SPY×FAMILY

FAMILY PORTRAIT

ORIGINAL CONCEPT BY
TATSUYA ENDO

NOVEL BY
AYA YAJIMA





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VIZ MEDIA

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NOVEL BY **AYA YAJIMA**

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FAMILY PORTRAIT


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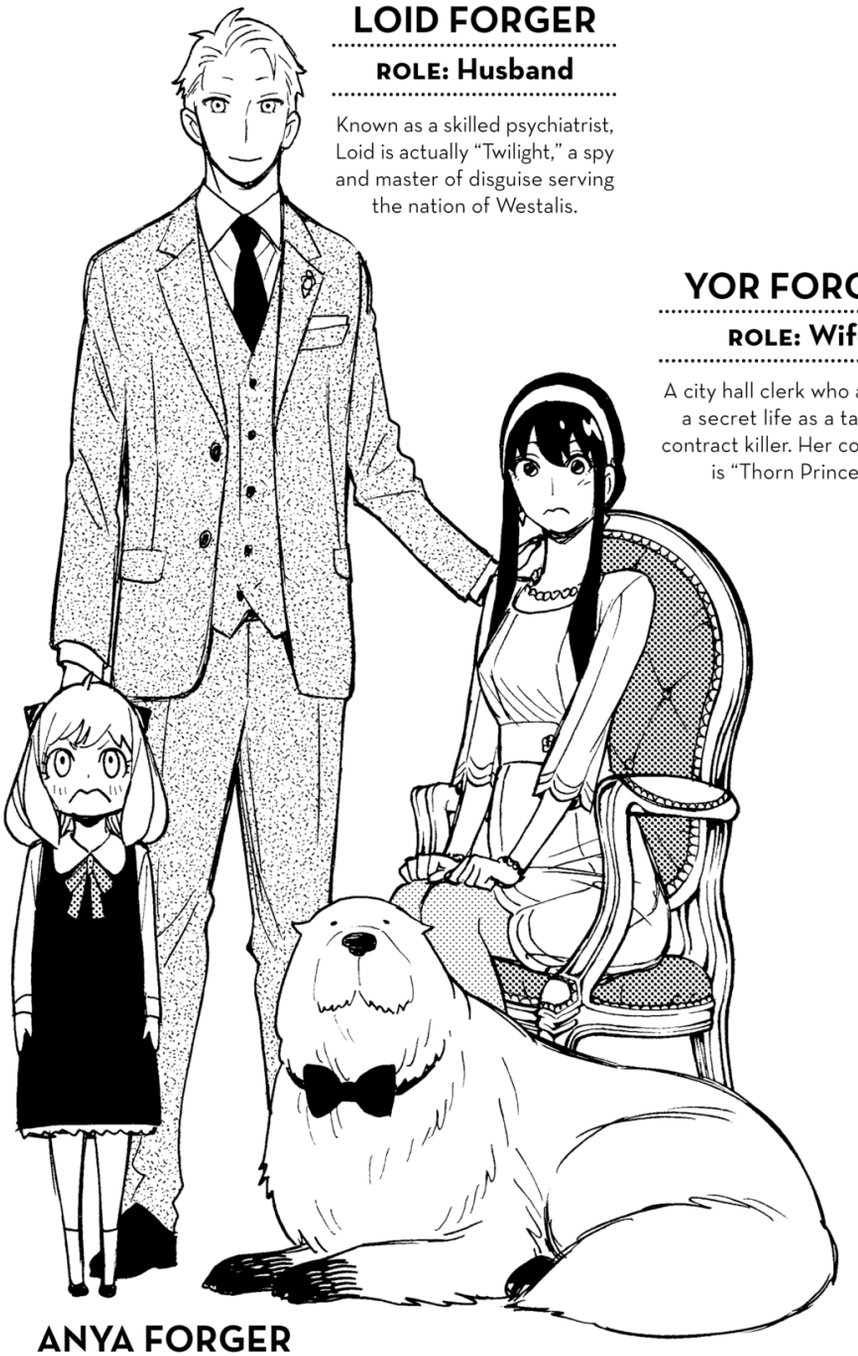
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SPY×FAMILY CHARACTERS



LOID FORGER

ROLE: Husband

Known as a skilled psychiatrist, Loid is actually "Twilight," a spy and master of disguise serving the nation of Westalis.

YOR FORGER

ROLE: Wife

A city hall clerk who also lives a secret life as a talented contract killer. Her code name is "Thorn Princess."

ANYA FORGER

ROLE: Daughter

Anya is a first grader at the prestigious Eden Academy. A telepath whose abilities were created in an experiment conducted by a mysterious organization. She can read minds.

BOND FORGER

Anya's playmate and the family guard dog. As a former military test subject, he can see the future.



MISSION

OPERATION STRIX

Spy on Donovan Desmond, a dangerous figure who threatens to disrupt peace between the East and West. Must gain entry into the prestigious Eden Academy to breach the target's inner circle.

TARGET

DONOVAN DESMOND

The focus of Operation Strix, and chairman of Ostania's National Unity Party.

KEY PEOPLE



DAMIAN DESMOND

Second son of Donovan Desmond.



FRANKY

Intelligence asset who works with Twilight.



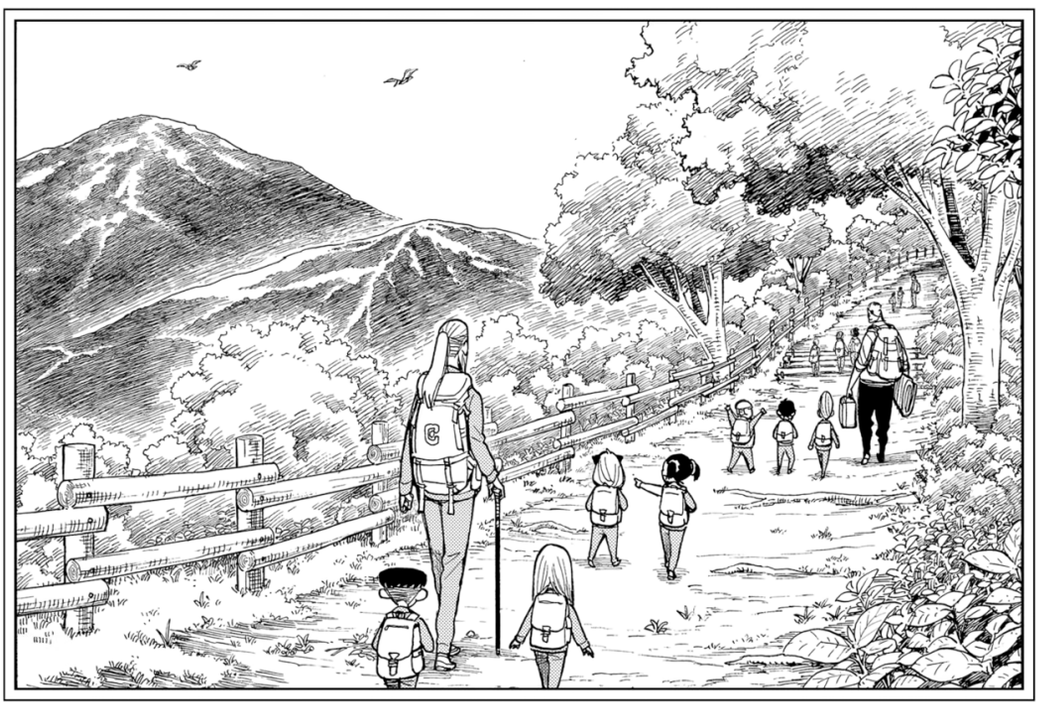
YURI BRIAR

Yor's younger brother, a secret police officer.

STORY

Westalis secret agent Twilight receives orders to uncover the plans of Donovan Desmond, the warmongering chairman of Ostania's National Unity Party. To do so, Twilight must pose as Loid Forger, create a fake family, and enroll his child at the prestigious Eden Academy. However, by sheer coincidence, the daugher he selects from an orphanage is secretly a telepath! Also, the woman who agrees to be in a sham marriage with him is secretly an assassin!

While concealing their true identities from one another, the three now find themselves living together as a family. When a terrorist group launches a plot to assassinate a Westalis minister using bomb-bearing canines, Twilight succeeds in stopping the plot thanks to a dog who can see the future. The Forgers name the dog "Bond" and welcome him into their family. Things seem to be going smoothly for the Forger family and Operation Strix, but many obstacles remain on the path to maintaining the fragile peace between the East and West!



MISSION 1

SPY×FAMILY

"Nature's classroom?"

Yor Forger repeated the unfamiliar phrase and blinked her dark eyes a few times as she set a mug of cocoa on the table.

Anya pulled the mug closer to herself and nodded. "Yeah, next Friday! We're going up into the mountains for school!" Anya handed Yor the information packet she'd received in class.

Yor Smiled. "That does sound like fun!"

"I've never been camping before," Anya stated.

"Hm?" Yor's smile faltered as her eyes widened in surprise. "It's an overnight trip?"

"Yup!"

Yor's face tightened as her thoughts suddenly filled with worry. Then, although Yor didn't say a word, her fearful thoughts began to manifest in Anya's mind. Anya Forger was no ordinary young girl. Having been raised as Test Subject 007 at a shadowy research facility, Anya was a telepath with the ability to read the minds of anyone near her.

Anya's only six years old, Yor thought. *She's never stayed overnight anywhere before, much less somewhere as serious as the mountains! I'll need to teach her how to hunt, how to skin an animal. She'll need to know how to fend off a bear attack, just in case...*

The thoughts that flowed into Anya's mind were accompanied by images of Yor killing and butchering a deer, as well as Yor forcing her hand into a bear's mouth to yank on its tongue. In these visions, Anya saw herself observing from nearby, her clothes brightly spattered as if she'd been participating in some sort of local tomato festival. Anya shuddered as alternating waves of chills and sweat slid down her back.

She and Mama had *very* different ideas of what camping was about.

Yor Forger, the woman Anya called "Mama," was a gentle and beautiful woman who worked at city hall in Berlint, Ostania's Capital city—or at least, That's who she appeared to be. In Fact, Yor was a talented assassin who killed under the code name Thorn Princess. As a result, Anya had come to accept this sort of disturbing mental imagery as one the few downsides of being her adopted daughter.

"She'll need an advanced survival knife and some good, thick trapping rope. I'll have to teach her how to tie some knots. Oh, and snares too..." Yor was mumbling out loud now, in a low voice that sounded as if it belonged to someone else entirely.

"They may be calling it *nature's classroom*, but I really doubt they'll be expected to hunt wild animals, Yor." From the seat to Anya's left, Loid Forger, "Papa" to Anya, gently corrected his fake wife between sips of the coffee she had brewed for him. "Could I see that packet, please?"

Loid worked as a psychiatrist at Berlint General Hospital, where his patients were often calmed by his soothing manner of speech. But that was merely a cover identity. In truth, Loid was the famed spy Twilight from the neighboring nation of Westalis, Ostania's cold war rival.

Loid had no idea that his wife was an assassin, nor did Yor suspect that her husband was a spy. Neither of them knew that Anya possessed mind reading abilities either, which made her the only one who knew everyone's secrets. Loid and Yor's marriage was a complete sham, and even though Yor believed she was Loid's daughter from a previous marriage, their "daughter" Anya wasn't actually related by blood to wither of them.

So while the Forgers may have appeared to be a thoroughly normal family at first glance, their relationship was in fact a rather complicated one with a great many secrets hidden beneath its carefully maintained veneer of normalcy.

"The trip is only two days and one night. They'll be sleeping in tents, but it says here they'll be furnished with beds, tables, sofas, rugs, and lamps," Loid said as he flipped through the packet Yor had handed him. "They even have bathrooms with a simple shower room."

"Is that really how people camp in this day and age?" Yor asked, her eyes widening.

"I don't know about this day and age," Loid said. "But that seems to be how they camp at Eden Academy."

Yor let out a strained chuckle. Anya attended the most prestigious private school in all of Ostania. Eden Academy's students were all incredibly wealthy, many of them the children of the nation's top political and business leaders

In order to protect its elite students from those who might attempt to harm or kidnap them, the academy held the camping trip on a wooded mountain owned by the school, and every class would take the camping trip on a different date so as to maintain a ratio of one faculty chaperone for every few students. The school also promised meticulous nighttime security measures.

"The weather forecast for that weekend is nice and sunny," Loid said. "It should be quite an enjoyable trip. And besides, there are lots of things that children can't learn in a classroom."

"That's a relief to hear," Yor said. Her manner was much more relaxed now that she had a better grasp of the situation. Smiling, she headed into the kitchen for snacks.

"That said..." Loid looked from the pamphlet to Anya. "You'll be cooking for yourself, and it sounds like you'll be learning a lot about stars and the night sky. Make sure you listen carefully to your teachers and try to get along with your classmates, okay? I don't want you getting into any fights."

"Okey dokey." Anya straightened her posture and gave her father a stiff salute. Loid nodded his satisfaction.

"The great outdoors may provide an opportunity to bury the hatchet with any classmates you've had differences with in the past," Loid said. "Working side by side has a way of turning pas disagreements into mutual camaraderie."

Anya blinked. "Um..."

"Just make an effort to get along with your classmates on this trip, okay?"

You already said that, Papa. Even at her age, Anya could clearly see Loid's secret spy agenda lurking behind his kind, fatherly smile.

Loid was an agent of WISE, a Westalis intelligence agency focused on the East, and was currently engaged in a mission called Operation Strix. The mission involved monitoring the activities of the chairman of Ostania's National Unity Party, Donovan Desmond, who was considered a significant threat to peace between the East and West. Desmond was an extremely cautious figure who rarely appeared in public, but he did attend the elite get-togethers for parents of Eden Academy students, as his sons both attended the school.

That was the whole reason Loid had adopted Anya from an orphanage and enrolled her at Eden Academy. Her academic performance so far had made it clear she was nowhere near the Desmonds' elite honor-student track, however.

Anticipating this possibility, the ever-meticulous Loid had prepared a backup plan: if Anya could befriend Desmond's younger son, Damian, Loid could use that relationship as an entry into his target's inner circle. Plan B had hit a rather significant snag, however, when on the first day of school, Anya had punched Damian in the face.

If only she could use this opportunity to get even a little bit closer to Damian...

His expression may have been impassive, but the words that flowed from Loid's mind to Anya's were accompanied by a montage of images of her and Damian enjoying camp activities together, wide smiles gleaming upon their faces.

"Leave it to me, Papa," Anya said.

"Hm?"

"I'll try hard to make friends," she elaborated.

At this proclamation, Loid's lips widened into a beaming smile.

"Wonderful! That's my girl. You can do it, Anya," Loid said.

Peace between the East and West may depend on it, he did not add.

"Yeah!" Suddenly energized by the request from her beloved papa, Anya downed her cocoa and dug into the cookies Yor had placed on the table. As she chewed, she worked out the details of Operation Camp Friends.

STEP 1: Learn all about camping.
STEP 2: Impress Damian with amazing camping skills.
STEP 3: Damian is all like, "Oh, Anya, you're the camping master! You should bring your parents to my house, and we'll all go camping together!"
STEP 4: Visit the Desmonds with Papa.
STEP 5: Damian's dad is all, "Welcome to our home, Mr. Forger," and then Papa's like, "It's good to meet you, Mr. Desmond. Let's end this war."
STEP 6: World peace.

It was such a flawless plan that Anya was momentarily startled by her own brilliance. She couldn't suppress a smug chuckle as she reached for her cocoa.

Just then, Bond, the family dog, wandered over and took a sniff of Anya's cocoa. He let out a bark, his fluffy coat of fur tickling Anya where it brushed against her skin.

"No cocoa for you, Bond," Loid chided the eager dog. "Cocoa is poisonous for dogs like you. Why don't I get you some milk instead?"

Seeing Loid about to get up, Yor quickly leapt to her feet. "Oh, Loid, let ke get that for you."

"No, I can handle that much," Loid insisted. "Please, sit down and relax."

"No, you're the one who should be relaxing. You always work so hard!"

Ultimately, the doting wife and doting husband (of an entirely fake marriage) went into the kitchen together, with Bond plodding after them.

Papa, Mama, Bond... Ever since escaping from the facility, Anya had bounced between orphanages and foster homes. But now she'd finally found someplace worth treasuring, and if she could bring about world peace, then they'd all be able to keep happily living here together.

I will try really hard, she vowed, squeezing her small hands tight as she watched her parents pour milk into Bond's bow together.



"Young ladies and gentlemen, this marks the start of our two-day sojourn in nature's classroom," declared Henry Henderson. "I expect you all to behave with the elegance expected of Eden Academy students." Despite having replaced his usual three-piece suit with a track outfit for the occasion, the housemaster was looking as elegant as ever.

"Yes, Master Henderson," replied the students of his first-grade class. They were standing up straight and listening politely, although their attention had been stolen away by the sweeping expanse of nature ahead of them.

Wow, those flowers smell good!

I saw a squirrel!

That breeze feels really nice.

I wonder what kind of berry that is.

I can hear birds chirping!

As the happy thoughts of Anya's classmates streamed through her mind, she also found herself fascinated by the rich green plants and clear blue sky that she rarely got to see from her home in the city. All kinds of birds and bugs flitted around the campsite, and the large white tents the academy had provided were every bit as luxurious as Papa had said they'd be. The beds looked soft and fluffy, and there were even hammocks that swayed gently in the breeze.

It was all so exciting! And the more the sights and sounds and smells of the outdoors filled her senses, the further Operation Camp Friends faded from her thoughts.

Master Henderson then led the students of his class through their tent assignments while distributing their cooking utensils and ingredients. The twenty-nine students would be divided into six groups of four and one group of five, with each group sharing two tents.

By the time Anya's close friend Becky Blackbell called out, "Anya! I'm so glad we get to be in the same tent," Operation Camp Friends had been completely forgotten.

"I brought some truffles from this uptown chocolatier to eat in the tent," Becky continued. "They're all wrapped up in ribbons and stuff and look supercute."

"I brought peanuts," Anya said.

Becky chuckled. "Then we're on for girl talk and snacks tonight!"

"Girl talk?" Anya asked. *Why would Becky want to talk about other girls?*

Becky made a show of covering her mouth with one hand, shocked that Anya had never heard of girl talk. Then she gave a knowing smile in the direction of some of the male students.

"Speaking of romance, that's your boy, right? Can you believe we're in the same group?" Becky sighed dramatically. "It must be the power of true love."

Anya stared blankly at her giddy friend for a moment before turning to follow her gaze. The boy Becky was staring at had wild black hair and a lazy, eyes-half-closed expression. It was none other than Damian Desmond, the son of Loid's target, flanked by his usual pair of flunkies.

"What're you looking at, uggo?" snapped Damian. He fixed Anya with an icy glare as soon as he noticed her looking his way. "I can't believe we're in the same group again."

"It's like you're cursed or something, Damian!" said one of the flunkies. "The curse of the were-runt."

"You really can't catch a break, boss man," the other flunky agreed with a sigh.

I see Sy-on Boy's still a jerk, thought Anya. (Everyone always called Damian "the Desmond scion," but Anya wasn't sure what that meant or how it was spelled.) *And his henchmen are jerks too.*

Just then, the memory of her forgotten mission hit her. Anya choked back her anger and stared Damian straight in the eyes.

"W-what do you want?" he stammered, flinching away. "You got something to say to me, peasant?"

"I knew I'd be in the same group as you," Anya said as pleasantly as she could.

"Huh?" Damian furrowed his brow in confusion.

"Wait, Anya, are you saying..." interrupted Becky, clasping two trembling hands over her mouth. Her big eyes glimmered even more than usual. "Are you saying you had total faith that destiny would bring you two together like this?" Her voice shot up an octave. "Oh wow, Anya. That is so romantic!"

"Romantic?" Anya stared at Becky, confused.

"This is exactly like *Berlint in Love!*" Becky said. "I'm, like, all choked up right now."

Anya had no idea what Becky was going on about, except that *Berlint in Love* was some sort of TV show that Becky was completely obsessed with. The reason Anya had known that she'd be in the same group as Damian was that she'd read Loid's mind and knew he'd snuck into the classroom to change the group assignments. But she couldn't explain that, of course.

Ignoring Anya's bafflement, Becky rambled on. "That was so brave of you, Anya. I know that on some level, your feelings have made it through to him."

Meanwhile, Damian's face had become as bright red as a boiled octopus. "I d-d-don't know what you're on about. Being in the same group as you is, like, the worst thing that's ever happened to me. As if we have any use for your little stub legs and your stupid face and your creepazoid stalker vibes."

How Anya wished she could punch him again. She was reaching the limits of her self-restraint, her fingers beginning to curl into a fist, when she heard a faint whisper.

"Not elegant."

Somehow Master Henderson had come up behind them completely unnoticed. Despite the softness of his rebuke, each of the students immediately snapped to attention.

"Mr. Desmond." Master Henderson's soft voice was rich with refinement and majesty. "Is uttering such vile insults how a proper gentleman behaves?"

Withering under Master Henderson's gaze, Damian could manage little more than a mournful moan in reply, but his thoughts on the matter were more detailed: *Dammit! I can't believe she got me in trouble again! Every time I get mixed up with that uggo, it explodes in my face. I really am cursed by this were-runt!*

Hearing Damian's inner monologue, Anya was taken aback. A mere few minutes into her first interaction with Damian, Operation Camp Friends had already crashed and burned.

Looking back and forth between the unrepentant Damian and the dejected Anya, Master Henderson sighed deeply from beneath his snow-white mustache.



