

SPY CLASSROOM

SHORT STORY COLLECTION 01 Bridal Royale



Takemachi
ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari

SPY CLASSROOM

SHORT
STORY
COLLECTION

01

Bridal Royale



SPY CLASSROOM



code name
PANDEMONIUM

code name
MEADOW



code name
GLINT

code name
**DAUGHTER
DEAREST**





SPY CLASSROOM 01

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

Bridal Royale

Takemachi
ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari


New York

COPYRIGHT

Spy Classroom Short Story Collection, Vol. 1

Translation by Nathaniel Thrasher Cover art by Tomari

Assistance with firearm research: Asaura

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SPY KYOSHITSU TANPENSHU Vol.1 HANAYOME ROYAL

©Takemachi, Tomari 2021

First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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

English translation © 2023 by Yen Press, LLC

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

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

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: April 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Anna Powers

Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Takemachi, author. | 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://lcn.loc.gov/2022055931>

ISBNs: 978-1-97536496-0 (paperback)

978-1-9753-6497-7 (ebook)

CONTENTS

SPY CLASSROOM

Specialized lessons for an impossible mission

Bridal Royale

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

The Bridal Hearing

Chapter 1

Sybilla’s Case

Chapter 2

Sara’s Case

Interlude

Intermission ①

Chapter 3

Monika’s Case

Chapter 4

Grete’s Case

Interlude

Intermission ②

Chapter 5

Bridal Royale

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Prologue

The Bridal Hearing

It all began as part of their usual training.

The Lamplight girls had returned from the bioweapon retrieval mission, and after taking a ten-day furlough, they got right to work preparing themselves for their next mission.

Their task was simple: to make Klaus say “I surrender” by any means possible.

Klaus was their team’s boss, and the girls trained by trying to defeat him. In terms of actual spy work, getting a target to cough up the information you were after was one of the most basic tasks there was. However, their opponent was the self-proclaimed World’s Strongest, and the girls had yet to successfully complete their objective even a single time.

We gotta beat Klaus, no matter what it takes!

They were united in their goal, and they worked around the clock to try to complete their training.

“The issue is the boss will be able to see through any of our usual tricks... We’ll need to find a method that will really trip him up.”

The analysis came from Grete, code name Daughter Dearest. She had red hair, a long, slender frame, and a sort of ephemeral fragility not unlike a glass sculpture.

“In other words, what we need to do...”

As the team’s strategist, she matter-of-factly handed down her verdict.

“...is submit a marriage registration for me and the boss.”

“Taking that last bit out of context, it makes it sound like you’ve finally lost it.”

The cool retort came from Erna, code name Fool. She was a petite blond girl

who looked as sweet and adorable as a doll.

“Not at all, Erna,” Grete calmly replied. “This is a crucial part of the plan. Once I become his legal wife, I’ll be able to request copies of his health records from the hospital and even take out life insurance policies on him. It will open up all sorts of new angles for us to attack from.”

“Oh, I see. I shouldn’t have doubted you, Big Sis Grete. You really did come up with a perfect plan.”

“And the first thing I’m going to do is make reservations for our honeymoon.”

“I’m sensing some ulterior motives here!”

The two of them continued chatting, and eventually, they arrived at the residential affairs section of City Hall. With an uncommonly radiant smile, Grete presented the clerk with a marriage registration (forged), a letter of authorization (forged), and some ID papers (also forged).

The clerk smiled warmly as she took the documents. “Congratulations! I’m sure he’s a very lucky guy.” She hummed a little tune as she headed for the cabinets in the back.

“Huh, that’s odd...”

When she got there, though, the humming abruptly cut off. She walked back over to Grete and Erna with puzzlement on her face and cocked her head in confusion.

“I’m terribly sorry, but it would appear that Mr. Klaus is already married...”

“““WHAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”””

Grete’s and Erna’s eyes practically bugged out of their heads.



The world was awash in pain.

The Great War’s end led to an era where the nations of the world began prioritizing their spy programs over their militaries. The Din Republic was one of the countries that suffered in the war, and they too established an intelligence agency and started sending their spies across the globe.

One of the spy teams that operated under their banner was called Lamplight. It was a peculiar group made up of a single boss and eight young female washouts, and whenever their allies were in need, Lamplight would rush from their base in Din to help.

The following incident happened during the team's downtime.

It was right after they got back from the bioweapon retrieval mission, and shortly before the mission to track down Corpse would begin.



Grete and Erna quickly returned to their base and told the others about the shocking news.

"Teach is married? Whoa, I didn't see that one coming!"

Lily's eyes went wide. She was a silver-haired girl with a lovable appearance and a sizable chest. Her code name was Flower Garden, and she was, at least technically, the girls' leader.

The other girls gathered in the gorgeous Heat Haze Palace's main hall and gave voice to their bewilderment as well.

"I—I mean, hey, he is sort of around the right age." "Still, what a shock..." "I always figured he was a perma-bachelor, yo."

In their minds, they all thought of Klaus as sort of a lone wolf.

Apart from his old team, Inferno, there wasn't a single person he seemed deeply attached to. As far as they could tell, he didn't have any friends and wasn't in any relationships. They got the impression that all he did aside from go on missions and train was sit in his room and paint.

"Well, who'da thought. Our very own Klaus, bound in holy matrimony."

The cool-headed comment came from Monika, code name Glint. She had cerulean hair and a medium frame, but aside from her asymmetric hairdo, none of her features were particularly distinctive.

Unlike her perplexed teammates, her smile was as indomitable as they came.

"I don't know how we missed that in our investigations, but either way, there's just one thing to do." She glanced around at the others. "You feel me?"

The rest of the team nodded in agreement.

“Yeah! We can go kidnap Teach’s wife and use her to blackmail him!”

“Oh, heavens no! We should start by forging evidence of him committing adultery.”

“I’m gonna go plant a bomb at his wife’s house, yo!”

“Have you people no morals?” As troubling suggestions began flying back and forth, a tall, handsome man with long hair cut in. He was standing by the girls’ table with a look of utmost exasperation on his face. He was Lamplight’s boss, the girls’ instructor, and, notably, the subject of the conversation they were having at that very moment.

“Teach! How long have you been there?!” Lily yelped.

“Quite a while,” Klaus replied. He shook his head in vague annoyance. “Before you go making trouble for no good reason, you should know that the marriage only exists on paper. It was for a mission, and it didn’t involve any of the sort of domestic life you’re picturing.”

Lily clapped her hands together. “Ohhh, I get it. It’s one of those sham marriage thingies.”

The rest of the girls nodded. It all made sense now.

It wasn’t uncommon for spies to have fake marriages. Pretending to be married could often be helpful during infiltration missions, and many high-society parties required their attendees to be accompanied by a spouse.

“Training or not, I’d appreciate it if you could avoid messing with my family register. I trust that settles the matter.”

With that, Klaus turned to leave.

The girls let out sighs of satisfaction. All their questions had been cleared up.

Sure enough, Klaus was as single as ever. Some of the girls felt unconscious pangs of relief—

“...Not quite. You still haven’t told us everything.”

—but Grete shot a pointed comment Klaus’s way.

He stopped in his tracks. “Have I not?”

“When I looked into your records...I discovered that the marriage was filed just two months ago, right after you put Lamplight together. And what’s more, your bride was only eighteen years old,” Grete said, laying out the facts one after another. “Boss, is the person you married—”

“Nothing gets past you, does it?” Klaus nodded. “You’ve deduced correctly—I’m married to someone on Lamplight.”

“”””””””WHAAAAAAT?!”””””””””

“Again, it’s only on paper. The member in question doesn’t want to make their identity public, so don’t pry.”

“I mean, you say that, but...” Lily pursed her lips discontentedly. “The whole reason we were looking into it at all was for our training...”

“Your industriousness is commendable, but moderation in all things. Even with your furlough over, we’re still coming off a major mission. Why not try to enjoy your youth a little? I can’t imagine you’ve had time for many age-appropriate activities over these past two months,” Klaus said with a gentle look on his face.

Again, the incident took place between the bioweapon retrieval mission and the mission to hunt down Corpse.

At the time, Klaus was still handling all the missions on his own and not letting the girls take part out of a fear that they would be out of their depths.

Lily went silent.

“Hrrmn...”

She crossed her arms and let out a quiet grunt as she visibly sank into thought. Then, she smiled.

“...Y’know what, Teach is right.” She turned calmly to the rest of the team. “Whoever it is clearly wants to keep it a secret, so let’s not try to figure out who the bride is.”

The others all smiled in agreement at Lily's suggestion.

Klaus smiled as well at how obediently his pupils were listening to his instructions. “Magnificent.”

After Klaus left the main hall, Lily spoke up.

“All righty, let’s find us that bride!”

“I figured as much,” Thea—code name Dreamspeaker—replied in exasperation. She was a black-haired girl with ample curves who positively exuded charm and allure. “I must say, though, I’m a little surprised. Grete is one thing, but I wouldn’t have expected *you* to be so interested in who Teach’s bride is.”

“The thing is, I found this in the incinerator,” Lily replied as she fished out an envelope.

From the bits of the address that had survived the fire, it appeared to be an invitation to a fancy party. The host was one of the nation’s most famous gourmands, and you had to bring your wife in order to attend. Klaus must have needed to infiltrate the party in order to conduct a counterintelligence op.

In other words...

“Whoever the bride is, they got to accompany Teach on the mission and eat a swanky meal!”

“Ever the glutton, aren’t you?” Thea massaged her temple and sighed. “Still, I am a little jealous they got to join in on a mission.”

The bride may have only been there to accompany Klaus, but the fact remained that she had gotten to do some actual fieldwork. Many of the team’s members hardly got taken on missions at all, and hands-on experience like that would have been invaluable for them. A discontented look spread across Thea’s face, and Erna and Monika shared the sentiment.

The bride got to act as Klaus’s lover, got to eat nice dinners, got to go on missions—the list of perks seemed to go on and on.

“So, does anyone wanna fess up?” Lily asked the others. “I promise we won’t be mad at you!”

However, nobody decided to speak up. The girls exchanged suspicious looks,

eyeing everyone else in the room. One of them was the culprit, but the question was, who?

“...Welp, guess there’s no choice.”

An unspoken agreement was reached, and the girls all took their seats at the round table in the middle of the room. The chairs were spaced out in an even circle.

Lily planted her elbows on the table and crossed her hands. “All right, nobody’s leaving ’til we’ve settled this! The bridal hearing is now in session!”

Not a single one of them spoke up in dissent.

At the moment, their thoughts were as one.

We need to find out who Klaus married!

The thing was, something about this smelled fishy. Klaus had insisted that the marriage only existed on paper, but if that was really the case, then why hadn’t the bride simply identified themselves? Perhaps there was some real romance blossoming behind the scenes. Their curiosities were piqued!

Lily, who was acting as their provisional chairwoman, cleared her throat. “Why don’t we start by having everyone point at who they think the bride is?”

The girls all pointed their fingers across the table.

The results caused some yelps...

“What the hell? Why’re you all pointing at me?” Three votes went to the white-haired girl with a sharp look in her eyes and a body as toned as a wild animal’s—Sybilla, code name Pandemonium.

“B-but...me?” Another three went to the girl with curly brown hair and eyes as big and wide as a small woodland creature’s—Sara, code name Meadow.

Lily and Monika had each technically gotten a vote as well, but the group had already locked onto its targets.

Lily didn’t waste a beat. “Torture Officer, you’re up!”

“Yo, I’ve got just the invention for this!”

Annette, code name Forgetter, sprang up from her seat. Her ash-pink hair was

messily tied up and accompanied by an eyepatch and a cherubic smile.

She left the main hall for a moment, and when she returned, she was pushing a large wheelchair.

“It’s my very own special-made electric chair!”

“The fuck kind of hearing is this?!” Sybilla quite reasonably cried.

It was not, in fact, any sort of proper hearing, and for that matter, the term *bride* only really referred to a woman immediately after she got married. In this scenario, the term *wife* or *spouse* would have been much more apropos, but the girls had a bad habit of getting caught up in the moment.

“Well, as I recall...,” Grete calmly noted, “...the two of you both shared some intimate moments with the boss right around the time the marriage registration was filed. Sybilla, you had the incident with the pickpocket, and Sara, you had those times just before and after the Manor Renovation Battle...”

Sybilla and Sara winced at the pointed callouts.

“Urk...”

“I—I mean, you’re not wrong, but...”

“We want answers! We want answers!” the rest of the team began chanting.

Once again, Lily didn’t waste a beat. “Torture Officer, you’re up!”

“As a special treat, I’ll go ahead and double the voltage,” Annette replied.

“All right, all right, I get it! I’ll talk, you happy now?!”

“Yeah, I don’t want to get the chair, either!”

Sybilla and Sara began desperately explaining themselves, with each of them recounting what had happened during the events in question.

With that, the girls’ discussion about Klaus’s bride got underway.

Chapter 1

Sybilla's Case

"Attacking him at night's gotta be the call, right? I say we go after him after he falls asleep."

"We already tried that twice, and it didn't work. As far as frontal attacks go, I'm about ready to throw in the towel. Is Klaus much of a drinker? Could we slip him some poison?"

"I think we should kidnap his girlfriend, yo!"

"I would prefer to avoid dragging other people into this if we can help it... What if we merely made it seem as though we had kidnapped her? We could hand him a hair ornament of hers and say, 'Does this look familiar?' to give him the wrong impression."

"First things first, do we know if Teach even *has* a paramour? I mean, I suppose we could always lure him into getting one."

It may have sounded like a gathering of violent gangsters, but that wasn't it. It was actually a group of spy girls doing a training exercise.

They were crowded around a table in the manor's main hall, and suggestions and countersuggestions flew through the air as the eight of them pointed to various spots on the map of the manor's floor plan and tried to work out a strategy for attacking their target.

The target in question was a man named Klaus.

Klaus was Lamplight's boss, but aside from that, the girls knew next to nothing about the man who'd gathered them all together.

Why were they planning on assaulting him, one might ask? As it turned out, they had a good reason. Back when Lamplight was first founded, the original plan had been for Klaus to teach them himself. However, it turned out that

there were some catastrophic issues with that arrangement, so when it fell apart, Klaus came up with a new training method for them in its place: having them try to make him say “I surrender” by any means possible.

They could poison him. They could get him to gamble away all his money. They could even seduce him. Just like in an actual spy battle, they were allowed to use any and all tricks at their disposal.

It didn’t matter how they beat him—just that they did.

Lily, the girls’ leader, summed up the group’s thoughts. “Hmm. What I’m hearing is we want to keep it pretty simple this time around.”

She gave the others a cheery smile, then tilted her head a little.

“Now, we’ll need to start by luring him out. How do we want to play it?”

“You could try seducing him,” her white-haired teammate suggested. “Y’know, flutter your eyes a little and be all, ‘Oh, Teach, I want you to massage me with your big strong hands...’ Maybe get him to rub your tits a little.”

Lily’s face went bright red. “No thanks???”

“Why make ’em so big if you’re not gonna use ’em?”

“It’s not like I had a say in the matter!”

“Well, if seduction’s off the table, I guess that leaves us with fibbing. ‘Could you come to my room? I’ve got something I wanna talk to you about,’ or whatever.”

“Now *that* I might be able to get behind...”

Lily crossed her arms. Better that than trying to seduce him, certainly.

“Hmm.” After a moment, she blinked. “Is this really gonna work, though? Whenever we lie to Teach, he always sees right through us.”

“Nah, nah, you’ll be fine. Here, take this pouch with you.”

The white-haired girl who’d suggested the plan picked up a pouch from the table and tossed it over. Its latch was broken, so it would make for the perfect prop.

Afterward, they finalized their plan.

Lily was going to lure out the target, and once she did, the rest of them would swoop in and attack. The plan was simple, but the classics were classics for a reason.

Their target, Klaus, was over in the storage room, which was a small space tucked away in a far corner of the manor's first floor. At the moment, he was in the middle of organizing his mission tools. It was the best opportunity they were going to get.

The girls readied their weapons and hid themselves in the corridor. The hallway was long, and it had no shortage of good hiding places. They snuck behind pillars, stoves, and cabinets and waited for their target to show up.

The air was thick with tension as Lily took the pouch and headed into the storage room.

"Teach, I have a favor I want to ask! My pouch broke, so could you come to my room to help fi—" Lily's voice cut off.

A massive sound like a balloon popping came from inside the room, and as red powder blasted through the gaps in the doorframe—

"THE POUCH EXPLODED INTO CHILI POWDERRRRR!"

—Lily let out a scream.

"""""""" """"""""

The rest of the team turned their gaze as one onto the white-haired girl who'd provided the pouch.

"So I had this slick idea, see."

With a proud look on her face, she began handing pairs of goggles out to each of her teammates. She had a sharp stare and roughly cut short white hair. Her body didn't have a single pound of excess fat on it, and her eyes had an intimidating look about them. The bracing dignity she carried herself with was like that of a wild animal bounding through a meadow.

Her name was Sybilla, her code name was Pandemonium, and she was the mastermind behind the current operation.

She nodded as she revealed the *actual* plan to the others.

“If the target’s gonna see through any bullshit we try to feed him, then all we gotta do is have the attacker not know what’s up, either. I call it Operation: Collateral Damage!”

""""""""Yeesh...""""""""

The others were taken aback, but Sybilla chose not to pay them any heed.



She snapped on her goggles. “C’mon, let’s not let Lily’s sacrifice be in vain! Capture the target while he’s still blinded!”

As soon as she barked out the order, the rest of the girls all started racing in Klaus’s direction.

“Well, I suppose what’s done is done.” “Rest in peace.” “I’ll never forget the memories we shared, Sis.” “...You all know that Miss Lily isn’t actually dead, right?”

The time for second-guessing themselves was over. The girls charged into the storage room with their convictions renewed.

After all, that was the way they trained—through lies and deception, with no holds barred.



The incident in question took place shortly after Lamplight’s founding, just four days after Klaus instructed the girls to defeat him.

At first, the girls underestimated their assignment and thought it would be a piece of cake, but as time wore on, the sheer difficulty of the task before them finally began sinking in. Klaus didn’t just call himself the World’s Strongest, he had the skills to back up the claim, too. It didn’t take the girls long to realize just how real his talents were.

By day four, the raw gulf between his abilities and theirs was really starting to get them down.

They began doubting their entire training regimen and losing what little self-confidence they’d managed to retain.

Furthermore, some of them still didn’t fully trust Klaus yet—and thus, the stage was set.



Ten minutes after the attack...

“...Damn, I can’t believe he was able to dodge the chili bomb.”

“MUST BE NICE FOR HIM, HUH?!”

The girls were back in the main hall holding a postmortem.

To make a long story short, their attack failed.

When the explosive pouch Lily was unwittingly carrying went off, it had filled the entire room with a special tear-inducing powder. The idea was to have it blind Lily and the target alike...but the target had reacted quickly enough to escape out the window. By the time the begoggled girls got to the storage room, the target had had enough time to come back with goggles of his own. It only took him a few seconds to completely wipe the floor with them.

In the end, Lily's sacrifice ended up being in vain after all.

Tears and mucus streamed down her face as she confronted Sybilla. "You're a monster! A thug! How can you not feel guilty about turning your own teammate into a bomb?!"

"I mean, I *am* sorry, but, like..." Sybilla replied as she held Lily away from her throat. "This was our best shot, y'know? Our shitty acting's never gonna fool him. If you'd known about the bomb ahead of time, he'd have seen through it even quicker."

"Y-you're not wrong, but still..."

"And plus, in a real battle, using stooges like that is fair game."

It wasn't cowardly. It was simply their trade.

There were no precepts that spies had to follow, nor did they have a code of chivalry. Seduction, assassination, disguises, blackmail, kidnapping, infiltration, and wiretapping were all on the table. For the girls, all that mattered was that they completed their mission.

In a sense, the conditions they trained under were about as close to actual fieldwork as you could get.

"I shoulda paid more attention to the staging, huh?" Sybilla said. She looked up at the ceiling and began muttering to herself. "What we need is the element of surprise. We could have Lily fistfight the target on a dried-up riverbed, then set off the bomb right as they go for a conciliatory handshake... Or we could have Lily confess her love to the target, then set off the bomb the moment they

exchange a kiss... We could send Lily out in the dead of winter to look for a lost puppy, then set off the bomb when the target hugs her to warm up her frozen shoulders..."

"Why's it always *me* getting blown up?" Lily retorted.

"C'mon, there's no need to get mad. Here, to show you how sorry I am, I'll even take over your cooking shift tonight."

"And you'll give me an extra-big portion?"

"Sure. I've got tons more chili powder I need to use up."

"...You're not sorry at all, are you?"

The argument started with just Sybilla and Lily, but the rest of the team quickly got dragged into it as well. After figuring out the spots where their last plan went wrong, they got to work putting together their next one.

That was what the girls did. They started with proposals, worked them into plans, carried out recon, put their plans into motion, screwed up, held postmortems, and started the whole process over again. The hope was that by doing so over and over, they would gradually end up honing their skills.

As the rest of the team started getting excited about their next scheme, Sybilla let out a frustrated murmur under her breath. "Damn, and I thought it was a pretty good idea..." However, none of the others heard her.



As the day wound to a close, Sybilla headed back to her room and lay sprawled out on her bed.

The strength drained from her body as she stared vacantly up at the ceiling.

"I'm wiped. Again..."

Each of the girls had a bedroom all to herself. The manor had rooms enough to spare, so the girls all lived and trained there together.

The bed was soft and fluffy, and Sybilla's body sank readily into it. If she let her guard down, she'd be asleep before she knew it. It reminded her once again of how luxurious her new life was, but that in turn reminded her of what she was going to have to do to earn it, and it made her head feel heavy.

There was just one reason why Sybilla had gone to lengths as extreme as sacrificing her teammate to carry out her attack, and that reason was the Impossible Mission. That was the term for the type of mission that Lamplight had to look forward to, and having to undertake it was the price they were going to have to pay for their lavish manor lifestyle.

Impossible Missions were incredibly difficult. Their success rate was in the single digits, and 90 percent of agents who went on one didn't come back alive. Sybilla didn't know what specifically their mission was going to entail, but the fact it awaited them was why they were devoting every moment of free time they had to training. They were battling around the clock, day and night.

For all their efforts, though, all they'd been met with was a string of failures. Even with all of them working together, they couldn't defeat a single lone spy.

That was why she was so anxious. Their deadline was only four weeks away, but she didn't feel like she'd learned a thing.

"Are all elite spies seriously that strong...?"

They had been forced to acknowledge a cruel fact time and again over the course of their training: their target, Klaus, was a bona fide monster.

He was leagues ahead of them in every metric, from his athletic abilities to his quick thinking on his feet to the accuracy of his hunches. He turned the tables on them when they all rushed him down with knives at the ready, he saw through every booby trap they laid, and he didn't bat an eye at their seduction attempts. There was no denying that Klaus's skills were in a league of their own.

The problem was, what if their upcoming mission required them to go up against someone with skills on par with Klaus's? They'd get annihilated, that was what.

Thinking about that possibility, and about the fact that it was getting closer every moment, sent a chill down Sybilla's spine. She reached for the framed picture on her nightstand.

It was an unremarkable photograph of the ocean—but hidden behind it was the picture she really wanted to see. She disassembled the frame, pulled out the photo, and felt a flood of warmth fill her heart.

A few words spilled from her lips. “Your big sister’s doin’ her best...”

Nobody was supposed to have heard—but someone spoke up from behind her. “Whoa! I never knew you could sound so sisterly!”

“The hell?!” Sybilla leaped violently from her bed and looked in the direction the voice came from.

Lily froze midway through opening the door. “Ah, sorry. I knocked, but you didn’t say anything,” she mumbled by way of an excuse.

“Yeah, I was pretty out of it.”

Sybilla wanted to kick herself for being so careless. It wasn’t like anything bad would come of Lily seeing her, but it was embarrassing all the same.

She flopped back down on her bed.

Lily closed the door behind her, then jogged over to the bed and picked up the photo.

The picture was of three children, one of whom was a younger Sybilla. They were standing in front of a white building with big smiles on their faces.

“Is this your little brother and little sister?”

“Yeah,” Sybilla said from atop the bed. “We got it taken back when I was at the orphanage.”

“Oh, huh,” Lily replied casually as she took another look at the photo. Her mouth curled into a small grin. Sybilla assumed she was thinking about how much cuter her siblings were compared to her.

“This photo’s pretty old, isn’t it? You’re so teensy!”

“.....I don’t get back there much these days.”

“Do they know you’re a spy?”

“Nah. When I left, I told ’em I was joining a detective agency out in the sticks.”

Spies generally didn’t tell their families about their jobs. If their families accidentally let any information slip, they could end up in serious danger before they could blink.

“I guess the rules are the rules,” Lily said sadly.

“Yup. Still, I think they figured somethin’ was up. Back when we split, we made a promise that once I got rich, we’d get back together and live happily ever after.”

“Aww, that’s nice.”

“Course I’ve accomplished exactly jack and shit since then.”

Sybilla had been overeager to a fault during her academy days, and it had earned her a lot of pushback from her peers and instructors. Her poor teamwork during her practical exams meant her abilities plateaued, and to make matters worse, she caused so many other problems that before she knew it, she was on the verge of expulsion.

She had all the motivation in the world to want to get stronger, but that was precisely what made her failures sting so harshly.

“Honestly, I’m worried as hell.” Sybilla couldn’t believe how pathetic she sounded. “If things go on like this, we’re boned. The thing is, I dunno what I can do. It doesn’t feel like I’m gettin’ any stronger, so it’s like, what’s this training even good for? Hell, I don’t even know how much I believe in our teacher yet...”

She realized that she was saying too much.

Glancing over to the side, she discovered that Lily’s eyes were moist. Lily dabbed at them with a handkerchief. “Sybilla, you’re such a good kid...”

“Wh-what?”

“I had you pegged all wrong, and I’m super sorry. All this time, I thought you were just a rude, uncivilized orangutan.”

“You wanna walk that comment back, or am I gonna have to make you?”

“But now, I realize that you’re a really *kind* orangutan.”

“Yeah, see, that’s not the part I wanted you to take back!”

Despite Sybilla’s angry outburst, Lily was operating on a frequency all her own.

“It’s okay. You are getting stronger—we all are!” She smiled radiantly and

took Sybilla by the hand. Her eyes were gleaming. “With how crazy strong Teach is, we’ve gotta be learning a bunch by fighting him so much. And we’re just gonna keep getting better and better. Then, we’re gonna complete that Impossible Mission and get a gigantic bonus!”

Sybilla found herself a little overwhelmed by the infectious enthusiasm. “I—I guess so...”

“And as step number one, we’re gonna give Teach what-for.” Lily released Sybilla’s hand and proudly threw out her ample chest. “Heh-heh-heh. And it just so happens that your magnificent leader Lily’s come up with a plan to do just that! Plus, the plan even comes with a free boxed lunch!”

“Sorry, a what?”

“Y’know, for moral support. After all, you’re gonna be the star of the show this time!”

That was probably what she’d come to tell Sybilla in the first place.

Lily’s voice rang with a touch too much confidence as she explained their next plan of attack.

The following morning, Sybilla quietly snuck out of Heat Haze Palace.

The manor sat in a port city in a small nation called the Din Republic. The port was the nation’s gateway to the rest of the world, and its presence had grown the city into the third most prosperous locale in the country. Between the traders gathering there to sell their imported goods and the throngs of immigrants who worked on the docks, the city was a melting pot of people of every socioeconomic status imaginable.

The girls’ cover story for living there was that they were students at a local seminary school.

Sybilla strode down the bustling holiday streets dressed as your average stylish schoolgirl.

“Annette’s wiretap worked like a charm.”

Lily had laid out the plan for her.

“Tomorrow, Teach is going into town to pick up some confidential documents.

If you can steal the envelope they're in, he'll surrender right then and there. We can win without even having to fight him."

She had a point. It was a good plan.

Whenever you were delivering highly sensitive information, it was important to do the handoff directly. Even though they were within their own borders, there was no knowing where enemy spies might be lurking, and sending the intel via mail or by phone ran the risk of interception. Soon, Klaus was going to head somewhere in the city so he could receive it in person.

Now, if that intel were to get stolen...

Sybilla tracked Klaus's suit with her gaze. The air of intimidation he usually carried himself with was gone like it had never been there. He walked through the city as just another young man in the crowd.

Klaus stepped into a paint store as unsuspiciously as could be. When he did, the owner brought him a can of paint from the back of the shop.

The owner's gait is too spry for how heavy that can should be.

It was an amateurish mistake, but most of their covert domestic collaborators weren't exactly much to write home about.

Whatever was in that can, it definitely wasn't paint.

So that's where the documents are hidden...

Klaus paid, then immediately stashed the paint can away in his bag.

Always the thorough one, that Klaus. If Sybilla wanted to make off with the documents, she was going to have to steal his entire bag.

After Klaus left, he headed down the main road with brisk, unfaltering steps. From time to time, he would find a spot where traffic was especially dense and cross the street by smoothly weaving his way between the cars.

It was taking everything Sybilla had just to keep up with him.

She continued assiduously tailing her mark and tried to figure out when the perfect moment to strike would be.

Once he made it back to the manor, he would waste no time in opening the

paint can, reading its contents, and disposing of them. If she wanted to steal those documents, she was going to have to do it while he was still out in public.

An opportunity presented itself when they reached the park in the heart of the city.

“Excuse me...would you like some juice?”

A girl called out, but not to her—to Klaus.

Sybilla clenched her fists. *Looks like it's my lucky day.*

Klaus hadn't gone straight home.

Instead, he'd stopped by the city's large public green, sat down leisurely on the grass, and retrieved a wrapped-up hunk of bread from his bag. By the look of it, he wanted to enjoy a peaceful meal surrounded by greenery.

Klaus seemed to constantly be on the move, and it was rare for Sybilla to ever see him take a load off like this. Perhaps this was a secret vice of his.

Right as he took the first bite, a young girl came up to him.

“It's...orange juice. Um...freshly...squeezed,” she stammered out.

She looked like she was about eight, and her face was bright red. Given the dingy state of her pale, yellow dress, it wasn't hard to figure out how impoverished she was.

Sybilla eavesdropped on their conversation from behind a nearby tree.

“.....”

She couldn't make out what Klaus had said, but it looked like he was taking the girl up on her offer. He took his wallet out of his bag and handed her some coins before stashing his wallet away again.

An innocent smile spread across the girl's face like a flower coming into bloom. She pulled a glass that couldn't possibly have been clean out of her pocket, then began filling it with juice from her canteen.

“Oop—” Sybilla heard an alarmed yelp.

The girl had just tipped her cup too far and splashed juice all over Klaus's shoes.

“I-I’m so sorry...,” she said, squatting down by Klaus’s feet with tears in her eyes.

“.....”

Klaus’s full attention was on the girl who’d just spilled juice on him. His bag was sitting behind him, and from the look of it, it was the last thing on his mind.

Sybilla was never going to get a better opening. What she had was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and if she was going to steal the bag, then now was the time to do it.

She slipped out from behind the tree, silently approached Klaus from behind, stealthily reached for his bag—

“Wha—” “Huh?”

—and felt her fingers meet someone else’s.

Sybilla’s hand and the juice girl’s hand smacked right into each other.

For a moment, it felt like time itself had stopped.

Sybilla froze up. Her gaze met the girl’s.

“Wait, you—”

The moment she opened her mouth to talk, though, she felt someone flick her in the forehead.

It was little more than a light tap, yet it threw her off-balance as though by magic and sent her sprawling on her rump.

It went without saying who she had to thank, of course.

A deep, heart-stirring voice sounded out.

“Magnificent.”

There was a beautiful man standing before her.

He was tall and skinny, and at first glance, it was easy to mistake him for a woman. Many of his lovely features were hidden behind his shoulder-length hair. It was Lamplight’s boss—Klaus.

“That was some excellent work back there.” He looked down at Sybilla with

an expression of utmost pride. “You made sure to never stray too far or come too close when you were tailing me, and though your efforts ended in failure, your movements during the theft itself were nothing short of fantastic. You hid your presence completely and didn’t make a single sound. A captivating performance all around,” he said matter-of-factly as he offered his hand to Sybilla down in the grass.

Sybilla sighed and let him help her up. “...If you’re praising me for all that, it means you already knew I was tailing you.”

“Since the moment I left Heat Haze Palace, yes.”

“That’s the whole goddamn time!”

In the end, Klaus had seen through her from the start. No amount of compliments would be enough to wash *that* bad taste out of her mouth.

Klaus crossed his arms and closed his eyes. “Here, why don’t I tell you the trick to tailing someone?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“All you have to do is make like you’re doting on a butterfly as it flutters.”

“Why’re your lessons always so useless?!”

“Hmm. What if I told you to place the balls of your feet correctly?”

“What makes you think I’d be able to get *anything* from that?”

That was it, right there. That was the reason she and the others weren’t able to train normally.

The fact of the matter was *Klaus was soul-crushingly bad at teaching*.

There was no denying how talented of a spy he was. The girls didn’t have a great grasp on the full extent of his abilities yet, but he both called himself the World’s Strongest and had the skills to back that claim up. However, that was precisely where the problem lay.

His intuition was simply too far beyond the average person’s.

Most people would have difficulty explaining how exactly to put on a shirt or to button a button, and Klaus’s inability to teach spy techniques stemmed from

the same source. He could certainly try, but in the end, all his explanations devolved into crude “just do it”s and “somehow or other”s.

As a result, Lamplight had been forced into their current regimen of mock battles.

“In any case, you’re on the right track. All you need to do now is be as fast as a thrust needle,” Klaus said to sum it all up.

“Again, this advice is just not helpful...”

Sybilla was a little bit fed up with Klaus. She wanted to click her tongue at him, but she suppressed the urge.

Is this guy really gonna be able to help me get stronger...?

It was pretty clear by now that their plan had failed.

They hadn’t just lost; they’d been utterly trounced. The target had known she was there the whole time, so there was no way she would have ever been able to get her hands on those documents.

Feels like my skills haven’t grown a single inch.

Lily had claimed that they were all getting stronger, but that was probably just wishful thinking. The tables were getting turned on them over and over in an endless loop, and Sybilla doubted they would ever break free.

She could feel the frustration building up within her like a fire scorching her insides.

However, there was something more pressing on her mind.

First things first, about that kid who was selling juice...

Sybilla looked down at the bewildered girl.

The kid appeared to have a habit of staring at the ground, and her body was so scrawny that she seemed ready to collapse with every breath. Sybilla and Klaus’s conversation had gone completely over her head, so she was just standing there in a daze.

“Hey, kid, are you—”

“A-ahhh!” the girl screamed.

It was clear how freaked out she was. She was clutching the hem of her dress like her life depended on it.

“C’mon, you don’t gotta be so scared...” It made Sybilla feel like she was being a bully. She reached out to pat the girl’s head.

“Eek!”

When she did, the girl shrieked and leaped at Klaus to get away from her hand.

The moment she did, there was a loud *crunch* as something got flattened. The girl had crushed Klaus’s bread underfoot. “Ah—” she squeaked hoarsely. Tears started dripping from her eyes.

