

SPY CLASSROOM

SHORT STORY COLLECTION 03 Honeymoon Raker

Takemachi
ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari

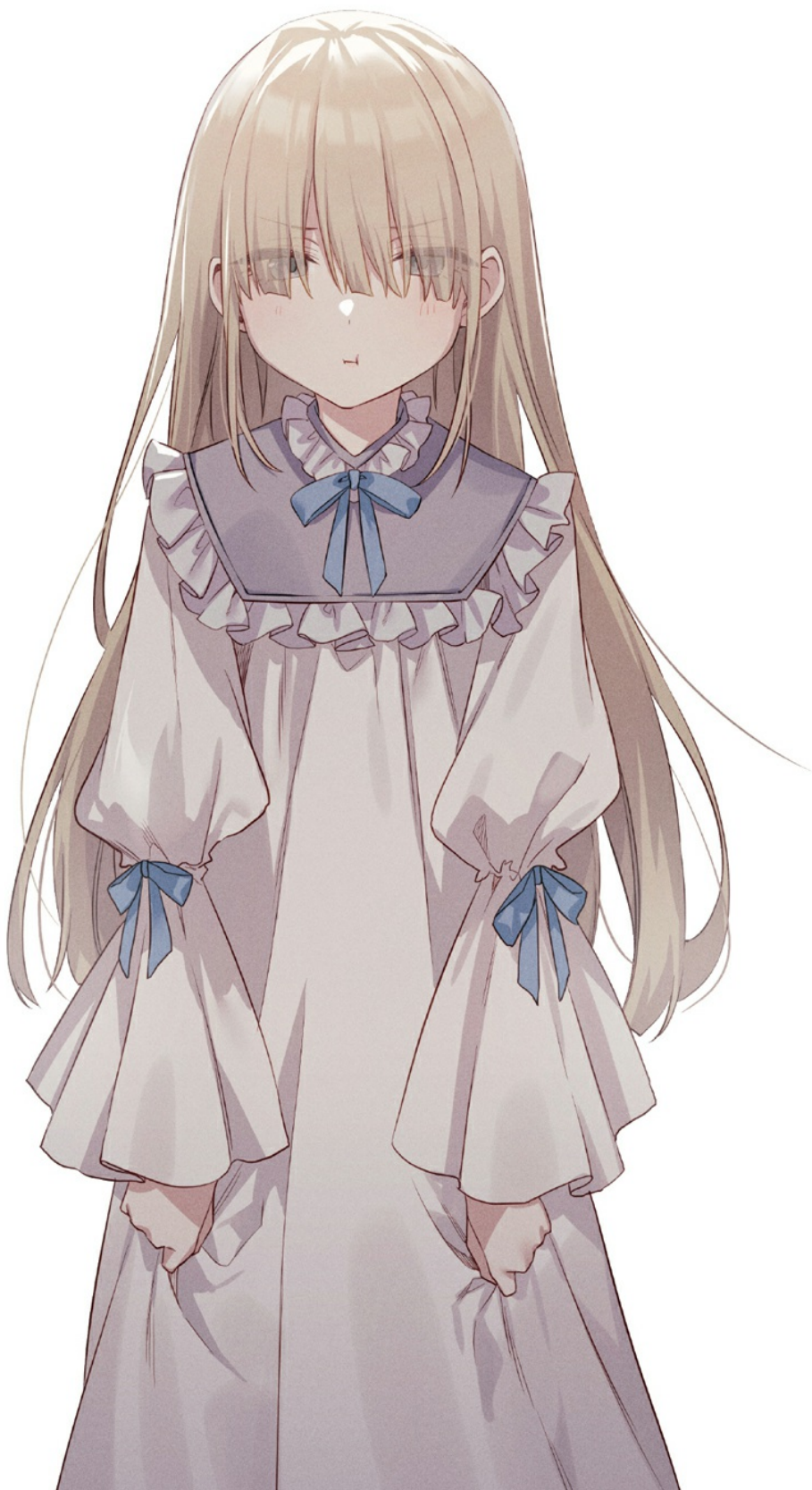


SPY CLASSROOM

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

03

Honeymoon Raker



SPY CLASSROOM

code name
**DAUGHTER
DEAREST**



code name
FORGETTER

code name
GLINT



code name
MEADOW



Who's the strongest?



SPY 03 CLASSROOM

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

Honeymoon Raker

Takemachi
ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari


New York

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Spy Classroom Short Story Collection, Vol. 3

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Cover art by Tomari

Assistance with firearm research: Asaura

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SPY KYOSHITSU TANPENSU Vol.3 HONEYMOON · RAKER

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First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: December 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Anna Powers

Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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

Title: Spy classroom short story collection / Takemachi ; illustration by Tomari ; translation by Nathaniel Thrasher.

Other titles: Spy kyoshitsu tanpenshu. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2023-Contents: v. 1. Bridal royale— | Audience: Ages 16 & up. (provided by Yen On.) Identifiers: LCCN 2022055931 | ISBN 9781975364960 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975364984 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) Subjects: | CYAC: Spies—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction. | LCGFT: Short stories.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.T343 Sps 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022055931>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9712-8 (paperback)

978-1-9753-9713-5 (ebook)

CONTENTS

SPY CLASSROOM

Specialized lessons for an impossible mission

Honeymoon Raker

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

The Legend of the Moonrakers

Chapter 1

Pharma's Case

Flashback ①

The Avian Ecosystem

Chapter 2

Lan's Case

Flashback ②

Girls' Night

Chapter 3

Queneau's Case

Flashback ③

Football

Chapter 4

Vics's Case

Flashback ④

Guys' Night

Chapter 5

Qulle's Case

Flashback ⑤

"Sky Monk" Adi

Chapter 6

Honeymoon Raker

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

CHARACTER PROFILES



Bonfire

Klaus

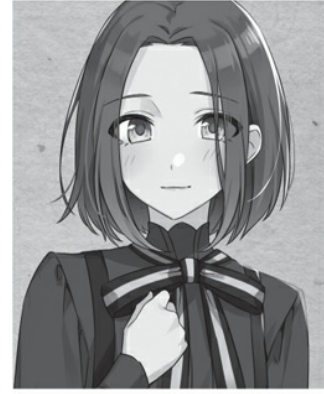
Lamplight's founder
and the Greatest Spy
in the World.



Flower Garden

Lily

A naive girl from
the backcountry.



Daughter Dearest

Grete

A quiet girl and the
daughter of a
major politician.



Pandemonium

Sybilla

A brave girl and the
daughter of a gangster.



Glint

Monika

An arrogant girl born
into a family of artists.



Dreamspeaker

Thea

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



Meadow

Sara

A timid girl whose
parents run a
small restaurant.



Forgetter

Annette

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



Fool

Erna

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

Team Avian



Flock

Vindo



Glide

Qulle



South Wind

Queneau



Cloud Drift

Lan



Lander

Vics



Feather

Pharma

Prologue

The Legend of the Moonrakers

The moon was making its journey downward. It was ever so slightly waning, and as it hung in the western sky, a right arm wet with blood rose up to meet it. The arm's fingers scraped the sky, unable to grab hold.

A male voice boomed out.

"Did you just try to grab the moon? Derangement must be setting in."

The tall man was standing a little ways away and wearing a hood that covered his face.

"This country has a word for people like you: moonrakers."

The hooded man sounded amused.

"They're fools who try to rake the moon's reflection off the surface of a pond—just the way you're doing now."

The other man wasn't quite sure how to respond to the dismissive accusation. It took him some time to put the feeling welling up within him into words, and he let out a long sigh.

He was lying on his back. He couldn't feel his left arm anymore, and it was gushing a tremendous amount of blood.

All he had was a strange sense of purpose. He needed to rake them. He needed to gather up the fragments of the moon he'd seen that night.

Chapter 1

Pharma's Case

Morning came.

Guided by the sunlight streaming through the curtains, Sara sat up. After giving her arms a big stretch, she hopped out of bed. Her puppy Johnny was still bundled up in the blanket from when he'd nuzzled up into her bed the night prior.

The Sara in question was "Meadow" Sara, a girl with big round eyes like a woodland creature's and brown, permed hair.

Sara stripped out of her pajamas and changed into the school uniform she used to camouflage herself. She tied her ribbon into a long, tight knot, then completed her outfit by donning her trademark newsboy cap before stepping out of her room.

She was just about to stop by the bathroom to wash her face when she spotted a silver-haired girl with a charming face and a large bosom—namely, "Flower Garden" Lily.

"Good morning, Miss Lily."

"Hey there, Sara."

Lily returned Sara's greeting with an exuberant smile.

At that point, Sara realized how strange this was. Lily loved to sleep in, so it was odd to see her up and about at seven in the morning.

"Heh. You're up early today."

Sara let out a small chuckle, to which Lily replied with a boisterous laugh. "You bet your butt I am! We're on holiday! Who wants to waste a day off by snoozing

it away?!”

They were, in fact, on holiday.

Every time they completed a big mission, they got the next two weeks off. For people who bumped shoulders with peril as often as they did, it was essential they get their proper R & R. If they didn't rest their bodies and build up their energy, their morale was sure to suffer.

At the moment, the girls had just finished up a mission in the Far East nation of Longchon.

“You know, you're right. It's so nice to have some time off.”

Sara shared Lily's good cheer.

Naturally, the girls were each free to spend their holidays however they wanted. Everything from going on trips to reading books to enjoying the arts was on the table. Spies were paid handsomely, too, so they had ample funds to finance their activities with. They were going to spend the next two weeks painting the town red.

There they were, smack-dab in the middle of their wonderful vacation!

Or at least, they were supposed to be.

Sara grimaced. “Huh? I just got the weirdest pain in my head.”

Lily tilted her head. “Hmm? Yeah, it feels like I've got some wrong memories mixed up in the old noggin.”

The girls groaned at the static crackling through their brains.

The two of them had just woken up, and their heads weren't operating at full capacity yet. They'd very nearly dredged up some unpleasant memories. It was almost as though Lamplight's boss Klaus had told them something on the first day of the break that threatened to send their entire vacation into disarray.

They gave their heads a vigorous shake in unison.

“I-I'm sure we're just imagining things,” Sara said. “Let's make the most of our vacation.”

“You can say that again!” Lily agreed. “We've been freed from all of life's

shackles. That's what vacations are all about!"

"Nothing scary is going to happen to us."

"Of course not! There's nothing but happiness as far as the eye can see!"

"And the first day of the break was completely uneventful!"

"Yep, nothing happened whatsoever!"

As they shared a conversation that wasn't entirely truthful, they washed their faces and headed down to the dining room. They'd baked a bunch of delicious bread the previous evening. Warming it back up and shoving its buttery goodness in their faces would ensure their day of vacation bliss got off to the perfect start.

The girls opened the door to the dining room.

At the table, they saw a young man with mean eyes chowing down on the very bread they'd been looking forward to.

"Hmm. You just get up, Lamplight ladies? I thought I'd drop by."

""THERE'S A CREATURE IN THE DINING ROOOOOOOM!""

Sara and Lily's shriek echoed through the building.



The world was awash in pain.

After the Great War, as the world entered an era of nations competing through espionage, the small Din Republic put together some spy teams of its own and dispatched agents across the world.

One of those teams was Lamplight, a group comprising a man and eight spy academy washouts. Under the leadership of their boss, Klaus, the girls trained and took on assignments so difficult they were referred to as "Impossible

Missions.”

Then there was Avian, the team they met in the Far East. Avian was like Lamplight’s polar opposite. Its members had been pulled from the top scorers on the nationwide spy academy graduation exam. Out of three thousand students, they had been the best six. Everything about the team was elite.

The two teams had been drawn together as though by destiny, and after fighting over Klaus, they managed to reach an accord. Everyone had assumed once the two groups went their separate ways, it would be a while before they ran into each other again. However, Klaus had made an announcement on the very first day of Lamplight’s vacation.

“I want to train Avian.”

Avian had won the right to appoint Klaus as their boss, but they’d given it up on Lamplight’s behalf. Klaus had invited Avian to Heat Haze Palace in order to repay them for that.

The training Klaus offered them was thus: *“Defeat me.”*

The elites had been skeptical at first, but when they humored Klaus and took him on, he completely mopped the floor with them. The defeat clearly dealt a harsh blow to their pride, and they returned to Heat Haze Palace the next day only to get crushed again. From there, the cycle repeated. They kept coming back nearly every day in a way that could best be described as obsessive.

Avian had become a group of stalkers.

There was a period of one month between Lamplight’s return from Longchon and Avian’s departure to the Fend Commonwealth. It was a period of mingling between the two teams—a honeymoon of sorts—and that was how it all began.



The man eating their bread in the dining room was “Flock” Vindo.

Vindo had brown hair and sharp eyes. Out of over three thousand academy

students, his brilliance had earned him the best grades of them all and, eventually, a position as Avian's boss. His outstanding talent made him one of the most promising young spies of their generation.

At the moment, he was also the person who stopped by Lamplight's base the most often and had earned himself a spot at the top of the stalker list.

Beside him, he was joined by "Glide" Qulle, a girl with jade-green hair tied back in a ponytail. She wore a pair of glasses with round lenses and could rarely be found without the confident smile of an honors student. She'd been the fourth-best academy student.

"I'm sorry about all the hassle," Qulle said with an apologetic bow.

Lily and Sara clutched at their heads as the memories they'd been desperately trying to repress came flooding back.

These were the intruders who'd come and destroyed their happy vacation. When Avian stopped by, they did so with no regard for the girls' convenience or comfort.

Over time, the rest of the Lamplight girls trickled down into the dining room as well. When they saw Vindo and Qulle sitting there like they owned the place, they stared at them in cold dismay. "Yeesh, they're here already?"

Vindo ignored them and continued eating bread. He must have arrived in the wee hours of the morning.

"Man, you don't have a lot going on, do you, Vindo?"

When Lily gave him a pitying look, Vindo glowered back at her. "I have plenty of things on my plate. I'm just here to train with Klaus, that's all."

"Yeah, but you've been coming every day since that first defeat."

"I managed to rack up another two losses just this morning."

"Already?"

"I had some calories I had to work off. By the way, I grabbed some stuff from your kitchen. Thanks for the food."

"YOU ATE MY BREAKFAST?!"

about her was shrouded in mystery. They knew she'd fought Monika, but they didn't even know what her specialty was.

As Lily and the others stared at her, Pharma gave her arms a big stretch.

"Now, uhhh," she drawled, "I'm eating some tasty bread at the moment, so can I do that laaater?"

""""Leave our bread alone!""""

"Awww?" she whined as the girls snatched the bread away from her in a rage. "Give that baaack! I've been buying too many pretty jewels lately, so I'm super broke. I had to go without breakfast today."

Despite Pharma's forlorn plea, the fact of the matter was that the bread had been stolen from the girls to begin with. They weren't about to let her play the victim card.

Beside her, Qulle let out a sigh upon realizing the conversation was getting nowhere.

"So the deal is, we want to borrow some people from Lamplight." In the end, she gave up and just explained the situation herself. "We're a little short on personnel for the mission we're on. Would a couple of you mind tagging along with Pharma tonight?"

"Huh?"

Lamplight hadn't seen that one coming. To think the day had come when the elites were asking *them* for a favor.

They half assumed that Avian was joking, but the look in Vindo's eyes was dead serious. "We already hashed things out with Klaus," he said. "There's bonus pay for this, and Pharma will be doing most of the actual work. All you people will have to do is enjoy a meal in a nice restaurant. You up for it?"

"Yeah, what they said. Thanks in advaaance," Pharma said, clasping her hands together and bowing. "There's no one we can turn to here but Lamplight, see."

Avian must have been under some serious pressure.

The Lamplight girls let out little gasps of shock. As previously mentioned, they were a band of washouts. Although they were working professionals in the

world of espionage, many of them still carried inferiority complexes from their academy days. What's more, Avian had gone out of their way back in Longchon to demonstrate just how much stronger they were.

The girls had to admit it felt nice to be relied on now.

"I—I mean, if you need our help that bad, then I guess we can pitch in." A smile crept across Lily's face. "The more funds to enjoy our holiday with, the better. And besides, we can't leave our fellow spies in the lurch. What do you all say?"

The other girls were on board as well. Their replies of "Fuck it, I'm in," and "Yeah, when you put it like that, how can we say no?" were tinged with delight and embarrassment, and their anger from before was gone and forgotten.

"Thanks so muuuch!"

Pharma rose to her feet in joy and shook each girl's hand in turn. Personal space wasn't her strong suit.

"Heh-heh, it's time for Heavy-Duty Helper Lily to swoop in and save Avian's bacon!" Lily thumped her chest. "We accept your request! Here at Lamplight, making the impossible possible is what we do best. Don't you worry, Avian. You're in good—"

"Oh, we don't need you."

After bluntly dismissing Lily, Pharma turned her gaze over to the three girls who'd been hiding behind their noisier comrades and watching things play out from the back.

One of them was "Fool" Erna, a girl with long blond hair and as adorable as a doll. Her innate fear of strangers was out in full force, and she was staring at Pharma and the other Avian members in fright.

The next was "Forgetter" Annette, a girl with messily-tied-up ash-pink hair and a large eye patch. She was observing the dining room intruders with keen interest.

Finally, there was "Meadow" Sara, who was standing in front of the other two as if to protect them.

“We’re counting on you three. Erna, Annette, and Sara.”

“““?”””

The three of them all cocked their heads in puzzlement.

The designated members were the youngest people on Lamplight’s roster. Erna and Annette were fourteen, and Sara was fifteen. They all had powerful secret abilities and were adept at setting up schemes from behind the scenes, but their mental fortitude left something to be desired, and it was often too dangerous to send them onto the front lines.

Why had Pharma chosen *these* three?

Lamplight had their concerns, but Pharma let out a sigh of genuine relief. “Oh, that’s suuuch a big help. You’re lifesavers.”

It was too late to back out now.



Pharma gave Erna and Annette instructions to go get changed. She’d already bought outfits for them specially for this mission.

As for Sara, her only instructions were to wear “something comfortable,” so she changed into the blouse and light-green skirt Thea had once picked out for her. She headed back to the main hall feeling more than a little embarrassed. Pharma was waiting for her there. “Ooh, looking cute, Sara,” she said with a smile.

Sara wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that.

Internally, she was conflicted. She was about to embark on a mission alongside one of the elites, sure, but that wasn’t the main thing setting off her nerves.

“Y-you, um...,” she said timidly.

“Hmm? What’s uuup?”

“You’re Projection, right? The one from the spy academy on the island.”

“Yeah, that’s meee,” Pharma confirmed. “I changed my code name.”

That was the thing—Sara and Pharma were from the same school.

The only time they had run into each other in Longchon was right at the end, so they'd never gotten a chance to talk, but Sara had definitely noticed. Sara had spent two years in that spy academy, and that whole time, Pharma had reigned over it as its finest student. She'd gone by Projection at the time, so she must have changed it to Feather when she'd joined Avian. It made sense, considering how all the Avian members had themed code names.

"I remember you too, Sara."

It sounded like Sara wasn't the only one who'd noticed.

"You cried all the time. Out on the corner of the beach."

"....."

Upon having the truth thrown in her face, Sara let out a small, choked gulp.

Lazy as Pharma was, her acting ability and marksmanship were outstanding. In comparison, Sara had sucked at everything the academy made her do. However, going back to her parents hadn't been an option, so she'd spent every day sobbing her eyes out all on her own.

Apparently, that had stuck in Pharma's memory.

"...Oh, I'm sorry. You probably didn't want me bringing that up, huh?" Pharma seemed to have taken a hint, and she waved her hands frantically. "Anyways, I really appreciate you coming. It's a huuuge help."

"It's nothing, Miss Pharma! You shouldn't be thanking someone like—"

Sara skittered backward, her eyes wide.

Pharma had won the respect of everyone in her spy academy dorm, whereas Sara had been a friendless loner. If anyone who'd known them back then saw the way Pharma was bowing to her, the sight would have struck them speechless.

The two of them had lived in completely different worlds.

To Sara, Pharma was like a divine being from on high. Back at the academy, she'd been too nervous to even talk to her.

As she stood there feeling embarrassed, a pair of new faces joined them in the main hall.

“I’m all finished changing, yo!”

“I look even cooler than usual.”

It was Annette and Erna, fresh from putting on their new outfits.

There were some odd choices. The two of them liked to wear skirts they could store tools in, so it was unusual to see them in shorts. Their fair thighs were left exposed for the world to see. For their tops, they were both wearing the same shirt-and-suspender getup in different colors. Erna’s was yellow, whereas Annette’s was pink. It was the kind of outfit you often saw on city girls who paid attention to fashion trends.

“Oh, that looks perrrfect,” Pharma said with delight. “This should go swimmingly. I knew asking Lamplight was the right call.”

“They sure are cute.”

Sara smiled as well and patted Annette’s and Erna’s heads. The two of them let out bashful cries of “Hey!” and “Yeep!” as they gave her a pair of pleased grins.

Afterward, Sara asked a question that had been nagging at her mind. “S-so, um, Miss Pharma, what exactly is this mission?”

She knew she had to be ready for anything. What kind of mission could have someone as talented as Pharma coming to Lamplight for help? Vindo had said all they’d be doing was eating dinner, but Sara doubted it would be that simple.

“Whaaat? You really want to know?”

For some reason, Pharma didn’t just give her a straight answer.

Sara didn’t miss a beat. “Please, tell us,” she replied, to which Pharma answered, “It’s a mixer.”

“Huh?”

“The four of us are going to a mixer.”

Annette and Erna gave Pharma puzzled looks. They didn’t know what the

word meant.

Sara *did* know what it meant, but that just served to deepen her confusion. Mixers were events for men and women to meet each other. Pharma must have recruited them to make the head count work out, but even so, why had she chosen the youngest-looking members?

Pharma gave them a big smile.

“Once we get there, we’ve got a pedo politician we’ll be wining and dining.”

On hearing that, Annette looked even more puzzled—

““WHAAAAAAAAAAT?!””

—but Sara and Erna let out screams.



Pharma gave them the rundown.

A few days ago, the Military Intelligence Department had arrested a young man for suspected espionage. The boy had been getting huge amounts of funding from an unknown source and using it to engage in political activities. One of those activities had been acting in support of Arranq city council member Lido Jahn by threatening journalists into burying scandalous stories about him and spreading false rumors about his political opponents. And he hadn’t been acting alone, either.

Before the boy had had a chance to cough up info on his allies, though, he’d succumbed to the torture and died of emaciation. The Military Intelligence Department had screwed the pooch.

The question was, who exactly was that boy they’d detained? Had he been a foreign spy? Was Jahn himself complicit? The Foreign Intelligence Office knew leaving things to the military would get them nowhere, so they’d entrusted the

mission to their up-and-coming spy team Avian.

“Now, from what we hear, Mr. Jahn is a big fan of young girls. If we bring some along for him to drink with, it’ll go a long way toward loosening his tongue,” Pharma explained cheerfully.

The situation made sense.

For the girls, though, having to go to a mixer was a high hurdle indeed.

“No way, I caaaaan’t! There’s no way I can handle going to a mixer!”

“I, uh...I don’t really get it, but I feel like this is going to be super scary! I’m no good at talking to strangers!”

Sara and Erna trembled as they arrived at the restaurant Pharma had led them to.

The restaurant was a quiet establishment that was divided up into individual rooms. Many of its patrons were there for business events or to have private conversations, so it had dim lighting that gave the whole place a rather adult air. When they glanced at the menu, they discovered just how pricey everything was. It was the kind of place the girls wouldn’t normally go near.

The men hadn’t arrived yet.

Sara took her seat with tension etched across her face.

She had made sure to at least explain what exactly a mixer was to Erna and Annette. Upon discovering they’d be sharing a meal with a bunch of unfamiliar men, the ever-shy Erna had looked like she might very well faint. Annette, on the other hand, was just as cheery as ever. “If I get a tasty meal out of it, I’m down for whatever, yo!”

Pharma had just stepped away to find Councillor Jahn, leaving the rest of them there on their own. Erna nervously grabbed at Sara’s blouse and whispered in her ear. “*B-Big Sis Sara, wh-what do we do?*”

“I—I don’t know. It’s really too late for us to back out...”

As Erna’s elder, Sara wanted to be able to comfort her, but sadly, she lacked the bandwidth to do so.

She racked her brain to muster up some wishful thoughts. *“B-but we don’t know for sure that he’s going to be dangerous. He is a city council member, after all... Maybe this really will just be a pleasant meal.”*

“Y-you’re right! Maybe he’ll be nice and not talk to me at all!”

“Yeah. J-just because he’s a pedophile doesn’t mean he’s a bad person.”

“I choose to believe! I’m gonna make it home in one piece!”

As an aside, Sara had had to explain what a “pedophile” was to Erna, too. The guy they were dealing with was attracted to young girls.

As the two of them trembled with trepidation and Annette carefully examined the menu, the door to their room swung open. Standing beside Pharma was a man with a gentle look about him.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Lido Jahn, a member of the local city council.”

““I-it’s nice to meet you, too...,”” Sara and Erna squeaked in reply, tripping over their words.

The man looked a lot younger than they’d been expecting. They’d been told he was thirty-eight, but he could easily have passed for a man in his twenties. He was wiry and didn’t come off as particularly memorable, but his kind smile made him seem likable in spite of that.

“Thank you so much for coming today. Please, don’t be shy; order as much as you want. It’s my treat.”

Jahn sat across from them and gave them a bow.

Nobody else followed him and Pharma in, so it looked like he was going to be the only man there. It was less of a drinking party for people to get to know each other and more of an event with him as the sole guest of honor.

Jahn then turned and bowed to Pharma, as well. “And thank you too, Pharma. To think you put this whole thing together... They remind me of my daughter. Spending time with girls their age truly sets my heart at ease.”

“Oh, it was my pleasure,” Pharma said.

Pharma's cover story was that she was a university student hoping to get into politics. As far as the councillor knew, she'd gotten a part-time job at Jahn's office, and she was throwing the party as her way of showing her appreciation to him.

Given how respectfully Jahn was bowing to a woman his junior, he couldn't have been all that bad.

Sara and Erna conferred via whisper.

"H-he seems like a nice person..."

"Y-yeah. You're right."

Their initial impression of him was passable.

Annette looked up from the menu. "Yo, buddy, did you just say we remind you of your daughter?"

Sara's heart skipped a beat at how pompous Annette sounded, but Jahn took it in stride. "So much so it's shocking. Especially the two of you with the blond and pink hair." He gave Erna and Annette a forlorn look. "When my wife left me eight years ago, she got sole custody and banned me from seeing my beloved baby girl. She was twelve at the time... I'm a bit ashamed to admit it, but I've taken to talking to young girls from time to time to help distract myself from the loneliness."

Sara and Erna let out little gasps at the newfound revelation.

Much to their surprise, the motives behind the party were actually relatively benign. Hearing the phrases *pedophile* and *wining and dining* had made them assume it was going to be centered around fulfilling his perverse sexual fantasies, but the fact of the matter was, not every pedophile in the world was actually a bad person. Perhaps it had been rude of them to jump to conclusions and give him the cold shoulder because of mere labels.

Jahn scratched his head and laughed to lighten the mood. "Ha-ha, people do tend to get the wrong idea about me. I try to explain myself, but society doesn't look too kindly on that kind of behavior."

Sara and Erna took a good, long look at their own prejudices. Wanting to hear

more, they asked him some questions. “So you mentioned a divorce...” “Wh-what happened there?”

“She found out about the prostitutes. I’d been hiring underage sex workers on the daily.”

““We were right the first tiiiiime!!””

All that said, there were still plenty of pedophiles who *were* bad people.

Later, they would discover Jahn had paid hush money to cover up his soliciting minors for sex on forty-three different occasions. He’d been born to a member of parliament, and he’d used their wealth to become a politician himself. He was the very portrait of a predator.

Not noticing the girls’ revulsion, Jahn turned to Pharma and smiled. “So what can you tell me about these girls?”

“I take it they’re to your liking, Councillor?”

“The part I’m most interested in is...how old are they?”

“All of them are eighteen.”

““No one’s actually going to buy that!”” Sara and Erna retorted internally.

Erna and Annette were fourteen, but both of them were short of stature and could easily be mistaken for twelve-year-olds. Sara admittedly seemed a bit older, but even then, she didn’t look a day over her actual age of fifteen.

“.....”

Jahn froze and gave Erna and Annette a dubious look. He blinked.

Then he nodded. “If anyone asks, that’s certainly what we’ll say.”

““This guy is a menaaaace!””

Sara and Erna shuddered all over again.

The man sitting across from them shouldn’t have been allowed to get near minors under any circumstances.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Erna turned to her seatmate. “Hey, Annette.”

“Huh?”

“That guy thinks you’re a little girl. He’s making fun of you.”

Erna’s plan was full scorched earth.

Sara and Erna were well aware Annette had a complex about her height. Whenever people commented on it, she always flew into a rage. She was liable to blow up the entire restaurant for them.

Sure enough, Annette gave Jahn a skeptical glare. “Yo, buddy, what do you take me for?”

“Someone who’s very mature for your age.”

“Yo, this guy’s all right!”

“*“He really isn’t!”*”

Thanks to his surprising answer, he managed to avoid inciting Annette’s wrath. Jahn was clearly experienced at handling younger girls—a fact that only deepened Sara and Erna’s disdain.

“Heh. I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself, Councillor.”

Beside him, Pharma made no efforts to tell him off. Instead, she simply observed with a docile expression on her face and ordered a round of drinks for the table.

She had no intention of reining the man in.

Sara and Erna wanted desperately to go home, but they were well past the point of no return.

“All righty! Let’s all cut loose tonight, shall we?!” Jahn was having the time of his life. There wasn’t a drop of liquor in him yet, and his face was already flush. “This right here, this is what life is all about! And what’s more, my good friend even said he’d join us!”

“Your friend? There’s someone else coming?” Pharma asked.

“Indeed! My first true compatriot!”

That was news to Pharma, and she cocked her head in bewilderment.

The fact that this guy was a friend of Jahn’s gave the girls little hope about his character. They tried praying for a reprieve, but Jahn ignored them and

boisterously explained. “We hit it off at the pub yesterday. The man’s a fellow diehard! My sensors went off the moment I met him. He’s incredible! He’s the kind of guy who would take eight girls with nowhere else to go and invite them to come live in his manor with him—I’m sure of it. He didn’t say anything to that effect, but my gut never lies!”

At that point, they heard a pair of footsteps approaching their private room.

“Ah, he’s here!” Jahn nodded with delight and threw open the door.

“Allow me to introduce you. This is my compatriot—Klaus!”

The tall, long-haired man standing there was one they knew well.

“””” ””””

The girls were struck utterly speechless.

“Hey there, J,” Klaus said casually, to which Jahn replied, “Glad you could make it, K,” and offered him the seat next to his own. They’d only met the night prior, but the two of them were thick as thieves, and they clapped each other on the shoulder with joy.

The girls were flabbergasted.

Lamplight’s boss had joined the mixer as one of the pedophiles.

Eventually, everyone’s drinks arrived. There was beer with glasses for the two men, a Cassis Orange for Pharma, and grape juice for the younger three.

“Ch-cheers.”

“Hear, hear...”

Sara and Erna nodded to each other and, as a team, poured Jahn a glass of beer.

““Here you go, Mr. Jahn.””



Jahn stared at the glass they were offering him with glee and, after toasting, drained it in one hearty swig.

Thus began Sara and Erna's first-ever mixer. And the very first thing they'd done in it...was poison their counterpart's drink.



Five minutes into the meal, Jahn had to step out for a bit.

Soon after imbibing the laxative prepared by Lily the local poison expert, Jahn's complexion had worsened, and he'd headed for the bathroom. He wouldn't be back for at least fifteen minutes. Poison wasn't a big part of Sara's and Erna's repertoires, but the lighting in the room was dim enough that even they could fool a layman.

Once they were down to just Klaus, Annette turned to him. "Yo, Bro, are you one of those 'pedophiles,' too?"

Klaus grimaced. "It wounds me that you would even ask that." He took another sip of his beer. "I'm on a mission separate from Avian's investigating a crime syndicate. There's a woman loosely associated with them coming to this restaurant today, so I decided to befriend Councillor Jahn solely to provide myself with some cover here."

"I think I just stumbled on something mighty interesting, yo."

Klaus furrowed his brow. "Try to keep your amusement to a minimum, if you could. I had to stomach a lot of unpleasantness to ingratiate myself with that man."

When the appetizers arrived, Annette wasted no time in attacking them, cackling to herself all the while.

Meanwhile, Sara was overcome with relief. "R-right, of course. I knew the boss would never go to a mixer for real."

Sara knew Klaus was far too busy to go around skirt-chasing, but for a moment there, she'd been flummoxed all the same. She didn't quite know how to describe the feeling she'd gotten in her heart.

She let out a long exhale.

“.....”

When she sensed someone’s gaze, she turned to the side and found Pharma looking at her in surprise.

“Ohhh,” Pharma said. “So thaaat’s what’s going on, huh? Ah, the innocence of youth. It’s adorable.”

Sara wasn’t quite sure why, but Pharma’s lips were curled into a grin, and she was staring at Sara with rapt delight.

Across the table, Klaus continued giving his matter-of-fact explanation. “In any case, I’ll be sure to keep a close eye on him. I won’t let him lay a hand on you. You girls can just enjoy your meal in peace.”

That was heartening to hear.

Erna’s expression softened. “That’s a big relief,” she said happily. Meanwhile, Annette declared, “I’m gonna put in all the orders I want, yo,” and called over their server to pile more expensive-sounding dishes onto their tab.

Things were starting to feel like a regular old Lamplight dinner. As the mood in the room lightened, Sara managed to muster up a soft smile. “This is nice. If things go on like this, we might actually have a good—”

“I’m sorry, did you forget? This is a *mixer*, remember?”

Pharma interrupted the conversation and made her point with wide eyes.

“““Huh...?””””

Sara, Erna, and even Klaus all reacted with surprise.

This couldn’t be good.

Before they had a chance to say anything, though, the door swung open and Jahn returned with a broad smile on his face. “So sorry about that, everyone,” he said as he sat back down in his original seat looking none the worse for the

wear. Not only had he made a full recovery, but he'd also done so in half the time they'd expected. The man's stomach must have been made of steel.

"Are you feeling better now, Councillor?" Pharma said, playing up how worried she was about him as she pulled a small box out of her bag. "I was thinking it might be fun to have a little lottery. What do you thiink? We'll say whoever draws the 1 has to feed the person who draws the 2."

"Ohhh, now that does sound like a good time! Brilliant idea, Pharma!" Jahn cried. He gave her an excited little round of applause.

In contrast, Sara and Erna glared at her with reproach. *"Is she for real right now?!"*

Pharma was determined to see the event through.

After putting one slip in the box for each person present, she passed it to Jahn and had them all draw slips one by one. Once Jahn, Sara, Erna, and Annette had all taken a turn, Pharma gave the box another shake and offered it to Klaus. "Don't be shyyy, Klaus."

"....." Klaus made no effort to hide the displeasure on his face. "Did I just see you mess with the box?"

"I'm suuure you're just imagining things."

"From where I'm sitting, I only see one slip in there. What happened to the one you're going to draw?"

"Huuuh? Look, you're part of the group, so surely you're going to draw a slip, right? Only a reaaal party pooper would go and spoil the fun now."

"....."

Klaus went silent, but he did resign himself to drawing a slip. He wasn't happy about it, but he had a duty as a spy to carry out his mission.

Once Pharma drew the final slip (although from where Sara was sitting, it looked like she pulled it out of her sleeve), everyone unfolded their papers.

Klaus had the 1, and Sara had the 2.

Pharma rose to her feet in glee.

“All righty! Klaus, why don’t you go ahead and feed Sara some of that salad?”

“Whaaaaat?!”

Sara’s face immediately went hot, and she let out a hysterical cry.

“Ooh, you lucky dog!” Jahn said in disappointment as he thumped Klaus on the shoulder. Erna and Annette squeezed their fists tight and cheered her on. “Big Sis Sara...” “I’m rooting for you, yo!”

Klaus gave Pharma an icy look. Eventually, though, he defeatedly picked up a fork and stabbed it into the carpaccio salad that had just arrived at the table.

After lifting up a couple slices of lettuce—

“Say ‘aaah.’”

—he held the fork out to Sara.

“~~~~~!!”

She could hear her heart pounding. Thinking about how red her face must have been only served to deepen her embarrassment.

Annette and Erna gave her looks of encouragement. Sara steeled her resolve, squeezed her eyes shut, and opened her mouth.

Klaus delicately put the lettuce in.

The instant the fork left her mouth, Sara grabbed her fresh glass of grape juice and chugged the whole thing down. Her body felt like it was burning up.

“Oh, she’s so pure.” Pharma let out a pleased laugh. “For our next game, what about having the winners do an indirect kiss with a straw?”