"Now, the only job you guys have is to stay the hell outta my way. Is that clear?" Damian barked, standing protectively between the

girls and the bag of ingredients and cooking tools their group had been given.

That night's starlit dinner was scheduled to be prepared by Eden Academy chefs, but each group was responsible for preparing their own lunch, and Damian was taking charge.

"This may be 'nature's classroom,' but a class is still a class. I can't afford to lose a stella star because you lot put another black mark on my transcript. I'm a Desmond, and I've got a reputation to uphold."

As was often the case, Damian's thoughts were focused on acquiring the eight stella stars (Eden Academy's version of merits) needed to enter the honors program. Eden also handed out demerits known as tonitrus bolts. Any student unfortunate enough to collect eight of those was expelled.

"I'm gonna make a better lunch than any other group, that's for sure," he concluded.

Ignoring his speech entirely, Becky rifled through the ingredients bag.

"With these, probably the easiest thing to make would be a pot-au-feu," she said.

"A pot of foo?" Anya repeated.

"*Pot-au-feu*," Becky carefully enunciated. "We cut up the ingredients, boil them in water, and season with salt and pepper. That's all there is to it!"

"I don't like pepper," Anya said.

"You are such a child sometimes." Becky sighed. "Fine, then. We'll hold the pepper for your sake."

Anya cheered her approval.

"Now, I'll start peeling the vegetables, and you—"

"Hey! No one put you in charge of anything," yelled Damian. His face was red with anger over being ignored by the two girls.

"Oh, shut up." Becky rolled her eyes.

"You can't just start making important decisions like that! The only task I'd even trust you with is fetching water and firewood. So just get out of here and be quick about it."

No matter how arrogant or bossy Damian became, his two flunkies hung on his every word and backed his every order. The long-faced one was named Ewen, and the round-faced, bucktoothed one was named Emile.

"Yeah, the boss man's right," Emile chortled. "I bet you two have never even made a fire before!"

"It's obvious that you're both completely useless," added Ewen. "The only way for you to help is to not try."

"Like any of you have ever made a fire before," Becky retorted, seeming thoroughly bored with the whole affair.

The three boys burst into laughter, their faces lit up with smug pride.

"What's that creepy laugh for?" asked Becky.

"We've gone on nature trips with *Mr. Green,*" boasted Damian. "You know, the custos? Who used to be a marine? So yeah, we can make a fire."

"So true, boss man."

"He even took us river rafting! And there were some real intense rapids too, right, Damian?"

"That's right," said Damian, puffing out his chest.

Despite his show of pride, the mental image running through Damian's head was of him falling into the river and pleading to be rescued. Anya couldn't help but chuckle. *Pretty lame, Sy-on Boy.* On the other hand, the idea of riding a boat through rapids did sound pretty exciting.

"I wish I could ride on a boat," she said.

Damian snickered. "A stubby-legged runt like you couldn't row a boat in the first place. You'd go right over the side."

"That's a horrible thing to say, even for you" declared Becky. "It doesn't even make sense! Her stubby legs have nothing to do with her ability to row a boat!"

"What?!" cried Anya. "You think my legs are stubby too?"

Anya understood that Becky was trying to defend her, but her friend's retort left her more depressed than Damian's original insult.

"Besides," she muttered, "Sy-on Boy's the one who fell out of the boat."

Her counterattack, barely audible as it was, left Damian startled and flushed. "H-how did you know that?!"

"Bwah, help meee!" Anya pantomimed Desmond as she re-created the moment from his memories. "I'm the sy-on of the Desmond family! Glug! Glurgh!"

"Oh wow, did you really fall in?" Becky affixed Damian with a pitying gaze. "That's so pathetic."

Thoroughly flustered, Damian could only muster a fiery glare. After a few seconds, he turned to his flunkies. "If you told *anyone*..."

"We didn't tell a soul!" said Emile.

"You know we'd never do that to you! She just made a lucky guess!" said Ewen.

Satisfied with the protests and violent headshaking of his faithless henchmen, Damian exhaled a sign of relief. But the flush in his cheeks remained as he refocused his glare on Anya. "I can't believe a dolt like you got me to play right into your hands like that."

Anya looked into her hands, confused. She wasn't sure what that meant, but it sounded like she'd won and he'd lost. She went with it.

"Serves you right," she said.

"Big words from the thirty-point wonder," he shot back.

"No woman admires a man stuck in the past," Anya said.

"What's the hell's that supposed to mean?"

Anya wasn't entirely sure herself.

"I heard Bondman say that," she admitted.

"The cartoon?" Damian said, his voice raised in annoyance. "Ugh. Grow up!"

Anya felt a wave of relief wash over her. She had gotten so mad at Damian that she had forgotten to hide her powers, but thankfully no one had noticed.

Becky watched them argue with an expression of delight. "Aw! Lovey-dovey couples are nice, but there's something extra special about bickering, will-they-won't-they romances. It's just like some of the ones on *Berlint in Love*!"

Anya didn't know what she was talking about, and when Becky leaned over and whispered into her ear, "Don't worry, I've got this," it didn't clarify matters any.

As Anya tilted her head in confusion, Becky addressed the group. "For now, let's divide into teams—one to get water from the river and wash the vegetables, and another to gather wood and start the fire."

As Becky spoke, a sly smile spread across her face.



"What the hell was the Blackbell girl thinking?" Damian grumbled.

"Becky's a good person," Anya said.

Anya wasn't sure if Damian was angry because Becky had taken charge or because he was now stuck with Anya. Under Becky's leadership, he'd been assigned to partner with Anya on water duty. Becky had put herself, Emile, and Ewen on fire duty.

Nice work, Becky, Anya thought. *Thanks to you, Operation Camp Friends is one step closer to success!* All she had to do now was earn Damian's respect by showing off how much she knew about camping. She and Yor had read book after book about camping, and Anya was convinced that she knew all there was to know on the subject.

She proudly stepped in front of Damian, taking the lead on the trail to the river. The faint path through the woods was littered with tree roots and was difficult to traverse, but enduring the rough terrain was a small price to pay for world peace.

"Hey, you sure we're going the right way?" Damian asked, idly swinging his water bucket.

"Don't worry," Anya said, turning toward Damian with an expression of complete confidence. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

"What're you staring at me with that goofy expression for?" Damian asked, after a few seconds.

"I'm just glad we're on the same team."

Damian flushed red. His mouth opened and closed like a goldfish's as he tried to find the right reply.

"I know that you want to be the best at camping so it'll look good on your school records," she continued. "And I can help you do that!" Then, too quietly for Damian to hear, she added, "For the sake of world peace."

Damian's thoughts suddenly hit her in an overwhelming jumble. *What's the deal?! Why's she being so nice to me all of a sudden? No, she's done this before—acting like she wanted to help*

me, like she couldn't bear it if I got expelled. But why? Is she really just like all the others?

Lost in confusion, Damian stared at Anya. Then he felt a strange shiver run down his spine.

Ugh, I don't feel so good, he thought. *And now I'm getting goose bumps.*

This wasn't the first time Anya's telepathy had elicited this sensation in him—though of course Damian didn't know that. Racked with confusion and with weird feelings he couldn't explain, Damian simply stood there and tried to push through them all.

"I want to help you," Anya continued. "That's why I studied camping so much!"

"You..." Damian began, his voice quavering.

No! Don't you fall for that!

Anya stiffened as a loud voice suddenly echoed in her mind. Her eyes darted around, trying to find its source. It took her a moment to realize the thoughts had been Damian's.

Suddenly, the jumble of confusion in Damian's mind had hardened into something cold and stiff. *It's just like Ewen and Emile are always saying,* he thought. *She's no different from all the other suck-ups who are trying to use me to get in my dad's good graces.*

Huh? Why's Sy-on Boy suddenly thinking about his dad? wondered Anya.

Had she messed up the plan somehow? Had she let it slip that her real goal was to get her papa a meeting with his dad? But Damian didn't have superpowers like she did, and Operation Camp Friends had only ever existed in her mind. How could he have known?

Anya was flustered. She hadn't anticipated this and had no idea what to say or do now.

It was Damian who finally broke the awkward silence. "Get moving already, slowpoke." Without waiting for a reply, he pushed past her and continued down the trail.

Bewildered, Anya chased after him.



"How much longer?" Damian grumbled.

"It should be just ahead," Anya said, causing Damian to bristle with frustration.

He was tired of being told that the river would be around each new bend. They'd been walking for such a long time, and he was growing angrier with each dashed hope. Trying to lighten his mood a bit, Anya showed him a giant worm she'd discovered, but that only seemed to make him more upset.

At this point, even Anya couldn't shake the feeling that they'd been walking for far too long. Ahead of them was nothing but lush green trees for as far as the eye could see. There was no sign of any river.

"Mr. Green told us to enter the trail at the sign, walk straight, and then turn left at the first fork," Damian grumbled. "He said it was so simple that we wouldn't need a map. There's no way this is what he meant." Suddenly, Damian went pale. "You do know your left from your right, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"Then raise your left hand," Damian demanded.

"Okey dokey." Anya flashed Damian a reassuring smile as her right hand shot up into the air.

Damian clutched at his temples with both hands. "That's your right hand, you idiot!"

Anya could almost feel herself shrinking as it finally dawned on her that in her zeal to impress Damian, she'd mixed up her right and left and led them a long way down an incorrect path. The forest fell into a deep silence broken only by the occasional ominous chirping of some unfamiliar bird. Anya shuddered.

"A-are we lost?" she finally asked fearfully.

"Yes," Damian replied. "And it's all your fault."

The two stared at each other, neither saying a word.

Just then, something rustled in a nearby bush. They both screamed and went rigid with fear, until an adorable, bushy-tailed squirrel emerged from the brush, its cheeks puffed out as if stuffed with something.

"Aw," Anya gushed. "A little squirrel!"

"Man, don't scare us like that," Damian said softly.

The tension faded from Anya's face as she gazed at the creature, and Damian took a deep breath of relief.

"All right," he said. "Let's get back to camp. We haven't gone all that far, so if we turn around and head back the way we came, we should be able to make it back."

"Yeah!" Anya said, suddenly remembering that she had, in fact, taken steps to ensure their safe return. It was a little trick she had learned from one of the books she and Yor had read together. "That should be no problem," she announced. "I've been marking the trail as we walked."

"Oh yeah?" For once, Damian actually smiled. "Good thinking!"

Anya's face lit up at this rare praise. "Pretty good, right? Am I a total camping genius, or what?"

"No, since you're the one who got us lost in the first place. How've you been marking our trail?"

Grinning, Anya reached into the pocket of her tracksuit jacket and proudly pulled out her bag of peanuts. "Good for eating, and good for marking a trail too!"

Damian stared at her.

Why isn't he saying anything? She'd expected praise, gratitude, maybe even a tear or two. Instead, his shoulders slumped and his jaw went slack.

"What's wrong, Sy-on Boy? Are my peanuts making you hungry?"

Damian mumbled something under his breath and pointed at the squirrel.

Anya turned to look back at the creature. It had just spotted something to eat on the ground and was running toward it, its bushy tail shaking. It disappeared into a patch of grass, then reappeared a moment later, triumphantly holding a peanut in its front paws. In a flurry of cracking, it set about breaking through the shell with its front teeth. Anya was so overcome with the cuteness of what she was seeing that it took her a moment to understand its significance.

The squirrel had been following them and eating all the peanuts she'd been dropping. Their trail markers were gone.

She cried out in frustration. Startled by the noise, the squirrel abandoned the half-eaten peanut and darted away.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Damian demanded. "I'm sure your trail's long gone! Why would you use peanuts, of all things? You couldn't think of anything that wouldn't be eaten by literally every bird and animal in the forest, you dummy?!"

Tears welled up in Anya's eyes. Before long, she was sobbing uncontrollably.

When Damian spoke again, his voice was significantly more gentle. "Well, look. It's not like it's that complicated of a trail. I'm sure we can find our way back by retracing our steps."

Anya nodded and wiped at her tears.

"So come on," he urged. "Let's get going."

Just as Anya started to follow, she felt something splat against her forehead.

Water? She raised her eyes upward and saw through the canopy of leaves that a dark cloud was now blocking out the sky. While they had been busy bickering, she hadn't noticed the forest darkening.

"Great," said Damian. "Now it's raining on top of everything else."

It didn't take long for the sporadic drops to turn into a downpour, soaking them both. The raindrops were hard and heavy, landing like a barrage of pebbles. It was so intense that they struggled to keep their eyes open.

"Hey, keep it together!" commanded Damian as Anya started to sob again. He grabbed her arm and squeezed it tightly, pulling her close to speak in her ear. "I saw a small cave a ways back. Let's head there."

Without waiting for Anya's reply, he started back up the trail. Despite almost slipping several times on the soaked, muddy earth, the pair managed to find their way to the shallow cave at the base of a cliff.



"We'll wait out the rain here and head back as soon as it eases up," Damian said.

The two children were sitting side by side in the small cave.

"Okey dokey." Anya's voice was tired and small, and her hair and tracksuit were thoroughly soaked. She'd managed to wring some of the water out of her clothes, but her shoes were still squishy, and it was grossing her out. "I'm wet everywhere," she grumbled.

"I am too. Suck it up," Damian ordered. He reminded her again that this was all her fault.

Anya shrunk even smaller. Outside the cave, the sky was still dark, and the heavy rain was showing no signs of letting up. While they were relieved to have found shelter, the endless, thundering downpour had left Anya feeling scared and hopeless. Without realizing she was doing it, she inched closer to Damian.

"That's close enough," Damian barked, and Anya felt like crying again.

If only Papa was here. If Mama was here, she'd give me a big hug. If Bond was here, he'd lick away all my tears. Anya's mood sunk further with each thought. *Instead, I'm stuck here alone with mean old Sy-on Boy.*

Suddenly the darkened world went white, like the sudden pop of a flashbulb. Anya squealed and curled into a ball. "S-something just—"

Damian's reply was drowned out by a deafening clap of thunder that echoed off the cave walls. Even Damian stiffened at that. Their ears were still ringing when the sky flashed white for a second time.

"Aw, come on," he moaned. "How much worse can this get?"

The second thunderclap was much louder than the first. The terrifying, explosive burst of noise bounced around the cave, and the shock waves made their skin tingle. As the thunder faded, the kids were pretty sure that they could hear the sound of a tree falling somewhere nearby.

Overwhelmed by fear, Anya could no longer hold back the tears. "Papa, save me!" she cried between sobs. "I'm so scared."

Rolled up in a ball, she couldn't see beyond her own knees. After a moment, she felt a hand take hold of hers.

"L-look, it's gonna be okay," a voice stammered. The hand was the same size as hers and shaking just as much. "Lightning hits tall things, right? And there's tons of tall trees around here, way taller than us. And this cave, the rock, is real solid too. So don't be scared, all right?"

Anya raised her head and looked up at Damian sitting beside her. His face was as white as a sheet. Even through her own veil of tears, she thought she could see moisture welling around his eyes. Anya heard the stream of thoughts racing through his head. *If lightning were to strike here... Father, I'm so scared... No! I'm a scion of the Desmond family. If I can't protect one crying girl, then what good am I? But this is so scary... No, no, you can't be scared! Remember, you're Father's son...*

Huh, thought Anya. *Sy-on Boy's scared of the lightning too.* But he was still trying to comfort her. The grip of terror on her heart seemed to loosen a little bit. Anya gave his hand a squeeze back. Damian turned to her for a second, a look of surprise on his face. He quickly looked away, but there was a little more strength in his grip after that. And his hand stopped shaking. *It's warm,* Anya thought.

"I'm hungry," Damian said after a while.

"I have peanuts," Anya replied.

"Anything but peanuts."

"I wish I could eat that pot of foo," Anya said, sadly.

"Don't bring up stuff like that, dummy! It's just gonna make us hungrier."



"I bet Becky's worried about us."

"They're all probably on the brink of tears," Damian said, nodding.

"I bet the teachers are real mad, though."

"Yeah," Damian agreed. "We're getting tonitrus bolts for sure."

Though they were both still soaked and shivering, still scared by the unyielding storm, the cave had started to feel somehow warmer. In time, the warmth from Damian's hand spread to Anya's cheeks and dried away her tears.



"Mr. Desmond! Miss Forger!"

When the rain finally stopped, the two children stepped out of the cave to find Master Henderson and Mr. Green racing up the path toward them.

"Thank goodness you're both all right," said Mr. Green, giving them a relaxed wave. Master Henderson, on the other hand, scowled at them like an angry lion.

"The two of you should know better than to wander away from camp," he scolded. "Do you understand that every faculty chaperone is now scouring this forest for you? In the mountains, rain and lightning are not to be taken lightly! You're lucky that Custos Green has tracking experience, or who knows what might have happened to you!"

"Little something I picked up in the marines," Mr. Green said. "Our special forces team did plenty of tracking, but that rain washed away most of your footprints, so it's something of a miracle I was able to find you at all. You two ought to thank your lucky stars." He flashed the two kids a playful smile.

Master Henderson cleared his throat loudly, quieting his overly forgiving colleague. "Now, clearly inadequate faculty supervision was also a factor here. No matter how simple the trail, we should have stationed a chaperone at the halfway point, and I do apologize for that. For now, let us return to camp and get you dried off." Then he added ominously, "However, this is not the last

time we will be discussing this. I have yet to decide on a suitable punishment for your actions."

"Mr. Henderson, wait!" Anya said, clinging to her teacher's tracksuit. "Er, Master Henderson, I mean."

"Yes, Miss Forger?"

"I'm really sorry," she pleaded, her head bowed. "I'm the one who's bad at maps and got us lost. Sy-on Boy didn't do anything wrong, so please don't punish him."

"Yeah, we get it, runt. Stop acting so noble." Damian stepped forward to stand at Anya's side. "As your partner, it was my job to check if you were going the right way, and I didn't. I'm just as much to blame as you are." Turning to Master Henderson and Mr. Green, he bowed his head. "I am truly sorry for all the trouble I've caused."

Anya looked at him, confused. "Sy-on Boy?"

Damian snorted derisively. "It'd be a stain on my honor as a Desmond if I let you cover for me," he muttered. The back of his neck flushed a light pink.

Mr. Green gave Master Henderson an amused look. "Well, what do you say, Master Henderson?"

Master Henderson stood quietly for a moment, the clenched expression on his face gradually softening.

"Perhaps it is not necessary that we discuss this matter again," he said. "As punishment, you two will help with the preparations for tonight's stargazing activity. But first, you will go back to camp, shower, and change into dry clothes." And with that, he turned elegantly away from the children. His thoughts, however, continued to flow into Anya's mind from behind his perfectly postured back.

Certainly, disobeying the class rules and endangering their own lives with such careless behavior is worthy of harsher punishment, Master Henderson mused. *But there was much beauty and elegance in the way Mr. Desmond and Miss Forger sought to protect each other.* Despite his sternness, Anya could sense Master Henderson's kindness and joy in his students' growth.

Anya dared to ask the question. "So... no tonitrus bolts?"

"As I just said, there will be no further punishment. Therefore, no tonitrus bolts will be assigned. Do not make me repeat myself again."

Phew!

Relieved, Anya turned toward Damian with a smile. But despite the similar glimmer of relief she saw on his own face, he snapped at her.

"What are you grinning about? Thanks to you, I'm gonna have to work all afternoon." To himself more than her, he mumbled, "The curse of the were-runt got me again."

Just like that, Damian was back to his old, awful self. She could sense the feelings of warmth he'd briefly held for her rapidly chilling.

"You really are the worst," she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I was grateful to you, but you weren't grateful back," Anya said. "You cheated me!"

"So go cry about it, uggo."

"You're a jerk, Sy-on Boy."

"Enough of that," interrupted Mr. Green, his voice uncharacteristically tired. He shrugged and sighed deeply. "You gonna be at each other's throats for the whole trip? No one's even eaten yet, they've been so worried about you two. Hurry over and show 'em you're okay so you can put their minds at ease." His tone wasn't harsh, but Anya could sense the frustration he was holding in check.

"Look there, children," instructed Master Henderson. "The storm has left you a parting gift."

Following their teacher's finger, Anya and Damian looked upward toward the bright sky that looked as though it had been washed clean by the rain. Their eyes widened in unison as they gazed upon the dazzling rainbow set upon a patch of clear blue sky.



When the bus dropped her off at the building where she lived, Anya didn't immediately open the door to her lobby. Instead, she paced up and down the sidewalk.

Operation Camp Friends was a failure! She wasn't looking forward to having to say it out loud.

"Worf!"

A white fluffy blur suddenly leapt at Anya, knocking her to the ground. Her dog's tail was wagging so vigorously that Anya worried it might just go flying off.

"Bond?"

"Worf!" he answered, licking at her cheeks with his warm, tickly tongue.

A few steps behind Bond, Loid came running up. "Oh, Anya, you're home!" Apparently, Bond had foreseen Anya's return while they'd been on a walk and was so excited he'd pulled free of Loid's grasp.

"Welcome back," Loid said. "We weren't expecting you here so early."

"Yeah," Anya said, avoiding Loid's gaze. "I'm back."

Loid raised an eyebrow. "Is something wrong? You look upset."

"The world is doomed," Anya reported, sadly.

"The world...?" Loid repeated.

"I was really bad at camping," Anya explained, her shoulders slumped. "A squirrel ate my trail, and I confused my right and left."

It was clear from the look on Loid's face that he had no idea what she was talking about. "You didn't have fun?" he asked.

Anya remembered the birds and bugs and trees and flowers that she'd never seen before. She remembered the bright rainbow and blue sky after the storm and enjoying their homemade pot-au-feu with Becky and the others. Gazing up at the sparkling stars with all her classmates. Gossiping with Becky while eating her fancy chocolates in their bright white tent.

The warmth of Damian's hand as it held hers...

"No," she said, startled by this revelation. "I had a lot of fun!"

"Is that right?" Loid said, the taut muscles in his handsome face easing into a smile. "I'm so glad."

Anya's heart suddenly cleared, and her feet felt lighter.

"Well, head on inside then," Loid said. "Yor's been waiting for you."

"Okey dokey!"

"She's been cooking for you all morning," Loid said. "There's hamburg steak and even a cake."

"O-okey dokey," Anya repeated, but with far less enthusiasm as she recalled the weapons-grade cuisine Yor had cooked in the past. *This could be my last meal.*

Recognizing the look of someone preparing to meet their death, Loid leaned over and whispered reassuringly, "Don't worry, I helped her cook. In fact, I did just about everything. The only thing she made by herself was the southern stew, and I know that's your favorite."

"Woo-hoo!"

Anya's enthusiasm was authentic this time, and suddenly she was very, very hungry. *I want to go inside and eat Mama's stew and Papa's hamburger steak and watch TV with Bond right now!*

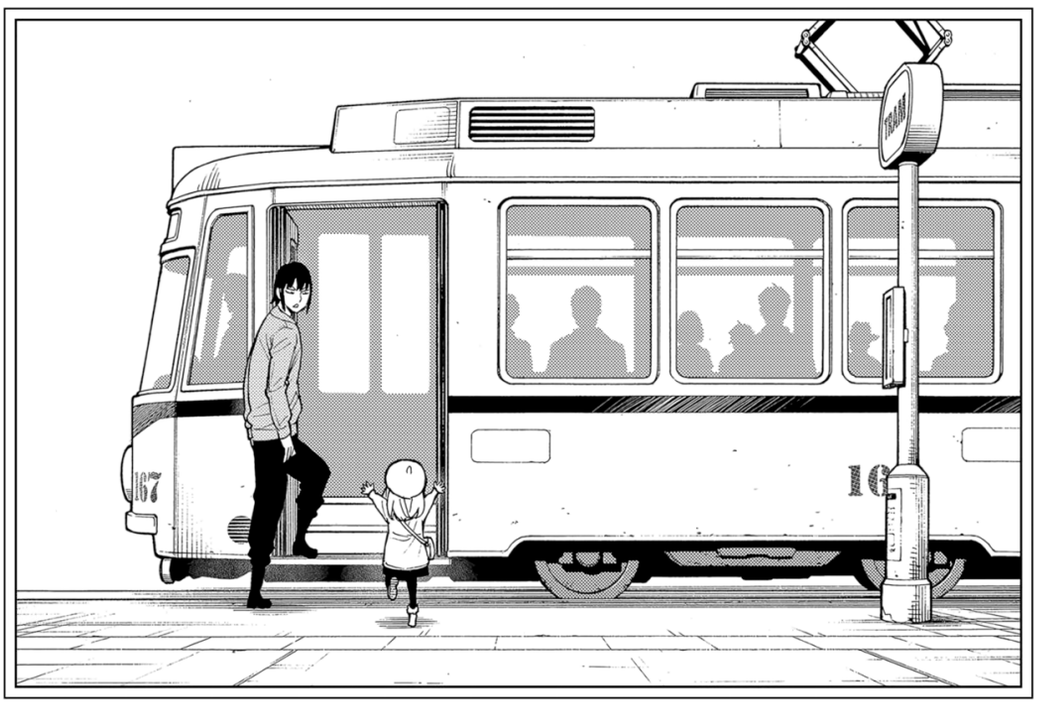
"C'mon, Bond!" Anya called.

"Worf!"

"You too, Papa. I'm hungry!"

"How quickly she changes her mind," Loid muttered.

Urging Papa and her beloved dog to hurry after her, Anya raced toward the apartment where Mama was waiting.



MISSION 2

SPY×FAMILY

"Good day to you, Mr. Berman. How are you feeling today?"

Yuri Briar stood in a doorway and addressed the man in the small room before him in a friendly tone of voice. The man did not respond, however.

"My, this room has a rather unpleasant smell to it, doesn't it? I do apologize for that."

Yuri, now twenty years old, had lost his parents at a young age and had been raised by his only living relative, his older sister, Yor. Yuri loved his sister more than anything in the world and was eager to do whatever he could to give her a better life. With her encouragement and his drive, he'd finished school at a young age and secured a prestigious job at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Yuri traveled around the continent as an elite young diplomat. Or at least, that was what was written in the public records. Yuri Briar's real employer was the SSS—the State Security Service. He held the rank of lieutenant.

"We've opened windows and added fans, but nothing helps," he continued. "There's nothing that can counteract the stench of a filthy traitor who's sold out his country. And who do you think that stench is coming *from*, Mr. Berman?"

Yuri Briar was an officer with the secret police.



The captain called him over as soon as Yuri stepped out of the interrogation room.

"How long has it been since you've slept, kid?"

"I appreciate your concern, sir, but I took a nap in the break room three days ago. I'm fine." Yuri saluted and flashed a warm smile. Yuri was tall and slim, and his face still had a child's soft features. The SSS uniform, normally so imposing, looked more like a schoolboy's uniform on the young lieutenant. "I want to keep working hard to make this country a better place for my sister."

A child's dream, straight from the mouth of a blushing schoolboy, thought his captain. But he knew that Yuri was not the sweet, harmless young man that he appeared to be. Just now, in the interrogation room, he'd extracted a confession from a treasonous politician named Thomas Berman, whom no one else had managed to break. The black gloves Yuri wore were wet with what his captain could only assume was the traitor's blood.

Lieutenant Yuri had earned a reputation for being very enthusiastic about his work.

"Take tomorrow off," the captain ordered. "It's a holiday anyway."

"I'm telling you, I feel great," Yuri insisted. "I couldn't be more energized about getting out there and doing my job!"

"That's an order," the captain said flatly.

"We don't have time for holidays!" Yuri said. "We need to capture Twilight and put an end to the threat posed by Westalis!"

He's just like a dog, thought the captain. *Sometimes it's like he's practically rabid. But he's also eager to please, and he's completely loyal to his master, the state, even if that's only because it happens to be where his sister lives. She's the reason he's thrown away far-brighter prospects just to get his hands bloody with this job.*

Nowadays, it was diplomacy that attracted the nation's best and brightest. And it was an exhausting job that demanded everything from a person—perfect for Yuri. But he'd tossed it aside in favor of a dirty job conducted in windowless rooms. *If the sister who single-handedly raised him knew what he really did for a living, how would she feel about that? Could that be the reason he's so determined to hide his real job from her?*

He was speculating, and there was nothing to be gained from that. But there was one thing the captain knew for sure: everything Yuri Briar did was for the sake of his sister. Her happiness was what he lived for. The captain had to admit, it was admirable. He wasn't fool enough to let himself be overtaken by sentimentality, but he held his young subordinate in high esteem for his unwavering convictions.

And that was why, even though the service was perpetually shorthanded and overworked, he didn't want to see Yuri get used up and burned out.

"Adequate rest is required to ensure high-quality work. Take tomorrow off. When you come back the next day, you'll be able to push yourself that much harder."

"If I may speak freely, sir—" Yuri began, but the captain cut him off.

"Do it for your country and for your sister's future."

At the mention of his sister, Yuri finally relented. "Yes, sir."

He looked more like a sulking teenager than an SSS officer.



"They tell me I have to take a day off, but what am I supposed to *do*?"

Yuri flopped down onto his bed and stared up at the cloudless sky through his window. He'd had nothing to do all morning.

Didn't Dominic say he and Camilla were going away for the holiday? I wish I could go somewhere with Yor, like we used to. Or even just get dinner together. Images of his sister's smiling face flashed through his mind. Finally, he was able to relax.

"Wait a minute. If today's a holiday, then shouldn't city hall be closed?"

On his way to check the calendar, he stopped to gaze at the pictures displayed on his dresser. His sister smiled back at him. Yuri flushed at the sight of her. She was so beautiful that Aphrodite herself would pale in comparison. *If Yor's off work, maybe I could go see her. I haven't beheld her beauty in person for nearly two weeks!*

But if it was a holiday, Berlint General Hospital would be closed too. That would mean Loid Forger, a man he despised, also had the day off. To Yuri's deep vexation, Loid Forger had married his sister. Not that Yuri recognized the marriage, of course. As far as he was concerned, Loid Forger was nothing more than a despicable con man who had managed to steal away his beloved sister by virtue of being a tiny bit good-looking, a tiny bit tall, a tiny bit eloquent, and a doctor who knew a tiny, tiny bit about caring for others.

"Stupid Loi-Loi," he muttered, angrily. "Get back to work, you lazy bastard! I don't care if it's a holiday. Throw yourself into your job and work yourself to death!" Yuri was growing irritated now that the image of the wretched grifter Loid Forger was lodged in his mind.

The phone on the dresser rang, adding to his fury. *Who would dare to call me this early in the morning?* He picked it up and answered curtly.

The call must have been from heaven, because the voice on the other side was so beautiful that it could only have come from the most radiant of angels. "Yuri, hi! It's me, Yor."

"Y-Y-Y-Yor?!" he stammered, his voice rising an entire octave.

"I'm sorry to call you so early," she said. "Are you on your way to work?"

"N-no, I have the day off today."

Yor's voice brightened. "Really?"

"Um, yeah, that's right," Yuri said. "No official travel or mandated overtime today, so I've got the whole day free."

"I'm so glad to hear that!"

The excitement in Yor's voice made Yuri's heart skip a beat.

Listen to how happy she is! She must be so eager to see me! Suddenly Yuri regretted all his grumbling toward his captain. *Maybe I should bring him a big bouquet of flowers or something.*

"Loid ended up having to work today, so he's not here right now." Yor's words just grew sweeter and sweeter. Yuri could feel the tension going out of him, leaving his heart as pure and bright as the sky outside. "He got some sort of urgent summons from the hospital or something."

"So Loi-Loi has to work today? That's fanta—I mean... rough. That's real rough." Yuri chose his words carefully, but he couldn't keep the excitement out of his voice.

"Yuri!" Yor chastised him. "He's your brother-in-law. Could you at least try to refer to him by his actual name? I've told you, no one calls him 'Loi-Loi.' You just made that up."

Just hearing the phrase *brother-in-law* made Yuri's skin crawl. But dutiful brother that he was, Yuri mumbled that yes, he would try. It was a promise he had no intention of keeping. *I still refuse to accept Forger as my sister's husband. I never will. I'll die before I accept it, and not even then!*

"So I have a little favor to ask of you," Yor said. "Could you come over?"

"Of course, Yor. I'll be right there!"

Heart bounding with joy, Yuri burst out his front door and ran straight for his sister's apartment building. His footsteps felt so light that he wasn't sure he ever touched the ground at all.



"I'm here, Yor!" Yuri shouted as he threw open the front door to the Forgers' apartment, a wide smile across his face. "What do you want me to do? Get something from a high shelf? Move something heavy? Notarize divorce papers? Whatever you need!"

"Oh, Yuri, you're here! Thank you for coming," said Yor, who'd been eagerly awaiting his arrival. She returned his smile, and Yuri's heart leapt into his throat.

Wow, Yor, you're so adorable today. I've got to be the luckiest man in the world for having the cutest, kindest sister. But just as Yuri was relishing his good fortune, a small life-form emerged from behind his sister as if to ruin his pleasant thoughts.

"Uncle," she said.

"Chihuahua Girl," Yuri grunted.

The life-form was Anya Forger, Loi-Loi's bastard daughter. She was a complete moron who had once managed to mishear the phrase *whole enchilada* as *swole chihuahua*, hence Yuri's nickname for her. On the other hand, she claimed to be striving to succeed in school so that she could take care of Yor forever, which Yuri considered to be quite virtuous.

But there was no escaping the fact that she had spawned from the loins of that grifter Loid Forger. *I'll not be deceived by their ilk.*

"I'm not your uncle, I'm your *step*-uncle," he corrected her. "And why aren't you at school?"

"It's a holiday," she pointed out.

Hm. So it is. That does check out. Yuri rebuked himself for not anticipating her presence. *Well, at least it's better than Loi-Loi being here. Let's hope she watches cartoons on TV or something*

and keeps out of our way. Oh, Yor. You know I would do anything for you, right? Oh, my sweet, sweet Yor. How perfect you are!

Anya couldn't help but burp at that point. Reading Yuri's mind always gave her heartburn.

"How come you're always burping?" Yuri asked.

"I eat a lot," Anya said.

Vulgar creature, Yuri thought. *Probably couldn't stop stuffing her face at breakfast. Well, it's not as if I don't understand the impulse—my sister's cooking is fantastic, after all. It has that indescribable fragrance you just don't find anywhere else, and the more you chew it, the more exciting new flavors you discover! That's because she always uses such unique ingredients, like chunks of the chopping board—which are rich in nutrients and give your jaw a good workout. Oh, how I wish I could be an ingredient to be lovingly chopped up for one of Yor's culinary masterpieces!*

After spending a few moments internally shouting his love for his sister, Yuri turned to face her. "So? What do you want me to do, Yor? I'll hold your bags, I'll clean the fan blades, I'll even do your laundry. Just say the word!"

"Well..." she began.

"Ah, of course. It's a beautiful day, and you want to make room in your closet for your summer wardrobe. And while we're reorganizing, we can put you and Loid in separate rooms!"

"No, it's... it's definitely not that."

Overwhelmed by her brother's sudden intensity, Yor's own resolve seemed to be fading. She was clearly having trouble finding the right words.

She's no less adorable when she's being shy, Yuri thought.

"What's wrong? I'm your brother, remember? I'll do anything—just go ahead and say it!"

"The thing is," Yor began, "there's an event today, and city hall is one of the sponsors."

"Mm-hmm."

"Millie said she'd go and represent us, but she caught a cold. So just this morning they called and asked me to replace her. But Loid couldn't get out of going to work, and our friend Franky, who always helps us at times like this, doesn't seem to be home..."

Franky? Who the hell is that? Yuri stiffened at the unfamiliar name. *I've never heard her mention any Franky before... Hm.*

Probably just some babysitter or something. You better be taking your job seriously, Franky, because if you're actually coming around to ogle my sister, I'll have you executed.

"The event's going to take several hours, and I can't leave Anya alone for that long," Yor said. "Would you watch her for me, Yuri?"

"Huh?" Yuri stiffened. He hadn't expected the conversation to go in this direction. He chewed over her words for a minute. "So... you want me to spend the day with Chihua—er, with Loid Forger's daughter. While you... spend the day... somewhere else."

"That's right," she said. "Will you help me out?"

And just like that, Yuri's perfect day off came crashing down all around him. *What the hell? I was so excited to spend the day with my sister, and now I'm playing nursemaid to Chihuahua Girl? I should have just stayed home and surrounded myself with pictures of Yor while reading up on interrogation techniques. That'd be a billion times better than this!* So deep was his despair, he thought he might collapse on the spot.

"Please, Yuri?" Yor implored. "You're the only one I can turn to."

After hearing such a plea from the person he loved most in this world, he had no choice.

"Just leave everything to me, sis."



Thirty minutes later, Yuri was flipping through a magazine on the Forgers' sofa, but he wasn't paying much attention to its contents.

Yor had left the apartment, promising to return as quickly as possible with a gift from the event. From the doorway, she'd pleaded with him one last time to take good care of Anya, then disappeared. Yuri's fixated mind had been replaying the moment ever since.

"Uncle Yuri, I'm bored."

Anya was sprawled on a rug beneath the table with a *Spy Wars* book open in front of her, kicking her legs up and down.

Yuri put down his magazine and rose from the sofa. "Then how about we do some studying?" he asked.

"Ugh, studying." Anya's distaste was clear on her face.

Yuri hadn't suggested it to torment her. Having spent very little time with children, he had no idea what they did for fun and had to fall back on memories of his own childhood. Hoping to get a good job so he could start taking care of his sister as quickly as possible, Yuri had thrown himself into studying a wide range of topics—journalism, law, medicine, engineering—so he'd be ready for any profession. That had left him with little time for play, though he'd never missed it. In fact, he took great pride in the depth of his knowledge and considered it the foundation of the man he'd become.

"Tell me what your weakest subject is," Yuri instructed. "I'll work with you on that."

"I don't have any weak subjects," Anya said. "I'm great at everything."

Yuri didn't buy that for a second. "Don't you lie to me. If you won't tell me, then we'll just have to work on all of them."

Anya let out a terrified squeal.

Is this dimwit really an Eden Academy student? Yuri thought. *What a nightmare it must be for my poor sister to have to deal with this, just because she married some jerk who already had a kid. But what if I could teach Loi-Loi's spawn how to study effectively? I'm sure Yor's eyes would glitter like jewels with joy, and she'd say, "Oh, I knew I was right to turn to you, Yuri." She might even give me a little kiss as a reward, like she used to when we were children. Oh, my sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet Yor. How I love you! Never in my life have I seen a more beautiful—*

Yuri felt a cold gaze affixed somewhere near his forehead, which was enough to derail his thoughts. Looking down, he discovered Anya staring silently at him. When Yuri met her gaze, she sighed a deep, pitying sigh. Irritated, Yuri cleared his throat.

"Go to your room and bring out your notes and textbooks. Don't forget to grab some pencils."

"I'm not in the mood to study today," Anya said.

"You said you were bored, didn't you?"

"Not *that* bored."

"Fine, then." Yuri sighed. "Go watch TV or something."

He didn't like her enough to push her to better herself, and he knew it was unlikely to matter anyway. His obsession with his sister aside, Yuri was a realist.

But Anya wasn't about to let up. "There aren't any cartoons on right now though," she whined.

"Then go nap like that fat dog of yours," Yuri said, irritated, pointing to Bond, who was happily dozing on the rug. Why did they even have such a worthless dog, anyway? How was such a lazy creature supposed to guard anyone? "In fact, you should just go ahead and sleep till my sister gets back."

Anya didn't seem particularly happy with that but said nothing, choosing instead to glare at him in silence.

"What?" he demanded. "Say what you want to say."

At that, Anya raced out of the living room. Yuri assumed she was going to her own bedroom to sulk, but she reemerged immediately, holding a notebook and pencils. She sat down on the rug, placed the notebook on the coffee table, and set to work diligently writing something. From time to time, she'd sneak a glance at Yuri, smile a sly smile, and immediately return to her scribbling.

Yuri glanced at her paper and flinched at the horrific penmanship in her long rows of messy letters. It was as if she'd dipped worms in ink and let them wriggle all over the paper. If this were a coded enemy message, he'd declare it impossible to crack.

"What is that, some sort of demonic curse? It's creeping me out."

"It's my diary," Anya said. Her smile was so smug that it was nauseating. "When Mama gets back, I'll show it to her."

Yuri snatched the notebook away and made a determined effort to decipher what she'd written.

TODAY IS A HOLLYDAY BUT I WAS STUCK AT HOME WITH UNCLE YURI. HE WOODENT PLAY WITH ME LIKE SCRUFFY DOES. HE ORDERD ME TO SLEEP ALL DAY LIKE A DOG. HE'S SO MEAN. I HATE MY LIFE!

Yuri clutched his temples and fell to his knees with a scream. It really was a demonic curse! *What would Yor think if she were to*

read this? He could already feel her disapproval.

"Yuri, you've gone too far," he imagined her saying. *"How could any sister ever love a terrible boy like you?"*

Unable to cope with the despair and confusion, Yuri began banging his head into the coffee table.

Anya's eyes widened. She gulped.

Yuri abruptly stopped.

"Let's go out somewhere," he said. He rose unsteadily, rivulets of blood dribbling down his face.

"You're bleeding," Anya said, pointing to the open wounds on his forehead.

"Forget about that," he growled. "We're going out to have fun now. Get your things, Chihuahua Girl."



"Goin' on an ooting, goin' on an ooting!" Anya sang from her seat on the streetcar next to Yuri.

"Stop kicking your seat," Yuri ordered. "And it's pronounced *outing*."

After working several all-nighters in a row, he'd been forced by his captain to take a day off. And now he was spending it riding on a streetcar with the tagalong child of the lowlife who had stolen his sister. Yuri couldn't suppress a deep sigh at his misfortune. He was a highly regarded secret police officer, bound by oath to defend his country. *What did I do to deserve this?*

The old woman in the neighboring seat was watching as Anya giggled and sang.

"Why, isn't she adorable!" she said.

Not even a little, thought Yuri.

Millie, he suddenly recalled. *That's how this happened to me.* He was supposed to have spent today talking to Yor, helping Yor, eating Yor's cooking... But that dream had been destroyed when Millie—some coworker of his sister's—had caught a cold. *Does she even really have a cold?* he wondered. *Isn't the timing a little too suspicious? What if this so-called Millie just didn't want to deal*

with the hassle of working on a holiday and decided to push her duties on to my sweet, trusting, angelic (and also beautiful) sister? If that's the case, she deserves nothing less than to be executed! This world has no place for vermin like her!

But no, Yuri stopped himself. *Whoever this Millie is, she may be a treasured colleague of Yor's. If anyone deserves to be executed for this, it's clearly Loid Forger for dumping his spawn on my sister so he could go goof off at work all day. Damn him! If only he were some sort of spy so I could have him publicly executed for his crimes!*

It was in the midst of this fantasy that the tram arrived at their stop. Brimming with excitement, Anya leapt onto the platform.

"So where are we going, Uncle Yuri? An amusement park? I want to ride a Ferris wheel!"

"If you're going to play, shouldn't it at least be educational? We're going to Kid Street Workplace," he announced.

Anya couldn't quite catch that. "Kid Streetwalkers?" she repeated back to him. A young woman who'd been walking nearby snorted out a laugh.

Yuri grimaced. *As if this experience wasn't embarrassing enough.*

"Kid. Street. Work. Place," he enunciated carefully. "One of my coworkers told me he and his wife took their kid there the other day."

"What sort of place is it?" Anya asked skeptically. "Is it fun?"

"To put it simply, it's a government-accredited indoor amusement facility that helps kids choose a future occupation by offering simulated experiences of various jobs that might interest them," Yuri explained. "It was created to spur interest in the fields that are important to Ostania's future—law, military, medicine, scholarship, engineering, and so on."

Anya looked up at her uncle with glazed-over eyes. "Uncle, I don't know whatever language you're babbling in."

Yuri sighed and reiterated his explanation, more slowly this time. "Basically, you play at different jobs so you can decide which one you want to do when you're older."

The sparkle returned to Anya's eyes. She squeezed her hands in front of her and started breathing heavily. "That *does* sound fun!"

"Right? Now hurry up."

As Yuri set about finding the facility, he felt something brush against his fingers. Realizing Anya was attempting to hold his hand, he yanked it away. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"On outings, Mama and Papa hold my hand," said Anya. "Scruffy too."

"Who's Scruffy?" demanded Yuri. "You mentioned him before." He had no desire to hold this small child's hand, but if she were to become lost, he would never be able to look Yor in the eye again. Reluctantly, he took her hand in his. It was warm and slightly clammy. Worse than that, it was sticky.

Disgusting. Does she not properly wash her hands? And it's so tiny!

"How old are you?" he asked.

"I'm six," she said.

"Huh." Yuri furrowed his brow. Her hand seemed smaller than he would have expected for a child her age. Or maybe it was bigger? He realized he had no idea how large the hand of a six-year-old was supposed to be. *Yor used to hold my hand like this*, he remembered. *Of course, when I was her age, mine was never sticky from candy.*

"How long till we get there, Uncle Yuri?"

"Probably about ten more minutes."

"I'm excited!" Anya exclaimed.

"Just try to stay focused and watch where you're going." But for all the coldness of his tone, Yuri hadn't noticed that little by little, he'd unconsciously slowed his stride to match the walking pace of Anya's shorter legs.



"Welcome to Kid Street Workplace," called out a smiling employee as soon as Anya and Yuri stepped through the door. "Here on Kid Street, you can learn about all sorts of different jobs. Go play and experience everything the workplace has to offer, and maybe you'll discover what you want to be when you grow up!"

The facility was much larger than Yuri had expected. It really did seem like an entire tiny town for children. There was a miniature fire station, hospital, courthouse, library, newsroom, post office, bank, publishing house, scientific laboratory, and more, all charmingly rendered in great detail. Cobblestones lined the streets, which had crosswalks, working traffic lights, and even a small bus shuttling kids from workplace to workplace.

Parents and children walked the streets in pairs, most of the former looking strangely exhausted. A mother shambled by with the glazed eyes of a corpse, while a father sagged on a nearby bench as if he were a forgotten piece of luggage.

"Daddy, hurry," pleaded a little girl who looked a bit older than Anya, tugging at her father's arm. "I want to be a fashion model next."

"Yeeaaahh..." the father grumbled. "I don't know about that. Look, Daddy's been putting on a little weight lately, and it's starting to show. How about you try working in that candy store instead?"

"Noooo!" said the girl. "I wanna do the model one!"

Yuri watched the exchange with suspicion, his brow knitted. *Who cares how fat you are?* He wondered. *Your daughter's the one who'll be modeling. No one cares about your potbelly.* He looked to Anya, who was still just standing there, her mouth agape.

"How many times could you fit my house in here?" she finally asked.

"Hm? Well, based on my estimate of the square footage of this facility, it could probably fit around eighty apartments like the one you live in."

"Eighty..." Anya gulped.

"So what do you want to do first?" Yuri asked, flipping through the pamphlet he'd been handed at the entrance. "Judge, scientist, bank clerk," he suggested, all occupations he'd aspired to in his own childhood. "There's also prosecutor or lawyer—those are good ones too."

"Lemme see," Anya whined, jumping up and down to get a look at his pamphlet.

Yuri glared down at her. "You were given one at the entrance too, remember?"

"Oh," Anya said. She retrieved the crumpled pamphlet that she'd crammed into the small pouch at her waist.

"So?" Yuri asked again. "We can't dismiss journalism. And if you have the physical strength, joining the military might not be a bad idea."

"I want to go here," Anya said, pointing to her crumpled pamphlet. As Yuri followed her finger, his face stiffened. "I saw a police cartoon yesterday," she explained excitedly. "When you're a police officer, you can jump down on bad guys and beat them up. Then you can throw them in jail and make them eat bad food."

Yuri groaned. "Just don't say things like that in front of my sister."

He was already starting to regret bringing Chihuahua Girl here.



"Welcome to the police workplace," said a smiling young woman as they entered the child-sized police station. Like the other employees here, she was wearing what looked roughly like a police uniform. "Here you can experience what it's like to work as a police officer."

A father and son who had apparently just finished the police experience brushed by them, the excitement still clear on their faces. The boy turned toward Anya. "I got to shoot a gun for the first time ever," he said, beaming with pride. "Hit every target too. Can you believe that?"

The boy's young father pushed him gently forward. "Let's get moving now." He gave Yuri an apologetic nod. "Sorry about that."

Yuri reflexively nodded back.

"Next I wanna be a doctor!" the son announced.

"This is supposed to be my day off," complained his father. "Do I really have to put on a lab coat today too?"

"So what if you do?" said the son. "Hurry up!"

"Today of all days, can't you let me do some other job?" the father groaned.

What was all that about? Yuri wondered.

"Gun... Bondman..." At his side, Anya was excitedly mumbling something to herself. Yuri noticed a strange glimmer in her eyes as he looked down. "Two-eighths of am-yoo-nish-un!"

Yuri didn't know what to make of that odd gleam and her strange utterances, but one thing was immediately clear: *I can't let them give this child a gun.*

"Okay, we're ready for you." The woman at the entrance did not look up from her clipboard as she spoke. "The interrogation room is open, and the cast is ready to be interviewed as part of your investigation. Would you like to give it a try?"

"Yeah, sure. That sounds great," said Yuri. He was so focused on keeping a gun out of Anya's hands that he had barely paid attention to what the woman had said.

"But I want to shoot a gun! I want to be Bondman!" Anya said, tugging on the sleeve of his jacket. Yuri decided to pretend he hadn't heard that.

"The changing rooms are back here for you to put on your police uniforms," the smiling woman said, gesturing behind her.

"All right, get to it," Yuri said, giving Anya a nudge in the indicated direction.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir," the woman said. "You and your little sister will *both* need to get into costume."

"She's not my sister," Yuri said.

"He's my uncle," Anya clarified.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the woman replied, looking up at Yuri with surprise. "You look so young, I just assumed. Well, then, you and your niece can get changed back there."

Yuri had to fight back the impulse to clarify that she was in fact merely his *step*-niece. But in these dangerous times, drawing too much attention to himself might cause someone to report him to the secret police for suspicious behavior. Of course, Yuri *was* a secret police officer, but a report could still leave a blot on his record. *I guess that means I have to be her uncle now.* Luckily, he'd always had a talent for deception.

Clenching his teeth, Yuri stated firmly, "She'll do it by herself."

He turned to Anya and curled his lips into the sort of smile an uncle would make while addressing a beloved niece. "I'll wait here. You do what the nice lady says and be good, all right?"

"Your smile looks creepy," Anya said.

Yuri pretended not to have heard her.

The smiling woman locked eyes with another employee, who nodded. No longer smiling, she turned to address Yuri. "I am terribly sorry, sir, but it is the policy of this facility that guardians must share in the experience of the jobs with their children."

"What?"

"The idea is that by sharing in the child's experience, the guardian provides motivation and encourages the child to take joy in their work. I'm afraid we cannot offer access to our facilities to guardians who are unwilling to participate in the activities."

While the woman was polite, her words had the clear undertone of an educator who had no tolerance for rule breaking.

What the hell kind of rule is that? Yuri fumed. *What possible point is there in having grown adults playing doctor and lawyer? What does any of that have to do with the motivation of kids?* It made no sense at all, although he supposed it did explain why so many of the parents had seemed so exhausted or reluctant to allow their kids to choose certain activities.

I should have pieced that together sooner. Or better yet, I should have done more research before we came here in the first place. Yuri ground his teeth. *It would have been so much easier to have just taken that fat dog to the park or something. We could leave and go somewhere else...* Yuri glanced over at Anya, only to find her boring into him with an angry glare that spoke volumes.

The clear threat contained within those eyes seemed to say, *"If you make me leave here, I'll write about it in my diary and show it to Mama."* To prove her intentions, Anya flipped open the snap on her pouch, giving him a glimpse of the accursed page that she'd neatly torn from her diary and brought with her.

"Now," asked the woman, smiling again. "If you're prepared to follow the policies of the Kid Street Workplace, you can change into your uniforms over there. Or will you be leaving us?"

Even as the young SSS officer felt his face burning with humiliation, he knew he had no choice.

"I'll go get changed."



Dammit, thought Yuri. *Why do I have to go through this stupid game of pretend?*

They entered a surprisingly realistic interrogation room where a cast member portraying the suspect sat sulking on a metal chair in front of a desk. A new staff member explained that Anya and Yuri would be told the charges against the suspect, and they were supposed to interrogate a confession out of him in order to complete the activity. She told them that the details of the suspect's crime changed daily and that there wasn't any fixed script—the interrogations were all ad-libbed. Apparently, the cast members were mostly part-time workers, but the man who was playing the part today had put a lot of effort into making sure he fit a child's idea of what a criminal would look like, dressing all in black and even wearing a ski mask over his face.

Someone should have taken that off, thought Yuri. *No one would be allowed to wear a ski mask during an interrogation. And after they've gotten so many other details right, too!* Yuri took these things seriously and was already thoroughly irritated.

The woman turned to Anya, who was now wearing a crisp blue police uniform and clearly champing at the bit to get started. "Now, Officer Forger, why don't you try interviewing this suspect," she offered.

"Yeah!" said Anya.

Yuri, also dressed in uniform, fumed from his stiff steel chair in the corner of the room. His task was to record the suspect's answers.

The woman introduced the suspect. "This man is a criminal who sneaks into people's houses and steals their money and jewels. But he refuses to confess. Officer Forger, it's your job to get him to admit what he's done."

"Okey dokey." Anya snapped off a stiff salute to the woman, then turned to face the suspect, her face suddenly cold and grim.

What the hell? thought Yuri.

Anya lowered herself into the chair, shaking her head with a world-weary sigh. She spoke in a soft murmur.

"You again, Jack? You just never learn, do you?"

Who the hell is Jack? wondered Yuri. *And what, she just gets to make up the fact that he's a repeat offender?!*

"Sure is cold out," Anya said wistfully. "Looks like winter's here."

Yuri furrowed his brow. *Now she's writing in the season too?*

Anya rose up from the chair and slowly walked over to the window. Looking through the blinds, she said, "You come from up north, don't you? It must be snowing there by now."

"What, you think you can make me homesick by bringing up where I'm from?" The suspect smirked. "Well, you're wrong about that, Officer. I bid farewell to my hometown long ago. My father and mother have both passed on. There's nothing for me there now. Nothing."

Yuri was impressed at the way the man was rolling with all the new details his child interrogator had added to the story. He was a pretty good actor.


KSH
KSH

Anya and the suspect stared at each other in a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Don't you play the tough guy with me, John." Anya's voice was low and gritty—or at least, that's probably how she intended it to sound.

Yuri was screaming inside. *His name was Jack! How could you forget that? You're the one who named him!*

"You still have Margaret," Anya said. "What about her?"

Who the hell is Margaret?! But the suspect gasped at the name and looked up at Anya. Anya turned back from the window to meet his gaze. "I know Margaret is still out there, waiting for you," she said.

The suspect stared at her.

"Atone for your crimes, go back up north, and make Margaret a happy woman," she commanded him, and at that, the suspect broke down in tears.

"You're right. I... I did it," he confessed.

Anya stepped closer to him and patted him on the back. "You want a burger?" she murmured in her low interrogator voice.

What. The hell. Was that.

Yuri gaped at the two of them, speechless.

"That was wonderful!" the woman exclaimed, clapping her hands. "What a brilliant idea to appeal to the suspect's conscience. Absolutely perfect!" The man playing Jack—no wait, John—clapped along with her.

"Excellent interrogation work, Officer Forger," the woman said. "I now present you with this badge to mark your successful completion of this activity."

A childlike grin broke out on Anya's face as she accepted the shiny gold badge. "I did good?" she said. Her gritty cop voice had disappeared entirely.

"You did great," the woman said.

"At the end there, I was honestly on the brink of tears," the suspect said. "You could make a great detective one day, miss."

Buoyed by the two employees, Anya beamed with pride. "Well, the idea has crossed my mind," she said, smugly.

Yuri could see that their goal was to support and encourage their young patrons whenever they managed to not completely botch an activity. *But still,* he thought. *No suspect would ever*

break down over an interrogation technique like that. If that sort of pathetic farce was all it took to reform a criminal, the world wouldn't need cops or secret police! And they expect this sort of activity to foster the next generation of talent for the future of Ostania?

As Yuri chewed over these thoughts, the suspect left the room and was replaced with a new actor. This one was young and handsome, the sort of flashy young man one might see in a nightclub.

"Now, it's time for Officer Briar to experience an interrogation. Please, come over here. Officer Forger, you'll sit at the notetaker's seat."

"Good luck, Uncle," Anya said.

"Uh, sure..."

Yuri rose to his feet without much enthusiasm and approached the woman for his briefing. Not that he had any intention of taking any of this seriously. *If that last interrogation was good enough for them, then any half-assed effort should suffice,* he figured.

"Officer Briar," the woman began. "This man was arrested on suspicion of repeatedly abusing his wife. We would like you to extract a confession. He allegedly punched and kicked her because he was displeased with her cooking. He even broke her nose, which will take two weeks to—"

Somewhere in the middle of the woman's explanation, a switch flipped in Yuri's head. Without a word, he turned on his heels to face the suspect.

"Um, Officer Briar," the woman said. "I'm not done with the briefing."

"I've heard enough," Yuri said, lowering himself onto the chair in front of the suspect.

"Good day, sir," he addressed the man with a smile. "I'm Officer Briar, and I'll be interviewing you today."

Yuri's eyes studied the man from beneath his long hair. His handsome, cool-guy face looked a little too much like Loid Forger's. *This guy hit his wife? Just because she's a bad cook?* Yuri's teeth clenched with a sharp click. He maintained the welcoming smile, but beneath it was a boiling stew of anger and hatred.

"You've been a bad boy, huh?" Yuri said in the comforting tone of a parent dealing with a small child. "Hitting your wife, I mean."

The suspect chuckled. "Whoa there, officer! I never hit my wife or anything like that. She was the one who fell over and hurt herself."

"So you didn't do anything wrong?" Yuri asked. The smile still lingered on his lips, but his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Nope. If anything, I'm the victim here." The man rambled on, airing grievances about his wife's lack of zeal for housework and how she only ever prepared the same handful of meals.

Yuri leaned over the table and clasped his hands around the sides of the man's head. "And if I were to break all your teeth, smash your nose, and split your chin open, do you think maybe you'd fall over and hurt *yourself*?" He smiled. "If anything, I'd be the victim."

Despite Yuri's cheerful demeanor, the suspect shuddered and audibly gasped. As Yuri stared dead into his eyes from only inches away, the smile faded from his lips.

"You beat your wife," he said, icily. "Even though she was a good woman who did nothing wrong and did nothing to provoke or resist you, you hit her. You should die for that, and I'll see to it that you will. No trial, just a summary execution at my own hands." He slid his hands down from the man's temples to his throat. "Your death is the apology she deserves."

The suspect shrieked in terror as the color drained from his face. His hands trembling, he stammered out a frantic stream of pleas. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I'll stop, I promise! I'll never hit my wife again! I mean, seriously, though—I don't even have a wife. You know I'm just an actor, right? I'm totally single—I don't even have girlfriend! Please, please forgive me!" The suspect—or rather, cast member—broke down into sobs.

Snapping back to himself again, Yuri quickly pulled back his hands. "Oh, uh... No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." he said. "I guess I just got a little too into the role there."

Still trembling, the man stared wordlessly at Yuri. The woman who'd briefed him also sat frozen in place.

As an awkward silence fell over the fake interrogation room, it was Yuri's turn to pale. *What did I just do?* he asked himself. *What happened to "any half-assed effort should suffice"? If Anya*

were to tell Yor about this... He could picture his sister's downcast face, bemoaning how she hardly even recognized the man he'd become. *Oh no,* he thought with a start. *Even worse, she could figure out that I'm not actually a diplomat, that I'm part of the SSS!*

All of this is Loi-Loi's fault, he decided. *If the suspect hadn't made him think of Loid's stupid face, none of this would have happened!* Yuri swore a silent vow of revenge against his brother-in-law.

"Uncle Yuri... So cool..."

"Huh?"

From the notetaker's table in the corner of the room, Anya had spoken softly, her voice wavering, but the words were clear. Yuri turned to meet her gaze and found a look of awe in her wide, sparkling eyes. She had never looked at him with such respect before.

"You're an in-terror-gator *genius*," she said, her voice hushed.

"Interrogator," he corrected her. "And I'm really not." *This just happens to be part of my* job.

Anya read the unspoken sentence in his mind and began breathing heavily with excitement.

"Whoa! You do this all the time—" Anya caught herself. "Uh, studying, I mean. You must study all the time to be... so good at weird stuff like this."

The actor and guide no longer seemed to be frozen in place. Their faces suddenly lit up, and they both abruptly broke into passionate applause.

"That was so real!" the actor said. "You were so intense! For a second there, I almost thought..." He chuckled nervously. "I can't believe how much presence you brought to that!"

"You should really pursue a career in acting," said the guide. "Not only are you handsome, you're a total natural! I was scared out of my wits there!"

"Oh, I... I don't know about that..." stammered Yuri.

"No, seriously," she said. "You were incredible! You had all the intensity of a real cop!"

"If you want, I could introduce you to a few agents," the actor offered. "You could really make a career out of this."

Yuri laughed nervously. He hadn't been acting at all, just venting his hatred for Loid Forger. But that didn't mean he

couldn't enjoy the attention. He was only twenty years old after all, and he still lived for praise the way he had as a child.

Now in a thoroughly good mood, he turned to Anya. "Where to next?"

Anya grabbed his hand and headed off toward the next attraction.



"Uncle Yuri, I'm hungry," Anya moaned.

"Wow, is it that late already? We haven't eaten all day," Yuri realized.

"My tummy is so empty I think I can feel my spine."

"Let's get a hot dog or something from the food court."

After the police experience, they'd thrown themselves into all the Kid Street Workplace jobs one after another—reporter, firefighter, judge, prosecutor, soldier, sculptor, doctor, and train conductor. They had completely forgotten about lunch.

They sat down at an indoor café that was built to look like an outdoor terrace, and as they were eating their hot dogs with soda (for Anya) and coffee (for Yuri), the exhaustion suddenly caught up with them. Anya looked ready to fall asleep right there at the table. All the other customers around them seemed tired too. Yuri realized that the facility had emptied out significantly over the last hour or so.

"So, which kind of work did you like best?" Yuri asked Anya as he sipped his coffee.

"Mmm..." Anya looked up at the ceiling. It was painted to look like a blue sky dotted with white puffy clouds. She sighed as if suddenly overwhelmed by the tediousness of it all.

"I did enough work today," she said. "I'd rather play for a living."

Yuri spewed out a mouthful of coffee and lapsed into a brief choking fit. He had not been expecting that response.

"What I really want to be is a cloud," Anya announced.

Yuri stared in silence as he wiped his mouth.

"Or a bird," she added.

Well, that was a massive waste of time, Yuri thought. He could almost hear a faint fizzle as all the day's hard work petered away into nothingness. He was at a complete loss as to what to say. *You could have picked anything—lawyer, police officer, I don't care. But instead you want to be unemployed?!*

Oblivious to Yuri's anguish, Anya returned her half-eaten hot dog to her plate and went rooting around in her pouch. She found her pamphlet and spread it out over the table. "For our last stop, I want to go here," she said, pointing to the corner of the map.

"Why?" Yuri asked bitterly. "Is that where they teach you how to be a cloud?"

"Uncle Yuri," Anya said, her eyes full of pity. "People can't really be clouds."

Yuri glared at her. *How does a moron like her come up with such aggravating retorts? Can all children do that?*

"What is it then?" he finally asked, bending over her map.

The tip of her finger was floating over a box marked JEWELRY FACTORY. It claimed to offer children a chance to design and make items like brooches, necklaces, and earrings. Yuri was surprised.

"Since when are you into fashion?" he asked.

"I'm always stylish," Anya insisted.

Unfortunately, they were almost out of time. Yuri had left Yor a note, but he didn't want to risk worrying her. "Well, we don't have time for that," he said. "We need to get back to my sister."

Anya's shoulders slumped. "Awww. I wanted to bring a present home for Mama."

"Oh?" Yuri's eyes widened in surprise.

"Mama said since she had the day off too, that we would go do all sorts of fun stuff, but then she had to work, and she said she was really sorry, and I told her it wasn't her fault, but Mama still felt so sad..."

Anya's words, however clumsy, struck a deep and familiar vein within Yuri. How many times had Yor profusely apologized to him when they were children for being too busy with work to spend time with him? It had always made him feel so helpless and miserable.

"That's why I wanted to make her a brooch out of a pretty bug or something," Anya said.

"No bugs," Yuri said quietly. "My sister hates bugs. Make her something else."

Anya looked up at him quizzically. "But you said we didn't have time."

"So hurry up and finish eating already," Yuri said. "We'll make it quick."

Anya's face lit up, and she gobbled down what was left of her hot dog before springing out of her chair. "Okay, instead of a bug brooch, I'll make her a flower one!"

"No flowers," Yuri said. "I'm going to make her a hair band with a flower on it."

"What?" Anya said. "The sheer effrontery!"

"For such a dim kid, you know a lot of random words," Yuri mumbled as the pair walked together toward the jewelry workshop. He hadn't even noticed that he'd taken her small hand as soon as it had brushed against his.



"I'm sure they'll be getting home soon," Yor said to herself.

She glanced up at the wall clock as she arranged the salad, baked apples, and veal schnitzel she'd brought home with her. She'd intended to leave the event much sooner, but it had run longer than expected. She'd frantically raced back home as soon as she could, only to find Anya and Yuri gone and a note on the coffee table that read, I TOOK ANYA TO KID STREET WORKPLACE.

Her coworker Sharon had mentioned Kid Street Workplace before, so Yor knew it was a popular spot for kids. But it had never occurred to her that she'd come home to an empty apartment. The idea that Yuri had taken Anya somewhere to play left her feeling strangely anxious and twitchy.

But it did look like Yuri had thought to fill up Bond's food and water bowls before leaving.

For all his talk of not recognizing her marriage, he'd stepped up for their family when she'd needed him most. *He really is such a good guy,* Yor thought. *Sure, he can be short-tempered and stubborn, but in his heart, I know he's a sweet person.* Yor smiled as she set out a slice of peanut chocolate cake for Anya and a bottle of Yuri's favorite wine.

Loid had said he wouldn't be back until late, so they could eat as soon as Yuri and Anya got home. Yor beheld the table and smiled. "It can't compete with Loid's cooking, but I think I did pretty good for myself!"

She wished she'd had enough time to make them a home-cooked meal, but at least by getting home late they'd given her time to make a pot of soup. Yor had never attempted to make a cold potato soup before, but she was pretty confident she'd nailed the recipe.

It did smell a little strange, but that was probably just from the spices, she figured.

"I hope they come home soon," she said. "Right, Bond?"

Bond obediently barked in response.

"Do you think they'll like the soup? It's a shame I accidently added so many onions though, so I can't let you try it for me, Bond."

"Worf..." Bond grumbled, slowly backing away. Just then, the dog's ears twitched and he let out a happy bark. His tail wagged as he ran toward the apartment door.

It seemed Anya and Yuri were home at last.



"I'm basically a genius," Anya said. "If anything, my flower brooch is *too* good."

"If anyone's a genius, it's me," Yuri insisted. "Look at how cute this hair band is. Perfectly worthy of my beautiful sister."

"When she sees mine, she'll burst into tears," Anya predicted.

"Maybe," he countered. "But it'll be tears of *joy* that she cries when she sees mine."

"Wanna bet, Uncle Yuri?"
"You're on, Chihuahua Girl. But that's still *'Step-Uncle'* to you."
"Whatever you say, Uncle Yuri."



Yor couldn't make out exactly what they were saying, but she could hear the sounds of a minor squabble from the hallway behind the door. It was as if being with Anya made Yuri revert to a child himself. *Two peas in a pod,* Yor thought.

Chuckling, she ran after Bond, eager to welcome her daughter and little brother home.



MISSION 3

SPY×FAMILY

"Goddamn it, Twilight!" Franky cursed under his breath. "How many times do I gotta tell you, I'm an *informant*, not a field agent! Stop dragging me into the part of your job with all the injuries!"

Thanks to his business associate Twilight—also known as Loid Forger—Franky had spent his day being examined by an orthopedic surgeon at Berlint General Hospital and was finally on his way home. This wasn't the first time he'd found himself cursing Loid Forger's name.

Officially, Franky ran a small tobacco shop in the Ostanian capital city of Berlint. But unofficially, Franky's shop was peddling more than just newspapers and cigarettes. He secretly dealt in all the sorts of information a certain spy from Westalis might need to do his job. So long as Loid was willing to pay, Franky did everything from forging documents to obtaining the entrance-exam questions for an elite private school.

But even though Loid Forger came off as a refined gentleman who wouldn't hurt a fly, the man was a shameless taskmaster. He was constantly drafting Franky to babysit the kid he'd adopted for his mission and even to help with the occasional spying objective. On this last job, Franky had hurt his back and ended up at the local hospital where he was quickly becoming a regular.

Loid worked as a psychiatrist at the same hospital—that was his cover identity—and Franky was always tempted to stick him with the bills for his treatment, but that was merely a fantasy. Who knew how Loid might react?

If I could afford to, I'd refuse all his weird requests. I'm an intelligence asset, not his dang personal assistant. But the problem was, he couldn't afford to. One of his passions was developing new spy gear, a hobby that yielded plenty of practical benefits but consumed endless amounts of cash. He had no choice but to keep agreeing to whatever ridiculous nonsense Twilight was willing to pay him to do.

Usually those with money and power were not also blessed with good looks, but somehow Loid had turned out handsome, rich, *and* powerful, while Franky was none of the above. The world could be so unfair. Even the fake family Loid had put together for his job was nearly perfect, with a drop-dead gorgeous wife and a little girl who, despite being annoying sometimes, was pretty cute too. They even had a dog.

If I was half as handsome as that guy, I'd be living a life of romance and excitement right now. Everything comes down to the way you look. Always has.

Franky suddenly realized he must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. He'd let himself get so lost in his thoughts that now he was physically lost as well. He had intended to go straight home, but now he wasn't sure where he was. It appeared to be some sort of garden, but he didn't see anyone else around. He could see the hospital's inpatient ward nearby—maybe the space was intended for patients' use?

That meant he'd circled around to the opposite side of the hospital and was now that much farther from home. *Just my luck*, he thought, sighing and rubbing his temples. As he set about retracing his steps, he heard a voice from the corner of the garden.

Franky turned toward the sound and saw a patch of snow-white roses in full bloom. The voice seemed to be coming from that direction.

Is someone singing? Entranced by the faint but beautiful voice, Franky approached the thicket of roses and peeked inside. There he saw a girl in white pajamas. She was clasping her hands in front of her and singing. Her long blond hair extended nearly to her hips. She was, in a word, gorgeous. Franky figured she was sixteen, maybe seventeen years old. Her eyes were closed, and she didn't seem to have noticed him. *Is she a patient here?*

Her voice was staggeringly beautiful. Franky knew it was cheesy, but he couldn't help but think that this was the voice of an angel. Even though the song was one he'd never heard before, he could tell the girl was skillfully navigating its intricate lyrics.

Finally, the song ended, but the girl's eyes remained closed. The garden lapsed into a pleasant silence as the last echoes of her singing faded away. Franky couldn't stop himself from reflexively applauding.

The girl's thin shoulders twitched in surprise.

"Who's there?" she whispered in a frightened voice, wrapping her arms protectively around herself.

Now he'd done it. She thought he was some kind of stalker or something.

"Oh, no, I'm not a creep or anything," Franky tried to explain. "Er, I mean, I was just on the way back from my ortho appointment. I heard this beautiful song and then saw you singing, and I shoulda said something, but it was just so pretty that I was, like, entranced... But anyway, I'm really sorry I surprised you like that." He held up his hands and backed away.

The apology seemed to work. The girl relaxed her defensive pose. "No, I'm sorry, I completely overreacted," she said. "I, um... I did very much appreciate the applause. Thank you for that."

"Y-yeah, sure..." Franky mumbled, taken aback by her sweet, bashful smile. He scratched the back of his neck. "Look. I, uh, dunno much about music, but that was, like, truly moving. It was really, really good."

"Th-that's very kind of you to say." She blushed a deep crimson at the intensity of his praise.

"So, uh, why are you singing out here all by yourself?" Franky asked, looking up at the hospital ward behind them. "Oh, right, I bet you couldn't sing in your room without bothering your roommates, huh?"

"Oh, I have a private room," she explained, her eyes still closed. "But we have quiet hours at night. I'm not good at singing quietly, and I wouldn't want to disturb the people in the neighboring rooms. I wish I had a soundproof room."

"Yeah, I dunno that soundproofing hospital rooms is a great idea," Franky said. *She wants a soundproof hospital room? Must be rich,* he thought. Of course, she was staying at Berlint General Hospital, the most famous hospital in the nation's capital city. It was the hospital of choice for politicians, celebrities, and business magnates, so Franky had to imagine a private room within it would cost a small fortune. No wonder she had such an ethereal vibe to her—she probably had wealth enough to be free of worldly concerns.

Inspecting her more closely, he noticed that even her pajamas looked more expensive than anything he owned. She was likely some magnate's daughter, raised as a princess in some secluded private estate. And yet he didn't sense a hint of haughtiness from her. Maybe real-life princesses actually were as pure and graceful and kindhearted as the ones in fairy tales.

Franky thought back to Twilight's fake daughter, a girl who was posing as a little princess in order to attend the elite Eden Academy. *This* was what true royalty looked like, not Anya Forger. The two girls might as well have come from completely different worlds.

Two worlds that I got no business being in, he reminded himself. Franky nodded at the girl and turned to leave.

"Um..." she called after him.

"Yeah?" he said. When he turned back to face her, she finally opened her eyes, and he saw that they glimmered like deep, clear jewels. She wasn't looking at Franky, but off into the distance.

"If you have time to spare," she began hesitantly, "and you wouldn't consider it a bother... would you care to hear one more song?"

The offer sounded almost painfully sincere, and Franky couldn't imagine who else she'd be talking to, yet her eyes wouldn't meet his. Suddenly, Franky spotted the white cane lying near her feet and finally understood.

She's blind. He wondered if that was why she was in the hospital, or if maybe the blindness was a symptom of some other condition.

Franky gazed at her beautiful face as she waited nervously for his reply. "Yeah, sure," he said after a moment.

"Thank you." Her eyes glittered, and her whole face lit up.

Franky's heart skipped a beat. *She's a child, you idiot,* he reprimanded himself. *Don't you go getting all googly-eyed over her.*

"I guess I don't got anything urgent waiting for me at home," he said. It was better not to come off as too eager.

The girl didn't seem offended. She nodded and smiled. "May I ask your name?"

"It's Franky."

"Mine is Alessa," she said. "Alessa Baltzar."

Her smile was as bright as a flower in full bloom.



"You seem to be in a strangely good mood lately," Loid said. He was studying Franky from across the table at the coffee shop where they often met. Today, Loid had come to pick up a new miniature listening device that he'd commissioned from Franky.

"Huh, is that right?" Franky said. "How about that." He pretended not to notice as Loid's eyes suspiciously probed him.

This didn't seem like the same man who, until recently, had been sulking over being dumped yet again. But watching him gaze out the window now, Loid could swear it looked as though Franky was ready to break into song.

"Well, it's a beautiful day, after all," Franky said.

"It's cloudy," Loid said.

"And so what if it is?" Franky said. "As long as there's no rain, it's all good as far as I'm concerned! You can't go out when it's raining, right? Wouldn't wanna catch a cold or something."

Loid raised an eyebrow at his asset's unusually cheery reply. *Perhaps he's been dumped so many times it's finally broken him mentally. Or maybe he's on some sort of natural high from all the work he's been doing. Either way, I don't like this. I need Franky's undivided attention focused on intelligence gathering, child protection, and resource development if my mission is to succeed.*

"Anything new in your life lately?" he asked with a carefully controlled tone of nonchalance.

Franky chuckled. "Let's just say that even in the most barren of deserts, one can still find a flower in bloom."

So it is a girl then, Loid thought, relaxing a little. Franky must have fallen for some attractive waitress or something, clearly having learned nothing from his past experiences. *Just another case of unrequited love that likely won't amount to anything. Nothing to be concerned about.*

After this girl turned him down, however, the problems would begin. Loid cringed at the thought of having to listen to Franky moan about his miserable luck as he drank himself into yet another stupor—but that was a problem for another day.

As Loid took a sip of his usual coffee with milk, he recalled what Yor had told him that morning. "Oh, that's right. Franky, can you come by the house after this?"

"What, you need a babysitter again?" Franky asked, skeptically.

"No, Yor wanted me to invite you. You've been helping out so much lately, she said she wanted to cook you something."

"Aw, I appreciate that, but I got someplace I need to be. Give Yor my best, though," Franky said cheerfully. His face lit up as he remembered something. "Oh! Loid, do you remember that record collection you bought when you were trying to culture up your kid for that Eden Academy interview?"

"Sure," said Loid. They'd barely ended up listening to any of the records. Every time he'd tried to play one of them for Anya, she had promptly dozed off. He'd abandoned the project before long. The record collection was now gathering dust in a corner of her room.

Franky leaned over the table. "Wasn't there some opera in there?"

"I think so?"

"Could I borrow those sometime?"

"Huh?" Loid stared at Franky, puzzled. He was not the sort of man Loid would have expected to have an interest in opera. In fact, he doubted Franky had much of an interest in music at all. *Although when Franky was obsessed with that Monica girl, he became a regular at her cigar bar, despite knowing nothing about cigars,* he recalled. *Maybe this new one works as an usher at the opera house or something? Or at a music store? It could just be a café that plays classical music. Well, whatever it is, this is a man who will never learn.* Loid nodded.

"Thanks a bunch, Loid," Franky said. "Now, I got an important promise to keep, so I gotta go. Catch you later." He sped out of the café, nearly bouncing out the door.

Dumbfounded, Loid watched Franky's back fade out of sight. "I just hope this doesn't end up with him asking me for help again," he muttered as he fidgeted with the recording device Franky had brought him. Franky had refined the design multiple times now, and this new version was surprisingly light. It would be perfect.

"Is their dog really that big?" Alessa asked.

"Oh yeah," Franky said. His voice and hands were animated as he described Bond to Alessa. "He's so big, the kid who lives there can ride around on him. He's honestly more like a small bear than a big dog. Real thick fur, too."

They were seated side by side on the bench in the hospital's back garden. For the last month, Franky had been coming there every chance he had to trade stories with Alessa and to listen to her sing. Alessa always enjoyed the small gifts of candy or flowers he brought, reacting to them as if he'd given her gold or jewels. She'd laugh at even his dumbest stories in her pure, beautiful voice. But most of all, Franky loved the beaming smile that showed him just how much she looked forward to his visits. Every time he saw it, it filled him with a joy he'd never known before—albeit one tinged with awkwardness and embarrassment.

"Sometimes we take him to the park to throw one of those flying discs for him, but that dog is so stupid," Franky said. "He'll be chompin' at the bit all the way to the park, and then once we get there, he just spaces out and ignores the disc completely."

Alessa had gasped at the description of Bond and sighed enviously at the stories. "I've always wanted a big dog, ever since I was little," she said. "But my father would never allow it. He said all that dander and fur could be bad for our throats."

"Aw," Franky said, his shoulders slumping. It broke his heart a little to see Alessa look sad like that. *Her dad probably had a point,* he had to admit.

The thing was, Alessa's dad was *the* Baltzar.

At the risk of Loid calling him a stalker again, Franky had used all his skills as an intelligence broker to learn everything he could about Alessa. As young as she looked, she was actually nineteen. She came from a family of famous musicians: her father was a world-renowned pianist, and her mother was an equally well-known opera singer. Her brother, who was three years older than Alessa, was a ready making waves as a violinist. Her uncle was the conductor of a notable orchestra, and her aunt was regarded as a brilliant composer. The family's patrons were said to include some of Ostania's top business and political leaders.

Two years ago, Alessa had been scheduled to make a spectacular debut at her mother's opera company, but a neurological disease had robbed her of her ability to see. That was how she'd come to be a patient at Berlint General Hospital.

Despite her ill fortune, Alessa hadn't let her talents fade. She practiced daily in the garden behind the hospital. Franky admired her deeply for that. If it had been him, he'd probably have lashed out at everyone and everything around him, becoming a sullen, self-destructive wreck. Yet not once in the month they'd known each other had Alessa uttered a single complaint.

That made him want to help her all the more.

"You know what? Next week, I can bring Bond with me," Franky offered. "Sure, he's dumb, but he's a total sweetheart, so he's nothing to be scared of. Maybe you can give him some dog treats or something."

"Do you really mean it?" Alessa's pale face flushed red, and she rose from the bench in excitement. But just as quickly as it had appeared, the excitement on her face faded and she sat back down.

"What's wrong? Is it the fur? I mean, yeah... he does have a lot of that... Well, maybe I can find a shorthaired dog somewhere and borrow him for a day—"

But Alessa quickly cut him off. "No," she said, her voice little more than a murmur. "It's just that I have my eye surgery next week..."

Franky was startled. "Seriously?! Why didn't you say something sooner? That's huge!"

"I'm so sorry," Alessa said, her eyes welling with tears.

"No! I'm the one who should be sorry, really." After a moment of awkward silence, he continued, his voice suddenly full of cheer. "But hey, that's a pretty simple procedure, isn't it? I bet it'll be all over within an hour or so."

Alessa made no reply.

"Uh, so... not a simple procedure, then?" Franky ventured.

Alessa nodded slightly. Her eyes were devoid of their usual sparkle. Franky felt a sickly twinge in his heart. For a while, neither of them said anything. The clouds above them were thickening, beginning to threaten rain.

Finally, Alessa spoke. "The truth is, I... I'm scared. The doctors said I'll be under anesthesia and it'll all be over before I wake. But I can't stop thinking, what if I never do wake up? What if I can never sing the songs I love again, or never speak with you again?" Her quiet voice began to break. The locks of blond hair that flowed in gentle curves down her shoulders trembled. "I've never been able to enjoy speaking to any man the way I do with you, Franky. I want to be able to keep singing my songs, and I want you to keep hearing them."

"Alessa..." Franky started, but he wasn't sure what else to say.

"That's all I need to be happy."

Franky didn't know it was possible to feel such pain and such happiness at the same time. To think that she valued him of all people as much as the music she so clearly loved... But more than that, he was terrified. Even with all the advances in surgical techniques in recent years, there was still no guarantee that a patient would wake from general anesthesia. Franky's heart clenched with the exact same fear that she seemed to be feeling.

"Yeah, I get it," Franky said, his voice much more cheerful than he actually felt. "I know how scary surgery can be. You know my friend Loid, that preening pretty boy I told you about? When he had his wisdom teeth removed, he was so scared he fainted right there in the dentist's chair."

"He fainted?"

"Yeah, then he cried when he saw the needle. The doctor had to chase him around like a toddler!"

"Really?"

Franky leaned in close to her and whispered into her ear. "Well, the truth is... none of that was Loid. Both those stories were really about me."

"O-oh." Alessa didn't seem to know what to say.

"I like to keep that part secret when I tell the story, though."

Alessa abruptly burst out laughing. When the laughter subsided, she thanked him.

"You're gonna be okay," Franky said. "I think your surgery is gonna go fine. No way is anything bad gonna happen to someone as kind and sweet as you. I promise you that."

Her smile was fading, and now tears were welling in Alessa eyes. "Oh, Franky, I'm not like that at all," she said hoarsely. "I'm

not the kind person you think I am. I'm a disgusting, awful human being. I always looked down on others because I thought I was better than them, that I was special. I was so conceited and felt like I deserved every pretty, sparkly thing in this world. That's why I don't have a single friend who visits me here."

Franky could see sadness in Alessa's beautiful, doll-like face, but not a hint of self-pity. Despite the shame she felt over her past behavior, he could see a strong sense of resolve as she looked to her future.

"I've lost so much, going blind like this. But it's taught me how to see what's truly important in life, what's truly beautiful." The faintly humid breeze fiddled with her hair as she spoke. She turned to Franky and smiled sweetly. "It makes me so happy when you tell me your wonderful stories and try to encourage me. You never demand that I cheer up or be strong. You always just tell me that things'll be okay. I'm really glad I met you."

Franky wasn't sure how to respond to any of this. He simply stared into her deep hazel eyes. He could see himself reflected in them even if she couldn't see him. But there was an obstacle between them even greater than that, and Franky was feeling it more strongly than ever. Alessa had implied that he was beautiful, that now that she'd lost her sight and so much else, she could see what was truly important.

But Franky hadn't been telling Alessa who he truly was.

"I'm going to get that surgery. When it's over, will you be there for me?" Alessa asked, her white cheeks flushing red. "And will you be there for me every day after that?"

"You say that now," Franky said, in his typical jesting tone. "But I could be, like, some squat, hideous troll, you know?"

"I don't care!" Alessa said, sounding slightly angry. "I don't care what you look like. I don't care how squat or hideous you are!" At this point, even her ears were turning red. She quickly regained her composure. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that you *are* those things, I'm just trying to say that I wouldn't care at all if you were—"

"You don't know the half of it, Alessa." For once, Franky was glad that she couldn't see him. He wouldn't want anyone seeing his face right now.

"Um, Franky?"

When Franky didn't respond, Alessa reached toward him with a slim finger. Franky watched the finger futilely probe the empty air, and then without thinking, he reached out and grasped it between his hands.

"Oh, good." Alessa's sightless eyes smiled. "I was worried you'd gotten up and left."

Franky said nothing. The finger in his grasp felt so frail and ephemeral, as if it were made of glass. It seemed as though it could shatter at any moment. He wanted to grasp it tightly, but instead, he gently released it.

"Looks like it's about to rain," he said, finally. "You'd better get back to your room. Wouldn't want to catch a cold right before your surgery."

"Yes, you're right," she said in her usual controlled tone. She gave him an obedient nod. "When the bandages come off, will you come see me again?"

"Sure," Franky said. He walked away as she stood waving in front of the hospital doors. His mind was made up—he needed to call Loid.



I had a feeling this would become a problem. And surprise, surprise, now it has.

The fact that Loid's intuition had been correct brought him no satisfaction whatsoever. He stood there for a moment, his arms crossed in front of him, staring at Franky in silence.

Finally, he spoke. "You're saying that you want to be wearing a completely different face for when this girl gets her bandages off?"

"Yes! Please, you gotta help me."

"Denied," Loid said flatly.

When Franky had phoned to request this back-alley meeting, the story he'd told had been both entirely what Loid had expected and something of a surprise. In the past, Franky had asked him for things like dating techniques, relationship advice, and the

secrets of being appealing to women. He'd never asked for a new face. That just showed how serious he was about this girl, Loid supposed. But the idea of using a special mask to become someone else and then pursuing a relationship as that person was beyond absurd. For one thing, the deception could only last for so long. Franky was merely an intelligence asset, not an actual spy. It wouldn't take long for someone to see through a simple mask.

"Pursue your romances with your own face," Loid commanded as he turned to leave. "We're done here."

"Wait!" called Franky, chasing after him. "Remember how you and I masked up as SSS officers to question Yor? Something like that is all I'm looking for here! But maybe this time with better hair. I'll wear different clothes and stuff too. I just want to change my vibe a little, you know?" Franky threw his arms around Loid's waist and grabbed on tight to keep him from walking away. "Just make it as far from what I actually look like as possible, okay? I know that last disguise looked pretty good, but it was still too close."

"How was that one close to you at all?" Loid asked as he peeled off Franky's hands.

Franky wasn't giving up. "Make me a handsome guy with blond hair and blue eyes this time. No, wait—I don't wanna look like you, that'd be creepy. What do you say we make it with long, wavy black hair and a boyish face? Almond-shaped eyes with thin eyebrows, and maybe a little bit of an intellectual look?"

"Trust me on this, Franky. Stick with your own face." Loid sighed. "How many times do I have to tell you? You can't deceive women into a relationship."

"You do keep saying that. But coming from you, that's just rich."

"Goodbye, Franky," Loid said.

"Okay, seriously, wait! I'm begging you here!" Franky darted in front of him to block his retreat. "Oh great Twilight! You're my only hope! Pleeeeease!"

Franky knelt on the floor before him, groveling so low his forehead touched the concrete. Loid stared down at him. Franky had always been persistent, but he'd never been this bad before.

"Are you really that in love with her?" Loid said.

At this point, Franky usually answered with something like *"Yes! That's why I need your help! Please, take pity on your poor, humble Scruffy!"* But this time, he said nothing.

Maybe he really was serious this time. If that were the case, then Loid had even more reason not to help. What Franky wanted simply wasn't possible. It was not an easy thing to discard one's own face, and Franky was a smart enough man to understand that.

"Listen, Franky, I can help you plan the perfect date," Loid offered. "But if you go as someone else and it does work out, then what? Are you going to come to me to change your face every time you meet? If you truly are serious about her, then go and see her just as you are. That's the best thing you could do." With that, Loid turned to leave once more.

"...tzar," Franky muttered. His voice was barely audible with his face pressed to the ground.

Loid stopped at the entrance to the alley. "What?"

"It's the Baltzar girl," Franky repeated, lifting his head. His thick glasses hid any potential emotion that might have shown in his eyes.

Loid furrowed his brow. "Baltzar? The famous family of musicians?"

"Yeah."

The Baltzars were among the most famous musicians in the world, and their patrons surely included scores of Ostanian magnates WISE would want to learn more about. That particular intelligence pipeline was one that Loid would be more than eager to tap into.

"Alessa herself was a promising opera singer. If she gets her vision back, she could be a worldwide sensation. That could lead to all sorts of intelligence-gathering opportunities," Franky said in a dispassionate voice. "Helping me could be a good deal for you too."

Franky's words landed coldly on Loid's ears. "And you're sure you're okay with that?" His own voice was no less icy.

"Yeah, I am." The expression on Franky's face was one Loid had never seen before.

"I see."

Is that really your answer? Loid made no pretense of being a virtuous person, and there was no denying the value of what Franky was offering him. As a spy, he should be accepting it eagerly.

And yet, looking at the man before him, Loid couldn't help but feel disheartened.

Loid had deceived countless women, used them for his own purposes, and callously discarded them when they had no further value to him. He had no intentions of apologizing for that and no reason to think they'd ever forgive him if he did. His hands were dirty, but he had a duty to fulfill, ideals to protect. None of it had been for his own gratification.

But out of fear of losing the person he loved, Franky was going to deceive her, and even unwittingly turn her into an informant for a foreign intelligence agency.

Something about that didn't sit right with Loid.

Franky isn't even a spy, so why would he...?

The answer hit him.

Loid was disappointed. Franky could be a fool, but Loid had never considered him to be a bad person. Because despite how frivolous he was, Franky was a hard person to hate. He was a bit of a goof, but he had his redeeming qualities. When all was said and done, Loid had never disliked the generally good-natured informant, who always tried so hard to be charming. Indeed, had he not long ago dispensed with emotional such ties as "friendship," he might even have regarded him with some small amount of—

You're being ridiculous.

Loid recoiled at his own thoughts. What was he doing? He didn't trust anyone. He didn't hold feelings of any sort for anyone. Weren't those the rules he lived by? Weren't those the rules people like him needed to follow in order to survive?

I'm a spy, and this man is a valuable source of information. Nothing more, and nothing less. He didn't need to be cheering up Franky when he was dumped by one of his crushes, or inviting him to dinner, or teaching him ridiculous things like the secrets of seducing women. There was no need for them to have that sort of relationship. There never had been.

"Okay. I'll do it," Loid said.

"Thank you," Franky said with a sigh of relief. He was back to his old self again, his contorted expression gone. "I owe you one."

Loid looked him over with his cold eyes and said nothing. He turned and this time finally walked away.



The weather outside was nothing short of flawless.

His position there may have simply been a cover, but Dr. Loid Forger did work at the hospital. It was hardly a place where he needed to sneak around, and yet now Loid was hiding in the shadows behind the building, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible as he waited near Franky and Alessa's meeting spot.

He knew the back garden well, having previously identified it as a potential escape route. As usual, it was empty. He had no idea who had planted all the white roses or why, but they only made the place seem somehow more lonesome.

"Um, excuse me. Are you... Franky?" Alessa had arrived late and was clearly nervous as she approached the bench beside the roses where Franky sat waiting for her.

"That's me," Franky said, rising to his feet. He barely looked like Franky at all. His soft, unruly brown hair and delicate, youthful features complemented his small stature well. He wore a simple gray turtleneck sweater, bright denim jeans, and sneakers, an outfit that bore little resemblance to his typical attire. He'd bought them all especially for this day. The thick trademark glasses were gone, as was the single earring on his left ear.

"I'm so glad you made it through the surgery okay," he said.

"Oh, yes."

A smile spread across Franky's fake face, and she returned it, shyly. It was clear from her expression how much affection she held for him.

Alessa was indisputably a beautiful young woman. Between her beauty, her youth, the Baltzar name, and the passion for singing Franky swore she possessed, it seemed there was no

doubt that she would match or even exceed her mother's success at the opera.

And then she would inevitably gain many influential patrons.

Whether she liked it or not, all sorts of information—useful and otherwise—would be flowing through her soon. Completely unbeknownst to her, she'd already been turned into an intelligence asset by the man she cared for.

Ever since that day, Franky hadn't had much to say. Even that morning, when they were applying the mask's special makeup, he spoke no more than necessary.

"And you're sure you're okay with that?"

Abruptly recalling the moment, Loid cringed at himself for ever having asked. He'd always prioritized thinking through things rationally and advancing his missions as smoothly as possible. When had he started harboring these kinds of irrelevant concerns?

Loid brushed the thoughts aside and focused his attention on the two people in front of him.

"Here, a little something to commemorate your upcoming discharge," Franky said, handing Alessa a bouquet of flowers.

She blushed and buried her nose in the bundle of white dahlias. "They're so beautiful."

Alessa went on to talk about when she might be discharged, how much she wanted Franky to visit her at home, and how eager she was to introduce him to her parents and older brother. Franky watched her calmly and quietly as she spoke.

"Oh, and after that, I'd like to go to an amusement park! I want to ride a Ferris wheel at least once in my life. I was always so busy with practicing and rehearsing that I never made the time to do anything like that. But now, after my surgery, my parents are telling me to take time to rest and recover, and, well... If you don't mind, I was hoping I could go there with you, Franky." Alessa made this last plea in a soft whisper.

Loid expected Franky to leap at that request with a smile and say yes to her, but he didn't so much as nod his head.

"So, um, listen," he said, in a quiet voice. "There's something I have to tell you."

"Oh?" Alessa said, smiling. "What is it?" Her eyes were unguarded and trusting, like those of a small child, and a warm

smile seemed poised to burst out in response to whatever Franky said.

Franky looked around nervously. A gentle smile spread across his face. "I have to leave the country on some urgent business, so I'm afraid I'm not gonna be able to see you again. I'm sorry."

The budding smile froze on Alessa's lips. "W-what?"

Loid was nearly as bewildered as she was. He hadn't anticipated anything like this. Franky merely sat there, smiling calmly with the lips that Loid had made for him.

"Why?" Alessa clutched the bouquet of flowers in dismay. "But... but you promised you'd be by my side forever, Franky!"

"I'm so sorry," Franky said. His voice was kind, kinder than Loid ever imagined it could be. But behind the kindness was real strength and resolve. It was clear that this was a proclamation that would not be rescinded.

"H-how could you?" Alessa stammered. Tears welled up in her eyes and began to flow freely down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry." Franky hesitated before he spoke again. "Alessa? Could you sing for me one last time?"

To Loid, his plea almost sounded like a prayer.

After working through several sniffles and sobs, Alessa began to sing. Her voice was hoarsened by crying, but her sad love song came through clearly and beautifully. Franky listened intently, as if trying to burn the moment into his memories forever.

Loid averted his eyes. Without either of them noticing, he quietly slipped away.



"Hey, there," Loid said as he approached Franky.

Franky was sitting behind the counter at their usual bar and tilting a glass. His mask was gone, and his face was already red from alcohol. He met Loid's greeting with silence.

Loid took a seat at the bar, leaving one open seat between them, and ordered a martini from the elderly, taciturn bartender.

"I see you're still drinkin' that snooty stuff," Franky grumbled. "One for me too," he called out to the bartender.

The bartender delivered two strong cocktails with olives. The men quietly sipped their drinks for a little while until Franky finally broke the silence.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I shouldn't have played you like that."

"It's fine," Loid said, staring into his martini glass. "If you hadn't done what you did, I'd have thought a lot less of you."

"You really have changed." Franky chuckled. "Keep that up and you're gonna wind up in an early grave."

Despite his words, there was a hint of a concerned, even caring tone in his voice. Both men resumed drinking in silence. When Franky spoke again, his bloodshot eyes were cast down at the bar.

"Alessa deserves to live among things that are truly beautiful."

"Hmm. I see," said Loid.

A man like Franky, who dwelled in the darkness, couldn't see himself as being one of those beautiful things, Loid supposed. That was why he'd ended it. Unlike all of the others, though, she was the one girl who wouldn't have held his looks against him. She would have accepted him, no matter how he appeared. She might have even been able to accept his secret identity as an intelligence dealer—

Ah, Loid abruptly realized. *Franky knew that too.* Franky understood exactly how pure of heart she was, and that was the reason he'd came to Loid for help, playing the part of a lovestruck fool, begging to be transformed into someone else.

It was so that if they were ever to cross paths again, Alessa would never realize this Franky had been her Franky.

"Why didn't you just tell me the truth to begin with?" Loid asked.

"Hm?"

"You could have just told me there was a girl who had fallen for you and you needed my help to end it." If Franky had framed it like that, Loid figured he would have been perfectly willing to help. There had been no need for the whole roundabout ruse.

"Are you kidding me?" Franky snorted. "No way could I have asked you that! Can you imagine how humiliating it would have been if I'd been wrong about her intentions? I'd have dropped dead on the spot."

It was like he was already back to his old self again.

Loid swirled his empty glass around, watching the olive wobble around the edges. "I can't believe you were able to pull one over on *me*," he said.

"Aha! Turns out I'm not so bad at this after all!" Franky cackled triumphantly. "But man, I really wanted to go out with her too. I just had to go and do the right thing. I'm such an idiot." Franky slumped over the counter and moaned dramatically.

Loid looked away so as not to see the real tears that Franky was covering up with that bit of theater. Instead, he called out to the bartender and ordered another round of cocktails for himself and his friend.



"Congratulations! You're finally going home!"

"Good luck with all of the wonderful work you're doing!"

"I promise to go see you on that opera stage one day."

"Please give our best to your mother and father."

Everyone, from the hospital director to her full team of doctors and nurses, had turned out for Alyssa's official discharge from the hospital. Someone pressed a huge bouquet of flowers into her hands.

"Thank you so much for all that you've done for me," she said to them as she turned toward the car waiting for her beyond the hospital doors.



Everyone had been so kind to come, but the person she'd wanted to see most of all wasn't among them. She'd spent the last several days beating herself up over the way she had left things.

"How could you?"

Those had been the last words she'd said to him. But she understood now that there must have been circumstances behind what he did, and she regretted how immaturely she'd reacted.

I'm sorry, Franky. She wished she could tell him how grateful she was to him. She'd come to truly believe that wherever he was in this world, he was still rooting for her.

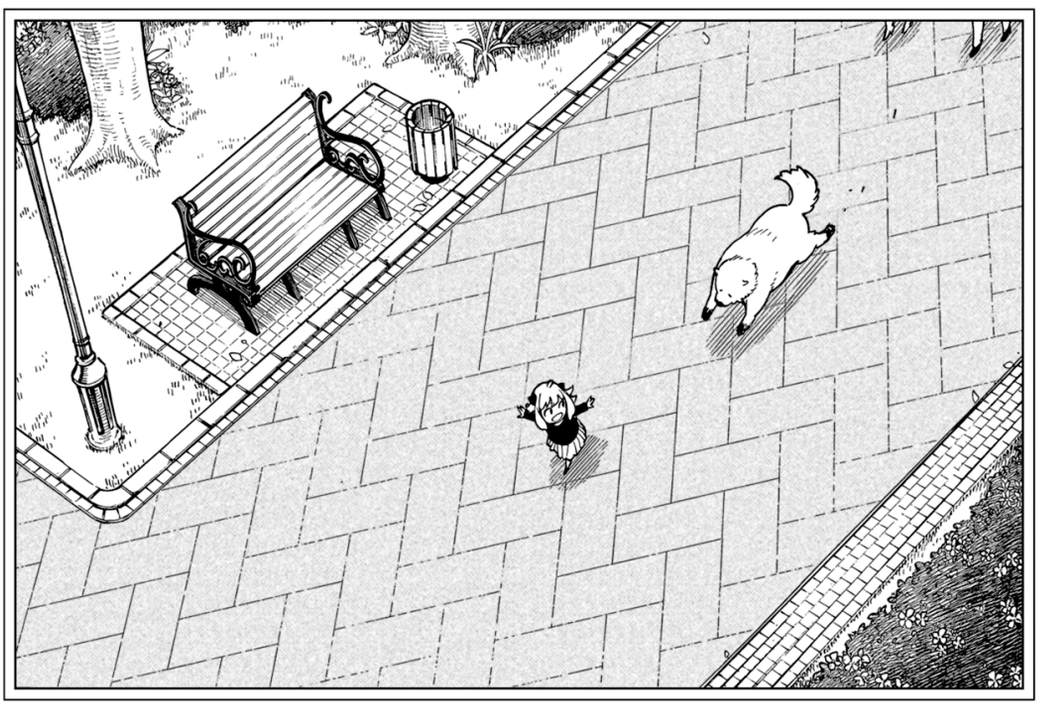
She stepped outside of the hospital that was so full of memories with him and brushed past a young man on the plaza outside. A familiar smell of tobacco wafted past her. *Franky?*

She twisted around to look at the man, only to find that she'd been mistaken. The color and style of his hair, his face—everything about him was different from the man she had known.

Disappointed, she tried to shake off thoughts of him as she stepped into the car.

The car started and sped away.

The young man she'd passed watched her fade into the distance, and although she would never hear the words, he quietly said his goodbyes.



MISSION 4

SPY×FAMILY

"**B**ond, fetch!"

"Worf!"

"Anya, Bond, stay where we can see you."

From underneath a clear blue sky, Yor called after Anya and Bond as she placed homemade sandwiches, fruit salad, and freshly baked cookies atop a large picnic blanket. She and Loid watched their adorable daughter Anya and their dog play with a flying disc.

"Don't worry, Yor. I'll keep an eye on them." Loid Forger, a.k.a. Twilight, surveyed the scene with a satisfied smile. *Absolutely perfect*, he thought. They looked like the quintessential happy family. Who could possibly see this and suspect they were anything but?

Even the tiniest hint of doubt can be enough to get a spy captured or killed. That was why it was so important to periodically arrange these moments of harmonious family life and display them to the world.

This morning, Loid had made a point of happening across various other families who lived in their building and exchanging greetings and polite conversation with each. He did this whenever we could weave together a brief break from his busy schedule, as he considered it an essential part of his mission.

"It's nice that we got some sun today," Loid said. "But the breeze is a tad chilly, don't you think?"

"I thought it might be, so I brought extra blankets just in case," Yor said. "Please, help yourself to one."

As Loid and Yor continued their conversation, Anya and Bond came racing back across the grass.

"Papa!" Anya called.

"What is it?" Loid asked. In keeping with his role of the ever-doting father, he hugged his child in his arms. "Are you hungry? Do you want a sandwich?"

Anya shook her head. "I'm not hungry yet," she said. "But that man over there wants to talk to you."

"That man...?"

His brow furrowed, Loid followed her extended finger to a lanky young man standing a short distance away. He wore a tattered sweatshirt, faded jeans, and a shabby pair of old tennis

shoes. He had a large bag slung over one shoulder and held a folding easel in the other. Upon closer inspection, Loid could see paint spatter of various colors on his shoes and clothes. He looked too young to be a working artist, so Loid assumed he must be an art school student.

Could he have been sent by the agency to covertly deliver a message? Disguise or no, it would be reckless for an agent to make direct contact with his cover family present. Loid needed to approach this situation with caution. He didn't sense any malice from the man, but he could still be an enemy agent.

As Loid was considering all this, the young man began walking toward him. Loid worked his lips into a harmless smile and stepped off the picnic blanket to greet him.

"I hope my daughter hasn't been bothering you," he said.

"No, not at all. I'm a painter, actually," the man said. He spoke clearly and with flat intonation. Loid found his voice to be vaguely pleasant. "Lately, though, I've had a hard time figuring out what I want to paint. It's clear that there's something my work is missing, but I just don't know what. I'm in what you might call a slump. I couldn't think of anything to paint today either and was about to go home when it finally hit me." The young man nodded humbly in Loid's direction. "Please, will you allow me to paint you?"

"You want to paint me?" Loid asked, making an innocently surprised expression. Inwardly, however, he was eyeing the man suspiciously. *What is this, really?* he wondered. Was this man an enemy agent after all? And if so, what was the purpose of this ruse?

Loid could detect no hint of deception in the man's words, however. Seeing through people's lies was an important part of his job, and he excelled at it. The young man standing in front of him didn't show any signs of someone who wasn't telling the truth.

"You want to paint a picture of *Papa?*" Anya clasped her hands in front of her and started breathing heavily with excitement.

The man shook his head, revealing streaks of dried oil paint mixed in with his black hair. Loid caught the smell of turpentine wafting off him as well.

"I was actually hoping to paint your whole family, not just your father."

"Even Bond?" Anya asked.

"Yes, of course," he replied. "And your dog too."

"Worf!" Bond barked.

"Oh, how kind of you to say. Thank you, good sir," the young man said to Bond as he respectfully shook the dog's front paw.

Loid was beginning to think this man really was a painter, or at least an aspiring one. But that didn't make his request any less of a problem. He was torn about how to respond. As a spy, even something as innocent as modeling for a painting meant leaving needless traces of "Loid Forger" behind. Careful not to show any concern in his expression, Loid casually glanced at the scene around him. As he'd feared, this exchange had attracted a significant amount of attention. A young couple on a nearby picnic blanket was now watching them curiously.

"What did he say?" the man asked.

"I think he wants them to model for him," said the woman. "Probably some sort of art school project?"

Drawing a lot of strange looks here could cause problems on his mission going forward. But on the other hand, refusing a reasonable request from a student could damage his reputation. *The problem is, I don't know who's out here watching me right now. If this were to be seen by some of the gossips in our building...*

Loid could easily imagine how they'd react.

"Did you hear about the Forgers? Some poor art student asked them to model for him, and they turned him down flat!"

"They seem so nice, but I guess they're cold at heart."

"They should have just let the poor lad paint them! It wouldn't have cost them anything."

"Maybe there was some sort of reason they didn't want to be painted."

Would a proper, ordinary family be expected to help a young student like this? No, because after all, today was his day off! He could refuse on the grounds that they'd wanted to spend this time together as a family.

Loid quickly finished making his mental calculations.

"I'm sorry, but I've been so busy at work lately. I was really looking forward to spending this time together as a family..."

But midway through his well-reasoned excuse, Anya let out a loud gasp.

"What was that for?" Loid asked. "What are you—"

"That patch!" Anya said, pointing at the back of the young artist's bag with a trembling finger.

"Oh, this?" The young man spun his bag around, revealing a round, sparkling patch that had been affixed to it. Bondman, Anya's favorite cartoon character, smiled at them from its center. "It was a prize you could win by eating Bondman chocolate bars. I thought it would look good on my bag."

"That one's so rare," Anya muttered, her voice trembling with excitement. "I've never seen it before." As a lover of both Bondman and prizes, Anya unsurprisingly began to drool over the patch.

A feeling of dread struck Loid.

"We can pick up some Bondman chocolate on our way home if you like," he hastily offered.

The young artist knelt to pat the shoulder of the young girl whose gaze was transfixed on his bag. "You can have it if you like," he casually offered,

"Really?!" Anya's wide eyes lit up.

"It's glued on, but I could give you the whole bag," he said. "I just need to keep the stuff inside. Let me see if I can find a garbage bag or something that I can put my things in."

As promised, the man stood up to search for a garbage bag, but Loid hastily rushed over to stop him. "That's very kind of you, but we can't let you go through so much trouble on her behalf," he insisted.

"But she really loves it," the young man said matter-of-factly. "I'm sure the patch would be much better off with her anyway." With that, he walked to a nearby drink stand and secured a large plastic bag from the merchant. Without any hint of hesitation, he dumped the contents of his canvas bag into the plastic bag and handed his now-empty bag to Anya.

"Here you go."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Anya said, literally jumping for joy as she embraced her new Bondman-adorned bag.

Seriously? thought Loid. *What is with this guy?* The man said nothing to suggest he expected them to model for his painting in

exchange for his generosity, but he had certainly made it hard for them to refuse. Those with virtuous intentions were so often the hardest to deal with. *It seems we don't have a choice now.*

Loid made up his mind. At least this wasn't some famous artist. A portrait painted by a student shouldn't cause any serious issues.

"Please allow me to thank you on my daughter's behalf," Loid told him. "If you're sure that we'd be sufficient for your purposes, we'd be happy to model for your painting. Wouldn't we, Yor?"

Loid turned to his wife, who'd been watching the whole exchange from the picnic blanket. She eagerly nodded her ascent. "Yes! Anya is so happy. Of course we'll help you any way we can."

"Oh, I hardly did anything worthy of all that," the young man said, looking pleasantly surprised by their reaction. He extended a paint-smeared hand to Loid. "Thank you very much. This means a great deal to me. My name is Felix Curtis. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine. I'm Loi—"

Loid froze midhandshake.

Felix Curtis was one of the most famous names in contemporary art. He was reported to be something of an eccentric, only rarely appearing in public, so his face was not widely known. But his paintings had been selling for shocking sums of late. In fact, Loid had read about another record-setting auction in the newspaper just a few days ago. *Could this really be him?* Loid wondered. *I'm quite sure I've read that Felix Curtis was in his midthirties.* The man standing before him couldn't have been more than a teenager.

"Loid Forger," Loid said, returning to his introduction. "Sorry, you caught me by surprise there. I take it you're not *the* Felix Curtis, just someone who shares a name with him?"

"No, that's me," he said plainly, as if the topic held little interest for him.

Oh no.

For all Loid's skill at controlling his emotions, it would have been clear to anyone watching that he had not been expecting that. "I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you."

"Papa, do you know him?" Anya asked, tugging at his jacket.

"No, it's just... Felix Curtis is an extremely famous painter," Loid said, carefully hiding his own deepening unease.

"I'll just start setting up," Felix said. "You all can get back to enjoying yourself. Please, don't mind me."

But Anya was staring intently as Felix set up his easel on the grass. "Are you really super famous?" she asked.

"Oh, I'd hardly say *that*," Felix answered. "Just normal famous."

"Are you a billionaire?" she asked.

"No. I donate most of the money I earn to places like art schools. Painting costs a lot of money. I want young artists to be free to paint without worrying about those costs."

Loid listened closely as Felix answered Anya's questions sincerely and at length. His answers showed an admirable spirit and, if true, would make him a man of quite virtuous character. Which would mean that any attempt to back out of his request now would paint the Forger family in an even worse light.

"Um, Loid..." Yor was whispering at him, trying to get his attention. "Is this man really that famous? I could have sworn he was just an art student."

Loid lowered his voice to answer. "He's certainly the talk of the art world right now. He's known for layering transparent watercolors to create almost photorealistic paintings. I've seen some of his work in museums, and they truly are impressive. Art critics praise him for being able to 'turn any canvas into a camera lens.'" Loid clenched his teeth at his own words. That was exactly what made this such a big problem. If a photorealistic painting of him and his family were to be displayed as a featured exhibit in a museum—

That would be very, very bad. Loid would need to avoid that fate, whatever the cost.

"Wow, and he looks around Yuri's age." Yor sounded truly impressed, but after a moment, her smile faded and her brow tightened. "When you say that he's famous, that doesn't mean this painting of us could end up in a museum or something, right?"

"If this were an ordinary painter, then no," Loid said carefully. "But in his case, even his rough sketches are in great demand. An actual, completed masterwork from him? Well..."

Loid watched the blood drain from Yor's face as he spoke.



Loid wasn't aware, of course, that his wife had her own secret identity—Thorn Princess, the contract killer. So far, no one had ever seen the face of the Thorn Princess and survived.

But there was still a one-in-a-million chance that someone could.

One day, through some blunder or another, she could fail to kill a target. And that target could go on to a visit a museum and see the works of Felix Curtis, where they could learn that the Thorn Princess had a husband and daughter. The odds were slim, but she couldn't dismiss the possibility that this painting could endanger Loid and Anya.

What can I do? Yor thought frantically. *How could I possibly back out of something we've agreed to when I can't even explain the reason why?* Yor thought hard, but a solution failed to come to her. Nevertheless, her resolve was adamant.

I have to make sure he doesn't paint my face!



"Is something wrong?" Loid asked. Understanding none of the circumstances behind her distress, Loid was both confused by and concerned about his wife going pale and lapsing into a sudden silence. "Are you feeling sick?"

"No! I couldn't be healthier!" Yor declared with a forced smile.

"Well, you're sweating quite a bit."

"Yes, it's just that... it's very hot today," Yor said, pulling off her hooded knit sweater. Unfortunately, she'd only worn a thin tank top beneath it, and the day's cold wind sent her abruptly sneezing.

"If anything, it feels a bit chilly out," Loid said. "That's why you brought extra blankets, right?"

"Well, I was mistaken," Yor said between shivers, the inauthentic smile still upon her face. "It's turned out to be very

warm!"

What is going on with you, Yor? Loid was hesitant to push the issue further, but he was puzzled by his wife's odd behavior. *Based on what she said before, it sounds as though she was happy to model for a student painting but has reservations about being depicted in a museum piece—the same as me. But Yor isn't a spy and has no particular need of anonymity...*

No, I almost forgot. Yor works at city hall. Loid could see how having a widely recognized face from a famous painting could cause trouble at her workplace. For one thing, there were those who were always quick to judge what government employees did on the taxpayers' dime, and they could find the painting inappropriate for someone in Yor's position. Or at the very least, Yor could be worried that this might bring unwanted attention from her colleagues. *Her relationship with her coworkers already seems somewhat fraught. Yes, that's most likely the reason.* Loid nodded to himself, satisfied with his theory.



"You're way off, Papa," Anya said.

"Hm?" Loid was startled to find Anya suddenly at his side and staring up at him. But this certainly wasn't the first time he'd heard her muttering some nonsense completely out of the blue. "What do you mean? I'm way off of what?"

"Nothing," she said hastily.

Just as Loid cocked his eyebrow at yet another inexplicable exchange with his daughter, Felix finished setting up his easel.

"Now," he said. "If you're ready to begin..."

Yor slowly raised a trembling hand. "Um, can I go to the bathroom first?"

"Of course," Felix said. "Take your time."

"Yes, please excuse me."

Yor raced toward the park's public bathroom at an incredible speed, leaving three people and one dog she'd passed gazing after her with mouths agape.

"Does your mother run track or something?" one of them asked Anya.

"Mama is a myoo-niss-a-pull worker," Anya said.

"A municipal worker? Well, good for you for knowing a big word like that!" the woman said. Anya giggled shyly as Bond let out a big bark of support.

While Loid listened in on Anya's conversation, he couldn't help but be distracted by Yor's trip to the bathroom. Had she just needed to go that badly? Or was there more to it?

Maybe he'd overthought things when he'd developed his theory about Yor not wanting to be painted. She was probably just cold from being outside all day. Loid was pondering whether he should drape his jacket over her shoulders when she returned, or if perhaps a blanket would be better, when he began to suspect Anya was staring at him again. He even felt as though he could sense a trace of pity in the heat of her gaze, but by the time he looked down, she was helping Felix brush Bond's coat.



Yor returned several minutes later.

"Sorry about the wait," Yor called out. Loid was relieved to hear from the tone of her voice that she was back to her old, confident self.

"That was quick, Y—*Yor*?!" Loid looked up to greet her and yelped in surprise.

Yor's lustrous black hair had been swept forward and now completely covered her face. Worse still, the hair that dangled past her chin had been looped around her neck to make what looked like a scarf of her own hair.

"I-is something wrong, Loid?" she asked. Perhaps because her hair now completely blocked her field of vision, she approached slowly, reaching out her hands to feel for him.

"Gyaaah! It's a monster!" Anya shouted in terror. Bond began barking furiously, his trembling tail tucked between his legs.

Confused, Yor began inching toward them. "What? Is there some sort of monster here? Anya? Bond? Are you okay?"

Are you okay? Loid was tempted to ask, but he resisted the impulse. Instead, he mustered as much calm as he could. "Um, why the new hairstyle, Yor?"

"Huh? Oh, this?" Yor said. "Well, uh, C-Camilla at work has been saying recently that long bangs are in style this season, so I thought I'd try them out."

"You're saying that hairstyle is in fashion?" Loid asked.

"That's right!" Yor said after a suspiciously long pause. "I figured if I was going to be painted, it should be with the latest hairstyle. Why, does it look strange?"

"Strange isn't... exactly the word I'd use..." Loid mumbled.

Of course it was strange! Not to mention completely unheard-of. But on the highly unlikely chance that Yor was legitimately fond of this hairstyle, he didn't want to hurt her by saying so. *This proves that going to the bathroom was just a pretense for her to hide her face from the painter, doesn't it? Or does she really think that hairstyle is fashionable?* Loid stared hard at the hair beast his wife had become as he pondered these possibilities. *Dare I say something?*

As an indescribable tension was building in one corner of the peaceful park, Felix stepped forward and chimed in with a calm tone, "I think that hairstyle is great and very original. Your dark hair might darken the overall shading of the painting though, so your previous style might be better."

Inwardly, Loid breathed a sigh of relief as Yor quickly swept her hair back to the way it had been.



"What a shame, huh, Yor?" Loid said.

"Yes, I guess." Now that Yor had undone her new hairstyle, the color had again drained from her face, as had the confidence from her voice.

As directed by Felix, the three Forgers were now seated on the picnic blanket, with Bond dozing happily on the grass nearby. Meanwhile, Felix's brush danced over the canvas on his easel.

"I want this to look natural," he said. "So feel free to continue to talk amongst yourselves. You don't need to try to hold some stiff pose for my sake."

"I'm hungry," Anya said. She reached for a sandwich, which she began chomping away at. Loid thought that might be pushing Felix's lax posing rules too far, but the painter made no comment.

The cold breeze brought another sneeze out of Yor, and Loid turned to see her shivering in her thin tank top. "Yor, I really think you should put your sweater back on. That wind is only getting chillier." He picked up the hooded knit sweater Yor had removed earlier and handed it back to her. "You wouldn't want to catch a cold."

"Oh, yes... Thank you," Yor said. She stared at the sweater for a moment, before putting it on backward and pulling the hood up over her face.

"Umm... Yor? You okay?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm much warmer now." The yarn covering Yor's mouth wiggled as she spoke. "You're right, the wind really has gotten cold!"

Even Anya was staring at this strange spectacle now, the sandwich in her hand forgotten. Felix said nothing at all, as if he was too focused on finishing his rough sketch of the family to notice. Clearly, Loid had to do something.

"I think you may have that on backward," Loid finally said, as if it was a casual observation free of any deeper concerns.

"Oh. Sorry. How careless of me."

Yor slowly pulled her face and arms out of the sweater and twisted it around so that it was on correctly. She stared glumly down at the blanket. An awkward silence fell over them.

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind blew under a corner of the blanket. The fluttering edges made a flapping sound that was soon accompanied by Anya squeals.

"I got dirt in my eyes!" she yelped.

Noticing Anya raising her hands to her face, Yor reached out to stop her. "Don't rub at it, Anya. That'll only make it worse!"

Holding Anya's hands, she said, "Open your eyes slowly, look up, and try blinking."

Anya did as she was told, and after a short flurry of blinking, the smile returned to her face. "It's all better now!" she announced.

"I'm so glad," Yor said. She started to smile, but abruptly stopped as if suddenly remembering something. "Eyes..." she muttered quietly to herself. "That makeup article that Mille showed me said that a person's eyes make the biggest impression..." The look upon her face was dark and intensely serious.

"Mama, Papa, you're being weird," Anya whispered to them. "Like when you turned into that sweater monster."

As Loid was about to agree, Yor suddenly squealed.

"Oh no, this wind is so strong! Now *I'm* the one who has dirt in my eyes!"

Yor squeezed her eyes shut. Her entirely unconvincing acting job was not helped by the fact that the wind hadn't been blowing at that particular moment. "Oh no, it's so bad! I don't think I'll be able to open my eyes until we're back home."

Yor's attempt to sell this ruse was so inept that all Loid or Anya could think to do was stare blankly at her.

After a moment, Loid decided he had to say something.

"Uh, are you okay there, Yor?" he asked sweetly, pulling himself across the picnic blanket to get closer to her. "Here, let me see," he said, gently placing a finger on her jaw as he moved his eyes closer to hers. Yor shuddered in surprise, and her eyes flew open.

"O-oh..." she said, finding herself staring directly at Loid.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

"N-n-not r-r-really..." she stammered.

"Please try to hold still," Loid said softly as he moved closer still, his eyes peering deeply into hers...

With a piercing scream, Yor brought her hands to Loid's torso and shoved him away with all her strength. Loid spun his body in the air to land smoothly on the grass several meters away. There were oohs and a smattering of applause from nearby park visitors.

"I know I said you could move around a bit," Felix gently chided them. "But that was a little much."



"Thank you for giving me so much of your time today," Felix said, bowing his head in gratitude. "I feel like this has marked the start of a new journey for me, and I owe that to you."

"You're very welcome," Loid said, hiding his exhaustion behind a casual smile. "I'm sorry if we were a bit more... boisterous than you'd have liked."

The park had largely emptied out, and a bright red sunset had emerged over the western sky.

Yor's strange behavior had continued throughout the session, from repeatedly twisting her head away from Felix due to a supposed kink in her neck to making ridiculous faces while refusing to acknowledge that she was doing so. Having to constantly contend with her ruses had only further tired Loid out. Meanwhile, Yor herself seemed to be completely dead on her feet. Anya had fallen asleep in the middle of the session and was snoozing comfortably in Loid's arms even now. Bond was the only one who seemed to have any energy left.

Loid apologized for dragging things out so much that Felix hadn't even had time to start adding color to his rough painting, but Felix waved it away. "Oh, that's nothing to worry about. I already have all the colors in my head. I can just paint them at home."

"Is that so? I'm relieved to hear that," Loid lied, giving the man a vague nod. He had hoped that the famously perfectionistic painter would be dissatisfied enough with the incomplete painting to shelve it entirely.

The painter and the Forger family parted ways, with Felix promising to bring the completed painting to the park a week later to show it to them.

At this point, Loid didn't think he could summon the energy to shop for groceries on the way home or prepare a full dinner. Even the idea of going to a restaurant sounded exhausting. "I'm a little beat," he said. "Do you mind if we just order something in?"

"Oh, right... Of course. That's fine," Yor mumbled. She was gazing gloomily at her feet.

"Well, how about pizza?" Loid asked, summoning all the cheer he could muster in hopes of lifting her spirits. "A coworker of mine said there's a fantastic place that just opened."

"Huh? Oh, that sounds perfect. I was just thinking I could go for a good steak right about now."

Steak? he thought. *What does that mean? Does she want to order pizza with steak on it?* Loid had no idea if that was even an option at the new restaurant, but he figured he knew where she was coming from.

"I guess nothing's better than meat when you're tired, huh?" he said.

"Yeah... sweets are the best when you're tired."

"Um, maybe I could go get us a cake or something to take home for after dinner?" Loid offered.

"No," Yor replied. "I think we should take the bus home instead. Especially with Anya already asleep."

The conversation was completely incoherent. Loid gazed with concern at Yor's face. Her eyes had all the sparkle of a dead fish.

I guess she didn't want to be in that painting after all. Loid figured if that was indeed the reason for her earlier behavior, she must have been feeling terrible that all her efforts had been in vain.

Don't worry, Yor, everything's going to be okay. That painting will never hang on the wall of a museum.

Twilight would be taking care of that.

As he walked with Anya in his arms and Bond tugging on his leash, Loid mulled over the options available to him. The smoothest solution would be to meet with Felix in a week, pretend that he loved the finished painting, and offer to buy it with funds from the agency. He couldn't even begin to imagine the cost of that, however. If his goal was not to attract suspicion, he couldn't be throwing around more money than a typical psychiatrist like Loid Forger would be able to afford. That meant Loid only had one option left—one that was significantly more risky.

He would have to sneak into Felix's home, steal the finished painting, and make it look like a robbery.

That did seem like the most realistic solution, and now that he'd decided on it, the only thing left was to put his plan into

action.

How did it come to this? Was today just not my day? Loid could never have imagined that taking his family out for a picnic in the park would bring his entire life as a spy under threat. The spy, who had already been consuming a great deal of antacids lately, let out a long, quiet sigh.



"Ah, so *that's* why you wanted me to dig up where Felix Curtis lives out of the blue like that," said Franky, who was clearly enjoying this. "I was wondering what weird mess you'd gotten yourself swept up in this time."

"Yes," Loid said. "It's quite the predicament."

They were standing on opposite sides of the counter in Franky's shop.

"I always thought Felix Curtis was some sort of underground activist or something," Frankie said.

"If only he was. That would have made things so much easier." A Western spy like Twilight knew exactly how to handle the sorts of terrorists who sought an end to diplomatic relations between the East and West. Unfortunately, Felix Curtis was a good man, which is what made this such a delicate problem.

"Here," Franky said. "This is the address."

"Appreciate it," Loid said, opening the folded slip of paper Franky had passed to him. The address written on it belonged to an apartment not far from the public park where they'd met the artist. "How's the security?"

"Full of holes big enough to drive a truck through," said Franky. "This guy's supposed to be megarich, right? Gotta wonder what he's doing living in a rundown old dump like that."

Apparently, what Felix had told Anya about donating most of his money to budding artists must have been true. Loid shoved the slip of paper into a pocket and dropped Franky's fee on the shop counter as if he were paying for a pack of cigarettes.

"See you later," he said and started to walk away.

"Hold up a sec," Franky said.

"What?" Loid asked. "Unlike you, I'm a very busy man."

"Oh, come on. Don't be like that," Franky said. "I figured I might as well dig a little deeper into your guy. And you know, I might have found something that'll put your mind at ease."

From his coat, Franky produced a second piece of paper, which had been folded into a small square. His brow furrowed, Loid reached for the paper, but Franky yanked it back. "Separate fee for this one."

"Don't be ridiculous." Loid snatched the paper out of Franky's hands.

"Hey! You can't do that!" Franky protested.

"I'll take a look at this first," Loid said dryly. "Then I'll let you know if it's worth the money."

"As if I'm the one cheating you here!"

Loid ignored Franky's indignation as he unfolded the paper and scanned its contents. After a moment, his eyes widened. *So that's what that was all about.* He had to stop himself from bursting into laughter.

That didn't go unnoticed by Franky. "Now you're just creeping me out," he said. "You okay, there?"

"Just like you said," Loid responded. "You've put my mind at ease."

"Right?" Franky said, smugly.

"Yeah, I really should have figured this out sooner." Loid smiled faintly as he dropped another few bills on Franky's counter to cover his "separate fee."

He finally understood why Felix had smelled of oil and turpentine when they'd met him at the park.



A week later, Felix was waiting for the Forgers in the same place they'd met and showed them their family portrait, which had been painted with an incredibly bold and creative touch. It was

not what one would call photorealistic—in fact, it looked more like something a child might have made.

"Is this a potato?" Anya asked, pointing to a white blob in the corner.

"No, that's Bond," Felix said.

"And is this a shrimp?" she asked.

"Ah, no. I'm sorry," he said. "That's your father."

Sheepishly, the painter explained that he'd used watercolors throughout his career and still wasn't used to working with oil-based paints. But even as he was apologizing, he seemed happy and somehow energized by his work.

"Because of all of you," he said, "I've been able to experience the true joy of painting again. Thank you so very much."

Loid gazed at the painting. He'd already seen it once when he'd snuck into Felix's apartment. The man who'd wowed the world with his photorealistic watercolor art had broken out of his slump by producing his first original work in oil. Loid had no idea how much such a painting would be worth, or if it was worth anything at all.

But whether it ended up hanging on a museum wall or not, one thing was certain—Loid no longer had to worry about this family portrait affecting his mission.



"Is anyone else hungry?" Yor asked, with a beaming smile upon her face. "I know I am. Loid, why don't you let me handle making dinner tonight?"

"Uh, sure... That'd be great," Loid said, though the surprise request was a bit perplexing.

"Then let's hit the supermarket on the way back!"

Yor darted toward the park exit, bouncing with each step. Her mood had improved immensely the moment she saw Felix's completed painting. She'd spent the last week beneath a dark cloud of gloom, so Loid was relieved to see her back to her cheery

self. "Tell me everything you want to eat tonight!" she called back to them.

"I'm... not very hungry," Anya said, staking out a careful defensive position. Her enthusiasm was plummeting as rapidly as Yor's had risen.

"Play along, and I'll buy you whatever sweets you want afterward," Loid whispered. Sacrifices needed to be made for the sake of a harmonious family. For the sake of his mission. "Besides, Yor's cooking has been getting better, hasn't it? It'll be okay."

"All right," Anya agreed. "But you're the poison taster."

"We'll need beef, of course. And maybe I'll buy one of those roast ducks?" Oblivious to their secret conversation, Yor was already mentally writing her shopping list, punctuating each item by humming happily for a few seconds. "Maybe some salt pork...?"

A bitter smile flickered over Loid's face. *Even if Felix hadn't completely changed his art style, everything still would have worked out once I'd stolen the painting.* He hadn't been able to tell Yor that, though, so she'd spent the week in a truly dismal state. *Maybe I should invite her on a date or something,* he pondered. *No, I don't want to end up being kicked in the chin again like last time. This time we should go out to eat as a family.*

What a bizarre painting it had turned out to be. Of course, there was the potato-shaped Bond and the fact that Anya had mistaken him for a prawn, but still, there was something in that painting that there wouldn't have been if Felix had churned out another one of his beautiful, photorealistic masterworks. Loid wasn't sure exactly what that was, but he had felt its presence.

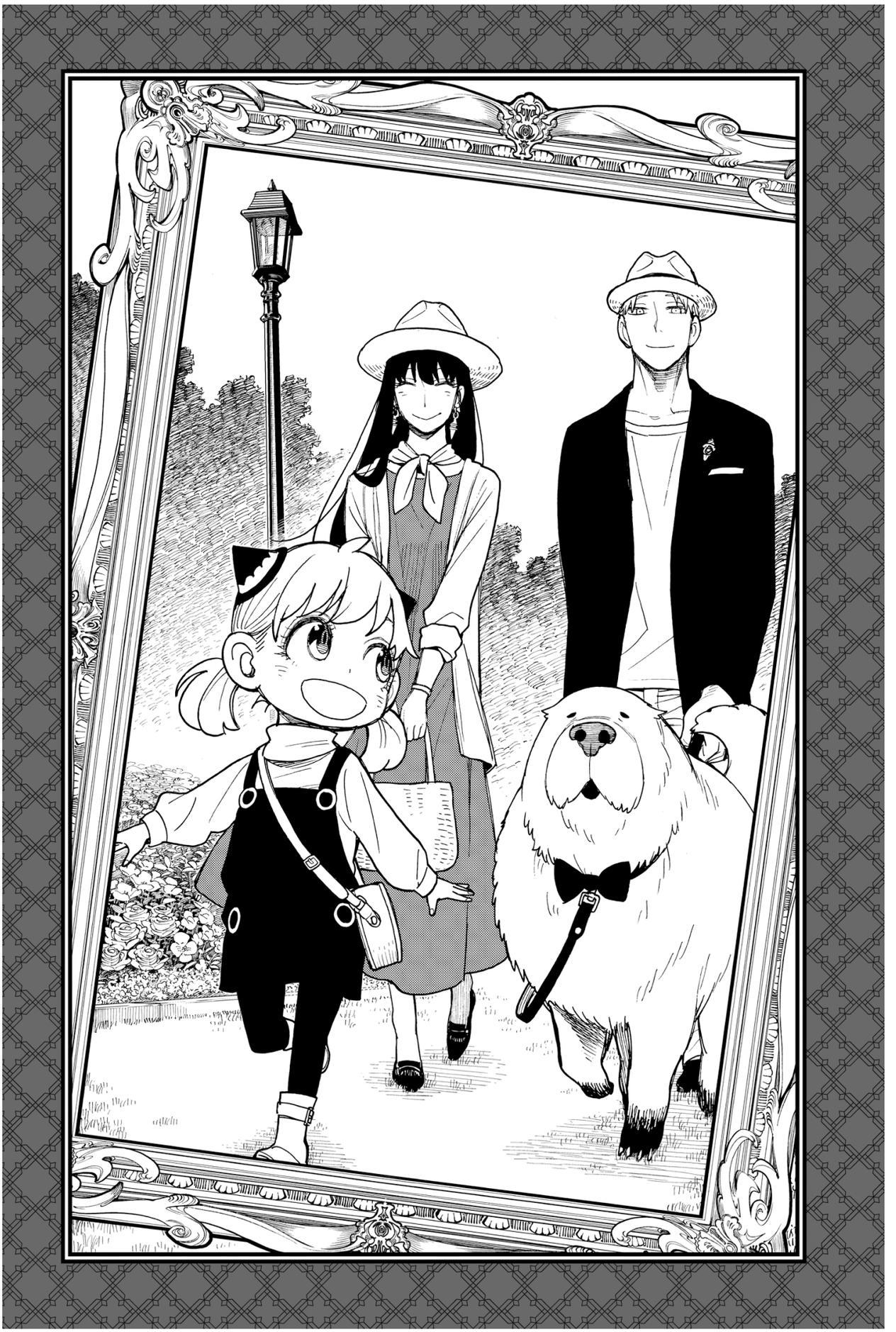
"I thought the painting was good," Anya said. "It did kind of suck, but I liked how warm it felt."

Loid didn't know what to say to that. She had honed right in on whatever it was he hadn't been able to place his finger on. For all his masterful technique, that warmth hadn't been present in any of Felix's other paintings. Maybe that was why he had seemed so happy when he'd unveiled this one to them.

"It really was a wonderful painting, wasn't it?" Yor said with a giggle, nodding at Anya. "It was so nice to see those happy people and realize that's how we looked in his eyes."

Loid returned the smile she gave him and said, "I thought so too."

He didn't really.



That was just one of those things Loid said to maintain the all-important harmony of his fake family. Such was Loid's purpose, as a persona created specifically for completing this mission. He did not speak for Twilight.

And yet, deep within his heart, Twilight was experiencing a sense of gentle calm that surprised him. A calm just like the blue sky above them.

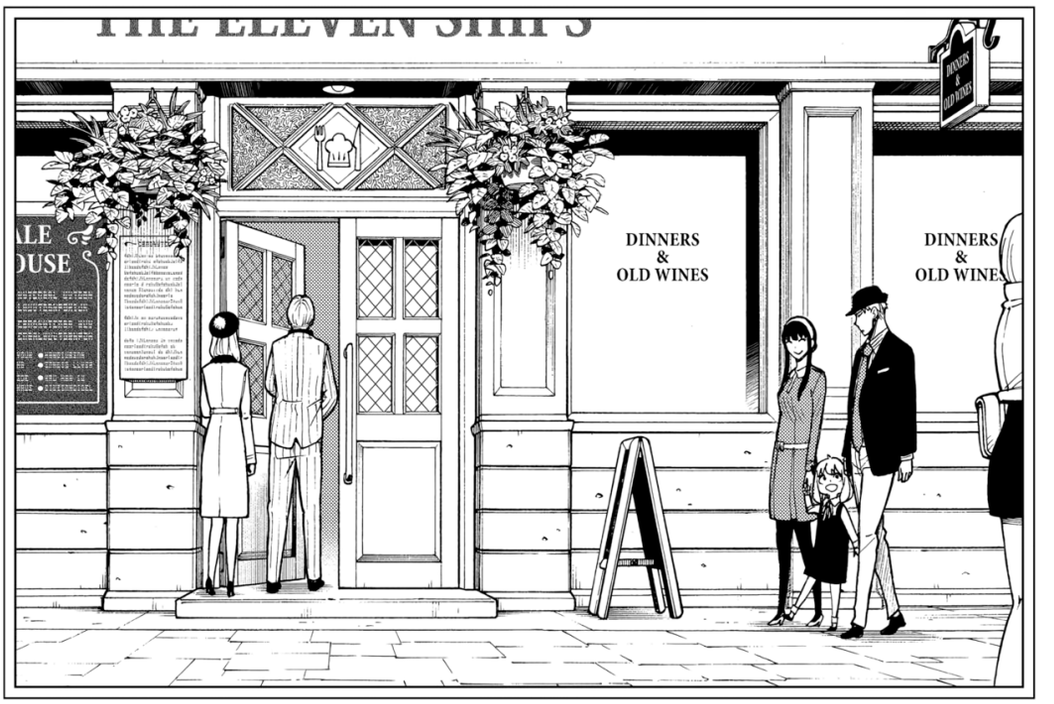
"I thought it was a very nice painting," he said. The words flowed naturally from his lips.

"Worf?" barked Bond.

"That means he liked it too," said Anya, laughing.

Yor smiled gently as she gazed back at their daughter.

And below that deep blue sky, the smile that spread across Loid's face was not entirely fake.



SHORT STORY

SPY×FAMILY

In the heart of Berlint, the capital city of Ostania, there was a quaint restaurant that had become popular for its cozy atmosphere and the chef's innovative culinary creations, for which each ingredient was selected with great care. Lily, one of the waitresses at this restaurant, was preparing to open for the day when she began to reconsider her opinion on relationships.

"I'm starting to wonder if getting married is even worth it," grumbled Lily to her coworker Rose. She sullenly set the restaurant tables, feeling stung after being rejected by yet another man she'd been set up with.

"You sure this isn't just sour grapes from getting dumped again?" Rose said. "You're running out of time here. You really need to pull yourself together and make more of an effort."

"I wasn't *dumped*," insisted Lily. "We just had different values, is all! Don't act all superior just because you're lucky enough to have a boyfriend who's ready to propose." In her irritation, she'd made a crumpled mess of the neatly folded napkins. Lily took a deep breath to calm herself. "I'm telling you, I'm giving up on the whole 'finding a boyfriend and getting married' thing. I'm fine living by myself. I don't need anyone."

Rose, who was older, wasn't having it. She launched into another speech about how Lily had to "face the reality of her situation," leaving the younger waitress flushed and flustered.

"Families come in here all the time," Lily said. "Do they look like they're happy to you?"

"Mm. Well, you got me there," Rose conceded.

"See? It's just a flood of parents yelling at their kids all day, as if their own manners weren't terrible to begin with." As she refolded the napkins, Lily ran through a list of regulars who fit that description.

"Yeah. I can't stand customers like that," Rose said, scrunching her face into a frown. "Remember those newlyweds who were fighting the whole time they were eating? Like, seriously, you can't save that till you get home?" She placed a vase with a single flower at the center of each table.

Lily was even more fired up now. "Right? And do you remember that older couple where the husband just complained about literally everything?"

"Oh, I remember," Rose said. "As if I could forget."

"The food was lukewarm, the service was too slow, the paintings on the walls were tacky, there were wrinkles in the tablecloth," Lily recounted. "Meanwhile, his wife just sat there shrinking, like she wished she could disappear completely. It was painful to watch. And you have to wonder, if he's that bad in public, then what's he like at home?"

"It was awful. Just awful," Rose said, shivering at the thought. "Well, I guess being married isn't the same thing as being happy."

"Yeah, no kidding!" As the pair readied the restaurant, they continued trading stories of customers who were clearly trapped in miserable marriages. Finally, Lily ran out of steam and sighed deeply, her plump shoulders sagging. "It's just like they say, I guess—marriage means your life might as well be over."

"Okay," Rose said as she straightened the silverware. "But what about that one family?"

"Which family?"

"You know the one," Rose said. "You were talking about how the husband was just your type."

"Oh, the, uh... It started with an *F*, right?" Lily racked her brain for the name. "Folders, or something?"

"Forgers," Rose corrected her. "You know, the ones who always call to reserve a table before they come in?"

"Yeah, Forgers. That was it," Lily said, nodding. "Of course I remember them!"

The Forgers were a family of three with a little girl. Lily could tell that they were upper-class just by looking at them, but they weren't ever snooty about it. They were always friendly and polite, always kind to the restaurant staff.

The dad was tall and always had a gentle smile, and on closer inspection, he was quite handsome. He really was exactly Lily's type. His wife seemed a little plain at first glance, but she had a pretty face and good fashion sense. When Lily had messed up her order once, she had been nice about it and had seemed more concerned about Lily's feelings than her own. Lily remembered inwardly throwing up the white flag that night, knowing that she could never compete with such a woman.

"Yeah, I remember them," Lily said as she straightened out another tablecloth. "Superhot dad with a pretty wife and an adorable little girl."

The girl couldn't have been older than, what, four years old? She had a bit of a lisp and an expressive face. Lily was rarely charmed by kids, but even she had to admit to fawning over that one a few times.

"You know, I actually saw them at the city zoo the other day," Lily said.

"Ah, yes. When you were dating marriage prospect number twelve, I believe? That one was a spectacular disaster."

"Oh, shut up," Lily said. "I remember the husband put that little girl on his shoulders so she could see the giraffe. She got so excited and tried to copy all the giraffe's movements. She was wobbling all over the place, and the dad was like, "Hold still, that's dangerous!" But he was still kind of laughing about it, and he squeezed her tight so there was no way she could fall. The mom was watching them and smiling.

To Lily, it had seemed like a perfect happy-family moment. The kind that makes you go, *"Look how happy they are"* or *"Aw, they're so sweet."*

"I think the husband is some kind of doctor," Rose said.

"Seriously? Now I'm even more jealous," said Lily. "But how do you know that?"

"I overhear them talking when I bring their food," Rose said. "Also, the wife works at city hall, and the little girl's a student at Eden Academy. They're like the perfect family."

"What? That tiny little girl goes to the most prestigious private school in the country? Is she even, like, smart?" Lily was astonished at how much her fellow waitress knew about the Forgers. "And seriously, how do you know this much about them? Are you some kind of spy?"

"Like you don't eavesdrop on your customers? It's the only fun part of this job!" said Rose as she put the finishing touches on the table settings. "Speaking of which, guess who made a reservation for tonight?"

"Geez... A husband who's a doctor, an attractive wife who works at city hall, and a daughter who goes to Eden." To Lily, they seemed to be the quintessential happy family. She had no doubt that they lived in a beautiful house and that their days were filled with love and tranquility. The image was so dazzling and bright that she had to shut her eyes for a moment.

"Oh, and I think they have a big dog, too. You're a dog person, right?" Rose asked.

"They have a dog too? Of course they do!" Lily was so jealous that she almost collapsed on the spot.

"So what do you think?" Rose teased. "You ready to hop back on that marriage train?"

Lily grabbed the straps of her apron and pulled them tight. With tears in her eyes, she said, "I swear to you, Rose, I am going to find me a husband, even if it kills me."



Of course, Lily and Rose had no idea who the Forgers really were.

The waitresses could never have guessed that the family that seemed to be the very picture of domestic bliss was really just a group of strangers putting on a show for the world.

Nor could the so-called Forgers have possibly known that their performance as a pretend family was helping to raise the marriage rate in Ostania.

SPY×FAMILY

AFTERWORD

Thank you very much for picking up a copy of the *Spy x Family: Family Portrait* novel.

I've had the privilege of working with Shonen Jump's novel department several times in the past, but I never imagined that one day they'd be publishing a novelization of my own work.

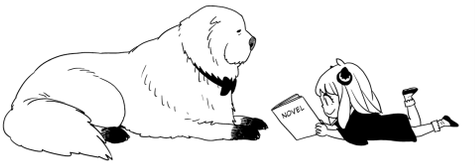
I felt honored that my series was going to be novelized, but I was also anxious about my first experience having someone else adapt to a different medium the characters I had created.

As it turned out, my favorite story in this collection is Mission 2. I couldn't help but laugh at the snappy banter and slapstick between Anya and Yuri. I also loved the back-and-forth between Loid and Franky in Mission 3.

Aya Yajima did such a great job bringing the characters to life through words that I could effortlessly picture every scene, which made drawing the illustrations for this book just as easy. (That said, I'm sorry to say I couldn't figure out how to express the portrait described in Mission 4, so I ended up drawing a different scene instead.)

I hope all my readers have enjoyed seeing the zany antics of *Spy x Family* expressed in novel form (with a few illustrations) as much as I have.

Tatsuya Endo



AFTERWORD

I love everything about *Spy x Family*—its comical yet somewhat sinister tone; its somber yet refined setting that's so reminiscent of Cold War Europe; its thrilling, cinematic scenes; its powerful, heart-wrenching monologues; its exhilarating action; its lovable cast... I love it so much that if I could, I would move to the city of Berlint and get a job with the clerical staff at Eden Academy, just so I could get a front-row seat to watch the characters I adore.

I am so thankful to Tatsuya Endo for not only carefully supervising my work, but also providing the many wonderful illustrations to accompany it. I've loved his work ever since his first serialized manga, *Tista*, and I was moved to tears seeing the beautiful original art he made for this book.

I'd also like to thank my editors, Rokugou and Nakamoto—it was a privilege having them to turn to every time I ran into trouble while working on this book. I'm also grateful to the editorial staff at Shonen Jump's novel department, who've taken great care of me ever since my debut work with them; Lin at Jump+; Shiotani at NAHT, who handled the proofreading; and the many other people involved with the production and publication of this book.

And of course, I'd like to thank from the bottom of my heart every person who reads this book. Thank you so much. I'm excited to continue enjoying *Spy x Family* together with you all!

Aya Yajima



TATSUYA ENDO

The first novelization of my life! I could not be more grateful.

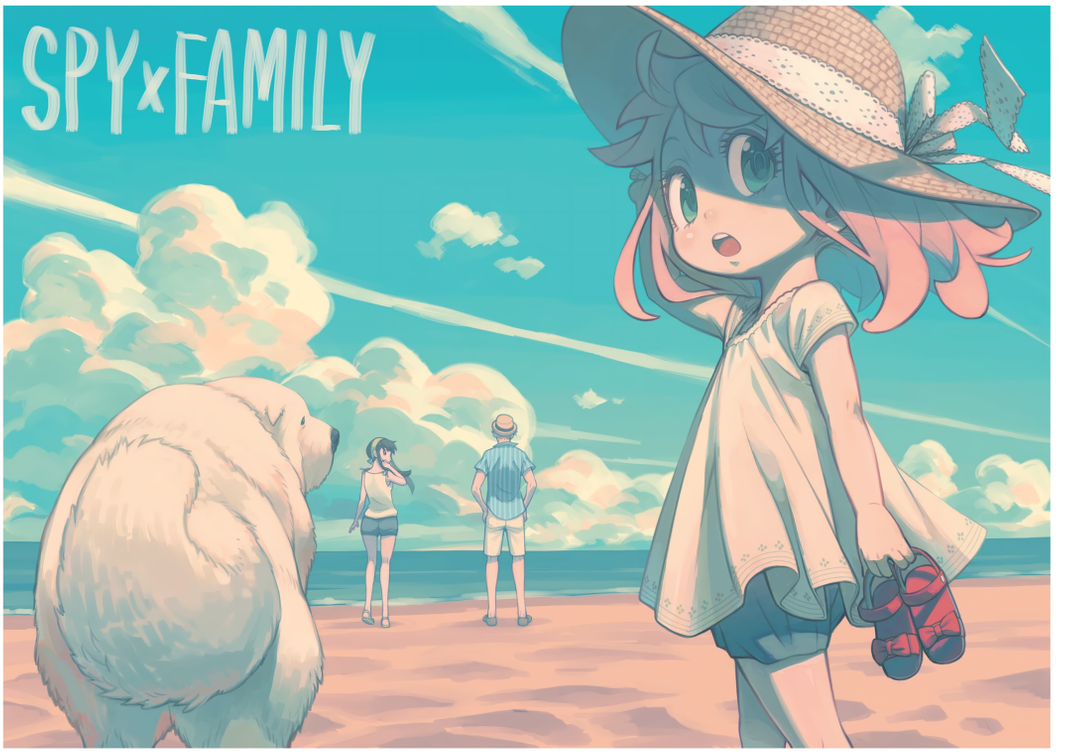
Tatsuya Endo was born in Ibaraki Prefecture, Japan, on July 23, 1980. He debuted as a manga artist with the one-shot "Seibu Yugi" (Western Game), which ran in the Spring 2000 issue of *Akamaru Jump*. He is the author of *Tista* and *Blade of the Moon Princess*. *Spy x Family* is his first work published in English.



AYA YAJIMA

I love *Spy x Family*! It always makes me laugh and cry!

Aya Yajima is an author who has written novel adaptations of several best-selling manga series published by Shonen Jump's novel division. She began her professional career in 2011 with a series of novels for *Blue Exorcist*. In 2019, Yajima then began writing the novel adaptations for the hit series *Demon Slayer*, and in 2021, she partnered with manga artist Tatsuya Endo to write the first novel for *Spy x Family*.


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