“H-hey, no, c’mon...”

The girl paid no heed to Sybilla’s hurried plea and began crying in earnest. She curled up into a ball and wailed.

Klaus gave Sybilla a cold glance from his position beside her. “Look, you made her cry.”

“Wait, this is my fault?!”

“Don’t worry, your actions were kind. But they weren’t enough to make up for how scary your face is.”

“...Thanks, now I feel even shittier.”

Klaus gave a small nod, then stooped down on one knee.

“Do you like cats, young lady?” he asked. His voice usually had an almost mechanical emotionlessness to it, but now, it carried an undertone of kindness.

The girl looked up.

Sybilla was honestly a little surprised. She had no idea he even *could* sound like that.

Still down on one knee, Klaus inspected the hem of the girl’s dress. Upon closer inspection, it was terribly frayed. She had worn it out pretty thoroughly. In his other hand, he was holding a needle and thread.

The girl stared at Klaus’s fingers in rapt attention.

From there, it all happened in a flash as Klaus sewed up the threadbare dress at an incredible speed. His movements were smooth and flowing, and in the blink of an eye, he finished embroidering the dress's hem with an adorable little cat.

"Wow!" the girl said. A smile spread across her face before their eyes.

Now adorned in her newly decorated dress, she flashed a toothy grin of delight. No more tears spilled from her eyes.

Sybilla was astounded at the feat Klaus had just pulled off. "Where'd you get the needle from?"

"I always carry some hidden in my sleeve. And I unraveled my handkerchief for the thread."

He turned his suit's cuffs toward Sybilla and slid a number of needles of varying lengths in and out of them.

As it turned out, Klaus could do a perfectly fine job explaining *what* he did.

"The trick to embroidery is to make like you're doting on the entire world."

He just couldn't explain the methods or logic behind how he did it.

Sometimes, it was hard to tell if he was an idiot or a genius.

"Thanks for the save..."

At any rate, she knew she needed to thank him. If she'd been on her own, she wouldn't have known how to pacify the crying child.

Sybilla took another look over at the girl. Her smile really was adorable, especially with her missing baby teeth. The sight gently stirred up Sybilla's memories.

"I'm gonna walk the kid home," she said.

"How civic-minded of you," Klaus replied.

"...Yeah, she looks kinda like my sister."

"Sorry, what was that? I didn't quite catch it."

"Nah, it's nothing. I just said I'm not gonna leave some kid out on her own."

Wouldn't sit right with me."

Klaus shot a quiet stare at the girl. Between his still eyes and his level expression, it was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

Eventually, he nodded as though in satisfaction, though it was anyone's guess as to why.

"...No, I suppose not. I'll come along, too."

Sybilla hadn't seen that one coming, but before she had a chance to ask Klaus why, he was already gently chatting with the girl.

Apparently, the juice peddler's name was Finé.

Once you talked to her, it became clear that she was a cheerful young girl just like any other. She was afraid of Sybilla at first, but after Sybilla talked to her a bit and told her some jokes, Finé started smiling at her, too. By the time all was said and done, she was holding both their hands and walking down the main road looking as happy as could be.

In particular, she really seemed to take a shine to Sybilla. Finé bombarded her with question after question, and Sybilla deftly answered them all, smiling gently as she watched Finé's gaze dart every which way.

"Well, would you look at that," Klaus said admiringly. "It seems I didn't need to butt in after all. The two of you are getting along like a house on fire."

"Yeah, I've been practicin' since I was a kid." Sybilla used to have to look after her two younger siblings, so she was well versed in dealing with children. "You can head on back, if you want," she offered. "I'll make sure she gets home safe."

"No, no, it's fine. I'll see this through with you."

"Y-your call..."

It was a little awkward, that was all.

The three of them were holding hands with Finé in the middle, and it was making Sybilla feel a bit self-conscious. The fact that she still had her reservations about Klaus was part of it, but something else was bothering her more.

We totally look like a couple...

She was pretty sure that back at the park, she had seen loads of parent-child trios that looked just like them. With the way Finé was sandwiched between them, did the people passing them on the street think that they were a family, too?

"If people see us as a family, that actually works in our favor," Klaus told her over Finé's head. "It'll help us draw less attention."

Apparently, he had figured her out.

Sybilla gave him a dubious glance. "You sure about that?"

"Go on, honey. Try calling me 'sweetie.'"

"Okay, that one's definitely a bridge too far..."

"This is part of your training, too."

"....."

When he put it like that, it was hard to argue. There were times in a spy's life when they needed to be prepared to pretend like they were married.

She could feel her face growing hotter as she parted her quivering lips. "...S-swee—"

"I was joking."

"Oh, you're so dead!" she bellowed, blushing up a storm.

Once her head cooled off, she realized that she was wearing her fake seminary uniform. There was no way anyone would have actually mistaken them for a couple.

Seriously, how'd I get stuck with this jackass as my boss?

Sybilla shot Klaus a scathing glare, which caused Finé to erupt into laughter. She might not have understood what they were talking about, but she still found their bickering endlessly amusing.

"Do you two not get along, miss?" she asked.

"Nope," Sybilla replied without a moment's hesitation. "I try to beat him up

every day, and every day, he beats me up first. He's merciless."

"I've been plenty merciful. Lately, I've started only using one hand."

Sybilla gave Klaus another glare. "Yeah, and that pisses me off even more..."

When she did, Finé gave Sybilla's hand a little squeeze and smiled. "That's just like at my house, then."

"What?"

"My daddy always says that when you get mad at someone, it's because of how much you love them."

"In our case, I don't think it's anything nearly so heartwarming." Sybilla paused for a moment. That made it sound a bit too harsh. "I mean, forget love, I barely know the first thing about this guy."

"But then why's your hand getting so warm, miss?"

"....."

That shut Sybilla up good.

It wasn't like she seriously had feelings for Klaus or anything, it was just that all this talk about love and stuff was kind of embarrassing. Still, she could feel her face go redder by the moment.

"You're a cheeky little rascal, you know that?!"

With a jokey grin, Sybilla let go of Finé's hand and began ruffling up her hair. "Eek, that tickles!" Finé cried with delight as she tried to shake free.

"So, where exactly is it you live?" Sybilla asked. "The two of us'll help you apologize to your folks for spilling the juice, but you gotta let us know where it is we're goin'."

"We're almost there."

Finé broke free from Sybilla's hand, then took a turn off the main road and headed down a side alley. Sybilla and Klaus followed along after her.

Eventually, Finé stopped somewhere wholly unexpected—a dead end. And there didn't appear to be any houses nearby, either.

“Miss White-Haired Lady, Mr. Stitching Guy...”

Finé’s voice was barely a whisper.

“...I’m sorry.”

Something moved in the shadows.

“Huh?” Sybilla said, dumbfounded.

All of a sudden, there was a giant standing before them. The man was well over six feet tall and covered in muscle. He was huge. Plus, he was nearly as broad as he was tall. It was like looking at a wall.

Sybilla started to react, but Klaus tapped her lightly on the arm.

A moment later, the man’s boulder-like fists sent the two of them crashing into a wall.

The man shoved burlap sacks over their heads to obscure their vision, then dragged them off. After cuffing their hands behind their backs, he shoved them into a car and drove off. Sybilla was still dizzy from the blow she’d suffered to the head, but lying on her side for a bit helped her collect herself. Based on the scents she picked up through the sack, they were heading away from the ocean.

When the car stopped and their captor forced them out, Sybilla noticed that the light from the sun was gone. They must have been indoors. Their captor pushed them against a wall, then kicked their legs to force them to sit.

She heard a deep male voice. “Don’t move. Just wait there.” It was probably the same guy who’d punched them. A pair of footsteps receded away.

Once the man was gone, Sybilla reached up with her legs to rip the sack off her head.

The building they were in was made of wood and had clearly seen better days. Unlike the plaster and wallpaper coverings most of the city’s buildings boasted, the lumber walls there were left raw and exposed. She and Klaus were down on the first floor, but thanks to the two-story ceiling, she had a decent view of the entire building. There were what appeared to be hammocks hanging all around, and the air was ripe with the distinctive smell of musty cloth.

The handcuffs are fixed around a pillar, huh?

She tried moving her wrists, but all she got for her troubles was a metallic rattling noise. She couldn't undo her restraints.

Once she finished surveying their situation, she called over to Klaus. "Where are we?"

"Deep in the slums, I imagine."

"I wonder what the hell was up with that golem-looking dude. Was he some friend of Finé's?"

Klaus didn't look shaken in the slightest. He began dispassionately laying out the facts. "This is a port city. Tourists and merchants have been stopping here for ages, and whenever you have a city like that, it's easy for the social fabric to fray. One of the most acute issues is the philanderers. Once they've had their way with the local women, they head back to wherever it is they came from. When the women give birth, they often don't have the means to raise the children, so they end up abandoning them."

He gestured up at the second floor with his chin.

"And when they do, those children end up getting taken in by crime syndicates in the slums."

"....." Sybilla gulped.

She could see the eyes.

Up on the second floor, there was a gaggle of children peeking down at them. At a glance, Sybilla counted about twenty. The hammocks must have been where they slept, and now, they were using the swaths of cloth as hiding spots as they tracked Sybilla and Klaus with their nervous gazes.

All of them were just like Finé. Their bodies were scrawny, and their clothes were tattered and worn out.

"....."

Sybilla unconsciously started grinding her teeth. She could feel a fire rising up inside her.

“Sounds like someone knows a whole damn lot about us.” The enormous “golem-looking dude” was back.

Now that she could really see him, he looked more like a towering wall than ever. He wore his muscle like a suit of armor, and each of his arms were thick as one of Sybilla’s thighs and threatening to burst out of his clothes. The light shone menacingly off his leather jacket as he strode up to them like he owned the place.

“We’re just your average Joes with an ear for rumors,” Klaus replied unconcernedly.

The man nodded. “That checks out. You didn’t have guns on you, so you’re no plainclothes cops. Just some idiots with more curiosity than sense, huh?”

Sybilla had wanted to blend in as much as possible, so she’d left all her weapons back at the manor. Apparently, Klaus had been thinking the same thing.

“...So, I take it you’re the leader of the gang of pickpockets that’s been making the rounds lately?” Klaus asked.

The question earned him a suspicious look from the man. “See, now you’re sounding like some sorta gumshoe.”

“Again, we’re just a pair of average Joes. I just happened to catch word about a certain garbage human who’s been making a living by forcing children to steal for him.”

“Hey, whoa, you make me sound like some sorta monster.” The man shrugged with apparently genuine offense. “All I’m doing is taking in kids who’ve got nowhere else to go. These guys don’t have parents to look out for ’em, and I’m here teaching them a trade, putting clothes on their backs, and keeping them fed. If you think about it, I’m basically a social worker.”

“And you really believe that.”

“Damn straight I do. There’re some real scumbags in this world, but I ain’t one of ’em. As soon as you promise to keep quiet about Finé’s pickpocketing, y’all can be on your merry way.”

So, that was why he'd kidnapped the two of them—to ensure their silence.

To sum it all up, Finé had been a thief all along. That juice she was selling was nothing more than a prop to let her get close to Klaus so she could steal the wallet out of his bag. Once she realized that Sybilla and Klaus were onto her, she and the man had exchanged a look, and she led the two of them into a secluded alley so he could attack them.

“.....”

They'd been played.

The smart thing to do would be to just do what the man said and turn a blind eye to the whole thing. Any crime they accused him of would leave Finé and the other children homeless. If they could lead peaceful lives under the man's protection, then perhaps that was for the best.

But first, there was one question that needed answering.

“...Finé cried.”

“Huh?” the man said, confused.

Sybilla looked up and shot him an indominable glare. “All I did was reach toward her, and she started bawlin' like the world was gonna end.”

Sybilla had merely been trying to pat her head, yet she'd immediately recoiled.

It was like she was afraid she was about to get hit. Like the instinctive fear welling up inside her had been too much to bear.

A telltale sign of abuse.

Sybilla clenched her fists tight. “Every time you hit these kids, you tell 'em the same damn thing, don't you? ‘I'm only getting mad 'cause of how much I love you,’ you say. You call that shit *love*!”

The man let out a low, strangled groan.

Sybilla looked up at the children hiding on the second floor. “Hey, Finé! What the hell's your daddy been doin' to you?”

Finé was the only one she'd directed the question at.

However, there wasn't a child upstairs who didn't react. Some of their faces froze as fear filled their minds, some of them curled into balls as their shoulders trembled, and others instinctively clutched at their heads—but all of them knew exactly what she was talking about.

Sybilla could even spot the big, blotchy bruises on some of their faces.

"Shaddap, you!" the enormous man roared. "Don't go talkin' shit about my teaching methods!" He charged at Sybilla, who was still bound, and raised his massive fist in a practiced motion.

Klaus hurled himself between them and took the punch in her place.

"Rgh..."

Sybilla thought she saw him blunt the blow by catching it on his shoulder, but still, Klaus grunted in pain.

"Are you okay...?" she blurted out.

If he really had taken that punch head-on, then he wasn't walking away without at least a broken bone or two. That was no amateur's punch. The man had rotated his leg and waist to send his full power down his arm and into his fist. It made for a deadly attack—one that clearly had some training behind it.

"You little brat. You've got a rebellious look in your eyes..."

Sybilla glared at him, and the man grinned.

"Hey, Snowflake. You grew up in the slums yourself, didn't you?"

"....."

He'd seen right through her.

Sybilla went silent, and that was all the confirmation he needed.

"When you've put in the time that I have, you can tell these things." He scoffed proudly. "I've broken in plenty of mouthy shits like you. With *these two fists*."

He jabbed twice in the air. The blows were sharp, and Sybilla could hear the air whizzing by as he fired each one off.

The onlooking children yelped in fear.

“Let’s see how many punches you can take. Few dozen, at least. You can scream all you want, but it won’t do you any good. No one will hear.”

“.....” Sybilla knew this world.

It was a world where little girls sobbed and cried, but nobody lent them an ear.

Sybilla had grown up in a different city, but it was all the same world. Up until when they went to the orphanage, she’d spent her entire youth trying to protect her siblings from a city drenched in violence and poverty.

She understood that pain in her very bones.

Wanting to change that world was what drove her to become a spy.

To Sybilla, it felt like Finé’s eyes were screaming for help.

She bit down hard on her lip.

Beside her, Klaus’s head was still drooping. “What was that you said...?” he rasped. “No one would hear us scream?”

The man’s nostrils flared. “Course not. In a dump like this, no one gives a rat’s ass about a little scream or two.”

“...So if someone screams, no one will come to help?”

“That’s what I just said, ain’t it?”

“You’re certain about that? No one will care, even if we make a huge racket?”

“How many times do I gotta—”

“Understood. Oh, and by the way—”

Klaus’s voice dropped an octave.

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

Kerchunk.

A metallic noise rang out.

Klaus’s handcuffs toppled to the floor.

In his hand, he was holding a needle—one of the ones from his sleeve. He

tossed it over to Sybilla, and she caught it behind her back and quickly unfastened her cuffs as well.

The man reeled backward. “Wh—”

As Sybilla massaged her newly freed wrists, she launched into a tirade. “I swear, it’s like fuckin’ amateur hour over here. I mean, attackin’ us right by the main road like that? It’s like you don’t even give a shit about keeping a low profile.”

“Thank you for playing along,” Klaus told her. “I wanted to find out where his hideout was.”

The moment before the man punched her back in the alley, Klaus had tapped Sybilla on the arm. It was a signal that meant “don’t resist.” Sybilla had been reluctant, but she refrained from putting up a fight and intentionally took the blow.

The two of them rose to their feet in unison and glared at their foe side by side.

“The handcuffs broke...?”

The man didn’t quite understand what was going on. He seemed to think that their restraints had merely malfunctioned.

“Two against one, huh?” However, his composure remained unbroken, and he shifted to an oblique stance and began taking rhythmic steps. He was clearly a trained martial artist. “No problem. Bring it. I’ll have you know I was in the army.” He gave them a hollow smile. Sybilla knew he was jacked, but she hadn’t known he was actually a soldier. “And in case you forgot, I just knocked y’all on your sorry asses. You come at me two at a time, and I’ll still mop the—”

“Nah.” Sybilla took a step forward. “I’ll be fine solo.”

“What’d you say?”

“When it comes to scum like you, I’m not gonna be able to sleep tonight unless I pummel you myself!” Sybilla squeezed the handcuffs she was holding and roared. “I’m code name Pandemonium—and it’s time I cleaned you out.”

She took a running start and charged straight at the giant. She had no proper

weapons to speak of, but she brandished her handcuffs and rushed down the man twice her size all the same.

“Talk shit, get hit, kid!” the man bellowed, then launched a series of jabs at Sybilla’s face. She dodged them by the slimmest of margins, then swung her handcuffs at the side of his head.

However, her foe was far faster. His huge frame belied his raw agility, and he pulled back before firing off his next jab. Sybilla tried to block his attack, but the blow had too much force behind it. She nearly got mowed down, but she slid to the side at the last second and grabbed at her opponent’s waist.

“_____”

A moment later, his foot slammed into her thigh. He wasn’t winding up for any of his attacks, so he never left her any openings, but because of the sheer difference in their weights, his blows still packed a massive punch.

Sybilla got sent flying like a ragdoll and tumbled across the floor.

“Ha,” the man scoffed in amusement. “There’s no way a little girlie like you’s ever gonna beat me.”

When it came to combat, that much was just common sense.

In fights to the death, larger people were stronger. Heavier people were stronger. Men had the advantage. And the small and the weak were helpless before the tyranny of the mighty.

At least in the past.

Sybilla held up a revolver. “Even if she’s got a gun?”

The man’s smile froze on his face. “Where the hell did you—”

“What, this? I just nicked it.” Sybilla laughed proudly. “Compared to *him*, you practically left yourself wide open.”

The man clutched at his waist in shock.

Sybilla had stolen it in the blink of an eye.

That was the true talent of the girl who bore the name Pandemonium—picking pockets.

The man's excessive levels of confidence had told her that he had a concealed weapon of some sort, and once he was kind enough to let her know he used to be a soldier, it wasn't hard for her to figure out where he was keeping it.

'Course, I dunno whether or not I was actually "as fast as a thrust needle," but hey, it's somethin', she thought self-effacingly as she leveled the barrel at the man.

He broke out in a cold sweat, but his composed expression had yet to break.

"C-c'mon, there's no way a kid like you actually knows how to use a—"

A gunshot split the air.

Sybilla didn't flinch at all as she pulled the trigger; the bullet grazed the man's ear and slammed into one of the wooden house's pillars.

The man went weak at the knees and sank to the floor. When Sybilla informed him that "that's the only warning shot you get," his massive body began trembling uncontrollably.

"Who are you people...?"

"Just a couple of concerned citizens."

Sybilla continued training the gun on him with her right hand and flashed him the handcuffs in her left.

"You're finished. Have fun in the slammer."

The man dragged his butt along the ground as he scuttled backward, now more louse than golem. His face was frozen in fear, but a moment later, something dawned on him. He looked up. "T-turning me in to the cops won't do you any good, you know..."

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"I've got a buddy on the force... I'll be out of there before you know it... So why bother turning me in at all? You could save us all some time."

"...Would you rather I shot you dead?"

"If you do that, it'll be you two who end up getting arrested!" the man shouted. He was getting his fight back. "There's no way you kill me and get off

scot-free. Are you really brave enough to pull that trigger when you've got your whole life on the line?"

Sybilla's hand shook a little as she held the revolver.

The man was probably just bluffing, but on the off-chance he wasn't, that was a big problem. Given they were spies trying to use the city as a base for their covert operations, getting involved with the police was the last thing they wanted to do. There were a lot of things that could go wrong if the cops started digging into their backgrounds or asking them to explain themselves.

The man picked up on Sybilla's inner turmoil. He grinned victoriously. "Now, put down that gun! Otherwise, I'll have my cop friend arrest you for attempted murder—"

"You're referring to Inspector Angerer, yes? I believe the Military Intelligence Department is taking him in on espionage charges as we speak."

The voice was Klaus's.

When they turned to look at him, they found him examining a single sheet of paper. There was a paint can lying at his feet, and its lid was open. The paper must have been the confidential document he just picked up.

"What?" The man's mouth hung agape.

Apparently, Klaus was right.

Klaus struck a match and lit the document on fire. It was clearly made of some sort of special paper, as it burned away into nothing in the blink of an eye. It didn't even leave ash behind.

"What a pathetic man. He got into bed with an imperial spy over truly paltry sums of money. We've been rooting out his support network one by one, but it turns out they're all just low-level scumbags like you. What a letdown." A look of genuine disappointment crossed Klaus's eyes. "The police can handle the rest. I'll pull some strings and make sure the children find their way into proper institutions."

"What the hell are you on about...?"

"That paper had information about you, too, ex-captain Frisé. It said that

despite your substantial frame you were a small-minded nobody, and that you got subjected to disciplinary measures for starting a bar fight. You're the very model of a petty crook."

"YOU SHUT YOUR GODDAMN MOUTH!"

Perhaps it was shock at the scorn in Klaus's voice, or perhaps it was the panic from having his last lifeline wrenched from him—either way, the man let out a roar loud enough to shake the entire house and lunged at Klaus without giving a moment's thought to Sybilla's gun. His eyes were completely bloodshot.

Sybilla immediately went to pull the trigger, but when she saw the boredom in Klaus's eyes, she thought better of it. There was no sense shooting a man when she didn't have to.

She knew all too well how powerful Klaus was.

Klaus shot a frosty look at the giant rushing him down. "I'm sorry to inform you, but...people like you aren't qualified to be my enemy."

Then he gave his assailant a quick smack on the forehead with the back of his hand. It didn't look like he'd even put that much power into the hit, but it was enough to make the man's head violently shake.

He ended up with a concussion, and he crumpled to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut.

After making sure the man was well and truly unconscious, Sybilla snapped her handcuffs around his meaty wrists. When the police came later, they'd be able to piece together what had happened.

The hiding children stared at them with their mouths hanging open in awestruck shock.

Sybilla started to try to explain what was going on to them, but she ultimately decided against it. Better to just leave as a pair of average civilians.

She and Klaus headed for the exit.

"Miss..."

Someone called out from behind them.

It was Fin . Her voice was choked with tears.

“...thank you.”

She seemed a little embarrassed, probably because she felt guilty for having tricked them.

Sybilla put on her most assertive grin to cheer her up. “Anytime!”

Sure enough, Sybilla and Klaus had been taken all the way to the slums. The moment they stepped outside, they discovered that the “wooden house” they’d been in was a dilapidated barrack that barely even qualified as a building. The whole area was filled with similarly run-down wooden shacks. It had only been a decade since the war, and there were still a lot of places where the government’s eyes had yet to reach.

They doubted they would find any phones nearby, so they headed briskly back toward the center of the city.

As they walked, Sybilla shot Klaus a question. “So you planned this all out?”

From the way he’d been acting, it was like he’d seen the whole thing coming.

“Not really,” he replied. “I’d just heard that there was a pickpocketing ring that used children, so I figured that if I waited in the park, there was a good chance I could get them to come to me. The rest was just luck.”

Ah, Sybilla thought. That made total sense.

Now that she thought about it, it had always been a little odd that a man as busy as Klaus was going out for a leisurely lunch in the park. However, it had all been calculated. He probably realized that Fin  was a pickpocket the moment she called out to him.

Then he went and saved her and the other kids.

It had probably been nothing more than an afterthought in his investigation of the spy lurking within their borders. In general, catching low-level criminals like that was below their pay grade. However, the fact remained that he’d saved those children from being abused.

Another question came to her, and she blurted it out. “Say, if we clear this Impossible Mission, is it gonna save a bunch of kids?”

In less than a month, they were going to take on an incredibly difficult assignment.

Klaus hadn't told them the specifics, but Sybilla had to know—was it going to help make sure kids like Finé would get to keep on smiling?

"That should go without saying," Klaus replied gently.

Sybilla nodded.

Surely, the fate of the nation would be resting on their mission. Even if it didn't have any direct link to the nation's youth, it would still play an indirect role in securing their futures.

And if that's the case, then I gotta get stronger...

As Sybilla renewed her resolve, she noticed that Klaus was gazing gently at her. "There's no need to get yourself so worked up," he said.

"Huh?"

"Don't you get it, after the way you manhandled that giant? Getting a little stronger here or there is hardly worth a thing. The first thing a spy should seek is a strong heart, not a strong body," Klaus declared. "And that's something you have in spades. Eventually, the day will come when the children of your homeland find themselves in your debt."

It was almost like he'd seen right through her.

In fact, perhaps that was exactly what those tranquil eyes of his had done.

Oh hey, he is lookin' out for us...

Sybilla felt her face go warm at the unexpected realization.

She waved him off. "Don't you worry 'bout me, I'm all good. Especially after I just got to experience how much stronger I am now."

It was thanks to her training that she'd been able to take down the large man. After facing off against Klaus, she knew guys like that were nothing to be afraid of.

"Y'know, I read you all wrong. I guess you make a decent teacher after all."

"Of course I am," Klaus muttered, looking rather content with himself. "I'm

going to lead you to success, or my name isn't the Greatest Spy in the World."

From there, they continued walking side by side down the road. Their conversation meandered, and though there were plenty of moments where Klaus was on a different wavelength than her and plenty others where she found herself on the receiving end of his airheaded nonsense, it didn't piss her off the way it had a few hours ago.

Contrary to all appearances, he was actually a pretty good boss. Or if nothing else, Sybilla had had enough of a change of heart to see him as one.

"I'm feeling a little peckish, so I might stop off somewhere for lunch. What about you?"

So when he posed his question—

"H-hey, uh..."

—her mouth moved faster than her thoughts.

"Yes?"

"I-I've got this boxed lunch, see..."

She showed him the aluminum lunchbox she'd been keeping stashed away.

Klaus gave her a look. "And you're offering it to me?"

Sybilla could feel her heart beating a mile a minute. "The whole reason Finé crushed your bread was 'cause I startled her, right...? I'm pretty sorry about that, so, uh...y-you wanna split it? I didn't make it myself or anything, I actually got it from Lily, but, like, still..."

Excuses and pieces of irrelevant information spilled out of her mouth one after another.

Why do I feel so nervous...?

Tormented by emotions she didn't quite understand, she waited for Klaus's reply.

"Actually, I think I'll take you up on that offer."

"...A-all right, then halvesies it is."

His answer filled her heart with warmth and relief.

“We can eat while we walk,” she suggested with a smile.

Klaus gave her a wordless nod.

Sybilla bit her lip to prevent her expression from turning too sappy. An oddly familiar spicy aroma wafted by her nose. She lifted up the aluminum lid—
—and the lunchbox exploded.



That night, at Heat Haze Palace...

“GET YOUR ASS BACK HERE!” “Eeeek! Put down the knife!” “I’ll do what I damn well please!” “A-and besides, it was all Monika’s idea!” “Oh yeah?!” “Nah, that was all Lily.” “YOU TRIED TO TRICK ME!” “Dang it, my Wunderkind Lily intelligence tactics failed me!”

The halls were filled with the cries of the damned.

This time, Klaus had nothing to do with it. To the contrary, he was holed up in his room trying to work on his oil painting. He sank deep in his bedroom’s chair and stared intently at his canvas with brush in hand. However, the environment was hardly conducive to concentration. Screams constantly split the air from downstairs and in the hallway.

“What are they *doing* out there...?” he muttered in exasperation.

Right then, Lily came charging into his room. “Teach, you gotta let me hide here!”

She was panting, and she’d clearly been fleeing with all her might. Her knees rattled in abject terror.

“No. Get out,” Klaus replied coldly.

“At least hear me out! There’s an orangutan going on a rampage out in the hallway!”

“I’m pretty sure the manor doesn’t have one of those.”

“No, we do! It’s got white hair and everything!”

“See, now I *definitely* know you’re in the wrong here.”

Klaus sighed. He could hear a pair of footsteps thundering toward them.

“THERE YOU ARE, YOU LITTLE RAT!” Sybilla bellowed as she kicked in the door. She was holding a chair and her eyes shined a fiery shade of red. Probably on account of the chili powder.

Lily let out a pathetic-sounding “Eeeek!” and hid behind Klaus. She and Sybilla squared off with Klaus stuck between them.

“C-c’mon, Sybilla, we can talk this out! We’re friends, right?”

“How ’bout you let me get in one good hit, then we go from there.”

“She says, holding up a *chair*!”

“Quit yelling at each other through me,” Klaus said, sounding utterly fed up.

“A-and besides, this isn’t fair! You said it yourself, remember?” Lily asked Sybilla. “You were going on all smug-like about how using stooges was fair game in a real battle and how we needed the element of surprise. I was just doing everything I could to beat Teach, that’s all! Hem-hem! If anything, you should be complimenting me!”

Lily thrust out her chest with pride. Sybilla’s eyebrow twitched.

That was the backstory behind the explosion—it was Operation: Collateral Damage Redux.

The boxed lunch that Sybilla offered Klaus—that is, the one Lily gave her ahead of time—had been a tear bomb filled with the same chili powder as the night prior. Furthermore, it had been furnished with a transmitter that the rest of the team had used to tail Sybilla. After waiting for Klaus and Sybilla to deepen their relationship and let down their guards, Lily had cried, “Now!” and gleefully detonated the bomb.

However, Klaus managed to dodge just ahead of time, and in the end, the only person who fell victim to the chili powder was Sybilla.

“Man, just a little closer, and we’d have blown up Teach, too. What a shame.”

By that point, it was pretty well established just how determined Lily was.

“I’ll never forgive you... The others, maybe, but never you...”

Then there was Sybilla, who was still steaming with rage. She hadn't been able to wash all the chili powder out of her beautiful white hair yet, and much of it was still stained red here and there. Combined with how red her eyes were, she looked downright demonic.

Lily stooped down and used Klaus as a shield. "Th-that's not fair, though. Why're you so mad when all I did was the same thing you did to me...?"

"Shut up..."

"Wait, is it 'cause we bugged your conversations with Teach?"

"Rgh!"

"I gotta say, I never knew you could pull off 'swooning girl' so well. With all that 'I've got this boxed lunch, see...' stuff, you sounded like an innocent little lovebird. When we heard that, the whole team got some big grins out of—"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH! I'll just hit you 'til you forget! C'mere!"

"Please take this anywhere other than my room." Klaus looked as irritated as he'd ever been. "...I can see we've got a long road ahead of us before the Impossible Mission."

He said the last part quietly enough that it was unclear if either of the girls heard him.

As the two of them continued violently panting, Klaus went on. "Apropos of nothing, I have something I'd like to say. As was made eminently clear today, hostile foreign spies can infiltrate anything from our parliament to our police forces to our army and rot them from within. The only ones who can protect our people are spies like us."

It went without saying that has-been soldiers and corrupt cops were far from the only threats running rampant within their institutions. There were probably people far more evil than that waiting for their moment to strike—just as Din's spies were infiltrating their enemy nations' institutions in turn.

That was what the shadow war was—a battle between spies with no holds barred.

"Go on. Lie to each other, fool each other, and improve each other—until

you're strong enough to take me down." Klaus softly rose from his chair. "And until you get there, then fighting amongst yourselves from time to time...can be magnificent, too."

Once Klaus moved, there was nothing standing between Sybilla and Lily anymore. Sybilla descended on Lily with a feral roar, and Lily fled with tears in her eyes.

There were four weeks left before the Impossible Mission, and the girls' training was only going to get harsher from there.

Chapter 2

Sara's Case

Erna was getting crushed.

She had blond hair, and though she was fourteen years old, her body was small for her age, and she had enough of a babyface that she could have easily been mistaken for a ten-year-old. In addition to her beauty, she also gave off an almost doll-like impression.

At the moment, though, she was moaning from between the floor and door.

The door wasn't squishing her horizontally, either. It was *crushing her from above*.

"How unlucky...", she whimpered, but there was no one around to hear.



The world was awash in pain.

Two weeks had passed since Lamplight was assembled in order to take on an Impossible Mission.

At the moment, the girls had yet to come anywhere close to completing Klaus's "defeat me" assignment, but they were all showing definite signs of growth. Through Sybilla's run-in with the pickpocket and Erna's incident with the kidnappers, the team had deepened both their coordination with each other and their trust in Klaus.

The more they worked together as a group, the better they understood each other's strengths and specialties.

This was the point where Monika and Thea were starting to stand out for their excellent performance.

At the same time, though, it was also the point where one of the girls was starting to fall behind.



“All right, I think we’re at the point where we need to consider blowing up Klaus’s whole room,” Monika suggested.

“I like it,” Lily agreed. “When would be the best time to do it?”

“The simplest thing to do would be to invite him to dinner, right? We can tell him we made some food and get him to come to the dining room.”

“Ooh, that sounds good! Then, we can sneak in, plant the bomb under his bed —”

The girls were still at it with their training.

Aside from how extreme their proposals were getting as of late, it was starting to become a familiar sight. The girls were crowded around a table in the manor’s main hall and laying out their violent suggestions.

“I mean, let’s be real, not even this is gonna be enough to take down Klaus. We might get some decent intel out of it, though,” the cerulean-haired girl—Monika—said snobbishly as she twirled her hair around her finger. Her height and weight were both dead average, and oddly enough, she had no distinctive physical attributes aside from her hair.

“No, no, I think this plan has a real shot! We just gotta think big. And by big, I’m talking about our boom!” Lily’s projections, on the other hand, were much more carefree. Unlike Monika, Lily was lovely in all the ways that drew people’s gazes. She had an ample chest and a beautiful head of silver hair. “The way I see it, there’s no need to hold back with the blasting powder. After all, we could blow the whole room to smithereens and Teach’d still probably walk away with just a couple scratches.”

“There you go, talking out of your ass again... Believe it or not, there are reasonable limits to these things, you know.”

“Remember last time, though? How we blasted that door off its hinges with our hose attack and it still wasn’t enough to beat him?”

“How’re you even planning on getting the blasting powder inside? Is that hole we drilled in his windowpane last week even still there?”

“It’s gotta be! Now, c’mon, let’s get this show on the road!”

Yet another disturbing plan was coming together, this time with Monika and Lily at the helm.

However, a third voice cut in to rain on their parade.

“If I may?” The black-haired girl—Thea—raised her hand. Her locks were long and lustrous, and her figure was alluringly curvaceous. “There’s something I think we really ought to discuss, but since nobody else is bringing it up, I suppose the task falls on me.”

“Hm?”

The team’s gazes all turned toward Thea, and she went on.

“We might need to start worrying about the state the manor is in.”

“~~~~~

Not a single one of the girls had a rebuttal to that.

By that point, their attacks on Klaus had been going on for about two weeks, and as one might be able to infer from Lily and Monika’s comments, a fair chunk of their plans involved structural damage to the manor. For them, knocking down doors and smashing in windows had become all but routine. If a tactic would be viable on an actual mission, they didn’t hesitate to use it against their instructor.

As a result, though, the once-beautiful Heat Haze Palace was starting to come apart at the seams. Several of its glass windows lay in shards, and it was impossible to count just how many spots there were where the girls had dented the walls or torn the wallpaper.