Klaus gave her a scathing look. “You’re getting a kick out of this, aren’t you?”



The game continued for some time, but fortunately, the girls never ended up having to do anything genuinely uncomfortable. Pharma fed Jahn some food, Annette and Erna fed each other some bread, and the party went on harmlessly.

As a result, Annette was all smiles the whole way through. “I wanna get some more meat,” she crowed as she wolfed down every scrap of food that came her way. Even Erna got caught up in Annette’s gluttony and gobbled down the food with gusto. “This is so delicious!”

Jahn did grumble a bit about how the drawings never seemed to go his way, but Pharma did a skillful job of patching things up and keeping him on tenterhooks.

The one odd thing was how one in every two draws ended up with Sara and Klaus having to get touchy. First, she would have to put her arm around his body, then he would have to give her a lap pillow. The orders just kept on coming.

I—I feel like someone might be reading into something here!

Every time it happened, Pharma gave her a look of profound satisfaction. Sara’s face went bright red whenever she had to touch Klaus, and Pharma couldn’t get enough of it. She was clearly toying with her.

Still, a thought crossed Sara’s mind.

This is what makes her so incredible.

She’d seen Pharma’s power a number of times before. Back at the academy, Pharma had used it to its full effect.

Humans were creatures whose sentiment could be swayed by the smallest of things. A raised fist would inspire anxiety, while an open palm could inspire camaraderie. Merely by changing Klaus’s position, it was possible to make the person he was facing feel comfort or discomfort.

Pharma was a mentalist who specialized in manipulating people’s emotions. The tiniest of moves she made could allow her to control entire spaces.

“Hmm, my luck really has forsaken me tonight.” They were an hour into the meal, and Jahn was getting understandably frustrated. He gave Pharma a defeated look. “What do you say we call it here and move this party somewhere else? I booked a hotel room in advance. How about we part ways with ol’ K and —?”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary.”

Pharma took his proffered hand and swatted it away.

“I’m code name Feather—and I’d say it’s time to descend into depravity.”

The door to the room swung open.

Standing on the other side of it was a girl with long hair and puffy red eyes. Her lips were pursed tight, and she was fixing an intense stare on Jahn.

“What...?”

Jahn was overcome with shock. He didn’t understand what was happening, and the girls were in the same boat. However, Klaus nodded, as he was the one person who’d immediately picked up on what was going on.

“I figured as much.” He shot a glance over at Pharma. “That’s the woman I’m tailing. Our missions had more in common than it seemed.”

“That’s the long and short of it,” Pharma said with a smug look on her face.

Jahn’s gaze flitted between Pharma and the newcomer like he didn’t know what to make of things. He looked like a man who’d just had a bucket of cold water dumped onto his face.

“What’s going on? Who is that?”

“Well, that’s a heartless thing to say.” Pharma gave him a cold look. “She’s the daughter you abandoned.”

“She’s right, Daddy.”

There was a sadness in the young woman’s voice.

That was true—earlier in the conversation, Jahn had mentioned having a

daughter. He'd lost touch with her eight years ago during his divorce. If she'd been twelve at the time, then that would make her twenty now. Pharma's use of the word *abandoned* didn't quite mesh with Jahn's story, but in all likelihood, the truth lay with the former of the two.

Klaus quickly explained. "She's Kacha Yudy, a low-level member of a *nasty* little criminal organization. They've been having her contact other spies, forge documents, and smuggle money and weapons for them. She's been a handy disposable pawn for them."

"Now, why would she go and do that?"

Jahn gave him a skeptical look. His curiosity was dispassionate, like it had nothing to do with him.

"To help *you*," Pharma said with an edge to her voice. "Didn't you ever find it odd? All those scandals getting hushed up, your rivals falling from grace... You've had more than your share of strokes of good fortune."

"Ah..."

"All that was thanks to your daughter. She helped them commit all sorts of crimes because they told her she was helping you. She's the very picture of devotion." Her voice rang firm. "And all because you told everyone who would listen just how much you loved her!"

Seeing Jahn's daughter Kacha and thinking about how fanatical her love was sent a pang through Sara's heart.

She remembered the explanation Jahn gave for spending time with young girls: "They remind me of my daughter." He himself had said that was how he explained his behavior. He'd been doing so for ages, and word must have gotten back to his genuine daughter Kacha. So she'd returned his love in kind. The no-contact order didn't apply to her, but she'd obeyed it all the same and supported her father from afar.

Pharma sadly shook her head. "Do you see now, Kacha? Your father has no love for his daughter. He just uses that as an excuse to get his grabby hands all over minors. He's scum, plain and simple."

She wrapped Kacha's shoulders into a soft embrace.

“No matter how hard you try, you’ll never make your daddy love you.”

In Kacha’s hand was a wiretap. She’d been listening to the entire mixer. That was the reason Pharma had thrown it in the first place.

Persuasion—that was one of the special skills “Feather” Pharma possessed. She could get anyone, no matter who they were, to open their hearts to her and spill their innermost secrets.

Kacha crumpled to the floor like her knees had given out under her and began crying. Pharma snuggled up to her and rubbed her back. Before long, Kacha would doubtless be clinging to Pharma and confessing all her misdeeds as Pharma consoled her.

Jahn awkwardly listened to the whole thing play out.

“I don’t know what to say. Thank you for doing all that, I suppose.” Despite the fact they were reuniting after eight years, Jahn barely sounded like he cared. He scratched his head and let out a strained laugh. “What an odd pickle this is.” From his perspective, she was just a stranger he’d cut ties with long ago. “Well, um... Kacha? When they lock you up, make sure you cooperate with the investigation. I say, aiding and abetting a criminal organization? That’s no way to behave.”

His shameless comments earned him a reply from Klaus. “You sound so carefree. It’s like you don’t even realize how doomed you are.”

“Huh?”

“The only things that have let you survive as a politician up until now have been your parents’ coattails and your abandoned daughter’s efforts. Now that she’s turned her back on you, it won’t be long before charges start getting filed against you.”

“.....”

“It appears you didn’t have any direct contact with the criminals, but to be

frank, I find you even more detestable than them. I have no sympathy to offer you.”

Jahn winced at Klaus’s words. Now it was all too easy for him to realize how ruined he was.

He shot a pleading look over at Pharma and Kacha, but neither of them was of any mind to help him. Everyone in the room was looking at him with venom in their eyes.

“Urgh...”

He hung his head and covered his face with his hands so he wouldn’t have to look reality in the face. His head twitched from side to side.

“——!”

Then an idea struck him, and he grabbed a knife off the table. Squeezing it tight, he leaped onto the table and lunged at Annette and Erna, who’d been looking on as spectators.

Perhaps he planned on taking them hostage, or perhaps he was simply lashing out. It was impossible to tell. Sara never gave him a chance to prove which it was.

“I’m code name Meadow—and it’s time to run circles around you!”

The puppy hiding in her bag jumped out and sank its teeth into Jahn’s arm. With a cry of “Gah!” he fell over backward onto his rear.

“I won’t let you lay a finger on Miss Erna or Miss Annette.”

Sara positioned herself protectively in front of them and glared down at Jahn.

She may not have had any personal ties to him herself, but she found his lack of regard for others maddening.

“You need to apologize,” she shouted. “Apologize to all the people you’ve hurt!”



Despite that slight hiccup, the mission ended successfully.

Jahn had passed out, so they just left him there and exited the restaurant.

On their way out, Pharma and Klaus shared a hushed conversation.

“We stumbled on Kacha while we were digging into that boy’s contacts. Was she really...?”

“Yeah. They pegged her as a mark. To them, she made for a convenient tool.”

“We have to make them pay for this.”

“They were probably planning on blackmailing Councillor Jahn, as well. They want to get a foothold here in the city. I’ll get you a copy of the intel I’ve gathered. The mission’s likely going to fall to Avian.”

“Right. I’ll be sure to let Vindo know.”

The girls couldn’t follow any of the details, but they could tell how dead serious it was. By the sound of it, Avian still had work left to do. That much was clear; Pharma’s voice was much graver than usual.

However, none of that was any of the girls’ business.

Once they were outside, Pharma’s expression brightened up. “Thank you all so muuuch. I couldn’t have done it without you. I’ll see you tomorrow, ’kaaay?” she said with a smile and a wave.

“So you admit you’re coming to Heat Haze Palace again tomorrow,” the girls half laughed, half groaned as they parted ways with her.

Klaus had some other work he needed to finish up, so the three girls headed back alone. They were filled with the pleasant feeling of a job well done.

“I was a little taken aback at first.” Eventually, Erna got over her nerves and smiled. “But Big Sis Pharma was really cool back there. It’s no wonder she’s on Avian.”

“For sure.”

Not once had Pharma ever let the girls feel like they were in any real danger.

The grip she'd had over Jahn's emotions had let her keep him from getting anywhere near them. That moment there at the end had given Sara a fright, but she was confident even if she hadn't done anything, Pharma would have stopped Jahn instead.

Pharma had been in complete control of the entire room.

Getting to go on a mission with her had been a really valuable experience.

As Sara thought about how she really needed to thank her for that, she called out to the girl walking ahead. "What about you, Miss Annette? How did you enjoy your first mixer?"

"Hmm?" Annette said as she turned around. There was a chicken bone jutting out of her mouth. For her, dinner wasn't quite over yet. "I thought the food was great, yo."

"I guess you really did spend the whole time eating, Miss Annette."

Rather than pay any attention to Jahn, Annette had continued shoveling meat into her mouth from start to finish.

Annette grinned, her mouth glistening with grease. "You should've eaten more too, Sis."

"I—I was too nervous to even think about the food."

"What a shame, yo! It was super tasty," Annette happily informed her.

"Now that you mention it," Erna said from beside her, "I was surprised at how nuanced the flavors were. That place was really fancy."

"Oh..."

"I took a look at the menu Annette was hoarding. All the prices had one or two more zeros than the restaurants I usually go to."

"W-well, um, I guess it did seem pretty expensive."

Sara had picked up on how high-end of an establishment it was. Erna was right about the prices on the menu, and the furnishings and decor had been swanky as well.

Had Pharma specifically picked a nice restaurant to put Jahn in a better mood,

perhaps? It was possible, though the way things had played out, Jahn himself was the one who had ended up paying.

“I really do think it’s a shame, yo.”

Annette gave her a tauntingly mysterious smile.

“And after all that work Pharma put into setting it up for you.”



True to her word, Pharma came to Heat Haze Palace the next day as well.

Early in the morning, she barged her way past the LAMPLIGHT USE ONLY! sign outside the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of fruit juice from the fridge. Its label had PROPERTY OF LILY! scrawled over it in big letters, but after a “Hmm?” and the briefest of pauses, she peeled the label off and began loudly chugging the bottle’s contents.

Sara watched her do it from nearby, but it all happened too fast for her to say anything.

She stood there in blank shock for a bit when suddenly, her and Pharma’s gazes met.

“Oh, hiiii, Sara. Thanks again for yesterday.”

Pharma gave her a smile and wave with her stolen goods still in hand.

There were a million things Sara wanted to comment on, but she had one burning question she wanted answered.

“Why...?”

“Hmm?”

“Why did you pick me to join the mission?”

In retrospect, Sara had been completely extraneous. Annette and Erna were the ones who looked like twelve-year-olds, and that was all Pharma had really needed. They were the only ones Jahn had expressed any real interest in, and seeing him go after the two people who looked like twelve-year-olds was what had set his daughter Kacha off.

In other words, there had been no reason for Sara to even be there. Why, Pharma hadn't even prepared an outfit for her.

"...Ooh, you noticed?" Pharma tilted her head in embarrassment. "Yeah, you were a freebie. It didn't have anything to do with the mission."

"But why?"

"I remember back at the academy, back when you used to go cry at the far end of the beach."

Sara groaned. Pharma had mentioned it before the mission, as well.

Those were hardly pleasant memories, and having them dredged back up caused her chest to grow tight. None of her skills had been up to snuff back then, and she'd spent her days getting yelled at by her instructors and sobbing her eyes out.

Pharma narrowed her eyes in chagrin. "I'm sorry I couldn't do anything to help."

"....."

Sara's eyes went wide.

Pharma looked down apologetically. "That's why I wanted to treat you to a nice meeeal yesterday. But instead, I just made you nervous. I guess my plan backfired."

"B-but why me...?"

"If anything, don't you resent me? I noticed you crying, but I ignored it tiime and time again. I would have had to, or there's no way I could have known about how often it happened."

How could Sara resent her for that? The training they had gone through at the spy academy was so harsh, it would have been bizarre if Pharma *did* have the bandwidth to look after someone else.

"But I'm a nobody, I just—"

"Don't put yourself down like that."

Pharma took a big step forward.

Sara was too surprised to move, and Pharma laid her hands on her shoulders before sliding her arms around her back and wrapping her in a gentle embrace.

“Congratulations. I think it’s wonderful that you became a full-fledged spy.”

“_____”

Sara could feel the heat from Pharma’s body.

After a short while, Pharma stepped back and stuck out her tongue a little. “Tee-hee, that’s what I’ve been wanting to tell you. I’ve been sitting on that for a whiiile.”

Not a moment later, a scream rang out from the kitchen’s entrance.

When they turned and looked, they saw Lily looking absolutely aghast. “I was looking FORWARD to that juice!” she yelled. Her face was scarlet, and she grabbed a nearby broom. “I’ve had it up to here with you people! Go home, Avian!! Today’s the day I punish you for your sins and end your reign of terror!”

Lily gave the broom a few practice swings. Her grudges ran deep when food was involved.

“Ooh, this could be bad,” Pharma said with a laugh, then made a break for it. She leaped out the kitchen window and fled to the outdoors.

“Miss Pharma!” Sara hurriedly cried after her. “I-I’m really happy we got to go on a mission together!”

Pharma flashed her a toothy grin and nodded. “Then I guess our love’s mutual.”



Two years earlier...

The Din Republic had a number of spy academies dotted throughout the land, and one of those facilities was built on a lonely island in a distant sea. Its isolation made it easier to practice with heavy weaponry there, but the fact it was closed off and impossible to escape from put a lot of stress on the female spy trainees stationed there.

One of those trainees was Pharma. She went by the name Projection at the time, and her grades were stellar. Her older brother Holytree was an outstanding spy, and her talent was on par with his. Whenever the academy held an exam, Pharma was consistently the highest scorer.

Plenty of the other students wanted to share the benefits of her success, and she'd earned herself quite a following.

"You were incredible in that marksmanship drill today, Pharma!" "I bet you could already pass the graduation exam!"

Pharma was surrounded by five such girls, and she gave them a conflicted smile. "Hmm. I dunno, I'd like to keep taking it easy here at the acaaademy for a bit longer."

As a note, she knew firsthand how dangerous standing out too much could be, and when she did take her graduation exam, she would pull her punches enough to only get fifth place. If she'd been trying her hardest, she would have been a contender for second or third. However, she'd crossed paths with some people she didn't much care for, so she'd decided to prioritize crushing them over maximizing her own marks.

Pharma tuned out her groupies as she walked across the island.

Right when she was about to leave the training area and head back to the dorms, a voice reached her ear.

"Hmm... I hear someone crying."

Her followers looked at her in confusion. "Huh?"

Pharma stepped off the path and headed for the sea. Her heart tightened in her chest at how sad the voice was.

When she arrived at the beach, the source of the crying came into view. It was a girl with brown hair. Her back quivered as she hugged a large hawk by the water's edge. From within her embrace, the hawk gave her arm a consoling nuzzle with its head.

"Ah, it's her," one of Pharma's hangers-on said.

The girl was a new student by the name of Meadow. She'd failed to

disassemble and reassemble her gun in the allotted time during their training that morning, and the instructor had chewed her out for it.

“Should we say something to her, Pharma?”

“.....”

Pharma didn't give the suggestion an immediate reply.

She stared at the brown-haired girl until she knew she would never forget the image.

“Let's nooot.” Pharma turned back and returned the way she'd come. “If she's not cut out to be a spy, then it's better she gets expelled sooner rather than later. If by some miracle she does become a spy, she's juuust gonna get herself killed.”

The world was awash in pain. They all knew it. Everyone had things they were and weren't suited for. Giving encouragement to the untalented was a great way to assuage one's feelings of guilt, but it didn't necessarily do the untalented themselves any good.

Pharma's admirers cast their eyes downward in sorrow. They probably felt bad for Meadow, though from Pharma's perspective, all of them were practically as incompetent as her.

“But you knooow,” Pharma said with a soft smile, “if someone does find some talent in her and helps her enter the world of espionage with her head held high, I'd like to get a chance to congratulate her. Ooh, it'd be nice to give her a warm welcome by treating her to a delicious meal.”

Even as she said it, she could already imagine what a lovely future that would be.

Someone failing at school was no guarantee they were unskilled. Perhaps someone would come along, discover her talent, and help her find some way to shine.

That might be an absurd thing to wish for, but there was no harm in hoping.

“I dunno, Pharma, you're such a spendthrift.” One of the groupies grinned and poked fun at her. “Would you really be able to save up for that? Good food

is expensive.”

It was an apt point, but Pharma wasn't worried. "I'll be fiiine." Even if she was broke, there were plenty of options available. She gave her followers a determined smile. "If the time comes, I'll just get someone else to foot the bill, see."

Like a prophecy, that was precisely what happened just two years later.

Flashback ①

The Avian Ecosystem

Lily chased Pharma for a full twenty minutes after getting her juice stolen, but she eventually ran out of steam without ever managing to catch her prey. It was unclear how it kept happening, but on five separate occasions, Lily had seen Pharma make a move, hesitated upon realizing she needed to be careful, and immediately stumbled into a trap Pharma set off. The gap in their skills was all too plain to see.

As Lily lay sprawled on the ground, Sara came in and smiled as she handed her a new bottle of juice. “I went and bought you a replacement,” she said, so Lily decided to let Pharma off the hook.

Pharma, the one who’d instigated the whole incident, was moved. “Thaaanks,” she said in that carefree tone of hers, and they all relocated to the main hall to enjoy their drinks.

“You all have been stopping by a lot recently, huh?” Lily said as she poured juice down her parched throat. “Where does Avian usually stay?”

“Hmm. Over in Lieditz, I guess,” Pharma drawled.

Lieditz was the capital of the Din Republic. By car, it took an hour or two to get there from the port city of Arranq where they were. Big cities like those were where the majority of the Din Republic’s counterintelligence missions took place.

“Back when we first got together, we all had our own apartments, but we have so many missions abroad and out in the countryside that we never got to use them, so now we just have two that we share.”

“Oh, wow.”

“It’s really nice, getting to relax in a big fancy manor for a change.”

Pharma kicked off her shoes and flopped onto a couch. “I’m putting on weiiight again,” she groaned quietly, but in spite of that, she showed no signs of budging. When she wasn’t working, she was lazy through and through.

Sara’s eyes went wide. “Th-that’s incredible... Six people of mixed genders in just two apartments?” she gasped.

“Yup. And we use one of them as a storeroom, so really, we just live in the one.”

“Six people in *one* apartment? Oh gosh, that must be so cramped... Does no one ever complain?”

“Nah, of couurse not. We get along too well for that to ever—”

“Oh, I’ve got some complaints, all right!”

A loud cry butted into their conversation from the back of the hall.

Everyone turned to look and saw a girl with glasses and a ponytail—“Glide” Qulle—standing there with her shoulders square. She stomped her way over to Pharma.

“I think you’re leaving out a lot of details there! As I recall, you all just turned my apartment into our meeting spot without my permission! And sorry, what? Are you telling me that everyone else broke their leases?! Why is this the first I’m hearing about it?!”

“Look, one thing led to anoother.”

“Yeah, ‘one thing’ was the rest of you getting plastered, and ‘another’ was you deciding to start using my place as a hotel!”

As the two of them began bickering, Sara found herself taken aback. She timidly raised her hand and interrupted. “Wait, what? So everyone just stays at your apartment, Miss Qulle?”

“That’s right. I mean, Vics usually stays with the women he picks up, and Queneau doesn’t come by very often, but other than that, yeah.” Qulle shook her head and let out a deep sigh. “I swear, the whole situation is a mess. ‘Your place is so big,’ they said, and ‘it’s so convenient to hold meetings there,’ and then they went and brought chessboards and decks of cards in, and now I can’t get them to leave. Vindo will sleep the day away there, and they keep rummaging through my fridge for snacks and booze.”

“I think it’s real nice. It’s so fun when we all bring food and play poker all night.”

A vein on Qulle’s temple throbbed. “That’s because you all keep colluding to take my money!”

She clearly had a lot of pent-up rage. However, the person she was directing it at feigned ignorance. “This juice is so taaasty,” Pharma said with a soft smile.

Qulle clutched at her head. “You know, this all started that time Adi showed up crying and telling me she’d lost her purse and didn’t have any way to get home.”

Sara looked at her in confusion. “Who’s Adi?”

“...Ah, right, you don’t know. She used to be Avian’s boss.”

“Oh,” Sara mumbled.

When Avian was first founded, the team had been made up of an experienced boss paired with six academy elites. That boss had died during their mission in Longchon, and apparently, her name had been Adi.

“Hmm, how do I put this?” Lily crossed her arms and summed it all up. “Avian kinda reminds me of a bunch of lazy college students.”

“Better that than being a teenage after-school club like Lamplight,” Pharma shot back.

Chapter 2

Lan's Case

Up in the attic, a girl was trembling.

"Prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee, prithee!"

The girl had dark-red hair tied back behind her head and an intense, dignified look in her eyes. She was called "Cloud Drift" Lan, and she was one of Avian's members. As of late, she'd started making regular visits to Heat Haze Palace so she could train with Klaus.

However, that had given rise to a big problem.

Namely, the fact that every time Lan stopped by, she nearly died at the hands of an ash-pink-haired demon.

"That knave hath a screw loose in her head. Wherefore doth Lamplight allow such a creature to roam free?"

The demon's name was "Forgetter" Annette. Annette had all sorts of different inventions up her sleeve, and a souped-up chainsaw and a grip full of bombs were her weapons of choice as she chased Lan around.

It had all started way back in Longchon, when Lan had mocked Annette by calling her a runt. Doing so had brought Annette's wrath down on her; she had flown into a rage and made relentless attempts on Lan's life. Annette's teammates had managed to talk her down and quell her fury for a time, but every time she ran into Lan, she would shout, "I'm gonna make you into a guinea pig for my inventions, yo!" and brandish all manner of deadly devices.

Today had been no different, and Lan had been forced to flee into hiding in

the Heat Haze Palace attic.

She let out a long breath. “The rest of Lamplight hath stopped protecting me, too...”

Toward the beginning of the two teams’ cultural exchange, Lan had asked the rest of Lamplight to keep Annette in check for her. The majority of the girls had been reluctant, but they’d taken her up on her request.

Now, though, they’d started just giving her looks of annoyance. “You could just not come to Heat Haze Palace, you know,” they said.

Why were they giving her the cold shoulder?

“Heartless they are, I daresay! Should not they strive harder to defend my personage?! Have they no fear of their manor turning into a murder scene before their very eyes?!”

The Lamplight girls weren’t there to defend themselves, but Lan raged against them all the same as she stared up at the ceiling.

It was surprisingly pleasant up in the attic. It got decent airflow, and it wasn’t too terribly warm.

“Ugh, thou leavest me no choice but to laze here until my mission begins!”

One wrong move, and Annette was liable to find her.

Lan looked around, thinking perhaps a siesta was in order. Maybe there was something she could use as a pillow.

“Hmm?”

As she searched, she spotted something piled up in the corner.

She fished out a flashlight and turned it on.

Her eyes went wide. “What have we here...?”



After Lamplight and Avian began their honeymoon, the first week passed in the blink of an eye.

As the two groups got used to spending time around each other, they began mingling outside of just their spy work like missions and training. Their reactions to that were varied, from those who wanted to establish friendships to those who took interest in each other's pasts. Differences began emerging in the girls' approaches.

It was around that time that Lamplight's local stuck-up tried reaching out to the Avian elites.



One of the rooms in Heat Haze Palace was a lounge.

The Lamplight girls didn't go there very often. The manor was spacious, and it had plenty of rooms the girls simply had no use for. Anything they needed to do could generally be done in either the dining room, the main hall, their bedrooms, or the communal bath, and because of that, the lounge went largely unused. It was a comfy room outfitted with sofas and a fireplace, but it was a little too small to happily fit eight people.

Yet now—

“Ahh, you're so cuuute. Hee-hee, Lamplight is the beeest. You've got good food, you've got cute girls, you've got soft couches... This is total bliss.”

—there was a woman there looking ecstatic.

That woman was “Feather” Pharma. Pharma had quickly begun integrating herself into Lamplight after the mixer mission, and part of that had involved taking over the lounge. She'd planted “Fool” Erna on her lap and was sniffing her hair with an oddly spellbound look on her face.

Erna looked none too pleased about the situation.

“Can I go now...?”

“Sorry, Ernaaa. By the way, I’m sleeping over tonight.”

“Yeep?!”

Erna’s expression froze. She tried to wriggle free, but Pharma just hugged her tighter.

“Meadow” Sara was there in the lounge, too, and she let out an awkward laugh as she watched them. “Do you have the day off of missions, Miss Pharma?”

“That’s riiight. *I’ve* got the day off.”

“When you say it like that, does that mean someone else—?”

“I think it’s Lan who’s on the clock today. I really wasn’t feeling this one, so I left it to her.”

Sara tilted her head in confusion. The idea of not “feeling” a mission struck her as odd, but a moment later, a sweet smell wafted through the lounge and interrupted her train of thought.

“Oh, the chiffon cake should be done soon.”

“Thaaanks!” Pharma exclaimed, overcome with emotion. “I feel bad for everyone who doesn’t have a little buddy who’s good at cooking.”

“Didn’t you just eat dinner, though? Be careful not to go to town and make yourself sick.”

“Yep, will dooo.”

“Also, I made extra, so feel free to share with the rest of your team.”

“Wow. You’re such a good girl, Sara.”

By that point, Sara and Pharma had settled into a friendly little-buddy–big-buddy relationship. But right as they were enjoying their friendly conversation in the lounge—

“Hey, it was Pharma, right? You got a sec?”

—a curt voice squashed the cheerful atmosphere they'd created.

There was a girl with cerulean hair standing in the doorway—"Glint" Monika. Monika had an asymmetrical hairdo, but aside from that, her build was so average it was like she'd intentionally removed anything distinctive about her appearance.

It was unclear why, but she had a grim look on her face as she stared Pharma down.

"Sara and Erna, you mind giving us the room?"

Monika's voice was sterner than usual.

Pharma gave her a casual smile. "Awww, but I wanted to keep patting Erna for a bit longer..."

"....."

Monika's expression was stony.

Realizing how tense things had just grown, Erna and Sara hurriedly fled the scene. "W-we'll give you two some space." "Y-yeah, that sounds like a good idea."

Pharma gave her a dejected look, like she'd just had all her fun spoiled. "What do you waaant, Monika?"

"To ask you a question. Just to be sure, you're the most skilled female spy on Avian, right?"

"I dunno about that. Qulle and Lan both got better grades on the graduation exam when we—"

"Cut the bullshit," Monika snapped.

To her credit, Monika was right. Pharma had placed fifth on the graduation exam, but that was only because she hadn't been taking it seriously. In terms of raw skill, Pharma put the rest of Avian's women to shame. She hadn't been trying her hardest during their battle in Longchon, either, and Monika had seen right through her.

"Well?" Pharma smiled. "What's up?"

“Back at your academy, you must have participated in a special joint training exercise.” Monika sat herself down on the couch across from Pharma’s. “I wanna know who its examiner was. Do you have any idea?”



The special joint training exercise was where Monika had learned the cruel taste of defeat.

Once every two years, the spy academies got all their best students together and assigned them a single mission. The female students were given the simple task of stealing a code book from their one examiner. Monika had qualified for the exercise just two months into her academy career, and she’d gone into it in high spirits. The other participants’ competitive sides had been flaring as well, and the testing grounds had brimmed with tension.

However, that one examiner had utterly mopped the floor with all twenty of the girls.

“Wait, for real? This is what passes for top students? Sheesh, what a shocker. You kids are weak as hell!”

The examiner had smiled smugly as she stood in the dilapidated house the exercise was being held in. Monika had never forgotten the words she’d said while the rest of the examinees had lain unconscious.

“Remember this: In our world, people without fire in their hearts are nothing more than garbage.”

That failure had caused Monika to lose faith in her own abilities. She’d begun half-assing things at her academy, and before long, she’d gotten labeled as a

washout.



That woman shattered my soul.

Monika's teeth dug into her lip as she thought back to how painful that experience had been.

Monika had long since come to terms with it. She didn't fully understand what it meant to have fire in her heart, but she'd come to see herself as a prodigy again, and she'd gone back to diligently training night and day.

However, the examiner's identity still nagged at her. Just who was the woman who'd handed her that bitter defeat? She didn't want a rematch per se, but that was roughly the headspace she was in.

That was why she wanted to track down other people who'd participated in the joint training exercise—so she could ask them if they knew anything.

Across from her, Pharma narrowed her eyes in nostalgia. “Yeah, I was there. So you were there, too? I had no ideeea.”

“Makes sense. We were banned from working together during the exercise, and there were plenty of people who thought of it as a competition to see who could take her down first.”

“But in the end, we aaall got wiped out.”

“I'd call it friendly fire...but that wasn't quite it. There were a couple of people who just lost it as soon as they went into that run-down house she was waiting for us in. Then their panic spread like wildfire...”

“I don't even remember what happened after that. I thiiink I heard someone playing the piano?”

“Yeah, we don't even know how she did it.”

The examiner had outclassed them so badly, they had no idea what she'd even done to them. She'd looked pretty young, too. She had only been in her midtwenties or so. Monika couldn't have been the only one who'd lost heart

after seeing the raw gulf in their skills.

All Monika knew about the examiner was the brief glimpse she'd gotten of her appearance, with her skin so white it looked bleached and a pair of deep crimson eyes. She'd looked like a foreigner. It was possible she wasn't originally from the Din Republic.

"She was amazing, huh? I dunno who she was, either." Pharma took a big stretch, then gave Monika a mocking look. "Isn't it pretty obvious who would, though?"

"....."

"I mean, I can tootally see why you wouldn't want to ask him."

"...Could you not pretend like you know me?"

Monika shot Pharma a glare. Pharma had hit her right where it hurt.

Naturally, she knew exactly who it was Pharma was referring to. Monika had considered broaching the subject with him on several occasions, but each time, she'd chickened out because she didn't want to talk about her own failure. At the end of the day, she only had a passing interest in solving the mystery, and there was nothing in particular pushing her forward.

All of a sudden, Pharma rose to her feet. "Don't worry, I'll come with you."

"Huh?"

Monika was surprised. She hadn't expected Pharma to show such enthusiasm.

Pharma gave her a big nod. "I've been kind of curious, myself. Especially laaatly." She gave Monika a smile, one that hinted at secrets untold. "All righty! Let's go find out about that woman who beat us up!"

In an odd display of excitement, she thrust a fist into the air.

The long and short of it was, they discovered the instructor's identity with shocking ease. After gathering intel from the other Avian members, they went to the relevant party's room and immediately got an answer.

"From your description, that has to have been Big Sis Heide."

Lamplight's boss, Klaus, gave them their answer with no resistance whatsoever.

He took a break from the document he was writing and described her.

"She was an Inferno member, code name Flamefanner. She was like an older sister to me. Her specialty was controlling people's hearts through art. People who weren't skilled enough would lose the moment they stepped into the same room as her."

"That checks out," Monika muttered in response to the big reveal. Everything about that made perfect sense.

Inferno had been the strongest spy team in the nation, though it had long since been destroyed. Klaus had loved them like they were his family.

Conflicting emotions raged within her as she let out a sigh. They'd inherited Heat Haze Palace itself from Inferno, meaning Monika had been living and working in the very same manor her examiner once had.

An uncharacteristically soft look crossed Klaus's face. "The special joint training exercise, huh? That takes me back. Inferno started holding that once every two years to headhunt new members onto the team. I guess Big Sis Heide must have been in charge of the most recent girls' academy exercise."

Pharma's eyes went wide. "Whoa, it was a recruitment test?! I had no ideeea that's what was going on."

"It was. I believe there was a rule where the participants weren't allowed to work together. The team wanted to test people individually. The exercise was also there to train the students, but that was a side benefit."

"Kinda cruel to make it so hard, though."

Klaus crossed his arms in puzzlement. "You have a point. It seems a little childish to annihilate the students the moment the test begins."

Monika agreed wholeheartedly. How were you supposed to headhunt anyone if all you did was mop the floor with them?

"Childish isn't even the haaalf of it!" Pharma cried in frustration. "Four years ago, there was this jacked old lady who took us all out with a long-range sniper

rifle!”

Klaus grimaced. “...That’d be Granny G.”

By that, he meant “Firewalker” Gerde. As long as she didn’t run out of ammo, Gerde had been strong enough to put down an entire village without letting a single person get near her.

“And according to my teammates, the boys’ academy had to deal with some guy beating all the students black and blue with a katana two years ago.”

Klaus massaged his temple. “Master...”

That would be “Torchlight” Guido. The Lamplight girls had once fought him themselves after Guido betrayed the Republic, and in terms of raw combat prowess, his skills exceeded even Klaus’s.

“Was Inferno actually tyrannizing the academies that badly?”

Klaus’s voice trembled at the revelation. The news came as a great shock to him.

Pharma gave him a pained smile. “I mean, they were, like, taking the top students and smashing their pride to pieces. A lot of people took it pretty hard...” A hint of sadness crept into her voice, but her smile soon returned. “... But I think for me, it gave me the push I needed.”

“.....”

Monika was in no position to say anything. She was one of the people who’d taken it hard and gotten her heart shattered.

She certainly had her misgivings, but at the end of the day, she had nothing against the special joint training exercise in and of itself. If she hadn’t met Flamefanner, she would have kept on being conceited all the way through graduation. There were some bitter pills it was important to swallow.

“That’s ‘Flamefanner’ Heide for you,” Klaus said with a satisfied nod. “She was a woman of many talents. She was an expert in covert ops, and with every

mission, she picked up a new skill. If she needed to infiltrate a theater, she would become a master pianist; if she needed to become a governess, she would master the art of painting. There was a period where I was really into oil painting, and I have her influence to thank for that.”

He crossed his arms and nodded once more. He then mumbled to himself, so quietly they could barely hear it. “Then there was all that erotica she wrote... Hmm, where did we store those, again?”

Heide had clearly been a woman of considerable skill.

Pharma clapped her hands together. “Must be niiice, being that well-rounded.”

“To think that she and my mentor were taking things too far with their drills...” Klaus’s expression darkened again. He was having a hard time overlooking what had happened. “Crushing academy students like that was uncalled for. I mean, when it came to training, they were strict with me, too... And I know what they were looking for is important for a spy to have, but still...”

“You sound like you know something,” said Monika.

“Well, they mentioned that their criteria for passing someone was if their skills were at least on par with mine.”

Monika’s bloodcurdling cry echoed through the room. “So you’re saying it was all *your* fault?!”



The special joint training exercises were secretly a recruitment test for Inferno. Ultimately, though, Inferno never ended up actually pulling new members from the academies. They’d picked up Heide and Klaus shortly after the Great War’s end, but in the ten years that followed, their roster never once grew.

The person who decided how they were going to choose new members to keep themselves relevant in the generation to come was Inferno’s boss —“Hearth” Veronika.

“Well, these are people who’ll have to carry on Inferno’s legacy...”

She had hair like crimson fire and a résumé a mile long, and she hemmed and hawed before giving the decree to her teammates.

“At the bare minimum, we need them to be as strong as Klaus.”

That was how the top academy students began experiencing the taste of hell once every two years.



Monika scratched the back of her neck as she walked down the hallway.

Her emotions were all over the place. There was a definite sense of satisfaction in finding out who the source of her setback had been, as well as a self-justifying feeling that defeat was inevitable. Then there was the frustration mixed in with it all. The fact that Flamefanner hadn’t chosen to recruit her and the fact that she’d dealt such an emotional blow both irritated Monika to no end.

The fact that Flamefanner had been an artist annoyed her, too.

Monika had been born to a bloodline of artists. Her family adored art, but she’d failed to inherit those same feelings, and her joining a spy academy had been more or less her way of running away from home.

She let out a big sigh as her fretful emotions swirled within her.

“I mean, it’s not like knowing actually changes anything,” she muttered defensively.

There really hadn’t been anything more to it than idle curiosity. It wasn’t as though she’d been planning on going out and getting revenge on the examiner once she’d figured out her identity.

And besides, Heide is dead.

Monika forced herself to accept that and headed for her bedroom. It was already nine at night.

When she got there, she discovered a crowd gathered around her room.

It was unclear what the Lamplight girls were doing there. Their faces were as red as if they'd just gotten out of the bath, and they were holding something with great embarrassment.

"What's going on over here?"

When Monika called over to them, they began stammering. "H-hey there, Monika..." "W-we, uh...we're pretty sure it's all bullshit, but, like..."

Lily and Sybilla pointed uneasily at Monika's bedroom.

On the door, there was an unfamiliar note.

FOUND IN THE ATTIC ABOVE DAME MONIKA'S ROOM →

The handwriting was Lan's.

At the end of the arrow, there was a massive stack of books. There were probably over thirty of them, and they definitely didn't belong to Monika. She'd never even gone up to check the attic.

Finding it all a little strange, Monika picked up one of the books, flipped it open, and let out a groan upon reading the table of contents.

The books were erotica, featuring depictions of *sensuous passion* between men and women.

"L-look, we all know there's no way." "B-but are those actually yours?"

All eyes were on her.

Her teammates were giving her the awkward looks of a bunch of people who'd seen something they knew they shouldn't have.

"Tee-hee, you're a healthy young woman. You have nothing to be ashamed of," said Thea. "I find it difficult to condone exposing someone's private feelings like this," said Grete. "I-I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to look, I promise!" said Sara. "I—I think I'm a little too young to be reading any of this!" cried Erna. "In that case, I'll read 'em aloud for you. Yo, Monika, you got any of them in

particular you recommend?" Annette asked.

It took a good long while for their boisterous comments to die down.



The Arranq National Museum of Art was a venerable institution with over a hundred years of history to its name. It had works not just from Din, but by artists from around the world, and it had more pieces on display than any other museum in the nation. It frequently borrowed paintings from the rich and powerful, and it rotated out its exhibitions so often that the port city's residents could visit it time and time again and never grow bored. It was one of the foremost art museums in the entire world.

It was currently eleven at night. The museum closed at seven, and all the staff had long since gone home. With the guard only patrolling once every two hours, the building was largely silent.

Ah, how exhilarating.

Lan strutted around feeling quite pleased with herself. Right before she'd left, she'd planted a stash of erotic novels in front of Monika's room.

I daresay Dame Monika is in a panic right now. All I need do is wait till she's been thoroughly teased, then approach her with my deal. "Should you wish for me to unveil the truth, all you need do is protect me from Dame Annette."

Lan had technically found the books in the attic above Sara's room, but she doubted they actually belonged to her, so she'd decided to use them to blackmail someone else. Monika could definitely take Annette in a fight, so Lan had chosen her.

'Tis a brilliant plan, if I do say so myself!

After nodding happily, Lan looked up.

The reason she'd sneaked into an art museum after hours had to do with an Avian mission. Her target was one of the curators who worked there. The woman was under suspicion of a very particular crime, and Lan's job was to confirm the evidence and apprehend the suspect.

First things first, I need to complete my mission...

As she psyched herself back up, she heard footsteps from the other end of the passageway.

At the moment, she was in a long, narrow exhibition hall with walls covered with oil paintings both foreign and domestic. Someone was coming toward her from the sculpture display booth over at its far end. The sound of their shoes echoed loudly through the empty museum. They were far removed from the guard's patrol route.

"Ah, so thou makest thy appearance."

Lan crouched down and prepared herself for combat.

However, the person who emerged wasn't who she had been expecting—it was Monika. The strongest girl on Lamplight was striding toward her with an icy look on her face. For some reason, she wasn't saying a word.

Lan tilted her head in confusion. She didn't recall ever telling Monika where she was.

As she watched warily, Monika's lips moved.

"Die."

In her hand was a gun.

"Wait, wait, wait! Hold on!"

Lan scurried backward.

It would appear her erotica plan had driven Monika into a rage.

"P-prithee, calm down. I'm on a mission at present, and this is hardly the time for this. L-look, uh, there will be time aplenty to discuss this later, so if you could lower thy gun—"

"Die."

"To think that negotiations would fail so utterly."

Lan decided to turn on her heel and flee. Talking things out clearly wasn't an option. She needed to make a run for it while she still had a head start.

Monika must have dragged her location out of Pharma. Considering how faithful Pharma was to her desires, that wouldn't have been hard. She was the kind of person who would sell out her teammates for a single slice of toast with jam.

The good news was, Lan was on favorable ground. She'd memorized where all the museum's staff-only passages were in preparation for her mission.

She raced down one such corridor and escaped to a storeroom piled high with display frames and cases.

I had no idea 'twould inspire such wrath!

Lan hid behind a sculpture stand and took a moment to catch her breath. She'd been prepared to take a tongue-lashing for what she'd done, but at no point had she expected to get physically attacked before the day was even over.

However, stealth is my forte. She shan't find me.

There in the darkened storeroom, she let out a sigh of relief.

Lan's faith in her stealth techniques was rock-solid. They'd gotten her out of more than a few life-or-death situations before. Even if Monika came into the storeroom, Lan could simply move from one bit of cover to another to avoid ever getting spotted.

She prided herself on being able to hide from anyone, even elite spies—

"I'm code name Glint—now, let's harbor love for as long as we can."

—but the moment the storeroom lights flicked on, something went whirling overhead.

Someone had just thrown a set of mirrors from the room's entrance. Light bounced off them as they spun through the air. Three reflections deep, they revealed Monika's face.

If Lan could see Monika's face, it meant Monika could see hers.

“HOOOOW?”

Monika called her special ability “creepshot,” and it allowed her to perceive everything that existed within a fixed space. No matter where Lan tried to hide, there was no escape.

Monika dashed across the shelving piled up in the storeroom and made a beeline for Lan.

“Hurk!”

Then she used the force of her charge to drop-kick Lan across the room and send her smashing into the wall. When Lan hit her head and crumpled to the floor, Monika planted a foot on her chest and took aim with her gun.

“All right, Lan, what’s it gonna be? You wanna die now, or you wanna die horribly?”



“Thy two options are in truth but one.”

Sweat cascaded down Lan’s face as she raised her hands in surrender. She didn’t know why Monika was so mad, but if she didn’t defuse the situation, her life was in very real danger.

“L-look, ’twas but a harmless prank. What say we all take a deep breath?”

“Any other final words?”

“Thou hast a paucity of mercy, I see. Ha-ha, ’tis not as though you harbor feelings for any on Lamplight, surely. A misunderstanding over a smutty book or two shouldn’t cause you any real—”

An explosion went off before her eyes.

The noise and the impact made her briefly think her nerves were on the fritz. A moment later, though, she realized what she’d seen was a gunshot, and she looked fearfully to her right.

There was a bullet embedded in the wall.

“Y-you actually fired?”

Lan had gone and poked at a sore spot.

She could tell that much, but she had no idea what that sore spot was. At the moment, she was less concerned with figuring out what it might be than she was with getting her bladder back under control. At the risk of sounding indelicate, she may or may not have wet herself a little.

Then she heard the sound of someone running outside the storeroom.

“——!”

She quickly shifted her attention, pushing Monika aside and standing back up.

“I’m on a mission right now! Thou may have tipped off my target!”

Hearing the gunshot had spurred them to action. If Lan didn’t give chase now, there was a danger they might escape.

Monika was unconcerned. “I got the lowdown from Pharma. This isn’t some Galgad spy you’re dealing with. They’re just a regular curator who’s been

stealing works of art. Civvy like that, they'll go down like a sack of—"

"They're no mere civilian!" Lan shouted.

When Monika stared at her, dumbfounded, Lan realized Monika had been laboring under a misapprehension.

"Sister Pharma failed to give thee all the details, I take it." Lan let out an exhale. "A group exists called the Discourse on Decadence. My target numbers among their ranks."

"Who are they?"

"'Tis true they're no spies. They are, to be precise, those who failed to become spies."

The information was confidential, but Monika was in the middle of things now, and Lan decided she needed to know.

"They're spy academy dropouts."

A feeling of emptiness racked her.

"They were taught how to deceive, but when their dreams lay broken, they turned against our nation."



When people enrolled in the spy academies, they were given a simple rule: Never use the skills taught here for evil.

It might have seemed obvious, but it was important enough that it needed to be made explicit. All the skills necessary to be a spy—shooting, deception, cajoling and coercing, inciting, lockpicking, assassinating—were talents that could also be used to commit crimes. The academies even taught their students how to trick the police if they got arrested and how to frame other people for the things they'd done. If one of the students ever went rogue, they would become a master criminal the likes of which ordinary law enforcement would be helpless against.

To prevent that, the academies threatened their students: *If you ever use your*

skills for evil, the Executioners will put you down.

The Executioners were a group of ruthless agents who specialized in putting down their own. They were the ones in charge of killing double agents, as well, and the academies made sure the students knew there was no escaping from the Executioners.

The good news was, none of the academies' previous dropouts had turned to crime. Perhaps they were afraid of the Executioners, but whatever the case, people who left the academies tended to live quiet lives.

Now, though, that streak was finally broken. A criminal organization had emerged made up entirely of spy academy failures.

It was one of the Foreign Intelligence Office's counterintelligence teams that had first discovered them. During the interrogation of a captured Galgad spy, they had found out there was a group called the Discourse on Decadence that had been selling state secrets to fund their operations. They'd quickly captured a member of the group and tortured them into revealing their secrets.

The Discourse on Decadence was a group of academy dropouts who'd taken the spy skills they'd learned and turned them to selfish ends, and they numbered at least twenty strong.

Now Avian had been tasked with assisting the Executioners and apprehending the group's members. That was what Pharma's mission from the other day had been about, too.



After Lan had laid the whole thing out for her, Monika nodded in understanding. "So they're shitters."

Lan gave her an exasperated look. "Were thou actually listening?"

Even after hearing Lan's story, Monika wasn't particularly concerned. The majority of academy students never made it to graduation, and it made perfect sense some of them might have decided to run afoul of the law. The idea of having to fight someone she'd once lived and trained alongside didn't exactly fill

her with joy, but still.

The two of them raced down the museum hallway as they shared their whispered conversation. The target had disappeared after hearing the gunshot, but there were no signs they'd left the building yet. Lan had sealed off the entrances and exits in advance.

Monika was under no obligation to stick with her, but it was her fault the target had gotten spooked. She would have felt bad leaving Lan to clean up her mess.

As they searched the premises for their hidden foe, Lan continued her explanation. "If naught else, they're no amateurs. If thou doth underestimate them, thou'rt likely to regret it."

"But they failed, right? They didn't make it to the graduation exam."

If these were academy dropouts, then that meant they had either failed one of their regular exams, or they hadn't been able to handle the training and had dropped out voluntarily.

Lan pursed her lips. "Bold words coming from a former washout."

"Hmm..."

"I mean no disrespect to Lamplight's skills. Academy grades are but one way of measuring talent, nothing more. Lamplight hath proved that in full."

Lan's voice rang with certainty, and Monika had seen the same thing herself. Her teammates had been branded as washouts due to how lopsided and specialized their skill sets were, but in situations where things lined up for them, they were capable of incredible things.

"Therein lies the reason for my concern. Some of these dropouts may well be as strong as Lamplight, if not stronger still."

"You're so right about that."

Lan's comment earned her a response.

They were in an exhibition hall filled with massive sculptures. The pieces were designed to be viewed from all angles, so they'd been installed in a wide space with plenty of room to move around in. None of the main lights were on, so all they had for lighting were the dim night-lights.

There, standing at the center of the ten stone statues depicting evil gods, was a girl.

The girl was on the taller side. Grete was the tallest person on Lamplight, and the girl looked to be taller still. Her arms and legs were long and straight, and her long face, big eyes, and firmly pursed lips made her come across as hostile.

Monika grasped her gun tight. "Didn't expect you to show yourself so brazenly."

"If anyone's surprised here, it's me. I always knew the Executioners might eventually track me down, but I never expected a couple of kids from my own generation to come after me." The girl shrugged. "My name's Shao Li. I dropped out of my academy last year."

"Criminals these days are awfully polite," Monika replied. "Nice of you to introduce yourself."

Lan had given her the details.

The crime Shao Li was guilty of was art theft. The National Art Museum had pieces on loan from countless different wealthy individuals. Whenever she returned one of them, she would replace it with a high-quality counterfeit and sell the original piece on the black market. Her academy had taught her how to forge documents, and now she was using that knowledge to break the law.

The money she made went straight into the Discourse on Decadence's budget. She was the group's top breadwinner.

The hostility faded from Shao Li's expression, and she gave them a warm smile. "I want to invite you to join us."

"Huh?"

"We're, like, basically the same age. I'm one of the group's lieutenants, so I'm sure I can get you in on a recommendation. What do you say, you two? Care to

join the Discourse on Decadence?”

Monika scoffed and turned to her side. “Well, Lan? Should we accept her invitation so we can surveil them from within?”

“Saying that aloud doth defeat the whole point...,” Lan quipped half-heartedly.

Monika had no intention whatsoever of infiltrating the group. That sounded like a lot of work, and it would be far faster to just capture the target standing before them and interrogate her.

“C’mon, just quit it with that spy stuff. You’re only gonna get yourself killed.” Shao Li laughed mockingly. “The way I see it, you’ve gotta look out for number one. What kind of loser goes and gets themselves killed for their country? I’m telling you, you all are brainwashed. That patriotism garbage gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Thine argument is lacking.”

This time, it was Lan who replied.

“You say you cannot lay down your life for your nation? So be it. ’Tis your right. Live as you please. Just run not afoul of the law. ’Tis that simple.”

“...Ugh. Spare me the sermon.”

“Turn thyself in. We hail from different schools, but we bear the bond of academy fellowship nonetheless. I shan’t kill you.”

Lan gave her right arm a gentle flick. There were lines of light visible from her fingertips. Those lines were string, the signature weapon of the girl who bore the code name Cloud Drift—string designed for binding.

Her specialty was Detainment, and that made her the perfect person for the mission.

“Yeesh, seriously? That’s the exact kind of stick-in-the-mud mindset I can’t stand!”

Before their eyes, Shao Li spread her long arms wide in irritation.

“I’m code name Molt—and it’s time you got fastened and filled!”

In each hand, she was holding a pistol. She was a dual-wielder.

She fired, and Monika and Lan immediately took cover behind a pillar.

They heard a popping noise from down by their feet. It was a spot Shao Li shouldn’t have been able to hit from the angle she was at. The sound of bullets slamming into things filled the entire exhibition hall.

It was then Monika realized she was using rebounds.

By firing rubber bullets and bouncing them off the walls and ceiling, Shao Li was able to attack her foes from their blind spots. That was an advanced technique. If nothing else, few—if any—academy students would have been able to pull it off.

That said, I could do that with my eyes closed.

Shao Li hid behind a pillar of her own and used her ricochets to try to take Monika and Lan down. Her bullets went flying off the walls and exploded on the ground around Lan and Monika. By firing her two guns one after another, Shao Li was able to keep up an incessant barrage of ammunition.

Gunshots continued to echo through the hall.

Monika was hoping to make things quick.

We need to act fast. Things could get ugly if they go on like this.

It was too dark in the exhibition hall for sight to be much use. Guided by the sounds of the pistols firing and the bullets striking the walls, Monika charged out from behind the pillar. Her plan was to close in on Shao Li and knock her out with throwing weapons.

“...Huh?”

However, she quickly noticed something was off.

The noises were wrong.

The twin pistols had been firing without pause and echoing incessantly

through the hall, so it had taken Monika a moment to realize what was going on—the ricochets were coming too soon after the gunshots.

Shao Li was using special guns—guns designed with silencers to mask their real gunshots so they could wait a little bit after firing to give off their noise.

“Got you,” Monika heard Shao Li murmur.

By obfuscating the sound in the dark, Shao Li could throw off her opponent’s timing.

Monika knew about a technique where a person blended lies together with their special talent to bring their foes down. It was the ultimate lesson the academies taught, one only top students on the verge of graduation were able to master—liecraft.

When she drew closer, she saw the smug look on Shao Li’s face.

She could hear Lan calling out her name.

Ricochet × Time Lag = Invisible Bullets.

The rubber bullet she’d failed to perceive smashed into the side of her head.



A memory flashed through Monika’s head of being in that dilapidated house from the special joint training exercise just after “Flamefanner” Heide left.

All that remained was a group of honors students who’d just had their pride shattered. They didn’t understand what it was that had been done to them, and they didn’t understand what it was they’d done. The wounds on their bodies were one thing, but the damage to their hearts was far greater.

What had all the hard work they’d put in even been for? They’d climbed to the tops of their classes, yet their talents had completely and utterly failed them.

That was the moment when all the skills they’d slaved away at their academies to learn had been proved worthless.

The first ones to recover were the ones who’d been through a special joint

training exercise before, the ones who'd already had their pride trampled by "Firewalker" Gerde. With bitter looks on their faces, they walked out of that run-down building. That was the group Pharma was in.

Then there were the first-timers too shocked to even move.

Monika was in the latter group. She'd been invited to the exercise in a record speed of just two months, and the confidence boost that invitation had given her meant it took that much longer for her to recover from losing it.

Now she couldn't even remember. How *had* she risen back to her feet?



At the moment of impact, Monika twisted her head to blunt the blow.

Luckily for her, the bullets Shao Li was using were coated in bouncy rubber. It made them better at ricocheting but far less lethal. Monika nearly blacked out, but she pulled herself together.

Lan fired a couple of warning shots at Shao Li as she rushed on over. "Art thou okay, Dame Monika?"

"Yeah. Peachy."

Her head hurt, but she could still fight just fine.

Shao Li clicked her tongue and quickly broke away from Monika, moving to another pillar. She must have run out of bullets, as Monika could hear her reloading. One option was to wait for her next reload and strike then, but this was a person who'd modded her pistols to give off the sound of firing and nothing else. Monika didn't put it past her to fake the number of bullets in her magazines.

Lan was impressed. "'Tis no small feat, landing a blow on thee, Dame Monika."

Monika shook her head. The only reason she had failed to avoid the shot was because there had been something else on her mind.

"Feels like fate's pulling some strings today," she said, combing back her hair.

“Hmm?”

“I think that lanky chick and I have met before,” said Monika. Lan looked surprised, and Monika clapped her on the shoulder. “Yeah, you mind if I handle her solo for now? I’ve got something else for you to do.”

Monika quickly told her the plan. As she did, Lan scrunched up her face. “I beg thy pardon?” She looked skeptical the whole way through, but she ultimately agreed.

While Lan got her preparations underway, Monika jumped out from behind her cover.

“You’re pretty strong!” she shouted into the darkness. “Tell me, were you at that joint training exercise two years ago?”

“.....Yeah, I was.”

She got a reply.

Considering Shao Li knew liecraft, she had to have gotten pretty close to graduating. It made sense that she would’ve gotten invited to the top student-only joint training exercise, too.

Monika could hear Shao Li’s voice coming from behind a distant pillar. “What, were you there, too? Then you should know exactly how I feel.”

“.....”

“Shit like that crushes your soul!!” Shao Li roared.

Her heartfelt bellow echoed off the walls.

“That day made me certain. I can’t compete! If I went into a world with monsters like that waiting for me, I’d just be walking to my death!! There was no way I could win. I knew the only smart move was to drop out before I got myself killed.”

“.....”

Monika nodded internally.

Yeah, I do get how you feel.

It had taken Monika herself a long time to recover after “Flamefanner” had

crushed her. Had she ever thought about dropping out? Of course. Up until she'd gotten recruited onto Lamplight and narrowly managed to nurse the last of her pride back to health, she'd spent her time at her academy full of apathy.

Monika and Shao Li had been in almost the exact same position.

"But here's the thing," Monika muttered. "You were a little quick to give up, don't you think?"

Her voice rang with confidence.

That was the difference between her and Shao Li—the fact that she'd stayed at her academy and hadn't been able to throw in the towel.

"For someone dressed up as a museum curator, you're not very refined."

Monika shot a glance at the rows of sculptures and scoffed.

"This here is an exhibition of talent—pieces from the darlings of their eras. See, in the world of art, there are all sorts of masters who weren't discovered for some time. Some of them didn't have their craft recognized for decades, and others had to change mediums entirely before they made their way into the limelight."

Monika took a step forward.

"How could you let anyone 'prove' to you that you're not a genius?"

"Shut up..."

"But hey, maybe you would've ended up mediocre anyways. Seems likely, the way you wimped out and ditched your academy."

Monika pulled a wallet out of her pocket and gave it a light shake. Three rubber balls tumbled out. They were throwing weapons she'd had specially made with metal cores.

"Now make like a good little loser and bow before the talented."

"——!"

The jeer struck a nerve. Shao Li began firing blindly with both pistols from behind her pillar. Monika was defenseless, and the bullets came raining down on her as they bounded off the walls.

So she does have some pride left, Monika mused pityingly as she evaded the rubber onslaught.

The barrage continued, and a delay started emerging between the bullets and the gunshots. The timing to dodge the attacks got all messed up. That was Shao Li's liecraft, a skill that by all rights, she should have been honing to defend her nation.

Monika couldn't get anywhere near her.

She could hear Shao Li crowing in triumph. "Shut up! If anyone's mediocre, it's the person I just riddled with bulle—"

"All set, Dame Monika."

That was when she caught Lan's voice.

Lan moved in and took cover in Monika's shadow. Countless threads extended from her hands. They were wound around every sculpture in the hall.

Shao Li immediately drew back and put some distance between herself and the string. However, Lan wasn't there to detain her.

"I swear, Dame Monika, thy confidence is something else," Lan said in exasperation. "To think that in a fight to the death, thou wouldst take such care to *avoid letting her ricochets strike the statues*. I do cede that there was a danger of them toppling depending on where the rubber bullets struck them, but my point doth stand all the same."

"Art deserves to be respected," Monika replied, then added, "I am technically an artist's daughter."

"'Tis news to me," Lan said softly, then brandished both her arms.

"I'm code name Cloud Drift—and 'tis time we birthed fetters."

Her Detainment strings wriggled like living animals and coiled their way around the ten statues.

Now Monika could move around without restraint. *She didn't have to worry about their bullets knocking the stone sculptures over anymore.* She charged straight at Shao Li.

“——?!”

Shao Li immediately responded by opening fire, and Monika swatted her rubber bullets away with a knife. With the bullets flying straight at her, she could parry them without breaking a sweat.

What's more, she could account for every single bullet coming from her blind spots, too.

Now that all she needed to worry about protecting was herself, she could math it all out. By calculating the angles the bullets would bounce and throwing metal balls in those directions, she could alter the bullets' trajectories with ease.

Nothing could get close enough to stop her.

Shao Li went pale. “No...”

Monika smashed the back of her knife into Shao Li's neck. It hurtled in a tight arc, and by the time she'd finished her swing, the fight was over. At no point had she given her foe a big enough opening to dodge.

“This is nothing new,” Monika declared as Shao Li crumpled. “You got crushed, unable to even fight back—just like we all did that day.”



Lan handed Shao Li off to another team.

Monika intentionally avoided asking for too many details, but she assumed that team was the Executioners. It was unclear if Shao Li had any future now that she'd used her spy skills for evil. Lan had promised not to kill her, so perhaps there was hope for her yet.

Monika wasn't overly curious.

That said, the connections between herself and Shao Li did give her

something to chew on.

Fate's a fickle beast...

Shao Li had once been a top academy student. Then, at the special joint training exercise, she'd run into Flamefanner and learned the taste of defeat. She and Monika had all that in common.

However, that was where their paths had diverged.

Monika hadn't been able to bring herself to give up completely and had gotten scouted by Klaus, whereas Shao Li had dropped out of her academy and fallen in with the Discourse on Decadence criminal organization.

What was it that separated them?

That was the question that dominated Monika's thoughts on her way back from the art museum.

Midnight was just about rolling around.

Lan had decided to spend the night at Heat Haze Palace. Monika wanted to chase her off, but Klaus had already given her permission.

There were an awful lot of clouds over the night road where Monika and Lan shared their simple conversation.

"Dame Monika, Dame Monika."

"What?"

"I was there too, you know. At the special joint training exercise."

"Huh. I don't remember you at all."

"I blame thee not. We were both on edge at the time. I do recall Sister Pharma, mind you. I could tell from her aura that she was cut of different cloth."

"Wanna trade her for our useless slut?"

"Thou shouldst not sell out thy teammates so readily."

"Worst-case scenario, I'm willing to just give her away for free."

“Changing the subject... Thou would do well to take more of an interest in me.”

“Name one interesting thing about you.”

“Back during the exercise, I spoke in the manner of the provincials.”

“That’s the single biggest nonissue in all of human history.”

“I follow not thy point, but I take thy comment for an insult.”

“So...what’d you think?”

“Of?”

“The examiner. Word is, she was an Inferno member called Flamefanner.”

“Is that so?”

“How’d you feel after going up against a world-class spy? Did it break you?”

“Oh, I felt naught but moved. *Ah, I thought, what wonders the world doth hold.*”

“...Are you serious?”

“Indeed I am. ’Twas admiration I felt, plain and simple. Everything about her seemed different from me. My heart pounded at the notion that I might reach such heights someday.”

“.....”

“...What holds thy tongue?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Hmm?”

“I just realized how completely pathetic I am, that’s all.”



When they reached the Heat Haze Palace entrance, Lan timidly turned to Monika. “B-by the way...”

Monika shot her a look, unsure what she was on about.

“Thy rage hath subsided now, I take it?” Lan asked, her face as pale as death.
“About the books?”

“Huh? I’m still gonna kill you later.”

“Hast thou no mercy?!”

“Eh, I guess I can let you off the hook just this once. I did kind of muck up your mission, after all.”

If she were honest, Monika had forgotten all about it until Lan had reminded her. However, she couldn’t work up the energy to be mad about it anymore. Flamefanner had been a master of many talents, and she had doubtless been the one who’d written that smut. Monika had heard she had a side job as an author alongside her spy work. Getting Klaus to explain that to the others would be enough to clear the air.

“A-ahhh, what a relief.” The tension drained from Lan’s shoulders, and she let out a deep exhalation. “By the way, I would also ask that thou convince Dame Annette to cease her attempts on my person.”

“See, now you’re just being greedy.”

“’Tis hardly greed when my life is in jeopardy.”

“Can’t you just ask someone else? Annette and I aren’t exactly what you’d call close.”

Lan had come to Monika because Monika touted herself as the strongest girl on Lamplight, but when it came to Annette, there was little help Monika could offer. The only ones who could stop her rampages were Sara and Klaus.

Lan frowned. “As of late, the rest of Lamplight hath been rather cold toward me...”

“Really? They have?”

That was news to Monika.

The Lamplight girls were still chanting, “Go home!” on the regular, but they’d stopped meaning it, and the two teams were starting to get along. Now the chanting was their way of hiding how much they actually liked Avian. As far as Monika knew, there wasn’t anyone on the team who was legitimately annoyed

by Avian's presence anymore.

"'Tis the strangest thing. And after I try so hard to be friendly, no less."

Right as Lan crossed her arms, one of the other girls just happened to show up in the doorway.

Lan gave her a smile. "Ah, Dame Sybilla."

It was a girl with white hair, a physique as toned as a wild predator, and a piercing look in her eye—"Pandemonium" Sybilla.

"Thou'rt looking as regal as ever, I see. Why, the intensity of thy gaze puts any gangster's to shame! It makes me wonder what thy father must do for a living!"

"...Okay, look. I don't know if you're jokin' or what, but that shit ain't funny," Sybilla replied, making no effort to hide her disdain as she strode away.

Sybilla had some baggage about her origins. Monika didn't know the details, but what she did know was Sybilla hated gangsters with a passion.

As Sybilla disappeared from view, another girl came by.

Lan gave her a big wave. "Ah, Dame Lily."

Alongside her silver hair, this girl's—"Flower Garden" Lily's—distinctive features included her sizable bust and adorable face.

"Ha-ha, thou'rt looking as curvaceous as ever! If thou turned thy grand bosom to the art of seduction, 'twould surely make thee a spy to be reckoned with!"

"I-I'll have you know I'm planning on blooming into a great spy without having to resort to methods like that!"

Lily's face went bright red, and she scurried off.

Lily was no fan of talking about sensuality, and it made her uncomfortable when people called attention to her physical features.

Lan's shoulders slumped in dejection. "See how curt they are with me?"

Monika thought back to the way Lan had called Annette a runt almost immediately after meeting her. Then there was the way she'd gone and poked at Monika's secret affections.

She gave Lan a look of contempt. The only conclusion she could draw was...

“...You’re a master at stepping on people’s sore spots, huh?”

Lan gave her a quizzical look. “Huh?”



Two years ago, “Flamefanner” Heide gave a wave from a dilapidated house deep in the mountains.

“All right, I have to get going. My dear baby brother is waiting for me with dinner at the ready!” she said, sounding oddly proud of the fact. “This is good-bye for us. And hey, if this was too much for you, quitting school is always an option.”

At no point did Flamefanner offer them a shred of mercy.

She was an egotist through and through, and she headed home without sparing the least bit of care for the academy students. The only things in her head were thoughts of dinner and the question of how she was going to get away with missing the deadline she’d set with her publisher.

There was no kindness, no malice, and no hidden message in any of what she’d done. She honestly didn’t care one bit about amateur spies, and her only goal had been to carry out the mission assigned to her by her boss.

She’d cast all trivial emotions aside. In a sense, she was the perfect spy.

Many of the students she’d beaten were devastated, but not all of them.

So that’s one o’ them elite spies, huh?

Lan was fifteen at the time, and when she regained consciousness, she lay on the floor with eyes aglitter.

She had me licked well and proper. I say, she’s got a gift!

That woman’s skills put even their instructors to shame. Lan felt like she’d just gotten to watch an extraordinary show. Her heart was pounding, and her blood burned hot in her veins.

She wanted to get back to her dorm so she could train at once.

As she rose to her feet with that thought at the forefront of her mind, the cerulean-haired girl crouched beside her caught her attention. The girl was staring at the ground with her head hung. Lan was looking at her from behind, so she couldn't see the girl's face or expression.

"You good there, missy?" Lan asked her. "You need some water?"

"....."

"Ignoring me, eh? Well, I can't rightly say I blame ya."

"....."

"I'm gonna head on out, if that's all right with you. The exercise is over, you know."

The cerulean-haired girl simply crouched there, not moving a muscle. She looked pretty depressed.

Lan let out an exhale, then laid a hand on the girl's shoulder as she left. "You did damn well back there. That was you still standing at the end, weren't it? I say, you've got a gift."

Those words left a hole in the cerulean-haired girl's—Monika's—heart. It riled her up just how off base Lan was. Monika's talents had just gotten done failing her.

Without looking up, she slapped away Lan's hand. "...Shut up."

"If you've got the strength to talk back, then I say you'll be right as rain."

Lan smiled and stepped away from Monika. The two of them never ended up seeing each other's faces, and in time, they both forgot about the interaction entirely.

Soon afterward, Monika stood back up.

She mustered some strength in her legs and, after some staggering, rose to her feet. She raised her head. Then, after letting out the faintest of groans, she began walking once more. She bit her lip in frustration, but eventually, her stride grew more determined.

Flashback ②

Girls' Night

“We’re going to have ourselves a girls’ night!” “Yaaay, girls’ night.”

Avian had begun treating Heat Haze Palace as a home away from home, and one late night when they were staying over, Thea and Pharma cheerfully informed the others of their plan. The sofas in the main hall were already adorned with drinks, snacks, and sweets, and the preparations for the party were all complete.

Lan and Qulle were standing by the couches as well, and they clapped their hands in excitement.

“”””””Huh...?””””””

Lily, Sybilla, Monika, Grete, and Sara had been called over with little explanation, and they just looked perplexed. As for Erna and Annette, the two of them were already asleep.

Lan stared at them in confusion. “Hmm? The reactions from Lamplight are nigh on lethargic. Have they no interest in gossip and gab?”

“Allow me to explain.”

Thea stood up and pompously did exactly that.

“Now, Lamplight has a high percentage of women to begin with, and Teach is often absent. For us, nearly every night is basically girls’ night. But there’s a much bigger reason.”

She sighed heavily as she revealed the truth.

“The romance situation in Lamplight is a barren wasteland where not even the hardiest of plants can survive.”

“There’s gotta be a nicer way to put it!” Sybilla cried.

According to Thea, it wasn’t that the Lamplight girls were uninterested in romance per se, but their training and missions kept them so busy that none of them could work up the energy to go out and meet boys in the city. They did technically have Klaus there in the manor, but they all agreed that “Grete’s got dibs,” so none of them but Grete really viewed him as a legitimate romantic target.

The rest of the girls gave Thea the side-eye like they wanted to object. Some of them took umbrage with her summary.

“We aaare spies, after all,” Pharma said with a sad smile. “It’s mostly just one-night stands for us, too.”

At that point, Sara timidly piped up. She sounded embarrassed by her own question. “D-does anything ever happen between members of the team?”

““““Never.””””

“You all denied it at once?!”

Despite Avian having three girls and three guys, nothing had ever taken a turn for the amorous with them.

“Twould be quite the problem if things ever got messy,” Lan said grimly. “Yeah, for suuure,” Pharma agreed. “The minute two people sleep together, the girl is whatever, see, but the guy always gets weirdly awkward. It’s the straaangest thing. He’ll spend all night whispering sweet nothings in your ear, but then the next morning, he’ll try to play it all cool and suave.”

“““““?””””””

“You’re looking at me like I just grew a second head.”

The Lamplight girls didn’t have much in the way of romantic experience, and Pharma drawled out her disappointment when they tilted their heads in bewilderment. The mood had a habit of turning awkward when the conversation turned to romance, so they were right on the verge of changing the subject and talking about food or work like they usually did when suddenly...

“It’s not fair!” Qulle cried with her face bright red. “Why do I never get swept off my feet?! I want to have a relationship. Something sappy and romantic!”

In her hand was a half-empty bottle of wine. Nobody had even noticed her drink it. Her spirits lifted, she rose to her feet and hoisted the bottle into the air.

“It’s settled! I’m gonna go ask Mr. Klaus out on a date!”

“We’ve let her drink too much. Sister Qulle always gets like this when she’s intoxicated.”

“Grete, please put down the vase.”

Thea scrambled to pacify Grete as the latter silently lifted one of the hall’s decorative vases overhead. Things were liable to turn bloody. “I’m sure everything will be fine. This is Teach we’re talking about, remember?” Thea told her.

While that was going on, Qulle marched out of the main hall with her head held high and dashed up to the second floor.

Five minutes later, she returned with her shoulders slumped.

“How’d it go?” Pharma asked.

“He shot me down,” Qulle said with tears in her eyes.

Unsurprisingly, she’d failed. Klaus hadn’t given her the time of day.

As Lily, Sybilla, and Monika watched from the side, they all shared the same thought.

“““She’s plastered. This could be good.”””

One feature nearly all the Lamplight girls shared was that while they didn’t pursue matters of the heart themselves, they had a keen interest in other people’s romantic affairs. At heart, they were a band of rubberneckers.

“Hey, it was a valiant attempt.” “But hey, if at first you don’t succeed, y’know?” “Yeah, I’m rooting for you,” they irresponsibly cheered her on.

Qulle valiantly thrust her fist into the air. “All right! I’m gonna go give it a second shot!”

The next morning, she would come to regret her actions so much she nearly

cried, but that was a fact that had yet to dawn on her.

Chapter 3

Queneau's Case

Arranq was the third-largest city in the Din Republic.

It had flourished as a port since medieval times, and it served as Din's gateway to the other major nations of the world. Lieditz was farther inland and served as the capital for reasons of national defense, but Arranq was no less developed as a city. It had commercial buildings, warehouses, and colleges aplenty, and its streets bustled with locals and tourists alike.

Perhaps Arranq's most distinctive feature was how much of a melting pot it was. The people who gathered there came from every class, race, and culture imaginable. There were maritime trading executives who made a fortune in international commerce during the postwar reconstruction; there were the longshoremen they worked to the bone. There were foreign businessmen strutting around the city in expensive suits; there were women dripping with charm who worked in the brothels that targeted them. And whenever diverse groups of people came together, there were always slums filled with abandoned children failed by the welfare system and the gangs that took advantage of them.

The city was so culturally eclectic that rumors went around about a legendary spy team having their headquarters there. Most people wrote it off as a simple urban legend, but the fact that every so often, a criminal group that threatened the nation's security got torn apart without the police lifting so much as a finger certainly lent credence to the story.

That was the city of Arranq, and it was there that a girl walked down an alleyway like she owned the place.

"I'm a good girl. ♪ And that's why I got. ♪ All my hopping shopping done, yo.



That girl was “Forgetter” Annette.

She was dressed in a seminary school uniform and using both hands to carry a paper bag. Her pigtails bounced as she skipped along, singing an oddly rhyme song to herself as she made her way down the back alleys of Arranq.

“Hmm?”

Then Annette stopped.

She’d just spotted something, and she stooped down and turned her gaze its way. Her right eye glimmered as she got down on all fours, not caring how dirty she was getting, and gave it her full attention.

“Ooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

A moment later, a cry of delight echoed through the street.



Two weeks had passed since Lamplight and Avian had begun their honeymoon.

The two teams’ interactions had deepened in that time, and the female Avian contingent had started staying the night more often and invading Lamplight’s lives around the clock. The racket they made continued night and day. For better or for worse, it was an exciting time.

Compared with the Avian girls, though, the Avian guys drew much clearer boundaries with Lamplight. The guys were primarily there to train with Klaus, and any mingling they did was secondary to that. They occasionally offered Lamplight some training, but that was the extent of their interference with the girls’ lives.

For some, though, there were interactions that simply couldn’t be avoided.

There was a magnetism of sorts that drew those cut from the same cloth together.



Something was off about Annette.

The rest of the team all noticed the change in their ash-pink-haired friend. Annette usually spent her time tinkering with bizarre gadgets in her room and playing pranks on the other girls (primarily Erna). It was rarely clear what rules governed her behavior, but she was nothing if not a creature of routine.

Recently, though, she'd been spending a lot more time out of the manor.

She would still join up with the others and spout her inscrutable nonsense when they were training or taking on missions, but the moment they were finished, she always rushed off again. It was unclear where she was going or what she was doing there, but she always returned with her face blackened with dirt. After hopping in the bath and washing off the outer layer of filth, she would head straight to bed.

The rest of the team was worried about her.

Lily crossed her arms and puzzled the situation over. "Hmm, I don't like this one bit. Wherever she's going, I bet there's trouble."

"I agree. I just hope she isn't going out and causing it."

The person who nodded—"Daughter Dearest" Grete—was a red-haired girl with long, slender arms and legs.

"Honestly, I'm less worried for Annette and more for whoever she's visiting," Lily agreed.

"I do hope she isn't going out and planting explosives."

"Yeah, Erna can survive that stuff 'cause she's Erna, but the kinds of traps Annette likes to lay could easily kill someone."

"...Well, I'm sure if she was causing any serious problems, the boss would step in and stop her. And moreover, she appears to be enjoying herself. Perhaps we should simply keep a watchful eye on her."

The two of them walked down the Heat Haze Palace hallway.

"You might have a point. Besides, we've got something more important on

our plates right now!”

After concluding their discussion, Lily kicked open the door in front of her and charged into the room.

“Hraaah! Go home, Avian! You people are starting to get too dang comfortable around here!”

The room in question was the lounge.

That was the room Avian had designated as their stronghold within Heat Haze Palace. It was furnished with soft couches, and the Avian members were gathered inside and looking over maps and documents together.

“Buzz off, Silver. We’re in the middle of a meeting,” “Flock” Vindo replied in irritation as he sat at the center of the group. He tapped his finger on the map laid out in front of him without so much as turning to look at Lily. “Those Discourse on Decadence assholes moved their base to Arranq recently. We needed to move our base of operations here, too.”

“...I must say, you truly are free spirits.”

On hearing Grete’s exasperated comment, “Feather” Pharma and “Cloud Drift” Lan gave her a cheerful wave.

“Thanks for haaaving us. Oh, by the way, we borrowed some of your sweets.”

“The desserts Sir Klaus makes are truly out of this world. The man doth never fail to impress.”

Lily’s shriek was downright bloodcurdling. “THOSE ARE THE SPECIAL FINANCIERS THAT TEACH BARELY EVER MAKES FOR USSSSS!!”

In the middle of the table, there was a big pile of shiny gold pastries. Klaus must have baked them out of the goodness of his heart. The man had a soft spot for Avian, a fact that numbered among the many gripes Lamplight had with the team.

“Quit wailing about every little thing.”

After shutting down Lily's complaints, Vindo shoved a financier in his mouth.

"The Discourse on Decadence has been getting more aggressive lately." He stuffed another one in. "If we're not careful, ordinary civilians are going to get hurt." Another small cake went down the hatch. "We're all very." Another. "Hard." Another. "At." Another. "Work."

"Does anyone else see the way he's gobbling those things down?!"

For all their arrogance, Avian were every bit the elite spies they claimed to be, and their pride and sense of duty occasionally shone through. Lily couldn't help but grind her teeth and clench her fists.

"I-I'll have you know our vacation's over, and we're hard at work on counterintelligence missions, too!" she said.

"What, mopping up after Klaus? How very diligent of you."

"Grr..."

"Shut your traps so you can watch and learn. We'll show you how we get things done."

Lily and Grete had no rebuttal to that, and they sat down on one of the couch sections.

Klaus had started divvying up some of his work to the girls ever since their mission in the United States of Mouzaia, but the majority of the missions assigned to Lamplight were far too difficult for the girls to tackle. Klaus handled the bulk of them himself, and there was no denying that what tasks he did send their way were little more than busywork. What's more, the girls often struggled even with that.

The fact of the matter was, getting to watch Avian handle a mission would be extremely educational.

When the Lamplight girls showed a legitimate interest in learning, Vindo made no efforts to shoo them away. He even casually slid to the side so they would have a better view of the mission files.

Before long, other girls started gathering in the lounge to join Lily and Grete. It got to be a little cramped, but nobody complained.

“Wait, huh?” As Lily watched the meeting play out from the side, she cocked her head. “Hold on there, Avian. Aren’t you missing someone?”

“You mean Queneau.”

Vindo nodded.

At the moment, there were only five Avian members there in the lounge. There should have been one more person at the meeting, a man called “South Wind” Queneau, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Queneau was a large man who wore a mask. Between that and his taciturn nature, he was a man of many mysteries.

The girls tilted their heads. Where was he?

“I don’t know,” Vindo curtly replied.

“Huh?”

“He’s probably off doing his own thing. We’ll share our findings later.”

That was an oddly detached way of putting it.

“I’m sure Queneau’ll be fine. ♪” “Yeah, right? He’ll come back sooooner or later,” some of the other Avian members added.

That wasn’t the reaction Lily had been expecting at all. Her eyes went wide. Was Queneau really so friendless on his own team?

As though sensing her question, “Glide” Qulle offered her some context. “Look, here’s the thing,” she explained. “It’s not like we’re icing him out or anything. He just prefers to operate solo, that’s all.”

“Oh, I see. So he’s not a big fan of group work?”

“Yeah. But it’s unreal how good an engineer he is. He’ll build us anything we ask for, and he’s a genius when it comes to blowing up walls and ceilings. He doesn’t say much, but he does good work.”

“You don’t say.”

It sounded like Queneau occupied a unique position on the team. Vindo and the others didn’t go out of their way to get buddy-buddy with him, but they didn’t push him away, either.

As their explanation sank in for Lily, Grete offered a quiet murmur from beside her. “We have someone like that on Lamplight, as well.”

“Hmm?”

“An inventor who often works alone.”

Now that she mentioned it, realization dawned on Lily.

Grete was right; Lamplight *did* have someone who held a similar role as Queneau did on Avian—a girl who occasionally went off on her own during missions and came back having achieved unforeseen successes.

“Bottom line is this,” Vindo said unconcernedly. “As long as he’s serving his country, who cares how he does it?”

On the surface, his words sounded cold.

However, the Lamplight girls were beginning to understand just how much trust underpinned them.



Annette raced down the hallway.

The rest of the girls looked on in bewilderment as, once again, she slipped out of the manor and dashed off, swinging her arms with great vigor as she went.

After briskly making her way away from the hustle and bustle of the main thoroughfare, she came to a brothel-packed street with a drainage channel running behind it. The channel was designed to take on the city’s sewage and carry it out to the sea. A stink lingered over it, and it swarmed with filthy rats and bugs.

The channel was no place for humans, yet Annette happily approached it all the same.

“I brought you some food, yo!”

Her smile was downright radiant.

Attached to the drainage channel was a skinny sewer pipe not designed to fit a human, and inside it, there was a black cat.

Dirty was really the only word to describe it. Its dark fur was matted with mud and sewer oil, giving it a sickening sheen. Even its eyes glinting in the darkness were ugly and covered by swollen lids. Everything about its features made it come across as arrogant.

“I knew it the first time I set eyes on you, yo! Your name’s Olive!”

Annette planted her hands on her hips and struck an imposing pose before the cat.

Olive the cat didn’t budge.

“You’ve earned my favor, so I’ll be expecting some thanks!”

Annette took the cat food she’d brought and tossed it into the pipe with a proud smile.

However, Olive still didn’t move.

“...Hmph.”

Annette puffed up her cheeks at Olive’s indifference. She pursed her lips and sulked for a bit, after which she tossed in a couple handfuls of dry food, but Olive showed no interest. Her nose twitched a bit, but that was all.

That cat was the reason Annette had been leaving the manor so often.

Olive had tugged on her heartstrings, and hard. The first time Annette had spotted her, she’d talked to Olive until the sun went down. Now, whenever she had free time, she went to that alleyway drainage channel and plotted to get the black cat to let her pet it.

At first, Annette had brought traps to try to catch Olive, but Olive always immediately ran away, so Annette had given up on that line of attack.

That whole time, the cat had never once warmed up to her. She didn’t even care about the canned food Annette had specifically gone to a pet store to buy.

“Yo, I brought a toy I thought you might like!”

Undeterred, Annette retrieved a rod-shaped implement from within her skirt. The rod had a bundle of fuzzy string on its end that was built to extend and retract. Annette had made sure to do her research into what cats liked.

With toy in hand, Annette slowly inched toward Olive.

“...Nay. All you’re doing is scaring her.”

The voice was deep and rumbling.

A large man had appeared behind Annette as though out of nowhere. He was massive, with arms and legs at least twice as thick as Annette’s. There was an eerie white mask over his face, and his raw presence served to intimidate everything around him even when he wasn’t doing anything.

He stood in the channel as though to block Annette’s path of retreat.

“What’s your deal, yo?” she asked.

“Stay away from this alley, ‘Forgetter’ Annette. This will be a danger zone soon,” declared the masked man, his voice solemn and grave. “And also...that cat will never love you.”

Annette was shocked, and the man walked away without waiting for her response.

After he left, Annette pulled herself together and deployed the toy she had made, but the black cat immediately turned tail and scampered deeper within the pipe. It was just as the masked man had predicted.

That marked an unforeseen encounter between “Forgetter” Annette and “South Wind” Queneau.



Annette’s trap plan, cat food plan, and toy plan had all failed in succession, so that evening, she went and visited the animal shed outside the manor.

“Yo, Sis, I need to know what kinds of things cats like to eat!”

When it came to Lamplight members who were good with animals, there was one member who stood head and shoulders above the others: “Meadow” Sara.

Sara had a variety of different animals under her care, and she had no trouble answering Annette's question. "Cats? That's an interesting one. Have you tried milk?"

"Ooh! I've got loads of that in the fridge already!"

"Great! Oh, but you're going to need to make sure it's a type that's all right for cats to drink. And when you give it to them, make sure to warm it up to room temperature first. Otherwise, it could give them an upset stomach."

Once Annette had her answer, she whirled around, declared, "I'm gonna go build a thermos with awesome insulation, yo!" and left the shed.

Sara watched her go, squinting as though Annette herself were shining radiantly.

Then someone else came by the shed.

"It would appear she's been looking after a stray cat."

The newcomer was Lamplight's boss, Klaus. He turned and looked in the direction Annette had run off in. Unsurprisingly, he too had noticed something was off about her.

"That's right." Sara's expression softened. "Miss Annette's been visiting that back alley a lot these last few days."

"Are you not planning on helping her? I understand she's been having a rough time of it."

With Sara's special "rearing" talent, she could train just about any animal to do what she said. Winning over a cat would be child's play for her.

"Oh, every part of me wants to..."

Sara gave Klaus's question a conflicted smile.

"...but this is the first time Miss Annette's taken interest in anything other than gadgets and growing taller, so I decided it would be best to just watch over her for now. This will be a valuable learning experience for her."

"You really are her guardian, aren't you?"

What Sara was describing was socio-emotional learning.

She was treating Annette as one would a child, and to that, Klaus had but one comment: “Magnificent.”



After their first encounter, Queneau started showing up at the drainage channel while Annette was there more often.

“I don’t wanna see your face, yo. Get out of here.”

“Nay. This is where my work is.”

Despite Annette’s shouts, Queneau paid her no heed. His voice rang with exasperation as he dutifully repeated his warning. “And again, it’s dangerous here. Soon, this will be a battlefield...”

Annette didn’t listen to a word he said and continued searching the area around the channel for the black cat while scheming up ways to get it to like her. The milk Sara had told her about had successfully piqued Olive’s interest, but in the end, Olive had never ended up approaching the dish Annette had poured it in.

Today, Annette was testing out a different tactic altogether.

By stringing fine thread from the nearby concrete and posts, she was creating a net of sorts across the waterway. Her fingers moved daintily as she surrounded the area the cat was liable to cross any second now.

Queneau watched her work without moving an inch. “Query. What is that?”

“A special trap I put together!” Annette chirped. “The moment she touches it, it’ll snatch her right up!”

Annette had stolen that handy-dandy thread from one of Avian’s members, “Cloud Drift” Lan. “Th-thou mayn’t have it,” Lan had protested through to the end, but as soon as Annette had busted out her electric drill, Lan had tearfully submitted.

Queneau pulled out a pair of scissors and snipped through the string. “...Nay. Don’t do that.”

“How dare you?!”

“Set the bait and leave. That cat is a wary one. She won’t fall for a trap that simple.”

Annette scowled in displeasure at the statement.

However, she remembered how accurately he’d assessed the cat’s temperament last time. After peevishly curling the corner of her mouth upward, she poured the warm milk into a saucer, set it down in front of the concrete sewer pipe, and stepped away from the drainage channel.

Queneau was well acquainted with the nearby alleyways, and Annette reluctantly followed his lead as he led her to an abandoned wooden house.

That was the building he was using as a hideout. Its window had a clear view of the channel. Annette pulled out a pair of binoculars and stared through them intently.

The cat Annette had dubbed Olive slipped out of the pipe she’d been hiding in. She turned her head side to side, carefully surveying her surroundings, then approached the saucer lying on the embankment. After walking in circles around it, she gave the milk a tentative lick, then began lapping it up.

“Whoaaa!!” Annette cheered.

That was the first time Olive had ever accepted an offering.

Annette wasted no time in leaping out the window. She tottered along the fence line and raced toward the cat.

Olive had been engrossed in the milk, but when she looked up and saw Annette, she turned on the spot and vanished back into the sewer pipe.

Annette was all alone by the drainage channel.

“Yo!” Her voice echoed with anger. “I think she’s pretty darn ungrateful!”

Once again, her plan to capture Olive had failed.

Annette’s shoulders slumped a bit, but she was still happy Olive had gone for the milk, and she filled the saucer back up to the brim. After looking around with sadness in her eyes and finding Olive was nowhere to be seen, she

returned to the wooden house beside the waterway.

She puffed up her cheeks and resumed her spot by the window with her binoculars.

Soon, Olive came back to the drainage channel. She checked to make sure there were no humans nearby, wandered around for a bit, and went back to lapping up the milk.

Annette frowned and lowered her binoculars. "That punk Olive won't drink the milk when I'm around, yo."

"Nay. I'll say it again," Queneau's voice rumbled. "The cat will never love you. Abandon your futile wish."

"Hmph."

"...You're a Bloodfolk."

Annette cocked her head. "What's that, yo?"

Queneau pulled over a chair and slowly sat himself down. The age-worn chair let out a horrible creaking noise every time he shifted his weight.

He unhurriedly began his explanation. "When the world is in times of upheaval, mothers beset by intense stress sometimes birth twisted babies. You could call it a genetic mutation. Great evils are born into this world. Dictators who commit massacres, thrill-seeking serial killers... Outsiders who lack the seed of humanity. Those are the Tainted Bloodfolk." His voice was level. "You, 'Forgetter' Annette, are one of those Bloodfolk. And an incredibly pure one."

Annette remained expressionless.

She didn't have any memories from more than four years ago. She had met Matilda, who had professed to be her mother that one time, but Annette had found her unpleasant and ended up blowing her up. Plus, Matilda wasn't even her birth mother.

Annette knew nothing about her origins, nor did she much care about them.

"I think you're talking nonsense, yo."

"Nay. One Bloodfolk knows another."

Queneau reached up and gave his mask a slight tilt.

He never showed his real face to his Avian teammates, but he revealed it to Annette and Annette alone.

“I, too, am a Bloodfolk. Though my blood is too thin to possibly compare with yours.”

“.....”

Annette remained stony-faced. She quietly fixed her right eye on Queneau.

Queneau returned his mask to its original position. “Here’s some advice, from one kin to another. Cats are attuned to the hearts of men. You’ll never get her to—”

“You stink, yo.” Annette cut Queneau off and stuck out her tongue. “I don’t like you. Killers who reek of blood shouldn’t go talking all pompous-like.”

“The fact you could smell that is proof positive you’re a Bloodfolk.”

Queneau gave his head a disappointed shake as he rose to his feet. The dark-red stain on his jacket sleeve looked like blood, and it wasn’t his.

“Heed these words... Alter your nature, ‘Forgetter’ Annette. Resist your fate,” he said on his way out. “For if you don’t...you’ll never obtain anything.”



The next three days passed in a flash.

Annette visited the drainage channel every day, pouring out a bowl of milk and then leaving the area each time she had. Olive seemed happy enough to drink it while Annette hid, so she started leaving out bowls of cat food, too.

Olive licked the bowls clean. The cat had a shocking appetite.

Annette beamed upon seeing the empty bowls, but Olive still ran away whenever she tried to get near, and her expression would darken once more.

The other Lamplight girls started picking up on what was happening, and they, too, offered Annette their support. They didn’t help her directly out of respect for Sara’s wishes, but they were careful to let her carve out free time in the

middle of their missions, and when she was working past the point when the shops closed, someone always made sure to go buy the milk for her. Some of the girls even bought her books on how to raise cats.

“Yo, thanks!” Annette would say before rushing off to the drainage channel.

All that time, Queneau didn’t show up so much as once.

The one time Annette spotted him walking down the far end of an alley, his jacket was wet with fresh blood.



Meanwhile, Avian’s mission was proceeding apace. At eight o’clock one night, all five of the team’s members aside from Queneau headed for a factory near the harbor.

The factory dealt primarily with metalworking. The building doubled as a warehouse, and back behind the lathes and other machinery, there were wooden shipping containers piled all the way to the ceiling. According to their official filings, they processed and treated foreign inputs and sold them to other Din businesses.

According to a newspaper article, there had been explosions heard from within the building last month, but when local police had investigated, they’d written it off as a machine failure.

The holes in that story had failed to escape Avian’s notice.

After picking the workshop’s lock, the five elites strode on inside.

“Yeah, that’s weeeird.” Pharma was the first to notice what was off. She gave her lips a captivating lick and pointed at the machines. “Look at where that lathe and drilling machine aaare. You wouldn’t normally put them so close together. The scrap iron would go flying and hit the workers and totally get in the waaay. Would you mind, Vics?”

“Yup! ♪ I’m on it. ♪”

The chipper reply came from a handsome young man with a gentle smile —“Lander” Vics. The machines were taller than he was, but thanks to his

freakish strength, all it took was a shove to move them.

Once the machines were out of the way, it became clear someone had carved a hole in the factory's floor. It was three feet to a side and packed full of metal pipes.

"Those pipes have riiifling marks."

"Yeah, they're making guns out of improvised parts—just like they taught us at the academy. ♪"

This time around, Avian had tracked down the site where the Discourse on Decadence was manufacturing their arms. Not only had the Discourse on Decadence been building weapons for themselves, but they'd also been selling them to gangs.

As her teammates secured the evidence, "Glide" Qulle put a hand to her ear. "Hey, Vindo—"

"Don't be insipid."

Vindo had spent the entire operation looking bored out of his mind, and he let out a sigh. He slowly withdrew his hands from his pants pockets.

"I don't need you to *tell* me there's hostiles here. Looks like they finally worked up the nerve."

In those hands, he was holding a pair of knives.

"I'm code name Flock—and it's time to gouge clean through."

Vindo's body vanished—or rather, he leaped with such speed that it looked like it did. After bounding across the top of the lathe, he landed over by the factory's side wall in the blink of an eye.

The pair of boys standing there, who looked to be Discourse on Decadence members, readied their guns, but they were too slow. By the time they managed to draw a bead on Vindo, he'd already finished driving a knife into each of their shoulders.

A girl popped up near the opposite wall with a light machine gun. It was a high-firepower weapon capable of tearing through people with ease, and the fact she had it spoke to how dangerous the Discourse on Decadence was.

However, they'd chosen a poor group to pick a fight with.

Before the girl could open fire, a thread the width of piano wire wound its way around her throat. That was "Cloud Drift" Lan's handiwork. An unnecessarily archaic, "Thou'rt fortunate 'tis I you face. Thy life I shall not claim," was the last thing the girl heard before passing out.

There were other Discourse members lying in wait, but Vics crushed one of their arms with a lathe, and a few whispers from Pharma led another set to descend into friendly fire.

"Two to the east... One to the west... No, scratch that last one, Vindo already took care of them..."

Meanwhile, Qulle stood in the center of the factory, keeping a watchful eye on the battle and relaying their foes' positions to her team.

Eventually, she gave a big nod.

"...All right, that's the last of them. I have to say, I wasn't expecting there to be so many."

The fight had ended in a quick trouncing, and the factory was quiet again.

The Avian combatants regrouped around Qulle.

Behind him, Vics was dragging a thin boy. The boy was stark naked. Vics had used his monstrous strength to tear his clothes to shreds, and he handed the naked, trembling boy over to Pharma. Pharma stroked his bare skin. "I'll be right back once I've overwritten his brain with so much pleasure he can't survive without meee," she said with a seductive smile before loading the boy onto a cart and wheeling him behind a set of lockers.

Qulle and Lan covered their faces in embarrassment as the boy's immodest cries echoed through the factory.

"Looks like we've really got them on the ropes ♪," Vics said, turning to Vindo with a grin. "Us snatching up their lieutenants got them running scared. Luring

the Executioners here so they could hit them with everything they had was a pretty big gamble, and it didn't pay off. Now all that's left are the last few lieutenants and the head honcho. ♪ Why don't you look happier about this? ♪”

“Be quiet, would you?” Vindo stepped away from Vics in annoyance. “The finished guns weren't here. They already sold them off. When I think of the gangs that got ahold of them and the innocent civilians in harm's way, it makes me sick.”

“Oh wow, I didn't realize you were so worried. ♪ That's our bighearted boss we've got. ♪”

“Of course I am. It's our job to keep the nation safe.”

“Well, hey, don't worry. ♪ Queneau said in his report that he knows where the guns ended up. ♪ He's been keeping an eye on the gangs for us.”

Vindo scowled. “And why didn't that report ever make it to me?”

“Hmm? Because I didn't tell you about it, duh. ♪”

“And why's that?”

“Oh? Should I have?”

Sparks crackled as the two of them glared at each other. Vindo shifted his hand a little to get ready to sock Vics, and Vics shifted his feet ever so slightly to accept his challenge.

The two of them were constantly at each other's throats.

Vics was usually the one who picked the fights. Both of them specialized in combat, and neither of them was willing to give the other an inch.

However, they broke it up when one particularly loud cry from the boy spoiled the party.

“I've got neeews, everyone. I just broke my record.” With a delighted smile, Pharma stepped out from behind the lockers. “I had him calling me Mommy in just foour minutes. How quick is that? But that wasn't the only thing quick about him. By the end, he was crying like a cute little baby and telling me aaall about their top leadership while he made like a shaken soda and sprayed his—”

““We don’t need the details.””

The two guys sounded legitimately peeved.

With that, Avian got one step closer to taking down the Discourse on Decadence.

Also, while Avian was taking down their opponents and getting intel out of them at blistering speeds—

“““““That was so fast!”””””

—all the Lamplight girls who’d come along to observe could do was gawk in admiration.



Most of Avian’s and Lamplight’s members were still at the factory, but Sara went back to Heat Haze Palace early and headed for the animal shed. The night was bone-chilling, and she knew her pets were in danger of catching cold. After getting permission from the others, she’d slipped away to bring her animals inside. She swaddled each of her mice in her hands as she moved them into their cage.

“Yo, Sis!”

Midway through the process, Annette came rushing in. She looked to be at her wits’ end, and she charged headfirst into the pile of blankets that had been stored in the shed for the animals.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m taking these!”

With that, Annette lifted a pile of blankets far too big for her to carry and dashed back out of the shed with tottering footsteps.

“Olive’s not doing too good! I need to hurry, yo!”

“W-wait, hold on!”

Sara tried to call out to her, but her mice shivered from the cold and burrowed their way into her clothes. Getting them into their cage took all of Sara's attention, and she missed her chance to stop Annette.



After discarding enough blankets to get herself down to a manageable load, Annette raced toward the alley.

Just a short while ago, she'd spotted Olive lying on her side by the drainage channel. She'd been curled up in an uncharacteristically docile ball deep in the sewer pipe where Annette couldn't reach her.

It had been clear just from looking at her that she wasn't well.

Annette had doled out her milk and cat food and stepped away just like always, but Olive had never emerged to eat. Normally, the voracious little cat would have finished both bowls off without leaving a scrap. Annette had tried swapping the bowls out for canned fish and other types of milk, but to no avail. That was when she'd hurried back to Heat Haze Palace to grab the blankets.

Arms laden with medicine and duvets, Annette arrived at the usual alleyway. None of the streetlights reached that far, and the path was dark. Annette wove her way between the buildings and made for the drainage channel.

"Hmm...?"

On her way there, she stopped.

She could hear gunfire coming from farther down the alley. It rang out intermittently. There was some sort of firefight going on. Brothel workers screamed and fled toward the main thoroughfare.

As Annette stood there, motionless, a sketchy-looking man rushed out from behind a building.

In his hand was a crudely constructed firearm.

The look on his face as he ran was frantic, like he was trying to get away from someone. He was on a collision course with Annette.

“Outta the way, kid!”

Right before he slammed into her, something massive descended from atop the building.

That something was Queneau.

Queneau positioned himself to protect Annette, taking the man’s charge head-on and grabbing his face in his large grip.

“I’m code name South Wind—and it’s time to howl unseen...”

There was a slender apparatus coiled around Queneau’s hands. It was designed to strengthen each of his fingers. He fixed his hands around the man’s head like a vice.

“Oh hell, it’s you.” On seeing Queneau, the man clicked his tongue in distress. “You’re the homicidal lunatic who’s been going around killing gangsters!!”

“Aye.”

As the word left Queneau’s mouth, the man’s head exploded like a grape. Queneau had used his reinforced grip to crush it. Globbs of blood splattered across Queneau’s jacket.

“Query.” Queneau turned around. “Didn’t I tell you repeatedly to stay away?”

“Yo, what’s going on?”

“It’s become a battlefield... The guns the Discourse on Decadence sold are fueling a gang war... It’s out of control.” Queneau scooped up the gun the man whose face he’d crushed had been holding. “I killed the ones attacking civilians indiscriminately. And the evacuation is finished. All that’s left is for the gangs to kill each other over nothing.”

Annette dashed past Queneau. “I’m worried about Olive!”

“Nay. Listen to people when they’re talking to you.”

Once Annette took off, there wasn’t a person alive who could restrain her.

Gunshots and screams echoed through the alley at irregular intervals as Annette raced down it. She leaped over a dead body, then ignored a woman falling from a second-floor window. A stray bullet obliterated the hairband keeping her right pigtail in place, but Annette didn't stop.

It was rare for her to run so hard it left her out of breath. The playful smile that served as her constant companion was nowhere to be seen.

There was another gangster blocking the road. When he saw Annette sprinting down the street, he took her for an assailant from a rival gang and fired. His bullet blasted away Annette's remaining hairband. He was just about to take aim again when Queneau came chasing after Annette and landed a shot square between his eyes.

Annette didn't slow down until she reached the drainage channel, focusing everything she had into putting one foot in front of the other.

Eventually, she arrived at the fork in the waterway where she'd first spotted the black cat.

There, Olive was lying in a pool of blood.

She was bleeding all the way from her shoulder to her groin. She'd gotten hit by a stray bullet, and Annette could see the projectile lodged in the flesh and bone near her neck.

Annette dropped the blankets she'd been carrying.

"Olive..."

She called out the cat's name and reached out to touch her body.

"Aren't you going to run away from me?"

The cat flopped into Annette's arms.

She'd already breathed her last.

Her body still had a faint warmth to it, but there was no life in her bones. Annette shook her over and over, but no light ever returned to her eyes.

"O-Olive..."

Annette let out a frail moan and pressed her head against the cat's body. She

rubbed her face back and forth as though trying to wipe all the blood Olive was losing.

When Queneau got to the drainage channel, he simply stood there. He didn't know what to say to her.

All the while, the gunshots continued.

The gang war was raging on.

Queneau knew it was the Discourse on Decadence's leader who had incited the fighting in the first place. In order to drum up demand for their prototype guns, the ringleader had spread misinformation to pit the gangs against each other.

It was a pointless conflict. A bloodbath with nothing to be gained.

At that moment, a man showed up by the drainage channel. Given the makeshift gun he was clutching, it wasn't hard to deduce he was a gangster. "Who goes there?" he barked at Annette and Queneau as he leveled his barrel at them.

Annette lifted her face from Olive and stared at the man.

The man screamed. One could hardly blame him, considering how much blood was smeared across her face.

"Wh-who are you people?"

"Olive died," Annette muttered, "and it's all your fault..."

"Who's Olive?" The man gave her a confused look, then spotted what she was cradling in her arms and scoffed. "Wait, that's just some cat."

"....."

"Here I was, thinkin' we'd killed a friend of yours or somethin'. Ha! If you ain't a part of our world, then I got no business with you. Go on and skedaddle back to the main road before I—"

"I can't tell them apart, yo."

"Huh?"

"I don't understand the difference between people and cats. Aren't they

basically the same?”

The man stared at Annette with his mouth half-agape. He furrowed his brow, unable to comprehend what she was talking about.

There was no way Annette and the man were going to be able to hold a conversation—their brains were simply built differently.

“So if you say it’s okay to kill cats...”

Still clutching Olive in her right hand, Annette reached out with her left.

“...then it must be okay to kill people, too.”

With that, the massacre commenced.



The gang war that had abruptly started in Arranq ended by nine the same night.

Thanks to Queneau’s efforts, there were zero civilian casualties, but with over fifty dead and wounded gangsters, it became a huge news story all the same.

The situation was too much for the local police to handle, and they ended up having to call in the army, which happened to include Captain Welter Barth of the Military Intelligence Department. The situation was so extreme that they feared foreign spies might be involved.

When they got to the scene, what they saw shocked them.

Several of the corpses had been rendered into unidentifiable smithereens. There was blast residue all over the area, and a full fifth of the buildings had been leveled.

Welter shuddered at the sheer malice he sensed, but in the end, he had no choice but to report the dead gangsters as having simply killed each other in the fighting.

The fact that a girl approximately fourteen years of age had brutally slaughtered thirteen of them was quietly omitted.



Annette and Queneau walked away from the alley to get away from the cops and soldiers patrolling the area. Annette had wrapped the black cat's corpse in a blanket, and Queneau was following a few steps behind her.

Queneau had changed into a fresh jacket. He'd long since gotten rid of his bloodstained one and burned it to ash to destroy the evidence. He'd offered to burn the cat's body, too, but Annette had shaken her head no. She was still cradling it, like the reality of the situation had yet to sink in for her.

The two of them made quite the pair as they strode through the night.

"Aye," Queneau said. "People like us have no tears... Not even for times like these..."

Annette had already wiped the blood off her face. She slowed her pace to let Queneau catch up. "Were you worried about Olive, too?"

"Aye. The cat refused to leave her territory."

"....."

"Let me explain myself. I tried to catch her, too. I wanted to get her away from the alley. But just as she never warmed to you, she never let me touch her..." Beneath his mask, Queneau let out a sigh. "Not all can escape the darkness. The cat failed to, and so too did we..."

"I don't get what you mean, yo." Annette squeezed her fists tight and whirled around. "I didn't do anything wrong!"

"...You really believe that?"

"It's all *their* fault Olive died!"

"Nay."

Queneau came to a stop, then strode past Annette and overtook her.

"We have to change. Otherwise, we'll never be free from the fate of the Bloodfolk."

Annette gave him a skeptical look.

In the end, Annette never did get a proper rundown of what the Bloodfolk actually were. Queneau refused to talk about it, like he felt no further explanation was necessary.

As Queneau strode on and left Annette behind, he heard a pair of cheerful voices call out from his flank.

“Oh, hi, Queneau. What are you doing here?” “Ah, a strange twist of fate indeed.”

It was the Avian women.

Qulle and Lan set down their shopping bags and waved at him. From the bags, he could hear the sound of bottles clinking against each other.

They were standing in front of a late-night liquor store. Whenever Avian reached a stopping point in one of their missions, everyone on the team except Lan liked to celebrate with a drink.

Pharma stepped out of the store with a wine bottle in each hand. “Heyyy, it’s Queneau,” she said, beaming. “So Vics and Vindo got into a fight during our mission, see, and looong story short, they decided to settle it with a contest to see who could land a punch on Mr. Klaus first. We were just in the middle of buying drinks to enjoy while we watch their match.”

Annette quietly took cover behind the building. The women didn’t seem to have noticed her.

Pharma reached over and laid a hand on Queneau’s arm in an overly familiar fashion, to which he let out a sigh. “Nay. You should be stopping the fight.”

“Awww, but the Lamplight girls have already started betting on the ouuutcome.”

“Then they have no more class than we do.”

As Queneau stood there, Vics showed up as well. Upon seeing Queneau, he slung an arm over his shoulder. “You’re gonna bet on me, right, buddy? ♪ I promise, you won’t regret it. ♪”

“You came to buy alcohol, too?”

“Yeah, to drink after I win. ♪”

Then, without a sound, Vindo appeared on the opposite side as Vics with a look of exasperation on his face. “I don’t know why Vics is so needlessly competitive. Still, you should bet on me.”

“...If you’re on good enough terms to come shopping together, then you’re on good enough terms to not fight.”

Vindo had a large handbag full of booze dangling from his shoulder. After his bout with Vics, he intended to finish it all off before the night was out. However, him being a glutton and heavy drinker was hardly news.

Vindo turned his gaze to Queneau, then to the spot where Annette was hiding behind the building. “Looks like you finished up on your end, too.”

“Aye.”

Vindo pulled a bottle of whiskey out of his bag. “This is the stuff you like, right? Good work today.”

Without waiting for a response, he tossed the bottle over. Sure enough, it was Queneau’s favorite—a brand produced in the United States of Mouzaia.

Avian’s members chatted happily as they set off for Heat Haze Palace. From the look of it, they were planning on staying the night there. Every so often, Queneau looked back over his shoulder. “Come on,” he called back.

Annette had watched the whole series of exchanges from start to finish.

“‘Forgetter’ Annette... Do you understand how I feel?” Queneau said. “I worry... If they died, would that be enough to make me cry? Does a dirty killer like me even have the right to hope for that?”

“.....”

“What about you? If your Lamplight allies died, would you be able to cry for them?”

Annette offered him no reply.

Queneau went on undeterred. “I dream sometimes...of the moment their lives, or perhaps mine, comes to an end...”

“.....”

“If I had a choice, I’d like to die on their behalf... That would be enough to bring me joy...”

Annette walked over, emotionless, and peered up at Queneau’s large frame.

The anxious eyes she saw behind the slits in his mask were like those of a young child.



After quietly slipping out of her bedroom in the dead of night, Annette made for the Heat Haze Palace garden. Her shovel crunched through the ground as she dug her hole.

At no point did she break out her beloved drill. She drove every scoop into the hard earth by hand.

Merriment and cheer echoed out from within the manor. Avian had dragged the Lamplight girls into their drinking party.

Rather than join in the festivities, Annette devoted her full attention to digging out the soil. When she had finally finished her hole, she quietly placed Olive’s body at the bottom. She then gently covered the body with dirt, and when she was finished filling the hole in its entirety, she planted the cat toy she’d built atop it as a grave marker.

“Hello, Annette.”

Klaus walked over to her.

Still hunched over, Annette stared up at his chest. Her gaze was fixed on something that was, by all rights, unthinkable.

His shirt was missing its third button from the top.

“...Hmm? Ah, this.” Klaus nodded. “Vindo and Vics came looking for a showdown. They’ve improved a lot in a very short time. I still beat them without taking an injury, mind you.”

Annette’s expression was stony.

Knocking off one of Klaus’s shirt buttons was an impressive feat, the likes of

which the Lamplight girls had yet to achieve themselves. In that moment, though, Annette couldn't have cared less.

Klaus knelt down beside her. "It looks like you've been through a lot."

Annette laid her head on his shoulder. "I've never felt this glum before, yo."

"I can see that. Would you mind telling me what happened? Feel free to take your time."

Annette gave him the rundown on the situation. She told him about the black cat she'd taken a shine to one day. About how she'd named the unfriendly cat Olive and how she'd started feeding it daily. About how she'd never succeeded in petting Olive while she had still been alive. About how Olive had died after getting caught in the cross fire of a gang war.

Her voice was chipper, but there was grief lurking just below its surface.

"....."

"What is it, Bro?"

After listening to her story, Klaus laid a hand over his mouth and sank into silence.

Annette shifted her head to coax out a reply, and Klaus laid a hand on the grave marker. "Look, I don't want to be the bearer of false hope."

"Huh?"

"This cat was wary and had a fierce appetite. She refused to leave her territory. She was tired this morning, and by nightfall, she was lying down and bleeding from her groin. Did I get all that right?"

Annette nodded. Those were the facts, exactly as she'd laid them out for him.

Klaus went on. "Now, I need you to understand that this is by no means certain," he prefaced his statement. "But it's possible that she may have been pregnant."



Queneau, as well as the black cat she had met, proved to be great catalysts of

change for Annette.

“Alter your nature, ‘Forgetter’ Annette. Resist your fate.”

The world may have been awash in pain, but she’d never felt that pain, not in any real sense. She followed her whims wherever they took her, and when things got to be too much for her, she turned to violent outlets. Never once had her heart been sullied.

This experience had given her a taste of despair, and it sparked something deep within her.



Annette returned to the drainage channel once more.

The army and police had given up looking for survivors and brought their investigation to an end. The whole area was cordoned off with police tape.

Annette sliced through the tape without a moment’s hesitation and made her way to the waterway.

Klaus’s theory had a definite logic to it. It was odd that a cat as cautious as Olive would have continued hanging around an alley as it became an active combat zone. If she had been on the verge of giving birth, though, then that was a different story altogether. She couldn’t very well have pulled up stakes when she had been on the verge of going into labor. She had been hungry because she had needed nutrients for her unborn litter, and she had been wary of strangers in order to keep them safe. All of her behavior made sense.

On top of that, Annette had never gotten a chance to observe Olive from close-up. She could easily have failed to spot a swollen belly. However, the fact that her appetite had dropped just before she’d died implied she might have been on the verge of giving birth. Considering where her bleeding was, there was a possibility she’d already had her litter by the time she had died.

“Olive’s babies...”

Annette clutched her flashlight and searched for signs of tiny life.

The rain was coming down hard, but even as her small frame got soaked clean

through, she never stopped looking.

About an hour into her search, she discovered something pink beside the sewer pipes. They must have just been born. There were three of them all next to each other, and though they had a few patches of black fuzz, the majority of their skin was bare and exposed.



Annette gulped and turned her flashlight's beam toward them.

The light wavered.

She stowed the flashlight away, crouched down, and cupped the three lumps in her hands to lift them. She bit down on her trembling lip as she slowly rose to her feet and looked back up.

“_____”

A wordless moan escaped her throat.

Everything before her had been blown to bits. All the concrete surrounding the drainage channel lay in ruins, and the debris lay scattered around her feet.

The three kittens Olive had birthed had all been crushed to death by the rubble.

However, it wasn't the gang war or some random accident that had ended their lives. It was the bombs Annette had set off in a mad frenzy to kill the gangsters.

Annette was the one who'd killed Olive's babies.

Flashback ③

Football

“We’ve got a hole in our schedule,” Vindo said as he sat idly in the dining room. “Want to play some football?”

“If you’re bored, you could always just leave!” Lily yelled.

That was how the two spy teams ended up holding a football match out in the courtyard.

Avian was a group of elites, but one of their defining characteristics was how strict of a line they drew between work and play. When they had time off, they took advantage of it to its fullest. By the second half of the honeymoon, Avian had completely made themselves at home at Heat Haze Palace, and it wasn’t uncommon for them to drag the Lamplight girls into their leisure activities.

When the promise of, “If Lamplight wins, we’ll get out of your hair,” was made, the football battle lines were drawn.

They set up chairs in the courtyard as makeshift goals. Pharma and Grete were the referees, and Sara was the scorekeeper. Klaus was absent. Everyone else was a player. The first team to five goals would be the victor.

“Okay, start the gaaaame.”

When Pharma blew her referee whistle, Sybilla and Lily began kicking the ball back and forth. The referees’ and players’ gazes all gravitated toward it.

Monika was the first to make a move.

“Think fast!” she shouted as she sank a merciless body blow into the enemy defender.

Lan fainted in agony from the unforeseen gut punch. “Prithee, whyyyyyy?!!”

What Monika had done was a blatant violation of the rules. Vics had seen the whole thing, and as Lan went limp, he let out an indignant cry. “Ref?!”

One of the refs in question, Pharma, cocked her head in confusion as she stuffed her cheeks full of cookies. “Huuuh? I didn’t see anything. I was taking my care package from Sara.”

Grete played dumb and shook her head. “I’m quite sure I didn’t see anything, either.”

Neither of the referees had seen the play in question, so no foul was called. Lan hobbled off, unable to keep playing.

Qulle didn’t like what was happening one bit, and she stormed up to the referees. “H-hold on just a minute, now. I’m calling for new refs! You’ve clearly been bought off—”

While she was doing that, though, the game continued on. The refs hadn’t stopped the game, so the ball was still in play.

As Qulle looked away, Lily dribbled the ball over and smacked her leg into Qulle’s.

Lily collapsed onto the ground and began writhing around. “AAAAAGH, MY LEG!!”

“...Huh?”

Fweeeet, went Grete’s referee whistle. “Unfair charging, tripping the ball holder from behind while within the penalty area. Qulle gets a red card and is ejected from the game.”

“WHAAAAAAT?!” Qulle shrieked in protest.

Down on the ground, Lily clutched at her leg with a look of anguish on her face. “It’s gonna take me two whole months to recover!” she moaned. “My career as a player is over!” “She’s already given the card,” Erna informed her, to which Lily said, “Oh, I’m better now,” and stood back up.

After Sybilla landed a beautiful penalty kick, Lamplight earned themselves a one-zero lead.

~~~~~ .....

Having lost two players two minutes into the match, realization began dawning on the Avian players.

*So that's how Lamplight's gonna play this?*

When the refs weren't looking, they attacked their opponents. When the refs *were* looking, they faked injuries to earn fouls.

The way they were taking full advantage of their spy techniques was downright revolting.

"If that's how you wanna do this," Vindo said, "then two can play at that game."

From there, the battle only got uglier.

"Fool" Erna slammed into her teammates and insisted, "Avian just shoved me!" "Dreamspeaker" Thea said, "Hey, Pharma. If you call that a foul, I'll send you Erna and Annette to use as body pillows," to try bribing the referee. "Lander" Vics hurled the ball at Lily's stomach and forced her to drop out of the match. "Forgetter" Annette sneakily swapped the ball out for a metal sphere in an attempt to injure the opposition's legs, but "South Wind" Queneau spotted her and got her ejected from the game for her efforts. Meanwhile, "Flock" Vindo continued matter-of-factly playing football and racking up goals. "Pandemonium" Sybilla realized the tides were shifting against them, so she nonchalantly moved the goal out of position. When Avian called her out on it, "Glint" Monika played dumb, Sybilla intentionally got under their skin, and a brawl broke out between the two teams.

Queneau was the one person who didn't join in the fighting, but despite insisting, "Nay, let's just play football," not a single person heeded his words.

In the end, everyone but him got red carded, so Avian won the match.

## Chapter 4

### Vics's Case

There were fourteen people all crammed into the Heat Haze Palace lounge, a number far greater than the room was built to comfortably hold. They were gathered shoulder to shoulder, with one of the girls sitting on another's lap and three people on each of the two-seat couches.

"Flock" Vindo sat at the center of it all. He tapped his fingers on the documents strewn across the table and furrowed his brow.

Everyone else stared at him and waited for him to speak.

"I've got it," he eventually said. "I need Lamplight to give me a list of everything you've purchased over the past six months. Don't leave a single thing out."

On hearing that, a dark-haired girl—"Dreamspeaker" Thea—cut in with a question. "What exactly do you need that for?"

"The budget for our spy work comes from the Foreign Intelligence Office. At least once a quarter, Klaus has to submit an expense report."

"Daughter Dearest" Grete gave him a quiet nod. "I see... He does seem to have an awful lot of paperwork he's responsible for."

"The thing is, if he asks for too much money, it starts looking like he's embezzling. Even the tiniest of screwups could give us leverage."

"Glint" Monika crossed her arms. "I dunno if you're gonna find one. He's not the kind of guy who makes mistakes like that."

"You're forgetting about his awful handwriting. It's hard to tell his twos from his fives. Even if he didn't make any errors himself, there's a chance they misread his writing on their end, and if they sent him more money than he

asked for...”

“Meadow” Sara’s eyes went wide. “Then we can accuse him of embezzling!”

Vindo gave them some brief background.

Due to the nature of their work, spy accounting was always kind of sloppy. Their budget requests were inexact, and they were granted with little oversight or scrutiny. Spy organizations the world over had to deal with agents who demanded huge operating budgets and then used that money to spend every night painting the town red in overseas locales.

All that said, it was still embezzlement if spies requested more money than they actually used. When spies belonging to national intelligence agencies spent money, that money came directly out of the taxpayers’ pockets.

“When spies make lavish purchases abroad, the line between legitimate work expense and selfish extravagance can be blurry. If we play our cards right, this could be a chink in his armor. For a man who prides himself on being the Greatest Spy in the World, being accused of embezzlement would be a blemish on his pride,” Vindo said. “We’ve used similar methods to bring down foreign spies before. When a spy’s nation cuts them off on suspicion of embezzlement, it doesn’t take long to isolate them and get them to flip.”

The girls winced, and Sybilla let out a sharp sigh. “...Dang, that’s a sick idea. I dunno if we’d’ve ever come up with it.”

“This is why we make *plans* before we attack him,” Vindo said in annoyance.

Lamplight and Avian were in the middle of a joint training session.

Lamplight’s boss Klaus had given Avian the same task he’d given his own agents. The “defeat me” assignment sounded almost like an insult, but while Avian had attempted the task solo at first, their repeated failures had eventually led them to pursue a joint strategy with the Lamplight girls.

Vindo was the man taking point on those efforts.

“For now, we’ll split into two groups. Half of us will get in touch with the Foreign Intelligence Office’s head of financial affairs, and the other half can go through old expense reports to—”

“Tee-hee.”

When Vindo tried to wrap the discussion up, though, he found himself interrupted by an unpleasant chuckle.

He shot an annoyed glare at its source. “What’s so funny, Silver?”

As Vindo stared at her, Lily covered her mouth with her hand and let out a “tee-hee-hee” as she pantomimed bursting into mocking laughter. “Man, you’re a pretty all right spy, but you don’t know the first thing about taking down Teach. There’s no way that plan would ever work on him.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If we stop attacking him all of a sudden, he’ll obviously know we’re up to something. He’ll come up with a counter, and that’ll be that.”

“.....” For a brief moment, Vindo bit down on his lip. “Ah, so we need to have five people or so attack him like normal—”

“Tee-hee-hee.”

Lily burst into laughter again. It was really kind of obnoxious.

“If we go after him while we’re working on our real plan in parallel, he’ll sniff us out in a heartbeat. *They’re missing their usual desperation*, he’ll say. *They must be plotting something*. The best way to pull off what you’re describing is to make sure only a few of us actually know about it. The plan was doomed the minute you explained it to the whole group.”

“.....”

Vindo scrunched up his face in displeasure, but he had no rebuttal for her argument.

When Lily saw that, she puffed her chest up in delight. “Ha-ha! We’re better at being outmatched than you!”

“It’s not like your record against him is any better,” Vindo snapped, but his comment did nothing to remove the shit-eating grin from Lily’s face. Avian had given Lily more than her share of lickings, and now that she had something over them, she intended to hold on tight. Her smile brimmed with triumph.

Eventually, Vindo let out a long sigh. "...Fine. Let's hear what you've got."



Three weeks had passed since Lamplight and Avian had begun their honeymoon.

The two sides had come to stop questioning each other's merits, and both sides were training hard. Klaus was drilling Avian, and Avian was teaching Lamplight their skills. It was just like the arrangement that had originally been drawn up, and the two teams were closer and on better terms than ever.

However, that threw a few things into sharp relief.

With the two teams lined up side by side, their foibles and flaws were rapidly becoming clear.



After giving up on the plan to frame Klaus for embezzlement, the teams decided to take a breather. They brought some tea and teacakes into the lounge, and everyone took a load off.

"Hey, I was wonderin'," Sybilla said as she took a big swig of her tea. "How are things goin' with the Discourse on Decadence?"

"Oh, we're aaall finished," "Feather" Pharma drawled. "We tracked down their base and rounded up most of their lieutenants. Now it's up to anoother team to handle the rest. We wrapped the whole thing up pretty quick."

A girl with dark-red hair tied back behind her head—"Cloud Drift" Lan—nodded. "Verily. We seized their operating funds, to boot. The rest of them have naught to do but wither away."

The Discourse on Decadence had gone down fast after the battle in the metalworking factory the other day. The boy Pharma had interrogated had told them everything he knew, and aside from a small sum with a very specific purpose, Avian had successfully retrieved all the money the Discourse on



Decadence had earned through their illegal activities.

There were still technically three members of the group's senior leadership on the lam, but dealing with them was someone else's problem.

Upon hearing the phrase *operating funds*, Lily broke into a grin. "Oh, cool. So you mean that safe there is full of loads and loads of— Ow!"

There was a large safe sitting in the corner of the lounge. When Lily went to reach for it, Vindo hurled a pencil at her. "Hands off. Klaus is bringing that to the Foreign Intelligence Office tomorrow night. That money belongs in the national treasury. Don't even think about messing with it."

"I—I was kidding, obviously. Even I know how to draw the line between—"

"I guess we'll need to station a guard on it."

"Where's the trust?!"

Lan stepped over and planted herself in front of the safe.

According to Avian, there was enough money in there for someone to spend an entire lifetime living in luxury. That was why they had deliberately purchased a new safe and stationed it in Heat Haze Palace.

Lily rubbed her bruised hand and chuckled. "So Teach is the one doing the handoff, huh?"

"We figured it'd be for the best, considering the amount involved. Better safe than—"

Midway through his sentence, Vindo's eyes went wide as comprehension dawned on him.

"You're right, attacking him then could be a decent angle. Once the money's in Klaus's hands, he's responsible for it from then on out. Plus, it'll restrict his movements."

Lily nodded like she'd seen this new development coming. "Heh-heh. Now that we've got our course set, it's time for Lamplight's perfect strategist to take the wheel! Grete, you're up!"

Grete had been standing in the corner, and she took a step closer to the table

when Lily called her name.

Vindo offered no objections to her being the one to handle the plan's specifics. He clearly respected her ingenuity.

"I appreciate the vote of confidence. Now, I have a few ideas I'm working with..."

As Grete gracefully moved the meeting forward, everyone listened to her with rapt attention.

With that, Lamplight and Avian's joint training advanced to a new stage.

As it did, one young man regarded the scene playing out before him with a surly glare.



After the strategy meeting concluded, Grete stood on her own in the kitchen and gazed out the window.

Night had fallen, and a heavy rain was pounding down. The windowpane rattled from the rain and the blustering winds. Grete traced the raindrops rolling down it with her gaze as she worried about the man who'd yet to come home.

*Why isn't the boss back yet, I wonder...?*

Once again, he'd been out on a domestic counterintelligence mission.

Grete didn't know what his plans were, and she wasn't sure if she should make him dinner or not. Klaus always told her, "It isn't your job to wait on me," but whenever she cooked things for him, he always ended up eating them.

As she stood there, she sensed someone behind her.

"So what was up with that lousy plan? ♪"

The voice was mocking her.

When Grete gasped and turned around, she found a young man handsome enough to be a movie star waving at her.

“Hey there. ♪ I’m just here for some water.”

It was “Lander” Vics, the man who acted as Avian’s anchor. Vics was a prodigy who boasted the second-best grades of any academy student. His slim physique belied his inhuman strength, and that paired with his ability to hide weapons in his muscles made him a formidable fighter.

Grete hadn’t expected the sudden one-on-one, and she went stiff.

Vics grabbed a bottle of mineral water from the fridge and laughed in amusement. “Oh right, you’re the one who’s scared of men. ♪ I’ll go ahead and get out of your hair. ♪”

Grete had androphobia. Due to her past experiences, she froze up whenever she had to deal with men aside from Klaus. The time she’d spent completing spy missions had helped alleviate her symptoms, but she still got tense in situations where it was just her and a man.

However, she had to ask.

Unless she’d misheard him, Vics had just insulted her.

“...Might I ask what you meant when you called it a lousy plan?”

“Pretty much exactly what I said. ♪” Vics smirked. “The others talk about you a lot. They say that aside from Klaus, you’re basically Lamplight’s second-in-command. But I guess I was expecting too much. ♪”

It didn’t sound like he much cared for the plan Grete had put forth at the meeting.

He spat his next words out in disappointment.

“I can’t stand people like you. ♪ People with no hunger. ♪”

His very back seemed to reject her as he turned to leave. Grete watched him go in a daze.



“Yeah, Vics can be a jerk,” Qulle said as she soaked her body in the tub. “Don’t let it get to you. He’s got a rude mouth and a rude heart, that’s all.”

Heat Haze Palace was home to a large communal bath. It was a luxurious setup, with enough space to hold eight people with room to spare and a shower area big enough to run around in. After being pulled up from underground, the bathwater was heated to the perfect temperature using a state-of-the-art gas heater.

Due to how strong the downpour was, Avian had decided to stay the night at Heat Haze Palace. The girls were borrowing the spare bedrooms, and the boys were sleeping in a pile over in the lounge.

The jade-green-haired “Glide” Qulle was quite taken with the manor’s large bath. She’d doffed her usual glasses and was soaking happily in the bathwater.

The boisterous voices of the others echoed from over in the shower area.

“Let me scrub you dooown, Annette and Erna.” “Y-yeep! I’m scared... My body won’t stop shaking!” “I get the feeling this chick is bad news, yo!”

With sponge in hand, Pharma had chased Annette and Erna into one corner of the bathroom. Even Annette looked afraid, which was a rare sight.

Grete, on the other hand, was sitting on the edge of the bath without actually going in. She didn’t much care for bathing with others, but she’d joined them nonetheless because she needed advice.

When she told Qulle about the tongue-lashing Vics had sprung on her, Qulle gave her a sympathetic nod. “Bottom line is, he’s got a mean streak. He might look nice, but if he’s got a problem with you, he doesn’t hold back. He’s kind of awful.”

Sybilla and Lan had just finished up showering, and they slipped into the bath as well.

“Yeah, I’ve been on the receiving end of his shit. He nearly dragged me to another damn mixer yesterday. Plus, he keeps tryin’ to get under my skin! And it pisses me off how stupidly strong he is!”

“He mocked me just yesterday! And when I did naught but oversleep a mere three hours!”

They all spent the next little while complaining about Vics. It wasn’t Grete’s intention to talk badly about him behind his back, so she held her tongue. However, Sybilla and Lan had a major bone to pick, and they continued grumbling for a good long while. Grete was pretty sure that in Sybilla’s case, Vics was just continuing their training, and that in Lan’s case, she brought it entirely on herself, but she kept those thoughts to herself.

Then they all heard a lazy voice.

“Naaah, Vics is just too serious for his own good.”

Pharma slipped into the bath looking utterly content. Behind her, Erna and Annette lay exhausted in a mountain of suds.

“Cut him some slaaack, would you? The guy’s got a lot on his plate.”

Upon hearing her act as the voice of reason, Sybilla and Lan lapsed into introspective silence.

For a moment, the bath was quiet.

“You know, you’re right. I think I kind of get what he was trying to say.” Qulle turned a reserved look Grete’s way. “You’ve grown so much stronger than you were at the academy, Grete. So much so, it’s almost annoying.”

“.....”

“But back when you were a student, there was this terrifying avarice about you. If I had to guess, I’d say he was telling you that you’ve lost that.”

The look in her eyes was apologetic.

Qulle and Grete were from the same academy, so the fact that she was the

one pointing that out left Grete momentarily speechless.



Grete was well aware.

Vics's comment had hit the nail on the head. That was why Grete couldn't just ignore it.

She *had* lost her hunger.

She was still giving her training and missions her all, of course. Her work needed to be perfect so she could help support the team headed by the man she loved. She knew her teammates saw her as the next most capable member on Lamplight after Monika, and she strove to live up to those expectations.

However, there was no denying how much more passionate she'd been during her student days.

Back then, Grete had been starved for affection.

Grete had arrived at her academy after being abandoned by her family and shouted at in contempt by her father. She had wanted so badly for someone to love her for once. To need her. That was why she had put so much effort into developing her spy skills. She had quite literally worked herself half to death.

Now, though, she'd lost that hunger.

The reason for that was obvious.

*"You're beautiful."*

The moment Klaus had said those words to her, it had filled her with more joy than she'd ever felt in her life.



Right as she was leaving the bathroom, Grete heard the sound of a door opening and closing over by the foyer. She quickly tidied her hair and outfit, then headed over.

Klaus had just gotten back and was shaking the rain off his jacket. He'd been using an umbrella, but he'd gotten soaked all the same.

"Welcome home, Boss."

Grete offered him a towel. "I appreciate it," he said, then paused for a moment and let out a puzzled, "Hmm?"

"Tell me, Grete." Without pausing to dry himself off with the towel, he gave her a calm look. "What's wrong? You look down."

"...You noticed?" she asked, to which Klaus replied with a puzzled, "Of course I did."

It warmed her heart. However, she quickly looked down in shame. That feeling of contentment was precisely why she was so vexed.

She had little confidence in her ability to hide the truth from Klaus, so she decided to just tell him everything.

Grete looked her beloved square in the face. "...I'm happy. I feel so blessed to have met someone who complimented my real face, and to get to spend time with him like we're doing right now." She squeezed her fist tight in front of her chest. "But because of that, I find myself lost... I'm afraid I don't know what more to wish for."

The majority of people who aspired to become spies did so out of a sense of civic duty or a desire for self-actualization. Either they wanted to protect their homeland and their families, or they wanted to put their abilities to the test. Most of Lamplight's members fell into the former category, but Grete didn't belong to either.

All she wanted was to be needed by someone.

The thing was, she'd already gone a long way toward achieving that.

Klaus was silent, and his expression didn't change.

Worried she'd disconcerted him by oversharing, Grete hurriedly gave him an apologetic bow. "I'm terribly sorry. I know how tired you must be, yet here I am, bothering you with my trivial—"

"Here's the thing, Grete," Klaus said succinctly. "If you're happy, isn't that a

good thing?”

“.....”

“Perhaps what you need is a new goal to strive for. It’s your life, so I know it’s not my place to say anything, but...”

Klaus contemplated for a moment, then gave a small nod.

“...I’m also a spy. As your boss, I’m looking forward to watching you grow.”



The rain had cleared up by morning. The sky was clear, and Grete was dressed in her combat *gi*.

Back when they had gone to the Far East nation of Longchon, someone had bought it for her as a souvenir. It was a traditional Ryukese outfit with long sleeves and legs that covered the body. From what she’d heard, it was generally worn by people learning the martial art called kung fu.

It was the perfect attire to train in.

For her first bout, she headed to Lily’s room.

“Excuse me, Lily?” She extended her hand and made the “come at me” gesture. “I was hoping we could spar.”

“What are you talking about?” Lily groaned. She’d just gotten out of bed, and she groggily rubbed her eyes.

They ended up holding the *kumite* sparring match right there in the room, and Lily swept Grete’s legs out from under her with ease. Lily spent her time during missions right in the heat of things, so she’d had ample opportunity to train her body on the front lines. She held back a fair deal, but Grete still found herself getting flung onto the bed. With a sad, “Ow!” she lost.

For her second bout, she headed to Thea’s room.

“Excuse me, Thea?” Again, she extended her hand and made the “come at



me” gesture. “I was hoping we could spar.”

Thea blinked at her in confusion. “What? But why?”

She did end up agreeing to the *kumite*, and things went a lot better for Grete that time around. However, Thea had a large edge on her when it came to stamina. As soon as Grete started to get tired, Thea used a self-defense technique to grab her right arm and twist it upward. Grete had no choice but to cry uncle.

It was time for her third bout, and Grete refused to give up.

“Excuse me, Sara?” She made the “come at me” gesture to the girl she’d run into at the animal shed. “I was hoping we could spar.”

“Where in the world is this coming from?!” Sara cried. Despite her hysterics, though, she did agree to go along with it.

The two of them had been evenly matched back when Lamplight had first been founded, but Monika’s tutoring had improved Sara’s skills dramatically as of late. With a two-handed shove, Sara beat her with relative ease.

Grete was oh-for-three.

As she sighed in disappointment, Sara gave her a puzzled look and asked her for details. “So what exactly is going on?”

“I’m doing a hundred-man *kumite* so I can get back to my roots.”

“You mean you’ve got another ninety-seven fights to go?”

Sara gave a weirded-out laugh, but she quickly sensed there was more to the picture. “You know, Miss Grete, I think there are other areas you might be better off focusing on,” she said, then pulled on Grete’s sleeve.

She led Grete to the Heat Haze Palace courtyard and pointed with a strained smile.

“Do you really think you can keep up with them?”

Grete’s head spun at how fast the five figures there were moving.

There in the courtyard, with its gorgeous flower beds and brick paving, a fierce battle was unfolding. There were wires strung up, and the people leaping off the Heat Haze Palace roof used them as footholds to practically dash across the air.

Right when Grete thought she'd spotted someone running up a wall in the corner of her vision, she immediately saw someone in another corner moving so fast she nearly mistook them for a wild animal. In the time it took her to blink, the sound of metal striking metal rang out multiple times.

"Monika, Vics, the boss is headin' that way!"

"Got it." "We're on it. ♪"

As best she could tell, there were five people engaged in combat training: Monika, Sybilla, Vics, Vindo, and Klaus—the five strongest fighters across the two teams.

Klaus was fleeing, and the other four were giving chase. For that exercise, having superhuman physical abilities was a basic prerequisite. The pursuers took full advantage of their wire and throwing knives, but Klaus varied his speed to stay one step ahead of them.

"....."

All Grete could do was stand there frozen in place.

Those people had elevated combat to a level she couldn't begin to compete with.

At the end of the day, she lacked the nerve to step into their domain.

If Grete wanted a solution to her problem, she was going to have to go to the man who'd pointed it out.

After Vics finished his training, Grete found him in a corner of the Heat Haze Palace courtyard. Fighting Klaus had left him completely drained, and he was lying sprawled out on the cobbled ground. Sweat poured from every inch of his body, and as Grete approached, she was greeted by its distinctive masculine stink.

After rolling him a bottle of mineral water from a safe distance, Grete ducked behind one of the garden trees. “I had something I was hoping to ask you, Vics.”

“Why do you have to do that from the other side of a plant?” he joked in mild exasperation. However, it was obviously because of her androphobia.

The conversation commenced with neither side able to see the other.

“What is it that drives you to strive for such excellence as a spy?”

“Nothing in particular.” Vics thanked her for the mineral water and popped off the cap. “It just rubs me the wrong way, knowing there’s people out there who are stronger than me. ♪”

Grete hadn’t expected the answer to be something so basic.

For the next little while, she could hear Vics voraciously chugging down his water.

“...And that’s all?”

“Yup. ♪ That’s all there is to it ♪,” Vics said with a cheerful laugh. “A Galgad spy killed my parents, you know. ♪”

Grete couldn’t stop herself from letting out an audible gasp of surprise. For how grave a revelation that was, he sounded shockingly nonchalant.

“But if you asked if that’s what drives me, I’d say it isn’t. At the end of the day, the thought of Vindo leaving me in the dust pisses me off... Look, it’s hard to sum up in a few words. ♪ But hey, that’s just the way motives are. ♪”

“.....”

“Everyone’s got these urges—and all we can really do is interrogate them. ♪”

Once he had finished his monologue, Vics thanked her for the water again, then stood up and walked off.

Grete was starting to realize that the man had a habit of talking about whatever he wanted to, regardless of what the listener actually wanted to hear.

After returning to her room, locking the door, and closing the curtains, Grete

*undid her disguise*, revealing the birthmarks covering the left half of her face.

That was her true face, the one she kept hidden away.

That was where it had all started for her—the scars that had been with her since birth. Being ostracized and abandoned by her father and brother had filled her with an intense desire to be loved. When Klaus had complimented her real face, she had been drawn to him.

She needed to seek out her urges again. To track down the hunger she'd lost, that intense desire to be loved.

*The boss wants me to grow as a spy... He said he was looking forward to it...*

No matter how full of happiness she was, the one thing she would never lose was her love for her beloved. In order to live up to that lovely gaze of his, she would have to strive for more.

She needed to reach greater heights as a spy.

What's more, she'd already learned how to do that. There was a specific way spies fought. It was the final concept the academies taught their students—a method of deception all her own that would deceive and overcome foes by using her unique talents to their fullest.

“Liecrafft.”

It was time to sublimate her entire way of being into a spy technique.

*Everything is going to be fine*, she told herself. She'd already found her answer.



Vics had finished his break, and as he walked across the Heat Haze Palace courtyard, he spotted Vindo awkwardly sprawled out much the same way he himself had been mere moments ago. There were more rips in Vindo's shirt than there had been before.

Vics strode over and looked down at Vindo from above. “You managed to sneak in another loss while I was resting? I'm impressed you can keep that pace

up. ♪”

“Oh, be quiet,” Vindo replied in annoyance as he sat up. “We don’t have much time left. As soon as either Avian or Lamplight gets called abroad, we’ll lose access to this advanced practice. We need to get in every rep we can.”

Knees trembling, he tried to rise to his feet. He wanted to have another go at Klaus.

Alongside the group training efforts to come up with plans to entrap Klaus, Vindo and Vics had also been fighting him head-on to train their combat skills. All they used to fight him were single knives, no tricks or subterfuge.

Vindo’s persistence was on a whole different level. He would spend the entire day rushing Klaus down and losing over and over again. The others, including Lamplight, found a perverse satisfaction in seeing Vindo’s arrogant ass get handed to him on repeat. Lately, though, Vindo had started to frighten them.

For the rest of the team, their fights against Klaus were essentially sparring matches against a known superior opponent. They took the fights seriously, but they went in with the assumption that they were going to lose.

Vindo, on the other hand, treated every match like his life was on the line.

Ignoring the clear gulf in their skills, he threw himself upon Klaus with murder in his heart. When their knives clashed, they did so with force that sent off sparks.

Before long, that bloodlust of his had begun freaking out not just Avian, but Lamplight, as well. The way he fought was like violence incarnate.

However, Vics couldn’t bear to watch it.

“We gotta start coordinating more ♪,” he called after Vindo as Vindo went to leave. “If we end up having to fight someone like Mr. Klaus, someone who far outmatches us, are you planning on taking them on solo so you can lose like you have been? Don’t be an idiot. There are some missions you can’t complete alone, you know. ♪”

“.....”

“We need to take a page out of Lamplight’s book and work together. Why

don't you get that?"

Vindo turned back. There was a harsh, icy look in his eyes. "Don't be insipid."

"....."

"It probably feels real good to spout platitudes about teamwork and cooperation. But when push comes to shove, can any of you actually keep up with my moves?"

Vics squeezed his fists tight and ground his teeth. When was it, he wondered, that Vindo had started being so flagrantly haughty? When it came to their spy work, Vindo always condescended to people, belittled them, and looked at them with eyes of disdain.

Vindo's shoulders slumped in exasperation. "When you say that, all I hear is you begging me to bring myself down to your level."

Vics could tell Vindo was trying to pick a fight.

He was more than happy to oblige.

"I'm code name Lander—and it's time to get smashing. ♪"

Vics gave his arm a light swing, pulled out the whip he'd been keeping concealed on his body, and cracked it with all his might.

This was no average surprise attack. Thanks to Vics's freakish strength, any attack he made could be a knockout blow.

The whip's tip broke the sound barrier and loudly shook the air as it struck Vindo head-on. He staggered.

Right when Vics was sure he'd gotten him, Vindo vanished.

"I'm code name Flock—and it's time to gouge clean through."

The next thing Vics felt was a chill on the back of his neck.

It was the back of a knife.

"Like I said, you're weak."

On hearing the voice, Vics finally realized Vindo had slipped past him with his knife at the ready. No matter how many times Vics saw Vindo use that

technique, he could never track it.

What's more, Instakill Counterattack—the one move where Vindo shrugged off an enemy blow, then struck back with one of his own—was far faster than Vics remembered. Training with Klaus had allowed Vindo to hone it even further.

“You aren't qualified to be my backup.”

“.....”

Vics dropped his whip.

Vindo let out a disinterested huff and stepped away. The way he turned around made it clear the discussion was over.

“...Tell me,” Vics muttered. “What do you think Adi would say, if she saw us like this?”

“Adi's dead,” Vindo replied coldly. “I'm Avian's boss now.”



Avian's current situation filled Vics with a feeling of peril.

It wasn't just spite that had kept him from passing Queneau's reports along to Vindo during the previous mission. It was because Vindo had needed to realize that until Vics had brought it up, *Queneau hadn't crossed his mind a single time*.

That right there was a testament to how fraught Avian had become.

When Inferno was taken out, the Din Republic's spy network had fallen to pieces.

“Torchlight” Guido was intimately familiar with the Republic's spies, and his defection had led to spies working on anti-Galgad intelligence operations getting killed one after another.

The efforts of Inferno's sole survivor, “Bonfire” Klaus, could only get the Republic so far. In light of that, the Foreign Intelligence Office's director had

ordered the twenty-seven spy academies to gather up their top students and conduct an emergency graduation exam. From there, he had taken the six top scorers and built Avian.

What he ended up with was a dream team. The top graduation exam scorer, Vindo, who went by Reverb at the time, had trained under legendary Inferno sniper “Firewalker” Gerde and had skills surpassing those of his instructors. Second place was “Naval Mine” Vics, who was not only outstanding in a fight but had also captured a pair of Galgad spies who had infiltrated a training exercise. Fifth place was “Projection” Pharma, whose older brother already served as an accomplished spy. Her talents were on par with his, and she was being viewed as a contender for the strongest female spy of the upcoming generation. Sixth place was “Skull” Queneau, who had the unique distinction of having served time as a serial killer, and fourth place was “Clever” Qulle, who’d fought with Queneau during the graduation exam and walked away victorious.

Aside from “Dyeweaver” Lan, who came in third in the exam due to a series of fortuitous coincidences, all of them were elites who’d been at the tops of their academies.

Finally, a woman in her late twenties was appointed as the team’s boss.

“What?! No way, no shot, no chance, no can do!”

At first, the woman was none too happy about it.

Her name was “Sky Monk” Adi.

Adi had originally belonged to the Naval Intelligence Department, but she had been poached by the Foreign Intelligence Office four years prior. Her round, evenly cut hairdo made her come across as serious. She’d completed many missions as a spy, and her job was to help lead the talented but inexperienced elites.

However, she spent their entire first meeting wailing, “I can’t do it!” like a child.



Despite her apparent wealth of experience, she'd been little more than a petty grunt saddled with all the busywork. If the Foreign Intelligence Office hadn't been so hard up for personnel, she never would have been put in charge of a team.

"Everyone here's so much stronger than me! They are, I know it! I swear! Why'd they put me in charge of the team?! What am I supposed to even do?!"

Adi was useless, and the rest of the team was at a loss for what to do with her.

They all shared the same concerns, and they exchanged glances among themselves. *Are we gonna be okay with a boss like her?*

Just as they realized that if worse came to worst, they could install someone else as their de facto boss, Adi recovered from her moping and looked up. "Let's change our code names!"

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

"Look, I'm desperate here! We're all gonna make this team together. So c'mon, let's change them! When it comes to teambuilding, that's step number one!"

From there, it was like Adi had shaken off all her doubts. She talked a mile a minute, pounding out introductions and assigning roles like it was nothing.

She was by no means an outstanding spy.

As a boss, though, she was unmistakably competent.

Her sunny disposition helped steady everyone's nerves when they went on their first mission. She alleviated the friction caused when the elites' prides clashed. The team's coordination was nonexistent at first, but they soon realized they needed to work together in order to fill in for her shortcomings.

When they were out doing fieldwork, Adi would always blurt out things like, "Sorry, everyone! I found a lost kid!" as she brought trouble to their doorstep, and Vindo and Vics would level harsh glares at her. "Put it back, woman." "What kind of spy goes and does good deeds on foreign soil? ♪"

Pharma would defuse the situation. "I'm sure it's all fiiine."

Qulle would squeeze the bridge of her nose. “We’ll need to put someone in charge of her again.”

“...Aye. How many times does that make?” Queneau would say with a sigh, and Lan would cross her arms in pompous acceptance. “Ah, how incorrigible our boss doth be.”

If they wanted to clean up their boss’s messes, the team had no choice but to hone their skills. Scolding her together on one of the frequent occasions she obstinately said, “Hey, everyone! I found something else I need to apologize about!” during a mission brought the team together.

As such, the day she died left Avian at a great loss.

Adi was killed in Longchon by the local mafia. The fact she had gotten shot protecting a child who had nothing to do with their mission was a very in-character way for her to go.

The team immediately reported her martyrdom to the Foreign Intelligence Office, but the missive they got back was the despair-inducing, “We don’t know when we’ll be able to assign you a new boss.” Once again, the Foreign Intelligence Office’s personnel shortage was rearing its ugly head.

Without a boss, they were left in a precarious situation—at the end of the day, their whole team consisted of inexperienced rookie spies.

During that period, it was Vindo who acted as the glue that kept the team together. “I’ll lead Avian until we find our next boss,” he told them with ice in his eyes. His tone made it clear the subject wasn’t up for debate.

The fact of the matter was, he did a good job. He took command of the team while also handling all the most dangerous infiltration missions himself. He looked after the others, and when the need arose, he put down their foes without mercy.

At first, that had been all well and good.

However, it’d soon given rise to a whole new problem.

No one could keep up with how fast Vindo was improving.



Once they finished their combat training—which had amounted to little more than a one-sided beatdown—Klaus told Vindo, “I’ve got a mission,” and headed out.

His mission was to have lunch with the president of a Galgad trading company whom he had “just happened” to hit it off with while posing as a watchmaker. If all went well, the relationship would give them a channel they could use to sneak spies across the border. It was an important mission, yet Klaus was confident enough that he’d helped Vindo train immediately before setting off.

At that point, Lily summoned everyone to the lounge.

Inside, Thea and Qulle were writing something on notepads. By the look of it, they’d finished drafting their strategy.

Once all the Lamplight and Avian members were assembled, Grete unveiled the finalized plan.

“We’re going to attack the boss before he starts moving the money.”

Klaus was slated to deliver the money to the Foreign Intelligence Office that evening, and they were all going to attack him.

Vindo frowned at how unexpectedly simple the plan was. “Before he starts? Not while he’s moving it?”

“During transport, the boss will be on even higher alert than usual. Our chances of success would be nonexistent.”

“So in the end, it comes to brute force... It kills me to admit it, but I don’t love our odds beforehand, either.”

“Oh, we aren’t expecting to win.” Grete shook her head. “Our true objective will be to plant a transmitter on the boss during the fight. If we want our original plan to frame him for embezzlement to work, we’ll need to link up with whoever it is that’s in charge of the Foreign Intelligence Office’s books.”

In other words, they were revisiting a plan they’d already written off.

This time, it was Lan who cocked her head in puzzlement. “Hmm? But did

Dame Lily not suggest that should we face Sir Klaus while knowing that, he wouldst sense that something was incongruous and thus foil our plot?"

"She did, which is why we're going to have Lamplight and Avian team up and attack him together... We aren't used to fighting alongside each other, so some amount of incongruity will be expected."

"Ah, I pick up what thou'rt putting down," Lan said, nodding in satisfaction. "Rather than hide the incongruity, thou aimst to place it in full display."

"Exactly! This plan is about the friendship and unity between Lamplight and Avian!" Lily said, raising her fist in the center of the room. "That fight we had in Longchon will be water under the bridge! Now we're comrades carrying Din's intelligence network on our backs! Not even Teach will be able to withstand the strength of our unified bond!"

It was impressive how much determination Lily was able to pack into her voice.

Somewhat overshadowed by her enthusiasm, Grete went on to announce their formation. The idea was that the duos would have one member from Avian and one from Lamplight. All the spies got assigned, with Vindo paired up with Monika, Pharma paired up with Sara, and so on.

Vics's partner ended up being Sybilla.

"...I'm with *you*?"

Vics met her grimace with a radiant smile. "Guess you'll have to put up with me. ♪"

With that sorted, the pairs split up, and each took their positions. The Lamplight girls seemed to already know what spots to take. "We're by the entrance, Big Sis Qulle." "Got it. There's no need for us to rush," went one exchange. "We're up on the roof, Queneau." "...Aye. Understood," went another as they led Avian to various positions throughout the manor.

Sybilla took the lead in her duo, as well. "Let's get goin'. We're right next to the hidden passageway." "You got it. ♪"

The hidden passageway she was talking about was the underground corridor

connecting Heat Haze Palace to the fake seminary school. When Klaus got back from lunch, they would be in position to attack him immediately.

It was going to be a simple fight, no bells or whistles. To Vics's dismay, he couldn't help but be reminded of the defeat he'd suffered that morning and the scorn Vindo had shown him.

Sybilla gave him a sandwich, and he ate it as they waited for just under an hour. Then they heard Klaus's footsteps.

As Klaus emerged from the passageway, they moved in to flank him.

"Let's get his ass, Vics!"

The moment Vics heard Sybilla's voice, he took the brick he was holding and hurled it at Klaus's right side. As he did, Sybilla matched his timing and came at Klaus's throat from the left with her knife.

Vics had seen her in action a few times now, and he could tell she had a rare talent for syncing up with others. Despite the way she carried herself, there was a subtle thoughtfulness that informed everything she did.

Unable to block both attacks at once, Klaus instead chose to flee forward.

A thought crossed Vics's mind. *Man, if only I could team up with Vindo like this...*

The two of them were supposed to be equals. They'd both been in the running for that top spot on the graduation exam, and they'd spent their early Avian days competing ruthlessly as fellow spies who used their athletics to fight on the front lines.

At some point, though, Vics had found himself staring at Vindo's back as he pulled further and further ahead.

Klaus took off at a run to get some distance between them, and Vics gathered his strength in his fists as he gave chase.

*I want to be stronger!!*

He pressed his foot against the ground as hard as he could, then barreled forward with all his might. His enormous strength gave him an explosive burst of speed. He might not have been able to accelerate and decelerate at weird

intervals like Vindo, but when it came to short-term power and speed, he could outdo anyone else there.

*Strong enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with Vindo!*

Sybilla and Vics weren't alone. Now that Klaus was back, the rest of their teammates who'd been lying in wait moved in to surround him as well.

Their attacks were coming from just about every direction imaginable. No one man could possibly handle all of them—

“I have to ask—how much longer should I keep playing along with this game?”

—yet the moment their hearts swelled, a composed question shot them down.



There were fourteen people bound up in wires and lying on the Heat Haze Palace lounge floor. Elites and washouts alike were all bound hand and foot. As of late, it had started becoming a regular sight.

In the middle of it all, Klaus gave them a nonchalant round of applause. “You added a few more people, but you still got the same result. There you go charging in blindly again. You really need to come up with some more sophisticated plans.”

Lily trembled in frustration. “Urgh, and we didn’t even manage to stick the transmitter on him.”

Avian and Lamplight had pulled off their joint attack with aplomb, but it still hadn’t been enough to defeat Klaus. No matter how much muscle they threw at the problem, beating him in a head-on fight seemed like a pipe dream.

Klaus gave them a disappointed headshake. “I need to go over to the Foreign Intelligence Office headquarters. I hope you use that time to reflect on your

actions.”

He still needed to transfer the money.

Klaus turned to Qulle, who was collapsed on the ground with her glasses askew, and asked her, “What’s the password?” before reaching for the lounge’s safe.

“Hmm... There’s no money in here.”

A few seconds later, he spoke up in puzzlement. “Vindo, where’d Avian put the money you recovered?”

“Huh?”

“It’s not in the safe.”

On hearing that, the Avian members let out cries of shock and hurriedly sat up.

Klaus had opened up the safe, and inside, it was completely empty. There wasn’t so much as a single coin to be seen. The money they were certain they’d put there was gone without a trace.

“Wait—that doesn’t make sense.”

Vindo was the first of them to speak up.

“We stationed a lookout at the safe, and we didn’t tell the number to a soul. No one could have gotten it open.”

Secure as Heat Haze Palace was, Avian had refused to let their guard down. From their perspective, they’d only just met the Lamplight girls, and there was a chance one of them might be hiding an unscrupulous nature. Not only had they never left the safe unattended, they’d kept a tight lid on the password.

It had been their job to keep the money safe until they handed it over to Klaus, and they’d taken that duty seriously.

“Ah...”

Lan let out a buffoonish gulp.

When everyone's gazes fell on her, she looked down apologetically and explained. "B-Brother Vindo came by just now and bade me to open it..."

Vindo nodded. It all made sense to him now.

There was only one person with the skills required to impersonate someone so perfectly.

"Was that you in disguise, Red?"

"Indeed it was. We stole the money." Grete was bound up in the corner of the lounge, and she nodded as she undid her restraints on her own power. "Lamplight worked together to lure Avian away and create a situation where Lan was guarding the safe alone. Then we took the money inside and relocated it."

"So there was a secret second plan you only told Lamplight." Vindo bit his lip in frustration. "What I don't get is, why? What were you hoping to achieve?"

"We wanted to extort the boss."

Grete turned her gaze away from Vindo and over to Klaus.

"If you want us to return the money, Boss, then please say you surrender."

Klaus narrowed his eyes in amusement. "And if I refuse?"

"Then we'll destroy it. It would be no water off our backs. The only ones who'll take the blame will be Avian for failing to secure the funds."

""""""""\_\_\_\_\_!!""""""""

Every pair of eyes on Avian went wide as its members let out wordless screams.

Now they finally understood the full scope of Grete's plan. The joint Lamplight-Avian attack on Klaus had been a feint to let them lure Avian away from the safe, steal the money inside, and use it as leverage against Klaus.

Lily, Monika, and Sybilla grinned proudly. This was precisely the moment they'd been waiting for.

"As they should. After all, it was Avian's job to look after the money until the



handoff with Teach.”

“And hey, you were the ones who made the call to leave it in Heat Haze Palace. That isn’t on us.”

“Aw, shit, wouldja look at that? You’re all tied up and can’t do nothin’ about it. What’s that? If you wanna complain, then you’d better get some proof—cold, hard proof—that we stole the cash.”

With great excitement, they drove the point home.

The Avian members’ eyes began twitching.

“Thou’rt lunatics, the lot of you.” “What do you mean, proof? Grete literally just admitted it.” “...Aye. What happened to friendship and unity?”

For all their protestations, though, it didn’t change the fact that the stolen money was a failure on Avian’s part.

After listening to their exchange from the sidelines, Klaus crossed his arms. “Look, I don’t particularly care about letting Avian fail a mission.”

“Would you mind caring a little?” Vindo said.

“Still, that money was headed for the national treasury. As a spy, I don’t want to just sit back and let it slip away.”

Avian had stolen two million dents from the Discourse on Decadence, and that was a gigantic sum of money—nearly as much as most people made in their entire lives. If money like that got added to the treasury and made its way into the Foreign Intelligence Office’s budget, it would be enough to buy off loads of targets. They could also put it toward social services in order to help lift people out of poverty. Klaus couldn’t simply overlook those facts.

“All right, Boss. You need to make your decision.” Grete sidled a step closer to Klaus. In her hand, she was holding a remote control. “If you don’t give us an answer within ten seconds, the money will disappear forever.”

She rested her thumb on the button.

The Avian members all held their breath. Even if they wanted to make a move, Klaus had bound them up too well for them to try anything.

Klaus pondered for a moment, then spoke.

“.....Much as it pains me, I’m afraid I can’t surrender.”

““““SERIOUSLY?!”“““““

When the Lamplight girls cried out, Klaus let out a dismayed exhale before giving them a detailed explanation. “This training exercise is based around the real-world example of needing to get a target to give up state secrets. It would be one thing if it were their own money, but nobody’s going to spill state secrets over some lost government funds.”

The girls had succeeded in dealing a blow to Klaus and the Din Republic, just not enough of one to extract the “state secrets” they were after. What’s more, this was money a mere criminal organization had been able to steal. The Republic could do without it and be just fine.

Even after having it all laid out, Lily still ground her teeth and refused to back down. “W-we’ll really do it, you know! One press of that button, and the money goes kablooey!”

““““““DON’T!!”“““““ the Avian members screamed.

“Do it. The only ones you’ll be hurting are Avian.”

““““““AT LEAST *TRY* TO STOP THEM!!”“““““ the Avian members screamed even louder.

Lily and Klaus glared each other down, and Avian spent the next little while looking back and forth between them in suspense.

“.....I believe this is as far as we go.”

Eventually, Grete let out a sigh.

“We yield. However, we did go out of our way to steal that money. In exchange for returning it, Boss, I’d like to ask that you allow one of us to accompany you while you transport it.”

“Hmm. If that’s all, I suppose that’s fine.”

Another training exercise had come and gone, and once again, they’d failed to make Klaus say, “I surrender.”

All they’d succeeded in winning was a single concession, and even that had been a narrow thing.



Lily gave her arms a big stretch and grinned. “We were so close. If there had been more money there, we might’ve really had him.”

“You people are out of control,” Vindo grumbled.

One thing Lamplight and Avian had in common was their habit of holding postmortems after their training sessions.

After deciding it might be nice to have dinner together, they’d ended up holding a barbeque over in the courtyard. They’d split up into a group in charge of shopping and a group in charge of setting up the grill, then gotten to work dissecting their loss. They had a lot of thoughts, both about Grete’s plan and about their coordination during the attack.

“Thy strikes were a beat too slow, Dame Sara,” the Avian side pointed out. “I think you might rely on your teammates a bit too often, Pharma,” Lamplight noted. And there were other things they hadn’t been aware of, too. “It’s incredible how fast Sybilla is at acclimating to a new team.” “Compared to Queneau, Annette causes more collateral damage than she really needs to.” “You need to do a better job managing risk, Qulle.” Comparing and contrasting each other allowed them to make all sorts of new discoveries.

Arguments did break out from time to time, but the conversation continued on. Klaus had built a new classroom for Lamplight—one where the students could learn from one another.

“You did good, Redhead,” Vindo said to Grete midway through the discussion. “That was a clever idea. You had us all fooled.”

“It wasn’t just me, Vindo...,” Grete said, shaking her head. “All of Lamplight

worked together to deceive Avian.”

“.....”

Vindo’s eyes widened a little. He faltered for a brief moment with his breath caught in his throat.

Grete gave him a small bow, then stepped away.



It was Grete who ended up accompanying Klaus as he transported the money.

The two of them left the dinner preparations to the others and met up in the manor’s foyer. Having changed into the kind of outfit one would wear when going out on a date, Grete took her spot by Klaus’s side.

When they left Heat Haze Palace, the setting sun’s rays shone down on them, casting the courtyard’s flowers in a dim glow.

As they headed for the car parked away from the manor, a faint smile played on Grete’s lips. “I’ve decided to have a new dream, Boss.”

“And what’s that?”

“I want to work hard as a spy, and eventually, when the world grows more peaceful, I imagine the day will come when you retire from the front lines. When that happens, I want to be there, smiling by your side...like a member of your family.” The evening light dyed her cheeks red. “That’s my next goal...”

“I see,” Klaus said. Succinct as his reply was, there was a faint passion in his voice. He returned her gaze with a look in his eyes he never would have shown the other girls. “In that case,” he said softly, “you’ll need to grow even stronger than you are now.”

“I know. And for that, I leave myself in your very capable hands.”

“Magnificent.”

The two of them walked side by side in silence for a while.

Right as they approached the edge of the property, Klaus posed a question. “By the way, where’d you put the money?”

“I traded it in so it would be easier to transport. It didn’t seem very secure to transport two million dents a long distance as cash.”

“I see. Even with me protecting the money, it never hurts to be cautious. What did you trade it for?”

“Wedding rings.”

“.....”

Grete withdrew a small box from her pocket. Inside, there was a pair of extravagant rings bedecked with massive pink diamonds. She took one and gave her head a small tilt. “May I have your hand, Boss? You can carry one, and I can carry the other.”

“.....”

Klaus stared intently at the proffered ring, completely at a loss for words. However, retreat wasn’t an option. He was the one who’d promised to let someone couple up with him to transport the money.

“...I’m amazed you would go to such lengths.”

“Tee-hee, just as expected.”

It was rare to see Klaus so dumbfounded, and Grete gave him a bewitching smile.



Vics watched the whole interaction from a Heat Haze Palace window. People had started fighting over the barbecued food, and he was off to the side, watching them warmly.

*Well, would you look at that? Lamplight’s second-in-command is no slouch. ♪*

Vics would never have thought to use Avian as a tool to blackmail Klaus. He found himself forced to reevaluate his opinion of Grete.

*But I guess a talent like disguises is always gonna go hand in hand with deception. There’s all sorts of ways to use it, and she’s got the brains to really make it sing. She’s got the makings of a darn fine spy. ♪*

What would you call a liecraft like that, he wondered? It went beyond something like “Agitation” or “Body Double.” The range of deceptive techniques at her disposal far exceeded that of most spies. She was willing to fool friend and foe alike, and she took advantage of anything for the sake of her love for Klaus.

Perhaps that itself would make a good moniker—Forbidden Love.

That was the way Daughter Dearest fought, and that was the way she lived her life.

*I don't think I'll ever get bored of Lamplight.* ♪

Vics couldn't help but grin.

He thought back to the moment he'd seen earlier, the one where Grete had obliquely chided Vindo.

*Maybe that's what'll change Avian...*

Visions of a pleasant future sprang to mind.

So long as Vindo continued dismissing his teammates, Vics and the others had no choice but to go along with it. They needed something to challenge that status quo, and perhaps they'd just found it.

When Vics realized all he was doing was leaving his problems for someone else to solve, he shrugged in admission of his own weakness. He couldn't change the situation, though, so he had little choice but to put his faith in the girls.

He chuckled to himself that it hardly made for proper compensation, but he intended to stimulate Lamplight in turn. Vics was fine playing the heel. He was going to keep on being mean, being petty, and lighting fires under the people around him. Lamplight was sure to respond to that. Those girls had a competitive streak a mile wide.

He stepped away from the window.

“Now, if I'm gonna get someone mad at me, then it's clearly gotta be Sybilla. ♪ After all, she's got the most potential for growth. ♪”

Having selected his victim, a wicked smile spread across his face.

## Flashback ④

# Guys' Night

“The ladies are having a girls’ night, so we should throw ourselves a guys’ night! 🎵”

On Vics’s orders, the guys were all gathered in the lounge. There were three people he’d called there: Klaus, Vindo, and Queneau.

Vics had gotten excited and handled all the planning on his own. Getting to share a meal with Klaus, the man who called himself the strongest spy in the Din Republic, was a rare treat. Vics had assembled loads of expensive alcohol and sides in preparation for the shindig.

“Dang, this is tasty.” “You’re right, it’s not bad.” “...Aye.”

What ensued, however, was a gathering so dull it brought tears to his eyes.

They were a full thirty minutes in, and they’d yet to have anything remotely resembling a conversation. Vindo had spent the whole time eating and drinking, Klaus only spoke in empty pleasantries, and Queneau rarely talked to begin with.

Not a single bit of laughter could be heard, and the time flowed by with no sound save that of chewing.

Objectively speaking, the current state of affairs was perhaps to be expected, but Vics was dejected nonetheless. And the way Vindo was gobbling down all the delicacies Vics had prepared with Klaus in mind certainly wasn’t helping his mood.

“You seem disappointed,” said Klaus.

“Yeah, I was hoping people would’ve been getting chatty by now. ♪ Why’s it so darn quiet in here? ♪”

“I mean, if you have something you wanted to talk about, I would be willing to oblige.”

“I’d love to hear about some of your past missions, Mr. Klaus. ♪”

“...That’s a tricky one. Inferno’s mission dealt with highly classified domestic secrets.”

Even when Vics handed him a conversation topic on a silver platter, all Klaus gave him was a vague, nonspecific answer. He also tried asking about spy techniques, but all he got back was abstract nonsense.

All the while, Vindo and Queneau said basically nothing. They had no desire to help liven things up.

Finally, Vics snapped.

“All right, this is a mission. ♪”

““““Hmm?””””

“There are suspicions that Galgad Empire spies have invested in an illegal casino within our borders and are using its profits to buy off members of parliament. We’ve infiltrated the casino to get to the bottom of things, and we have to blend in with the other guests—if that were the situation, would you still be wearing those long faces?”

““““ ..... ””””

On hearing Vics’s taunt, Klaus, Vindo, and Queneau all hung their heads and lapsed into silence.

Then, as one, they steeled their expressions and lifted their heads.

“I have the good stuff here, Queneau. Would you care for some?” “Aye, much obliged. To think I would get to enjoy a glass poured by a man of your stature.” “It’s no fun sitting around drinking. What do you say we play some cards, Klaus? Loser has to take three shots.” “That seems disrespectful to such nice liquor.”



“...Aye, but I don’t hate the idea.” “Heh. You’ll be saying ‘I surrender’ in no time.”

“Wait, now the party’s popping?!”

Vics’s eyes went wide in shock. He’d always known they had the skills to pull it off, but there was something unnerving about how completely their personalities had shifted as they’d begun playing poker.

“You should’ve just done that from the start. ♪ C’m on, guys.”

“Why should I have to? This isn’t even a real mission.” “I tend to agree.” “...Aye, this is exhausting.”

Vics slammed his fists on the table. “I swear to God! Why am I surrounded by a bunch of killjoys?!”

Crackers and whiskey bottles went flying from the force of the impact. Klaus and Vindo deftly snatched them out of the air, and Queneau gave them an impressed nod.

“That’s it, we’re arm wrestling! ♪” Vics cried.

““““Huh?””””

“That’s the only way I’m gonna get any enthusiasm out of you people, right?! Or what, you too chicken?”

He gave them a provocative sneer and extended his arm.

The first one to respond was Vindo. “You never learn,” he said before moving over.

The two of them placed their elbows on the table, grabbed each other’s hands, and glared daggers.

“Go,” Klaus said. Vindo yanked their locked hands toward him, hard enough that Vics’s elbow rose off the table. “Elbow contact lost. Vindo wins,” Klaus declared.

“BITE ME, MAN! That’s it, today’s the day I pound you into the dust!!”

Vics’s voice was several times more savage than usual, and he lunged at Vindo. Realizing things were about to get messy, Klaus and Queneau rose to

their feet, and the guys' night drew to a close.

While all that was going on, the girls were hanging out in the main hall. "Man, boys can be so loud." "Preach," Lily and Sybilla respectively remarked as they listened to the chaos and nonchalantly sipped their tea.

## Chapter 5

# Qulle's Case

“The Discourse on Decadence senior leadership managed to give the Executioners the slip.”

When Vindo gave them the news, Avian gasped.

It was night, and he'd ordered them to gather in the lounge without the Lamplight girls noticing. That had been ominous in and of itself, and when they learned what had happened, they were despondent.

The Discourse on Decadence was a criminal organization made up of former academy students. Avian's efforts had led to the capture of the majority of their members, and only three people remained at large. A team called the Executioners that specialized in killing their own compatriots had taken over the mission...but apparently, the Executioners had failed.

Vindo crossed his arms in annoyance. “The group wounded two of the Executioners when making their escape. The brass believes they're trying to flee the country.”

His tone was detached.

“Avian has new orders. Our job is to kill the Discourse on Decadence leadership.”

A series of sighs came from across the room. Their reactions were an equal mix of frustration and sadness.

“So in the end, this is what it coomes to.” Pharma's shoulders slumped as

she sat with her legs sprawled across the couch. “Killing our own. I’m really not feeling it.”

“They don’t know a lot, but it still constitutes Din state secrets,” Vindo replied coldly. “We can’t let them cross the border.”

If nothing else, they knew the locations of the spy academies, the contents of the curriculum, and key details about the top students who went to their schools. It was relatively minor information about their intelligence organization, all things considered, but they still couldn’t let it get out.

Perched on her sofa’s armrest, Lan raised her hand. “Can we not take them alive?” she asked. “It would bring me scant joy to slay a classmate of mine from but a single year ago—”

“Nay.” Standing in the corner of the room with his arms crossed, Queneau shook his head. “They’re too strong for that.”

Beside him, Vics let out a grim laugh with an equally sour expression. “Yeah, I don’t see any reason to capture them if it just means we’re more likely to get ourselves killed. ♪”

If they had been dealing with people on the level of those Avian had apprehended earlier, then capturing them might have been feasible. Now, though, they were dealing with opponents skilled enough to escape the Executioners. It would be a sad joke indeed if Avian underestimated them and ended up going to their own deaths.

There were three survivors—the leader, “Thunderclap”; the chief advisor, “Hermit”; and the instructor, “Madfest.”

Vindo had been in the same class as Thunderclap, and while he hadn’t been on Vindo’s level, he had some impressive assassination techniques at his disposal. Avian couldn’t afford to give these people any quarter.

“All right, Vindo. ♪” Vics gave him a taunting wave. “Sounds like we’ve gotta bring our A game here. Surely this is no time to be stubborn. What do you say we start really giving this teamwork thing our all so we can—?”

“That’s not happening.”

Vindo's reply was brief.

He was so completely uninterested, he didn't even turn to look Vics's way.

"I'm going to do my thing. Come along if you want."

The smile vanished from Vics's face. "...Are you seriously stupid enough to forget the way Lamplight conned us?"

"That was an anomaly."

"Man, how many more times are you gonna have to lose to Klaus before it beats some sense into your head?"

"I'll win eventually. And I'll do it my way."

The tension in the air between them was palpable.

Over to the side, Qulle buried her face in her hands in abject frustration.

*Ugh, this again...*

It was far from the first time that particular scene had played out. There was some major antagonism between Vindo, who flaunted his abilities and carried out one-man operations, and Vics, who had serious reservations about how unbalanced the team was becoming.

The two of them duked it out constantly, but Vindo was the team's boss, and Vics had no choice but to fall in line.

*No change on the Vindo front, huh? And here I was, thinking there had been signs of hope...*

Naturally, Qulle was on Vics's side. Vindo had been downright unbearable lately. The strategy he'd forced through in their fight against Lamplight in Longchon—the one where he'd taken on five of them solo—had been absurd. They had ended up winning that battle, but it was hard to say what role his plan had actually played in that. Vindo had gotten captured, and it was Vics who had ultimately made the winning move.

Qulle had thought their interactions with Lamplight had sparked a change in Vindo, but it looked like that had been wishful thinking.

Lan spoke up, hoping to change the mood in the room. "Should we inform

Lamplight of our mission?”

“This stays strictly under wraps. The Discourse on Decadence has people from the same academies as them. Things could get messy if Lamplight tries to stick up for them.”

Pharma and Queneau agreed with Vindo’s verdict. “Plus, it’s not exactly the most cheeeerful of conversation starters.” “...Aye. We have a duty of confidentiality.”

“I have visual confirmation on them from a contact. We know their location,” Vindo said to sum up the situation. “All that’s left is to make our attack tomorrow night and put them down.”

“.....”

Vics bit down on his lip. Vindo was ignoring him like he wasn’t even there.

The meeting wrapped up in much the same manner. Vindo delivered the plan as an edict, then dismissed them without so much as asking for their opinions or input. “I’m feeling peckish,” he muttered as he left the lounge, not sparing a glance at the others on his way out. He was doubtless planning on rummaging through the kitchen for food.

Qulle glanced over at the resentment on Vics’s face.

*I get how you feel, Vics.*

She didn’t say it aloud. She knew a show of pity would only wound his pride.

Secretly, though, she sympathized with him.

*Times like these make me jealous of Lamplight from the bottom of my heart.*

It felt like the girls had spent their whole time together showing off. Despite the gap between their skills and their boss’s, they had a spy team that trusted and believed in each other. They trained with the intent of pushing each other to improve, and during missions, they banded together and worked as a group.

That there was the source of Vics’s anger.

Lamplight had everything Avian was lacking. What’s more, they evoked an image of the warmth Avian had once had. Looking at them made it impossible

not to remember how Avian used to be back when it had first been founded.

*What would Adi say if she were here today?*

Time and time again, everyone's thoughts turned to her—to the woman Avian had lost who'd served as the soul of the team.



Back when “Sky Monk” Adi had still been alive, she'd earned herself some sort of scolding on the daily.

“Dammit, woman. How long is it going to take you to quit poking your nose into things that have nothing to do with the mission?”

“Sorry about that. I promise I won't take my eyes off the target again. It's just, there was this old woman who passed by carrying tons of luggage. She looked like she was really struggling. I couldn't *not* help her. But look, stuff like that doesn't happen all that often, so would you mind letting me off the hook this time, Vindo?”

Vindo crossed his arms and looked at her with disdain. As he did, Adi apologized so vigorously she nearly banged her head on the table bowing.

Adi screwing up during a mission and having to apologize was no laughing matter, but from an outside perspective, the situation was positively primed for someone to poke fun at it. “...Which one of them is in charge, again?” Queneau joked, feigning puzzlement, while Pharma did her best to mollify Vindo. “Vics was there to pick up her slack, so there's no harm dooone.”

Avian was in the middle of their mission in Longchon, and currently, they were gathering information about the intelligence organizations in and around the Far East. Nearly half a year had passed since their graduations, and the team had settled into a rhythm.

Now the team spent much of their time trying to get a handle on Adi.

She was a good person, but her skills as a spy left a lot to be desired. She'd

been put in charge of the team due to her wealth of experience, but she often got distracted and lost focus during their missions. Each time she did, Vindo would fly off the handle at her.

Given how regular an occurrence it was, though, he soon simmered down. “Well, whatever. I swear, though, this had better be the last time—”

“Oh hey, that reminds me!” Adi cheerfully dug around in her pockets. “The old lady gave me some oranges, and I’d be happy to share them if you’d— MY EEEEEYES!”

Vindo took the orange she offered him and hacked at it with his knife. Juice sprayed everywhere, splashing Adi in the face and causing her to drop to the floor and writhe in pain.

“Next time this happens, you’re fired.”

“But I’m the boss here!”

“Then start acting like it.”

Without waiting for a response, Vindo left and went to his room.

Qulle had been watching the whole thing play out from the side, and she sighed and handed Adi a towel. “Are, um, are you okay?”

“Thanks, Qulle. Oh hey, you want an orange?”

“I’m good.”

“More for me!”

Adi snatched up the mangled orange and dug in.

It was unclear if she was an idiot or merely a ditz, but either way, she certainly marched to the beat of her own drum. She was blessed with a rare personality that made it impossible to hate her even as she followed her whims, consequences be damned.

“I’m sorry about all that,” Qulle said. “Not even we can stop Vindo when he gets mad like that.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. It *was* my fault, after all.”

“I mean, you are technically our boss...”



“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Adi replied, chuckling in amusement with a mouth full of orange. “Him getting mad at me feels like the only time Vindo’s actually enjoying himself. It’s important to give him chances to let off steam.”

Naturally, the comment earned her a round of ribbing from the others—“... Nay. That’s not for the person being scolded to say.” “Thy heart is so big, I fear it may burst out of thy chest”—but Adi just laughed it off.

A moment later, a serious look crossed her eyes. “I really am worried about him, though.”

“Huh?”

“It’s like, he takes himself a little too seriously for his own good,” Adi explained. “No matter how rational he tries to be, it’ll never fill that hole inside him. He can shove all the inconvenient bits aside to make this big show of how logical he is, but all that’ll do is make his impatience hit him that much harder.”

“.....”

The others were unsure how to respond to that.

That right there was classic Adi. She didn’t ever use her powers of observation during their actual missions, but every so often, she would make an offhand comment that cut right to the core of her teammates’ psyches. She never brought them any proper intel, but she would occasionally blurt out something with several layers of meaning.

The rest of the team paid her little heed, but Qulle took those words to heart. “What hole?”

“The one he’s got inside him. Can’t you see how hungry he is? If I had to guess, I’d say he’s one of those people who was driven to spy work for the sake of vengeance.”

“.....”

“But logic is no good for filling those kinds of holes.” Adi turned and looked out the window. “Even a quarter moon can become a full circle if you’re willing to change your point of view.”

Qulle had no idea what Adi was talking about, but she repeated back, “A

quarter moon...,” all the same.

Adi grinned. “That’s right. In fact, I’m gonna go tell him that.”

“He’s going to get mad at you again, you know.”

It’d only been after “Sky Monk” Adi was gone that the truth had dawned on them.

They could make up for losing her as a spy, but none of them could fill the shoes she had as a person.

Those pleasant days were never coming back.

All of them had depended on her. The time they had spent complaining about her was time they had spent baring their true feelings, and that had served as a springboard for further discussion.

Losing her had left a hole none of them knew how to fill yet.



After the meeting, Qulle headed for the courtyard garden to take a breather.

She gazed idly at the stars and sank into thought.

Heat Haze Palace was surrounded by walls so as to avoid being seen from the street. That generally led to poor airflow, but that night, a humid wind rushed over her.

*.....? Where are the Lamplight girls?*

All of a sudden, she realized how quiet the building was. She didn’t hear a single set of footsteps in the hallways. Normally, at least one person would be loudly tromping about.

However, that worked out just fine for her.

She pulled back her hair and exposed her ears.

*Sorry, everyone... I know this is a little impolite...*

That was Qulle's special ability—Ultrahearing. Her auditory perception was leagues beyond most people's, giving her an uncanny ability to eavesdrop and get a read on situations. It was a powerful skill, and one perfectly suited to espionage work. She steadied her breathing and focused her attention on her ears.

*Right now, I want us to learn from you.*

Qulle believed in her heart that it was Lamplight that would spark a change in Avian.

*Can you give us a hint about how we can reinvent ourselves?*

And so, she strained her ears and closed her eyes as though in prayer.

At the moment, the Lamplight girls were divided up into rooms.



Several of the girls were assembled in a bedroom on the far side of Heat Haze Palace.

There were four of them: Annette, Lily, Sybilla, and Monika.

Annette's room was littered with tools and unidentifiable machines of all kinds. It was clear one wrong move could lead to a major accident, so aside from Annette, who was sitting in her hammock, the other three had all taken great care to secure places to stand that looked safe.

"I've got an important announcement, yo!" Annette said, swaying back and forth as she broke the ice.

Sybilla and Lily offered a pair of amused comments.

"Hot damn, it ain't every day *Annette* gets us together."

"What do you have cooking? I can see you've called for the team's most athletic members."

Everyone but Annette had been dragged there with little explanation, but the

three of them all belonged to a group called the Operations squad. They were the ones who often stood on the front lines and fought enemies when the situation got ugly.

Monika scowled in irritation. "I'm gonna be honest, I don't see any world where this ends well."

She wanted to leave, and she tapped her foot on the ground to make sure everyone knew it.

The thing was, Annette was the biggest troublemaker on Lamplight. Whatever she was about to suggest, there was no way it was a good idea.

That was something they were in consensus about, and Sybilla and Lily exchanged some hushed whispers. *"Eh, I get where she's comin' from." "Let's make sure we're ready to flee at a moment's notice."*

With expectations low, they all waited to hear what their summoner had to say.

Annette gave them her brightest smile.

"I want to get revenge on Avian, yo!"

""""SIGN ME UUUUUUUUUUUUUUP!!""""

That was enough to completely change their minds.

"Yeah, those punks have been gettin' too goddamn comfy around here!" "It's high time we got us some payback!" "I couldn't agree more. I like where your head is at."

As soon as Annette proposed the idea, all three girls flung up their hands to signify their approval.

Avian had been stealing their food and interrupting their time off. In Lamplight's eyes, they were a menace. Sure, there might not have been any serious animus there, but the girls couldn't help but want to get at least a little bit of retribution.

On top of that, the Lamplight girls were always quick to mobilize when pulling pranks was on the agenda. Monika normally shied away from such nonsense, but this time, not even she had any objections.

“Then without further ado, let’s put together a strategy!” Lily ordered, and they immediately got to work discussing their options.

In order to prevent any leaks, they decided to keep their plan a secret from everyone but the four of them.



Meanwhile, everyone who wasn’t involved with the prank scheme was gathered for different reasons.

There were four of them: Thea, Erna, Grete, and Sara.

All of them had been called to Thea’s bedroom. Thea had gone around to her teammates’ rooms and asked, “If anyone is free, would you mind coming with me?”

Sara was the final person she had asked, and when she had arrived, she’d found a large banner hanging from Thea’s wall.

## LAMPLIGHT EMERGENCY INVESTIGATION HEADQUARTERS: THE CASE OF THE FLOATING “FOOL” ERNA

By the look of it, Erna was at the center of yet another bizarre incident. Considering the fact that she’d once been appointed as the leader of a nascent religious group, there was no telling what she’d gotten herself wrapped up in.

Thea was standing boldly at the center of the room with Erna at her side. Across from them, Grete was sitting down with bated breath. Sara went over and sat next to Grete.

“Now, I’m sure you’re wondering why I brought you here tonight,” Thea said

loudly. “As you can see, something strange happened to Erna at dawn today. Our duty is to unravel and comprehend this event.”

This was all coming a little out of nowhere. Sara blinked in confusion, and Grete tilted her head in puzzlement. “I...see...”

Undeterred, Thea thumped Erna on the back. “We’ll start with testimony from the victim.”

“It’s me again. I’m the victim!” After giving an anguished introduction, Erna explained. “Early this morning, back when I was still asleep, I woke up to find myself shaking. That’s when I realized I was floating in the air over the courtyard. I was wrapped up tight in a mattress, so I couldn’t move.”

“What...?”

“That’s when I fainted, so I don’t remember anything after that.”

That was less to go off than they’d been expecting.

They couldn’t help but wonder if Erna had simply dreamed it all up, but looking at the despair in her face, it must have been real.

“Are you hurt?” Sara asked worriedly. Meanwhile, Grete nodded in comprehension. “Ah, so that’s why you called it the Floating Case...”

The good news was, Erna had woken up back in her room with nary a scratch on her body.

“Thank you for your testimony,” Thea said sympathetically. Then her expression stiffened. “Now, to be honest, I do suspect that Annette is our culprit.”

“I think I agree,” said Sara.

“But don’t you think we have other suspects we need to consider?”

The implication in Thea’s words was profound. Sara didn’t understand what she was talking about at first, but when she did, she gasped. “You mean, Avian?”

“That’s precisely what I mean.”

“I-I’m not so sure...”

True, Avian had started staying at Heat Haze Palace nearly every night. It would have been technically possible for them to sneak into Erna's room early that morning.

"I find it difficult to imagine them doing something like that."

Grete had her doubts as well, but Thea shook her head.

She must have had hard evidence against them.

"Avian's been acting suspiciously. Suspiciously enough that it makes me think they have ulterior motives. As a matter of fact, I'm absolutely certain that they're plotting something."

Her expression was dead serious.

"After all, there are three men on the team, and not a single one of them has tried to make a move on me!!"

"...That's a much stupider reason than I was expecting."

Despite Sara's icy quip, Thea just trembled, aghast. "They're clearly trying to get us to lower our guards so they can carry out their nefarious plot! I mean, it doesn't make sense! Teach was one thing, but this is three whole men who don't seem the slightest bit interested in me!"

"Maybe they're just being professional."

"Oh, I don't think so. Have you already forgotten what they demanded of us?"

"Huh...? Oh, sure, there was that thing with the boss, but still."

It'd taken Sara a moment to remember what Thea was talking about.

Avian had once tried to appoint Klaus as their boss. After winning him fair and square, though, Avian themselves had renounced their claim on him. That was all in the past.

Sara let out a big sigh.

*There Miss Thea goes, being irrational again.*

Thea didn't have much in the way of mental fortitude, and every so often, she descended into outright hysterics.

Plus, this was Thea they were talking about. She'd probably been over the moon. *Avian and Lamplight living together?! Oh, I can just imagine the salacious encounters we'll have! Hee-hee, I'm getting fired up already!* From the sound of it, though, none of the male Avian cohort had come after her. That had dealt a heavy blow to her pride, and now she'd been reduced to spouting conspiracy theories.

"I think you're being unreasonable, Miss Thea," Sara said, realizing it was up to her to talk some sense into her teammate. She began calmly laying out the facts. "Even if they did still want the boss, they wouldn't try to steal him like that. You can't really believe they've spent almost a month tricking us, all so they could perform ridiculous floating experiments behind our—"

"It isn't impossible!!"

"Miss Grete?!"

All of a sudden, Grete spoke up from beside her and agreed with Thea. Grete's face was pale, and her eyes were wide. "Two or three years would be a small price to pay if it meant getting the boss... And developing new technology would certainly be on the table... It all lines up..."

"....."

Sara gazed mournfully at her teammate. Whenever Klaus came up, Grete's IQ immediately plummeted.

From there, things gradually devolved into a formal investigation into Avian's behavior.



From out in the Heat Haze Palace courtyard, Qulle heard everything.

Annette, Lily, Sybilla, and Monika were planning to play a prank on Avian.



Thea, Sara, Grete, and Erna were conducting an investigation into their groundless suspicions toward Avian.

Qulle wasn't able to pick up the details, but she did manage to get the broad strokes.

“.....

The whole reason she had been eavesdropping on them was in hopes of finding a clue as to how to make some changes in her own team. However, all she had heard was inexplicable excitement and people working themselves up over nonsense.

“THEY'RE ALL DERAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAANGED!!”

Qulle's scream of horror got swallowed up by the night sky.



The next morning, there was an unusual duo sharing a conversation in the Heat Haze Palace courtyard.

Lily had a garden she grew plants for her poisons in, and Queneau had gone in without asking and carved out a little kitchen garden. It was full of vegetables he'd either purchased and transplanted from a nearby farm or things that could grow in a single month like radishes.

The garden was his way of thanking Lamplight for their hospitality, but they hadn't gotten the memo and found the whole situation unnerving.

As he was doing his daily watering, Klaus came by to see him. "I've been wanting to talk to you for a while, but I never found the right moment."

"...Aye. What is it?"

When Queneau stopped and turned around, Klaus went on. “We’ve met before, haven’t we?”

“.....”

“If I’m misremembering, then don’t worry about it. I just get the feeling that we have.”

“.....Aye. I’m impressed you noticed through the mask. My physique was a lot different back then.”

“I thought so. So you wear the mask because—”

“Nay. I’m just shy.”

“...? Well, if you say so. I’m happy to leave the past where it is. Also, it sounds like someone’s coming.”

As the two of them exchanged their hushed conversation, a young woman came rushing into the garden.

“Mr. Klaus!!”

It was Qulle.

She came in shouting, and without offering them so much as a “good morning.” She’d been running around at top speed since the crack of dawn; her breathing was ragged, and her shoulders were heaving. Her face was red.

Klaus found it all rather odd. “What’s wrong? You’re out of breath,” he said.

“Your subordinates are out of control, and you need to stop them!!” Qulle cried.

“I’m sorry. Can’t be done.”

“But I haven’t even told you what happened yet!!”

Klaus shook his head, uninterested in even hearing her out. When the Lamplight girls went on their rampages, keeping them in check was beyond even him.

Qulle frowned in frustration. “I’m begging you to get them under control. At this rate, they’re liable to interfere with our mission.”

She went on to explain the plans to prank and investigate Avian she'd overheard. Queneau looked exasperated. "...Aye, what an unruly lot."

Klaus let out a small exhale. "Understood. I'll order them to quit messing around."

"Would you mind using stronger wording than that? We're in the middle of a pretty sensitive mission right now."

"The one about the Discourse on Decadence?"

"Yeah, that's the one," Qulle replied. She gave him a haggard smile. "Anyhow, I really appreciate it," she said with a bow, then dashed back over to the Heat Haze Palace entrance.

Despite being outranked, Qulle knew her request was reasonable, and she hadn't hesitated to make her position clear. Klaus found himself pleased with her initiative, and after bidding Queneau a short adieu, he stepped away. When he went looking for Lamplight members, he spotted one of them watering the garden.

"Hello, Lily. I understand you're plotting some tit-for-tat against Avian."

Lily was holding a watering can in both hands, and her eyes went wide. "Hweh?! Dang, Teach, you're as sharp as ever. I can't believe you figured us out so fast."

Klaus sank into thought for a moment.

*Now, how best to get through to her...?*

The girls had a habit of taking things too far, but if Klaus admonished them in earnest, he was confident they would call off their plan. At the end of the day, they were reasonable people. When he told them to quit doing something or to cut something out, the girls were willing to do as instructed.

Klaus's ability to communicate was dubious at best, so he always made sure to deliver his most important points in simple terms to make sure they got through.

This time, though, he'd specifically been asked to use "stronger wording."

*Normally, I would just tell her to quit messing around, but here...*

After waffling back and forth, he settled on a turn of phrase.

“What you’re doing is like swimming one-handed in a raging stream choked with mud.”

“Gotcha...”

With a look of unsurety on her face, Lily nodded and tried to digest Klaus’s words.

She could tell he was alluding to danger and recklessness in some capacity—

*Huh? ...Is he telling us to do it, just carefully?*

—but unsurprisingly, his message failed to get through to her.



As the sun began setting, Avian got to work.

There was an area that sat just between the company housing for longshoremen and the slum where orphans and homeless people gathered, an area not too far from where the gang war a few days ago had taken place. The space was filled with shoddily constructed concrete apartment buildings, and the air stank with the smell of rot.

Once night fell, the whole region quickly cleared out. The people who lived there didn’t have the money to pay for electricity, so they went to bed as soon as the sun set. Also, they had to be up early so they could loiter along the harbor looking for work. Not even gunshots would wake them from their slumber.

Amid the neighborhood’s darkness, Vindo and Qulle rendezvoused.

“I asked Mr. Klaus to get the Lamplight girls to stand down. They won’t bother us.”

“Got it,” Vindo said with a nod, largely uninterested in Qulle’s report. Their

assassination op had already begun, and the rest of the team was in position. Lamplight was the furthest thing from Vindo's mind.

"Queneau and Lan disguised themselves as illegal immigrants and snuck in this morning," he explained in brief. "The targets got in touch with a smuggler. The three of them are slated to take off for Tolfa tonight. The down payment they gave the smuggler had our mark on it."

The mark he was talking about was the one Avian had planted. They'd confiscated most of the Discourse on Decadence's operating funds after their fight at the metalworking factory, but they'd intentionally left a little bit behind. If Avian had completely cleaned their foes out, they might have resorted to attacking civilians. Instead, Avian had placed a transparent mark on the money and made sure it would fall into the survivors' hands.

Qulle nodded. "Then we have confirmation."

"Yeah. When they come to the meeting point, we hunt them down."

The two of them were up on the third floor of an abandoned building. It had been built some twenty years prior, and while it had once belonged to a food import business, the business had gone bankrupt due to the Great War, and the building was now derelict and occupied solely by the homeless. Avian had paid off its residents to let them take over part of one of its floors.

The window gave a full view of the area, allowing them to confirm the meeting spot the smuggler had set.

"I will say," Vindo said out of nowhere, "they're a nuisance."

"What are you doing?!"

Qulle was too slow to stop him.

After leaping out the third-story window, Vindo kicked off the billboards extending from the building to slow his fall as he descended to ground level. The moment he landed, he dashed behind the building.

Qulle gave up on trying to track him by sight and relied on her Ultrahearing to get a read on the situation.

There were three children in front of Vindo, all of whom screamed. They were

part of the local homeless population. The kids' voices were young and terrified.

"Who are you?" Vindo snapped at them. "What are you doing here?"

"W-we, uh..., " one of the children stammered. "We—we were hired...to report if we saw anyone..."

"Well, get lost. And don't you dare tell anyone about me, you got that? Now scram."

"Yes, sir!" the children squeaked as they ran off.

Vindo gave a small nod, then returned to the dilapidated building.

Presumably, the orphans had been hired by the Discourse on Decadence. They were wary of the Executioners and had hired some local children to run recon for them.

*It would've been better to pretend not to notice them, you know.*

From Avian's perspective, it would've been in their best interests to simply ignore the scouts and have them report back that they hadn't seen anyone.

However, Vindo had sacrificed that potential advantage in order to ensure the children didn't get caught up in the conflict. His methods could be ruthless at times, but he always put the good of the nation first.

Comforting as Qulle found that, it sent a chill down her spine all the same.

*These Discourse on Decadence people might be a nuisance...*

She gulped.

*...but with the way Vindo is now, I find it hard to imagine them walking away with their lives.*

It felt like he was supremely confident in his ability to slay his foes no matter how much caution they exercised.

The speed at which he'd closed in on those children was beyond anything Qulle remembered him being capable of. He'd taken his already brutally efficient movement and honed it even further. His training with Klaus was paying off.

Right when Vindo returned to the third floor and asked Qulle, "Any

movement?” the radio she was holding buzzed.

It was a message from Vics, and an urgent one at that—one so grave it made Qulle gasp.

“He said Lan’s gone missing...?!”

Lan had been operating solo when all of a sudden, she’d disappeared.

Vindo scowled. “They’re making their move.”



Avian weren’t the only ones operating near the Arranq harbor that night.

The puppy’s nose twitched as he scampered down the road. Sara ran along after him, and Thea, Grete, and Erna followed a few steps behind her.

The four of them were conducting their investigation into Avian.

Thea had arbitrarily become suspicious of them, and she’d given the order for part of the team to begin tracking Avian. Grete and Erna had been oddly enthusiastic about the whole thing, and on their request, Sara had begrudgingly tagged along.

“It looks like Avian is gathering by the port...,” Sara said tentatively.

One of her specialties was using her puppy’s nose to track people. Thanks to that, the Lamplight girls were able to tail people from far enough away that their marks had no idea they were there. It was a skill she’d developed during their training with Klaus.

After following Avian’s scent, they arrived in a seedy part of town.

“How odd. What could they be doing here?” Grete said, her expression darkening. “The mission dealing with the Discourse on Decadence is supposed to be over. I can’t imagine any reason they would have for coming somewhere so remote at such a late hour... Could they truly be plotting something behind our backs?”

The four of them put up their guards and looked around.

They were surrounded by abandoned buildings, rotting wood houses, and

apartment buildings and criminal firms that positively reeked of corruption. The farther they went, the sketchier things got.

Eventually, they spotted an office belonging to the water department. There was someone visible through the blinds on its window.

“Hey!” Thea cried. “That’s Vics there!”

A familiar-looking young man was standing inside disguised as an office worker. And the woman next to him was likely Pharma.

The four Lamplight members sprang into action.

“We’re too exposed out here. We need somewhere safer to observe from.” “I see a roof I bet we can get to on the next building over!” “Sara, would you mind planting a listening device on Johnny and sending him over?” “O-on it!”

With excellent coordination, they got to work conducting their wiretap operations.

Sara would have preferred to just call the whole thing off and go home, but she fought back the urge to say that aloud.



Unaware of the Lamplight team’s surveillance, Vics let out an anxious sigh.

He and Pharma were disguised as water department employees. By going around to nearby buildings under the pretense of investigating a leak, they tried to root out where the Discourse on Decadence was. Midway through their search, though, Lan had stopped reporting in, leaving them no choice but to abort their task.

After getting Vindo’s reply over the radio, Vics’s shoulders slumped. “We’ve got new orders. Vindo says that finding Lan is on us. ♪” His voice was chipper, but there was a faint irritation lurking just below its surface. “Looks like he’s not interested in sticking his neck out, even when his own agent is in danger. ♪ It’s not like he has Qulle with him and she’s the perfect person for conducting a manhunt or anything.”



Qulle's Ultrahearing was a handy tool for finding people. Surely, the most efficient deployment would have been to put Vics and Pharma in charge of watching the exfiltration meetup site while Vindo and Qulle went and looked for Lan. Apparently, though, that wasn't on the agenda.

Vindo wanted to be the one to battle and defeat the Discourse on Decadence himself. That was probably why he was so loath to leave the spot where the fighting was most likely to occur.

"That's just the kind of guy Vindo is," Pharma offered nonchalantly. "It's fiiine. Let's go rescue Lan. Them abducting her probably means they won't kill her just yet."

That said, they could be taking her to a secondary location to torture her. There was no time to waste. With the water department employee cards in hand, Vics and Pharma left the office to check Lan's last known location.

As they sped off to save their teammate, though, Vics brought up a different topic altogether. "Now that we've got a minute, I've been meaning to ask you..."

He gave Pharma a discreet look.

"...what do you make of it? Of Avian's current situation?"

"Hmm?"

"I'd say we're in big danger. ♪ You see, me, I don't understand what's going on in that guy's head. How is he dense enough not to change after all that time he's spent losing to Mr. Klaus? ♪"

Vics was well aware this was no time to be talking about things that were unrelated to the mission.

However, he had to ask.

He knew they didn't have long left in their exchange period with Lamplight. The time they'd spent with the girls had influenced Avian in major ways. This might be their last chance to change themselves.

The thought made him restless, and the restlessness stirred his heart.

Still charging forward, Vics put Pharma in the hot seat.

“You’re someone who’s good at looking at the big picture. ♪ I’d love to get your thoughts on all this.”



The girls listening in on Vics and Pharma scrunched up their faces in concentration as they hid on the rooftop and stared at the walkie-talkie.

The voices on the other end crackled in and out.

*“You’re.....picture. ♪ I’d love...your.....this.”*

The audio quality wasn’t great, and it was quiet, too.

Vics and Pharma had been in the water department office, so that was where Sara had sent her walkie-talkie-laden puppy, but they’d rushed out of the office with little forewarning and made it all but impossible to pick up their audio.

What could they have been talking about?

“Eavesdropping on them seems to have failed,” Grete said calmly.

“Th-there’s not much Mr. Johnny can do when they run away from him like that...,” Sara stammered.

However, there was one person utterly unperturbed by the way things had played out.

Thea gave them a confident smile. “Heh-heh, I know exactly what’s going on.” She brushed back her hair in a show of pride, and it danced in the night wind. “And if you take a look through your binoculars, you will, too.”

On her urging, the others did just that.

They could still just barely see Vics and Pharma. The two of them were hurrying, yet they were having a conversation with oddly tense expressions.

The girls weren’t sure what to make of it, but Thea loudly filled them in. “I’ve seen it a thousand times—they’re a couple on a date!!”

Erna cocked her head. “They are?”

“Oh, yes. Those two are proactive when it comes to matters of love. With

them all alone in a sketchy alley, something is bound to come of it! I have no doubt he was stealing her heart just now! *You're as lovely as any picture*, he probably said. *I'd love to have your company on an evening such as this.*"

It was a bold theory, but when you started viewing things through that lens, Vics and Pharma could certainly pass for lovers. After all, they *were* heading into an alley with serious looks on their faces and no one else around.

Maybe they really were out on a date.

Thea nodded. "It all makes sense now. If they were having passionate affairs within their ranks, it's no wonder they didn't hit on me," she said to convince herself. At least she was happy.

"S-so in other words," Sara said, tilting her head in bewilderment, "you're saying this has nothing to do with Miss Erna's floating incident?"

"You know, that might just be the case."

"Then that means we can call off the investigation here—"

"Oh, but this dalliance of theirs is interesting in and of itself. Wouldn't you agree, Sara?"

"....."

Sara froze up for a few seconds.

After thinking it over for a bit, she raised her binoculars.

"Y-you're right. This is for educational purposes." "We have so much to learn from them!!" "Y-yeep!"

At the prospect of amorous developments, the entire group continued watching.

The situation had no relation to Erna's predicament—but they were fascinated all the same!

Through their binoculars, they saw Vics and Pharma finally come to a stop. Both of them closed their mouths, pursed their lips, and gazed at each other.

Could they be about to kiss? Their expressions certainly suggested as much.

The four girls on the roof waited with bated breath. Their faces reddened, and

they clutched their binoculars ever tighter. Sweat trickled down their faces as wordless squeals escaped their throats. ““““.....!””””

Then someone snapped at them from behind. “Hey, you lot. What’re you doing here?”

““““Huh?””””

The door to the roof swung open, and three people stormed out of it.

They looked to be similar in age to the girls. All of them were probably in their late teens or early twenties.

Standing at the front of the trio was a fierce-looking man wearing a large pair of glasses. He stared at them with his intense, icy-blue eyes. He was dressed in a pale-blue shirt and positively radiating hostility.

However, it was the girl beside him who drew Thea’s attention.

“Oh? Do my eyes deceive me?”

She couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re Canary, aren’t you? Do you remember me? We were in the same class back at the academy.”

The young woman she was looking at had dark hair so long it nearly covered her eyes. Her code name during her academy days had been Madfest. Unsettling as her appearance may have been, she was a talented spy with the talent necessary to disguise herself as a person belonging to any one of over twenty skilled professions.

“Ah,” said the man with icy-blue eyes. He smiled as understanding dawned on him. “So you people are the next group the Executioners sent—”

“I’m sorry, can this wait?”

“...What?”

“I assume you all graduated, too. Congratulations! There’s a million things we could chat about, but I’ll need to take a rain check for the moment. We’re just getting to the good part!”

After carelessly brushing her counterparts off, Thea raised her binoculars and

went back to observing Vics and Pharma. The rest of the girls had long since shifted their gazes back off the rooftop as well.

The newcomers' eyes went wide at how completely and utterly they'd been ignored. It was almost anticlimactic, and they all made the same mumbled comment in unison.

“““...Who are these people?”””



It was at around that time that “South Wind” Queneau found a bizarre object.

Avian generally let Queneau operate solo, and he hadn't been paired up with anyone for their current mission. After concealing his bloodlust, he'd quietly hunted for clues that might lead him to the Discourse on Decadence.

That was when he'd run into something rather peculiar.

Upon arriving at what was supposed to be a vacant lot, he'd found it surrounded by a suspicious plastic tarp that had been hung up to prevent anyone seeing inside. Construction sites in the capital often used such tarps to soundproof their work sites and protect against dust, but as far as Queneau knew, the practice hadn't caught on in Arranq.

When he headed inside, he was greeted by a humongous apparatus.

Its base was the shape of a triangular prism that had been knocked onto its side, and there was a tree sticking out of it. The device was over fifteen feet long in all, and there were heavy chains connecting it to the trees being used to anchor it down.

Queneau knew what it was. Weapons like those had been used in the trenches during the Great War.

“Query. Is that a catapult?”

“Hmph. It's the killer.”

There, behind the catapult, stood Annette.

Seemingly displeased at having been caught, she puffed up her cheeks. “Yo,

go away. There's someone I wanna give the business to."

"...Nay. I don't understand."

"I'm busy right now. I need to stabilize the base."

In her hand was a wrench.

Annette was clearly the one who'd built the machine. She'd designed it for easy assembly and disassembly, which was how she'd gotten it there in the first place. When she'd put it back together, though, it had started warping under its own weight.

Queneau sighed and took a seat beside her. "...Aye. I'll help you."

"Hmm?"

"I don't know what your plans are, but this ridiculous device of yours is liable to cause collateral damage."

"Bleh to that!"

Annette stuck out her tongue, but Queneau ignored her and pulled out his tools.

His fingers weren't as nimble as hers, but what he lacked in dexterity, he made up for in raw strength. That allowed him to help reinforce the catapult in a way Annette had been unable to.

The two of them continued their work in silence.

Right as Queneau resumed wondering what Annette intended to do with her catapult, some other Lamplight members popped into the tarped-off area.

"Dang, you've really got that thing fixed down."

"Oh hey, if it ain't Queneau."

It was Lily and Sybilla. They must have just finished some sort of work, as their brows were slick with sweat. When they finished cooing at the newly fixed catapult and spotted Queneau, their expressions soured.

"Hmm... I mean, he *is* technically an Avian member..."

"Sure, but we can leave him outta the prank. He at least gave a shit about not

messin' up our lives.”

After a lively exchange, the two of them came to some sort of consensus.

Queneau cocked his head at one particularly worrisome word he'd caught. "... Query. What prank?"

"The special Human Hurling Apparatus I made, yo!" Annette said, laying a hand on her chest and explaining with great pride. "We're gonna send those Avian bastards flying!"

Apparently, this catapult would be throwing more than just rocks. What's more, it sounded like they were planning on targeting Avian with it.

As Queneau gawked in horror, Sybilla and Lily went on in amusement. "If we chucked rocks at 'em, they'd just dodge." "Yeah, but if we threw a live human being, then they would have no choice but to take the hit."

Queneau might have been a murderer, but that was enough to make even his blood run cold. ".....Nay. You're going to kill someone."

"It's fine. I tested it out on Erna yesterday morning!"

With a broad smile, Annette laid out her findings.

As long as the victim being thrown was swaddled in a mattress and the shock-resistant pad Annette had designed, they would be fine. And as long as the victim being thrown at was an Avian, they were positive—well, pretty sure—well, deeply unsure—well, hopeful...?—that they wouldn't die, either.

Queneau had a million different concerns, but he started by asking about his biggest one. "Who exactly are you planning on throwing with your—?"

"The person the three of us just captured."

The reply to his question came from Monika, who ducked under the plastic tarps while pushing a dolly.

Atop the cart, there was a girl bound from head to toe.

"Prithee..."

It was Lan. The dolly shook and toppled onto the ground.

Lan had been helpless against three attackers at once. On top of that, Lily had

poisoned her. Her muscles spasmed as despair swelled in her eyes.

“Brother Queneau, these people are out of their minds...”

“...Aye. I agree.”

All the while, the Lamplight girls continued briskly getting their preparations in order. After wrapping Lan up in the mattress and shock-absorbent pad, they loaded her into the Human Hurling Apparatus, then added in weights until it was ready to launch the moment they severed its cord.

Queneau looked on, unable to do a thing. There was no way he could take all four of them on his own. He prayed Lan would survive.

Monika used her mirrors to keep track of their targets. She was also the one in charge of calculating their angle and distance of attack, while Sybilla used her strength to keep the device steady. It seemed almost a shame for them to be in such perfect harmony over something so stupid.

“And hey, what’s the harm?” Lily said playfully. “The Discourse on Decadence mission is over, right? A little surprise every now and then never hurt anyone.”

Before Queneau had a chance to tell them it *wasn’t* over, Monika gave the order. “They’re in position.”

It was all too late.

With a grand cheer of, “““FIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIRE!”””” they sliced through the rope.



Vics and Pharma stopped and exchanged a look.

*What do you make of Avian’s current situation?*





It was an important question. The team's future hung in the balance.

Vics's ever-present handsome smile had been replaced by a pair of tightly pursed lips, and the look of nonchalance Pharma normally wore was gone, too. Her eyes were open all the way.

Pharma said nothing for a good ten seconds, and Vics made no move to rush her.

A stray dog with some kitchen scraps in its mouth came right up to their feet before walking away. A piece of oil-stained glass skidded across the ground, practically crawling, then vanished into the darkness of the night.

Unconcerned by any of that, the two of them stood in silence.

Then Pharma spoke.

"Honestly, I'm not too woorried about it."

"Really?"

"Like, apologies to Adi, but if anything, I kinda like the way things are."

She covered her mouth with her hand and swayed from side to side. Her smile was conflicted and contained shades of self-deprecation.

Unable to make sense of what she was saying, Vics let out a small groan.

Pharma went on, her voice gentle and placative. "Look, Vics, the thing about us—"

The rest of her sentence got cut off by a scream from overhead.

"PRITHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!"

"\_\_\_\_?!"

The two of them looked up at the sky.

There was something massive hurtling toward them at a tremendous speed—a bundled-up mattress.

They reflexively moved to dodge, but when they heard Lan’s voice coming from within, they stopped in their tracks.

Pharma barked out a quick order. “Vics!!”

Vics had already gotten started before she’d even said it. He knew he couldn’t stand by and let Lan get dashed against the ground. He had no choice but to catch her.

By his estimate, though, the mass he was dealing with weighed something on the order of 110 pounds. Taking a direct hit from something like that would be fatal to the average person.

Vics knew that, yet he didn’t flinch. He had his strength, and his strength was anything but average.

He saw the mattress coming at him like a bullet, and he faced it down with a grim determination. Every muscle in his body was operating at full throttle. Pharma pressed her arms against his back to brace him.

Then came the impact—and the two catchers got sent skidding backward. However, the force was too much for them to take.

““HURRRRRRRRF!””

With that, Vics and Pharma got blasted away.



Over at the vacant lot...

“““““THAT’S A DIRECT HIIIIIIIT!!”””””

Annette, Lily, Sybilla, and Monika all cheered. Their pent-up frustration had finally been released, and they exchanged a round of high fives.

Queneau was too aghast to say a single word.

Over on the third floor of the derelict building...

“Huh?! Did I just hear Lan scream?!” “.....!”

Qulle and Vindo had been waiting on standby, and they too sensed something was amiss.

Vindo acted fast and checked his radio.

“No response from Vics and Pharma... We need to split up and investigate.”

It was the logical order to give. The two of them scampered off, not liking one bit that their allies were vanishing like flies.

Up on the nearby roof...

““““Was that a mattress that just went flying by?!““““”

Sara’s group had been watching Vics and Pharma through their binoculars the whole time, and their eyes went wide in disbelief.

Vics and Pharma had been staring into each other’s eyes, but just when it had looked like they were about to profess their love for each other, a rolled-up mattress had come flying out of the sky and blasted them away. The girls couldn’t even begin to make sense of it. All they could tell was that something bad was happening.

They pulled themselves together and started taking the situation seriously.

“Wh-what’s going on?! Avian just got attacked!!”

“But who did it?! The Discourse on Decadence group they were fighting already fell apart!”

“...I imagine there may have been survivors.”

“I agree, and now they’re out for revenge. The academy dropouts must be somewhere near—”

Sara, Erna, Grete, and Thea analyzed the situation one after another, then turned around in unison.

Over on the other side of the roof, there was a trio of people standing idly.

“——by?!”””””

“...Okay, seriously, who are you people?”

The man with icy-blue eyes gave his head a weary shake.

He and his compatriots were the exact people in question—the last of the former academy students who’d formed the Discourse on Decadence criminal organization.

After shaking off the Executioners, they’d made one last-ditch gamble and come to their former headquarters in Arranq. Their plan had been to stay hidden right up until their overseas departure time, but that had been thwarted when a group of shady-looking girls had shown up on their roof. That there was the full story.

“All I can tell...”

The man with the icy-blue eyes—that was to say, “Thunderclap” Garrack—drew his gun.

“...is that we can’t afford to let you walk out of here alive.”

The Discourse members hadn’t known about Lamplight’s existence, but now that the girls knew who they were, they had to die.

The Discourse members had no reservations about killing to save their own hides, and back in their academy days, they’d boasted some of the best grades around. Sure, they’d given up before even trying the graduation exam, but if they’d attended it, they would have given the top six a run for their money.

That much was becoming obvious to Sara from the raw pressure they were exuding.

A bead of sweat trickled down her back. “I can’t believe they took out Mr. Vics and Miss Pharma in a single—”

“We literally didn’t have anything to do with that,” Garrack corrected her.



The feeling of imminent peril helped Thea get her thoughts back in order. The excitement from their earlier horseplay drained from her body like it had never been there as she began analyzing the situation. For starters, she casually slid over a bit to put Erna and Sara behind her.

They were on a rooftop, and falling wasn't an option. None of them had the physical acumen required to survive a five-story drop unscathed.

*This is all coming out of nowhere!*

She made sure not to show it on her face, but internally, she was screaming.

Their three adversaries shared a hushed exchange and assumed a formation. By the sound of it, the man with the icy-blue eyes was named Garrack.

If this came down to a brawl, Lamplight was at a serious disadvantage. According to Avian, the male academies devoted more of their training time to combat than the female ones. There was little doubt in Thea's mind that they were no match for that Garrack guy.

*None of the four of us specialize in combat, either...*

To make matters worse, they hadn't even brought their guns.

"How unlucky...", Erna mumbled from behind her. Now that Thea thought about it, it was Erna who'd picked the building for them. Her choosing the exact one the Discourse on Decadence had been hiding in was a classic stroke of Erna bad luck.

Thea steeled her resolve and took a step forward.

Her only option was to use her talent for negotiation to convince their opponents to let them go. Considering the Discourse members were planning on killing the girls right then and there, though, Thea had little confidence in her ability to get through to them.

Thea raised her arms in surrender, and Garrack drew a bead on her. Right as he was about to squeeze down on the trigger, the door to the roof swung open once more.

"Wait, Qulle?!"

Sure enough, it was Qulle who came rushing in with her gun at the ready. The

shot she fired as she raced across the rooftop grazed Garrack's right arm, and the sound echoed through the night.

The Discourse trio braced for a fight, and Qulle used that opportunity to plant herself in front of the girls. "Thank goodness," she said. "You aren't hurt."

She gave them a relieved smile, then turned and sent the Discourse members a steely glare.

Qulle had been aiming for Garrack's hand, but he'd managed to narrowly dodge that. A thin trickle of blood ran down his arm.

He licked it off and winced. "Hmph, you sure got here fast... 'Clever' Qulle. I guess that's your Ultrahearing at work."

"Well, aren't you well-informed? I do go by a different code name now, by the way."

Qulle didn't flinch, not even after having her name and special ability identified.

The Discourse on Decadence was made up of academy enrollees. They knew all of Avian's personal details. Some of their members must have been Avian's classmates.

Garrack grinned triumphantly. "Oh yeah, I know everything. Back as a student, you made quite a name for yourself. That's how I learned all your intel."

He stowed his gun and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Like how you're no good in a fight!!"

He barreled across the roof and bore down on Qulle. After dodging another of her shots, he fired a high kick directly at her defenseless face.

Qulle got sent tumbling.

Sara screamed and tried to rush over to give Qulle a hand, but Grete held her back.

It was the right call for Grete to make. Even if they pitched in, they still wouldn't be any match for Garrack. That wasn't even accounting for the other

two high-ranking members of the Discourse on Decadence waiting in the wings.

The girls needed to help, but there was nothing they could do.

Qulle wiped the blood off the side of her head and rose to her feet. "You're right. I really am nothing special."

"Huh?"

"Leaving the academy has shown me that over and over. To be honest, it's kind of crushing my confidence," she said in the face of Garrack's overwhelming might. "It wasn't the woman we met at the joint training exercise. My group of elites has someone in a league of his own, and I've even been outclassed by people on a team of supposed washouts. I'm kind of just a nobody."

"...Maybe you're right about that," Garrack said with a nod. His mouth curled into a self-mocking sneer. "There's always a bigger fish, and there's always a bigger pond. It's so self-evident, we end up forgetting it. That's why the Discourse on Decadence I built got taken down so easily. I'm...I was such an idiot."

"How the mighty have fallen."

"But it wasn't always like this, you know. When I first realized that working as a spy would mean walking to my death, I started gathering allies right there in the middle of the joint training exercise. All we wanted was to be able to live free. So we fled from our academies and became a team. It felt like we were invincible. We were living life to the fullest. We conned the police, screwed over gangs, and spent every night laughing shoulder to shoulder about how easy it all was."

"...But then you ran into a bigger fish."

"That's the way it goes." Garrack's shoulders slumped. "If you want to laugh at us and call us morons, now's your chance."

Qulle shook her head.

"Your loss," Garrack said with a sigh. "And hey, no hard feelings. But you have to die. It's the only way we can be reborn."

Thea felt a knot tighten in her chest. It was hard to breathe.



Even just from that short snippet of conversation, it was all too clear these really were people who'd attended spy academies just like they had. It was like looking into a mirror. They had shared joy and laughter with each other just like the Lamplight girls had at Heat Haze Palace.

That said, she was hardly in any position to be offering them sympathy.

She could feel Garrack's bloodlust prickling at her skin. He had every intention of killing them.

"If you want to start over, be my guest. I'm just doing my job here."

Qulle was undaunted.

She used both hands to comb back the hair hanging over her ears, then went on.

"I'm code name Glide—and I'm going to make time for honorable pride."

After boldly announcing herself, she took off at a dash.

She wasn't charging at the Discourse members. She wasn't moving to protect the girls. She was running toward the door—toward the north side of the roof.

Her bizarre movement completely stole the Discourse members' attention. They were afraid of her escaping to call for backup. That was the one outcome they absolutely couldn't afford, and Garrack quickly drew a bead on her with his gun. The other two Discourse members continued keeping an eye on the girls. The coordination was impeccable.

A thin smile played on Qulle's lips.

*There's that blind spot, just like I was looking for.*

Even with her Ultrahearing, picking out a distant conversation when she was atop a building with the wind buffeting her was no easy feat. However, those voices carried so well that neither distance nor wind could stop them from reaching her.

*"Hello, ladies of Lamplight. What exactly do you think you're doing?"*

*""""Ack!""""*

*"Three of my teammates just got knocked unconscious, you know."*

*"G-gosh, I wonder how that could have happened..."*

*"...Nay. Don't try to deny it."*

*"You ladies want to pick a fight with us that bad, huh?"*

*"What? No! Of course not! We would never—"*

*""""It was all Lily's idea.""""*

*"Et tu?! ...Wait, huh? Were those gunshots?"*

*"Look, it doesn't matter. Give me a hand here."*

*""""Huh?""""*

*"Seems you've got something there that might be useful."*

It took everything Qulle had to contain her laughter.

*You're such a weird team. This honeymoon has been a blast.*

On some level, she could sense it. Once Avian finished their current mission, they were going to be sent abroad, and so she felt a twinge of sadness upon realizing her victory was imminent.

The Discourse members weren't focusing on anything outside the rooftop. Qulle running off at an odd angle had completely captured their attention—enough so that they didn't notice the threat approaching them from behind.

*Tell me, Vindo, she asked him silently. With a surprise attack like this, surely you can spare their lives, right?*

She heard some gleeful whoops from off in the distance.

*““““Round two! FIIIIIIIIIIIIIRE!!””””*

Their aim was flawless.

Thanks to Queneau's stabilizations, the Human Hurling Apparatus Annette had built had become a proper weapon. After using Monika's calculations and Sybilla's strength to lock onto their target, Lily let out a grand shout and cut through the restraining rope.

This time, the person they were hurling had forgone the shock pad and mattress.

Like a majestic cannonball, Vindo soared through the air.

Thanks to his exquisite sense of balance, he was able to adjust his posture in midair with perfect precision, allowing him to land on the fifth-floor roof without a hitch. He made his silent descent on the building's south side—the exact place where the Discourse members' blind spot was.

It took them precisely 1.3 seconds to realize he was there. That lag proved to be their undoing.

All at once, the three of them got battered against the floor.

The swift knife strikes Vindo smashed into their necks sent them spinning like they'd just been headlock thrown, and they all fell onto their backs. Unable to break their falls, they hit their heads on the ground and blacked out.

The girls had gotten front-row seats to all of it, and they stared in blank shock.

The pace at which Vindo had switched between stopping and starting had been unbelievably sharp. They knew he'd inherited his footwork from a member of Inferno, but it was clear his training with Klaus had honed his movement even further.

Vindo had just taken out all the Discourse on Decadence survivors on his own.

“.....”

Garrack was still just barely clinging to consciousness. He was lying on his back with his eyes wide, unable to comprehend what had just happened to him. The force of the impact must have left him stunned, as he made no move to grab the gun he'd dropped.

Vindo towered over him.

He offered no words to Garrack, but he didn't avert his gaze, either.

“...Must be real nice being you, huh?” One glance at Vindo was enough to tell Garrack everything. “You've got talent, you graduated less than a year after enrolling, and you're already making a name for yourself as a spy. Shit, man, I'm jealous. I really am.”

The two of them must have attended the same academy.

“If I could've just been like you, then everything would've been—”

“...You're right. If our circumstances and environments were a little different, you might have been up here, and I might have been down there.”

At long last, Vindo spoke.

Garrack twitched and let out a surprised groan.

“But still—everything you just said is insipid.”

The indifference in Vindo's voice was biting.

He walked off like he'd lost all interest in Garrack.

“I know a couple people who never gave up on their own potential, even when everyone else called them washouts.”

Thea couldn't see what sort of expression he was making as he said that.

The one thing that stuck in her head, though, was the quiet smile Qulle wore beside him.



As the Discourse on Decadence problem got officially resolved, Lamplight

found themselves rather busy. While Avian enjoyed their short four-day break, Lamplight had to spend all their time tracking down a spy who'd infiltrated the country. Not even Lamplight could get away with slacking off forever.

In the end, the only time Lamplight and Avian's breaks actually lined up was on the final day of the honeymoon.

Avian told Lamplight about how the Discourse on Decadence situation had played out from their usual spot in the lounge. All the members they had captured were going to be detained for the time being. Their lives were safe, at least for now.

"So if you really think about it..."

Lily nodded in satisfaction.

"...the whole reason you were able to capture them alive was because of all the chaos we sowed!"

"Like hell it was ♪," Vics snapped, throwing a seat cushion at her in rage. Despite taking their human cannonball head-on, he'd somehow emerged without a scratch.

"She's not wrooong, though," Pharma drawled as she stepped in to defuse things. "Our original plan *was* for Vindo to kill them all. All's well that ends well, right? Better this than having to murder our own countrymen."

Queneau and Lan crossed their arms and gave her a pair of assured nods.

"Hmph," Vindo scoffed. "Not like there's any hope for them anyways. I wouldn't be surprised if they got dragged before the firing squad tomorrow."

"There's still a chance they'll make it, and that chance ain't zero." Sybilla crossed her hands behind her head and grinned. "They had talent, right? If they end up seein' the error of their ways and choosin' to become spies for real, all that'll do is make Din stronger. Even if there's only a one percent chance they survive, that's miles better than nothin'."

Klaus had explained how things worked to them.

Spies were loath to kill someone who might be useful. The academies had a rule where they would eliminate anyone who used their skills for crime, sure,

but that mostly existed as a deterrent.

People had absolutely been victimized by what the Discourse on Decadence had done. While the gang war was as much the gangs' fault as anything, the punishment awaiting the Discourse members was steep. The death penalty was still a very real possibility. On top of that, Annette had declared she would "hunt them to the depths of hell, yo" without a hint of jest in her voice.

What the Discourse members had was a single ray of hope, nothing more.

Now their fate was in the hands of the Foreign Intelligence Office's leadership.

Once Avian was done filling them in, Lily rose to her feet. "Then with that, let's get this show on the road!"

With great vigor, she stretched one of her hands all the way up in the air.

"Go home, Avian! It's time for your Lamplight-sponsored farewell party!"

A round of cheering and applause rose up in assent.



Avian's overseas departure date had been set.

Despite it having been less than a year since the team had been founded, in light of their successes in the Longchon and the Discourse on Decadence missions, they had been assigned a very special mission.

Their task was to uncover the reason behind "Firewalker" Gerde's death.

Inferno's fall was the greatest mystery the Din Republic's Foreign Intelligence Office spy agency faced. Much as they wanted to investigate it, though, they had their hands full just filling the hole Inferno had left. "Bonfire" Klaus was their most reliable asset, and they needed him elsewhere.

Thus, they had selected Avian.

The team's boss, "Flock" Vindo, had a history with Gerde, and the Foreign Intelligence Office had ordered them to search her last known location in the Fend Commonwealth.

That information was all highly confidential, so Lamplight wasn't briefed on any of it.

All the girls knew was that it was time for the two teams to *temporarily* part ways.



The revelry continued all through the night.

They ate and shouted, drank and fought, chased each other around, chatted and cried and laughed, then ate some more and shouted into the night sky for no reason at all.

All the lights in Heat Haze Palace were on, and they brought tables and chairs out to the courtyard and piled them high with food and drinks. Naturally, that included alcohol for Avian and Klaus. The girls were forbidden from drinking any, yet some of their faces ended up quite red nonetheless. "It's odd how that happened when they weren't supposed to be drinking," Klaus said, but he decided not to give it too much thought.

Klaus and Vics conversed about the state of international politics with wineglasses in hand. Lan and Lily tried out all the food, then started playing chess while Sybilla helped facilitate some cheating. Over in the kitchen, Queneau worked hard cooking additional food as Sara and Erna jotted down his recipes. Pharma made some virgin cocktails of her own invention in an attempt to win Annette over, ultimately managing to pique the girl's interest. Qulle was the first to get plastered, and she griped and moaned while Thea consoled her. Vindo and Monika bickered about the teaching methods the latter was using with Sara in an argument that grew increasingly heated.

Deep in the night, Qulle began her third round of vomiting.

She'd had too much to drink.

Grete rubbed her back and made her drink water, and eventually, Qulle's head started clearing.

After downing far too much alcohol, she'd started fondling Thea's chest, causing Klaus to leave in genuine displeasure. "Don't be indecent in public."

Qulle had then moved to hugging Sara with all her might, and Vics and Queneau had been forced to peel her off. Then she'd topped it off by barfing all over Monika, earning her a full-power punch to the stomach before she got carted off to the far end of the courtyard.

"...I'll go look for some medicine," Grete said and headed into the building.

As feelings of guilt and regret washed over her, Qulle realized there was a man standing beside her.

"Enjoying ourselves, are we?"

It was Vindo. He had a large hunk of camembert cheese in his left hand and a wine bottle in his right.

"...I really have no excuse."

"You really are an obnoxious drunk, you know."

"Oh, shut up... Did you come to look after me?"

"In your dreams. I'm just here 'cause it's nice and quiet. You didn't come along until later."

Vindo took an unimpressed bite of his cheese, then a hearty swig of his wine. He was drinking it straight from the bottle, and the wine splashed loudly as it poured through the bottle's mouth.

"I can't stand all the racket."

Qulle turned to look and saw the Lamplight and Avian members gathered around a table and having some sort of meeting. All their faces were flush, and it wasn't just because of the alcohol.

Vindo had no intention of going and joining them.



Qulle turned back to look at Vindo. Filled with a feeling she couldn't quite put her finger on, she let out a long exhale.

*...Did he change? Did he not? In the end, I'm still not sure.*

She'd been so hopeful. She'd really believed their time with Lamplight would change Vindo—and in turn, Avian. However, there weren't any definite transformations she could point to. Vindo still obstinately refused to communicate or cooperate with the rest of them. Training with Klaus had sharpened his skills, but his attitude toward his teammates showed no signs of improvement.

*Hmm... What's really going on in that head of his?*

If she asked, would he tell her?

She suspected he might, but what ended up coming out of her mouth was a different request altogether. "Hey, lemme get in on that wine action." She reached out for it, but Vindo slapped her hand away. "You've already made enough of an ass of yourself for the night."

As she rubbed her smarting hand, she flopped onto her back and chuckled.

*I shouldn't be asking that while my brain is addled with booze,* she laughed to herself.

The moon hung high in the sky. It was the kind of moon so bright she could make out the ridges and valleys on its surface. It had an oblong roundness to it not unlike a lemon.

"It's waned a bit too much," she murmured, "to really call it a full moon."

"Nah." Vindo lowered the wine bottle he'd been drinking from. "Any way you slice it, it's clearly full."

"Huh. Really?"

"Sure looks that way to me."

His words stirred up a pleasant memory from the depths of her mind, but with how drunk she was, the memory took too long to coalesce.

As the two of them stood there in quiet tranquility, Lan came running over to

them. “Sister Qulle, Brother Vindo, thou should come, too.”

“Huh?”

“’Tis been decided we’re all going to paint a mural on the wall.”

In her hand was a red spray can.

When Qulle looked over, she saw the rest of the group walking along the Heat Haze Palace outer wall and looking for a spot to paint their picture.

“...Won’t Mr. Klaus get angry at us?”

“Verily, he seemed mortified at the thought.”

“Then we shouldn’t do it!!”

“But in the end, he gave us his leave through gritted teeth.”

Qulle was surprised to hear Klaus had signed off on this. From what she’d heard, the man was pretty attached to Heat Haze Palace.

Lan tugged her by the arm, and Vindo reluctantly followed along, too.

The group had settled on using a patch of wall right beside the entrance as their canvas. They were going to paint a creature straight out of myth, and the plan was for them to take turns painting a single feather each.

“Yeep! It’s my turn next!” “I’d better make sure mine sticks out, huh? ♪” “I’m gonna draw it real big, yo!” “All my spaaace... You’re so meeean...”

Unimpressed by the gaggle of his allies swarming around the wall, Vindo snatched the spray can, said, “Outta my way,” and leaped up onto Queneau’s back.

The line he drew was so sharp and red it was like he’d etched it out of the wall with a knife.

““““Ooooh!”””””

An odd cheer rose up.

Upon landing next to Qulle, Vindo tossed her the can. “Your turn.”

“Right, okay...”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. I’m just surprised to see you joining in, that’s all.”

Vindo frowned and narrowed his eyes. “...What kind of wet blanket do you take me for?”

It almost seemed like he was pouting, and Qulle couldn’t help but grin. “You know, Vindo, this painting’s probably going to fade in about a month or so.”

“...It is? Then why are we even putting it up in the first place?”

“We should get together and repaint it. All of us.”

“.....”

Vindo opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, and Qulle turned her gaze away from him and over at the finished mural.

There were two reasons Klaus had given them his permission. The first was because the paint they were using would fade away in about a month anyway. And the second was because it was more than just a piece of graffiti.

It was a bird of fire—a unified symbol of the teams, Lamplight and Avian, coming together.

Everyone knew the legend.

That was why they’d drawn a phoenix—as a prayer that everyone would make it back there alive.



## Flashback ⑤

### “Sky Monk” Adi

“Hey, Vindo. Vindo!”

“...What do you want? You came all the way to my bedroom, so this better be good.”

“As your boss, I just had a small piece of advice I wanted to pass along.”

“Be quiet and shut your piehole. Don’t talk to me. Go away, now.”

“That’s so rude!!”

“...Okay, fine. What? What is it?”

“The moon! Look up at the moon.”

“Excuse me?”

“What kind of moon would you say that is?”

“...It’s a crescent moon. Anyone could see that.”

“Nope, it’s a full moon.”

“What?”

“You can’t see it because the sun’s not hitting it, but the whole round moon is still there. It just *looks* like it’s missing a chunk. If you use an astronomical telescope, you can actually see the shadow.”

“...Did you seriously come here to do some wordplay? If we had it your way, the concepts of half-moons and crescent moons would stop existing.”

“No, no, you’re not listening. The same thing applies to life. As your senior, I thought it was important I impart a little nugget of wisdom to—”

“And you think I’m gonna take wisdom from a woman who used classified

documents to blow her nose?”

“I really am sorry about that!!”

## Chapter 6

# Honeymoon Raker

The taste of dirt filling his mouth was vile, and Vindo's eyes shot open.

Upon spitting out the damp soil, he realized it was mixed with black blood. He could still breathe just fine, so he assumed he'd taken a wound to his digestive organs. He was also hemorrhaging tremendous amounts of blood from his left arm. The pain racing all through his body snapped him back to his senses.

*...That was a long dream I just had.*

As he rose to his feet, he thought back to the situation that had just befallen him.

His head had been filled with thoughts of his exchange period with Lamplight. All his recent memories had gotten dredged up, including the time Pharma had asked for Lamplight's help on a mission, the fight in the art museum Lan had given him a report on, the time Queneau had been off working a completely different angle while the rest of them battled the Discourse on Decadence, the violent confrontation he and Vics had had, and the moon he'd seen during the farewell party Lamplight had thrown.

Given how the last memory had been one of Adi, he had an idea of what was going on.

*I'm no fool.*

Vindo laughed at himself a little.

He knew full well the name of the phenomenon that had just happened to him.

*That was my life flashing before my eyes, wasn't it?*

When people were on death's door, random memories welled to the surface. Their minds understood they didn't have long left to live, so their brain cells went into overdrive plumbing their past for a plan that might help get them out. Any memory might hold the secret to survival, and it was important to check them all. That was the science behind the phenomenon of people's lives flashing before their eyes.

However, Vindo failed to come up with a tidy plan.

He had no way of escaping the man before him—the man with three right arms looming in the darkness.

The man was wearing a black coat long enough to completely cover his body. His hood obscured his face from view, but his three right arms were distinctive enough to make up for that. His real arm was marked with fat scars, and it was joined by a pair of prostheses that shone with a mechanical luster. They looked to be pretty hefty, yet the man wielded them with ease.

As the man watched Vindo rise to his feet, his body quivered. "To think I would overpower you so completely. I must truly be one of the great heroes of our era."

His voice was filled with fascination.

"Ah, I can feel retirement inching away from me."

Vindo didn't know the man's name.

That was code name Black Mantis—a member of the enigmatic Galgad spy unit Serpent, and one of the people who had driven Avian to ruin.



The tragedy had struck during their mission in the Fend Commonwealth.



“Firewalker” Gerde was suspected to have been operating there, and Avian’s job was to follow her tracks. Gerde had belonged to the legendary spy team Inferno, and she’d disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Wanting to get to the bottom of why that was, Vindo had relied on his memories to find the apartment building where he’d last met her. Believing it to be her hideout, he’d searched its premises.

As his teammates worked to gather eyewitness reports about her, Vindo himself tried to find the entrance that connected to the building’s basement. The one he’d used during his last visit had been blocked off, so he needed to find another one.

It took him a good long while to make his way down to the basement, but when he got there, he discovered documents detailing a terrible plan that had been put into motion behind the global scenes.

He immediately got in touch with his team.

In the dead of night, he summoned Avian to the flat they’d been using as a base. Vics, Queneau, Pharma, and Lan came in one after another. All they were waiting for was Qulle.

Qulle arrived late with a look of absolute desperation on her face.

“Everyone, hurry! We need to—”

She froze midsentence. The team had all been working separately, and none of them had any idea what she was trying to tell them.

However, the unsettling wave of hostility that hit them certainly gave them an inkling.

**“Programme Number One.”**

First, Queneau died in an explosion.

When the grenade came smashing through the window, he immediately dived atop it and covered it with his body. As everyone else stood there

dumbfounded, it exploded beneath his chest. It was obvious the wound was fatal; the bottom half of his body was completely mangled. Unidentifiable clumps of flesh that must once have been fat or guts went splattering across the floor.

“.....Aye.”

A crack splintered across the mask he always wore, and his mouth poked out from beneath. There was a faint smile on his lips.

“Brother Queneau?!”

As Lan’s scream split the air, Vindo and the others sprang into action.

They could tell they were under attack. The first thing they did was flee into the hallway. Outside the room, there were agents waiting for them with guns drawn. Based on their attire, they were likely with the CIM.

These people weren’t trying to capture Avian, but rather going straight for the kill. That was a departure from the standard anti-spy playbook.

Inside buildings, though, Vindo’s power was absolute.

Using the door he had just opened and the building’s structural beams as cover to avoid the bullets, he bounded off the walls and floor. In a blink, he’d closed in on their foes and sliced through their carotid arteries with his knives.

Upon fleeing the building, they found themselves met with another furious rain of gunfire. They were surrounded by over fifty hostiles.

It was clear their opponents had a skilled commander at their helm.

**“Programme Number Seventeen,”** a female voice echoed out from the darkness. With every command, their foes changed up their formation, and the bullets began coming from a whole new angle. When Avian tried to flee, their enemies cut them off, and when they tried to hide, they found people had already been posted in every building they approached.

Although the Avian members avoided taking any direct hits from the veritable hailstorm of lead coming their way, the bullets chipped away at them nonetheless.

Even so, Avian didn’t give up. They killed what enemies they could and fled

into the darkness. Vindo put down nine hostiles, and Vics got seven.

When they reached the river, they pulled out a new move.

“Lan, you need to go.”

“Prithee, wait. Brother Vindo, I—!!”

The moment Lan tried to protest, Qulle shoved her into the river from behind. They needed to make sure at least one person survived to report their intel back.

The battle raged on long after they’d evacuated Lan.

It took them over an hour to break the siege. Qulle used her Ultrahearing to find them a route, and they sniped their foes, stole the guns from the foes they’d downed, and used the guns to kill more foes still. It became impossible to tell if the blood they were caked in had come from themselves or from others.

After heading north along the river, they arrived at a spot so full of plum trees it was practically an orchard. There must not have been anyone managing it, as the trees were withered and the crows had gorged themselves on the ripe plums littering the ground. There were no electric lights there, just the still glow of the moon.

At long last, they’d shaken their pursuers.

However, they still needed to put some more distance between themselves and their foes. Vindo, Vics, Pharma, and Qulle headed up the river in a single file line.

“I couldn’t even keep track...of how many of them we killed. We need to find out...what the hell’s going on. ♪” Vics said through gritted teeth as he clutched at the spot where his arm had taken a bullet.

Up ahead, Vindo nodded. “It sounded like you had some intel, Qulle. What’s going—?”

He turned around just in time to see it happen.

At the back of their formation, red blood bloomed from Qulle's throat.

The newcomer carried herself nimbly as she quietly took Qulle's life, wielding her serrated knife with the fluid movements of a dancer. "Hee-hee!" The moonbeam was her spotlight, and she basked happily in its glow as she flashed a toothy, sadistic grin.

"Chaos! And! Turmoil!"

The girl laughed, both her shoulders bare and exposed. She had a graceful build and long, slender limbs. The scars running down her arm stood out like ghastly lightning bolts.

"Those are the vibes we're working with, huh? Hee-hee-hee. I never expected you to actually escape from Belias, y'know. They're kinda useless, huh?"

As realization dawned on Vindo that they'd been cut off by yet another foe, a new voice came from a different direction. "Don't screw around, Green Butterfly."

That voice had a decided menace to it.

A large man came out from behind the plum trees and charged at them. Despite his size, his movements were swift. He brandished his right arm. It was concealed under his coat, and something came shooting out of it, attacking Vindo and Vics at the same time.

The two of them tried to evade, but those *things* extending from the man's right arm were faster.

"Vics! Vindo!" Pharma shrieked.

The objects that had just shot out from the man's arm were another pair of right arms. They gave off a metallic luster. They were clearly artificial.

The two prosthetics whizzed through the air, narrowly missing Vindo's and Vics's throats.

Vindo grabbed Pharma by the collar and put some distance between themselves and the many-armed man.

“My aim was faulty?” the many-armed man muttered in bewilderment. “No, it was tampered with... Fascinating. So you’re manipulating my body.”

Pharma had the ability to control people’s interest and focus through her body language. It was thanks to her efforts that they’d survived that initial strike.

“But how long will you be able to keep your little trick up against me?”

The man’s three right arms stirred, and a wave of bloodlust emanated from him.

Vindo fought through the chill that seemed to spread through the air and tried to gauge their opponent’s strength. This man was in a whole different league from the CIM agents. This wasn’t the kind of foe they could beat with their stamina and ammo reserves as exhausted as they were.

Vindo made a snap call.

“We’re getting out of here.”

Remembering the way Queneau and Qulle had been killed filled him with an incandescent rage, but the logical part of his brain led him to make the correct decision as a spy.

He turned and fled from the massive man.

The girl the man had called Green Butterfly circled around with her gun at the ready like she’d read his every move. “Hee-hee, you really think we’re gonna let you—GYAHHH?”

Her obnoxious voice cut off midway through.

“Out of the way, lady.”

Vindo dodged her shot, then bore down on her in a flash. She never had an opportunity to react. By shifting his center of gravity, he took the ten-foot gap between them and closed it with a leap so fast it looked like he’d teleported. After using his footwork four times in succession, his knife reached her throat.

“Those moves...” Green Butterfly’s eyes went wide. “Were those Firewalker’s?”

The best he could do was nick the skin of her throat.

She was no pushover, either. Vindo could probably have successfully killed her if he were in peak form, but fighting for over an hour had drained him of his strength.

He kicked Green Butterfly in the stomach, but while he was busy driving her off, the many-armed man drew ever closer.

“Fall back. I need to engage my full strength.”

The man was still over thirty feet away. There was no way his prosthetics could reach that far.

Vics took advantage of the distance to lay down some suppressive fire. His aim was true, and his shots flew straight at the man’s head.

However, an ominous voice rang out like it was echoing directly inside their heads.

“Now the Unrivaled purge can begin—Surmounters, avail me.”

Vindo gasped, and in that moment, the fight was decided.

Black Mantis had been working on his prosthetic Surmounters for over a decade.

Back in the United States of Mouzaia, he’d been consumed by a desire to become a hero and thrown himself into their development. Upon discovering how expensive R & D could be, he’d become a spy, headed to the Galgad Empire, and decided to start embezzling his operating funds. After accepting White Spider’s invitation to join Serpent, he’d managed to secure funds from Galgad’s intelligence agency and finally complete his prosthetics.

The mechanical arms were too unwieldy for anyone smaller than him to use, and they were perfect for burning, cleaving, and strangling people.

But they had one function more terrifying than all the others—their shock waves.

By using a burst of superheated, pressurized steam, he was able to shoot out

a blast of extremely fine iron sand that could repel bullets and destroy everything in its path.

Pharma and Vics were the first to get hit by the shock wave, and the two of them went flying. Vics's extended arm got crushed, and Pharma was a bloody mess. Vindo had immediately sidestepped, but not even he managed to fully escape the blast.

Thanks to the distance, he was able to regain his balance, but by the time he managed to lift his head, he'd already lost his teammates.

Black Mantis fired from his left hand and shot Vics clean through. Vics had been protecting Pharma with his body. However, Black Mantis's second shot got her, too.

"It's not happy work," Black Mantis said happily, "but this is my duty. Ah, for the hopes of Galgad's people rest upon my shoulders."

"....."

Right as Vindo began truly seeing red, Black Mantis held his arm out again.

A second shock wave exploded out.

Once again, Vindo got blasted away. He couldn't block with his knife. Any suppressive fire he laid down would be pointless. He tried to shield himself with his left arm, and it left his skin shredded and flayed.

His body rose into the air, and he hit the back of his head on the way down. The strength drained from his body as his brain rattled in his skull. He'd been fighting constant battles for some time now, and he'd reached his limit.

He crawled along the ground, wincing at the taste of dirt in his mouth and bracing himself for death. He couldn't even muster the willpower to stand up anymore.

"You're still alive?" Black Mantis muttered in surprise. The fact only served to heighten the man's fascination, and he launched into a rapt soliloquy.

Vindo reached for the moon.

He himself didn't know why he'd done it. The first quarter moon was making its descent in the western sky. There was no way he could ever reach it, yet he felt as though it was fully within his grasp.

"Derangement must be setting in," Black Mantis said pityingly. "This country has a word for people like you: moonrakers. They're fools who try to rake the moon's reflection off the surface of a pond—just the way you're doing now."

After scoffing, he slowly made his approach.

"Worry not, O moonraker. I shall put you out of your misery."

The two creepily long prosthetics glinted, then began whirling as though overjoyed to have received a command from their owner. He was planning on using every ounce of his strength to pulverize Vindo's flesh.

Despite the peril he was in, Vindo kept on staring at the moon.

Eventually, the last of his strength left him, and his consciousness cut out as though sleep had taken him.

When it did, he saw something—his life flashing before his eyes, and the solemnity of the moon he'd looked up at during his time with Lamplight.



It wasn't his first time fighting someone who completely outmatched him. The scars that had been etched in his flesh sent heat all through his body.

There was "Firewalker" Gerde.



Gerde had trained Vindo there in the Fend Commonwealth two years ago, back when he had still been with the Military Intelligence Department, and after clobbering him senseless for several days straight, she had asked him for a favor.

*“I’m gonna need you to lend Little Klaus a hand.”*

They were words not just from a teacher, but from someone who’d saved him as a child many years prior.

*“You’ve got potential, sonny. Enough that you might actually be strong enough to stand by his side someday.”*

Then there was “Bonfire” Klaus.

The man Gerde had told Vindo about was so strong it made him wonder if he needed a hand at all. Vindo had spent a month attacking Klaus with everything he had, and he’d failed to so much as scratch him.

*“Once your mission is over, you should come back to Heat Haze Palace.”*

On the evening of the farewell party, there had been a marked softness in Klaus’s voice.

*“Next time, I’d like to welcome you as a friend.”*



*“...This is insipid.”*

Those were the first words that spilled from Vindo’s mouth.

He squeezed his knife in a backhand grip and mustered the last of his strength to stand up.

Remembering his honeymoon with Lamplight, thinking back to his time with Adi, and reflecting on his encounters with the strong all made him feel like his vision had just cleared. He pushed past his limits and forced his body to move.

*“Still you fight?”* Black Mantis smiled in glee. *“Not bad. I see you’re*

determined to struggle to the bitter end, even when faced with overwhelming might. As the Unrivaled, you have my respect.”

Vindo had no desire to entertain the man’s drivel. Instead, he threw his final smoke bomb, dashed away, and quickly carved some gashes in one of the plum tree’s trunks. He was using a cipher only intelligible to Din spies. In his message, he left details about the girl called Green Butterfly and the many-armed man.

The smoke bomb only bought Vindo a few seconds. Black Mantis had been ready for his attack, and it didn’t take long for the wind-force from Black Mantis’s prosthetics to blow the smoke screen away. Black Mantis shifted his gaze over to Vindo’s new position. “What were you hoping to achieve?” he muttered.

Vindo spun his knife in his hand and reassumed a combat stance. “Moonraker, huh? That’s what you called me?”

“Hmm?”

“I appreciate your keen eye. I already knew the phrase, mind you.”

“Is that so? Forgive me for wasting your time, then.”

“Not at all, I got a kick out of it. You made a total ass of yourself.”

Black Mantis scowled in displeasure.

Seeing that tickled Vindo pink, he grinned. “You clearly have no idea where the word comes from, do you?”

He launched into the tale in order to rile his foe up.

“One night, when these crooks were moving their smuggled goods, they screwed up and dropped them in a lake. They tried to fish it out with rakes, but unlucky for them, a tax collector happened to be walking by and asked them what they were doing. Thinking fast, the crooks pointed at the reflection of the moon on the water’s surface. ‘We’re trying to scoop up this cheese floating in the lake,’ they said. ‘What a bunch of idiots, trying to rake up the moon,’ the tax collector said with a big laugh, then left.”

After delivering his story in a single go, he made his confident declaration.

“So you’ve got it backward.”

“.....”

“The real idiot was *the guy who laughed at the moonrakers.*”

“.....”

Having realized his mistake, Black Mantis quivered in frustration.

“...And what of it? Either way, it doesn’t change the fact that you’re a doomed man.”

The composure was gone from his voice. He may have been strong, but that very strength made him especially susceptible to being taunted.

“Someone like you could never understand,” Vindo said. “You’ll never know what it felt like to try to grab that moon.”

Vindo had no intention of explaining himself.

He had no intention of explaining the strength that the moon he sought—that the moon Adi had looked up at—that the moon he’d seen during the farewell party with Lamplight—and that the *honeymoon* he’d spent with those washouts had granted him.

“We’re spies. When we die, we take our intel—the proof that we lived—and hand it down.”

“Take your empty delusions and perish.”

Unable to contain himself any longer, Black Mantis unleashed a shock wave from his prosthetics.

Vindo predicted its timing and dodged the blast by a hair’s breadth.

He’d seen the attack twice before. Given Black Mantis had been left unscathed both times, the shock wave clearly didn’t reach behind him, and with the way he needed to plant his feet to use it, he had no ability to respond to his targets quickly changing course. Plus, he couldn’t use it repeatedly, either.

Using his trademark footwork, Vindo circled around to a spot the shock wave

couldn't reach.

Black Mantis was undaunted.

"Anyone could think up that counter."

He spun around and lashed out with his prosthetics. Even without their shock waves, his Surmounters were still fully capable of slashing and strangling.

But the moment Black Mantis tried to catch Vindo mid-movement, his body swayed.

"——?!"

Someone had just thrown a rock at him.

It was about the size of a fist, and it had flown in silently from Black Mantis's blind spot and landed a direct hit.

Vindo had seen it all happen.

*Vics...!*

There was still breath in Vics's lungs.

Even as her own life slipped from her, Pharma had used her skills to the fullest to extend Vics's. In the final moments before he perished for good, he had used his raw arm strength to carry out his surprise attack.

It was far too amateurish to truly call teamwork.

All the same, Vindo wasn't about to let that brief opening in Black Mantis's defenses slip by.

"I'm code name Flock—and it's time to gouge clean through!"

He slipped past Black Mantis's prosthetics and plunged his knife forward at

lightning speed.

He failed to impale the man's throat.

At the last moment, Black Mantis gave up on attacking and devoted his full efforts toward evasion and defense. He blocked the knife strike with his mechanical right arms. Sparks flew as metal clashed with metal.

Black Mantis moaned.

The sound of something breaking rang out.

"My Surmounters...!"

Vindo's knife plunged into the attachment point connecting Black Mantis's shoulder to the mechanisms, and the two prosthetic arms dropped off.

Black Mantis toppled over backward with a look of horror on his face. One follow-up from that knife, and even his life would be in grave danger.

However, he quickly realized something and let out a long exhale.

Vindo had already breathed his last. The blades extending from the prosthetics had sliced a deep gash in his gut, and he crumpled lifelessly to the ground.



There was a feeling only those who'd attained a certain state of mind could comprehend.

The Din Republic's legendary spy team Inferno had referred to that state as having fire in one's heart. However, not even they themselves could have really described what that entailed. The best they could have done was say it was something spies came to understand when they went through a period of explosive growth.

Klaus had achieved it at age nineteen during a battle against the Serpent member Silver Cicada.

Monika had achieved it at the tender age of sixteen during a mission in the Fend Commonwealth.

And in that moment, “Flock” Vindo had achieved it as well.

Not only had he destroyed Black Mantis’s weapon, but he had also done so in a way that would take time to fix.

If not for what Avian had achieved there, Lamplight’s mission would have gone radically differently. Monika would have died, and when Klaus had gotten attacked in that train with his arms bound, he might very well have lost as well.



Vindo was standing in a world of all white.

It was blindingly, beautifully white, and there was nothing around him. He didn’t remember how he’d gotten there. However, he concluded it was all a hallucination conjured up by the fact that he was on death’s door and didn’t give it much more thought. “Not like it matters,” he snapped.

He turned to the white void.

“...If I made different choices, could we have avoided this?”

Faint as they were, he still had doubts. He would’ve had to be made of stone not to at least question himself a little every time Vics had called him out.

Countless “what-ifs” swirled through his mind. What if he’d cooperated with Vics—what if he’d listened to what the rest of Avian was telling him—what if he’d bonded with his teammates the way those Lamplight girls did—what if he’d quit being a spy altogether like the Discourse on Decadence...

There had been countless options available to Avian. Lamplight and the Discourse on Decadence had shown them that. But Vindo hadn’t taken any of them. He couldn’t.

“Nah, that’s not it. They just don’t get it.”

That, he was sure of.

Every time Vics had scolded him and told him to work on his teamwork, irritation had welled up in Vindo's chest. There was a reason for that, and he spoke it aloud.

"Avian was perfect. There wasn't a single thing we needed to change."

They'd been fine just the way they were.

Avian could never have become like Lamplight, nor should they have tried. They'd had a style all their own.

The Avian members had fought hard after losing Adi. Vindo had improved his skills, and the other members had honed their techniques as well. In order to fill the huge hole they'd been left with, they had fought and egged each other on as they'd completed their missions. Vics had been coming after Vindo to the bitter end.

The team had lacked for nothing. They'd inherited Adi's spirit, and the moon had been full the whole way through.

"As a spy team, Avian didn't have a single flaw."

When he said that, *she*—the woman who'd been standing before him for who knows how long—the boss who'd built Avian from nothing—the person called "Sky Monk" Adi who'd once inconvenienced him to no end—gave him the conflicted look of someone who lamented their early reunion, yet who'd been eagerly awaiting it for ages, and who was unable to hide her joy at getting to see him again. Then she smiled softly.

"That's absolutely right, Vindo."

She said it a little pompously, as though wanting to remind him she was his superior.

Unsure what he ought to start chewing her out for first, “Flock” Vindo closed his eyes.



## Afterword

Takemachi here! It's been too long.

This here is *Spy Classroom's* third short-story collection. It's got stories about Avian and Lamplight's exchange period.

I made a pretty bold call here. When you consider the second season as a whole, it would have made more sense to give a proper depiction of the girls' time with Avian, and this is content that by all rights should have been in Volume 6. If I'd done that, though, it would have been absolute murder on the book's pacing. After agonizing over my options, I decided, "I know I need to show their time with Avian, but I can cut almost all of that from the mainline series and move it to a short-story collection." Being able to do that is one of the big advantages of the way Fantasia Bunko lets me publish short stories in *Dragon Magazine*.

...Now personally, I was blown away. "Wait, this is awesome!" I said, but maybe other authors consider this sort of thing to be old hat.

Next up, I have some notes on each of the stories.

**Pharma's Case, ft. Sara:** Pharma's a nice girl who gets to shine way more in her short story than in the mainline books. I had a lot of fun with this one.

**Lan's Case, ft. Monika:** Prithee, prithee. What more is there to say?

**Queneau's Case, ft. Annette:** This was my favorite story out of the whole collection. I really love this pairing.

**Vics's Case, ft. Grete:** I wanted to make Grete talk to a man other than Klaus. That, and I wanted her and Klaus to revisit where they stand with each other.

**Quille's Case:** This chaotic story had a full fifteen characters all running around higgledy-piggledy. They're a lively bunch, that's for sure. The culprit behind the

Case of the Floating Erna was so obvious, nobody really gave it a second thought.

**Honeymoon Raker:** It probably goes without saying, but this one was Vindo's story. He truly is the lead character in Avian. I touched on it in the story, but Lamplight could never have succeeded in the Fend Commonwealth if not for him.

At this point, I have some people I'd like to thank, starting with Tomari. As I mentioned in the Volume 6 afterword, the only reason I was able to depict Avian in such detail was because you, my number one reader, gave them your seal of approval and gifted me with such wonderful character designs. I'll never be able to thank you enough for that. I'd also like to thank the many fans who loved Avian as well. The positive comments you wrote about them on social media were the tailwind pushing me forward as I wrote this collection.

Now, I'm thinking the next short-story collection will take place in the period surrounding the Fend mission. It'll have the lead-up to that ordeal, things that took place during it, and the cleanup that followed. Volume 9 is slated to come first, but that short-story collection is definitely on the agenda, so I hope you look forward to it.

...After all, a certain someone is going to need to find a new home for herself. Prithee.

*Takemachi*

# **First Published**

## **Pharma's Case**

*Dragon Magazine*, September 2021 edition

## **Lan's Case**

*Dragon Magazine*, November 2021 edition

## **Queneau's Case**

*Dragon Magazine*, January 2022 edition

## **Vics's Case**

*Dragon Magazine*, March 2022 edition

**SPY CLASSROOM**

**Specialized lessons for an impossible mission**

**Honeymoon Raker**



NEXT MISSION

# SPY CLASSROOM

09

The curtain finally rises  
on the third season...

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