

Takemachi
ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari

SPY CLASSROOM 02

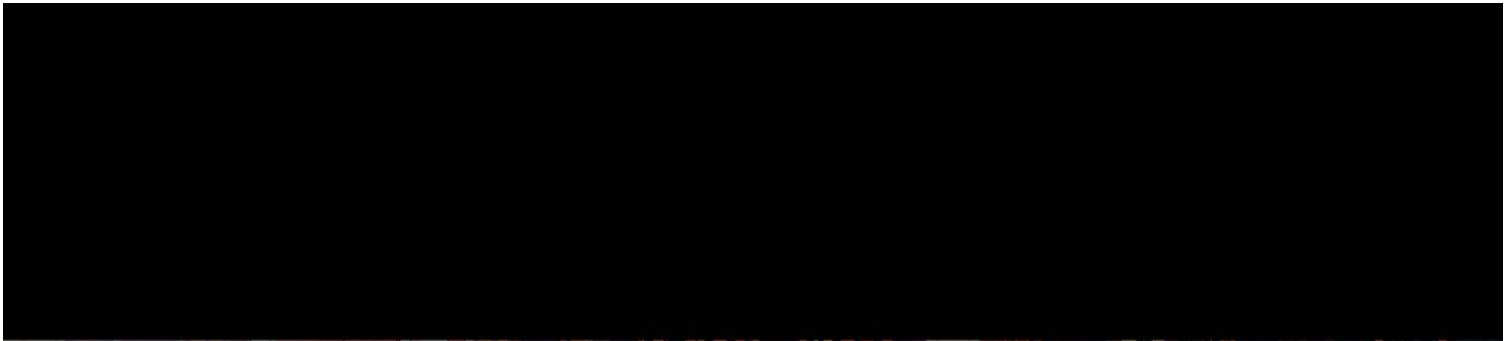
To My Dearest Grete

SPY CLASSROOM

02

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A Girl Getting Dressed



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ILLUSTRATION BY: Tomari


New York

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Spy Classroom, Vol. 2

Translation by Nathaniel Thrasher

Cover art by Tomari

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SPY KYOSHITSU Vol.2 <<MANAMUSUME>> NO GURETE

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First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: January 2022

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Takemachi, author. | Tomari, Meron, illustrator. | Thrasher, Nathaniel Hiroshi, translator.

Title: Spy classroom / Takemachi ; illustrated by Tomari ; translation by Nathaniel Thrasher.

Other titles: Spy kyoushitsu. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021021119 | ISBN 9781975322403 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975322427 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) Subjects: | CYAC: Spies—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.T343 Sp 2021 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021021119>

ISBNs: 978-1-97532242-7 (paperback)

978-1-9753-2243-4 (ebook)

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SPY CLASSROOM

Specialized lessons for an impossible mission
Code name: Daughter Dearest

Prologue

Succession

The burial was conducted in a public cemetery.

A handsome man stood silently before the grave. His hair was long for a man's, and wet from the rain, it stuck to his cheeks. Keeping it unfashionably long was his way of hiding his otherwise attractive looks in order to maintain a low profile, but loitering alone in a cemetery under the pouring rain in the dead of night was hardly a great way to avoid standing out.

The nature of his job meant that he normally went to great lengths to not draw people's attention, but in that moment, his conspicuous appearance was the furthest thing from his mind.

The man was a spy.

He went by many names, but the one he used most frequently was Klaus.

Nobody was at the cemetery but him. After all, who else would come with lantern and shovel in hand to pay their respects to the dead deep in the cold, rainy night?

There was a lingering loneliness in his eyes as he stared at the headstone. There were several names carved on it, all of them common and unassuming. However, those weren't the true names of those who lay interred below—only the false aliases the dead had used before passing.

When spies died, few of them left tangible traces of their lives behind.

They didn't need to.

The information they gathered—their successes, their teachings, their deeds, and their will—lived on in those who survived them.

After making sure nobody was watching, Klaus plunged his shovel into the dirt and began digging up the grave, working around the coffin so as not to damage

it. When he finished his work, he retrieved a white box from his pocket and softly placed it at the bottom of the hole.

“Master... I may only have this one finger of yours to bury, but rest easy.”

Once he was done paying his respects, he began shoveling the dirt back in. The hole was full again in no time.

Klaus breathed a heavy sigh.

The man he was burying was a teammate of his from the spy team Inferno, the people who took Klaus in as an orphan and raised him into an elite spy. To Klaus, they had been nothing less than his family.

The moment his thoughts turned to his old comrades, he sensed people behind him.

“Teach...”

He turned to see eight girls holding black umbrellas.

Their outfits, uniforms from a fictitious seminary school, seemed perfectly suited to a cemetery.

Klaus frowned. “There was really no need for all of you to come.”

A girl with silver hair stepped forward from the group—Lily, their leader. Lily uncorked the wine bottle in her hands and splashed some of its contents over the gravestone. Then she joined her hands and closed her eyes tight.

The girls passed the bottle around, each one pouring wine on the grave and offering a short prayer in turn. However, one of them accidentally used more than their share, and the final member to take her turn was left with barely two or three drops. They still had a lot of work to do when it came to finer details.

Still, Klaus had the utmost faith in their potential. He turned to the grave and spoke. “Just you watch, Boss. Together, the nine of us will succeed Inferno as a new spy team—Lamplight.”

No response came, but Klaus felt heard all the same.

Having finished addressing his family, he looked back over at the girls. There was something he wanted to make absolutely sure of as they stood there

before the grave.

“As long as Lamplight remains active, we’ll be taking over Inferno’s duties. At the moment, our most pressing mission is finding out more about Serpent, the group that took Inferno out. It won’t be easy. Are you all sure you’re ready for this?”

The girls didn’t so much as flinch; some of them even flashed him proud smiles.

One after another, they put their resolve into words.

“So you’re sayin’ we can expect fatter paychecks, right?” “I’ve always admired Inferno.” “I’m going to save lots of people.” “I wouldn’t give you all up for the world, yo!” “Anything to stay by your side, Boss...”

Their histories, motives for becoming spies, aspirations, and feelings about the group were all different.

However, their answers were all the same.

Lily gave him a grin. “I’d go to the ends of the earth if it meant I could bloom into a worthy leader for our team.”

“Magnificent.”

Having said their piece, the girls bowed to the headstone and turned to leave. Their eyes burned with determination, and it was clear that they wanted to get back to their training as soon as possible.

As they left, Klaus shot another glance at the grave and renewed the promise he made to his mentor.

“I’ll protect them this time, I swear.”

He knew he probably wouldn’t be coming back for a while.

And he knew that his family resting beneath the headstone wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Chapter 1

Disguise

The world was awash in pain.

In the beforetimes, wars ended just a few months after they started. No matter how much the countries hated each other, the fighting would have to stop once one side exhausted their resources. No conflict, no matter how bitter, could be allowed to interrupt the harvest, and if one side used up all their bullets, they would accept their defeat with grace and retreat—until scientific progress reared its head.

The steam engine was one of the cornerstones of the Industrial Revolution, and the ships and trains it powered represented a massive leap forward in transportation technology. With them, it became possible to mass-produce the supplies needed for war and supply the front lines with provisions imported from far-off continents. Nations could even supplement their armed forces with soldiers drafted from colonies they controlled.

Those factors all culminated in a war that exceeded every precedent and raged on for years. Nobody won that war, but all of mankind was party to it, and it taught them something important.

War's cost performance was simply too poor.

All it did was stagnate economies, impoverish the masses, and eat away at the national power of those who fought it. The only ones who came out on top were the nations on other continents who sold resources to the combatants instead of participating themselves. It was a massive waste all around.

This realization drove the nations of the world to change the way they approached conflict. They knew they couldn't afford to start any more wars, so they established an international peacekeeping body and entered a new age of ostensible harmony and cooperation. They still had all the same ambitions as before, but now they saw the pointlessness of using guns to achieve them.

Instead, they turned to...other means.

That marked the end of wars fought in the light.

In their place rose spies and information—shadow wars.

The Din Republic was no stranger to these shadow wars.

Before the Great War, it had two intelligence agencies: one for army intelligence and one for naval intelligence. However, the two didn't get along, and due to the strict regulations ever present in military organizations, neither was particularly outstanding at what it did. That was why, during the war, Din established a new body that outclassed them both—the Foreign Intelligence Office.

At its core was a legendary intelligence group called Inferno. Inferno had served the royal family back in medieval times, and although they were allegedly exiled during the popular revolution, the exact particulars of those events were shrouded in mystery. Thanks to cooperation between Inferno and career members of the military intelligence agencies, the Foreign Intelligence Office made rapid strides, and their efforts were instrumental toward ending the Great War.

After that, another ten years passed, and a combination of intrigue and betrayal led to the annihilation of the thirty-eighth-generation Inferno.

However, there was one young man who survived, and he was determined to carry the torch. To do so, he took a provisional squad and made them into an official spy team.

Together, they were the thirty-ninth Inferno, but to distinguish themselves from their predecessors, they went by a different name.

And that name was Lamplight.



Lamplight's headquarters was situated in a harbor city in the Din Republic.

As a major commercial hub, the city was home to a series of trading companies, and there was a small building called Garmouth Seminary quietly

nestled among their offices. If you went through the passageway hidden in its storeroom, you would find yourself greeted by an impressive garden surrounding an even statelier building. The manor's name was Heat Haze Palace. Rumor had it that this place had originally served as a hideaway for the royal family and had been a palace in function as well as in name, although not even its current residents knew how much truth there was to that claim.

Until just recently, the whole building had been wiretapped as part of a scheme. Now, though, the bugs were removed, and the manor was back to being an ironclad fortress of secrecy. Even if someone knew where it was, they had no way of knowing what went on within its walls.

"Magnificent." Klaus gazed at the manor's splendor.

He was a beautiful man, and if not for his height, he could easily have been mistaken for a woman. His build was trim, and his long hair concealed his handsome features. Although it was intentional on his part, it was still impressive how androgynous he appeared. He was a mere twenty years of age, but with his mature, collected demeanor, he could easily have passed for someone in their late twenties or even thirties.

There were three important things to know about Klaus.

First, he was Lamplight's boss, and the team's eight girls all operated under his command.

It had been ten days since he last returned to the base. When he opened the door and stepped into the carpeted hallway, one of the girls rushed over and gave him a cheerful wave.

"Teach, you're back! It's been too long!" Her silver hair bobbed around her pretty face.

Her name was Lily, and she could be identified by her silky silver hair, ample bosom, and ever-present smile. As the team's leader, she was the person in charge of keeping the eight girls united.

It had been ten days since Klaus last saw her, too.

"So it has," he replied as Lily peered at him inquisitively.

“Did you enjoy your trip abroad? You said you were going to the Lylat Kingdom, right? Lucky you; I hear their seafood’s to die for...”

“It was all right. And you? How was your holiday?”

“Oh, it was fantastic. Ten days of paid leave; doesn’t get better than that!”

Klaus had given the girls ten days off.

During their time as a provisional team, the members of Lamplight completed a grueling mission that required nonstop work, so Klaus felt that they had earned a breather. Conveniently, their bonuses from the Foreign Intelligence Office for completing the mission had just come in, so the girls were all loaded with extravagant amounts of spending money.

“I even got you a gift. C’mon, follow me to the dining room!”

Lily tugged on Klaus’s sleeve as she raved excitedly about her break. He hadn’t even gotten a chance to set his bags down yet.

A question came to mind. “By the way, where are the others?”

The manor was quiet. Too quiet.

Lily puffed up her cheeks in a pout. “They aren’t back from their vacations yet. Buncha slackers, if you ask me.”

Klaus glanced around, but he didn’t see any trace of the other girls.

He didn’t hear any footsteps upstairs, either.

He did, however, smell something wafting from the dining room: the aroma of freshly cooked bacon. That must have been the aforementioned gift—Lily had timed it to be ready right when he got back.

The door to the dining room was wide open.

Inside, he could see that the food had already been laid out. The bacon steak sat atop a pure-white tablecloth, accompanied by a tray of fruit and a bottle of wine.

However, as soon as Klaus stepped inside the dining room—

“That was all bullshit, by the way.”

—Lily stuck out her tongue.

As she did, the other girls revealed themselves from their hiding spots.

They leaped out from every corner of the room—behind the door, beneath the tablecloth, atop the chandelier—and descended upon Klaus.

Other than Lily, every member of the team took part in the coordinated surprise attack. All seven of them were equipped with wires designed for restraining people.

Klaus faced his assailants—

“Makes sense.”

—and spoke with the same unflappable composure as always.

He twisted his body to evade the initial wave of attacks so deftly it was as if he’d seen them coming and, at the same time, extended his long, slender arm toward the tablecloth.

In one smooth motion, he yanked it toward himself.

The plates arranged atop it didn’t so much as shake.

Then he hurled the cloth at the girls like a fisherman casting a net. All seven of them toppled to the floor, neutralized.

Klaus spoke matter-of-factly. “Not very subtle.”

He didn’t even sound upset about the fact that his subordinates had attacked him out of the blue.

Lily clenched her fists in frustration. “Darn it... I figured that even you’d let your guard down right after coming back from vacation!”

“It takes more than that to get an elite spy to drop his guard. You’ve come far, but you still have a long way to go.”

“Well then, at least teach us how...”

“Surprise attacks should come floatily. That’s all there is to it.”

“Now who’s got a long way to go?!”

That was the second important thing to know about Klaus—he was a teacher.

Back at their spy academies, the girls of Lamplight had been washouts. They were all clever, but due to one reason or another, none of them had been good fits for the academy environment. Klaus wasn't just their boss—he was also the teacher responsible for cultivating their talents.

At the moment, they had one assignment: make Klaus say *I surrender* by any means necessary.

He himself was the one who'd given them that task, and they diligently fought him day in and day out in order to hone their skills.

Klaus gave them a nod for getting right back into the swing of things after their vacation.

"I will say, though, that your enthusiasm came across loud and clear. Magnificent as always."

"Of course! How could we not be pumped up?" Lily squeezed both her fists even tighter. "I mean, Lamplight's not just a provisional team anymore; we're the real deal now! That'd get anyone motivated. As soon as we get assigned our first mission as an official team, we're gonna knock that sucker out of the park!"

She was practically bouncing out of her socks, and her breathing was heavy with excitement.

She called over to the others, who were still tangled up in the tablecloth. "You guys with me?"

She got a handful of responses back.

"Yeah, bring it on!" "It's high time we show the world what our teamwork is capable of!"

The break had clearly recharged their batteries. Their voices were confident and determined.

However, Klaus had to tilt his head in confusion. "Our first mission's already over, though."

"Huh?"

"I completed three missions in Lylat, then another two domestically. The next mission will be our sixth."

“ .. ”

The girls' expressions stiffened.

They'd all been looking forward to sharing a memorable first mission, and the sound of their hopes shattering was practically audible.

“Now then, remember to keep up your training,” Klaus added, then grabbed an apple from the table and left the room.

That was the third important thing to know about Klaus—he was a colossal airhead.

The girls found themselves abandoned without anything even resembling an explanation.

They looked at one another, and when the fact that they hadn't been invited to participate in any of those missions finally sank in—

""""""""HOLD UUUUUUUUUUP!""""""""

—they bellowed at Klaus in unison.



“You finished them all on your own? And that quickly?”

In a room of the Cabinet Office Building, an old man with gray hair stared blankly at Klaus. His gaze was normally sharp enough to kill, but at that moment, he was wearing a rare expression of bewilderment. After sweeping back his grizzled hair, he took another look at the report he was holding.

The whole exchange played out in the Foreign Intelligence office. The room's name may have been unassuming, but its security was airtight. Entering it required first being let into the Cabinet Office Building by the guards stationed outside, then riding an elevator that needed a special key, then finally entering a numeric passcode. Not only was there no furniture atop its scarlet carpet save for a single table and sofa, there wasn't even any staff aside from the single man permanently stationed there. All in all, it made for a rather unsettling ambience.

"It's hard to believe, but if anyone could pull it off, I guess it would be you."

The room's master and the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Office, a man known only as "C," furrowed his brow. "You know, after going to all those lengths to officially get those girls on your team, you could have at least taken them along."

Klaus gave his response without a moment's hesitation. "They're not ready yet."

He sat down and took a sip of the coffee the Director had brewed for him. As always, it was terrible.

"I want them to build up experience as much as anyone, but these aren't some business negotiations we're talking about. I can't casually take them along on missions they're not equipped to handle."

"They finished their last one just fine, didn't they?"

"That was an exception. For that one, I needed them there to be able to get the job done at all."

Back then, Klaus had known someone would betray him, meaning that completing the mission alone wouldn't be possible. He didn't have a choice.

This time, though, all the missions he'd finished were simple enough to clear on his own with ease. And not only did he not need the girls, but bringing them along could have put them in danger.

"I'm not saying they aren't skilled. Eventually, I will have them participate. But for now, I think it's premature."

Klaus could have sent them back to their spy academies, but he didn't, and he intended to take responsibility for that choice. It was his duty to teach them, train them, and guide them.

However, discretion was also the better part of valor.

"...And how many years do you intend to leave them rotting on the sidelines, exactly?"

"You say that like you actually think I'd do that."

"It's a mistake you're dumb enough to make." The Director focused his penetrating gaze on Klaus.

Klaus returned the look coldly. “Could you assign us something more appropriate, then?”

“Appropriate how?”

“Well, do you have anything with little danger to life and limb but lots of opportunities for learning and growth?”

“Of course not.”

Klaus figured it couldn’t hurt to ask, but the Director curtly shut him down. “In that case, I’d like to hold off on taking any new missions at all for the time being. I’ve done what needed doing, didn’t I? Now, I want to devote a few weeks toward training my subordinates and gathering information on Serpent.”

“You know full well I can’t sign off on that.”

The Director dumped a fat stack of files onto the table.

There was probably enough paper there to fill a few novels, and in all likelihood, each file contained a new mission that needed to be completed.

Klaus stared back at him in silence. “.....”

“You’re not even trying to hide your annoyance.”

“As I recall, you gave me the whole month off.”

“Maybe I think your complexion’s improved.” The Director’s fleeting smile vanished. “But you realize what’s going on. Even as we speak, the Empire’s sending their vile spies across our borders and invading our nation.”

“.....”

“They’re corrupting our government. Stealing our technology. Leading our people toward ignorance and complacency. And our brethren are out there this very moment, laying down their lives in foreign lands to gather intelligence to help us stop the invasion. But losing Inferno cost us dearly.”

At the name Inferno, Klaus had no way to retort—no doubt why the Director had mentioned it.

The Director took out an especially thick file and placed it on the table. “This mission, in particular...is one only you can handle.”

The document was bound with ominously black paper and string. Klaus didn't have to read it to know the mission inside would be a doozy.

"It's unfortunate that Lamplight is so inexperienced that you have to handle its missions on your own. It really is."

"....."

"But this world is in pain, and it isn't going to sit around waiting for you all to be ready."

"....."

"Giving me the silent treatment isn't going to get us anywhere, you know."

Klaus grabbed the file and flipped through its pages, of which there were close to a hundred. After reaching the end in under ten seconds, he tore the whole file to shreds.

The Director's eyes flashed. "You're refusing to do it?"

"It's as you can see," Klaus replied.

"What is?"

"I memorized it all."

For a brief moment, a hint of surprise entered the Director's gaze.

Klaus sighed. "I don't have a choice, do I? Not if I want to protect the people who Inferno loved."

That was something his mentor had taught him time and time again.

Even if he had his own reasons for wanting to turn a mission down, he couldn't let his personal feelings get in the way of doing what needed to be done.

After all, spies like them were the only ones with the power to change the world.

By the time he got back to Heat Haze Palace, it was already well into the night.

The Cabinet Office Building was in a city a fair distance away, so visiting it

invariably meant he got in late.

The manor was dark save for the lights by the entrance. The girls must have already turned in for the night. It was a bit early to go to sleep at their age, but despite his absence, they must have tired themselves out training anyhow. Miscellaneous spy tools lay scattered around the main hall.

When Klaus got back to his room and began loosening his tie, there was a knock on his door.

He heard a demure voice come from the other side.

“Boss, I brought you some tea...”

He opened the door and found a girl carrying a teapot on a tray.

She had bobbed red hair, a svelte frame, and limbs just as slender. The impression she gave off was like that of delicate glasswork; if handled too roughly, she seemed liable to break.

It was Grete.

“I appreciate it, but you needn’t have stayed up just for me.”

“I was happy to, Boss.”

“And as I’ve told you a thousand times, please stop calling me that.”

The moniker didn’t sit right with him. As far as he was concerned, that title belonged to one person and one person alone—his predecessor, a spy by the code name of Hearth.

Grete didn’t reply to that and instead busied herself pouring the tea from the pot into a warmed teacup. Klaus reflexively checked it for poison, but there didn’t appear to be any. She was serving him out of genuine goodwill.

There was really no need for her to do this. She was his subordinate, not his maid.

He had repeatedly told her as much, but she had ignored him every time.

“...When I discovered this aromatic tea on my vacation, I knew I had to get you some.”

“These are some high-end leaves. Weren’t they expensive?”

“...Nothing but the best for you, Boss.”

“I see. Thank you.” Klaus quickly surveyed her as she went about her preparations.

This wasn’t the first time she had shown him such devotion. Even in the middle of their big mission, she had clearly been pining for him.

I don’t get it. What did I do to warrant such affection?

Why was it she acted so tenderly toward him?

He thought back—to the day her behavior first changed.



The event itself wasn’t exactly life changing, but it was certainly memorable.

It took place just before the mission to recover the bioweapon.

Due to the importance of the task before them, Klaus decided to get in some training as well. He was in a playful mood at the time, so the exercise he chose as a warm-up for their mission was to disguise himself as someone else, then “visit” Heat Haze Palace and claim to be one of Klaus’s coworkers who’d come to visit him. The girls didn’t suspect a thing, and he successfully duped them into thinking high-end wine would get him dead drunk. While he was at it, he also got Lily to confess to the fact that she’d been regularly pilfering from Klaus’s cache of canned foods. He’d had an inkling that his supply was dwindling faster than it should have been, and sure enough, it turned out that the usual suspect was to blame.

After fooling the girls through and through, he ditched the disguise, at which point he was struck by an urge to shower. Wearing the unfamiliar outfit had caused him to work up a bit of a sweat, and he headed to the bathroom.

In addition to its large communal bath, Heat Haze Palace also had a private bathroom. The former was for the girls’ use, and the latter was for his.

Right before opening the door, he realized that someone was in the changing room. There was no rhyme or reason to how he noticed—he just did.

Should I knock? He raised his hand but then thought better of it.

There was no way the girls were actually using his private bathroom. They were obviously setting up to attack him, so it would be politer to feign ignorance and just head right in. He opened the door.

Inside, he found Grete—stark naked.

“Hmm?”

“Ah—”

She immediately grabbed a towel and huddled up to cover herself, but it was too late. Klaus had already seen everything, from her skin so fair it seemed almost translucent to her long, supple legs. Even the parts she normally kept covered up had entered his gaze. “How beautiful,” he murmured. “Trying to seduce me? A bold tactic. First, let me applaud your courage.” As he praised her, he braced himself for the incoming attack.

However, none of the others leaped out at him.

“Boss...” Still clutching her towel, Grete trembled with tears in her eyes.

Something was off.



Klaus made a snap decision and exited the changing room.

Ever since that day, Grete had started treating him differently.



...I still don't get it. Nothing about that should have made her have feelings for me.

Accidental as it was, the fact remained that he had seen her naked. Normally, he would have expected the incident to make things awkward between them or perhaps even inspire resentment. For whatever reason, though, it seemed to have had the exact opposite effect. Maybe it was that she wanted him to take responsibility for having seen her like that. In Klaus's view, that was a fairly twisted ideology as far as sexual mores went, not to mention old-fashioned.

"I couldn't help but notice you got in late tonight. Do you think you'll be able to rest more tomorrow, at least?"

Grete's voice shook him from his reverie.

"Not likely. Not only did I just accept an important mission, I also got ordered to rewrite all my reports."

"Really? They're making *you* do rewrites?"

"Many of the missions I take on are ones that other people have already failed at. They want me to keep detailed records so they can make better plans in the future."

"Diligent as ever, Boss..."

"I wrote 'I just made it work' for all of them, and they told me to quit screwing around."

"Ah," Grete replied sympathetically.

That was Klaus's Achilles' heel.

Put simply, he couldn't explain his own actions in any sort of detail. Just like how other people couldn't explain the exact process they took to put on a shirt or to button a button, he was unable to teach people the techniques required

for espionage. That deficiency was why he'd turned to the unorthodox teaching method of simply telling his pupils to defeat him.

That wasn't to say his written reports were completely useless, as he did make sure to list out the mission's basic information and the broad strokes of how things went down. When asked for specifics, though, his intuitive explanations frequently began sneaking back in.

As a result, he had a huge backlog of work to get through. There would be no breaks in his immediate future.

A look crossed Grete's face, like there was something she felt she needed to say.

"Boss..."

"Yes?"

"If you're all right with it, could I hold you against my chest?"

"Why would I be all right with that?"

What was *this*, all of a sudden?

As Klaus regarded the offer quizzically, Grete spread her arms out wide. "Please, there's no need to be shy. Come here and let me pamper you."

"Did you hit your head or something?"

For a come-on, it was strangely aggressive.

Klaus wondered if one of her teammates was putting strange ideas in her head. "Just so I'm clear, is this some sort of seduction practice?"

"Oh, no, I wasn't trying to pull anything over on you..." She hung her head in disappointment. "I just wanted to give you a breather..."

"What for?"

"We completed our last Impossible Mission in large part thanks to your efforts. And even now, you're handling all the missions and paperwork on your own while still finding time to train us..."

The mission she was referring to was the bioweapon retrieval mission.

Although they'd factored it into their plan, the fact remained that the majority of the girls' work had been carried out with their enemies' full knowledge. Any elite spy could have easily outmatched them, which was why Klaus had ultimately decided to use them as decoys and handle most of the mission on his own.

"I'm sure your fatigue, and...*other things*"—Grete gulped—"are just about ready to burst."

Klaus decided it would be best to ignore the way she leaned into the phrase *other things*. "I appreciate the concern, but the best thing you can do for me is to focus on your training. For now, that means assaulting me."

"Ah! So you're asking me to make a move on you...!"

Grete perked up.

Klaus furrowed his brow. "Grete, the next time you come to my room, you had better have one of the others with you."

"Ah! So you prefer to do it with a group...!"

"I'm really not sure what to say to that."

Once again, Klaus found himself reminded of just how many weirdos per capita his team had.

After confirming that Grete was gone, Klaus let out a sigh.

When she exited the room, she left the teapot behind. It was filled to the brim.

Her timing had been impeccable. One moment, he was starting to feel a bit parched, and the next moment, there she was. It was like she had known what he wanted even before he did—a feat that required superlative powers of observation.

As the tea's gentle aroma wafted through his room, he thought back to what she had said.

Fatigue, huh...?

The Director said that his complexion had improved, but his words were

rarely to be trusted.

Perhaps he ought to give some consideration to what the girl pining for him thought.

Klaus reached up and touched his cheek.

It felt slacker than usual. His muscles were getting worn out—even the facial ones he so rarely used.

She's right; I do need a break. But at the same time...

He shifted his gaze over to the wall—specifically, to the weapon mounted on it.

The weapon was an implement from the Far East, and it was far larger than a spy tool had any right being. It was curved like a bow, and in the hands of an expert, it boasted tremendous power.

The sword had belonged to his mentor Guido. Now it served as a memento.

“Make sure you protect ‘em this time,” he’d said, just before he breathed his last.

Those were the final words of the man who had been like a father to Klaus, like a friend, and like family.

Instead of worrying about myself, I should really be prioritizing the girls’ development...

His thoughts turned to the task the Director had just assigned him.

“Your mission this time is to kill an assassin.”

The next document the Director handed Klaus was a report on a series of politicians.

They were from all across the world, but each of them belonged to some sort of anti-Imperial party, and each of them had died unexpectedly. The deaths had been caused by falling, and although they had all left suicide notes, there was a high chance that the notes were fake. Someone had clearly forced them to jump.

“We’ll call the target...‘Corpse,’ let’s say. Apparently, they look like they’ve got

one foot in the grave themselves.”

The moniker struck Klaus as melodramatic.

“Two weeks ago, the Republic lost one of our politicians the same way. Suicide by jumping. We’re working under the assumption that it’s the same bastard’s handiwork. Looks like they’ve finally made their way to Din.”

The Director let out an unconcerned sigh, as though he were talking about a child playing pranks.

“A team from the first division was looking into Corpse, and this is the intel they gathered. Treasure it like gold.”

Klaus nodded. He could imagine what the Director was going to tell him next.

“Gathering that information cost your comrades their lives. And the people we sent in after them were killed, too, so taking down Corpse has been classified as an Impossible Mission.”

Right on the tail of their last Impossible Mission, he was being assigned another one.

This time, it was a domestic counterespionage mission. This task called on him to act less as a spy and more as a member of the secret police.

Furthermore, based on what he saw in the brief...

“This one will be even harder than your last Impossible Mission.”

Klaus agreed with the assessment.

“We’ve lost a lot of skilled people to this assassin. Their skills are no joke, and they’re probably not working alone, either. Plus, as you’re aware, all your information’s been leaked to the Empire. If you make any overt moves, Corpse is liable to just go to ground.”

The Director gave him one final instruction.

“The girls are going with you. You won’t be able to do this on your own.”

The words lingered in his ears like wax.

Klaus sighed as he reminisced on the conversation he had in the Foreign Intelligence office.

Then he thought back through the documents he'd read and began putting together a plan. The Director hadn't just been making empty threats. It might have been smaller in scope, but in terms of raw difficulty, the task before him put the bioweapon retrieval to shame.

He needed to prepare himself for a tough road ahead.

The question was: Should he include the girls in his plan or not?

No. Corpse could kill them. Better to deal with this on my own.

Klaus was confident in his ability to outfight, outpredict, and outdeceive just about any foe.

Confident as he was, though, he was still only one man. He knew he couldn't respond to every possible threat, and he had no way of being sure he'd be able to protect his protégés.

It'd be one thing if their skills were more honed, but...

He knew this was asking too much of them, and as the person in charge of teaching them, he was better qualified than anyone to make that call.

In a perfect world, he'd have liked to be able to gather a little more information before making a final decision, but— *"But before you do that, there's another mission I want you to handle."*

—the Director had given him another task to complete, as well.

That sly old fox..., Klaus silently spat.

Back when the Director was on active duty on the front lines, he must have been a force to be reckoned with indeed. It was all too easy to picture him cowing targets into submission with that raptor-like gaze of his.

To sum it all up, there was only one thing to do.

Klaus would have to get the easy missions out of the way as quickly as possible so he could start getting ready to take down Corpse.

Dealing with his exhaustion would have to wait.

The morning after Klaus took on his new mission, the girls laid yet another trap for him.

When he first stepped out of his room, he was greeted, oddly enough, by a puppy. He recognized its breed as the type one of the girls was raising. It must have escaped. He reached down to pick it up, but the puppy immediately turned tail and ran. Klaus followed after it, eventually reaching a storage room where he found five of the girls lying in wait. They attacked.

“That didn’t even make for decent sport.”

He fended them off with ease.

Right as he was about to leave the room, though, he suddenly noticed that the doorknob was booby-trapped. There was a needle fastened right in his blind spot, and if he’d carelessly reached for the handle, it would have pricked him.

He carefully removed it with a handkerchief and found that it was coated in something—poison.

Whenever poison entered the equation, there was one girl on the team who immediately sprang to mind.

“Lily, was this you?”

An odd “Yeep!” came from behind the door.

It swung open, and Lily timidly poked her head in. “Y-you figured me out? I thought I’d have a shot if I set up a trap for after you let your guard down...”

“Your plan was too straightforward.” He handed the needle back. “Well-trained spies are sensitive to hostility. Even without skills like mine, anyone could have discerned a trap like that.”

“Oh... And here I thought I’d improved so much...”

“Enough not to forget your antidotes, you mean?”

“Heh! I’ll have you know that these days, I remember it nine times out of ten!”

Anything but ten out of ten was still a pretty big problem.

She was doing little to quell his reservations about taking the girls on missions.

“One other thing.” Suddenly hitting on an idea, he tapped Lily’s shoulder.

“Follow me.”

She looked at him in confusion but followed him out of Heat Haze Palace and into the city all the same.

Eventually, they reached a car parked by the side of the road. Klaus got in and had Lily take the passenger seat. Then he started driving toward the freeway. There was something he wanted to talk to her about on the way there.

“So what’s this all of a sudden? Wait, is this one of those ‘joyride dates’ I’ve heard so much—?”

Klaus cut her off. “Do you all want to participate in the missions?” Now that they were alone on the freeway, he was free to say his piece. “I thought I should ask for my own edification. At the moment, where do you all stand?”

“Do I even need to say it? Of course we want in.” Lily, realizing she’d misread the situation, scratched her cheek in embarrassment. “I should mention that not dying’s still a big priority for us, but ‘sides that, we want to work as spies. That’s the whole reason we’ve been training our butts off and trying so hard to beat you. Someday, I wanna be a spy so great my skills awe the whole world.”

“I see.”

“Plus, our wages are way lower without those completion bonuses...”

“In that case, you don’t have anything to worry about. We’re splitting all the bonuses equally, even for the missions I complete on my own.”

“Really? Well, in that case, I’m totally on board to keep skipping them the way we— Ow!”

Still holding the steering wheel with one hand, Klaus reached over and flicked her in the forehead. “What happened to wanting to awe the world?”

“Hey, you can’t blame me for that! Getting lots of money and respect as a master spy just for lazing around is the dream, isn’t it?!”

“You really wear your greed on your sleeve, don’t you?”

“But...if that’s not an option, then we really do wanna be a part of the missions.” Lily dropped her voice before continuing. “We’re spies, too, you know. We’re here because we wanna change the world.”

Her tone had none of its usual frivolity to it. Each of her words rang with heartfelt emotion.

This was different than the simpleminded elation she'd shown when he appointed her as team leader. From what he could make out in his peripheral vision, her eyes burned with a strong sense of duty.

"Magnificent."

They were at their destination, a provincial city on the border between the port city and the capital.

It sat just off the rail line that connected the two cities, and its population was somewhere in the upper five figures. Small as it was, though, the series of commercial buildings peppered around the railroad meant that it had a pretty respectable shopping district.

"We'll talk more after the mission's over."

As Klaus got out of the car, Lily's expression lit up.

"Whoa, you're letting me be part of a mission? Already?"

"I am indeed. Your job is to walk around town for an hour, buy some refreshments, then come back to the car."

"You got it. What then?"

"Then we're heading home."

"Huh?" Lily gaped at him.

"I can handle the target on my own."

The reason he took her along was because he wanted a chance to have a leisurely conversation with her. Lately, the time he found himself spending in Heat Haze Palace was getting scarcer and scarcer.

"That's not a mission; that's just me running an errand for you!"

Ignoring Lily's clear displeasure, Klaus tied his hair back and got ready to go to work.

Klaus's mission from the Director was to unmask an enemy spy lurking within their borders.

The task itself was simple.

Another spy team had tracked the target down, so all Klaus had to do was apprehend him.

The wrinkle, however, was that the man was a skilled spy. His mission in Din was to provide financial kickbacks to local politicians sympathetic to the Empire in exchange for them obstructing development on the harbor. The Republic's spies had failed to capture him twice already, which was why the task had fallen to Klaus.

The man's current hideout was a room in an apartment complex. Klaus went to the building disguised as a plumber, but his foe saw him coming. Another Republic spy must have screwed up somewhere, but for whatever reason, the room was already laid with traps. The man clearly wanted to capture Klaus himself and press him for information.

Klaus forged his way through the traps and squared off against his foe directly.

Luckily, he didn't have to worry about how much noise he made in the fight, as both of the adjacent rooms were empty. According to the building manager, both residents were off on vacation. Klaus didn't have to hold back.

It didn't take long before the hand-to-hand techniques he'd learned from his mentor laid the man low.

Klaus pressed a knife against his foe's throat. "Were you working with anyone else here...?"

The man said nothing. "....."

"Operating alone, I see. Good to know."

"....."

Somehow or other, Klaus was able to glean the truth from the man's reaction.

The man didn't have any accomplices in the city.

"Just so you know, your allies in other cities are being rounded up as well. Don't even think about trying any funny business."

When you were capturing a network of spies, it was essential to do so in one fell swoop.

Otherwise, word about the arrests might get out, and some of your targets were liable to flee.

“Now, how did you know I was coming? I take it you... Ah.”

The man said nothing, but his expression told Klaus everything he needed to know. All his questions had been cleared up.

Mission complete.

Klaus got in touch with his contact and handed the man over. Then, after changing back into his suit, he left the room. Another team was in charge of cleanup, so all he had left to do was head home and write his report.

He looked down at his hands.

My muscles really are getting stiff...

During the fight, the other spy had tried to drink poison, and Klaus had screwed up and actually let him get a drop in his mouth. If he'd been even a hair slower, it would have meant losing a valuable source of information.

Perhaps his nonstop work schedule was finally catching up to him.

Time is short as it is, but I need to make it up to Lily, too, so maybe we should stop by a restaurant on our— Then, halfway through his thought, he heard something.

A gunshot.

Then, a moment later, a scream.

It had come from out in the city.

Klaus's head shot up. The city had a number of gangs, but as far as he knew, there weren't any turf wars going on at the moment. An enemy spy making some sort of desperate play? No, the spy as good as said that he was working alone.

The gunshot didn't make sense.

More importantly, though, the scream had come from Lily.

Had he gotten her caught up in something...?

Whether I'm tired or not, I shouldn't have let that happen.

The good news was that Klaus was already equipped for action. He was armed with his gun, and he had his other spy tools stowed on his person. Today was not the shooter's day.

Whoever you are, you messed with the wrong man's teammate.

As he thought to himself, Klaus rushed through the alley.

Luckily, none of the townspeople were particularly shaken by the sudden gunshot.

Klaus found that fact odd at first, but he soon noticed a crowd of police officers gathered around an abandoned car. Its tires had burst, so everyone probably thought the noise had just come from the tires degrading. Before long, the police dispersed. The city was as peaceful as could be.

However, Klaus was certain that what he'd heard was a gunshot.

Someone must have drawn the police there on purpose.

He continued racing toward the source of the scream, and it wasn't long before he found Lily. She was sitting in the middle of an alleyway with blood gushing from her arm.

Her back was propped up against a metal barrel, and she was in the middle of applying emergency first aid to herself. She took a knife and sliced off a strip of her uniform to use as a bandage for her right arm. Klaus could see from the beads of sweat rolling down her neck that she was in considerable pain.

When he raced toward her, she turned her gaze farther down the alley.

"Don't worry about me, Teach, head west! It was a man in a beige coat!"

The wound was bad; there was a fair puddle of blood gathered around her feet.

Worried as he was, though, she was right. He needed to pursue her assailant.

Who did this...?

He dashed through the alley at top speed. It was deserted, and nobody

passed him going the opposite way.

However, he still couldn't spot the man in the coat. He must have already covered some serious ground.

Klaus closed his eyes and concentrated his focus into his ears. He could only hear one other pair of footsteps running through the alley, but his intuition told him that the person wasn't worried or panicking.

He could also tell that they were pretty far away from him. Once they reached the main street, their footsteps vanished into the crowd. Continuing to track them by sound was beyond even him.

Instead, he fastened a wire onto one of the buildings beside him and scaled it.

Upon reaching the roof, he surveyed the streets below.

There were no men wearing beige coats to be seen. No men that looked like they were fleeing or were worried about being tailed. Not a soul in the alleyway, either.

Did they get away...? No, something feels off.

However, he couldn't put his finger on what that was, so he decided to shelve that thought for the moment.

When he returned to her original spot, he found that Lily was done applying first aid. Her arm was all bandaged up, and she'd stopped sweating.

"Hey, Teach. You get him?" Her tone sounded oddly cheery.

"Unfortunately, he gave me the slip."

"Wow, even you couldn't run him down?"

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, but the terrain was stacked against me."

It was a pretty sorry excuse, but that was the truth.

Klaus hadn't been anywhere nearby when the attack actually happened. There wasn't much he could do about their enemy escaping in the time it took him to get there.

"....."

However, Lily went quiet with a perplexed look on her face.

“What is it? Feeling let down?” he asked.

“Oh, no, it’s not that. It’s just, you went after him so confidently, so I thought it was odd...”

“Confidently?”

Was that really the impression he’d given off?

If so, that was pretty embarrassing.

“...Anyway, enough about the attack for now. We need to get that arm treated.”

“Oh, right.”

He could ask Lily about the details later, and the Foreign Intelligence Office might know something as well. If this had something to do with Corpse, then that would be interesting in its own right...

His thoughts turned as he walked toward the hospital. Then, he heard it.

“In you go!”

When he turned around, he was greeted by a most peculiar sight.

It didn’t make sense.

What had led to the event unfolding before his eyes?

Why was Lily stabbing his arm with a poisoned needle?

And what’s more, she was doing it with her right arm, the one that should have been injured.

A chill ran through his body, followed by a wave of heat like blazing fire. Sweat gushed from every pore.

He assumed he had Lily’s special poison to thank for that. It was impressive how fast it worked.

They didn’t call Flower Garden a poison specialist for nothing.

“Why...?” he asked her through trembling lips.

“Huh? You told me to, remember?”

He could just barely see Lily tilt her head to the side.

“You said, ‘When I come back, give me your poison to numb the pain.’”

He didn’t remember saying anything of the sort. “Pain? What pain...?”

“From your arm; it was bleeding so bad...”

Bleeding? He hadn’t been bleeding. *Lily* was the one whose arm got injured.

However, he didn’t have the strength to listen to her anymore. He slumped into her side.

His legs were weak. He was dizzy. His head felt heavy.

She let out a panicked yelp and caught him in her arms. She knew she’d messed up.

As she looked around frantically, the misaligned pieces finally clicked into place.

“Magnificent.” Klaus grabbed Lily’s arm as he choked out the word.

Sure enough, there was no sign it had ever been injured.

“I see. It was an excellent move. The wounded Lily I saw after the gunshot and the Lily here with me now are different people.”

“Huh...?”

“And I’ll do you one better, Lily. The Klaus standing next to you now and the bleeding one you saw earlier who told you to poison him were different people, too.”

There was only one conceivable explanation.

“There are two of each of us.”

Klaus found himself delighted by the clever trick.

Their foe had manipulated Lily’s actions perfectly.

First, they disguised themselves as Klaus and showed her their “wounded” arm to get her to scream. Next, they carefully talked her down and gave her the order to wrap her own arm in a bandage and poison “him” the next time she

saw him. Then, after they had Lily fully tricked, their foe confidently headed off to meet Klaus while impersonating Lily.

The whole plan had been orchestrated to a T, and what's more, it had required a rare mastery of disguises.

There was only one person he knew who could pull off a stunt like that.

A modest voice came from behind them. "...Just as I expected."

They turned.

There, they discovered the other Lily. She wiped the blood off her right arm and gave them a smile.

"I know how sensitive you are to traps, Boss... If we came at you with hostility, you'd have seen it coming from miles away..."

She must have seen what had happened that morning—how he'd sensed the mechanism on the doorknob and avoided it.

"That's why I tricked Lily into poisoning you out of *goodwill*."

The other Lily reached up and touched her face.

"I'm code name Daughter Dearest—now, let's fill this time with laughter and tears."

As she introduced herself, the girl ripped Lily's face off.

A mess of red hair spilled out from beneath the mask.

It was Grete, the team's master of disguise.



In the world of espionage, disguising oneself was a fairly pedestrian ability.

Assuming the image of a generic stranger was hardly a difficult task. All it took was a wig, some sunglasses, and a little makeup, and just about anyone could stop appearing as themselves.

However, impersonating someone specific was another matter altogether. The difference in difficulty between the two tasks was like night and day.

Not only did you need a resin mask that covered your entire face, but you also needed to carefully sculpt and color it.

And on top of that, you needed preeminent powers of observation.

Perfectly mimicking someone else's appearance, their mannerisms, and their voice was a difficult task, even for an elite spy.

But when Klaus was recruiting members for Lamplight, he heard a rumor at one of the spy academies.

A rumor about a girl who possessed unparalleled disguise techniques but who wasn't able to use her skills to their full potential...



See, I don't know about that... From where I'm standing, it looks like she's using her skills just fine...

Klaus paused for a moment to mull over the discrepancy.

He hadn't given her any special teaching, so whatever circumstances had been holding her back, she must have overcome them on her own. Either that, or her old teacher must have misjudged her.

"After all this time, we finally have you." Grete smiled happily. In her hands, she was holding her cast-off wig and mask.

Each time Klaus saw her handiwork, he felt astonished all over again.

Just now, she'd been the spitting image of Lily. She'd mimicked her perfectly, from her voice and appearance down to her smallest gestures and tics.

Klaus's failure to see through her disguise was a testament to her raw skill—that, and the wound.

The blood trickling down her arm had been so graphic it caught him off guard.

He could tell that it was real by its rusty smell. She must have used a transfusion pack or something, but in any case, he would be lying if he said that seeing a teammate so badly wounded hadn't thrown him off his game. Grete had figured out his weakness and used it against him.

“.....”

He shifted his weight, feigning continued discomfort as a way to slip his hand into Lily’s pocket. If what she told him earlier was true, then that was where she was hiding the antidote.

“If you’re lookin’ for the antidote, you’re not gonna find it.” Suddenly, he heard a commanding voice from behind his back. “I just nicked it.”

A new girl strode out from a nearby passageway.

It was another one of Lamplight’s members—the white-haired Sybilla.

Sure enough, Klaus couldn’t find the antidote anywhere on Lily.

Then more girls began appearing in much the way Sybilla had, until they surrounded Klaus with weapons in hand. Before long, all eight of the team’s girls were assembled there in the alley. The footsteps he heard heading toward the main street earlier must have been one of the other girls helping sell the story.

The others chimed in with words of praise. “Your plans never disappoint, Grete.” “That was awesome, yo!”

One of them, however, was completely bewildered: Lily.

“Huh? What’s the big idea, leaving me out of the loop?”

“...If we told you the plan in advance, you would have leaked it before we even got started,” Grete replied.

“Okay, I can’t really argue with that.” Lily gently slid Klaus down onto the ground.

As he sat atop the cobblestone street, the girls lined up around him with triumphant expressions. This was the moment they’d all been waiting for.

“Hmm-hmm.” Grete chuckled happily. “I must say, Boss, seeing you down on your hands and knees has an appeal all of its own. Your head is just begging to be rested on someone’s lap.”

Klaus shook his head. “I never realized you had such a sadistic side to you.”

“From what I can see, you’re a bit of a masochist, so...”

“That’s not what I meant when I told you to ‘assault’ me.”

“You’re pushing yourself too hard, Boss...,” said Grete. “If you were in peak form, you would have seen through my disguise the moment you saw Lily injured.”

“.....”

“You’ve accomplished so much since you lost Inferno three months ago. You handpicked Lamplight’s roster, you told us to use a training method that sacrificed your own rest, and you competed an Impossible Mission. Then you gave up your time off to protect us from our own inexperience.”

“That all sounds about right.”

“My question is: When was the last time you took a proper day off? Ten days ago, perhaps? Or closer to a hundred?”

The way she was asking, she wasn’t about to take silence for an answer.

What the girls didn’t know was that up until just before he lost Inferno, he’d been assigned to a special independent mission. Taking that into account, it had been quite some time.

“My last break was four hundred and sixty-five days ago.”

““““Geez...”””””

Several of the girls reacted in unison.

For the last fifteen months, he’d basically been doing nothing but working and training.

“You sure you got your head on straight?” Sybilla retorted.

Grete sighed.

“...You can’t keep doing that. Any normal person would have collapsed in a pool of their own blood by this point.”

The rest of the girls agreed, offering comments to the tune of “You gotta let us help you out” and “Please, take a break.”

They were obviously concerned about the current state of affairs.

That was why they had gone to such length to demonstrate their skill and cooperation to him.

“.....”

Klaus couldn't think of anything to say to that.

“You don't have to shoulder it all on your own, you know.” Grete smiled. “You have us now, Boss. Let us share your burden.”

She drew her gun, a small automatic pistol, from her pocket.

“Now, about that surrender...”

She cocked it and pressed it against his forehead.

“And please, from tonight on, rest easy in my bosom.”

Her smile brimmed with affection, and her eyes were as warm and gentle as a goddess's.

Klaus raised his hands in a show of nonresistance. “I understand where you're all coming from now.”

Grete's expression softened. “I'm glad to hear it...”

“You're right; I am tired. I didn't take any time off, not even after we finished the Impossible Mission, and between the constant assignments and keeping up with your training, these past two weeks have been especially grueling. I'm not a machine, and even my stamina has limits. At this point, it's safe to say I'm exhausted.”

“Exactly, that's what we've been—”

“However, that aside...,” Klaus interrupted.

“...how much longer should I keep playing along with this game?”

“Huh...?”

Klaus dropped down onto all fours.

That accomplished two things—getting him out of Grete's line of fire and putting him in position to sweep her legs out from under her.

Combat had never been her forte, and his movements were so agile, she

didn't even have a chance to react. By the time she recovered her balance, their positions were reversed.

Klaus leveled a spear-hand strike at her throat.

"Magnificent."

He stopped his hand just as it first made contact with her slender throat.

The threat was clear: If she so much as twitched, his nails would slash her carotid artery.

The other girls stood frozen in place.

"The nonhostile poisoned needle was a clever move. I applaud your forward thinking."

All the poison was gone from his system.

By drawing out their conversation, he had given his body time to recover.

"I'm sorry, guys...", Lily mumbled apologetically. "I didn't get a clean hit. The needle missed his vein, so he only got a little dose, and none of it reached his bloodstream..."

The others couldn't possibly blame her for that. After all, they had used her without keying her into their plan.

Grete stiffened up, her eyes wide as dinner plates.

"How did you...?" The words got caught in her throat. "You shouldn't have been able to see it coming..."

"I saw it coming just fine." Klaus withdrew his hand from her throat.

"As you said, elite spies are sensitive to hostility. Attacking me out of goodwill was an effective tactic. The problem is, I was already on guard from all the suspicious things I spotted before the attack."

"Wait, you mean you predicted the needle...?"

"The way you cleared the area was too overt."

Klaus gave Grete's wrist a light flick, and she dropped her gun. He snatched it away and began casually twirling it in his hand.

The other girls showed no signs they were planning on attacking him. They knew how futile it would be to come at him head-on when he was hale and hearty.

“As for how I sensed it, I just did. But if you want me to start listing what I found suspicious, I could go on all day,” he said, launching into an explanation. “Lily was bleeding in plain sight in the middle of that alleyway, and there was a pool of blood by her feet, so she’d clearly been there for some time. And yet I was the only one who came. All the police officers and civilians got the gunshot mixed up with the sound of the tire bursting, so none of them felt the need to come running. The thing is, it was all far too convenient. I didn’t know why yet, but I could tell that the culprit was setting a trap for someone who could tell the difference between a gunshot and the sound of a tire popping.”

Despite how far away from the scene Klaus was, the noise from the gunshot reached him all the same.

Police officers and brave passersby would have rushed over to the abandoned alleyway, too, but they all stopped when they saw the punctured tire. The only people who would continue on and get a chance to discover Lily and her injuries were specially trained spies.

The moment Klaus saw her, he realized that he was the one the culprit was after.

However, the explanation was just in hindsight. In the moment, he picked all that up through intuition, not logic.

“When someone realizes they’re being set up, they naturally grow vigilant—”

Then Klaus unveiled the truth.

“—which is something the spy I fought today can attest to.”

Realizing that both his neighbors had gone on vacation at the exact same time had raised the enemy spy’s suspicions, meaning that the Republic spies had done a sloppy job of clearing the area. Klaus had been annoyed at them when he first pieced it together, but this time around, it stung in a whole different way.

The girls, who had just made the exact same mistake, gawked at him with

their mouths hanging open.

Klaus turned his gaze to each of them in turn. "If I had delegated today's mission to you all, you would have died."

They averted their gazes in discomfort.

The final one he turned toward was Grete. Although she didn't look away, all the vim and vigor was gone from her expression.

"You're all blessed with magnificent talents, and someday, they'll come into bloom. But for now, you don't have the skills to take on fieldwork."

He delivered his closing statement.

"It's not safe for me to rely on you."

And with that, he left the girls behind and quietly exited the alleyway.

That night, Klaus sat in his room and sighed.

They aren't ready for me to take them on missions yet...

After the display they'd shown him that day, he had no choice but to accept it. There was only one logical decision.

I have to keep handling them on my own, no matter how hard it means pushing myself.

It was going to be rough, but so be it. He was going to have to take down Corpse on his own.

Operating a rookie team is harder than it looks...

Klaus found himself reminded of that all over again.

The day may have been over, but the work was never done. And of that work, plenty of it was missions that only the Greatest Spy in the World could complete.

Exhaustion was starting to gnaw at him, but if he didn't push through, other people would pay for it with their lives.

Everywhere I turn, there's a new problem...

There were the difficult missions piling up one after another.

There were his subordinates, who would be hard-pressed at best to clear those missions safely.

There was the fatigue that was slowly but surely eating away at him.

And finally, there was a fast-approaching Impossible Mission—the assassin hunt.

Klaus didn't think team building would be easy, but he hadn't expected it to be nearly that hard, either.

All he could do was fumble about and make the best choices he could with the information he had.

His boss and mentor weren't there to guide him anymore, and he'd lost every teammate he'd once respected.

Now he had to deal with being a teacher as well as an elite spy. How was he supposed to juggle the two?

All my teammates from Inferno are gone. Even if it destroys me, I have to...

As thoughts swirled through his mind, Klaus felt his eyelids droop.

He must have nodded off while he was thinking; he leaned forward in his chair with a start.

How long had it been since he last fell asleep anywhere but his bed, he wondered? It was like he was a kid again. Back then, he often dozed off on the sofa in the main hall after missions.

Realizing he was dwelling on the past again, he shook his head to clear his mind. A man who prided himself on being the Greatest Spy in the World couldn't afford to run out of steam like that.

He suddenly realized that what had woken him was the fragrant aroma of tea.

"...Grete?"

"I have some tea for you..." She was standing beside him carrying a teapot on a tray. "I made you some herbal tea to help you sleep, but I fear I accidentally went and woke you instead..."

"Don't worry about it. It was just a quick catnap."

“I wanted to thank you for the training session today. The others and I just finished our postmortem.” Grete promptly began filling his teacup.

He had been asleep, which meant that she had missed a golden opportunity to attack him.

However, Klaus knew that she didn’t see it that way. She clearly had some sort of code she followed, as the herbal tea wasn’t poisoned, either.

Grete handed him the teacup, then spread her arms out wide.

“...And as the cherry on top, a tender embrace with yours—”

“I’ll pass.” He took the tea and the tea alone.

Grete gave him a look of unconcealed disappointment. Klaus ignored it.

“You’re a tenacious one.”

Honestly, it was impressive.

He had assumed that her defeat that afternoon would get her down, but here she was right back at it. The moment the tea passed his lips, he belatedly realized just how thirsty he’d been. Her timing was truly impeccable.

“Let me ask you this straight...”

It was high time he heard it from the horse’s mouth.

“...do you have feelings for me?”

“.....!”

Grete’s shoulders trembled, and the tray clattered out of her hands. She hurriedly moved to pick it back up.

“...Y-you noticed, Boss?” She stared at him in amazement. “...I guess nothing really does get past you.”

“...You were trying to hide it?”

“.....”

After a protracted silence, Grete let out a quiet mumble. “...Just as I expected.”

“Come now, don’t lie.”

She could play it as cool as she liked, but it wasn't going to make it any more believable.

When it came to spies, romance was a tricky subject. Some people couldn't help but prioritize love over their missions, and depending on the situation, that could be a deadly weakness. If Klaus kept pretending not to notice how she felt, it could lead to unexpected problems down the road.

He needed to tell her straight up.

"Grete, the way I feel about you is—"

"Please...", Grete cut him off, "...hold off on giving me your answer." Her voice was trembling. She shook her head. "...My heart isn't ready yet."

"I'd really like to make sure things are clear between us."

"But..."

Hearing her voice trail off like that hit him with a pang of guilt.

She may have been a spy, but she was also an eighteen-year-old girl. He needed to respect her feelings.

"My apologies. Another time, then."

"...Thank you for understanding."

"The one thing I will say, though, is that you need to stop mixing business with pleasure. Starting tomorrow, don't bring me tea anymore. You're not my maid, so stop worrying about me and just focus on your training."

Grete pursed her lips in displeasure.

Klaus wanted to treat her feelings with the delicacy they deserved, but he had too much on his plate at the moment to be as tactful as he'd like.

Being a man on top of being a teacher and a spy was one too many responsibilities to shoulder.

"...Very well." Eventually, she nodded. "But please, at least take this report..."

"What's this, now?"

"It's a report on the mission you completed today."

Grete handed over the document she'd secretly been carrying, comprising several sheets of paper bound together.

"I know this is forward of me, but you mentioned that they'd been giving you a hard time, so..."

"...So you ghostwrote it for me?"

"I did... I observed you and wrote out as much as I could."

Klaus glanced over its contents. The document contained a detailed description of his actions.

He hadn't sensed anyone watching him at the time, which meant she must have been using binoculars from a considerable distance away. She had gone to great lengths to avoid interfering with his mission.

"What can I say? This is really quite something. You're far too considerate."

"...Does it make you want to let me dote on you?"

"I'm going to ignore that last bit, but I really do appreciate this. Thank you."

Grete gave him a courteous bow.

The way Klaus saw it, he was the one who should have been bowing to her, but he couldn't deny that it was very Grete of her to do so.

She cleared his empty teacup and started to leave.

After thanking his subordinate for her dedication, he turned back toward his desk. Rejuvenated by his little siesta, he started getting to work preparing for the battle against Corpse, when suddenly— "Wait a minute."

—he stopped Grete in her tracks.

His honed intuition was screaming, like an itch inside his head.

Something was off.

There was something he'd overlooked. After plumbing the depths of his mind, he emerged with a question.

"In that case, when exactly did you come up with the plan you used today?"

Grete, who was almost out the door, tilted her head.

“What do you mean...?”

“It was too fast.” Klaus looked at her in puzzlement. “I didn’t tell a single person about the mission I was going on. You shouldn’t have had enough time to even put that plan together.”

The girls had carried out their attack with essentially no time to prepare.

Choosing to have Lily come with him was a spur-of-the-moment decision, and he didn’t even tell her any of the mission’s specifics. And yet Grete had managed to coordinate with the others and manipulate Lily anyway, the flaws in her plan notwithstanding.

That would have been a praiseworthy accomplishment in and of itself, but to complete another objective at the same time?

Grete laid a finger on the corner of her mouth. “Ah, I see... Well, it took time to see that the transmitter I stuck on Lily was moving, to predict where you’d go, take the train, and get a grasp on the situation, so...”

Grete spoke softly as she went back over the details.

Before long, she gave her answer.

“All in all, it took me...two seconds to come up with today’s plan.”

That was unbelievably short.

However, he doubted she was lying. Between the time it took her to reach the city, figure out where exactly he and Lily were, and clear the area, there was basically no time left for actually devising the plan.

Klaus was impressed.

Of course, he could have come up with an even better plan himself just as quickly, but that was only because he was skilled enough to call himself the Greatest Spy in the World.

Her intellect was already head and shoulders above huge swaths of her contemporaries’.

And to think that two months ago, she had been on the verge of washing out of her spy academy.

Surely raw talent alone couldn't have accounted for that sort of rapid development.

"...It really isn't anything praiseworthy." Grete shook her head. "I merely took one of the hundreds and thousands of mental simulations I ran and put it to the test. After so many days of constantly fighting you, my predictions have grown rather accurate, so I spend every night thinking up ways to defeat you. From there, it's merely a matter of choosing an idea from my stockpile that suits the situation."

"You would go that far...?"

"Of course. The person I adore is wearing himself down to the bone to complete our mission on his own instead of leaning on me for help. And not only am I not helping him, I'm spreading him even thinner by having him help me train..."

Grete was on the verge of tears.

"It hurts so much...knowing that I'm nothing but a burden to the person I care about so..."

Klaus returned her gaze, unable to reply.

Were those thousands of plans she'd come up with and calculations she'd done the reason behind her rapid improvement, then?

Her love was so intense it was almost blinding.

Klaus didn't know what to make of it.

What could have *caused* Grete to develop such strong feelings toward him?

Not even Klaus's legendary intuition could figure that one out.

However, that wasn't what he needed to focus on at the moment.

"_____"

He hesitated—but only for an instant. That was all the time he needed to make his decision.

It was like a light had just shone down on him.

The walls had been closing in a moment ago, but now he knew what to do to

get out.

First off, he needed to start by correcting her misunderstanding.

“Grete,” Klaus said to her. “I never once thought of you as a burden.”

“...Huh?”

“To the contrary, I’m grateful you’re here. Losing Inferno was like losing a piece of myself, and it was you all who helped fill that hole in my heart. If I’m being honest, nobody wanted Lamplight to stay around more than I did.”

Grete’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Is that...really true?”

“It is, and I’m ashamed to admit that it’s why I was being so overly cautious with you girls.”

If people wanted to call him a coward, he wasn’t about to stop them.

The girls were dear to him—and he didn’t want to lose them.

However, he still needed to take that first step. If all he did was cower in fear, then they had no future.

“For our next mission, we’re taking down an assassin.”

Grete’s eyes went wide. “...What?”

“Grete, will you lend me a hand? I need you.”

This was going to be a gamble, but he had no choice. He needed to bet it all on her brains and her love.

If they were going to reach the next level as a team, it was going to require that her resolve be firm.

Grete sucked in a deep breath. “Just now, was that...?”

“Yes?”

“...a proposal?”

“No.” Klaus’s shoulders slumped.

How was it possible to get that from anything he said? Perhaps he needed to make things clear between them after all.

“...I was kidding.”

Before he could open his mouth to speak, though, Grete gave him a small smile.

“Boss, never once did I expect my love to be reciprocated. Love seeks not compensation. However, I have your answer all the same.”

Her voice was modest yet confident at the same time.

“It would be my pleasure to help. I would do anything for you and for this team you built.”

There was no hesitation in her eyes.

Klaus didn't know where her love had come from, but he knew there was only one thing to say to that.

“Magnificent.”

“...Just as I expected.” Grete replied to his proclamation with a reserved murmur.

In any case, Klaus now had a new option available to him.

Their upcoming Impossible Mission was going to be even harder than the last, but Klaus knew exactly how to take it down.

“I'm going to be selecting four members of the team.”

“What for...?”

“Unfortunately, there isn't room for all eight of you to accompany me on the mission,” he said. “I'm going to take on the assassin...with Lamplight's four strongest members by my side.”

Chapter 2

Placation

Four of them were going to be chosen.

Word about Klaus's decision spread like wildfire among the girls.

After all, Grete wasn't the only one who'd had her misgivings about the status quo.

Klaus was a classic one-man army.

It was standard procedure for a team's boss to have sole purview over command and control, but the way Klaus was handling all their missions solo was a different story altogether. Furthermore, he was also taking care of all the team's reporting, accounting, and other miscellaneous clerical work while still finding time to train the girls. And he was doing all that while having worked so many days straight that it was a challenge even counting them.

As far as team structures went, theirs was about as abnormal as it got.

However, there was a reason things were the way they were.

Klaus wanted to let them focus on honing their skills.

As powerless as that made them feel, they knew there was only one thing they could do about it.

They had to get stronger—strong enough for Klaus to rely on them.

After they realized that, the girls devoted everything they had to their training. They felt bad about how exhausted Klaus was getting, but not bad enough to keep them from plotting attacks that took specific advantage of that weakness. And when Klaus wasn't there for them to attack, they would practice in other ways, doing everything from basic stuff like weight training to even waging mock espionage battles between themselves.

Now, at long last, they were finally getting to participate in a mission. Or at

least, some of them were...

“He’s only picking four of us, so... What, the other four are just gonna be stuck holding down the fort?” Lily grumbled listlessly.

She was sitting at her desk, wearing a pair of goggles and surrounded by an assortment of sketchy-looking tools. She also had a towering mound of cigarettes, which she peeled open one by one so she could boil their contents and separate out the nicotine. Then she ground up a series of bugs and plants to extract their poison and carefully mixed her ingredients together.

Lily was clumsy when it came to a lot of things, but making poison was one of the few exceptions. As she spoke, she performed her work with utmost skill and precision.

“Eh, can’t say it doesn’t make sense.”

The response came from her white-haired companion, Sybilla.

Sybilla’s presence was, to sum it up in a word, commanding.

The light in her eyes was as sharp as any knife, and her build was as lithe as a beast’s. Like Lily, she was seventeen, and the two of them could often be found hanging out together.

At the moment, Sybilla was sitting on Lily’s bed and practicing her lock-picking technique. Dozens of padlocks were piled up around her, each and every one of them open.

“He’s worried about sendin’ us off on a mission, but at the same time, if he keeps trying to do ’em on his own, he’s gonna hit a wall soon. The way I see it, taking the four best of us is the only choice he coulda made.”

“You’re right. It’s not bad, as far as ideas go,” Lily murmured.

“And the logic’s sound, for sure...,” Sybilla replied.

“But there is one thing...”

“Yup, one pesky little thing...”

They made the same uneasy comment in unison.

““It’s gonna make things awkward as hell around here.””

Up until then, the eight Lamplight girls had gotten as far as they had by working together, one and all. Both in training and on missions, they'd divvied up their tasks evenly so they could all put their talents to use. They had been equals in every sense of the word.

But now, with this selection...

"Hey, we always knew this day was gonna come," Lily remarked. "After two months together, I think we all have a decent idea of who's leading the pack."

"Now that you mention it, who do you think's getting picked?"

"Well, for starters, our beautiful team leader Lily is obviously gonna be the first one on the—"

"No, but seriously."

"...I think Monika's basically a shoo-in."

Monika was their arrogant, cerulean-haired teammate.

When it came to which of the girls was stronger, her name would show up at the top of any list. Her acting abilities were top-notch, as were her inventiveness, close-combat prowess, marksmanship, and just about any other skill you could name. She often boasted about how she'd intentionally pulled her punches at her academy, making her something of an exception among the ragtag group of washouts that made up the rest of Lamplight's roster. Aside from Klaus, she was the heaviest hitter they had.

She was also on the Operations squad—the same squad as Lily and Sybilla.

"Wait, that means we're doomed! We'll never make the cut!"

"Shit, you're right!" Lily let out an anguished scream, and Sybilla echoed the sentiment.

Within Lamplight, the girls were divided into three squads. There was the Intel squad, who was in charge of sorting through the information the team gathered, coming up with plans, and giving orders to the others; the Operations squad, who was in charge of putting Intel's plans into action; and the Specialist squad, who was in charge of using their unique talents to back the other squads up.

Given that they were on the same squad as the team's indisputable ace, the odds that either of them would get picked seemed depressingly slim.

"Hey, it's getting late. We can talk more later," Sybilla said.

"Oh yeah, we've got dinner to make."

The two of them cut the chatter and left the room. They were on cooking duty that day, which meant they were in charge of preparing dinner for all eight girls.

When they got to the kitchen, they found a brown-haired girl there wearing an apron.

"Oh, hey, if it isn't Sara. What's up?"

"Ah, you two are on cooking duty?" Sara gave them an affable smile.

Her hair was so messy it seemed almost to have a life of its own, and her eyes had their usual timid look in them. She'd somewhat improved on this front, but when she first got to the manor, she'd constantly looked like she was on the verge of tears. Sara was a self-professed coward and the kind of girl you instinctively wanted to protect. Her youth, at a mere fifteen years of age, probably played into that as well.

The question was: Why was she holding a kitchen knife even though it wasn't her turn to cook?

When they asked, she answered readily.

"Teach is busy holding a strategy meeting with Miss Grete, so he asked me to make them something to eat."

Sara had a habit of addressing the other girls as *Miss*, an odd display of deference that came from the fact that, out of all of them, she had entered her spy academy the latest.

"Whoa," Lily murmured in surprise. "*Teach* asked you to cook for him...?"

That certainly wasn't an everyday occurrence.

Klaus made it a point not to delegate any of his housework to the girls. They may have all been living together, but he made a clear distinction between his

subordinates' personal lives and his. He must have really been up to his neck if he was willing to cross that line.

““ ””

Lily and Sybilla exchanged a glance, then nodded in unison.

“This is our chance!” Lily cried. “I’ll go get the poison!”

“It’s kind of scary how fast you two decided that!” Sara yelped.

“I’ll go get my restraining wire.”

“And how are you so in sync?!”

As the two of them quickly began putting together a plan, Sara made a desperate bid to try to stop them. However, Lily and Sybilla rushed off to their rooms to grab their weapons undeterred.

They were thinking the exact same thing.

This might be their last chance to earn their way into those four slots.

“Question is: How’re the three of us gonna get him to take the poison?”

“Wait, when did I get roped into this...?”

Sara gave them a dumbfounded look. However, the resignation in her eyes showed that she knew resistance was futile.

The three of them stood in the kitchen with their ingredients laid out in front of them.

“Thinking back on our previous failures...” Lily fiddled with the vial of paralytic poison in her hands. “Whenever we poisoned his food or tea, he never even touched it. Maybe we could try coating the utensils in poison?”

By and large, Klaus could always see through any sort of act they pulled, and he had an amazing nose for traps. If they wanted to slip him some poison, they’d need to throw him off his game first.

“Teach really is a monster...,” Sara remarked dejectedly.

From there, they came up with a series of other suggestions. “We could poison the salt and pepper shakers and let him poison himself.” “We could cook

something really spicy and poison his water.” “We could poison Lily’s portion and have her offer him a bite.” However, none of the ideas really spoke to them.

As they continued racking their brains, Sybilla suddenly cocked her head to the side. “Huh? Wait, I feel like we’re forgettin’ the obvious.”

Sara trailed off. “Really? What?” she asked expectantly.

Sybilla replied like it was the most natural thing in the world. “We wanna poison his food, right? Why not just make something really tasty?”

“.....”

Sara blinked.

“.....?”

Then she looked toward Lily for help.

It was clear that she didn’t understand how Sybilla’s brain worked just yet.

“Sara...”

Lily began laying out the situation. “I’ve been keeping this a secret, but truth is, I’m a big klutz. To give you an example, I’m the kind of person who would know all the answers to a written test but fill the bubbles in wrong and get zero points anyway.”

“Okay...”

Then Lily pointed at Sybilla and introduced her. “In contrast, our white-haired friend here is the kind of person who’d just get zero points the old-fashioned way.”

Sybilla gave Lily a swift kick in the rear. “What kinda shitty example is that?!”

“It’s a perfect example! It illustrates how dumb you are!”

“You’re getting zero points, too, y’know!”

“Maybe, but at least I’m not some blockhead whose solution to every problem is to bulldoze her way through it!” Lily shouted back with all her might.

Sybilla often cloaked it behind Lily’s dysfunctions, but she was no paragon of

competence, either.

She had a tendency to approach situations head-on and solve them with brute force. At the end of the day, blunt was the only way she knew how to be.

When she discovered that Klaus could see through her acting, she started planting explosives on her teammates and sending them after him none the wiser. Then, when she found that frontal attacks didn't work, either, she started coming after him nonstop without pausing to rest or sleep. Whenever she had a problem, it was in her nature to approach it with the simplest solution imaginable.

She pressed on with determination. "C'mon, just hear me out. We start by cooking something that'll knock his socks off. I'm talkin' the best damn dish the world's ever seen. Once the target digs in, he'll let down his guard. And then, boom. We give him the poisoned tea. It's foolproof."

Lily let out an impressed coo. "Ooh. If we could pull that off, that'd actually be pretty good."

Hearing it all laid out like that, the idea sounded halfway respectable. However...

"Problem is, how? Making something that irresistible is way easier said than done."

"I've got a plan," Sybilla replied confidently. "A little while back, I spotted him makin' lunch. When I did, I figured it might come in handy, so I wrote out the exact steps he followed."

Sybilla produced a sheet of paper.

All the necessary ingredients, as well as how much of which spices to use and the time to complete each step in the process, were all listed out in painstaking detail.

"We already know how good the guy is in the kitchen, and this is something he cooked for *himself*. We follow these steps, there's no way we don't end up with something amazing."

"Oh, I get it!"

The way Sybilla put it, it was starting to sound like a really good idea.

And besides, they didn't have much in the way of a fallback plan. It couldn't hurt to at least try it.

With that, their course was set.

"All right! Let's whip up some food so tasty it makes him forget his own name!" Sybilla cheered.

Lily and Sara responded as one. "'Aye, aye!'"

Thus began the trial and error.

As it turned out, replicating Klaus's cooking was no easy task. Klaus did all his measuring by eye, so all they had to go off of for the quantities were Sybilla's rough estimates.

Sara was the daughter of a chef, so they delegated the food prep to her, with Sybilla providing assistance from her memories. After they cooked up a series of samples, Lily chimed in with absolute confidence. "If you need a taste-tester, I'm your gal!" The other two decided to let her do what she did best, and Lily licked each plate clean, shouting "Next!" each time she did. The girl was like gluttony made flesh.

Eventually, a full two hours after dinner was normally served, they finally got their dish to a point they were happy with.

The cabbage rolls were finally complete.

Next, Lily went around to the other girls and told them that they had a perfect plan in the works. The others had their doubts, but Lily made a promise she had no way of keeping—"No, no, this'll work. In fact, if it doesn't, I'll even put on a strip show... Starring, uh, Sybilla."—and that was enough to get their rears in gear. The girls equipped their concealed weapons and gathered in the dining room. After Klaus was weakened by the poison, it was their job to finish him off.

Once all eight of them were assembled, they called in Klaus and presented him with the dish they'd labored over.

"Magnificent." When he praised them, his expression was softer than usual. "I'm sorry I had to ask you to cook for me, but thank you. This is fantastic."

“Right?” Sybilla smiled proudly. “There’s plenty more, so help yourself to seconds. Lily, you wanna go brew some tea?”

Standing behind Sybilla where Klaus couldn't see her, Lily grinned. Klaus's guard was down, just like they'd planned. If they offered him poisoned tea now, he might really drink it.

The eight girls waited for their moment to strike.

"That would be great," Klaus replied. "If I could be so bold, though..."

Suddenly, he stood up and headed to the kitchen next door.

Inside, he found the remaining cabbage rolls. He took the cream stew meant to top them and stirred in some additional seasoning. Then, after taking it and pouring it over the eight plates' worth of cabbage rolls, he sprinkled spices, vinegar, and oil over each one in turn.

He laid the plates out in front of the girls.

“...they’ll be even better seasoned like this.”

////////////////////

The girls had a bad feeling about this.

They gulped, picked up their spoons, hesitantly dug into the cabbage rolls—and had their minds completely blown.

Before they noticed, Klaus had already left the dining room.

The girls had been so focused on gobbling down the cabbage rolls and using bread to scoop up the last drops of stew that they'd completely forgotten to attack him. Fat and happy, they washed down their feast with some post-meal tea. Then, as they began to get a vague inkling that they were forgetting something, their bodies went numb, and they crumpled to the ground in agony.

It was a catastrophic failure.

Everyone other than Sybilla, Lily, and Sara staggered back to their rooms as if this was how they'd expected things to turn out from the start. "I'll be looking forward to that strip show," a couple of them told Sybilla on their way out, but she didn't have the faintest idea what they meant.

Lily heaved a heavy sigh in the now-empty dining room. “Never thought we’d lose before we even *got around* to poisoning him...”

Sybilla and Sara nodded.

“Damn, and I was so sure we’d nailed those cabbage rolls.”

“I was surprised at how different his were. It was like my whole body was crying out in joy.”

They had to face the facts. Even when it came to cooking, Klaus was in a whole different league than them.

That skill was probably useful for spy work, too. He could use it to get hired as a nobleman’s personal chef or perhaps use his culinary mastery to win over a target’s heart.

That moniker he used, the Greatest Spy in the World, wasn’t just for show.

Like it or not, they got it.

They understood why he felt like he couldn’t count on them.

“Guess we’d better give up on getting picked for the mission, huh.”

“Yeah...”

Sybilla sighed, and Lily was in full agreement.

There were plenty of Lamplight members whose skills put theirs to shame. There was no way they were going to make the cut this time around.

Sara nodded sadly. She felt the same way the other two did.

Right as the solemnity of it all seemed poised to overtake them, though, Lily spoke up.

“...It’s okay, though. I’ve got an idea that’ll turn this all around.”

“Well, *someone* sure looks smug all of a sudden.”

“Okay, look. We might have lost, but we’ve still got a job to do. Think about it—what do you think’ll happen to the team if all the people who got left out start moping around all the time?”

“...The others’ll start walking on eggshells around us, and that’s when the

mood around here will go to shit.”

“Exactly, and there’s only one way we can prevent that. As the losers, we gotta congratulate the winners and send ’em off with a big smile!”

“Ohhh,” Sybilla remarked understandingly. She clapped her hands together in agreement. “You’re right. Hell, thinkin’ about the long run, ours might just be the most important job of all.”

Lily grinned. “Yeah, totally!”

They would have obviously preferred to have gotten picked, but now that that was off the table, they needed to change gears. Protecting their relationship with the others was important to them.

“U-um...” Sara nervously raised her hand. “Do...do you mind if I help, too? Honestly, I don’t think I’m getting picked, either...”

Neither Lily nor Sybilla had any rebuttal to that.

Sara’s stint in her spy academy had been the shortest of any of theirs, so while it wasn’t exactly her fault, there were a lot of shortcomings in her skill set. Her Specialist squad teammates Erna and Annette had their own share of unfortunate quirks, to be sure, but there was no denying their talents.

Lily and Sybilla had the tact not to admit it, but they’d both come to the same conclusion.

“Of course.” Sybilla gave her a cheerful smile. “The more the merrier!”

Now that they had their task laid out for them, the mood in the room was a good deal lighter.

Sybilla stood up from the sofa and clapped herself on the cheeks. “All right! Time to get up off our asses!”

“You said it!” Lily cheered. “Let’s send ’em off with a bang!”

“Whaddaya say we start by congratulating Monika? There’s no way *she* doesn’t make it.”

“I agree!” Sara replied. “We should show Miss Monika how happy we are for her.”

“Yeah! We can, like, make her a giant parfait!”

With that, they excitedly got to work making the parfait together.

All three of them had a keen appreciation for how hard being a spy was, and they knew that if you got eight girls together, some of them would inevitably end up being better than others. There was no way they’d all end up at the exact same skill level. And they also knew the world of espionage wouldn’t be kind enough to turn a blind eye to those differences in proficiency.

They had learned that the hard way back at their academies.

However, they weren’t about to let that get them down.

Some of Lamplight’s members may have been more talented...but at the end of the day, they were all on the same team!

And as a testament to that fact, they piled the queen-size parfait high with fruit, chocolate, and whipped cream.

For the finishing touch, they sliced strawberries into heart shapes and laid them atop the parfait one by one.

Once their parfait packed full of love was finished, they silently tiptoed over to Monika’s room—

““““Congratulations, Monikaaaaa!””””

—then all rushed in at once.

We’re not mad we didn’t get picked. Good luck out there. We made this parfait just for you.

After telling her how they felt, the three of them each gave her words of encouragement.

“After all, you gotta be one of the four.” “Give ’em hell for us.” “We’re cheering for you, Miss Monika.”

Monika, for her part, took their blessings rather well.

They’d made the right choice.

As they left her room, proud of their accomplishment, they ran into Klaus in the hallway.

“Oh, there you are. I was trying to find you all.” His tone was plain and matter-of-fact. “Pack your bags. Lily, Sara, and Sybilla, you and Grete have a train to catch tomorrow.”

“““Huh...?”””

“The mission’s starting.”

The three of them gaped at him with their mouths hanging open.

By the sound of it, they’d all been chosen for the mission. Before they had time to be shocked, though, there was a question burning away at them.

“But, um...what about Monika...?” Lily asked.

“What about her? She’s going to be on standby,” Klaus replied unconcernedly.

They’d wanted to avoid having things get awkward over some of them getting left out. That was why they’d gone and whipped up that parfait—



“““ ”””

—but in the end, they couldn’t have made things more awkward if they tried.



“So what was up with that parfait just now? You messing with me? Trying to pick a fight? Sara’s fine; we all know she probably got dragged into this. The problem is you punks. It’s *aaalways* you two. Put yourselves in my shoes for a second and think about how it must feel to get constantly jerked around by the team’s Two Stooges. I’ll tell you, it doesn’t feel great!” Monika yelled, holding Sybilla by the collar.

Once the chewing-out was finally over, Sybilla headed for Klaus’s room.

She barged straight in without knocking.

“HEY, YOU!”

“I see someone’s feeling chipper.” Klaus didn’t seem particularly bothered by the sudden intrusion. His expression was calm, and he kept on writing as though he was used to it.

Sybilla stomped over to Klaus and laid into him. “You picked the *worst* possible timing, asshole!”

“I don’t see how I can possibly be blamed for that.”

For once, he was actually right about that.

Sybilla cleared her throat to calm herself down. She knew she needed to stop flying off the handle.

“...Hey, can I ask you a question?”

“Be my guest.”

“You really sure you chose the right four?”

“Would you rather I hadn’t picked you?”

“N-no, that’s not it; I’m totally psyched. I just wanted to know where your head’s at, that’s all.” Sybilla relaxed a bit and broke into a grin.

Much as she might find fault with some of the things he did, she had a lot of respect for his skills. Out of all the spies she'd ever met, he was by far the most talented. Getting acknowledged by someone like that would be enough to make anyone giddy.

That was why she wanted to know why.

She, Lily, and Sara weren't exactly what you'd call outstanding. So why had he picked them?

"Well then, I suppose I'd best give it to you straight."

"Yeah, hit me."

"I'm deeply concerned."

"The hell?!" Sybilla yelped.

Klaus looked up and gestured at her right arm with his pen. "How's the fracture doing?"

"...That's..."

"You aren't fully healed yet, are you? You're barely operating at half strength."

She should have known he'd see through her.

The fracture was something she'd gotten during their last Impossible Mission.

During their fight against a certain monster of a man, she used her arm to block one of his kicks, but a full-power strike from a combat specialist wasn't something you could just shrug off. That single blow had put her out of commission.

Her arm had healed a fair bit in the month since then, but she definitely wasn't back in peak condition.

"Why'd you pick me, then?"

"There was a reason behind the choices I made, but I can't reveal it just yet."

"...Just so we're clear, the reason you *aren't* explaining your thought process isn't 'cause you *can't*, right?"

“.....”

“I guessed it?!” she quipped, but she knew he was joking.

Spies were rarely told all the particulars of the missions they undertook. Not only could knowing too much make them a target, it also increased the danger of information getting leaked. Sybilla understood all that, but that didn't make her any happier.

Klaus exhaled and crossed his arms. “One thing I can say, though, is that there was a very particular reason I specifically chose *you*.”

“Yeah? What's that?”

“You know how you've been anonymously donating all your wages to an orphanage?”

“How the hell do you know about that?”

Sybilla broke into a cold sweat.

After risking her life to complete the last Impossible Mission, Sybilla got a fat paycheck added to her bank account. Instead of spending it herself, though, she donated it all to a particular orphanage.

However, no one was supposed to know about that.

“When you move that much money around, the higher-ups are going to suspect you're a double agent. Don't worry, I made sure to explain the situation.”

They must have thought she was funneling funds to some sort of shady organization.

“The reason I picked you is related to that. I was thinking you'd be the perfect fit for the job, but...” Klaus paused for a moment.

His gaze flitted back and forth between Sybilla's arm and her face. He exhaled.

“...there is your injury to consider. It's unfortunate, but if you want to sit the mission out on account of your health, I won't hold it against you.”

From the sound of it, Klaus had put a lot of thought into the decision after all.

Sybilla could hear the conflict in his voice.

She hurriedly waved him off. “Hey, whoa, hold up. I never said I wanted to sit it out. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t worrying yourself sick for no reason, is all.”

Klaus looked at her silently. “.....”

“When it’s just you, you’re the coolest customer around, but you get all cagey the minute your teammates get involved.”

“It would appear that way, yes.”

Sybilla had a decent grasp on Klaus’s personality.

In matters that concerned him, he was large and in charge, calling himself the Greatest Spy in the World and acting with an air of absolute confidence. However, he always hesitated before relying on his teammates for anything.

She couldn’t really blame him, though. It must have been traumatic, losing his family the way he had.

“I came here to tell you that you don’t gotta worry about a thing. When I heard you chose me for the mission, I was over the moon.” Sybilla thrust her fist forward. “I might not act like it, but the way I see it, I owe you a lot for recruiting me. However good of a spy you thought I’d turn out to be, I’m gonna make sure I get twice as good. I’ve seen the way Grete works her ass off, and I’m not about to lose, either.”

Just like the others, Sybilla had had a rough time at her academy. She wanted to become a spy, and she always put in the effort, but a couple strokes of misfortune had left her on the verge of running away from it all.

If she hadn’t gotten headhunted into Lamplight when she did, she would have ended up dropping out.

Klaus closed his eyes and crossed his arms again. “Magnificent.”

She couldn’t tell if she’d gotten her feelings across, but he gave her a solemn nod. “Out of all the people on the team, you have the gentlest heart. You could stand to think your actions through a bit more, but still.”

Sybilla glared at him. “You coulda stopped after that first bit.”

Klaus opened his eyes. “I suppose you’re right,” he murmured. “In that case, would you mind doing a small training exercise to help put my mind at ease? Nothing much, just a quick round of sparring.”

“With you? Like we just said, my arm—”

“I’ll only use a single finger.”

“I”

Klaus confidently raised his index finger.

Sybilla shrugged. She knew how strong he was, but not even he stood a chance with only one finger.

“Seriously? You *really* think you can take me like that?”

“If you’re so confident, let’s make it interesting. When you lose, you have to wear a maid uniform.”

“Huh? Where’s that comin’ from?”

“Getting second thoughts? You can even use weapons if you want,” he replied provocatively.

Something inside Sybilla snapped. “Bring it, tough guy! You beat me, I’ll wear whatever the hell you damn well want!”

“Magnificent.” Klaus rose from his chair and narrowed his gaze a smidge. “This will be nice, going all out for a change.”

Two seconds later, the match was over.



“So you’re the new maids!”

A woman in her midtwenties stood imposingly before Sybilla, Grete, and Lily. She gave them a cheery smile, the exact kind you’d expect from someone who specialized in manual labor. Her long blond hair was tied up in a ponytail, and every time she moved, it swayed from side to side like an actual horse’s tail.

As for her outfit, she was wearing a black dress topped by a white apron.

Her name was Olivia, and she was the head maid.

The girls handed her their résumés, and she looked through them.

“So you’re here for a seasonal gig while your seminary school’s on holiday? That’s weird; didn’t know any schools had a break round about now. Not that I’m doubting you, mind, especially not when you’ve got referrals from a politician.”

She looked at the girls quizzically and scratched her head.

“By the way, why’s Miss White Hair glaring at her uniform?”

“...It’s nothing, ma’am.”

Sybilla had yet to fully accept the reality she’d been thrust into.

The outfit she’d been furnished with was designed to distinguish between a mansion’s residents and its staff: a plain black dress to help its wearer fade into the background and a white apron that was easy to perform housework in. Its use had been traditional in upper-class houses since medieval times.

“.....”

However, the first things many people noticed about Sybilla were her short hair and sharp eyes. She was more tomboyish than cute, and she knew it, which was why she opted for pants and trousers over skirts and dresses whenever possible. If it were up to her, she would have taken the seminary school uniform she usually wore and ripped it up ages ago.

One of these days, I’m gonna sock that asshole good...

A maid uniform was the last thing she wanted to be wearing.



It all began one week prior.

On the day of their departure, four girls gathered in Heat Haze Palace’s main hall.

Grete, code name Daughter Dearest. Red hair. Eighteen years old. Intel squad.

Lily, code name Flower Garden. Silver hair. Seventeen years old. Operations squad.

Sybilla, code name Pandemonium. White hair. Seventeen years old. Operations squad.

Sara, code name Meadow. Brown hair. Fifteen years old. Specialist squad.

They were the ones who'd been called upon for that mission.

They sat down on the sofas surrounding Klaus.

"Our objective is to take down an assassin, currently referred to as Corpse."

Klaus remained standing as he began outlining the mission.

"Thanks to the intel our countrymen gave their lives to obtain, we have a strong lead on who Corpse's next target is. Our task is to covertly insert ourselves into their life and try to locate Corpse."

Honestly, they would be lying if they said they were excited about the prospect of going toe-to-toe with an assassin. The possibility of things devolving into an outright fight to the death was a little too high for their liking.

At that point, Lily's hand shot up.

"Teach, I've got a question. This is a domestic mission, right?"

"It is. Why?"

"I know it's weird to be asking this, but you sometimes take on domestic missions, too, right? Why do they send you abroad one minute, then turn around and give you a bunch of domestic work the next?"

The other girls nodded.

Lily was right—nobody had ever properly explained that to them.

"...That's a fair question. Let's start with a little review."

Klaus began writing on the blackboard as he spoke. His handwriting was god-awful.

"The Foreign Intelligence Office is split up into two divisions. There's the first division, which operates mostly internally and focuses on rooting out spies

within our borders. Then, there's the second division, which focuses on gathering intelligence and performing acts of international espionage."

In general, members of the first division were called secret police, and members of the second division were called spies.

"So Lamplight's part of the second division?"

"No. We operate under both umbrellas."

"Both of 'em?"

"We go where we're needed, whether that's in Din or abroad. Our task is to take missions that other teams failed at and see them to completion. That was how Inferno operated, and as its successor, that's how Lamplight will operate as well."

Grete covered her mouth with her hands.

"So we really will be focusing on Impossible Missions..."

Impossible Mission was the common term for missions that their fellow countrymen had tried to complete and failed. When that happened, the mission's difficulty spiked, giving Impossible Missions a staggering 90 percent mortality rate coupled with a paltry 10 percent success rate.

Sara tilted her head to the side.

"Huh? But back at my academy, they always told us, 'Stay away from Impossible Missions.'"

"It isn't well-known, but there's actually more to that saying." Klaus elaborated, "Stay away from Impossible Missions—Inferno handles those."

The girls gasped.

Up until then, they hadn't realized just how heavy the responsibility resting on their shoulders was. At the same time, though, it made sense.

Like it or not, there were always going to be missions that needed to be tackled, no matter how hard they might be.

Besides, that 90 percent mortality rate probably didn't include the missions that Inferno took on.

Lily quietly summed up what they were all thinking. “It’s a little late to be saying this, but we took over for a pretty incredible team, didn’t we?”

Strictly speaking, the task they were up against wasn’t technically spy work. However, it still fell under their intelligence agency’s purview, and it was still part of the shadow war, which meant it was on Lamplight to see it through.

Klaus nodded. “Let’s get back to the subject at hand. Grete, Lily, and Sybilla, you three will be engaging the assassin’s target directly. He’s a senator, and your job will be to protect him from inside his mansion and try to flush out the enemy while keeping your identities hidden.”

The man they were guarding was named Uwe.

The three girls he listed off all nodded.

“Meanwhile, Sara and I will be providing off-site support.”

Sara nodded timidly.

“Now, let’s go—and let’s all make it back alive.”

With that, the spies rose to their feet.



Before they went in, Grete handled the preliminary investigation.

The Appel family had been involved in politics for generations, and its current head, Uwe Appel—active senator and vice-minister of the Ministry of Health and Welfare—was no exception. He was what you might call a radical leftist, and despite being a member of the elite himself, he was harsh on the wealthy and powerful and pushed policies to better the lives of the poor. At the moment, he was up to his eyeballs trying to secure a bigger budget for various welfare initiatives.

As far as they could tell, the man didn’t have a single skeleton in his closet. Despite being born to a member of parliament, he also served in the armed forces as a young man, and he was a patriot through and through. Between that and his political savvy, it made sense that other nations would want him out of the picture. All of Corpse’s targets had been politicians with similar interests as

Uwe.

Uwe's mansion sat a fair distance away from the capital. Its location was terrible. It was deep in the mountains, and to get there, you had to take an hour-long bus ride, then walk for another hour still.

Another notable characteristic of the mansion was the contrast between the building's grandeur and how few people lived there. There were nearly thirty rooms in all, yet only five residents: Uwe himself, his wife, his mother, his personal secretary, and the head maid. As it turned out, Uwe didn't need the additional maids for his own benefit but rather for the sake of the mansion's frequent visitors. Apparently, their predecessors had all died in an accident.

Sybilla and the others thought back over the intel as they began changing in one of the mansion's vacant rooms.

I get it, pretending to be maids is a good way to infiltrate a mansion, but still...

She might have been ready for it, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

As Sybilla stood sullenly, a smirk crept across Lily's face.

"Pfft. You're not gonna get hung up over wearing a skirt and an apron, are you? C'mon, pretty clothes never hurt a— OW!"

"Shove it. Next time you talk shit, you're getting hit."

"You're *already* hitting me!"

While the two of them grappled with each other, Grete briskly finished getting dressed. "...I have to say, there's something odd about this mansion."

"Hmm?"

"The halls are so empty. Normally, a generational politician like Uwe would have their house decorated much more lavishly than this."

Grete was right. Although the reception room had paintings hanging from its walls, anywhere that guests were unlikely to visit was totally unadorned. Some of the walls that hadn't been repaired recently even had visible cracks on them.

"Damn, you really know your stuff," Sybilla remarked.

"...To tell you the truth, I actually come from a politician's family myself."

That was news to Sybilla and Lily.

They'd known she was genteel, but they'd never imagined that she was the daughter of an actual politician.

"...I fear that our new employer might have a difficult personality."

"All right, all right, I get it. This is no time to be freakin' out over a little maid uniform." Sybilla ditched her seminary school outfit and quickly changed into her new uniform.

If Grete was already raring to go, she couldn't let herself hold the team back.

"Starting now, it's go time. Let's hit the ground runnin'."

With fearless smiles spread across their faces, the girls began their mission.

At the end of their first day, Olivia stood in the hallway with her mouth hanging open.

"I can't believe it..."

The best way to describe her expression would be *abject shock*.

For several long seconds, she stood frozen in place like a statue with her eyes wide and her arms stiff. Eventually, though, she nodded after realizing that her eyes weren't playing tricks on her.

She gave the three new maids lined up before her a big smile.

"You girls are something else! It's only been a day, and the mansion already looks like new!"

She clapped her hands in joy at the mansion's radical transformation.

In the month between the accident that took the lives of the girls' predecessors and the hiring of the girls themselves, Olivia had had to handle the huge building's affairs all on her own, and the cooking and laundry had kept her so busy that she hadn't had time to clean. Dust had built up in all the rooms, and a musty smell had taken hold of the carpets and curtains.

Now the difference was like night and day.

The dust had been swept up, the curtains had been washed, and the carpets had been properly cleaned.

The girls had carried out their maid duties with aplomb.

“Oh, no, really, it was nothing.”

Modest as Lily’s words were, the pride in her expression was unmistakable.

The girls had learned how to do basic housework at their spy academies. All this had taken was selecting the right cleaning agents to use and carefully removing the grime. Compared to the training they normally did, cleaning the inside of a mansion was like a walk in the park. Lily’s usual clumsiness hadn’t helped, but when the other two kept an eye on her, they found that they could make up for her shortcomings.

“I guess they just build kids different these days, huh. You all might even be able to hold your own against Mr. Appel.”

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen him all day.”

“No, he said he’s staying at a hotel, and he’ll be back tomorrow. Look, I don’t want to scare you or anything but...brace yourselves. He can act a bit prickly. It’s a habit he picked up back in his army days, and you know what they say about old habits.”

Apparently, Grete’s assessment of Uwe’s personality had been right on the mark. They would need to be careful not to get on his bad side. Getting fired before they could find Corpse would be an embarrassing way to go out.

Filled with a sense of accomplishment over the work they’d done, the girls headed back to the servants’ quarters. There was no shortage of rooms, so they each got one to themselves.

Right as Lily and Sybilla started taking a load off in Lily’s room—

“I see you managed to infiltrate the mansion without a hitch.”

—they heard a voice from outside.

“You can come in,” they replied, and Klaus hopped in through the window.

The servants’ quarters were on the first floor, so it was trivial for a man with his skills to slip in.

Three people in the already-cramped servants’ room was a tight fit, but there

wasn't really any way around it. They were a bit concerned about being heard from outside the room, but at the moment, the hallway was empty.

"How are things coming along?" Klaus asked.

"Pretty good," Sybilla replied. "This dumb getup looks awful on me, but if that's our biggest problem, I'd say we're on the right track."

"Don't worry. I think you look fine."

"....."

Sybilla felt her face flush red, but when she realized he was only trying to placate her, she waved him off.

"You think that's gonna fool me? Just do what you gotta do and get out of our hair."

Klaus gave her a small nod.

"In that case, I have your marching orders. Uwe will be back tomorrow, so your job is to bug the mansion so we can get details on his interpersonal relationships and the status of his health."

"Roger. We'll get it done."

"By the way, the method I recommend is—"

"Forget it, we'll just ask Grete."

"...I do have feelings, you know."

They decided to humor him and ask, but sure enough, as soon as he said "See it through like a pious minister," they went right back to ignoring him.

If they pointed out every ridiculous thing he said, they'd have been there all day.

"Hey, Teach, Teach." Lily sat up from her bed and looked at Klaus. "This Uwe guy's the one who's getting targeted, right? In that case, shouldn't we just tell him who we are straight up? That'd make it way easier to—"

For a moment, Sybilla found herself in agreement, but Klaus immediately shot Lily down.

“That’s not an option. Sly politician or not, he’s still a layman. He’d just accidentally leak information to the enemy.”

“Oh...,” Lily replied dejectedly.

“And be vigilant. For all we know, Corpse could already be lying in wait somewhere in the mansion.”

The girls flinched at Klaus’s warning.

It had almost slipped their minds, but the mission was already underway. The fact that they were at home instead of abroad didn’t change anything. They were still the shadow war’s lead actresses, and it was still their job to lurk in the darkness and deceive anyone who stood in their way.

“Now, I have more work to do, and you have your task. Go make like a cloud giving cover to the moon.”

Wanting to make up for his earlier failure, Klaus gave them another piece of virtually meaningless advice, then headed to leave. He had places to be.

“Hey, one other thing,” Sybilla called over to him.

“Yes?”

“Go give Grete a visit, too. She’s in the next room over.”

Lily piped up in agreement. “Yeah, good idea. It’d totally make her day.”

“.....” Klaus gave them an expressionless look. “...I take that to mean you’re rooting for her romantic success?”

“Huh? Of course we are. We’re her friends, aren’t we?”

Sybilla and Lily had both realized how Grete felt. As a matter of fact, there wasn’t a single member of Lamplight who hadn’t. When she wore her heart on her sleeve the way she did, it wasn’t exactly difficult to figure out.

“I see,” Klaus murmured. His tone gave them no indication of how he felt about that.

Then he hopped over the window frame. They couldn’t hear his footsteps anymore, but he’d been going in the direction of the room next door.

In the end, he never ended up telling them why he’d asked.

“Y’know, for a guy who never explains shit, he sure asks a lot of questions.”

“Well, I’m sure he knows what he’s doing.”

It wasn’t the first time that Klaus’s thought patterns had left them stumped. However, after all they’d been through together, they trusted that he had their best interests at heart.

For now, all they could do was carry out their mission.

On their second day at the mansion, they heard an old man’s voice echo through the courtyard right as the sun began its descent.

“Damn them! Damn those blathering fools, wasting all that money on pointless receptions!”

Uwe, the man their mission revolved around, was back.

He was fifty-eight years old, but they certainly wouldn’t have guessed that from the vigor of his bellows.

Olivia hurriedly called them over to the entrance to greet their employer.

Uwe didn’t have a chauffeur, so when his car pulled in beside the mansion, he himself was the one at the wheel. He made no effort to hide the displeasure on his face as he strode toward its entrance.

“Olivia, there’s no need for you to meet me every time I come and go! It’s a waste—a waste, I tell you!”

Between his broad shoulders, his long, straight back, and the self-possessed air he had about him, Uwe gave off a most imposing impression indeed. While he still had the gray hair and creased skin typical of men his age, even those seemed somehow menacing.

“...Hmm?”

For some reason, he stopped about thirty feet back from the entrance. He squinted in puzzlement.

Olivia smiled. “These are the new maids we hired off that recommendation from the other day.”

“Hmph. I figured you must have brought your little sisters with you to work or

something. Buncha wet-behind-the-ears brats.”

“Why would they be my sisters? We all have different hair colors. And please, you’re scaring them.”

“...Well, fine. So you’re the new maids, are you?”

The girls introduced themselves and recited their fake résumés.

Uwe gestured with his chin. “Olivia, you know what to do.” Olivia sighed and vanished inside. When she returned, she was holding a rifle, a military model about three feet long. With a stern expression on his face, Uwe took the rifle from her and cocked it.

The girls didn’t know what to make of that.

As they stared at him, fire flared up in Uwe’s eyes. He pointed the rifle straight at them.

“ARE YOU THREE HERE TO KILL ME?!”

Whatever they’d expected, that roar wasn’t it.

The girls’ eyes went wide, and they recoiled so hard they fell on their backsides. He was seriously considering shooting them—and they had no idea why.

Who *was* this guy?

Uwe clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“...Hmph. No dice, I see.”

Lily’s gaze darted around in alarm. “Wh-what...?”

“I’ve had two politician friends die under suspicious circumstances recently, so I figured there might be a hit man lurking somewhere, but I haven’t been able to root them out just yet. If you’d tried to fight back, I’d have shot you on the spot.”

“Oh, so you were just protecting yourself...”

“The hell I was. I want to be the one to shoot the bastard dead.”

For an old man, Uwe sure had a lot of fight in him.

He made no move to lower the muzzle. What did he plan on doing if it accidentally went off?

“However, whether you’re fit to be my maids is a different story.” Uwe finally pointed the gun upward. “You, with the white hair. I’ve got a bit of an appetite. Go whip me up something to eat.”

He was testing her—and in an alarmingly authoritative voice at that.

Sybilla headed for the kitchen as instructed.

When she passed Olivia, Olivia gave her an apologetic look, but Sybilla smiled to tell her that she didn’t mind. From the look of things, Olivia was at a loss for what to do.

I mean, I get that he’s a little unhinged, but cooking’s easy.

She really didn’t think it was that big a deal.

Her cooking may have failed to knock Klaus’s socks off, but surely she could make something tasty enough to satisfy some old man.

Besides, she couldn’t have messed up pot-au-feu if she wanted to. They made the consommé in advance the previous night, so all she needed to do to make a delicious meal was simmer the meat and vegetables and serve them alongside bread. A child could have done it.

Once she finished cooking, she brought the completed dish to the dining room.

Uwe was waiting at the table with his rifle resting beside him.

“Dig in while it’s hot, sir,” Sybilla said as she set the pot-au-feu in front of him.

The savory smell of consommé wafted through the room.

Lily’s stomach rumbled.

Sybilla had clearly nailed it.

The girls watched Uwe in confident anticipation.

The moment he put the first mouthful of pot-au-feu in his mouth, he rose to his feet with such intensity that he knocked his chair over backward.

“Any maid who serves this filth is a WASTE OF SPACE!”

From that day forth, the girls found themselves in maid hell.

As it turned out, Uwe was even more tyrannical than they’d been warned.

To succinctly sum up his personality, he hated wastefulness with a burning passion. Perhaps they should have taken the undecorated state of his mansion as a warning.

“Silverrrrr! You spilled detergent on the floor again?!”

“Hey, White, quit cleaning all the useless places nobody even looks at! You’re wasting rags!”

“Red, I expect you to come promptly when I call for you! Time’s a-wasting!”

The three of them could barely go a few minutes without getting shouted at.

Whenever Uwe found something to complain about, he wasted no time in making his displeasure known. Either they were using too much detergent, or dirtying too many cleaning rags, or doing laundry too often, or using too much water—but in any case, he would always find something to reprimand them for. It was starting to get in the way of them actually doing their jobs.

And the mansion’s constant stream of visitors didn’t help, either.

Say what you liked about Uwe’s hatred of waste, but it certainly made him an effective politician.

Bureaucrats and other statesmen would often drop by to ask Uwe’s advice about budgets and expenditures. Uwe himself was in charge of issues related to welfare, but his visitors were from all sorts of departments, from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and the Ministry of Transportation to the Ministry of the Army and everything in between. After one look at their project outlines, Uwe would point out all sorts of unnecessary budget items and unreasonable estimates from contractors.

That was all well and good, but whenever such a visitor came, it was the maids’ job to greet them, see them off, serve them tea, and so on, and with guests coming so frequently, they often found themselves having to schedule their work down to the minute.

Lily was the first to start slipping up.

“You OAF! How many teacups must you break before you’re satisfied?!”

“Eeeeep! I’m so sorry!”

She had always been a bit of a klutz. Normally, Sybilla would have stepped in to help shore up Lily’s weaknesses, but as it turned out, she was having a rough time of it, too.

“Your cooking was as dreadful as ever today! How many times do I have to tell you to stop wasting ingredients before you get it through that skull of yours?”

“.....”

Not once had she managed to cook a meal to Uwe’s liking.

She and the others went through a painstaking series of taste-tests, trying everything from appealing to his elderly palate by going easy on the spices to testing out a wide variety of different ingredients in case there were some in particular that he disliked, but nothing seemed to satisfy him.

In the end, he would always just growl “Eat it yourself,” then gnaw away unhappily at a loaf of bread. It was really starting to get on Sybilla’s nerves.

At times like those, Grete seemed like she would be the most reliable member of the team, but— “You have some sort of problem with me?”

—she ended up earning Uwe’s ire as well.

“...Not at all; I’m just not feeling well.”

“Hmph. Don’t you lie to me. It’s plain as day how much you hate me.”

“I swear, that’s not—”

“Get out of my sight. Don’t waste my time working with that expression on your face.”

Her relationship with Uwe quickly deteriorated, and he ultimately treated her even more coldly than he did the other two.

And that wasn’t all; she was barely able to pass herself off as a real maid. As Uwe said, her displeasure was finding its way onto her face.

“What’s going on, Grete? This isn’t like you.”

When they asked her about it out of concern, she shook her head.

“...It’s nothing. I’m not about to throw in the towel over something as trifling as this.”

“Huh? Whaddaya mean?”

That was when they discovered a most unexpected weakness of hers.

“...Whenever I talk to a man other than our boss, my stomach starts hurting.”

“You what?”

In any case, though, all three of them were having problems with Uwe in their own way.

At night, they returned to the servants’ quarters.

“Hey, Lily?” Sybilla asked.

“Yeah...?”

“At the end of the day, we’re here to protect that geezer, right?”

“That’s the idea...”

The two of them crumpled onto the bed, unable to even bring themselves to shower.

They were supposed to be using the cover of night to bug the mansion, but they didn’t have the strength left to do so. Their maid work during the day left them too wiped to do anything at night but keel over, and there was no end to Uwe’s tyranny in sight.

As they lay there, they heard a knock on the window.

They pulled back the curtain and found Sara standing outside. She was dressed in the outfit she used on missions: black overalls and a newsboy cap worn low over her eyes.

“Good work so far,” she said as she climbed into the room. “Oh, where’s Miss Grete?”

“She’s not feeling well, so she’s lying down in her room.”

“Oh no, is she sick?”

“Who knows, but she’s definitely got somethin’ goin’ on.”

When Grete explained the situation to them—that her body shouted at her in protest when she talked to any man besides Klaus—her face had been lifeless and pale. All the enthusiasm she’d shown at the start of the mission had vanished without a trace.

As Sybilla worried about their ailing teammate, Sara produced a large box. “I finally found an empty shack to work out of, so I’m here to give you some backup.”

Lily hopped to her feet in excitement. “Backup?”

The word was like music to her ears.

Sara removed the cover draped over the box. “Him!”

As it turned out, the box was actually a metal birdcage.

Sensing a powerful gaze coming from inside it, Sybilla and Lily peered in.

““A hawk...?””

A large raptor sat within. He was well-built, and his eyes burned with a fierce intensity.

“You can give him letters or anything, and he’ll bring them to my shack. Once he does, I can have him bring you whatever you need.”

The hawk rapped on the birdcage with his beak as though to announce his presence.

A loud, metallic clang rang out.

“.....” Sybilla pointed at the hawk. “So wait, you want me to keep that thing in my room...?”

“He’s not a ‘thing.’ He’s Mr. Bernard.”

“Bernard, huh...?”

“Oh, and I have some important instructions on how to take care of him. He’s on a special diet, so remember to feed him twice a day. Also, you have to call

him by name every so often, and make sure you brush his wings every morning
—”



Sara's voice rang with pride as she continued her explanation. She must have been excited to get a chance to talk about one of her prized pets, as she was talking much faster than usual.

Sybilla gave her a sidelong glance as she went on and on, then opened up the cage, sat the hawk on her arm, walked over to the window— “You're a right pain in the ass, aren'tcha?!”

—and hurled him with all her might.

Sara screamed. “MR. BERNAAAAARD!”

That would normally have constituted a terrible act of animal cruelty, but Bernard was a hawk, so he merely spread his wings in midair and flapped his way off into the darkness. If the explanation from earlier was right, he was on his way back to the shack Sara found.

As Sara watched him go with a look of abject heartbreak on her face, Sybilla turned back to her.

“We're undercover, remember? Nobody brings a pet with them when they get hired as a maid.”

As soon as the first hawk cry came from their room, they'd get found out in a heartbeat.

“Oh... I didn't think about that...”

“Can't you get some transceivers? We do a lot of scrubbing and washing, so it'd be best if they were waterproof and small enough to hide in our clothes.”

“I-I'm sure Miss Annette could make something like that, but that's not really an option right now...”

Annette was another member of the Specialist squad who had ash-pink hair. When it came to machines and devices, she was the team's go-to girl.

However, Annette wasn't there. Sara looked down apologetically.

Sybilla hurriedly waved her hand. “Hey, no, I'm not blamin' you or anything...”

She'd only been voicing her honest thoughts, but given the situation, it had come out more accusatory than she'd intended. Sara soon realized that, too,

but her expression remained glum.

The three of them exhaled in unison. ""Sigh..."

"It's like we can't catch a break," Lily said with a melancholy look on her face. "At this rate, we'll never complete the mission."

"M-maybe we really shouldn't have been picked," Sara replied mournfully. "If Miss Monika or Miss Thea were here, I'm sure they would be handling things better..."

"....."

Upon hearing their other teammates' names, Sybilla bit down on her lip.

Sara had probably been directing the statement at herself, but it had hit Sybilla right where it hurt.

Suddenly, they heard someone noisily rushing through the hallway. Sara barely had time to dash under the bed before Olivia burst into the room.

"Is everything okay? I just heard a scream."

That would have been Sara's, no doubt.

Sybilla scratched her head.

"Ah, sorry, ma'am. There was a bug, and I got startled."

Olivia puffed up her cheeks. "Really? Freaking out about a little insect, at your age?"

Sybilla looked Olivia over. She'd assumed that the head maid would have been in her nightwear by now, but she had yet to change out of her uniform. She must have still been working.

"Were you locking up, ma'am? I can handle that, if you want."

"I was, but don't worry about it. There are some jobs I can't exactly delegate to the rookies."

A bashful look crossed Olivia's face.

Then, once Sybilla saw that her guard was down...

"AH! ANOTHER BUG!" she shouted.

“Eek!” Olivia leaped toward Sybilla.

And with a rather unladylike yelp, to boot.

She was clearly none too fond of creepy-crawlies, and her knees shook for a little while. However, she eventually realized that there were no bugs to be seen and let out a big sigh.

“O-oh, for heaven’s sake! I’m going to bed! Just make sure you keep it down!”

She rushed out of the room, her face red from embarrassment at her overreaction.

Once she was gone, Sara slipped out from under the bed. She and Lily gave Sybilla puzzled looks.

Why had she gone out of her way to scare Olivia like that?

Sybilla answered by holding something up in her hand.

“A key...?” Lily oohed.

“I just nicked it.”

Olivia had been locking up, so Sybilla had known that she’d have the key to the mansion on her.

Now, *they* had it.

Sybilla opened up her suitcase and retrieved a book from within. The inside of the book was hollow, and although her gun was stored inside it, that wasn’t what she was looking for at the moment. What she was after was some clay. After taking it out, she pressed the key into it to make a mold. That way, they could still make all the copies they wanted after stealthily returning the original.

“Whaddaya say we quit mopin’ around and get back to basics? We just want the geezer to lay off us, right? In that case, all we gotta do is find some leverage.”

It might have been heavy-handed, but it was certainly the simplest way to solve their current problem.

With things going the way they were, they didn’t have much choice.

“I’m a sneak up there and put this shit to bed for good.”

Sybilla's eyes flashed commandingly as she stuck her tongue out.



The next night, Sybilla got to work.

Moving in complete darkness so as not to be seen, she made her way to the study. Thanks to her duplicate key, its door didn't give her any problems.

Inside, she discovered that the entire room was piled high with paperwork and documents. Keeping it all organized was far too much for Uwe's one secretary to handle, and the books that didn't fit on the bookshelves were in stacks on the floor. There was hardly even anywhere to stand.

With this much to go through, there's no way I don't dig up at least some dirt.

Holding her penlight in her mouth, she quickly flipped through anything she could find related to health or money. Even if Uwe wasn't committing tax evasion or taking illicit contributions on purpose, there was a chance he was doing so on accident. Alternatively, finding evidence of him having health problems would give her ammo to blackmail him with as well.

It wasn't long before she ran across a letter saying he'd gone in for a physical checkup recently, but the important bits—the actual results—were nowhere to be found. Either he hadn't gotten them yet, or he'd already thrown them out. All she was able to learn was the name of the hospital he went to.

As Sybilla looked at the documents spread out before her, her gaze suddenly landed on a familiar word.

Orphanage.

It was written on the spine of one of the folders.

She set her mission aside for a moment and opened it up.

The document she found inside wasn't anything official but rather a report that Uwe himself had compiled. Based on the pictures, he'd made it shortly after the war. The children captured on their film were thin and emaciated, and the documents detailed their grim food situation. After the war, when they hadn't been receiving meat or vegetable rations, Uwe had stepped in and

delivered food to the orphans himself. Now that Sybilla thought about it, she remembered that the orphanage her siblings were at had also— “What the hell do you think you’re doing in here?!”

An angry bellow rose up from behind her.

Shit.

She’d gotten distracted.

As the gravity of her blunder sank in, she turned around and found Uwe there with his face bright red. He practically slammed the light switch on, then carefully slid himself along the wall as the light bulb slowly flickered to life.

His destination was the rifle hanging on the wall.

As soon as he reached it, he aimed it at Sybilla without a moment’s hesitation.

“I knew it! You ARE a hit man!”

“I told you, I’m not!” She raised her hands in surrender. “And also, just for the record, I don’t think cute maids like me usually moonlight as killers.”

“You have the eyes of a villain!”

“Wow, rude.” As she quipped back at him, she frantically thought about how she was going to talk her way out of this.

If she got kicked out of the mansion, it would all but guarantee their mission ending in failure.

Before she had a chance to say anything, though, Uwe spoke up in a dubious tone.

“Curious about that document, were you?” His gaze had landed on the report Sybilla was holding.

She hadn’t gotten a chance to set it down before raising her hands.

She played along. “...Yeah, kinda.”

“Why?”

“It was for educational—”

“No, forget I asked.” Uwe lowered his rifle, his reddened face back to its usual

hue. “It’s just words on paper. If you want to read it, be my guest.”

“Huh...?”

That was easier than she’d expected.

She hadn’t even started lying yet.

“There was a story I heard back when I was visiting those orphanages.”

Indifferent to Sybilla’s confusion, Uwe sat down in his chair and began talking.

“It must have been about eight years ago. Everything was chaos after the war, and gangs were running rampant. Scamming veterans out of their disability checks, pressuring war widows into selling their homes for cheap... Things are still a mess now, but nothing like what it was back then.”

His tone was slow and leisurely.

Between that and his hoarse intonation, it was almost like listening to a fairy tale.

“But the worst gang of all was called the Cannibals. They operated out of the capital, committing every wicked deed you can think of. They killed people just for sport. And their leader—their leader had a knack for vanishing. People just wouldn’t notice him, like he was a ghost or something. Then, before you knew it, he’d have his knife stuck right in your heart. Layfolk and police alike were terrified of him. It was like he was descended from the devil himself.”

“.....”

“But one day, the leader got arrested, and the Cannibals fell apart. And do you know why?”

“...Why would I?”

“His eldest daughter turned him in.” Uwe sounded almost proud. “Wonderful, isn’t it? A girl, just nine years old, doing the right thing in order to protect her siblings.”

“.....”

“Her siblings got taken in by an orphanage, but the girl went missing soon after. Said she needed to make money. Brave kid. Some say she’s working as a

detective's assistant in the capital, others say she lied about her age to get a job in a cotton mill, but nobody knows for sure where she is these days. It's a moving story, if you ask me."

Having finally finished his tale, Uwe let out a long exhale.

Sybilla shrugged. "Why tell me all that?"

"Well, you see, I just remembered that the eldest daughter was a girl with white hair and sharp eyes. And these days, she'd be right around your age. As I recall, her name was—"

Uwe said a name.

It was a vulgar word, the kind that reflected poorly on those who'd given it.

"...Never heard of her."

"Hmph. Well, I won't press you on that."

Uwe scoffed disappointedly. When Sybilla handed back the report, he skimmed over it by the bulb's light and licked his dry lips.

"But you've seen it, too, haven't you? You know just how rough things were in the orphanages after the war. The nation could barely purchase any food, and there was never enough to go around, especially not for welfare institutions. I tried my damndest, but all the government cared about was economic policy and infrastructure spending."

"Yeah, don't I know it..."

"Not much has changed since then. No matter how much I rant and rave, they never leave anything for social services other than scraps and crumbs." Uwe's voice grew quieter. "...That's why I have to get rid of as much waste as I can. Every tiny bit I save is a tiny bit more I can give."

"....."

Now the reason behind his miserly ways was clear.

By rooting out surpluses and economizing as much as possible in his personal life, he was able to donate that much more to the needy. Even if it was only for his own peace of mind, when you considered the lavish lifestyle the position of

vice-minister could have afforded him, it spoke volumes about his character.

Sybilla understood that compulsion he felt all too well. “So that’s why you were so hard on us about efficiency...”

And here she was, thinking he was just another curmudgeonly old man. She’d gotten him all wrong.

“All right, I’m with you. Starting tomorrow, I’ll do my best to cut down on—”

“No, that’s not why I told you.”

“Huh?”

“What I’m telling you is, for tonight, you can read to your heart’s content. I’m willing to turn a blind eye to you breaking into my study.”

Now Sybilla *really* didn’t get it.

As she started wondering what to make of that, Uwe went on.

“As of tomorrow, you’re all fired.”

She let out a dumbfounded yelp. “What?”

She thought that maybe he was joking, but his expression was as serious as could be.

“I hired you three so I could play the friendly politician, but the waste of it is eating away at me. I don’t need three more maids. I want you gone by tomorrow afternoon.”

She gasped.

Who could have imagined that he was already willing to make a decision like that? If all three of them got fired, the mission was as good as doomed.

“W-wait, please. Without us, the mansion’ll get filthy again in a heartbeat.”

“All I need clean is the drawing room. Olivia can handle that on her own.”

“Still, don’t you think you’re being extreme about—?”

“I just told you, waste is the enemy. Even in its smallest form.”

Uwe’s mind was made up. The determination in his eyes made it clear that no words would sway him.

It stung, but she was going to have to give up on changing his mind for now.

“...Let me ask you one question, at least,” Sybilla said. “If you hate waste so much, why don’t you sell this massive mansion?”

Uwe took the question as a dig. His brow furrowed.

“It’s out in the middle of nowhere. I couldn’t get decent money for it if I tried.”

“And ’cause it helps keep you safe from hit men?”

Not having ordinary civilians around to blend in with made it difficult for spies to do their job.

Uwe readily agreed. “...I can’t afford to die, not yet. This country’s welfare system still needs me.”

The corner of Sybilla’s mouth curled upward.

“Is that so? Well then, in that case, I can’t afford to get fired yet.”

And with that parting statement, Sybilla turned away from Uwe and rushed out of the study.

Her deadline was in twelve hours.

That was how long she had to figure out a way to save their jobs.

Now she finally understood why Klaus had picked her.

He was right—protecting Uwe meant something to her.



Back in the servants’ quarters, Lily and Grete were playing with Sara’s hawk.

The look on his face was as intense as ever, and each time he scarfed down a piece of raw meat, he earned a delighted cheer from the girls.

After Sybilla had thrown him out earlier, Sara brought him back. The girls’ constant setbacks had left them mentally wrung dry, and hanging out with domesticated animals was a great way to relieve stress.

Beside them, Sara continued her narration from earlier. “Now, some of his

favorite things are...”

The original plan was to have a strategy meeting, but Sybilla wasn't back yet. Sara brushed Bernard's wings as they waited for her to return.

Soon, they heard footsteps in the hallway.

When the door swung open, they saw Sybilla biting her lip on the other side. However, it was difficult to tell at a glance whether she was doing it out of frustration or determination.

“How'd it go? Were you able to track down some information we can use to —?”

Sybilla cut off Lily's question with a shake of her head. “Nah, Uwe found me.”

The other three immediately grasped what that meant. They bowed their heads in unison.

“““...Thank you for your service.”””

“Hey, I didn't get canned *yet*!”

They assumed that she had gotten fired, but apparently that wasn't it.

When Sybilla laid out the whole story, though, they discovered that they hadn't been far off the mark. However, the truth was even worse. It wasn't just Sybilla who was getting fired—it was all three of them.

“That's really bad!” Sara cried.

Sybilla agreed with her, then lowered her tone. “Now, I wanna tell you a story about myself.”

Lily tilted her head in confusion. “Wait, *now*?”

“Just hear me out. Way back when, I got sent to an orphanage with my kid siblings. The place was dirt-poor, and it pissed me off so bad it made me wanna become a spy so I could try to change the world. Uwe and I have a lot in common.” Sybilla laughed self-deprecatingly. “That's why this made me so happy. That punk Teach, he really understood how I felt.”

She looked down for a moment. When she raised her head back up, her eyes were burning.

“I wanna make Teach proud, and I wanna keep Uwe safe. You guys willin’ to help me out?”

Her tone was commanding, with a very Sybilla surety to it.

The others didn’t fully understand her sudden burst of passion. They could tell that something had happened, but Sybilla didn’t seem inclined to discuss specifics, so they chose not to hound her about it. Instead, they decided to trust the resolve burning in her eyes.

“Help you or not, we sorta already accepted the mission.” Lily laughed.

“I mean, sure, but...,” Sybilla replied bashfully.

“U-um!”

Then Sara timidly raised her hand. “I understand how Miss Sybilla feels. I’m a coward and not very good, and even now, I’m sure the others could have done a better job than me, but...” She paused for a moment. “But when I found out I got picked, it made me really happy.”

Her face was bright red. It was an embarrassing thing to admit.

“Heh.” Lily gave them a boastful smile.

“You two are so cute. See, I knew from day one that I was gonna make it. If you think about it logically, there’s no way the team leader would get left out of such an important mission.”

“But, Miss Lily, I heard you cheering ‘Hell yeah’ in your room after we got the news.”

“Does the defense have anything they’d like to say to that?”

When Sybilla pressed her, Lily’s expression froze.

“...I, uh...I do that every day!”

“What kinda weird-ass habit is that?”

As she watched her teammates banter, Grete let out a soft chuckle.

When Sybilla asked her, “What’s so funny?” she replied with obvious delight.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing. I was just thinking about how the boss must have known

how you all felt when he picked you...”

“And it made you fall for him all over again?”

“No, it’s just as I expected. He’s exactly as wonderful as I always knew...” Grete’s voice rang with great fondness. “And you should know, you aren’t the only one who wants to make the boss proud.”

“Figures.”

The four of them put their heads together.

Once the circle was complete, they began quietly carrying out their strategy meeting.

“So how’re we gonna keep our jobs?” Lily chuckled fearlessly. “Threaten him?”

“Any of you have a plan?” Sybilla asked.

The other girls immediately listed off their ideas.

“I could disguise myself as Olivia and convince him not to fire us, perhaps...”

“Maybe we could secretly poison him, then get him to like us by saving him in the nick of time?”

“If it were me, I think I would start by finding someone other than Uwe to negotiate with.”

Grete’s plan was sophisticated, Lily’s was underhanded, and Sara’s was cautious.

Sybilla flashed them her pearly whites. “I’m gonna cook him something so tasty, he’ll have no choice *but* to keep me on as a maid.”

“Wow, brute force again?” Lily clapped her hands together. “But y’know, I like it. It has Sybilla written all over it.”

Nobody disagreed.

Their heads still pressed together, the four of them smiled.

“All right, then let’s get this culinary grudge match goin’. This time, we’ve even got a big-brain general on our team, so we—”

“Hooray!”

“What’s up, Grete?” Sybilla asked.

“...You all seemed so excited, I thought I’d join in... So you know, ‘Hooray!’...”

“...We appreciate the effort.”

Sara joined in. “H-hooray!”

Lily turned to Sybilla. “Wait, do we really sound that ridiculous?”

Once the silly exchange was over, Sybilla closed the meeting with a bang.

“Remember, the four of us got picked for a reason. Let’s do this thing with our heads held high!”

They thumped their heads together in agreement.



From there, the girls split up into two groups.

The next morning, Grete and Lily made for the kitchen. They laid out the ingredients they’d gotten up at the crack of dawn to buy and crossed their arms.

Lily voiced some belated doubts.

“Now that I think about it, is cooking something delicious really gonna get us out of this jam?”

“We just need to trust in Sybilla...”

Grete lined up an assortment of colorful spices on the counter. She had everything from cardamom, ginger, and cayenne peppers to peppercorns both black and pink.

“For now, though, we need to begin the food prep... Lily?”

“I’m on it! Leave the taste-testing to me!”

Lily puffed up her chest with pride. Back when they tried to trap Klaus with food, she did a bang-up job of polishing off the test batches, so she assumed she would be reprising her role. However— “...Why would we have you do

that?”

—Grete put a quick stop to that.

“Hweh?”

“The task before us calls for following the recipe, weighing ingredients, crushing them, heating them, mixing them, simmering them... Given your skills at mixing poison, I would have assumed that this fell squarely under your area of expertise.”

“.....”

“Did the thought never occur to you? Or did you let your appetite cloud your judgment last—?”

“Sybilla can never find out about this!”

As she begged for Grete’s silence, Lily began prepping the condiments. She carefully ground them up, making sure to remove the least fragrant parts so as to draw out the spices’ aroma. Sure enough, that kind of work was her specialty, and she carried her work out without the slightest pause. The way she *used* her poison might have still needed work, but as far as concocting it went, she was a consummate professional.

Grete nodded in satisfaction.

“Normally, it would take two hours to prepare all these spices, but let’s see if we can’t get it done in half that time.”

“Th-there’s no way!”

“There is, if you follow my instructions to the letter...”

Ignoring her partner’s screams, Grete began making some exceedingly precise calculations.

For her, predicting her teammates’ movements down to the second was child’s play.



Meanwhile, Sybilla and Sara were on their way to the capital’s outskirts.

They whizzed down the road atop a borrowed motorcycle, knowing that if they dawdled, they wouldn't make it in time. Despite the Din Republic's small size, the roads around its capital were well maintained, and the freeway went right up to it.

Eventually, they stopped in front of a large building—a state-run hospital. The building was a towering five stories tall, and its stone construction made it look almost like a castle.

Sara, who'd been told nothing about the plan, opened her eyes wide. "Wait, this is where we're going?"

"Yup. It's where Uwe took his physical." Sybilla took off her helmet. "Couldn't find the results anywhere in the mansion, so we had to come here."

"To get them to give us a copy, you mean?"

"Nah, that's not happenin'. We'd need to prove we were his representatives, and we don't have time for that."

However, Sara was right about one thing—they *were* after Uwe's test results.

Sybilla had a hunch that those results would play a key role in winning him over. However, it was going to take a bit of doing to get ahold of them.

When Sara pursed her lips in confusion, Sybilla gave her a confident smile.

"I'm just gonna steal 'em."

Sara's expression went stiff. "From a hospital?!"

"Shh. Not so loud."

"B-but...think of how tight their security must be! And there's so many employees, too..."

"Yeah, exactly. The bigger they are, the easier they are to sneak into. All I gotta do is steal a key to the changing room, steal an outfit from one of the lockers, disguise myself as a nurse, and snatch a look at the results outta the filing cabinet. It'll be like takin' candy from a baby."

Sybilla waved her hand unconcernedly.

"When I give you the signal, I need you to get Bernard to fly in through the

window and cause a scene. That'll give me the cover I need."

She began stretching to warm herself up.

"....."

For a short while, Sara just looked at her in shock.

Eventually, though, she let out a defeated sigh. "You're incorrigible, Miss Sybilla."

As exasperated as her expression was, though, she almost looked like she was enjoying herself.

She whistled through her fingers, and a hawk swooped down out of the sky and came to a stop right beside her.

"I can send him whenever you want, and if you need him to take a specific route, he can do that, too."

"You're a lifesaver."

After telling Sara what she wanted and completing her preparations, Sybilla spoke in a commanding tone.

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

And with that, she disappeared into the hospital.

In the end, Sara waited outside the whole time, so she never saw what exactly went on within its walls.

She also had no way of knowing where Sybilla came from, where she had honed her outstanding techniques, and most importantly, what sort of monster she inherited those skills of hers from.

All Sara knew was one thing.

When it came to stealing, Sybilla—the girl they called Pandemonium—was a virtuoso.



At around midday, they finished making their meal.

Under Grete's careful guiding hand, Lily had made yet another batch of their historied cabbage rolls. This time, though, in place of pork, they used hearty servings of liver and other organ meat. That had given it a strong smell, so to cover it up, they substituted out the cream stew in favor of a heavily spiced soup.

Lily had taste-tested them, too, and they'd come out wonderfully. A single spoonful of the soup was enough to make its lovely spiced aroma fill one's nose.

The rolls were, without a doubt, delicious.

However, there was one problem—their star player, Sybilla, wasn't back yet.

...Sorry, but we kept him waiting as long as we could.

Eventually, Lily made the call to carry the cabbage rolls out. This time, the quality of their cooking was beyond reproach. Nobody could have possibly found fault with it.

However, when Uwe took a bite over in the dining room, he gave them a highly unexpected review.

"This is dreadful!"

"Huh...?"

"It's better than yesterday's, maybe, but you can't expect me to eat this! That can be your problem."

He grimaced and shoved the plate of rolls back to them. Once again, all he planned to eat was the bread they'd intended to be a side dish. He bit into it, clearly not enjoying it for a moment. That was his way of saying that lunchtime was over.

With a shocked look on her face, Lily took a small taste of the leftover cabbage rolls' sauce. It tasted just fine to her. The only explanation she could think of was the geezer before her had completely different tastes than everyone else she'd ever met.

Uwe breathed hard through his nose as he crossed his arms. "Hmph. Well, no matter. Either way, as of right now, you're all f—"

"Nah, see, I'd bet good money that those cabbage rolls are tasty as hell."

Lily turned to find Sybilla standing beside her, panting and out of breath. She'd been running as fast as she could.

She strode toward Uwe as he sat at the dining table.

"Hey there, Mr. Appel. If I were you, I'd suck it up and eat 'em."

"What in the blazes are you—?"

"I saw your bloodwork from the hospital, and your red blood cell count's way below average. You've got a serious vitamin deficiency." She continued pressing. "You must have had *some* idea, didn't you? 'Bout your taste disorder."

"...Grr! Don't be ridiculous!"

Uwe roared at her, red-faced and furious.

"You think you can just come into my dining room and make baseless accusations?! I don't have a—"

"Anyone else woulda thought those cabbage rolls were delicious, but you called 'em 'dreadful.' You think I'm not gonna notice that?" Sybilla glared at him and went on. "After the war, you sweat and bled to cut down on your excesses. Remember the photos in that report yesterday? They were of you, goin' around to orphanages after the war and handing out food in person. All so those kids who weren't gettin' any rations would have enough to eat. It's a noble thing you did, but you took things too far, didn't you?"

She narrowed her eyes in exasperation.

"You even gave 'em the food off your own damn plate."

"Hmph. And what's so wrong about that?"

"Everything, that's what. You stopped givin' your body the nourishment it needed. That's where the taste disorder started up. And as your diet got worse, so did your disorder. You can barely taste *anything* now, can you?"

Lily thought back to what she knew about Uwe's diet. All she'd ever seen him eat was bread. There was no way he was getting enough nutrition.

"Hey, Lily, what did Mr. Appel have to say when you gave him those rolls?"

"He said the meal was 'better than yesterday's.'"

“I’ll bet. The less you can taste, the more you start liking dishes loaded with spices.” Sybilla grinned triumphantly. “Forget about hit men, Mr. Appel—malnutrition’s gonna do you in before they can even get a foot in the door.”

“.....”

“What you’re gonna do now is, you’re gonna keep us on staff. You can’t possibly call that a ‘waste’ anymore. We’re gonna cook nutritious meals for you every day, get you your sense of taste back, and next time, I’m gonna make you enjoy my cooking for real.”

Sybilla’s tone was rude, but there was an unmistakable kindness lurking just below its surface.

When she told him that she was going to make him enjoy her cooking, she wasn’t saying that she was going to make some outstanding dish.

What she was saying was that she was going to make sure his sense of taste returned.

If he called her cooking dreadful, all she had to do was give him no choice but to find it delicious. It was a brute-force solution, which was why it suited her so well.

Lily, for example, would never have come up with something like that.

Uwe closed his mouth and stewed over what Sybilla just said. Then he took the cabbage rolls back from Lily and tried another spoonful of soup. He grimaced. Sure enough, he couldn’t taste it at all.

“...Everything you just said was true.” The words came out as practically a sigh. “I had my suspicions, of course. So I was right... I really do have a taste disorder...”

“If you knew, why didn’t you report it sooner?”

“I didn’t want to admit I was getting old... My age was a factor, too, wasn’t it?”

“Could’ve been, sure.”

“Oh, don’t coddle me. If you think I’m old, just come out and say it.” His lips curled upward.

It was the first genuine smile any of them had seen out of him.

“But even so, Sybilla... I have to cut out waste,” Uwe said. “It isn’t only the orphanages. There are still scores of people in this country who have to make do with nothing but a single roll of bread each day. What would people think if they saw a man tasked with maintaining social welfare living large with four maids on his payroll?”

“...You’re awfully stubborn about this Goody Two-shoes thing, aren’tcha?” Sybilla gave a small shrug. “What about just firing one of us, then? It’ll be tight, but three maids should be enough to keep things running around here.”

It was a perfect compromise for both sides.

Uwe had his convictions as a public servant to consider, and the girls had their mission as spies that they needed to worry about.

Uwe considered Sybilla’s proposal, then gave her a slow, thoughtful nod.

Thus, thanks to Sybilla’s valiant efforts, they were able to prevent two of the dismissals.

They were down a member, but the undercover mission could go on.



After walking an hour from the mansion, Sybilla finally reached a little town.

She let out a small sigh, then headed to the designated location.

The meeting spot was a tobacco shop located in an obscure part of town. The store was little more than a drab hut, and it was so small that even a single customer put it close to capacity. Although it had windows, they were so stuffed with tobacco and bottles of soda that it was impossible to see into them from outside.

Klaus was sitting at the counter, his face partially hidden by the newspaper he was reading.

Even in his homeland, he made sure never to drop his guard for a moment.

In all honesty, Sybilla and the others weren’t exactly sure where he’d been or

what he'd been up to. However, they'd assumed he was off doing *some* sort of intelligence work.

"Grete told me what happened," Klaus said. "As I hear it, you did some excellent work back there. She spoke highly of your efforts."

"Well, that was nice of her."

Sybilla shook her head.

"But in the end, I still got fired. Sorry about that."

The only ones who'd been allowed to stay on as maids were Lily and Grete. Once it was decided that one of them would have to go, Sybilla volunteered to have it be her. Uwe hadn't been pleased, but he chose to respect her choice.

"I see. Well, you still did a wonderful job placating Uwe."

"...Even there, I can't really take all the credit."

"Oh?"

"Wouldn't have been able to do it without that hint you gave me."

"The hint..." Klaus replied, and Sybilla nodded.

"It was buggin' me for forever. I re-created your cabbage rolls, but the minute you made the tiniest change to them, it was like they tasted a million times better."

After their ignoble failure, she'd given a lot of thought as to what had caused it. They had used the exact same recipe and the exact same amount of seasoning, so why had their rolls turned out so different?

She had a number of working theories.

"When you served us those cabbage rolls, you remember how exactly you did it?"

"I just did."

"The thing is, after you divvied the rolls onto eight plates, you went back and added more seasoning."

That fact hadn't escaped Sybilla's notice.

If he had wanted to change how they all tasted, he could have added the seasoning to the sauce before he doled it out. Instead, though, he chose to season each plate individually.

“Here’s my theory—I think you adjusted the vinegar and spices based on our individual nutritional states.”

That was nothing more than conjecture, of course.

Klaus hadn’t put any conscious thought into his actions, so there was no way of knowing the truth for sure. He might have just been adjusting the sauce to fit each of their flavor preferences.

But Sara had said it—it was like “her whole body cried out in joy.”

That had gotten the idea of adjusting a dish to suit the health of whoever was eating it stuck in Sybilla’s mind.

“Of course, all the clever commentary in the world doesn’t change the fact that I got fired. I hope you can give me passing marks for at least keeping the other two employed.”

“.....”

For a little while, Klaus said nothing. His expression was unreadable.

Was he mad at her?

Or was he just disappointed?

It was her first time screwing up an actual mission, so she had no idea what to expect.

Her body tensed up.

“I’m really sorry I screwed up, especially after talking such a big game.” She leaned forward. “But I can still make up for it. I can still switch over to the support team and help finish the mission that way.”

“No,” Klaus replied. “That wouldn’t serve any purpose.”

“!”

His words were cold. There was no emotion in them.

He continued on in the same tone. “As far as support goes, Sara’s doing fine on her own, and we have me working outside the mansion as well. Anything more than that would be unnecessary.”

“But I...”

Her blood ran cold.

She never imagined he would shut her down so completely.

“...Look, I know I blew it.” She leaned even farther forward. “But I’m beggin’ you, just give me another chance. Next time, I swear I’ll—”

“I have a question I should probably ask you.”

Klaus crossed his legs.

“How much longer should I keep playing along with this game?”

Sybilla let out a dumbfounded murmur. “Huh?”

It had a gentler lead-in than usual, but that was what he said whenever they were wrong about something.

“You seem to be operating under a misconception.”

His eyes softened.

“Why would I ever turn my back on such a stellar subordinate? ‘Make up for it’? That doesn’t make sense. You have nothing to make up for. ‘Switch to the support team’? Unnecessary. You belong on the front lines,” he said. “I have but one thing to call you—magnificent.”

“What...?”

Apparently, he was praising her.

More than joy, though, that mostly filled her with questions.

“No, remember, I told you. I got fired; I can’t go back to—”

“You can. And what’s more, Uwe will owe you.”

“What? How?”

“His malnutrition gave him a taste disorder...but was that his only symptom?”

Sybilla tilted her head to the side. Was he saying there was something else?

Uwe was rude, maybe, and short-tempered, but she assumed Klaus wasn't talking about his personality.

Now that he mentioned it, though, she remembered something odd Uwe said when they first met him. That evening by the entrance, he had suspected three people with completely different hair colors of being Olivia's sisters. Then later, when he met Sybilla in the study at night, his gait was strangely awkward until the light finished kicking in.

She quickly found an answer.

"...You think he has nyctalopia?"

"The signs are certainly there."

Nyctalopia was a condition where the sufferer's vision dropped precipitously in low light.

It was often referred to as night blindness, and one of its common causes was vitamin deficiency.

Uwe's taste disorder screwed up his diet, and that could very well have given rise to other problems in turn. And because hospitals performed their eye tests in broad daylight, his doctor would have been none the wiser.

Had Klaus really pieced that all together through hearsay?

No, there was no way. He must have at least been observing the mansion or something.

"Uwe's been driving himself to and from parliament, but it's high time he gave that up. Not even he could call hiring a driver wasteful, given the circumstances," Klaus said. "Hurry on back to the mansion. The team needs your straightforward attitude."

With that, he grabbed a bottle off the shelf beside him, used the corner of the counter to pop its cap off, and offered it to her. The soda inside was bright and colorful. That was his way of showing his appreciation for her efforts.

It was a small gesture, but it made her grin all the same.

He was watching.

It might not have showed much, but he really did acknowledge how much hard work they were putting in.

“You’re really somethin’, you know that? I knew there was a reason I respected you so much.”

That’s why I was so happy when you picked me.

Choosing not to voice the last half of her statement, Sybilla took the bottle from him.

Then she laughed. “Thanks. I’ll be sure to pay you back twice over for this, too.”

Klaus smiled.

Two hours later, Sybilla was a maid again—and a driver now, to boot.



Another two weeks passed in what felt like the blink of an eye. The intelligence work was proceeding without a hitch.

“Your steering is so wasteful. Can’t you drive any gentler?!”

“Shaddap! If you keep babbling like that, you’re gonna bite your tongue!”

Uwe and Sybilla bickered at each other like animals as they pulled up to the mansion.

The exchange made them look less like a master and his maid and more like a stubborn grandfather and his willful granddaughter, but Uwe cared little for formality. As far as he was concerned, it was just another form of waste.

“By the way, who was that guy who came and talked to you today?” Sybilla asked. “He was lookin’ at me all funny.”

“An old friend of mine. Nobody you need to be worried about.”

“If you say so...”

“Oh, don’t get worked up over every little thing. He was probably just

surprised to see that my driver was so young.”

“Rude. I’ve got a driver’s license as good as anyone’s... ..It’s homemade, but still.”

“Hmm? Sorry, what was that last part?”

Thanks to being his driver, Sybilla was in an excellent position to look into Uwe’s acquaintances. Furthermore, the fact that he couldn’t go anywhere without her meant that they always had an eye on him, which came as a great comfort.

As Uwe’s attitude gradually softened, the girls were able to do their spy work with greater and greater ease.

Once they’d conducted background checks on all the other residents, they began looking into each of the mansion’s frequent visitors. They had the bathroom and drawing room bugged, and depending on what they heard, they sometimes stuck transmitters on the guests and had Sara tail them after they left the mansion.

Things couldn’t have been going smoother.

As Lily got things ready for dinner, Sybilla quietly whispered to her, “It’s weird, huh. Another day done, and we still haven’t found anyone suspicious.”

“Nothing out of the ordinary with the mansion, either. Can’t say I hate how peaceful things are, though,” Lily replied in a carefree tone.

“No arguments there.”

Back in the beginning, Sybilla had been livid about being forced to work as a maid, but nowadays, she found it fulfilling. Uwe was an honest, upstanding politician trying to make the country a better place, and while his methods may have been forceful at times, she knew he was doing it all for the children.

The longer she stayed undercover there, the more she’d get to help him with his work.

She almost hoped the assassin wouldn’t come at all.

That way, things could stay peaceful.

However, she knew full well that wasn't how the world worked.

A scream rang out.

It came from the courtyard. A woman. Not Grete. Older. Olivia?

Sybilla and Lily took off at a run.

As they did, they heard footsteps thundering from upstairs.

"OLIVIAAAAA! What happened?!"

The footsteps were Uwe's. He rushed down as well, carrying his prized rifle and wearing his pajamas.

Sybilla and Lily would have preferred that he not do anything rash, but at least this meant they had eyes on the man they were charged with protecting. They subtly positioned themselves to guard his flanks as they all raced toward the courtyard.

When they got there, they found Olivia collapsed on her rump.

Her face was pale, and she pointed off into the air.

"Th-there..." Her voice was trembling. "There was a gunshot...from up there..."

Sybilla's gaze snapped up.

Olivia was pointing toward the large trees that surrounded the mansion, and Sybilla spotted something human-shaped holding a rifle and standing atop the branches.

"What the hell are those...?" she murmured.

The first thing she saw...were the scars.

The person's face was hidden beneath a hood, but the full moon illuminated their mouth for the world to see.

More specifically, it illuminated the scars that covered it. They might have been burn marks, but whatever they were, the blackened skin crawled across the person's face like a curse.

It was almost like looking at a cadaver.

Sybilla thought back to the intel they'd been given before the mission. Was that...Corpse?

A few words slipped from Olivia's lips. "I think I'm going to be sick..."

One could hardly blame her. The scars were hideous enough to inspire revulsion in any who saw them.

"EAT LEAD, FIEND!"

As the girls stared in confusion, Uwe opened fire.

The man was nothing if not brave.

However, his bullet merely hit the tree that Corpse was standing on. Due to his night blindness, the shot had gone way too low.

Corpse leaped down from the tree and vanished into the darkness of the woods. In the blink of an eye, they were gone from sight entirely.

The girls' hesitation only lasted a moment.

"We'll go after 'em. Olivia, Mr. Appel, you two go back inside and call the police."

They snatched Uwe's gun out of his hands, then headed toward the forest.

Maybe they were coming off a bit more battle-ready than maids should have, but they couldn't afford to let this opportunity pass them by.

Even if they couldn't capture or kill their foe, getting a hint of their trail would be enough to make their investigation go that much smoother.

Right as they were thinking of how they could pull that off, they made it to the woods.

However, the moment they took their first steps into the trees, Sybilla's foot got tangled up in wire. She turned to Lily for help, but she was stuck, too.

They'd walked into a trap—one carefully placed to blend into the darkness.

And what's more, it had caught them both at once. The person who set it was clearly no slouch. It was like their foe had read their every move.

The wire grew taut and yanked Sybilla into the air. She hadn't even had time

to grab the knife hidden in her skirt. If someone shot her now, she'd have no way to dodge.

Images of the horrors to come flashed through her mind.

She heard Uwe and Olivia scream.

They were all going to die.

"Magnificent."

But right as she prepared herself for the worst, a familiar voice rang out, and the wire snapped.

Sybilla's foot was free, and she twisted her body to stick the landing. Beside her, Lily landed hard on her ass.

"It's begun." Klaus stood before them, knife in hand.

His darkened gaze was focused deep in the forest.

"Sybilla, Lily, brace yourselves. The assassin's made their move."

As he spoke, he disappeared into the darkness as though he'd never been there at all.

The battle between Lamplight and Corpse was finally underway.

Chapter 3

Exposed

The following took place before they went to Uwe's.

In order to prepare for the Impossible Mission, Grete was doing some intensive one-on-one training with Klaus. They sat across the table from each other as though playing chess, but instead of a chessboard, what they had laid out before them was a blueprint of Uwe's mansion.

"Uwe is in the reception room. The time is two PM. I infiltrate the mansion disguised as a deliveryman. I have an item—we'll call it 'A'—hidden in my pocket."

"...Well, I start by using Sara's animals to check what kind of firearms you have."

They were running battle simulations.

It was similar to their normal training but conducted with their minds instead of their bodies. Klaus played the role of the assassin, and Grete had to promptly reply with what orders she would give her teammates. Much like in a chess match, they took turns taking actions and moving their pieces across the blueprint.

As the simulation went on, Grete gained the upper hand, stripping Klaus of his weapons and driving him into a far corner of the mansion. Everything was going great, until...

"Now, I reveal Item A from my pocket."

Klaus turned up the piece of paper he'd written on at the beginning of the match. On it was the name of an object that completely turned the tables. He had anticipated everything from the very start.

Grete gasped.

In the end, the assassin won. The pieces representing her teammates all lay prone on the table.

Klaus gave his verdict. “That wasn’t bad.” Then he continued. “We should go again. Are you up for another round?”

“Of course.”

All they had to do was change the starting conditions, and they could get right back into the fray.

As she reset her pieces, Grete spoke. “You know, it might be easier on you if we did all our training this way...”

“That wouldn’t work. There’s a dramatic difference between thinking a scenario through and actually experiencing live combat. And besides, I’m still no good at explaining particulars.”

That much was indisputable. For example, he would often respond to Grete making moves like “I have Sybilla rush you from behind” by replying “I respond to the attack like a tiger.” At times, it barely even felt fair.

When it came to getting in reps, though, those war games were the most efficient way to do it.

In a single night, Grete was able to go through dozens of fights against Klaus and learn from each of her defeats.

“By the way, I have a question for you...,” Klaus said.

Between rounds, they would often shoot the breeze and drink tea as they rested their minds.

Grete nodded before Klaus could go on. “Of course. The panties I’m wearing today—”

“That’s not what I was going to ask.”

“—are white.”

“You really didn’t have to finish that sentence.”

An exasperated look crossed Klaus’s face.

A certain teammate of Grete’s had suggested that she try to bring up sexual

topics more often, and she'd taken the advice to heart.

For the time being, she decided to put up a brave front. "...Just as I expected."

Klaus rubbed his temples. "My actual question was about something more serious."

"What is it?"

She was tempted to say, *Like where we're going to hold the ceremony?* But she restrained herself. She knew she was in danger of seriously annoying him.

Klaus gave her a pointed look. "Why weren't you able to use your skills to their full potential at your academy?"

He hadn't been lying.

She could tell from the intense look in his eyes how serious a question it was.

"I asked your teachers about all of you, of course. I know about Lily's constant blunders and about how her brazen personality kept her from getting along with her contemporaries. I know how Sara was never all that motivated to be a spy in the first place and about how Sybilla's background meant that she had behavior problems for a time."

Those were the other three who'd be going along on the mission.

Grete knew he was telling her all this in confidence.

"But you, Grete—you're the only one who didn't make sense. What's your story?"

"....."

That was when she realized he was worried about her.

It wasn't a tale she relished telling, but she could feel her expression soften all the same.

"I could tell you, but I doubt you would believe me..."

"Whatever you say, I promise I'll believe it."

"...Thank you; that means a lot."

His words were reassuring. That alone was enough to set her heart aflutter.

She cradled her teacup in her hands as she revealed her secret.

“...The thing is, I can’t deal with men.”

Klaus took a surprisingly long time to react.

He said nothing. The muscles in his face didn’t move. He didn’t so much as blink.

He was so motionless it was like time itself was standing still—

“.....

—and the long silence dragged on.

“Boss?” Grete tilted her head. “You promised you would believe me, remember?”

“I’m sorry; that didn’t make sense.”

That was almost worse than him not believing her.

“...I’m saying that whenever I talk to a man, it gives me a stomachache.”

“You seem to be talking to *me* just fine.”

“You’re an exception.”

“Well, that’s oddly convenient.”

Klaus still didn’t seem totally satisfied by her answer.

He gave her a dubious look and sank deep into silence again. However, he eventually replied, “Well, I promised I’d believe you, and I do,” in a voice that sounded somewhere between astonished and resigned. He took another sip of tea and shook his head.

“The workings of your heart never fail to confuse me.”

“Really?”

As she saw it, her feelings about this were totally normal, but he clearly didn’t share that opinion. It was odd.

After all, wasn’t he the one who had fundamentally changed her value as a person?

As much as she wanted to explain herself, though, there was another, more pressing matter at hand.

She changed the subject. “Now, may I ask you a question?”

“What’s that?”

“What happened to your hand?”

A red line had been sliced across Klaus’s hand. Normally, he would never let himself get wounded like that.

“Ah, that,” he murmured as though it were nothing. “I had an urgent mission this afternoon, and I was dumb enough to let my hand get snagged on something. It’ll heal soon.”

“See, your fatigue is already starting to get you hurt. Please, get some rest.”

“I’ll be fine. And like it or not, I have a long backlog of reports I need to—”

Grete picked Klaus’s fountain pen up off the table. She knew it was his favorite one, and she held it in a tight embrace. “...You aren’t getting this pen back until you’ve rested.”

She stared at him intently.

He knit his brows in annoyance but eventually mumbled “Magnificent” and began cleaning up the blueprint. That was his sign that their training session was over.

“All right, you win. I’ll go to sleep, so you should—”

“Of course. I’d be happy to sit in your bed with you and sing you a—”

“Get out.”

“.....”

Klaus had cut her off before she’d even finished.

“Grete, I can tell that you’re tired, too. I’ll be asleep soon, so could you get the lights on your way...” He trailed off.

When Grete turned to look, she found him collapsed on his bed. His eyes were closed, and his breathing was steady. The transition had been so swift it

was like someone flipped a light switch inside him.

“...Well, that was fast.”

If he slept like that, he was liable to catch a cold. Grete hurriedly draped a blanket over him.

“.....”

Normally, even just approaching him would make him snap wide awake, but this time, he was out like a light. He must have really been exhausted. It was the first time she'd ever seen him so vulnerable.

“Did you get careless because you were with me?” She asked her question hoping against hope, but she got no reply. She gently touched his hand. Nothing. He really was out cold.

“...Was this your way of letting me pamper you, perhaps?”

She stayed beside him, continuing to savor the firm warmth of his hand.

Her heart was beating out of her chest.

Just being with him and getting to gaze at his calm face in respite was enough to fill her heart to the brim. She felt like she was basking in the sun's rays.

Love didn't seek compensation. In her head, she knew that, but she couldn't help but let her cravings get the better of her.

Never once did I expect my love to be reciprocated, but...

She squeezed his hand tight.

“Even so, if I complete the mission...and live up to your expectations...

“...would it be greedy of me to hope for just a tiny fraction of your love...?”

For the rest of her life, Grete would never forget the time she stood there.



After winning Uwe over, the girls' intelligence work began progressing at a rapid clip, and Grete was at the center of all their efforts.

As she did her maid work, she gave orders to each of the other girls in turn.

Sybilla was her jack-of-all-trades.

“...The boss says, ‘Investigate Uwe as though you were chiseling a stone at the bottom of the ocean.’”

“You mind translatin’ that for me?”

“I suspect he wants you to ask Uwe about the other people who will be attending the dinner tomorrow.”

After she gave the order, Sybilla replied “Ohhh,” nodded, and rushed off to the study.

“Heya, Mr. Appel. We should hit the road soon.”

She rattled the car keys as she casually called over to Uwe.

“We usually don’t leave for another hour,” he snapped at her. Without missing a beat, Sybilla replied, “Yeah, but I think the weather’s gonna turn. And besides, if we get there early, we can talk about the plan for tomorrow.” It was a clever recovery.

Grete had no doubt that by the time Sybilla got back, she’d have her task complete.

Not only was she progressing the mission, she was also doing a great job of maintaining a pleasant relationship with their employer.

At the moment, she was the group’s cornerstone.

Meanwhile, Lily was helping out in a different way than Sybilla.

Thanks to her natural charm and inherently upbeat disposition, she was a big hit with the mansion’s other residents. Things hadn’t gone well at her academy, but the fact remained that she had a personality that made people want to overlook her many mistakes. Thanks to that, she was able to get away with questionable behavior without having it come across as suspicious.

“Lily, I want to install more listening devices in preparation for tomorrow’s dinner. Could you distract the other residents for me?”

“Y’know, I thought you might say that, and you’ll be happy to hear that I already knocked over a bucket and soaked the whole hallway.”

“.....”

“Precognition, yet another one of my mighty Lily powers.”

As Lily cheerfully flashed Grete a peace sign, they heard Olivia scream from over in the hallway. “Oh no, she already found out!” Lily cried, rushing off with tears in her eyes.

Her methods weren’t subtle, but it was precisely the attention she drew that let the others operate with such little scrutiny.

They made sure to take full advantage of that.

Finally, they had Sara handling odd jobs outside the mansion.

Thanks to her animals, she was able to handle a lot of the many smaller tasks that needed doing. Humble as she was about it, there were a lot of jobs that only she could do.

Whenever Grete went to town to go shopping, she always made sure to exchange information with Sara on her way there.

“Sorry, but there wasn’t any movement on the traps we set, and my little ones weren’t able to pick up a scent. Our opponent must have come prepared.”

That was what Grete had expected, so she just nodded.

“Then tomorrow, I want you to spend the day on lookout. Make sure you’re close enough to the mansion to come if we need you.”

“You got it.” Sara nodded, then gave Grete a timid look. “D-do you think the assassin’s going to come back...?”

“We can’t be sure that they won’t.”

“Oh... Yeah, that makes sense. It’s okay, though. It’s fine. I’ll do my best.”

Sara clapped her cheeks to boost her morale, then disappeared around a street corner.

The girls were operating like a well-oiled machine.



The final car left, and the mansion was cloaked in the silence of night.

Lights from the guests' headlights flickered across the mountain's trees, but those eventually faded from view as well. The hustle and bustle from mere moments before was gone without a trace, giving the sound of the front door swinging shut an odd gravity that lingered in the ear.

Grete let out a big sigh.

They'd successfully made it through the dinner party.

Although the mansion was deep in the mountain backwoods, a full thirty guests had made the journey anyway, all of them politicians and influential figures who revered Uwe. They'd had to prepare a bunch of the rooms that normally went unused, but somehow or other, the four maids had pulled it off.

As Grete let the tension drain from her body, Sybilla approached her with some consternation on her face.

"Sybilla, do we have a problem?"

"Yeah, you could say that." She gestured upstairs with her thumb and laughed. "Uwe's goin' apeshit over how much the party cost to host. But hey, what's new, right?"

"That's not what I meant..."

Sybilla nodded and shot her some hand signals.

"No intruders. A couple of the guests seemed sketchy, but I didn't find any weapons when I picked their pockets."

Grete replied with hand signals of her own.

"Nothing odd on Sara's end, either. And for once, Lily was actually able to get through her maid work without making any mistakes."

With that, the information exchange was complete.

To sum it up, everything had gone smoothly.

"And it's all thanks to your instructions, Grete. Y'know, I never thought we'd be able to get everything done, but whatever magic you worked, it all went down like clockwork."

“Oh, no. If anything, I should be the one complimenting you. I merely worked behind the scenes, but it was you all who did the heavy lifting.”

Modest as her words were, though, Grete was secretly brimming with pride. She was pulling it off.

Even without specific orders from Klaus, she was still able to evaluate the situation and give appropriate instructions to the other girls. They were gathering information little by little, and eventually they'd have enough to corner their foe.

Her head was filled with thoughts of her beloved, who had pushed himself further than anyone else time and time again.

...We need to get the boss to rely on us.

She pursed her lips.

She was giving it her utmost, and thanks to her teammates' cooperation, everything was proceeding as planned.

For the time being, they decided to return to the dining room to get their maid work done. There was still a huge amount of used cutlery left over from the party. Ideally, they would have liked to clean up as the party went, but there had simply been too many people present for the maids to make a dent in the workload. They'd done as Uwe instructed and barely prepared enough for everyone to eat their fill, but even so, there was still a lot of half-eaten food left over.

As they cleaned, Sybilla suddenly spoke up. “Hey, Grete. You said you were a politician's daughter, right?”

“I did. What of it?”

“That means you got to go to high society shindigs like this, right? I'm kinda jealous. It was so, y'know, *luxurious*.”

Looking at the remains of the feast was reminding Sybilla of the dinner that had just taken place.

She had a spellbound look on her face.

Sure enough, the dinner had been well deserving of the descriptor.

Many of the invitees were industrial bigwigs who sympathized with Uwe's policies, and others were actresses raised in the orphanages who now mingled and smiled pleasantly. Uwe's wife was there, too, wearing a ravishing dress and decked out in jewels.

Far left or not, politicians' dinner parties were always lavish affairs.

The event had left Sybilla's head spinning in awe.

Grete shook her head. "...I'm afraid I never really fit in with that world."

It was an honest answer.

In fact, that much should have been obvious—otherwise, she'd never have become a spy.

"Huh," Sybilla replied flatly. "Yeah, guess you've got that problem with guys and all."

Sybilla obviously realized that there was more to the story.

However, Grete appreciated her tact in not pressing the issue.

"...For now, why don't we just focus on our work. I'll tell you about it another time."

She smiled evasively, then turned her full attention toward cleaning. Sybilla replied with a relaxed, "You got it."

Grete focused.

That's right, I have to concentrate...for the boss's sake...

A twinge in her heart threatened to disrupt that concentration, but she shook her head to rid herself of it.

When she came out into the hallway, she found Olivia waiting for her there.

"Grete, could I speak with you?"

Olivia's voice was an octave lower than usual, and Grete could deduce that she was about to be scolded.

This was something she'd have to get through.

"Just as I expected," she quietly mumbled to herself to keep her morale up.

Olivia called Grete into her room in the employee quarters.

Things were strewn about and piled high by the bed, and her spare clothes had been lazily dumped atop a chair. She must have been a smoker, as there was a faint smell of tobacco wafting in the air. Olivia didn't normally allow the girls into her room. The excuse she always gave was that it was a mess, and from the look of things, that was no lie.

Olivia took a seat atop her wardrobe of a chair, squishing the clothes underneath her. She gave Grete, who was standing across from her, an intense stare.

"So care to tell me why you spent the entire party cooped up in the kitchen? I wanted you out mingling with the guests."

Sure enough, she was getting scolded.

Grete immediately bowed low. "...I'm terribly sorry. I wasn't feeling well, so I thought it would be best if I just washed dishes."

"You know, we could have done all the dishes afterward..."

Grete's excuse was something of a half-truth.

There were a lot of men at the party, and being around them had made her stomach sick. That much was true.

However, she had also slipped out of the festivities in order to carry out espionage work. However she played this, she needed to avoid raising Olivia's suspicions.

Olivia twirled a tuft of her hair around with her finger. She was making no efforts to hide her displeasure.

"You're eighteen, Grete, so I'm sure you know this by now, but the world of politics is dominated by men, and it's full of sons of bitches who think women like us are beneath them. But that's precisely why having a couple of cute, young maids walking around and smiling helps a party like ours run smoothly. That's why I wanted you out there."

"Oh, I see..."

Grete knew that, of course, but she nodded as though that information was

all news to her.

Seeing her response cheered Olivia up a bit. She smiled.

“You know, it’s not so bad once you get used to it. All you have to do is flatter them a little, and there are plenty of men who’ll happily give you some pocket money or take you on trips or to the theater.”

“...Isn’t that only because you’re so pretty, ma’am?”

“You really think so? Well, you just made my— Wait, that’s not what we’re here to talk about.”

Olivia’s expression softened for a moment, but she quickly got back to business.

“Is there some reason you weren’t feeling well?”

“.....”

Now, then... How was she going to talk her way out of this one?

She didn’t exactly have the gift of gab, so coming up with an eloquent excuse on the spot was beyond her skills.

If she tried to say something that was too far from the truth, it wouldn’t be believable. However, the boring reality wouldn’t be enough to satisfy Olivia, either.

Maybe it would be best to add in a bit of the world’s most popular spice.

“...The truth is: There’s already somebody I have a crush on, so I’m trying to avoid getting too involved with other men.”

“What?! Tell me everything!” Olivia stood up so fast she knocked her chair over.

“.....”

Grete hadn’t expected to get such a big nibble. In fact, that was more of a full-fledged bite.

“O-okay...” Grete faltered a bit at Olivia’s surprising level of interest. “...Well, I suppose it’s what you would call lovesickness. Whenever I think of him, it makes me not want to talk to any other men...”

“Oh, are you talking about that guy from before?”

“...Who?”

“You know, the hottie. Oh, no, that’s right, you didn’t see him. When the assassin attacked, there was this total hunk who just happened to pass by.” Olivia went on to list his features.

The man she described was on the younger side and had an androgynous look, long hair, a tough expression, and a dapper suit.

“It looked like he knew Sybilla and Lily. What’s his story?”

“...I’m not sure what exactly you mean.”

“Did he come here to see you? What’s he doing now?”

“...Oh, no, he’s just a teacher from our school. I imagine he came to check up on his students.”

“Oh, huh. Sounds like he takes his job pretty seriously. Guess I was jumping to conclusions.”

After launching her rapid-fire barrage of questions, Olivia smiled. “Sorry about that. There’s not a whole lot to gossip about around these parts, so I was starving for a little drama. But still, lucky you. Love, huh? Guess I can’t be too hard on you for that.”

Grete felt that *starving* was putting it a little strongly, but she nodded along anyway.

With that, Olivia let out a long exhale. She propped her chair up and sat back down.

Grete let out a quiet exhale as well. It looked like she was back in Olivia’s good graces.

However, Olivia then asked her something totally unexpected. “Can I have him, then?”

Grete tilted her head in confusion at Olivia’s request.

“...What?”

“If that teacher isn’t the guy you’re pining for, that means you don’t mind if I

take him, right?”

It was like she thought of him as an object.

Olivia went on, sounding almost indifferent about the whole thing.

“Let me know the next time he’s coming around. I’ll keep my schedule open.”

“...Even if you meet him, there’s no guarantee he’ll actually be interested in you...”

“What, you don’t think so? I’m hot as hell, you know.”

“.....”

“He’s probably got all *sorts* of stress built up. I’ll get some booze in him, pretend to get drunk so I can rub my boobs all over him, get him into bed, and do what—”

Olivia stopped midway through her sentence.

Her smile faded, and she carefully observed Grete.

“Oh, huh,” she commented. “I’d wondered if you were even capable of that expression.”

“.....”

Grete wondered what Olivia was seeing just then. She didn’t have it in her to look in a mirror.

Olivia let out a big belly laugh and clapped her hands together. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding! Geez, Grete, you really wear your heart on your sleeve sometimes.” She seemed to find the whole situation irresistibly funny.

She stood up and placed a hand on Grete’s shoulder.

“Being lovesick for your teacher? That’s something I can get behind. Just make sure it doesn’t get in the way of your job. And quit worrying so much. I’m sure you could get any guy you wanted.”

“...Really?”

“Sure! You’re a hottie, Grete. All you’re missing is the attitude.” She grinned. “See, good-looking gals like us, it’s our job to live life fast and easy. There isn’t a

man alive who likes his women gloomy.”

Olivia was trying to encourage her.

Her words were meant as advice from a full-fledged adult to a girl just on the edge of maturity.

Grete meant to simply take them in the spirit they were intended—

“I can’t stand that way of thinking.”

—but she ended up doing the exact opposite.

“And I don’t like people who don’t put in the effort to be worthy of being loved.”

“The hell’s your problem?”

Olivia was pissed now. Grete had taken her advice and thrown it back in her face.

She let go of Grete’s shoulder and shot an angry, piercing glare her way.

“Have you considered that maybe that’s why he doesn’t love you back?”

“.....”

Grete bit her lip.

Countless quotes flashed through her head, and she desperately choked back the urge to vomit.

“Hit the nail on the head, huh?” Olivia laughed mockingly. “Figures, gloomy girl like you.”

That was what Olivia *really* thought of her.

She waved her hand as though shooing her away.

“If you don’t want my advice, then fine, don’t take it. And you don’t have to attend the dinner parties, either. If you showed up acting like you just ate something rotten, you’d only bring everyone down,” Olivia said coldly. The conversation was over.

Grete might never set foot in that room again.

Realizing that, she quickly observed it in its entirety. When she did, a piece of

jewelry placed carefully atop the table caught her eye. Its jade-green gemstone glinted in the light.

“...By the way, that’s a very nice brooch.”

Olivia raised an eyebrow. “It was a present from a boyfriend. Why, what about it?”

“Oh, no, nothing...”

Grete gave her a respectful bow and left the room.

As she did, she resisted the urge to ask, *It was made in the Galgad Empire, wasn’t it?*

After fleeing Olivia’s interrogation, Grete returned to her room and collapsed onto the bed.

So...tired...

At the end of each day, all of her built-up exhaustion finally had a chance to catch up with her.

She knew she needed to focus, but her body craved rest, and her mind refused to work.



She wanted to at least change into her pajamas, but even after making up her mind to do so, her body refused to get up from the mattress. In addition to her workload, there was something else feeding her exhaustion.

Olivia's words had hit her right where it hurt.

"Have you considered that maybe that's why he doesn't love you back?"

Of course she had.

She didn't have Lily's looks, the kind that could charm just about anyone. She didn't have Sybilla's cheerful, uncomplicated personality. And she didn't have that indescribable charm Sara did that made people want to protect her.

She was gloomy, bigheaded, and clumsy with words.

Klaus didn't hold any romantic feelings toward her.

She knew that full well.

That's why I have to do everything I can...

She had to put in the effort, get results, make him proud, and earn his love. That was the only option available to her.

She reached for the object sitting atop her nightstand. It was a fountain pen.

She clutched it tight and held it softly against her chest.

...I never did end up returning this after I stole it from the boss.

In the end, she took it with her as a sort of charm. Each time she touched it, memories of him flooded back through her mind.

Doing so was her form of rebellion against Olivia for receiving that brooch from her boyfriend.

Look, she was saying, I have this fountain pen that I stole from my beloved. So there.

However, if a victor could be found in their little exchange, it certainly wasn't her.

"Boss...", she murmured.

Nobody replied, of course. As she continued dwelling in her reverie, she heard

a knock on her door.

It was Lily, from the next room over. She peeked her head in.

“Heya, good work today.”

“Lily...?” Grete sat up so she could face her.

Now that she thought about it, she hadn’t gotten a report from Lily yet that day. She’d completely forgotten about it.

“Right, if this is about today’s dinner party—”

“Let’s put the work stuff aside for now.” However, Lily completely ignored her.

“There, there.”

Instead, she leaped onto the bed and started patting Grete’s head, stroking her as one would a child with an utterly cherubic smile on her face.

Grete blinked.

“...What’s this, now?”

“You just looked really tired, so I thought I’d pamper you a bit.”

“I see...”

“Sorry it’s me and not Teach, though.”

Where was this coming from?

Grete still didn’t know what to make of it, and Lily grinned as she continued her gentle treatment.

“If soothing Teach’s exhaustion is your job, then that means it’s my job to soothe yours. It’s really not that complicated.”

She must really have been concerned about Grete’s well-being.

Lily moved around to Grete’s back and began kneading her muscles, massaging her scalp, neck, shoulders, and back with practiced motions. According to her, she often did the same thing for their teammate Monika. She probably meant that Monika often *ordered* her to give her massages to apologize for various wrongdoings, but either way, Lily knew what she was

doing.

However, something else weighed on Grete's mind—in a quite literal sense. Namely, the soft pressure on the back of her head.

"Lily, you really do have a nice figure..."

"What makes you say that, all of a sudden?"

The whole time, Lily's breasts had been pressing against her.

When Lily realized that, she leaped away from Grete, flustered. She was normally the life of the party, but she immediately got bashful whenever the subject turned to her body or anything even vaguely sexual.

Grete wondered if she might not be better off if she were similarly shy.

She sighed. "...No, no. I'm just a little sensitive after all the times I've tried to seduce the boss and failed..."

"No, c'mon, there's no need to get down! Your figure's plenty—"

Lily came to an unnatural pause.

Her gaze was resting on Grete's washboard of a chest.

"Plenty, um..."

"Yes?"

".....Plenty good for cross-dressing."

"....."

Apparently, that was the most positive spin Lily had been able to come up with.

Realizing what a land mine she'd stepped on, Lily began talking a mile a minute. "Th-that's some real dedication from our local master of disguise! Perfect control over her body!"

"....."

"Why, she's such an expert she doesn't even need a chest binder to pass as a man!"

"....."

“In fact, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say she’s cross-dressing twenty-four seven!”

Grete grabbed Lily’s hand. “Would you mind if I broke your pinkie finger...?”

“That mad, huh?” Lily yelped.

Of the two of them, though, Grete had sustained far more damage in the exchange. She freed her back from Lily, then kept leaning forward until she collapsed onto the mattress. “Curse this world; curse this world’s *pain*,” she groaned as she punched it.

Now that Lily had hit all her sore spots, all Grete wanted to do was cry.

She suddenly remembered something she’d said to Klaus.

“Rest easy in my bosom...” Even I realize how pitiful that must have sounded...

Objectively speaking, it was a sorry state of affairs.

If Klaus had replied, *What bosom?* she probably would have ended her own life on the spot.

Grete’s heart lay in tatters. Lily patted her on the back. “Don’t worry, Grete. There’s plenty attractive about you.”

Her voice was sunny and chipper.

“And no matter what happens, we’ll always be friends.”

Lily beamed as she left the room, only vaguely aware that she’d done more harm than healing.

After Lily left, Grete heaved another sigh.

She appreciated the sentiment, even if she didn’t agree with it one bit.

Attractive? I’m not attractive, not in the slightest...

She buried her face in the sheets and cradled her head in her arms. Whenever she got this depressed, it opened all her old wounds back up.

“How could I ever love a daughter as creepy as you?!”

The words were like a curse that refused to leave her. They must have played back in her mind a thousand times.

She clutched her head tight. She didn't want to remember.

"Why can't you just smile normally like everyone else?!"

She buried herself in the blanket to try to make the voice go away.

"I wish you'd never been born!"

However, its echo refused to fade.



Klaus read a report as he sat in his hotel room.

He'd gotten the document from one of the spy academies, and it contained Grete's scores on a variety of tests. The grades on her written exams were all close to perfect, but her grades on the practical exams were far, far lower—with the exception of those that didn't require direct human interaction, where she did just as well as on the written ones.

The problem was with tests like infiltration and negotiation—the one where she came in contact with others. On those, her grades were close to failing.

"I can't deal with men."

He had never doubted her, but the test results were further evidence that she'd been telling the truth.

Androphobia, huh...?

Grete's father was a politician, a congressman who represented a center-left faction that enjoyed a comfortable alliance with Uwe's left-wing radicals. Public documents listed him as having four children, three older sons and a younger daughter, and stated that the daughter had been living abroad since she was thirteen in order to recuperate from a disease.

The truth, though, was that the man had all but forced her to enroll in a spy academy.

To put it simply, he had abandoned her.

The world of politics is chauvinistic to its core. Women are expected to be amiable and pretty...and any who can't adapt to those demands, the patriarchy

denounces as worthless. It's like its own circle of hell.

An environment like that must have been brutal on Grete.

According to her file, she herself was the one who chose the code name Daughter Dearest.

It was an ironic moniker if ever there was one.

Klaus ripped up the report and dumped the shreds on an ashtray. "That said, a few pieces of paper will never be able to tell me what's in her heart."

He lit a match and burned away the scraps.

"For the time being, though, I suppose I'd best finish this mission."

With the matter summed up, he tied his unruly hair back behind his head.

"It's time for the assassin hunt to begin."



Over in her shack, Sara was feeding her pets.

She needed somewhere to operate out of that was removed from both the town and Uwe's mansion, so she'd chosen an abandoned shack in the mountains to use as her base. She was accompanied by a hawk, a pigeon, a dog, and a group of mice. The way their cages filled the room was reminiscent of a pet shop.

Between delivering packages, creating diversions, and tracking people, there were a lot of ways animals could be useful in her line of work.

Even in an era as scientifically advanced as theirs, there were some things only animals could do.

When Sara had to explain her skill set to others, she called it rearing for the sake of expedience. Personally, though, she just thought of it as forging a bond of mutual trust with her pet. In fact, she and her hawk Bernard had been together since before she even joined her spy academy.

"There you go. Pork's always been your favorite, huh?"

Bernard was something of a gourmand. He would barely touch anything other

than the special feed Sara made for him.

As Sara watched him peck away at his meal, the sound of a knock echoed through the shack.

“Eep!” She froze.

Had the enemy found her?

If worse came to worst, at least she could count on Bernard to protect her. She stood beside him with her gun at the ready. Then, she heard a familiar voice. “It’s me.”

“Oh, it’s Teach.”

She opened the door and found Klaus standing outside.

Sara wasn’t totally sure how he’d been spending his time during the mission, but looking at the documents stuffed into his bag, it was clear that he was getting things done.

Sara moved the table over into the center of the room and began flipping through his papers.

As she did, she handed him the files Sybilla had stolen in turn.

Many of the assassin’s targets had been old friends of Uwe’s. The assassin themselves must have already been somewhere around him, and if not, they probably at least had a collaborator in place.

“With all this information, we should be able to zero in on a suspect soon.”

“True,” Klaus replied, then produced yet another document.

It was the details on all the political deaths they suspected Corpse of having been involved in.

“The main method Corpse uses is making it look like their targets jumped to their deaths. The fact that they don’t use weapons makes them hard to track, and most of their assassinations get written off as suicides.”

“That’s horrible...”

“The politicians they killed all worked tirelessly to revitalize our nation after the war. Each loss cuts us a little deeper...” Klaus’s expression darkened.

When you focused on what was right in front of you, it was easy to lose sight of the big picture.

This was no mere murderer they were dealing with. This was someone who was getting rid of people, shifting the course of politics, changing their nation, and reshaping the world.

By eliminating politicians who obstructed the Empire's goals, they could get Imperial sympathizers elected in their place. That way, Galgad could control its neighbor without needing to start a costly, wasteful land war.

So this is why they call it a shadow war...

Sara gulped.

Even if they only counted the confirmed kills, Corpse was still an assassin who'd murdered dozens of people the world over. That body count didn't just include their targets—they often killed the people around them so it wasn't clear who exactly they'd been after. And when they were trapped, they had no qualms about murdering innocent bystanders to get away.

They were a spy of the nastiest sort—the kind with no morals whatsoever.

That was who they were up against.

Sara was furious at their foe, but at the same time, she felt a chill rise up inside her that threatened to freeze her whole.

"Sara." Klaus called out her name. "Don't worry. As the Greatest Spy in the World, I swear I'll take down Corpse. There's no need to be afraid."

And with just that, the stiffness in her body evaporated.

The way he proudly declared himself the Greatest Spy in the World might have come across as childish, but the fact of the matter was, he had saved them time and time again.

Sara was a coward, and he was her bedrock.

Klaus, having finished what he'd come to do, nodded and turned toward the door.

"I—I...!"

The moment she saw his back, Sara blurted out. There was something she needed to tell him.

“I know it’s pathetic, but hearing that made me really relieved. Being relied on is nice and all, but to tell you the truth, I feel much safer knowing you’ve got my back...”

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“So, um, I think you should pay more attention to Miss Grete.”

Klaus turned around with a quizzical look on his face.

It was only after the words left her mouth that she realized what exactly she was trying to say. It was something that only a coward like her *could* say.

“What she’s doing takes a lot more courage than I think you realize.”

“.....”

Klaus said nothing, and his expression was even colder and more unreadable than usual. Eventually, he let out a quiet “I see” and left Sara’s room.



Five days after the first attack, there was another.

A gunshot woke Sybilla from her sleep. She dashed up to Uwe’s bedroom and found a broken window with glass everywhere.

Luckily, Uwe was alive. He was breathing heavily and holding his rifle. He was also firing it off into the darkness, but Sybilla put a quick stop to that.

“So the assassin’s back...”

They were back, but they’d also messed up.

The shot had come from outside, so they must have been trying to hit Uwe with either the bullet or the glass from the broken window. However, due to a recent furniture rearrangement, there was no way to get a clean shot on the bed through the window.

It was weird, though. How could an assassin that skilled have screwed up the same job not once but twice in less than a week?

The bullet was sitting on the floor.

Sybilla took a closer look at it.

It was a .25-caliber round, so the assassin must have been using a pretty small gun. Eyeballing it, though, the mansion was about a hundred feet from the tree line. Only an idiot would use a gun that small for a shot like that.

Had they not been shooting to kill? That didn't make sense, either.

She picked up the bullet with her handkerchief and pocketed it.

At that point, the other residents finally started showing up. The eminently forgettable secretary checked in on Uwe's condition.

"Why, I barely escaped with my life." Uwe let out a long breath. "And I have you to thank for it, White. If you hadn't moved my bed like you did, the broken glass would have cut me to ribbons."

Sybilla smiled. "Yeah, looks like you caught a lucky break."

Luck had nothing to do with it, of course. Sybilla had carefully considered the placement of the window and location of the nearby trees and arranged the furniture specifically to protect against attacks from outside.

"It was the man with the hideous scars again..." Uwe snorted. "Blast it all! Next time, I'll shoot the bastard dead!"

"Your nyctalopia's gotten better?"

"Thanks to you all cooking for me, I'm mostly recovered. The next time he shows up, it'll be his last."

Due to his last two weeks' worth of nutrient-dense meals, Uwe's symptoms had abated significantly. On its face, that was good news, but it would've been better if he didn't use it as an excuse to push himself so hard.

Sybilla stole the rifle away from him and hung it back on the wall.

"Bravery's good and all, Mr. Appel, but in situations like this, people usually just hire guards."

"Hmm. That might not be such a bad idea, but..."

Uwe crossed his arms in thought. He was weighing the danger he was in

against his hatred of wasting money.

From Sybilla's perspective, though, it would be a welcome turn of events. As long as whoever he hired turned up clean, adding more protection would only make their lives easier.

Suddenly, a voice rose up in protest.

"Oh, no, don't do that."

It was Olivia's. At some point, she'd gotten behind them.

"We don't know who this assassin is, so I have to say, I'm against bringing more outsiders into the mansion. I'm scared, Mr. Appel."

She made her case persuasively, pressing on Uwe with every word and huddling up to his side.

"And also, don't you think it would be best if we dismissed the outsiders who just showed up, too?"

Sybilla took a step forward in protest. "What're you talking about?! I was the first one to even—"

"It seems like you three don't get scared of anything. Why is that, I wonder?" Olivia's voice trembled with fear. "You were all so brave during the first attack, but why? Are you used to this kind of thing? Why? Was it really a coincidence, you moving the bed like that?"

"....."

"Don't you think we should at least do another round of background checks on them, Mr. Appel? For example, we could start by inspecting their personal effects..."

Olivia squeezed Uwe's arm against her clothes, gazing at him from so close she could have kissed him if she were so inclined.

Uwe faltered again. He was torn between his suspicious nature and the trust he'd come to place in his new maids.

Sybilla struggled to come up with an answer. If Uwe started to have misgivings about their backgrounds, he might drive them out of the mansion

altogether.

Olivia smiled triumphantly.

“That’s—”

“Be careful, ma’am...”

But right as Sybilla was about to respond, someone behind her offered a helping hand.

“...it’s dangerous to pick up glass with your bare hands like that.”

It was Grete.

It wasn’t clear when she’d gotten there, but she was watching them calmly as she cleaned up the broken glass.

Olivia silently returned her gaze. Her expression was as cold as ice, and she seemed almost annoyed. However, she soon broke into a smile.

“...You’re absolutely right, and I even cut my finger. I should go wash it off.”

With that, she opened her right hand.

A shard of glass just over an inch long tumbled to the ground.

She stepped away from Uwe with boredom on her face and headed to leave the bedroom.

The moment she passed Grete, the two of them glared at each other.

“.....”

“.....”

What did it mean?

Nobody else was quite sure, Sybilla included. For the time being, she decided to just help clean the room.

As she did, she quietly asked Grete a question.

“When exactly did Olivia grab that glass?”

It was almost like she’d been using it as a concealed weapon.

For an expert, a shard of glass was more than enough to slit someone’s

carotid with. And not only was it useful as a weapon of last resort, it was also easy to explain away if anyone pressed them as to why they were carrying it.

There was no doubting it—that was a spy technique.

“She was right behind me, and I didn’t notice a thing. If she wanted to, she coulda—”

“Sybilla,” Grete replied gracefully. “For now, just focus on your maid work.”

The wheels in her head were already turning.

Despite her request, though, there was one thing Sybilla had to know.

“What’s Teach say to do?”

“...He said that he trusted my judgment.”

Sybilla’s eyes went wide. “He left you in charge of *everything*?”

Grete gave her a small nod, then busied herself with the cleaning.

Sybilla hadn’t expected that. She knew that Klaus was leaving *some* of the decisions to their on-the-ground discretion, but she’d had no idea just how much responsibility he was entrusting to Grete.

“.....”

She stole a glance at Grete’s face in profile. Her expression was lifeless. Physical strength had never been Grete’s strong suit, and the built-up anxiety was clearly eating away at her.

And by the way, where the hell is he?

She glared off at nowhere in particular.



In the end, they didn’t finish the cleaning until late that night.

Grete rubbed her temples as she headed back to her room. She had a pounding headache, probably thanks to working day and night without rest. If she wasn’t careful, she might well pass out on the spot.

However, she couldn’t afford to let her guard down.

There were too many things she needed to think through.

In all likelihood, she won't make her move just yet. If she does, the suspicion it would put on her would do her more harm than good. I can tell how much she hates me, but she should be too scared of the boss to try anything...

Grete had asked Sara to look into Olivia's passport records.

She had been born in a small eastern nation, and she often took extended vacations from her work at Uwe's to travel abroad—vacations whose destinations all overlapped with the sites of suspected Corpse kills.

Furthermore, the victims were politicians. It stood to reason that she used information she took from Uwe to get close to them.

The problem is: I still don't have a firm grasp on her abilities... I wanted to observe her response to the attacks and use that to slowly piece together a picture of her talents, but any more would be pushing it...

The finale was fast approaching.

They were at the point where the tiniest decision could make or break the mission.

If she made one wrong move, people she cared about would die.

“.....”

That realization was like a vise squeezing on Grete's heart.

This was the burden Klaus bore. If this was the alternative, she could hardly blame him for wanting to complete all their missions solo.

He had been constantly conflicted during their last Impossible Mission, and now she had firsthand experience as to why. Up until then, she had never realized what a scary thing choosing to rely on her teammates really was.

She was hardly sleeping.

After all, every second she slept was another second she wasn't spending refining the plan.

She could barely eat.

After all, what if a crisis struck while she was savoring her food?

Her feet felt heavy. She knew that if she wasn't careful, she was liable to collapse. And if she did, she wasn't confident she'd be able to get back up.

Suddenly, her foot got caught on a snag in the carpet. She nearly toppled over forward, but someone caught her.

"Hey, Grete."

It was Lily.

As she held Grete's shoulder, Lily studied her companion with worry in her eyes. They were right in front of the servants' rooms. Had she been waiting for her there?

"Are you okay? C'mon, let's get you into my room so you can rest."

"I apologize, but I only tripped." Grete quickly pulled herself off of Lily. "A little rest in my own bed, and I'll be as good as—"

"No, no, no. You look like you need another massage. Don't worry; I'll knead you up till you're squooshy as a jellyfish."

Unwilling to take no for an answer, Lily corralled Grete into her room. She was the stronger of the two, and Grete had little recourse but to let herself get pushed along in.

However, part of her was a little bit glad.

That last massage Lily gave her was the real deal. Setting aside the stinging comments Lily made about her body, it had made her feel a lot— That hesitation proved to be her undoing as Lily murmured something odd. "Got you."

"...Huh?"

By the time Grete realized what was going on, it was too late.

"SECURE THE TARGET!" Lily bellowed.

As she clamped a hand over Grete's mouth, Sybilla appeared seemingly out of nowhere. She must have been hiding by the door. Grete tried to struggle her way to freedom, but Sybilla grabbed her arms to prevent that. "Quiet, now," she whispered in Grete's ear like a mugger threatening her victim.

Eventually, they succeeded in pinning her down on Lily's bed.

"Hyurk," she grunted feebly.

Sara was already waiting beside the bed. She hopped up and sat on Grete's legs. Sybilla had her right arm, and Lily had her left.

She was completely trapped.

"...May, um...may I ask what this is about...?"

"We're mercilessly interrogating the enemy." Lily's voice was stern. She pulled out a large paintbrush.

Then she started using its bristles to tickle the back of Grete's neck.

"~~~~~"

No matter how much she writhed, there was no escape.

"We have no sympathy to spare for the enemy."

"D-didn't you say just yesterday that we would always be friends...?"

"That was a lie," Lily stated firmly.

And oh, what a cruel lie it was.

As Grete glared bitterly at her, Lily reached for Grete's skirt.

Then, with a whoop, she tore something off of it and showed it to her.

It was a small, button-like device. Grete recognized it immediately. "You bugged me...?"

"Heh. You thought you'd be able to play me for a fool forever; well, think again."

It was the same type as the kind they'd installed throughout the mansion.

Lily must have planted it while she was giving her that massage the previous night. In other words, she already knew exactly what Grete was up to.

Lily smiled smugly. "The scarred man—that was you in a disguise, wasn't it?"

Sara's and Sybilla's eyes went wide with surprise. ""What?"" Apparently, they'd attacked her without even knowing why.

Grete was a little bit shocked.

She always assumed she would get exposed eventually, but she never imagined that Lily would be the first to figure it out.

She considered silence as an option, but then the brush ran back across her neck. “~~~~~!”

This wasn’t an interrogation. This was torture.

She sighed. “...All right, I surrender... You’re right, it was me all aloloololo~~~~~!”

Even when she tried to confess, though, she found herself getting tickled yet again.

Lily looked down at the brush in wonderment. “Wow, this is fun. So? Why’d you do it?”

“...I was going to tell you, but then I got interrupted.”

“Yeah, but your reactions were so cute I couldn’t help myself.” Lily didn’t sound even a little bit ashamed.

Luckily, that helped Grete stop feeling guilty about tricking her teammates, too.

“By pretending to be an assassin, it let me observe the staff’s reactions... That way, I could find out who had taken special training...”

That was right—Grete was the one who took those shots at Uwe and Olivia.

When gunshots rang out, trained spies instinctively braced themselves. They would pretend to be scared, but at the same time, they would also do what they had to so they didn’t get targeted. Grete had been checking to see if anyone nearby had done something like that.

It was pretty much the same as the trick Uwe himself had used. In his case, though, he acted too erratically—erratically enough that even trained spies got legitimately scared.

Lily smiled a haughty, knowing smile.

“I think it’s about time, don’t you? Time you told us what’s *really* going on

with this mission.”

“...I can’t. This burden is mine to bear.”

“Y’know, Grete, you’re pretty incredible. At the end of the day, none of us were able to tell Teach that we wanted to help lighten his load.” Lily gave Grete’s hand a squeeze.

“But I’ll say this—we want to help lighten yours.”

When Grete looked into her gentle eyes, she finally realized how Lily had seen through her disguise. She had been carrying out her role as the leader and paying attention to when her teammates were suffering.

Or maybe it was the other way around.

Maybe, despite the self-centered facade she put on, she really did care about her teammates—and that was why she’d been named leader in the first place.

Sybilla followed Lily’s declaration with a “Yeah, that goes ditto for me,” and Sara nodded along. “Me too.” Their eyes were full of kindness.

Meanwhile, Grete’s eyes were filling with tears.

She might not have been able to meet up with the man she loved, but she never realized she had friends who cared so much about her.

Her mouth started moving on its own.

“All right, hear me out. The target, Corpse, is—”

But before she could finish, she heard something.

“So you kids were spies after all.”

The voice was completely void of emotion.

She’d cloaked her presence perfectly. Doing so was a skill that took considerable training—assassin training.

Hearing her speak was as unsettling as the feeling of a hand squeezing their hearts.

“Screw this. No more cloak-and-dagger.” The voice was coming from by the doorway.

Olivia peeked in through the small gap between the door and the wall.

Then she lobbed something through it.

A grenade.

“The window!” Grete shouted.

Sybilla was the first to act.

She grabbed Sara by the collar and gave Lily a swift kick in the rear toward their only way out of the room. Grete, now free, followed after them.

Sybilla smashed the window open with a single kick, and the four of them leaped out.

They barely had time to get around the wall before the blast came.

Flames billowed from the window, followed by shards of glass and chunks of furniture. Sybilla had grabbed a suitcase on the way out, and she used them to protect her teammates from the shrapnel. Thankfully, they’d put enough distance between themselves and the window to avoid any serious harm.

However, the unsettling voice rang out once more.

“Round two.”

Another grenade came falling toward them from overhead.

It was like she’d known exactly what escape route they’d take. Grete’s mind turned as fast as it could, but she couldn’t come up with a single way for them to escape the blast.

Right before the grenade went off, though, something swooped toward them from above.

A hawk.

After appearing out of nowhere, the hawk—Bernard—deftly snatched the grenade out of the air with his talons. He was going to carry it off into the air, then drop it somewhere far away from his owner, Sara...but he let go a moment too late.

He was still right next to the grenade when it went off.

“——!”

Sara let out a wordless scream.

Blood sprayed through the air and splashed Grete in the face.

Shredded hawk feathers fluttered through the air.

Then what remained of the hawk crashed into the ground with an ignoble *thump*.

“Mr....Bernard...?” Sara could hardly get the words out.

Olivia didn’t launch any more follow-up attacks. She’d already fled.

Nobody had expected her to make her move so soon.

“Wh—?” Lily raised her voice. “Where’s Teach? We have to get him over here!”

Grete understood all too keenly how she felt.

There were no two ways about it—if Klaus had been there, then that sacrifice wouldn’t have had to happen.

“...He’s not here...”

However, the situation was far graver than the others realized.

“Huh...?”

“...The boss isn’t coming...”

She needed to tell them. She needed to reveal the true nature of their mission.

She needed to tell them about the heartrending decision the boss had been forced to make.

“...We have to win this battle on our own...”

Sybilla’s, Lily’s, and Sara’s expressions froze.

These were by no means the circumstances Grete had expected to reveal the big secret under.

But the fact of the matter was, the Greatest Spy in the World wasn’t with

them.

Chapter 4

Love and Assassination

Olivia ran.

A tangled mess of anxiety and frustration rolled around inside her as she drove her feet forward.

How could she have let that bitch figure out who she was?

As much as it stung having to give up a valuable position at a powerful politician's side, though, it was time to go. She needed to get away from that mansion, and she didn't have a second to waste. Barring a truly unforeseen turn of events, the three girls were dead. However, there was one foe still alive who she needed to avoid fighting at all costs.

Bonfire...

She'd only seen him once, but she knew exactly who that handsome, long-haired man was. He was the most fearsome spy in all of Din.

Now that she thought about it, *he* was probably the one who'd figured her out.

The role breakdown made sense—while Grete played the role of the assassin, Bonfire must have been on the sidelines observing how people reacted.

Olivia was originally from a small country to the east.

She didn't remember her original name anymore, but she remembered working as a backcountry hooker, and she remembered assuming that was all she'd ever be. She was reasonably successful at what she did, but without the money or the motivation to pursue any other sort of life, she resigned herself to eventually marrying one of her customers and dying alone and forgotten. Such was her lot in life.

Each time she sold her body, her heart and soul grew a little bit colder.

Then, one day, her life changed when a big-city politician came to her little town for a night of debauchery.

Between the customers and the girls, there were twenty-three people in her bordello that day—and all of them got gunned down.

Olivia was slow to realize what was going on. At the time, she'd been fast asleep in the back, and by the time the noise woke her, it was already over. Her small-town brothel had become a slaughterhouse.

A lone man stood beside the mountain of corpses.

The skin on his cheeks was sunken and thin—like a walking corpse.

“Oh, you're up. I used a silencer, but still, you've gotta have nerves of steel to sleep through something like that.”

Haggard as he looked, though, his smile was as sunny as could be.

“Now, I'm going to need you to jump out that window for me.”

“What...?”

“The story I'm thinking of going with is that you just snapped,” he explained unconcernedly. “Your john happened to have a gun on him, and you took it, went on a killing spree, and jumped to your death. I can't exactly go publicizing my assassinations, you know.”

The sight laid out before her was utterly unthinkable, but for some reason, Olivia was calm.

“Assassinations...? You had a reason you killed all these people...?”

“Nah, I was only after one. The others were just for cover.” He grinned. “If a politician alone died, people would suspect foul play. But with twenty other bodies on the pile? See, now that's just a random tragedy.”

Cover.

That was his sole reason for killing—massacring—nearly two dozen innocent people.

He raised his gun and walked toward Olivia.

Olivia retreated backward, but the room only went so far, and she soon found

her back to the window. It was open, and they were on the fourth floor. If she jumped, there was no guarantee she would survive.

“Come on, we don’t have all day. If you’re lucky, you might even live.” His voice was low and threatening. “If you don’t jump, I’ll shoot you and find someone else to do it.”

She glanced around. A few people were just barely holding on to life. They were her friends, the coworkers who’d shown her the ropes back in the day, the madam who took her in, and the regular whom she’d promised to marry. After seeing their shallow breathing, the final person she turned to was the assassin.

His gaze was cold and ruthless, like he was looking at a specimen in a jar.

When she locked eyes with him, Olivia felt a fire light up inside her.

He was *different*.

She had looked plenty of people in the eye in her day, but compared to him, they all seemed hopelessly boring.

It was like he was a prince on a white horse from some whole other dimension.

The heat in her head traveled all the way down her spine and into her legs, warming her frigid skin and coaxing her frozen heart into beating once more.

“Please, take me on as your apprentice.”

Her mouth moved on its own, and so did her arm. She reached for the man’s gun.

Thinking back, it was probably nothing more than a whim on his part, but he let her take it.

Once he did, she didn’t hesitate. She fired as he had, taking aim at her dying coworkers, madam, john, and friends and putting them down one after another. It was exhilarating. Although she had never held a gun before, her bullets struck true. She had a gift. And in all her life, she had never felt as alive as she did in that moment. She was a woman reborn.

When everyone was good and dead, she turned to the assassin and smiled.

“Take me away from here.”

He regarded her like she was some sort of strange creature, one that he didn’t quite know what to make of. Eventually, though, his lips curled into an amused smile.

That was the day she became an Imperial spy and the day she met Galgad’s master assassin Roland—code name Deepwater.

Thus began Olivia and Roland’s whirlwind romance.

He taught her how to deceive and how to kill, and together, they traveled the world earning huge paydays. Olivia would provide backup while Roland assassinated people, and when the occasion called for it, she, too, would take up arms. Dozens of people met their ends at the duo’s hands.

Each time they finished a mission, Roland would make love to her. He was an assassin skilled enough that he would later strike fear into the Republic as “Corpse,” and when Olivia thought about the fact that *she* was the one in his arms, it filled her heart with such joy she felt as though she might burst.

Her days were filled with slaughter, ludicrous amounts of money, and the sublime affection of the finest assassin there was.

She could never have obtained such luxuries back in her little nowhere town.

“There’s a man you need to watch out for.”

Eventually, once Olivia tempered her skills, Roland gave her a warning. She had recently begun working for the politician Uwe Appel, and she’d finally earned his trust and was using it to leak confidential information to the Empire.

Roland went on to tell her about the greatest spy in Din.

“I told you how our spies took out Inferno, right? The thing is, there’s this one guy who gave them the slip. They tried to lure him in with a bioweapon so they could assassinate him, but that went south, too. If there’s anyone in Din you gotta be worried about, it’s this guy,” he explained, his face thin and haggard as it always was. “He goes by a lot of names—Bonfire, the Dust King, Ax, Lone, Practical, Crowbar—but the main alias he uses is Klaus. The good news is, we know what he looks like.”

He showed her a photograph.

From the angle, it must have been taken secretly. On it, there was an image of a relaxed-looking young man smiling. It appeared he was chatting with his family or something.

Whoever took the photo must have been close to him.

“Hey, I don’t get it,” Olivia asked as she seared the photo into her memory.

“Don’t get what?”

“This guy’s mentor double-crossed him, right? Why can’t we just kill him? We have his photo.”

“It’s not only his photo. We even know where the guy lives.”

“Then, that’s all the more reason to—”

“We tried. Everyone we sent got captured—by him, no doubt.”

Ah, Olivia realized. The man was using his own house as bait.

Because he knew that his location had been leaked, he was able to turn the whole place into one big trap.

Roland gave her a nod.

“If you ever run into him, contact me immediately.”

“Good idea. There’s no way a spy from a backwater country like Din could possibly hold a candle to—”

“No, that’s not it. That man’s on the same level I am.”

Olivia couldn’t believe her ears.

She knew exactly how outstanding Roland’s skills were. As far as she could tell, his assassination techniques were unrivaled anywhere in the world. The only spies who *might* be better than him were in Serpent, and even then, Olivia doubted that Roland would let himself be outdone by that team shrouded in mystery.

“I can feel it; this is destiny... Oh, how I’ve waited for this day. How I’ve waited for *him!*” Roland’s expression was downright exultant. “He and I, we could

become rivals. It's been so boring not having any real competition."

"Rivals...? You really think he's as strong as you?"

"Our relationship is gonna be long and storied. I can feel it in my bones."

Perhaps that was his intuition as an elite spy at work.

It certainly seemed fateful.

Even the man's code name, Bonfire, was symbolic. It was the perfect counterpart to Roland's code name, Deepwater.

Fire and water—two elements that could never coexist.

Roland reached for Olivia, and she readily slid into his arms. They exchanged a kiss.

"So please, my dear, watch out for him."

As he whispered in her ear, he handed her a brooch.

And so Olivia ran.

Now that her true nature had been exposed, she had no reason to stay in that mansion any longer.

She raced through the trees that surrounded it. Luckily for her, the moon was out. That was enough for a trained spy to run at full speed, even without a proper light source. If she could make it through the woods and into the mountains, that should be enough to keep her safe.

Fighting wasn't an option.

Not against someone whose strength was on par with Roland's.



"Fighting isn't an option. Not against someone whose strength is on par with Corpse's—"

"....."

"—is what Olivia is thinking right now, I'm sure," Grete finished in that demure voice of hers.

Sybilla and Lily stood beside her near the mansion and listened to her lay the situation out. The scent of gunpowder still wafted through the air. Uwe was shouting in confusion over in the courtyard, but this was no time to go talk him down. Explaining what was happening would be more trouble than it was worth, so they hid behind the building so he wouldn't find them.

"So that's what's goin' on, huh?"

After hearing Grete's explanation, all the pieces finally clicked together for Sybilla.

Now that she thought about it, there had been little hints all along.

"You're a goddamn powerhouse, you know that?"

"...That's very nice of you to say." Grete gave her a small bow.

"Wait, what's going on?" Lily broke in. She still wasn't totally following.

"Whaddaya mean, Teach isn't here? We've seen him loads of times around the mansion, and Sara's been meeting with—"

"That was Grete in disguise," Sybilla explained.

The assassin wasn't the only thing their fellow maid had pretended to be. She had played one other role as well.

"All those times we saw him here, that was all Grete."

Lily's eyes went wide. "What...?"

She had just seen through one of Grete's disguises, so the fact that she'd been duped so thoroughly came as quite a shock. It took her a moment to process it all.

The part she found the hardest to believe was the first attack. Grete would have had to disguise herself as the assassin, catch her and Sybilla in a trap, nonchalantly change into looking like Klaus, then come in and save them. The skills it would have taken to do all that in sequence were downright superhuman.

"Wow, you really got us good. And we even chatted from pretty close up, too," she remarked.

Grete laid a hand atop her chest.

“...I’ve memorized everything about the boss, from the rate he breathes and blinks at to every follicle of hair on his head.”

“Damn, powerhouse might be sellin’ you short!”

“Well, I do happen to be an *expert* at cross-dressing.”

“Wait, you’re still mad about that?”

Despite the sadness in Grete’s eyes, Lily didn’t miss a beat.

That was the sort of issue that might not be so easily forgiven, but for the moment, Grete simply summed up their situation.

“...Anyhow, the long and short of it is that the boss is somewhere far away right now.”

Sybilla had a pretty good idea of what Klaus was doing. “Hunting the assassin, right?” She gazed off into the distance. “The person to watch out for in the mansion wasn’t Corpse. It was Olivia—their partner.”

It was clear that Olivia and Corpse were two different people.

After all, she didn’t look anything like the description listed in their dossier. It was safe to assume that she was Corpse’s ally rather than Corpse themselves.

In that case, it was pretty easy to guess where Klaus had gone.

“Teach left Olivia to us, and he’s off fightin’ Corpse himself. That about sum it up?”

“It does.” Grete nodded.

The whole time they were talking, Lily’s gaze was darting every which way.

“So in the end, he went off to fight Corpse on his own after all? All that stuff about picking four of us was a lie, and he still isn’t willing to count on us for—”

Sybilla shook her head. “It wasn’t a lie. He picked four people just fine.”

Sure enough, he had picked the four strongest members of the team.

“He went after Corpse with four people in tow—everyone but us.”

Not counting them, there were exactly four members left on Lamplight—

Thea, Monika, Annette, and Erna.

The fact of the matter was, the four people who got “left behind” at Heat Haze Palace were the four he actually picked.

By that point, even Lily realized what had happened. She stood frozen in place with her mouth dangling open.

Sybilla let out a murmur, as much in response to Lily’s expression as anything. “Long story short, we didn’t make the cut.”

Sadness leaked into her voice. She couldn’t help it.

The other mission was the real one.

For all she knew, Klaus and the other four girls could be locked in fierce combat with Corpse as they spoke.

All that time, she had wondered why the four of them had been the ones to get picked despite their inexperience. As it turned out, the answer was as simple as could be—due to their inexperience, they hadn’t gotten picked at all. That was all there was to it.

“—Magnificent.”

The moment she reached that conclusion, a deep, echoing voice rang out.

Sybilla looked over and found Grete speaking in Klaus’s voice.

“—It’s me. I left this message for you with Grete beforehand. First of all, I’m sorry we had to deceive you. Tricking the enemy spy into thinking I was close at hand was the best method I had of protecting you. With any luck, that knowledge should have kept them in check.”

It was like listening to a voice recorder. Grete was replicating his voice perfectly from its tone to its pitch.

“—I’m also sorry I wasn’t able to take you on the mission with me, and I think I owe you each an explanation as to why.”

Sybilla and Lily gulped, then waited.

If they were going to make peace with this, they needed to hear what he had to say.

“—Starting with Sybilla, she sustained a serious injury to her right arm, so I was worried what would happen if I took her to fight Corpse. If she were in peak condition, I would have liked to take her along. It’s a shame, really.”

“.....”

“—As for Sara, the animals she commands are truly excellent at what they do, but I had worries about Sara’s resilience. I firmly believe that one day she’ll be ready to use her prodigious talents to their fullest, but that day hasn’t quite come yet.”

“.....”

“—And in Lily’s case, I think it goes without saying, but she makes too many blunders, and her skills fluctuate erratically with her mood. Her explosive talent and admirable mental fortitude are impressive, but I judged that Corpse would be a poor matchup for her.”

“.....”

Everything he pointed out was true.

Sybilla had no rebuttal to that. She bit down on her lip, hard.

Her smarts weren’t anything to write home about, and she knew it. Klaus may have had the decency not to come out and say it, but he probably thought of her as pretty useless in her injured state.

Beside her, Lily was pursing her lips and wearing a rare serious expression. She was going through the same indescribable vexation as Sybilla was.

Klaus hadn’t chosen them.

That realization weighed on Sybilla’s heart like lead.

She had no outlet for the emotions raging within her, but as the urge to vomit threatened to overtake her— “—However, your flaws weren’t the only things I looked at when making my choice.”

—Grete’s voice echoed loud and clear.

Sybilla raised her head with a start.

Grete’s voice picked up in volume, suggesting that this was the part Klaus

truly wanted them to hear.

“—The four of you are incredible at working together with your teammates, and situations that call for cooperation are where you truly shine. Now you’re up against Corpse’s disciple. They’ve probably inherited all of Corpse’s skills, and they won’t go down easy. When I was trying to decide who could face them in my absence, I knew it had to be you four.”

Klaus’s voice rang out strong as Grete delivered his conclusion.

“—Your mission is to take down the assassin’s apprentice without my help. I know you four are up to the task.”

Then she went back to her own voice. “...And that’s the end of the message.”

A small stream of air escaped Sybilla’s lungs.

It wasn’t a sigh. It was a laugh.

The message had resonated with Klaus’s unique brand of sincerity. Not once did he use the words *somehow or other* or *I just did*. She could only imagine how difficult it must have been for someone as ineloquent as him to put all of that into words.

But it makes sense...’Cause that’s the kinda guy you are, isn’t it?

He’d seen their inexperience and weakness, calmly thought the situation through, and guided them to where they needed to be.

Hell, that’s the reason I decided to stay on your team in the first place...!

Heat began bubbling up inside her.

She laughed again and licked her lips.

“Well, hey, no time like the present, right? This shit all started ’cause we were sick of riding that punk’s coattails, so we’d look like pretty big assholes if we couldn’t take down a single target on our own.”

Lily came in with an excited follow-up. “Hell yeah! I’m gonna make Teach regret the day he ever left Wunderkind Lily off his roster!”

Grete raised an eyebrow in surprise. “You know, I was afraid you two would feel down after hearing that, but...”

Sybilla and Lily exchanged a glance, then replied in unison.

““Nah, we’re all fired up.””

Sure, they hadn’t been picked to join the Corpse mission, but in a way, their current assignment spoke volumes about the faith he had in them.

The situation was all laid out. Now it was time for action.

They weren’t about to let Olivia escape.

“Lily and I’ll go after her. Grete, you’re in charge of comin’ up with a plan.”

Sybilla then shifted her gaze and gave an order to the girl crouching down a little ways away.

“...And, Sara, you keep handlin’ that first aid.”

“.....”

Sara didn’t reply; she was busy desperately trying to treat her wounded hawk.

Bernard managed to avoid the explosion, but he ate the shock wave head-on. His feathers were all mangled up, and there were chunks of shrapnel stuck in his belly. Sybilla couldn’t tell if he was going to make it or not.

For now, she knew it would be best to leave Sara to her work.

Right as they made to leave, though, Sara rose to her feet, rushed over to Sybilla, and handed her something.

“His, um! His name is Mr. Johnny. He’s good at tracking scents!”

It was a toy-size dog with beautiful chocolatey-black fur.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she stammered, “T-Teach was right, about how I wasn’t brave like you all, and right now all I want is to stay by Mr. Bernard’s side, and I know how pathetic that is, and I’m sorry that I can’t do more, but I —”

“You’ve done plenty. If you weren’t here, we would’ve all died, remember?” Sybilla patted her head. It was her way of promising to avenge Bernard.

Sara wiped her tears away under Sybilla’s gentle hand, then rushed back over to her wounded hawk.

“One last thing. Grete, did you and Olivia have some kinda beef?”

Lily seconded Sybilla’s question. “Yeah, I was wondering that myself.”

They didn’t know why, but it felt like there was some extra hostility there.

Grete shrugged. “...She asked me if she could ‘have’ the boss.”

Sybilla and Lily let out simultaneous laughs.

“Well, now we *definitely* gotta take her down.” “Yeah, who does she think she is?”

Olivia had probably just been joking.

If anything, though, it being a joke had only served to stoke the flames of Grete’s hatred.

The fact that they had a mission to finish and a country to serve were all well and good, but it was Klaus’s faith, Sara’s partner, and Grete’s love that were what truly roused the girls to action.

Sybilla and Lily ripped off their maid uniforms and quickly changed into the combat outfits they’d been hiding that whole time. There was no need to hide who they were anymore, and these were the outfits they felt most comfortable in.

Lily spoke first. “We don’t need Teach around to be great. Now, let’s get out there and prove it.”

Sybilla agreed. “She hurt our friends. Time to make her pay.”

The two spies smiled in fearless unison, then dashed into the forest.



Halfway into the mountains, Olivia leaned against a tree to catch her breath.

She’d made it more than half a mile from the mansion. Even if Bonfire found the girls’ corpses, not even he could track her that far.

She took a moment to check her tools.

All she had on her were a couple cigarettes, a lighter, two knives, and an

automatic pistol with eight bullets. It wasn't a lot to work with, but given how suddenly she had needed to get out of there, it was plenty. All she had to do now was get through the forest, make her way down to a city, mug some tourist for money and a passport, and flee back to Galgad.

She knew that she ought to lie low, but her desire to have a smoke ultimately won out.

The moment she lit up her cigarette, though, she heard a noise.

Something was scampering through the brush, leaving a trail of falling leaves in its wake.

It was probably a boar or a deer or something. Olivia stood at the ready with a knife in one hand and her gun in the other.

She could make out two sets of footsteps, the first of which was some small critter. But the second...was bipedal?

"It can't be..."

Had Bonfire found her?

Right as she started fearing the worst, though, a most unexpected individual made their appearance.

"Sup."

It was the white-haired girl—Sybilla.

She leaped out from behind a tree clad in a flexible outfit, then fired a shot without so much as hesitating.

Olivia quickly hid behind a tree, and Sybilla's bullet struck it dead-on. "You're not goin' anywhere."

Standing right beside her, there was a small black dog.

Was that how she tracked her? Olivia chided herself for her carelessness. She had no idea that the girls had brought animals with them.

But more importantly...

"You... You're still alive? That grenade should have killed you; how did you —?"

“Let’s just say I’ve got friends in high places. That was some sloppy work, not checkin’ your kills.”

“Clearly...”

“Lemme guess... You were scared shitless of a certain someone and wanted to get out ASAP, right?”

“.....”

Bull’s-eye.

The girl had read her like a book.

“You think we’re gonna call in the boss for the likes of you? I can take you down just fine on my own.”

“I see you don’t think much of me.”

They were having their little chat in a thick grove of evergreens.

There was about sixty feet between them, and most of it was obstructed by pine trees. Olivia would have liked to settle this with a shoot-out, but she couldn’t afford to waste her precious bullets on the girl.

She gripped her knife tight.

“I’ll admit I was wary of your boss, but that’s only because he earned Roland’s respect.”

“Roland?”

“The man you people called Corpse. I don’t ever want to hear that ugly name out of your mouth again.”

Back when she was eavesdropping on them, hearing that name from them really set her off. She refused to let them use that stupid code name any longer.

She heard Sybilla laugh from behind a tree. “You sure it’s okay to be tellin’ me his name?”

“Oh, it’s fine. It’s not like you’re going to be leaving these woods alive or anything.” Olivia lowered her center of gravity. “Roland didn’t mention any stuck-up brats I needed to be worried about.”

Olivia hated the mouthy white-haired girl, clumsy silver-haired girl, and gloomy red-haired girl so much it made her sick. Perhaps, in her heart of hearts, she'd been hoping for an opportunity like this.

"That means you can die."

As the words left her mouth, Olivia leaped out from her arboreal cover. She faced the direction Sybilla was hiding and fired a shot.

Sybilla quickly returned fire, which told Olivia exactly where she was.

She closed the gap.

Sybilla fired a second and third shot at her as she did, but Olivia dipped and wove between the trees to block the bullets. A scrap of bark scratched her cheek, but that was all.

The only bullet Olivia used was for her initial shot across the bow. There was no need for her to waste any more just to kill some kid.

"Roland is the greatest assassin there is." She smiled. "And as his apprentice, I've learned all his techniques."

She stowed her gun in her leg holster, leaving her hand free.

She was practically on top of Sybilla now. Sybilla continued trying to get a bead on her, but it was too late. Guns were useless at that range. Overreliance on firearms was a classic amateur move.

Olivia swung her knife and knocked Sybilla's gun out of her hand.

As she did, she curled her empty hand into a fist and slammed it into Sybilla's face. Her light body crumpled easily, and she tumbled down the mountain slope.

Olivia could feel that she'd gotten a solid, clean hit in.

The girl was no match for her. After all, she was just a kid. She lacked the experience in spy-to-spy combat to put up any sort of real fight.

However, Olivia couldn't afford to waste any more time there. She needed to move in for the kill with her knife.

Sybilla lay on the ground, moaning in agony. It sounded like she'd hit her head

or something. “Dammit, I underestimated her,” she cried as she clutched her head in pain.

Olivia dashed toward her.

She swung her knife at Sybilla’s fair, slender neck. She could practically see it—in a few seconds, the girl would be dead.

The next thing she heard was a cold, commanding voice.

“Man, you’re way dumber than I thought.”

Sybilla was gone.

The knife found nothing but empty air.

Huh...?

For a brief moment, Olivia’s mind went blank, but it wasn’t from the shock of having her guaranteed attack evaded.

It was from the eerie feeling that just welled up inside her.

Like the girl had literally vanished.

By the time she understood what was going on, she was already falling. Sybilla had swept her legs out from under her.

Olivia tried to break her fall, but when she reached backward to catch herself, Sybilla grabbed her arm and stopped her from doing so. Olivia slammed onto her backside, her arm still clutched in her enemy’s grasp.

She heard a cold voice above her.

“Sloppy.”

This was bad.

Right as Olivia realized just how grim her situation was, she felt the grip on her arm release and, at the same time, sensed a knife approaching her left shoulder. She rolled to the side, barely getting out of the way, but the knife found its mark in her back instead. Pain from the blood loss shot through her. It was hot. The wound wasn’t deep, but it was still a serious blow.

She hurriedly put some distance between herself and Sybilla.

Instead of immediately giving chase, Sybilla flashed her a confident smile.

“Maybe it’s ’cause he hasn’t been pulling his punches lately, but you just seem so *slow* by comparison.”

“.....” Olivia bit down on her lip for a moment, but she soon returned to her senses.

I can’t get shaken, not by someone like her. And besides, it’s not like I’m going to lose.

Sybilla’s speed had caught her by surprise, but that was nothing to lose her cool over. At long range, the advantage was hers.

She sacrificed her gun to go for that surprise attack, but...she couldn’t seal the deal.

Olivia wasn’t about to get fooled by the same trick twice.

And more importantly...

...how do you think you’re gonna beat me at long range without your gun?

She would have liked to conserve her bullets, but this was no time to be playing it safe.

She retreated backward to re-widen the gap between them.

Now they were at gun range instead of knife range. However, that turned out to be a careless blunder.

When she reached for the gun in her leg holster, she came up empty.

“What...?”

“Sorry, but if you’re lookin’ for the gun you had on your thigh...”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sybilla grin.

“...I just nicked it.”

In her left hand, she was holding Olivia’s gun.

She fired without a moment’s hesitation.



Lily made her way through the woods alone, running toward the gunshots she'd heard.

“Man, after all that hype together, she just went and ditched me...”

The two of them set out at the same time, but it didn't take long for Sybilla to leave her in the dust. She was simply far more athletic.

By the sound of it, Sybilla had already started fighting Olivia on her own.

She was pretty fired up about all this.

Makes sense, though. Fighting is what Sybilla does best...

On top of her tremendous athletic abilities, her sticky fingers could also steal just about anything.

Out of all the girls, Sybilla's close-quarters combat skills were second to none. If there was a one-on-one fight to be had, she was their go-to. That was what made her Lamplight's combat specialist.

Aside from actual monsters like Klaus and Guido, she could go head-to-head with almost anyone and come out on top.

“That albino orangutan really does shine when it comes to brute force, doesn't she?”

If the orangutan in question had been there to hear her, Lily's comment would have earned her a sucker punch.

Lily mused for a moment on whether she could pull off the same feat—

“...That's what makes her my right-hand gal.”

—and admitted defeat.

Oh, shut up.

In her head, she could almost hear a certain someone retorting, but she chose to ignore them.



The bullet grazed Olivia's cheek.

The realization that her beautiful face had been marred filled her with a boiling rage, but she knew that she needed to keep a cool head. Her very survival hung on the line.

She was too far from Sybilla to use her knife but too close to effectively dodge her bullets.

It was the worst possible distance.

She turned her back on Sybilla and ran at full throttle toward a large tree, taking an arcing path so as to make herself a harder target. She needed to put some distance between herself and that gun. Even a little would do. As she ran, dirt exploded by her feet, and branches shattered by her head.

Olivia had gone to great lengths to preserve those bullets, and now Sybilla was burning through them like there was no tomorrow.

She wanted to settle things then and there, which was understandable. It's what Olivia would have done in her shoes.

Olivia poured every ounce of technique Roland had taught her into running.

"Tch." Behind her, she heard Sybilla click her tongue.

Right as Sybilla fired her last bullet, Olivia made her way to safety behind the large tree.

In the end, the only bullet that hit her was the initial shot that grazed her cheek.

Is she really that bad a shot...? With a physique like that?

As relief at having survived her narrow brush with death flooded through her, doubts started creeping in as well. If their positions had been reversed, she could have shot her opponent dead with her eyes closed.

However, there was no good reason for Sybilla to let her escape on purpose.

Something feels off...

Then she remembered something.

And now that I think about it, why did she let go of me earlier...?

She thought back to Sybilla's surprise attack.

When Sybilla grabbed her arm, that should have been it. But for some reason, she released Olivia's arm right as she swung her knife.

"Sometimes, you're not in peak form. But that's true for the other guy, too." Roland's teachings ran back through her mind. *"Always pay attention to which hand your opponent's using."*

During their whole fight, Sybilla had *only ever used her left hand*.

A smile spread across Olivia's face. She strode out from behind the tree.

Sybilla was out of bullets. Olivia had nothing to fear.

And besides, even if she *did* have one or two left, she wasn't in any condition to use them.

"You know, you did a good job of hiding it as a maid."

Sybilla scowled, and Olivia laughed.

"But you're right-handed, aren't you? What, did you hurt it?"

"Tch."

At Sybilla's response, Olivia was sure of it.

The girl was in no state to fight.

Olivia was done being on the back foot. Now she knew that the gun was no threat to her.

All there was left to do was methodically corner the girl like the prey animal she was.

With pain on her face, Sybilla threw the gun down the mountain and readied a knife in her left hand. However, she didn't rush Olivia. Instead, she assumed a defensive position and inched backward.

Olivia charged her, and their knives clashed.

The moment the two blades met, Olivia fired a middle kick at Sybilla's abdomen. The attack was telegraphed enough that Sybilla was able to block it with her right arm, but doing so caused her to shriek in pain.

"How's this for dumb?"

“Rgh...”

“You put up a brave front; I’ll give you that!”

Next, she plunged her knife at Sybilla’s face.

Sybilla immediately blocked with her own knife, but Olivia succeeded in knocking it out of her hand.

“Oh my, what a shame. Was that your last weapon?”

“Preciate the concern, but...” Sybilla fell back, then smiled. “...I just nicked yours.”

She reached into her pocket and pulled out Olivia’s spare knife.

Once again, she’d stolen it in the blink of an eye.

“You filthy little pickpocket...”

Now Olivia was down to nothing but the knife she was holding.

However, that was plenty.

The situation had changed, and now there was no way she could lose.

Everything the girl did with her right arm was a bluff. Now that Olivia knew that, victory was hers.

“You might have my knife, but all that does is put us on equal footing. You really think that’s enough to beat me?”

“...Nah, better quit while I’m ahead.”

Sybilla spat on the ground, then turned around and ran. She was trying to make a break for it. Olivia hesitated for a fraction of a second—then decided to give chase.

She’d reevaluated Sybilla. Someday, she might pose a threat to the Empire, and Olivia was determined to put down anything that stood even the faintest chance of obstructing her beloved.

That, and also...

“You’re running toward a cliff, you know.”

“Wh—?”

Sure enough, Sybilla's escape was cut off by a sharp precipice.

Once they broke free of the pine trees, the two of them arrived at an open clearing. For Olivia, killing an amateur once they were cornered was child's play.

"Did you seriously not know that?" Olivia jeered. "See, I was taught to know the terrain around my mission site like the back of my hand."

"Yeah, well, I was taught to love my mission site like I would a baby."

"What does that even mean?"

"That's what I wanna know." Sybilla peered over the cliff and let out a small sigh.

The drop was short enough that you could make it down with proper equipment, but it would appear that the girl hadn't come prepared.

Olivia laughed. "You really are unloved, aren't you?"

"Say what now?"

"I realized it when I was talking to the crazy bitch, you know."

"...Just so we're on the same page, you're talkin' about Grete?"

"I realized how unloved you kids really are." Olivia laid a hand atop her chest. "Roland taught me everything he knows. What did Bonfire teach you?"

"...Nothin' really comes to mind."

"Has he ever made love to you, then?"

"Gah! I don't need that image in my head!"

"Roland's made love to me countless times. He's given me his heart, his skills, and anything else I asked for. And if there was something I didn't understand, he would take my hand and guide me until I did."

The girls could never dream of getting the kind of education she had.

Olivia tilted her body to the side. "It's thanks to that love that I know how to sense hostility."

The moment she did, a gunshot rang out, and a bullet whizzed past her.

Lily popped her head out of the trees, gun in hand. "See, this is why nobody

likes a natural.”

Apparently, she was still alive, too.

That meant it was probably safe to assume Grete had survived as well.

“Never would have taken *you* for a spy.”

“No-Longer-Pretending-to-Be-a-Maid Lily, at your service.” Lily had a gun in her right hand, but she was clutching something else in her left.

Amid the dark and the gloom, it gleamed in the moonlight.

It was a needle about four inches long, and its tip was wet with something—probably poison.

“This is where we get serious. You’re about to feel the wrath of the greatest tag team the world has ever seen.”

Lily grinned cheerily, and Sybilla readied her knife.

Given how well the two of them got along, Olivia could only assume that their coordination would be similarly tight.

No matter, though.

She had Roland’s teachings on her side.

“When you’re stuck in a two-on-one, open yourself up to get flanked.”

Olivia positioned herself directly between Lily and Sybilla.

Lily’s expression darkened. She couldn’t use her gun anymore. If she did, she ran the risk of hitting her own teammate.

Now all Olivia had to do was crush them in hand-to-hand combat.

For her opponents, a pincer maneuver should be the default play.

“Here we go!” Lily cried.

“Right there with you,” Sybilla shouted back.

The two of them were in perfect harmony.

Sybilla made the first move, brandishing her knife with her good left hand and charging in. Her speed made it hard to react to, but knowing that her right arm

was useless gave Olivia some breathing room.

She faced Sybilla and blocked the attack head-on.

The blow had way more weight to it than she'd expected—Sybilla must have put everything she had into that strike. Olivia's knife went flying.

"You're wide open!" Lily rushed at her from behind, telegraphing her attack for no good reason.

Unfortunately for her, though, she lacked Sybilla's reaction speed. All Olivia had to do was step to the side.

"Huh?"

"Ah—"

The girls didn't realize what Olivia had orchestrated until it was too late.

Lily's needle plunged deep—into *Sybilla's* thigh.

Sybilla's face went pale.

"You fuckin'...dumb...ass..."

It was clearly some serious poison.

Sweat gushed from Sybilla's pores, her body twitched, her eyes went out of focus, and her legs began wobbling.

"Thanks, kid. Nice work." Olivia laughed. "I have to say, you two are the worst tag team I've ever seen."

It was sad, really. Olivia leveled a casual kick at Lily's jaw.

The needle toppled out of her hand.

Olivia snatched it up, then ran her finger along its tip.

The moment she did, her skin felt like someone had set it on fire.

"This is some potent stuff."

Anyone who got a dose of that poison wouldn't last long.

"Sorry, but a certain someone stole all my weapons. This'll have to do."

"G-give that back—"

“That’s the plan.” With that, Olivia stabbed the needle all the way into Lily’s arm.

Lily’s face went as pale as Sybilla’s had. Her breath turned to ragged gasps, and the strength drained from her legs.

“W-water... I need...w...,” she mumbled incoherently.

“You can try running, but all you’ll find is a cliff.”

The girl was no match for her.

Lily tottered over to Sybilla, who was just as out of it as she was, and leaned against her for support.

That was enough to send them both toppling over the edge.

Olivia checked just to be sure, but it was too dark for her to make out their corpses.

However, there was no need for her to go all the way down and see for herself.

Not only had they taken full doses of that deadly poison, they’d also fallen off a cliff over a hundred feet high. Nobody could have survived that.

This time, they were dead for sure.

The battle was over, and Olivia was its undisputed victor.

It’s weird, though...

Now that she’d successfully put the girls down, a question began nagging at her.

Why did those two risk their lives fighting me when they could have just sent in Bonfire...? They should have known how outmatched they were. Why throw their lives away?

Originally, she had assumed that Bonfire was waiting in the wings close by, but now...

That first time I saw Bonfire, there was someone missing... Someone good at disguises... Someone with a good build for cross-dressing with...

It didn't take her long to reach a conclusion.

"...Bonfire isn't even here."

In that case, there was nothing to be afraid of.

I get it... They knew there was an Imperial spy, and they wanted to put them on guard.

Now that she knew the trick, she couldn't help but laugh.

How embarrassing, running away with her tail between her legs. She almost screwed everything up.

"Don't worry, crazy bitch. I'll put you out of your misery."

Lily and Sybilla were dead. All she needed to do now was kill Grete.

Then, there wouldn't be anyone left who knew her secret.

It was time for her to settle the score with that little redhead.



Two girls lay prone at the cliff's base.

The white-haired girl's tongue dangled sadly out of the side of her mouth as she lay on the ground unconscious. She was still alive, as evidenced by the convulsions that racked her body every so often, but even those were slowing in frequency.

Meanwhile, the silver-haired girl lay completely motionless. She was facing up, and her eyes were closed as though she were asleep. She hadn't removed the needle, so it was still stuck deep in her arm, and yet all of a sudden— "Upsy-daisy!"

—Lily sat right up.

After checking to make sure nobody was watching her, she reached over and got to work on her prone partner. She pulled out an antidote, jabbed it into her, forced some water down her throat, and began slapping her cheeks with gusto.

"Heya."

Sybilla's eyes snapped open. "GAAAH! I thought I was dead there—"

Halfway through her cry, though, she flopped back onto the ground and vomited. The twitching in her legs meant that she wasn't going to be standing up anytime soon.

"Funny you should say that; the poison pretty much put you in suspended animation. You're gonna want to take it easy for a bit."

"Blarrgh..." Sybilla continued expelling the contents of her stomach. "What about you...?"

"I took the antidote ahead of time, and I'm pretty resistant to this stuff to begin with." Lily flashed her a peace sign. "Still...I'm not gonna be running any marathons for a bit, either."

Lily had an inherent resistance to poison, and she was the one who grabbed Sybilla as they fell and took care of the landing. Midway down, she hooked a wire into the cliffside to slow their fall.

"Seriously, thanks. If we kept fighting her up there, she'd have put us both in the ground." Sybilla took the water bottle and gulped it down. "And good thinkin', preparing a poison to use on your teammates."

"Remember back when I stabbed Teach on accident? That's when I came up with the idea."

"That's kinda messed up." Sybilla stared up the cliff face.

"You think she fell for it? In a perfect world, I woulda liked to get a couple more hits in..."

"Yup, everything's going according to plan. Olivia's heading back to the mansion as we speak."

Lily and Sybilla had played their roles with aplomb.

Their job had been to fight Olivia, then "die" right in front of her.

When Sybilla stole all her weapons, it had lured her into using Lily's poisoned needle. Once Olivia watched them get poisoned and fall off the cliff, it had convinced her that they were well and truly dead.

Furthermore, it clued her in to the fact that Klaus wasn't there.

"She's kinda slow on the uptake, isn't she? I mean, come on. Not even I'm dumb enough to yell 'You're open' when I attack."

"You do, though. All the time."

"Ah, I see you've fallen for my elaborate ruse. I only pretend to be a klutz day in and day out."

"Pretty sure you're just a klutz." As she offered Lily a weak comeback, Sybilla sat up.

Their work was done. The rest was up to Grete.

Even if they wanted to help, it was going to be a while before they could even walk again. All they could do now was pray for their teammate's success.

"...Is Grete really gonna be okay, you think?" Sybilla turned and looked at Lily. "She's not exactly great in a fight. How's she planning on beatin' Olivia?"

Grete was a thinker, not a fighter. If you lined all the Lamplight girls up by combat prowess, she'd be closer to the back of the line than the front.

There was no way she could beat Olivia in a fair fight. She'd get slaughtered.

However, Lily's reply was downright optimistic.

"Eh... I'm sure it'll all be fine."

"C'mon," Sybilla replied exasperatedly. "This is serious—"

"Think about her resolve," Lily quietly elaborated. "She didn't just pretend to be Teach, she took over all the planning, guiding, leading, moral support, and coming up with a plan to take down the target stuff he would have done, too. How could someone with the heart to do all that *possibly* lose?"

Sybilla clenched her fists. She knew all about Grete's resolve.

After all, taking the place of the Greatest Spy in the World? Sybilla had to be impressed at the sheer audacity of the idea.

"Look, no one's sayin' she isn't a badass," Sybilla replied. "But the fact is, she didn't have much stamina to begin with, and the last time we saw her, she was barely standing."

If Lily hadn't caught her, Grete might have collapsed right then and there.

And yet even so, her voice had rung with confidence.

"If Olivia comes back to the mansion, I'll finish her myself."

Exhausted as she was, she still planned on facing Olivia alone.

Lily let out a heavy sigh. "Well, all we can do now is trust in our fearless tactician."

Then she looked toward the direction the mansion lay and smiled a gentle smile.

"Bring it home, girl. Win Teach's praise. Win his love."



The sound of gunshots echoing through the forest made it all the way to Grete.

Sybilla and Lily were fighting.

It wasn't clear how strong their foe was, but the fact of the matter was that Olivia was an active-duty spy. The difference in talent between her and a bunch of amateurs like them who'd only just provisionally graduated was no doubt immense.

The best-case scenario would be for Sybilla to take her down, but Grete knew better than to hope for that. Given how injured Sybilla was, Grete had had her doubts about sending her in at all. However, Sybilla hadn't so much as hesitated before valiantly charging into the fray, and Grete would forever be thankful to her for that.

Soon, though, Olivia would be back.

Grete had made all the necessary preparations to face her, but as confident as she was in herself, her fears refused to subside.

This is the weight the boss has been shouldering this whole time...

She drew up the plan in Klaus's place.

She gave the orders in Klaus's place.

And now she was going to battle their foe in Klaus's place, too.

It was only after she first stepped into his shoes that she truly appreciated the responsibilities he bore.

Each one piled onto her in turn and pushed her body that much closer to its breaking point.

...Imagine how nice it would be if I could just throw it all away and flee.

She clutched her fountain pen charm tight as she thought back to one of their last conversations.

"Our opponent this time is a fearsome assassin, so I'm taking the four strongest members of the team with me to keep the danger to a minimum. Meanwhile, I want you to take the remaining three members, root out the assassin's accomplice, and defeat them. Do you think you're up to it?"

When Klaus had asked her that, Grete gave her response on the spot. "Of course."

She was ready.

Ready to do whatever it took to become someone the boss could rely on.

Now, though, her resolve was wavering.

An endless torrent of fear gushed up from the deepest, darkest part of her soul.

All she could think about was how terrifying it was. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying.

She wished Klaus was there with her. She wanted him to protect her. To save her.

She wanted him to wrap her trembling shoulders in an embrace and never let her go.

I want to just... I want to run away...

But in the end, it was Klaus's words that stopped her.

"Don't hesitate to run away."

His expression had been so gentle.

“If you do, I’ll handle everything. I don’t know how, exactly, but I’ll find you. It’ll be fine. Even if it means I have to cut down to two hours of sleep a night, I promise you, I’ll—”

Unable to stand listening to any more of that, Grete shook her head.

“...I won’t run.”

She summoned up her strength and roused herself from her nervous stupor.

If I run away now, the boss will only overexert himself again...

She could envision exactly what would happen.

In order to save his team, and in order to protect the nation his family loved, he would shoulder the burden all on his own.

He talked a big game about being the Greatest Spy in the World, but even he was only human. Sooner or later, exhaustion would get the better of him.

And when it did, he would die, just like his old team before him.

...That’s why I have to stand and fight.

It didn’t matter who her foe was. She had her promise with Klaus to give her strength.

“Would it be all right if I made a small request...?”

Right before departing for her mission, Grete asked Klaus for a favor.

“After the mission, if I’m able to complete it successfully, would you hold me in your arms...?”

Klaus frowned.

It was clear that he was agonizing over how best to respond. It was a rare sight, seeing him so flummoxed.

Grete smiled.

“It doesn’t have to mean anything. I just wanted something I could lean on when things get rough...”

Klaus quickly picked up on what she meant. “It’s a promise, then.” His eyes

were honest and sincere. “After you come back alive, I’ll hug you as hard as you like.”

After hearing that, Grete felt like she could do anything.

Her legs stopped trembling. She clutched her fountain pen tight and looked forward with her head held high.

Then she heard footsteps.

When she turned around, she saw Olivia.

The time for reminiscing was over.

Olivia stood atop the roof holding a small knife.

“What’s with that face? Were you waiting for me?”

Their strategy had been to have Sybilla steal all her weapons. Grete doubted she had failed in her task, meaning Olivia must have kept a spare in her bedroom.

Olivia smiled confidently. “I killed Sybilla and Lily.”

Their plan worked. Olivia fell for it.

Grete didn’t have any way of knowing that for sure, but she chose to believe it anyway.

“Once I kill you, there won’t be anyone left who knows my secret.”

“Won’t there? Who’s to say I haven’t already told Mr. Appel the truth?”

“Maybe you did; maybe you didn’t. Either way, I’m sure I can convince one lousy old man.” Olivia ran her tongue over her lips, then switched her knife to a backhand grip and approached Grete.

Grete steadied her breathing. They were on the roof. There was nowhere to run.

It was time to put this mission to bed.

Klaus was going to fight Corpse, and when he did, he would win.

Grete wasn’t about to let herself be beaten, either.

“All right.” Olivia lowered her center of gravity. “Let’s dance.”

“...Just as I expected.”

Grete put the fountain pen in her pocket and pulled her gun out in its place. Due to her weak body, she used a smaller pistol than the other girls did. She cocked it and immediately fired.

However, Olivia was faster.

She threw her knife with unerring accuracy, and it slammed into the side of Grete’s gun, throwing off her aim and making her shot go wide.

As Olivia charged toward her, Grete activated her trap, and an arrow came flying straight at Olivia’s blind spot. It was all but silent. Given that her foe was listening for a gunshot, Grete doubted she’d be able to hear it.

“Nice try,” Olivia scoffed. She dodged to the side and evaded the arrow coming at her from behind.

It flew off the roof and soared into the darkness.

Grete groaned.

Olivia had the same elite spy skill Klaus did—the ability to sense when hostility was being directed at her. If Grete wanted to beat her, she would need an attack that was completely unpredictable—either that or one that was impossible to dodge, even if she saw it coming.

Failing that, it would come down to hand-to-hand combat.

Olivia was already in melee range. Grete shifted her fingers on her gun, then swung its grip at Olivia’s head like a hammer.

Once again, though, Olivia was faster. She kicked Grete hard in the side, then buried her fist in Grete’s gut before she had time to recover.

Grete’s gun slipped from her hand as she crumpled to her knees.

She was no match for Olivia.

All of Olivia’s moves were simply too fast for her. Nothing she did made any difference.

By the time she so much as started an attack, Olivia was already in the process of finishing one.

Grete was outclassed, plain and simple.

She raised her head to try to stand up, but Olivia was already right there in front of her. She grabbed Grete by the throat.

Unable to breathe, Grete let out a weak moan. She grabbed Olivia's arm, but she wasn't strong enough to loosen its grip. She tried kicking, but that accomplished just as little.

"You're finished. How anticlimactic." Olivia mercilessly squeezed down on her neck. "Did you seriously not realize how stupid it was to attack someone stronger than you head-on?"

"....."

"Oh, I see. That teacher of yours didn't teach you squat. Tough break, huh." Olivia loosened her grip.

Grete broke into a coughing fit as she collapsed onto the roof. A little longer, and she would have suffocated.

She wasted no time in reaching for her fallen gun, but Olivia put a stop to that by stomping down on her hand.

"Wasn't disguises your thing?" She pressed down with her boot. "I have to ask, how were you planning on beating me? I don't care who you are; nobody can put on a mask in under ten seconds, and it takes up both your hands to do it. Nobody could do that in a fistfight. I mean, someone with your skill set? You lost the moment you let it come down to a one-on-one."

Olivia picked up Grete's gun—her sole weapon.

"But you know what? I'm a nice gal, so I'll give you one last chance." She pointed the gun straight at Grete. "Jump."

"...Jump?"

"That's right. Jump off the roof. Now."

Before Grete had a chance to respond, Olivia grabbed her by the collar and hoisted her to her feet with the gun still trained on her. She shoved her toward the roof's edge.

Grete only barely managed to stop herself from teetering over it.

Down below, she could see the brick-laid courtyard. They were probably a good forty feet up.

“It’s only a three-story drop. If you’re lucky, you might even survive.”

“So...you want to make it look like I killed myself...?”

“It’s easier for me that way. Then I can pin Lily and Sybilla on you, too.”

Grete felt Olivia press the gun against her back.

It was lined right up with her heart. It might not have been the strongest gun around, but a point-blank shot would still be plenty lethal.

“Time to make a choice. Either let me shoot you dead here and now or bet everything on a leap of faith.”

“You horrible...”

“Put your hands in the air and step forward. If you don’t, I’ll shoot.”

The words had a well-worn tone to them. This wasn’t the first time she’d given that speech.

If you resist, you get shot. If you jump, you might survive.

When presented with those two options, just about anyone would pick the latter, and the whole incident would get handled as a suicide. Nobody would be able to prove that the victim had been murdered.

That brutal assassination method had served Corpse and Olivia well.

A small whimper escaped Grete’s throat. “.....”

She bit down on her lip and raised her hands.

After that display of nonresistance, she did as instructed and took a step toward the ledge.

Olivia followed her forward and kept the gun pressed against her back. “There you go, just like that.”

She had no intention of letting Grete escape.

The next step Grete took would send her plummeting to her doom. Hitting

the bricks below would shatter her bones and crush her heart.

Olivia had called it a leap of faith, but with a fall like that, no amount of faith would be enough to save her.

Grete hadn't done any of the necessary preparations to survive a fall like that, and even if she did have some trick up her sleeve, Olivia would have a clear shot on her from the roof anyway.

"This is your lucky break, you know."

Behind her, Olivia laughed.

"Once you're dead, your teacher will finally love you. As your superior, I'll make sure to attend your funeral and tell them all about what a good, hardworking maid you were."

In Olivia's mind, her death was already a done deal.

Grete shook her head. Olivia had gravely misunderstood.

"...He won't love me. Not even if I die." Her mouth practically moved on its own. "I've known for a long time that the boss doesn't feel that way about me."

Olivia's voice rang with pity. "You lived a sad life, kid."

Grete shook her head again.

She told Olivia how she was wrong. How he'd made a promise to her—that if she came back alive, he would hug her.

"And that's why...I can't afford to die here..."

There was nothing to be gained in death.

There was no hope, no salvation, and no paradise waiting in the grave. And there certainly weren't any happily ever afters.

She needed to keep going.

No matter how hard the mission was, and no matter how inescapable her destiny was, she needed to stay alive.

She needed to survive until she'd won his love.

"...I have to live on if I want the boss to hold me in his arms."

“Well, tough luck. This here’s the end of the line. Try all you like, but you’ll never beat me!” Olivia pressed the gun into her skin.

Grete’s body tilted all the way forward.

“Now, get it over with and jump already!”

Grete felt almost weightless as her body began falling toward the ground.

But then she heard it.

A gunshot.

She immediately wrenched her body to the side.

The shot grazed her shoulder, shredding her sleeve and casting its scraps into the air.

Behind her, Olivia let out a dumbfounded cry. “Wh—?”

The bullet was buried deep in Olivia’s collarbone.

The force of the impact sent her flying backward.

At the last moment, Grete grabbed on to the edge of the roof. A second later, and she would have plunged to her death. After hauling herself back up to safety, she took a look at her foe.

The bullet had shattered her collarbone, placing heavy pressure on her lung and throat. Blood flowed from Olivia’s mouth as she lay prone atop the roof. She desperately pressed her crimson, drenched arm against her chest to try to stem the bleeding, but blood continued gushing from the wound.

That one shot had completely turned the tables.

“H...ow...?” she spluttered from facedown.

Grete could tell exactly what she was thinking.

“Why didn’t I sense any hostility?”

The thing was, Grete had learned a thing or two from her battle against Klaus. Surprise attacks didn’t work on elite spies. They had a keen sixth sense for when hostility, malice, animosity, and even goodwill were being directed their way.

Once she knew that, she could work around it.

“...Just as I expected.” Grete stood over the woman before her. “If anyone has a right to complain about an anticlimax, it’s me. After all those backup plans I made, you went and stole Corpse’s playbook word for word—trying to make me jump to my death.”

Then she mimicked her foe’s loathsome voice. “Oh, I see.”

“You only know how to do exactly as you were taught.”

“Gack...” Olivia coughed up more blood. “But I couldn’t sense...anyone coming after me...”

“You’ll understand soon enough.”

No sooner had the words left Grete’s mouth than they heard a bellow from down in the courtyard.

“YOU WON’T GET AWAY WITH THIS FOREVER, ASSASSIN SCUM!”

The voice was Uwe’s.

He was downright livid at once more having had his dearest wish denied.

Olivia hurriedly lifted her head, and then her eyes went wide with shock.

“Of course you didn’t. That bullet was meant for me.”

Grete continued in a quiet murmur.

“I’m code name Daughter Dearest—now, let’s fill this time with laughter and tears.”

She gazed at her reflection in Olivia’s eyes.

She gazed at the scars.

They stretched across her face like an infestation, coloring it a shade of black so vile it inspired revulsion and disgust in any who saw it. She was as horrifying to gaze on as the most hellish of fiends.

Olivia let out a dumbfounded moan. “You used...a disguise...?”

It was clear from the look in her eyes that she desperately wanted to avert her gaze.

That was the point.

The scars had one purpose—to inflict an unforgettable mental blow on those who witnessed them.

That was why Uwe had recognized them so immediately.

“While it’s true I wanted to smoke you out, that wasn’t the only reason I appeared before Mr. Appel as an assassin twice over. I wanted him to be willing to shoot me on a moment’s notice.”

Furthermore, she also used the first and second attacks to gauge his marksmanship.

His accuracy during the first attack had fallen short of the mark she needed on account of his night blindness, but Sybilla’s hard work eventually paid off, and his shooting during her second attack was proof of that.

At that point, all Grete needed to do was lure him into position. When he saw her scarred face, he would shoot her on reflex, and when she dodged, the bullet would hit the person standing behind her—Olivia.

I took my “hostility-free needle” idea and refined it.

After she lost against Klaus, she went back to the drawing board.

Instead of clearing the area, she could incorporate the people nearby into her plan.

And rather than using goodwill in hostility’s place, she didn’t leave anything for her foe to sense at all.

That was how she crafted the perfect weapon.

A magic bullet completely devoid of hostility, goodwill, or malice.

“It’s not...possible...”

The reality of Olivia’s situation had yet to sink in.

“...What isn’t?”



“The timing on your disguise... It doesn’t make sense! Your hands were in the air! You were helpless! I never gave you a chance to put on a mask!”

Olivia had stated earlier that nobody could put a mask on in under ten seconds. Even now, she had yet to escape that inside-the-box way of thinking.

Spittle flew from her lips as she raged. It was like she was trying to talk her way out of the outcome that had already transpired.

“What makes you believe I put on a disguise...?” Grete calmly asked her.

Olivia froze with her mouth hanging open.

Upon seeing her reaction, it became all too clear what fatal mistake she had made. Olivia had prided herself on figuring out that Grete was disguising herself as the assassin and as Klaus.

And in turn, that pride blinded her.

It tricked her into believing that the way Grete looked normally *was the way she looked without any disguise on at all*.

She never once realized that was exactly what Grete wanted her to think.

“I didn’t put on a disguise. Quite the opposite, in fact. I merely took one off.”

“What?”

“As I’m sure you’re aware, taking a mask *off* can be done in an instant.”

If one was so inclined, they could even do so by biting through it at the lip and ripping it off with their teeth, and they wouldn’t even need their hands to do so.

Olivia’s eyes went wide. The truth was finally dawning on her.

She looked at the scars covering Grete’s face.

When Olivia first saw them, she commented that she thought she was going to be sick, and Uwe had later called them hideous. Even Sybilla’s and Lily’s expressions had frozen with fear.

The scars were detestable.

Anyone who saw them was filled with a sense of revulsion so strong it carved itself deep into their memories.

Grete pointed at her scarred face and laughed with tears in her eyes.

“This is my real face.”

The scars had been with her since she was born.

As she grew older, they spread like a curse, eventually covering much of her face.

It wasn't androphobia that had kept her from fitting in with high society—it was her scars.

The world of politics sought beauty from its women, and she quickly found that she had no place there.

Her father constantly told her off for her inability to smile sweetly, often going so far as to even call her creepy. Instead of taking her with him to events, he made up a story about her being sickly and kept her under house arrest. It was a combination of him and her older brother, who joined in on the verbal abuse, that caused her to develop androphobia.

Then, before she even knew what was happening, she got shunted off to a spy academy in an apparent attempt to erase her from the world altogether.

She had gone her entire life without ever once being loved.

For a short while, Olivia didn't move.

She just kept staring at Grete's face, so still it was like time itself had stopped. Her wounds were deep, and the pain must have been considerable, but she paid that fact little heed.

Down in the courtyard, Uwe was still just as worked up, and his shouting faded into the background for Olivia's and Grete's silent stare-down.

Eventually, Olivia's mouth curled into a twisted smile.

“Ha!”

And with that, she loudly broke into laughter just as warped as her grin.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” She was laughing so hard she had to clutch her sides to keep from convulsing. Doing so caused her wound to open even farther, but she didn't seem to care.

“...What exactly is so funny?” Grete asked with some displeasure.

“Oh, it all makes sense now.” Olivia wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “Now I finally understand why it is you’re so gloomy.”

“.....”

“No wonder no one loves you,” Olivia hissed as she slowly rose to her feet. “And see, that’s why I’ll win.”

She stuck a finger in her wound and dug out the bullet with obvious agony on her face. She then took her knife, sliced off strips from her maid uniform, and used them to bandage up the hole.

“...You still plan on fighting with an injury like that?”

“What? Oh, please. Your whole mindset is pathetic.” Olivia held up her palm and laughed. “I only made one mistake here, and it was trying to solve my problem on my own. The thing about having someone to love you is that I know he’ll protect me, so I don’t have to get my hands dirty.”

On it sat a jade-green brooch.

She crushed it with her finger, revealing the round mechanism inside. The light atop it pulsed green.

“...It’s a transmitter,” Grete murmured.

“Roland will be here for me soon. I feel like the luckiest gal in the world.”

As Grete watched the transmitter, she saw the pulses of flashing light gradually speeding up. The interval must have corresponded to how close Corpse was.

“When Bonfire showed up five days ago, I immediately called for Roland. It turned out that was just you in drag, but it was all for the best anyway.”

“—!” Grete gasped.

Disguising herself as Klaus was meant to restrict their opponent’s options, but it had clearly backfired.

Grete picked up her gun, but Olivia didn’t seem fazed in the slightest.

“Oh, you’re going to finish me off? Are you sure that’s a good idea? If you do,

Roland will be so enraged he'll rip you to pieces. And not just you. He'll slaughter everyone in the mansion and everyone who lives in the town—men, women, and children alike! He will! He'll do it because he loves me!”

The flashing sped up again.

Grete's stomach churned thinking about how big a blunder she'd made.

Her vision grew dark, and her mind went hazy.

Dealing with Corpse was supposed to be Klaus's job, but she had gone and screwed that all up. It was hard to imagine the others having successfully captured Corpse after he took off so suddenly.

Now the greatest assassin was coming her way. And yet...

“...It doesn't matter.”

The only thing she had to keep her faltering heart going was sheer willpower.

“Just as I expected... This is all within expectations...,” she mumbled, the words practically a prayer.

At some point, it had become something of a catchphrase of hers.

As someone who had to fabricate her very face, the world of spies was the only one she could live in.

That was why she needed to be cleverer than everyone else.

She needed to be calm and collected, no matter the situation.

If she didn't, who would ever love someone like her?

Eventually, when the transmitter stopped flashing and started emitting a constant glow, Olivia crowed.

“Now die, ugly and unloved!”

Something came flying through the air.

Olivia smiled wide—

“...Huh?”

—but her smile soon froze.

That something was a suitcase.

It was large, black, and rectangular, and it landed right between them.

Why had it come flying through the air?

Was this part of Olivia's plan?

Grete gave her a quizzical look, but Olivia was just as confused as she was.

Mysteries abounded.

Who had sent them the suitcase, and why, and from where?

However, Grete had a nagging feeling that she'd seen it somewhere before—
"How truly pathetic."

She whirled around.

A man was standing in a spot that had previously been empty. He was the one who'd thrown the suitcase.

"It defies understanding. How could anyone see her face and not be moved?"

The man's tone bordered on lackadaisical.

"I remember how she looked in that changing room as clearly as if it were yesterday."

Hearing the phrase *changing room* sparked a memory in Grete.

She thought back to the most blessed day of her life.

Grete wore a disguise twenty-four seven, which meant she had to be careful about how she cleaned her face. Her standard routine was to bathe with her mask still on, then stealthily wash her face in her room later. Sometimes, though, she would take off her mask so she could bathe more leisurely.

That day, she let herself get careless.

Although she used the private bathroom instead of the large communal bath, she ended up bumping into someone anyway.

"Seeing her bare face made me realize something. It made me realize just how much she'd polished her skills in order to win the love she desired. It made me realize just how disciplined she was. I was enchanted by the radiantly

magnificent heart I saw in that face.”

The man strode forward until he was directly beside Grete.

“And so I couldn’t help but say what I thought of it.”

Klaus repeated himself.

“‘How beautiful.’”

Grete gazed at his face in shock. He was the real Klaus.

This was no disguise, and it was no delusion. Her beloved was truly by her side.

It was really him—*the one person who had ever complimented her real face.*

Olivia had come to the same realization. The one man she truly feared was standing before her.

“Roland?!” she frantically cried. “Roland, where are you?! I need—”

“Why so panicked? He’s right there in front of you,” Klaus replied unconcernedly.

He pointed—right at the suitcase.

“Though to be fair, he is a little more rectangular now.”

Grete took another look at the suitcase.

It was just over three feet tall and about two and a half feet wide—definitely big enough to fit an adult man inside, if very cramped.

A weak voice dribbled out from within. “O...livia...?”

Klaus had captured him alive.

The mission had been to kill him, but he had gone and accomplished a far more challenging task.

“Why...?” Olivia murmured. “You were supposed to be evenly matched...”

“We were?” Klaus tilted his head to the side. “That reminds me, I had something I wanted to ask you. When we met, he kept going on about ‘rivals’ and ‘fate bringing us together’ and ‘long and storied relationships’ and a bunch of other stuff I couldn’t make heads or tails of. Do you know what that was

about?”

“What do you—?”

Klaus spoke bluntly. “I mean, he was a complete pushover.”

The man in the box—Corpse—was leagues stronger than Olivia or Grete, but apparently, he was still no match for Klaus.

“We were dealing with a man who was more than happy taking civilians hostage and killing them, so the risks involved meant we needed to send heavy hitters after him, but that was all there was to it. He certainly wasn’t on par with the Greatest Spy in the World.”

Olivia shook her head feebly and tottered over to the suitcase. “This isn’t happening...”

Her voice was hoarse.

“It isn’t, right? Please, Roland, say something...”

“O...livia...” The response from inside the suitcase was utterly lifeless. “Help...”

“_____”

Olivia let out a wordless cry and crumpled to her knees. Her body shook, and tears cascaded down her pallid cheeks, casting the scent of ammonia out into the air.

She began pounding on the suitcase. Whether her goal was to smash the lock or to berate the man within, nobody could say, but it soon became clear that no external attacks would be sufficient to break the suitcase open.

“Grete?” said Klaus.

“Of course, Boss. I prepared one just like yours.”

She retrieved the suitcase she’d stashed away in a hidden corner of the roof and offered it to him.

Klaus raised an eyebrow. “You did all the hard work here. Why not do the honors yourself?”

“...And miss a chance to watch you in action, Boss?”

Surely it was okay to let him indulge her that much.

There was a heat that had been permeating her body for the last few minutes, and her knees were on the verge of giving out.

Klaus gave her a small nod, murmured “Don’t call me Boss,” and took the red suitcase from her hands. He approached Olivia with a steely look in his eyes. “You’ve done too much killing,” he said, as though reading off her rap sheet. “Shadow war or not, you two crossed a line. I hope you’re prepared to pay the price.”

Olivia shook her head. “You never told me...”

She slammed her fists against the suitcase as she cursed the man inside.

“Roland loved me, but he never taught me about this...”

“I see. Now I understand why you lost.” Klaus hoisted the suitcase up into the air. “You weren’t qualified to be our enemy.”

When he swung it, the massive rectangular box opened up wide like a whale’s maw and swallowed its prey whole. Olivia screamed, but when the suitcase snapped shut, her voice vanished as quickly as she had.

All that remained on that roof were a pair of matching red and black suitcases.

It made for a quiet ending, perfectly befitting the assassins contained within.

Epilogue

Daughter Dearest

When Klaus was first told about the mission's details, he grimaced.

Its requirements were twofold.

“Capture the assassin—and capture their accomplice at the same time. Both of them are skilled, so if you try to capture them one after another, the second one will likely go to ground.”

In terms of raw difficulty, it exceeded even their last big mission.

Capturing both of them on his own wasn't really feasible.

He was going to need someone to keep the accomplice busy while he captured Corpse.

Should I send all eight of the girls after the accomplice while I take on Corpse alone? No... Considering how dangerous Corpse is, it'd be best if I took at least some of them along with me...

He was torn between his duty as their boss—and his duty as a spy.

In the end, it was Grete who offered him a lifeline.

“I want to help lighten your burden, Boss.”

It would be a gamble. Not only would he himself be gone, but he would have to take the team's best and brightest with him to keep Corpse in check.

But despite all that, Grete stated confidently that she would take the lead, come up with a plan, and handle their second foe—so Klaus decided to take that bet.

And sure enough, she completed her ordeal with flying colors.

Thanks to her efforts, they were able to complete both their requirements at once.



Uwe stood across from Olivia in his study.

She had served as his head maid for several years, but he had never gotten to know her all that well, and he admitted that some of the orders he'd given had been selfish. Now he regretted that.

He had always just assumed that she'd be with him until the day he died.

"And you're sure I can't talk you out of resigning?" He had a pretty good idea of what she was going to say, but he had to at least try.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Appel. I'm afraid my fear's gotten the better of me."

She gave him an apologetic bow. She was already dressed in plainclothes.

"I drove the killer off with my gun, didn't I?"

"Maybe, but they never found a body. I'm heading to a friend's place for a while to take it easy. Take care of yourself, Mr. Appel."

Uwe shook his head in denial.

He knew it was pointless trying to stop her. She was a young woman. Even without this whole business about a hit man, it had been foolish of him to expect her to stick around forever.

As an older gentleman, though, he had a duty to at least send her off with some words of wisdom. He started with a question.

"This person you're staying with... Is it a man?"

Olivia's eyes went wide. "Oh? Did I ever tell you I had a boyfriend, Mr. Appel?"

"You take me for a fool?! I can put two and two together, I'll have you know!"

"...I shouldn't have expected any less of you, sir."

"You're damn right. And as someone who's been around the block a few times, I have some advice for you."

Uwe lowered his voice, knowing full well he was meddling with affairs that were none of his business.

“That man is bad news, Olivia. Every time you get back from one of your vacations, you reek of ill intentions.”

“.....”

“I don’t believe for one minute that he truly loves you. He’ll win you over with pretty words, maybe, but once he’s done using you, he’ll toss you by the roadside. You deserve better than that.”

Olivia froze with her mouth hanging slightly open.

That wasn’t what she’d expected at all. She was probably taken aback at how harsh he was being, but she had served him well, and he didn’t want to see anything happen to her.

Uwe went on in an uncharacteristically warm tone. “If you don’t believe me, go see for yourself. Ask him to tell you how he really feels, and pay close attention to his answer. That’s the one last piece of advice I have for you.”

Olivia stewed over his words for a moment.

Uwe had been afraid that his warning would go in one ear and out the other, but it looked like it hadn’t. Deep down, she must have already sensed it, too.

However, Uwe had no idea what she was thinking right then.

“...Let’s say I did.” She gave him a strangely jocular smile. “What if I asked him to say something, and he replied, ‘Help’?”

Uwe replied with a hearty laugh. “That’d be something, all right! I’d tell you to dump that loser on the spot!”

After a few more laughs and a generous parting gift, Uwe sent Olivia on her way.



“Phew...”

After Olivia—or rather, Grete wearing a mask of her face—left the mansion, she let out a sigh.

Talking to a man for that long had taken a toll on her, but she managed to

keep him fooled through to the end.

She would have liked to tell Uwe the truth, but doing so would have meant exposing her own identity as well. Uwe knew her face, as well as Lily's and Sybilla's. If they wanted to avoid the risk of having their information leaked, keeping him in the dark was the best option.

“.....”

Suddenly, a puddle by the side of the road caught her attention.

She could see Olivia's face reflected on its surface. She hadn't had much time to put the mask together, but her craftsmanship was impeccable all the same.

Her performance ended in a success, too. However, there was something still weighing on her—Uwe's warning.

Did Corpse really not love Olivia?

Grete hadn't considered that possibility.

Olivia had acted so confident about it that Grete had just automatically believed her. Now, though, she wondered how Olivia had felt when she heard him plead for her help.

“Perhaps she and I were more alike than I thought...” Grete took one last look at the puddle, then spoke solemnly. “Good-bye, Olivia...”

She tore off the mask and stuffed it into her bag. Then she changed out of the plainclothes, as well.

With that, Olivia was well and truly gone.

They'd handed her and Corpse over to another team earlier. Grete knew they were going to be interrogated, but she didn't know what would become of them after that.

As she recalled, though, this had originally been an assassination mission.



Ultimately, the girls continued working at Uwe's for the full duration they were originally scheduled to.

As they continued playing the role of loyal maids, they dug up what more they could on Olivia's true identity and investigated to make sure she wasn't working with anyone else. In doing so, it became clear that she'd occasionally been offing maids who began suspecting her of stealing information and assets from Uwe and aiding an assassin.

Meanwhile, Sybilla began subtly guiding Uwe to make sure the next batch of maids he hired were on the up-and-up.

Once they finished background checking their replacements, their work was finally done.

In the end, Sybilla seemed almost reluctant to leave, and Uwe was disappointed to see them go as well.

"Thanks to you lot, I feel better than I have in years," he told them. "And it looks like my bill might finally pass. That's a lot of children we're going to be able to help, Sybilla."

Sybilla gave him an appreciative nod. "That's my Mr. Appel for ya. I'll be comin' back to hang out someday, so make sure you don't go kickin' the bucket on me before I do."

"Ha! This world couldn't get rid of me if it tried!"

And with that final exchange, the girls left Uwe's mansion for good.

When the girls arrived at the station, they were greeted by Sara, Klaus, and an unexpected third guest.

""Bernard!""

Sybilla and Lily excitedly rushed toward the birdcage.

A fierce-eyed hawk stared back at them from inside it. Saving the girls' lives was about as distinguished as service came, and to them, he was nothing short of a hero.

Grete breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, I'm so glad he survived."

"It'll be a little while before he can fly again, but he pulled through," Sara

replied.

Both of Bernard's wings were bandaged from base to tip. His wounds were serious, make no mistake, but thanks to Sara's diligent care, he was still with them.

He was brave, smart, and an irreplaceable member of Lamplight.

Sybilla and Lily played around with him for a bit, but their gazes then turned to the bored-looking man standing beside them.

"Hey, Teach. Long time...no see? It doesn't feel like it, but I guess it has been."

Klaus gave Lily's greeting a nod. "That it has. I've been in a whole different city than you."

"By the way, where're the others?"

"There were a few loose ends to clean up on the Corpse matter, and after they were done with that, they were planning on doing some sightseeing before they came back."

The four absent girls had undoubtedly gone through a mission just as hard as theirs. Even with Klaus by their side, going toe-to-toe with a master assassin was easier said than done.

Sybilla snapped her fingers. "Then hey, sounds like we've got us an excuse to have some fun on our way back, too."

"Yeah! My maid wages are burning a hole in my pocket!" Lily cheered.

The girls immediately starting gabbing about all the places they wanted to visit and all the tasty food they wanted to eat. They'd been working for the past month straight, and even their days off had been consumed by their spy duties. In other words, they had a full month's worth of slacking off they needed to get out of their systems. Sara had had the foresight to bring along a guidebook, and they oohed and aahed over each of its pages.

Once they'd settled on an itinerary, Sybilla called over to Klaus.

"Hey, you've got the day off, too, right? How about hookin' us up with some wheels?"

“...That’s not a bad idea. I’ll go find a rental place.”

It seemed only fair that he reward his subordinates for their hard work.

“This is gonna be awesome!” Lily shouted cheerily. “All five of us, going for a drive together!”



When Klaus came back with the rental car, he found Grete waiting for him alone.

“.....”

Lily, Sybilla, and Sara were nowhere to be seen.

Their luggage was gone, too.

“Just for the record, where are the others?”

“...They all got on a train, and they seemed very excited about it.”

“That girl lies like she breathes, doesn’t she?” Klaus sighed.

What he wouldn’t give to pick Lily’s brain about precisely what emotions she felt when she said, *“All five of us, going for a drive together!”*

Not that he hadn’t seen it coming, mind.

This was their way of being thoughtful. Toward Grete, he assumed.

Either that or perhaps toward him.

“Well, it would be a shame to waste a perfectly good car. Would you like to go for a drive, just the two of us?”

“...It would be my pleasure.”

Grete got in the passenger’s seat, and Klaus took off along the coast. The weather was perfect for gazing out at the deep blue sea.

The whole time, Grete said nothing. From the look of things, she was as tense as a bowstring.

Klaus had assumed that she would try coming on to him again now that she had him alone, but apparently that wasn’t the plan. Seeing him for the first time

in a month had her nerves on edge. Her fists were clenched tight, and she was as stiff as a board.

“Grete.” Klaus decided to get the conversation started. “You’ve been on my mind a lot over this last month. I’ve been thinking about how to respond to your feelings, both as your boss, as the Greatest Spy in the World, and also, as a man.”

For him, this was uncharted territory.

It wasn’t the first time someone had ever been in love with him, but most of the time that only happened on missions. To him, romance was simply a tool to manipulate his target with. Once he’d gotten what he needed out of them, he washed his hands of the whole matter.

However, this time was different. He wanted to treat Grete’s feelings with the respect they deserved.

“And do you have your answer...?” Grete asked hesitantly.

“I do.” Klaus pulled over by the side of the road. “I decided to forget all my duties, responsibilities, and ideals and simply open my heart up to you as a man.”

He got out of the car, and Grete followed his lead.

As they stood atop the scenic overlook, Klaus turned to face her head-on.

She wasn’t going to run from his answer anymore. She pursed her lips and returned Klaus’s gaze.

A gust of wind blew past. Her hair fluttered in the breeze.

Klaus waited for it to die down, then spoke.

“I’m going to be candid with you, Grete—I don’t see you in a romantic light. I can’t reciprocate your feelings.”

“...I see.”

“However, I don’t want you to misunderstand me. I’ve never harbored romantic feelings toward *anyone*. My inability to become your lover has nothing to do with some deficiency in you; it has everything to do with me. I’m simply

not interested in that kind of love. At the risk of sounding crude, I don't have much in the way of a libido." He went on. "The kind of love I want is familial love—the kind of relationships that get forged in both the harshest parts of missions and the most peaceful times out of them."

It was his teammates who had lifted him up out of solitude and despair and accepted him into their lives.

That was the warmth that had carried him through to that day.

"That's why I can't respond to your feelings in kind. I can't love you as a woman, and if you end up wanting to give your heart to some other man, I won't stand in your way."

"....."

"But if you're willing to stay by my side as part of my family, then I would be all too happy to love you."

The wind picked up again.

Grete's hair flowed across her face, covering her expression for a brief moment. When the wind stopped and her cheeks came back into view, they were wet with tears.

"...Can you...do something for me...?"

Her voice was small and ever so frail.

She reached up and slowly peeled off the mask covering her face.

Her scars came into view, as did her flushed-red cheeks.

"Please, tell me... How do you really feel about me now...?"

"There's only one thing I have to say to you, Grete."

Klaus reached for her scars and gently stroked them.

"You're beautiful."

Her expression contorted as though something inside her had just snapped.

At first, she only let out a quiet moan, like she had something caught in her throat. She pursed her lips and clamped her hands over them to try to hold

back the waterworks, but the dam eventually burst. Tears poured from her eyes, and a sob spilled from her throat. As her tears tumbled to the ground, she leaped into Klaus's arms and bawled like a child, louder than anyone would have imagined her to be capable of.

Klaus reached his arms around her and gave her a gentle hug.

Her code name was Daughter Dearest.

At first, it had come across as ironic.

But in that moment, Klaus couldn't think of a single name that would have suited her better.

Next Mission

By the time Klaus and Grete got back to Heat Haze Palace, it was already deep into the night.

Their outing had lasted basically the whole day, and throughout it, Grete hadn't left his side for a single moment. They went around and saw the sights, then shared a meal and chatted on the train ride home.

It wasn't exactly clear where familial love ended and romantic love began.

As the team's boss, was he really making the right decision? Or was he just using clever words to manipulate the situation to his benefit? His mind was plagued with doubts, but he chose to ignore them.

In life, there was never a single "correct" decision. All you could do was do right by the choices you made.

"It's a little embarrassing, but...", Grete confessed at one point, "...at first, I assumed that everyone on the team would fall in love with you sooner or later."

"Now there's a disturbing thought."

"I thought it was only a matter of time before we started fighting over you and the team fell apart from within."

That was pretty close to the worst outcome he could imagine.

Being on a team torn apart by love would be like hell on earth. He didn't even want to imagine it.

"But when I disguised myself as you, I found out that the others were all rooting for us to get together..."

"I'd believe it."

Klaus nodded. Given who she was talking about, he wasn't surprised.

"Lamplight's a really nice team, isn't it...?" Grete murmured bashfully.

Once they got on the subject, they began talking about the team's future, too. Up until then, Klaus had been pondering the matter all on his own, and he had to admit, it was kind of nice having someone to talk to about it.

Taking things easy every once in a while wasn't half bad.

After all, the world so rarely afforded them that opportunity.

When Klaus reached the entrance, he found Lily at her wit's end. When she spotted him, she rushed over.

"What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost," he asked.

She had clearly discovered something amiss.

Klaus had a sneaking suspicion what it was about, but his guess turned out to be off the mark.

"Hey, so you said that Thea and the others were just cleaning up some loose ends, right?"

"That was the plan, why?"

Klaus had tasked them with retracing Corpse's steps one last time and making sure they hadn't missed anything. He'd already gone through most of the work himself, though, so he doubted they would find anything particularly noteworthy.

"They still aren't back yet..."

Klaus turned his thoughts to the four members in question.

There was the graceful, black-haired Thea; the arrogant, cerulean-haired Monika; the innocent, ash-pink-haired Annette; and the stoic, blond-haired Erna.

All four of them were competent and skilled. He doubted they would show up late without at least calling ahead, but...

"Well, they do have Erna with them. Hopefully, they just ran into a snafu with their transportation..."

However, Klaus had a bad feeling in his gut, and in situations like those, his gut was uncannily accurate.

“But anyhow, it’s late. We’ll give them until morning.”

“But what if they still don’t show up?”

“Then we’ll find them, and we’ll treat it as a mission of the utmost priority. Make sure you’re all ready to go.”

His voice was calm, but in his heart, he was all but certain that waiting until tomorrow wouldn’t make a difference.

And sure enough, he was right.

The four girls’ whereabouts remained a mystery.



In the dead of night, a black-haired girl—Thea—quietly got up from her hotel bed.

They were a little tight on cash, so all four of them were sharing a room. The room was a double, which meant it was two girls to a bed. It was cramped, and Thea couldn’t sleep.

She took a look at the radiant figure she cast in the room’s full-length mirror.

Her voluptuous silhouette was accentuated by her long, lustrous hair. Her lips were attractively full, and when she ran her tongue over them, they shone seductively in the light. Everything was perfect. Nothing was out of place.

There’s just one problem...

Thea sighed.

...a single body isn’t going be enough to get us out of this situation...

Now then, what to do.

“You’re up.”

She heard a voice. It came from by the window.

A cerulean-haired girl smiled haughtily from her seat atop the windowsill.

She had androgynous looks and a medium build, and although her hairstyle was fairly distinctive, it was difficult to describe with words. No matter how

much you looked at her, it was hard to make her image stick in your head—a feature she shared with Klaus, Guido, and many other elite spies.

The girl's name was Monika.

She was dressed in her mission outfit, and she had clearly just gotten back. She must have come in through the open window.

“Are Annette and Erna asleep?”

“Yeah. I’m trying to remember how long it’s been since the last time I sang a lullaby... Oh, that’s right. About a month.”

“That’s not that long.”

“I was teaching it to Grete. Hmm-hmm... If she used the techniques I taught her well, she’s probably cradling Teach against her chest and singing it to him as we speak.”

“Pretty sure your advice is all gonna backfire, if you ask me.”

As she made her rude remark, Monika hopped down from the windowsill and glared at Thea.

“So?”

“So what?”

“Don’t give me that. Time’s up. Make your choice.”

Thea needed to stall her. But before she could get the words out, Monika made her move.

She took her gun and aimed it right between Thea’s eyes.

“Are you gonna betray Lamplight? If you are, I’d appreciate it if you told me.”

She flashed her most arrogant smile yet.

“I’ll need some time to get rid of your body.”

The cataclysmic situation they were in had fallen on them without any forewarning. It hadn’t so much as given Thea a chance to prepare herself.

She gulped, then stole a glance at the ash-pink-haired girl sleeping peacefully behind her—Annette.

She needed to figure out a solution.

If she didn't do something, Lamplight was going to fall apart.

Afterword

Takemachi here. It's been a while.

I know that Volume 2 isn't the greatest place for it, but I hope you don't mind if I take a moment to talk about when Volume 1 went on sale.

For Volume 1, I was blessed to have Fantasia Bunko's editorial department go all out for me. They made a beautiful promotional video featuring Klaus and the seven girls with actual voice actors voicing them, they put up life-size stands of the seven girls in a bunch of bookstores, and they held an online popularity poll for the seven girls. And after the poll, Tomari—the series illustrator—even drew a fantastic piece of Klaus and the seven girls and posted it on Twitter.

You read that right—the *seven* girls.

Realizing that I wrapped not just myself, but the editorial department, the voice actors, and Tomari into my lie honestly made me shiver a little, but at the same time, it filled me with gratitude that they would do that. Thank you all so much for playing along.

Still, I can't help but imagine a certain someone mumbling "How unlucky..." after being forced into hiding until the very end of Volume 1, so I hope I can try to make it up to her. I suppose I'll need to take that up with my editor. I'm counting on you, editor!

At this point, I have some acknowledgments I'd like to make.

To Tomari, the book's illustrator. Since Volume 1, you've been essential in making this series the best it can be. Thank you so much for that. I suspect the illustrations will continue playing a key role going forward, so I hope you'll continue putting up with me.

I'd also like to extend a special thanks to R, who gave me valuable advice while I was working on both Volume 1 and on Volume 2.

Next, I'd like to address all the readers who purchased *Spy Classroom*. Honestly, I don't know how I can thank you. I plan to keep doing my best so I can provide you with as much entertainment as possible.

Also, you'll probably have already heard by the time this book goes on sale, but it's been announced that the series is getting a manga adaptation. Details are going to be posted on the official Twitter account, so I hope you'll give it a follow.

Finally, I should probably explain what happened with the girl who placed solidly in first in the popularity poll and who's featured on the cover of the book you now hold. The thing is, much as I wanted to, the course the story took kept me from letting her play a part in Volume 2.

When you read Volume 3's subtitle and synopsis, I hope you'll understand why.

I plan on giving the next book my all so I can write a story the readers will be satisfied with, but until then, that's all from me.

Takemachi

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