“To put my concern into perspective,” Thea went on, “Erna got crushed just last night.”

Lily’s eyes went wide. “But how?”

“She said that one of the doors we knocked off its hinges toppled over on her.”

Over in the corner of the main hall, Erna was holding an ice pack to her head.

It was still swollen. “It really hurt, too...,” she added tearily.

“In any case, it’s starting to get in the way of our everyday activities. I think we should start fixing up some of the damage. In addition to taking shifts cleaning, I propose we take shifts doing repairs, too,” Thea said with an elegant smile.

It was a perfectly sensible suggestion—

“Yeah, no.”

—but Monika sounded completely incredulous.

“In case you forgot, we’re about to go on a death-defying mission. You want us to spend our time playing handyman?”

“Well, I certainly don’t think we can leave everything else by the wayside,” Thea replied.

“Right now, we need to spend every second we’ve got on training. We can deal with the maintenance stuff later.”

“...You can try to make it sound as clever as you like, but we both know you’re just trying to get out of having to do more chores.”

“Oh? You’re saying that in Slut World, laying out the facts counts as ‘trying to make it sound clever’?”

“Oh dear, was that an attempt at an insult?”

Thea and Monika glared daggers at each other. Their smiles were brimming with confidence even as the pair of them bristled with irritation. Nobody was quite sure if the way they were arguing was incredibly civil or as lowbrow as could be.

They were two of the most skilled members on Lamplight’s roster, but somehow or other, they seemed to constantly find ways to end up at odds.

“C’mon, we’re all friends here,” Lily said in an attempt to mediate, but the angry sparks flying between Thea and Monika only grew fiercer.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, the others began chiming in with their opinions as well.

“She’s right, though; fixing this place up’ll take forever.” “Even so, I imagine the boss would prefer we tried to avoid letting the manor get too destroyed...” “Yo, who wants to repair it when we could do a full remodel!” “Someone please stop her. If she remodels this place, we’re all going to die.” “All right, everyone, take it down a notch. Your beautiful leader is getting a headache over here.”

Two weeks had passed since they all met, and over that span, the girls had gradually been growing more candid and less reserved with each other.

Even the taciturn Erna had started coming out of her shell and joining in, and the girls’ lively discussion filled the room.

However, *one of them* was conspicuously quiet.

“And here’s the thing, stuff gets patched up all the time.” Eventually, Monika smiled triumphantly. “Obviously, Klaus must be calling in specialized contractors. And that means it’s not our problem.”

Thea clearly hadn’t known that. She grumbled and bit down on her lip as she stared at Monika, but in the moment of truth, she couldn’t come up with a counterargument.

Monika was the victor.

Thus, it was decided that they would ignore the damaged areas, and the meeting was adjourned.

“What Big Sis Monika said doesn’t make sense,” Erna declared after the girls went their separate ways. “Things definitely keep getting repaired, but I’ve never seen a contractor anywhere around.”

Aside from the main residence where they all lived, Heat Haze Palace also had a small shed off to its side.

It had originally just been a vacant storehouse, but now, it had been transformed into an animal shed full of everything from a dog and some mice to a hawk and a pigeon. None of them were caged, and the fact that the hawk and the mice could coexist without so much as a partition was a testament to the hawk’s keen intellect—either that, or perhaps to the love they’d been shown by the girl rearing them.

Erna was standing outside the shed and speaking to the girl within.

“In my opinion, this can only be the work of a ghost. What do you think, Big Sis Sara?”

“That’s definitely a unique theory,” Sara replied with a bemused smile. Sara was a girl with wavy brown hair. She had a newsboy cap she always wore pulled down low, and her big round eyes evoked the image of a small woodland creature as they peeked out from beneath it. “But there’s no way it’s actually a ghost.”

At the moment, she was doling out her special feed to all the animals. The critters positively adored her, and they huddled around her so they could nuzzle her.

“But I saw it!” Erna insisted from a step’s length outside the shed. “I was walking near the hallway that connects to the shed last night, and this long shadow showed up out of nowhere, and I leaped away and banged my head against a nearby door, and the door collapsed on me.”

She was talking a good deal faster than normal.

You wouldn’t know it from the way she was acting at the moment, but Erna was an extremely shy person. In one-on-one situations, the only people she could carry a proper conversation with were Klaus and Sara.

As a result, Erna often ended up visiting the animal shed to find Sara.

When Sara found herself reminded of that fact, she gave Erna a big smile. “Ah. Is that why you’ve been sticking so close to me today, Miss Erna?”

“Hm?”

“Because you’re scared of the ghost?”

“——!” For a moment, Erna’s cheeks went bright red.

Sara burst into laughter. With how childish Erna looked and acted, it was hard to believe she was actually fourteen. “If you’re that scared, you’re free to come into the shed.”

“The animals are scary, too... Everything about them screams ‘danger.’” Erna refused to move from her spot outside. “The manor’s haunted, but the shed’s

full of your animals... I'm trapped with nowhere to run."

"I think you might be overselling it a little."

"Caught between a ghost and a pet place..."

"That actually sounds kind of fun."

It reminded Sara of a recently opened foreign amusement park she'd heard of.

All that said, there was a good reason why Erna was as afraid as she was—she had a proclivity for misfortune. Her psychiatrist said that there was nothing occult about it and that she was just subconsciously drawn to accidents and bad situations, but it was impossible to say how true that was.

"Don't worry, my pets are all friendly," Sara said with a kind smile. "Actually, would you like to borrow one? This little guy could be a guard dog for you and chase off any ghosts you find."

Sara scooped up the puppy that was sitting by her feet. He was round and black, like a slab of dark chocolate.

"And he won't bite me...?" Erna asked with upturned eyes.

"No, no. I've trained him well."

"I dunno..."

"In all the time I've had him, he's never bitten a single person. And he's really warm when you curl up with him at night."

Ultimately, Erna ended up going for Sara's sales pitch.

She gulped, then took a single step into the shed. Her movements were timid and hesitant, but she reached for the puppy Sara was holding all the same.

At that point, the puppy sensed her presence. He began sniffing at the air.

Erna still looked pretty nervous. "Y-you're *sure* he doesn't bite...?"

"Totally. I taught him that it's not okay to—"

Chomp.

The puppy took Erna's hand—and bit down with gusto.

““””

It happened so fast, the girls didn’t even have time to react.

A moment later, though, the pain starting sinking in. Erna’s arm quivered, and she bit her lip and shook her head side to side as tears slowly welled up in her eyes.

“YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!”

“I-I’m so sorryyyyyyyyyyy!”

Erna shrieked at the exact same time Sara’s shout rocked the shed.

The two of them continued screaming for five full minutes, until the rest of the team came to check up on them.



It was eleven at night, and as the rest of the girls were drifting off to sleep, Sara headed down the manor’s stairs.

Oh dear. I feel so bad about what I did to Miss Erna...

Her shoulders slumped as she thought back to what had happened.

The good news was that Erna’s hand hadn’t actually been injured. The puppy had only been play-biting. However, Sara was still ashamed that he’d done something so disgraceful, especially after how much she’d boasted about him not biting people. She was so sure she’d trained him better than that.

And on top of that, that wasn’t the only thing she wanted to apologize to Erna for.

I’m pretty sure the “ghost” she saw was actually—

When she reached the first floor, she let out a little sigh. Then, she noticed something.

There was a light coming from the kitchen.

She could also hear the sound of tableware clinking. Someone was there—but all the girls should have been asleep at this hour. The manor did have one other resident, but going for an unhealthy midnight snack seemed out of character for him.

And there was no way it was an actual ghost.

...I-is it a burglar, then?

Sara's knees began shaking.

She wished she'd brought at least one of her pets with her.

Now that she knew about the burglar, though, she couldn't just turn tail and run. She needed to at least get a good look at them before she went and called for help.

She inched her face up to the keyhole and peeked inside.

"Hm? Ah, Sara."

As soon as she did, the person inside immediately noticed her presence.

She let out a little squeak, but as soon as she returned to her senses, she quickly realized who the voice belonged to.

"T-Teach?"

Sara went into the kitchen.

Inside, she found Klaus. He was a tall man, and partially due to his shoulder-length hair, he was beautiful enough it was easy to mistake him for a woman.

He was Lamplight's boss, the girls' teacher, and an elite agent who claimed to be the Greatest Spy in the World.

Despite the many ways in which he was her superior, though, he was currently holding a white dishcloth.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"It's as you can see."

"It looks like you're just drying some dishes, though."

"That's because I am drying some dishes."

As he spoke, Klaus continued swiftly retrieving the kitchen's plates, washing them, and meticulously wiping them dry. The thing was, those were the plates the girls usually used. The girls had already given them a wash, but after Klaus was done with them, they were polished to a lustrous gleam.

Sara stared at him, awestruck. The way he worked was as fast as it was efficient.

Klaus stared at her in confusion. “What? Is it so odd to see me doing housework?”

“I-it’s just, we’re perfectly happy to clean our own plates.”

“This is part of my training. There are times when a spy has to pretend to be a chef or a maid, you see.” After explaining himself, his voice grew quieter. “...And besides, my old team made me do all their grunt work. It’s gotten to be part of my routine.”

When he said that last part, his expression seemed almost gloomy. However, the change was so subtle that Sara couldn’t be sure she hadn’t just imagined it.

In any case, it felt strange watching an elite spy doing chores like that. Intellectually, she understood that he ate, slept, washed, and went to the bathroom just like any other human, but it was hard for her to reconcile that knowledge with her image of him as the Greatest Spy in the World.

“People are multifaceted creatures.” Klaus seemed to have picked up on her bewilderment. He squinted at her. “And you’re no exception.”

“Huh...?”

“That toolbox you have. You’re the one who’s been coming out every night to fix up the manor, aren’t you?”

Sara gasped a little and hid the toolbox she’d been holding behind her back. She’d forgotten all about it.

He was right—she was the one who was behind the repairs.

Each night, she snuck out of her room to mend the doors and windows they’d broken during the day.

In all likelihood, the so-called ghost Erna saw was none other than Sara herself.

“Magnificent.” Klaus nodded in satisfaction. “The fact you saw a problem and chose to provide a service for your team is commendable. And not many people would have been altruistic enough to do so anonymously.”

After briefly praising her, he gave her a pointed look.

“However, I can’t say I’m pleased with the fact that you alone are having to sacrifice sleep. If the damage is too bad to ignore and it’s affecting your training, then it should be everyone’s job to help fix it.”

“I—I guess you’re right...”

“I’ll tell the others tomorrow. And I’m sorry for making you do all the repairs on your own.”

Sara vigorously waved her hands in disagreement.

She felt bad that he would apologize, especially after she just discovered that he was doing chores on his own as well. He had nothing to be sorry for.

And on top of that, he was laboring under a big misunderstanding...

“Um, actually!” She was hesitant to say anything, but her sense of duty eventually won out. “You don’t need to tell the others about what I’ve been doing.”

“Oh? And why’s that?”

“I’m fine doing the repairs on my own. I’d rather they all be able to get a good night’s rest...”

Klaus stopped wiping his current plate and looked at Sara with unconcealed confusion. He didn’t seem satisfied with her answer.

She decided to be blunt.

“—I—I realize I’m the weakest member on the team.”

“Hm?”

“I did attend my academy for the shortest time out of all of us, after all. I mean, even if we’d gone for the same amount of time, I still would have ended up less skilled, but the point is, I’m a total amateur...”

Unlike conventional schools, students at spy academies didn’t all enter at the same age.

Although Sara was fifteen, she had entered her academy just two years prior. So while Erna was only fourteen, the fact she’d joined her academy four years

ago meant there was a pretty big gap between them.

“In a way, they’re all my seniors. That’s why I call them ‘miss,’” Sara explained. “I can never speak up during our meetings, and all I do is weigh them down...”

“...So you’re saying you wanted to help out in whatever little way you could?”

“Exactly,” Sara said. Bashful self-derision crossed her face. “Knowing your place lets you act accordingly—that’s what they taught me at the academy.”

Given how unskilled she was, this was the best course of action she could take.

The only reason she became a spy was so she could make a living after her parents’ restaurant closed down. The other girls were all full of dreams and aspirations, but Sara didn’t have anything nearly so lofty.

On top of that, her ineptitude had just recently caused one of her teammates to get hurt. Considering how worthless she was, lightening the others’ loads was the least she could do.

At that moment, that was all she had driving her.

“...What in the world were those academy teachers thinking?”

“Huh?”

For a moment, Sara thought she saw a flash of anger flit across Klaus’s face.

By the time she did a double take, though, his expression was as cool as could be. He went back to polishing the tableware, then took the pile of clean plates he’d assembled and began putting them away with movements even more deft than before.

“For now, just go to bed,” he instructed her. “I understand where you’re coming from.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

After his encouragement, Sara had no choice but to retire.

As she left, she stole a glance at Klaus’s face. However, she couldn’t figure out what he intended to do.

Klaus's plans wouldn't start becoming clear until the following morning.



"Miss Lily, you have to get up. We're in charge of cooking breakfast, remember?"

Early the next morning, Sara tapped Lily's shoulder as the latter snoozed away in her bed.

In order to maintain Heat Haze Palace's secrecy, they couldn't hire maids from outside. In addition to all the repairs and cleaning, the girls also took turns cooking for the group.

Today, it was Sara and Lily's turn. However, Lily had decided to sleep in.

"...Urgh, cut it out. I didn't steal your cookies." Lily clutched at her sheets and let out a moan. Then, she rolled across the bed to get away from Sara.

"What are you dreaming about?"

"...I know I went to the cupboard...but I didn't eat them... I just moved them a little..."

"To where?"

"Into my belly."

"That sounds a lot like eating them!" Sara shouted. She gave Lily's shoulder a firm shove.

Upon tumbling out of bed, Lily finally opened her eyes. "Gah! I had a horrible dream about getting framed for something I didn't do," she said rather untruthfully.

Sara didn't even know where to start with her.

"Morning... Wait, huh?" Lily stared drowsily at Sara. "You already made breakfast?"

"Huh? No, we're supposed to go make it together."

"Then what's that nice smell?"

As soon as Lily mentioned it, Sara noticed it, too.

She could smell the scents of citrus and olive oil wafting over from somewhere.

Someone must have gotten the cooking schedule wrong.

Lily's eyes went wide. "Wait—I think I know what this is!"

She shoved her mattress aside, then—ignoring the fact that Sara was right in front of her—stripped out of her pajamas and changed into her seminary school uniform. She was moving with a rarely seen fervor. After getting dressed in the blink of an eye, she said, "Sara, to the kitchen!" and charged out of the room.

Sara had no idea what was going on, but she hurried along after her.

The sun had yet to finish rising, so the hallway was dark and hard to traverse. Between the broken doors left casually lying against the walls and the chunks of wood and plaster scattered across the sides of the floor, the journey was fraught with peril.

Perhaps the girls really should get around to fixing the manor up a bit.

As the thought crossed Sara's mind—

"Hm?"

—the tasty smell grew stronger. Someone was making breakfast over in the kitchen.

Sara followed Lily as she rushed down the stairs, and when they got to the first floor, they ran into someone unexpected.

"Good morning, Sara and Lily. Would you mind going and waking up the others?"

It was Klaus. He was frying a fish in some butter.

The man usually ate breakfast separately from the girls, so it was unclear what he was doing cooking so publicly. Given how much food there was, he was making enough for the whole team.

"I thought it might be nice to treat you all every once in a while. So, that's what I'm doing."

Lily's eyes went wide. "I knew it. It *was* Teach."

Sara paused, confused. "...What brought this about?"

"Actually, would you two mind doing me a favor? I need someone to taste-test the dressing for me."

Klaus handed them each a small dish.

Sara gawked at him. She couldn't believe her eyes.

Normally, Klaus only cooked enough for himself. That often led to Lily trying to snatch bites of his food, and he would invariably tell her off. Now, though, he was going out of his way to cook enough for everyone so he could treat the girls to a meal.

It might be a trap.

However, all of Sara's fears evaporated the moment she took her first lick of the dressing. The combination of the punchy, chili pepper-infused olive oil and the fresh orangey aroma was so good she could barely think straight.

"I'll go wake the others up!" "Me too!"

The two of them rushed off, still holding their dishes, and went around rousing their sleeping teammates. None of the other girls fully bought it when Sara and Lily told them that Klaus was cooking a homemade breakfast for them, but one taste of the dressing was enough to shock them into belief. Before long, the whole team was gathered in the dining room.

It was a well-known fact among the girls that Klaus's cooking skills were as good as a professional chef's—perhaps better. By mastering the culinary arts, he had gotten to the point where his status as a first-rate chef could allow him to carry out infiltration missions just about anywhere.

It went without saying that the meal was a masterpiece.

There was a lettuce-and-mussel salad, a cod meunière, some toast, a squash potage, and even some custard pudding packed to the brim with egg for dessert. It was far too lavish a meal to have for breakfast, but it all tasted so good that they wolfed it down without a moment's pause.

Klaus had gone to the market early that morning to pick out all the freshest ingredients.

“Bro, I’m so glad you’re my boss!” Annette said.

"I'll follow you for the rest of my life!" Erna agreed.

Monika nodded. "If there's gotta be someone better at cooking than me, it makes sense it'd be you."

“This is really quite impressive, Teach. I would go out with you in a heartbeat if it meant getting to enjoy food like this every day,” Thea remarked.

They all cheered.

However, not even their barrage of compliments was enough to shake Klaus's expression. "It's a superior's job to show his subordinates how much he appreciates them," he said.

“The best part of all was the dressing,” Sara said with a sigh. “It was just perfect.”

“The dressing is fine as it is,” Klaus replied. His eyes narrowed. “But if you add pepper and red wine, then reduce it, it becomes a truly sublime steak sauce.”

All the girls, Sara included, let out expectant gasps.

“And it just so happens, I picked up some fresh beef tenderloin at the market today.”

""""""""W000000000000!""""""""

A thunderous roar rose up, accompanied by a round of applause.

Not only was Klaus being uncharacteristically nice to them, but now he was preparing them the ultimate feast!

“I’m letting it breathe at the moment, but by tonight, it’ll be in the perfect state for cooking.”

Instead of actually paying attention to Klaus's explanation, the girls began chanting.

“He’s the perfect boss!” “He’s the self-proclaimed World’s Strongest!” “His descriptions might suck, but he makes up for it with his talents!” they cheered. At first, their compliments were all over the place, but in the end, they all settled on chanting, “Teach! Teach! Teach!”

When it came to raw enthusiasm, the girls were in a league of their own.

“Teach! ♪ Teach! ♪ Teach! ♪” they yelled as they clapped their hands in unison.

“I didn’t realize you would all be so delighted.”

““““““““Teach! ♪ Teach! ♪ Teach! ♪”““““““““

“I’m glad, too. I had to get up early, but it was all worth it.”

““““““““Teach! ♪ Teach! ♪ Teach! ♪”““““““““

“But I have to ask—”

Klaus gave them an icy look.

“—who said you all were getting any of the steak?”

The chanting stopped right there and then.

““““““““.....Say what?”““““““““

The girls’ expressions froze.

They’d been clapping enthusiastically, but that stopped, too, leaving the dining room as quiet as if time itself had ground to a halt. At first, they assumed he was kidding...but one look at his stern expression told them he wasn’t.

“U-um...” Lily was the first to recover. She raised her hand. “What happened to showing us your appreciation?”

“I made you breakfast, didn’t I?”

“But what about the tenderloin you bought?”

“That’s for my dinner.”

“Do you have anything you maybe want to say to us?”

“Get back to your training.”

At his curt reply, the same expression crossed every girl’s face.

Is this guy for real?!

The sound of their raised expectations crashing back down was almost audible. “Boo to wealth inequality!” “Down with the bourgeoisie!” “Long live

communism!" At first, their jeers were all over the place, but in the end, they all settled on chanting, "Meat!"

They resumed their clapping as they shouted.

“““““Meat! Meat! Meat!”””””

“Oh, be quiet.”

He was mad.

The girls snapped their mouths shut.

“I fail to understand what you find so amusing about these bizarre chants,” Klaus quietly remarked. After a pause, he said, “...If you want the steak that badly, then why don’t we make a contest of it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought we might try something different than our usual training routine. If you beat me, the steak is yours. But if you lose, a punishment awaits.”

Now, it was clear what he'd been plotting.

The free breakfast was his way of laying the groundwork for the challenge.

“I—I mean, it is an attractive offer, but...,” Sara said in a mild-mannered voice. She frowned. “...surely there’s no way that luring us in with food is going to—”

"I'm in!" "Me too!" "You're on, Teach." "Yeah, let's do this."

“—Never mind.”

Sara's exasperated comments were quickly drowned out by the declarations of assent rising up one after another.

Klaus had them all by the stomachs. Now that they'd tried the sumptuous dressing, it was all too easy to envision what the steak would taste like. It would've taken critical thinking skills to turn Klaus's challenge down, and those were in short supply at the moment.

“Magnificent.” Klaus rose from his seat. Everything was going exactly as he’d foreseen. “And don’t worry, I’m not a monster. Your side will have a substantial advantage.”

In the end, not a single person declined the sudden showdown.



The rules of the contest were as follows.

Klaus and the girls were going to race to see who could fix the doors, clean the large communal bathroom, sweep the halls, mend the windowpanes, and wash the windows the fastest. Each task would be split into its own round, and if the girls triumphed so much as a single time, the delicious steak would be theirs. Interfering with the other side through violence and the like was forbidden.

Looking at the rules, the contest was pretty slanted in the girls' favor. After all, it was eight against one.

“Remember, this is still a training exercise. Make sure you take it seriously.”

As Klaus put it, the skills they would be honing were essential for setting up traps and casing infiltration sites.

The girls were raring to go, but the reason they were so fired up had nothing to do with any such practical considerations. When victory meant getting to eat top-shelf steak, they would have given it their all regardless of anything Klaus said.

Round one was repairing the broken doors.

Due to the various rampages of Klaus and the girls, several of the manor's doors had been destroyed. The doorframes needed to be filled in with new wood, and they also needed to have their hinges replaced.

Conveniently for their purposes, there were two such doors right next to each other.

“The trick will be to use our numerical advantage.” Sara frowned. “But efficiently managing this many people at once is next to possible...”

Thea smiled confidently to assuage Sara's worries. “Worry not. With me at the helm, I'll have us working as a well-oiled machine.”

“Ooh,” Sara replied, feeling rather reassured. Thea's voice had a mysterious magnetism to it. No matter how noisy and chaotic her surroundings, her words

always seemed to find their way to their target.

“Even with so many people at my disposal, my orders will bring out the best in all of them. Not even Teach will stand a chance against us.”

“I—I should never have doubted you for a moment.”

“Now, as for the particulars of our strategy... Grete, are you ready?”

“Yes, I have our plan right here.”

Upon hearing her name, the redhead handed Thea a document. Barely any time had passed, yet she already had everything all written out. By the look of it, Grete and Thea had already decided to divvy up the work by having the former come up with a plan and having the latter carry it out.

Thea glanced over Grete’s notes, then smiled proudly. “Heh-heh. It’s time we showed him just what we’re made of.”

The girls followed their fearless commander over to the door, and Klaus did some stretches in front of the door beside theirs.

The grandfather clock in the main hall loudly chimed out the time.

That was the signal to begin.

“Sybilla, start off by measuring the sections we need to fix!” Thea’s voice felt like it was resonating right in their hearts. “Monika and Lily, you’re in charge of cutting the wood! It doesn’t need to be precise just yet. And while you’re doing that, Sara can prep the preservative and paint we’re going to use for the—”

“—All done.”

Klaus’s voice echoed out.

It reached the girls’ ears right as they’d just gotten started.

“What...?” Thea said, dumbfounded.

When Sara looked over, she was greeted by the beautifully mended door that had sprung up before Klaus as though by magic. The entire frame had been in pieces mere moments before, but now, all that damage was gone without a trace.

“But how...?” Thea gasped.

“Rather than using a bradawl, it’s faster to just jam a knife in and move it correctly.”

“You’ve already lost me...”

“Then, once you’ve accurately eyeballed your measurements, all that’s left is to move with the speed of a winter wind descending a mountain as you fit the broken frame, install the hinges, and apply your paint from top to bottom.”

“What do you mean, ‘accurately eyeballed your measurements’?!”

He’d buried all the important bits beneath abstract metaphors.

Sara was reminded yet again of what made Klaus unique.

So much of his genius comes from his superhuman intuition.

The majority of Klaus’s abilities didn’t require him to put any conscious thought toward them. Normal people couldn’t really explain the way they put on their shirt or buttoned a button, and Klaus was the same way with his techniques. Not only could he perform miraculous feats far beyond what any of the girls were capable of, but he’d picked them up on instinct alone.

As a result, his teaching abilities were horrifically bad, and the girls had been left with no choice but to participate in his absurd “defeat me” training. Even that was just further proof of how utterly abnormal the man was.

Evaluating Lamplight’s boss Klaus was simple—when it came to anything besides teaching, he was all-powerful.

Sara could do nothing but stare in shock. “He really is like some kind of monster...”

“It’s not fair...,” Thea mumbled pathetically as she slumped to her knees.

It was time for round two—cleaning the bath.

The manor had a large communal bath that the girls generally used, but although whoever’s turn it was to do chores occasionally cleaned it, it was starting to build up noticeable amounts of mold and limescale. For round two, they’d split the bath in half, and whoever finished cleaning their side first was the victor.

“So, about that disaster in round one,” Monika said with an irritated scoff. “The problem was, trying to have eight people all working at once was doomed from the get-go. It’s too many people, no matter how they’re led. All we did was trip over each other. What I want to know is, what the hell did you think was going to happen?”

Monika turned her gaze toward their key player from round one, Thea, who crouched down by the edge of the bath. “Unhhh, why does nothing ever woook...,” Thea groaned as she buried her face in her knees.

It didn’t take much to make Thea lose heart.

“Can you *please* get a damn spine?” Monika said.

“...I’ll be okay once I get four guys to hit on me.”

“That’s one slutty self-care routine you’ve got.”

“...I’d also be fine if a guy bought me a handbag. Or after three bouquets.”

“What is this, some sort of word problem?”

Erna quickly added it up. “So five bouquets and one flirting corresponds to about two handbags.”

“And two bouquets are pretty much the same as three guys hitting on her,” Lily added.

“...And there you have it,” Thea agreed.

“There I have *what?!?*”

Despite Monika’s angry bellow, the point of the matter was, Thea was down for the count.

Sara rubbed Thea’s back and raised a question. “But how are we supposed to compete if we lower our headcount...? Especially now that we’ve got a dropout —”

“If anything, all we just did was shed some dead weight. We’re gonna center our efforts around our most athletic members.”

As Monika scoffed arrogantly, the white-haired girl spoke up. “In other words—you’re sayin’ it’s my time to shine?” Sybilla immediately got to work rotating

her shoulders and stretching.

It was a sensible choice. When it came to physical prowess, Monika and Sybilla stood head and shoulders above the rest of Lamplight.

Monika nodded. “Also, we’re going to have one person running interference on Klaus.”

Sara’s eyes went wide. “But isn’t that against the rules?”

“*Physical* attacks are, sure.” Monika snapped her fingers. “Lily, you know what to do.”

Lily raised her hand. “Aye, aye, Captain! If you need someone to make a nuisance of themselves, then I’m your gal!”

“...You look like you’re enjoying this a bit *too* much,” Sara remarked.

All she could do was sigh.

Thinking about it logically, though, she knew that Monika was making the correct call. It was practical, and it toed the line without going over.

Soon, the starting bell rang.

Sara picked up a brush, headed into the bath alongside Sybilla, and got to work attacking the limescale buildups. Considering how widespread they were, it was going to take some time to get rid of them all. Meanwhile, Monika and Sybilla practically slid across the floor as they cleaned everything in their wake. It was incredible how much faster they were than the rest of the team.

At this rate, they might actually win.

As Sara’s hopes soared, Lily headed over to Klaus to seal the deal.

“Heya there, Teach. By the way, do you have any friends? You totally don’t, do you. How about I hang out with you, then? All you gotta do is pay! That’s the deal of a lifetime for a loner like you! Gosh, I’m nice. What’s that, cat got your tongue? Are you pretending to be busy cleaning so you can cry on the inside?”

Even Sara, who was just listening from off to the side, was starting to get ticked off. When it came to being a royal pain in the ass, nobody did it better than Lily.

However, Klaus seemed unaffected. The sound of his brush strokes was as steady as could be.

“I have a question for you, Lily.” His voice boomed out, calm and collected. “Have you thought about what’ll happen if you beat me?”

“Huh?”

“You’ll get some steak, yes. But it’ll be split eight ways, and only one of those portions will go to you. Will that really be enough to satisfy you?”

“Hah, nice try. B-but if you think you can demoralize me that easily—”

“Did you ever consider the possibility that if you switched to my side...you could have all that steak to yourself?”

“.....”

Lily’s obnoxious yapping came to an abrupt stop.

Sara didn’t like where this was going.

It was pretty easy to guess what sorts of questions were running through Lily’s head.

Can I keep eight portions for myself? Which side is winning? Actually, is it even possible to beat Klaus? What choice will give me the surest chance of getting that steak?

“I’m sure you’re clever enough to make the right decision.”

It looked like Lily had made up her mind.

She grabbed a nearby showerhead and turned the faucet as far as it would go.

“Monika, Sybilla, look out! The shower turned on all on its ownnnnnnnnn!”

And with that cry, she blasted the two of them with cold water.

That made two losses in a row.

Back in the main hall, Lily was bound head to toe in wire. Monika—who was still soaking wet—threw a jab right into her gut.

“You little shit! You little SHIT! How many times! Must you sabotage me! Before you’re satisfied? How many?!” Monika launched another punch

between each interjection, and each time, Lily let out a pained groan.

Sara went over to try to stop Monika's angry beatdown, but after Lily herself confidently shouted, "I'll never give in to your torture!" Sara decided to leave the two of them to their devices.

Eventually, Klaus came over and told her, "By the way, Lily, I was lying earlier," to which Lily let out a scream that sounded like she was dying.

"YOU TRAITOOOOOOOOR!"

Monika sank another punch into Lily's stomach. "YOU DON'T GET TO USE THAT WORD!"



After that, the girls continued racking up losses.

First came round three—sweeping the halls.

Between Thea, who was still disheartened from her earlier defeat, Sybilla and Monika, who were changing out of their soaked clothes, and Lily, who was cowering over to the side and clutching her abdomen, their team had suffered an unusually large number of temporary dropouts. That meant it was time for the team's smaller members to shine.

"We can't leave everything up to the others anymore."

"Yo, I'm kind of shocked at how useless they ended up being."

Namely, Erna and Annette.

The two of them teamed up and got to work sweeping the hall. Not only did Erna nimbly manipulate her broom, but she also foresaw a sharp gust of wind right before it burst through the window and was able to use it to dump a huge pile of dust on Klaus's side. However, when Annette shouted, "I'm coming to help, yo!" and unleashed the deluxe vacuum cleaner she'd built, the sheer volume of dust Erna had displaced caused it to fly out of control.

Somehow or other, the vacuum cleaner ended up sucking in Erna and sealing their team's defeat.

"If you hadn't gotten in my way, we'd have won for sure," Annette declared.

“That was clearly your fault!!” Erna yelled back.

Once the dust settled, the two of them both ended up blaming each other for the loss.

Then came round four—mending the windowpanes.

Monika was all finished changing now, and she carried out the task with outstanding speed and technique. However, she was so pissed off that she refused to accept any assistance from her teammates, and because she was obviously no match for Klaus one-on-one, they lost yet again.



In what seemed like no time at all, the girls found themselves up against the ropes.

The fifth and final round was upon them—washing the windows.

The smokescreen they used in one of their attacks had left all the manor’s windows blackened and filthy, and although they’d already wiped down the glass from the inside, the second-floor exteriors were still filthy. Back when the smokescreen got blown outside, it had left behind a fair amount of soot.

As such, the contest was to see who could clean more of the manor’s forty windows the fastest.

However, the girls didn’t exactly have an excess of morale.

They couldn’t see themselves winning. Klaus was just too strong, and they could already picture him crushing them at window-washing with his honed, superhuman skills just like he had in all the other rounds. The windows were up on the second floor, but they doubted that fact would so much as slow him down.

The girls’ expressions were the portraits of gloom as they looked up at the windows from the manor’s courtyard.

Among them stood Sara, who was feeling just as defeated as the rest of the team.

I can’t believe it. Even the others didn’t stand a chance...

She slumped her shoulders. Brains, brawn, unique special abilities...the girls

were so much more skilled than she was, and not even they had prevailed.

I guess we're doomed after all...

The only person whose spirits didn't seem crushed was Lily.

She began chanting, "Meat! ♪ Meat! ♪ Meat! ♪" in an attempt to renew her teammates' motivation. Nobody else joined in, but even so, she wrapped things up with a single extra-confident, "Meat!"

"Now, how do we wanna divvy up the labor?" she asked.

She *hmm*ed contemplatively as she looked up at the windows to try to find a way to turn the situation around.

Her expression was as serious as could be, but at the same time...

"...That sounds kind of funny, coming from someone who just betrayed us," Sara said.

"Th-that was one thing, this is another!" Lily replied, flapping her hands about as she tried to change the subject. "Bottom line is, I'm not giving up. Not until I get what I came for."

For better or for worse, Lily's mental fortitude was unshakable. Her sole motivation was steak, but still.

"Our bottleneck's gonna be water," she muttered.

"What do you mean?" Sara asked.

"Well, if you want to clean windows quickly, you need a bunch of water, either with or without soap. Once you drench the window to unstick the dirt, all you need to do then is run a wiper over it and you're done."

She was referring to a T-shaped tool designed for cleaning. They'd been invented a few years back, and their rubber blades were fantastic at removing huge amounts of grime in one fell swoop. The technical term for them was squeegees.

"The problem is, getting water up to the second floor is gonna be a hassle. We'll have to use spray bottles and go a little bit at a time."

Sara glanced over at Klaus, who had already finished his prep work.

There was a large spray bottle hanging from his waist. Apparently, he too had decided to base his tactics around using a spritzer for his water.

If only there was a way to drench a whole window at once.

Sara couldn't get the thought out of her head.

The easiest way to do it would be to fill up a bucket and simply dump it all out on the window. Just as Lily pointed out, though, getting water up to the second-story windows that way would require a huge amount of work moving buckets back and forth. Transporting that much water would take so many people that they wouldn't have enough personnel left washing the windows to beat Klaus.

But wait...

She had an idea.

There *was* a way she could get water to her teammates, even when they were up in the air. And it was a method only available to her.

As Sara was just about to finish collecting her thoughts, the starting bell rang.

Her teammates were still pessimistic about their odds, but they got ready to start cleaning.

"Everyone!" Sara yelled. "I need you to each head to a different window on the second floor!"

The others were perplexed for a moment, but they eventually started following Sara's instructions. They hooked their fingers into the recesses in the wall and began swiftly climbing their way up to the second story.

Meanwhile, Sara dashed to the kitchen on the first floor and grabbed the item she was looking for.

A moment later, and her preparations were done.

"I'm code name Meadow—and it's time to run circles around them."

After amping herself up, she raised her hand high.

"Mr. Bernard! Mr. Aiden!"

As she shouted out the order, she released an intense-eyed hawk and a chubby pigeon. The two of them soared vigorously through the air with cans full

of water clutched in their talons.

Fortunately, Thea picked up on what Sara was thinking. She shouted as concisely as possible. “Look alive!”

That was enough to get the rest of the girls on the same page. When the birds delivered their payloads to the girls, they dashed the cans’ contents against their windows with all their might. Once they had the windows thoroughly soaked, they took their water wipers and wiped them clean.

That let the girls finish far faster than ever would have been possible with a spritzer.

They tossed their empty cans to the ground and each moved to the next window.

“Mr. Johnny!”

As soon as Sara shouted, her puppy started dashing around and using the basket she’d plopped on his head to swiftly scoop up the discarded cans before bringing them back to Sara.

Her animals were moving like they were extensions of her own limbs. That was the power of Sara’s rearing skill—missions that would have been impossible for a human to complete suddenly became possible.

After refilling the empty cans with water, Sara handed them back to her birds and had them deliver them to her teammates. Then, she stepped out of the kitchen for a bit to take stock of the situation out in the courtyard.

From the look of it, the girls had a slight lead. Thanks to Monika and Sybilla taking full advantage of their explosive athletic abilities, the windows were getting done like nobody’s business.

Then, Sara looked over to see how their opponent was faring. Her eyes met Klaus’s as he hopped from one window to the next.

She felt like he was telling her something with his gaze.

“Not bad.”

She had seen through his plot, of course. Klaus had set this whole thing up so that she would get a chance to shine. She didn’t have flawless leadership

abilities, unrivaled strength, or even an unbreakable will, but even so, there were things that only she could do.

By way of a reply, she put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. “I’m just getting started.”



In the end, the girls lost.

“My meeeeeeat,” Lily sobbed in the dining room.

“Hey, it could’ve been worse. At least you got that sliver as a consolation prize,” Monika said consolingly.

The final round came right down to the wire, but once all was said and done, Klaus emerged the victor. Thanks to his superhuman athleticism, he was able to wipe down his last window just a second before the girls did.

As recognition for that photo finish at the end of the five rounds, Klaus awarded them a single steak. At twelve ounces, it made for a sizable act of benevolence, but after being split eight ways, even a steak that big didn’t go very far. Lily was glum at first, but as soon as she put her slice in her mouth, she cried, “Mmm, meat! 🎵” and immediately cheered back up.

Incidentally, the punishment he gave them for losing was the task of repairing the rest of the manor’s damage. They were enjoying their dinner now, but it had taken a lot of hard work to get there.

Monika yawned. “All right, I think I’m going to turn in. I’m kinda wiped.”

She left the dishes for the others to deal with and headed for the door.

When she did, Sara stood up and called out to her. “Would it, um, be all right if I made a suggestion?” It was taking all her courage to be so loud. She could feel her face getting hot. “Are you sure we don’t need to start taking shifts repairing the building? I really think it would be a good idea.”

She glanced nervously around at the rest of her teammates. She normally wasn’t nearly so vocal, so her proposal had come as quite a surprise to the others. Their expressions were tinged with bewilderment.

Monika stopped and gave an uninterested shrug. “Like I said yesterday, I think

it's a bad call." Her tone was downright derisive. "Do you seriously think we have time for that? With a life-or-death mission just two weeks away?"

"But doing repairs is training, too. Spies do other things besides just taking down targets."

"...C'mon, we've already got our hands full with just the cooking and cleaning rotations."

"But Miss Monika, that's because you keep skipping out on them."

Monika went silent. "....."

Thea and Lily simultaneously burst into laughter.



“Oh dear, that has to be embarrassing.”

“She totally called you out.”

Monika grabbed the two of them by the collars. “You should just remember that if it weren’t for you two weighing me down, I would’ve won that contest,” she said, even though the day’s results were well past litigation. The three of them ended up squabbling and shouting at one another for a while, but once they’d had it out, Sara brought the matter to rest.

“Miss Monika, I have nothing but respect for your skills.” Her voice rang confident and proud. “But chores are chores, and we all need to split them up fairly.”

All the other girls stared straight at her.

Sara was actually being *assertive*.

The surprise in their eyes was plain.

Sara squeezed her hat tight and hung her head.

“...Or at least, that’s kind of what I think, b-but I know I might be stepping over the line here...”

“I agree with everything you said.”

The first person to back her up was Erna.

After that, the rest of the team gave Sara a round of applause. Now that the manor was all fixed up, they all felt so much more at home. All of them were picking up what Sara was putting down.

Monika frowned awkwardly, but eventually she too agreed with her usual airy nonchalance. “I’ll keep that in mind.”



That night, Sara ran into an unexpected visitor when she headed to the animal shed.

“Teach?”

It was Klaus. He was holding a gas-powered lantern and gently rubbing the hawk’s belly. A bucket full of raw meat sat at his feet. “I had some meat left

over. Is it safe for them to eat?”

Apparently, he had brought over the steaks he ended up not making for the girls.

“Are you sure? I would love that for them, but from your perspective, they’re just animals...”

“You and your critters were today’s MVPs.”

Sara gladly accepted Klaus’s kind offer and doled out the meat to her pets. Her hawk only ever ate the special feed she made for him, but all the other animals were overjoyed at the rare treat they were receiving.

Now that Sara thought about it, perhaps Klaus had been planning on treating her pets all along. The fat content in tenderloin was low, making it a perfect cut to feed to animals.

Klaus watched peacefully as the animals nibbled away at the steak.

“Say, Teach—”

Upon seeing his expression in profile, a question crossed Sara’s mind.

“—do you come here a lot?”

“...What makes you think that?”

“They seem used to you, and there’s also what Miss Erna told me. She said she saw a ghost.”

Sara had initially assumed that it was her, but the part about the “long shadow” had been nagging at her. Obviously, even someone of Sara’s stature could still make a long shadow if the light hit her at just the right angle, but alternatively...

“What can I say? I like animals,” Klaus readily confessed.

“I’m kind of surprised.” Sara smiled. “When we first met, I expected you to be a much colder person.”

“It’s like I said yesterday—people are multifaceted.”

“I guess they really are...”

“Becoming more assertive will serve you well, Sara. I’m sure there are plenty of times when you feel like you’re one step behind the others, but just like today, there will be plenty more opportunities for your abilities and mindset to shine.”

That was what Klaus had been trying to tell her.

He had dressed it up as a training exercise, but in truth, he’d wanted to provide her with an opportunity for her to show off what she could do. He could have tried encouraging her with words, but the way he’d chosen would leave far more of an impression.

That was what had let her express herself so confidently back there.

Sara felt her heart thump in her chest. “Understood, sir.”

Klaus nodded. “Magnificent.”

Having completed his main objective for the visit, Klaus picked up a new piece of tenderloin. When he placed it in front of the puppy, the puppy began gleefully chewing on it.

“This little guy is particularly adorable,” Klaus murmured quietly.

He seemed to be quite taken with the dog.

“His name is Mr. Johnny. He used to be a big biter when he was a baby, but he’s gotten a lot more obedient lately, and he hasn’t bitten anyone since... Except for that one time.”

““Except for that one time’?”

“He may have nibbled Miss Erna’s hand a little.”

“That sounds like Erna, all right.” Klaus smiled and scratched the puppy’s chin. “In that case, I imagine I’ll be fine. When it comes to dealing with animals, I happen to be an expert at—”

Chomp.

The puppy took Klaus’s hand—and bit down with gusto.

““ ””

Klaus and Sara went silent.

For a moment, Sara felt as though the entire world had just ground to a halt—but when she finally parsed what she'd witnessed, the blood drained from her face.

"O-oh gosh, I'm so sor—"

"There's nothing to apologize for. He's just being friendly."

She'd been expecting him to rebuke her, but Klaus was calm and composed. His face didn't so much as twitch.

"B-but...even so, he's not supposed to..."

All the while, the puppy continued gnawing on Klaus's hand. Play bites or not, his teeth were sharp enough that he had to have broken the skin by now.

Klaus gave his reply as matter-of-factly as could be. "Do you really think I would get into a situation like this by mistake? We're playing, that's all."

"I'm sure you'd never make a mistake like that, but..."

At the same time, the fact remained that he *was* getting bitten.

"Are you, um...putting on a brave face right now?" Sara asked nervously.

"Of course...not."

"And you're not fighting through the pain?"

"No, no. It doesn't hurt...one bit."

"Those were some really unnatural pauses, Teach!"

Sara knew how inappropriate it was, but she could feel laughter bubbling up from her chest all the same.

Once again, she'd gotten to see a whole new side of Klaus.

He was right. You couldn't judge someone based on just a small part of who they were. Depending on the situation and the circumstances, they might well show you something completely different. Sometimes, even the Greatest Spy in the World got bit by a dog and tried desperately to play it cool.

And if that was the case, then surely someday, the moment would come when even an inexperienced spy like her who couldn't rear a single dog

properly would get to do great things.

As that tiny hope flickered in her heart, Sara rushed over to pull the puppy off her teacher.

Interlude

Intermission ①

Sybilla and Sara finished their stories.

Both of them had recounted their encounters with Klaus in exacting detail. Naturally, both of them had spun and dramatized their tales a bit, but by and large, everything they'd laid out had been the truth.

Through their training, they had each forged a bond of trust with Klaus.

Sybilla waved her hand in embarrassment. "And hey, think about it. For my thing, you guys were bugging our conversation the whole damn time, remember? You should already know we never talked about any sorta fake marriage."

Sara followed up by explaining herself as well. Her face was bright red. "I—I could never m-marry him, either. There are plenty of more suitable candidates!"

There were no discernible lies in either of their testimonies. The group was no closer to finding the bride than before.

All they could do was hum thoughtfully. "Hmm..."



Right around that time, Klaus was walking through the hallway beside the main hall.

The door was slightly ajar, so he could see what was going on. Inside, the girls were having a heated debate while seated around a circular table. He could tell by the fervor in their voices just how serious they were.

What in the world are they doing...?

He'd had his suspicions, but sure enough, they were in there trying to root out the bride.

Klaus was on the verge of shouting at them to get back to their training—but then, at the last moment, he stopped himself.

They just survived a grueling mission. I should cut them a little slack.

At the end of the day, he was the one who'd told them to enjoy their youths a little. Best to let them do as they pleased. Besides, he would feel bad about raining on their parade after they'd gotten so invested.

He surreptitiously gazed at their faces.

...I fear that I've taken a lot from them.

If he hadn't recruited them onto Lamplight, they would still be living at their academies. Instead of having to go on life-or-death missions, they could be spending time with their peers and building up experience gradually. They may have been washouts, but surely they'd had at least a few friends.

For now, I'll just give them some time to themselves. I can handle the missions on my own for a while.

Klaus was satisfied with that, and he headed for the entrance to set out on a new mission.



And thus, the bridal hearing continued.

Now that Sybilla and Sara were no longer suspects, the question became who the team wanted to cast doubt on next.

"...Well, the next highest vote counts were Lily and Monika," Grete said.

The girls crossed their arms and sank into thought.

As they were pondering, Thea spoke up. "By the way, nobody suspected me of being the bride. Why is that, I wonder?"

"Klaus has trouble dealing with you, Sis," Annette pointed out.

Thea replied with a surprised, "He does?" but none of that was especially important at the moment.

The girls' minds turned over the possibilities.

It was true that there was a certain level of trust between Klaus and Lily, but

Lily's espionage skills were hardly what you'd call reliable, and it was hard to imagine Klaus intentionally taking her along on missions.

Eventually, their gazes settled on Monika and Monika alone.

"Who, me? What're you, nuts?" Monika's lips curled into a sardonic grin. "No way. Klaus and I don't even get along that well."

"But Monika," Lily rebutted, "what about that solo operation you went on back in the Empire?"

Now that doubt had fallen on Monika's head, it was joined by some entirely reasonable suspicion. The air around the table grew even tenser than before.

Monika sighed. "Fine. You want me to talk, I'll talk. But there's one other thing we should revisit, too."

"What's that?" Lily asked.

"That whole business with the meat pie shop. If you think about it, it all started because we were trying to support Grete in her romance. Don't you want to go back over it to see if anyone was acting suspicious?"

Ahh, the girls sighed in agreement. Sure enough, the meat pie shop was directly related to Grete's love. If the bride harbored some faint feelings toward Klaus, it might have shown up in their behavior back then.

Eventually, Monika began recounting her story.

It was time for the bridal hearing to move onto its next chapter.

Chapter 3

Monika's Case

After Lamplight finished its month of training, its members embarked on an Impossible Mission.

The girls started by sneaking into the Galgad Empire, then got to work gathering intelligence on the laboratory they needed to infiltrate.

Over in the rearguard, Thea and Grete were in charge of sorting through the information the team assembled and coming up with specific plans to achieve the overarching goals Klaus had set out for them. Sometimes, they also approached targets themselves when the team was short-handed.

“Did you follow that, Grete? If you want to get a man wrapped around your finger quickly, the best way to start is by making a lot of physical contact.”

“...Ah, so that's the technique you were using today. I'll be sure to remember that.”

As the two of them were carrying out their duties, they also developed an odd mentor-student relationship.

Meanwhile, Sybilla and Lily carried out their assigned missions one after another. They pickpocketed wallets off of Endy Laboratory employees, stole client lists from drug dealers to use as blackmail material, infiltrated distributors' offices to find out what deliveries the laboratory was expecting—the list went on and on.

“Is it just me, or are we getting stuck with the biggest workload of all?” Lily moaned.

“We're not,” Sybilla muttered. “From what I hear, the two of us together are only gettin' handed half the Operations squad jobs.”

The two of them continued running themselves ragged all over the Empire.

Then there was Sara, Annette, and Erna, who provided backup to the other squads.

They, too, handled a large variety of jobs.

Whenever a request came in for them to build a weapon that could be disguised as a wallet, to direct a group of mice to drive people out of an office building, or to cause an accident in order to buy some time, they carried out the task with aplomb.

“My homemade rubber ball set is complete. Yo, time to test it out on Erna!” Annette crowed.

“Y-yeep?” Erna yelped. “Why are they bouncing so much, and why are they making that awful thudding noise?! This doesn’t feel safe!”

“I see you loaded them with metal, just as requested,” Sara said. “I’ll handle the delivery, so you two can go ahead and take a breather.”

Annette and Erna were both a little emotionally immature, but Sara did a stellar job managing them. Keeping the two problem children in line was a key part of her job, and it was a task that Sara alone was equipped to handle.

However, that wasn’t to say that everything always went exactly according to plan.

It was their first real mission, and many of them made mistakes. Some of them were so nervous their hands shook and their knees rattled. They knew that if they screwed up, it would be all too easy for the police to apprehend them and hand them over to the Imperial army or intelligence agency. Captured spies had nothing to look forward to but death by torture, and the mere thought of that was enough to make several of the girls quiver in their boots.

Klaus did what he could to help them out whenever they got into a pinch, of course, but there were eight of them, and there was only so much a single man could do for them all. A single month wasn’t nearly enough to turn a bunch of academy washouts into elite spies.

But they had one saving grace—the genius in Lamplight’s ranks who stood head and shoulders above the others.



As Grete stood in the business hotel in Galgad's capital, her eyes went wide.

"...Are you serious?"

She was disguised as a male technician, and she'd infiltrated one of her teammate's hotels under the pretext of needing to fix the room's radio. Grete was a master of disguise, and her job was to use the many faces she had at her disposal to pass messages between her teammates.

The cause for her surprise was the room's inhabitant, Monika.

"...Allow me to reiterate, just to be sure," Grete said. "The success of our entire Impossible Mission rests on this upcoming task, and the boss says it's going to be quite dangerous. In my opinion, it would be best to bring along the entire Specialist squad, and the boss is prepared to provide backup himself when and where he can, as well."

They were halfway through their undercover mission, and their intel on the Endy Laboratory was all starting to come together. At long last, they'd finally figured out who they needed to compromise in order to accomplish their goals.

If they wanted to get into that lab, they needed to take their target down.

However, the importance of the task at hand wasn't the only thing that had caught Grete's attention. Klaus himself had described it as being dangerous. The exact phrasing he'd used was the needlessly abstract "it'll be as perilous as poison gas pooling at our feet," but even so, they couldn't afford to ignore the sentiment.

Despite all that, though, Monika sounded almost nonchalant. "Yeah, I'll be fine solo." She didn't even sit up on her bed as she gave the same reply as she had a moment ago. "Now that I have my weapon from Annette, I don't need any more backup. Tell Klaus he can focus on supporting the others."

"_____"

All Grete could do was stare at her speechlessly.

Monika's voice practically bubbled with confidence. And she wasn't bluffing, either.

There was a pronounced gap between her and the rest of the team. Aside

from Monika, all the girls were worn out. Not only had they been at the bottoms of their academy classes, but this was also their first real mission. It was only natural for them to want help from Klaus and their teammates, and many of them had asked the Intel squad for exactly that.

The only one who seemed at all relaxed—excluding Lily, whose well of emotional fortitude seemed nigh bottomless—was Monika.

“If he’s got effort to spare, better to spend it on the rest of the team. At this rate, Lily’s gonna come up with some sort of inane idea. She’ll say something like, ‘We’re all worn out, so let’s throw a party!’”

“.....”

“Nah, I guess I should give the idiot some credit. Not even she would suggest something *that* stupid.”

Monika’s glib comments didn’t earn so much as a grin out of Grete. Instead, she just gave her head a small shake. “But Monika, not even you can—”

“Ugh, just drop it already. I said I can do it, so I’m gonna do it.” The look in Monika’s eyes was frigid. “And I’ll get it done quick, too. See you back here in two days?”

After unilaterally ending the conversation, Monika grabbed the book sitting on her nightstand. It was a piece of pure literature by an Imperial author. She lit an aromatic candle and made herself comfy.

Grete gave her a puzzled look. “If I may...”

“Hm?”

“...what made you wash out at your academy?”

Monika stared at her silently, and Grete elaborated on her question. “You once told us that you pulled your punches during your exams. But why would someone with your talents and confidence go and do something like that?”

Monika laughed. “If I told you it was ‘cause I discovered my ceiling—”

“What?”

“—would you believe me?”

Grete wasn't sure how to reply to that. She sank into silence.

Monika shrugged. "I'm kidding. It just started feeling like work, that's all. I figured I wasn't in any hurry to graduate."

Grete could tell that that was a lie, but with how evasive Monika was being, she had no way of pressing the issue.

She had lived under the same roof as Monika for over a month now, but she had yet to see so much as the faintest glimmer of sincerity out of her.

"Hey, Grete."

As Grete went to leave, Monika called out to her from behind.

"You don't have to worry about me. If things actually start looking dicey, I'll get out of there."

Grete had no idea whether or not she truly meant that.



The morning after she accepted the assignment from Grete, Monika headed to an apartment complex in one of the capital's suburbs.

The Imperial capital was situated in a valley with the schools and businesses concentrated in the middle and the residential areas on the high ground surrounding it. The suburb Monika went to was full of prewar public apartment complexes. There were dozens of them, each standing eight stories tall, and altogether the full development was home to over two thousand people. Every day, the suburb's residents used the bus and subway systems to commute in and out of the heart of the city.

Early that morning, Monika bided her time by one of the apartment buildings and watched the people coming and going.

Luckily for her, she wasn't the only bored-looking youngster loitering about. The area was full of truant teenagers, so all Monika had to do to blend in was sit on a bench and enjoy her breakfast sandwich and coffee.

Then, she heard a group of kids shouting over by the residences.

"You little twerp." "Just give us what we want already." "Yeah, and quit your backtalk."

It sounded like someone was getting bullied.

Monika rose from her seat and headed toward the voices.

There were three bullies picking on a single kid over in an alley between two of the buildings. The victim looked to be about nine, and the boys surrounding him were far brawnier. The kid was cradling a lunchbox in his arms. That was probably what his hungry assailants were after.

Monika took a good look at the victim's face, then called over to the group. "C'mon, that's not cool. Seriously, three against one?"

The bullies all turned and looked at Monika. They were a little younger than her, probably fourteen or fifteen, and they were all dressed in grimy shirts and soot-stained cotton trousers. Their home lives clearly weren't great.

"That's not very sporting." Monika smiled. "I get that you're hungry, but this just isn't right."

"The hell? I dunno what your problem is, lady, but you can't just—"

"Shut up."

The boys went dead silent.

Monika had just hurled a handful of rocks at them—five in total.

They stood there with their mouths agape. "Wh—"

The coin-sized rocks had just flown at them like bullets.

However, not a single one had landed a hit. Instead, the pebbles had whizzed beside their ears, between their thighs, and beneath their armpits like they were weaving their way around them.

"If you don't want me to be nice about it, I certainly don't have to." Monika picked up some more rocks off the ground. "These ones'll hit."

The bullies shrieked, then beat a teary-eyed retreat.

Now, the only one left was their victim.

The kid had chestnut hair and was wearing a bulky pair of glasses and a beautiful ocean-blue blazer. Monika's sudden appearance had left him bewildered. He did manage to stammer out a "Th-thank you..." but the reality

of the situation had yet to sink in for him, so that was all he could bring himself to say.

“Look, you can be as amazed as you want”—Monika tossed aside her rocks—“but it looks like you missed your school bus.”

“Oh no...”

The red bus heading to the private school was already turning down the road.

Monika smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll walk you there.”

“O-oh, no, you really don’t have to... I’ll be fine on my own.”

“Don’t worry, I can explain to them why you were late. Wouldn’t want to get in trouble with your teacher, right?”

She grabbed the boy’s arm and began pushily leading the way. He was flustered at first, but the phrase “in trouble” seemed to do the trick, and he obediently followed along.

The boy’s name was Mattel.

He spent the whole time nervous as hell, so Monika did her best to make small talk to cheer him up. After making up a story about coming to visit her grandmother, she threw in a handful of jokes, and eventually, she actually got Mattel laughing.

“Tell me, miss!” Once he’d loosened up a bit, he spoke up. “Do you have superpowers? You know, that thing you did with the rocks back there.”

“Of course not,” she casually replied.

However, her dispassionate answer only seemed to pique Mattel’s interest. “Then please, teach me how to throw rocks like you do.”

“Hm?”

“I wanna get strong like you. My dream is to become a soldier in the Imperial army someday.”

Mattel’s eyes were sparkling with reverence, like he was looking at a real live hero.

Monika pretended to think it over for a moment. “Hmm... Eh, sure, what’s the

harm. I'll give you some pointers after you get out of school."

Mattel pumped his fists in delight. He began calling Monika "Coach" and started telling her all sorts of things about his school that she hadn't even asked about. She responded with a couple of perfunctory "hmm"s and "oh huh"s.

The two of them continued on pleasantly until they got to Mattel's school, where Monika dropped him off.

Naturally, it wasn't altruism that had inspired Monika to rescue him.

Mattel was her target's son. That was the first and only reason she'd lifted a finger.



"Your task is to extract information from a licensed electrician named Jordan Cupca."

Grete was the one who'd given her the details.

"The information he has is essential to our mission."

The girls' ultimate goal was to infiltrate a facility called the Endy Laboratory, and in order to do that, they needed maps of the premises and intelligence on its defenses.

The people Grete set her sights on were the construction teams that frequently visited the lab. Her logic was that instead of trying to get information out of the researchers, who were bound by a strict duty of confidentiality, they could simply pump intel out of the lab's external contractors. Furthermore, it stood to reason that a contractor who dealt with switchboard maintenance and electrical inspections would have a pretty detailed understanding of the lab's inner workings.

Of the people that fit that description, Jordan Cupca did more work for the lab than anyone.

In order to get close to him, Monika started by winning over his son, Mattel Cupca.



After dropping Mattel off, Monika headed down a sideline on her own.

Over on the corner of the street, there was a partially constructed building. At the moment, it was little more than a frame of steel beams, and even those only went up three stories high. DO NOT ENTER signs were hung up all around the steel chain surrounding the area.

Monika stepped over the chain and headed into the construction site.

Fortunately, there was no one around. There must not have been any work scheduled for that day.

After making sure the site was clear of people, Monika whirled around.

“If you’re trying to be stealthy, you’re doing an awful job of it.”

She was talking in the direction of the building’s shadow.

“You were tailing us that whole time I was taking Mattel to school. That’s right, you, the hag in the ugly blue scarf. What do you want? Who do you work for?”

All was silent—but only for a moment.

That was enough time for the other party to decide that Monika needed to be eliminated. The individual in question was an old woman pushing a handcart. She rushed out from behind the building and shouted, “Die!” while grabbing an automatic pistol from her cart. She was obviously at least in her sixties, but she had the speed and agility of a woman in the prime of her youth.

Monika ducked behind a girder and assessed the situation.

I didn’t make any mistakes, so Mattel must’ve been the one the hag was tailing. When I got close to him, that was enough to draw her attention.

It was unclear what her goal was or who had hired her. That said, all Monika needed to do to find out was capture her opponent and make her talk.

The old woman blasted off shots at the girder Monika was hiding behind.

Her cart must’ve been packed full of firearms, as the moment one of her guns ran out of ammo, she pulled out another without a moment’s delay. In short, her assassination technique was to overwhelm her foe with raw firepower until they died.

“Now then, how long can you keep hiding? At this rate, you’re just going to get—”

“I’m fine right where I am,” Monika replied frostily to the old woman’s taunt. “I can see you well enough from here.”

By all rights, the steel girder should have blocked her line of sight, but Monika grinned all the same. Then, she withdrew a rubber ball from her pocket.

Annette had made those balls for her to use as throwing weapons.

“It’s time for you to learn something—that this world is home to monsters the likes of which you’ll never beat.”

Still hidden behind the girder, Monika hurled the ball with all her might.

Her technique seemed downright superhuman.

After bouncing back and forth between the myriad girders, the ball eventually smashed right into the old woman’s face.



Despite utterly demolishing the old woman, Monika learned almost nothing of value.

The woman must have been under some sort of brainwashing or something, as all she was able to do was mutter incoherently. Monika snapped a photo of her and sent the film to the Intel squad via express mail. Figuring out who the old woman was could be their problem.

At the moment, there was only one thing Monika could say for certain: the Mattel family was in some sort of serious hot water.

That high-firepower hag was no amateur. She must have some sort of organization backing her.

However, even knowing that wasn’t enough to faze Monika.

Still, no sense worrying about an org so insignificant it would willingly deploy someone as incompetent as her.

Monika’s mind was made up.

She was going to stick with the original plan—get close to Mattel, then pump

his dad Jordan for information.

“Hey there, Mattel. I’m here, just like I promised.”

“Coach!”

That evening, Monika headed back to the apartment complex and met up with Mattel again.

Over at the onsite park, she taught him how to throw rocks. What they were doing amounted to nothing more than finding stones on the ground and hurling them at empty cans, but Mattel took to it with zeal. All Monika was doing was playing the part of a coach and giving him the occasional pointer, but Mattel seemed moved all the same, which certainly made her job easier.

According to Mattel, it was like doing drills. Sweat poured from his forehead as he single-mindedly continued going through the motions. Monika briefly wondered what it was about phrases like “doing drills” and “secret training” that young boys found so enthralling.

When she asked Mattel why he was going about it so passionately, he answered with obvious excitement. “So I can become a soldier!” His eyes sparkled. “Being a soldier is an important and honorable job. They taught us that in school. Before I was born, we fought valiantly against the Allies. My dream is to become a soldier so I can fight in the next war.”

His responses were oddly snappy. He was probably imitating the way soldiers talked.

“Ah,” Monika replied half-heartedly.

Imperial soldiers had ravaged the Republic, so as someone who was born there, Monika had complicated feelings about all that. In what world were people who mercilessly mowed down women and children anyone to look up to? There were a million things she would’ve liked to say, but she knew that telling them to an innocent child wouldn’t accomplish anything.

“Do you have a dream, Coach?” As Monika stood there engrossed in her thoughts, a question shook her from her reverie. “I’m curious. What do you want to become?”

“Who, me? Nah, no dreams.”

“Wait, no dreams?” Mattel’s eyes went wide in surprise.

Monika scratched her head.

It was a fair enough question. In elementary schools, they often made the students write essays about their future aspirations.

Back before she joined her spy academy, Monika attended a civilian elementary school herself. Even back then, she’d never been any good when the topic turned to dreams and goals.

“Tell me, do you think having dreams is a good thing?” Monika asked in a dispassionate tone of voice.

Mattel raised an eyebrow. “Is...is it not?”

“Here, try this on for size. Let’s say you found out you were fantastic at football, and that you were good enough to become the best player in the world. Would you still want to become a soldier?”

The Empire founded its professional league before the war, and to that day, football players were revered by children the nation over. On game days, people would gather in television-equipped pubs and go wild whenever their team made a shot.

Mattel started wavering. “If that happened...I would have to think about it.”

“What if you could become the biggest movie star in the world? Would you want to become a soldier, then?”

“Oh, man...”

“You’d have more money than you knew what to do with, women would throw themselves at you, and you’d get to eat gourmet food every day. Would you trade that life to go live in some strict, smelly barracks?”

“I-I’d have to think about that one, too...”

“Or would you still try to become a soldier if you got to the military academy and you ended up being dead last in the pecking order the whole time you were there?”

“.....”

Mattel was silent. He understood what Monika was trying to say.

“It’s all just leftovers.” Monika smiled bitterly. “The thing about people is that we sort things into stuff that seems possible and stuff that doesn’t, then take the best of what remains, call it our ‘dream,’ and treat it like it’s priceless. It’s really nothing that special.”

At the end of the day, people desired money. They desired recognition. They desired to be able to contribute to society. They desired sex. People were filled with all sorts of desires, and jobs were nothing more than a means to achieve those ends. Sanctifying them by calling them “dreams” or “ambitions” was ridiculous.

That was how Monika saw the world.

“.....” Mattel seemed dumbfounded.

None of that had ever crossed his mind before. He stood motionless, like a stray child who’d just lost his map.

Monika smiled in self-derision.

It was time to get her head back on straight. There was no sense lecturing her target’s son about her philosophy on life.

She changed the subject.

“By the way, I’m getting pretty thirsty. Let’s stop by your place so you can get me some water.”



Monika didn’t have much in the way of passion.

Her family had built their fortune as artists. Her father was a painter, her mother was a musician, and her older brother and older sister had inherited their parents’ skills and were planning on becoming artists as well. During the Great War, the whole family evacuated to another continent so they could continue devoting themselves to the arts. They all wanted to heighten their craft; day in and day out, they had discussions about what constituted “beauty.”

Monika never really fit in.

The well of artistic sensibilities seemed to have run dry at her siblings, and as the youngest daughter, Monika never found herself drawn to art. Whenever she slapped some paint on a canvas, she received reasonable amounts of praise, and when she picked up an instrument, she would garner decent reviews. However, she herself couldn't care less.

"Your music and art are all function and no form. It's technically precise, but it never pops," her father told her wistfully. "Perhaps your true calling lies in some other field."

His words echoed heavy in her thirteen-year-old ears.

I have to find somewhere where I can really be myself.

In the end, she decided to become a spy on little more than a gut feeling. She used her father's connections to join a spy academy, and when she got there, she passed the entrance exam without a hitch.

By all accounts, she'd made the right choice.

The moment she first got there, Monika immediately began getting the best grades out of all her peers. It only took her a few shots to get a feel for how guns worked, she was able to listen to simultaneous radio broadcasts in three different languages and memorize them all, and she was able to take those three messages, convert them into a cipher, and relay them over a telegraph without making a single typo. She was even able to complete a sixty-mile hike, then scale a seventy-foot-tall building barehanded and sneak in through a seventh-floor window immediately thereafter.

Being a spy is what I was born to do.

It didn't take long for Monika to start believing that, and she began putting everything she had into her training.

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

Soon, though, her hubris got smashed into a million pieces.

One day, the academies all brought their best students together for a special

joint training exercise—and on that day, Monika learned the truth.

The assignment was dead simple. All they had to do was steal a single code book from their examiner. Monika had only recently enrolled, and she was surrounded by upperclassmen whose current skills surpassed even hers. They all assumed they had it in the bag.

But they failed.

Not just that, they got annihilated. Soon, every student but Monika was lying unconscious on the ground.

As the sole survivor, all she could do was stare blankly at their examiner.

“I gotta say, I’m surprised. I guess we’re not gonna have a single successful candidate this time around! I mean, Guido’s still holding his test over at the male schools, but that guy’s even stricter than me.”

The examiner had taken down twenty honors students without so much as breaking a sweat.

Once Monika was the only one left standing, the examiner gave her a smile. “You can head on back now. Yeah, you, with the blue hair. I heard about you, you know. Getting invited to this exercise after just two months at your academy? You’ve got promise, kiddo. That’s something to be proud of. But with your current skills, you’re a total no-go.”

She patted Monika on the shoulder as she passed her by.

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

Monika didn’t know.

She didn’t know that the woman was a member of Inferno and Klaus’s de facto older sister, “Flamefanner” Heide.

And she didn’t know that the so-called “special joint training exercise” was secretly a selection test for new Inferno members.

In that moment, though, she’d witnessed something—a peak she would never be able to reach, no matter how much effort she put in.

That was the day Monika stopped trying.



When they arrived at the apartment, Mattel got Monika some mineral water, then chugged down a glass himself. Soon thereafter, he began nodding off.

“Sorry, Coach... I’m just really tired...”

He diligently apologized, then plopped himself down on the nearby sofa and fell asleep. When Monika gave his shoulder a light push, he crumpled onto his side. The sleeping pill she’d slipped into his water had worked like a charm.

“Don’t worry, it’ll wear off soon.”

Mattel was the only other person in the apartment. His mom had moved out during the divorce, and his dad was still at work. Mattel had told her what time his dad was getting home, so Monika knew she was free to scour the place. The apartments in the complex were pretty standard two-bedroom affairs, with a pair of bedrooms accompanied by a living room and a combined kitchen-dining room.

Monika headed straight for the dad’s bedroom and opened up his filing cabinet.

Let’s see if we can find something to blackmail him with, shall we?

The best-case scenario would be finding schematics for the Endy Laboratory’s electrical systems, but he probably stored those at his workplace or in some office inside the laboratory itself. What Monika needed was something she could use to threaten him into stealing those schemata.

Worse comes to worst, I can always take the kid hostage and get information out of him that way.

She’d already won Mattel over, so that would be easy to pull off if necessary. Looking through the apartment’s photo albums, it was clear to see just how much the man loved his son. Monika didn’t relish the thought of kidnapping the kid, but it would certainly be an effective way to get the target to obey her instructions.

When she opened up the man’s chest of drawers, Monika tilted her head to

the side.

...Is that a false bottom?

The bottom of the drawer was ever-so-slightly elevated.

The question was, why would an ordinary civilian apartment even have something like that?

She lifted up the bottom and inspected the hidden drawer's contents. Inside, there was a single notebook.

Monika couldn't help but grin as she leafed through it.

This target's got one hell of a secret.

It was time for a change of plans. Monika decided not to leave the bedroom. Instead, she hid behind the door and waited.

An hour later, Mattel's dad got home.

His name was Jordan Cupca, and he was a skinny, earnest-looking man who worked at a small electrical shop. He draped a blanket over Mattel, who was still out like a light, then loosened his tie and went into his bedroom.

Monika pressed her gun against his back. "Don't move. Don't turn around. Hands up."

"Wh—"

Jordan was understandably shocked. His body trembled. He reflexively started to look back, but Monika pressed harder with her gun. "I *said*, don't turn around."

Jordan raised his hands. He was as pale as a sheet. "A-are you a burglar?"

"Nah, nothing nearly that barbaric." Monika pressed the bedroom door shut behind her. "I took a look at that false bottom of yours."

"I'm sure I don't—"

"That's quite an exciting document you've put together."

Tiny quivers began running down Jordan's back. Monika couldn't see his face, but she guessed he had tears in his eyes right about now.

Now that she had him good and scared, she made her reveal. “Don’t worry. I’m on your side.”

“What?”

“You’re planning on defecting, right? I’m a spy from the Din Republic.”

That was what the false-bottom drawer had contained—a scathing report on the unethical research Jordan’s motherland was conducting.

Jordan detested the Empire’s expansionist ways much the way Monika and the rest of Lamplight did.

Jordan continued facing away from Monika as he explained the situation.

He described how he was unable to turn a blind eye to the acts of aggression the Galgad Empire committed during the Great War. Officially speaking, Galgad signed a security treaty after they lost the war, but the nation’s people still harbored deep grudges against the Allies, and the army was preparing in secret for another war. According to Jordan, the Empire was on track to start another campaign of aggression.

“I’ve given up on my motherland. During my work inspecting the lab’s electrical systems...I discovered that they’re performing human experiments on death row convicts.”

Jordan had taken that confidential information and listed it all out in his secret notebook. Eventually, he planned on handing it over to a foreign journalist and exposing the Empire’s schemes.

“Kind of ironic, considering how much of a diehard patriot your kid is,” Monika commented drily.

Jordan heaved a heavy sigh. “I imagine I have his school to thank for that. The teachers there drill the students into thinking that the reason we lost the Great War was because of the Allies’ underhanded tricks.”

“Oh yeah? I’ll be honest, figuring who was in the right and who was in the wrong is above my pay grade.”

“Well, that makes two of us. And I’m certainly not trying to speak poorly of all the soldiers who died fighting for our homeland. Even so, the Din Republic was

clearly the victimized country there. That's the way I feel, at least."

The Empire invaded the Republic simply because it was in its way.

Jordan nodded. "If you're a spy from the Republic, then this is the best thing I could have asked for. You're investigating the laboratory, right? I'd be happy to help out however I can."

"Glad we could come to an understanding."

"You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this day to come."

Monika flipped back through Jordan's notebook, then nodded in satisfaction.

The man wasn't lying. The notebook had dated records of rumors he'd heard at the lab, transcripts from the recording devices he'd planted in the switchboards, research documents he'd stolen, and vitriolic diatribes directed at the Galgad.

His mistrust of the Empire had been building up for years, and this was the result. He was practically a spy himself.

Looks like my work here is done. It's almost disappointing how simple that was.

She hadn't needed to bribe him or threaten him or anything. As far as jobs went, this one had been about as easy as they came.

Jordan even had his daily notes all neatly organized, so she wouldn't need to ask him to clarify or elaborate on any of it. It was hard to believe that an amateur like him had collected so much information.

Wait a minute...

A thought crossed Monika's mind.

These notes are almost too detailed.

The moment she realized what it was that seemed so off, she gasped. "Hey, Jordan. Let me ask you a question."

"What?"

"While you were stealing all this intel...did you ever draw any suspicion?"

“Huh...?”

Jordan didn't seem to understand the question. It was like the possibility had never even crossed his mind.

Monika fought back the urge to click her tongue. Never mind, he was *definitely* an amateur. He'd forgotten the risks he was taking.

Now, what would happen if anyone had noticed how shadily Jordan was acting?

The first thing they'd do is get the secret police involved, and the secret police would assign a counterintelligence operative to him. Then, the operative would start digging through Jordan's personal life and acquaintances. And how would they do that? Probably the same way Monika had—by getting close to his son.

Monika's eyes went wide. “The old woman.”

“The who?” Jordan asked.

“They've already got you under surveillance!”

If that old woman was a member of the secret police, it would mean that they were right on Jordan's tail.

All of a sudden, they heard the sound of wood exploding into splinters over by the entrance. Someone had just smashed in the apartment door, and whoever they were, they weren't there to play nice.

Mattel screamed. The noise must have woken him up.

“Mattel! Are you okay?!”

Jordan sprang into motion like he'd just received an electric shock. He rushed into the living room, toward the scream.

Monika immediately hid. She peered into the living room through the crack in the door.

“How nice to meet you. I'm here from Ravine, the Empire's counterintelligence organization,” a female voice said casually. “My name is Eve, and you, Jordan Cupca, are under arrest for suspected espionage.”

Monika stood there with bated breath as she thought through just how

doomed they were.

The Din Republic's intelligence organization, the Foreign Intelligence Office, didn't make a strong distinction between intelligence and counterintelligence work, but in Galgad, Ravine existed as a fully autonomous counterintelligence body. Assassinating foreign spies and suppressing renegades and insurgents was their entire MO.

Once they zeroed in on someone, that person was as good as dead. They didn't even hesitate to kill their own citizens.

Currently, there were two hostiles: a petite woman wearing a cruel smile, and a large, brawny man. The man had already captured Mattel and was holding a knife to his throat, but Monika's instincts told her that the woman named Eve was the more dangerous of the two. She was clearly the one calling the shots.

"I—I don't know what you're talking about..." Over in the living room, Jordan's knees rattled. "You must have made some mistake. I've been nothing but loyal to the Empire..."

"Oh? From what I hear, you've been doing *quite* a lot of grouching down at the pub."

Eve gave Jordan a forceful kick to the chest. He groaned in pain. "Dad!" Mattel cried, but the man told him to shut up and clamped his hand over Mattel's mouth.

After kicking Jordan a couple more times, Eve threw a wire out from the tip of her finger. Her technique was masterful, and the wire seemed like it was practically alive as it coiled its way around Jordan's neck.

"I'm taking you in. Don't you raise your voice."

"....."

"If you try to resist, I'll strangle you and your son both."

She already had the evidence she needed. Jordan wasn't going to be able to talk his way out of this.

Monika calmly reached her verdict.

I need to hightail it.

It was time to abandon Jordan and Mattel. She'd succeeded in her mission the moment she got the notebook, and now, she could simply escape out the bedroom window.

Jordan shot a pleading look over in the direction Monika was hiding in.

"Hm? Do you have someone holed up in the bedroom?" The gesture didn't escape Eve's attention. "You know, I *did* get an odd report this morning. One of my agents got taken out by a mysterious assailant. Could it be? Have you already made contact with a foreign spy?"

"Th-that's, I..."

"I asked you a question, you little worm. Answer it!"

Eve tightened her wire just short of suffocating Jordan and kicked him yet again. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he gasped for air.

Eve wasn't letting up. It was only a matter of time before he confessed.

Sorry, Jordan. You weren't careful enough, and now you're going to pay the price.

Monika inched quietly toward the window.

At least your notebook will get put to good use.

The prospect of him getting executed was a sad one, but as a spy, this was the correct call for her to make.

The mission was complete. There was no need to expose herself to any more danger.

Monika made up her mind to leave the family to die and reached for the windowsill.

All I have to do is throw in the towel. Just like I always have before...

She thought back to how, ever since the joint training exercise, she'd started giving up on everything.



For Monika, getting recruited onto Lamplight was a welcome release from her slothful days of training at the academy.

She had seen her ceiling, but she hadn't been able to abandon her last vestiges of hope. *Maybe someday, she prayed, a well of genius will spring up inside of me.* It was a self-indulgent fantasy, but she couldn't quite bear to rid herself of it.

When she got scouted to join Lamplight, she found her expectations for herself renewed.

I was right, she thought. Being a spy is what I was born to do.

Training with Klaus would be the perfect opportunity for her. She rejoiced at the opportunity to test her skills against the self-proclaimed "World's Strongest."

As the other girls attacked Klaus head-on, Monika gathered information, making sure to hide her true strength all the while. Then, once their training reached its final stages, she made her move and went after Klaus for real.

Out of all the attacks they staged during their month of training, hers was the one that came closest.

Everything was proceeding according to Monika's plan.

"Look, Teach, we've got a hostage! If you take one step closer, I'll light this report on fire!"

"And she's got a bodyguard, too. How d'ya like them apples? You've got no choice but to surrender, yeah?"

Monika chuckled gloatingly as she listened to her teammates' voices through her radio during the operation's final stages.

Lily had gotten ahold of a report that Klaus badly needed, and Sybilla was there using her powerful close-combat skills to defend her. Klaus had been forced into a two-against-one situation where he couldn't afford to lift a finger.

However...

"Magnificent."

By the time Monika joined up with the others, it was all over.

Klaus had already stolen the report back and was gazing down coolly at Lily

and Sybilla. The two of them were on all fours and staring in blank shock.

“Wh-what just happened...?” Lily groaned.

“I simply moved things along like a stream gently washing away a leaf,” Klaus replied like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Seeing him there caused the joint training exercise to flash back through Monika’s head.

In that moment, she realized that she’d hit her ceiling again.

She had taken him on with everything she had, and she’d been completely and utterly trounced. When she looked at the situation objectively, it was enough to drive her to despair.

I could sacrifice my whole life, and I’d still never surpass Klaus.

No amount of effort would be enough to beat him. That much was clear.

She was going to end up as a slightly above-average spy who got used up and thrown away on a whim. That was the sole future that awaited her.

Her heart had beat for a brief moment, but it was rapidly freezing over again.

“Rgh! It’s okay, Monika, next time we’ll get him for sure! Don’t let it get you down, okay?”

“Yeah, she’s right. No sense mopin’.”

Lily and Sybilla were none the wiser, and she envied the way they could devote themselves so effortlessly to their training.

Nowhere but the perverse world of espionage could that asinine, unflagging hardheadedness of theirs thrive.

If only she could be as inept as they were. Then, being a spy would be the only choice she had anyway.

If only she could be as skilled as Klaus was. Then, she would truly believe that working as a spy was her calling.

Instead, though, she was merely competent and nothing more. She was decent at everything, but there was no field where she could compete with true geniuses.

How was she supposed to be passionate under conditions like those?



That was why Monika gave up.

She made the call to flee. She had no motive strong enough to justify going head-to-head against the enemy for the sake of two people she'd only just met.

If there existed a god of espionage, then Monika simply didn't have their blessing. She would never reach the highest heights. She would never become like Klaus or that examiner. She'd abandoned hoping for that ages ago. She'd given up.

She whispered, "Goodbye," and leaned out the window.

"Leave my dad alone!"

The moment she did, she heard a cry.

Mattel...?

She reflexively looked back.

Then, her body moved on its own. She approached the door and peered back into the living room.

"Go away, you meanies! Get out!"

Mattel was fighting back with everything he had. He must've escaped the man's grasp.

Now, he was grabbing glasses and forks and everything else he could get his hands on from the kitchen area and throwing them at Eve and the man. His foes seemed bewildered at the fact that a child was hurling things straight at their faces—and accurately, at that.

That there was the rock-throwing technique Monika had taught him. He was fighting to protect his father.

His face was bright red, and he was weeping his eyes out, but he never let up. The moment he picked up a new piece of tableware, he immediately shifted his grip on it to make it easier to throw, then clumsily hurled it.

"You little shit!"

The man flew into a rage and slammed Mattel to the ground. But Mattel bit his fingers and wriggled free.

Monika had a clear view of Eve, and she could see the question lingering in the woman's gaze.

Why even fight back?

Monika shared the sentiment. No matter how you sliced it, Mattel didn't stand a chance.

Why was Mattel resisting? Why wasn't he just giving up? What was driving him so?

"Let my dad GOOOOOOO!"

However, his show of resistance didn't last long. The man captured him again, and this time, he pressed Mattel's head against the floor so he couldn't bite his fingers a second time. Mattel kicked and tried to struggle free.

"Can you please shut the child up already?" Eve spat in exasperation. "Just break his arm and be done with it."

The only thing Mattel's fruitless resistance was doing was pissing off his opponents. Yet even so, he just kept on struggling.

Countless "why"s rose up to the forefront of Monika's mind, and one of them in particular flashed the most intense colors of all.

...Why am I still standing here?

All she had to do was flee. Mattel had been fighting back so loudly that nobody had heard her open the window. It had been the perfect opportunity, yet her feet had refused to obey her.

The more she watched Mattel, the more she saw her teammates and the way they never gave up even when faced with an overwhelming foe.

She could almost hear Lily's and Sybilla's cheerful voices.

"Next time, we'll take Teach down for sure! All the defeats we've suffered have been laying the groundwork for our eventual victory."

"Yeah! We can't keep losin' forever, that'd be the pits."

Whenever those two spoke up, the others would soon follow with their voices full of hope.

“In that case, I have a plan that might be worth testing...” “No, no, I want to try rushing him down again first.” “I-if it’s all right, I have something I’d like to add, too.” “I wanna play with Bro, too, yo!” “This time, my honey trap will bring him down. As they say, hundredth time’s the charm!”

The task was so difficult that Monika had given up on it, yet a bunch of people far weaker than her were giving it another go.

Those voices she’d spent the past month listening to refused to leave her head.

She could feel her body growing hotter.

Something had just flickered to life in her heart.

Was the heat rage? A sense of duty? Whatever it was, it was welling up from deep inside her. She looked up at the ceiling and whispered quietly. “This feels like shit...”

She covered her face with her hand and let out a large sigh.

...I’m not supposed to have passion. I mean, what the heck?

Nothing ever made her heart stir. Nothing was supposed to, in any case. Yet there she was, still standing there instead of making the rational decision. It was like there was someone shouting in her ear. *Do it! Stand up! Fight back!*

“Have they started rubbing off on me? That’s hilarious.” She grinned a self-deprecating grin. “Like a goddamn virus or something.”

Monika sucked in a deep breath.

She didn’t want to lose this heat. And that meant fleeing wasn’t an option.

There was no need to actually take down the enemies—all she needed to do was get Jordan and Mattel out of there safely.

If she was going to do that, she needed her mind to be as cold as ice and as sharp as steel.

She readied her weapons. In her right hand, she had a revolver, and in her

left, she had a broken mirror and her rubber balls. Finally, she made sure the device hidden in her pocket was still where it was supposed to be.

“All right, shitters, looks like I have to actually *try* for a bit.”

That marked the first step toward her awakening.

Monika charged out of the bedroom and aimed her gun.

Eve and the man reacted immediately. Eve took a nimble leap over the sofa and hid behind it, and the man lifted Mattel up to use him as a shield. They could sense Monika’s hostility. It would take more than a surprise attack to bring them down.

She fired a pair of shots off anyway.

The first bullet penetrated the room’s light fixture and plunged them all into darkness. Monika couldn’t afford to let the hostiles see what she looked like. The sun had all but finished its descent past the horizon, and the faint light it provided was only barely enough to do battle by. Now, it was the twilight that would define their deadly clash.

The second bullet smashed into the room’s full-length mirror. The mirror shattered, scattering shards across the room. Monika followed up by throwing the mirror pieces she was holding so they landed in specific locations.

All her combat preparations were complete. She ducked back into the bedroom and held her breath.

“Now, who might you be?” Eve almost sounded like she was enjoying herself. “A foreign spy, come to protect these two? Or just one of our own homegrown idiot activists?”

Monika laughed. “I’m the kid’s coach.”

As she replied, she tried to use her opponent’s voice to gauge where she was. However, she ran into a problem. She could figure out Eve’s rough location, but she couldn’t pin down the exact spot. Eve must have been throwing her voice.

“You have five seconds to come out, or the boy dies,” Eve said coldly.

The fact her opponents had a hostage put Monika at a major disadvantage.

Now, how to make my way out of this predicament...

She had a clue to work off of—her training with Klaus.

The situations were exactly the same, and despite the hostage, the World's Greatest had managed to take down Lily and Sybilla both. All Monika had to do now was replicate that feat.

The problem is, I wasn't there to see how he did it...

By the time Monika got to the scene, the fight was already over. She had no way of reenacting his technique.

"I simply moved things along like a stream gently washing away a leaf."

That was the only explanation he'd given.

When they pressed him for more specifics on how he did it, he sank deep into thought.

"...I just did."

I swear to God! How can anyone be that bad at teaching?!

As Monika belatedly grumbled to herself, she noticed a hostile tendril snaking its way around her throat.

"!"

Upon noticing that faint presence, she rolled into the living room.

"Oh goodness, you dodged it."

"You didn't even wait five seconds, you liar." Monika reached up and felt her shoulder. She'd escaped at the last possible moment, but she'd still gotten nicked. *"A wire user, huh..."*

Monika didn't know when she'd done it, but Eve had laid a web of wires over the entire living room.

All the wires were extending from Eve's right hand. That was what she'd used to silently attack Monika. Come to think of it, she'd probably used them to throw her voice, too.

"Taking away the light was a poor move," Eve crowed triumphantly. *"You*

can't see a single one of my wires, yet I can still feel the whole room through my fingertips."

"And you couldn't have warned me ahead of time?"

Monika was right in front of her foe, but she couldn't act.

One careless move, and she could find herself tangled up in a wire she hadn't spotted. Her other foe, the man, had his knife to Mattel's throat. And Eve's wires were still wrapped around Jordan's neck.

She was blocked in on all sides.

Eve took the gun in her left hand and fired off a shot.

There was less than ten feet between them. Monika contorted her body, but dodging the attack was beyond her.

"Rgh!"

The bullet grazed her shoulder. A line of blood ran down her arm.

"You avoided taking a fatal wound? From this range?" Eve laughed, clearly impressed. "How intriguing. I wonder how many more dodges you have in you?"

She fired again.

Monika fixed her gaze on the gun's muzzle and perfectly calculated the bullet's trajectory. She had to sacrifice a few strands of hair, but she was able to avoid the shot.

Eve laughed in amusement. She had never been expecting that shot to land in the first place.

"Eve, stop playing around," her teammate chided her. "Either put her down or capture her already. What happens if her teammates hear those gunshots and come to help her, huh?"

"I know, I know. Spoilsport." Eve reluctantly stowed her pistol away.

Their misguided caution earned a chuckle out of Monika. She was laughing at herself as much as she was at them.

Oh, I'm not getting any backup. I told Grete I didn't need any.

She shouldn't have shown off like that. She should have just accepted the help. Now, the only one who was going to be fighting was her. All she had to rely on was her own cool intellect.

She snuck a glance over at Mattel. The moment his sorrowful gaze met hers, he hung his head.

"Don't take your eyes off me, Mattel." Monika put away her gun and readied her knife. "Just you wait. I'm gonna show you something a hundred times cooler than any soldier."

"Ready to make our stand, are we?" Eve smiled. "Come at me. I'll strip the skin off your bones."

Eve began delicately twiddling the fingers on her right hand. Beside her, the man shook his head in exasperation.

This was good. Monika needed her opponents to feel certain that they'd already won. The more they had their guards up, the more danger the hostages would be in.

Monika let out a fierce roar and charged forward. "HRAAAAAH!"

She squeezed her knife tight and swung it at her foes.

"—Caught you."

However, her body soon froze.

The invisible wire coiled around her right arm brought her attack to an abrupt halt. She gasped in pain and dropped her knife. She tried to struggle free, but another wire soon captured her left arm, as well.

Eve hadn't been lying when she said that her web of wires stretched across the entire room. Monika's attack had been doomed from the start.

"It's no use," Eve said triumphantly. "Still, I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything more out of you."

"Rgh... Coward..." Monika's ensnared arms were hoisted into the air, forcing her into a truly pathetic pose. "This technique of yours hardly seems fair. I'll have to try it out myself sometime."

“You aren’t too bright, are you?” Eve sneered. “You really think you’ll have a next time for anything?” She gestured with her right hand, and yet another wire wrapped itself around Monika’s neck. “We’re going to torture you, then kill you. That’s the only future you have to look forward to.”

“In that case, could you do me one final favor?” Monika replied, undaunted. “I wanna know how you do it. How can you manipulate so many wires all at once?”

“Wh—! Do you even understand the situation you’re in, child?”

“Yeah, of course. You said it yourself—you can feel the whole room through your fingertips, right?” Monika shook her hips. “Well, I can do it, too. When you strung up my arms, it told me where all your wires were.”

A rubber ball tumbled out of her pocket, and Monika kicked it, hard.

The ball was a custom-made throwing weapon about two inches in diameter made of a heavy metal core surrounded by rubber. When Monika kicked it, it went soaring directly at Eve’s face.

Eve dodged the initial attack, but Monika had accounted for that. Next, it bounced off the wall and smashed hard into the back of her neck.

“You little...”

The moment the wires went slack, Monika wrenched herself free. After catching her rubber ball on the rebound, she pulled out another one and readied them both. Then, she hurled the two balls with all her might. They bounced around the room unfettered and soared at her opponents’ blind spots.

“She’s firing blind! Don’t panic!” Eve shouted. “They’ll hit my wires soon enough, and that’ll be—”

“Like hell they will.”

While her enemies were distracted, Monika fired a kick at the side of Eve’s head.

She already knew where all the wires were. She had nothing to fear from them.

When Eve reeled back, the rubber ball that had just bounced off the ceiling

sank into her shoulder like that had been its plan all along.

“How...?”

“It’s just basic calculation.” Monika grinned. “Once I know where your wires are, all I have to do is bounce my balls between them.”

That was Monika’s true weapon—her calculation skills. The key question was, what angle did she need to throw her ball at to make it hit her enemy, and how many ricochets would it take to get there? By calculating it all out on the fly, she could use the metal balls’ rebounds to defeat her enemies from their blind spots. Her balls were far less predictable than bullets, and there was no way to track the danger they posed.

Right before Monika could finish Eve off, Eve let out a yell. “Kill the hostage!” she shouted. Her hysterical cry echoed through the room. “Kill the kid! Now!”

Monika froze up. Even if Eve was bluffing, the threat alone was enough to get her to stop moving.

Eve smirked. Her plan had worked like a charm.

However, she hadn’t noticed one thing. She had no idea that while Monika’s body was still, her mind was working overtime.

The mirror’s at a 34-degree angle, the balls lose 16 percent of their velocity each time they ricochet... So, if I time it for 2.4 seconds afterward... That wire is a problem... But if I shift it 0.4 inches to the side, I can actually use it to my advantage...

She calculated. And calculated. And calculated. And calculated. And calculated. And calculated. And calculated. And calculated.

By using the mirrors she’d strewn across the room in advance, she could make out the room in its entirety.

This’ll work.

Monika didn’t move. Or rather, she couldn’t afford to. The stiller she stood, the safer her foes would feel. They wouldn’t attack the hostages if they thought that continuing to hold them was effective.

Monika needed to defeat her opponents *in a single instant without moving an*

inch. Right now, those requirements were nonnegotiable.

“I’m code name Glint—now, let’s harbor love for as long as we can.”

For her next attack, she used the fastest thing in the world.

Light.

The blinding light the device she was holding gave off bounced across the mirrors and struck the man square in the face. Immediately thereafter, she turned to Eve and blasted her in the eyes with light, too.

For a pair of people whose eyes had gotten accustomed to the dark, it was a painful attack indeed. Monika’s two foes groaned in unison, and in unison, they sprang into action.

They were spooked. Right in the middle of a life-or-death battle, they’d gotten blasted by light out of nowhere and been robbed of their vision. It was only human to panic. They immediately began attacking and dodging.

Monika had seen it all. The mirrors she’d set up, the wires, the ricocheting balls, the beams of light, everything.

Her calculations had allowed her to control the entire space.

Tell me, Klaus...

She directed a silent comment toward her absent instructor.

...when you beat Lily and Sybilla, this is how you did it, right?

Eve swung her wires. The man, still holding his hostage, contorted his body to get away from the light.

And with that, the future Monika had ushered in came to pass.

The answer she’d arrived at after tens of thousands of calculations—was a picturesque case of enemy-friendly fire.



Monika wasn’t able to put her opponents down for good.

It took everything she had just getting them to injure each other enough so she could rescue the family and beat a hasty retreat. The wounds her foes dealt each other were bad enough they chose not to press their luck by giving chase.

Once they'd all escaped to safety, Monika handed Jordan and Mattel a note. "I'm going to go cover your escape route. You won't be able to stay in the Empire any longer. Go to this address and give them this password, and the Republic will give you political asylum."

Their undercover collaborators in the Empire would help get them across the border. Forcing Mattel to abandon his homeland sucked, but the important thing was that he was still alive.

When Jordan began thanking her again and again, Monika gave him some pocket money for emergencies and urged him to get moving. Jordan gave her one last deep bow, then gave Mattel's arm a tug.

"....."

However, Mattel wouldn't budge. He just stared at Monika, transfixed.

"What is it? You gotta get moving."

"S-so was I was right?" he asked, his face flush. "Do you actually have superpowers, Coach?"

"Seriously? This again?"

"But the way you moved back there, you *must* have superpowers."

"Nah. I'm just a little clever on my feet, that's all." Monika gave him a wry smile. If she really did have superpowers, she would have been able to make so much sense of her life. "There are tons of folks in this world of ours who're way cooler and way closer to having superpowers than me. There's people who're immune to poison, master pickpockets who can make people forget they're there..."

"But not you, Coach?"

Monika fished a device out of her pocket.

A clicking sound rang out, and a flash went off.

"*Creepshot.*"

That was what Monika had used to fire the light—a camera.

"This is my power. Pretty uninspiring, huh?"

Mattel snapped his eyes shut from the sudden blast of light.

That was the technique she'd been keeping a secret, even from her teammates.

By taking full advantage of her calculation abilities, she was able to use mirrors to get her target in focus at just the right moment. Without movements as precise as hers, it would be nigh impossible to take clean pictures while on the move.

"It is handy, though. I got good shots of the hostiles back there. Now, all the spies in the Republic will be able to see these photos, and the enemies don't even know their faces got leaked."

A bashful look crossed Monika's face. "But at the end of the day, that's all it's good for. It's just a shitty ability that's already found its ceiling."

The most accurate way to describe her would be as a jack of all trades but a master of none.

There were plenty of girls in Lamplight with stronger specialties than her. Compared to the likes of poison, disguises, theft, negotiation, rearing, tinkering, or accidents, it was almost laughable.

Monika had given up long ago. She could do everything, but she couldn't do anything. She was going to be stuck as a slightly above-average spy for the rest of her days.

"Y-you're too stubborn, Coach."

"Huh?"

It sounded like Mattel had something he wanted to get off his chest.

"And you've got too much pride. As far as I'm concerned, you're already the best spy in the world."

He clearly meant every word, too.



Monika wasn't quite sure how to respond to that, so she said nothing and patted Mattel's head.



"I'm sorry, but would you mind repeating that...?"

After she finished her task and returned to her hotel, Grete stopped by again. When Monika gave her report, Grete stared at her and uttered the aforementioned words. It felt nice, being able to shock someone who was normally so composed.

"Like I just said," Monika replied smugly, "I got photos of three Ravine members, drove them off, and made an ally out of an electrician who knows detailed specifics about the Endy Laboratory. Now, we hold all the cards."

".....I see," Grete said quietly with a pronounced nod.

Monika sat down on the bed and crossed her legs. "I told you I'd be fine solo, didn't I?"

"You really are in a league of your own." Grete gave her a small smile. There was a hint of chagrin in it. "You know, the boss once told me that finding you amongst the academy washouts was a stroke of good fortune. He said that you harbored a frighteningly magnificent amount of talent."

"I... Heh, who knew our Klaus was such a flatterer?"

Hearing that shook her for a moment, but she quickly hid it behind a veil of snark. She and Klaus hadn't interacted that much, but from the sound of it, he was looking out for her after all.

Her talents had driven her to despair on more than one occasion, and she'd cursed her underwhelming skills time and time again. If they were going to cause her such anguish, she wished she could've just been born average.

But as it turned out, there was someone who'd seen potential in her.

"...Might I trouble you to answer another question for me?" Grete asked. "The day before yesterday, you said you began holding back because you discovered your ceiling. That it was why you washed out at your academy."

"Oh yeah? Is that what I said?"

“In that case, why exactly do you choose to stay with Lamplight?”

“.....”

Monika paused before answering, but it wasn't to hide how she really felt. The thing was she didn't fully understand it herself. Why would someone as accustomed to giving up as her stick around on a team like Lamplight that willingly threw itself into danger?

She was fed up. She had no passion. Nothing drew her interest. Her heart had frozen over.

None of that should have changed, not to any meaningful degree. But there was no denying that during this last op—especially when she heard Mattel's voice—she had felt a warmth in her chest.

What was it that was driving her?

Back there...were those her teammates' voices that had flashed through her mind?

Monika crossed her arms. “I don't have any big special reason, but if I had to pick...”

“Yes?”

“...I guess it'd be the friendly faces?”

“I think that's a lovely answer.” Grete seemed strangely pleased, and she gave Monika another smile.

Then, the radio sitting in the room began buzzing. That was the sign that there was a crisis. Monika clicked her tongue. She had a pretty good idea of who might be calling.

She picked up the radio and spoke before so much as hearing a word. “This is Glint. Radios can be intercepted, so don't use them unless it's an emergency.”

“This is Lily—I mean, Flower Garden! And it is an emergency! We need help! Mayday! Mayday!”

“I can tell you're never going to get to the point, so just hand the radio off to someone else.”

“Yeah, you’ve got her there. This is Sybilla—I mean, Pandemonium.”

“Do you two have some sort of quota for screwups you’re trying to meet?!”

Aliases or not, they still shouldn’t be giving out their names. And she’d *just* reminded them that the radio calls might get intercepted, too.

“Seriously, we could really use some help. Flower Garden lost her gun, and we really gotta find it before it causes an inci—”

Monika turned off the radio and heaved a heavy sigh. What the hell were those two idiots even doing?

“Grete, I think that question you just asked me missed the point.”

“I’m beginning to see that...”

“My reasons aside, this team would be in a sorry state without me.”

With her rare moment of respite cut short, Monika began getting ready to head out.

If she ran into those two, they had better believe they were going to get hell from her.

How best to punish them? Monika mused with a smile as she leaped out the window into the moonless night.



If Lamplight’s emotional bedrock during the bioweapon retrieval mission was Lily, then its logistical bedrock was Monika. She was the team’s ace in every sense of the word, and her efforts were what allowed them to complete the Impossible Mission.

For all her incomparable skills, though, her heart was as cold as ice.

She’d discovered her ceiling. She was fed up. She had no passion. Nothing drew her attention.

However, there was something she’d overlooked—the change that was starting to take root in her heart.

That change would eventually turn into a raging passion.

In time, that heat would reshape her entire life and cause her bottomless well

of talent to come into full bloom. Once she shattered her ceiling, she would become a greater spy than she could have ever dreamed of.

It was just a matter of time before she found all that out for herself.

Chapter 4

Grete's Case

"Ah, there's a thought," Klaus said.

Grete looked up at him as she walked by his side. She was tall for a girl, but Klaus was taller still, and she always ended up tilting her gaze upward whenever they talked.

As she gazed at him, she could feel her face growing hot.

The only time his handsome eyes looked that relaxed were when he felt well and truly at ease.

"You should stop by that meat pie shop next time you get a chance."

Klaus was pointing at a small store tucked away in a little corner of their port city. Its hours of operations were over at the moment, and there was a CLOSED sign hanging in the door.

"...If it's earned your endorsement, Boss, then I think I will." Grete smiled. "Their pies must be really special."

"That they are. I don't know anyone who makes a better meat pie than them. They were so tasty I actually tried to replicate them once, but I couldn't get it just so."

"Oh my! I hardly believe it. To think that there's a dish that not even you can re-create..."

"The version I made was exceedingly close to the real deal, but it still wasn't quite the same," Klaus replied. "The generations of love they've passed along and poured into their pies simply can't be replicated in a day."

The shop's sign listed the year it was founded, and the date was over a century prior. It clearly had quite a history. They must have been passing down their recipe and improving on it for ages. Even just the look of the wood the

shop was constructed from was enough to get a feel for how long its history was.

“Love passed along...,” Grete murmured quietly, then looked back at Klaus. “In other words, you’re saying that you want me to accept the love you’re passing along to me, Boss...?”

“I am not.”

“That certainly sounded like a proposal to me...”

“See, now you’re just ignoring what I said altogether. And don’t call me ‘Boss.’” Klaus shook his head and resumed walking. “It’s a recommendation, nothing more. I have a lot of memories of eating there with Inferno.”

“Inferno...”

“It was a reward for a mission well done. Lukas loved the place. He and I would always end up fighting over the last slice, and my mentor would get mad at us.”

Inferno was the spy team Klaus used to belong to. He had loved them like a family, but now, they were gone. The “Lukas” he mentioned must have been one of the other members.

“I guess I’ll never be able to enjoy their pies like that again.”

Grete stared blankly at Klaus’s back. There was a loneliness to his gait as he walked on.

In the end, it was nothing more than a trifling conversation they shared while walking back from the grocery store.

However, Grete remembered each and every word they exchanged that day.



Lamplight had completed their Impossible Mission.

Thanks to the girls’ efforts and Klaus’s scheme, they successfully retrieved the Abyss Doll bioweapon. Partway through, they found their path blocked by “Torchlight” Guido—Klaus’s mentor and a traitor to the Din Republic—but thanks to how much the girls had grown, they were able to defeat him.

Although Lamplight disbanded after their mission, the girls soon fought to reassemble the team. They decided that instead of returning to their academies, they would instead help investigate Serpent, the masterminds behind Guido's betrayal, and thereby take their next steps into the world of espionage.

Before they headed out on their next mission, though, Klaus gave them a ten-day vacation to congratulate them for completing the Impossible Mission.

It was during that vacation that the meat pie shop incident took place.



"All right, I'm heading out. Make sure you spend these ten days resting up. And while I hope I don't need to tell you this, do at least *try* to exercise some restraint."

With that, Klaus picked up his suitcase and opened the front door.

The eight girls saw him off from the foyer.

Based on the size of his suitcase, he wasn't planning on coming back for a while. According to the itinerary he'd shared with them, his destination was the neighboring Lylat Kingdom. He looked pretty overpacked for a one-man sightseeing trip—almost as though he intended to spend his entire ten-day vacation completing espionage missions—but the girls assumed that surely, not even someone as free-spirited as Klaus would head off on a bunch of missions without bringing them along.

"He's really gone, huh?"

After Klaus disappeared from view, Lily was the first one to comment.

"Looked like he was in a hurry, too. Bet he's got a packed schedule."

The follow-up comment came from her partner in crime, Sybilla.

The two of them closed the front door and sighed.

Lily let out an embarrassed laugh. "Feels kind of weird, doesn't it? We've been together with Teach for basically the last two months straight."

"Yeah, we've been through a lot together." Sybilla nodded. "I thought he was just a weirdo at first, but now, I actually respect the guy."

“Ten days without him, huh... Makes me feel kinda lonely.”

“For sure. I almost can’t wait for him to get back.”

“But all that aside—”

“Yeah, that aside—”

Lily and Sybilla locked the door, then turned to their other six teammates.

““IT’S VACATION TIIIIIME!””

“““““Woo-hooooooooo!””””””

A huge chorus of cheers and applause rose up.

Sara clapped, and Annette set off party poppers. The girls all threw up their hands, leaped up and down, and, in the end—for reasons unknown—starting tossing Erna into the air in celebration as they shared in their joy.

Sybilla held her fist up high. “Hell yeah, finally! This is what I’ve been waiting for!”

The fact of the matter was the girls hadn’t had a single proper day off during their entire tenure there. They had spent their first month training ceaselessly, and from there, they’d headed straight into a deadly two-week-long infiltration mission.

One could hardly blame them for being excited.

“Starting tomorrow, I intend to travel my heart out!” “Yeah, I might try to get some light shopping done.” “I’m gonna go on an adventure with Erna and Sara, yo!” “Wait, Sara, you never told me Annette was coming, too!” “Come on, it’ll be more fun with all three of us.”

All of them began announcing their plans for the break, and there were few things in life louder than eight teenage girls all talking at once.

Lily charged up the stairs, then shouted when she got to the top, “All right, everyone, listen up!”

The others went quiet and looked at her.

“Each of us can spend these ten days however we want, but tonight, we should all have a party together. With no Teach and no training to do, the night

is ours!”

“Woo!” the others all cheered.

“I can’t hear you! Is that really all the excitement you’ve got?!”

“Wooooo!” the others shouted.

“You can do better than that!”

“WOOOOOOOOOO!” the others screamed.

“C’mon, I said LOUDER—”

“Oh, just get on with it,” Sybilla shot back.

Lily cleared her throat. “First things first, we need to get us some grub. I say we head to the meat pie shop. You know, the one Grete told us about. Remember how good they were last time?”

Grete nodded. “...It did come with the boss’s recommendation, after all. I think that would be the perfect place for a feast.” There was a hint of sadness in her expression at Klaus’s absence, but other than that, she too was glad to be getting some time off.

When Lily brought up the subject of meat pies, the response from the others was a resounding, “No objections here!”

With the matter settled, the team wasted no time in heading out.

Eight excited smiles decorated their faces.

This was their first vacation since having completed their mission, and Klaus’s absence only served to make it feel even more special. They’d gotten a lot closer with him over the course of the mission, but there was still something thrilling about their boss being gone. Like any group of young women their age, the idea of a girls’ night out with no adult supervision was too good to say no to.

“...Should we get anything aside from the meat pies?” Grete asked.

“I want to get a cake, too!” Erna said excitedly.

“What about some you-know-what?” Lily suggested.

“Ah yes,” Thea said. “The *special* grape juice.”

“I’ll grab some out of the cellar,” Monika said.

“Ooh, I’m curious. What’re you all talking about, yo?” Annette asked.

“Nothin’ you need to worry about,” Sybilla replied. “You’re a little young still.”

“But aren’t you all underage, too?” Sara pointed out.

It was hard to blame them for being in high spirits.

Klaus’s order—to exercise some restraint—was long since forgotten.

When the meat pie shop came into view, Lily couldn’t contain herself any longer. She took off at a run.

The others laughed in bemusement and followed along after her.

It made for a beautiful scene.

The spy girls had deepened their bonds and survived a deadly mission together, and now they were hitting the town like a band of happy, innocent kids. They’d worked hard to earn that breather, and they were making sure to enjoy it to its fullest.

They jockeyed for the lead as they charged toward the meat pie shop—

TEMPORARILY CLOSED

—and, without sparing so much as a glance at the sign, crashed headlong into the door.



Having a procession of girls slam into his door one after another was no ordinary event, and the shopkeeper rushed out in a hurry. He was a friendly-looking old man, and though at first he regarded the girls with confusion as they cowered on the ground and clutched their noses, he soon realized that the TEMPORARILY CLOSED sign was to blame and began profusely apologizing.

“Nah, it’s totally our own fault...,” Lily said, massaging her reddened nose. “But I gotta ask, why the closure?”

“I’ve been running into some trouble lately.” The shopkeeper bowed apologetically. “To tell you the truth, I’ve been thinking about closing up shop

for good.”

““““What?”””””

Lily’s eyes went wide, and she wasn’t the only one. Why would the store have to close when the business was thriving? However, the shopkeeper didn’t seem to want to talk about it. He merely gave them an evasive smile.

“Hm, smells like garbage.” In the end, it was Monika who picked up the scent. She shot a pointed look at the portulaca planters out in front of the shop. “Someone must have dumped a bunch of it all over the place this morning. So you’re getting harassed?”

The shopkeeper flinched. “I-it’s that obvious?”

Monika raised an eyebrow arrogantly. “To me, yeah. Y’know, maybe we ran into you like this for a reason. Why don’t you tell us what’s going on?”

The man sighed. “Telling you won’t change a thing,” he muttered. “But I suppose it might help you understand why I don’t have a choice. It’s Mannheim Inc. that’s behind it.”

“Mannheim? The food company?”

The shopkeeper nodded solemnly.

The girls all recognized the name. Mannheim Inc. was a major corporation that owned a series of restaurants and retail stores scattered around the nation’s capital that sold meat-based home-style cooking. They were particularly famous for their fried chicken takeout and their restaurants’ stew.

Lily began singing the jingle from their radio commercial. “Ma-Ma-Mannheim’s, Fried-Fried Chicken! ♪” It was obnoxious, so everyone chose to ignore her.

The shopkeeper slumped his shoulders. “The other day, the company president came to me in person and asked me to sell him my meat pie recipe.”

“Oh yeah? Well hey, lucky you,” Monika replied.

“I assure you, it was anything but. He offered me next to nothing, and what’s more, he even demanded that I never sell meat pies out of my shop again. Naturally, I turned him down, but then—”

“That’s when the harassment started,” Monika said, finishing the shopkeeper’s sentence for him.

According to the shopkeeper, they weren’t just dumping garbage in front of the store. His main supplier stopped selling him flour and the local electronics shop started refusing to service his oven. He had to imagine that Mannheim was putting the squeeze on them somehow.

“And besides, I’m getting too old for this. Especially with how my back has been lately...” He gave his head a feeble shake. “I don’t have anyone to hand down the store to, so maybe it’d be better if I just sold the recipe and put the old girl out to pasture for—”

“But, sir...”

This time, it was Grete who cut him off.

“...This shop is a long-standing local institution. There are hundreds, if not thousands of people who find joy in the pies you make. And we all count ourselves among them.”

“It’s been passed down for generations, that it has.” The shopkeeper let out a deep sigh. “But there’s some things you just can’t fight. The sentiment alone is enough, miss, it really is.”

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself of that as much as anything. With a sad look on his face, he turned and went back inside.

All the girls could do was watch him go.

The girls made their trek back with heavy feet.

The smiles from earlier had been replaced with dismal, glum expressions. All their merriment had vanished without a trace. The meat pies they’d been so looking forward to were unavailable for purchase, and at that point, they couldn’t bring themselves to settle for anything else.

“The fun party mood got spoiled, yo,” Annette muttered bluntly, and Erna agreed.

“Yeah.”

Sara gave them a pair of consoling pats on the head.

“.....All.” Up at the front of the group, Lily began stretching, her expression still grim. She took deep breaths and pulled each of her arms as far as it would go.

Beside her, Sybilla was doing the same. “Righty,” she said as she stretched her fingers one by one and popped her joints.

“All righty,” Lily repeated, to which Sybilla murmured, “Ayup.”

Then, they gave their answers in almost-perfect unison.

“Time to crush Mannheim Inc.”

“Mannheim’s gotta go.”

They grinned fearlessly and exchanged a fist bump—

“Noooo no no no! Hold on there, now, hold on.”

—but one of the other girls hurried up and grabbed them by the shoulders.

Namely, Thea. She tried her utmost to rein in Lily and Sybilla’s enthusiasm. “I certainly understand how you feel, but what specifically do you intend on doing?”

“Poison their president.” “Beat their president black ’n’ blue.”

“That’s so crude!” Thea shrieked. She squeezed her temples and let out a sigh heavy with exasperation. “In case you’ve forgotten...these are *civilians* we’re talking about. What are you going to do if the police come after you?”

“Hey, they’re the ones doin’ all the criminal shit...,” Sybilla grumbled.

“You don’t have any proof of that. This is a major corporation we’re talking about. Its president will have wealth and power in spades, and I find it hard to imagine that someone like that would do their own dirty work in a simple shakedown.” Thea bristled. “Look, I’m plenty mad as well. But punishing the president won’t make up for all the damage he’s caused. Even if we solve the immediate problem, there’s no guarantee that the owner will even have the motivation left to keep running the shop...”

““Rgh...””

Lily and Sybilla bit their lips and clenched their fists. They could remember

just how pained the shopkeeper's expression had been.

The other girls hung their heads as well.

They'd only eaten the shop's meat pies once, but the mouth-watering flavor had left a deep impression on them. Their chests tightened in pain at the thought of having someone swoop in and steal that away. And there were probably tons of other people in the city who were experiencing that exact same feeling of loss.

“...I disagree,” Grete declared. “I believe this is a problem we have the power to solve.”

The others all turned and looked at her.

"You have a plan, Grete?" Lily asked, sounding a little surprised.

“I do. But for it to work,” she said with a smile, “I’m going to need everybody’s help.”

The girls exchanged a series of glances, then nodded.

Not a single one of them was opposed.

Technically, Monika let out a sarcastic, “Klaus did tell us to exercise some restraint,” but nobody paid her comment a second thought.

“Then it’s decided.” Lily clapped her hands together. “Let’s do this thing! Down with Mannheim!”

""""""""""Yeah!""""""""""

The team exchanged a round of fist bumps.

Their time off without Klaus was just beginning—and now, so too was their grand operation.



Before the next day even rolled around, the girls began digging up every scrap of information they could on Mannheim Inc.

Reports began pouring into Heat Haze Palace's main hall one after another. Gathering intel was what spies did best, and compared to stealing information about a foreign research laboratory, getting a glimpse inside a mere food

company was child's play.

Grete stood on alert in the main hall and wove her plan together.

I can't let a shop so full of the boss's memories get crushed like that...

Her heart was brimming with her earnest-to-a-fault infatuation.

She refused to let Klaus lose something he loved while he was off on vacation.

The first one to gather her intel was Thea.

She returned to the manor wearing a flashy dress. She looked like a high-end cabaret hostess, and her outfit left quite a bit of her chest exposed. Thea was the only member of the team who would've ever dared wear something so alluring.

"From what I hear, Mannheim Inc. recently had a new president take over, and the new guy is an idiot. He ruined their earnings in no time at all, and everyone in the company hates him."

Grete nodded. "...And because nobody in the company will give him the time of day, he's looking for something that can turn his situation around all at once. That explains why he wants to get his hands on the recipe from a popular local eatery."

"Exactly. His rash behavior was what started this whole mess. I'll be sure to ask for more specifics tonight."

"What happens tonight?"

"Tonight, I have a date with their director of general affairs. He intends to show me a *ravishing* good time—in more ways than one."

Thea winked and smiled charmingly as she left the main hall.

The next person to return was Sybilla.

In contrast to Thea, she was dressed in a formal suit. She returned to the main hall in her stockings, with her out-of-character high heels slung over her shoulder.

"I nicked an employee ID card." She triumphantly tossed a female employee's card onto the table. "Then, I posed as her and chatted up their clients.

Apparently, this new dumbass president made some seedy friends as a kid. They're probably the ones doin' the actual harassment."

"Do these friends have connections to organized crime...?"

"Looks like it, yeah. Someone even said they were carryin' guns around. That's why no one can stand up to 'em."

"...We'll have to avoid letting the situation get out of hand, then."

No matter how they chose to handle things, they needed to make sure the shopkeeper didn't suffer any more on their account.

Grete quietly nodded as she made her decision.

The intel kept on coming in, and before long, the plan was complete.

Grete gathered her teammates in the main hall and posed a question to them. "...Out of all of us, who would you say comes across as the most gullible?"

""""""""Lily.""""""""

"Excuse me?!"

Thus, Lily was chosen as the key player in their operation.

Two days later, the Mannheim Inc. president fell for Grete's bait.



Lily casually sipped her tea in an apartment on the capital's outskirts.

The room was run-down and barely furnished, with the only furniture to speak of being the bed and the table. There was a carpet on the floor, but it was practically in tatters from all its worm-eaten holes. Everything about the environment was dismal, and the air throughout the room was musty and dank.

Lily's thoroughly pilled sweater served to complete the look.

"Oh, poor Lillian...", she said as she gazed out the window. "You loved your grandfather's meat pies ever so much, and you learned the recipe so you could take over the shop someday. But alas, you could never give up on your dream of becoming an actress. To pie, or to act? The debate raged within you, but eventually, you left home and worked hard to try to make a name for yourself.

But your acting career never took off, and now, you find yourself living in poverty. Oh-oh-oh, Lillian, your tale brings me to tears.”

She was really chewing the scenery, but she was also the only person in the room, so there was no one to make fun of her.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

“If you’re here for the rent, I don’t have it,” she replied as she headed over and opened it.

A friendly-looking and well-dressed man stood outside it. In addition to his fancy suit, he was adorned in all manners of necklaces and rings. It wasn’t hard to figure out that he was nouveau riche.

The man was none other than Mannheim Inc.’s new president, David.

“You must be Lillian,” he said, removing his expensive-looking hat.

“That’s, um...that’s me, yeah.”

“Please, there’s no need to be so nervous. Here’s my card.” He smiled gently and handed her his business card.

Lily’s eyes went wide. “Y-you’re the president of Mannheim Inc.? But...I don’t understand!”

“May I come in?”

“O-of course. Though I’m afraid there isn’t much to come in to...”

David strode right on in, then gave the room a quick once-over and chuckled. “You weren’t kidding. What a dump.”

“I know... I’m sorry.”

“I looked into you, you know. I hear you want to become an actress. It must be hard, getting turned down by every theatrical company you apply to.”

“Huh...? Who told you that?”

“Your little blond friend. She sounded so worried about you. Said you’d been having a rough go of it. Now, what you don’t seem to realize is that show business is all about who you know,” David warned her condescendingly.

He ran his gaze hungrily up and down her body.

“Your looks aren’t bad.” He smiled in satisfaction. “In fact, they’re pretty decent.”

“Th-thanks?”

“How about this: If you want, I can set you up with a troupe I know. I’ve got some pull with them.”

“Y-you’d really do that?”

“But in exchange—”

David’s voice went serious.

“—you have to teach me your grandfather’s meat pie recipe.”

“How do you—”

“This photo happened to find its way to me.”

David placed a photograph atop the table. It depicted Lily and the meat pie shop owner standing happily side by side.

“Th-that’s me and Gramps... Wh-where’d you get that?”

“My director of general affairs got it from one of his sources. I must say, you two look like quite the happy family.”

“.....”

“He taught you the recipe, didn’t he? All you have to do is give it to me.”

“B-but Gramps told me never to tell it to anyone...”

Lily looked down anxiously and slumped into a chair. She rubbed her fingers together, as if she was thinking it over.

David’s voice went softer. “I know. I tried to get him to give me the recipe, but he wouldn’t budge. But that’s not important. You already cut ties with him, didn’t you?” He sounded almost like a father admonishing an ill-behaved daughter. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep it a secret. All you have to do is tell me the recipe.”

“...R-really?”

“I’ll pay you for your troubles, of course. How does a thousand dents sound? That should cover your rent for the next three months.”

“Y-you’d really give me all that money?”

David nodded and pulled out his wallet. “In fact, I’d be willing to pay you right here and now.”

“.....” Lily’s face lit up for a moment. However, she quickly looked down again. “But...”

“Why even hesitate? Your dream will come true, and what’s more, you’ll even get paid. There’s no downside for you.”

David took another look at Lily’s body. A lewd grin spread across his face, and he lightly patted her bed. “On top of that, if you’re willing to become my lover as well, I’m prepared to offer another two hundred dents a month—”

“I’ll sock you, y’know.”

“What?”

Lily awkwardly cleared her throat. “...*Cough, cough*. S-sorry, I’ve been coming down with a bit of a cold.”

She covered her mouth with her hand to hide her face until she could get it under control. “I can’t keep this act up much longer,” she whispered, but it didn’t look like David heard her. There was something resembling a walkie-talkie inside her sleeve, but he didn’t seem to have noticed that, either.

Lily sipped her black tea and let out a light sigh. “To tell you the truth, it’s actually something else entirely that’s giving me second thoughts.”

“Oh?”

“Before you came over, there was someone else who wanted to buy the recipe first.”

“...Ah. So someone beat me to the punch, did they?” David licked his lips. “Would you mind telling me who?”

His brow furrowed. There was violence burning in his eyes—violence that said that depending on who it was, he might end up deciding to take them out of

the picture.

Lily picked up the magazine lying on the table and opened it to the marked page. It was an article about a famous chef from the next country over. “This guy—John Dumont.”

“Wh—” David’s words got caught in his throat. “John Dumont?!”

There wasn’t a person in the culinary world who hadn’t heard of the chef John Dumont. He was the single most influential chef in the neighboring Lylat Kingdom. He was said to be one of the five best chefs in the world, and his innovative cooking had earned him fans the globe over.

“I-if you’re going to lie, at least make it believable.” It was obvious how flustered David was. “That’s one of best chefs in the world you’re talking about. His restaurant is booked up years in advance, and the man himself is a legend. Why would he so much as glance at a tiny little nation like—”

“He also said he would be stopping by soon.”

The doorbell rang.

Lily smiled. “Coming!” she said as she went to open the door.

An imposing-looking older gentleman was standing outside.

David went pale and snatched up the magazine. Upon comparing the picture in the article to the man outside the room, a look of pure shock crossed his face. All of his bravado from before was gone. “Y-you’re him. You’re...really John Dumont,” he said in a pathetic stammer.

The older gentleman calmly smiled.



And now, for a peek behind the curtain.

Obviously, the girls didn’t have enough pull to rope the real John Dumont into their scheme. In truth, it was actually their master of disguise—Grete. She’d used the photo in the magazine to perfectly impersonate the world-famous chef.

Plus, the girls had laid three other traps as well.

The first was information. Thea had masterfully manipulated the director of general affairs into getting some information to the president—the information that the meat pie shop’s owner had a granddaughter who’d inherited the recipe.

The second was the forged photo Monika put together. After taking a creepshot of the shopkeeper, she’d carefully stitched it together with a photo of Lily. At a glance, they look like a loving grandfather and granddaughter.

The third was Erna. Erna had a knack for attracting trouble and scoundrels. All she had to do was hang out around the meat pie shop a little, and it didn’t take long before a group of thugs surrounded her. She assumed they were David’s lackeys, so she showed them the photo and told them where the fake apartment was.

With the three traps combined, they had reeled David in hook, line, and sinker to meeting a John Dumont that couldn’t possibly have been there.

Grete smiled from within her gentlemanly disguise. However, she was no good at talking to men. To make up for that, Thea stood beside her in a neat blouse. “I’ll be interpreting for Mr. Dumont today. Ms. Lillian, I see you have other company?”

John Dumont was a foreigner. It made perfect sense for him to have an interpreter accompanying him.

Lily went ahead and introduced David.

When she did, Grete-disguised-as-John let out a loud yell. “——!”

Thea, her “interpreter,” nodded, then relayed the message. “He says it’s ‘preposterous.’ He’s quite indignant with you, Mr. Mannheim President.”

“...A-about what?”

David was still pretty thrown off at having suddenly found himself face-to-face with someone so influential.

Thea scoffed scornfully. “A thousand dents, for that meat pie recipe? It’s sad that the president of a food company would be so inept at judging value. Mr. Dumont is prepared to pay two hundred thousand dents for it.”

“T-two hundred thousand?”

“That’s how valuable it is. The magic of that recipe will captivate people the world over. Why else would I come to buy it in person?—says Mr. Dumont.” Thea turned her back on David to demonstrate that they had no interest in minor leaguers. “What do you say, Ms. Lillian? As soon as you give the go-ahead, we can get ready to transfer that payment. And our restaurant is patronized by famous actors from all across the world, so we might be able to set you up with some meetings, as well.”

Lily jumped for joy. “Sold!”

“Then it’s official.”

Lily and Grete-John exchanged a handshake.

David had been completely shut out, and Thea spoke once more to deliver the finishing blow. “Mr. Mannheim President, the recipe is ours. You would do well to leave Ms. Lillian and her grandfather alone from now on.”

“Rgh! If you think you can just waltz in here and do whatever you want...”

“If you want to make enemies of us, then be my guest. Just remember—if Mr. Dumont so much as utters the words, ‘Mannheim’s food is mediocre,’ your company will go under in a heartbeat.”

“.....”

David smashed his fists against the table. A loud *bang* echoed through the room, and the table cracked.

However, it was nothing more than one final act of desperation.

He glared at the three of them with his face bright red, then rushed out of the room with an expression of deep shame.



That night, the girls threw a party in the Heat Haze Palace dining room.

“Ah, the sweet taste of success! ♪”

They clinked their glasses together to celebrate their victory.

The table was lined with all sorts of luxurious dishes. Their elation at having

driven off the Mannheim president had revived all their excitement at being Klaus-free, and the girls cheerfully bragged to each other about their valorous efforts.

Sybilla happily dug into a hunk of meat, then flashed her pearly whites. “We nailed it. Now, the Mannheim president’s got no reason to go after the recipe anymore. There’s no way that guy’s got the stones to go head-to-head with John Dumont. He’s as good as gone.”

The next one to speak up was Lily, who was just as cheerful as Sybilla was. “Man, what a smart plan that was. We were able to settle everything without things getting violent a single time.”

“I mean, I still kinda wanna beat the shit outta the guy, but yeah.”

““Huzzah!”” the two of them cheered giddily as they clinked their glasses together once more.

For reference, it wasn’t every day that the girls managed to fool someone so successfully. Their daily training consisted of them racking up loss after loss against Klaus, and even during real missions, they always ended up leaving the trickiest bits to Klaus as well.

This time, though, they’d emerged victorious all on their own.

All of their spirits were soaring higher and higher with no end in sight—including Grete’s.

That ended up going pretty well...

She excused herself from the chaos and watched over her exultant teammates with a marked feeling of satisfaction.

“Just as I expected,” she murmured to herself over on the far end of the dining room.

I’m sure the boss will be satisfied, too.

Everything had gone according to her plan. Her sole regret was that the man she loved wasn’t there to witness it.

“So, what’s our star of the day doing all alone over here?” That was when Monika came over.

She tapped her bottle of mineral water against the edge of Grete's chair. That was her way of saying, "cheers."

"You did good today. I gotta say, things always seem to run smoother with you around."

Grete gave her a light bow. "Thank you... That's very nice of you to say."

However, she noticed that something felt off.

It was rare for someone as snarky as Monika to ever give out a sincere compliment like that.

"You sure you aren't going overboard, though?" The corner of Monika's mouth curled upward. "Honestly, I'm surprised you were willing to go so far for this. It's not every day you see that."

Monika smirked as she plopped herself down in the seat beside Grete's. So *that* was what she'd come to ask.

Grete answered honestly. "He said the pies reminded him of Inferno."

"Who?"

"The boss. He told me that that shop was full of memories of Inferno for him. I didn't want to let the shop go under while he was away..."

"I should've known it was about Klaus." Monika laughed in amusement. "Pretty noble of you, doing all that to protect something the person you love cares about."

"...Did I make a mistake, do you think?"

"Hey, don't ask me. I don't know the first thing about your relationship with Klaus."

The fact that Grete was pining for Klaus was essentially common knowledge by that point. She was supposedly trying to keep it a secret, but she wasn't doing a very good job.

The only person who hadn't realized yet was Klaus—or at least, that was what Grete chose to believe.

"To be candid, I don't think the boss and I are very good at communicating

our feelings...”

“You don’t say.”

“That’s why I want to at least figure out how the boss feels and do whatever I can for him.”

During her conversations with Klaus, it often felt like they were on two different pages.

Klaus wasn’t great with words, and she herself had a habit of taking her emotions and running too far with them. Whenever that happened, things tended to get awkward for a moment, and Klaus would furrow his brow.

Grete couldn’t even begin to count the number of times he’d told her, “That’s not what I meant.”

It filled her with a deep sense of loneliness.

I want to properly understand his feelings.

Doing so was a deep-seated wish of hers.

That was why she was fighting to protect the meat pie shop that was full of Klaus’s memories.

Have I gotten closer to the boss’s heart this way? Even just a little?

She held her hand in front of her chest and clenched her fist.

“Huh,” Monika said. She sounded almost bored.

Then, her expression turned serious, and her tone got very cold very quickly.

“And you really think Klaus’ll be happy about this?”

“Huh...?”

The words tore into Grete’s heart.

As her eyes went wide, Monika gave her a chilly smile and went on. “Tell me, did Klaus ever actually ask you to save the pie shop? He gave us two instructions: ‘rest up,’ and ‘exercise restraint.’ The way I see it, you haven’t been doing either.”

“I.....”

“Would Klaus really want us to use the skills he’s taught us on a single lowlife nobody?”

“.....”

Grete didn’t have an answer to that. Her body froze up.

The thought hadn’t even occurred to her until Monika pointed it out, but what if she *was* just one-sidedly imposing on him?

A moment later, Monika thumped her on the back. “I’m kidding. C’mon, chin up.”

“...Ah.”

“I’m just screwing with you. I can’t help but get jealous when I see someone else get so earnest about their love.”

After jovially explaining herself, Monika headed back and joined the others.

If Monika had been screwing with her, she’d done a damn good job of it. Grete indeed felt all screwed up. A dark shadow fell over her heart.

...Did I actually understand what the boss wanted?

A surge of unease ran through her, but it was interrupted by the phone ringing.

The rest of the girls dropped their conversations and headed over into the main hall.

Heat Haze Palace did technically have a telephone, but calls hardly ever came through. The only way to connect to it was by giving the operator a specific password after calling the number.

This time around, though, a certain someone had played a little trick.

Lily gulped and picked up the receiver. “Hello? Can I ask who’s calling?”

“It’s me. David.”

Hearing his voice come through gave the girls a proper shock.

Annette hooked the phone up to a speaker.

David’s gratingly familiar voice crackled through the main hall. “*Sorry for*

ringing you up out of the blue like this, but I just had to talk to you."

A certain someone had given him a special temporary number that connected directly to Heat Haze Palace.

"You've reached Lillian," Lily replied, giving him her fake name. "Thank you for stopping by this afternoon."

"You seriously told him you were called 'Lillian'?" Sybilla belatedly quipped.

"I have to ask—did you sell the recipe yet?" David asked.

Lily glanced over, and Grete gave her a signal with her hands.

"Not yet," Lily answered. "But I'm just about to sign the contract."

"Could I ask you to wait on that?"

"I mean, you can ask, but...two hundred thousand dents is a lot of money..."

When she hesitated the same way she had that afternoon, David dropped the bombshell.

"I'll give you two hundred and fifty. Please, sell it to us instead."

Astonished looks crossed most of the girls' faces. "Wait, *what?*"

Two hundred and fifty thousand dents was more than seven times what the average adult man made in a year.

"P-please hold for a second," Lily yelled, then covered the receiver with her hand. "Grete, what's going on...?"

Grete smiled as all her teammates' gazes fell on her. "Just as I expected."

This, too, was part of her scheme.

"From his perspective, it's the logical decision to make. If he managed to get sole control of a recipe that received a glowing review from John Dumont, two hundred and fifty thousand dents would be nothing compared to what he stood to gain. The profits from such a dish would send his company into the stratosphere."

That was why she'd instructed Thea to talk the meat pie recipe up so aggressively. By jacking up the recipe's price, they could steal a huge amount of

money from their enemy.

“If the pie shop owner is going to continue operating the store, he’ll need to be compensated for his damages. Once we sell David a fake recipe, we’ll have the money to make things right with the shopkeeper.”

The girls cheered in excitement at the tactic being proposed.

The harassment had sapped the meat pie shop’s owner of the will to continue running his business, but if the shop got a big cash injection, he might find his drive again.

That was the final step of Grete’s plan—scamming David out of a boatload of money.

Lily smiled in relief and turned back to the receiver. “Okay, I’ve made my decision. I’ll sell the recipe to you.”

“Well, all right, then. I appreciate it.”

“Let’s do the handoff tomorrow. I give you the recipe, you give me the money.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll get the two hundred and fifty thousand together and bring it over.”

Lily flashed a thumbs-up to the others, and they responded in kind. Their scam had worked, and they were all elated.

Right up until the next time their opponent spoke, that was.

“I just have one requirement—I need you to prepare the recipe in front of me so I can make sure it’s the exact same as the pies from the shop.”

The girls’ smiles froze on their faces.

Not even Grete had seen that turn of events coming. Something was off. She quickly shot Lily a hand sign.

“Hey, uh...,” Lily said, playing dumb. “You don’t, like, distrust me, do you?”

“I’m just taking precautions. If you know the recipe, it shouldn’t be a problem for you, right?”

“O-of cooourse not. But do you *really* need to verify it?”

"I wasn't planning to, not at first. But a quarter of a million dents is a hell of a lot of money, and you were acting a little strange today."

“S-strange how?”

“‘I’ll sock you’? Really? To a man who went out of his way to offer to buy your recipe?”

"Ah," the girls all remarked.

Sure enough, that was the exact threat Lily had made when David asked her to contractually become his lover.

"In any case, I'm afraid I simply can't give you the money until I have proof that the recipe is the real deal. I do apologize for acting so suspicious of you."

“Wh-what? Nah, it’s all good.”

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm looking forward to getting to eat an identical meat pie to the ones in the shop."

"Of course. I mean, the recipe *is* real, so, uh, it'll definitely turn out the same."

After arranging a time for her meetup with David, Lily hung up the phone.

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

.....

A heavy silence descended on the room.

It took a good long while before they finished grasping the situation.

“So, lemme make sure I’ve got this straight,” Sybilla groaned. “We’re screwed, yeah? We don’t know the real recipe. There’s no way we’ll be able to make an identical pie.”

She did, in fact, have it straight.

With David inspecting the recipe itself, their lie was about to be revealed for what it was. They had no way of making their opponent pay them that money. Completing the operation would require one final trump card, and they didn't have one handy.

As the team sank into silence, Sara squeezed her fists tight. “W-we could swap them out. We can make a pie following the fake recipe, then secretly exchange it for a real one. I’ll create a diversion with my animals, and Miss

Annette can—”

“Yup! If I tinker with the oven, we’ll be golden, yo!” the ash-pink-haired girl Annette said, finishing Sara’s thought. She smiled innocently and leaped up and down with a screwdriver in each hand.

“That’s part of a plan, but not a full one,” Thea calmly pointed out. “To do it, we would still need to procure an authentic pie. But the thing is, we can’t get the shopkeeper wrapped up in this. What we’re doing is well outside the bounds of the law, and that would make him an accessory to our crimes.”

““ ””

Sara and Annette hung their heads in despondence.

Thea smiled to cheer them up. “Still, it’s a good idea. And I know a way we can make a meat pie that’s exceedingly close to the real deal.” She walked over to the phone. “We can get Teach to help. Grete, you once told me that he tried to replicate the pie, didn’t you? All we have to do is ask him for the recipe he used.”

Klaus was staying in the Lylat Kingdom, and he’d told them what hotel he was lodging at just in case. They would have to make an international call, but that shouldn’t be too much of a problem.

The call connected. “Hello there, Teach.” Thea smiled. “I had a question I was hoping you wouldn’t mind answering,” she said, then left out the part about the scam they were running. She successfully got the recipe from him.

However, her expression soon darkened.

Eventually, she said, “...Thanks so much for the help,” and lifelessly hung up the phone. She turned to her teammates and handed them the memo she’d taken. “This is what he told me.”

A: Ground shoulder roast, onion, carrot, apple, garlic, salt and pepper, red wine. Suitable amounts of each.

B: Bread flour, pastry flour, cornstarch, water, butter. Suitable amounts of each.

① *Mix A. (Until it becomes the color of a single drop of blue paint spilled into*

the sun as it sets over Emai Lake.)

② *Mix B. (Until it's as soft as Erna's cheeks after they've been pinched three times.)*

③ *Enclose A in B. (Be as smooth as the Lute Snow Fields in spring.)*

④ *Bake. (Once the sear marks become bubbly-crunchy, take it out. Bubbly-crunchiness is delicious.)*

Good hunting.

~~~~~

The recipe was downright despair-inducing.

They could just barely make out the ingredients, but the steps were as vague as vague could be, and there was really no way to describe the descriptions that came up every so often other than “baffling.”

Furthermore, Sybilla pointed out the biggest problem of all. “Why’s it say ‘suitable amounts of each’ for all the ingredients, dammit?!”

Without proper measurements, the recipe was just about useless.

They’d used up all their options. At this point, they had no choice but to flee.

“Look, guys!” Lily gave the others a deep bow. “I-I’m super sorry! All I did was screw up, and now we—”

“It’s not just your fault,” Monika interjected. She stretched her palm toward the ceiling and sighed. “We all got too carried away. Grete’s plan had a big gaping hole in it, and Grete didn’t even see it coming. Klaus might’ve, though. He told us to exercise restraint, and this is what we get for not listening to him. Am I wrong?”

She turned her gaze once more toward Grete, and all Grete could do was nod. “No, you’re right... About all of it...”

The possibility of the target growing suspicious was one that she should have foreseen.

The problem was, she let her greed get the better of her. If she’d sorted through the information more carefully, she could have calculated a sum that

David would have been more comfortable parting with.

“.....”

Grete squeezed her fists tight.

I was completely blind...

And after Klaus had even warned them that their excitement was making them sloppy, too.

I utterly failed to take the boss's concerns to heart...

She'd hadn't understood his feelings one bit, and she'd gotten the team into a huge mess.

Knowing that hurt more than she could bear.

“...Monika is absolutely right. This all happened because of my blunder—”

“So, you mind fixing it?” Monika picked the memo up off the table and handed it to Grete.

“What...?”

“And this time, make sure you *really* understand what Klaus is thinking.” Monika pointed to one of the passages. “‘Good hunting,’ he said. I’d say Klaus probably has some idea of what’s up.”

Grete stared at the sentence in shock.

Sure enough, the words of encouragement he’d chosen were a bit overdramatic if all they were doing was baking a meat pie.

“But...what is it you would have me do, then...?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I want you to follow his recipe and make a meat pie just as good as the shop’s.” Monika gave Grete a light pat on the shoulder. “Only someone who loves Klaus like you do could ever decode this cryptogram of a recipe.”

“.....”

Grete realized just how difficult the problem she was being tasked with was.

However, this was the only option they had.

There were a mere twelve hours left. That was all the time Grete had to do trial runs, refine her process, and eventually come up with a copy that could hold its own against the pies sold in the shop.

It was going to be an incredibly difficult challenge, but—

“I’ll help!”

Then, Sara spoke up.

“My parents ran a restaurant, and I used to help out all the time. I can do whatever prep work you need.”

With that, the rest of the girls got to work as well.

“I’ll pop out and grab those ingredients,” Sybilla offered before running off.

“I’ll mod the oven so it bakes things all bubbly-crunchy, yo,” Annette said as she whipped out a toolbox, and as she did, Lily puffed up her chest.

“If you need a taste-tester, then look no further.”

“I’m prepared to sacrifice my cheeks for the cause,” Erna declared, lamenting her misfortune.

Thea tried to console her. “I really don’t understand why he put you in the recipe...”

The unreserved assistance her teammates were offering her filled Grete’s chest with warmth. “Thank you so much, everyone...!”

“Hey, I like those meat pies, too,” Monika replied coolly.

“Down with Mannheim!” Lily cried, to which the others cheered, “““““Yeah!””””” again.

It was time for them to put their honed teamwork to use.

Compared to the Impossible Mission they’d just completed, this challenge was going to be a walk in the park.



The next day, David arrived at the apartment the girls were illegally squatting in. He took a look at the gas oven they’d hastily installed, and triumphantly popped open his attaché case. Two hundred and fifty thousand dents sat inside

in neatly stacked bills.

After making sure it was all there, Lily got to work baking her meat pie. She was the only Lamplight member present in the apartment, but the others were watching over her from their wiretap in the next apartment over.

The girls had fought valiantly to decode the recipe, but they had no intention of sharing their results with David. Instead, Lily used an inferior recipe to assemble her pie, then gave the signal as soon as she put it in the oven. The mouse Sara had stationed there rushed out, and while David was busy recoiling in disgust, Annette activated the mechanism she'd installed in the oven. With that, the fake pie David had watched Lily make got traded out for the girls' deluxe version.

After patiently letting the pie bake for twenty minutes, Lily proudly handed it to David. "Dig in!"

David did just that. "Hmn!" he immediately grunted. "This is the shop's pie, all right! I can tell by the flavor that this is the real thing!"

Lily clenched her fists, and the girls next door exchanged a round of high fives.

Decoding Klaus's recipe had allowed them to successfully fool their enemy.

Now, for a brief aside.

It's really not that important, but if you're curious, this is how the minor kerfuffle that happened afterward went.

David polished off his meat pie. "This pie really is something," he said.

Lily gave him a broad smile. "Well, I'll be taking this now." She reached out and took the attaché case—

"Oh, you're not getting that money," David declared.

He pulled a pistol from his pocket and leveled it at Lily's forehead.

"What?"

"Obviously, I was lying. Now that I know the recipe, you're useless to me. Drop the attaché case. And do us both a favor and don't try to resist, okay? I have supporters who work in organized crime."

His threats were clichéd, but that didn't make them any less threatening.

With the gun still pressed to her forehead, Lily sighed. "...Man, this sucks."

David sneered. "Well, at least you understand the position you're—"

"Just for the record, I didn't want to do this, okay? I didn't want to get violent with a civvy. And plus, if it was going to come to this anyway, then there was no point to even making the pie at all..."

"What, you're thinking of fighting back?" David scowled at her and placed his finger over the trigger. "Not a smart move, girly. All I would have to do to kill you is move a single finger."

"Ooh, bad news," Lily told him. "You're not gonna be moving anything anytime soon."

"Wh—?"

Not a moment later, David crumpled to his knees.

He didn't understand what was happening. His eyes went wide, silently begging for answers, but he could no longer open his mouth to ask. He collapsed onto the carpet and convulsed all over.

"I'm code name Flower Garden—and it's time to bloom out of control."

There was no way David could have noticed, but the room had just been filled to the brim with poison gas.

Lily picked up the attaché case and headed out.

Out in the apartment building's hallway, Grete was waiting for her with a smile. "Just as I expected."

Setting up the poison gas contingency had been Grete's idea. She wasn't going to let anything past her this time.

"When it comes to lying and cheating, we're the best in the game ♪," Lily replied with a smile.

The two of them exchanged a double-handed high five.



Ten days later...

Once Klaus finished his vacation—if you could call it that, given that he'd spent the entire time completing missions—he came back to Heat Haze Palace, and they all returned to their busy routines. The girls got back to their training, and Klaus continued carrying out missions on his own.

Most days, he came home well into the night, but today was unusual in that it was still evening when he got back.

As he sat in his room pondering what to have for dinner, a nostalgic aroma reached his nose.

There was a knock on his door.

After a pause, Grete popped her head in, then wheeled a cart into the room.

“Good work today.” She smiled. “I brought you dinner.”

When Klaus looked at the plate atop the cart, he found it topped with a meat pie he recognized well.

Ah, thought Klaus, so this is what smelled so familiar. Grete had brought him takeout from the shop he'd gone to with Inferno so many times.

“.....”

Klaus watched her as she sliced up the pie. She looked oddly proud.

“You know, I've been hearing an odd rumor lately,” Klaus said. “And it's about that very pie.”

“Oh? And what rumor might that be...?”

“Apparently, the president of Mannheim Inc. got scammed when he tried to buy the recipe. Someone posing as the shop owner's granddaughter took him for a quarter of a million dents. He went to the police and tried to accuse the shop owner of fraud, but it turned out that the shop owner didn't even have a granddaughter to begin with, so the president wasn't able to prove a thing. Even the apartment the con artist claimed they were living in wasn't actually rented out to anyone.”

“It sounds like this con artist really covered all their bases...”

“After all that went down, the meat pie shop happened to receive a lavish

anonymous donation. Thanks to the money, the owner was able to hire an apprentice and begin renovating the shop. It looks like it'll be with us for a while yet."

"Oh, that's lovely to hear."

"Out of curiosity, did you know about all this?"

"...No, not at all."

All Grete did was smile modestly. Klaus noticed a childishly playful glimmer in her eye.

However, he wasn't nearly so boorish as to dig any deeper.

"Sorry for asking such an odd question," he said, then changed the subject. "Also, I have another apology I need to make. The truth is, I'm not particularly hungry. There's no way I'm going to be able to eat such a large meat pie."

"Oh! ...Is that so?" Grete's expression clouded over with disappointment.

Klaus went on. "So how about this? What if we split it and each took half?"

"_____"

"Go ahead, fetch yourself some utensils. In my opinion, this is a dish best enjoyed with others."

Grete's whole face lit up. "Of course!" she replied with a nod. "In that case, I have an idea. We wouldn't want the pie getting cold, so what if we just shared this single fork and knife, got real close, and used them to feed each other in—"



“I’ll pass.”

“...Boo.”

Grete looked a little disappointed, but she quickly rushed off to grab another set of utensils.



While all that was happening, the rest of the girls were enjoying some meat pie of their own in the dining room.

They scrambled to shovel as much pie as they could into their gullets, thoroughly staining their mouths in the process. At the end of the day, the shop’s pie really was miles better than their reproduced version. There was just no competing with professionals.

After wiping her mouth with a napkin, Thea told the others about the story she’d read in the newspaper.

“In the end, David ended up getting ousted from Mannheim Inc. It would seem that the previous president is coming back to resume his duties.”

“I mean, that’s what happens when you misappropriate company funds and lose them to a scammer,” Monika commented. She popped a hunk of meat pie into her mouth with her bare hands, then licked the oil off her fingers. “I guess the Mannheim employees got their happy ending, too. They got an excuse to kick out that second-gen dumbass, and that’s worth two hundred and fifty thousand any day of the week.”

“Indeed. It was a lovely outcome for all involved,” Thea said with a nod. The others all agreed.

An atmosphere of harmony fell on them as they basked in the wonderful conclusion they’d brought about—with one exception. Lily’s head looked like it was about to vibrate right off.

“This isn’t good enough!” Steam spewed from her ears as she shouted.

“...What’s this, all of a sudden?” Thea raised an eyebrow. “This is the best outcome we could have hoped for. What’s there to be unsatisfied about?”

“The *report*.”

“The what?”

“We should report what happened to Teach. We need to let him know about our big win!”

“You realize that what we did was a *crime*, right?” Monika said, shutting her down cold. “If this is just because you want to brag to him, then I’d think again. All it’ll do is make him mad.”

Lily pouted sadly. “I feel bad for Grete. After all that work she did for Teach’s sake...”

“Ah,” the others said as the same realization dawned on them.

If they didn’t tell Klaus what they’d done, then he would never find out just how much Grete cared. It seemed a shame, especially after how dedicated she’d been.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that,” Monika replied. “I’m sure Klaus has an inkling of what’s up.”

At that very moment, Grete came down to the dining room. She speed-walked through to the kitchen, retrieved a knife and a fork, and headed back up to the second floor.

It wasn’t hard to figure out what was going on.

She was doubtless enjoying a nice dinner for two with Klaus.

“See?” Monika said smugly. “That’s probably him trying to be sincere.”

“You’re right,” Thea said with a smile. “Teach probably said something along the lines of, ‘I’m not that hungry, so why don’t we share?’”

That sounded like Klaus, all right.

“What a liar,” Sybilla replied without hesitation.

“What a liar,” Lily concurred.

“What a liar,” Sara agreed, unable to conceal her smile.

“I bet he was lying, yo.” Annette grinned.

“What a liar.” Erna nodded.

Over in the kitchen, there was a huge pile of ingredients he'd purchased to use that evening. Given that he'd just finished a mission, he was probably famished.

The girls exchanged glances with each other, then burst into laughter.

It was a shoddy lie, to be sure, but it was a lie he'd told for Grete's sake.

Interlude

Intermission ②

With that, Monika finished telling the two stories—the story about her solo operation during the bioweapon retrieval mission, and the story about the con they ran to protect the imperiled meat pie shop during their post-mission furlough.

Once she was done, Thea spoke up in blank amazement. “You know, I have to say...”

Then, she said what everyone was thinking.

“...the heroine vibes Grete gives off are really quite something.”

“What the hell is a heroine vibe?” Monika retorted.

“Let’s say your heroine level’s a one. Grete’s would be two hundred million.”

“I think you’ve got me a little too low there.”

The comparison earned Thea a glare out of Monika. She probably didn’t actually care, but still.

Grete cut in, her expression troubled. “The question is, what should we do? We talked it all out, but we’re no closer to an answer than before...”

She was right. Throughout all four vignettes, there wasn’t a single person who’d obviously been acting shady. Nobody had come across as close enough to Klaus for the girls to identify them as the bride, and none of them had been going on any sort of special missions. They were out of suspects.

The discussion was deadlocked.

Then, someone made an offhand remark.

“Look; end of the day, does it really matter who the bride is?”

That someone was Sybilla. She sounded like she was done with the whole

affair.

“It’s just a name on some papers, right? Instead of wastin’ all this time trying to figure out who it is, I figure we could all just start taking turns being the bride. That way, everyone’ll be happy...”

It wasn’t a bad proposal. The majority of the others started nodding along in agreement.

As they did, though, Lily cut them off. “That’s it!”

“What?”

“We’ve been thinking about this all backward. The whole reason we’re in this jam is ’cause we tried to figure out who the bride *was*.”

She rose to her feet and snapped her fingers.

“But the thing is, all we have to do is pick one now! It’s time we got us a *new* bride!”

Chapter 5

Bridal Royale

The night they discovered that Klaus was married, the girls began making their preparations.

They were going to have themselves a bridal royale.

There were a lot of perks to being Klaus's bride. There was the fact they got to accompany him on missions, there were the luxurious dinners that often came with that, and for anyone who had feelings for him, the title had value in and of itself.

The girls had started by discussing the question "Who is the bride?" but when turning to the past failed to offer them any likely candidates, they ultimately came to the conclusion "In that case, what if we just picked a new one?" Out of all their strange ideas, this had to be one of the strangest.

When they went to share their decision with Klaus, he heaved a long-suffering sigh. "I know it's only on paper, but still, you're seriously planning on going ahead and just choosing my wife for me? Do I get a say in all this?"

The girls were shocked. "We never even considered that part!"

Klaus shook his head in exasperation, but eventually, he said, "Well, I guess it'll make for good training," and gave them the go-ahead.

He laid out the rules.

The battle would take place at 1 PM sharp the next day, and everyone who wanted to take part had until fifteen minutes before the fight began to come to the main hall and announce that they were participating. Once the combatants were locked in, they would disperse, and whoever was the last person standing after they'd made everyone else admit defeat would win. The use of guns, grenades, and any other weapons that could cause serious bodily harm was forbidden.

It was basically a battle royale version of their normal training exercise.

Five of the girls signed up immediately.

There was “Flower Garden” Lily. “I’ll be expecting you to take me out to a fancy dinner for our anniversary, Teach!”

There was “Daughter Dearest” Grete. “Boss... It may be in name alone, but the title of bride will be mine...”

There was “Fool” Erna. “I want to spend time together with Teach... and I’m not backing down on that!”

There was “Dreamspeaker” Thea. “You want me, don’t you? If you let me come on your missions, I’m all yours.”

And there was “Forgetter” Annette. “I’ve got a lovely secret objective, yo!”

The remaining three—“Pandemonium” Sybilla, “Glint” Monika, and “Meadow” Sara—decided not to join in for the time being.

With that, the battle to become Klaus’s bride began.

The question was, who would emerge victorious?



The night before the battle, Sybilla lay on her bed and tore the whole situation a new one.

Okay, seriously! What’s even goin’ on here?!

She’d gotten too caught up in the others’ enthusiasm to say anything, but now, she was coming back to her senses.

This ain’t even about espionage anymore! I mean, what the hell is a “bridal royale”?! I just kinda accepted it at the time, but things went off the rails the minute Grete tried to submit a fake marriage registration!

It was a perfectly legitimate complaint. However, the wheels were already in motion. She’d chosen not to participate, so it didn’t actually concern her anymore, but still.

Eh, whoever ends up becomin’ his bride, it’s not like it’s my problem...

She decided to just go to sleep and closed her eyes. Before she could drift off,

though, she was interrupted by a knock on her door.

“Who is it?” she asked, to which she received a dignified, “It’s me.”

It was Thea who opened Sybilla’s door clad in a negligee. Sybilla had no desire to let anyone into her room wearing an outfit that suggestively transparent, woman or otherwise. “Go away,” she said succinctly.

“I want to have a strategy meeting,” Thea replied as she barged in anyway. “Tell me, Sybilla, are you *really* planning on sitting tomorrow’s battle out?”

“Yup. That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“Then in that case, I have just one thing to say.” Thea sat down on Sybilla’s bed. “Join in tomorrow. For me.”

Sybilla sighed. “Yeah, I figured one or two of you would come try this.”

“With Monika abstaining, Lily is the odds-on favorite. Grete is no good in a fight, Annette’s effectiveness is curtailed dramatically without her explosives, and with a little bit of psychological warfare, I can defeat Erna, as well.”

“You sure ’bout that? Lily’s an idiot, so I’d say Annette’s the more dangerous of the two.”

“You might have a point there. But she and Lily can be dealt with in much the same manner.” Thea smiled and stroked Sybilla’s thigh. “We just need to clean them out of every weapon they have.”

“.....”

“I don’t have any way to overcome Lily’s poison or Annette’s inventions. But with your athletic physique and talent for theft, it would be a different story. As things stand, you’re the strongest piece on the board.”

Thea’s hand traveled intimately over Sybilla’s body, and Sybilla swatted it away.

This was the way Thea fought—through negotiation. She preferred to get powerful people on her side before the battle even began.

“Just for the record, my right arm’s still outta commission,” Sybilla reminded her. She’d taken a bad hit during the bioweapon retrieval mission.

However, Thea didn't back down. "For you, one arm will be plenty."

Sybilla scratched the back of her head. "Honestly... I'd've expected you to be backin' up Grete here. Y'know, what with all that romance advice you give her."

"You're not wrong, and it certainly stings a little." Thea frowned apologetically. "But the thing is, I have a dream, too, and I don't intend to give up on it. I want to inherit Inferno's will and protect this nation as a spy. Meanwhile, I'll continue supporting Grete in her romantic endeavors—and that's the answer I've arrived at."

There was no hesitation in Thea's voice.

Her resolution was firm. There was something stirring about how unembarrassed she was about her actions.

"Sybilla, what I'm prepared to offer you is money. Go ahead and name your price."

"....."

It wasn't a bad offer.

Money was one of the main things Sybilla wanted. She'd received a number of completion bonuses for her spy work, and she'd donated them in their entirety to the orphanage she used to live at. Not a day went by where she didn't remember her childhood memories of starving alongside her little brother and sister.

Thea had figured all that out—as well as the fact that Sybilla had no real reason to turn her down.

"All right, I'm in." Sybilla nodded. "You want me on your team, you got it."

"I look forward to working with you. I promise, you won't regret this."

Thea extended her hand, and Sybilla shook it.

That marked the formation of a team—"Pandemonium" Sybilla and "Dreamspeaker" Thea.

However, they weren't the only group making an alliance in secret.



Sara stared blankly at the ceiling as she soaked in the bath.

Down beneath the ground floor, Heat Haze Palace was equipped with a highly modern gas-powered communal bath. It was big enough to fit all the girls at once, but Grete and Monika didn't like bathing with others, so they all kind of just used it whenever.

At the moment, Sara didn't see anyone else in the bath, so she was enjoying a long, leisurely soak on her own.

She was one of the other people who'd decided not to participate.

As for why not, she simply didn't have a strong reason for wanting to become the bride.

...There are loads of people who'd be better qualified for the role than me.

When it came to being mature and womanly, Thea fit the bill, and Monika was better as a backup spy. And on a sentimental level, she wanted Grete to get picked.

The fact of the matter was, Sara wasn't worthy of becoming Klaus's bride.

It would have been impertinent of her to even participate. Klaus had told her to become more assertive, but there was no way he wanted her to become so self-assured she couldn't read a room.

So why won't this gloomy feeling go away...?

The moment the sigh left her lungs, a series of ripples started spreading across the water's surface. She barely even had time to be surprised before something came splashing up beside her.

"That's enough submerging for now, yo!"

"What? Miss Annette?"

It was, in fact, Annette. Apparently, she had been underwater that whole time. Sara hadn't noticed her at all.

Annette seemed unsurprisingly dizzy, and she staggered to her feet. Her hair wasn't tied back, so it sagged down and clung soggly to her face. "Oh, hey!" she cried as she finally registered that Sara was there. "Sis, perfect timing! We've

got business to discuss, yo.”

“You should drink some water first. Here, I’ll go get you some.”

“Wanna team up with me?”

Sara blinked in surprise at the sudden request. “Um, are you asking me to join the bridal royale?”

“Yeah, that’s right. C’mon, let’s pound the others into a pulp together.”

Her words rang with violence, but underneath it all, she was saying that she needed Sara’s help. Sara had no particular reason to refuse the request, but she did have one question. “Why *do* you want to become the bride, Miss Annette?”

“Hm?”

“I can figure out what everyone else’s reason is, but you’re the only one I don’t quite follow...”

Sara was pretty close with Annette, but that wasn’t to say she understood everything that was going on in her teammate’s head. What was it she was hiding behind those innocent eyes of hers?

“My goal”—Annette smiled sweetly—“is confidential, yo.”

“Th-that’s pretty cute... Wait, no, I’m not going to let you fool me! I’d really like you to tell me.”

“I refuse. But the point is, I want you to join in.”

After delivering her directive, Annette began spinning in place. Sara was confused until she realized that Annette was trying to dry her hair. “This is the fastest way to do it, yo,” Annette explained.

Sara still wasn’t satisfied, but she nodded anyway. “Oh, I suppose.”

She had a habit of pampering Annette.

With that, another team was made—“Forgetter” Annette and “Meadow” Sara.

The myriad plots and schemes continued swirling together as the night before the battle wore on.



On the day of the battle, the girls gathered in the main hall at half past noon and began stretching and pumping themselves up for the coming showdown. The air was thick with a different sort of tension than their usual training carried.

Sybilla's and Sara's unexpected changes of heart earned them some suspicious glances. Everyone spent the next little while trying to figure out who they'd made alliances with, but Sybilla and Sara kept their poker faces strong.

"I am kind of relieved," Erna said from her seat on the couch right before the cutoff. "It's a good thing Big Sis Monika isn't participating. It would have been scary if someone managed to buy her help."

Monika was nowhere to be seen in the hall. By the look of it, she really wasn't interested in becoming Klaus's bride.

The seven of them were the only ones there.

"To be honest, I doubt she even *can* be bought," Thea replied.

Lily and Grete nodded in agreement.

The rest of the girls all regarded Monika's talents with a sort of reverence. Within the group of washouts that made up Lamplight, her skills were clearly a cut above everyone else's. Her abstention was a welcome turn of events.

Then, the grandfather clock's hand turned to mark 12:45.

Lily nodded again. "Looks like we hit the cutoff. Now, the entrant list is locked —"

The sound of a door clattering open cut her off.

Every head in the room turned, and they were greeted by a mane of fluttering cerulean hair. Its owner's mouth curled into an arrogant grin.

"What's up, shitters? Say hello to your new frontrunner."

As Monika introduced herself, she strolled on in.

""""""WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!""""""

Several of the girls shuddered.

Monika gave them a little wave as she basked in the chaos she'd just caused.

“It seemed like it could be interesting, so I figured I’d join in, too. Don’t worry, I’ll play with a handicap. I’ll do this whole thing barehanded. It’s not like I need weapons to beat you chumps.”

The unexpected announcement sent a stir through the team.

Lily was shocked. *I never thought Monika would actually join in. She wasn’t kidding about being the frontrunner...*

Tears welled up Sara’s eyes. *I can’t. I can’t! There’s no way I can beat herrrrr...*

Erna pumped herself up. *This is bad. But even so, I can’t afford to lose.*

Thea calmly analyzed the situation. *This is fine. If I coordinate with Sybilla and lure Monika into hand-to-hand combat—* Sybilla started sweating. *This is gonna be rough. I mean, goin’ up against Monika with an injury like this?*

Suddenly, Annette piped up. “Yo, Sis, I wonder what’d happen if I pulled up your shirt.”

Monika’s sudden intrusion had thrown all the other participants for a loop.

All their plans had been predicated on Monika not being there. With that assumption gone, it was impossible to anticipate what shape the battle would take.

Monika smiled sadistically. “And plus, I’ve got a looooot of built-up stress after you all kept getting in my way during the Impossible Mission. I hope you’re ready for payback. Lily and Sybilla, I’m looking at you two.”

The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

“...I have an idea I’d like to propose, everyone.” Grete modestly raised her hand.

Everyone turned and looked to see what she had to say.

“I suggest that as soon as the battle begins, we all launch a concentrated attack on Monika.”

~~~~~ .....

Grete wasn’t pulling her punches today.

**One minute in: “Glint” Monika has been eliminated.**



“GRETEEEEEEE! I’LL GET YOU FOR THIS!” Monika bellowed from where she lay tied up from head to toe in the main hall, but nobody lent her an ear. Monika or not, she’d still been outnumbered seven to one. Between that and the fact she was empty-handed, she hadn’t stood a chance.

The girls exchanged a round of satisfied nods, then scattered across Heat Haze Palace and got ready for round two.

Now, it was time for the battle to begin in earnest.

Immediately after the match began, Sara headed down the back hallway on the first floor and joined up with Annette.

At the moment, Sara wasn’t carrying any actual weapons. All she had was her puppy Johnny tucked under her hat and her hawk Bernard perched on her shoulder. Annette had instructed her to come unarmed.

In contrast, Annette was armed to the teeth, and her skirt was bulging to the point of breaking.

“So, um, Miss Annette?” Sara asked. “What exactly is it you want me to do?”

In the end, Annette had never actually shared any sort of definite plan with her. As a matter of fact, she still didn’t know why Annette had even recruited her. What was she going to have Sara do to seize control of the battle?

“Yo, Sis!” Annette hopped happily. “First off, c’mon into my room.”

They were right beside a door, and Annette opened it up to reveal her bedroom. Mountains of junk were piled up all around, and the smell of fuel permeated the air.

It wasn’t the most relaxing of environments, but Sara replied, “Okay,” and went in.

Annette stood in front of her and puffed herself up with pride. “Now, I want you to sit in that hammock there.”

“You got it.” Sara sat down on the hammock-shaped swath of cloth hanging in the middle of the room.

“Here’s some warm milk and chocolate for you.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“But I’m collecting the toys that come with the chocolate, so you can’t keep it.”

“Ha-ha. Well, I hope this one has something nice inside.”

“That’s all.”

“Huh?”

Having concluded her business there, Annette left the room.

Sara had been left behind. She tried to follow after Annette, but with both her hands now full, she couldn’t figure out how to get out of the hammock.

She heard Annette call back from the other side of the door. “Your job is to hide in there, Sis. Otherwise, you’d get in my way.”

“Huuuuuuuh?!” Sara cried.

Apparently, Annette just wanted her to take it easy. The fact that she’d pressed Sara into joining made less sense than ever.

As Sara’s confusion began really setting in, she heard another voice out in the hall. Annette had specifically told her to hide, so she couldn’t afford to make a sound. Sara went silent and strained her ears to figure out what was going on outside.

The voice rang with determination. “What a perfect opportunity... Now, at long last, I can finally get my revenge...!”

“Yo, uh,” Annette said, playing dumb, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’ve had it up to here with you. You and me are going to settle this, Annette!”

Out in front of the door, the battle between Erna and Annette was about to begin.



Up on the Heat Haze Palace roof...

Sybilla and Thea had joined up, and now, they were standing atop the roof with their ears strained. They could hear violent noises from down below. The



battle had already started.

Sybilla smiled. “Sounds like we’re all good to go after our target of choice.”

“Indeed we are,” Thea replied with a nod. “However, defeating her inside the manor will be tricky. And she knows it, so she won’t be coming out anytime soon. We’ll have to time it perfectly and take her down before she knows what hit her. And the best time to do that—”

Thea clicked her heel.

“—is right now.”

On her signal, Sybilla leaped off the roof.

Then, before she could fall too far, she kicked open a second-floor window and dove through it into the manor. Without pausing for so much as a moment, she assaulted the girl strolling unconcernedly down the hallway.

“Huh?” Her target was Lily.

Lily tried to flee from Sybilla’s attack, but Sybilla was faster. Thanks to her incredible athleticism, she was able to run along the wall, close in on Lily in the blink of an eye, and send her flying.

Lily tried to use the momentum from the hit to put some space between herself and Sybilla, but her escape route was already blocked.

“Splendid work, Sybilla.”

Thea, who’d just gracefully descended to the second floor, smiled.

She and Sybilla positioned themselves so they were boxing Lily in from both sides.

“R-rgh...” Lily bit her lip and began panicking. “Th-that’s not fair, ganging up on me two-on-one like that! Do you people have no hearts?”

Sybilla sighed. “Never thought I’d hear *you* accuse someone of not playin’ fair.”

“Now, are you ready to surrender?” Thea confidently brandished a brush. “Or is some torture in order?”

Lily inched backward toward the window and reached into her shirt. “Y-you

might think you've got me, but I still have a few tricks up my—"

"Just so you know, if you're talkin' about your poison gas," Sybilla said, showing Lily the item resting in her palm, "I just nicked it."

"Hweh?"

Sybilla was holding a device designed for emitting poison gas. That was Lily's favorite trick—spraying poison gas that she and she alone was immune to. If she'd been able to set that off inside the manor, she would have been all but invincible.

"I'm sorry, Lily, but you lost." Thea smiled. "Your poison gas is so powerful, it hardly even seemed fair. But now that we've stolen it, you can be beaten like anyone else."

"D-drat! I screwed up, big-time!"

"Hm-hm, and now it's tickling time." Thea gave her brush a dainty shake. "I should warn you, my torture can be quite addictive. Your body will go flush and begin throbbing late into the night, and eventually, you'll come to my room. 'Please,' you'll say, 'can you do it again?' begging me on your hands and—"

"What exactly are you planning on *doing* to me with that brush?!"

Lily screamed, but she didn't actually try to put up a fight. Any moment now, she would concede her defeat.

It was oddly sportsmanlike of her—in fact, it was *too* sportsmanlike.

Sybilla was struck by a sense of unease. Something felt off. But what? Then, she realized—it was Lily's chest. Now that she took a better look, something about Lily's ample bust seemed almost artificial.

She immediately leaped backward. "Thea—it's a trap!"

However, her accomplice failed to process what was going on. All Thea was able to do was let out a delayed, "Huh?"

The next moment, a pair of voices echoed through the hallway.

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

“I’m code name Flower Garden—and it’s time to bloom out of control.”

The first change was with Lily—or rather, the person they’d assumed was Lily. The mask covering her face came off, revealing Grete’s face beneath. And the second change took place immediately thereafter, when the real Lily charged into the hallway. She turned toward Thea and Sybilla and blasted them with poison gas.

Sybilla was able to dodge the gas, but she wasn’t able to save her teammate.

Soon, Thea’s body began tilting to the side. Right before she collapsed, Lily gently caught her.

Sybilla clicked her tongue.

*So we weren’t the only ones who teamed up!*

Still, it was an odd pairing. To think that “Daughter Dearest” Grete and “Flower Garden” Lily would ever join forces!

Eventually, the poison gas dissipated from the hallway. Grete must have taken the antidote ahead of time, as she seemed perfectly unaffected.

“Thea!” Sybilla shouted as she stepped backward. “Don’t surrender! No matter what they do to you, just stick through it! I’ll save you, I promise!”

For now, she had no choice but to abandon her teammate and beat a tactical retreat.

Even though Thea had been captured, the rule was that she wasn’t out of the competition until she said, “I surrender.” As long as she had the willpower a spy needed to resist torture, Sybilla would be able to get her hands on the antidote and rescue her.

All she needed to do was hold out for five minutes, and they had a good shot, but—

Lily caressed the back of Thea’s neck with the brush. “Coochie-coochie-coo!”

“I SURRENDER!” Thea wailed with tears in her eyes.

“What the hell?!” Sybilla yelped.

She had lasted all of half a second.

Now that Thea had given up, Grete ignored her and came running after Sybilla. "...I won't let you get away."

Sybilla could take her in a fight, but given the situation, she had no choice but to flee.

**Thirteen minutes in: "Dreamspeaker" Thea has been eliminated.**



After narrowly escaping the hammock, Sara peeked out the door to see what was going on outside.

Out in the hallway, the fierce battle between Annette and Erna was beginning.

Annette led off by doing a spin.

"I'm code name Forgetter—and it's time to put it all together, yo."

Her skirt gently flapped upward, and a quintet of model planes tumbled out from within. Right before they crashed into the ground, their propellers violently whirled into motion, and they soared straight at Erna.

Erna dodged them by the skin of her teeth.

There was no way she could have tracked them with her eyes. It was her superhuman intuition that had picked up on the impending danger.

She wove between the model planes with steps as nimble as a dancer's.

"I HOPE YOU'RE READY, ANNETTE!"

Erna closed in on her opponent and pulled out a wooden knife.

Annette withdrew a rod-shaped instrument from inside her skirt. "This here's my magic wand, yo," she declared as she brandished it, but it was clearly an oversized stun gun. She blocked Erna's attack.

However, Erna's charge had been so forceful that Annette got pushed back a step.

Things had played out just like Erna foresaw.

Her lips parted ever so slightly.

“I’m code name Fool—and it’s time to kill with everything.”

An ominous noise rang out.

There was a set of stairs leading up to the second floor that sat right across from Annette’s room. It was far narrower and steeper than the staircase over in the foyer, and a sound like a string snapping came from atop it.

That was when the metal balls appeared.

Erna must have laid a trap, as a huge number of metal balls the size of fists came raining down the stairs.

The attack was so tremendous, it was like looking at a landslide. Erna’s ability to sense misfortune allowed her to dodge it by the narrowest of margins, but she was the only one.

Annette whipped out an umbrella-shaped contraption and used it to shield herself. Her lips were pursed tight. She just barely managed to defend herself, but by the time the balls finished rolling, her umbrella was in tatters.

Sara watched the brutal exchange through the crack in the door with shock in her eyes.

*W-wow... Miss Erna is amazing...!*

She never would’ve guessed that Erna would be winning. Annette was being forced to fight without her grenades, but even in light of that, it was still an impressive feat.

“Heh. This is only a fraction of what I can do once I get serious.” Erna laid a hand proudly atop her chest. “All right, Annette. You should hurry up and surrender. I don’t want to hurt you too badly.”

“.....”

After blocking Erna’s metal ball attack, Annette plopped herself down against the wall. She looked almost bored. After staring wordlessly at her destroyed umbrella, she snapped back to her feet and turned her gaze toward Erna. “I’m curious, yo. Why do you want to become the bride?”

“Yeep?” Erna’s eyes went wide in surprise at the unexpected query. She immediately began fidgeting. “Th-that’s, uh... I—I have my reasons... The

question is, why do *you*?”

“I don’t care one bit about being the bride, yo. No matter who he marries, Bro’ll always be mine.”

“Huh? But then, why did you join in at all?”

“Cause I want Sara to become the bride.”

“Huh?” Erna and Sara gasped in unison.

Sara continued watching Annette through the crack in the door, but because of the angle, she couldn’t see her expression.

“This is me paying her back for everything she always does for me. Sara’s a bit thick when it comes to her own feelings, so it’s on me to give her a little push,” Annette said. “I misjudged you, yo. She’s done so much for you, too, and here you are ignoring her and trying to become the bride yourself.”

Erna flinched. “I—I...”

Of all the tools Annette had at her disposal, psychological warfare was one of the last ones Sara expected her to use.

*Sh-she doesn’t really mean what she’s saying, does she?*

She was probably just lying through her teeth to throw Erna off her game. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time Annette had said something crazy and outlandish.

Whatever the case, though, Erna definitely seemed flustered.

“Y-you’re right, Big Sis Sara really has—”

“You’re wide open, yo.”

“You’re the woooooooooorst!”

Annette didn’t waste a second before charging in with her stun gun. Erna shrieked and tried to flee up the stairs, but Annette caught her by the leg. She raised her stun gun aloft to deal the coup de grace—

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHH! OUTTA MY WAAAAAY!”

—and at that very moment, an intruder came bursting in.



Sybilla hadn't noticed a thing.

If she'd thought about her situation rationally, she would have realized that Thea's defeat had removed her whole reason for participating, but she had more pressing things to consider at the moment. She frantically tried to put some distance between herself and Lily.

The biggest thing that made poison gas tricky to deal with was the fact that it was invisible. It was impossible to tell just how much of it a given hallway was full of. Getting out of there ASAP had been the smart move.

She ran at full speed to the far end of the second floor, then hurled herself down the stairs to the ground level.

"Yeep?" "Huh?"

For whatever reason, though, Erna was trying to run *up* the stairs at the exact same time.

All of Erna's attention had been focused on Annette, so she hadn't picked up on the new source of misfortune. As a matter of fact, she may have even been subconsciously drawn to it.

As a result, the three of them ran straight into one another.

Not only did Erna crash into Sybilla, but she dragged Annette in, too, and it ended in a huge pileup.

"Yeeeeeeep!" "Ahhhhh!" "Oho?"

All three of them lost their balance in midair and went tumbling down the stairs. It had all happened so quickly that none of them had a chance to properly catch themselves.

That opening was *exactly what Grete had been plotting to create*.

"Lily," Grete said as she looked down at her teammates from the second floor. "Go for it."

"Bombs away!"

Lily hurled her poison gas emitter at her three opponents.

Sybilla managed to dodge yet again, but Erna and Annette weren't so lucky. For them, the problem was that they were each grabbing at each other to make sure the other one couldn't get away. Once the two mutual saboteurs breathed in the gas, they crumpled onto the floor.

"Ooh, a big catch," Lily said, sounding mighty pleased with herself after felling her prey. She began tickling the bottoms of Erna's and Annette's feet with her brush.

"I surrender!" "Yo, I give up," the two of them said with tears in their eyes.

"...So, we failed to finish off Sybilla."

Grete shot a cold look over at the courtyard.

As she found herself forced to flee yet again, Sybilla figured out where it was that she and Thea had screwed up.

They'd been far too lax. There was someone they should've been keeping an eye on from the moment they figured out how to instantly eliminate Monika.

As an aside, the whole bridal mess took place just before the Corpse mission, which was precisely when Grete's burgeoning love for Klaus was causing her abilities to improve at a blistering clip. At that point, the others still thought of Grete as being just "a girl who was resourceful and good at disguises, but with no stamina" and nothing more.

Now, though, Sybilla finally started revising those preconceived notions of hers.

*So this is what that punk Grete looks like when she gets serious!!*

Now that an opportunity to become Klaus's bride was on the line, her talent was bursting at the seams. Grete had ascended to her ultimate form.

**Fifteen minutes in: "Forgetter" Annette has been eliminated.**

**Fifteen minutes in: "Fool" Erna has been eliminated.**



Monika, Thea, Annette, and Erna had all been eliminated off the back of Grete's abilities. She was mowing down the competition. However, there a different girl altogether who was feeling more self-assured than ever.



“Whew. I’m so talented, it’s almost scary. I guess I’m just the type who gets her big breakthroughs after the mission is over.”

Namely, Lily.

Annette and Erna had already surrendered, but she tickled their feet in turns all the same as she crowed victoriously. The two of them couldn’t flee, and there was something really quite fun about watching tears well up in their eyes as they flapped their legs about. All she was having to do was follow Grete’s instructions, and her opponents were dropping like flies.

By now, Sybilla and Sara were the only competition they had left.

“I gotta say, Grete... This is really nice.” Lily smiled peacefully as she addressed her accomplice. “It’s like, I feel *confident*. I know we promised to wait until it was down to just you and me, then disband the alliance and duke it out, but honestly, I’m good. You can be the bride.”

Grete’s eyes went wide. “Lily...”

“I’m cheering for your love to work out, y’know? I want you to get those chances to flirt with Teach. I mean, I’m not gonna lie, losing out on those fancy dinners stings a bit.” She gave Grete a nod, like she was making a small vow of comradery. “But if it means you get to be happy, then it’s a price I’m willing to pay.”

The smile she wore truly was a gentle one.

Midway through her speech, Erna interrupted to say, “Don’t let her fool you. Big Sis Lily is definitely going to betray you,” but Lily mercilessly ran the brush over the soles of her feet. “YEEEEEP!” Erna cried as she twitched and fell on her face.

As Grete stood there overcome with emotion, Lily squeezed her hands and went on. “I’ll go deal with the other two. Don’t worry; once I tell them that we’re doing it to support your love, I’m sure they’ll hand you the win, too.”

The way Lily saw it, the last two members should be easy enough to get through to.

Sara and Sybilla hadn’t had any interest in becoming the bride in the first

place. Plus, they both had big hearts. If Lily made her case passionately enough, she could get them to back down.

Lily let go of Grete's hands. "All righty, I'm off," she said as she started walking away.

"...Please, hold on a moment." However, Grete called out to stop her.

"Hm?"

"I'm deeply grateful for your kindness, but I would appreciate it if you didn't try to persuade them like that."

Grete's voice rang with surety.

When Lily tilted her head in confusion, Grete anxiously crossed her hands in front of her chest. "Lily," she asked, "are you really sure that Sybilla and Sara don't harbor any special feelings toward the boss?"

"Huh...?"

"Are you completely and utterly certain...?"

Lily had no response to that.

*Did* Sybilla and Sara have romantic feelings for Klaus? She'd never seen any signs that they did. However, she couldn't deny it flat-out. Grete's question brought something to mind—the yet-anonymous original bride.

Sybilla and Sara had once been two of their prime suspects, and in the end, the true bride had never come forward. She'd kept the truth locked away in her heart.

Grete went on, sounding mighty serious. "If it turns out that they are smitten with him, then belittling those feelings just because I had them 'first' would be arrogant, cruel, and most of all, unfair of me." She shook her head. "It's something I worry about. The fact is those two are too kind for their own good..."



Sara was out in the courtyard.

All she'd done after escaping through Annette's window was totter aimlessly.

Her mind was empty. Annette was the whole reason she'd joined in, but now, she was eliminated.

She cradled her hawk Bernard in her arms and sighed.

*Did Miss Annette mean what she said back there...?*

She was thinking of what Annette had told Erna.

*"Sara's a bit thick when it comes to her own feelings."*

Was she being serious? Or had she just been lying to throw Erna off her game?

Sara was having trouble digesting Annette's claim. It felt like the words had gotten stuck somewhere deep inside her.

Suddenly, she heard Lily humming to herself from inside the manor.

"Hee-hee-hee! ♪ Lily, you wonderful little schemer, you! I've successfully won Grete's trust. It's not gonna feel great, but all I have to do now is eliminate the others, then quietly stab Grete in the back... Heh-heh, it's the perfect plan. Now, I'll have a chance to give Teach the *present* I—AHHHHH! There's lightning coming from the floooooor!"

Midway through her pleased monologue, she screamed.

Sara hurried over to the hallway and spotted Lily passed out and convulsing.

"Wait, she took herself out...?"

Karma was a harsh mistress.

By the look of it, Lily had stepped on one of Annette's traps.

The battle wasn't over yet, so Sara rushed down the hallway and snapped some handcuffs around the unconscious girl's wrists. There was no way Lily was coming back from that, so Sara decided to circle back later and get her to say "I surrender" once she did.

After completing her work, Sara let out another sigh.

*I didn't even want to win, and yet...*

Somehow, she'd accidentally made it to the final three.

Perhaps she should just surrender now. She'd considered doing so countless times already, but she'd never managed to bring herself to pull the trigger.

"I don't understand why, and I'm the one doing it..."

As the murmur left her lips, she heard a pair of footsteps behind her.

"Oh hey, Sara, you beat Lily?"

It was Sybilla. She looked down at Lily's prone body in surprise.

"Oh, no," Sara replied with a shake of the head. "I think Miss Lily beat herself."

"The hell? Eh, I guess that's Lily for ya."

"It really is, isn't it?"

The two of them shared a carefree laugh.

Thankfully, Sybilla didn't seem particularly hostile, so Sara didn't have to worry about things turning violent. Just like her, Sybilla had joined the fray to help out someone who had since been knocked out of contention.

Sybilla leaned against the window and gave Sara a cheerful grin. "Kinda weird, you and me makin' it through, huh?"

"You can say that again..."

It was ironic that the two least motivated people of all had survived for so long.

Sara leaned against the wall beside Sybilla and glanced at her teammate's face. Sybilla was staring at the ceiling as though deep in thought. The sun hung high in the sky, casting her shadow out long.

For a little while, neither of them said a word.

It was quiet and still, like they were merely taking stock of the mood hanging in the air. The sounds of violence that had echoed through the manor mere moments ago were gone like they'd never been there at all.

"Um, if you don't mind!" Sara was the first to break the silence. "Do you want to surrender together? I think the bride really should be Miss Grete."

Sybilla's being there helped Sara make her mind up.

She hoped that Sybilla would agree with her.

"...You've got a point." Sybilla nodded, still staring at the ceiling. "That'd probably be for the best."

"Y-yeah. I'm sure of it."

"But are you really okay with that?"

"Huh...?"

"You were hesitating, right? Don't you wanna figure out why?"

Sara hung her head. The question had pierced the softest part of her heart clean through.

I...

"W-well, um," she said, choking out the words. "What about you, Miss Sybilla?"

"Hell if I know." Sybilla laughed self-mockingly. "But when Grete was pullin' out all the stops in our fight just now, I was like, damn, girl, you're incredible."

"What do you mean? As in, her techniques were incredible?"

"There was that, too, but honestly, I just thought she seemed badass. I mean, the way she wasn't ashamed of her love, but was layin' it all out there and standin' proud... I'm sure there's plenty of stuff she's not telling us, but still." Sybilla laid a hand atop Sara's shoulder. "I feel like you and I could stand to be a little more honest with ourselves, too."

"....."

"But hey, I don't know shit about my feelings, so who am I to talk?" Sybilla gave Sara's shoulder a couple of thumps. "I'm not here to force you to do anything you don't want to. I'm gonna go on ahead now and make a fool of myself, so you can just sit back and watch me in all my glory."

She waved and headed down the hallway.

Before she left, she spoke once more.

“It’s time I fought Grete for real. As the current bride, I gotta hold my head high.”

As Sara watched her go in blank shock, the words “I surrender” found their way to her lips.

**Thirty-five minutes in: “Meadow” Sara has been eliminated.**



Sybilla chose the courtyard as the stage for the final showdown.

Grete was her only remaining opponent, so she headed there first and waited for Grete to come to her. Carelessly heading to a location that Grete had time to set up in was a mistake not even she was dumb enough to make.

The rest of the defeated girls headed to the courtyard as well to watch the finale.

As Sybilla felt her pulse accelerate, she thought back to how it was that she became the bride.

There was exactly one reason why Sybilla agreed to marry Klaus: Grete hadn’t fallen in love with him yet. Aside from that, it sort of just happened.

When night fell after the incident with the pickpocket in the slums, Sybilla went on a rampage in an attempt to wring the life from Lily’s body, but midway through, Klaus said, “Ah, right,” and stopped her. Lily took the opportunity to flee from Klaus’s room.

“Sybilla, will you marry me?”

“WHAAAAAAT? Have you fuckin’ *lost* it?”

Hearing the request from out of the blue threw Sybilla for a loop, but once Klaus explained, it turned out to be no big deal. He just needed someone to be his wife on paper to simplify some of his missions. Klaus had previously been using someone else as his wife (probably someone in Inferno), but circumstances were such that he needed a new spouse.

“I, uh...”

Sybilla knew it was only a formality, but her face went hot all the same. In contrast, Klaus’s expression hadn’t changed a bit. He was the embodiment of

cool. "If you don't want to, you're certainly welcome to say no. I can ask someone else to do it."

"O-oh. H-here's a question, then. Why me?"

"This is going to sound rude, but I didn't exactly have many options. Anyone who looked too young wasn't going to be able to pass as my wife, so Erna, Sara, and Annette were poor fits. Lily makes too many mistakes for me to feel comfortable picking her. And I feel like Grete tries to avoid me, so she wasn't a good candidate, either."

"Oh yeah? What about Thea?"

"I would really rather not choose her."

"She'd cry if she heard you say that."

"I don't hate her or anything, but she makes too strong of an impression to be believable as my wife. That's why I had it down to you or Monika. If you don't want to do it, I'll go ask her."

Sybilla didn't sense any sort of special emotion in his tone.

He was being a professional through and through. When he asked her like that, she would've felt bad for running away. She was about to dive headfirst into the world of espionage, so was she really going to lose her cool over a measly fake marriage?

"Sure, I guess," she replied. "Oh, but could you keep it a secret from the others? It'd be embarrassing if they made fun of me about it."

"Very well. I won't tell a soul."

"Thanks. I just know Lily would give me endless shit."

"Probably, yes. The good news is I don't expect we'll be found out. After all, none of them have any reason to look into my family register. It'd be a different story if one of them went to City Hall and filed a forged marriage registration with my name on it, though."

"Who the hell would do that? That'd be nuts."

"I just have an odd feeling it might happen, but...you're right. I'm probably

just imagining things.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I never knew you were such a jokester.”

Three days later, Grete fell in love with Klaus, and two months after that, she went and filed a forged marriage registration.

Back when the whole bridal hullabaloo began, Sybilla’s initial reaction was feeling guilty toward Grete. She felt bad that she hadn’t come forward, despite knowing about Grete’s love. She’d wanted to tell the others for a while, but she’d never found the right moment to do so.

That was why, when the discussion started veering off track, she’d guided it in a specific direction.

*“End of the day, does it really matter who the bride is?”*

Sure enough, Lily had fallen for the bait and suggested that they choose a new bride.

When she did, Sybilla was overcome with a wave of relief.

The night before the royale, Sybilla stopped by Klaus’s room.

The moment she came in, he immediately spoke up as though he’d been expecting her.

“I’m sorry about this.” He raised his head from the documents on his desk and looked Sybilla in the eye. “I never expected our marriage to cause the sort of chaos it did. I didn’t plan for any of this to happen.”

“Nah, it’s not your fault. Nobody could’ve seen that stunt Grete pulled comin’.” Sybilla laughed with some chagrin and took a seat across from Klaus. “Just so you know, though, I’m plannin’ on droppin’ out of bridal contention.”

“I see.”

“I’ll join in to help Thea out, but I’ve got no plans of winning myself. You’re cool with that, right?”

After thinking it through, Sybilla had reached a conclusion. If nothing else, there was no reason for her to actually try to win.

“Guess it was only just the once I ended up actually playin’ your wife, huh?”



“That it was. Just a single night.”

Right before the Impossible Mission, there was a mission that required attending a fancy event. Just as Lily deduced, it was a dinner party hosted by a notable gourmand. There was a politician there who’d been using the event as cover to meet up with an Imperial spy.

Klaus had known that going as a bachelor would make him draw unwanted attention, so he took Sybilla along when he snuck in. While he was working, all Sybilla did was listen to the orchestra play and chow down on some delectable roast beef. That was her sole contribution to the mission.

As Sybilla thought back fondly on the evening, Klaus called her name. “Sybilla.”

“Hm?” She looked over and saw him fishing something out of his desk.

“It may have been a marriage in name alone, but you were still my wife. The thing is, though, I realized I’d never gotten you anything.” He handed her a small box covered in red wrapping paper. “This is for you. A gift, to thank you for marrying me.”

Sybilla opened it up and discovered that it was full of small, colorful candies. They gleamed in their jar like tiny little stars.

“...Oh hey, thanks.” Sybilla nodded, then left the room.

Thinking back, that was the moment where something sprang up inside of Sybilla.

She didn’t know how to describe it—just that it felt like a hole had opened up in her heart.



The battle was heading toward its end.

Eventually, Grete arrived in the courtyard where Sybilla was waiting. Her shoes clicked loudly against the cobblestones as she strode elegantly past the clematis bed.

A circular garden table sat at the center of Heat Haze Palace’s courtyard. Some of the team’s members would enjoy some tea and sweets there from

time to time, and Grete and Sybilla themselves had enjoyed a cheesecake together at that very table. Neither of them could remember what it was they'd chatted about back then.

Now, the two of them stood flanking the table on either side. The rest of the girls watched with bated breath from the sidelines.

*Gotta say, I wasn't expecting her to just come at me head-on like this,* Sybilla thought. *She must know how disadvantaged she is if we just duke it out. Odds are, she's got something up her sleeve.*

*—is precisely what Sybilla is thinking right now.* Grete's thoughts turned as well. *Her combat instincts are top-notch, after all. In a fair fight, I can't hope to win...*

The two of them stared at each other in silence.

*Should I just charge? Go fast enough that Grete can't react?*

*—she'll think, and if she actually does decide to attack, my defeat will be sealed...*

*Rgh, this is rough. Lookin' at her, she clearly thinks she's got this in the bag.*

*—and to make her believe that, I have to make sure I continue projecting confidence.*

*Shit, I don't get it! Should I just trust my gut and go for it?*

*—and if she stops thinking altogether, the odds that I lose are quite high as well...*

Sybilla's physical prowess and Grete's keen mind were on the verge of coming to a head.

Looking at the situation as it stood, Sybilla held an overwhelming advantage. Her right arm was unusable, but she could certainly take Grete down without it. However, Grete's intellect was turning the whole paradigm on its head.

More time passed by as they continued trying to feel each other out.

"This is nerve-racking as hell, huh?" Sybilla said, breaking the tension with a grin. "Gotta say, I wasn't expecting us to be the finals matchup."

Grete gave her a calm look. "I can see that the role means something to you, too. Would it be all right if I asked you something, apropos of nothing...?"

"Yeah, go for it. I've got a pretty good idea about what you wanna ask."

"Are you the current bride?"

"Yup." Sybilla nodded. "It's me. Him 'n' me are married."

A stir ran through the crowd.

Meanwhile, Grete didn't seem shocked at all. She nodded like she'd already known. "...So I was right, then. You have feelings for the boss as well."

"Huh? Nah, no no no! It's not like that! Let's not jump to conclusions here!" Sybilla waved her hands. Her face was bright red. "I dunno, it just kinda happened. Listen, Grete, you mind hearing me out for a sec?"

"...Not at all."

"I'm rootin' for your love to work out," Sybilla said, looking a little bashful. "Straight up, I am. No bullshit. And if you asked me if *I'm* in love with him, honestly, I doubt it. That's probably not it. But it's like, these are emotions we're talkin' about here. Shit ain't black and white. You can't sort this stuff into ones and zeroes. I don't hate him, that's for sure. The guy's strong, and I respect him. I do wish he wasn't such a damn airhead, but hey, end of the day, that's how I really feel."

"....."

"And I don't want to give up the bride spot. The role just kinda fell into my lap, sure, but it'd still hurt to hand it away. I hate to admit it, but it was kinda nice getting to go out with him. You might think that's irrational of me, but the way I see it, there's no reason I can't feel this way and still support your love."

In one clean speech, Sybilla got out all the feelings that had been swirling around in her heart.

Not a single one of the others poked fun at her or cracked a joke. Given the way they'd been acting up to that point, that was practically a miracle in and of itself.

"Not at all... It's refreshing, getting to hear your true feelings." Grete gave her

a peaceful smile. “Now, I know that you too are head over heels for the boss...”

“Were you listening to a word I said?”

“I’m joking. Never once have I ever doubted your kindness.” Grete laid a palm nostalgically over her chest like she was holding something precious. “I would never dream of asking you to simply relinquish the bridal role to me. However everyone feels, I want to face those feelings head-on.”

“Y’know, somehow that doesn’t surprise me.”

“That said, I do want to become the bride. Call me selfish if you like, but I want to get closer to the boss’s heart... I want to understand the man who gave my life meaning.” She softly spread out her hands. “...And so, I intend to take you on with everything I have.”

“Same here. No hard feelings then, yeah?”

Sybilla put up her fists. Whatever reservations she’d had were gone now.

Grete responded by hunching down and getting ready to counterattack.

Sybilla took off at a run.

The others gasped in anticipation.

After agonizing over what to do, Sybilla had ultimately settled on not thinking at all. There was no way she was going to beat Grete in a game of bluffing and double-bluffing, so she decided to trust in her raw physical abilities. It was the best option available to her, and the one Grete had been most worried about.

However, it was certainly a possibility Grete had foreseen.

She may have been at a huge disadvantage, but she hadn’t given up.

And furthermore, *she’d predicted that Sybilla would choose the courtyard for their showdown.*

The hallways inside were still full of Lily’s poison gas, so it was only natural that a cautious opponent would head out into the courtyard. And if that person wanted to take advantage of their athleticism, the area around the table would be the best place for them to move around freely.

Grete had set up immobilizing wire traps ages ago.

Without a moment's hesitation, she triggered them—

“—!”

—but Sybilla was faster than she'd anticipated. Having shaken off her indecision must have increased her speed even more.

Grete recalculated, then reacted. A barrage of wires shot toward them from every direction.

Would Grete's wires string Sybilla up first?

Or would Sybilla reach Grete's throat first?

“I surrender.” “...I surrender.”

The answer was neither and both.

The spectators stared in amazement at the scene before them.

There were wires tied around Sybilla's throat, and Sybilla's nails were pressed against Grete's carotid artery. In a real battle, either would have proved fatal, and both sides had recognized that and admitted their defeat.

“Wait, what the hell?” The first one to grin was Sybilla. “After all that, we didn't even end up with a winner?”

“...That was splendid.” Grete smiled as well. “I must say, your speed is really quite something.”

“Not that it did me any good. You were readin' me like a book the whole damn time.”

“...Hee-hee, not at all. That last attack was so quick, I couldn't even follow it.”

The two of them exchanged a laugh from so close they were practically touching. Something about the situation was just so wonky they couldn't help themselves. Eventually, they both went limp and collapsed to the ground with a pair of smiles.

**Fifty-five minutes in: “Pandemonium” Sybilla has been eliminated.**

**Fifty-five minutes in: “Daughter Dearest” Grete has been eliminated.**

The rest of the team gave them an enthusiastic round of applause.

“You were incredible. Both of you were,” Thea said kindly.

Sara was practically panting with excitement. “Th-that was so inspiring.”

“Hrmn... I want a do-over,” Erna said, sounding rather vexed.

“I see you both in a whole new light now, yo!” Annette said with a smile.

The others showered the two downed combatants with praise.

The one exception was Monika, who was standing apart from the others with a bored look on her face. “The problem is, what do we do about the bride? You’re not seriously gonna suggest we have a rematch to—”

Right as Monika started complaining, though—

“Huh? Is it over already?”

—an incongruously chipper voice cut in.

All the girls turned to see Lily gaping in confusion. Her hands were still cuffed behind her back. “So, uh... What all happened while I was unconscious?”

“Now that I think about it,” Thea murmured, “did anyone actually hear Lily say she surrendered?”

Everyone shook their heads.

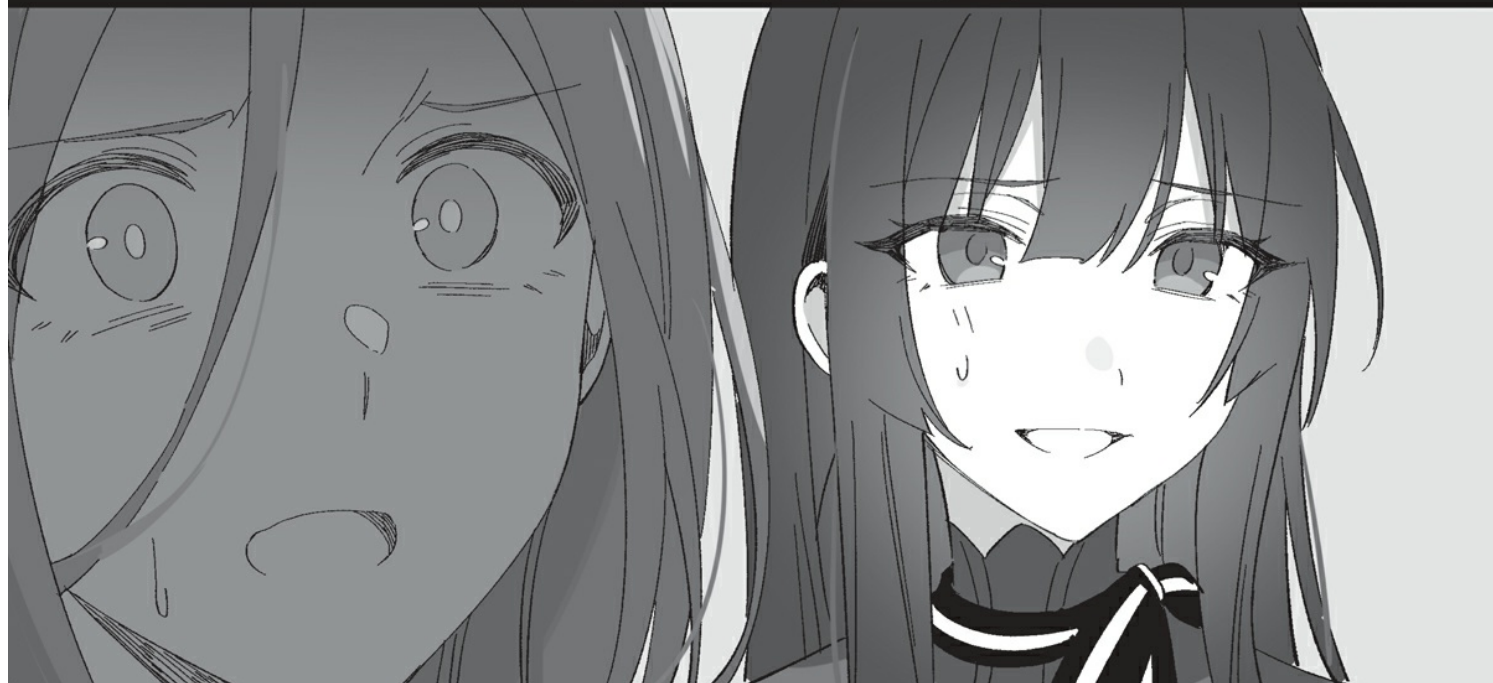
Thea was absolutely right. Lily fell for a trap and got knocked out, but she’d never actually surrendered.

In other words, she was still in the running.

~~~~~ .....

They all froze as the realization dawned on them.

This *definitely* wasn’t the conclusion they’d been looking for.



“So, ummm,” Lily said, breaking out into a cold sweat, “i-in that case, do we, uh, wanna call a do-over, or, like—”

“It sounds like we have our winner.”

With that, Klaus appeared as though out of nowhere. He hadn’t shown up that morning, but he’d probably just been off on some sort of counterintelligence op. There was a little bit of blood on his sleeve, and it wasn’t his.

He nodded as though he’d inferred everything. “Who would have thought that Lily would end up winning? Splendid work. I actually have some prep work I need to get done for my next mission, so Lily, let’s go get that marriage registration filed posthaste.”

Klaus grabbed Lily by the arm and hauled her off.

The remaining girls watched them go in blank shock.

A moment later, a cry of “What the HEEEEEEELL?!” echoed through the air.

Bridal royale victor: “Flower Garden” Lily.



“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Hoooooold up,” the girls said as they all expressed their vehement objections, but Klaus decided to take Lily with him anyway. She was clearly the winner according to the rules, and there was no going against the rules.

Lily herself seemed perplexed. “Huh? Huuuuuh? I won?” However, Klaus ignored her. He needed to hurry up and file those divorce papers and that new marriage registration so he could get his family register changed.

As he went through the process at City Hall, Lily remained just as dazed. She occasionally let out an “uhhh” or a “whuuh,” and eventually, she slumped her shoulders. “Man, when we get back to the manor, they’re gonna be so mad at me.”

Her demeanor was much the same on their way home, too.

On their way there, they took a shortcut that took them through a park. Its fountain twinkled in the sunset’s light, and the couples standing around it let

out cheers of delight. However, all Lily saw were her own two feet.

Upon hearing how heavy her footsteps were, Klaus exhaled. “You did *want* to become my bride, didn’t you? I don’t see why you’re so dejected about it.”

“Hey, even I can read the room! The others were appalled!”

“Well, I have good news on that front. As it turns out, there aren’t actually that many missions that involve going to fancy dinners.”

“That just means my victory was pointless!” Lily yelled in protest.

Klaus turned a deaf ear to her complaints, and eventually, Lily spoke up again and changed the subject. “Hey, Teach?”

“Yes?”

“Who were you hoping would end up becoming the bride?”

It probably hadn’t been deliberate on her part, but she had spoken at the moment they were right in front of the fountain. Lily’s hair grew damp from the misty drops of water dancing through the air.

Seemingly unconcerned by that, she continued piling on the questions. “Actually, more to the point, how do you really feel about us?”

“.....”

Klaus could tell that it wasn’t mere curiosity that had inspired the question.

He stopped and shared his candid thoughts. “I want to be there for you while still maintaining healthy boundaries,” he said honestly. “When young men and women spend a lot of time together, it’s common for romance to bloom. However, you’re just teenagers. I have no desire whatsoever to abuse my role as your instructor or toy with your impressionable hearts. I’m not going to fall in love with any of you—but I do hope, with all my heart, that you all find happiness.”

Deep down inside, that was how he truly felt.

Naturally, he fretted about those boundaries constantly. There were times where he worried that he was leading Grete on, there were others where he got fed up with Thea’s lewd advances, and whenever he gave the girls advice

out of concern for their well-being, he was never quite sure how far it was appropriate for him to tread into their personal affairs.

However, there was one point he always came back to.

He had become their teacher—and as such, it was his job to guide them.

To that end, he spoke once more. “Don’t worry, Lily.”

“About?”

“I’ll handle the missions on my own for the time being. If any of you want to experience a normal romance, you’re more than welcome to go out and do so. All I ask is that you don’t neglect your training.”

“Huh...?”

“You all have a right to enjoy your youths. Never give that up.”

“.....”

Klaus had seen how invested the girls got in trying to find the bride, and it made him feel guilty at having forced them to devote all their time to training and missions. He realized now that he needed to give them more freedom.

“Teach...” Lily shook her head from side to side. “...I think you’ve got it all wrong.”

“I do?”

“Honestly, what you said earlier’s been bugging me for a while. You know, when you told us to try to enjoy our youths a little.”

Klaus remembered the conversation. She was talking about what he said when the girls came asking him about the bride.

“Why not try to enjoy your youth a little? I can’t imagine you’ve had time for many age-appropriate activities over these past two months.”

“We’ve had it all.” Lily pulled a voice recorder out of her pocket. “I secretly recorded all the conversations we had while we were trying to figure out who the bride was. Here, this is for you.”

“.....”

“Once you listen to it, you’ll understand just how greedy we are. You see, we haven’t given up a thing. Even smack-dab in the middle of a deadly mission, our days have been full of partying and doubting and falling in love and agonizing over how to juggle all that with our friendships. You’re such a softie, Teach. You’ve already given us the best youth anyone could ask for.”



At the same time, as the evening light streamed into Heat Haze Palace...

In the dining room, Sybilla shouted angrily as she stood sandwiched between Grete and Thea. “For the last time, I’m not in love with him! How many times do I gotta spell it out, dammit?! I’m just sayin’ that spending time with him ain’t half bad, that’s all—”

“...There’s no need to be so coy. I’m just glad to have someone else who understands just how wonderful the boss is.”

“Don’t you worry, Sybilla, I can teach you how to get men eating out of the palm of your hand. I’ll train you and Grete up side by side.”

“If you think I’m takin’ any sort of lessons from you, you’ve got another think comin’!”

Annette skipped down the first-floor hallway, and Sara chased after her in confusion. “E-excuse me, Miss Annette? So why *did* you ask me to join your team...?”

“That’s a secret, yo.”

“Oh... I was really hoping you would tell me, though...”

“My lips are sealed. I’m not gonna say a thing until you stop being so dense.”

Out in the garden, Monika was grumpily reading a book. Erna summoned up her courage and called out to her. “B-Big Sis Monika?”

“What’s up? It’s not every day you come looking for me.”

“W-would you mind, um, giving me some advice? It’s about love...”

“...Why not just ask Sara or Grete?”

“Yeep. I—I just don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“...If you say so. Problem is, I can’t help either. You could try Thea?”

“That seems like the most dangerous option of all!”

The girls’ respective emotions all gently mixed and mingled with each other.

None of them had lost anything.



“I want you to take me along on missions,” Lily said willfully as they stood before the park’s fountain. “And I want you to treat me more like an adult. Both when it comes to spy stuff, and when it comes to woman stuff.”

She fixed her unwavering gaze straight at Klaus.

Klaus took a small breath and straightened his shoulders ever so slightly. The glimmering droplets of water in his peripheral vision splashed against his lips, and he glanced up just a little and looked at Venus and the white moon as they hung amidst the slowly darkening sky. Then, he looked back down and returned his gaze to Lily. She hadn’t so much as blinked.

He turned her words back over in his heart. *I want you to treat me more like an adult.*

A week later, Klaus’s higher-ups would order him to capture the assassin known as Corpse, and after anguishing over his decision, he would decide to take the girls along on the mission. Furthermore, Grete’s advances would become even more extreme, and Klaus would decide to confront her love head-on.

It was impossible for anyone to say how much of an effect Lily’s demand had on those decisions.

Klaus smiled a little, then said, “Magnificent.”

“Hey, what the heck?” Lily puffed up her cheeks. “I want a proper answer! That was me being hyper-rare, once-in-a-decade levels of sincere!”

“If you want me to treat you like an adult, then beat me first.”

“How am I supposed to do that?!”

“In any case, the more pressing matter is what we’re going to have for dinner.

Perhaps I'll treat you for once. What would you like?"

"For real?! I want steak!"

"Glad to see you're as adaptable as ever."

"Meat! Meat! Meat!"

"Seriously, enough with the ridiculous chanting."

The two of them chatted merrily for the next little while as they made their way through the park.

No records exist of their exchange save for in their memories.

Afterword

Takemachi here. It's been a while.

This collection contains four short stories that were originally serialized in *Dragon Magazine* with loads of edits and revisions, one completely new short story, and a few additional odds and ends.

Chronologically speaking, the content here takes place from the middle of Volume 1 right on up to just before Volume 2. There were a lot of girls who didn't get much of a chance to be in the spotlight in Volume 1, so you can think of this as sort of an unabridged version of the bioweapon retrieval mission.

By the way, an alternate title for this collection could be *Spy Classroom: Romcom Edition Pt. 1*.

My philosophy for the main books is to pack as much story as I can into a couple hundred pages, but I do worry about how this means I don't get to include much slice-of-life or romantic content about the girls. Given the option between "Let's send Teach a love letter!" and "Let's hurl a bunch of firecrackers into Teach's room!" they seem about a hundred times more likely to choose the latter. Not much is going to change for the main books going forward, so getting to include that stuff in the short stories comes as a big relief to me.

The question at the forefront of my mind while writing these five stories was, "How do the Lamplight girls *really* feel about Klaus?" (Monika ended up being pretty much the same as ever, but that's Monika for you.)

Unsurprisingly, it still ended up being pretty light on the "rom" relative to most of the rom-coms out there, but compared to the main books, I like to think it touched on the girls' feelings a bit more than usual.

And there you have it. The short story collection centered around Sara,

Sybilla, Monika, and Grete.

(By the way, here's a tidbit of exposition. I suspect that 99 percent of the readers will have forgotten, but just for reference, the woman named Eve featured in Case: Monika showed up in Volume 1, Chapter 4 as well. Her most memorable quote was, "Gack.")

Next up, I believe some thanks are in order. Tomari, your illustrations here were just as fantastic as in the main books. The girls were adorable in a whole different way than they are in the main storyline, so thank you for that. Getting to see your illustrations is always a huge highlight for me.

Finally, I have...a preview? If I get the chance to publish a *Pt. 2*, it stands to reason it'll be centered around Annette, Thea, Erna, and Lily. Feels like that group is even less suited for rom-com shenanigans than the first one, huh. I will be able to publish the book, though...right? Yeah, probably.

Until next time.

Takemachi

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink