around. Mercier *was* the serial killer."

"…Oh-ho. Fascinating."

"Don't you 'oh-ho' me. You knew, didn't you? You knew all along." When the vice-admiral implied that he hadn't been involved, Thea shot him a glare. "Mercier held a confidential title here—he was your secret laboratory's director."

The man was dead, so perhaps she should have stuck a "former" at the start of that job description.

There were three facts backing up her theory. The first was that no matter how you sliced it, stealing inventions from the lab would require the help of an inside man. The second was the testimony she had saying that Mercier had been a favorite of Grenier's. And the third was how delayed that one man's reaction had been to being called "Director." He'd only held the position for a few days, if that.

When she sat down and thought about it, it was an easy enough conclusion to reach.

"Looks like the jig is up." The vice-admiral gave her a thin, impressed smile. "The man was good at what he did, but his morals were a bit lacking. He was never satisfied until he'd tested his inventions out in the field. I'm telling you, I'll never understand these eggheads."

"If you didn't stop him, how are you any less guilty?!" Thea bellowed.

That was the truth behind the string of mysterious deaths that people called the pirate's curse—they were Director Mercier's experiments. In order to find out if his spy gadgets were viable for fieldwork, he tested them out on islanders and tourists. A double-digit number of people had lost their lives at his hands.

Just thinking about those tragic victims made Thea's blood boil.

Sara had told her everything. She knew that three years ago, Raftania's mother had died under those same suspicious

circumstances.

"Mercier's killer was after one thing—vengeance."

Thinking back to the anguish she'd seen on Raftania's face lent strength to Thea's words.

"I don't know what exactly happened that night. But all she was doing was finishing off her mother's killer! And I'm sure that you of all people can understand what drove her to such extremes!"

Before she knew it, she was leaning halfway across the table.

"After all, you're the one who's been covering everything up and refusing to let anyone investigate the murders properly!"

Thea didn't know the specifics of how it had gone down, but through some means, Raftania had learned that Mercier was the one who killed her mother. Then she'd stolen the invention and murdered him herself.

She was just a girl. It was impossible to envision just how much that decision must have weighed on her.

According to Sara, Raftania had been the first one to find her mother's body. The reason she'd freaked out back when the water hit her in the face in Thea's ravaged room was because it had brought back those traumatic memories.

All Raftania wanted was to get revenge for her murdered mother, to marry Klaus, and to escape the island.

The girl had so much conviction, it was impossible for Thea to hate her.

"I have to say, that was a rousing speech." That thin smile continued playing on Grenier's lips. "Din Republic spies, eh? I knew you wouldn't disappoint."

Thea slumped back against the sofa and crossed her arms. "And that's another thing. I've had just about enough of your smug intimations."

"Hmm?"

"I assume you've been in touch with 'Bonfire' Klaus? Just because you're buddy-buddy with *Teach* doesn't mean you get to be pompous with *me*."

That mystery had been straightforward to solve as well.

Grenier trusted the girls far more than he should have. Not only had he declined to have them executed for infiltrating his military base, he'd actually gone out of his way to help them sneak past its guards so they could have the conversation they were having that very moment. And besides, hadn't Klaus visited that island before?

"Right you are. He and I have been seeing a lot of each other over these past few days," Grenier readily confessed. "We've known each other since his Inferno days, and he already told me about all of you."

Klaus was also the one who'd chosen Marnioce as their vacation spot. Wanting to meet up with Grenier had been one of the motivations for the trip.

"What's your goal here? If you don't tell me, I won't reveal the killer."

Thea delivered the question that had been burning within her.

Why was he using the naval base to develop spy gear in secret?

Why had he given his tacit approval to experiments that were killing the locals?

"Staging a coup d'état."

Grenier's answer elicited a gasp from Sara. "What…?"

However, that was in line with Thea's expectations. There weren't many possible reasons for a Lylat vice-admiral to be cozying up to a Din spy like Klaus. Grenier was trying to shake the Lylat Kingdom to its core, and Klaus had decided to support him after determining that doing so was in the Din Republic's interests.

As the blood drained from Sara's face, Grenier explained himself. "I trust you two are aware of what things are like in the Lylat Kingdom."

Thea and Sara nodded.

Their academies had drilled at least the basics into them.

"It's the land where revolutions die," Thea replied. "A century ago, when countless Western-Central nations were having popular revolutions to overthrow their monarchies and abolish their aristocracies, *Lylat's ended in failure*. They might be a constitutional monarchy on paper, but the real situation hasn't changed one bit from their days when the royals held absolute power. There's a tiny noble class that's living high on the hog by robbing the people of their freedom and bleeding them dry."

That was the truth about their Lylat Kingdom neighbors.

The Fend Commonwealth's royal family had historically enjoyed tremendous authority, but even their position had become largely symbolic when the nation transitioned to a constitutional monarchy. Everyone in the country had a vote, and the parliament they elected did all the actual governing.

Over in Lylat, though, things were different.

The government there was of the nobility, by the nobility, and for the nobility.

There had been countless civil rights movements over the past century, but the royal guard and security forces had crushed every last one of them. They'd dragged thousands—tens of thousands—of activists to the guillotine and painted the capital's plazas red with their blood.

Democratization had never come to them like it had to countries like Din and Galgad.

"I intend to overthrow the monarchy. I've spent countless years in preparation."

Where did he store such ambition in that large body of his?

His eyes burned with the fires of justice.

"The people are suffering so that a small handful of aristocrats can live in luxury. Exorbitant inheritance taxes rob the people of their wealth, and that stolen money gets sunk into waging wars. Public health is nothing but an afterthought. When anyone complains about the rampant hunger and plagues, they get rounded up and put to

the guillotine faster than they can blink. I ask you, what other nation has stooped so low?”

“…Look, I understand where you’re coming from.” Unwilling to yield to her counterpart’s fervor, Thea raised her voice in turn. “But still! That doesn’t mean you can just sacrifice the islanders to—!”

“You think this coup can happen if I don’t get my hands dirty? I have a duty to fulfill, even if that means dooming myself to the darkest pits of hell!!”

There was nothing Thea could do but hold her tongue at such a steadfast declaration of intent.

Grenier knew the depths of his sin, yet he was determined to continue walking that bloodstained road. He wasn’t about to get talked out of it by some girl who was there on vacation.

Still, Thea’s heart ached for Raftania and the other islanders.

“…Why try to expand the base, then?” She decided to move on to her next question. “If your intent is to overthrow the mainland government, wouldn’t it make more sense to avoid making waves?”

“There’s something I need to find, and the islanders are obstructing my search,” Grenier said with a long sigh.

“Your search? What are you searching for?” Thea asked.

Grenier prefaced his reply—“Staging a coup requires a colossal amount of money”—then gave just about the last answer she’d been expecting.

“That’s why I need Jackal’s treasure.”

“”……What?””

Without meaning to, Thea let out a dumbfounded exclamation at the exact same time Sara did.

However, the look in Grenier’s eyes was as serious as could be. Those weren’t the eyes of a man who was joking.

"The value of Jackal's treasure is said to rival our national budget. With money like that, I could secure assistance from the Fend Commonwealth or the United States of Mouzaia."

"A-are you for real right now?" Sara stammered. And rather rudely, at that.

"I assure you I am," Grenier said, not ashamed of his claim in the slightest. "There are plenty of legends validating its existence. That will be the key to ensuring the coup's success. We've developed weapons and tools aplenty in my lab, and once I get my hands on Jackal's treasure, we'll finally be able to retake our—"

That was as far as he got in his sentence.

All of a sudden, a tremor shook the command room like an earthquake.

The moment it did, they heard a tremendous roar. The sound was loud enough to shake the very air.

Several of the room's shelves toppled over, dumping glass and documents all over the floor. Thea and Sara screamed and dived under the table for cover.

Grenier briefly covered his head, but the moment the tremors stopped, he immediately stood back up. "What's going on?! What was that just now?!"

Then the command room's speaker buzzed on, and a panicked sailor's voice came through. *"Commander, do you copy?! Someone is shelling the base!"*

"Th-they're what?!"

"A medium-sized ship of unknown nationality is approaching!"

Grenier grabbed the binoculars hanging on the wall and went over to the window. Thea and Sara did the same, coming out from under the table before grabbing other pairs of binoculars and looking out beyond the window.

The fog was even denser than before, making it impossible to see much. However, the large, dark silhouette of a ship was unmistakably visible atop the waves.

The mysterious ship was floating just a few hundred feet off the island's shore.

"That's…"

It looked to be an old freighter. It had three masts with tattered black sails hung from them. However, it was the rows of cannons visible on the ship's sides that truly made it feel imposing. There was also a malignant, almost demonic sculpture attached to its prow. It was the great pirate's symbol, and all who beheld it trembled.

There was no knowing which of the three let slip the words.

"That's Jackal's ship…"

A pirate ship straight out of a legend had appeared in front of the base.

"B-but that's impossible!" "It can't be!"

Sara and Grenier shuddered in disbelief. No matter how hard they rubbed their eyes, though, the ship refused to vanish from view.

Thea's blood ran cold, and she lowered her binoculars.

Now she understood the truth.

In the end, she hadn't solved the mystery at all. She didn't know a thing about the seawater that had flooded her room, and she had no idea who those shady figures she'd faced in the naval base had been.

She thought back to Raftania's screams.

"It's the curse…!"

She crumpled to her knees. Terrified tears blurred her vision.

It was time to admit it. Much as she wanted to deny it, there was something that defied all logic right before her eyes. The navy had

greedily sought its treasure, and now it was here to strike them down.

"It's the pirate curse! We're all going to diiiiie!!"

Thea let out a hysterical shriek, unable to do anything but lament her poor judgment.

Chapter 3

The Pirates

It was the fourth day of their vacation, and during their exploration of the island's caves, Lily, Sybilla, and Monika made a huge discovery.

"We… We actually found it…," Lily mumbled, with her mouth agape in the shape of a wide O.

Beside her, Sybilla and Monika rubbed their eyes as well in stark disbelief.

"No fuckin' way…"

"You're kidding, right…?"

The three of them turned their flashlight beams toward their find.

All of them were fully outfitted in spelunking gear. They had anti-skid hiking boots, they had pantyhose to protect their legs, and they had climbing outfits built for heat retention. Meanwhile, their backpacks were packed full of provisions, rope ladders, and other expedition equipment.

They'd spent the full day exploring the island's caves. After finding a large grotto connected to the sea that wasn't on any of their maps, they marched straight on in. Eventually, they arrived at a wide, open space not unlike a lake and were greeted by a most peculiar sight.

It was what one might call a carrack—a ship large enough they had to crane their necks to view it in its entirety. It was stout and roundish, with a demonic figurehead extending from its prow. The barnacles and moss coating its sides spoke to its two hundred years of history.

All three of them shouted in unison.

“““WE FOUND A PIRATE SHIIIIIIIIIIIIP!!”””

Their voices echoed through the dark cavern, startling awake a group of sleeping bats.

Indeed: In just a mere four days, they’d already found their pirate ship.

◇◇◇

Not a single one of them had been expecting to actually find the ship.

All they were motivated by was basic curiosity. They’d heard that the island was dotted with caves, so they wanted to go exploring. And hey, if they found pirate treasure while they were there, so much the better.

After Raftania told them about the pirate legend on the first evening of their vacation, that was the general vibe in the room when they went back to their boardinghouse and held their strategy meeting.

Sybilla smirked and jabbed Monika with her elbow. “You’re seriously gonna come treasure huntin’ with us? I gotta say, didn’t see that one comin’.”

“Really? It sounds like fun.” Monika gave her a small shrug. “Besides, I’m supposed to be staying out of public right now. And my wounds aren’t totally healed yet, so it’s not like I can just spend the whole time swimming.”

During their previous mission, Monika had become a notorious international criminal, and her mug shot had circulated widely. The official story was that she was dead, but she still wanted to avoid drawing any unnecessary attention.

“Anyways, I’m gonna hang out with you two for a bit, then bail if I get bored. We should gather some intel first, right?”

Lily was glaring at a map, and she gave Monika's suggestion a nod. "Yeah, we'll start by gathering local legends and getting the lay of the coastline!"

"Sounds good. Once we've narrowed down some caves of interest, we can head in."

"If that's the plan, then I guess we'll need to buy some equipment, huh? I wonder if they sell spelunking stuff at any of the stores here."

"……?"

Sybilla tilted her head in confusion when she saw Lily and Monika cheerfully chatting away, but she specifically elected to cut into the conversation without questioning it. "What should we do if we actually find the treasure?"

Their expedition began as frivolously as could be.

At the time, none of them had any idea that they would end up actually encountering the Great Pirate Jackal's ship.

◇◇◇

Mouths agape, the three of them took another gawk at the vessel they'd stumbled upon.

"I never thought I'd get to see a real pirate ship…"

"Yeah, ditto. And it was just right fuckin' there, too. That can't seriously be the ship from the legend, right?"

Lily and Sybilla crossed their arms in dissatisfaction. It was bewildering how easy it had been to find. All they did was stroll into a large cave that wasn't on any of their maps, and there it was. And they'd barely walked half an hour from their boardinghouse to get there, too. It didn't make sense how close it was to civilization. Surely, one of the islanders would have found it by— "It was that landslide two days back."

Monika shone her flashlight over at the cavern wall.

"Huh?"

"The ship is normally sealed off from the world. There are probably dozens of deadly traps you have to evade, puzzles you

have to solve, and devices you have to activate before you can board it. But the landslide from two days ago destroyed them all and sent the ship floating all the way over to this lake in a cavern connected to the sea."

"Oh, that makes sense. Dang, we really hit the jackpot."

Now that she mentioned it, there were broken cogs scattered about and signs that the nearby sediment had just collapsed. The walls that had once protected the ship were broken, and the water had carried it all the way to the grotto. Then, right before it drifted all the way out to sea, it had gotten caught on a cave wall.

In other words, the boat from before really was a long-lost pirate ship.

Lily cleared her throat and looked up at it.

"Then, I repeat…"

She and Sybilla sucked in big breaths.

"WE FOUND A PIRATE SHIIIIIIIIIIIIP!!"

"PREPARE TO BE BOARDEEEEED!!"

The two of them tossed off their backpacks and began hopping around the ship. None of them were accustomed to making such a huge find, and they hollered "Whoo-hoo!" and "How're we supposed to get on?!" as they ran circles around the ship's perimeter. It was the same kind of glee as that of a child who'd just been given a new toy.

Monika shrugged in exasperation. "…I swear, you two are like little kids."

"What the hell?" Sybilla scowled and took a break from rapping her fist on the boat's hull. "Why you gotta be such a buzzkill? Are you sayin' you're *not* excited?"

"Seriously? That's a stupid question."

Monika sucked in a big breath, and her eyes went wide.

"HOW COULD I NOT BE EXCITED ABOUT SOMETHING LIKE THIS?!"

Monika abandoned her usual aloof demeanor and took off at a run.

After spotting a perfectly sloped section of the cave's wall, she dashed up it and leaped onto the deck.

"Last one on is a rotten egg!" "Dammit, that's not fair!" "Yeah, I was supposed to get on first!"

The others followed the wall and hopped on board as well. Then, without delay, they immediately began exploring the legendary pirate ship.

After landing on board, the first thing they spotted was the three masts looking so mighty, it was hard to believe they'd been sitting there for two hundred years.

"Holy shit, those things are huge!" Sybilla cried. "And they're still in perfect condition."

Lily nodded. "It's amazing how well-preserved they are. This thing might actually still be seaworthy."

Monika stared at them in shock. "Did we just stumble onto the discovery of the century…?"

Next, they headed below deck. The doors to the cabins had rotted through, but the girls forced them open. Their cheers of excitement were a good 50 percent louder than usual as they scanned around with their flashlights.

At the center of a large room that looked to be the captain's cabin, they found something enshrined atop a lavish chair.

"S-skeleton alert!" Sybilla yelped.

"Th-that's not a model or a decoration, either…," Lily stammered. "Could that be Jackal himself?"

"Could be," said Monika. "He *is* holding a jewel…"

The skeleton was wearing a cloak that had been all but completely devoured by insects.

The three girls offered the corpse a brief prayer, then headed over to another room.

Once they were done paying their respects to Jackal's skeleton, they descended a set of stairs by his feet.

The aquatic stench was leagues more intense down there, but as soon as they plugged their noses and turned their flashlights toward the back of the room, thoughts about the stink were the furthest thing from their minds.

"TREASUUUUURE!"

"BOOOOOOOOTY!"

"What?! This is wild. Does this mean we're millionaires now?!"

The room was so full of coins and jewels that the three of them couldn't have carried it all off if they tried. There were diamonds and emeralds larger than you could find at any jewelry store in the world and chests overflowing with gold. The bounty gleamed majestically under the light of the girls' flashlights.

It truly was the pirate ship from the legends.

There was a room that must have been the sleeping quarters, full of dangling tatters that had once been hammocks, and littered with beer bottles. It gave them a glimpse at what life must have been like on the ship. Right next door, there was an imposing gun deck that still had cannonballs and gunpowder off to the side. All the food in the galley was rotten, but the casks and bottles in the wine cellar were still intact, and when they popped one of the corks, they were greeted by the full-bodied aroma of two hundred years of fermentation.

They were on a *pirate ship* straight out of a *legend*!

Lily trembled with joy, and when she returned to the upper deck, she climbed all the way onto the ship's prow. After planting her foot

atop its demonic figurehead, she let out a bold shout. "'Tis I, the Great Pirate Lily!"

"Cap'n! What are your orders?!" "We await your command, cap'n!"

Sybilla and Monika were immediately ready to play pirates.

Their excitement melted their brains like a drug. Imagining that they'd truly become pirates, they raised their voices high.

"HARD TURN TO STARBOARD! RAM THE ENEMY SHIP!"

"AYE-AYE, CAP'N!!"

There was nothing in their minds but the heady thrill of adventure.

The delusion had fully taken hold. The vast blue sea surrounded them everywhere they looked, and before them sat a fleet of enemy ships trying to steal their treasure. The sinister nobles had forced their slaves to build them grand wooden ships packed with the latest innovations. However, no pirate worth their salt would yield to such scurvy foes.

"We'll show those Fend Kingdom Trading Company dogs hell for invading our turf! The roar of our guns will mark the battle's start!"

""Opening fire, cap'n!""

The three of them took their pistols and fired into the air.

Contrary to their delusions, though, they were in a cave rather than on the high seas.

Their bullets struck the roof of the cavern. It was already unstable from the landslide, and the shock from the impacts caused another section of the ceiling to collapse. It came crashing down toward the ship.

Just like that, a huge rock smashed right through the deck.

"""AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"""

That brought the girls crashing right back to their senses.

The three of them had been fortunate enough not to get hit by any rocks, but the ship wasn't so lucky. The hole the rocks had torn

in the hull was a good six feet across. It didn't look like they'd penetrated the bilge, but the sleeping quarters area on the lower deck was completely destroyed.

The girls had thrown themselves onto the ground near the prow, and they gulped upon seeing the extent of the damage.

All of a sudden, the whole thing felt a lot more real.

"Th-there's a hole in the priceless historical artifact…"

"…L-look, shit happens. For all anyone knows, that hole was there when we got here."

Lily broke into a cold sweat, and Sybilla tried to calm her down.

They didn't know if more rocks were going to start falling, so they took cover beneath the masts. All their excitement from earlier had just had a cold bucket of water splashed all over it.

Lily and Sybilla began calmly discussing their plans going forward.

"So what should we do?" Lily asked. "What *can* we do?"

"We'd better start by tellin' the locals," Sybilla replied. "The ship's too important for us to just go finders keepers on it. Best case, they let us keep a bit of the treasure as a reward."

"Yeah, you're right. In that case, you wanna pocket some of the nicer stuff while we have the chance?"

"I dunno. Morally speakin', that feels a little dodgy."

"C'mon! We clearly deserve it for finding this thing."

The girls might have discovered the ship, but not even they felt brazen enough to claim ownership of it. After all, this was the kind of discovery that would make its mark on human history. They needed to hand it over to the islanders so they could turn it into a new tourist attraction or donate it to a museum. It was only fair that they be the ones to decide its fate.

As the two of them chatted up a storm, Sybilla suddenly realized that Monika hadn't said a word that whole time. "Huh? What's up, Monika?"

Monika was clutching her head, and her face was as pale as a sheet. "I think…we might not want to tell the locals just yet…" Her voice was hoarse. It was like all the life had drained out of her. "I

mean, I know they'll find it eventually and it's just a matter of time, but…we should still hold off…"

"Wait, why?"

"We're the ones who broke it, right? We smashed up the ship…a priceless historical artifact…"

"Sure, but what's done is done. Like, I get that it'd cause an international incident if anyone found out, but as long as we get our stories straight—"

Before Sybilla had a chance to say, "no one ever has to," Monika's lip trembled.

There was a little detail that was about to bring Lily's and Sybilla's optimism crashing down to the depths of hell and, in a sense, start off a much more difficult mission than the treasure hunt ever had been.

"We gotta find those bullets."

◇◇◇

It was the afternoon of the sixth day of their vacation, and the three morons were lying on the ground of the cavern with the ship. Their supply of food and water had run out, and they stared up at the ceiling in a daze to try to escape from reality.

Lily and Sybilla let out a pair of exhausted groans.

"We can't find those bullets anywhere."

"This shit's impossible. They're too damn small, and the cave's too damn big."

The three of them had spent the last two days straight sleeplessly searching for the bullets.

They'd fired three rounds off into the cavern roof, and they knew those shots had landed somewhere in the cave after bouncing off the ceiling. Either they'd sunk into the water, or they'd gotten wedged in rocks. They peeled their eyes and shone their flashlights around, but to no avail.

The girls tried borrowing Sara's puppy Johnny on the fourth evening, but not even his canine olfactory senses could track them down. The scent of gunpowder smoke was completely drowned out by the smell of the sea permeating the cavern.

There was a key reason why they were going to such lengths in their search: Those three bullets were evidence they were the ones who'd damaged the ship.

The guns the girls used had been made in the Din Republic, and the same went for their bullets. What's more, they'd been manufactured over the last few years. If any such bullets got found on the pirate ship, then as the people who found the ship, it would be obvious that the three of them were the ones who fired them.

Furthermore, the state of the wood's rot would show that the hole in the deck was recent.

Now, there was always a chance that they might not get caught. The bullets might never get found, and even if they did, it would be hard to tie them to the hole in the deck. If anything, it was far more likely that they would get away with it.

However—the costs of getting found out were incalculable!

Visions of what the world's news outlets would say flashed through their heads.

"A group of tourists from the Din Republic both discovered and destroyed a ship belonging to the Great Pirate Jackal. The cost of the damage has been estimated at around thirty billion dents. It's unclear at this time why the tourists were armed, but evidence has been uncovered suggesting they discharged firearms. The Lylat Kingdom's Ministry of Culture has joined historians the world over in condemning this malicious act of vandalism, and the Lylat people have even taken to the streets in protest against the Din Republic—"

"Shit, there's no way we can apologize our way outta this!"

Sybilla's cry echoed off the walls.

She'd pictured it more times than she could count, and it felt like the weight of it all was going to crush her. She got up and called over to Monika, who had massive bags under her eyes. "We gotta find 'em now! Before things get *real* ugly!"

"Yeah, duh. Tell me something I don't know…"

"But what do we do? Searchin' like this ain't gettin' us nowhere. Should we bring in more help?"

Monika shook her head. "Nah, that's a bad idea. More people means more ways for the news to spread."

The girls had taken precautions to make sure no one else came in and had placed DO NOT ENTER signs all around. They also didn't want the boat drifting off to sea, so they'd tied it in place with loads of ropes.

However, all they were doing was delaying the inevitable. With how close the cave was to where people lived, it was only a matter of time before the islanders or navy found it.

"Then I guess all we can do is improve our equipment," Lily said as she got up. "That means getting better lights and a generator. We need all the help we can get."

"Good call," Monika agreed with a nod. "These piddly flashlights aren't going to cut it."

The lights they were using were designed for basic spelunking. They were fine for lighting the path directly in front of them, but they lacked the output to illuminate the entire cavern at once. Some of the bullets might have ended up in the water, but as things stood, it was too dark to retrieve them.

"Let's head into town and buy the best stuff they've got. All right, everyone, open up those wallets!"

On Lily's orders, the three of them took stock of their cash on hand.

Lily had four bills on her. Sybilla, eight bills. Monika, six small coins.

Money like that was barely enough to cover their food expenses during their trip.

Monika sighed. "…Yeah, that figures."

They'd paid for their lodgings up front, and buying all their spelunking gear locally had just about cleaned them out. Out on a remote island controlled by a foreign nation, it wasn't like they could just go make a bank withdrawal.

"Step one is raisin' funds, then. Do we need to get jobs or somethin'?"

"If we do, then we need to start quickly. We're short on time here."

Sybilla and Lily were at a loss for how to deal with the impasse.

They only had a week left. The most they could allot to raising money was three days, tops.

Monika let out a pained groan.

"I…I have an idea. It's the easiest way to make money there is on the island."

""Oh?""

Lily and Sybilla looked at her, their interests piqued.

For some reason, though, Monika was biting her lip in dismay. "Honestly, though, I'd rather not do it. It's not a pleasant option."

"J-just lay it out for us." Sybilla waved off her concerns. "We don't got much of a choice here. This is an emergency. We're all ready to grit our teeth a little."

"……From what I understand, Thea is crazy popular right now. The dudes here are showering her with gifts. There's too many male sailors on the island and not enough chicks, so young women are valuable just for existing."

The information she was presenting earned a simultaneous gasp of ""Wh—?"" from Lily and Sybilla.

Monika went on in a voice empty of emotion. “The market value of sexual stuff is inflated here—do you get my drift?”

Lily’s and Sybilla’s faces went bright red, and they bit their lips as well. They understood exactly what Monika was saying. Sure enough, no faster way to make money sprang to mind.

Sybilla’s gaze darted back and forth. “C-c’mon, now, you can’t really expect us to—”

“You think I WANT to do this?! We don’t have a choice. Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

The determination in Monika’s voice left an oppressive silence in its wake that permeated every inch of the cavern.

The girls were silent for a good five minutes as they tried to come up with an alternative. No matter how hard they racked their brains, they couldn’t think of anything. Lily’s cheeks went redder still, but despite her trembling and cries of “Nooooo, I don’t wannnnna…,” no better solution presented itself.

Monika didn’t so much say the words as sigh them. “We’d better steel ourselves—we aren’t getting out of this as innocent as when we went in.”

◇◇◇

It was the evening of the sixth day of their vacation and the morning of the seventh.

Lily, Sybilla, and Monika gave up on their bullet hunt in the cave for the time being and headed back toward civilization. After crashing at their boardinghouse and sleeping like logs, they waited for sundown to make their move.

In addition to Lily, Sybilla, and Monika, Thea was staying at that house as well.

According to the owner of the house, Thea had left early in the evening, dressed in some sort of hostess outfit. The girls didn’t know what Thea was doing, but that wasn’t really their problem right now.

Monika handled the negotiations with the owner.

"I promise we'll pay you for the damages, so can we mess up one of the rooms a bit?"

With a carefully woven story about "wanting it to be a surprise" and "it being a religious thing," they successfully got the owner to both give his permission and to promise his silence.

The three of them all got buckets and filled them with seawater.

"Heave!" "Ho!" "Hrah!"

Then *they dumped the water all over Thea's room.*

For the finishing touches, they also strewed seaweed and small sea creatures around and tried to make it look like the room had been struck by a supernatural phenomenon.

The next morning, their efforts paid off.

Out in the hallway, Thea sounded bone-tired.

"I'm going to throw out all my clothes. This is too creepy for me to ever wear them again, even after I wash them."

Thea was freaked out, just like they drew it up.

It was a reasonable reaction when something so seemingly unnatural had happened to her on an island with folklore about a pirate curse. And just like they planned, she tossed all her clothes in the garbage.

Monika sneakily took a creep shot of her doing it.

"I got the pics."

Now the image of Thea throwing away her clothes was captured clear as day on film.

It was the evening of the seventh day of their vacation, and the three girls donned ski masks and moved out.

Their destination was a bar near the naval base. Its prices were cheap, but its seats were cramped, its decor was crude, and everything on its menu was the kind of greasy stuff guys loved.

Inside, there were nothing but men. The girls had chosen the time of day when the bar would be the most crowded, and there were nearly forty sailors there, standing nearly shoulder to shoulder as they poured beer from tankards into their gullets. The stench of tobacco filled the entire room.

Undaunted, the girls strode in.

"Hey, what do you people think you're—?"

That was when the bar patrons took notice of them.

They were dressed more or less like burglars, and it didn't take long before they had the attention of every man there. All the chatter immediately died down, and a peculiar tension filled the air.

Sybilla stepped forward. "The Raven-Haired Succubus cleaned out her room this morning. Here's a photo of her dumpin' out her wardrobe."

The girls had just finished developing the film, and Sybilla held the photos aloft. They took the copies they'd made and began handing them out to the men nearby. On seeing the pictures, the men let out excited cries. "Oh hey, they're right." "God, she's such a looker."

That was precisely the reaction the girls had been looking for, and that was why they'd duped Thea into throwing out her clothes.

Once Sybilla had everyone's attention again, she raised her voice loud.

"Now, let the Raven-Haired Succubus Secondhand Wardrobe Auction…BEGIN!!"

"""""""""WOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"""""""""

The foul men in the bar erupted into cheers. It wasn't just the patrons, either. Even the male staff thrust their arms in the air as

they hooted and hollered. These men were starved of the female touch, and their madness knew no bounds.

Thea's secondhand clothes ended up selling for a full five times more than the girls expected.

SYBILLA got A SET OF THEA'S LINGERIE THEY HAD THE DECENCY NOT TO SELL!

THE GIRLS got SOME FLOODLIGHTS!

◇◇◇

It was the eighth day of their vacation, and the three dumbasses' dumbassery continued.

"So you're tellin' me we have money, but there's nowhere on the island we can buy a generator?"

"Yeah, we forgot to check that. Pretty funny, huh?"

"You two need to quit gabbing like morons and get your rears in gear."

Sybilla, Lily, and Monika commented in turn as they headed into the bowels of the pirate ship.

The girls had made plenty of money off their clothing auction, and even after paying a cleaning fee to the boardinghouse's owner, they still had loads left over. That was what let them buy the large floodlights designed for ships, but sadly, all the generators were sold out.

If they wanted to use their floodlights in the cave, they needed to find a way to power them.

"We need to focus up," Monika said as she rummaged through the ship. "There's not a lot of places where we'd be able to find a generator."

"You mean, the naval base?"

"They have to have one lying around *somewhere*. We're just going to borrow it for a bit."

Monika located the clothes piled up in the ship's storage.

After lying there for two centuries, they were about as far from clean as you could get. Basically all of them were covered in holes from where bugs and mildew had eaten through them.

Lily scrunched up her face. "Okay, but why do we have to wear those rags? Ewww, they smell salty…"

"Look, it's not like we can sneak in there wearing our own clothes or anything we bought locally."

In the unlikely event they got caught, that would pose a huge problem.

Unlike with covert ops in urban areas, it was relatively easy to identify people by their clothes in places with small populations like remote islands. Furthermore, none of them had brought their mission uniforms with them on vacation.

The three of them picked out the nicest-looking shirts and cloaks they could find from among the pirate clothes, but the smell was still brutal.

"These should do for disguises. All we have to do is pop in tonight, grab it, and go, after all."

With those optimistic words to carry them through, the three girls got to work preparing.

Monika's predictions were on the mark, and they had no trouble at all finding a generator lying in a warehouse when they sneaked onto the naval base that night. After disabling all the defenses, they retrieved their prize without anyone spotting them. Sybilla hoisted it onto her back, and they quickly made to leave.

Compared to the brutal missions they'd survived in the past, this was like taking candy from a baby.

It was immediately after exiting the warehouse that trouble reared its ugly head.

“””…….There’s no way we can get back.”””

A storm had just struck the island from out of nowhere.

The wind was raging, and the rain mercilessly battered them as it poured down at a sharp angle. With all the branches and trash flying through the air, the girls had serious misgivings about walking outside.

They hid in the warehouse for a bit, but the storm showed no signs of subsiding. If anything, it only grew stronger as time marched on.

“Shit. What do we do? Walk along the coastline with the generator on my back?”

“Nah, no way. For one, it’s liable to break if we did that.”

“Id’s doo cold. *ATCHOO!*”

As Sybilla and Monika whispered to each other in turn, Lily let out a tremendous sneeze.

All of them were dressed in the tatters the pirates had once worn, so their clothes offered them little protection against the cold. Due to the low-pressure system, the temperature had dropped precipitously.

Monika shot a glance over at Lily and sighed. “We need to find some hot water. At this rate, we’re all gonna catch colds.”

She began walking from the warehouse over toward the barracks.

Sybilla and Lily let out little gasps of surprise, but they quickly followed after her. Staying warm was their top priority at the moment.

All the curtains at the women’s barracks were drawn, and the building was quiet. Most of the people there had already gone to bed for the night. The building had four floors, and the first was a mess hall. When the girls peeked through the window, they spotted its water heater.

They circled around to the back entrance, used their picking tools to get past the lock, and silently sneaked inside.

Monika shrugged triumphantly. “Heh. There’s no way anyone in this dinky rural naval base could ever detect me.”

That there was hubris talking.

As soon as the girls set foot in the mess hall, they realized their mistake. As it turned out, there *was* someone in the barracks capable of detecting their intrusion.

The moment the girls sensed his presence, the individual in question flapped his way over like he’d heard them come in and landed on the table in the center of the mess hall.

“_____?!”

They practically jumped out of their skin.

All three of them knew that person—or rather, that hawk—by name.

Monika looked at him in surprise. “…Bernard?”

That hawk was one of Sara’s pets. He was also a member of Lamplight, who’d been given the code name Insight. The question was, what was he doing there on the naval base?

The girls wondered if perhaps they were misidentifying him.

“That’s Bernard, right?” “I think that’s Bernard, yeah.” “That’s definitely Bernard.”

No matter how many times they looked at him, though, it was clearly him.

Illuminated by the back door’s night-light, the hawk stared at the three intruders. “……”

“Dang, he’s really glaring at us.” “But why?” “I mean, we are acting pretty shady.”

Apparently, hawks could see perfectly well, even at night.

Then, all of a sudden, Bernard spread his wings out wide. He’d decided that they were suspicious. He flew across the mess hall, slammed into a stack of chairs piled up in the corner, and knocked it over. A loud crash rang out, and the girls heard women saying, “What was that?!” and “Burglars?!” from outside the mess hall.

“Ugh, stupid bird…!!” Monika snapped.

“Hey, no disrespecting Master Bernard!” Lily scolded her.

"Kill the breaker," Sybilla said. "We need to grab somethin' we can warm ourselves up with and skedaddle."

From there, they acted fast.

Monika hurled a coin and flipped the mess hall's circuit breaker, cutting off power to the entire barracks. Meanwhile, Sybilla scoured the shelves for matches and candles.

The female sailors were clearly confused, but they bravely began making their way toward the mess hall.

Lily responded by dashing over and planting herself in front of the hallway.

"Gah, you leave me no choice!"

She'd brought her classic paralyzing gas along, just in case, and she put it to work.

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

That was her trademark move, and in enclosed spaces, its power was absolute.

The gas she set off in the hallway robbed the incoming sailors of their mobility and sent them even deeper into a panic. "I can't move…?!" they cried.

After that, they continued buying time as they looked around for matches and candles. Midway through their search, Sara showed up for reasons unbeknownst and kicked them away, and the girls fled the base.

MONIKA got A GENERATOR STOLEN FROM THE NAVAL BASE!

LILY got CHASED AROUND BY BERNARD THE HAWK!

◇◇◇

It was the ninth day of their vacation, and after many trials and tribulations, the three of them had successfully secured lights and a generator. They spent a sleepless night tucked away in a corner of the naval base with nothing but matches and candles for heat, then left at the crack of dawn.

At that point, they didn't have the energy left to return to their boardinghouse, so they changed into their regular outfits that they'd stashed by the road and collapsed on the beach. The sand was so dry, it was the like last night's storm had never even happened. To them, the beach's warmth felt gentler than any feather quilt.

"We're supposed to be on an island vacation," Monika groaned. "Why're we out here working ourselves to the bone, again?"

"Hell if I know," Sybilla replied. "I say we rest today, then startin' tomorrow, we spend our last three days gettin' this shit done."

Lily looked up. "Um, just as an FYI, Master Bernard is still following us…"

The three of them were appalled at how stupid it was that they'd thrown their precious holiday down the drain, but given how irrevocable what they'd done was, it wasn't like they had much of a choice. The storm had passed, and up in the clear blue sky, a hawk circled through the air and refused to let them escape his sight.

While they were lying there on the beach and staring up at the blue expanse above, Grete came by. "Whatever happened to you three?"

She looked down at them in concern.

They couldn't bring themselves to tell her the truth, so they dodged the question. "What about you, Grete? Enjoyin' your vacation?" Sybilla asked.

Grete gave them a bitter smile. "…I'm not sure I know how to answer that question."

"Huh?" "Hmm?" "What?"

Grete's response earned her a series of puzzled looks.

When the girls fixed their gazes on her, Grete told them the truth with resignation in her voice. "It's just, I'm locked in a battle I can't afford to lose. Just another day in the life, you know?"

From the sound of it, she was worried about the Klaus situation. The somber expression on her face made it clear just how dire things were. In all likelihood, this had something to do with the girl who'd shown up and declared herself Klaus's fiancée.

"Look, Grete." Monika rose to her feet and laid a hand on Grete's shoulder. She looked Grete square in the eyes. "I don't know all the details, but I've just got one piece of advice for you."

Monika had a dead fish look in her eyes.

"If something's important to you, make sure you don't lose it."

As someone who'd lost something important herself (the bullets), her words rang with a rare weight.

Lily and Sybilla smiled.

"She's right. There's nothing sadder than only realizing what you had once it's already gone. All you're left with are regrets, and you spend every night sobbing into your pillow…"

"But no matter how hard you wish, you can't make time turn back. Don't you go fuckin' your thing up, Grete."

All of their eyes were empty and hollow, but the emotion in their voices was true.

Upon receiving the warning from the girls who'd lost something so important, Grete was overcome with emotion. "Thank you, everyone…"

The three others exchanged a series of glances. *"We're basically the last people she should be taking any sort of advice from."* *"Wait, Lily, you've been cryin'?"* *"Ten ounces a night."*

The whole thing seemed so ridiculous that in a way, it was almost relieving.

Sybilla hopped briskly to her feet. “Now, let’s go play our hearts out to pray for Grete’s success!” she said as she threw her arm around Grete’s shoulders.

“What, you mean now?” “But I’m not done resting yet…,” Monika and Lily protested, but Sybilla held firm. “Nah, screw that!! We’re on vacation, remember?!” The other two gave her a pair of exhausted smiles, then dived at Grete.

“What, what?!” Grete cried as they dragged her toward the sea.

“Let’s play like there’s no tomorrow!” “Preach it!” the girls cheered, and they continued screwing around all the way to sundown.

They’d maxed out their stress levels, and that was their way of letting loose.

SYBILLA got SOME WHITE FABRIC as thanks for cheering Grete up!

Grete made her way back to her boardinghouse at around nightfall, and the girls headed to a restaurant. It was a quiet seaside establishment with few customers. Its windows were open, and a sea breeze blew through the room.

It was their first decent meal in ages, and though Lily started out by guzzling seafood down with abandon, before long, she planted her face directly on the table and drifted off into a soft slumber. Her exhaustion had finally caught up with her. Even when their squid paella arrived, she simply mumbled “I can’t eat another bite” in her sleep. Coming from her, that was all but unthinkable. Perhaps the end-times were upon them.

Monika sighed as she divvied up the paella. “You could at least wait till we get back to the house before conking out. I swear…”

“……”

After staring at Monika’s face for a bit, Sybilla took the back of an oily spoon and rapped it against Lily’s nose. However, she didn’t so

much as stir. She was out like a light.

Having made doubly sure of that, Sybilla slid her chair over to Monika's. "Hey, Monika. You mind if I ask you somethin' I've been wonderin' about for a while?"

"Like what?"

"What ended up happenin' between you and Lily?"

Monika choked on her mouthful of paella. Sybilla handed her a glass of mineral water, and she grabbed it and chugged it down before taking a series of laborious breaths.

She shot Sybilla a reproachful glare. "You're seriously gonna go there?"

From Sybilla's perspective, though, it was a fair question.

There was a period right after their mission where things had gotten awkward between Lily and Monika. Monika had come out and told Lily straight up that she was in love with her, leaving Lily at a complete loss. They later talked things out at Heat Haze Palace, but only the two of them knew how that conversation ended.

Sybilla turned her palm upward. "Look, try puttin' yourself in my shoes for a second. Bein' stuck between you is awkward as hell."

"I guess you have a point…"

"Can you at least bottom-line it for me? I dunno how I'm supposed to act around you two."

The fact was, Sybilla had been devoting a lot of effort toward trying to figure that out.

It was unclear why Lily and Monika were acting like nothing had changed, but Sybilla had spent her entire time playing third wheel, wondering if she was supposed to be livening things up or if it would be better to give the two of them some time alone.

Monika took one of the mussel shells from the paella and carefully balanced it on Lily's snoozing head. However, Lily still didn't wake up.

"Don't worry about it. Nothing's changed between us—that's what we agreed on."

"Oh, huh. And whose idea was that?"

"Mine. It's easiest for everyone that way. And Lily signed off."

In other words, they'd chosen to maintain the status quo.

Monika ordered some tea to wash the meal down with, then planted her elbows on the table and stared out the window so she wouldn't have to look Sybilla in the eye. She had no interest in going into detail. "That answer your question?"

"Yeah. But if anything happens, come talk to me. Don't go bottlin' it up."

"…I'll think about it."

"Hey, better me than Thea."

"Well, that goes without saying."

Sybilla dumped Lily's uneaten paella onto her plate and finished it off. Something about it tasted extra delicious.

For a while, the silence was only broken by the sound of the salty breeze.

When the tea arrived, Monika spoke softly. "You know how Klaus forbade us from all getting together?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure."

Back on the first day of the vacation, Klaus had instituted a strange rule. Aside from the first, thirteenth, and fourteenth days, the girls weren't allowed to all gather in one place. Sybilla still didn't have any idea what that was about.

"This is Klaus we're talking about. It's probably a type of training."

Lily was fast asleep, and Monika stared at the whorls in her hair.

"Odds are, Lamplight's about to get separated."

Sybilla gasped. "Wh—?"

"That's my guess, based on how solemn he looked. Grete's probably picked up on that, too."

"Ah…and that's why she's freakin' out about where she stands with him?"

Monika took a sip of tea, then exhaled. "This vacation is like a rehearsal. It might be a few months, it might be half a year, it might even be a whole year, but we're going to be split up, and we're not even going to be allowed to communicate."

"……"

"The world's approaching a crisis. If we want to gather intel more efficiently, it's the logical choice."

Like it or not, Monika's explanation made sense.

Lamplight had historically spent most of their time collectively staying in a single city for long periods of time, but in all likelihood, that was only because Klaus wanted to be able to protect them.

However, what if Lamplight spread out?

That would free Klaus up to move freely across the globe. He could take reports from Lamplight members stationed around the world, then devote his time exclusively to the hardest jobs before moving over to another country.

In terms of raw optimization, it was clearly the right thing to do.

"Now obviously, I have no idea how long we're going to be separated for, or to what extent. But given how much Klaus is agonizing over it, I have to imagine it's going to be major."

"…Yeah, true enough."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little sad."

Sybilla nodded in agreement.

Lamplight had certainly spent short periods living apart from each other. During their missions in both Galgad and Longchon, the team had spent nearly a month split into two or three groups. However, they'd all been staying in the same city, and they'd still been able to exchange information and meet up. And after just a short month or two, they'd been right back in Heat Haze Palace, horsing around like always.

Now they were being scattered to the winds.

It would have been all too easy to gripe and moan about the situation, but considering how much danger the world was in, they had no choice but to accept it.

Monika turned her gaze back to Lily's whorls. Sybilla couldn't tell what emotions lurked behind that face of hers, but the heart-rending warmth in her gaze was unmistakable.

Sybilla chose her next words with great care. "Y'know, the Great Pirate Jackal never got to go back to his homeland."

"What're you talking about?" Monika said with a small grin.

Sybilla shrugged. "I wonder what kinda thoughts went through that guy's head?"

"Hey, don't ask me."

"It'd sure be cool if we could meet him."

Unsure of what it was she was even trying to say, Sybilla went quiet.

However, when she thought about that ship back in the cave and about the skeleton that had breathed its last in the captain's cabin, she couldn't help but envision Jackal boldly sailing the ocean blue.

◇◇◇

It was the tenth day of their vacation, and after restoring their energy by playing on the beach and getting a good night's sleep at their boardinghouse, the girls returned once more to the cave with the pirate ship. Luckily, there were no signs that anyone had come in. The site had evaded detection.

The cave remained shrouded in darkness, but this time, they'd come prepared.

"All right! Let's find those bullets in a flash so we can enjoy the rest of our vacation!"

On Lily's command, Sybilla and Monika activated the device they'd brought along.

"The generator is a go!!" "Let there be light!!"

The floodlights had originally been designed to help fishing boats lure in squids and fish, and the girls installed them at five points on the ship's deck and around the cave before turning them on. Each of the large lights was roughly twenty inches across, and by bouncing

them off the mirrors they'd set up, they were able to illuminate the entire cavern.

The effects were immediate. No longer did they have to individually check every nook and cranny with their flashlights, and their field of view expanded dramatically. When they turned the floodlights toward the water, they could see all the way down to the bottom of the lake.

Their plan bore fruit just two hours after they began.

"Oh hey, I found one."

"Nice, me too."

Monika and Sybilla had each tracked down a bullet. Both of them had been resting at the bottom of the lake. Without the floodlights, the girls never would have spotted them there.

Lily nodded in satisfaction at their results. "Heh, that means there's only one left. This is way more effective than what we were doing earlier. We'll be done here in no time."

"Don't go tempting fate," Monika scolded her as she continued searching. "Someone could come strolling in here at any moment, and the second that happens, we're goners."

"I—I do know that. But we hung DO NOT ENTER signs at the entrance, remember?"

"That's the exact kind of overconfidence that gets you—"

Monika froze midsentence.

A vast darkness had just fallen over the cave. Someone was standing in front of their flood lamps. On the wall, there was a shadow of a girl with two ponytails, posing triumphantly.

The three of them raced over to the lights.

"I just made an AMAAAAAAAZING find, yo!!"

The girl who'd just arrived in the cavern was none other than Annette.

Her ash-pink ponytails bounced up and down, and her eyes gleamed. Her vocabulary had deteriorated just as much as the others' had upon first laying eyes on the ship, and she chirped, "Gosh!" "Golly!" as she inspected it from every angle.

"That went perfectly, yo. My plan to follow them after I spotted them wearing weird outfits at the naval base totally paid off! And with Bernard flying above them, it was dead easy, too!"

Apparently, Annette had been present at the naval base, too. If there was one thing she was good at, it was staying undetected. Not a single one of them had noticed her stalking them.

After proudly revealing her trick, Annette whirled around. "I'd better go tell all the locals about this, yo!"

"""NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"""

The three girls lunged at her skirt to hold her down.

"Don't!" Lily yelped in desperation. "You can't! This'll cause an international incident if we're not careful, and if it does, Teach is gonna be furious with us!"

"That doesn't sound like my problem, yo!"

"You're the wooooorst!"

They'd been discovered by the worst interloper imaginable.

Annette's thought processes worked differently from everyone else's. She prioritized her own wants over everything else, and on top of that, she occasionally went out of her way to torment people. She was completely immune to reasonable arguments.

"Let's negotiate, Annette!" Sybilla cried. "What is it you want? If you agree to keep quiet, we'll do whatever you want!"

It was a shameless declaration of surrender.

As far as negotiating strategies went, it was hard to imagine one that was worse. "What the hell do you think you're doing, writing her of all people a blank check?!" Monika interjected, but Sybilla snapped right back, "What fuckin' choice do we have?!"

All of a sudden, Annette's body relaxed. She cast an emotionless glance at the pleading trio— "Ooh-*hoo*."

—and when she did, the corners of her mouth curled upward more sharply than the three of them had ever seen.

They didn’t like where this was going.

“Prove that you mean it, then.”

The three girls let go of her skirt, and with a “”””Yes, ma’am,””” they knelt on the cave floor.

“First off, you have to give me a tour of the ship. Then—”

Annette had conquered them, and she boldly made her demand.

“—if you gather up all the materials I ask for, I won’t tell a soul.”

◇◇◇

It was the eleventh and twelfth days of their vacation, and Annette had spent both of them running the three of them ragged. She requested huge amounts of stuff like iron, tin, and silver, and the girls had to run all across the island to meet her demands.

What’s more, she also took a keen interest in the ship itself.





“I wanna check out the treasure, so go unload it for me! And that includes Jackal’s hat and sword, yo!”

“Yes, ma’aaaaam.”

With that, they had to take the oodles of treasure packed onto the ship and get it all off. The girls were stronger than average Joes and Janes, but it still took the three of them half a day to finish the job. That was a testament to the sheer quantity. The treasure had been packed into every inch of the ship.

Partway through, they stepped away from the cave. “Let’s just attack her.” “Yeah, and tie her up,” they plotted. Despite the odds being massively in their favor, though, they knew that as soon as they made a move against Annette, any screwup would spell their doom. They had no choice but to go along with her orders.

In the end, it wasn’t until the evening of the second day that she turned them loose.

Annette looked at the mountain of gold piled up in the cavern and nodded in satisfaction. “Now I’ve got all the materials I need!”

“Wh-what are you even planning on making?” Lily asked, with sweat pouring down her brow, but she got no reply.

Annette planted her hands on her hip. “You’re free now, yo!” she announced.

The three of them feebly hung their heads. “”””Thank you, ma’am…”””

“Oh, right, and one other thing!” All of a sudden, Annette did a little hop and stuck her head right in front of theirs. “I found this on the deck, and you can have it!”

“”””Huh……?”””

It was the bullet Lily had fired. Annette had already found it.

As the three of them stared at it in wordless shock, Annette strolled away.

The girls let out massive exhales and sank to the ground beside the ship. They sat back-to-back-to-back and held their balance by placing their weight on each other.

Then, in turn, Monika, Sybilla, and Lily grinned.

“Well, we’ve been through a lot—”

“But now our mission’s complete.”

“It was a long journey getting here, but it looks like we pulled through.”

They exchanged fist bumps to commend each other on a job well done.

They’d cut it a little too close for comfort, but they’d finally found all three bullets. Even if they spent the whole night sleeping, they still had plenty of time left to enjoy their holiday.

The girls gazed absentmindedly up at the ship.

Despite the damage it had suffered, it still dominated the cavern with its presence. They’d been staring at it for days, yet the sight had never gotten old. It was like looking at something unreal.

“We should probably report our big find, huh?” Lily said softly.

That was the final piece of work they needed to do. Once they told the police or the navy, they would come take care of the rest.

Sybilla nodded in agreement. “Man, this is gonna blow their minds. The whole island—hell, the whole world—is gonna lose it.”

“……”

Rather than join in their conversation, Monika slowly rose to her feet.

Their tripod had lost one of its legs, and Lily and Sybilla lost their balance and toppled over. ““Ow!”” they yelped.

Monika paid them no heed and walked over to the ship. “I think I’m gonna board it one last time.”

““Huh?””

“This is our final chance to say good-bye to the ship. We probably won’t be able to get near it again. Researchers are going to descend on it in droves, and the cave will become off-limits.”

The other two nodded. Her logic made sense.

The ship was a bona fide historical artifact, and once people knew it existed, the first thing they would do was take steps to preserve it. The cave would get locked down in no time, and boarding the ship would become a pipe dream.

"You know what, you've got a point," Lily cheered. She hopped to her feet. "Once more, for the road! What do you say we play one last game of Pirates?"

Monika glared at her. "Don't you *dare* pull out your gun," she snapped as Lily ran off.

Right when Monika started walking after her, Sybilla wrapped her in a shoulder hug and whispered in her ear. "Hey, Monika. You want some time alone with Lily?"

"What? I told you, it's not like that—"

"C'mon, we both know you wanna make some happy vacation memories. I'm gonna give you two some space."

Sybilla's mouth curled into a smirk, and she clapped Monika on the back.

Monika bit her lip like she wanted to mount a protest, but after watching Sybilla walk away for a bit, she just let out a sigh and climbed onto the ship's deck.

Lily had beaten her there and was striking a dramatic pose with one foot planted on the prow. She swept back her hair with a courageous look in her eye. "Captain Lily, at your service!"

"Where's this coming from?"

"I wanted to help cheer you two up. You both looked kinda anxious."

"……"

Monika gasped a little at the unexpected answer.

She and Sybilla *were* anxious—about the possibility of Lamplight getting split up that they'd talked about on the ninth day.

They'd specifically avoided mentioning anything to Lily, but she'd sniffed them right out. The girl was nothing if not in touch with her teammates' emotions.

"I notice that kinda thing. In case you forgot, I *am* Lamplight's leader," Lily said as she stared out beyond the ship's prow. "I'm sure we're about to be cast out into the great deep. We'll have to weather the stormy seas of this tumultuous era without any maps to guide us."

"True that…"

"But you know, we have nothing to fear. After all, we're the mighty spies who tracked down the ship of the Great Pirate Jackal. Rooting out the world's secrets will be a cakewalk, don't you think?" She valiantly thrust her knife out before her. "We're gonna see this long voyage through, no ifs, ands, or buts! That's the Lamplight way!"

"…Sure. Yeah, maybe you're right about that."

Monika sighed in exasperation at Lily's bold declaration, but her eyes crinkled in joy.

Down on the ground, Sybilla crossed her arms and nodded as she eavesdropped on their conversation. No matter how adverse the circumstances were, Lily's bravery always came through. She might not have been the most talented spy around, but just hearing her say that was enough to fill the girls with a mysterious energy that gave them the confidence that they could complete any mission.

It sparked hope—hope that they could overcome the trials that awaited them after their vacation.

Lily went on, loud and proud. "Now, set saaaaail! The Lamplight Pirate Brigade is leaving port!"

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say, cap'n."

Monika grinned sarcastically. There they were, pretending to be pirates again.

Lily was speaking metaphorically, of course. She was likening their next mission to the ocean from the age of pirates. Her saying "set sail" was her way of encouragingly saying "We're gonna nail this next mission," nothing more.

Yet all the same, the ship began slowly moving.

""""Huh?""""

The three of them let out their most dumbfounded cries yet.

Monika went over to the side of the deck and shouted down at Sybilla. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

“Hey, it wasn’t me! I didn’t do shit. The ropes are all cut!”

Sybilla rushed over to the five ropes tying the ship to the cavern. All of them had been sliced through. She grabbed the ropes and made a desperate attempt to throw them back onto the ship, but the ship had already begun drifting out to sea, and the ropes merely splashed into the water.

It didn’t make any sense. How did this happen?

“I helped you set sail, just like you asked, yo!”

A voice tinged with madness echoed through the cave.

When the girls all turned to look, they saw Annette wearing Jackal’s pirate hat and giving them a crisp salute. They hadn’t even realized she was still in the cave.

She was the culprit behind everything that was happening. She might have even installed some sort of device that was moving the ship.

“”””ARE YOU KIDDING MEEEEEEEEE?!”””””

All their screams were for naught, and little by little, the ship got pulled out toward open water.

The ship continued down the stream connecting the lake to the sea with Monika and Lily still aboard. Despite crashing into a couple of walls on its way there, it slowly but surely made its way to the mouth of the cave.

Sybilla ran after it and did everything in her power to halt the ship, but sadly, she lacked the resources to accomplish anything. The

severed rope was too short to be useful, and the ship was far too large for Sybilla to stop it alone.

Unless they did something, the ship was going to escape the cave and float off into the sea.

Bottom line is, shit just got real!

This was no time to be standing around.

"I'll go call for help!" Sybilla yelled. "You two, protect the ship!"

"G-got it!"

After shouting the plan to Lily and Monika, Sybilla ran back toward town. She didn't have time to waste giving instructions to Annette. Sybilla left her behind and raced across the rugged coastline at top speed. It would have taken an average person thirty minutes to walk that path, but Sybilla cleared it in just ten.

After arriving at that familiar beach, she spotted a girl sitting in the sand.

Not only was it someone she knew, but luckily, it was the exact person she needed.

"Raftania!!"

"Hmm…? Who's there?" The girl Sybilla had met on the first day—Raftania, the boardinghouse owner's daughter—shot a confused look her way. She wiped the sand off her butt as she stood. "Oh, you're one of Mr. Klaus's students. What's got you all worked up—?"

"I need a motorboat! You said you had one, right?!"

"What?"

"I don't got time to explain! We've got people in distress. They're driftin' out to sea, and we gotta—!"

Midway through speaking, Sybilla raised an eyebrow. Raftania's eyes were puffy, and there were tears rolling down her cheeks.

Huh? What was she cryin' for?

Sybilla couldn't make sense of it.

All she knew was that apparently, Raftania had been sobbing her eyes out on the beach. Even her shirt collar was soaked. She must have been there long enough for her big teardrops to trickle that far

down. She was holding an extravagant wedding bouquet, but she'd been hugging it so tightly, all the flowers were crushed.

Raftania gave her a puzzled look. "…What do you mean, 'in distress'?"

Hearing that snapped Sybilla back to the situation at hand. She didn't have time to ask Raftania why she'd been crying.

"We got a bigger miracle than we bargained for," she said, then grabbed Raftania by the hand and dragged her away.

Meanwhile, Lily and Monika were doing their absolute best to keep the ship they'd been stranded on in one piece.

If all they were worried about was their own lives, they could easily have dived off the side. However, doing that would leave the ship adrift without a crew, and it would surely sink.

They needed to figure out a way for the two of them to get the ship back to the island on their own.

However, the task was beyond them. Not only was the ship slowly being dragged away by the tide, but white fog was rolling in and making it hard to tell which direction the island was even in. They thought about turning the rudder, but it had broken ages ago. After all, the ship was two hundred years old. It was a wonder it even still floated.

"Should we just jump, Lily?!" Monika shouted as she searched the ship for anything that might help them. "There's no way the two of us can control a ship this big!"

"But if we abandon it, think of what'll happen to the ship!"

"I get that, but still…!"

"For now, let's raise the sails! If we catch a wind heading toward the island, it might just work!"

"There's no way. For one, the wind isn't even blowing!"

"It's better than sitting around doing nothing! This ship is the jewel of the island! We have to defend it!!"

They climbed the masts and cut the ropes that were keeping the sails furled. As it turned out, releasing sails in the correct order was no easy task with just two people. Gravity got the sails where they needed to be, but several of them ripped in the process. They were hardly in any state to catch the wind now.

Upon ringing a bell they found, they heard the sound of a motor from down beside the ship.

"How're you two holdin' up?!"

"I-it's actually real. Y-you mean she was tellin' me the truth?"

Sybilla gave them a big wave, and Raftania gawked.

Lily tossed them some of the rope lying on the ship, and Sybilla tied it tightly so the two boats wouldn't lose each other. Then they used a rope ladder to get Sybilla and Raftania up onto the deck.

"I can't believe you found us among all that fog."

Monika was audibly impressed, and Raftania nodded. "Us islanders know the currents like the backs of our hands. It weren't hard to get a rough bearing. Then we just followed the bell."

"Well, we're glad you're here. Where'll we end up if we keep drifting?"

"If we hold our current course…"

Raftania's expression hardened.

"…then I wager we'll end up roundabout the naval base. We ain't far from it now."

"Oh, dang. With all the fog, I had no idea."

Monika was breathing a sigh of relief, when all of a sudden, Raftania dashed off and headed for the lower deck. Something had just dawned on her.

"Raftania, where you goin'?!"

Sybilla hurriedly tried to call her back, but Raftania didn't return.

"She's probably just excited to be on a pirate ship," Monika said, then got to work putting together a plan. "We need to get in touch with the navy and have them escort us, ASAP. Does the boat have a radio? If not, we need to find something else we can send an SOS with."

Either way, protecting the pirate ship was their top priority. Letting a cultural relic get into a shipwreck would be a huge loss for mankind.

As they wrapped up their discussion, they saw the hazy outline of land beyond the fog. Based on its shape, the huge structure they saw on the coast had to be the naval base.

"Wow, the base really was right in front of us all along. Look alive, people. The sooner they rescue us, the—"

A massive roar thundered out so hard, it shook the entire ship.

Their hull tilted, sending the girls tumbling across the deck.

""""Agh?!""""

They wondered for a moment what had caused it, but the only plausible answer was the now absent Raftania.

When they raced inside the cabin, they found her collapsed on her backside on the gun deck. There was smoke that smelled of gunpowder billowing from one of the cannons.

Raftania had just fired off a shot.

"…What? But how?" Monika mumbled. "Two-hundred-year-old cannons and gunpowder shouldn't be usable… And plus, how did you even know how to fire that?"

"Wh-what're you doing? WHAT THE FUCK?!" As Monika froze, Sybilla strode past her and grabbed Raftania. "What if that'd hit someone, huh?! Did no one ever teach you the difference between right and—?"

"I don't give one rat's ass no more!!"

Raftania violently shook Sybilla off of her.

On seeing a fresh wave of tears in Raftania's eyes, Sybilla went quiet. Between that and the way she'd been crying earlier, it was obvious she was carrying a terrible grief.

"Thank you, Sybilla. Thanks for lettin' me onto this here ship. I can't think of no better place to die."

Smoke hung over the gun deck as she went on.

"I done killed a man."

""""You what?""""

"I was avengin' my Ma. Did you know? That man—that *fiend*—Mercier was scopin' you out while you played on the beach. He was lookin' for his next target."

The three girls thought back to the sketchy man they'd spotted back on the first day of their vacation. That must have been Ensign Mercier. They'd been cooped up in the caves for most of their trip there, but even they'd heard about the murder and knew the name of the man who'd been killed.

Raftania continued her lament. "I knew it all. I knew he butchered my Ma. I knew he'd been killin' tourists and locals like it was nothin'—and I knew how to kill that madman, too! And so I didn't hesitate. I needed to let my Ma rest in peace!"

She slammed her fist into a nearby wall to vent her rage. Years of rotting had weakened it, and the wood split open with ease.

"All I had left to do was get Mr. Klaus to marry me. I knew he'd take me away from here before my sins got exposed. Even if he knew what I'd really done, he'd still whisk me away! That was how it was supposed to go…"

She bit down on her lip so hard, it bled.

"But you know what he told me just now? 'You're a filthy killer,' he said."

""""……""""

The girls couldn't even begin to process what it was they were hearing.

Raftania had just confessed to murder, but they didn't know any of the context, so they had no idea what was going on. "What kind of lunatic did you *bring* with you, Sybilla?!" "Hell if I know! Like, she's a killer? What is she talkin' about?!" "…I mean, she does seem pretty torn up," they said in hushed whispers.

Confused as they were, the one thing that was clear was that Raftania was harboring a deep anguish. The path that had led her there had been filled with harsh experiences.

The girl in question let out an exhale that sounded almost like a laugh. “Look, the base is turnin’ its guns.”

“What?”

“This ship ain’t long for the world.”

The girls looked over at the naval base through the cannon portholes. The fog was still dense, so it was hard to see, but they could tell that the base’s shoreside battery was slowly turning their way.

Its target was the pirate ship; of that there could be no doubt. There was no way a naval base would take cannon fire like that without retaliating.

“I’ll sink to the depths alongside the ship. There ain’t nothin’ back there for me but a pair of navy handcuffs.” The other three paled, and Raftania smiled at them. “Thank you all. This was nice, here at the end. Gettin’ to throw a punch at that rotten navy ain’t such a bad way to go.”

With that, she tossed them the key to the motorboat.

She had the bright, cheery smile of someone who’d already given up on life.

They didn’t have much time left. Getting bombarded from out of nowhere had likely caught the navy off guard, but the instant the order came down, their concentrated fire would come down on them in an instant. Once that happened, the worn-out old pirate ship would sink in no time.

“You’d best get a move on.” Raftania waved them away. “If you stay with me, you’ll die like—”

“Oh, shut up.”

It was Sybilla who cut her off.

Raftania let out a wide-eyed gasp, and Sybilla scratched her head in irritation as she stood across from her. “Like, seriously, what’re

you sayin'? Not a single thing that's come outta your mouth has made a lick of sense. You bad with words or somethin'?"

"No, really, they're gonna sink the—"

"Nah, you don't know that."

"What're you talkin' about?"

"See, us, we haven't given up yet."

Monika and Lily followed her up. "Yeah. You don't get to decide how this ends." "Right? It'll take a lot more than this to spook us," they agreed.

Raftania blinked. What they were saying defied her comprehension.

Sybilla thumped her on the shoulder. "Look, Raftania, I don't know what you're goin' through. Hell, I barely understand half of what's goin' on here." Her next words rang with confidence. "But you'd better peel those eyes of yours. I'll have you know there's miracles in this world of ours."

Acting fast, the girls got to work.

For the girls, letting the ship they'd gone to such lengths to uncover get lost again wasn't an option. What's more, they weren't about to stand by and let Raftania die alongside it, either.

They needed to stop the navy from firing.

It was do-or-die. Lily suggested an absurd scheme, and though Monika balked—"Are you for real?"—Sybilla grinned. "It's not like we've got any better plans. Time to avert us a disaster."

Then they scattered and began gathering up what they needed.

Sybilla was the first to run off, and she snatched up the wedding bouquet lying by the cannons. "Oh, nice. This should work." Raftania hadn't been able to bring herself to part with it, and she'd brought it all the way down to the gun deck with her.

After the girls reassembled on the upper deck, they laid out the items they'd collected.

- There were the leather boots Erna had fished up on the first day.

- There was the lingerie they'd stolen from Thea's room but decided not to sell.
- There was Bernard the hawk, Sara's pet who'd doggedly followed them all the way there.
- There was the white cloth they'd gotten for comforting Grete.
- There was the huge wedding bouquet that Klaus had returned to Raftania.
- And finally, there was the generator and floodlights they'd worked together to track down.

Needless to say, it was all the miscellaneous stuff they'd accumulated over the course of their vacation.

"Wh-what're you thinkin' of doin' with all that?"

Raftania had wandered up to the deck as well, and she stared at the miscellanea in confusion.

Lily grinned. "If you wanna protect a pirate ship, you've gotta call for its captain," she said.

It was a deranged gambit to end all deranged gambits.

However, the trio carrying it were dead serious about it. "We're outta time. It's all or nothin' here!" Sybilla said, to liven the others up, and Monika gave her a grim smile and bit her lip. "I just wish we had something better than this stupid idea!" "We've gotta believe in the memories we've collected during our time here!" Lily crowed.

They stood in a circle around their pile of stuff and cried out.

""""We call on you, Great Pirate Jackal! RISE!!""""

◇◇◇

At the same time, over in the residential area near the naval base, the sudden tremor had thrown the islanders who lived there into a panic.

They mistakenly assumed that there had been some sort of explosion at the base, and they rushed out of their homes and looked out at the water in the direction the roar had come from.

Then they saw it—the silhouette of a pirate ship floating over the foggy sea.

"Wh-what is that thing…?!"

"G-go fetch some binoculars! C-could that thing be real?!"

They called each other outside, and before long, they all gathered on the beach.

Meanwhile, over at the naval base, the sailors were getting ready to shoot down the mysterious enemy vessel.

Spotting the pirate ship had thrown Grenier for a loop at first, but he promptly kicked the girls out of the command room and began relaying levelheaded instructions to his men via radio.

His message to them was thus: that there was no way the ship that had just shown up could actually be the pirate ship they'd spent all those years searching for.

It was the logical conclusion to draw. This was clearly the work of either terrorists or some rogue state. Surely, their plan was to use the ship's unusual appearance as a distraction while they launched their attack. The ship had already fired a cannonball at them, after all.

If Grenier didn't act now, he was going to get his men killed.

Right when he opened his mouth to give the order to fire, he spotted a change take place on the ship.

"Commander, there's someone moving down on its prow!"

A powerful light was emanating from the pirate ship, and that light was illuminating the person standing on the prow and casting their shadow against the fog as if the fog was a gigantic screen.

Grenier took his binoculars and turned them toward the figure. They were being lit from behind, so he couldn't make out who it was, but it looked like their mouth was moving.

"They're saying something!" he yelled. "I need someone who can read lips to take notes!!"

However, every sailor who came to the command room bore the same look of disbelief. "B-but what they're saying… That's impossible!!"

All of them trembled as they stared at the figure on the prow.

◇◇◇

Standing atop the ship's prow was a pirate.

The pirate, who was wearing the exact same outfit as the Great Pirate Jackal had been wearing, was a white-haired girl with a mean look in her eyes.

"I am Jackal's heir, the Great Pirate Sybillan!!"

Sybilla struck a daunting pose, faced the naval base, and made her declaration with pride.

"This is a warning to the depraved navy trying to defile this land! If you take any further steps to despoil our island, or if you attempt to harm this ship, then I shall bring a one-thousand-fold curse to bear against ye!"

In that moment, a genuine miracle occurred.

When Sybilla gallantly stood there, she was the spitting image of the legendary pirate Jackal himself.

For Bellmoon, the scimitar that had slain scores of pirates, she had a wedding bouquet. For the hook that mercilessly gouged any of her men who defied her, she had a leather boot. For the cruel parrot whose favorite food was the eyes of the dead, she had a large hawk. She'd constructed the tricorne hat that struck fear into all who

beheld it with Thea's bra and panties. And she'd imitated the cloak said to be covered in blood by taking the white cloth from Grete and soaking it in wine.

Then, the moment she took her position on the prow, they used the floodlights and generator to manifest the light that was said to have shone down from the heavens. What's more, the backlight effect it created served to cover up all the subtle differences between Sybilla and a genuine pirate.

All the items they'd collected over their vacation lined up perfectly with the pirate legend, and thanks to those coincidences, there she was—the Great Pirate Sybillan.

And then, just like that, the naval base's battery *ground to a halt*.

"Wha……?"
"""THEY STOOOOOOOOPPED!!"""

That was the second miracle.

Grenier had stopped before giving the order to fire. The appearance of someone eccentric enough to recreate the legend, no matter how clumsily, had exceeded the bounds of his comprehension—so much so that it had created doubt in his mind whether sinking the ship was really the correct call.

Raftania was dumbfounded, and Monika, Lily, and Sybilla let out a cheer.

The girls weren't sure what exactly was going on in the naval base, but they struck triumphant poses nonetheless.

"You think I scared 'em off?" Sybilla asked.

"What I *think* is that they were so confused, they didn't know what to do," Monika replied.

“The bottom line is, they didn’t blast us out of the water, and that means we can chalk this up as a win!” Lily said.

As things stood, the currents were going to carry the pirate ship back to the island where it would wash ashore right next to the naval base. When it did, the navy would take care of preserving it. The girls had successfully saved the ship. Now all they had left to do was to disappear without leaving any trace they’d been there.

Raftania was still standing in petrified disbelief, and Sybilla clapped her on the shoulder. “C’mon, let’s get outta here before things get messy.”

Raftania no longer had the willpower left to refuse. She gave a small nod, and Sybilla pulled her by the arm and disembarked from the ship.

Epilogue

The Thirteenth Day (Part Two)

The girls were all finished telling their stories.

Grete and Erna had recounted their time with Raftania the islander.

Thea and Sara had described how they infiltrated the naval base in their quest to uncover the mystery behind the string of murders.

And Lily, Sybilla, and Monika had explained how they found a pirate ship and spent all their time searching for some bullets.

The three groups had spent their vacations in drastically different ways.

After hearing Grete wrap up her tale about the islanders,

"Oh, wow. You, Raftania, and Teach got wrapped up in a love triangle?!"

Lily reacted with admiration.

After hearing Thea wrap up her tale about the navy,

"I—I had no idea that Raftania had that kind of side to her!"

Grete let out an astonished gasp.

After hearing Lily wrap up her tale about the pirates,

"What is *wrong* with you people?! I swear!"

Thea was outraged.

The moment they were done talking, Thea began chewing Lily, Sybilla, and Monika out. "I was so terrified out of my mind at that pirate curse, and that was all you three?! And then you went and sold off my clothes?! And that whole business with the pirate ship… You have to be *joking*!" she ranted as she clamped her hands down on Lily's shoulders.

Klaus shared the sentiment, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm pretty shocked myself. To think that you all went through something so extraordinary."

Despite his prodigious intuition, not even he could have foreseen them getting wrapped up in such a historic incident. He hadn't even considered the possibility that they might actually find the pirate ship that easily.

In any case, though, all the information was out on the table.

Klaus took charge of the discussion and laid out their next step. "Now let's go ahead and lay out everything we know about Annette's whereabouts."

Annette had vanished on the thirteenth day, and the whole reason they'd shared those stories was so they could find her.

Grete laid her notebook down on the table and showed everyone what she'd written.

Annette's Activity Log
Day 1: Played on the beach
Day 2: Planned Raftania's wedding?
Day 3: Planned Raftania's wedding?
Day 4: Planned Raftania's wedding?
Day 5: Planned Raftania's wedding?
Day 6: Planned Raftania's wedding?
Day 7: Planned Raftania's wedding?
Day 8: Sneaked into the naval base w/ Thea and Sara
Day 9: Stalked Lily/Sybilla/Monika?

Day 10: Found pirate ship. Forced Lily/Sybilla/Monika to work for her. Went to a hot spring?

Day 11: Forced Lily/Sybilla/Monika to work for her. Investigated tidal currents?

Day 12: Put the pirate ship out to sea

Day 13: Went missing

"Dang, it's kinda stark, seeing it all laid out like that."

The first one to speak up was Lily.

"She really did get bored of planning that wedding, huh?"

The girls all nodded.

The fact that according to Grete, Annette had declared as much on the tenth day all but confirmed it. She'd been so enthusiastic about it at first, yet for the back half of her vacation, she'd completely lost interest.

"She was making the three of you gather up some sort of materials, right?" asked Sara.

"Yeah, I think she wanted to invent something. It was either something really big, or a lot of something," Monika replied.

Something dawned on Grete after hearing that, and she cocked her head. "…Hmm. But where exactly on the island would she build it? I can't imagine there would be any adequate facilities here."

The other girls all let out little ahhs of agreement.

Unlike Heat Haze Palace, Annette didn't have a personal area for tinkering here. The island's main industries were tourism and fishing. The options for local workspaces were limited, at best.

No matter how many raw materials she gathered, she still needed somewhere to process them if she wanted to do any proper inventing.

Thea sucked in a gasp. "No, there is one place. Sara and I saw it for ourselves."

Klaus nodded as well.

Annette had visited it on the eighth day.

"It would appear we have our answer."

Having arrived at his answer, Klaus ordered the girls to move out.

"We're heading to the naval base."

◇◇◇

On their way to the naval base, Monika remembered something.

"Hey, Grete," she asked. "How are people taking the whole pirate ship situation?"

"The locals saw the entire thing play out, and it's become the talk of the island. Word is already spreading about the legendary Great Pirate Sybillan…"

"Well, that's a big goddamn problem!" Sybilla yelped.

""""There's no need to shout, Sybillan.""""

"Don't fuckin' call me that!!"

After Sybilla finished yelling about her teammates' teasing, Sara and Thea nodded.

"The navy was pretty shocked, too," Sara said.

"And it's hard to blame them, what with an unidentified pirate ship showing up out of nowhere," Thea agreed. "In the end, though, they did end up taking it into custody and investigating it."

As an aside, the two of them had been meeting with the vice-admiral in secret when the ship appeared, and they'd used the ensuing chaos to more or less flee the naval base. Thea had spent the whole night wailing "It's Jackal's cuuurse" and hadn't been able to get to sleep until Sara patted her head and let Thea use her lap as a pillow.

At that point, Thea shot a look over at Lily, Monika, and Sybilla. None of them had told her a thing. "It begs the question, what exactly *were* you three doing up until this afternoon?"

""""Sleeping off our exhaustion.""""

"…Well, I suppose that does make sense."

After escaping from the pirate ship, the three of them and Raftania had crashed hard.

Later, when Raftania woke up, she'd gone around to tell everyone that the wedding was off.

◇◇◇

Getting into the naval base turned out to be a trivial affair.

Klaus had it set up so that as soon as he showed up at their reception desk, the staff immediately sent word to Grenier, no matter how late it was. Just as Thea had suspected, Klaus was a frequent visitor there.

When they were shown into the command room, they found Annette receiving a warm welcome.

"What are you doing here, Annette?" Klaus asked.

"Hmph. It's you all."

Annette was sitting on a large couch and helping herself to the huge plate of sweets she'd been provided.

Grenier was sitting across from her.

"I'm in the middle of negotiating right now, yo. Don't come butting in!"

"That's right," Grenier said. "Your agent just marched right on in."

Not only had Annette marched into the base without permission, she'd managed to secure a one-on-one meeting with the vice-admiral.

The rest of the team found that highly dubious, and Grenier explained.

"She said that in exchange for free access to my lab, she would tell me the pirate treasure's whereabouts."

Lily, Sybilla, and Monika all gasped in unison. "Ah…!"

The three of them had completely forgotten about it. Based on their story, the treasure had already been unloaded from the ship

and was lying in the cave.

Klaus sat down beside Annette and fixed his gaze on Grenier. "… And how do you intend to reply?"

"Why, I plan on accepting her terms, of course," Grenier said empathically. "After seeing the ship and the booty she brought, it was clear she was telling the truth. I need to retrieve that treasure before the islanders get their hands on it."

Lying on the table was a ring adorned with a massive diamond. Annette must have polished it, as it shone with a brilliant gleam.

Grenier sounded downright enraptured. "Now my wish will come true. This coup d'état will turn the Lylat Kingdom's power structures on their heads!"

"……"

Klaus was already aware of the man's ambitions—he wanted to overthrow the Lylat government and the oppressive way it stratified their society.

As their neighbor, the Din Republic could ill afford to sit idly by while a coup took place in Lylat. There were countless angles for spies to work there.

On a personal level, though, Klaus was sympathetic to Grenier's ideals. The sound of Lylat's people suffering had reached his ears, too.

"You can count on my support," Klaus said, offering him some superficial encouragement. Then he said, "But there's one thing…" and lowered his voice.

"This is a request not as a spy, but as a simple tourist."

"Hmm?"

"Don't threaten the islanders' livelihoods any more than you already have."

Klaus knew that Grenier had spent years pushing for the naval base to get expanded. He knew about the murders Grenier's favorite researcher had committed, too.

"These people live in harmony with the splendor of nature, and you need to respect that. How is what you're doing to them any

different from the Lylat nobles you so despise?”

“_____”

Grenier inhaled sharply for a brief moment, then let out a long exhale. “…You’re right, of course. Now that I have Jackal’s treasure, I mean the island no harm.”

“Good.”

“If anything, I intend to start repaying them. I know what it is I’ve done.” Grenier cast a look outside the window. “I’ll be keeping the treasure, but perhaps we can use the ship itself as one of their island’s tourist attractions. It would take too much work to sell it off anyhow.”

There were no hints of deception or insincerity in his voice.

Grenier’s grand ambitions might have occasionally led him to make morally dubious choices, but at heart, he had a strong sense of justice. Klaus had engaged with him a number of times during Klaus’s time on Inferno, and he’d seen for himself the work Grenier put in to ease the people’s suffering.

Klaus nodded. “Also, it would be prudent to let the islander who murdered Mercier off the hook. If you try to arrest her, the truth behind the serial murders is likely to get exposed. The man reaped what he sowed.”

“…You’re right. Maybe a lighter touch is called for.”

With that, Klaus’s end of the negotiations was complete.

Annette was in good cheer as well. “As long as I can use the lab, I don’t care about any of that.”

Klaus turned to leave, but several of the girls looked like they still had things they wanted to say. Their shoulders twitched as they fidgeted.

“N-now, a little birdie told me this,” Lily said, stepping forward. “But there’s a big hole in the deck of the ship, right?”

Grenier looked at her in confusion. “What? How could you know that?”

“The point is, that hole was probably there from the start. It *definitely* isn’t there because someone broke it.”

"I…see…"

The girls were looking for some assurance.

Grenier let out a perplexed sigh. "Well, we haven't really started our investigation yet," he muttered. "I say, that ship has a lot of secrets. Why did its cannons go off when it was drifting by? And who exactly was that figure who called herself Sybillan…?"

"Just a pirate ghost, I imagine. Maybe curses are real after all," Klaus said quickly, before Grenier could ask too many questions.

◇◇◇

After retrieving Annette from the naval base, they headed back to the beach they'd started out at. "I'm gonna tie her up so she doesn't run away again," Sybilla said before winding a rope around Annette and dragging her along with them.

When they arrived once more at the beach, Lily spoke up. "By the way, Teach…did you say you're backing the vice-admiral's coup?"

She was referring to the conversation back at the base, no doubt.

When Grenier had talked about wanting to overthrow the government, Klaus had offered the man his support. Several of the girls had been taken aback by that.

"Are you sure about that? I thought that Din and Lylat were supposed to be allies."

"We are," Klaus replied. "If it wasn't for Lylat, the Republic might very well still be under Galgad occupation. Even with the war over, we've continued fostering a strong relationship with them in order to keep Galgad at bay."

That was Din's official position, in any case.

After the Republic got invaded, it was a combination of supplies from the United States of Mouzaia, troops from the Fend Commonwealth and Lylat Kingdom, and covert ops by the Din Republic spy team Inferno that allowed them to drive off the Galgad

forces. Once the war ended, those four nations' intelligence agencies had formed an alliance.

"But here's the thing—Lylat is where the Nostalgia Project began."

That was the name of the globe-spanning plan that had secretly been progressing in the Din Republic.

"We don't know the details, but it's definitely cause for concern."

There was a lot they didn't know.

However, remaining ignorant and leaving things be wasn't an option. For Klaus, there was something essential urging him onward.

"If it wasn't, Inferno wouldn't have fallen."

Guido had betrayed Inferno and joined Serpent.

What if his motives had been related to the Nostalgia Project?

If that was true, then the Din Republic couldn't just stand idly by. This was a topic so sensitive that neither "Hearth" Veronika nor "Torchlight" Guido had so much as mentioned it to Klaus.

"Our deadline is the start of the global economic recession. That's how long we have to get right to the heart of the Lylat Kingdom and steal their most closely guarded secrets."

Gerde had described it in her legacy. According to her, the world was headed for a financial crisis so bad, it would be called the "Great Depression," and that was going to lead to a second Great War breaking out.

Once war drew closer, though, Lamplight would have little choice but to stop interfering with Lylat's government. If the Galgad Empire invaded while the Lylat Kingdom was in the middle of a coup, it would be all too easy for the Din Republic to get caught in the middle of the hostilities.

"I'd like to hear it straight from you, Teach." Lily pursed her lips tightly and took a step forward. "What sort of mission is Lamplight about to embark on?"

"…It would appear that many of you already suspect what's happening."

Klaus nodded, then took the notebook Grete had been using and opened it for the girls to see. Written inside were notes detailing how each and every one of them had spent their vacations.

In a sense, the notebook itself was Klaus's objective.

"When we split up, we can see the world from countless different angles. We can observe things we never would have been able to if we were all in one place. Has this vacation helped you all understand that?"

The holiday had made him certain of that.

By spreading out, they'd been able to gather huge amounts of intelligence in a short amount of time. They'd learned about Raftania's situation, about the navy conspiracy, and about the pirate legend. They'd exceeded Klaus's wildest expectations.

"For the next year, Lamplight will be parting ways."

The girls didn't so much as shudder. They'd already braced themselves for this.

Klaus continued. "I'm going to be dispatching you in small groups to specific task sites. There, you'll gather intelligence, engage in covert ops, and complete your missions—and in doing so, we'll obtain a full picture of what the Nostalgia Project entails."

Unlike before, they wouldn't be living together anymore. It would be at least a year before they all got back together, maybe more.

They were going to have to fool everyone around them while they were alone on foreign soil. That was the mission that awaited the Lamplight girls.

Lily stuck out her tongue. "Well, I'd be lying if I said I was confident we could handle something on the scale of world revolution."

"That's not what I like to hear."

"But now… Now we have something we're fighting for."

Klaus could tell exactly who she was referring to.

There was a burden Lamplight now carried that they hadn't back when the team was formed.

"…Avian, you mean."

Back in the Fend Commonwealth, all but one of those elites had perished. If it weren't for their sacrifice, Serpent might very well have swallowed Lamplight up and destroyed them.

"Lamplight and Avian can protect Din on two fronts."—that was the promise that Avian's boss, "Flock" Vindo, had made, and it was a vow that was still holding strong. It wasn't just Lily. There was conviction in the other girls' expressions, too.

"Our classes with you taught us skills, Teach, and our classes with the elites honed them. This is just the next lesson in that chain," Lily declared. "It's time for our extracurriculars. We're gonna leave the classroom and spread our wings in the world beyond!"

That was the speech Klaus was supposed to make, but Lily had stolen the words right out of his mouth.

Maybe that was a sign that Lamplight's leader was growing up.

"Magnificent."

Klaus gave her an appreciative nod, and Lily said, "Sounds like it's settled!" before looking back toward her teammates and thrusting her fist in the air. "That means all we gotta do now is party! Let's make this last night of our vacation *count*!"

The mood had been getting serious, but Lily's cheerful shout blew all the solemnity away.

The other girls raised their fists as well, and they used some of their last precious hours there to have one final dinner.

Just like on the first day, their dinner of choice was a seafood barbeque.

Lying on the beach was a generator and a set of large floodlights. "Isn't that the generator you stole from the naval base?" Thea pointed out. "It's fine, we'll give it back later!" Sybilla offered by way of an excuse.

Sandwiched between the lights and the table and chairs, there was a charcoal grill. Once all there was left to do was barbeque the food, Lily left the beach before returning with someone carrying a large basket.

"I brought a special guest! Iiiiiiiiit's Raftania!"

"And I brought loads of food! It's my treat!"

It was, in fact, Raftania.

She flashed them her pearly whites, and she tugged along a handcart laden with ingredients and drinks. She looked like a girl reborn, and she smiled happily as she filled the grill up with seafood. A delectable aroma rose up, and the girls let out another round of cheers.

Over the course of the meal, Klaus held private discussions with three different girls.

Each and every one of those conversations was a vacation memory he would never forget.

The first was with Raftania. When Klaus stepped away from the main festivities, she approached him.

"…So, uh, Mr. Klaus."

"Yes?"

"Are you sure your mind's made up? About marryin' me and all, I mean. I could even just be the second or third wife, I don't mind…"

"It's not happening. I know about how you tried to feed the girls hamburger steak made from human flesh and how you pawned your murder weapon off on Grete."

"I promise, I would never have put human meat in *yours*!"

"Oh, so that's why mine was so fancy… That doesn't make it okay, you know."

"Aww. I know, I know. I'll go apologize to 'em later."

"Make sure you do. As for the rest, I already filled you in. I talked things over with the vice-admiral. He's not going to expose your crime, and he's going to give up on expanding the base. The pirate ship is going to become a tourist attraction. That boardinghouse of yours is going to get a lot busier. With how bright the island's future is, there shouldn't be any need for you to leave."

"…I guess not, nah. I was right, y'know? You really are my hero, Mr. Klaus!"

"I'm not sure I'd go that far."

"Give Sybilla an' them my thanks, too. I was lost, an' they pulled me up from the dark. Those're some good students you got there."

"Indeed I do. They're my pride and joy."

"Y'all should come visit again someday. I'll be sure to give you another warm welcome."

"…You know that if I ever come back to this island, there's no way I'm staying at your boardinghouse, right? It's too much of a headache."

"……Why, I never!"

When Klaus told her his very reasonable opinion, Raftania burst into tears. "This time, I really ain't lettin' go till you agree to marry me!" she cried as she clung to his leg, and he had to call Sybilla over to pry her off and drag her away. It was a giant mess.

After Klaus drove off Raftania and caught his breath, Grete came over. "You and Raftania really do get along like a house on fire, don't you?"

"What wild misunderstandings could possibly have led you to that conclusion?"

"I was joking."

She chuckled and sat down next to him.

Klaus nodded. She was someone else he needed to have a serious conversation with.

"You were right, Grete."

"About what?"

"There really was a pirate ship. It wasn't a fantasy."

"…No, it wasn't."

"You were right about it all. Our lives aren't set in stone. Neither is the world, and neither am I. Thinking that everything can be understood is nothing more than base conceit."

"That's very true."

"Would it be okay if I took a year to think about it?"

"Huh……?"

"I do apologize for asking for so long. However, it's not like we'll be able to see each other anyways. I need time to properly confront my emotions. When we see each other a year from now, would you mind giving me another chance to tell you how I feel?"

"…O-of course not, it would be my pleasure!"

Grete let out a flustered gasp, then nodded as vigorously as she could.

After Grete left, her face all flushed, Klaus spotted Annette lying on the beach.

She was staring up at the night sky, utterly unperturbed by the sand dirtying her clothes and hair. She'd clearly eaten her fill, as she was contentedly patting her belly.

"Hello, Annette," Klaus said as he walked over to her.

Annette snapped upright and gave him a smile. "What's up, Bro?!"

"I was wondering if I could ask about how you're going to remember this vacation."

At long last, it was time for the final story.

It was the story one could only arrive at after hearing everything there was to hear about the islanders, the navy, and the pirates. It was Annette's story.

◇◇◇

They ended up walking along the beach as they chatted. Annette was likely more comfortable talking like that. They strolled slowly, listening as they went to the sound of the waves washing up across the beach, then washing back the way they came. The soles of their shoes left imprints in the wet sand. A cold wind nipped at them from the sea.

"Why did you offer Raftania so much help?"

That was the question Klaus chose to open with.

Annette walked with big strides, savoring the sensation of each step as she went. "I wanted to see what being a wedding planner was all about, so I—"

"That was you laying the groundwork. You wanted to worm your way into Raftania's heart."

At no point had Annette's interest in the wedding been genuine. She'd gotten bored of the whole thing by halfway through her vacation, and besides, she had no reason to side with Raftania in the first place.

No, Klaus was asking about something else entirely.

"What was your reason for secretly orchestrating the murder Raftania committed?"

Late at night on the fourth day of their vacation, Raftania the islander committed a grisly crime.

However, she couldn't have possibly done it alone. Raftania was just a girl. There was no way she could have found her mother's killer solo, much less steal a prototype weapon to murder him with. And the prime suspect was, without a doubt, the girl who'd remained steadfastly by her side from days two through four and who'd inspired enough adoration from Raftania for the latter to refer to her as "Ms. Annette."

“Yo, that Ensign Mercier guy?” Annette grinned happily. “He was a lot like me. I had him pegged for a cold-blooded killer right away. He came to the beach on that first day of our vacation to assess his next victim.”

It was unclear how, but Annette had figured it out. She’d sensed the danger they were in.

However, that still wasn’t an answer.

“You could have just told me.”

If she had, he would have reacted promptly. And if Klaus had been operating from the get-go, he could have uncovered Mercier’s crimes with ease.

“But you didn’t, and to the contrary, you invested quite a lot of effort. You went out of your way to help arrange the wedding in order to earn Raftania’s trust and incite her to take revenge. Why did you go to all that trouble?”

“……”

Annette stopped in her tracks and turned around.

They’d put a fair amount of distance between them and the partying girls now. Annette’s eyes were fixed on her teammates, who had linked arms and were dancing for no reason in particular. “I found my limits, yo. I couldn’t beat Monika.”

Back when Monika betrayed them, she’d beaten Annette half to death.

Immediately thereafter, Annette’s mental state had been highly unstable—so much so that right after she woke up, she sneaked out of the hospital in order to make an attempt on Monika’s life.

It was the first time in Annette’s life she’d ever hit a wall like that.

“Sara convinced me to go looking for a path forward. So I gave up on killing people myself. I figured it out, yo—I can get other people to do my killing for me.”

That was the answer she’d arrived at.

It was a bit too sinister for it to really be called maturation. Upon finding her limits, she found a new method of achieving her ends.

"So I ran a little experiment. I dug into Raftania's background and found that she had a reason to hate the killer, so I said what I needed to get her to murder him."

"……"

"The plan was a huge success, yo. All I did was help her out a bit, and she totally killed him."

"……"

"And you know what? My conscience doesn't hurt one bit."

Klaus nodded. He didn't doubt it. It was going to take a lot more than that to give Annette pause.

However, he was surprised.

There was a hint of something akin to unease in Annette's voice.

"…What do you think of me, Bro?"

"Hmm?"

Annette turned toward him. "The killer had free access to all those weapons being made at the naval base, and he used them to kill the locals. That's the exact same path I'm heading down."

She was referring to the island's serial murders.

All of the killings had been carried out with inventions Mercier had developed in the secret lab. Mercier himself was the one who used them, but Klaus understood what Annette was getting at.

To build a weapon was to unleash evil onto the world.

If she kept heading down this road, her malice would disseminate.

"Will you keep liking me, even if I get worse and worse?"

Her voice had a faint tremble to it, and Klaus had to stifle a noise.

He was getting a glimpse of emotions that Annette had never had before.

Apprehension. Worry. Unease. Anxiety. Fear.

It reminded him of the loss she'd suffered. Back when she met a black cat in a back alley, her attempts to look after it had ended in

disaster. Now that he thought about it, that tragedy also had its roots in a group called the "Discourse on Decadence" selling guns to gangsters.

Now the pain from that failure and that loss were introducing her to the concept of fear.

Perhaps it was unlike her, but it was only unlike the old her. When Klaus realized the changes she'd undergone, he couldn't help but give her a big nod.

"The truth is," he said softly, "your plan was to have Raftania die, wasn't it?"

"Yep," Annette replied unashamedly. "I didn't need her anymore."

Once Raftania sank alongside the pirate ship, no one would ever know that Annette had been involved.

That, too, was part of the scheme Annette had drawn up for her vacation.

She'd gathered up sulfur at the hot springs to create gunpowder with. She'd researched the ocean currents. She'd gotten the girls away from the ship and had set up a device to force it to set sail. And she'd tampered with the cannons so that a single girl could fire them on her own.

According to Lily, Raftania's first reaction to seeing the pirate ship had been, "You mean she was tellin' me the truth?" Annette had told her about the ship in advance. And about the cannons, too.

"But the others threw a wrench in that plan."

"……"

"There's your answer right there. No matter how wicked you get, we'll always be there to catch you." Klaus laid a hand on Annette's back. "Don't be afraid of changing. The world is awash in pain, and it needs you to evolve."

When he told her that, Annette broke into a joyful smile and wrapped her arms around him. "I knew there was a reason I loved you, Bro!"

"I know you do, so could you get off? You're heavy."

"That's why I've got a gift for you. Power anew for your team!"

"……"

She let go of Klaus's neck and stuck her tongue out as she made her reveal.

"I've already planned them all out, yo:

"Paradise Lost.

"Daughter Meanest.

"A Dream Play.

"April Fools' Day.

"Contrarian.

"Veneer.

"The High Plain of Heaven.

"I put everything I've got into them, and they'll take the others' talents to a whole other level."

Klaus knew what that power was called.

In the final battle of their mission in the Fend Commonwealth, Lily had used it to overpower White Spider.

Those were the Last Codes—weapons imbued with Annette's malice in order to make it easier for others to kill.

Annette intended to use the navy's secret laboratory to complete them.

Klaus couldn't have asked for better news. He'd spent his vacation plagued with doubt. The girls were still far from experienced, and he had major concerns about leaving them on their own. He was terrified at the prospect of losing one of his pupils.

Annette's proposal was the perfect thing to assuage his fears.

"When was it?" he couldn't help but ask.

"Hmm?"

"When was it that you started caring about the rest of Lamplight?"

"They're toys, yo. That's all the others are to me."

Annette turned and looked back at the rest of the team still enjoying their barbeque. They were having trouble controlling the grill, and they shrieked and shuddered as its flames surged out of control.

As Annette watched them, her right eye gleamed. "But," she said.

"They're my absolute *favorite* toys—my Knickknacks."

An emotion rose up inside Klaus, and it left him at a loss for words.

Annette had always been the most difficult to handle of the girls. The things she said made little sense, and he could never predict what she was going to do. In terms of how many problems she caused, she had the rest of the team beat by a country mile.

Now that very same girl was giving Lamplight the best present imaginable.

…I guess this is what they mean when they talk about the joy that teaching brings.

It was a feeling he'd never experienced until he met the girls, and it filled him with certainty.

Lamplight could overcome any hardship they faced. Even if they were scattered to the winds.

Next Mission

◆◆◆ The Twins' Story I ◆◆◆

In the Lylat Kingdom's capital city of Pilca, there was an aristocrat engaged in the gamble of his life.

The man held the rank of marquis, and his family had run a spice business for three generations. Back when Lylat was colonizing nations in the Far East, his grandfather had greased some palms in a major way in order to be given control of a massive pepper farm. The man built a fortune by threatening the locals with firearms into performing backbreaking manual labor, but ever since Marquis Watteau inherited the business after the Great War, its operations had been going downhill. It all started when the locals went on strike. Watteau had ordered his eldest son to do whatever it took to get them back in line, even if that meant shooting a few of them, but the son had been too afraid of retaliation and had failed to put down the uprising.

For Watteau, that pepper farm was a crucial source of income. Aristocrats had historically made their money by leasing land to farmers, but Lylat had begun importing a lot of its grain from abroad as of late, and their domestic farming industry had suffered for it. Now many aristocrats were terrified of falling into bankruptcy and desperately trying to figure out how to make money.

Now Watteau was in a position where he needed help from soldiers and other aristocrats to end the strike. That was going to cost him a small fortune. The problem was, Watteau's assets had declined rather sharply over the past few years.

In order to raise the necessary funds, Watteau had gone to an illegal casino run by the notorious Lucidor family.

This is fine. This here, this is a sure bet…

The casino sat in a building right in the heart of the capital. It was the kind of gambling house where the sums at play were more than the average citizen earned in a month. The games they offered were roulette and baccarat. Loud music filled the floor as men with bloodshot eyes vied for one another's chips.

Watteau sat in front of a roulette wheel with his hands clasped together in prayer.

"Don't you think it's about time you called it a night, Marquis?"

"Surely you don't want to go bankrupt, do you?"

Many of the aristocrats sitting around him smirked as they watched him drive himself to ruin. They were the ones on good terms with the Lucidor family.

Roulette was a simple game where you had to guess which pocket numbered zero to thirty-six a ball would go into. How much you won changed based on how you bet. You could bet on colors, or you could bet on odds or evens. You could also bet on specific numbers. The lower the odds, the bigger the payout.

"Shut up!" Watteau bellowed. "You think I'm going to go home on a loss?!"

Watteau's bet of choice was on the numbers one through twelve, making his odds of winning about one in three.

However, the heartless ball elected to make its way into the twenty-three pocket instead.

"Oof." "Today just isn't your day."

Cruel laughs rose up from the peanut gallery.

However, it was hard to blame them. Watteau had already made six huge bets and lost each and every one of them. A full fifth of his fortune was gone forever.

Watteau clutched his head in frustration. Sweat gushed from his forehead, and he buried his face in his hands. When he let out an agonized moan, the onlookers jeered at him in amusement.

However, there in the middle of that boisterous gambling hall, Watteau was secretly quivering in delight.

It's certain, then…

He continued feigning distress so as not to arouse suspicion.

That dealer really can make the ball land wherever he wants!

Over by the roulette board, the blond dealer calmly whistled as he retrieved Watteau's chips from the table.

Watteau looked at him and thought back to what another man with the same face had told him.

Two days before Watteau's big gamble, he spoke with a fortune teller.

It was Watteau's friend who introduced him to the man. According to his friend, the fortune teller could tell someone's family situation, worries, and even their secret ambitions just by looking at them. The fortune teller would then offer them advice, and if they followed it, everything would start going their way. Some people had multiplied their fortunes multiple times over, and others had been able to reunite with friends they hadn't seen in years.

The whole thing sounded highly dubious, but when Watteau invited the fortune teller to his mansion, with nothing more than a glance, the young man immediately hit the nail on the head. "*You're having money problems, aren't you?*"

"*Anyone could have guessed that*," Watteau found himself stammering, but the fortune teller said, "*Even though you haven't told your own wife?*" and was accurate yet again.

"*You're the exact sort of man I've been hoping to meet. How would you like to join forces with us?*"

After a brief conversation, the fortune teller made him a surprising offer.

"*You know the Lucidor family's casino? My brother works there as a dealer. We made sure to get him in there ahead of time.*"

Watteau stared in shock as the man lowered his voice to a whisper.

"You know how dirty the Lucidors' hands are, don't you? Someone needs to teach them a lesson."

Watteau knew exactly what the man was talking about.

Illegal gambling wasn't the only shady business the Lucidors were involved with. They were human traffickers, monsters who would abduct attractive women and girls from the colonies and sell them off to other aristocrats. They'd even gotten in bed with the Mafia and were operating in the underworld, in addition to their legitimate work as aristocrats.

"You can keep the money you make. Our goal is just to punish the Lucidors. We've been looking for someone like you who could bet huge sums of money without turning any heads."

It was all far too good to be true. "*I don't believe you*," Watteau snapped. *"If it turns out you're lying, then all I'll be doing is losing a fortune gambling."*

The young man didn't so much as blink. *"I'll offer myself up as a hostage. You can lock me up, and if anything goes wrong, feel free to kill me on the spot."*

Upon seeing the fortune teller's dealer brother at work, Watteau was astounded all over again. He'd sent one of his men to investigate ahead of time, but even after witnessing it with his own eyes, he still couldn't believe it.

That's ten in a row…

The brothers had told him a series of pockets ahead of time, and the balls were sliding into them like it was nothing.

Watteau's initial assumption was that the wheel had been tampered with, but that simply wasn't possible. There were casinos that had tried attaching magnets to their wheels before, but they always got found out. Attempts to tilt the wheel similarly ended in failure.

The thing was, roulette was a game where the audience's full attention was on the wheel. If a ball's arc looked even the slightest

bit unnatural, some keen-eyed observer was sure to notice. It was an incredibly difficult game to rig. People had no choice but to leave their fate in the hands of Lady Luck—that was why people called roulette the "Queen of the Casino."

"Even so, my brother can always land the balls on the exact numbers he wants to. There's no trick to it, just raw technique. There are some dealers who control roughly what area their balls land in, but you could search the world over without finding anyone who can hit specific numbers the way my brother can. And the owners are none the wiser."

Dealers spun the wheel without looking at the board. It was a way to limit the house's ability to cheat.

However, what if there was some godlike dealer who could land the ball exactly where he wanted without looking at either it or the pockets?

Why, that dealer and their fingers would break the game on a fundamental level.

"For the final step, all you have to do is pretend to give in to your desperation and bet everything you have on a single spin."

Watteau thought back to the young man's advice and steeled his nerves.

There was no way the fortune teller could betray him. After all, the man was locked up in Watteau's cellar. There was a guard stationed there, too. Watteau held the man's life in his hands.

"I-I'm all in! GOD, GRANT ME STRENGTH!"

He took every last one of his chips and bet them all.

The onlookers burst into laughter.

"It's sad, is what it is." "The guy's lost it." "I feel for him, y'know?"

Their reactions were understandable.

Watteau had just made a straight bet. His odds of winning were one in thirty-seven. It was nothing short of suicide. If that ball didn't go in, half of his fortune would up and vanish.

If he won, though, he would earn a staggering amount of the Lucidor family's money.

Heh, idiots. They fell for my acting, hook, line, and sinker.

Watteau recalled the fortune teller's smile.

He clenched his fists and watched as the roulette wheel gradually slowed.

This is the gamble of my life, and I'm the one who's going to win it —

Watteau had bet on thirty-one. That was the number they'd agreed on ahead of time.

However, in a cruel turn of events, the ball slid into the number one pocket.

"Huh?"

His whole body went ice-cold. Terror clutched directly at his heart, and his train of thought froze. The crowd bombarded him with uncaring laughter, but he didn't process a word they were saying.

He looked at the dealer, figuring that this had to be some kind of mistake.

There was a faint smile playing on the dealer's lips—the smile of a reaper, come to herald his end.

"GAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

As he wailed, Watteau descended into madness. "He's a cheat!" he said on repeat, like a broken record, but not a single person paid him any heed.

Rather, Marquis Watteau's disgraceful performance became the talk of the town, and the man was reduced to a laughingstock.

◇◇◇

On the upper floor of the Lucidor family casino, there were four men laughing and clapping.

One of them, a man in the middle of the room named Isaac, drank deep from his wineglass.

Isaac was a slender thirty-four-year-old and the second son of the current head of the Lucidor family. He was the man who ran their illegal casino, the Vigean. His main line of work was offering

entertainment to thrill-seeking aristocrats, but he was also in charge of making problematic aristocrats "disappear" from time to time.

One of his dealers had just finished a major job, and Isaac heaped the man with praise. "Hot damn, that was slick. Marquis Watteau's done for. It'll be dead easy for my old man to buy up the rights to that pepper farm now."

"Nah, that was nothing. The guy was a chump."

The dealer smugly crossed his legs as he enjoyed some wine, much like Isaac. Rather than join in the others' cheerful conversation, he drank down his wine like it was water.

He was an aloof young man whose smile revealed nothing of what lay beneath. He was supposedly in his late twenties. His blond hair was as beautiful as woven silk, and it was parted in the middle, leaving his forehead bare and his charming face on full display. The corners of his mouth snapped upward when he smiled, giving him the merry grin of a teenage boy.

From just his appearance, not a single person would have taken him for a grim reaper of a master gamer who'd brought countless aristocrats low.

The blond man shamelessly grabbed a hunk of cheese sitting in front of Isaac and shoved it in his mouth. "But more to the point, Mr. Isaac. I'd like my compensation now."

"I suppose we did agree on five targets, didn't we? Get this man what he wants."

Isaac and the dealer had struck a deal.

For the dealer's part, he was helping Isaac take down his rivals in the aristocracy. The dealer's talents were like witchcraft. He would pretend to run into their targets at random, lure them into the casino, sucker them into doomed bets, and destroy them.

In exchange for leading five aristocrats to ruin, what the dealer had asked for was information.

Isaac's underling took a document out of the safe and offered it to him.

"That there's a list of everyone in the underworld who secretly helped back that anti-establishment revolution two years back. Not even Genesis Army intelligence has that intel yet."

"Ooh." The young man looked over the list, visibly impressed. "That's what I like to hear."

It was only their deep ties to society's dark underbelly that allowed the Lucidors to get ahold of that information. There had been a failed revolution two years ago, and though the state police had suppressed it, the number of Mafia members who'd been helping support the revolutionaries behind the scenes meant that they'd had to call in the army to do so.

"I gotta ask, what's the plan there?" Isaac said with an amused chuckle. "If you hand that list over to the Genesis Army, all those guys are done for. That's some juicy blackmail material if I ever saw it, but—"

Suddenly, Isaac noticed something.

The blond youth's emerald eyes were burning with the fierce brutality of a predator stalking his prey.

"Nah, man…"

He gasped at what he'd just realized.

The man before him was trying to realize a dream that the people of Lylat had failed to achieve for a hundred years, despite their best efforts.

"Look, I'm telling you this for your own good. Just drop the whole thing." Isaac's tone was stern. "That shit won't work. Not here. If one word gets out about what you're doing, Nike will—"

"Oh, I know. I'm not planning on drawing any attention. And I'm gonna silence everyone who could rat me out."

The young man folded up the document, slipped it into his pocket, and gave Isaac a cheeky smirk.

"That means none of you are leaving this room alive."

The four men, Isaac included, all stared at him in shock.

The jovial smile on the young man's face had been replaced with a pointed glare. "What, you guys thought you were safe? Dunno if you forgot, but you're a bunch of corrupt aristocrats who've been living large off the royal family's hand-me-downs, too."

With a light "Hup!" the youth hopped to his feet and kicked his leg to send his shoe flying straight up. A gun tumbled out from its sole, and he nimbly caught it. Despite all the wine he'd been drinking, he didn't seem tipsy in the slightest.

Isaac went pale. "S-someone kill this—!"

"That's not gonna work. Not with my brother on the job." The youth shrugged. "If you see someone with shabby clothes, you can usually guess that they're poor, right? My brother can do the same thing, just a hundred or a thousand times more precisely than most people. Your guards are all in his pocket."

Isaac couldn't comprehend the words he was hearing.

What the youth was describing was basically a superpower. Anyone who could pull off a stunt like that could buy people off with ease. It would be trivial to dig dirt on anyone they wanted.

"Your luck ran out the day us brothers set our sights on you."

The blond youth aimed his gun and grinned.

"So you gotta tell me—how much longer should I keep playing along with this game?"

◇◇◇

There once was a pair of twins who did some covert ops in the Lylat Kingdom.

One was a master gamer—"Soot" Lukas.

The other was a fortune teller—"Scapulimancer" Wille.

Those twins were Inferno's backbone, as well as Klaus's de facto older brothers, and back when they were alive, they went on a rampage there.

◇◇◇

Despite the smug bravado "Soot" Lukas displayed against the Vigean manager, his combat instincts were awful, so he struggled quite a bit in the ensuing fight. All his point-blank shots missed, which gave Isaac and his men time to gather their wits and return fire. Both sides ended up running out of bullets, and between the poison needle hidden in his wristwatch, the wires tucked in his sleeves, and the mini crossbow tucked in his shoe, Lukas's raw resource advantage allowed him to narrowly eke out a win.

Once he finished the men off, Lukas wiped the blood from his cheek. "Dang, those guys were strong. I dunno if Klaus could've beaten them." Then he quickly searched their base and snatched up the valuables and a little something extra.

After changing out of his bloodstained clothes, he nonchalantly strode out of the building and melted into the city as it enjoyed a peaceful weekend night.

From there, he traveled along a prearranged set of back alleys to rendezvous with his younger brother Wille.

A man with the same face as his gave him a casual wave. "Hey there, Lukas."

"Hey, yourself. I see you made it out of Watteau's mansion without too much trouble. Good going."

"Of course I did. The man isn't exactly an expert in inspiring loyalty. All I had to do was get the guard a cute girlfriend, and he let me stroll right on out. You had a rougher go of it, I assume?"

"Nah, it was dead easy. Those guys were no match for me."

"And yet you showed up awfully late to our meetup."

"You say such cruel things to me. I'm gonna go cry now."

As Lukas slumped his shoulders, Wille frowned.

That was because he'd spotted the girl standing behind Lukas. She was wearing a flimsy dress. She looked to be in her pre-or early teens. Her hair was blond, albeit a lighter shade than his brother's. Her clothes were as thin as a negligee and offered just as little modesty, so Lukas had given her his jacket to wear over them.

"Who's the kid?"

"They had her locked up. To use as merchandise, probably."

The girl was the little something extra he'd found at Isaac's base. Based on her outfit, they must have been planning on selling her to someone.

"…And you brought her with you?"

"I couldn't just leave her there. If I did, some nasty aristocrat would've snatched her right up."

The girl's name was Suzie. She didn't have any papers.

"So I decided to hire her as our servant."

"There you go, making decisions on your own again…" Wille let out an exasperated sigh, but he didn't actually have any strong objections. He crouched down to meet the girl's eye level. "I'm sorry that my brother's such an idiot."

"Rude."

The twins' back-and-forth earned them a small smile out of Suzie. "No, I'm glad he found me…" It would appear that she didn't have any problems with Lukas's decision, either.

When they asked her for details, they learned that she used to live in an orphanage. Her good looks ended up working against her there, as the orphanage director sold her to Isaac. That was when her documentation was destroyed.

Rather than go back to the orphanage, she preferred to stay with Lukas.

"C'mon, what's the harm? No sense letting an opportunity go to waste," Lukas said with a shrug. "It'll probably get dangerous for us to go out shopping before long. We can pay Suzie a handsome salary to do it for us."

Upon her hearing that, Suzie's shoulders twitched.

Seeing her reaction, Wille grinned in delight.

The girl had a sharp head on her. After watching and listening to Lukas, it had taken her no time at all to guess what the twins were up to.

"…You shouldn't." Suzie's voice trembled. She grabbed at Lukas's sleeve in distress as she made her impassioned plea. "Nike will kill you! Everyone knows it. If you do bad things, Nike will come for you. You mustn't disobey the king!"

Nike was like fear personified. Even children who didn't go to school had heard of her.

The king held absolute power in the Lylat Kingdom, and she presided over his mighty Genesis Army intelligence organization with an iron fist. She defied all limits on what a spy could be, and she held control over the police, the military, and even the courts.

"Nike hears everything," Suzie whispered, glancing around in terror. "If you say bad things, she'll come after you!"

Naturally, the twins knew all about Nike.

As members of Inferno, they'd worked together with her during the Great War. She was a spy who surpassed human limits in a whole different way than Hearth did.

A slim smile spread across Lukas's face. "Who cares? I hate to break it to you, but I've never lost. You're talking to a master gamer who's won a thousand matches straight."

"That's a lie, by the way. He gambles away money all the time."

"Here's the bottom line. If you're gonna work for us, then there's one thing you gotta understand." Undeterred by Wille's correction, Lukas patted Suzie on the shoulder. "It doesn't matter how strong our opponents are—**us brothers always come out on top**."

He gave her a confident grin and stuck out his tongue.

In his head, he was thinking back to what Gerde had told him.

◇◇◇

Back at Heat Haze Palace, Inferno's base, Lukas found himself feeling suspicious.

Nine years had passed since the Great War, and Klaus had just been given a special mission, so he was going to be away from the team for a while. That in and of itself was fine and no particular cause for concern, but something about the way Guido had assigned him the task didn't sit right with Lukas.

That was why he went and paid a visit to the lounge, where Inferno's most senior member—"Firewalker" Gerde—was relaxing.

Gerde was an old woman dressed in a casual outfit of jeans and a tank top that left her strapping biceps fully bare. She was chugging down beer and listening happily to the radio.

When she saw Lukas come in, she raised her beer bottle in the air. "What's going on, Lukas? You finally decided to take my training?"

"Don't even joke about that, Granny G. I just saw my life flash before my eyes."

Lukas evaded her offer with a pained grin, then said, "Hey" and asked his question.

"Is it just me, or have things been weird between Guido and the boss lately?"

The moment the words left his mouth, Gerde set her bottle down on the table. "Now, you listen here, sonny. How much do you know —?"

"Just what me and my brother have guessed."

Naturally, Wille had shared the same doubts. If anything, Wille's ability to pick up on things like that far exceeded his own.

"My brother's pretty worried. 'They're carrying a dangerous weight,' he told me. And if *he's* freaking out, then I gotta assume something big is going on. There's this weird rumor I overheard, see?"

Lukas spoke the fateful words.

"A rumor called the Nostalgia Project."

Gerde's eyebrow twitched. She was dead easy to read when she was drunk. "…Well, well, well. And where'd you hear about that?"

"During a mission with Guido, when I was taking this soldier chick for everything she had."

Lukas hadn't been given the details on what they were doing.

He'd been blindly following Guido's instructions out in a neutral country, and his orders were to follow a woman. When Lukas got bored of just idly tailing her, he invited her to a gambling den and cleaned her out. After he'd relentlessly egged her on and attacked her psychologically, she'd lost her composure and had begun muttering under her breath:

"Mr. Spider had such hopes for me, and look at what I've done! What shame I've brought on the name Silver Cicada!"

"How could one chosen to stop the Nostalgia Project such as I lose to a mere civilian?"

The woman assumed that no one had heard her.

However, Lukas had mastered the art of reading lips, and the slightest of facial twitches was enough for him to tell what she was saying. Whoever this Silver Cicada woman was, she'd gotten sloppy. The way Lukas had broken her down played a key part in that, but still.

Guido never ended up telling him what he did to the woman and her allies.

After he finished explaining himself, Gerde shook her head. "The boss made the call not to tell you two. It's not my place to say any more."

"What the hell, you mean she's icing us out?"

"It's proof of that girl's conviction, I'd say."

"……"

Lukas pursed his lips in annoyance at his failure to get Gerde to blab.

If she didn't want to tell him, there was little more he could do. Gerde knew all of Lukas's tricks, after all. They'd been working together for over a decade.

He hadn't come away completely empty-handed—now he knew that Inferno's boss was grappling with a problem so thorny, she couldn't consult her own team about it—but that only served to exacerbate the frustration bubbling up inside of him.

"Shit, man. I don't like this one bit. Maybe I'll go hit up Klaus and Wille and just go on a big rampage. Just you wait. Once we get going, we'll have every politician in the country tearing their hair out. We're not happy, and we're about to make it *everyone's* problem!"

Lukas limbered up his arm and started to get up to leave.

"The project got started in the Lylat Kingdom."

All of a sudden, Gerde spoke up.

"Hmm?" When he turned to look, he saw her letting out a resigned sigh.

"Don't mind me, just talking to myself. That's all I can really reveal…" She popped a pair of cigarettes in her mouth and lit them. "Inferno's standing at a crossroads right now. I'm glad we've got you looking out for us."

As he stared at the long, thin curl of smoke she exhaled, Lukas found his resolve growing firm.

◇◇◇

"I picked up what Granny was putting down. Bottom line is, this rotten kingdom is up to no good. And the boss and Guido are wrapped up in it."

After putting Suzie to bed in their hideout, the twins celebrated having completed the first stage of their plan and poured themselves glasses of the expensive wine they'd looted from Isaac's base.

Lukas chugged his down in a single swig and smoothed back his hair. "That means we've only got one option. And hey, I never liked this country much anyways."

The two of them made the call to infiltrate the Lylat Kingdom all on their own. They hadn't told Inferno's boss about their plan. They'd taken a mission they knew they could finish in a month and lied about needing a year to complete it, then had spent all their time since then living in Lylat.

That said, they knew better than to believe that the boss wasn't aware that they were running wild.



Maybe she was choosing to turn a blind eye. Either that, or the situation was so dire that she legitimately hadn't noticed.

On seeing how firm Lukas's resolve was, Wille let out a sarcastic laugh. "Man, you really are an idiot, huh?"

"Hey, you're the one who followed me out here."

"Yeah, 'cause I knew you'd never be able to pull this off on your own."

"Well, I'm glad one of us was thinking straight. Dang, what a great brother I've got."

"Magnificent."

"Yeah, magnificent."

A hint of a grin played on Lukas's face.

"I'm all in. If that's what it takes to protect Inferno, I'm down to put everything on the line."

Lukas truly did act as the team's backbone.

More than anyone else, he was right there at the team's center. He was able to provide support to the technically skilled members of Veronika, Guido, and Gerde while at the same time offering guidance to the less-experienced Heide and Klaus.

Everyone knew that he was going to be the next boss of Inferno someday. And his brother Wille followed him every step of the way.

That was why the two of them had gotten to work in the Lylat Kingdom.

"Let's do this thing. We're gonna take this country, and—"

By a strange twist of fate, a pair of girls would end up finishing that sentence for him two years later.

◆◆◆

Nine years after the Great War, the Inferno twins put a plan into motion in Lylat.

Ten years after the Great War, "Torchlight" Guido and the rest of Serpent's machinations brought Inferno down. "Bonfire" Klaus survived that purge, and he went on to found Lamplight.

Eleven years after the Great War, after overcoming many missions, Lamplight defeated Serpent and enjoyed a vacation on Marnioce.

Then another year passed, and twelve years after the Great War, a pair of up-and-comers made their move.

◇◇◇

She'd long since gotten used to how lonely mornings felt.

With drowsy eyes, she headed over to the washbasin to clean her face. The cold water splattered out and soaked her all the way down to her neck. She returned to her bedroom, stripped out of her wet nightclothes, and put on her school uniform. The ribbon mandated by her school's dress code was wrinkled, and though she pulled it tight to try to remove the crease, it always came right back, so she had to go get her spare ribbon from the dresser.

The whole series of events took place in a run-down apartment in the Lylat capital of Pilca.

When she opened the curtains, the bright sunlight came streaming in.

Her roommate, who was still lying in bed, let out an annoyed groan before curling up in a ball over on the corner of her bed in an attempt to escape the light.

Exasperated as she was by the way her roommate showed no signs of getting up, she went over to the room's mirror.

Unsurprisingly, she saw herself on its surface, but something about her looked different today.

"Huh," said Erna. "I think I might have grown a little taller."

She took a moment to admire her reflection.

Erna had been keeping her hair short recently, and that had distracted her so much that she hadn't really noticed much else. Her legs were peeking out of her skirt a lot more than they had when she first arrived there in Lylat.

"I guess that makes sense," she muttered idly to herself.

A full two years had passed since she got scouted onto Lamplight from her spy academy.

The Abyss Doll bioweapon mission was two months long, the Corpse assassin mission was a bit over a month, and the Purple Ant mission in the United States of Mouzaia was a bit over a month, too. Then, after three months where it was just one thing after another, she'd fought and reconciled with Avian over in the Far East, shared a one-month honeymoon with them, gotten dragged into a web of Serpent and CIM deception in the Fend Commonwealth, had gone on vacation, and after all that, she'd spent a year living in the Lylat Kingdom.

Erna, who'd been fourteen when she joined Lamplight, was sixteen years old now.

It was no wonder she'd grown.

"Yeep!"

After pumping her fist in triumph, she turned back to her blanket-swaddled roommate.

"Annette, you need to get up. We're going to be late."

She walked over to the bed and shook Annette.

"…I'm taking the morning off, yo."

Erna couldn't help but sigh. "They're going to expel you, you know. What kind of exchange student sleeps in basically every day?"

"You take things too seriously."

"…Hmph."

"You should try taking a page from my book… Zzz…"

When Annette got like that, there wasn't a lever in the world that could move her.

If Erna stayed with her any longer, she was liable to be tardy herself. After a plain breakfast of bread and soup, she headed straight to school.

At present, she and Annette were exchange students at St. Katraz High School.

After she'd spent a full year walking to school, the route there had become a familiar sight. As she got closer to campus, a handful of people she knew came up to her. "Good morning," they greeted her with voices rich in refinement and class. "What lovely weather we're having today."

St. Katraz was a girls' school, and all of them were girls wearing the same uniform as Erna's.

"Yeah, morning…," Erna replied softly.

Interpersonal communication was hardly Erna's forte, so she'd had her misgivings about her ability to fit in as a student, but she'd actually made some friends.

Her predisposition for unluckiness—which was really a desire for punishment—had gradually been getting better of late as her self-esteem improved. She was still able to sense the early warning signs of misfortune, but she didn't accidentally get the people around her caught up in her bad luck anymore.

Without that, she was a perfectly adorable high schooler who just happened to trip over her tongue sometimes.

The other girls gave her radiant smiles. "Did you hear? Homecoming is next month, and this year, they're going all out. I daresay we're going to be swamped preparing."

"Ugh, but we have exams next month, too…," Erna said, groaning.

"It's so unfair, isn't it? That does remind me, though. A new restaurant just opened near the station, and the food there looks to die for. I hear that famous chef John Dumont is the one running it."

"Ooh, we should go."

"Tee-hee, you should see the way your face just lit up."

It was just the sort of pleasant conversation that any students might have.

Erna was quite taken with her new lifestyle. She did feel pangs of loneliness at times, but she would be lying if she said she didn't enjoy studiously doing her schoolwork and hanging out after school with girls her same age.

Occasionally, though, she could feel the wall that existed between them.

"Oh dear, would you look at that?" one of the students said, making no effort to hide her disdain.

There was a man sitting in front of the school gate dressed in shabby rags. He had an empty can and a sign that said "NEED MONEY OR JOB."

There was a line of cars dropping off students in front of the school, but despite the pleading looks the man gave to the drivers, none of them paid him any attention. The students refused to even look him in the eye as they went inside.

"Good heavens, the homeless are at it again."

"How positively filthy. Why aren't the school guards doing anything about him?"

"What a dreadful way to start our morning. Make sure to hold your breath when you walk past him."

The girls Erna was with were not hiding their revulsion. They were close enough that the man could hear them, and they were fully aware of it.

"……"

That, too, had become a familiar sight to Erna.

The majority of the students who went to St. Katraz were daughters of aristocrats or members of the bourgeoisie. You couldn't even enroll without making a substantial donation. It was very much a school designed for the rich and powerful.

The only emotion the girls who went there felt toward the masses was antipathy.

None of them criticized each other for it, either. To them, it was a natural way to feel. There wasn't even any true malice behind it. In their eyes, the fact that they had to look at something unpleasant first thing in the morning made them victims.

Erna passed the man by, just like all the other girls.

"……I'm sorry."

She only just managed to get the words out.

The rest of the group gave her a set of quizzical looks. "Huh? Did you just—?"

Erna shook her head and quickly denied it. "Yeep! I didn't say anything."

One of the girls let out a shrill "Eeeeeek!" without missing a beat.

"Did you hear that, everyone?!" "It was a 'yeep'! We got to hear one of those oh-so-precious yeeps!" "Oh, what an auspicious day!" "Yeep! Yeeeeep!"

"……"

As her classmates cheered, Erna sank into silence.

"Yeep" was something she'd unconsciously started saying to make herself seem more childish. Presenting herself as an innocent young girl and leaning into the misfortune that followed her was how she made her way in life.

However, Erna was sixteen now.

Every day, she reminded herself that it was high time she sealed the yeeps away, yet every so often, one sneaked out all the same.

◇◇◇

Nightfall was when Erna's true work began.

Attending St. Katraz was nothing more than a way to mask her identity. It was while attending the job she kept a secret from the

school that she finally got to do some proper espionage.

The job in question was through a Lylat Kingdom attorney's office. She worked there four times a week.

"I must say, I don't know what I'd do without you. Ever since you showed up, I started finally being able to get through my paperwork."

"I'm happy to help."

Gabriel Mash, Esq. clapped his hands together in appreciation, and Erna gave him a respectful bow.

Gabriel had opened his own practice at a young age, and he was a generous man who was famous for taking on any case, even ones where he didn't stand to make money. His track record was hardly stellar, but his refusal to turn down a client meant that he was offered new work on the daily. That, combined with his inability to keep things tidy, meant that his office was constantly a complete mess.

Erna nodded as she bound some documents together with string. "And thank *you* for keeping this a secret from my school."

"Yeah, of course. What's the harm, I say? You came here from abroad, and now you're working your butt off. That's the exact kind of kid a guy wants to root for."

Gabriel hummed a little tune as he read through a court record. He was a thirty-four-year-old redhead with a beard that didn't much suit him. Once again, he'd taken over a case that another attorney had thrown in the towel on. Gabriel and his wife often got into fights over the man's disregard for money.

Erna showed him a document. "Which file did you want these materials in, Mr. Mash?"

"Hmm?" Gabriel took a quick look at it, then let out an understanding laugh. "Ah, these are from that thing last week. Our guy got prosecuted for seditious conspiracy just because he had a hunting rifle in his storehouse. I'll plead his case, but I don't think I'll be able to get him off the hook. Someone got thrown in jail last

month for the exact same thing. I have to wonder, what is it the royal administration is so afraid of?”

The man’s brain worked quickly, but he always laid out his thoughts plainly. He readily revealed the relevant details.

That was the reason Erna was working there.

Piles of case files made their way to Mash Law every day, the majority of them cases that had been rejected by the courts—in other words, disputes between commoners and members of the aristocracy. Due to his kind nature, Gabriel accepted the kind of cases that other law firms wouldn’t touch.

The court records Erna got to handle contained all the details of the events.

On May 2, the Mon Ange Books publishing house on the second block of Tungten Street was ordered to cease operations. The Royal Censorship Bureau had determined that five of their publications contained language that constituted a “disturbance to public order.” The president and directors were all arrested, and it looked like the prosecutor was going to push for prison time.

On February 8, there was graffiti found on Lieutenant-General Gigogh’s house over on the west side of the capital. Its message was critical of the administration, and it was assumed to be the work of the anonymous artist Maxim. A local man was arrested, although he denied any involvement. The offense normally only carried a fine, but in an unusual move, the prosecutor advocated for prison time.

On April 7 and 8, twelve students and professors from Toulk University were arrested for treason. The professors launched a series of criticisms against the administration during their lectures,

and the group had allegedly been producing films with anti-establishment themes.

There were battles raging in Lylat between people who resented the government and those who sought to control them. Gabriel didn't harbor any anti-government sentiments himself, but his willingness to take on work that other attorneys avoided meant that such cases constantly found their way to him nonetheless.

What's more, those case files contained the *personal information of the relevant parties.* In order to represent someone, an attorney needed to know not just their name, age, and address, but sometimes even details about their background and interpersonal connections.

As a result, Mash Law had a huge amount of data on people across the kingdom who had problems with the government, and Erna was all too happy to secretly copy that information for herself.

I've been gathering it up slowly. Little by little, bit by bit.

She'd been working there for over six months, and in that time, she'd compiled quite the list.

She was carrying a stack of documents and wondering how she could get the intel to her teammates when her foot landed on a stray sheet of paper.

"YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP?!"

"Yeep?"

The paper slid out from under her, and she tumbled to the ground in a spectacular fashion.

Gabriel came rushing over. "Are you all right?" he asked, to which Erna gave him a pained smile from down on the ground. "You're great at your job, but that clumsiness of yours is a force to be reckoned with."

"How unlucky…"

Erna let out a sigh and brushed off the papers that had landed on her head.

Due to how bad of a spill she'd taken, the documents she'd just finished sorting had landed everywhere. Papers of all sorts had come spilling out of the nicely bound files.

She seized the opportunity to grab one of the papers and show it to Gabriel. "Which case does this go with, Mr. Mash?"

"Oh, here, let me show you."

Gabriel readily explained the situation. The man was affable and had a sharp memory, but his adherence to his professional duty of confidentiality was shockingly lax.

Thanks to him, though, Erna's intelligence work went that much more smoothly.

◇◇◇

Erna took the notes she'd copied from the office and brought them home with her. She was going to transcribe them onto microfilm when she got there, so it was crucial that she not run into any trouble on her way back.

However, there were always two stops made on her way there.

The first was a bakery. It was open late into the night to cater to unmarried blue-collar workers, and she rushed in to buy up their unsold bread. After filling her bag as well as both arms, she headed out into the back alleys of the city.

Midway through her journey, she stopped to take a rest.

It's exhausting, spending every day like this.

She had school during the day, then her job at night. On top of that, she had to work to complete her mission while hiding her true identity as a spy all the while. She never had a moment to herself to just *relax*.

However, that was how spies normally operated.

Up until Lylat, Lamplight had never stayed in a single country for more than two months at a time. The team was unique in that their job was to go around the world overcoming situations that had proved impossible for their countrymen.

Now, though, Erna was faced with the solitude that came with being a spy who had to lie to everyone around them. Aside from Annette, she hadn't seen any of her teammates in ages.

But it's all fine. I'm hanging in there. I just have to take things one day at a time, and—

Right as she was taking in the smell of the bread to cheer herself up, she heard a voice.

"And what exactly do you think you're doing?"

It came from behind her the moment she set foot in the alleyway.

Three men dressed in military uniforms stepped in to cut off her avenue of retreat. They'd been hiding just out of sight.

The leader of the trio had a shaved head. His features were so pronounced that his eyes were practically bugging out, and he radiated a quiet hostility as he marched over to where Erna stood, motionless. "We're with Genesis Army's Nilfa unit. What's an exchange student like you doing loitering in alleyways?"

Erna bit down on her lip a little.

The Genesis Army was the Lylat Kingdom's intelligence agency—a group that leeched off the aristocracy and used their outstanding counterintelligence skills to keep domestic malcontents in line.

She'd heard of the Nilfa unit, too. They were the ones in charge of suppressing anti-government sentiment in that area. They showed up many a time in Gabriel's court records.

Erna played the part of a delicate young girl and cast her eyes downward. "I was just giving them some bread…"

Sure enough, the back alley Erna was visiting was filled with homeless people like the one she'd seen that morning. They had problems just getting enough to eat, and they gathered in alleys to scrounge for scraps and took charity from churches in order to get through the day.

Four people, men and children dressed in shabby clothes, had already gathered around her. Without that bread, those people would starve. Some of the people in their ranks had lost their jobs and houses after getting arrested for opposing the government. Erna had learned about them through her work at the law firm, too.

The Nilfa men nodded like they'd seen her answer coming. "You sure were. We've done our research. Every night, you buy up unsold bread and dole it out to these people. It's admirable, it really is."

Their mouths curled into mocking sneers.

"But the question is, what are you getting out of feeding this gutter trash?"

"……"

Erna's face went hot.

She knew that was how they really felt, and that just made it all the more reprehensible.

"You go to St. Katraz, right? You should be focusing on your studies." The leader of the trio gave Erna a look dripping with scorn. "We know you've been working at that law office. It boggles the mind, it really does. Why take your hard-earned money and throw it down the drain like that?"

"Th-these people are—"

"Lazy bums? Yeah. The only reason they're even able to live here is because good people risked it all driving those Galgad savages back into their own country. Now these wastes of space are squandering that blessing and stinking up the whole city."

The Nilfa trio shoved the homeless people aside and moved in to surround Erna.

"Hands up. You're under investigation."

Their interrogation wasn't going to be gentle.

Erna could see the guns hanging from their waists. Their barrels glinted dully in the moonlight.

"It's people like you who always embolden the morons who try to oppose us and attack our nation. You wouldn't happen to be an enemy spy, would you?"

They were calling it an investigation, but it was little more than mob justice.

It happened all the time. The aristocracy regularly sicced the Genesis Army on people who harbored anti-government sentiments in order to bury them in abuse and strike fear into their hearts.

It was true that spies had an easy time joining up with people who had a bone to pick with the government. When people lacked the power to fight their nation's institutions, it wasn't much of a jump to go from that to wanting foreign spies to threaten those same power structures. However, that only served to legitimize the Genesis Army's methods.

The men smiled cruelly. "You make one shady move, and we'll execute you for sedition. You wanna join the rest of the bodies?"

Cold sweat trickled down Erna's back.

That note with my list on it is in my collar.

She hadn't put it in her bag. It was tucked safely away in a hidden pocket in her shirt. No matter how violently they searched her, they wouldn't find it.

I just have to put up with a little bit of abuse…

It was clear from the look in the men's eyes just how vulgar their desire to torment a young girl was. Erna was sixteen now, and her body was closer to that of an adult woman.

However, fighting back would be a bad move.

All she had to do was endure, and then their suspicions that she was a spy would go away. That was enough.

As a female spy, she was prepared for this. All she had to do was let them satisfy their—

"Y-you're wrong. She didn't do anything wrong!"

The cry came from an unexpected direction.

It was one of the homeless youths that Erna had been trying to give bread to. His voice trembled as he looked pleadingly at the Genesis Army trio. “All she does is bring us food out of the goodness of her heart. She would never defy His Majesty—”

“Get your foul breath out of my face!”

One of the Nilfa men slapped him across the face.

Violence came naturally to them, and the crack of the swift backhand echoed through the alley.

“Oh, I get it. The girl’s trying to defy us by winning over the human trash. Now we’ve got her on obstruction of a public official on top of seditious conspiracy. In accordance with Article Four of the Peace Preservation Act, you’re under arrest.”

Hearing that made Erna’s blood run cold.

“Now, get over here! The guillotine is thirsty for your—!”

“Oh, just shut up.”

As the man shouted, Erna sank her elbow into his solar plexus.

There were three hostiles she needed to contend with, and she’d gone for the bald man in the middle.

The surprise attack caught her foes off guard, and their reactions were delayed. The man on the right went to draw his gun, but Erna grabbed his arm, twisted it all the way back, and snatched his pistol away from him. Then she used his body as a shield as she circled around and shot the left man in the shoulder.

She continued taking advantage of their confusion and pressed on. “I’m code name Fool—and it’s time to kill with…”

“You little shit!”

The man with the shaved head roared and fired off a front kick.

Erna had assumed that her elbow jab had knocked him out cold, but clearly, he’d managed to soften the blow at the last minute.

“Gah!”

Unable to get a shot off in time, Erna had no choice but to block the kick with her arms. However, her body was too light to defend against a blow from a trained adult man. She went hurtling backward and smashed her head against the brick wall behind her.

How unlucky…

As it turned out, her odds in a fight against three full-grown men were slim.

The one thing she could use to beat them was her special talent, but it wasn't just some switch she could flip at will. All it let her do was detect where tragedies and accidents were likely to take place, nothing more. And right now, there was nothing to speak of in the area.

I don't sense any misfortune… Everything's totally safe here.

Her nose twitched as she tried to sniff some bad luck out, but she couldn't sense anything. It made her wonder if her senses were getting duller. Now that she thought about it, she hadn't noticed the Nilfa ambush, either.

There was nothing she could do to win.

"TAKE THIS, TRAITOR!"

The bald man raised his fist to strike Erna.

She got ready to dodge, knowing that it was going to be a close call.

That was when a knife pierced the man's hand clean through.

The Genesis Army trio let out cries of disbelief.

The knife had come flying from out of nowhere and impaled his hand straight through the bone.

"What's gutter trash doing with a weapon like that…?" the man stammered.

Erna didn't understand what was going on until she looked behind him and saw what had happened.

The knife had come from the young homeless man who'd been trying to defend Erna. He was holding a weapon resembling a gun, and based on its shape, that must have been what had fired the knife.

He was breathing heavily in fear as he stared the Genesis Army members down.

Considering how shabby he looked, it *was* weird that he had a weapon so advanced…

"It was a present from yours truly, yo."

A new voice came, this time from above.

When Erna looked up in shock, she saw Annette standing on a nearby rooftop.

Unlike her, Annette had barely grown at all over the past two years. Her messily tied-up hair, on the other hand, had become even more billowing. It sat under her large gray hat and made her unnervingly eccentric-looking.

"I made sure to hand them out in advance. Erna was doing some dangerous work, you see."

The Genesis Army men stared at her in bafflement as she swung her way down on a wire.

Annette had seen all this coming.

Now Erna realized why she hadn't sensed any misfortune. If anything, the only thing welling up in her chest was pity for the doomed Genesis Army members.

"Who even are you…?" The bald man clutched his impaled hand and scowled in discomfort at the sudden newcomer. "Do you have any idea what you're getting yourself into by defying—?"

"Oh, yeah, it's gonna be rough. But realizing that gave me a cool idea, yo."

Annette loudly clapped her hands together.

"If you're gonna do bad things, then two can play at that game!"

That clap was the signal.

On Annette's prompting, people began emerging from all over the alleyway—the homeless ones Erna always gave bread to. There were

men and women, young and old alike. There were three of them at first, then five, then seven, then nine, their numbers swelling with each passing moment. The one thing they all had in common were the gun-shaped weapons they were holding, courtesy of Annette.

The Genesis Army men screamed. Perhaps understanding had just dawned on them.

They were already fully surrounded. There was no way for them to escape.

Annette flashed a grin at the homeless throng. "Now, everyone pull your triggers in unison. If you don't, they're gonna kill you all."

Some of the people in the group were frightened, but her threat did its job and stamped out their hesitation.

"This is Last Code: Knickknacks—a sobered world of ruin, yo."

It was the same technology that had powered the electromagnet back on the Marnioce naval base. Despite being as small as watch batteries, they were incredibly powerful. Annette installed them into all of her inventions. With a flip of her remote, she could turn the magnetic field on and off—and in doing so, this allowed her to facilitate other people's homicides.

This time around, she'd included them in guns that fired knives. It was a weapon that gave *normal civilians the power to kill.*

The knives flying from the homeless people's guns sank deep into the bald man's body, drawn to him by the magnetic force the first knife that hit him gave off. There was nowhere for the surrounded Genesis Army members to run. As soon as a single knife found its mark, the power of the magnets meant that the next ones could no longer miss. The men's blood sprayed across the alley as they got skewered from head to toe.

All the while, Annette didn't lift so much as a finger. She simply observed in silence as the homeless people vented their pent-up

anger by filling the Genesis Army members with knives.

◇◇◇

"You can be pretty vicious, you know," Erna said.

"Hmm?" Annette replied. "What, are you mad or something?"

"No, no, it's fine. None of this would have happened if I hadn't been so careless. It's my fault…"

They'd made it through unscathed, but immediately after the danger passed, Erna regretted the whole thing.

The three Genesis Army members were dead.

That was murder. Erna might not have killed them directly, but her heart still ached. Those men had killed scores of innocents, but still.

However, the more pressing issue was the fact that the Genesis Army had their eyes on her.

"We won't be able to go home or back to school anymore."

She was going to end up on the wanted list for sure.

The homeless people present at the scene had been involved in the murders themselves, so they weren't going to blab, but even so, her life was about to get a whole lot less peaceful.

"We'll need to relocate and lie low for a while."

Annette grinned and wiped some of the dead men's blood off herself. "Yo, we could always go back to Din for a bit."

It was a reasonable suggestion.

With nowhere to live, they were essentially homeless themselves now. The smart thing to do would be to quickly retrieve their luggage from their lodgings and flee the country before the Genesis Army began hunting them in earnest.

Erna bit down hard on her lip and shook her head. "We can't. We haven't finished the work Teach assigned to us yet."

Scurrying home and abandoning their mission wasn't an option.

In her mind, she was thinking about the vow they'd made that night during their vacation.

"We can't rely on Teach or the others. We all agreed. Once we split up, it was up to all of us to do our best."

The two years since Lamplight's founding had inspired major changes in Erna. That was true of the year she'd spent training and completing missions alongside the others, and it was true of the lonely year she'd spent working on foreign soil with only Annette by her side.





She wasn’t some helpless child who needed protecting anymore.

“We need to stand up to the Genesis Army on our own.”

Annette gave her a toothy grin like that was the exact answer she’d been hoping for. “Yo, I’ve been waiting for a job we could do together for ages.”

Her innocent smile made it clear just how excited she was.

In the past, the pairing would have been unthinkable. Erna and Annette spent a lot of their downtime together, but when it came to missions, they generally got partnered up with different members of the team.

In a sense, this was going to be the first time they actually worked together to complete an assignment. And they’d been given a brutally difficult mission to mark the occasion.

◇◇◇

The Lylat Kingdom was the land where revolutions died.

Half a year prior, the coup d’état led by Vice-Admiral Grenier ended in failure. The Genesis Army’s spymaster Nike noticed some tiny things out of place in his reports and went to the naval base herself. From there, she got one of Grenier’s right-hand men to betray him and tell her everything.

At Grenier’s trial, he was sentenced to death and was publicly executed via guillotine.

Launching a successful revolution in Lylat was said to be impossible.

◇◇◇

Despite knowing that, Lamplight went in anyway.

There was a plot brewing in the world's shadows—the Nostalgia Project—and in order to learn the truth, they needed to get close to the Lylat prime minister. If they weren't careful about how they did so, though, Nike the Invincible Tactician God would kill them. Fighting her head-on was an option of absolute last resort.

If they wanted to get to the prime minister, they needed to neutralize the Genesis Army.

That meant bringing about so much chaos that not even Nike could keep it in check.

After thinking long and hard, Klaus arrived at a verdict. It was hardly the most direct solution, but it was going to have to do. The good news was that particular fire already had plenty of fuel.

That plan just so happened to be *identical to the one the Inferno twins had tried.*

"—we'll start a revolution. Our job is to overthrow the Lylat government."

"Soot" Lukas had once made that very same declaration, and now "Fool" Erna was making it, too.

With just two girls, they were going to take down a national government.

Afterword

I know the Volume 9 afterword isn't the greatest place for it, but I hope you don't mind if I take a moment to talk about my writing process for Volume 8.

Back when I was working on Volume 8, things were moving fast on the *Spy Classroom* anime adaptation. The storyboards were getting finished, the designs were coming together, and loads of merchandise proposals were rolling in. As a creator, I was happy as a clam. I was technically acting as a supervising director, but everything they sent me was so good that most of my notes boiled down to "It's perfect." It really doesn't get better than that.

It was at that same time that the postrecording was taking place. Most of my involvement was remote, but for the first session, I went to the studio in person. I'd never seen voice actors do a postrecording session in the flesh before, and I was super excited.

Staff: "All right, Takemachi. When the voice actors get here, could you talk a bit about each of their characters?"

Takemachi: "Say what?!"

I thought I was just going to be exchanging light pleasantries, so that gave me quite the shock. Thinking about it logically, though, it made perfect sense. Voice actors are given their characters' bios in advance, but if you have the original creator right there, it would be a waste not to use them as a resource. The staff member had good intentions when they made the request, but my knees trembled all the same. What was I supposed to say?

What I'm getting at is, working on the anime forced me to consider questions like "How would I explain this character's appeal to a third party?" and "What role does each girl play in the narrative as a whole?" from the ground up.

All that thinking was what led to Volume 9. As the series moves into its second half, I decided to write a beach episode to square away all the characters' goals and emotional states. How did you like it? The second season got pretty dark, so I also thought it would be nice to have something lighter for a change.

At this point, I have some people I'd like to thank. First off, Tomari, thank you for granting my very unreasonable wish of changing what all the characters looked like in the series' third season. Also, I love the new designs for the Inferno twins. They really are the coolest brothers around.

Next up, it's the end of November, and I'd like to use this afterword to extend another massive thank-you to all the staff members who are still hard at work on the anime adaptation. Every time you send me a character design or piece of artwork, I groan, "This is so much better than how it looked in my head." It stings to admit, but all of you put me to shame.

Actually, now that I think about it, the anime will have actually started airing by the time Volume 9 comes out. I wonder what people will think of it. I'm getting butterflies already…

All that said, things are going to continue unfolding in the books, too. Next up is Volume 10, where the story will really kick off—though Short Story Collection 4 might actually come out first. There's still a big backlog of *Dragon Magazine* stories to release.

Takemachi

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink