

SPY CLASSROOM

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

02

The Spy Teacher
Who Loved Me

Takemachi
ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari



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SPY CLASSROOM

code name
FLOWER GARDEN



code name
DREAMSPEAKER

code name
FOOL



code name
FORGETTER



SPY 02 CLASSROOM

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The Spy Teacher Who Loved Me

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New York

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Prologue

The Spy Teacher Who Loved Me

A loud *thunk* rang out.

When Thea carefully scooped out the surrounding dirt with her shovel, a small metal box emerged from the ground. It was just about the right size to fit in a pair of hands without spilling over the side. Thea cast her shovel away and picked up the box.

There was a lock affixed to it, and her eyes went wide.

“It’s really here...”

One of her teammates had built Thea a metal detector, and she’d been using it to scour the halls of the mansion called Heat Haze Palace. The fact that she hadn’t found what she was looking for after three whole days of searching nearly led her to assume that it wasn’t in the manor at all, but right when she was about to give up, she hit pay dirt in one of the garden’s flower beds.

Thea gasped.

After taking a deep breath, she pulled something wrapped in a piece of cloth out of her pocket.

“This is the key that Hearth left me...”

She stared transfixed at the key.

Hearth was the former boss of the legendary spy team Inferno. She had been lauded as the Greatest Spy in the World who’d helped end the Great War, and she had once saved Thea’s life. It was impossible to understate the impact she’d had on Thea’s life. Not only did Hearth rescue Thea from a kidnapping, but she also inspired her to become a spy and even delivered hope to her right before dying at Purple Ant’s hand during their battle in Mitario.

Now that I think about it...

As Thea reminisced, a question suddenly dawned on her.

...how did Ms. Hearth know Teach would bring me to Mitario?

That there was a head-scratcher.

Shortly before Purple Ant killed her in the Mouzaian metropolis of Mitario, Hearth had spread an urban legend about a dark-haired hero and introduced a chink into Purple Ant's armor. However, it all seemed a bit too convenient.

Thea decided to sort through all the predictions Hearth would have had to make.

Future 1: Purple Ant's minion Roland, aka Corpse, would run into Klaus.

→ Plausible. As a matter of fact, Hearth had taken steps to plant the idea in Roland's head herself.

Future 2: Klaus would head to Mitario after Hearth died.

→ Plausible. Klaus would have no trouble turning the tables on Roland and extracting the pertinent intel from him. Considering how strong Klaus was, it was a pretty obvious prediction to make.

Future 3: By the time Klaus went to Mitario, he would have built a new team.

→ More or less plausible. According to Roland, Hearth already knew that she'd been betrayed. It wouldn't have been much of a leap for her to foresee that Inferno would get destroyed and that Klaus would have to put together a new group of allies.

Future 4: Klaus would recruit Thea onto that team.

→ There's no way, right?

That last bit was the one that didn't make sense. Thea hadn't joined Lamplight until after Hearth died, so Hearth would have had no way of knowing it would happen. However, the way Hearth had laid her groundwork in Mitario made it seem like she'd been certain of it. How could she have guessed that that future would come to pass?

Thea couldn't make heads or tails of it.

...Well, I suppose there's no sense racking my brain over the matter. Knowing Ms. Hearth, perhaps her abilities simply transcend common sense.

After trying to convince herself, Thea turned her attention toward the box she was holding.

"To the girl who will surpass me."

Before her death, Hearth had left a pair of presents for Thea: a short yet powerful message and a mysterious key. Not even Klaus had known what lock it might pair with, so Thea had gone searching all through Heat Haze Palace. Now she'd finally found a box that might be what she was looking for.

She gulped, then slotted the key into the lock. A satisfying *click* rang out.

Thea let loose a small yelp. She'd finally done it. She'd finally tracked down the gift Hearth had left for her. As she tried to suppress her accelerating heartbeat, she took the box back to her room, then delicately opened its lid. What she found inside was a smaller wooden box. Hearth had clearly taken great care to make sure that no water managed to seep in.

Thea opened the wooden box, too.

".....Photos?"

Inside, there were a number of scenic photographs of a building. It was two stories tall and made of timber. Something about it gave Thea an odd sense of déjà vu, but you could find structures like that just about anywhere in the world, so she couldn't pin down what it might be.

There was something written on the back of one of the photos.

"Klaus s you."

"Huh...?"

Thea’s eyes went wide. She hadn’t been expecting Klaus’s name to come up.

All in all, it was a strange message. The most important bit had been left completely blank, and there weren’t any signs that the section had rubbed off. As far as she could tell, it had been left unwritten from the get-go.

Thea let out a small sigh. That was Hearth for you, she supposed. Apparently, she’d intended to make Thea work for her present. It didn’t take long for Thea to pick up on the idea behind the message.

“I suppose she wants me to figure the rest out myself.”



The world was awash in pain.

The decade since the Great War’s end brought about an era where nations turned to spies rather than soldiers to advance their national interests. The small Din Republic was no different, and it had built up intelligence units and sent operatives out across the world.

One such unit was Lamplight, a peculiar team made up of eight female academy washouts led by a boss named Klaus. By successfully capturing the deadly Purple Ant over in the United States of Mouzaia, Lamplight managed to get a lead on their archenemies, the Galgad Empire intelligence team Serpent. Then, after returning home without suffering a single casualty, they had taken one of their well-earned post-mission holidays.

During that holiday, the message Hearth left behind gave rise to something of a commotion.



There was a fell creature roaming the halls of Lamplight’s base, Heat Haze Palace.

Every nook and cranny of the manor was luxurious and extravagant, and at first glance, one would expect the residents to be living in the lap of luxury.

However, the entity striding around it seemed wholly out of place. Its long black hair was splayed out in every direction, turning it into some writhing black blob, and the face peeking out from behind that hair was as pale as a corpse and had heavy bags around its eyes. Lifeless, delirious mumbles occasionally spilled from its mouth.

“...What goes in the blank spot...? ...Seeks? ...Knows? ...Sees? ...Ungh, and I don’t even get a hint... I—I guess I should start by writing out my theories...”

In truth, the creature was Thea. She normally carried herself with great pride thanks to her long, lustrous hair and her curvy figure, but at the moment, that dignity was gone without a trace. For the past three days and three nights, she’d spent every waking hour ruminating on Hearth’s message. However, nothing spoke to her as being obviously correct, so she’d been left aimlessly listing out ideas. She’d spent the whole time holed up in her room, neither eating nor bathing. Occasionally, she would come out and wander the hallways, mumbling incoherently before returning right back to her room.

From the outside looking in, it was downright unnerving.

“Guess Thea’s still in her funk, huh,” “Flower Garden” Lily casually offered from the dining room. Lily was a silver-haired girl whose distinctive features were her adorable looks and her sizable bosom. She was technically the team’s leader, and she’d been concerned about Thea for the last little while.

“Eh, I’m sure she’s fine. If she wanted help, she’d ask for it,” “Glint” Monika coolly replied. Monika was a girl who’d gotten rid of all her notable features besides her asymmetric cerulean hair.

Lily and Monika munched down on their breakfast toast as they continued their conversation.

“Yeah, but she’s starting to look like a ghost,” Lily said. “Whenever I run into her at night, it makes me want to exorcise her.”

“Yeah, she freaked Erna out so bad last night that Erna practically burst into tears.”

“Wait, Thea’s already claimed a victim?!”

“Still, I say we let her do what she wants. My only priority right now is

enjoying my vacation.”

Blunt to the end, Monika promptly left the dining room after finishing her toast. She probably wanted to go back to her room and read.

She had a point. Unless Thea came and asked them for help herself, it wasn’t really their place to butt in. Instead, it made more sense for them to prioritize their own R&R. It was already eight AM, but many of the girls hadn’t even woken up yet, instead having chosen to leisurely sleep in.

Yeah, maybe I’ll take a trip over to the capital today.

With that thought in mind, Lily headed back to her room as well. It had been a while since she last had any time off, so it might be nice to dress up in something cute and invite her teammates to go hit up a bunch of cake shops. Alternatively, going on a spontaneous solo trip could be fun as well. It could even be nice to just laze around and stare at the sky without a thought or a care in the world.

Growing more and more excited with each subsequent idea, Lily arrived at her room. Her original bedroom had gotten blown up prior to their Mitario mission, so she’d taken a previously empty room and set up camp there instead.

When she opened the door, she found a single slip of paper lying on the floor. *Huh?* she thought as she leaned down to pick it up. On it, there was a simple message.

“Klaus loves you.”

“

Lily stared at the words and stood frozen in place for a good long while.

Spoiler alert: It probably went without saying, but Thea was the one who’d written that. As part of her process to try to deduce what Hearth’s message was, she’d been scribbling her hypotheses down on paper. Then, as she stalked

the halls in a daze, she'd ended up dropping one of her notes, which coincidentally slipped under Lily's cracked door.

That was all there was to it. However, Thea hadn't come to Lily for advice, so Lily didn't know a thing about Hearth's message. To her, it looked like someone had tossed the paper into her room on purpose, perhaps even as an indictment. And if she took the words at face value— *Teach is...in love with me...?*

—then that was the only way to read them.

Lily didn't know who'd left it for her, but it looked as though someone had realized how Klaus felt and decided to inform her of it.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”

Lily's scream echoed all through Heat Haze Palace.

That marked the misunderstanding's first victim.



As Lily flailed in the hallway, another two girls came rushing over.

“What's wrong, Big Sis Lily?” “Oh, this'll be interesting, yo!”

One of them—“Fool” Erna—was a short blond who had a certain doll-like beauty, and the other—“Forgetter” Annette—was a bizarre-looking girl with ash-pink hair and a large eye patch over her left eye. When they arrived, they saw Lily staggering back and forth across the hallway and constantly bumping into walls with her face as red as a beet. Something was clearly very off.

First things first, the two of them hurried over to Lily and grabbed her.

“Calm down. You're scaring me!”

“Fess up, Sis. What's going on?”

The two of them clung to her, boxing her in from both sides.

“Th-th-th...”

Lily had difficulty getting the words out. It was a rare sight, considering how

her raw shamelessness usually allowed her to face any predicament with her head held high.

““Th?””

“Long story short!” Lily shouted. “Th-this is what’s up!”

She twisted and wriggled free from Erna and Annette, then left a piece of paper behind as she fled at top speed. Before either of the others could blink, Lily had already reached the far end of the hallway and disappeared around the stairs.

Having been left behind, Erna tilted her head to the side. “What could have happened?”

“I bet we’ll find out if we read that note, yo.”

Annette unfolded the paper Lily had dropped. It would appear that that was the message that had driven her mad.

“Klaus loves you.”

“Yeep...?” “Huh?”

Erna and Annette cocked their heads in unison.

“Who is the letter for?”

“I mean...Sis gave it to us on purpose...right?”

Lily had specifically given it to *them*, as though to say, *You need to read this so you know what’s going on*. Logically, that must have meant that the “*you*” in the letter referred to one of them.

The duo spoke in a daze.

“So this is saying...”

“...that Bro is in love with either you or me?”

With that, they reached their conclusion.

““_____!!””

They let out simultaneous wordless screams.

That marked the misunderstanding’s second victim, as well as its third.



Due to a series of coincidences, Hearth’s final message ended up causing a number of baseless misinterpretations, and listed herein is an account of the chaos that chain of misunderstandings brought down on their vacation.

As Thea agonized over the mysterious letter and Annette was confronted with an unexpected “revelation,” their thoughts drifted back to the way they’d spent their days up to that point.

Chapter 1

Annette's Case

"I'm gonna get a job, yo," Annette declared to the Heat Haze Palace dining room.

The audience for her statement was her seven teammates, who gawked at her in motionless shock like time itself had ground to a halt. Their mouths hung half-open from their sheer inability to comprehend what she was saying, and the forks they'd been holding tumbled to the floor.

Annette was going to get a *job*?

The word refused to sit right in their heads.

Thea spoke up and said what they were all thinking. "Ummm... Is this supposed to be some kind of joke?"

Annette hopped up and down. "I'm dead serious, yo."

"May I ask why?"

"I need some cash."

"Where were you thinking of working?"

"At a restaurant."

"Did you get Teach's permission?"

"Yup. I'm heading out to my interview later today."

"I see..."

There was nothing Thea could do but nod.

Then she turned to the girl on her right and pinched her cheek. The pinched girl followed suit and pinched the girl on *her* right, who proceeded to do the

same thing...until all seven girls aside from Annette had formed a big old cheek-pinching ring, at which point it finally became clear to them that they weren't dreaming.

Huh. Apparently, this was the real world, and soon, Annette would be heading off to work at a restaurant...

“““““Hold on just one dang second!”””””

With that, the seven girls retorted as one.



Lamplight had just captured the assassin Corpse and dealt with the issue regarding Annette's mother. The team had been through multiple ringers, and they'd just used the intel from Corpse, aka Roland, to settle on the United States of Mouzaia as the site of their next mission. Now they were hard at work preparing for their showdown against the Serpent member said to be lurking there. The Lamplight girls had spent the past month split into the chosen squad and the unchosen squad, so now that they were back together, their motivation going into the mission was high.

Let's do this. Let's head to the United States!

Let's do this. Let's take down Purple Ant!

After accepting the role of cheerleader, Lily got the whole team fired up.

As the girls decided on their infiltration sites, brushed up on the local language, and forged their ID papers, Klaus took care of all the team's urgent domestic missions while making the necessary preparations for their long-term stay abroad. If they had to give that time a name, they probably would have called it the Mitario Showdown Prep Phase.

It was during that period that the whole to-do about Annette's part-time job took place.



Ten hours prior...

Klaus took a seat on one of the couches in a very particular room. It had less furniture than one would expect for its size, with nothing on its dignified red carpet save for a table and a pair of sofas. The table was occupied by a few ordinary appliances like a coffeepot and a coffee mill paired with a single ashtray. It was a space designed for two people to have a conversation while facing each other. Thanks to how far the sofas were from the edges of the room, any listening devices planted in the walls would be unable to pick up the things said within.

“I see that this coffee of yours is still just as dreadful as always,” Klaus said, making no effort to hide his displeasure. Klaus was a tall, beautiful man with long hair. He sat atop the sofa with his legs crossed and sipped his coffee as overbearingly as he could.

The man sitting across from him had silver-gray hair and carried himself with an austere dignity. “You don’t mince your words, do you?”

Klaus’s counterpart went by the alias C. He was the person in charge—the so-called spymaster—of the Din Republic’s Foreign Intelligence Office and, at least technically, Klaus’s superior.

Klaus faced C from his seat in the Foreign Intelligence Office’s director’s office. “So?” he asked. “What is it?”

C had called for him rather suddenly. By and large, nothing good ever came of it when C gave him a new mission in person.

C shrugged. “You need to relax a bit. You haven’t taken a proper break in a while.”

“Because a certain someone keeps dropping more work into my lap.”

“We both know you’d keep on working whether or not I assigned you more missions.”

“I need to be able to devote time to training my subordinates. As I recall, this is the forty-fourth time I’ve brought this up.”

“Well, that’s news to me.”

Would I get in trouble if I kicked him across the room?

It was a tempting thought, but Klaus resisted the urge. The man was, at least technically, his superior.

“In any case, I have good news.” C gave him a gentle smile. “I’ve finally found a mission for you that lines up with your request.”

“My what?”

“Remember what you told me? You said you wanted a mission with little danger to life and limb but lots of opportunities for learning and growth.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Klaus had once asked for missions that would serve as good training for his inexperienced students. He distinctly remembered that, back when he made the request, C had flatly told him that no such missions existed.

C handed him a file. “You should thank me for putting this together.”

Klaus flipped through its contents. Sure enough, it was just the right difficulty for his subordinates. There wasn’t much actual danger, but it was still going to be tense. It was perfect for people like the girls who were short on actual combat experience, and it would serve as an excellent training exercise before they set out for Mitario. However, there was one thing that caught his attention...

“This mission is basically just busywork.”

“.....”

“Forget thanking you—you’re making us do your chores. Why would you specifically call me in here to give me an assignment that’s on par with a spy academy training drill?”

“.....” C slowly raised his coffee cup to his lips. “So you’d owe me one.”

Klaus considered throwing his coffee in C’s face, but he just barely managed to exercise restraint.



From there, Klaus left the Foreign Intelligence Office headquarters and returned to Lamplight's base.

It was a grand mansion, and it had been deliberately constructed to be inconspicuous. Upon reaching his bedroom-slash-study on the second floor, Klaus loosened his tie. After he had spent the morning training with the girls and the afternoon answering C's summons, he felt his body fill with the fatigue of a productive day.

Well, I suppose there's no denying that it was good news.

It was true that the task he'd been given had met his specifications to a T. Klaus himself was going to have to leave for a dangerous mission tomorrow, so this would be the perfect way for the girls to train in his absence.

The question is, who do I choose to take point?

Simple as the mission was, it still had its risks. He was going to need to select the best person for the job.

I'd like to give it to someone especially motivated...

He decided to mull it over while he made his dinner. He headed for the kitchen.

"Hmm?"

That was when he noticed something suspicious. He could sense someone in his room. He wasn't alone.

That's odd, though... Why didn't I notice the intruder earlier?

Klaus's room was furnished with a number of traps designed to let him know if anyone had come in. All in all, there were more than ten of them, from the strand of hair wedged in his door to the distinctive pile of dust on his carpet. None of his rudimentary sensors had been set off.

It didn't take him long to deduce why that was.

"You must have *memorized everything*. You looked through the window to see the locations of every object in the room, then took all my anti-intruder

traps and returned them to their original configurations.” Out of all the girls in Lamplight, only one of them could have pulled off a feat like that. “Magnificent. You’ve really sharpened your skills, Annette.”

Right then, his bed shook, and the girl buried in his blanket came leaping out. “You found me, yo!”

Sure enough, it was Annette. Her ash-pink hair was messily tied back, and she was wearing a large eye patch. She gave him a wide grin.

“What are you doing in here? Training?”

“Yup. I came to play with you, Bro.”

“I see.”

“But then I got sleepy while I was waiting for you, so I’m off it now.”

“...I see.”

She was an inscrutable one, that Annette. Everything she did was over-the-top, and whether or not she participated in their training routine depended entirely on her mood. Klaus put a lot of confidence in his powers of observation, but not even he could comprehend the way her mind worked. By all accounts, she seemed to be fond of him, but it was impossible to really tell.

“By the way, Bro,” Annette said, jumping on his bed.

Klaus doubted she would listen if he told her to knock it off, so instead, he simply replied, “Yes?”

“I want some spending money, yo.”

“Hmm?”

“I was trying to buy the parts for this machine I’m building, but I ran out.”

“...That’s a pretty substantial salary you’re getting paid, you know.” Klaus sighed. Spies got hefty bonuses for completing missions. Perhaps he needed to start managing her finances directly. “Unfortunately, I can’t give you any more money than you’re already making. If you want it that badly, though, you could always try taking it from me by force.”

“I’m gonna blow you to smithereens, yo!”

“...Not so much as a moment’s hesitation, huh?”

Annette immediately whipped out a bomb, so Klaus tied her up with the blanket and tossed her on the bed again. She kicked her legs back and forth in delight. “I lost!”

Klaus massaged the back of his neck.

Now, what to do about this problem child...?

He felt sympathy for her plight, but even if he gave her some pocket change, she would just spend up every last cent he gave her. However, she was liable to cause trouble if he left her to her own devices. She could easily end up trying to sell her gun or something.

Then a light bulb went off over his head—the undercover mission C had given him.

“Annette, what would you say to taking on a part-time job?” he asked.



And that brings us back to the beginning of our original story.

After Annette informed the others she was getting a job, the girls charged into Klaus’s room. They weren’t going to rest until they got an explanation for what the heck was going on.

“Teach! What’s this about Annette getting a job?!” Lily cried. As the girls’ leader, she stood at the head of the group and pressed their boss for answers.

“It’s a simple infiltration mission,” Klaus replied.

“Who the what now?”

“Two years ago, the Empire was conducting drug deals out of the restaurant she’ll be working at. The issue got resolved, but we still need to make sure that the restaurant’s gone back to being a fully legitimate establishment.” It was less of a mission and more of an errand. Galgad spies had once used the eatery as a fundraising site, and the owner had been involved, too. The restaurant had supposedly turned over a new leaf, but it was important that they made doubly

sure of that. “Annette’s going to be working there for the next two weeks. When I told her she could keep the wages she earned there, she enthusiastically agreed.”

“I—I guess I get what’s going on now, but are you sure this is a good idea?” Lily asked, scrunching up her face in concern. “Forget working, Annette can’t even do regular housework right...”

The others chimed in to agree.

“When I told her to wash the windows the other day, she blew the whole damn frame off,” Sybilla said.

“...When I asked her to go buy some vegetables, she started planting rows of seeds,” Grete concurred.

“When she was supposed to do the laundry,” added Erna, “all my clothes ended up covered in sequins.”

“Mine got turned into nurse’s uniforms,” Monika grumbled.

“Goodness me,” Thea replied. “Mine got turned into nun’s habits.”

One after another, the girls gave examples of Annette’s odd behavior. There were too many to list. Given how uncontrollable she was, it was a wonder she hadn’t gotten expelled the moment she set foot in her academy. Even among the band of washouts that was Lamplight, Annette held a special spot in their roster.

In a nutshell, Annette was Lamplight’s biggest problem child.

The girls looked at one another and shared some worried predictions. “What if she mixes gunpowder into the food?” “I feel like she’s going to remodel the kitchen into an armory.” “My money says she won’t even pass the interview.”

Klaus exhaled. “I’m sure none of that is going to happen...” He rested his chin on his hand and sank into thought for a moment. “...But having two people keeping an eye on her would probably be for the best.”

“Huh?”

“By the way, I’ve got another mission to take care of, so I won’t be one of them.” Klaus tore a nearby piece of paper into seven pieces, drew circles on two

of them with his pen, and handed the slips to the girls. “We’ll decide who’s going to go work with Annette via lottery.”

The girls all gulped. Two of those slips would be one-way tickets straight to hell. *Please, God*, they prayed as they drew crosses over their chests, summoning up every drop of piety they could muster as they reached for the papers with trembling fingers.

In the end, the two people who got chosen to watch over Annette—

“NOOOOOOOOOOO!”

—were Lily, who crumpled to her knees the moment she drew her slip—
“YEEEEEEEEEEEEEP?”

—and Erna, who was uncannily disadvantaged when it came to matters of luck.

With that, Annette, Lily, and Erna began their dual-purpose part-time job and infiltration mission.



Five days later, a nightmare descended on Heat Haze Palace.

Two girls stood in the main hall, their faces sheet-white.

One of them was Sybilla, a white-haired girl with sharp eyes and a bracing dignity about her. She clutched at her shoulders and trembled. “What, uh, what the hell’s goin’ on here...?”

The other was Thea, who was cradling her knees atop her chair with tears in her eyes. “I don’t know... Nothing makes sense anymore.”

The source of their terror, unsurprisingly, had to do with Annette’s new job. The three job seekers, Annette included, had all successfully passed their interviews and started work the very same day. Their plan to infiltrate the job site as waitresses had gone off without a hitch.

Since then, *four people had been driven to madness.*

The first ones to snap were Annette's babysitters, Lily and Erna. As soon as they first got back from the restaurant— "Bluhhhhhhhh..."

"Yeeeeeeeeeeep..."

—they collapsed onto their beds while groaning like their souls had just escaped from their bodies.

The following day, their gazes were just as unfocused—

"Bluhhhhhhhh..."

"Yeeeeeeeeeeep..."

—and they headed to the restaurant with unsteady footsteps.

It was like something straight out of a horror movie. Beside them, Annette gave the others a wave and announced, "I'm off to work, yo!" with a cheery smile, which only served to make the whole thing even more unsettling.

Something was going on at that restaurant!

And whatever it was, it was seriously *no bueno*!

Sybilla and Thea went pale. Their curiosity was far outweighed by their terror, and they made up their minds never to go near that restaurant. Their lives were too valuable. They also vowed not to let any of the others make that mistake, either, until— "All right, I'm gonna go heckle Annette while she's at work."

"...I think I'll head over as well."

—three days into the mission, two of their teammates got some ideas in their heads. The teammates in question were Monika and Grete, the latter of whom was a redhead with slender limbs and an ephemeral quality to her not unlike a glass sculpture. The two of them intended to bravely set out for the restaurant.

Naturally, Sybilla tried to stop them. "I—I wouldn't do that if I were you. Do you want your soul going *bluhhhhhhhh*, too?!"

Monika laughed proudly without paying her a bit of heed. "Think of how funny it'll be, though. Seeing Annette terrorizing a restaurant will be enough to keep me smiling for the next few days."

Grete nodded in agreement. "...Simple or not, the boss entrusted us with this

mission. We can't afford to slack off."

With that, they ignored Sybilla's warning and sallied forth.

The good news was, there was one sliver of hope to be had. Out of all the girls, Monika was the strongest and most talented of the bunch. Given her outstanding composure, she would be able to handle whatever the situation threw at her. Meanwhile, Grete was the smartest person on the team, and thanks to the intense love she harbored for Klaus, she was able to put up with just about anything if it was for his sake.

There was promise. Surely, the two of them would make it back with valuable intel!

"Gahhhhhhhhh..."

"Urrrrrrrrrrrrgh..."

However, the results were unsurprising.

The two girls returned with hollow eyes, like their souls had been drained from their bodies. They headed directly to their beds, collapsed, and didn't get back up.

One after another, Lily, Erna, Monika, and Grete had all suffered mental breakdowns. Every single one of them had made it through death-defying missions, but now, each of them had been brought low in a single blow.

Thus, Sybilla and Thea were consumed by fear of the unknown.

"What exactly is going on over there?!" Thea cried, unable to contain herself. "It's just a regular old restaurant, right? It's not as though it's some gathering of dark sorcerers!"

"...I dunno. It's all one big question mark," Sybilla replied with a shake of the head. "But Annette's gotta be behind this. I'm sure of it."

"Has she been trashing the restaurant or something?"

"If so, then why hasn't she been fired yet?"

“That’s a good point. She seemed to be in high spirits when she headed out this morning.”

The biggest mystery was the fact that the three of them all still appeared to have their jobs despite whatever it was that was going on. The only logical conclusion was that they’d found a way to blackmail the manager or something. It was the kind of thing Annette seemed liable to do.

“...I guess we’ll have to check it out ourselves,” Sybilla concluded.

“No way!” Thea yelled. “I know better than to peer into the abyss! It’ll suck us right in!”

“I—I mean, you say that, but otherwise, we’ll never know.”

“I have no desire to end up moaning or groaning or going *gluhhhhhhhhhh* at everyone!”

“C’mon, nobody’s gone *gluhhhhhhhhhh* yet.”

Thea groaned at Sybilla’s suggestion, but the fact of the matter was, they weren’t going to get anywhere if all they did was sit around cowering. They were technically on a mission, and failing to perform their professional duties was a nonstarter. They couldn’t let the three people conducting the infiltration be the only ones pulling their weight.

After steeling their resolves, the two of them went down to the port where the restaurant was. Four times on their way there, they were seized by a desire to flee, but they fought it back each time. In the end, they did something very out of character and held hands the rest of the way. It was something they never would have done under normal circumstances, but they did it half to steady their nerves and half to keep their partner in crime from making a break for it on their own.

“I-it’s just around this corner, yeah?” Sybilla asked.

“...That’s right,” Thea replied. “We’ll take one minute to brace ourselves, then go.”

“Got it. Let’s give it two minutes, though.”

“Good call. I was actually just thinking about upping it to three.”

After spending twenty minutes working up their nerve, they took that final step, squeezing one another's hands as they turned their gazes toward the restaurant.

It was an unpretentious establishment with a spacious open floor plan. There was nothing but a series of posts separating the indoor and outdoor seating areas, so a single glance was all it took for them to observe the restaurant in its entirety. The shop had a number of round wooden tables, and the waitresses hurried to and fro around them. Perhaps due to how close they were to the port, many of the male patrons were brawny and loud, and the portion sizes of the menu items on offer were pretty substantial.

And there, among it all, stood an angel.

"Have you decided on your order?"

The very first thing that caught Sybilla's and Thea's attention was the ash-pink-haired waitress serving her customers with an adorably cherubic smile. Without exception, every customer she waited on walked away with a happy smile.

"Chef, table two's gonna have a chickpea salad with no pepper, a garlic toast, a large sirloin pasta, and they asked to get their free coffee once they're done with their entrees. Also, table four and table twenty-two still need their tomato soup and their cheesecake."

Not only was she reciting off long orders in a single go, she'd even memorized what each of her tables had ordered and how long they'd been waiting for it.

On top of that—

"Manager, I fixed the tap that wasn't working right."

—she helped out behind the scenes when there weren't many customers to wait on— "I used my special sprayer to clean up the graffiti in the bathroom."

—used her inventions to great effect—

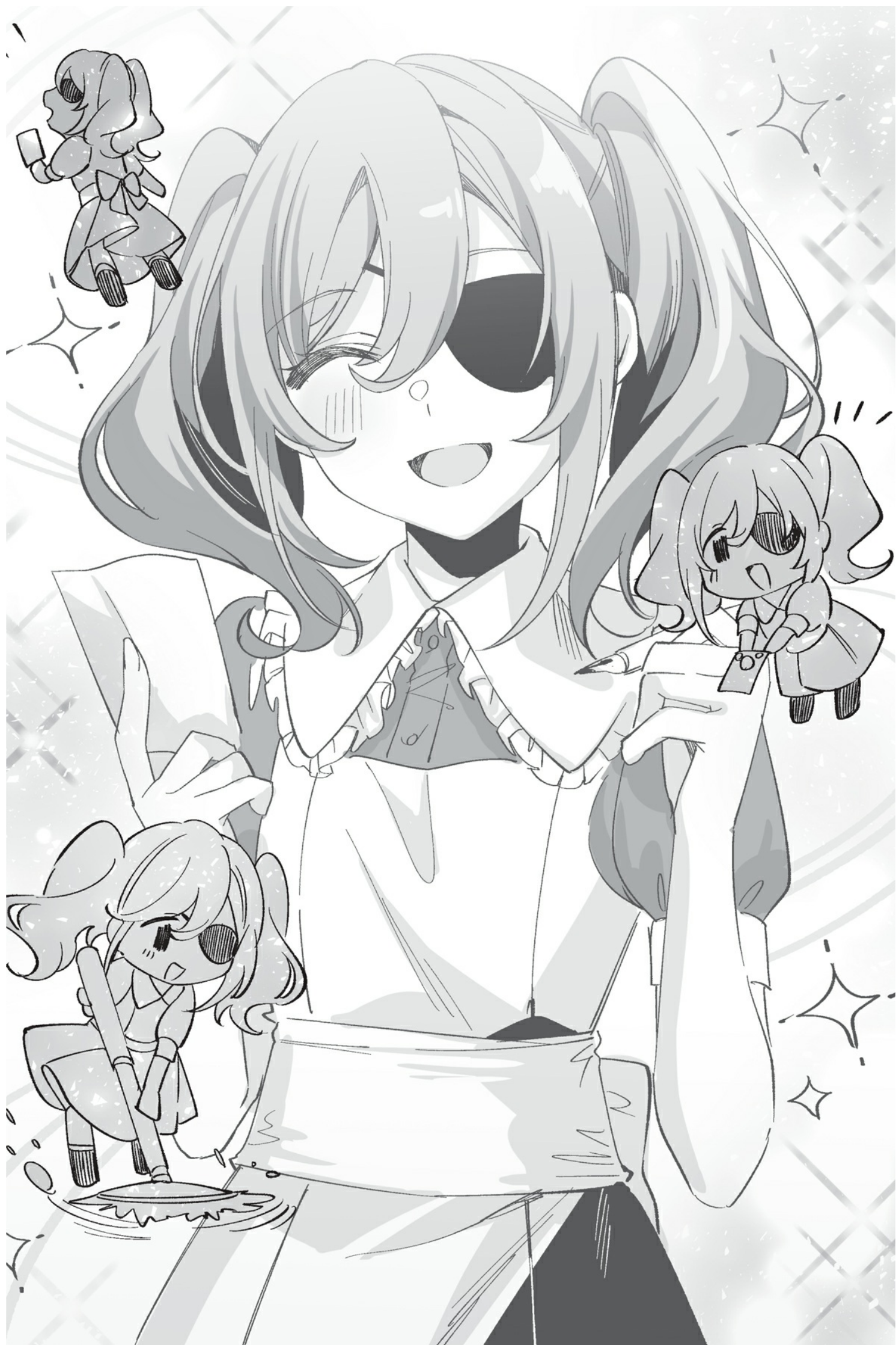
"Hello there, mister, welcome back. I didn't see you come in yesterday."

Would you like the usual?”

—and remembered the faces of every person who came in the door.

““ ””

Annette was the very model of a perfect part-time waitress. Her customers watched her go like they were gazing at their own daughter, and many of them quietly slipped her tips. They couldn’t help but want to give her a little spending money. Once they were done paying their tabs, they left the restaurant with big smiles. “Feels like the place has gotten fifty percent more crowded since she started working there,” one customer remarked as their group passed by Sybilla and Thea.



For the two girls, the sight defied everything they knew about the nature of reality. They knew that if they kept watching, their minds would shatter.

They raced home as quickly as their legs would carry them. ““WE NEED TO SPEAK TO HER GUARDIAAAAAN!”” they shouted, rushing over to a specific individual.

“Eek! Wh-what’s wrong?”

That person was “Meadow” Sara, a girl with timid eyes like those of a woodland creature peeking out from beneath brown hair. When it came to dealing with Annette, she was the best person to go to.

At the moment, Sara was feeding her pets over in the animal shed beside Heat Haze Palace. She’d been busy remodeling the shed for the past few days, so she hadn’t been taking part in the mission.

“D-did something happen? What’s going on?” Sara asked with her eyes wide.

Sybilla cut right to the chase. “Four people have been reduced to bluhhhhhhhhs.”

“What does that even mean?!”

“It was a close call. We almost ended up as bluhhhhhhhhs, too.”

“Is there some sort of new infection going around?!”

Sara pressed them for a more specific explanation, so Sybilla and Thea told her about what it was they’d just witnessed—the bizarre fact that Annette had risen to the occasion and was doing an outstanding job at her restaurant gig.

“Ah, I see,” Sara replied with a nod once they were done laying it all out. “That’s well within Miss Annette’s capabilities, you know.”

Sybilla cocked her head in puzzlement. “Huh? Whaddaya mean?”

“Hmm...,” Sara said, pausing for a moment. “...It’s a little hard to explain, but it’s really just a matter of how motivated she is.”

“How so?”

“She’s bursting with potential, really. Her memory is excellent, she’s good with her hands, and she’s an expert at dealing with machines. She just doesn’t put those talents to use very often, that’s all.”

In other words, the situation was this: Annette was incredibly talented, possessing both smarts and flexibility in spades. However, the problem was in her disposition and in the fact that she lacked any strong motivation when it came to being a spy. Furthermore, she had no particular desire to better her station in life. As a result, all her competence simply remained dormant, and she turned it to bear only on things that caught her attention.

Thea and Sybilla clutched at their heads.

“So all that talent is just wasted on her...”

“And she’s choosing to use it on her waitressing job...”

Sara smiled, perhaps not realizing the full depths of their exasperation. “You know that if you know how to ask, she does housework just fine, right? She has a thing about her height, so she loves it when you give her dairy products as a reward.”

“Ah, that’s right,” Thea said. “She did seem kind of torn up about how she wasn’t getting taller...”

“Isn’t it adorable?” Sara said delightedly. “I’m planning on heading to the restaurant myself later.”

“...Pretty sure you’re the only one who sees it that way,” Sybilla quipped with a sigh.

Sara wasn’t sure what to make of that. “...?”

The fact of the matter was, Sara the rearing specialist was far more talented than she gave herself credit for.

That evening, Sybilla and Thea went back to the restaurant with Sara in tow and munched on shrimp fritters as they observed the hardworking staff.

No matter how long they watched, Annette’s waitressing remained unimpeachable. She memorized her tables’ orders down to the word and

relayed them to the kitchen, then confirmed them with the chef. She was practically carrying the restaurant on her back. Plus, the customers loved her as well, and by the looks of it, she had a huge number of fans among their ranks. When they chatted with her, she always gave them big, innocent smiles. She was probably responsible for a fair bit of the eatery's foot traffic.

The sight still felt utterly unreal, but after having heard Sara's explanation, Sybilla and Thea were at least able to maintain their sanity.

"I gotta say, this was a shocker. I never knew Annette had it in her," Sybilla said as she chowed down on some cheesecake.

Thea took a sip of her raspberry juice and nodded. "Neither did I. It makes me realize just how shallow I've been."

"I guess we all misjudged her, huh."

"That we did."

As they spoke, Annette came over. "Here's your check," she said, not letting on in the slightest that she knew them. She was even doing a perfect job staying undercover.

When she left, Sybilla and Thea watched her walk away. By that point, their evaluation was one of utmost praise.

Then one of the other customers called her over. "You there," a man wearing red-rimmed glasses shouted. He was sitting alone and unhappily drinking some rum. There was something decidedly pompous about him.

Annette turned toward him and smiled. "What can I help you with?"

The moment she did, the man dashed his rum against her face.

Sybilla's eyes went wide. "Wh—?"

"This glass is dirty," the man said, showing Annette the cup in question with a sullen expression. "Get me a new one."

"....."

Drops of rum dripped from Annette's hair as she stood there in a daze.

"That four-eyed piece of shit!" Sybilla rose to her feet. "That's no reason to

dump it out on her.” She started heading over to give the man a piece of her mind, but Thea grabbed her arm. “Hold on, Sybilla. Let’s have some faith in Annette.”

“But, like...”

The two of them observed the explosive situation before them with Annette and the man both staring at each other.

“.....”

“.....”

The tension in the air was palpable. The man’s domineering gaze was fixed straight on Annette, and Annette was frozen with a smile still plastered on her face.

The first one to blink was Annette. “...I’ll get you that replacement right away. We’re terribly sorry for the inconvenience.”

With a modest bow, she headed to the back of the restaurant.

The man scoffed and curtly righted his posture. The other customers glared at him. “There was no need to bully her,” they tutted.

By the look of things, the incident was resolved.

“Damn, she even knows how to handle problem customers,” Sybilla said with a sigh of relief.

“That’s just a sad reality of the service industry,” Thea remarked. “No matter how excellently you do your job, there’s really just no pleasing some people.”

“Still, I’m impressed she was able to be so professional about it. I woulda just punched the fucker.”

Before long, Annette returned to the dining area and very admirably brought the rude man a fresh glass of rum.

“Question is, why’s she want money so bad?” Sybilla asked out of the blue. “Hey, Sara, have you heard anything on that front?”

“Wh-who, me?” Sara said, looking up with a start from the parfait she was stuffing her cheeks with. “A-actually, now that you mention it, she asked my

advice the other day... She wanted to know what kind of present Teach might like.”

“Wait, so she wants to buy him a gift?” Sybilla looked back over at Annette. “Never thought that’d be why she was workin’ her ass off...”

“What a surprise,” Thea remarked. “I’m learning all sorts of things about her today.”

The drops of sweat beading up on Annette’s brow as she scurried around the restaurant served as beautiful proof of how diligently she was working.

“...Also, is it just me, or are the lookouts not gettin’ stuff done for shit?”

In contrast, the two people who’d been assigned to look after Annette were in sorry shape.

“*Goddamn* it, you silver-haired dunce! You got our order wrong again!”

Tears welled up in Lily’s eyes as her customers berated her. “Eeeek! I’m sorry!”

“Manager, the blond kid went and tripped again!”

A scream rose up from the kitchen and, moaning “How unlucky...,” Erna collapsed onto the floor.

Between Lily’s clumsiness and Erna’s penchant for misfortune, you couldn’t have picked a worse pair of waitresses if you tried.



Meanwhile, the rest of the mission was proceeding apace.

“I completely forgot about the actual point of this,” admitted Thea.

The fact of the matter was, the waitressing job was simply one element of the infiltration mission. The primary objective was to look into the restaurant’s legitimacy, a fact that had slipped the entire team’s minds. Upon remembering what their job was, they got to work and started their investigation. During the day, they split into the employee team and the regular customers team and kept a watchful eye on the shop, and once night fell, they gathered in the main

hall and took turns listing out anything they noticed that seemed sketchy.

That night, Erna was the first to raise her hand during the debriefing. “The one suspicious thing I’ve noticed is how hard it’s been lately to get my body to do what I want. I tripped a whole lot today.”

The others all chose to ignore that particular comment. Erna being beset by misfortune was pretty much par for the course.

“Suspicious stuff, huh?” Lily was the next to speak up. “Well, someone covered the bathroom in graffiti again. And Annette just cleaned the last set off, too.”

Now that *was* notable. “I’ve got it all memorized, yo,” Annette chimed in. She wrote down a list of the aforementioned scribbles. All the phrases seemed kind of similar. “*Hardened Tower.*” “*Dangling Hero.*” “*My Long-Range-Missile Cannon.*” “*Bulging Doohickey.*”

Lily tilted her head to the side. “Hmm, what a mysterious bunch of words.” She stared at the list and crossed her arms. “‘*Hardened Tower,*’ ‘*Dangling Hero*’... Could they be some sort of religious symbols? And the long-range-missile cannon and the bulging doohickey could be some sort of top secret weapons they’re—”

“It’s slang,” Thea informed her. “They’re all referring to male genitals.”

Lily went beet-red. “And you waited until I said them all out LOUD to tell me that?!”

Many of the restaurant’s patrons were male longshoremen, and dirty jokes and comments about sex work were common topics of conversation. It was no surprise that a shop like that would end up with graffiti...

...but what *was* odd was that so much of it had shown up immediately after the last batch got erased.

“Could it be some sort of code?” Thea suggested.



The regular customer team promptly got to work.

Together, Thea, Sybilla, and Sara made frequent stops at the restaurant to try to figure out when the code was being written. Posing as customers, they enjoyed some pasta and strained their ears to eavesdrop on the other patrons' conversations.

Sara, who'd snuck her puppy in under her newsboy cap, was the first to produce results.

"I found this in one of the toilet's tanks."

Thanks to her puppy's nose, she'd managed to locate a bag full of dried cannabis. Weed was illegal in the Republic, meaning that their hunch about the bathroom being suspicious had been right on the money.

"Put the bag back where you found it," Thea instructed her, "but before you do, hide a transmitter in it."

Sara nodded and did just that.

An hour later, Thea's radio buzzed.

"I tracked down the guy who took the bag, so I picked him up and interrogated him." It was a report from Monika. *"Like we thought, they're using the bathroom to make drug deals. On the weekend, they write the amount they've got and the price on the door, and the buyers graffiti how much they want and leave behind the money. A 'hardened tower' is one bag, a 'dangling hero' is two bags... You get the idea. Later, someone comes and stashes the pot inside the toilet tanks."*

"Splendid work. Did he see your face?"

"Course not. I've got a master of disguise with me."

She was referring to Grete, no doubt. The two of them must have captured the suspect as a team.

"Now, just for the record, is there really no way I can talk you into coming to the restau—?"

"No can do. Brain'll break."

The line went dead. The fear had been etched deep within them.

In any case, though, the girls had the necessary intel. What they needed to keep an eye out for was someone who used the bathroom a lot. If they found that, then they'd have their dealer.

"H-how are we going to proceed from here?" Sara asked with a tilt of the head. "I feel like this next part is going to be really—"

"There are two patrons I'm suspicious of, Sybilla," Thea declared. "I'll handle the man on the patio. You're in charge of the man by the wall."

Sybilla flashed her a dauntless smile. "On it."

As the two of them left their seats in unison, their lips twitched ever so slightly.

"I'm code name Pandemonium—and it's time I cleaned 'im out."

"I'm code name Dreamspeaker—and it's time to lure them to their ruin."

They moved through the restaurant as smoothly as flowing water, and before so much as a single minute had passed, they'd both returned to their table.

"No dice," Sybilla said with a shrug. "I went through his bag, but there was nothin' in it. He's not our guy."

"Same here." Thea fiddled with her hair. "I leaned against him and gazed into his heart, but I didn't sense any dastardly desires."

Sara stared in awe at the two girls who'd finished their investigations in the blink of an eye. "Th-that was incredible..."

With that, they were now certain that the dealer wasn't one of the patrons. Whoever it was who was planting the weed in the toilets, it had to be someone else.

Sybilla glared over at the kitchen. "It's the staff we need to be focusin' on."



Next up, it was the employee team's turn.

At the time, Lily was making a cocktail. As it turned out, she was surprisingly adept at anything that involved mixing things together.

Erna, who was washing dishes beside her, let out a yelp. “A mouse!”

Sure enough, a little mouse scurried past their feet. That wasn’t an uncommon occurrence in and of itself, but Lily quickly noticed something unusual. With a “whoop,” she caught it and quickly released it. When she did, the mouse fled out the window.

That had been one of Sara’s pets, and it had had a letter strapped to its body.

Lily scanned over the encoded message, which contained the results of the regular customer team’s investigation. Now it was their time to shine.

“Sorry, Manager,” Lily said, “but could we take our breaks now?”

The middle-aged woman glared at her. “No.”

“What...?”

“You can take *breaks* after you’ve learned to do your actual jobs properly!”

“Whaaaaaat?”

“Don’t give me that! Do you have any idea how many plates you’ve broken between the two of you?!”

Lily floundered, but looking at the downward slant of her manager’s eyebrows, she could sense that pressing the issue wasn’t going to be an option.

Right then, Annette returned from the dining area. “Manager, the floor’s pretty dead right now, so I’m gonna go double-check our inventory!”

Just like that, the manager’s expression softened. “My, what a lovely idea. Go ahead and take these two to help you.”

“Yes, ma’am! On it!” Annette chirped.

“Th-the way she treats us, it’s like night and day...,” grumbled Lily.

Led by Annette, who’d become the employee team’s anchor, the girls headed into the storehouse out back. It was a building about the size of a small house. That was where the restaurant kept their spare cookware and the ingredients their suppliers brought them each morning. On top of that, it was also where

the employees stored their personal effects.

“All right, gang, let’s go through everyone’s stuff,” Lily cheered. “I bet we’ll find the permanent marker for the graffiti in there.”

“Yeah!” Erna agreed as the two of them began rifling through the bags.

Annette cocked her head in puzzlement. “Huh? I just wanted to check the inventory, yo.”

“How are you so diligent all of a sudden?!”

Immediately after cracking a joke about Annette’s priorities, Lily chanced upon a strange locker. Its bottom was ever so slightly loose. When she dug around, she found loads and loads of cannabis packed beneath it. “Jackpot!” she cried before checking the name on the locker. Whoever it was who owned the locker, that was the dealer they were looking for.

Over by the storehouse’s entrance, Erna let out a scream. “Yeep?”

Lily whirled around and saw a young man standing there looking as pale as a sheet. “Y-you...f-found it...?”

It was one of the chefs—a colleague of theirs who worked in the kitchen, who’d helped show them the ropes and who always had the gentlest look on his face. He was the one who owned the locker in which they’d found the drugs.

In his hand, he was clutching a butcher’s knife.

“I-I’m done for... You’re going to r-report the weed to the police, aren’t you? Y-you’re going to t-tell them that I’ve been dealing...” His voice was trembling so terribly, they almost felt bad for him. “I—I—I have to kill you... I’m so sorry about this... I’ll make sure it doesn’t hurt...”

The man was desperate. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he pointed his knife at the girls. He looked liable to charge at any moment.

“C-c’mon, take it easy,” Lily said, trying to talk him down. “If you kill us, that’ll make your crime so much more serious! If you turn yourself in, you might be able to get a suspended sentence.”

“Qu-quit lying. I-I-I’m not gonna let you trick me just because you want to live...”

“I’m telling you the truth, though. Please, you have to listen to me.”

“Unghhhhh... G-g-gotta kill you... I—I have to k-kill you...”

He didn’t seem to be in a listening sort of mood. Lily bit down on her lip.

Well, this is a problem. I’m a little short on weapons at the moment...

She wasn’t about to lose to some civilian. Academy washout or not, she had trained for this exact kind of thing. She was sure she could take him if push came to shove—

The thing is, people get unpredictable when they start panicking...

—but she ran the risk of walking away with an unforeseen injury.

Lily was at her waitressing job at the moment, so she didn’t have a gun or any knives on her. All she had for self-defense was a single poison needle, and she was going to have to fight while simultaneously protecting Erna and Annette.

What to do; what to do?

The situation reached its conclusion at the last moment anyone would have expected. While Erna was inching backward, her foot got caught on something. “Yeep!” she yelped as she lost her balance and crashed into the nearby shelf. When she did, the force of the impact unseated the wooden crate full of ingredients sitting atop it.

“Wh—?”

Erna and the young man stared aghast as a wooden crate and a deluge of onions came tumbling down on them. What’s more, the shock caused a chain reaction, and more and more crates began falling on them as well.

Once all the crates had finished crashing down, a silence descended upon the storehouse.

“.....”

Lily was struck speechless at what she’d just witnessed.

“Ooh,” Annette said, her eye gleaming with delight. “Yo, is Erna dead?”

“I’m not *dead*!” Erna’s head popped out of the pile of vegetables. “See, I told you it’s been hard to get my body to move right lately,” she moaned pitifully.

Not a moment later, one last onion came and conked her on the head. "...How unlucky," she said as she went limp.

Beside her, the young man had collapsed face down as well. He'd been caught smack-dab in the middle of the disaster.

Lily quickly went over and snatched away his knife. Now he posed no more threat to their lives.

"N-nooooooooooooooooooooo," the youth wailed bitterly upon losing his weapon. He curled up into a ball and began weeping in resignation. "I just needed some money..." he mumbled. "Ma couldn't pay for her surgery... Then someone told me that all I had to do was deal weed, and it wasn't like I could say no, so I applied for a job at this restaurant..."

Lily immediately picked up on what had happened. The man had been targeted by a foreign spy who saw that he was in a bind and used him to finance their covert activities. "Do you know who put you up to this?" she asked.

The young man shook his head. "I—I have no idea. We only ever communicated on the phone or with letters..." In short, he was nothing more than a pawn destined to take the fall. "I'm done for..."

"....."

Lily knew that the guy had a good heart. Despite her and Erna's constant screwups, he'd often treated them to sumptuous meals, and when they were closing up shop together, he always talked warmly about his mother.

"Still, there are some lines you just can't cross."

There was nothing else to say. It pained her, but the fact remained that he'd broken the law. She had no choice but to turn him in to the authorities. He would probably be able to get it knocked down to a misdemeanor, but even that would have a serious impact on the course the rest of his life took.

Annette stared at the man with a contemplative look in her eye. "...I just learned a whole lot."

"Hmm? What about?"

“Making money is hard work, yo.”

With that, she turned and went back to the restaurant.



In the end, they turned the young man in to the police. The restaurant had to close down for the day, and Annette and the others earned high praise from their manager for finding proof of the marijuana trafficking that had been running rampant there. It was Erna’s misfortune that ended up coming in clutch. In addition to letting them catch their foe without anyone getting hurt, it meant that none of the other employees had any reason to suspect the girls’ true nature. Any poison or bombs Lily or Annette had tried to use would have left behind evidence that would have been difficult to explain away.

That evening, the girls assembled in the main hall and shared their final debriefing.

“In other words, here’s where we stand,” Thea said, clapping her hands together as she summed it all up. “Not everything that happened left a good taste in our mouths, but the investigation is finished. We completed the mission!”

The others cheered. They’d carried out their duty with flying colors. Not only had they discovered that there was still drug trafficking going on at the restaurant, but they’d even caught the perpetrator. Now their work was finished.

“Yeah, but, like,” Sybilla said, crossing her arms, “we never managed to root out the enemy spy. Feels like we left things half-cocked.”

Monika agreed. “Yeah, that wasn’t cathartic at all. The real villain just took advantage of someone’s weakness and spent the whole time safely hidden away. It makes me sick.”

With that, the girls started arguing about the mastermind behind the incident. Whoever they were, they’d raked in the dough by taking advantage of a naive young man and pushing drugs out into the city. Now they were doubtless going

to use that money to fund Imperial covert activities. What they'd done was abominable, and yet...

"I understand how you feel, but this is the point where we need to pull out," Thea replied. "From here onward, it's another team's job to handle. They'll put a specialist unit on it in no time, so let's just trust our fellow operatives. Our work here is done."

"...Yeah, I guess you're right," Sybilla said with a satisfied grin.

Beside her, Lily puffed herself up with pride. "Dang, that was easy as pie! By day, she's an adorable waitress, but by night, she's a secret agent who cracks down on dope peddlers! There goes Lily, the Republic's greatest asset!"

"You sound even more full of yourself than usual," Sybilla remarked.

"Yeah," Erna agreed. "It hurts to admit, but this time around, *she* was our star player."

At that, all the girls' gazes gathered on one person.

"Wait, yo, are you talking about me?" Annette asked as she stuffed her face with leftover cake from the restaurant. She tilted her head in befuddlement.

She was, without a doubt, the mission's MVP. Setting aside the mental damage she had caused to some of her teammates, Annette had more than pulled her weight in several regards. Without her, they never could have achieved the rousing success that they did.

"I'm sorry. I misjudged you." Thea gave her a smile. "You're a fantastic spy. I think we're all a little bit jealous of how talented you are."

Annette's eyes went wide in astonishment.

Seeing her reaction brought warmth to the hearts of each and every one of her teammates.

Thanks to Annette's valiant efforts, the mission ended in success.

That evening, the girls encoded their reports and sent them over to the Foreign Intelligence Office headquarters. Then, after a slightly extravagant

victory banquet, they peacefully went to bed.

That night, the girls slept soundly, swaddled in the pleasant feeling of a job well done.

So soundly, in fact, that they didn't notice one of their members quietly sneaking out of the manor.

The thing was, they didn't know about the girl's other side.



The girl hummed herself a little song.

The way she was happily skipping down the night-covered street, it was like she was a kid looking forward to Christmas. And the girl was, in fact, in an excellent mood. She'd finished her job just the way she drew it up, and it wouldn't be long before her wages came in. She didn't really know what had been happening with the spy mission stuff, but apparently, that had gone well, too. Plus, her teammates had even complimented her. Her heart was full to brimming with positive emotions, and her step had a definite spring in it. She didn't have a single bit of apprehension about what it was she was about to do.

It was two AM, and the city was fast asleep. The girl continued down a quiet alleyway lined with residential buildings. There was nobody else around, and the only thing lighting up the darkness was a single dim streetlight.

The girl came to a stop just before the light. Then she posed as though standing at attention and went still.

The streetlight flickered. *Click, click, click*, the white light blinked. Each time it flashed, it illuminated the girl's visage against the gloom. There was a smile etched upon her face.

A good long while passed, and the girl stood frozen at attention for all of it.

Then a man came walking down the other end of the alleyway. He was wearing a suit and a pair of red-rimmed glasses. There was something a little

petty about the way he carried himself, and given his faintly flushed cheeks, he'd clearly been drinking.

"Huh, that streetlight's practically dead. Looks like the government's been dragging its feet on that one," the man muttered in annoyance as he continued down the lane. "This country is such a joke, it really... Huh?"

Then he came to a stop. When he saw the girl standing before him, his expression froze for a moment. However, he soon regained his composure and clicked his tongue. "What's this, then? I was wondering who you might be, but it turns out you're just the waitress from before. I thought you were a ghost or something. So? What's a girl like you doing out this late?"

"....."

"What, are you mad about that rum I threw at you? Maybe you brought one of your tough-guy friends along?"

"....."

"I mean, no matter who you bring, it's not like they can actually beat me or anything."

"....."

"Hey, are you ever planning on talking?"

Despite the man's question, the girl said nothing. Instead, she lifted her skirt a bit and gave it a shake. A folding umbrella toppled out and landed by her feet. She picked it up and popped it open.

"What, you going to hit me with that?"

"....."

The girl stood motionless with her umbrella splayed.

The streetlight kept on flickering and *click-click-clicking* at regular intervals right above the man's head.

"If you want to come at me, then by all means, be my guest. I'll put you on the ground before you can even blink."

"....."

Click, click. The flickering continued.

“Luckily, no one’s around, and I’m pissed off. Maybe I’ll use that body of yours to blow off some steam.”

“.....”

Click, click, click. The flickering continued.

“Look, I’ve got my reasons. I’m mad because you erased that graffiti. I needed that to keep the cash flowing.”

“.....”

Click-click-click-click-click-click-click. The streetlight started flickering even more rapidly.

“This is what you get for ruining my mood. Now, let’s get you out of those clothes. This might come as a surprise, but girls like you are just my type—”

The streetlight exploded.

The bulb shattered, causing glass to cascade down on the man like a shower, ripping his clothes and slicing his skin and lodging into his flesh. After the hail of glass, the heat from the explosion seared his skin.

Thanks to her umbrella, the girl emerged unscathed. It must have been made from some special material, as it shrugged off the glass like it was nothing.

“Rgh... You little shit...”

As blood gushed from his body, the man finally realized what was happening. In truth, the girl standing before him was...

“You’re in the same business as I am! Dammit, if I could only see...” Some of the glass had gotten into the man’s eyes. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gun, but with his vision obstructed, he couldn’t draw a decent bead on her. His bullets flew off in random directions. “...Why?” He clicked his tongue. “Look, I get the idea! The only time we ran into each other was the restaurant. You must have stuck a tracking device on me, watched where I went, and

became certain I was a spy! But it doesn't make sense. I didn't do anything suspicious back there! I wouldn't make that kind of rookie mistake!" he shouted with his vision full of darkness and his heart full of fear. "How did you know to put that tracker on me?!"

At long last, the girl spoke. "I did it..."

"Hmm?"

"...because you annoyed me, yo."

The man gasped. "What?" He crumpled to his knees as though all the strength had drained from his legs. "You planted the tracker...because you were mad I threw my booze at you? You're saying that it had nothing to do with me being a spy?"

"....."

"So, what, you plant trackers on all your problem customers so you'll be able to kill them whenever it suits you?"

"....."

"That's deranged... *You're* deranged! Everything about you is messed up!"

The girl gave her skirt another shake, and a new tool fell onto the ground. The man couldn't see it, but it was a stun gun that had been modified to produce many times its original voltage.

"Where are you? Where'd you go?!"

The girl quietly circled behind the terrified man and raised her stun gun to the nape of his neck as undetectably as could be. She gave off no hostility. But then again, of course she didn't. For her to give off hostility, she would have needed to care about whether he lived or died.

Tears rolled down the man's cheeks as he felt his death approaching.

Then, right as the stun gun brushed against his neck—

"That's enough."

—Klaus appeared out of nowhere and grabbed the girl's arm. The stun gun toppled from her hand, and the man passed out from sheer fright.

Klaus sighed. "...Well, this is certainly something. What do your two lookouts think they're doing?"

The girl said nothing. "....."

Klaus gave her a gentle look. "...I hesitate to ask, but are you doing this to protect the restaurant?"

"Yup. The place had to close down for the day because of him," the girl replied cheerily.

Klaus spent a good long time trying to figure out what to say to that, but eventually, he settled on sighing again. "Just so you know, eliminating problem customers isn't included in the waitress job description."

The girl's eyes went wide. "I had no idea, yo."

Not even Klaus could guess whether she was telling the truth or not.



A week later, Lily held up an envelope in the Heat Haze Palace main hall with a wide grin on her face. "My wages from that restaurant gig came in! Yippee! All my hard work is finally paying off."

It was a comparatively paltry sum compared to the completion bonuses they got for their spy missions, but there was something uniquely satisfying about getting the money they'd earned from waitressing. There was even a little extra added in as a sort of severance payment.

"Yeep!" Erna cried loudly from beside her. "I finally get it!"

"What's up?" Sybilla asked.

To which Erna happily replied, "I figured out why I've been tripping so much!"

"Hmm? Oh yeah, you did fall over a lot while you were working..."

"It's because I got taller! That's why it's been so hard to make my body move

right. My clothes were too tight on me.” Erna stood on her tiptoes as though to emphasize the way she’d grown. Now that she mentioned it, she *was* a bit taller. The fact she hadn’t noticed and had been wearing clothes a size too small had made it hard for her to move around. “I’m finally hitting my growth spurt,” she declared as she struck a triumphant pose.

The others gave her a round of applause. “Congrats!” There was a hint of melancholy to the news, as they did love to dote on their petite friend, but given how happy she looked, it seemed only proper to rejoice. A celebratory mood filled the room.

However, it didn't last long.

Moments later, a mechanical VRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR buzzed out.

The girls exchanged confused looks. “Huh?”

The noise was coming from Annette's room, and they quickly made their way over. In the hallway, they ran into Klaus, who looked just as puzzled, and all of Lamplight headed to Annette's room together.

Annette always left her door open, so all they had to do was approach it to get a clear view inside. Enshrined at the room's center, there was a large chair with a machine spinning an oversize metal file affixed to its top. Its design resembled that of an electric chair, and it was replete with straps to restrain whoever was sitting in it.

“I spent the money I earned to put the finishing touches on it, yo,” Annette said as she hopped up and down in the middle of the room. “I call it the Erna Shaving Apparatus! I’m gonna use it to file down her skull!”

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The entire team was left speechless.

As they stood there, Annette whirled around. “Oh, hey, Bro.” She produced a knife from within her skirt and handed it to Klaus. “I got you a present, yo.”

“Can I ask why?”

“It’s a bribe. I’m gonna need you to pretend this never happened.”

“.....”

Not even the mighty Klaus could come up with anything to say to that.

Annette then turned her gaze on Erna, who was trembling at the back of the group. “C’mon over, Erna! We’re gonna use my machine to take off that new height of yours!”

“I—I don’t think she’s joking!” Erna yelped.

“Don’t worry. All I want is to bring you back to my level! Three-quarters of an inch, that’s all!” That would be more than enough to prove lethal, and Erna screamed and fled. Annette brandished her weapons and gave chase. “Get back here! You aren’t allowed to leave me behind and have a growth spurt all on your own!”

“How is this supposed to be at all fair?!”

“Prepare yourself. This is what I decided to earn all that money for, yo.”

The two girls ran out of the room at top speed, and the remaining members all sighed in unison.

As it turned out, there was no need for them to revise their assessments after all.

Sure enough, “Forgetter” Annette was the biggest problem child in Lamplight.

Chapter 2

Thea's Case

“Whyyyyyyyyyyyy?” Thea sobbed. She collapsed face down on the sofa and continued her wailing.

Her beauty was downright bewitching under normal circumstances, but at the moment, her makeup was smeared, and her hair was as disheveled as it had ever been. There was no beauty there, only hysteria. The way she punched the sofa in anguish was like a child throwing a temper tantrum. No small number of the city's men were smitten with her, but if any of them saw her in that state, they would immediately become disillusioned.

Beside her sat Grete, who let out a similarly forlorn sigh. “...Nothing ever seems to work. The boss really is a fierce opponent.”

“It doesn't make any sense,” Thea responded in between her lamentations. “I refuse to accept this! I simply don't believe it!”

“No, no, we have to come to terms with the reality of the situation,” Grete said. “Your plan was perfect. I simply wasn't good enough...”

“You didn't do a thing wrong! Teach is just thickheaded—that's all!”

“You're just saying that to make me feel better...”

“Come on, have some self-confidence! A-although I do have to admit, it does sting...”

The two of them griped and complained with the grief of all the wrongs of the world, and right as the two of them were consoling each other in the main hall

“Ugh, what's with the downer energy? It's making my skin crawl.”

—Monika came in with venom on her tongue. She'd just gotten out of the bath, and she ran a towel over her asymmetrical cerulean hair as she shot an icy look at Thea.

"I could hear you from all the way down in the bathroom in the basement. So? What'd you screw up this time?" she asked, her voice thick with contempt.

"...That's not what happened, Monika. What happened wasn't her fault," Grete replied, promptly coming to Thea's defense. "Fortune just wasn't on our side..."

"Exactly!" Thea shouted. "It was just bad luck! My plan was flawless. Teach passed in front of a hotel while he was out and about, and I called over to him perfectly."

"It was really a splendid piece of work...," Grete agreed.

"That's right, and Grete's timing when she showed up soaking wet was perfect as well!"

"The boss was shocked, just as planned."

"The idea was that her being drenched would make him concerned enough for her that he would take her into the hotel with him. That's simply how men operate. At that point, all we would have to do was treat what happened afterward as a foregone conclusion. We were right on the brink of pulling it all off."

"Thea believed that the boss would be so aroused that he would overlook all the little details..."

"But somehow, he was able to keep his cool and ask her, '*How did you get so wet?*'"

"I hadn't been expecting to get questioned, so I panicked. I told him that it was from a passing rain cloud..."

"But Teach didn't fall for it. He just turned around and walked off like he'd seen right through us."

"...The boss truly is a formidable foe."

"He really is. I guess that's an elite spy for you. It's too hard to catch him off

guard.”

“.....”

Grete and Thea gave their explanation in turns, nodding at each other’s statements all the while. Neither of them seemed to have picked up on the degree of exasperation in Monika’s stare. “You people, I swear.” She sighed. In the end, she scratched the back of her head in annoyance. “Look, there’s something that has been bugging me for a while. Can I go ahead and just ask it?”

“What’s the question?” Thea said with a puzzled tilt of her head, and Monika didn’t beat around the bush.

“Are you *sure* you’re actually good at seduction?”



As it turned out, there was one other incident that took place during the Mitario Showdown Prep Phase as well.

While Annette was hard at work at her side job, the other girls took turns taking vacation time. Staying in peak condition was part of their job, too, and given how they hadn’t had any meaningful time off since the Corpse mission, it was essential that they get some R&R.

Of the girls resting, one of them chose to reenergize herself by spending time with Klaus—namely, code name Daughter Dearest, *aka* Grete. Thea tried to help Grete bring her love to fruition, and under Thea’s tutelage, Grete made several attempts to steal Klaus’s heart. However, she was met with failure each and every time, causing Thea to start lamenting her own uselessness. The fact that there was a man she was unable to woo wounded her pride as a self-proclaimed master of seduction.

Notably, this was also right after her confidence had crumbled due to the debacle involving Annette’s mother, the details of which don’t need to be recounted here. That was the state she was in when the incident began with someone asking for her advice.



Thea shuddered.

I—I simply can't believe it... How could she doubt me so utterly and completely...?

She walked down the hallway with her face buried in her hands and her body faintly quivering. By that point, she'd gone past hysteria all the way to blank stupefaction. She'd been shaken so deeply, she could hardly even speak. Monika's harsh words just kept bouncing around in the back of her head.

"You just have the exact kind of looks that idiot dudes go for. You're young, you've got a sexy figure, and you seem like an easy lay. It hardly takes a professional to press their massive tits against some ape to get him hot and bothered so they can manipulate him."

Oh, what a merciless accusation it had been!

Thea had denied it, of course. Grete believed in her, and Thea didn't want to let her abilities come under question in front of her. However, the fact that Monika had doubted her at all was enough to torment her.

Unghhh... That's the way people see me right now, isn't it?

More than anger, it was sorrow that filled her heart. Sure, she'd never once succeeded in seducing Klaus, but...

N-no, no, Monika's the only one who believes that. I mean, she is a grump. But I'm sure everyone else still reveres me as their local love guru!

Thea did her utmost to cheer herself up. She knew that if she didn't, it was liable to break her. After deciding to turn in early, she headed down the hallway toward her room.

Then someone called over to her. "Oh, hey, Thea. Perfect timing." That someone was Sybilla, who was standing in front of one of their teammates' rooms with her brows furrowed in consternation. "Would you mind lendin' a hand? I'm outta my depth here."

Thea pointed at herself. "Who, me?"

“It’s a romance thing. I’m no expert when it comes to this stuff, and Lily’d just go red and run away, so I can’t ask her for help, either.”

“When you say ‘romance’...” Thea looked with surprise at the girl standing beside Sybilla. “...Are you asking on Sara’s behalf?”

“Sh-she is,” Sara said. “I’m kind of at a loss here. I have no idea what I should do.”

Sara was standing in front of her room with her head hung low. She was a brown-haired girl with the kind of timidity one would expect from a small animal. At the moment, her cheeks were flushed, and she was anxiously twiddling her fingers in front of her chest.

“Oh,” Thea said in shock. Now, that was a surprise. Sara was Lamplight’s third-youngest member, and as far as Thea had known, she had no interest in matters of the heart. Thea was dying to help out in any way she could. However, Sybilla and Sara seemed somewhat less eager.

“I mean, I did give it my best shot,” Sybilla groaned.

“A-and honestly, so did I,” Sara said apologetically.

“But we couldn’t come up with any decent answers...”

“And there isn’t anyone else to turn to...”

The two of them sighed in unison.

“So I guess she...” “So I guess Miss Thea...”

“...is our only option, huh.”

“You settled on me by process of elimination?”

Thea’s eyes went wide. The situation was more serious than she’d thought. To think that Monika wasn’t the only one who had doubts about her romantic expertise.

As Thea saw it, the attitude they were taking with her was hardly respectful enough when *they* were the ones who’d come to *her* asking for help—

“.....”

—but Sara’s expression was downright tortured. It was clear that she was

really agonizing over this.

Thea had a lot of things she wanted to say but only one answer she could give. “For starters, why don’t you tell me what’s going on. How can I be of assistance?”

With that, she stepped into Sara’s room.

“A love letter?” Thea repeated in surprise.

“That’s right.” Sara nodded, then explained what had happened.

As the story went, Sara often went over to the big pet shop in the capital when she had time off. The building was furnished with a small lawn, so she liked to let her puppy, Johnny, run around there. Sara loved to spend her days off watching Johnny scamper around happily, enjoying the play equipment and hanging out with the other pets.

“Apparently, there was a man who saw me...,” Sara said embarrassedly.

“And the guy gave the clerk a love letter to pass along to Sara,” Sybilla finished.

Thea read over the letter. The sender was a man named Dominic Maura, and it started with the passionate declaration, “*I fell for you at first sight.*” It came on a little strong, but the love behind the words was plain to see.

“So?” Thea said, pushing Sara to elaborate. “How did you reply?”

“I wrote a letter back turning him down,” Sara replied. “I appreciated the thought, but I’m so busy with my spy missions that I don’t have time for things like that...”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“But when I did...more and more letters started pouring in.”

With that, Sara showed her a pile of papers so big, she could barely fit it in her hands. “Ooh,” Thea said in astonishment before glancing through them. The passion of their contents only escalated from the first one.

“You consume my thoughts so completely that I find myself unable to sleep at night.” “The sight of your smile as you watched your puppy play is burned into my gaze, never to leave.” “Oh, what I would give to speak with you.” “When I saw you, I knew it was destiny at work.” “Please, at least let me treat you to a meal.”

Frankly, it was a bit scary.

Sybilla crossed her arms with a fierce look on her face. “That’s when she came to me for help. What’s your take? It’s kinda stalkery; you think she should just ignore ‘em? How would you deal with somethin’ like this?”

Now, it was clear what lay at the heart of the matter. It was perhaps an enviable problem to have, but when it came to romance, turning people down wasn’t as easy as it looked. Sara was clearly conflicted as to how best to handle her suitor.

“To be honest,” Sara said, hanging her head, “it’s so overwhelming that I feel awkward even going to the pet shop anymore...even though Mr. Johnny loves it there so much...”

Her expression was heavy and downcast. Sara clearly didn’t have any experience being courted like that. That much made sense, given how long she’d been cooped up in her spy academy.

If she couldn’t come up with a solution, she would lose one of her favorite places. The first person she’d gone to for advice was Sybilla, but Sybilla hadn’t been able to come up with anything good, either. Thea took another look at the letters. The man’s love was out of control, but he didn’t seem like a bad person. He recognized that Sara was a minor, and it sounded like the kind of relationship he was after was entirely wholesome.

“Tell me, Sara. You’ve never met Dominic, right?”

“No. We’ve only ever interacted through letters.”

“In that case, I think it might not be a bad idea to try meeting up with him. There’s a lot you can’t tell about a person until you meet them face-to-face, things you’d never learn when half your conversations have nothing to fuel

them but your imagination.”

Sara’s eyes went wide. “Are you sure that would be okay...? I’m a spy, so getting wrapped up in a relationship isn’t exactly—”

“The most important thing here is your feelings.”

“M-my feelings?”

“Exactly. Let’s set all the spy stuff aside for a moment. What do *you* want? Do you want to give dating a try? Is there someone else you think is just lovely? I want to hear your candid thoughts about this.”

The fact of the matter was, dating was hard for spies. They couldn’t afford to reveal their true identities to their romantic partners, and those partners themselves could even be used against them. However, Thea’s concerns lay elsewhere.

Honestly, Lamplight has a lot of members who distance themselves from romance.

Perhaps it was the harsh nature of the world of espionage that put them in that position, but aside from Grete, none of them ever proactively pursued love. However, the bridal royale had proven that it wasn’t because they were uninterested in it. The situation was bad—Thea could feel it in her bones. If they kept forcibly shutting out the voices in their hearts, then inevitably, it would hurt them and have lasting repercussions on the rest of their lives.

Right now, she wanted to hear what Sara had to say when stripped of all pretext.

Sara took a good long while to come up with an answer. “I—I, um...” Her face went red, and she gave her hat a hard squeeze. “I—I do have someone who I think is lovely.”

Sybilla and Thea exchanged a look. That wasn’t the answer they’d been expecting at all.

Sara continued hanging her head in embarrassment as she went on. “But I don’t have any idea whether or not that’s actually love... And plus, I’m sure he has no desire to fall in love with me, and double plus, there’s someone else who

would be a much better pair with him, and I'm actually rooting for her love to work out..."

There was a man who immediately came to mind for Thea—the *one man* who was closer to the girls than any other, yet who was acting in good faith not to direct any romantic feelings their way.

"You know," Sara said with a chagrined laugh, "I might just be in love with the idea of romance. It really would be nice if I could fall in love the way Miss Grete did."

Thea gave her a smile. "That's perfectly normal for a girl your age."

The lot of them were all spies, but at the same time, they were still teenage girls, and they were right at that age where most people start yearning for romance.

"Then it's settled," Sybilla said with a grin.

"That it is," Thea replied with a nod before delivering her verdict. "Go ahead and meet up with Dominic. It'll help you find out if what you're feeling is love or not."

If Sara went on a date with another man, it would give her the tools to get her own feelings in order. This might actually be a perfect opportunity.

As Thea brought the discussion to its conclusion, Sara looked at her with a start and began getting flustered. "B-but is it really okay for someone like me to do this? I've never met up with a man to spend time alone with him, and I don't know the first thing about fashion, and I'm afraid I'm just going to disappoint him..."

When Sara left the manor, she generally went out wearing the school uniform they used for their cover story. The clothes she owned herself were all plain and drab.

"And just who do you think you're talking to, pray tell?" As soon as Sara started looking nervous, Thea poked her in the shoulder and confidently laid a hand atop her own chest. "I'll give you the best backup you could ever ask for. It's high time I showed you just what I'm capable of."

With that, Thea launched into her grand campaign to give Sara a makeover.



On the morning of the day the date was going to take place, Thea headed over to Monika's room. The moment she knocked on the door and stuck her head in, Monika looked up sleepily from her bed and chewed Thea out. "What? Why should I have to look at your mug first thing in the morning on my day off?" However, Thea paid her no heed. She was used to Monika being particularly rude to her.

"Would you mind coming to the main hall?" Thea asked.

Monika grimaced. "And why the hell would I do that?"

"There's something I want you to see. Come on down and behold my true might."

"Oh yeah? Fine," Monika replied listlessly to Thea's proverbial gauntlet throw. It wasn't the warmest of responses, but at least she'd agreed to come. After quickly changing from her pajamas to her mission outfit, Monika descended the stairs to the main hall alongside Thea.

"See, this is what I can do when I put my mind to it!" Thea cried as she threw open the door.

Inside, Sara was standing in the middle of the main hall dressed to the nines. Thea had given her attire that would not get in the way of her girl-next-door charm. All she had on as far as makeup went was a bit of foundation, and her outfit was centered around a long, light-green skirt from the Lylat Kingdom. Thea had left Sara's trademark newsboy cap right where it was, but she'd pinned a badge to it to give it a little highlight. She'd also used a curling iron to straighten the permed hair stretching out from under it.

"...Dang." Monika let out a small breath. "Good going."

Thea clenched her fists. Monika wasn't in the habit of giving out empty praise, so earning a commendation from her was sure proof that Thea had nailed it.

"Still," Monika said to Sara, who seemed deeply restless, "she was working

from a good baseline. You should be proud.”

The compliment made Sara blush. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of the unfamiliar outfit.

Then the other girls started gathering one after another. Sara was so beautiful, they hardly recognized her, and they all paid her compliments.

“I think you look badass, yo.” “You look wonderful, Big Sis Sara.”

On hearing the high praise coming from Annette and Erna, Sara bashfully scratched her cheek.

Thea proudly parted back her hair. “I should think so, considering I went all out.”

As Thea basked in her own satisfaction, Grete looked at her with admiration in her gaze. “You never fail to impress, Thea the Brilliant and Wise...” Monika’s comments had almost caused Thea’s disciple to lose faith in her, but now, that respect was restored.

“I’m not finished yet, not by half,” Thea declared triumphantly. “I’m going to back you up during the date itself, too, Sara. Make sure you bring your radio with you.”

A look of shock crossed Sara’s face. “Y-you’re going to be watching the whole thing?”

“Of course I am! And anyone else who’s not busy should come along, too. If we all work together, we’ll be able to orchestrate the best date ever!”

“All right!”

“No, no, no, no!” Sara yelped. “I appreciate the offer, but please, no! That would be too embarrassing!!”

However, the others were so pumped up, they completely ignored her protests. “Don’t you worry,” Sybilla reassured her. “If he tries to bring you to a sketchy hotel, I’ll beat the shit outta him for ya.”

“N-now I’m starting to get nervous, too,” said Lily.

“All my bugs are set up and ready to go, yo,” Annette announced.

“...I’ll have to use this as a reference for a date I can go on with the boss,” Grete mused.

“I’ll be rooting for you,” said Erna.

The look in Sara’s eyes was one of utter resignation. “O-okay...”

Thea let out a conflicted laugh. She wanted to be there for Sara, of course, but the fact was that the others were keenly interested in the topic of dating. It made perfect sense, given the ages they were all at. Thea felt a little bad for using Sara like that, but this was going to be a perfect opportunity for their teammates to get front-row seats to the romance that they’d been so quick to push aside.

“Ugh, what a bunch of busybodies.”

The one team member who reacted coldly was Monika—

“Oh? You’re not coming?”

“Excuse me? Why the hell should I have to tag along with you lot?”

—but when Thea asked her straight up, she replied with an annoyed glare.

“I’m only going to stick around until noon.”

Sara’s eyes went wide. “So you *are* coming!”

Much to her surprise, the full cohort ended up accompanying her.

They’d settled on a time and place for the meeting via the love letters. The location was to be a pet-friendly café in a suburb not far from the Republic’s capital. The café had a courtyard with a fountain where customers could let their dogs play while they enjoyed a nice galette, and the plan was for them to meet right in front of it.

As Sara headed over to the café with her radio, the rest of the girls waited on standby in a vacant room in the building across the street. All of them were lined up in front of their fourth-story window with binoculars in hand.

“Damn, it’s packed in there. I had no idea pets were so popular,” Sybilla said nonchalantly as she munched on her sandwich.

“Apparently, we’re in the middle of a pet boom,” Lily replied as she enjoyed a sandwich as well. “People have been getting into selective breeding lately, and celebrities have been getting in on the action, too.”

The two of them were being relatively calm about the whole thing, but in contrast, the two shorter girls beside them—namely, Annette and Erna—were practically hyperventilating with excitement. “I’ve got a clear view of the meeting spot, yo.” “Me too. I don’t see anything dangerous in the area.”

“All right, let’s go over it one more time,” Monika said to the eager duo before posing them a question. “What do we do if the guy ends up being a dirtbag who tries to get handsy with Sara?”

Annette’s and Erna’s hands shot into the air. “We blow him up, yo.” “I get him caught in a tragic accident.”

“Don’t you think that’s taking things a bit too far?!” Sara cried over the radio. It didn’t sound like there were any problems with the signal.

Annette and Erna ignored Sara’s protestations and exchanged a high five. “We’re gonna judge this guy backward and forward.” “We’ll never give Big Sis Sara away to a man who doesn’t meet our standards.” They were the two who Sara often took care of, and although they collectively made up the group called the Specialist squad, that was only one part of the bond they shared.

I can’t believe everyone actually came... I suppose that’s a testament to Sara’s natural charisma.

Lamplight was home to more than its fair share of oddballs, and Sara was one of the only “normal” people in its ranks. Many of the others adored her; the fact that the chronically antisocial Monika had tagged along was proof enough of that. Everyone wanted Sara’s date to go smoothly.

However, that kindheartedness of Sara’s was the exact reason Thea was worried. She rested her hand on her cheek. “You know, Sara comes across as timid, so she’s liable to attract all sorts of strange men. You know, like people who can only love women they think are weaker than them.”

“For sure,” Monika agreed. “I mean, we’re talking about the kind of guy who would go and write a mountain of love letters. Feels like the only way this can

As Dominic and Sara chatted in the café, Dominic's voice came through Sara's hidden radio loud and clear. "God, I'm so sorry. I probably made a complete ass of myself, sending you all those love letters. I don't usually do stuff like that, but I just couldn't help myself... Ah, right, I should introduce myself. My name's Dominic Maura, and I'm a senior at Shalita University. I've been thinking about getting a dog lately, which is why I was hanging out at the pet shop, and that's when I spotted you...and yes, fell for you at first sight."

Dominic was the one doing most of the talking, but that wasn't to say he was giving off a poor impression. He seemed like an agreeable young man. His outfit was well put together, what with his fashionable jacket and his expensive wristwatch, and when Sara was at a loss as to what to order, he offered her some thoughtful advice while also making sure to give her the seat with the better view. Plus, his academic background wasn't bad, either.

Most importantly, though, their conversation was as lively as could be.

"I'm studying genetically modified crops at uni. Have you heard of Weyrich corn? It's incredibly nutritious, so it comes highly recommended as pet food... That's right, I actually helped out a tiny bit with its development. Is that right, you feed it to your other pets? Well, I'm touched to hear they enjoy it."

Dominic was getting Sara to come out of her shell. As it turned out, the two of them had pretty similar interests. Sara gave him a sunny smile. *"Actually, do you know of food that would be good for a hawk's health? Mine's been a little under the weather lately."*

"For a hawk, huh? As far as carnivores go...I'm afraid I'm not too sure. I'll try asking the professor next time I see him. He's really busy, though, so it might take a while."

"The professor...? You mean, one of your professors at Shalita University?"

"No, Professor Tott. I ran into him at a conference last month, and we ended up hitting it off."

"Isn't he one of the biggest names in the field of biology?! That's incredible!"

It was about as harmonious as conversations got. So harmonious, in fact, that it was kind of boring to listen to. The others were relieved, of course, but it was

also a bit anticlimactic.

“It’d be pretty rude to keep listening in,” Monika said with a big yawn. “I’m bored, so I’m gonna bail. Sybilla, you want to come, too?”

“Huh? Yeah, I guess I’ll head out with you. Doesn’t look like there are any fires to put out, so you all can fill me in on the details later.”

With that, Sybilla started getting ready to leave, too. After the two of them left, Lily said, “Well, I came all the way up to the capital, so I might as well track down some sweets,” and vacated the premises as well.

Sure enough, it didn’t seem like there would be much point to them continuing to monitor the wiretap. Sara and Dominic’s café date was going just fine without Thea needing to lift a finger. That said, Erna and Annette seemed doggedly determined to continue supervising.

“By the way, did you know? Apparently they’re opening a new off-leash dog park.”

“Oh, wow, I had no idea.”

“Would you like to check it out with me next week? Then we’ll both be able to bring our pets.”

“Th-that might be nice... Oh, but would you mind if I waited to give you my answer? I don’t have a great sense of what my schedule is going to look like next week.”

“Oh, of course, I’m so sorry. Forgive me for being so forward even though we only just met.”

In the end, they even started making plans for a follow-up date. From listening to Sara’s voice, it sounded like she was excited about the prospect.

As far as first dates went, that one went just about as well as it could have.

The café date lasted about two hours. It was the perfect amount of time for a man and a woman to hang out for the first time; it was neither too long nor too short. Dominic seemed to have a good sense for that, and after giving Sara his contact information, he saw her off with a warm smile.

Thea approached Dominic directly right after the two of them parted ways. When he started walking toward the station, she intercepted his path and called out to him from the front.

“Hello there, you.”

“Hmm? Is there something wrong?”

Despite getting accosted out of nowhere, Dominic’s expression didn’t sour in the slightest.

Thea wanted to talk to him in person, just to be safe. This was a man who was on the verge of potentially getting very close with one of her dear friends, after all. She needed to make sure she vetted him.

He seems even more delightful up close.

Her impression of him just kept on improving. The smile he was giving her seemed downright harmless, yet he didn’t come across as at all frail. His body had the kind of mass to it that seemed trustworthy if he ever needed to protect you.

He’s probably a real hit with the younger ladies, Thea concluded. He probably had no shortage of fangirls.

She returned his smile with one of her own. “That was a cute girl you were with earlier. Who is she, your girlfriend?”

“.....? Why do you ask?” Dominic scrunched up his face a bit but then went, “Aah,” in realization and flashed his pearly whites. “Let me guess. Are you a friend of Sara’s?”

“Something like that. Sorry about that. I might have been watching over her a bit.”

“Oh, no, I don’t mind at all. It makes sense you’d be worried, especially after that mountain of love letters I sent her.” Dominic scratched his cheek in embarrassment. “She’s just as wonderful as I thought she’d be. I could feel myself getting swept off my feet... Oh, and I don’t just mean by her looks, of course. She’s even more wonderful on the inside.”

“That’s what I like to hear. You be good to her, okay? Oh, and by the way...”

Thea gently raised her index finger. "...You have a little something stuck in your hair."

"I do?" Dominic ran his hand over his head in puzzlement.

"Hold still. I'll get it for you." Thea took a step toward him and got right up close to his face. Dominic didn't turn away, so they ended up looking each other in the eye for a few seconds. ".....There, got it."

After three seconds of sustained eye contact, Thea stepped back.

Dominic gave her a small bow. "Thank you."

".....?"

Thea was confused.

She had a special ability—the power to deduce a person's wants and aspirations if she spent three seconds staring into their eyes. Just now, she'd peered into the heart of Sara's prospective suitor to make sure he was worthy of her. However, the desire she'd sensed was radically different from the impression he'd given off up to that point. What in the world was going on?

Still unsure what to make of it, Thea exchanged some simple pleasantries with Dominic and left. Then she quickly set out in search of Sara. She needed to see her as soon as possible.

At the moment, Sara was still in front of the café. Her conversation with Dominic must have worn her out, as she was staring distractedly up at the sky. It was still mid-afternoon, but the sky was overcast, and the sun was nowhere to be seen. Sara was squinting up at the clouds in a daze.

"Hello there, Sara."

"Oh, Miss Thea."

When she noticed Thea, she broke into a smile.

Upon seeing how ever-so-slightly flushed Sara's face was, Thea couldn't help but comment on it. "...Looks like someone's in a good mood."

"I-is it that obvious?" Sara asked, bashfully clamping her hands down on her cheeks.

“Let’s head back on foot, shall we?”

They could just as easily have taken the bus, but they decided to walk instead. The street Thea chose was one block over from the main thoroughfare. It was a quiet street lined with watch stores and tailor shops. A postal worker cycled past them on a bicycle.

“M-my heart was racing a mile a minute,” Sara said before Thea had a chance to ask. “I—I never knew that was what sharing a meal with a man would feel like. I was so nervous, I don’t even remember what it was we talked about. It was so embarrassing, getting looked at from so close up.”

“Mm...”

All Thea could offer her were vague noises.

Sara’s voice was high-spirited. She was speaking much faster than normal and talking about how well her inaugural date went. Thea thought back to what Dominic had said to Sara right before the two of them parted ways.

“I’m so glad I got to meet you... You really are pretty, Sara. Seeing you in person like this makes that even clearer to me. This whole time we were talking, I couldn’t believe how much we have in common and what an amazing person you are. I desperately hope you’ll go out with me again, but even if you don’t, spending today with a girl as cute as you is a memory I’ll carry with me for the rest of my life.”

Lines like those came across as vapid and hollow to her, but there probably wasn’t a young girl alive who was immune to the flattery from such a hottie.

“And? What did you think of Dominic?”

Sara furrowed her brow at this. “...Th-that’s a good question. I don’t have my thoughts all in order yet, but I’m pretty sure that I don’t have any romantic feelings for him. Still, it did make me happy when he said I was cute...but it was kind of embarrassing, too. Guys don’t say things like that to me very often.”

“I see...”

“But Dominic was... I mean, he’s so different from the one I think is lovely... I’m not saying that he’s a bad person or anything, though. Oh gosh, I don’t know how to put it...” Sara took another few stabs at explaining herself, but in the end, she just cradled her head in her arms. “Oh, it doesn’t make sense! Someone like me shouldn’t be getting so picky!”

Too much new information had gotten into Sara’s head, and it was sending her into a tizzy. As Sara panicked, Thea cast a gentle look her way.

Don’t you see? This is exactly what being a teen is all about.

By that point, it didn’t matter whether or not Sara was interested in Dominic. Her heart had already been jostled into motion. The reason she wasn’t going for Dominic was because someone else had crept into her thoughts. Now she was starting to care about things like her appearance. That was why it felt so nice to have a boy compliment her on her looks, even when she wasn’t interested in him specifically. That was something Sara had missed out on when she’d been devoting herself solely to her spy training. What she was going through now, though, was adolescence in all its glory.

That was what I wanted her to experience for herself. That was what I wanted everyone to have to face head-on. That was all there was to it. Thea clenched her fists in frustration. *So why did this have to happen?*

Ever since she peered into Dominic’s heart, she’d had a feeling of foreboding that refused to go away. She steeled her resolve. “L-look, Sara. There’s something I need to tell you—”

“Sara.”

Before she could get the words out, though, someone else called Sara’s name.

It was Monika. There was a still look in her eyes. “You got a sec?”

At some point, she’d arrived just down the street in front of them. Her face didn’t have the faintest hint of a smile on it. Beside her, Lily was awkwardly hanging her head.

“...Miss Monika?” Sara asked worriedly. “Is something the matter?”

“With stuff like this, it’s better to just rip off the bandage. I’m gonna give it to

you straight,” Monika said. She shoved an envelope into Sara’s hands, and Sara opened it with a puzzled look on her face. Inside, there were copies of the Shalita University student register and a large number of newspaper articles. “I looked up every student currently enrolled at Shalita, and there isn’t a single senior named Dominic Maura. Plus, there weren’t any students who worked on Weyrich corn, and Professor Tott spent all last month abroad on an international research project, so he wasn’t at any conferences. That guy lied about everything he told you.”

After Monika split off from the group, she’d secretly conducted a background check, and Lily and Sybilla had helped her out. With their support, and with Monika pulling out all the stops, infiltrating a university records room was child’s play.

What she’d just revealed was the same thing Thea had resigned herself to accepting. When she looked into that man’s heart, all she’d seen was a filthy desire to take advantage of people and swindle them out of huge sums of money. To him, Sara had never been anything more than a mark.

Sara’s face went pale. “What do you mean...? Dominic was so—”

“His real name is Tarik Pupke, and he was arrested last month,” Monika declared. “He’s a con artist who runs romance scams.”



Monika laid the facts out as they were.

Dominic—or rather, Tarik—wasn’t a student at all. He was unemployed, and he made his living by leeching off younger women and swindling them out of cash. He targeted girls from affluent families, started relationships with them, and pretended he was having money problems. After stoking the girls’ concerns, he would manipulate them into stealing valuables from their parents.

His actions caused tragic consequences for the families he victimized. Most of the time, the con got discovered when the parents noticed their daughter acting strangely, and when that happened, the damages weren’t only monetary. The parents would grow disappointed in their daughters for

betraying them, and the daughters' hearts would be so broken that they closed off their feelings. The bonds between parent and child would be forever broken, and families would be left in ruins.

Such was the misfortune that Tarik left in his wake.

"B-but," Sara stammered, "if he got arrested last month, then why is he free now...?"

"The prosecutor threw out the case," Monika replied. "There wasn't enough evidence. The victims must feel terrible."

The concept of romance scams hadn't been codified in Din law yet. The act of receiving money and presents was treated as a simple expression of free love, and no one had been able to prove that any fraud had taken place. The newspaper clippings had the whole story.

"But why would he go after me?" Sara asked. She was still having trouble coming to terms with the situation. "I'm not rich or anything..."

"He wants Johnny," Monika declared flatly. That was the name of Sara's puppy. "You know how pets are super popular in the capital right now? Well, you've trained Johnny perfectly. He's smart, and from the way he acts, it's like he can understand human speech. Plus, he's still in that cute puppy phase. He'd fetch a high price if you sold him to a celebrity or something."

"....."

Sara let out a choked sob. She'd just remembered the way he'd asked her to bring her puppy to their next date.

Monika produced a radio receiver from her pocket. "Sybilla's tailing Tarik as we speak. He just went into a pub with one of his buddies. Do you have it in you to listen in on their conversation?"

Sara gulped and squeezed herself tight as she nodded.

Tarik's mirthful voice came buzzing through.

"...Right now? Well, I found a new sucker. I just got done meeting with her. It's crazy how naive she is. It's only a matter of time before she's putty in my

hands... Yeah, exactly. I'll start off by having her steal from her parents' wallets, and at some point, I'll snatch up the dog, too... I swear, these people are hilarious. It's like, use your heads a little. There isn't a guy alive who'd fall at first sight for some hick kid like—"

The voice cut off. Monika had killed the signal, and not a moment too soon. It had been getting to be too much even for Thea to bear, and she'd just been listening as a third party.

However, even just the part that had come through had been more than enough to leave a wound in Sara's heart. Her face had gone all the way past pale, and now, she was as white as a sheet. Her knees were trembling, her teeth were digging into her lips, and she was breathing so hard that it was like it was taking everything she had just to stay upright.

"Don't you worry, Sara." Monika's voice was uncharacteristically gentle. "I've got this. When I'm through with him, he's going to *wish* he was dead."

She patted Sara on the shoulder and began heading back toward the busy thoroughfare. Even at just a glance, it was clear to see how livid she was. The raw fury she was emanating was enough to make one's hair stand on end.

As she went, Lily followed along after her. There was a poison needle already clutched in her hand.

Sara was sure that they would carry out the most perfect revenge imaginable —

"T-time out!"

—but she called them off.

"I-it's okay... You don't need to do all that..."

"And why not?" Monika asked with a skeptical grimace.

Sara gave her a self-deprecating smile. "I'm such an idiot... If I had thought about it, I would have realized that. I should have realized it was a scam the moment someone told me—someone like me—that they'd fallen for me at first sight. I was stupid for ever thinking a guy might do that... It was reckless of me

to think I could handle dating. I'm just a joke..."

Midway through, her voice grew hoarse. Once the tears spilled, they poured relentlessly from Sara's eyes, and she squeezed the bridge of her nose to try to stop them as she took off at a desperate run.

"Sara!" Thea called after her, but Sara paid her no heed and vanished around the corner.

Thea knew she needed to go after her, but before she could, someone else showed up.

"Yo, was that stuff just now true?"

"Is Dominic really a con artist...?"

Two someones, in fact: Annette and Erna. They'd gone off and enjoyed themselves once the date wound down, and the two of them had arrived at the street licking lollipops. Erna was carrying a third untouched one, no doubt meant for Sara.

The two of them had seen enough to suss out what was going on. They cast darkened looks off in the direction Sara had just fled.

"Y'know..." Annette cracked her lollipop between her teeth. "...I think I'm gonna go for a nice little walk, yo."

"I'll come with you."

Thea intuitively sensed danger. Neither of those two was great when it came to exercising restraint, and whatever punishment they levied on Tarik was liable to be excessive. Annette, in particular, had a side to her that was best left unexplored.

"H-hold on. Hold it right there, you two!" Thea said, trying hurriedly to stop them from doing anything rash...

...but Monika just glared at her. "Why stop them? Aren't you pissed, too?" she asked. "Jackasses like him who take advantage of people's innocence make me sick."

"Monika..."

“Stay out of our way. We need to teach this guy that there are some people in this world you don’t get to mess with.”

Monika had murder in her eyes. It might well have been that she blamed Thea for encouraging Sara to go on the date in the first place, but either way, that anger of hers was legitimate. They couldn’t just let Tarik walk away unpunished after the way he’d toyed with their teammate’s maidenly heart. If the law wasn’t going to judge him, then it was up to them to do it themselves.

All Thea had to do was nod, and the others would flawlessly enact vengeance on Sara’s behalf.

“This isn’t it.” However, she shook her head. Carrying out vigilante justice wouldn’t mend Sara’s pain. It would be a hollow revenge. “Can you give me some time? I have a better solution in mind.”

Monika gave her a dubious look.

“And just for the record,” Thea continued loudly, “I’m absolutely seething!”

There was one thing Monika did have right. They *did* need to teach him a lesson he would never forget—a lesson that in that world of theirs, there were some people you just didn’t mess with.



Sara was sitting on a bench beside a stream that ran right through the heart of the city. She had a loaf of bread, and when she strewed a little on the ground, pigeons flocked to her from all over. From the look of it, they were each politely waiting for her to offer them some. Sara continued tearing off little chunks with a desolate look in her eyes.

A couple passing by watched Sara with delight, then continued on their merry way.

Thea called out to her. “Sara...”

“I feel so stupid...” Sara’s voice was thick with grief. “I feel so stupid for letting myself get excited. Now everyone’s gotten front-row seats to me making a fool of myself...”

“.....”

“I’m the worst. There’s even someone else I think is lovely...but I got so happy when some other guy called me cute... And now, it just hurts...”

Huge teardrops spilled onto her knees. It was clear to see just how torn up she was. Romance scammers left their victims’ hearts in tatters. Thea understood that better than most, which was why she made sure to exercise extreme care whenever she herself laid a honey trap. That was why Tarik made her so angry. He’d taken advantage of her teammate’s naivete, and there was no way Thea was going to let that slide!

“I just wanted to fall in love like Miss Grete did...,” Sara choked. “But I should have known that someone like me could never—”

“That’s not true!” Thea grabbed Sara’s shoulders and looked at her head-on. “I’m so sorry, Sara. I acted carelessly, and this is where it’s gotten us. But please, at least let me explain myself. There was something I wanted to show you, something I wanted to show all of you—that you’re wonderful girls who are just as qualified and have just as much right as anyone to enjoy what romance has to offer.”

“Miss Thea...”

“This is a matter of love, and love is exactly how we’re going to settle it. The kid gloves are off now.” A beautiful smile spread across Thea’s face. “This time, I’m going to make him fall like he’s never fallen before.”

When they got back to Heat Haze Palace, Thea started giving orders to the others.

“Grete, could you put together an outfit that matches this picture? I’d like it to be a bit big on Sara. Lily and Erna, I need your help concocting a perfume. Sybilla, I’m sorry to have to ask this, but would you mind running out and getting us the materials we need? Annette, your job is to compile a list of Far East restaurants for me. And Monika, I need you to continue keeping tabs on Tarik’s location.”

Her instructions were detailed, and her teammates got to work carrying them

out. All of Lamplight was banding together on Sara's behalf.

Of all the people Thea gave directions to, Lily was the one whose contributions stood out the most. The poisons she could brew didn't just stop at paralytics. She also knew how to design poisons that could make people aroused or intoxicated, and with those at her disposal, she was capable of making an imitation love potion. With that, they were going to be able to settle things in relatively short order.

"Sorry to rain on your happy little parade," Monika said bluntly, "but do you have any actual reason for believing that us following your orders is going to be enough to bring Tarik down?"



“I’ve seen what’s in his heart, and I know his desires like the back of my hand. All we have to do is combine that knowledge with Sara’s innate charm, and he won’t know what hit him.”

Taking advantage of her unique talent to fuel her negotiation techniques was precisely where Thea shone. “Do you want to know why it was I washed out of my academy? Well, I’ll tell you.” Thea laid a hand atop her chest. “It was because I had relations with too many people. I went out with male faculty, local men, and the other girls at my academy, too.”

“Oh yeah?”

There was a spy Thea admired, and she’d tirelessly honed her skills in order to get to their level. She’d trained and trained to be able to charm, tempt, and manipulate people—so much so, in fact, that some of her instructors took issue with her methods and unjustly lowered her grades. With her pushing her skills to their limit, seducing a petty con man would be child’s play.

“When it comes to matters of romance, I’m the best in the game.”

And Thea, who bore the code name Dreamspeaker, was nothing if not determined.



At around the same time, Tarik was in a rather good mood.

It wasn’t just because of how smoothly his efforts to trick his mark were going. As he and his friend were drinking the night away in a pub, the man in the next seat over turned to him. “Sounds like you’ve got some interesting stuff going on in your life, buddy. If I buy you a drink, would you teach me the secret to running a good scam?”

At first, Tarik was afraid the man was a cop, but after chatting with him for a bit, he realized that that wasn’t it. Everything the guy did made him come across as a nobody, and each tiny detail Tarik described earned him an amazed chorus of *oohs* and *whoas*. The dude was a third-rate crook, and that was all he would ever be. Tarik was sure of it. At long last, he’d found someone who truly

respected his talents.

The long and short of it was, the man was no one important. After all, *nobody of consequence would ever pick a hairdo so mushroomy it drowned out the rest of their features the way he did.*

Tarik secretly decided to call him Mushroom Man.

“The most important thing is picking the right mark,” Tarik explained proudly. “The best thing about romance scams is how hard it is for the victims to come forward. They’re too embarrassed. *There’s no way he could have been a con man*, they’ll say, or *I’m so ashamed I let myself get tricked like that*. The best people to go after are rich girls. Their parents don’t want people to know about what their daughter did, so a lot of the time, they don’t even go to the police at all. You’ll never find a better target than that.”

“So that’s who you’re going after right now?”

“Yeah, a little brunette with some pets that’ll fetch a pretty dent. She’s timid and anxious, which is exactly what you want to look for. I’m positive she comes from money. Once I’m done getting her to steal cash from her parents, I’m gonna steal her dog, too.”

A chuckle escaped Tarik’s mouth as he thought back to how gullible her reaction had been.

“Fascinating,” Mushroom Man said as he rose to his feet. He thumped Tarik on the shoulder. “Thanks, man. This was a great way to kill some time.”

“T-to what?” Tarik’s eyes went wide. Hadn’t the man been trying to learn the trick to effectively conning people?

“But from one guy who trades in lies to another, I’ve got a warning for you—you aren’t cut out for this stuff.”

With that, Mushroom Man left. There was nothing Tarik could do but stare blankly at him as he went.

Naturally, Tarik had no way of knowing that the man he’d just been talking to was the Galgad spy White Spider.

Tarik had no reason to heed Mushroom Man's warning. He'd found a perfect target in Sara, and all he had left to do was reel her in. In what world did that make him not cut out to run cons?

He hummed himself a little song and made his way over to a coffee shop by his house. When he got there, the manager let him know he had a memo for him. Tarik didn't own a phone, so he always asked people to get word to him via his favorite coffee shop. The message was from Sara inviting him to another date. Everything was going just according to plan.

Sara had picked out a spot for them to get dinner, and when Tarik saw the restaurant's name, he let out a little coo. It was a restaurant that served Far East cuisine that Tarik had been meaning to check out for some time. He was impressed. What's more, she'd even put in an advance order for one of his favorite dishes. He didn't remember ever having mentioned liking it, so it must have just been a happy coincidence.

Tarik spent the next week unconsciously looking forward to the date.

On the evening of the holiday, when he met up with Sara in front of the restaurant, Tarik did a double-take. Her usual hat was nowhere to be seen, and her hair was tied back into a short ponytail.

Huh? Was she always this cute?

He tensed up. The change in Sara's appearance had pushed her far closer to being his type. She was wearing her hair the exact same way as an actress he'd been obsessed with lately, and her showy dress was a dead ringer for the one Tarik's first crush wore. On top of that, the scent of the perfume wafting off her felt like it was digging right into his brain.

When they got to their seats, Sara ordered a couple more dishes on top of their advance order without missing a beat. All of them were dishes Tarik loved. "To be honest, I just ordered all my favorites," she said with a smile.

Tarik's heart began racing.

His throat was dry, and he gulped down his booze in one big chug. A well-endowed silver-haired waitress had brought it over for him, and though it tasted sort of chemically, he chose not to worry about that. Immediately after

he drank it, he felt as though his heartbeat had begun growing even more rapid.

“You know, there’s something I’ve been curious about,” Sara said with a small tilt of the head.

That was one of Tarik’s favorite little tics women did.

“My dad’s really into collecting records,” she said and listed off a few band names.

Every single record she listed was one Tarik would have killed to get his hands on.

“Oh, your cup’s empty. What do you want to try next?” she said and offered him a menu.

Tarik loved how considerate she was being.

Two hours passed by, and in that time, the combination of Sara’s renewed attractiveness and several rounds of that weird-tasting booze put Tarik in a state of heightened arousal. He could practically feel the blood as it raced through his veins.

Perhaps this was destiny at work.

A glorious hunch began taking root in his heart. He’d interacted with a lot of girls during his time as a romance scammer, but none of them had appealed to him quite the way Sara did.

Now that I’m really looking at her, I can see what fair skin she has and how incredibly adorable she is. It makes me want to protect her.

He wanted her to be his, no matter what it took. He couldn’t hold back the exhilaration in his heart.

“S-say, Sara,” he said, rushing in for the kill, “would you like to stop by my place after this? It’s getting pretty late, so you could stay the night if you wanted.”

“That’s very nice of you to offer, Dominic. Could I just check one thing with you first?”

“What do you want to check? If it’s about pajamas or a toothbrush, I have an

extra—”

“Are you a con man whose real name is Tarik Pupke?”

A pair of cold eyes stared back at him, and a chill ran down his spine.

Sara continued by dispassionately listing off all sorts of personal information about him, stuff that ranged from where his parents lived to all his favorite coffee shops. And all of it was correct.

For Tarik, it was like the ground had just crumbled out from beneath his feet. He was supposed to be spending the evening sleeping with the girl of his dreams, not this.

“L-look, it’s not like that.” He broke out into a cold sweat. “The way I feel about you is real—”

“It’s okay.”

“Huh?”

“I’d be happy to stay at your place tonight. However, I’m going to need you to tell me the full truth about everything you’ve done so far. If you really want to go out with me, those are my terms.” The smile on Sara’s face was positively brimming with affection. She looked like the Virgin, willing to forgive any and all sins. “It must have been really hard on you, Tarik, getting crushed under the weight of your parents’ expectations when you were the one suffering most of all. But it’s okay. With me, you don’t have to pretend anymore.”

Tarik felt like his brain was melting into a goopy sludge. He’d never had a younger woman dote on him like that before, and the feeling sent a wave of heat through his body. With that, his instincts triumphed over his reason. The words slid effortlessly off his tongue. The thought of lying never once crossed his mind. He told her everything. He knew that she was his soulmate and that she would accept it all. She would accept it, and she would love him.

So he confessed to everything. He told her the names of every girl he’d duped, he told her how he’d done it, and he told her about the money he’d stolen from them. He didn’t leave out a single detail.

He wanted Sara to hear it all.

“...And that’s the last of it.” After getting it all out in a single go, he bowed his head in an attempt to curry favor. “B-but that’s all behind me now. These feelings I have for you are real, so—”

“I’m sorry,” Sara said, rising from her chair, “but you aren’t allowed to get off that easily.”

Her words rang harsh, and she pulled something out.

In her hand, she was holding a small device. Was that a voice recorder?

“I’m handing this over to the police. Now all those girls who couldn’t get their fraud cases to stick will get justice.”

It felt like someone had just dumped a bucket of cold water on his head. He immediately snapped back to his senses. “Y-you conned me?”

“The same way you tried to con me. I’m going to head home now.”

With a disappointed shake of her head, Sara stepped away from the table.

By that point, Tarik was in no headspace to make rational decisions. A girl who matched his tastes in every way imaginable was about to leave him. Every instinct in his body was screaming that he needed to stop her. “H-hold on just a —”

He made a pathetic grab for her shoulder, but the moment before he could reach her, someone grabbed his arm. “Don’t you lay a finger on her.”

There was a tall, long-haired man standing there. Tarik had no idea when he’d shown up. The man was dressed in a well-fitting suit and staring coolly at Tarik. He was so beautiful that Tarik couldn’t help but let out a little gasp. He also couldn’t move. The long-haired man wasn’t even putting that much strength into his grip, yet Tarik’s legs were trembling. In the end, he just plopped himself down on the restaurant’s floor.

“You know, Tarik, I wanted to thank you. You fell in love with me, even if just for a second, and that helped give me confidence,” Sara said with a gentle look on her face. “But the thing is, I know a much lovelier man than you.”

With that, she and the long-haired man entwined their fingers and left the restaurant together.

Tarik's perfect love lay shattered before him. A feeling of despair so great it felt like it might consume the world itself seized hold of him, and he let out a loud wail and began sobbing.



Out in the night-darkened alley...

"Wh-what's going on, Teach? I thought the plan was to have Miss Grete come and pick me up in disguise."

"Hmm? Oh, Thea told me the gist of what happened and asked me to help out."

"Ah, I see... Well, um, about your hand..."

"Let's leave them like this for a little longer. Pretending to be lovers is in our interests at the moment."

"Y-yes, sir. I'm so embarrassed about all this..."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of. It's only natural for someone your age to be interested in matters of romance."

"...I guess that's what it was. I let myself get worked up like a loser. It made me think I might be able to fall in love, too, someday."

"In that case, why don't we go hit the town?"

"Huh?"

"I do apologize that you have to settle for me playing the part of boyfriend, but I'll do my best to take the lead and show you a magnificent time. That way, you'll know you don't have anything to be afraid of the next time you feel ready to have another go at falling in love."



Thea was on cloud nine. "My golden days are finally here!"

The love-letter incident had just finished getting resolved. Tarik ultimately got rearrested on charges of suspected fraud. His victims had gone back to the police with hard evidence, the previously thrown-out cases had gotten reopened, and it was looking like criminal prosecution was just around the corner. Plus, even if he got off with a slap on the wrist, he was still facing down a double-digit number of civil suits. Thanks to an anonymous envelope with evidence in it that had arrived at the victims' houses, all the girls who'd been left without recourse had banded together to seek damages in civil court. It was going to be a good long while before Tarik got to lead anything resembling a normal life again.

The result had earned Thea some serious accolades from her Lamplight teammates. The way she'd gotten Tarik to fall in love with Sara had been nothing short of astounding. Grete in particular had gazed at her with awestruck eyes. "...Oh Wise One, I'll follow you to the ends of the earth."

Because of all that, Thea was grinning triumphantly, as if the whole world was smiling down on her. "Just leave it to me, Grete. Today's the day we make Teach yours, and I have just the plan to do it."

"...I'm in. Please tell me what I need to do."

"Heh-heh, and while we're at it, I'll make him say *I surrender*, too, and finally get to defeat him."

"...Of course. This is also good training."

"Now, the crux of our plan will be bunny suits!"

"Bunny suits? What kind of suit is that?"

As they chatted in Grete's bedroom, their plan to trounce Klaus slowly came together.



Meanwhile...

"Hey, Klaus."

“Hmm? What’s up, Monika?”

“Real talk, what is it? Why doesn’t Thea’s seduction work on you?”

“Explaining it all will take a while, so I hope you have some time. The thing is, my heart is like a cloud drifting through a summer sky just after a sudden shower—”

“Give me the abridged version.”

“...Thea’s seduction is all based around first peering into her target’s heart.”

“Ah, and she can’t pull that off against you.”

“Exactly. As a result, all she can do is to take her shots blind—”

“And drag Grete down along with her.”

“...Tell me, how in the world do *you* think I should deal with them? Their attempts have been getting kind of extreme lately, and I’m at a bit of a loss.”

“Hey, don’t ask me.”



Thea was unaware of Klaus’s concerns, and her rampage continued unabated.

“...I—I had no idea they had even invented an outfit this suggestive,” Grete said.

“Right? I remember exactly how it made me feel the first time I saw one. If we want to take down Teach, then this is the best way to do it!”

“Even so, I must admit I’m a bit nervous about wearing this thing...”

“Don’t you worry. I’ll be there wearing one right by your side. Together, we’ll give Teach the old one-hit KO.”

“You’re so wise...”

They continued chatting for a while, growing all the more excited as they did.

An hour remained before Thea would end up failing and weeping,

“Whyyyyy?!”

Interlude

Intermission ①

Out in the hallway, Annette and Erna stood frozen in front of the passage that read, *Klaus loves you*. Eventually, Erna screamed, “YEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!” and tottered off unsteadily down to the hallway’s far end with a face just as red as Lily’s had been.

Annette, on the other hand, was calm and collected. After closing her eyes for a few seconds as though digging through her memories, she ultimately grinned cheerily— “I assume this is just silly misinformation, yo.”

—and arrived at the truth. It wasn’t clear why, but she seemed satisfied with that, and she headed off to the kitchen.

When she got there, she found Monika boiling some water to make tea.

“Hey, Annette,” Monika said to her, “Lily and Erna just shot by with bright-red faces. You know what that’s about?”

“I think this here is to blame.” Annette held up the declaration of love. “Here you go, Sis. Everything’ll make sense once you read it.”

“Huh. Thanks.”

Annette handed Monika the aforementioned slip, then grabbed a cookie from the cupboard and a bottle of milk from the fridge before leaving. She didn’t stick around to explain any further.

After finding herself alone in the kitchen once more, Monika read the note—the one that said, *Klaus loves you*.

“What’s this about...?” Her face contorted into an undisguised grimace. “Was this addressed to me, Annette? ...Dammit, she’s gone.”

Monika had no idea how to interpret the message. Had Lily and Erna freaked out after discovering that Klaus was in love with her? Or had the message been addressed to someone else altogether?

...Was this seriously meant for me?

She spent half a second considering the possibility, then mumbled, "...This is stupid," and tossed it onto the counter.

That marked the misunderstanding's fourth victim.

Chapter 3

Erna's Case

The facts about the *Eccletnuk* luxury liner were as follows.

The *Eccletnuk* was a passenger ship registered with the Din Republic. It was built shortly after the Great War based on designs from the Bumal Kingdom. At 850 feet from bow to stern, with a top speed of twenty-three knots, and the ability to carry more than two thousand passengers at once, it was one of the finest ships in all the Republic. It could make the trip from Din to Mitario in the United States of Mouzaia in a single week, and with its crew numbering almost a thousand strong, each voyage it made was like moving an entire town across the ocean.

As far as the ship's interior went, it was furnished with all sorts of things to keep its passengers from getting bored on long trips across the sea. It had facilities ranging from pool tables and a reading room to an entire dance hall, and its state-of-the-art galley offered everything from fresh-baked bread to gourmet food from around the world.

The ship's one flaw was the steep price of its tickets, but thanks to the extensive newspaper ad campaign the operating company ran, they were always drowning in reservations. The middle class had carved out some financial leeway in the decade since the Great War's end, and they were more than happy to enjoy spending their money seeing the globe while the world was still at peace. Whenever the *Eccletnuk* set out on one of its monthly voyages, it was always booked to capacity.

It was the sunniest departure day the ship had seen in several years, and on board, it had a number of peculiar passengers—namely, one man and eight

girls. Now, their origins were as disparate as could be. Three of them worked for a furniture company, one was an aspiring jazz musician, one was a college student, another was an apprentice journalist, and the final three were a group of students off to visit a relative of theirs who lived in Mitario.

At a glance, the group appeared to have nothing in common. They were strangers, nothing more. They were staying in different cabins, they never chitchatted in the restaurant or the reading room, and they spent their afternoons separately studying languages or working out in the onboard gym. They didn't give a single sign that they knew one another. When they passed each other by, though, they occasionally exchanged glances so furtively that no one around them noticed. Then, when night fell and the majority of passengers were asleep, they crept silently through the hallways and gathered in one of their rooms.

On the second day of the voyage, the whole group save the man joined up once more in one of the guest cabins. Under the cover of night, the eight of them sat in a circle on the cramped room's floor. Then they all crossed their arms with serious looks on their faces. The air crackled with tension.

In the center of the room, there were five decks of playing cards.

A well-endowed girl with silver hair thrust her finger at the ceiling and shouted at the top of her lungs. "Let the first Mitario Concentration Quiz... begin!"

""""""""Yeahhhhh!!""""""""

The fact of the matter was, the group was Lamplight—a spy team heading to the site where a decisive showdown awaited them.



The big battle was finally upon them, and the girls were en route to Mitario. After finishing up their domestic missions, getting themselves prepared, and honing their teamwork, the girls left their motherland and set out for Serpent's hideout in the United States of Mouzaia.

They knew there was a fierce foe waiting for them just around the corner, and they made sure not to slack off on the journey there. Being on a ship didn't change the fact that they'd left their own borders, and they'd already boarded with false passports and begun using different backstories. As spies, they couldn't afford to arouse suspicion. They needed to act with the utmost discretion.

On top of that, it was also important that they spend what little time they had left training. It was undeniable that their skills were, at best, lacking, so spending the weeklong voyage lazing around wasn't an option. They needed to stock up on whatever intel they could about their mission site, they needed to work out their bodies, and they needed to train in whatever ways they could aboard the ship.

However, that wasn't to say that they couldn't have a little fun in the process.



First place: Monika and Erna—108 cards

Second place: Lily and Thea—82 cards

Third place: Grete and Sara—68 cards

Fourth place: Annette and Sybilla—2 cards

"I never want to team up with you again, Sis!"

"No, yeah, that was totally my bad. Seriously, I fucked up. I'll buy you some ice cream from the kiosk to make it up to you, okay?"

As Annette pouted, Sybilla pressed her hands together and apologetically bowed over and over. They'd been playing a special variant of concentration in pairs, where some of the cards had questions about the laws and culture of their mission site and other cards had those questions' answers. It was a game that tested both memory and judgment, and they'd split into teams by lottery and alternated drawing cards. At that point, it became evident that Sybilla couldn't even read the language the questions were written in. She'd been

reduced to having to play while holding a dictionary in one hand, and not even Annette's exceptional memory had been enough to overcome her dead weight.

Monika was still giving her a scathing look. "What kind of spy doesn't even learn the language of the nation they're gonna be working in? You think this is some kind of joke?"

"N-nah, it's not like that," Sybilla said, scratching her head in embarrassment. "I've just been focusin' on my aim and my CQC and my stealth lately, y'know? Hell, you were right there trainin' with me."

"Yeah, 'cause I assumed you at least knew the damn language!"

"It's fine—it's not like I can't hold a conversation. I'm just not great when it comes to readin' and writin', that's all..."

"Isn't your cover supposed to be that you're a journalist?"

"I'm gonna make a machine that pumps her full of electricity to help her learn the language, yo."

"That seems like a bridge too far!"

As Monika and Annette read Sybilla the riot act, another girl walked past them with a triumphant look on her face—namely, Erna, who'd won the concentration tournament alongside Monika.

I did it! I was able to pull my weight.

Getting to team up with someone as talented as Monika had played an enormous part in her victory, of course, but Erna had done her part contributing to the win as well. Thoroughly pleased with herself, she headed out into the ship's hallway to buy herself a treat as a reward for a job well done.

During her time aboard the *Eccletnuk* luxury liner, Erna was going to end up bringing about a miracle.

At the time, though, she had no way of knowing that yet.



Erna drank her hot cocoa in the ship's reading room and took a breather.

It was past midnight, but despite the late hour, it was still pretty crowded in there. Of the dozens of soft leather sofas that sat atop the room's carpet, more than half of them were occupied. The ship's sheer extravagance had people too excited to sleep. For some of them, this trip was going to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. There were people chatting excitedly as they pored over travel guides with beers in hand. The one thing they all had in common was the delighted looks on their faces.

Erna, in contrast, was just about ready to doze off.

Normally, she would have long since gone to sleep by that hour. Much as she wanted to curl up in bed, though, Monika, Annette, and Sybilla were still arguing in her cabin. She figured that the best thing to do would be to nestle herself into one of the reading room's nooks and kill some time drinking cocoa.

I'm exhausted. It feels like I've been training all the time lately.

She let out a heavy sigh as the cocoa's soft sweetness filled her mouth. She'd been even more driven than usual, what with their big mission coming up, and she'd started cutting into her own sleep time. Doing that put quite a strain on her body, and things were only going to get rougher once the mission started in earnest.

However, there was a good reason why she'd been driving herself to such lengths: Erna was an academy washout. She wasn't good at communicating with others, and she had a shy streak a mile long. It went without saying that spy missions often required interpersonal skills, and that was an area in which Erna was sorely lacking. She got good grades on her written exams, but she had never been able to put up results on her field exams, and whenever there were situations that required coordinating with others, she inevitably held her partners back.

That was why, when she was training with Lamplight, she put extra effort into improving her teamwork. She tried her utmost to think of ways she could use her unique predisposition—her penchant for misfortune—to benefit the others,

and she took proactive steps to consult with her teammates Annette and Sara.

Now her labor had finally borne fruit.

I really pushed myself, though, so I'm kind of sleepy...

It was the good kind of tired, the tired that came from having devoted one's all to their training. She sank deep into the sofa, and just as she was starting to nod off—

“Oh, I just can't. Why did I ever think I could pull this off?!”

—she heard a woman's voice coming from right nearby.

“No way, no how. It doesn't even make sense anymore. I can't believe it came to this, after all that hard work I did... Oh, wait! I could just run away! Yeah, let's do that! All I have to do is get out of here!”

It was quite the soliloquy the woman had launched into. She seemed to be lamenting something, and she was in enough of a tizzy that she was voicing every thought that went through her head. The fretfulness in her voice was intense enough to keep Erna from sleeping.

“Yeep...?”

When she opened her eyes and looked over at the sofa beside hers, she discovered that the woman was gone. She must have left.

What was she so worked up about? Erna wondered groggily. Then she spotted the makeup bag sitting on the sofa. “...Oh, did she leave that behind? Huh.”

The woman must have forgotten it when she left.

Erna went and grabbed it with plans to hand it over to one of the crew members. When she did, she discovered that it was oddly heavy. Erna recognized that weight. With a sense of foreboding looming over her, she took a quick peek at its contents.

Inside, there was a gun—a .38 revolver. It was hardly the kind of thing one would expect a civilian to be carrying around.

Something shady was going on.

Alongside the gun, there was a folded-up document written with exceedingly

precise handwriting. Its title was as follows:

The Sun Attendant Order's Plan to Seajack the Eccletnuk



Erna wasted no time in heading over to her boss, Klaus.

Klaus was a tall, beautiful man with long hair. He was so attractive, it was easy to mistake him for a woman. At the moment, he was playing poker in the rec room with some of the other passengers, taking great care neither to win too much nor lose too much as he surrounded himself with members of the upper class and gathered rumors about the mission site.

When Erna shot him the hand sign that signaled that there was an emergency, he immediately realized that danger was afoot. After smoothly excusing himself from the game, he assembled the girls on the passenger deck. The deck had plenty of dark spots at night, making it the perfect place for clandestine activities. The Lamplight members all gathered behind a massive flue.

“This is bad,” Klaus concluded after speed-reading the document Erna had handed him. “This is a large-scale operation they’ve got planned out. If they actually have the heavy arms and personnel this plan suggests they do, they could very well succeed in taking over the ship.”

If that happened, people could die, and what’s more, it might adversely affect Lamplight’s mission.

Grete raised her hand. “I wonder what kind of group this Sun Attendant Order is...”

“This is only my second time hearing of them myself. I knew that they were a new religion, but I had no idea that they’d grown to the point where they had the resources to seize control of an entire luxury liner.” Klaus stared back down at the document. “It doesn’t look like we have much time left. It says here that they’re going to carry their plan out at dawn tomorrow.”

The girls gulped. That meant that the seajacking was a mere five hours away. They needed to thwart it as soon as possible, but all the plan had listed were the personnel and weapon counts and the time it was going to be put into motion. There were supposedly more than a hundred adherents lurking on the ship, but it was unclear which exact passengers were associated with the Sun Attendant Order. There were more than three thousand people on board the ship if you counted the crew, and Lamplight knew next to nothing about the religious order they were up against.

The air filled with tension at the gravity of the situation—

“Don’t you all worry.”

—yet there was one girl who faced their predicament with a smile that practically brimmed with confidence.

Namely, Lily.

“This is just what we needed, right? It’ll be like a warm-up for our actual mission. Let’s go put this thing to bed.”

“She has a point. It’s not like we can just let the situation stand,” Klaus replied with a nod. “This is an emergency mission. I’ll be taking part, too. Our job is to work together, inspect the ship, and put a stop to this seajacking attempt. I want this thing settled quietly, meaning no unnecessary mayhem. Go out and show me how much you’ve grown.”

As soon as he gave the order, the eight girls dispersed. Covertly gathering intel was their bread and butter. Their objective was to capture the ringleader and stop them from carrying out their scheme before the ship descended into chaos. It wasn’t going to be easy, but the girls were undaunted. Klaus’s words echoed within each of their hearts.

It was time for them to demonstrate just how far they’d come.

After all their domestic missions and training, they were about to embark on a big overseas spy operation. Just as Lily had pointed out, this was going to make for the perfect warm-up.

Once they’d divvied up their responsibilities, the girls got to work walking around the ship. When they met up next, it would be after they were done

scooping up the necessary intel. As an expert pickpocket, Sybilla swiped a key off one of the crew members and snuck into the staff room. Sara could command a whole menagerie of animals, and she used her dog to try to sniff out any heavy arms she could find. Grete was a master of disguise, so she masqueraded as a crew member and started inspecting the passenger rooms. And Annette used her knack for inventions to plant listening devices disguised as wall piping all across the ship's hallways.

As for Erna—well, Erna got kidnapped.



This time around, the team split into two main groups as they investigated the seajacking plot.

The first group was led by Klaus.

Of that group, the first person to put up results was the team's boss, Klaus himself. As he and Lily walked down the hallway past the first-class cabins, he came to an abrupt stop.

It was late at night, and the area was all but empty. The first-class passengers staying on that floor no doubt preferred to enjoy their travels amid relative peace and quiet. The only other person in the oil painting-laden hallway was a single crew member pushing a serving cart full of beer. The man, who looked to be in his mid-thirties, gave Klaus and Lily a bow as he passed them by.

All of a sudden, Klaus reached out and grabbed the man by the neck. "Do you know anything about the seajacking?" he asked in a voice as cold as ice.

The crew member's eyes went wide. "H-how did you know...?"

"I just did," Klaus replied bluntly as he tightened his grip.

The man's face contorted in pain. It would appear that he was a member of the Sun Attendant Order. "O-our bonds are unbreakable. I'll never talk."

"I see. And here I was, hoping I wouldn't have to hurt anyone."

Klaus reached into his pocket with his free hand and quietly pulled out a knife. It was little more than a threat, of course, but even just that was enough to scare any civilian senseless. The man arched his eyebrows. It looked like he was about to cry. “I—I would never do anything to sully X’s perfect plan...”

“X? Is that who’s behind this?”

“They’re one of the Quadrumvirate the High Priest has placed his full trust in. Threaten me all you like, but that’s the only thing you’ll get out of me. I don’t even know who X is. They’re a brilliant tactician, and they never show themselves around anyone. It’s all thanks to X that we were able to grow as large as we did...!”

After the man choked out the words, Klaus promptly released him. He sank to the floor, and Klaus gave him another cold look before turning to Lily. “Lily, put him to sleep.”

“You got it.”

“Then pass the intel along to the others. The ringleaders we’re looking for are some sort of high priest and an individual called X.”

After apprehending the man and shoving him into a storeroom, Klaus began hunting for the next adherent, and similar scenes played out all across the ship. Slowly but surely, Lamplight was working their way from the outside of the Sun Attendant Order inward.

Meanwhile, Erna carried the makeup case and wandered around the ship.

First things first, I need to look for the lady this belongs to.

Erna never got a clear look at her, but she did remember her voice. She clearly knew what was going on, so finding her would be the fastest way to resolve the situation. Erna knew that if she walked around while carrying the case, it was liable to earn some sort of reaction out of her target, so she held it conspicuously overhead as she wandered.

That was when she sensed misfortune approaching.

She tried to dodge to the side as soon as the intense smell hit her nose.

However, it was futile. Five men sprang at her at once from the side of the hallway, and though her outstanding reflexes allowed her to react in time, the ship was too cramped for there to be anywhere for her to actually flee.

The men grabbed her and hoisted her aloft.

“Yeep? YEEEEEP?!” she shrieked, but there was nothing she could do.

Just like that, Erna got kidnapped.

She had no idea what was going on, and the group carried her all the way to the linen room, the area where the ship’s sheets and blankets and the like were stored. Once they got there, they delicately set her down atop a pile of fresh linens. It was soft and pleasant to the touch, and Erna could smell the scent of soap softly lingering on it.

The good news was, it didn’t seem like they were planning on attacking her.

The five men clad in their gray jackets lined up in front of her. “We apologize for the rudeness. We would have been a bit too conspicuous out there.”

“.....?”

“You have the exact case you told us you would... Ah, it’s such an honor to finally meet you!” The men knelt, clearly overcome with emotion. For whatever reason, the corners of their eyes were swimming. Then they looked back at Erna—who still had no idea what was going on—and bowed reverently. “O magnificent X! Please lend the Sun Attendant Order your wisdom!”

“...Yeep?”

There appeared to be a serious case of mistaken identity going on.

With that, Erna began investigating the Sun Attendant Order from the inside.



After getting kidnapped by the brawny men, Erna began freaking out a bit.

It feels like things are totally off the rails...

The men believed unquestioningly that she was this “X” person, and they were so overjoyed at getting to meet their idol that they began excitedly babbling at her. Based on what they told her, she deduced that the situation was something akin to the following:

The Sun Attendant Order was a small religious group structured around an old man they called the High Priest. When an individual who called themselves X joined up, though, the group rapidly expanded. X was concerned about a military or police crackdown, so they never showed themselves to the group and instead sent orders to the cult via letter. X’s managerial skills were incredible, and they managed to bring the Sun Attendant Order to the point where they finally had the tools to see their dearest wish fulfilled. The seajacking was the last step in that plan, and X was scheduled to finally show themselves to the cultists. The makeup case was going to be their sign that they had the right person.

The cultists were talking a mile a minute. “I had no idea the mighty X was such a small woman. Oh, I’m so glad we were finally able to meet up with you. The High Priest isn’t in the best of health at the moment, and we’ve all been so worried...”

It was obvious that they had a huge amount of faith in X. Merely meeting up with her had filled them with a visible sense of relief.

All Erna could do was offer them a half-hearted nod. “Y-yeep...”

“Hmm?” One of the cultists gave her a puzzled look. “Is something the matter? Is it possible we’ve made a mistake...?”

It was probably Erna’s clouded expression that was causing him to second-guess himself. His voice rang with doubt and anxiety.

He was right; it *was* all one big misunderstanding...but right when Erna was about to explain that to him, she stopped herself.

No, wait! This could be a golden opportunity!

Sure, it had just been a coincidence, but the fact remained that she'd managed to make contact with the religious group they were investigating. It was too good a chance to pass up. By telling them that she was X, she could get her hands on all sorts of valuable intelligence.

As the information started falling into place, she arrived at a conclusion: that the real X had made a break for it. Erna vaguely recalled the woman with the makeup case shouting, *"All I have to do is get out of here!"* She must have gotten cold feet at the eleventh hour and abandoned her role. And if that was true, then Erna could take her place, and nobody would be any the wiser. She was a little worried about her dubious interpersonal communication abilities, but she decided to set those fears aside. Just as Klaus said, it was time for her to show just how much she'd grown and overcome her social anxiety.

I'm going to pull off the perfect infiltration!

Erna swelled with determination. "No, no, I'm X. I'm definitely X!"

"B-but of course! Now, um... I know it's terribly impertinent of me to ask, but would you be so kind as to tell us your real name? It feels a little silly, calling you by your code name like this..."

"I'm Erina."

"Then Ms. Erina it shall be. We'll be arriving at our operational headquarters soon, and it would be our honor to invite you in."

After giving them a fake name, Erna boldly puffed her chest. "Before that, where's the High Priest?"

"The High Priest is at our headquarters as well. However, his health is failing him, so he's resting at the moment..."

"I thought this might happen, so I just got in touch with a talented doctor," Erna replied. "He's a man named Klaus staying in cabin 2903. Go call for him at once."

"You never fail to impress! Then I take it the reason our rendezvous was delayed—"

"—Was because I was recruiting more allies aboard the ship. And I gathered

loads of them. If the need arises, I can summon up a master poisoner or an expert inventor with a single phone call.”

“Oh, Ms. Erina, you’re amazing!!”

“Very good, keep praising me.”

By taking advantage of the situation, Erna had laid the groundwork to bring her teammates into the inner fold alongside her. Now, all she had to do was bide her time until Klaus got to the cult’s headquarters. When he did, he would surely compliment her for her meritorious deeds. And the cultists adored her so much, they didn’t suspect a thing. She was doing a fantastic job with this whole infiltration thing, if she did say so herself.

As long as she stayed with the cultists, they would lead her right to their headquarters. She continued down the hallway, thoroughly pleased with herself, and followed her escorts along a corridor that was designed for staff members only. It would appear that there were cultists among the ship’s crew. Unlike the hallways meant for passengers, this one was lined with movable shelving. Down at the end of it, there was a large room labeled MAIN STOREROOM. Erna could hear people talking behind its metal door.

Ah, she thought. That must be where the Sun Attendant Order’s headquarters were. When she took a big step forward, one of the cultists called out to her. “All right, Ms. Erina.”

“Yeep?”

“Please dance the dance of entry. You may be Ms. Erina, but the rules are the rules.”

“.....”

What the heck was that? She froze up as soon as she heard mention of the bizarre rite. “Wh-who came up with that obnoxious system...?”

“Wasn’t it you, Ms. Erina?”

The cultist gave her a confused look. She worried he was starting to get suspicious.

This is bad... I have no idea what they want me to do.

The question was, why had X come up with that inane rule? Whatever the case was, Erna had nowhere to run.

No, I have to think! I need to figure out what dance would make the most sense here!

As a spy, she'd honed her powers of observation and stockpiled all sorts of information. If she took advantage of that, it should lead her to the correct answer.

The cultists are wearing casual jackets...so it can't be anything that needs a special outfit. The corridor is narrow, so that rules out anything that involves moving back and forth too much, and it can't require music, either. Plus, the ship is headed to Mouzaia... And the fact that they targeted a luxury liner means they're probably acting out against the upper class...

Her thoughts turned, and the solution presented itself to her. There was a style of dance descended from step dancing that had been born among slaves in the United States who weren't allowed to own instruments—tap dancing!

Erna clicked her heels against the ground and began taking soaring steps and beating out a jaunty tune. *Tap-ta-tap, ta-tap-tap*. Occasionally, she accentuated the noise by clapping her hands together, and she ended her performance with a big, showy spin—

“Ms. Erina, all you have to do for the entry dance is wave your index finger in a cross shape.”

“You could have told me that earlier!” Erna cried. A little bit flustered at how readily he had revealed that to her, she loudly cleared her throat. “I—I just forgot, that’s all...”

“Ah, that makes sense. You don’t usually attend our gatherings, after all,” the cultist said with an apologetic bow. “Now, next up is the entry song—”

“Why are there so many rituals?”

The man presented her with a piece of paper. “Here’s the sheet music.”

The song was two whole verses of lyrics long. It looked like they weren’t going to let her into the headquarters until she sang it in its entirety. She steeled her

resolve and sucked in a deep breath. “Ohhh, our glorious skyyyybound flame. 🎵 Quiiivering with rage and burning up our seaaa of hope. 🎵 Like a spiiinning ball. 🎵 Of courage. 🎵 Courage. 🎵 Of cour—”

“Ms. Erina, you can just sing it silently to yourself.”

“Why didn’t you stop me earlier?!”

Erna threw the sheet music on the ground. What sort of thoughts had been going through their heads as they watched her sing her heart out? Her face was bright red, and her knees were shaking.

“A-are you all right? Please, come on in. Everyone’s been eagerly anticipating your arrival.”

The cultists cast sympathetic looks her way, but that wasn’t Erna’s top priority at the moment. “M-more importantly, what about the doctor...?”

“Huh?”

“Every second counts here! Go over to room 2903 and call for Dr. Klaus at once!”

Erna had no confidence in her ability to pull off the infiltration solo. Her limit was fast approaching, her story was coming apart at the seams, and most importantly, she wanted to get away from this cult and its bizarre rules as quickly as possible.

“Worry not. We just sent a messenger over.”

“Then let’s wait until they get here!”

“That isn’t an option. We need you to join the strategy meeting as soon as possible.”

“I can’t! I’m beside myself with worry!”

“I’m afraid we can’t wait any longer. Come along, Ms. Erina. You came this far already, and we need your help, even if we have to tie you up to get it. We’ll pay whatever cost we need to in order to see our greatest wish fulfilled.”

“But I don’t want toooooo!”

Unmoved by Erna's scream, the suddenly headstrong cultists hoisted her into the air again. Before anyone outside had a chance to hear her cries for help, they carried her into the Sun Attendant Order headquarters.



Meanwhile, over with Klaus and the girls he was leading...

Klaus managed to root out and interrogate several more cultists, but none of them knew any of the specifics of the plan. X had been keeping a tight lid on who had what information so as to avoid the risk of any leaks. This was proving harder than expected. Deciding that perhaps one of the girls had tracked down a lead, Klaus headed back to his room for the time being.

In front of his door, there was an unconscious man in a gray jacket. Sybilla was scratching her head beside him with a conflicted look on her face. "Ah, I fucked up... This guy was hangin' around room 2903, so I moved to capture him, but then he freaked out on me. I ended up havin' to knock him out."

"Room 2903...as in, my room?"

"I think he was sayin' something about a doctor?"

Lily was there, too, and all three of them tilted their heads in confusion.

It was unfortunate that they hadn't been able to gather any intel, but Sybilla had probably been right to immediately neutralize the potential threat. Klaus looked down at the collapsed man and sank into thought.

This is odd... Conducting a seajacking operation this major would require huge amounts of firepower and a group of highly trained operatives...and that's where things don't line up. And if anything, it's odd that I never picked up on what they were planning until now.

If he had to go off first impressions, then...

...it's as if they're working off a perfect plan, but their execution is all over the place.

Perhaps he had the wrong idea about the Sun Attendant Order. Even if he did,

though, he still needed to put a stop to their seajacking plan to prevent the worst-case scenario from coming to pass.

As Klaus was still thinking, two more of the girls returned.

“Hey there. We caught someone who seems like she might know something.”
“G-good work out there, everyone.”

Monika and Sara were dragging a woman along, each girl holding an arm.

The woman was wearing glasses and had bobbed hair and a mature air about her. She looked to be in her late thirties, and she was clutching a handkerchief and trembling.

“Sara’s puppy sniffed her out. That makeup case was hers,” Monika declared dispassionately. The black dog in question was riding atop the woman’s head and happily wagging his tail.

Klaus recognized her face. “...You’re the former military staff warrant officer Pauline.”

Pauline’s eyes went wide. “Y-you know who I am?”

“I remember you, yes. I heard that despite your low rank, you were very successful during our evacuations in the war. Ah, yes. As I recall, you later got fired for adultery.”

“Who are you people...?”

Klaus was under no obligation to answer that question. Instead, he rummaged through his memories. Pauline Carrack was a talented soldier during her time in the service, and she had a bright future ahead of her. She’d been in charge of everything related to supplies, from procurement to conveyance.

Klaus nodded. “I see. So that makes you X.”

“Agh! I-I’m just—” Pauline’s expression contorted in distress. Still clutching her handkerchief, she gave Klaus a fierce glare. “I gave that position up. L-look, I got scared. I’m not X anymore, and I’m not part of the Sun Attendant Order leadership. I don’t want anything to do with those people.”

“That’s a very convenient excuse.”

“I—I was just hanging out with them for kicks, that’s all. I was pissed when I got booted out of the army, so when I ran into this tiny religion, I thought it’d be a fun game to see how big I could turn it! They showered me with praise for every tiny thing I did for them, and it felt nice, so I kept doing it, until...” She averted her gaze from Klaus before spitting out her next few words. “Those fanatics over there are touched in the head. They’re just a bunch of losers, huddled together like idiots...”

Behind Pauline, Sybilla clicked her tongue, and that displeasure of hers was shared by everyone present. From the sound of it, the only reason that tiny cult had grown large enough to attempt a seajacking at all was because of a passing whim of Pauline’s. For all her talent, her personality was rotten. She’d concealed her identity so she could cut and run whenever she wanted to, and she’d been planning to simply watch the ship descend into chaos from the sidelines. It was incredibly irresponsible.

Klaus gave Pauline a look. “And? What’s the Sun Attendant Order’s objective?”

“I could tell you, but you wouldn’t believe me. That’s how inane it is.” She let out a contemptuous laugh. “They want to commit mass suicide.”



The storeroom that had been repurposed into an operational headquarters was respectably spacious. It had originally been designed to carry emergency rations and life jackets, but while there were signs that the room had once stored exactly that, it had all been cleared out. The storeroom was lit by a large, solitary light fixture dangling from the ceiling.

Ah, I see, Erna thought. People would normally have no reason to visit the storeroom that held the emergency rations. Furthermore, the three thousand people the *Eccletnuk* had on board meant that it needed a pretty sizable space to carry enough food for everyone. There were fifty cultists gathered there, and there was room for plenty more. There were no windows on account of their proximity to the ship’s bilge. The cultists were huddled around blueprints of the

ship and arguing beneath the light fixture.

When she saw them, there was something that immediately jumped out at Erna.

Huh... This isn't really the vibe I was anticipating.

Given that they were planning to take over the ship by force, she'd been expecting them to be a group of rugged militants. In truth, though, nearly half of the people there were women, several of whom were either old enough to be grandmothers or women carrying babies. There were men there, too, but none of them looked particularly dependable. Some of them were using crutches, and others were just boys feebly drooping their heads. It was hard to imagine any of them being able to hold their own in a fight. And while there were some firearms piled up in the back, as far as Erna could tell, there were only about thirty of them, and all of them were practically antiques.

There's no way these people could seajack a ship!

This wasn't what the document had described at all. With no shotguns or machine guns, their odds of successfully pulling off their takeover were nonexistent. The *Eccletnuk* had armed guards, and the would-be seajackers would find themselves trounced and arrested in no time.

As Erna stared at them in shock, one of the cultists called over to her. "Ms. Erina, please. The High Priest is asking for you."

"Yeep."

She never imagined it would be so easy to get a face-to-face. However, she had no reason to refuse, and she decided to meet with him. She was a little nervous, but perhaps seeing the High Priest would help clear up some of the incongruities.

There was a screen partitioning off a corner of the storeroom, and when Erna went through it, she found a large bed surrounded by worried cultists with their hands clasped together in prayer. By the look of it, the High Priest's condition was pretty serious.

As soon as she approached the bed, a hoarse voice rose up from it. "Ah, so you're X... Or rather, Ms. Erina."

The voice belonged to an elderly man, who sat up atop the bed. He certainly didn't look the part of a cult leader. The limbs stretching out from his gray gown were as spindly as withered branches, and while there was a kind look about his wrinkled face, it was all but devoid of life.

That was the High Priest, no doubt. He gave Erna a warm smile. "I do apologize for my sorry state. Thank you so much for coming such a long way to meet me. It was all thanks to you that our tiny group was able to grow to the size it is today."

"N-not at all. You shouldn't sell yourself short, High Priest."

Erna couldn't bring herself to tell him that the real X had hightailed it, and the High Priest was none the wiser to her lie. "No, no, I was just as surprised as anyone," he said with great reverence. "I had no idea we would be able to bring so many like-minded people together. I suppose suicide really is the hope of the modern era."

"Yeep?"

That wasn't a word she'd been expecting to hear.

Suicide?

Not noticing Erna's shock, the High Priest went on. "It's strange to think about how few of us there were at the start. We were just a tiny group of people who supported one another after we lost our families in the war. But word got around, and our numbers grew and grew. We had wives who'd lost their husbands to gang violence in the postwar chaos, boys who'd gone blind from chemical-weapon attacks, heartbroken soldiers who'd dutifully served their nation but returned home to blame and criticism, women whose hometowns had been shredded by gunfire... People lost hope for all sorts of reasons, from the tragedies of the postwar era to getting betrayed by people they trusted, and they all came together to achieve a common goal."

"....."

"We have but one objective: to escape this world and its despair and die gloriously beneath the Sun's light." The High Priest took Erna's hands and squeezed them in his. "We want to hold a mass suicide at the South Pole, and

thanks to you, Ms. Erina, our wish is going to be granted. I can never thank you enough.”

“.....”

At long last, she finally understood what the Sun Attendant Order was really after, as well as why they were trying to carry out a seajacking that had no chance of actually working. They’d long since given up on life, and they couldn’t see reality for what it was. Plus, they didn’t really care if their attempt ended in failure.

The world was awash in pain.

Many of the war’s scars had started to heal in the ten years since the conflict’s end, but there were still plenty of people who’d failed to get back on their feet from the damage they’d suffered either during the war or in the upheaval that followed it. What they had here were people who’d suffered so much that they’d grown weary of life itself, and for people who’d fallen into despair and given up on life, their one remaining hope was to at least have a beautiful death.

That was the true nature of the Sun Attendant Order.

“I can’t take it anymore!” a man shouted from behind Erna. “Please, just let me die already! I want to end my life, High Priest, and I want to end it nowwww!”

The screaming man had fresh scars from self-harm. He, too, had probably suffered grave psychological damage from his time in the war.

“Please, young Thomas,” the High Priest said. He winced in pain as he rose to his feet. “Just wait a little bit longer. Ms. Erina is about to tell us her secret plan for taking over the ship.”

“Don’t be an idiot! There’s no way that kid is the real X!” Thomas yelled.

When he did, the other cultists all turned and looked at Erna. The way the blood drained from their faces, it was like they’d all just snapped out of a dream. It was starting to dawn on them that Erna wasn’t actually X. Gloom descended upon the storeroom.

“X must have swapped places with this child and abandoned us!” Thomas bellowed. “We never even stood a chance. As soon as we started our takeover, we were just gonna get captured and sent to die in jail without even being able to kill ourselves!” He pulled out a gun. “If it’s between this and that, then I’d rather just kill as many people as I can and go out on my own terrrrrrms!”

Thomas had completely fallen into despair. He pointed his gun at the High Priest. Erna swiftly yanked the High Priest’s gown, and the two of them collapsed onto the ground. After missing the High Priest, the bullet ricocheted off the wall and slammed into the light on the ceiling. The sound of screeching metal grated at their ears.

As the cultists screamed and started to run around in terror, Erna charged at Thomas. He hadn’t been expecting her to rush him head-on, and he fired another shot. However, his bullet flew off in the wrong direction. Daunted by Erna’s willingness to run straight into certain death, Thomas began retreating backward in a panic.

After driving Thomas back to the exact spot she wanted him, Erna let out a quiet whisper. “I’m code name Fool—and it’s time to kill with everything.”

The light fixture fell from the ceiling directly over their heads.

Erna had a special ability—the ability to attack people by using her penchant for misfortune to its fullest. By dragging other people into her accidents, she could defeat them without having to use a single tool. It was the perfect assassination technique.

The light fixture continued to fall. It needed to be large enough to illuminate the entirety of the massive storeroom, so it was as large as a human head. Erna managed to dodge it by the skin of her teeth, but Thomas wasn’t so lucky.

The sound of the fixture hitting the ground boomed out deep and loud.

All it had done to Thomas was graze his collarbone, but that was plenty to sap him of his will to fight. “Arrrgh, I blew it *again*...” He dropped his gun and sank to the floor. “Why? Why is it always like this for me?! Every time I try to do anything, I always run into a string of bad luck, and nothing ends up going my way...! Everyone thinks I’m a joke. Dammit... Dammit... DAMN IT ALLLLLLLLLLL!!”

He slammed his fists against the ground in anguish. A series of vividly muffled *whams* echoed through the room. The cultists watched Thomas with tears in their eyes and teeth digging into their lips. All of them shared in his grief.

Eventually, the skin on Thomas's hands tore, and blood began trickling off them. However, he made no move to stop hitting the ground. It was like that punching motion was the only thing keeping him tethered to life.

In the end, the person who grabbed his hands and forced him to stop hurting himself was none other than Erna.

"I get it." Not even she herself understood why her body had moved. However, the words came to her like it was the most natural thing in the world. "I'm the same way. I lost my family, and I constantly have bad luck, and it makes me want to cry... But then, one day, I found relief. Every time something dangerous happens to me, it makes me feel like it's not my fault that my life wasn't going well. But the thing is, I hate that about myself, and it makes me depressed."

Erna talked about her penchant for misfortune, but in truth, the term was somewhat inaccurate. According to the psychiatrist who had diagnosed her, it was actually a desire for punishment. After losing her family in a fire, she'd become fixated on the notion that it wasn't fair that only she got to survive and keep on living. She subconsciously sought her own destruction, and feeling like a heroine right out of a tragedy was the only thing that set her heart at ease.

As a result, she understood how the cultists felt painfully well. After all, heading into ruin carried with it a huge sense of relief. It let people renounce all their responsibilities, avoid facing reality's cold truths, and cast off the role life had assigned for them.



The thing was, there were people in the world who desired annihilation.

Most people couldn't comprehend them, but that didn't make them any less real. Scant few were able to empathize with them, but Erna knew their plight. She knew full well how the vicious cycle of self-hatred could drive someone step by step to the edge.

And because of that, there was something she knew she had to put into words.

"But the thing is, I'm still here," she said. "It might sound trite, but I believe that as long as I keep on living, then someday, I'll be happy again. Until then, it doesn't matter what a fool I make of myself or how many times I screw up. I'm going to keep surviving."

That was why she'd thrown herself headfirst into the world of espionage. She'd found a single ray of hope amid her desire for punishment, and she'd made up her mind to help people. When she did, she found loving teammates and a boss who accepted her. She'd even gotten a provisional graduation from her friendless academy life and come one step closer to achieving her goal.

"And so..."

...I want you to stop trying to kill yourselves.

Before Erna could get out the words, the screams of the cultists behind her cut her off. They were anguished, like the cries of someone on their deathbed.

"It's the High Priest! He's in bad shape!"



Klaus and the girls continued interrogating Pauline.

The Sun Attendant Order's goal was to commit mass suicide, and the site they'd chosen to meet their demises at was the South Pole. It must have seemed like paradise there for people who'd grown as tired of society as they had. Their plan was to take over the luxury liner in order to transport their full congregation down there.

“They’re all such idiots,” Pauline muttered mockingly after she finished her explanation. “It’s so nonsensical—what can you do but laugh?”

“It’s true that I’m having difficulty wrapping my mind around it,” Klaus said with a shake of the head, “but if they feel strongly enough about this to go to such lengths, then I find it hard to ridicule them.”

“Oh, spare me the lip service. You think they’re just as stupid as I do.” Pauline’s expression contorted in frustration. “I thought I could stop them, you know. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have even gotten on the ship. But it can’t be done. Those people are out of control. And once I knew I couldn’t stop them, then what choice did I have but to abandon them?”

“.....”

“This is just their lot in life. When a bunch of losers get together and form a cult, all that awaits them is inescapable doom.”

“You don’t get to decide what is and isn’t escapable.” Klaus turned his gaze from Pauline. He’d gotten all the information he needed out of her. He turned to the Lamplight members he had present—Lily, Sybilla, Monika, and Sara—and addressed them. “We’re putting a stop to their plan. No matter what it is that’s driving them, we can’t let them see their wish fulfilled.”

Klaus had moral objections to suicide, no matter what philosophy it was that inspired it, and letting them hijack the ship was completely out of the question. Inferno had risked everything protecting the people of Din. Klaus wasn’t about to let anyone rob those people of their lives, not even the people themselves.

He started making his way toward the lower deck, and the girls followed along after him.

“Did you figure out where the High Priest is? How?” Lily asked.

“I just did.”

Klaus had gathered all the data he needed to make conjectures. Now, all he had to do was let his honed spy’s intuition lead the way.

“What should we do about her?” Sybilla asked. “That Pauline chick, I mean.”

“Leave her be,” Klaus replied curtly. “She’s not worth our time.”

They headed along a staff corridor and made their way down a narrow hallway lined with movable shelving. A couple of cultists tried to stop their advance, but Lily put them all to sleep with her poison. After descending a few staircases, they arrived at a storeroom designed to hold emergency rations. There were loud voices coming from inside. Sure enough, this was the cult's headquarters.

"We're low on time, so we'll have to come in hot. We're going to break through their line with the members we have here."

"Yup, looks like we don't have much choice."

Lily and the other girls nodded and readied their weapons.

"Our target is the High Priest. I want him restrained as soon as possible."

Klaus took the lead and threw open the storeroom door.

Throngs of cultists were gathered inside the spacious storeroom. There were nearly fifty of them in all, and they were lined up in a circle and bowing their heads to the person sitting on a pedestal in their center. Cries of reverence for the High Priest echoed throughout the room.

The person sitting in the middle was doubtless the High Priest.

Klaus and the girls didn't want to cause any more injuries than they had to. They strode forward, ready to suppress the opposition—

""""High Priest Erinaaaaa!!""""

""""High Priest Erinaaaaa!!""""

""""High Priest Erinaaaaa!!""""

""""High Priest Erinaaaaa!!""""

""""High Priest Erinaaaaa!!""""

—but for whatever reason, the person sitting in the center of the cultists with a lifeless look in her eyes was none other than Erna.



“How unlucky...,” Erna groaned as she sat surrounded by impassioned cultists. She was well past the point of no return, and she had no idea how she was supposed to escape.

How did things even come to this...?

All she could do as she reflected on the past was look up at the heavens with regret.

After one of the cultists lashed out, the High Priest’s condition had taken a turn. All of a sudden, he started clutching his chest in pain. Fat beads of sweat rolled down his forehead. A moan escaped his mouth as he began writhing atop his bed. A couple of the cultists tried to hold him down, but he shook them off and continued thrashing.

The cultists in the storeroom gathered around the bed with worried looks on their faces, then clasped their hands together and prayed for the High Priest’s recovery. Thomas had gone on a rampage earlier, but now, even he was passionately shedding tears.

After five minutes, the High Priest’s condition stabilized. *Huff, huff*, he panted sorrowfully. He clutched at his sheets as the cultists helped him sit upright. “... I’m sorry, everyone. You deserve better than to be stuck with such a useless leader.” His voice was so hoarse, you couldn’t help but feel bad for him. “My body is being racked with the most terrible pain. At this point, I don’t think I can even stand anymore. I’m no good like this...so I think it’s time for me to retire.”

The believers all stared down at the floor as they tried to keep their emotions in check, and Erna gasped. Now that she thought about it, the cultists had constantly been mentioning the High Priest’s poor health. Given that he’d been staying in his bed even though they were about to start their crucial seajacking attempt, his condition must have been pretty grave.

The cultists went silent, like they were waiting for him to deliver his final testament.

“This illness of yours...,” Erna said nervously, “...is it really serious?”

“No, I just ate too much at dinner.”

"I think you probably have a bit more in you."

“However, it is true that I’m losing steam. This is a perfect opportunity. What we need is a new, younger leader.” The High Priest—who was going to be perfectly fine in another two or three hours—gave Erna an intense look. “Ms. Erina, I relinquish the title of High Priest to you.”

“

What is this old man talking about? she thought bluntly. Just go to bed. You'll feel better after you take some medicine and get some rest. Overeating is no reason to retire. Also, what kind of leader goes and gorges themselves on a gourmet meal on the day he's going to stage a seajacking? Are you even taking this seriously?

There were a million things she wanted to tell him, but she was so baffled that she couldn't get the words out.

"I think Ms. Erina would be a great person to take over as High Priest!"

“Yeep?”

After the first cultist spoke up, the others piled on in agreement. “Ms. Erina, your speech just now really moved me!” “Considering how much she’s already done for us as X, she’s kind of the obvious choice.” “Heh, I guess that means our Quadrumvirate is going to be a Triumvirate now.” “Witness the birth of High Priest Erina!” “Long live High Priest Erina!” “We’re going to be a whole new Sun Attendant Order!” “Please, High Priest Erina, grant us your guidance!” “High Priest Erinaaaaa!”

There was no stopping the cultists' enthusiasm, and in the end, Erna found herself being hoisted up and carried to the middle of the storeroom.



////////////////////

Klaus and the girls stood frozen in their tracks.

Cheers of “Ms. Erina!” “Ms. Erina!” filled the storeroom without pause. The cheers were so enthusiastic, it was making the floor shake. Tears streamed down the cultists’ faces as they offered deep, reverent bows to Erna. The passionate, spirited shouts they were letting out hardly seemed like they were coming from people contemplating suicide.

“What am I even looking at?” one of the spies mumbled, and nobody had an answer for them. They were all asking themselves the exact same question. Erna was being extolled as a high priest, and there was nothing the Lamplight delegation could do but stare at her in silence.

“Hey! Who goes there?!”

At that point, one of the cultists finally spotted them. Without missing a beat, the cultists all drew their weapons and moved to protect Erna. “Look out, Ms. Erina, intruders! Let’s get ’em!” “We have to protect Ms. Erina!” “It’s time for the Triumvirate to show just what it’s capable of!” “Crush the fiends who dare stand against Ms. Erinaaaaa!”

Their adoration for Erna was downright fanatical.

Surrounded by the fired-up cultists, Erna mouthed the Lamplight members a message with tears in her eyes.

H-E-L-P!

Once again, misfortune had found its way to her.

“...So, uh, what should we do here?” Lily asked, cutting right to the heart of the matter.

Klaus took a moment to try to process the situation. He didn’t know how she’d gotten there, but now that Erna was in charge of the cult, there was no danger of them taking over the ship anymore. She would make sure to nip that in the bud. “Looks like everything wrapped itself up nicely,” Klaus concluded.

“In that case, we should probably scooch our butts on out of here,” Lily replied.

At that point, the cultists realized that something was off. They looked back

and forth between Erna and Lamplight, then tilted their heads in confusion. "... Huh? Are you acquaintances of Ms. Erina's, perchance?"

""""""Nope, never met her.""""""

"YEET?!"

For once, Klaus and the girls were on the exact same page.

Upon being denied her one lifeboat, Erna rose to her feet and shouted, "Y-you must have something, though! Something you need my counsel for!"

The cultists were getting conflicting information. "Ummm...", they said tentatively, "*did* you have some business with Ms. Erina?"

""""""Not that I can think of.""""""

"Don't just abandon me!"

""""""We got the wrong room.""""""

"Nobody's going to buy that excuse!"

""""""Long live Ms. Erina.""""""

"That reply doesn't even make sennnnnnse!"

With a quick "sorry for bothering you," the Lamplight girls bowed to the cultists and left the storeroom. They wanted to get as far away from there as possible, and the seajacking had nothing to do with it. Erna watched in teary shock as her teammates abandoned her.

Perhaps they were being a little unfair to her.

"...You know what, Ms. Erina, perhaps it's destiny that's brought us together. Allow me to offer you a few words."

After pretending that he didn't know her, Klaus strode through the cultists' ranks and made his way toward Erna. Several of them tried to stop him, but he slipped past them with effortless movements before ultimately reaching the center of the storeroom.

"T-Teach, you have to get me out of here...", Erna whispered.

Her eyes were swimming with a heartfelt desire for him to save her. However,

there was something he needed to tell her, and it wasn't that he was there to help. "You did good, Erna. Now, make sure you wrap it all up with a bow."

"YEEEEEEEEEEEP!!"

Her scream rocked the storeroom.

However, the fact remained that there was no solution for her except for the one Klaus had just presented.



With that, the attempt to hijack the *Eccletnuk* luxury liner ended before it even began.

From that point on, the reborn Sun Attendant Order continued revering High Priest Erina, and what's more, the tap-dance routine it was said she once performed became hugely popular among its members. Its jaunty rhythm lifted up the cultists' spirits, and before long, they were holding guerrilla dance performances. Considering the bizarre speed with which their tap dancing spread throughout the ship, one could say they managed to successfully hijack it after all. A famous movie director heading back to the United States even spotted what they were doing and offered to give them roles in an upcoming musical.

All that caused the cultists to sing Erna's praises even more, but the girl in question actually vanished shortly before the *Eccletnuk* arrived at the Mitario harbor. The cultists decided that she must have been a divine messenger, and with hope in their hearts, they grew into an acting troupe whose work sent waves through Mitario's film scene.

Klaus nodded in satisfaction at the way it all went down. "Not only did you infiltrate a cult, but within two hours, you'd reached the top of its ranks. Not even I could have pulled that off. When I told you to show me how much you'd grown, I had no idea you would rise to the occasion quite so splendidly."

However, none of his praise really landed with her. She was dead drained. "How unlucky..."

As soon as they arrived in Mitario, she ended up sleeping for three days straight, but considering all she'd achieved, that seemed like a small price to pay.

After no small amount of embellishment and dramatization, her miracles and the name High Priest Erina would end up etched into the annals of history. Even later, people would suggest that she was somehow connected to Lillian the Devil, the woman who struck fear into the heart of Mitario, but the two stories were likely unrelated.

Ah, Ms. Erina, your glory knows no bounds.

Chapter 4

Lily's Case

"If it's Flower Garden you want, you'll find her in the detention cell," Peggy informed Klaus.

Peggy, a plump, middle-aged woman wearing a bulging, undersize suit, was the principal of their seventeenth spy academy. She appeared at a glance to be a kindly old woman, but she had once served with the Naval Intelligence Department. Glimmers of skepticism flickered behind her mild expression.

"The detention cell? Did she do something wrong?" Klaus asked as he flipped through the academy's files. It was night, and the two of them were talking in the principal's office.

"No, this happens a lot. It's a bullying situation. Many of the other students have been harassing Flower Garden. Apparently, it all started when she got in her teammates' way during a test. Her grades were never all that stellar, so she made for an easy target..."

"I see. That does sound like a common enough story."

"Bullying is an unavoidable part of running a school. I'm not proud of it, but it is what it is."

"I don't follow, though."

"Oh?"

"Why lock the *victim* up? Aren't perpetrators the ones you're supposed to punish?"

"Flower Garden got her revenge." Peggy gave him a strained smile. "She poisoned all her bullies and sent them straight to the infirmary."

“A bold strategy,” Klaus replied.

According to Peggy, the bullying had been going on for some time. Klaus didn't ask for the details, but the gist of it was that twenty-five students had been involved, and Flower Garden had poisoned each and every one of their canteens. All the subjects of her revenge had been afflicted by extreme fevers that lasted three whole days.

Peggy shook her head. “I recognize that there were extenuating circumstances, but even so, she took things too far. Hence, the detention cell.” She parted the office's curtains. “This is where we monitor the cell from, so you can actually see it from here.”

Klaus put down the document he was reading and headed over to the window. There was a small shed on the other side of the courtyard, and the situation inside it was visible through its large aperture.

Inside, a silver-haired girl was mixing chemicals together with an intense look of concentration, like she was glued down to her desk. After heating a beaker, she retrieved the precipitate from within and mixed it together with yet another chemical. Then, after comparing it to the example from her reference book, she dabbed a tentative drop on her tongue. She frowned. By the look of it, her concoction was a dud.

The girl got right to work grinding up flower petals so she could get started on her next experiment.

“She knew she was going to be in there awhile, so she asked to be able to study at her leisure.” Peggy nodded. “That girl's a tenacious one. She works harder than anyone else at the academy.”

Peggy went on to tell Klaus that it had been eight years since Flower Garden enrolled at the academy and that she'd been working to improve herself that whole time. Due to the blunders she always made right when it really counted, though, her grades were atrocious.

As such, she'd been branded a washout.

The academy had accepted her due to the promise she showed, but she was far too immature for them to graduate her.

As Klaus continued staring at the detention cell, Peggy asked him a question. “...Are you going to be taking her with you?”

“I am, yes. For a time, at least.”

“Who even are you anyway? I got the oddest orders from my superior this morning. They told me that a man was coming and that I needed to tell him about my worst students. I have to ask—why?”

“That’s classified.”

“Ah, I see... I understand, of course. I suppose I don’t have any right to that information.” Peggy let out a chagrined sigh. “That girl survived hell, you know,” she began explaining. “Hers was the first village they ever used poison gas on, and she was the only person who survived. It had to have been her abnormal physiology that saved her; there’s no other explanation. Her family, her friends, her neighbors, everything she knew was gone. I’m told they found her just sitting there in a daze clutching her parents’ hands as the flies swarmed around them.”

“.....”

“It gets me to thinking. Even if she doesn’t end up becoming a spy, maybe it would be for the best if she found a safer path to take through life. That’s how I feel, not as a spy academy principal but as a human being. The whole reason I put the girls through such harsh training is because I don’t want them to die.” Peggy gave Klaus a long, pointed look. “Tell me, is the place you’re taking her heaven? Or is it hell?”

Her voice had a hint of reproach in it, and Klaus took a moment to evaluate her. He kind of liked how she cared about her pupils in ways that a spy needn’t have, so he answered her honestly. “I’m going to have her complete an Impossible Mission.”

“An Impossible Mission...?!”

“I’m not going to let her die, of course. It certainly won’t be heaven, but it won’t be hell, either.”

As Klaus gave her his brief response, he stepped away from the window. He was a busy man, and there were a double-digit number of academies he still

needed to visit. Now that he'd reached his verdict, it was time to make his demand and hit the road.

He scrawled a message on a scrap of paper and placed it on the principal's table.

"Pass this along to Flower Garden. Tell her that Lamplight has summoned her."

Their conversation took place a single week before the Lamplight team was formed—and five months before they had their deadly showdown in Mitario against Purple Ant.



In the United States of Mouzaia's capital, Mitario, Lamplight had begun a mission they would later end up calling the Mitario Showdown. Nations from across the globe were participating in a summit called the Tolfa Economic Conference, and they'd sent loads of spies alongside their government officials. Every intelligence agency in the world had deployed their top agents to the conference, and it had quickly descended into a chaotic battleground.

That was where one of Serpent's members—Purple Ant—came in.

His objective was to massacre every spy he came across with no distinctions made, no slowing down, and no quarter given. To do so, he brainwashed ordinary civilians into "Worker Ant" assassins and sent them to attack the spies lurking in Mitario. Top spies from every country under the sun lost their lives to him one after another, and even Hearth, once hailed as the Greatest Spy in the World, died at his hands after the unfortunate combination of being racked by disease and betrayed by one of her own.

By the time the girls arrived at the city, it had already become the stuff of nightmares, and it wasn't long before they ended up facing off against the Worker Ants. Sybilla had disguised herself as a journalist, and she ended up in a lethal brawl in a lightless building against a strong, taciturn boxer named

Barron. Monika had disguised herself as a jazz musician, and she ended up in a deadly game of darts against a college student named Miranda whose aim was second to none.

The girls both emerged victorious, but the true nightmare had only just begun. Purple Ant had given an order to the Worker Ants that if one of them lost, another twelve needed to go in and put the target down for good. Before the girls knew what was happening, they found themselves surrounded with their lives in grave danger.

As peril descended on them, there was another girl engaging in a reckless battle of her own.

“All right, here I go,” said the ash-pink-haired “Forgetter,” Annette, grinning with delight as she stood atop the building’s roof. “Time to leave Lily to die!”

It was just past eleven PM, but Mitario was a city that never slept. The countless skyscrapers and the glowing neon signs hanging from them made for a truly beautiful sight.

Annette threw herself off the roof toward those glittering lights, and a wire shot out from her skirt and slowed her fall.

She was a sitting duck dangling there, and there was an enemy sniper lying in wait above her. The Westport Building was the tallest skyscraper in the world, and the sniper had their rifle at the ready on its thirty-ninth floor. Even at night, escaping them would be nigh impossible. Even if their own shots didn’t land, all it would take was a single order from them, and their allies on the ground would start firing as well.

That was, unless another girl stayed on the roof and acted as a decoy.

“Looks like Annette managed to get away. I hope she can get word to the others.”

A silver-haired girl stood atop the roof and beamed to draw the sniper’s attention. That girl’s name was “Flower Garden” Lily. She was clad in a dark outfit, and the ribbon she was wearing around her neck fluttered in the air as she puffed up her ample chest with pride. She dodged the bullets flying her way

and took shelter behind the roof's water tank.

Lily was in dire straits; that much was undeniable. The sniper wasn't the only one closing in on the building. There were also Worker Ant assassins—twelve of them, to be precise.

“Now then, looks like it's time for the Republic's spy Wunderkind who's faced a thousand battles and never once been bested to get serious.” Despite being cornered with her back against the wall, she laughed all the same. “I mean, twelve opponents? What a joke. I could take out that many in a single punch. Come back when you've got a hundred times that, buddy.”

Herein lies a record.

After realizing that her teammates were probably in the exact same danger she was, Lily decided that the fastest way to get the information about Purple Ant's assassins to the Intel squad was to help Annette escape while she stayed behind on her own. It was the only way she could see to break through the despair descending on Mitario.

By Lily's estimate, it would take a bit under an hour for Annette to get in touch with the Intel squad and for reinforcements to arrive. That was how long she was going to have to face her foes on her own for. She'd long been mocked as an academy washout, and this was going to be the first time she fought a meaningful battle solo.

Herein lies a record of “Flower Garden” Lily's life-and-death attempt to stall for time.



One of the Worker Ants closing in on Lily was a young man named Patrick. By day, he worked at a bank, and by night, he worked as an assassin.

Two years ago, he got grabbed by five hoodlums while walking down an alleyway and dragged into a nearby building, blindfolded, and repeatedly doused in cold water. After fifteen straight hours of torture without being

allowed to eat or drink, he had an unequivocal truth burned into his mind: “Don’t defy the king.”

From then on, he went along with every order he was given.

Whenever he found strange inflows or outflows of money at the bank he worked at, he looked into the client’s personal information and shot them dead if he found them suspicious. It didn’t matter if they were a spy or an ordinary civilian. If he found them suspicious, he showed them no mercy.

Today, he’d received another order.

“One of the Worker Ants screwed up. Go in as a twelve-man kill squad.”

He got the king’s royal decree via an intermediary. The king never revealed himself in person, instead choosing to keep to the shadows. Patrick had never seen the king. All he knew was that if he tried to disobey him, his body would react so strongly that he would vomit. Because of that, he emotionlessly carried out the work.

When he arrived at the designated location, he discovered that the other members were already assembled. Their ages and genders were all over the place, with everyone from a young female student to a man who could well be described as elderly being represented.

“I’ll take command once we’re on-site. Those were my instructions,” Patrick told the group succinctly as he distributed radios and directed the others to spread out. Their target had fled behind the Westport Building to the business district with its rows of skyscrapers. “Two hours ago, one of our Worker Ants in the police force let the target give them the slip. Their mistake was that after they framed her for murder, they left the actual arrest to some other officers. She should still be nearby. Find her.”

Using the radios to keep in contact, he had them encircle the area.

It didn’t take them long to track down their target. One of their allies worked as a security guard at the Westport Building, and they got a report from him that he’d spotted their target with his telescope. She’d been on the roof of one of the office buildings.

Patrick swiftly headed to the location. The nine-story building had just been

built, and although it was owned by a trading company, everyone was out of the office at the moment, and the building lay empty. It was the perfect site in which to get a bit violent.

He put together a strategy. His plan was to have five of them, including their sniper, surround the building while the remaining seven went inside and started ascending its floors.

The story was, although their sniper constantly kept his rifle at the ready, the enemy had been able to sense his hostility. He fired immediately but failed to land a hit, and the shocked silver-haired girl fled inside the building. Meanwhile, the sniper had been so distracted by her that he lost sight of the ash-pink-haired girl who'd been with her.

So the pink-haired girl got away... We need to finish this before she can call for backup.

Patrick was unshaken.

The first thing he did was head for the first-floor offices and track down the control panel that operated the entire building. With it, he could manipulate everything, from the air-conditioning to the lighting. He turned on every light in the building. Then he readied his gun and began the search.

The seven of them scoured every corner of the floor for anywhere a spy might possibly be hiding. They started on the first floor before going to the second, then headed from the second to the third. Luckily for them, the building wasn't that big, and each floor had only five or six offices in it. The air was tense as they progressed from one floor illuminated by white florescent lights to the next.

While Patrick was giving out orders, the old man came over to him. He had the gentle face of a man who wouldn't kill a fly. "You command so efficiently... Have you been doing this long?" he asked quietly.

Patrick was impressed. "Well, that's something. You're composed enough to be making small talk?"

"My brainwashing seems to have loosened," the man whispered. "Up until just a few days ago, I couldn't even hold a conversation while under orders. My

mouth would freeze up... I still wouldn't dream of disobeying *his* orders, of course... The trembling, it doesn't stop..."

Sure enough, his hands were shaking. The king had no desire for his Worker Ants to fraternize among themselves. It was a measure to prevent information leaks or conspiracies from forming—or at least, that was what they assumed, but at any rate, it was one of the many rights denied to Worker Ants. Whenever they went against that decree, even just a little, their bodies would protest.

The man fought back his trembles. "But you can chat, too, can't you?" he asked.

"Yeah. Truth is, *his* control over me gets weaker the more of us there are together."

"Oh, really?"

"That's when I get assigned more complicated jobs. The restrictions run the risk of getting in the way."

"Ah, that's good to know. Do you think you'll ever break free completely, then?"

"Not a chance." The idea was far too optimistic, and Patrick shut it down cold. The king had no such mercy. The only thing that awaited him and the other Worker Ants was despair that knew no end. "I've already killed thirty-five people."

".....! That many?"

"How do I put it? It's like my heart is slowly dying. At the point I'm at, it feels like there's no going back. What about you? Do you really believe we can return to what we were? We're murderers, you know. I know this guy Deepwater who's been at it longer than I have, and even when his fetters got loosened, he just kept on killing people and looking bored out of his mind. He's barely more than a hollow puppet."

"That's horrible..."

"The hardest part for me was about half a year back, when I had to kill a kid. He was strong as hell, but that didn't change the fact that I was snuffing out a

child.”

Patrick only found out later, but that boy was none other than the renowned spy known as Ouka. Ouka was a boy with the heart of a hero who killed evil spies regardless of their nationality. He’d taken out a number of notorious operatives over the past few years.

Patrick was the one who’d gunned him down.

Ouka was just a boy, barely more than a child, and Patrick had shot him right in the heart. The boy had been on death’s door after getting swarmed by Worker Ants, and Patrick ended him. As soon as it happened, Patrick felt as though he’d lost something important as a person. He’d gone past the point of no return. Even if he escaped the king’s domination, he knew he would never be able to go back to the life he used to live. As a matter of fact, he didn’t even care about getting free anymore. All he had to look forward to was darkness of the pitchest-black sort.

All of a sudden, the old man whispered something. “.....She said a hero was coming.”

“Hmm?” Patrick replied.

“My brainwashing loosened back when a crimson-haired woman told me that. I can’t get her words out of my head. She told me that a beautiful, dark-haired hero would be coming someday...”

“.....”

Patrick had heard the rumors about the hero of Mitario. Someone had planted a strange idea in the Worker Ants’ heads, one that not even the king’s power could stop. Many of them believed that the rumor was actually true.

The old man smiled. “So please, don’t give up. Eventually, the hero will—”

“Don’t be absurd,” Patrick said, flatly rejecting the man’s nonsense. There was no sense lending credence to the baseless claims of some random woman. “I’d drop it if I were you. False hope will only cut you in the end. Nobody can overthrow the king, so all that’s left for us to do is kill as he—”

Midway through Patrick’s sentence, though—

“Stop right there. Hold your position.”

—something else caught his attention.

The man, who’d been about to take a step forward, yelped in confusion.

They were heading down the building’s sixth-floor hallway, and so far, they’d found nothing. They’d scoured every inch of every room, and the girl was nowhere to be found. They’d assumed their target was hiding somewhere on the seventh floor or above, but now, they’d finally had signs of life.

Patrick pointed down by their feet. “It’s a wire trap. If you trigger it, it’s set to release some sort of gas. Good money says it’s poisonous.”

“Oh dear...,” the man groaned. “I didn’t even notice...”

The trap had been cleverly set up. The wires were laid along a seam where one hallway joined with another, and a sprayer sat hidden behind a pillar.

“And what’s more”—Patrick carefully cut the wire with his knife—“the trap is double-layered.”

There was a second wire attached to the sprayer itself. If anyone carelessly touched it while trying to remove it, it would end up activating.

Their target was the one who’d set it up, no doubt.

She knew we were coming...?

It didn’t take long for Patrick to figure out what had happened.

She must have intercepted our radio comms... And now we’ve given her time to set up for the fight.

“Huh?” the man said, sounding puzzled all of a sudden. “I hear a noise coming from upstairs... It sounds dull and intermittent...”

“Yeah, she’s laying another trap. We need to stop her before she makes our lives any harder than she has already.”

The dull sound continued echoing out. Patrick didn’t know what it was, but there was a chance she was setting up something big.

The worst-case scenario would be if she blows herself up... After all, she knows there’s no way she can actually beat us all. Is she tampering with the water

pipes to blow up the entire building? No, there's no way she has the tools for that...

Spies didn't hesitate to lay down their own lives. No matter what it was she was up to, they needed to stop her as soon as possible. The thoroughness of their search had given her too much time as it was.

Patrick and his six allies climbed the staircase that led to the seventh floor. However, there was something barring their way at the top.

"So now we've got a barricade, huh?"

There was a series of office desks piled on their sides to stop anyone from entering the seventh floor. The structure was as tall as a person, and there were even tabletops wedged tightly into the gaps to prevent people from slipping through them.

"Is this some sort of trap, too?" one of the Worker Ants groaned. "Or should we dismantle it?"

Patrick sank into thought. Why had the enemy gone and built the structure?

".....No, we climb over. Our opponent is plotting something. Any tiny amount of time we give her is enough for an elite spy to set countless plans in motion."

Luckily, the barricade didn't reach all the way to the ceiling. Once Patrick thought of scaling it, he realized how easy it would be. Using one of the desktops as a foothold, he ascended the barricade and surveyed the situation on the seventh floor.

The light fixtures there had been smashed, leaving the floor dim and gloomy. There were five conference rooms by his count, and all their doors were closed. The main hallway also had a window, but it was only there to let in light and didn't actually open.

"Let's see if we can't do something about that."

Patrick gave a specific order to one of his allies and sent them back down to the first floor. Then, keeping a close eye out for traps, the remaining six Worker Ants climbed over the barricade one after another.

Once they were over, they took deep breaths. The only areas left were the seventh, eighth, and ninth floors. It wouldn't be long before they found the spy they were looking for.

As soon as all six of them reached the seventh-floor hallway, the old man let out another murmur. "I hear the noise coming from above. What should we do, skip straight to the eighth—"

Patrick cut him off. "It's a decoy."

"Huh?"

"I can smell it. The spy's on this floor."

As a Worker Ant, Patrick had put down plenty of experienced spies, and right now, his instincts were telling him that the noise was being used as a distraction. The enemy was making it seem like they were doing something noisy on the eighth or ninth floors, but in truth, they were actually there on floor seven.

"Go ahead," Patrick ordered one of the Worker Ants.

Without so much as the slightest look of disapproval, the twentysomething-year-old woman nodded and walked unflinchingly down the seventh-floor hallway. As soon as she arrived at the conference room at its end, her situation took a turn for the worse. She let out a pained gasp, then collapsed to the floor and convulsed.

"There's poison gas!" one of the others shouted.

Sure enough, there was a buildup of poison gas at the end of the hallway.

Suddenly, gas began blasting out from spots all over the hallway. There were sprayers just like the kind they'd seen earlier affixed to the backs of all the pillars. An acrid smell began permeating the entire hallway.

So that barricade's job was to give the gas time to build up...

The tabletops wedged into the gaps had turned the entire floor into a closed space. "Hold your breath!" Patrick shouted. "If we retreat back to the sixth floor, we can—"

Before he could finish, though, someone cut him off by rushing out of one of

the conference rooms.

That someone was a silver-haired girl. Her face still had adorable hints of childishness to it, but in contrast, her chest was full and well-developed. She looked to be about seventeen or eighteen.

That was their target. Patrick was sure of it.

The girl turned her gun toward them. Her finger was already fast on the trigger, and several of the Worker Ants leaped away. It was a natural reaction when someone pointed a gun at you, and they, too, had spent countless hours training. The king's order was absolute: Find the option that gives you the best chance of carrying out your mission. They'd entered the enemy's line of fire, so it was their duty to take evasive maneuvers so they could get ready to strike back.

However, doing so caused them to reflexively suck in air, and the poison gas seized its opportunity.

"Shit... I breathed it in...!"

Another Worker Ant hit the floor.

The silver-haired girl didn't fire. The gas might well have been flammable, and she wanted to avoid igniting it. The gun had been a bluff all along. She was a clever one, that was for sure.

As Patrick watched his teammates fall, he found himself bewildered. *I don't get it. How's she moving around like that without a gas mask?*

The girl was just a teenager, yet she was fighting them with a brazen confidence.

Does she think she can actually beat us...?

Patrick found the notion baffling.

After stowing her gun away, the girl drew a new pair of weapons. In her right hand, she was holding a knife, and in her left, she had a needle. There was something viscous on its tip—likely poison.

Her lips moved. "This is me being seriouser than serious.

“I’m code name Flower Garden—and it’s time to bloom out of control.”

Her eyes burned with resolve, and she brandished her poison needle.



As Lily was fighting for her life, a girl showed up outside the building.

“Time to see how Sis is doing, yo.”

It was Annette. She’d used the nearby pay phone to relay the intel to Thea. All she needed to do was wait for backup, but she returned to the building anyway.

She wanted to help Lily out.

She was hard to read at the best of times, but she did have a certain degree of fondness for Lamplight. If nothing else, she loved the milk custard Sara sometimes made.

Annette stood motionless as she observed the building. There were four suspicious people hanging around it. They pretended to just be passing by, but every so often, they shot meaningful looks up at it. They were Worker Ants, stationed to make sure their target didn’t escape out a window.

Annette went up to one of them.

“Excuse me,” she said, putting on a childishly innocent smile as she addressed the woman by the entrance. “Is it all right if I go in? My dad left something inside, and he asked me to go grab it for him.”

Thus began the performance.

Her job wasn’t to attack from head-on but rather to provide backup by drawing away the enemy’s focus.

“Hmm...?” replied the slim woman in her forties. She looked back at Annette with eyes as gentle as if she was looking at her own daughter. “And whose child might you be? I’m so sorry, but the building is off-limits at the moment.”

“Wait, but my dad told me that anyone could just walk on in.”

“.....”

“And also, what do you mean, whose child am I? My dad’s the vice president here, yo. How do you not recognize me?”

“.....”

“Actually, who are *you*? Nobody’s supposed to be here this late, and you’re supposed to need a key to get in. That’s weird, yo. I’m gonna call the cops.”

By making up random lies as she went, Annette was able to corner her opponent bit by bit.

At that point, the woman reacted in a way she hadn’t expected. All of a sudden, she drew a knife and slashed at Annette. When Annette dodged, the woman pulled out a gun as well and fired off a shot.

The bullet just barely grazed Annette. A few tufts of her hair floated gently to the ground, and one of her ponytails came undone. As she fell on her backside, she tilted her head. “.....?”

“Oh, no, sorry.” Still holding her gun, the woman gave her an apologetic bow. “It’s not like I saw through your lies or anything. For all I know, you might actually be the vice president’s daughter. I’m so sorry for startling you.”

“..”

“I just wanted to make you into a wax doll. You’re just so terribly adorable, I couldn’t help myself. I preserved my firstborn, but you’re even lovelier than her. Oh, how disgraceful. I’m getting a little wet.”

“.....”

“This is my calling, you see. I process cadavers. I can’t fight, so on my own, I never had enough materials for my wax dolls...but ever since the *king* chose me, my life has been so complete.”

“.....”

“Perhaps I’ll strangle you. Don’t worry, though. I’ll cover up the rope marks with a ribbon. You’ll still make a wonderful doll.”

The woman quietly pulled out some rope and stroked it back and forth to test its strength. Her breathing grew heated and her face flushed as she approached Annette.

Annette rose to her feet and wiped the dirt off her skirt. “I had the wrong read on you, yo.”

“Hmm?”

“You’re kinda like me. It’s that same feeling—so transparent and sparkly and beautiful.”

Annette reached toward the woman—

“That means I don’t have to pull my punches, doesn’t it?”

—and gave her head an adorable little tilt.

“I’m code name Forgetter—and it’s time to put it all together, yo.”

The sound of a motor revving up rang out right at the woman’s feet. There was a robot there wriggling like a massive centipede. It was long and slender, and it moved quickly, first crawling up her foot, then coiling all the way around her leg.

With that, it exploded.

It was an incredibly weak explosion, but it was still plenty to destroy a body part it had completely enveloped. The woman’s leg shattered as though it had been plucked right off her hip. Her eyes went wide, and she passed out.

The corner of Annette’s mouth curled upward. “Welp, there goes my last bomb. I gave all the rest of my weapons to Lily.”

Annette left the woman behind without so much as glancing at the blood that had started gushing from her wound. It wouldn’t take long for the other Worker Ants surrounding the building to realize that something was amiss and come running over, and Annette needed to be out of there before then. With no weapons, she had no way of fighting them.

After putting some distance between herself and the building, she turned back around to reassess the enemy's strength. "If she's got seven of those guys going after her...", Annette determined, "...then she's gonna be in for a rough time, yo."

With that, Annette had given all the backup she could. She'd trimmed the enemy's ranks from twelve to eleven. It was an impressive result by any measure, but it was far from enough to turn the situation around.



Lily cocked her head as she stood in the seventh-floor hallway. Why were her foes so weak?

There were six people collapsed face down in her sea of poison gas, all of them clutching guns. They clearly were no ordinary civilians, but they seemed too incompetent to really call them assassins.

Huh... Were they secretly pushovers?

Now, that was anticlimactic.

Poison gas attacks like that were her specialty, but even so, she hadn't expected it to actually take out six whole people. Why, they'd gone down before she even needed to stab them with her poison needle.

She took a look at her downed foes and tried to deduce what was going on.

These people were able to frame me for murder, so I assumed they were going to put up a hell of a fight, but these guys were hardly better than amateurs. I can't believe I beat them with my very first attack...

She continued staring at them.

Also, who even are these people? I assumed they were Purple Ant's minions, but is that not what's going on? Are they foreign agents? Some sort of local Mitario gang, maybe?

At that point, Lily had no idea who it was she was truly dealing with. Unlike Sybilla and Monika, she'd never fought a Worker Ant directly. She'd delivered

her report as quickly as possible in order to protect her allies, but she didn't have a good read on how strong their enemies actually were.

Lily headed over to her prone opponents so she could search their belongings.

There was no denying that she wasn't paying as close attention as she could have been. Lily was unbeatable in spaces full of poison gas, so it was only natural for her to get a bit careless. And that was precisely the way Patrick wanted it.

"_____!"

Patrick should have been unconscious, but he rose to his feet without warning and assailed her with his knife. Lily tried to twist her body to dodge the attack, but Patrick managed to get a clean stab in on her right shoulder. Then, when Lily frantically tried to swing her needle, he sent her flying with a fierce kick to the abdomen.

Lily just barely managed to land without hurting herself, but she got sent rolling across the ground all the same. She pressed down on her shoulder wound and shot a glare at her foe. "Why isn't my poison working...?"

"I was faking it. If anything, I'm curious why you thought it *would*." Patrick shrugged, as if to say that everything had gone exactly as he planned. "You already told us you had poison gas in your arsenal with that trap down on floor six. Between the hallway sealed off by a sketchy barricade and the window that didn't open, it didn't take a genius to figure out what your plan was. I'll admit to being surprised that you didn't need a gas mask, though."

"....."

"By the way, you want me to tell you the actual reason your poison failed?" Patrick pointed at the ceiling. "It's simple, really. We turned on the AC. All we had to do was hold our breath for two minutes, and we were able to circulate out all the air on the entire floor."

Patrick had remembered the control panel on the first floor, and he'd sent someone down there ahead of time. The building had only just finished construction, so its equipment was completely brand-new.

"You got done in by your own scheme," Patrick declared coldly. "There's a

dull noise coming from upstairs. You were probably using it as a diversion, right? Well, that was what kept you from noticing that we turned on the AC, and now, all we have to do is kill you a little at a time.”

The other five people who’d collapsed in the hallway rose as one. All of them had only been pretending to breathe in the poison gas, and now Lily was up against six assassins in more or less peak form. What’s more, they were even standing between her and the stairs. The building only had one stairwell, meaning that Lily had nowhere to run.

Patrick launched a front kick at Lily with movements just as fast as the ones from his previous attack. She tried to fend him off with her knife, but he kicked it out of her hand.

“Looks like you’re right-handed,” Patrick said with a smirk. “Pretty hard to fight with that injury, huh?”

“Y’know, I don’t like a single thing that’s coming out of your mouth!”

Lily turned her back on her foes and ran. A jolt of pain shot into her shoulder midway through her dash, and while she did lose her balance, she managed to right herself before she toppled over.

Patrick unhurriedly gave chase. By his estimation, she was in no state to fight anymore. She hadn’t even been able to keep a decent grip on her knife.

The thing was, the hallway was a dead end for her. She could try shooting the sealed window open, but they were seven floors up, so it wasn’t like she could just jump out, and if she tried shimmying down the side of the building, the Worker Ants on the ground would shoot her dead.

Lily ultimately ended up fleeing to the men’s bathroom. It had five urinals, two stalls, a single locker full of cleaning supplies, and a drainage pipe running along its ceiling. There wasn’t anything special about it.

“If you try to follow me,” Lily yelled, her voice frenzied, “I’ll blast you with my poison gas! Even with the AC running, the bathroom’s still a confined space!”

“That’s true. It would be easy enough for you to plug the bathroom’s exhaust port,” Patrick replied as he followed her in without a moment’s hesitation. “But the question is, do you even have any poison gas left? After how much you

burned through filling up the entire seventh floor?”

“.....”

“Either way, it’s fine. If I get taken down, the others can just wait for the bathroom to ventilate. Then someone else can come in and kill you. And if they get taken down, they can send another one in. There’s no way you have enough in stock to beat all of us.”

Lily brandished the gun in her left hand.

Patrick grinned. “See, I knew you were out of gas. Looks like pretending to fall for your trap was the right call.”

Lily fired a bullet, but her offhand shot ended up going wide. Patrick’s footwork was intentionally misleading, and it had completely thrown Lily’s timing.

Patrick closed in on her and sank a punch into her gut. Then, when she lurched forward, he swept her legs out from under her and dropped her onto the ground.

“This is checkmate,” Patrick declared, stamping his foot down on Lily’s face as she lay prone on the floor. “Nice resistance you put up. Futile but nice.”

“Ughhh...”

Lily reached out to try and lift herself off the ground, but Patrick stomped down on her hand. “Now, talk. Who are you? Which country are you spying for? Where are your allies?”

“What is this, an interrogation...?”

“Look, I’m not a monster,” Patrick whispered softly. “Tell me everything, and I’ll spare your life.”

Lily very much doubted that he would let her go, even if she answered his questions. She shook her head. “I’m not telling you a thing.”

“Why? Surely it’s gotta be a better option than just dying here.” There was a hint of mockery in Patrick’s voice. “I don’t get it. Is your motherland really that precious to you? Or what, are you covering for your allies?”

“.....”

Lily offered no reply to his question except silence.



Lily wasn't talking, and Patrick looked down at her and sighed.

No dice, huh? May as well just kill her, then.

Only a small handful of Worker Ants were under orders to interrogate the spies they captured, and as slaves unable to disobey their king, all they could do was faithfully fulfill their missions. That said, Patrick didn't want to stick around any longer than he had to. He'd just gotten a report that the Worker Ant stationed at the entrance had been killed with a bomb. The girl's allies were probably fast approaching.

Patrick drew his automatic and gently pulled back the slide. It made a satisfying sound as it loaded a bullet into the chamber, and he pointed the pistol at Lily.

...Another child, brought low by the world.

He felt an emptiness inside him. Here he was, about to end another young life the same way he had Ouka's.

There's no way I could ever defy the king. I have no use for false hope.

Sadly, it was clear to see that his target lacked the power to rebel against the king. She was no great spy. She'd failed to defeat even a single one of her twelve Worker Ant foes, and now she was lying on the bathroom floor like a loser. Looking at the blood spilling from the wound on her shoulder, she was in no state to even fight. Patrick pitied her for how fleeting her life was. He laid his finger on the trigger.

“...Here's the thing about me.” At last, Lily spoke, her lips faintly moving as she lay face down on the floor. “The hell I was born in was way worse than this. Back there, people got killed so casually, it'd blow your socks off.”

“Huh?”

“As everyone I knew collapsed and died around me, I wished as hard as I could. I wanted to live. But that wasn’t all. I wanted to shine. I wanted to *get back at the world that treated me like garbage*. I wanted to bloom brighter than anyone else, and I wanted everyone to fawn over me. I know it sounds egotistical, but it’s true.”

“.....?”

Patrick was bewildered at the speech Lily had started giving. What was she even talking about? What *was* there for her to talk about, other than begging for her life? This soliloquy had come completely out of left field, and Patrick had no idea what to make of it.

The thing was, Patrick didn’t know.

He had no idea how much tenacity the girl before him had taken with her through life. He had no idea what being in that dying village had carved into her soul. And he had no idea what eight years of being mocked and ridiculed at her academy had done to stoke that flame.

For there was something burning in “Flower Garden” Lily—a well of emotional fortitude that never ran dry, one that let her keep grasping for victory no matter how badly the deck was stacked against her.

Patrick knew none of that, so all he felt was irritation.

Why the pointless show of stubbornness?

The way she was acting rubbed him the wrong way. He’d given up on everything, and her raw willpower was painful for him to look at.

“What the hell are you—” he snapped at her as he started to put strength into his finger resting on the trigger.

“By the way, I gotta ask.” With that, Lily gave him the faintest of grins. “How much longer should I keep playing along with this game?”



Patrick's read was off the mark.

Lily's stubbornness wasn't pointless at all. She'd put together the intel, Annette had delivered it, Thea and Grete had received it, and before long, they'd gotten to work using it to its fullest. The situation in Mitario had been outright doomed, and Lily's unwavering spirit had completely turned it around.

Over in a multi-tenant building right off one of Mitario's alleyways, Sybilla and Erna were getting cornered on the upper floors much the same way Lily was. Their guns allowed them to keep their foes at bay, but they only had a finite number of bullets. Eventually, their magazines ran dry, and they found themselves getting driven back and back until they ultimately ended up on the roof.

One after another, their foes reached the roof as well with firearms in hand. Barron had fought Sybilla on equal footing mere moments before, and there could be no doubt that each of their new opponents was just as skilled as he'd been.

Sybilla readied her knife and stepped in front of Erna. She was getting ready to launch an all-or-nothing assault. Erna realized that she was acting out of desperation. "Big Sis Sybilla...", she warned her, but Sybilla had already accepted her fate.

"Close your eyes," Sybilla said gently. "I'm gonna pull out at all the—"

She tried to tell Erna something, but before she could finish, she got cut off—by a thin, shadowy figure.

The gaunt Corpse, *aka* Roland, had just appeared on the roof as if out of nowhere.

"What?" Sybilla gasped. "The fuck're you doin' here...?"

"My new mistress gave me a job." In his hands, Roland was carrying a pair of guns. He twirled them around as though to familiarize himself with their weight. "More importantly, you mind keeping your eyes peeled for me?" he asked, his voice ringing with a sort of ecstasy. "I gotta know—between Bonfire and me, who's faster?"

The rest happened in a flash.

Roland rushed directly toward their twelve foes, guns akimbo. The hostiles responded to his frontal charge by returning fire, of course, but their bullets seemed to mysteriously slip by and fail to connect. In contrast, Roland's quick-draw shots were uncannily accurate. He didn't kill any of the Worker Ants as per Thea's orders, but all the same, his technique was exquisite. He fired off precisely twelve shots, and by the time the last one landed, he'd successfully subdued each and every one of their foes.

““ ””

Sybilla and Erna stared in shock.

The assassin Corpse had inspired fear across the globe, and inhuman feats like that were precisely why.

Meanwhile, over in a riverside alley, Monika had yet to give up despite the twelve snipers boxing her in. She and Sara hid in an insurance office and searched for a way to escape their predicament. They lacked the means to defeat all twelve foes, and while Monika had the skills to escape on her own, that would mean leaving her partner, Sara, to die, and abandoning her was a nonstarter. They were just one piece short of solving the puzzle.

Right as things started looking truly hopeless and Monika loudly clicked her tongue, the situation shifted. Something caused the Worker Ants chasing them to panic.

“This is the place, I think...”

A moment later, Monika and Sara heard a voice at the back entrance. The person who'd rushed to their aid was the spitting image of Klaus.

“Teach?” “Klaus...?”

Their eyes went wide for a moment, but it wasn't long before they let out sighs. “...Nope, just Grete,” Monika said, slumping her shoulders.

“...We were short on personnel. I do apologize for not being the boss,” Grete said.

“I’m surprised you were able to find us,” Monika remarked.

“Well, Aiden was sitting on the roof...”

Monika squinted in surprise and looked over at Sara. Sara responded with a small nod. She’d used the cover of night to send over her pigeon. “That checks out,” Monika said. “So why’re the hostiles panicking like that?”

Grete raised her hand up to her own face. “I let them catch a glimpse of me just now. It would appear that they recognize the boss’s face. They seemed quite alarmed.”

“Who can blame them? Anyone would freak out if a guy they could never beat in a million years showed up.”

“I must say, it really is wonderful. This is far from the first time I’ve done so, but disguising myself as the boss always gives me the oddest feeling, like the boss and I have become one...,” Grete said bashfully. “It’s ever so thrilling.”

“Did the stress make you finally snap?” Monika quipped as she rose to her feet. “Jokes aside, that was good work, Grete. Thanks to you, we’ve got a real shot at making a getaway now. You mind helping me out, Sara? I need someone to come with me when I go sock Thea for the way she signed off on this nonsense.”

“...I did come with a plan in mind,” Grete offered.

“That’s what I like to hear. Let’s do this, us three.”

With that, Monika took out a handful of mirrors and wedged them between her fingers.

It was time for the girl who would one day come to be known in some circles as Flash Fire to show but a glimpse of what she would eventually become.



“How much longer should I keep playing along with this game?”

As soon as the words left Lily’s mouth, a major change took place. Namely, *the bathroom’s water pipes burst.*

When the pipes running along the ceiling ruptured, they poured their water out all over Patrick. He sensed danger, but he decided to finish Lily off before taking evasive action. He went to pull the trigger.

However, Lily's counterattack was faster.

Electricity flowed freely, and before Patrick knew it, it felt like his entire body was on fire.

"GAHHH!"

He screamed. Lily had just turned on her stun gun, and the water spurting from the pipe became a de facto conducting wire linking the stun gun and Patrick. And that was Annette's modded stun gun, so it went without saying how enormous the number of volts it was putting out was.

As the person operating the stun gun, Lily received the current as well.

"...OW!"

However, she fought through it with willpower alone and charged at Patrick.

"This damn girl...!!"

The other Worker Ants had been watching it all unfold from the bathroom's entrance, and they moved in to pin Lily down. The pipe had already stopped dumping out water, and taking down a single injured girl was no challenge at all. A pair of middle-aged men stormed into the bathroom to try and steal Lily's stun gun.

"Watch out! There's more water coming from behind—"

Patrick's warning was too little, too late. All of a sudden, a surge of water came from outside the bathroom and spread across its floor faster than the men could close the gap. It was barely more than an inch deep, but it was more than enough to soak through the men's shoes.

Lily flipped on her stun gun and plunged it into the water to unleash its current. The men rushing at her screamed, passed out, and collapsed on the floor before they could reach her.

Naturally, Lily herself took a full blast as well—as did Patrick, for that matter. Her legs wavered as a wide grin spread across her face. "Ah, man. I guess with

this much water, the current gets too diluted. Looks like taking out everyone on floor seven in one go was too much to ask for.”

She limped over to the locker full of cleaning supplies. “Ooh, found some rubber boots,” she said as she tossed her own shoes aside and replaced them.

The look on Lily’s face was one of pure confidence. Nobody could lay a hand on her. Patrick had taken two full blasts, so he couldn’t even hold his gun. The Worker Ants inside the bathroom had been rendered immobile by Lily’s electricity. And the Worker Ants outside the bathroom didn’t have a clean shot at her, and if they tried to get closer, they too would fall victim to her stun gun.

The water pooling in the bathroom had already risen to the two-inch mark. She must have clogged the drains ahead of time, as it showed no signs of flowing out.

“Getting blasted by water out of nowhere is scary as hell,” Lily said with a laugh. “I had that happen to me once, you know. Right when I first met Teach, we went out on a lake in a boat. I thought I had him right where I wanted him, but then he got me, just like I got you.” She gazed off, basking in nostalgia.



However, there was something Patrick was far more interested in than her idle anecdotes. “Where did all this water come from...?”

“I’ve spent this whole time building it up on the eighth floor. I smashed up the pipes on floors eight and nine, and the dammed-up water slowly flowed down until it came to a stop at the seventh-floor barricade. The building’s water tank is up on its roof, see. Once I messed with it to make it overflow, it flooded the place in no time.”

“So those tightly packed tabletops—”

“—Weren’t for the poison gas at all. Looks like my gamble paid off. I figured that anyone skilled enough to notice the double-layered wire trap down on six would *choose to leave the barricade up so they could pretend to get hit by my poison gas*. You were way better at playing dead than I expected you to be, so that gave me a bit of a scare, but this water attack was my real plan all along.”

Patrick groaned. How could a girl that young have been thinking that many steps ahead?

The barricade had been so blatant—would destroying it have been the right call after all? No, no. Even if he had, she would have just saved her poison gas and switched to a different strategy. The girl had never given up on victory. Despite being driven as far into a corner as one could go, she’d kept her wits about her and weaved lies together in a determined attempt to survive.

“Fall back to floor six!” Patrick shouted at his allies outside the bathroom. “The water will drain once we destroy the barricade! Then we can just shoot her!”

Patrick still had three teammates left. If even one of them made it to the stairwell, their victory would be assured.

“You think I’m letting you escape?” However, Lily broke into a run. “I’m in *seriouser* than serious mode here! Welcome to the stun gun party—and ‘cause I’ve got these rubber boots, I get to walk away unscathed!”

She’d gotten shot full of electricity twice over, but it didn’t appear to have dulled her movements in the slightest. She dashed across the flooded floor and rushed out of the bathroom.

Patrick dragged himself after her in an attempt to give chase.

By the time he left the bathroom, Lily and the other Worker Ants had already started fighting. All of them were equipped with guns, but having to draw a bead on their foe before they could fire meant their speed was no match for Lily's stun gun—not with how soaked the entire seventh story's floor was. Patrick was able to avoid the blast by leaping atop the conference room doorknobs, but most of the others weren't so lucky. The electricity from the modded stun gun traveled through the water as fast as lightning, shot through the soaked shoes, and indiscriminately shocked the people wearing them.

Two of the Worker Ants screamed in pain and dropped their guns. However, Lily got hit by the blast as well.

“Arrrgh! My hands were so soaked that the rubber boots...ended up being useless!”

No shit, Patrick silently quipped. The girl seemed like kind of an idiot.

After staggering for a second, though, Lily puffed her chest right back up. “But like I said, unscathed! Electricity just doesn't work on me!”

That's clearly bullshit, Patrick quipped again.

Lying as easily as she breathed, Lily ditched the rubber boots and ran across the floor barefoot as she moved in to bring down the Worker Ants heading for the barricade. She should have been too injured to even think about fighting, yet her self-injuring attacks were running roughshod over the Worker Ants.

What the hell is that girl even made of...?

Patrick perched frozen against the wall with his feet still balanced atop the doorknobs. He tried to aim his gun at Lily, but his fingers were so numb, it slipped from his grasp entirely and fell to the floor. However, it was hardly his fault. If anything, Lily was the weird one for being able to run around like that after taking so many blasts.

“Flower Garden” Lily was still going. No matter what she was up against, she never stopped moving. And “Flower Garden” Lily never threw in the towel. After all, she knew what *true* hell looked like. Patrick had given up and declared the king's domination to be impossible to overturn, yet there that lone girl was,

trying to stand against it.

Eventually, one of the Worker Ants threw themselves against the barricade. The water on the floor flooded out, taking all the built-up hydraulic pressure with it. Lily pressed her stun gun against her final foe and knocked them out, but there was no stopping the water once it started draining.

Patrick pumped his fist. Now that the floor wasn't flooded, the stun gun was nothing to fear. All he had to do now was wait for his allies to recover and finish off the incapacitated girl. He broke out into a wide smile. "At last, we finally wo—"

"Good work, Lily."

A calm voice echoed across the seventh floor.

Over at the edge of Patrick's vision, he saw Lily's entire face relax. "You sure took your sweet time, Teach...", she mumbled happily as she slowly crumpled toward the ground. ".....The win is mine."

Her body had taken all it could. She closed her eyes and slumped against the intruder like the final taut strings keeping her upright had just been cut. Patrick couldn't get a clear view of who they were from his angle—

"Magnificent."

—but immediately after he heard that word, the figure bore down on him with tremendous speed and severed his consciousness.



After tying up the Worker Ants, Klaus picked up Lily's unconscious body and carried her down the stairs. The countless suicide attacks she'd done with her stun gun had knocked her clean out, and her clothes smelled burned. Klaus was pretty sure that she'd gone far past the point that willpower alone should have been able to carry her, yet she'd managed to endure all the same. Even when surrounded by assassins, her quick wit and dogged tenacity had allowed her to buy the time she needed.

...In the end, she chose to rely not on poison, but on her memories of our

skirmish.

Looking at the state of the battleground, he could more or less piece together what tactics she'd used. It was a very Lily strategy. Out of everyone on Lamplight, she was always the one who put the most of herself into her training.

As her instructor, he was given a mixture of pride and endearment at that fact.

".....Hnn." Lily let out a small groan. She must have been coming to her senses. "Ahhh," she sighed when she looked up at Klaus. "You really did come for me, Teach. I half thought I'd imagined it."

"I did. You made it."

"If you're the real Teach, you should prove it by treating me to a nice dinner."

"Well, maybe I'm a figment of your imagination after all."

A hollow look crossed Lily's eyes. "What happened to the others...? Are they okay?"

"We're not out of the woods yet, but we were able to enact countermeasures. And it's all thanks to you."

"So was Purple Ant behind all this?"

Klaus nodded. "It looks that way. I'm heading over to Thea next to finish him off." Thea had gotten Roland to tell her where Purple Ant's hideout was. The plan was for Thea to infiltrate it, then have Klaus come in after she'd gotten visual confirmation of their foe.

"Hnngh." After Klaus told her all that, Lily wriggled her way out from Klaus's arms and collapsed unceremoniously on the floor. "...In that case, you should go get ready. I'm good. I can walk on my own."

Perhaps that was her pride as Lamplight's leader speaking. She smacked her trembling legs and clung desperately to the stairwell's handrail.

"I'll stay with you until we join back up with Annette. Being on your own is rough."

“You already mopped up all the enemies in the building, though, right? Then everything should be aces.”

“.....”

The look in her eyes was dead serious. It was hard to believe that that declaration was coming from a girl who'd just been inches from getting murdered.

“You should really consider relying on me from time to time,” Klaus suggested.

“.....?”

“I know I'm the one who stuck you with the role, but you don't need to be so darn brave. By all rights, you should be scared. Frightened. But you hide it all behind a grin so you can keep the others' spirits up. When things are looking bleak, you work yourself to the bone lightening things up with jokes. Isn't that hard on you?”

“.....” After a long silence, Lily shook her head. “...Nah, not even a little.”

“Is that so.”

“Still, that might be nice every now and again. ‘Lily, the spoiled baby.’”

“That has an odd ring to it.”

“‘Lily, clinging to Teach's clothes in the hopes he'll pat her head.’”

“Now you're almost sounding like Erna.”

“‘Lily, demanding that Teach gives her a lap pillow as a reward for a mission well done.’”

“I thought you preferred food.”

“‘Lily, weeping and begging for Teach to save her.’”

“...That just sounds like an ordinary Tuesday.”

“Seriously, though, I'm fine.” Lily shook her head again and quietly plopped herself down on the floor. “There might come a day where I toss my pride aside like that, but right now, I'm good. Thanks to you, I found a way that I can shine.

That's all I need."

"I see."

"Go ahead and leave that chest of yours open for another girl to use."

With that, Lily closed her eyes as if drifting off to sleep. It was a bold thing to do. Tied up or not, the seventh floor was still teeming with foes. However, she was at her limit.

Klaus gently draped his waistcoat over her shoulders.

That marked the end of the battle fought in the Mitario office building.

Therein lay a record of the time "Flower Garden" Lily fought on her own to the bitter end.

After all her desperate scrabbling, she finally found something—a victory that was hers and hers alone.



Back in the Din Republic, Peggy let out a sigh in the principal's office of her spy academy. It was a dreadfully cold day, the kind of day where the biting wind made you want to put on an extra jacket. The academy sat deep within the mountains, so all the air from their base came blowing right through it like a gift from afar.

On that day, Peggy was lost in thought. How were the students she'd graduated faring, she wondered?

"What's the matter?" her younger male colleague asked with a laugh as he continued filing his documents. "Feels like you're sighing an awful lot."

"Oh, I'm just feeling a bit anxious," Peggy replied with a smile. "I was wondering to myself how our alumni were holding up."

The other teacher pursed his lips in agreement. "Oh, yeah, I feel you. It's like, would it kill our bosses to let us know how they're doing every so often? I get that we're spies and that's just how it goes, but still."

In the world of spies, information was only shared on a need-to-know basis. Peggy and her coworkers had no way of knowing what kind of missions their pupils were being sent on or what kind of results they were achieving. They weren't even told when their old students died.

As instructors, that not knowing stung. They couldn't help but wonder what their girls were doing and where.

"Not even our top students were able to get good results on their graduation exam..." Peggy said worriedly. "But the front lines were so short on hands, we ended up having to graduate them anyway."

"Hey, it's not their fault that the other academies had such heavy hitters. I hear that 'Reverb' Vindo and 'Naval Mine' Vics were even more gifted than their instructors. And wasn't that 'Projection' Pharma girl who wiped our students out Holytree's little sister?"

Peggy let out another sigh. "...I guess the world really is just a big place."

There were students who'd gotten outstanding grades at Peggy's academy, but even they'd failed to earn anything better than mediocre marks when they'd competed against the other academies' top scorers. Just because someone did well in school did nothing to guarantee that things would go well for them out in the real world. The question was, then, what about the washouts? Surely, having done poorly in school didn't doom them to repeat the same failures once they left, did it?

"Oh, that reminds me," the other teacher said with a grin. "Did you see the paper this morning?"

"Not yet, why?"

"I don't know how much of it I believe, but I found a *fascinating* article in it."

He showed her the article in question.

The Shocking True Story of the Fiend Lurking in Mitario, Lillian the Devil!

Its headline read like something straight out of a tabloid rag, and the story was about a serial killer who'd shown up in Mitario, the capital of the United States of Mouzaia. After killing seventy-six innocent victims, she fled pursuit and

ultimately perished. According to people who knew her from during her stay, she was an adorable silver-haired girl from the Din Republic. She had a job at a burger joint, a massive rack, a clumsy streak, a voracious appetite—

Right around when she got to that part, Peggy burst out into side-clutching laughter. Her colleague gave her a funny look, but she continued laughing undeterred.

The story was bullshit. She was sure of it. It had been spread to cover up something a group of spies had been doing behind the scenes, and there was no doubt in Peggy's mind that a certain someone had been involved. The description lined up perfectly, and in all likelihood, she was alive. They'd probably just used her name to conceal who the body really belonged to.

"Looks to me like she's doing just fine for herself," Peggy said, wiping away a tear. When was the last time, she wondered, that she'd been in such a good mood?

If Peggy knew one thing, it was that "Flower Garden" Lily had only just begun making her mark on history. After leaving the academy, their little washout had gone out into the world and thrived.

Interlude

Intermission ②

Right as nine AM was rolling around for Heat Haze Palace, Sybilla let out a big yawn as she headed down to the kitchen. She'd left her gnarly case of bed hair untreated.

When she got there, she found Sara looking similarly drowsy. "Mornin', Sara. You just get up, too?"

"Yeah, I did. I completely overslept."

Sara cut off some slices of bread and popped them in the toaster. There were also two portions of salad set to the side. Grete had been on breakfast duty that day, so she was probably the one who'd made them. By that point, theirs were the only two plates left.

"Looks like everyone else is already up, huh?"

"Ha-ha, we're a little bit late to the party."

The two of them enjoyed a laugh as they got to work setting up to eat breakfast. They grabbed forks and knives, then got the butter and jam out of the refrigerator.

That was when Sybilla spotted the unfamiliar scrap of paper lying on the counter.

"What's up with this?"

"Huh," Sara said, similarly confused. She cocked her head in puzzlement. "Did someone leave us a note, maybe?"

"They did set some salad aside for us, so that'd make sense. Let's see what it says. Maybe they left us some dessert in the fridge or somethin'."

Their expectations were high as they turned over the paper.

“Klaus loves you.”

That was all the note said.

““ ””

The two of them were at a complete loss for words, and their heads were full of all sorts of questions. Who did “you” refer to? Sybilla and Sara were the ones who hadn’t had their breakfast yet, so logically speaking, it had to be addressed to one of them. As they reached their conclusion in unison, they let out a simultaneous red-faced ““HUHHHHHHHHH?!””

That marked the misunderstanding’s fifth and sixth victims.

The chaos brought about by the misunderstanding that that misunderstanding caused was about to begin.

Chapter 5

The Spy Who Loved Us

“That’s right—and make it quick. It’s embarrassing, leaving it trashed like that.”

After briefly conveying his instructions, Klaus set down his receiver. Then he sat at his room’s desk and let out a small exhalation.

He’d been making the call to the Foreign Intelligence Office’s general affairs division. His request was simple—that they repair the room that used to be Hearth’s and now belonged to Lily. Annette had blown the room to smithereens just before the Corpse mission. They’d been too busy since then to get around to it, but now that they’d finished their job in Mitario, they finally had some downtime.

Once it was fixed, the room was going to be Klaus’s. The girls had insisted that it was only right that he inherit Hearth’s old room, so it had been agreed that he would take it over. Klaus had been using the tiny room meant for the person on the bottom of the pecking order ever since his time on Inferno, the team that preceded Lamplight, but the moment for him to graduate had finally come.

Now Klaus was acting as Lamplight’s boss in every sense of the word. It had taken him a while, but at long last, his resolve was firm.

I have to say, these are some big shoes I’m going to have to fill.

Whenever he closed his eyes, he always remembered the image of that woman with her hair so crimson that it looked like it was on fire. She was code name Hearth, aka Veronika, and she was the person Klaus had called “boss” so reverently.

“Hey, Klaus. There’s one more thing I need to tell you...”

She taught Klaus not just how to be a spy, but how to approach the world. The rest of the team taught him all sorts of skills and techniques, but when it came to Klaus’s emotional development, it was hard to overstate the impact she had on him.

Klaus let out another breath.

He was proud to call himself the Greatest Spy, but there were a lot of shortcomings he needed to shore up before he could even think about calling himself the Greatest Teacher or the Greatest Boss. For instance, the way he communicated with his subordinates wasn’t anywhere near as proficient as the way Hearth used to.

...Actually, this might be a good opportunity to get the girls involved.

With his course of action set, Klaus left his room. It was noon on the dot, and that meant that it was lunchtime. When he arrived in the dining room, he found the eight girls sitting at the table. All of them, aside from the rather glum-looking Thea, were happily eating their pot-au-feu.

“Ah, perfect. Just who I was looking for.”

“““““Ack?!”””””

Several of the girls jumped.

Klaus gave them a confused look. “Hmm? Why do you look so startled?”

Their reactions didn’t make sense to him.

For whatever reason, five of the girls—Lily, Sybilla, Sara, Erna, and Monika—had nervous twitches in their faces. They shoveled pot-au-feu into their mouths to try to hide it, but their hands were trembling.

Lily gave him a forced smile. “I’m, uh, I don’t know what you’re talking about...”

“The contractors who’re coming to fix Lily’s room will be here this evening. These are special spy repairmen. I imagine this won’t be the last time we need

The girls had just started digging into the apples they'd bought for dessert.

"Once our break is over, the plan is to start our usual training back up alongside our domestic counterintelligence missions. I was thinking it might be a good idea to game out some overarching ideas for our schemes."

Lily gave her a thumbs-up. "Ooh, good thinking. I like where your head is at."

"Thank you... Now, to that end, we're going to need somebody to tail the boss while he—"

""""""?!"""""""

Just like before, Lily, Sybilla, Sara, Erna, and Monika all twitched. Several of them dropped their forks with their apple slices still skewered on them.

Grete didn't understand what had prompted such a reaction. She gave them a puzzled look. ".....?"

"T-tailin' him, huh?" Sybilla replied in an oddly high-pitched tone. "As in, like, followin' right behind him? That's kinda, y'know... It feels almost like a date."

"...I'm afraid I don't see the similarity," Grete said.

"For stuff like this, I think it'd be better for Grete to do it. Like, in case there's some kinda misunderstanding."

"What kind of misunderstanding...?"

Sybilla hastily waved her hands and retracted her statement. "Ah, no, that's not what I meant! I meant one of the rest of us might, uh, screw up or somethin'."

Grete blinked in abject bewilderment. "I certainly don't have a problem with being the one on tailing duty, but wouldn't it make more sense to have someone with more stamina like you do it?"

"Wha—?! N-nope, count me out!" Sybilla replied, making a big X in front of herself with her arms.

"Or what about Sara? She could use her animals to track his scent."

"I—I can't!" Sara pulled her newsboy cap down over her face. "I'd really rather sit this one out!"

“...Or perhaps Monika, would you mind stepping in?”

Monika squinted at her like there was nothing she would have rather done less. “I don’t wanna.”

Grete was dumbfounded. Every single candidate she’d been considering had shot her down cold. “...Is everyone under the weather today or something?”

Beside her, Lily and Erna were staring at the floor and doing their absolute best to avoid having the conversation turn their way. Lily, in particular, was letting out unconvincing fake coughs and pretending to have a cold. “Y-yeah, I’m not feeling so good...”

Grete was no fool, and she realized that there was something off about the vibes in the dining room. Without knowing the cause, though, all she could do was be perplexed.

Incidentally, this is what was going through Lily’s, Sybilla’s, Monika’s, Erna’s, and Sara’s heads, respectively:

“I—I can’t bring myself to tell her...!”

“Grete’s the last person I want findin’ out. I wouldn’t be able to face her afterward!”

“Honestly, I’m pretty skeptical about the whole thing. It might be true, sure, but it might not.”

“B-but still! He just made a move on me! He was trying to make time for us to be alone together!”

“I still can’t believe it! I-it doesn’t make sense...”

They were all thinking the exact same thing.

“How could Teach “have actually “fallen “in love “with me?!“”””” ”

This was right after the five of them had been infected by the misunderstanding caused by the “Klaus loves you” note. Each and every one of them was under the misconception that Klaus might well have romantic feelings

for them, and they were all desperately trying to figure out how they should react to the revelation.

The chain of misunderstandings had thrown everything into chaos.

Meanwhile, Annette had picked up on everything that was going on more or less by intuition and was wearing a wide grin. “Feels like things are getting real interesting, yo!”

In her pure, unsullied wickedness, she’d decided not to clear up the misunderstanding.

“...For now, I suppose we should just table this discussion about our training for later.”

Meanwhile, Grete had no idea the misunderstanding was even occurring, so she elected not to press the issue any further. She had a big decision of her own she was about to have to make.



As soon as Grete and Thea left the dining room, Annette began making her mischief.

“Yo, Klaus and I have plans to hang out tomorrow. Does anyone wanna come with?”

“??????!?????”

“I bet he’d be super happy if one of you tagged along.”

“????? _____?!?????”

“Also, is it just me, or has anyone else seen him researching popular spots to go on dates?”

“????? _____?!?????”

“I gotta say, it feels like I just found a new toy.”

Annette smiled contentedly at the way her teammates were reacting to her statements. All she had to do was say words that they associated with Klaus and

romance, and it threw their hearts into disarray. Annette, it should be noted, was a monster, and the demon child lurking within Lamplight's ranks took full advantage of the misunderstanding to try out all sorts of malicious pranks. The other five girls were completely at her mercy.

By the time they'd all finished eating their dessert, Sybilla and Erna were completely wiped. "F-for now, let's just wash the dishes and not think about anything else." "A-agreed." There wasn't a hint of life left in their voices.

Even Monika, who was normally so cool and unflappable, had been thrown for a loop. The last person she'd been expecting might well have feelings for her, and she had no idea how to deal with it. She didn't even have a way to verify if it was true or not. She pinched the bridge of her nose with a sour expression on her face.

Meanwhile, Sara was completely panicking. She stared blankly at the ceiling and looked like she was on the verge of fainting at any moment.

Finally, Lily's thoughts were anxiously turning.

Oh, this is bad...!! Her ears were bright red, and she was burying her face in the table. *This is no time to be worrying about breaks and missions! How am I supposed to act around Teach now...?*

Lily had a stronger sense of responsibility than most, and she was making a sincere effort to figure out how to deal with the problem at hand. As the girls' leader, how did she want to handle their boss's feelings?

Why did this have to happen? It's not like I want to have that kind of relationship with him. If anything, I'd much rather support Grete in her quest for love...!

That right there was the heart of the issue and the biggest reason the five of them were all racking their brains so hard—Grete. It was common knowledge among the girls that she was in love with Klaus. She tackled her missions and succeeded in them with an intense level of devotion on his behalf, and while there were some discrepancies in their exact attitudes, the whole team was rooting for her love to bear fruit.

Now, though, it turned out that Klaus might be in love with *them*!!

That revelation had caused nothing but problems, and it was tormenting the girls to no end.

I—I can't let the others find out what's going on. If I do...!

It was all too easy for Lily to imagine the worst-case scenario. From her perspective, the only people who knew the truth were Erna and Annette, the two young'uns, but how would the others react if the whole team found out?

She could practically see them already. *No, no...*, Grete would say sadly with tears welling up in her eyes. *If the boss has made his choice, then that's all there is to it... Oh, my stomach hurts...*

Meanwhile, Sybilla, Sara, Monika, and Thea would look at her with contempt in their eyes. *I misjudged you, Lily*, Sybilla would say. *I can't believe you're the kind of asshole who'd choose a guy over her friends.*

That was pretty awful of you, Miss Lily, Sara would agree.

Oh, so you used your position as team leader to seduce him? Monika would sneer. *You make me sick.*

I must say, I never expected you to be so forward, Thea would remark. *You must have been, to win him over after the rest of us failed so many times.*

That would be a complete and utter tragedy!! Lily screamed internally. If that happened, the team's interpersonal relationships would disintegrate, and Lamplight would end up as the kind of ugly, oppressive work environment you normally found only in suspense novels. *I—I need to stop that from happening, no matter what it takes!*

With thoughts of that terrible future flashing through her mind, Lily rose to her feet.

"I've made up my mind..."

She bit down on her lip and fixed her gaze straight ahead. The fires of determination were burning in her eyes.

Once the others turned their attention her way, she went on. "Everyone, I need you to listen up. I've been holding this back, but that's not an option anymore!"

“What is it this time?” Sybilla asked in exasperation as she looked over. Given the fed-up expressions on the others’ faces, they too were pretty sure that this was just Lily on her usual brand of nonsense.

“There’s something I need to ask your advice about!”

“Advice?” Sybilla replied. “What kinda advice?”

“R-romantic advice.”

“I’m sorry, *what?*”

Sybilla was shocked, and she wasn’t the only one. Every pair of eyes in the dining room was as wide as could be.

Lily ignored their reactions and loudly went on. “I’ve made up my mind—tonight, I’m going to tell Teach how I really, truly feel about him!!”

““““ABSOLUTELY DO NOT DO THAT!!”””””

The sheer force of their retort rocked the walls.



While the dining room was continuing to descend into madness, a different story was progressing up on the second floor.

“Grete, I was wondering if I could get your help with something,” Thea said, stopping her partner in crime in the hallway. Thea had just finished fixing up her appearance, combing her hair, and reclaiming her usual beauty.

“Of course. What is it?” Grete said, turning around as she stood in her room’s doorway. Thea couldn’t bring herself to describe what her business was, and Grete stared at her for a moment before giving her an understanding nod. “I assume this is about Hearth’s message.”

“Is it that obvious?” Thea replied with a tired look on her face. “I’ve gotten about as far as I can on my own. Would you mind if I picked your brain for a bit?”

With that, the two of them relocated to Thea’s room. Thea had been agonizing over the matter for days, and there were dozens of pieces of scrap

paper strewn all about. Her room normally had a rather mature aesthetic to it, what with its display cases full of brand-name items, but at the moment, it had been reduced to a cluttered mess and left reeking of ink.

Thea would have liked to have been able to solve the puzzle on her own, but no matter how hard she tried, the answer refused to come to her.

“Klaus s you.”

Try as she might, she couldn’t fill in that blank. She did have those photos that had been paired with the message as hints, but even after thoroughly investigating them, she had no idea what building it was they were depicting. Her deductions had hit a dead end.

Grete took a look at the pictures laid out on Thea’s desk. “Well, to start, what kind of relationship did you and Hearth have?”

It was understandable why she would ask. The Lamplight girls didn’t tend to talk much about their backstories, and Thea was no exception. She’d never gone out of her way to share any specifics, so all the others knew was that Hearth had saved her at one point.

“That’s a fair question. This is how it all happened.”

Thea decided to reveal her past to Grete.

She told Grete about how she was the daughter of a newspaper company’s president, and seven years ago, back when she was eleven, she got kidnapped by a group of Galgad spies. How they kept her imprisoned abroad for more than two weeks, and how she’d fallen into such a deep despair that she’d begun craving the release of death. How one day, after she heard a woman and a boy talking outside her prison, a furious noise sounded out and a crimson-haired woman rescued her. How the men who’d captured Thea lay dead behind the woman’s back, and one of them had a crowbar sticking out of his head.

She then told Grete about how, after the rescue, the crimson-haired woman (who Thea would later learn was Inferno’s boss, Hearth) spent the next ten days looking after her. How it had seemed like there were other Inferno members around but that Hearth was always the one who took care of her. How each night, Hearth had regaled her with tales of espionage as bedtime stories and

how Thea had come to idolize Hearth.

That was the long and short of how Thea and Hearth had met.

“Well? Was there anything you figured out after hearing all that?”

“I suppose the very first thing that comes to mind,” Grete said without so much as pausing to think, “is that the boss might have been present when Hearth saved you.”

“Exactly. That was the first thing I thought of, too.” Thea had spent no small amount of time considering the possibility. Hearth’s message could easily have been *Klaus knows you*. “And it’s true that when it happened, I heard what sounded like a woman and a boy talking.”

Klaus would have been thirteen at the time. He had joined Inferno when he was ten, so there were no issues as far as the timeline was concerned.

If that was the case, though, it gave rise to a whole new mystery.

“The problem is, Teach himself denied it. He told me that he’d never met me before.”

Thea had looked into the matter back when they were training just before the Corpse mission.

“Seven years ago, Inferno saved my life. Do you not remember that incident where Imperial spies kidnapped the only daughter of a major newspaper’s president, Teach?”

“...I’m not sure. I might have been on a different mission at the time.”

When she asked him, Klaus had denied it, and given who he was, she doubted he had remembered incorrectly.

There was that odd pause before he answered, though.

That said, it could have just taken him a moment to sort through his memories.

Grete took stock of that new piece of information. “That leaves two

possibilities. The first is that the boss met you back then, but he's choosing to conceal that fact for reasons unknown."

"And the second is that we actually never met, huh."

Either way, there were questions still unanswered. If they'd met, why was Klaus keeping it a secret? And if they hadn't, what other connection could she and Klaus possibly have?

That was the spot at which Thea had reached her dead end. She didn't feel like she had enough information to unravel the mystery on her own.

"First things first, I was hoping to narrow down which of the two it was," she said. "Do you have any idea how I might do that?"

"Hmm. Well, from what I know..."

Grete had answered all her other questions with hesitation, but there, she stopped mid-sentence. With an oddly meek look on her face, she laid a finger on her lips and quietly closed her eyes.

"Grete?"

When Thea said her name, Grete slowly opened her eyes. "...The truth is, there's someone I had plans to go see today. She might know things about the boss's past that we don't."

"Wait, you actually know someone who can help?!"

Thea could hardly believe her ears. The girls had been dying for ages to find someone who knew about Klaus's past. The nature of their training exercise—needing to defeat Klaus—had left them searching for intel on his personal life and weaknesses, but without any way to find someone with access to that information, they'd given up on that line of inquiry. If Grete had info that priceless, why had she been keeping it to herself?

"I find it unlikely that she'll actually tell us anything..."

There were hints of tension, perhaps even animosity in her voice.

"...but I need to face her head-on. Running away isn't an option."

When Grete told Thea who it was she was talking about, Thea stared at her in

shock.



Back in the dining room, the misunderstanding was still going strong.

“Tonight, I’m going to tell Teach how I really, truly feel about him!!”

““““ABSOLUTELY DO NOT DO THAT!!”””””

When Lily told the others about the once-in-a-lifetime levels of resolve she’d worked up, they reacted with vehement opposition. Upon getting brutally shut down by everyone present, Lily was taken aback. “Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!” She forcefully slammed the table with her hands. “Why not?!”

“H-how, uh, how to put this...?” Sybilla scratched her head in hesitation, then put on an awkward smile as she averted her gaze from Lily and glanced off in the wrong direction.

“So let me get this straight,” Monika said, calmly stepping in. “You want to tell Klaus how you feel about him, right?”

“Yup.”

“And those feelings or whatever, they’re romantic in nature?”

“Yup. I want to tell him exactly how I feel.”

““““ABSOLUTELY DO NOT DO THAT!!”””””

“Again, you gotta tell me why!” Lily cried when the other four rebuked her in unison yet again. She’d assumed that they would be completely on her side for this, and she hung her head. “I really gotta tell him that I don’t want to go out with him, though...,” she mumbled, but sadly, the others were all so out of sorts that they didn’t pick up on what she’d said and assumed she was telling them the exact opposite of that.

“There’s really no easy way to explain it...,” Sybilla replied. She furrowed her brow, and Sara, Erna, and Monika all made the exact same expression.

The thing is, I’m the one the boss is in love with, Sybilla thought to herself.

When she asks him out, he's a hundred percent gonna turn her down.

B-but it's not like I can just tell her, You should just give up because you're going to fail anyways, thought Sara.

She should really rethink this, thought Erna. It's too dangerous to go poking that bear right now.

Meanwhile, Monika started asking herself some questions. Wait, could it be? Do I just have this whole thing wrong?

The stories weren't lining up, and Monika and Monika alone was beginning to notice it. She tended to think pretty logically, and as a result, she was the first to unravel the misunderstanding. She glanced over at Annette, who was sitting off to the side. She was the one who'd shown Monika that message, and at the moment, she was covering her mouth with her hand to hide the massive grin she was wearing. "Time to observe them with zipped lips, yo."

She was clearly enjoying herself more than a little.

"....." "_____!"

Monika gave her a pointed glare, and Annette noticed that Monika was looking her way.

For a little while, everything was silent.

"...Hey, Annette, come over here." "Time to get out while the getting is good, yo!"

Annette fled, Monika gave chase, and before long, the two of them were gone.

The good news was that one person had finally figured out the misunderstanding that was happening, but the bad news was that that fact had gone completely over the other four girls' heads. All of them were still operating under the assumption that Klaus was in love with them.

Lily turned a deaf ear on her friends' objections and continued shouting. "C'mon, I need your help here. I-I've, like, never done this before. I have no idea what I'm even supposed to say!"

"Y-y'know what, I get it. If this is something you gotta do, then there's no

stoppin' that." The others had been taken by Lily's show of passion, and their attitudes started softening. "But even so, I'm sorry," Sybilla said apologetically. "I dunno how I'm gonna look you in the eye after this."

"Is what I'm doing really that wrong?!"

The look on Sara's face went serious, and she squeezed her fists tight. "B-before you do this, Miss Lily, I want you to promise me that we'll always be friends, no matter what."

"What sort of weird ritual is that?!"

After hearing their stern warnings, Lily clutched her head in dismay. "Man... I never knew that telling someone how you feel about them was this big of an ordeal."

"I-in my opinion..."

Erna was the final one to speak. She timidly raised her hand.

"...we should go get some sweets, j-just in case there are any hurt feelings afterward."

"Good call. We're gonna need loads," Sybilla said.

"I—I agree," Sara concurred. "J-just in case!"

Certain that Lily's declaration of love was going to end in disaster, the others hurriedly tried to figure out how they were going to patch things up afterward. "Hurt feelings?" Lily said with a puzzled look. "Ah," she realized. "Yeah, I can definitely see Teach feeling hurt after this."

In any case, the suggestion of going and buying sweets had a consensus, so the girls started getting ready to head out.

Lily gulped at the unexpected turn of events. "I—I guess it really is important to be ready for anything...!!"



"Be ready for anything," Grete said. "This is going to be dangerous."

The girls never took their guns with them out into public, but Thea and Grete had stashed theirs in their pockets. Two hours after they left the manor, they arrived at their destination. It was somewhere that Thea had been before: the administrative district in the Din Republic's capital.

The district was full of office workers coming and going, and in one little corner of it, there was a building with a sign describing it as the Cabinet Office Economic Research Center. It was impossible to know who worked there or what they did, but most people simply walked right past it without sparing it a second glance.

However, Thea knew what that building really was.

The Cabinet Office had an intelligence agency under their direct authority—the Foreign Intelligence Office—and that there was their prison. Some of the spies who got captured on Republican soil ended up getting imprisoned there. Once, their ranks had included the feared assassin Roland under the moniker Corpse.

Thea and Grete stood together in the dimly lit corridor and waited. They'd been told that the person they were looking for was due to be released that day. Thea had never met the woman in person, but she certainly knew who she was. Back when Roland had been shaking the world to its core, she'd helped him carry out his many assassinations by infiltrating the Din Republic and getting hired by the politician Uwe Appel.

The sound of footsteps on the marble floor clacked down from the end of the hallway. Eventually, the woman in question arrived.

"It's been a while, Olivia!"

"Well, if it isn't the crazy bitch!!"

There stood Olivia Fischer, Corpse's favorite disciple and Uwe Appel's cruel, traitorous head maid. Her long blond hair was tied back in a ponytail, she was wearing a white dress, and her features had an unmistakable sturdiness to them.

The moment she spotted Grete, she immediately rushed forward and swiftly wound up for a knife-hand strike.

Grete and Olivia were mortal enemies. Thanks to a little help from her teammates, Grete had ended their deadly showdown by successfully capturing Olivia. It was no wonder she wanted to kill Grete on sight.

“If you lay so much as a finger on me in here—”

Grete didn’t flinch, not even the moment before Olivia’s attack would have landed.

“—they’ll throw you right back in that cell. You’ll get a chance to experience that protracted torture all over again.”

“.....!!”

Olivia froze. She shot an uncomfortable look backward and surveyed the corridor. She’d just remembered that she was in enemy territory surrounded by Din spies.

“Once Roland passed away, they decided that you didn’t pose much of a threat anymore,” Grete said flatly. “They determined that you were nothing more than a puppet that Roland had been manipulating—and if they hadn’t, you would have been summarily executed.”

“He wasn’t... He didn’t...!!”

Olivia’s eyes went wide, and her voice was gravelly. By the look of it, she’d already known that Roland was dead. Thea had played a big role in the situation that had gotten him killed, and a feeling she couldn’t quite describe suddenly washed over her.

“...I’m going to kill you,” Olivia growled menacingly, her voice bristling with rage. “I’m going to crush your fucking skull. You and everyone else...!!”

“Go on, then. Try me,” Grete taunted her.

Thea rarely, if ever, saw Grete get that aggressive. “H-hold on, now,” Thea said, trying to defuse the situation. She was just now remembering that Grete had a habit of losing her cool when it came to matters involving Olivia. Thea stepped between the two of them. “L-let’s all just take a deep breath. You just spent a long time getting tortured, Olivia. I can’t imagine you’re in any state to fight right now anyway.”

The arms extending from Olivia's dress were little more than skin and bones. She'd probably spent much of the past two months in agony, and Thea doubted that she'd had a proper meal that whole time.

A skeptical look crossed Olivia as she took a disappointed step backward. "...What are you even here for? Did you come to laugh at me?"

"I had a question for you," Grete replied. "Would you mind telling us about our boss's past? I want to know everything that got leaked to Galgad's spies."

"What? I already told your goon squad everything I know."

With Roland dead, Olivia had no reason to continue being loyal to the Empire.

"...Information like that doesn't get shared with people as low on the ladder as us."

"Well, I don't see how that's my problem. I don't have a single goddamn thing to say to you."

"Roland died in the city of Mitario." As Olivia crossed her arms in annoyance, Grete pulled out a small item. "This is from the collar of the shirt he was wearing. I'll give you this as a keepsake."

In her hand, she was holding a small strip of cloth. Shortly after Roland died, she'd cut his collar off with a knife.

Olivia gasped and stared intently at its button.

".....Fine," she replied with an uncomfortable nod after a long pause.

It was a rare display of pettiness from Grete. After all, handing over the memento was the whole reason she'd gone there in the first place. Perhaps she was trying to avoid wounding Olivia's pride.

Olivia made an annoyed gesture with her hand. "That said, there isn't much to say. All Roland told me was to call for him as soon as I ran into Bonfire and to avoid fighting him no matter what. Then he showed me a photo and gave me the guy's name."

"I see... May I ask what name that was?"

"He taught me quite a few of them. Klaus, Lone, Crowbar, Practical, Ax, the

Dust King... I think that was all of them? Anyway, that's all I know."

After rattling off her answer, Olivia snatched the cloth out of Grete's hand.

"I really appreciate it." Grete thanked her, to which Olivia scoffed and started walking toward the exit. Her back was practically screaming that there was nothing left to talk about.

"...Where are you planning on going?" Grete asked.

"I'm heading back to my homeland to see if I can try making an honest living. I've had enough of espionage for one lifetime."

As Thea recalled, Olivia was from a small eastern nation. They had no plans to visit it anytime soon, so this was likely to be the last they ever saw of her.

Olivia continued striding toward the exit, but once she was halfway there, she came to a sudden stop. "Hey, Grete," she said, looking back over her shoulder. "There's something you should know."

"What's that...?"

She gave Grete an intense look. "The thing about us humans is, we can live just fine without being loved. Life's nicer when you've got a guy on your arm, sure, but it's not the be-all and end-all. You've got a hell of a needy side, so I thought you could do with a reminder of that."

Thea didn't know the specifics of their feud, so she had no way of knowing what to truly make of that advice. However, she did sense a gentleness to Olivia's tone.

Grete shook her head. "...That's a fair opinion to hold, and it's probably even true. However, I can't accept that."

"Huh?"

"The only people who can say that a life without being loved is a life worth living and actually mean it...are people who've experienced being loved at least once already." Grete's expression softened. "And you've certainly been loved."

"You and I are never going to be able to get along, are we?" Olivia muttered bitterly. Then she left.

Two women were standing on either side of the building's exit. They were the Foreign Intelligence Office personnel who were going to be taking Olivia to the airport. Olivia got into the car parked in front of the building and disappeared from sight.

"I wonder if we'll ever see her again?" Thea said quietly. "I'm sure it won't be anytime soon, but—"

"Thea," Grete replied somberly. "Olivia only has half a year to live at most."

"What?"

"Once they get to the airport, the torture team is going to be drugging her. Before long, her memory will start becoming muddled, she'll lose the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality, and she'll start spreading incomprehensible lies before ultimately dying."

Thea felt like she'd just been punched in the gut.

The only fate that awaited captured spies was a black hole of despair from which not a single ray of light could escape.

That was one of the Din Republic's counterintelligence tactics, no doubt. Allowing captured spies to return to their home countries allowed Din to protect itself by disseminating nonsensical misinformation to hostile nations. Perhaps that was Olivia's just deserts for all the people she'd helped Roland kill, but just or not, that was how many spies met their end in that world awash in pain they lived in.

"...Does she know what's going to happen to her?" Thea asked.

"I can't imagine that they would tell her in advance, no." Grete squeezed her fists tight in front of her chest as though in prayer. "This time, Olivia, it really is good-bye."

The two of them sat facing each other on the train ride home. There weren't many other passengers, and the background noise was enough to drown out most conversations. It was the perfect spot for exchanging confidential information. However, it was a good long while before either of them opened

their mouths.

The breaths Grete took as she sat across from Thea were deep and laborious. She'd clearly been nervous and probably even scared. She closed her eyes and sat in complete silence.

It wasn't until the train was almost at its final stop, their port city, that either of them spoke.

"It feels like we hardly learned anything back there," Thea said frankly. Unfortunately, Olivia hadn't actually told them much. Roland had barely told her anything they could use. To be honest, Thea felt a little bit let down.

"Thea," Grete said, "one of the names she listed was Crowbar."

"Huh?"

Thea thought back. When she'd gotten kidnapped, the men who'd taken her had been murdered with a crowbar.

"It would seem as though you and the boss met after all. Back then, he was the person who killed your captors."

One of Klaus's old names was Crowbar, and it made perfect sense as a moniker a foreign spy might have given him. Just like how the Din Republic had known "Deepwater" Roland as "Corpse," it wasn't uncommon for a spy to be known by a different name by their enemies than the code name they used domestically. Could an enemy spy have chosen to call a boy Crowbar after seeing him wield one? Absolutely. And Klaus's mentor "Torchlight" Guido fought with a katana, so it wouldn't be odd for his pupil to favor a melee weapon as well.

Klaus had been there back when Thea got saved.

"B-but, then," Thea said as she sorted through her thoughts, "why did Klaus hide that from me? He told me to my face that we'd never met before."

"....."

Grete sank into silence again, then placed a finger on her lips and assumed her standard thinking pose.

Thea's breath caught in her throat.

The two of them had gotten close over the past half a year. Not only had Thea taken to mentoring Grete in the ways of romance, but they'd also formed a friendly rivalry as fellow members of the Intel squad and gotten through the brutal battle in Mitario by working together.

Because of all that, Thea could tell—Grete was acting.

"Come on, Grete," Thea said. "You thought of something, didn't you?"

"....."

"Please, you have to give it to me straight. Whatever it is you figured out, I'm sure it's the answer to the assignment Ms. Hearth left for me. No matter what it is, I have to face it."

"Thea..." Grete looked back up. "How good are your memories from when you were kidnapped?"

Thea hadn't been expecting that question. She blinked, unsure of what Grete was getting at.

Is there something I forgot?

It had happened seven years ago, so there were probably plenty of things she'd forgotten. Given how traumatic it had been, she couldn't state with any confidence that she remembered every small detail with any sort of real accuracy.

She shook her head a little. "I don't remember anything aside from what I've already told you."

Grete inhaled sharply. There was a sadness in her eyes, almost as though she was about to cry. She shot an impassioned look Thea's way. It would seem her keen intellect had led her right to the truth. "Now, afterward," she said, "did Hearth take care of you all on her own?"

"Yeah, that's right... Now that you mention it, why was it only ever her?"

Despite being in charge of an entire spy team, Hearth had looked after Thea herself. The team had Klaus and plenty of other members on it, but none of them had ever shown their faces.

"And all the corpses were men?"

“Th-that’s right... It was the men who kidnapped me.”

Ten people had been slaughtered, and there wasn’t a woman among them. Thea definitely remembered that all the people who had abducted her were men.

“Now, Thea.” Finally, Grete looked her straight in the eye. “I want you to remember that this is nothing more than a hypothesis, but what I suspect happened back then was—”



Klaus stood amid the ruins of Lily’s bedroom.

Lily had already cleared out all her belongings, so there was nothing inside other than its cracked walls and floor. Klaus felt a certain melancholy at the idea of remodeling the room where Hearth had once lived, but at the same time, it felt like it was the right moment to do so. After all, everything around it had been remodeled, too—both the team itself and the people who had belonged to it. Klaus was the boss now, and it was on him to pick up where Hearth had left off.

He stood in the center of the room, closed his eyes, and thought back to one of the missions they’d gone on together.

Seven years ago, Klaus had gone with Hearth to save Thea.



In a world awash in pain, a sullen look crossed the boy’s face. It was seven years ago, meaning that the boy was thirteen years old. His hair was cut shorter and neater than it was in the present day, and his face still had a youthfulness to it. He was clutching a heavy-looking crowbar and dragging it along the ground.

Deep within the dilapidated house, there sat a small door. Inside, visible through the door’s peephole, there was a dark-haired girl crouching lifelessly on

the ground. She was filthy and dressed in nothing but her underwear. Her bare buttocks were covered in bruises from having been struck over and over, and her body was so limp, it was like she'd lost all hope as she simply waited for death to take her.

"That's awful...," murmured "Hearth" Veronika, who was standing beside the boy. Her brows furrowed in anguish as she stared at the girl. She was the person Inferno had been tasked with rescuing. A group of Galgad spies had recently made a move on the Republic's major media outlets, and although the Foreign Intelligence Office had tried to stamp out the entire plot in one fell swoop, a few of the Imperial spies managed to give them the slip. Some of the desperate survivors had kidnapped a newspaper company president's daughter and succeeded in evading the Foreign Intelligence Office's counterintelligence network and fleeing across the border. Rescuing the girl had been deemed impossible, and as such, the Republic had given the job to Inferno.

The boy silently raised his crowbar overhead and got ready to smash down the door.

Veronika called out to stop him. "Klaus, wait."

"What?"

"Don't let the girl see you. In fact, you're forbidden from interacting with her. Let the others know the same goes for them. Make sure everyone, especially the men, knows they're not to show their faces around her."

The boy shot her a confused look. He didn't understand why she would give him an order like that.

Veronika's voice grew harsher. "There are signs that she's been sexually assaulted."

"Ah," the boy replied in detached understanding. Even at thirteen, he could understand exactly what she was getting at. It was no surprise, really. A glance had been enough to see that the kidnapped girl was attractive despite her youth. It wasn't difficult to imagine what her captors had probably done to her.

The boy kicked his crowbar back up off the ground and rested it on his shoulder.

According to their intel, there were ten Galgad spies over by the front door.

“Listen to me closely, Klaus,” Veronika told him in her smooth, flowing voice. “Everyone has their circumstances, something that made them the way they are. Especially with how our world is awash in pain.”

“.....”

“So never forget to think about their origins and the environment that created them. Never forget to resent the world. And know that I say this in spite of that—I **want them all dead in the next sixty seconds.**”

The boy broke into a dash.

There was a door across from the room in which the girl was being held, and the boy kicked it open and stormed inside. Sure enough, there were ten men in there, gathered around a map and planning out their next escape route.

“Hey, where the hell’d the kid come fr—?!”

With a single swing, the boy shattered the shouting man’s skull before turning his sights on the other nine. The boy’s body had yet to finish growing, and he took full advantage of the crowbar’s weight and centrifugal force to strike the men in the vitals one after another with the speed of a passing gale.

For the next little while, the room echoed with the sound of the men screaming and the crowbar crushing flesh. People who saw the carnage the boy wrought took to calling him Ax, a weapon of pure destruction, and people who saw the way he became one with his crowbar to obliterate his foes took to calling him Crowbar as well. There were all sorts of names that intelligence agencies the world over gave Inferno’s youngest threat when they decided to actively be wary of him.

This time, though, there wasn’t a single person left to tell tales of his prowess by the time his assault ended one minute after it began.

After burying his crowbar in the final man’s head without a moment’s hesitation, the boy stole the keys from the man’s pocket.

Meanwhile, Veronika was still standing by the door. “I should have done more,” she mumbled. However, there wasn’t a single thing anyone could have

blamed her for. Inferno had come running the moment they got assigned the mission, and she knew that full well.

Veronika took the keys from Klaus. "I'm going to look after the girl until we can bring her home," she said. "She's going to need someone to stay by her side at all times, at least until the light of hope returns to her eyes."

"...Got it."

The boy felt that she was being overly protective, but he chose not to comment.

Veronika had ordered him not to let the girl see him, so he turned to leave. He didn't want to stay in that dilapidated house a single second longer than he had to. The man-stink was still pungent, even with the smell of blood now permeating the building, and the boy hated the way it reminded him of what the men had done to the girl. All sorts of emotions he couldn't stomach whirled up inside him.

"Hey, Klaus. There's one more thing I need to tell you." When the boy turned back, Veronika's tone softened. "_____"

The boy stared at her, not so much as blinking. Her words had just wrapped him up like a warm hug, and the sensation was so memorable, it caused them to nestle deep in his heart.

As promised, Veronika handled the girl's care herself. She didn't let the men anywhere near her, of course, but she didn't let the women help out, either. Veronika had little confidence that someone as rough-and-tumble as Gerde or as egotistical as Heide was equipped to provide the kind of mental-health care the girl needed.

Ten days in, the girl had become quite taken with Veronika. The boy never had a chance to witness that fact for himself, but the look on Veronika's face told him everything he needed to know.

"She told me that she wants to become a spy," Veronika said excitedly one night as Inferno was in the middle of eating dinner. From listening to her, you would have thought she was boasting about her own daughter. "She's just like

Klaus and Heide. Someday, she's going to be a better spy than I ever was."

The boy's eyes went wide. It wasn't every day that Veronika said something like that. From the sound of it, it was entirely possible that she was about to announce that Inferno had a new member.

The jacket-wearing man to Klaus's right, "Torchlight" Guido, clutched at his head in consternation. "C'mon, boss, you gotta stop picking up stray kids like this."

Inferno had lost several members in the Great War, and the team had to undergo an overhaul. Aside from the old guard of Veronika, Guido, and Gerde, the majority of the team was made up of youngsters like the thirteen-year-old Klaus, the seventeen-year-old "Flamefanner" Heide, and the twenty-year-old "Soot" Lukas and "Scapulimancer" Wille. Adding an eleven-year-old girl hardly seemed like a realistic proposal.

"You're right," Veronika said with a disappointed nod. "Someday, though, she's going to join our ranks. She has such a pure, beautiful heart. She's going to become a powerful spy and save us all."

Her lips curled into a delighted smile, causing dumbfounded looks to spread across the rest of the team's faces.

The boy continued staring at his boss as he etched the image of the single glance he'd gotten of the dark-haired girl—the girl Veronika had recognized as a brilliant spy in the making—into his mind.

The boy never forgot that girl, the one who would one day be known as Dreamspeaker.

When Veronika saw the boy—Klaus—staring at her, she gave him a big smile.

Seven years later, Veronika perished in the city of Mitario. When she died, there wasn't a doubt in her mind that Klaus would bring Thea there with him.



After thinking back to the mission he'd gone on with Hearth, Klaus let out a heavy sigh. His relationship with Thea, the girl who'd inherited Hearth's will, was dubious at best and consisted largely of her sexually harassing him. However, it was unclear if Hearth had predicted that part, too.

There were a million things he wanted to ask her.

I've gotten over my sadness, he mused to himself as he stood alone and silently surveyed the room that had once been Hearth's, *but there are still so many things I wish you could teach me.*

With that, he finished getting his feelings in order.

Perhaps I'll go brew some of that herbal tea she used to love, he thought as he left the room.



"...And that's my hypothesis," Grete said as she concluded her explanation.

She'd just finished laying out the possibility that Thea had been sexually assaulted. There were plenty of things that supported the theory. For one, there was the fact that Veronika had chosen to be the one to look after Thea. There had been other people there, ostensibly other members of the team, but the team's boss had taken care of her all on her own. However, it all made sense if Thea had been the victim of sexual violence. Most people would be loath to leave caring for a young girl who'd just been sexually assaulted to the men.

Grete gave Thea's hands a squeeze and spoke somberly. "Again, though, this is nothing more than a hypothesis—"

"No, Grete, I think you hit the nail on the head. There isn't a single answer that fits better."

Grete's theory offered an explanation for the biggest mystery of all—the fact that Klaus had denied ever having met her. They'd met in *the very place she got assaulted*, and Klaus had been trying to be considerate. By and large, women who were the victims of sexual violence detested the idea of anyone having

witnessed the scene of the attack. As a man, Klaus had decided as an act of kindness not to tell her that he was there.

“It’s fine,” Thea said with a smile. “I never thought of my body as clean in the first place. And besides, it’s not like I didn’t already realize it on some level.”

The new revelation answered another mystery, as well—it explained why Thea had slept around so much during her academy days.

There was a psychological concept called overwriting, and while people tended to assume that female sexual-assault survivors were likely to develop androphobia, there were actually some cases where the opposite was true, and they became sexually uninhibited. Having repeated sexual encounters was a way for them to process and take back ownership of their trauma. Doing that ran the risk of deepening their psychological scars, so it wasn’t necessarily recommended, but for Thea, it had likely served as a sort of adaptive behavior. Doing so was what had let her become as talented of a spy as she was, and it was all thanks to the hope her savior had imparted in her.

“All this did is remind me all over again just how much Ms. Hearth did for me.” Thea wiped away the tears that were starting to well up in the corners of her eyes. “And how...she’s gone now.....”

She’d finally found her answer. Hearth’s message was something along the lines of, *Klaus supports you*. They were words designed to help her face the past, as well as to remind her why it was she had become a spy.

The world was awash in pain.

Thea had heard that Hearth had been ravaged by disease, and when she realized that her death was fast approaching, she’d probably been planning on entrusting her mission to Klaus. Her hope had been that when Thea eventually got to Inferno, she and Klaus would take steps to change the world together.

“Ms. Hearth...”

Thea squeezed her hands together in front of her face and closed her eyes.

The train began decelerating. The number of buildings near the tracks picked up, and more and more shadows began falling over Thea. The sun was starting to set, too.

“I swear, life is just so full of pain,” Thea murmured.

“...It is, isn’t it,” Grete replied with a glum nod. She was probably thinking about the way she and Olivia had just parted ways.

Eventually, the train arrived at the port city where their base, Heat Haze Palace, was.

“Let’s go back,” Thea said. “Back to our home.”

“Yes, let’s. I think we could both do with a nice cup of tea.”

They exchanged a nod, then began walking in silence. They didn’t say a word their entire way there. They both had too many things they needed to ponder, and they both wanted a chance to immerse themselves in their raging emotions.

After going all the way from the station on through their fake seminary school, the two of them arrived back at Heat Haze Palace. When they opened the door, they found an unexpected figure standing stock-still in the foyer.

“.....”

Klaus was staring into the main hall, clearly at a loss for words. It was rare to see him so thunderstruck. What could possibly be happening farther within?

“Is something wrong?” Thea asked as she peered inside.

When she did, her attention was immediately grabbed by the bizarre entity in the middle of the room.

There stood Lily, fully upright and completely passed out with her mouth full of cake.

“What in the world HAPPENED in here?!”

It was Thea’s turn to play the straight man, and the sheer force of her retort shook the very walls.



The reason Lily ended up smothered in cake was, unsurprisingly, the aforementioned situation. While Thea and Grete had been somberly deciphering Hearth's dying message, the cascading misunderstandings had been causing Lily and the rest of the morons to sink further and further into disarray.

There was Lily, who'd been certain that Klaus was in love with her and determined to turn him down for the sake of the team.

Then there were Sybilla, Sara, and Erna, who'd misunderstood Lily and thought that she was about to profess *her* love to *him*.

As the bona fide psychological war with everyone reading far too much into one another's words and actions continued, they ended up deciding to visit every cake shop in the city and buy sweets on the assumption that someone was liable to have hurt feelings over Lily's confession. "I feel like we really don't need to buy this much!" Lily blustered at several points during their journey, but the other girls shut her down with stern looks on their faces. "R-remember, this is just in case!" Sybilla said. "And it's really important! It probably won't matter, but there's a slim chance that it will!" Sara added. "I agree! We should go visit another shop!" Erna concurred.

The three of them were all stalling for time. Their thoughts raced.

Shit, what's the play?! All I can do now is drag this out as long as I can!

Oh no... I'm not ready for all this... I need someone to come save me.

I don't want to see Big Sis Lily get hurt, but I know he's going to turn her down.

Their thoughts were fully in unison.

""""After all, I'm the one the boss is in love with!!""""

In the end, their misunderstanding continued unresolved all the way through to the evening. Without anyone around to talk sense into the three of them, their doubts slowly but surely solidified into certainty. Once they'd visited every last bakery in the city, though, they lost the pretext they were using to delay things, and before they knew it, they returned to Heat Haze Palace and ended

up back in the main hall.

Once the four of them finished setting their armloads of cake boxes down on the table, Lily smiled. “All right, I think it’s time I went over and had that chat with Teach.”

Seeing how cheerful she looked caused knots to tighten in Sybilla’s, Sara’s, and Erna’s chests, and Sybilla was the one who got hit the hardest. She and Lily had been chumming it up like two dumbass peas in a dumbass pod for a while now, and Lily had never once expressed interest in romance. Now, she’d finally worked up the nerve to tell someone how she felt about them. Sybilla would have loved nothing more than to be able to cheer her on.

The problem is, I’m the one Klaus is in love with! (Note: not actually true.)

Sybilla pursed her lips, cursed the cruel hand fate had dealt her, and planted herself in front of Lily. “Look, Lily, you gotta call this off!”

“Hweh?”

“I can’t explain why, not right now. But I’m beggin’ ya. At least give it till tomorrow. I gotta have a talk with the boss today, so at least wait until after that.”

Once Sybilla gave her impassioned speech, Sara and Erna came and stood beside her.

“I’m in the same boat!” Sara said. “I won’t let you through to see the boss, Miss Lily!”

“I feel the same way,” Erna agreed. “I want to protect our friendship!”

The three of them were all standing in Lily’s way.

Lily was completely taken aback. *I—I don’t know why, but they’re all acting super weird!*

There was clearly something serious driving them, but she couldn’t afford to back down, either. “I can tell you’ve got your reasons, but this is something I have to do! I have to protect Lamplight!” she shouted.

“Some people just can’t take a hint!” Sybilla shouted back. “I’m tellin’ you, back the hell down!”

They were past the point of talking things through. That last exchange had made that fact abundantly clear to everyone present. Lily took a resolute step forward—

“Hraaah! If that’s what it takes, then I’m gonna get seriouser than serious! Eat thiiiiis!”

—and grabbed one of the cakes to use as a weapon as she rammed herself at her three opponents.



As he listened to Thea’s screams, Klaus’s frown grew deeper and deeper.

The entire main hall was covered in icing, and the air hung thick with a sweet, sugary smell. More than a hundred confections lay splattered all across the walls and carpet, and the girls had fainted amid it all with their bodies covered head to toe in cake.

There were so many things to comment on, it was hard to know where to start.

Lily was passed out stock upright with cake overflowing from her mouth, Sybilla had keeled over and passed out in front of the main hall’s door with her body covered in cake, Sara lay collapsed on the floor with both arms full to brimming with cake, and Erna was so thoroughly covered in icing that her entire body was white. It was clear that a great battle had unfolded there, but what wasn’t clear was *why*.

In all likelihood, the morons had gone and done something moronic again.

Klaus decided to start by shaking everyone awake and lining them all up. He gently wiped the icing off Erna’s face but left everything else as it was. Then he gave them a questioning look. “So, uh...what’s going on? You’ve been acting strangely all day.”

“Errr, so, uh, about that...”

Lily cast her gaze downward in embarrassment. The others’ expressions were similarly awkward.

That was when Monika arrived in the main hall dragging Annette, who she'd tied up with rope, along behind her. "I finally caught the little pest."

Annette, for her part, was kicking her legs back and forth in delight. "I look like a bagworm, yo!"

Monika handed Klaus a slip of paper. "Pretty sure this is what's to blame!"

""""Huh?!"""" cried the icing-covered girls.

When Thea saw the paper, she smiled. "Oh, hey, the note I wrote. I must have dropped it somewhere."

Upon hearing that, the four dunces gave the most shocked reactions they'd shown all day. """"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!""""

Klaus gave them a deep nod. "It would appear there's been a bit of a misunderstanding here. Why don't each of you explain one by one what happened. That should let us get to the bottom of this."

With that, they finally started resolving the misunderstanding. Starting with Lily, they all explained both how they'd found the accusatory-looking note and what they had thought and done thereafter. It was pretty funny, hearing it all laid out like that.

"You people have a bad habit of operating on nothing more than gut instinct and momentum," Klaus pointed out.

Lily gave her shoulders a despondent slump. "Yeah, you've got us there..."

As far as the situation itself went, Klaus had no comment. He did scold them for making a mess of the main hall, but that was all.

Now that the misunderstanding had been cleared up, cheerful smiles spread across the faces of the girls who'd been laboring under it. It was clear that they'd been spending the entire day worried sick.

"Heh-heh." "...Tee-hee."

A pair of chuckles escaped Thea's and Grete's lips.

"Hmm?" Lily said, giving them a questioning look, at which point Thea burst out into full-on laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! You all are so funny! How can you be so pure and innocent?! It’s adorable how inexperienced you are with romance! You were so self-conscious and so confused—oh, I love it!”

Her smile was so lighthearted, it was like she’d just been exorcised and freed from an evil spirit’s grasp. Tears pooled up in the corners of her eyes. For the next little while, her whole body shook as she continued letting out loud, heartfelt laughter. Grete had to clamp down on her mouth, too. “It really is kind of hilarious... Heh-heh, oh, you’re all so wonderful,” she said through her laughs. It was a wild departure from the reserved way she usually carried herself.

The other girls stared slack-jawed at the giggling duo.



After a desperate attempt to catch her breath, Thea looked over at Lily. “You know, Lily, I really need to thank you. You cheered me right up.”

“...Huh?”

“I’d like to express my gratitude as well,” Grete said with another laugh. “All my melancholy just vanished like it was never there.”

Lily gave their thanks an icing-covered tilt of her head. She had no idea what they were even talking about.

“.....”

Through the whole exchange, Klaus continued watching over them.



“Hey, Klaus. There’s one more thing I need to tell you,” Veronika said.

It was seven years ago, and Klaus had just massacred Thea’s captors. His body was drenched in the ten men’s blood. At the time, he had yet to master the art of defeating his foes without getting himself dirty. The walls were a striking shade of red, the air hung thick with the smell of blood as unidentifiable fluids seeped from the broken men’s bodies, and the room across from that one held a young girl who’d lost all hope sleeping like a corpse.

There was no word to describe that place but *hellish*.

However, Veronika offered him a thin smile all the same. “No matter how much pain washes over the world, never let it break you. Hope is never unassailable, but the same is true of despair. Never forget the power the world has to put smiles on people’s faces.”

With the gentle expression still playing on her lips, Veronika went and opened the door to where the girl was being held.

Even as Klaus hurriedly turned to leave, he could still hear how warm her voice was.

“You’re little _____, right?”



Klaus himself wasn't sure why that memory had sprung to mind.

When he looked at Lily, though, it dawned on him. There was something his boss had once taught him: *Even in this world awash in pain, never let your smile fade.*

Klaus wasn't the only one who harbored pain. There was Grete, who had a complex about how her face looked; there was Annette, who'd had her very existence rejected by the woman who raised her; there was Thea, who'd suffered deep wounds from having been kidnapped; there was Erna, who was tormented by her own twisted psyche and sense of self-loathing; there was Sybilla, whose heart had suffered a wound that would never heal from the situation with her siblings; there was Monika, who'd fallen into a depression over the limits of her own talent and the disconnection she felt with the people around her; and there was Sara, who was at a loss about her immaturity and the fact that she didn't have a strong driving purpose in life. They all lived their lives agonizing, being hurt, and sometimes even hurting others.

That was what made Lily's mindset and the way it generated smiles so surprisingly precious. Thea and Grete had been looking down when they first walked through the door, but now, their expressions were as bright and as cheerful as could be.

Even Klaus had to admit it. *Lily really is the one who puts smiles on everyone's faces here.*

~~~~~"No way..."~~~~~

As Klaus stood there deep in thought, he suddenly noticed that all the girls were looking at him. Their jaws were hanging open like they'd just seen a ghost.

"Hmm? What's going on?" he asked.

Lily's voice trembled a little. "W-was that a smile I just saw, Teach?"



“I can’t say. I haven’t been doing much smiling recently.”

He reached up to check his cheeks, but that didn’t give him any definitive answers. The one and only time he remembered smiling recently was when Lamplight got back together. He hadn’t had much cause to smile ever since Inferno got wiped out.

Klaus made a shooing gesture with his hand. “More importantly, you need to hurry and get this mess cleaned up. The contractors will be here soon, and Lamplight’s going to be entering a whole new era.”

“No, no, you totally did!! What a red-letter day!”

The rest of the girls followed up on Lily’s assertion by excitedly nodding along with her. Klaus supposed that he must have been smiling after all. It was an odd feeling, realizing that he himself hadn’t been aware of it.

“Well, if I was smiling, then there’s only one reason why that would be.” Klaus crossed his arms. “I suppose it’s because of how much I love you all.”

“Seriously, enough with that stuff!” Lily cried with her face bright red.

“Magnificent,” Klaus softly replied.

## Bonus Episode

As the eight girls were having dinner in the dining room, Klaus came in. “Does anyone have any preferences for when they’d like their birthday to be? They can be whenever you’d like.”

“I’m not sure that’s exactly how birthdays work,” Thea joked.

Klaus went on to explain that in order to get into the United States of Mouzaia, they were going to need some fake passports. Klaus had gone and set their birthdays arbitrarily back when they infiltrated Galgad, but this time, he figured he’d take some requests. Once he’d collected everyone’s thoughts, he was going to pass them along to the Foreign Intelligence Office procurement team.

Thea frowned. “I realize that we don’t have much of a choice, but choosing birthdays arbitrarily like that doesn’t sit well with me. I hear that even though I’m gone, my parents still hold a secret little party for me each year, and it’s the day that my parents blessed me with the gift of life. I suppose I’d like a day that’s not too far off from my real birthday...”

Thea’s parents ran a major newspaper company over in the capital. Thea had decided to become a spy of her own free will, and her relationship with her family was a happy one.

She turned her gaze over to the others. “I mean, don’t you all agree?”

A dark pall fell over the rest of the team’s expressions. “My birth certificate got lost in the war,” Lily replied. “I never even had one,” Sybilla said. “I don’t have any records or any memories, yo,” chirped Annette. “I don’t have any records from when I was born, either,” echoed Klaus. “...My relationship with my parents isn’t exactly positive,” Grete muttered. “Ditto,” agreed Monika. “My family is gone...” Erna sniffled.

The first five didn't know their real birthdays, and the final three had fraught relationships with their families. Thea had gone and needlessly opened up old wounds. "...I'm sorry. That one's on me," she said, offering them an apologetic bow. Sara let out an awkward laugh.

In the end, the birthdays they settled on were as follows:

|                           |                          |                            |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Sara: January 12</b>   | <b>Annette: March 15</b> | <b>Monika: May 18</b>      |
| <b>Erna: June 4</b>       | <b>Klaus: July 11</b>    | <b>Lily: August 1</b>      |
| <b>Grete: September 7</b> | <b>Thea: November 16</b> | <b>Sybilla: December 9</b> |

## Afterword

Takemachi here! It's been too long.

This here is *Spy Classroom's* second short-story collection. It's got stories about Annette, Thea, Erna, and Lily and also puts a neat little bow on the first season. Here, I'm going to share some thoughts about each of the parts.

**Annette's Case:** Before I started writing this one, I said to myself, "I'm going to write a super-light-novel-short-story-ish story!" and this is what I came up with. Out of all the short stories to date, this one has the poppiest opener...but it's Annette, so there's some ominous elements mixed in, too. That's kind of what's so great about her.

**Thea's Case:** This one's a story about a girl who, from time to time, can be even more useless than Lily. Just for the record, she is actually good at seduction. If the male lead was a normal student or something instead of Klaus, she'd probably come across as way more erotic. The problem is just that she doesn't have great chemistry with Klaus.

**Erna's Case:** Personally speaking, this is my absolute favorite short story in the volume. I was so taken with that final scene that I poured everything I had into writing the story. No matter what I make her do, she always does such an adorable job bringing it all together. Yeep.

**Lily's Case:** This was Lily's POV on the Mitario Showdown, the perspective that didn't get shown in the fourth book. I couldn't fit this into Volume 4 for pacing reasons, but I worked super-duper hard on it. I love scenes like this where a character who normally screws around gets serious all of a sudden.

**The Spy Teacher Who Loved Me/The Spy Who Loved Us:** This was the new content written specifically for this volume. A bunch of foreshadowing from Volumes 2, 3, and 4 finally paid off here. I also love how, in all the comedy

sections, Monika's IQ drops by, like, fifty points. That's probably Lily's and Sybilla's influence at work. I think someday, I'd like to get a chance to properly write that crowbar-wielding boy's story.

At this point, I have some people I'd like to thank. I know I say this every time, but I'd like to thank Tomari once again for the fantastic illustrations. *Spy Classroom* had four volumes come out in 2021 alone. Thank you so much for adorning all of them with your beautiful art.

Next up, I'd like to extend a special shout-out here in the afterword to all the people who post fan art of the series on Twitter. As a creator, every post I see brings me so much joy. If I forget to retweet yours, don't hesitate to let me know, and again, thank you.

Now, the next short-story collection is going to focus on Avian and that time the rowdy elites barged into Heat Haze Palace. Volume 7 is probably going to come out before that, though. Until then, that's all from me.

*Takemachi*

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