

Takemachi
ILLUSTRATION BY Tomari

06



SPY CLASSROOM

Pandemonium, Thy Name Is Sybilla

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A Girl Dancing

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New York

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Translation by Nathaniel Thrasher

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SPY CLASSROOM

Specialized lessons for an impossible mission
Code name: Pandemonium

CHARACTER PROFILES



Bonfire

Klaus

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



Flower Garden

Lily

A naive girl from the
backcountry.



Daughter Dearest

Grete

A quiet girl and the
daughter of a major
politician.



Pandemonium

Sybilla

A brave girl and the
daughter of a gangster.



Glint

Monika

An arrogant girl born
into a family of artists.



Dreamspeaker

Thea

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



Meadow

Sara

A timid girl whose
parents run a small
restaurant.



Forgetter

Annette

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



Fool

Erna

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

Team Avian



Flock

Vindo



Glide

Qulle



South Wind

Queneau



Cloud Drift

Lan



Lander

Vics



Feather

Pharma

Prologue

Reminiscence

Heat Haze Palace was Lamplight's base in the Din Republic, and one of its walls was covered in graffiti.

The design was chaotic, with fifteen different lines extending outward from its center. Some of the lines were bold, others were elegantly curved, and others still were curled in bizarre spirals. No two were alike, but the one thing they all had in common was that they were bursting with life.

One might ask who had proposed spraying it, but by that point, the participants had all forgotten. They had been living it up, and some of them had even been drunk. The two spy teams, Lamplight and Avian, had thrown a party with all fifteen of their collective members, and it had been lively and boisterous the whole way through.

There was something that, in the moment, most people failed to realize.

It only crossed their minds long after the fact. Once it was gone, and once they got beaten down by life, they might start waxing nostalgic—and when they did, they would finally see it for what it was.

You know, that really was the prime of my youth.

From time to time, the Lamplight girls found themselves yearning for that noisy farewell party that lasted until well after midnight—for that starry sky they were under, and for that laughter with the elites as they graffitied the wall together.

This is code name Moonwatcher, reporting from Fend Commonwealth Radio Site 2974.

"Flock" Vindo: KIA

"Lander" Vics: KIA

“Cloud Drift” Lan: MIA

“Glide” Qulle: KIA

“Feather” Pharma: KIA

“South Wind” Queneau: KIA

Avian has been deemed incapable of completing their mission.

It was a month after the festivities that the report came in.

Chapter 1

Interrogation

Underground, there was an interrogation room.

In the Fend Commonwealth's capital, the Kashard Doll Workshop was a two-story building made out of strong, age-worn brick. The locals generally assumed that the target market for their dolls were rich overseas collectors. Anyone who spent twenty-four hours a day watching its entrances would have occasionally spotted strange men and women dressed in all black coming and going, but nobody actually had the time or inclination to waste that much attention on a boring old manufacturing studio.

In truth, though, that building was the headquarters for a spy team—a counterintelligence unit called Belias that belonged to the Fend Commonwealth's CIM. Their mission was to neutralize any foreign agents who infiltrated Fend's borders, and whenever they snatched up spies who meant the Commonwealth harm, Belias tortured them without mercy. After a few dozen hours of agony, their captives would invariably cough up intelligence on their homelands.

That evening, Belias had brought yet another spy to their interrogation room.

It was a tiny room not unlike a jail cell. It had no windows. The desk at its center was flanked on each side by a single wooden chair, and the other desk over in the corner was covered with writing implements. The air hung thick with that characteristically musty smell of the underground.

The captured spy was slumped back in her chair with her head hung low. Her hands were bound behind her back with a thick set of handcuffs.

“.....I'm starvin'.”

Her voice was hoarse.

A set of footsteps clicked against the floor as someone entered the room.

“Hello, young lady.”

The newcomer was a tall woman wearing a black flared skirt covered in frills. There were dark bags under her eyes, and thanks to that and her eerily pale skin, she looked like she’d just stepped off the cover of a horror novel.

She was a witch. There was no other way to put it.

“My name is Amelie. Around here, I’m also known as Puppeteer.”

Amelie was Belias’s boss. Despite being a young twenty-seven-year-old, she held a vital role in defending her country’s national security. She sat down across from the captured spy. “Welcome to the Fend Commonwealth, young lady. We greet you with open arms.”

“.....”

“Our nation has three methods by which it receives its visitors. For guests, we serve tea; for friends, we serve scones; and for enemies, we serve bullets straight to the forehead. The question is: Which one are you?”

“.....”

The captured spy persisted in her silence.

There was still enough childishness left in her appearance to reasonably call her a girl. Her body was as lean as a beast’s, and the eyes peering out from beneath her short white hair were brimming with a fierce energy.

The girl’s name was “Pandemonium” Sybilla.

Sybilla’s expression was grave as she sat in the chilly interrogation room.

Amelie spoke, her voice empty of emotion. “My dear guest from the Din Republic, the interrogation begins now.”



The world was awash in pain.

Ten years had passed since the end of the Great War, the largest war in human history. Seeing its horrors had driven the world’s politicians to turn to

spy work rather than military might as their preferred way of influencing other countries.

Lamplight was a spy team that fought on behalf of the Din Republic. It comprised eight former academy washouts, as well as “Bonfire” Klaus, the single strongest spy in the Republic.

That was the team Sybilla belonged to.

An hour before the interrogation began, Sybilla was running across the streets of Horough, Fend’s capital. One AM had come and gone, and as the night deepened, the fog thickened as though to complement it. If she’d left the streetlights’ glow, she would barely have been able to see ten feet in front of her.

The Turko River flowed right through Horough, and the road Sybilla was racing down, Fillade Street, ran right alongside it. It was a well-known tourist hot spot, and the street was lined with rows and rows of restaurants. The neat array of redbrick buildings next to each other made for a downright picturesque sight.

Sybilla ran beneath the streetlights with all her might, panting loudly. Eventually, she came to a stop in front of a high-end watch store with glazed windows that sat sandwiched between a pair of eateries.

The area was surrounded by DO NOT ENTER tape, and the nearby streetlight flickered on and off as though it was on the verge of giving up the ghost. With its light at her back, Sybilla stared into the store. Its showcases were broken, the floor was littered with shattered glass, and its numerous mirrors had been violently smashed and scattered about. On closer observation, there were some bullet holes in the wall as well. The store had been cleaned out of its watches, and the merchandise racks lay empty.

On its wall, there was a message written in red spray paint.

**WE ARE AVENGERS FROM THE LAND OF IMMORTALS BURN HOT
AND RAISE A GLASS TO RESURRECTION**

Sybilla grinned, unable to contain her joy.

“Well, hey, what the hell? Lan, you’re really—”

For a moment, the light from the flickering streetlight behind her that had been illuminating the store vanished.

When it came back, *there was a new figure in Sybilla’s field of view.*

She heard a female voice. “Are you one of the Din Republic’s spies? My apologies, but we’re going to slaughter you.”

As Sybilla whirled around, there was a pair of loud roars—two gunshots, one after the other.

Bullets grazed her left cheek and right leg.

She could tell that she was under attack, and on reflex, she leaped to the side and drew her automatic. She tried to take advantage of her honed physical abilities to quickly return fire.

“Programme Number 8.”

Before she could, though, the female voice coldly rang out.

A pair of hammers emerged from the fog and smashed both of Sybilla’s shoulders in unison. She went flying backward, and right after she collapsed onto the ground, she felt something hard press against her forehead.

A gloomy, witchlike woman was pointing her gun straight at Sybilla.

“.....”

There was nothing she could have done.

The woman wasn’t alone—Sybilla was completely surrounded. A group had shown up without a sound and blocked off all her escape routes. A man and a woman each wielding hammers were closing in on her from both sides, and another six people around them were training their guns on her. When she looked up, she spotted a man on the clock store’s roof drawing a bead on her as well. Each and every one of them was radiating hostility, and any of them could have destroyed one of her vitals in the space of a second.

“Or to be more precise—”

The first woman standing across from Sybilla with the automatic pistol glared

at her.

“—if you disobey any of our orders, we’ll slaughter you on the spot.”

It was Amelie.

Her wide, flared skirt swayed as she continued holding her gun. She cast the slightest of glances backward and furrowed her brow in annoyance.

A light flickered amid the fog.

“What an uncouth streetlight, flashing on and off like that. Failing to provide a suitably hospitable environment for our guests besmirches our nation’s good name,” Amelie snapped. She pressed her gun against Sybilla’s forehead again. “By the way, young lady—how much training have you received on resisting torture?”

Sybilla had little choice but to give in to her threats.



As she thought back to the events leading up to her capture, Sybilla clenched her fists.

After Amelie came into the interrogation room, she unlocked Sybilla’s handcuffs. However, Sybilla didn’t feel at all liberated. The air was thick now with a palpable hostility, and she could tell that if she made even the slightest show of resistance, her life would end on the spot. The only other people in the room were Amelie and her secretary, but Sybilla could feel far more than two pairs of eyes on her.

A cold sweat trickled down her back.

This was her first time getting captured by another nation’s intelligence organization.

“.....I’ve heard of you people,” Sybilla muttered. “My academy taught us that Fend’s got a load of top-notch counterintelligence teams. And I’ve heard the name Puppeteer, too. They say you’re an expert at exposing people.”

“You’re rather well informed.”

“I dunno ’bout that. The way I heard it, you’re supposed to be a guy in his

thirties.”

“I’m the fourth to hold the name. In my nation, code names are something you inherit,” Amelie explained matter-of-factly. She glowered at Sybilla. “Now tell me, young lady. What were you doing at the watch store?”

She clearly had no interest in making small talk. All that time, her tone had never once changed or betrayed any sort of personal emotions. It made her seem almost robotic.

“.....I was lookin’ for someone.” Sybilla bit her lip. “I wasn’t gonna do anything bad to the Commonwealth. Why would I? Din and Fend aren’t enemies or nothin’.”

“Indeed. Our nations have allied with each other to keep an eye on the Galgad Empire. Our relationship is built on cooperation.”

“Right? So—”

“But there is one thing you must remember, my dear guest.” Amelie stood up and grabbed Sybilla by her hair. *“Friendship has no place in our world.”*

She slammed Sybilla’s face into the desk.

“——!”

Sybilla’s nose was smashed, and she got a cut in her mouth that filled it with the taste of blood.

When she looked up in protest, she saw Amelie’s eyes burning with contempt.

Sybilla’s homeland, the Din Republic, was allied with the Fend Commonwealth.

When the Great War broke out, it divided the world in two. There were the Axis powers led by the Galgad Empire, and there were the Allied powers centered around the Fend Commonwealth and the Lylat Kingdom. As a nation that was invaded by Galgad, Din decided to side with the Allies, and by using espionage to steal intelligence from the Axis powers, they played a key role in securing the Allies’ victory.

Ever since, Din and Fend had enjoyed an alliance. And it wasn’t built from

hollow words peddled by politicians, either. Behind the scenes, the two nations' spies worked together to make sure Galgad didn't get up to any funny business.

However, there was a lesson Sybilla's academy had drilled into her over and over: Spies could work together, *but they could never be friends*. At the end of the day, spies only looked out for their own nations' interests, and sometimes those interests were in conflict with those of their allies. Din was happy to feed intelligence about Galgad to Fend in order to keep the Empire in check, but they took care never to reveal their own information or goals.

Spies from different nations often entered into temporary alliances, but they were far from friends.

As such, they had no qualms about torturing their allies' agents.

"Allow me to correct one misunderstanding." Amelie let go of Sybilla's head. "Your nation's spy academies have it a bit wrong. Exposing people isn't what we specialize in here. We're very good at it, make no mistake, but our true forte lies elsewhere."

"Huh?"

"It lies in torture, dear guest."

Amelie snapped her fingers.

A woman dressed in black wheeled over a series of carts from the back of the interrogation room. The trays were laden with machines and bladed instruments the likes of which Sybilla had never seen before. There was a chair covered in power cables and restraints, a peeler-like implement that looked perfect for carving away flesh, small bottles filled with ominously colored liquid...

Amelie ran her fingers almost lovingly across the electric chair. "Our nation excels in the sciences, and our torture technology is unrivaled. Spies from across the globe have sobbed and wept like newborns before me."

"....."

"I don't blame you for not knowing, though. Not a single person we've tortured has lived to tell the tale."

The more implements that got wheeled into the room, the heavier the sight of them weighed. Each torture device seemed to suck a little more air out of the room than the last. When Sybilla glanced down by her feet, she spotted a series of dried bloodstains on the floor.

“I’m going to be direct,” Amelie said, moving the interrogation along. “What were you doing at the watch store?”

“...Lookin’ for someone. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Who? And to what end?”

“.....”

“If you’re not going to talk, you leave me no choice but to take a different tack.”

A thin smile spread across Amelie’s face as she held her palm out to the side.

The woman, ostensibly her subordinate, gently laid a butterfly knife atop it. Amelie unfolded its blade and demanded that Sybilla present her arm.

Sybilla didn’t like where things were going, but she was hardly in a position to refuse. She laid her left arm atop the desk.

The moment she did, Amelie grabbed it. “Now, this is a torture session. I’m going to cut your fingers off one by one, dear guest.”

A powerful *thunk* rang out.

Sybilla’s eyes went wide. “——!”

Amelie had just swung the knife down at her fingers without a moment’s pause. The movement had been too fast to track, and the blade had carved deep into the desk’s surface.

“My apologies...,” Amelie said in that mechanical tone of hers.

Sybilla could do nothing but gawk at her, speechless.

“...my aim was a ninth of an inch off.”

The knife was stuck right between Sybilla’s ring and pinkie fingers. If she’d moved even a hair, she would have lost a digit.

“I promise to be more accurate next time. That was that last concession you get, young lady,” Amelie said emotionlessly. “Also, I expect you to give me your right arm. Based on the wear on your gun, you’re very clearly right-handed.”

“.....”

Sybilla was sweating bullets. She knew that if she let her focus slip, her knees would start knocking from Amelie’s raw malice. That said, none of this was coming as a complete surprise. Her academy had told her about this, too.

All that awaited captured spies was inescapable despair.

They would cough up their information, and once they did, they would be killed. They could try to keep mum, but pain and drugs would wear away at their sanity, and eventually, they would break and give up any information they were asked for. In rare cases, they could survive by becoming double agents, but doing so just meant dying at the hands of their old comrades.

A mumble escaped Sybilla’s lips. “Fuck.”

She’d known all that in principle, but actually experiencing it was a whole different beast.

Her heart was pounding loudly.

“.....I need water.”

“Hmm?” Amelie raised an eyebrow.

“I’m thirsty. It hurts to talk.”

Amelie snapped her fingers and had a decanter full of iced tea brought over. She expressionlessly took it, poured it into a glass with ice, and offered it to Sybilla. “Here you are, dear guest.”

Sybilla took the glass with her left hand.

With her right arm still firmly in Amelie’s grasp, she took a sip of the tea. “...‘Cloud Drift’ Lan.”

“Hmm?”

“That’s who I’m lookin’ for. She was on a team called Avian,” Sybilla said quietly. “Last month, everyone else on Avian died here in Fend. Cloud Drift was

the only survivor, so we're tryin' to find her. But she's gone missing."

"....."

"It's only been three weeks since it happened, but we can't find hide or hair of her. I heard that there'd been gunshots at the watch shop on Fillade Street, so that's why I went there. That's my story."

".....I see." Amelie fixed her eerie eyes on Sybilla. "Why did you react the way you did, then? As I recall, the wall said, *We are avengers from the land of immortals*. When you saw that, you smiled."

"'Cause it was Lan's handwriting. We're finally on her trail. Course I'm gonna smile."

"What did the message mean?"



Klaus out of the goodness of their hearts. Klaus clearly felt indebted to them.

However, none of the rest of Lamplight's members had been expecting him to make an announcement like that on their very first day back. As far as they were concerned, this was supposed to be the start of their break.

The girls' reactions were skeptical.

"I-if I'm being honest"—"Flower Garden" Lily, the lovable, busty girl with silver hair, scrunched up her face—"even now, I don't think I'm all that huge on Avian." She was picking apart her bread roll. "I mean, their leader did kinda beat me black-and-blue. I respect them, but being around them gives me the creeps."

Lily wasn't alone in that. The rest of the team's expressions were similarly gloomy.

"I-I'm scared of them, too," Sara agreed. "I know they aren't bad people, but still."

"We took 'em on—eight on six, and they crushed us," Sybilla noted.

"We knocked some of them out, but by and large, they took us to school," Monika added.

"It hurts to admit, but their skills are the real deal," Thea said. "It really is kind of alarming how competent they are."

"...I just hope they don't come and say that they've changed their minds and that they want the boss after all," Grete murmured.

"I think they're boring, yo," Annette offered.

"I—I feel like my safe space is getting invaded," Erna mumbled.

The team offered a variety of comments, but by and large, their reactions were negative.

The fact of the matter was that Lamplight didn't know Avian all that well. Both sides had been keeping their cards close to the chest during their time in Longchon, and there were several Avian members they had yet to so much as hold a conversation with. The atmosphere when the two teams parted ways had been vaguely amicable, but they'd hadn't actually done any real socializing.

Lamplight’s impression of Avian was that while they respected them, Avian was still a detestable bunch of elites who’d tried to steal Klaus away from them. They recognized that Avian’s skills were incredible, of course, and that they had a lot to learn from them as spies, but the fact that Avian had very nearly gotten them disbanded meant they held little affection for the team.

“Well, that settles it,” Lily said conclusively as she rose to her feet. “Looks like it’s our job to send Avian packing!”

“You do know that we owe them one, right?”

“That’s not what matters right now,” Lily replied. After shooting Klaus down, she raised her fist into the air. “I’m still holding a grudge over the way they conned us! If they think we’re going to forgive and forget, well, they can think again! Adios, Avian!”

The others all cheered along with equal enthusiasm.

“Adios, Avian!”

“I see you *ladies* are as noisy as ever.”

An icy voice sounded out like it was echoing up from the deepest depths of hell.

The girls turned around and found a brown-haired young man scowling at them with steel in his eyes.

The man was “Flock” Vindo, Avian’s current boss. His knife skills were top-notch, and he’d scored the highest marks out of the entire academy’s student body. He and his five teammates were standing in the foyer. Vindo had his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and he was giving the girls a stare that could freeze nitrogen.

“I’ll concede that we did try to steal Klaus. I’ll remind you, though, we had a perfectly legitimate reason—your incompetence—and we proved that during the showdown. You don’t have any basis for trying to drive us away. Also, this bit where I catch you shit-talking us is starting to get old.”

.....

The girls froze and began sweating profusely.

“I, um, uh... I didn’t realize you were already, uh, *here*,” Lily stammered.

Vindo gave her a bored scoff. “We’ve got some time off, too.”

Behind him, the rest of Avian’s members surveyed Heat Haze Palace’s interior with keen interest.

“So uh...,” Lily said, quickly backpedaling. “We didn’t actually mean any of that. We just kinda got caught up in the moment. We’ve got this bad habit of saying whatever comes to mind, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t read too much into it...”

“I don’t care if you meant it or not,” Vindo replied harshly. “I’ll admit that you’re more competent than you look, but that doesn’t mean we want to get buddy-buddy with you. That sounds insipid. The only reason we came here was to exchange intel with Klaus.”

“Urk...”

“If you want us gone, that’s fine by me. We weren’t planning on staying long anyway,” Vindo said dismissively.

“.....” The Lamplight girls quivered in their boots.

“.....” The Avian elites glowered at them.

A heavy silence descended on the dining room.

By all rights, Lamplight and Avian had no reason to spend time together. Everything about the two teams, from the way they carried out their respective missions to the courses their lives had taken, was completely different.

What brought those two disparate groups together—

“What? But the whole reason I invited you here was so you could take part in my training.”

—was Klaus.

Klaus was the one person present unfettered by their framework of washouts and elites, and he gave his head a puzzled tilt. He wasn’t paying an ounce of heed to the gulf that existed between the two teams.

Everyone there turned and looked at him in confusion.

Klaus nodded as though he'd been waiting for them to give him their attention. "You defeated Lamplight, so I felt you were due some sort of prize. After thinking it over, I decided that the best option would be for me to give you a training exercise."

"A training exercise? You'd do that?" Vindo asked.

"That's right—I'll train you myself. I've fought on the front lines as part of Inferno, and I can show you techniques that the academies aren't capable of teaching."

"...Interesting." Vindo visibly sank into thought for a moment, then nodded. "All right, then. We'll take you up on that—"

"Defeat me."

"Huh?"

"Your task is to work together as a group to make me say 'I surrender' through whatever methods you want. I'll still be doing missions throughout the break, but you should feel free to attack me whenever you please. That's the lesson."

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

All six Avian members were left speechless, Vindo included. Eventually, he turned to the girls. "Is he screwing with us?"

"""""He's dead serious."""""

"Can he not just teach normally?"

"""""He cannot."""""

"Wait, is this how you people have been training?"

"""""For over six months now."""""

"....."

There was another long silence. Even for the elites, it took them some time to process what they'd just heard.

Vindo stuck his hands back in his pockets, then stared motionlessly at the ceiling. After a moment, he snapped his head back down, languidly combed his

hair back with his hand, and shot Klaus a steely look. “The only reason I can think of for offering conditions that are that slanted in our favor.....is because you think we’re pushovers.”

Klaus had struck a nerve. Vindo was steaming with such an unbridled fury that Lily and the others gasped just looking at him.

As Vindo fumed, the other Avian members spoke up as well.

“C’mon, man. ♪ Are you seriously lumping us in with *Lamplight*? ♪”

“This affront shall not stand. Thou doth besmirch our honor.”

“Yeah, I really don’t see us losing. It is six against one, you know.”

“Let’s show him our full miiight.”

“...Aye. Our goal will be to finish it within one minute.”

Their pride had been wounded, and all six of them turned the full force of their hostility on Klaus. They were going to attack him, and they were going to attack him now.

As the Lamplight girls listened to the conversation from the side, the same thought ran through each of their heads.

I’m getting déjà vu all over again...

They themselves had gone down that exact same road.

A moment later, the Avian elites charged at Klaus without even bothering to come up with a plan and got TKO’d in brilliant fashion.

Klaus’s training sparked a major change in Avian.

In all likelihood, it had come as a serious shock to them. Never before had those top six academy elites suffered a defeat that crushing. On the first day, they left Heat Haze Palace with dazed expressions plastered on their faces.

The day after, they returned after having cooked up a plan. They took on Klaus another time and got routed the exact same way. Once again, they left in a daze, and once again, they came back the next day only to have it play out in identical fashion.

A question dawned on the Lamplight girls as they watched it all unfold—what

would happen when a group of people that prideful ran headlong into an immovable object?

“We’re back, ladies of Lamplight. Is Klaus around?”

“““““You don’t have to come here EVERY DAY, you know!”“““““

By the fourth day of the honeymoon, Avian had become little more than stalkers.



It was quiet in the interrogation room.

As Sybilla spent a few seconds thinking back to the start of their relationship with Avian, Amelie remained silent. The only sound in the room was that of her fellow intelligence agent’s fountain pen scribbling away.

“...Honestly, we didn’t care for ‘em one bit,” Sybilla muttered quietly. “But they weren’t just some nobodies to us, either. We want to find out how Avian went down. But there was only one survivor—‘Cloud Drift’ Lan—and after reporting that everyone else was dead, she went to ground.” She gave her head a big shake. “Like I said, we’ve been lookin’ for her for three weeks, but we still can’t find her.”

Amelie didn’t move. “.....”

“With that watch store, though, we’ve finally got a lead. Also, I’ve got some questions, too. What was a CIM counterintelligence team doin’ stationed at the store? C’mon, you can at least throw me a bone. Like I said, we’ve got no beef whatsoever with the Commonwealth.”

Sybilla made sure to emphasize her final sentence. Lamplight had no desire to formally antagonize the Fend Commonwealth. All they wanted was information.

“.....”

Amelie continued looking at Sybilla with nary a word or facial twitch. There was something eerie about the dark bags under her eyes. Perhaps her code name, Puppeteer, referred to the almost inhuman way she carried herself.

Eventually, she exhaled. “Thank you,” she said with a nod. “I understand your

situation now. I imagine that losing a group of acquaintances like that must have been most worrying.”

“Y-yeah, it was. Thanks for bein’ so understanding.”

“However...”

As the word left Amelie’s mouth, she tightened her grip on Sybilla’s arm.

“...your pulse rose a little. You’re lying to me.”

“——!!”

“An amateur mistake. I can see that you’re no great spy, dear guest.”

Sybilla was aghast. Amelie hadn’t just been squeezing her wrist to intimidate her. She’d been measuring Sybilla’s pulse to gauge her emotional state. Amelie’s lips curled into a smirk. She seemed to be delighting in Sybilla’s reaction.

This was the woman who headed the counterintelligence team Belias —“Puppeteer” Amelie.

Amelie was emanating such an ominous pressure that Sybilla could barely breathe. It felt like Amelie could see right through her.

Amelie let go of Sybilla’s arm and rose from her chair. Her shoes clicked loudly against the floor as she began circling the room. “So they sent in spies who can’t even lie properly... Was Avian really that unimportant to Din? Just who *are* you, dear guest...?”

There was something almost theatrical about the murmurs Sybilla caught from time to time.

Eventually, Amelie did a half spin. Her skirt went fluttering behind her. “Well, all right, then.” She strode elegantly over and stood in front of Sybilla. “Allow me to explain why we were stationed at the watch store.”

“Huh?” That wasn’t what Sybilla had been expecting to hear at all. “You’re actually gonna tell me?”

“I don’t see why not. We have no intention of souring our relationship with the Republic, either.” Amelie smiled. “Tell me, dear guest, how much do you

know about our royal family?”

“What?”

Sybilla cocked her head in confusion. Amelie had just gone and completely changed the subject on her.

Naturally, Sybilla had memorized all the basic information about the Fend Commonwealth. In a bygone era, they’d ruled the world. Fend was the first nation in history to have an industrial revolution and modernize their manufacturing, and it allowed them to expand across the globe. They brought Tolfa, the Far East, and the New World to heel one after another, dubbing them “territories of the Fend Kingdom” and forcing them to swear loyalty to the Crown. By doing so, the Fend Kingdom had dyed the world in its colors.

Eventually, the nation renamed itself from the Fend Kingdom to the Fend Commonwealth. On paper, it became a federation with each of its member states having control over their own internal affairs, but in truth, its rule was just as centralized and authoritarian as ever. The Commonwealth was a massive power structure that allowed the royal family to control nations all over the world, and though the role of global hegemon shifted to the United States of Mouzaia in the Great War’s wake, the royal family retained the lion’s share of its power and influence.

“I mean, I’ve heard of ’em...”

“As I would imagine. The Fend Commonwealth is deeply entwined with its royal family. Her Majesty Queen Ribault rules over what was once the Fend Kingdom and its fourteen vassal states, and every citizen in our fair nation has pledged their service to her, her esteemed son Crown Prince Darryn, and her other four sons.”

After speaking at length, Amelie dropped the bomb.

“Currently, Avian is charged with the attempted assassination of that very same Crown Prince Darryn.”

“What?”

Sybilla let out a dumbfounded gasp at the unexpected piece of information.

“From your reaction, I take it this is the first you’re hearing of this.”

“No, like... What are you *talkin’* about...?”

“You have at least heard the news, I assume. Last month, somebody planted a bomb in a government office building when Prince Darryn was visiting. The prince was thankfully unharmed, but two employees lost their lives.”

“Yeah, obviously I know about that. But I thought they said it was extremists who—”

“That was the story we released to the public, yes. In truth, though, we suspect that the Din Republic’s Avian team was involved.”

“You got any proof?”

“Naturally. Not that I’m obliged to show it to you, dear guest.”

The new piece of information sent Sybilla reeling.

Avian tried to assassinate the crown prince?

It didn’t make sense.

That was a piece of intel that Lamplight hadn’t so much as caught wind of. For one thing, Avian had no reason to go after the crown prince. Their only mission had been to look into a certain someone.

“Now, I trust that answers your question. The fact is, we at the CIM are looking for Avian as well.”

“W-wait, hold up. Avian’s gone.”

Amelie nodded. “Indeed. We discovered the same thing—that five of its six members perished. What we don’t know is why they attacked Prince Darryn and how they died,” she said. “The only person who knows what happened is the survivor, ‘Cloud Drift’ Lan.”

“.....”

“We at the CIM have been tasked with apprehending her, so it was inevitable that we would meet at that watch shop. We were both searching for the same person.”

Amelie picked her butterfly knife back up and pressed it flat against Sybilla’s

cheek. It was deathly cold against her skin.

“Tell me everything you know about Cloud Drift, young lady. That’s an order,” she whispered. “You knew her, did you not? That means you have information on her.”

“.....”

Sybilla had plenty of information on Lan. She’d spent a month with Avian.

She knew Lan’s age, appearance, and athletic capabilities; she knew that Lan had a habit of frequently changing her vocal tics and that she was currently obsessed with thees, thys, and thous; she knew that Lan loved apple pie and would eat it three times a week; she knew that Lan’s special ability was called Detainment and that she was an expert at fighting with string; she knew that Lan was scared to death of Annette and ran away at full speed whenever they crossed paths; and she knew that people suspected that Lan’s third-place performance on the graduation exam might have been a fluke.

However, all that information was classified. Everything Sybilla had shared with Amelie so far had been surface-level stuff. She’d kept all the important intel to herself.

“.....”

Her breath caught in her throat, and her lungs started aching.

“After all that, you’re choosing to keep mum?” Amelie tutted in disapproval. “How very strange. Did you not just say you didn’t want to be our enemy? Here I was, thinking you would be happy to help us root out a ruthless terrorist.”

“.....”

“If you intend to cover for her...you’ll leave me no choice but to resume with torturing you.”

As Amelie spoke, she pressed in with the knife. Its cold surface dug into Sybilla’s cheek. All it would take was a twitch, and it would slice Sybilla’s face, but Amelie was making it perfectly clear that that was none of her concern.

Why am I covering for Avian?

Memories of the time she spent with the team flooded back to Sybilla.



It was eight days into the honeymoon, and after getting trounced by Klaus, Avian had taken to dropping by Heat Haze Palace more or less on the daily.

Of the members, the one who visited the most was Avian's boss—"Flock" Vindo.

"I'm back, ladies of Lamplight. Where's Klaus? Oh, he's out on another mission. I'll wait for him over in the dining room, then. Are those tea cakes Qulle left here still kicking around? I'll have some of those. Oh, and I brought Vics and Pharma, too. The others are running a little late, but—"

""""""Go home!""""""

The sharp-eyed, brown-haired youth ignored Lamplight's shouting and headed on in.

Lamplight had initially treated Avian as guests, but their reactions had shifted as the days dragged on. Lamplight was supposed to be on break right now, and there was nothing more annoying than a group of visitors who refused to respect that and kept dropping by uninvited. By the time the first week had passed, Lamplight had started shouting "Go home" every time they ran into Avian.

It probably went without saying, but it was going to take more than that to deter the elites.

"...Are you guys just bored out of your minds, or what?" Lily asked in exasperation.

"Of course not," Vindo said as he stuffed his face full of tea cakes over in the kitchen. "We're taking turns with our time off, but we've still got counterintelligence missions we're completing. We're just being efficient about it, that's all. Don't lump us in with you lot."

"Wow, how diligent of you."

"Today, we're all on break."

"Wait, so you are just bored!"

Lily and the others renewed their efforts to shoo Avian away, and Vindo scoffed at them. “If it makes you feel better, our work is picking back up tomorrow. It’s not like we’re interfering with your precious little lives just for kicks.”

“Oh, well, that’s good.”

“We’ll only be able to spend three hours here tomorrow, then two hours in the evening the day after that and four hours in the morning in three days’ time. From day four onward, it’ll be two hours after midnight, six hours in the afternoon, one hour in the evening, and another twenty minutes late at—”

““““STOP COMING HERE EVERY DAY!”“““““

There was a big reason why the Lamplight girls were so desperate to drive him away. The fact of the matter was that Vindo wasn’t the only obnoxious one. When he came, he brought the rest of Avian with him, and they were just as annoying in their own ways. Lamplight hadn’t had much direct interaction with them in Longchon, so they hadn’t known it at the time, but Avian was home to no shortage of weirdos.

For one, there was “Feather” Pharma.

Between her overgrown, disheveled hair and plump figure, Pharma seemed to almost emanate sloth. She also appeared to think of Lamplight’s younger members as something akin to pets and would often wrap them up in embraces regardless of the time or place.

Her primary victim was a certain petite blond who looked as lovely as a doll —“Fool” Erna.

“Ohhh, little Erna. How are you aaalways so adorable? Come on, let me squish your cheeks. Squishy-squishy, squishy-squishyyy. Let’s go take a nap together.”

“Yeep! F-for some reason, that sounds really scary! Everything about that feels like misfortune!”

Much to Erna’s terror, she found herself getting smothered on the regular.

For another, there was “Cloud Drift” Lan.

Lan wore her dark-red hair long and straight, and her sharp facial features

gave her a decidedly dignified air. She'd had a traumatic experience with a Lamplight member named Annette, and every time Lan ran into her, she would shriek "The beast comeeeeeeth!" and run for her life. That wasn't a problem in and of itself, but she frequently crashed into Heat Haze Palace's furnishings and destroyed them in her haste.

Her primary victim was an androgynous-looking cerulean-haired girl who didn't have much in the way of distinctive features—"Glint" Monika.

"Why, Dame Monika! Just, um, so thou knowest, I broke thy mug the other day, but I have every intention to use Avian's operating funds to replace it—"

Monika gave her a look of absolute contempt. "I want that money coming straight out of your pocket. And next time you break something of mine, you're dead."

From there, Avian's rampage continued unabated.

"South Wind" Queneau—a big, mask-wearing man of many mysteries—went and started a vegetable garden on the premises, quietly muttering "Aye" to himself all the while. Without so much as warning Lily, he replanted all the herbs and poisonous plants she'd been growing.

"Glide" Qulle—a girl with a ponytail and a large pair of glasses—was a comparatively functional member of society, but even she had her share of problems. "Gosh, it's so nice to have someone else looking after them," she would say, appearing fully checked out as she refused to so much as lift a finger to keep her teammates in check. Instead, she just lazed about in the main hall with a look of utter release on her face.

Avian's members continued visiting day in and day out, and the Lamplight girls all shared the same opinion.

""""""""""I swear to God, these people are driving me mad!""""""""""

They were completely at the elites' mercy.

The problem was that they couldn't just kick them out. Avian had Klaus's permission to be there, and they were stronger than Lamplight to boot. Driving them away by force would be all but impossible.

Lamplight had found their natural enemy.

Avian had victimized all the girls in some way or another, and Sybilla was no exception.

In her case, the menace was “Lander” Vics. Vics was a young man who was handsome enough to be a model. He went out chasing skirts whenever he had time to spare, and he often invited Sybilla along on group dates—as a dude.

“Oh hey, Sybilla, want to go on a group date with me tonight? ♪ There weren’t enough men who agreed to come, but if you just cross-dressed, we wouldn’t have to break the bad news to any of the ladies. ♪”

“Fuck OFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFF!”

The rest of Avian’s men had long since lost patience with Vics, so he turned to Sybilla to be his partner in crime instead. When he refused to take no for an answer, Sybilla had no choice but to flee.

She raced down Heat Haze Palace’s halls with all her might.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“‘Cause you’re the most interesting person here! ♪ ”

“You makin’ fun of me or something?!”

“Hey, c’mon, don’t worry about it. ♪ Just think of it as training. ♪ Wooing the ladies is an important spy skill. ♪”

“That’s no training I want any part of!”

However, the thing about Vics was that he wasn’t so easily shaken. He’d been strong enough to claim the number two spot out of the entire academy’s student body, and although Sybilla had fought him herself back in Longchon, he clearly hadn’t been giving it his all. He gave chase with a confident grin, as though they were enjoying a fun game of tag.

Sybilla charged down the first-floor corridor and made a beeline for the end of the hallway. Fleeing to the second floor would have been another option, but that was where the girls’ bedrooms were, so she didn’t want any guys aside from Klaus going up there.

She steeled herself to face her foe at the hallway's end. She'd prepared for just such an eventuality.

"Eat this!"

She set off the tear gas canister attached to the wall.

Vics was right behind her, and she activated the gas at just the right time to blast him. The three-hundred-plus times she'd fought Klaus in Heat Haze Palace had prepared her for this.

Vics snapped his eyes shut and smashed the emitter with his fist.

That should have bought her all the time she needed. Without a moment's delay, she leaned forward to leap out of the window— "I'm code name Lander—and it's time to get smashing. ♪"

—but a roar like cannon fire split the air.

Sybilla could feel the impact from the blow on her skin. Something had just whizzed past her head, and her hair swayed from the wind it left in its wake. She froze and nervously looked in the direction the noise had come from.

There was a brick *lodged in the wall*.

"The hell...?"

The brick had slammed into the wall right next to the window, and though the raw force of the collision had shattered the brick, it had also damaged the wall and warped the window frame. Try as she might, Sybilla couldn't get the window to open anymore.

It went without saying where the brick had come from. Vics had thrown it with nothing more than his upper body strength.

"Fuckin' WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!" she screamed.

She thought back to Vics's special ability—his superhuman strength.

He didn't look particularly brawny, but the man was hiding an unfathomable amount of muscle just below his skin. Throwing a brick so fast that it warped the window frame had been child's play for him.

Vics strode over with a playful grin. "I picked that little baby up in the yard

earlier. ♪ I figured it might come in handy. ♪”

“But I would’ve seen you holding it...”

Vics had been unarmed—at least, as far as Sybilla knew. He hadn’t been holding a thing. That was why the long-range attack had caught her so off guard.

Vics stretched out his hands and flashed his empty palms.

“That’s what my Concealment technique does—it lets me steal my opponents’ attention away. ♪”

With that, it all made sense.

Sybilla didn’t know how exactly it worked, but Vics was able to carry weapons concealed on his body. She assumed he held them clenched in his lats or his glutes.

She let out an annoyed exhale at how effective Vics’s technique was at leading his foes astray. She had to be wary of his superhuman strength in any fight, but that just made it that much easier for him to fool his opponents; he kept his weapons hidden until the last possible moment and prevented them from noticing when he deployed his arms.

Superhuman Strength × Concealment = Bottomless Brawn.

There was a trick where you multiplied your techniques and your lies together, and Sybilla knew exactly what it was called.

“Liecrafft, huh?”

That was the final lesson the spy academies gave their students before they graduated. It was the only sure way to catch someone stronger than you by surprise so you could defeat them. Aside from Erna, not a single Lamplight girl had been able to get a handle on it.

“Oh right, you haven’t mastered it yet. ♪ That’s hilarious. ♪ What a loser! ♪”

“Shaddap!”

Sybilla returned Vics’s mocking laughter with a front kick. However, Vics was able to easily catch her leg and hoist her into the air. Once he had her caught in

his inhumanly strong grasp, there was no escape.

“Now, c’mon, you’ve got a group date to get cross-dressed for. ♪”

“I don’t wannaaaaaaa!”

Vics dragged her away, hauling her through the air like a captured boar. She shouted in protest, but unsurprisingly, Vics was undeterred. Sybilla knew exactly how it was going to play out. He was going to make her cross-dress, and she was going to have to endure the hellish experience of attending a group date disguised as a guy. The exact same tragedy had already played out several times over the past few days.

The question was: How was she supposed to defeat him?

As she was busy trying to think up a plan for next time, a high-pitched noise split the air—a whistle.

“Ah, that’s a bummer. ♪ Looks like I’m out of time. ♪”

“Huh?”

Vics gave his head a disappointed shake and released Sybilla’s legs. “Vindo wants us all to gather. ♪”

Avian was a giant pain in the neck, but Lamplight could have stood to take one page from their book—the approach they took to carrying out their espionage duties.

On Vics’s urging, Sybilla headed to the main hall and found the rest of Avian’s and Lamplight’s members gathered around Vindo. There were fourteen spies in all, and every pair of eyes was on Avian’s boss.

“It’s time. Let’s get ready to take down Klaus,” Vindo said definitively.

“Roger that,” the other Avian members replied. Their expressions sharpened so dramatically that it was like someone had just flipped a switch.

Then Vindo turned his gaze over to Lamplight. “Starting today, you lot are going to be helping us as well.”

“““““Huh?”””””

“As spies, your overall skills are low, but your special talents are a force to be

reckoned with. It stings to admit, but as things stand, we can't beat Klaus with Avian alone. We need to combine our forces to take him down."

Qulle, who was standing beside him, showed them a blueprint of Heat Haze Palace and smiled. "We've already come up with a plan."

Even at just a glance, the girls could tell it was a plan that Lamplight would never have been able to carry out solo. What's more, it was also incredibly detailed, and there was a series of fallbacks laid out in case the main plan fell apart.

"...If you want our help, you could at least be nicer to us," Lily said.

"This is just the way we communicate," Vindo replied. His voice rang with the same self-confidence as always. "It's like I said—together, we can protect our nation on two fronts."

Hearing how much faith the elites had in them made the girls feel a little self-conscious, but a little happy, too.

The rest of the Avian members grinned.

"Honestly, this was the plan all along ♪," Vics said. Lan nodded. "'Tis imperative we two teams learn to cooperate." "I think we all stand to learn a lot from this," Qulle agreed. "You know, I think it'd be nice if we deepened our bonds eeeven more. Let's go to a hot spring together," Pharma suggested. "...Nay. Control yourself," Queneau scolded her.

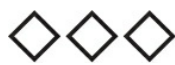
Avian was a noisy bunch, too, but there was something a little more mature about them than Lamplight. They were the very image of elite skill the girls so admired.

All in all, there were fifteen of them—one World's Strongest, six elites, and eight washouts. When they all got together, it was as noisy and chaotic as could be. It got to the point where it was hard to even tell who was talking.

"Hey, Vindo, Lily here. I've got a question. If you wanted to train with us, why did you always act like such a snob?" "Because the first thing you did when we got here was try to kick us out." "Aye. He pouted in a most unbecoming way." "Oh nooo, my sugar levels are getting low. I want to go out and eat sweets with little Erna." "Yeep! L-let go of me!" "S-stop it! You can't have Miss Erna!" "I do

like the sound of going out to eat, though. Perhaps we should make a reservation.” “Ooh, that’s gonna be a no-go for me. ♪ I’ve got a hot group date with Sybilla tonight. ♪” “Fuck off! If you need someone to cross-dress for you, that’s literally what Grete is good at.” “Thank you, but I have to decline. I believe Monika would look good in menswear, though.” “Don’t go selling me out. You probably just don’t want to have to eat dinner with any guys aside from Klaus.” “Oh? What’s this? Could it be? Do I smell love in the air?” “I wish to hear more details, too, prithee!” “I don’t remember giving you the right to talk, yo.” “Ack!”

The girls spent every day trying to get rid of Avian, but over time, they all gradually grew closer. The two teams motivated each other, fought with each other, and bettered each other. They were truly the oddest of couples. In time, they developed what could only be described as a rivalry—a rivalry they assumed would continue on for years to come.



“Why?” Amelie murmured.

When Sybilla snapped out of her reverie and looked back up, she saw Amelie looking bewildered, with her eyes wide like she’d just witnessed something she could hardly believe. It was the first time Amelie had expressed anything but consummate professionalism.

Sybilla didn’t understand what was going on. “Huh?”

Amelie took a moment to catch her breath.

“Why are you crying, dear guest?”

On hearing Amelie’s question, Sybilla finally noticed the droplets rolling down her cheek. She reached up and touched her face to see if they were really there.

Shit, they are... I’m actually cryin’. Fucking embarrassing...

This wasn’t the first time she’d experienced loss in her life.

As a child, she grew up in a gang, where violence and exploitation ruled. She’d seen people get murdered with her own two eyes, and she’d lost people she cared about deeply.

What shocked her was that she was crying the exact same way she had back then. Thinking about the elites had caused her to shed tears in a foreign interrogation room.

I can't believe it. At first, I just thought they were a bunch of assholes, but now...

In Longchon, they'd been out-and-out enemies. Not only had the two teams fought tooth and nail over Klaus, but Avian had stirred up that special feeling of inferiority in them particular to washouts. Then, when Vindo and the others started constantly stopping by, Lamplight had tried to chase them off—"Go away," they'd said, and "Screw off," and "If you're gonna come, at least bring us some snacks or something."

Now, though, thinking back to the time she'd spent with them was enough to make Sybilla cry.

She wiped away her tears. "...Just now, you said I was lyin' to you."

"I did."

"Well, you're right. I did lie." Sybilla looked straight ahead. "When I said we didn't care for 'em one bit, that wasn't true. We didn't hate 'em. We didn't hate 'em at all."

That was how she really felt.

She'd never wanted them to die.

She'd believed that they would get to keep on being rivals.

However, the death report had been true. When Sybilla and the others came rushing to the Fend Commonwealth, they'd found a picture of Avian's corpses. The girls had been holding out hope that the news was fake, but the photo revealed just how cruelly true it was. No amount of grieving would change the cold, hard reality that everyone on Avian except Lan had been killed in the line of duty.

It was the first time Lamplight had ever lost people that they as a group truly cared about.

"They wouldn't...", Sybilla spat, clenching her fists.

Amelie raised an eyebrow. "...?"

"That failed assassination on the crown prince? Avian would never do something like that." Her voice grew rougher. "Even if they wanted to, they'd never resort to filthy Galgad-ass methods like bombs. They actually care about collateral damage. It's a *frame job*! Someone out there pinned the crime on Avian, then killed 'em!"

"How unpleasant. Why, it sounds as though you're saying that somebody pulled the wool over Belias's eyes—"

"That's exactly what I'm fuckin' saying!" Sybilla roared, driven by raw impulse. She was past the point of being able to control her emotions. This wasn't fear at having been captured by a foreign intelligence team speaking, nor was it anger at the way Amelie had threatened her. She was being confronted head-on by the loss of Avian, and it hurt so bad she couldn't stand it. "I'm not tellin' you another goddamn thing." She glared at Amelie. "I got no reason to. Avian didn't have shit to do with the assassination. Someone's playing you, and I'm not sellin' my allies' information to someone who gets played like that."

"...You really don't understand the situation you're in."

Amelie didn't so much as hesitate. She pressed in with her butterfly knife and tried to slice open Sybilla's cheek.

Before the blade could dig into her fair skin, though, Sybilla made her move. She kicked the entire desk into the air, then extended her arm as Amelie went flying.

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

With that, she stole Amelie's knife.

Behind Amelie, the Belias personnel sprang into motion. They promptly drew their guns and trained them on Sybilla. Sybilla responded by readying her knife and crouching in preparation to lunge at them. If they fired, she was ready to take two or three bullets to close in on them. Because of how confined the quarters were, her odds of winning a chaotic brawl like that were at least a couple percentage points.

Amelie dusted off her skirt in annoyance. "You really intend to resist us?"

“Damn straight. I don’t have time to sit around gettin’ tortured for bullshit reasons.”

“Now you’re just talking nonsense. Our actions are founded in absolute righteousness. We are always just, and we do not err.”

She pulled a small stick from her pocket. Sybilla braced herself for the worst, but as it turned out, it wasn’t a weapon at all—it was a conductor’s baton.

Amelie elegantly brandished her baton and softly pointed it to her right. “Lotus Doll.”

“Yes, Master.”

On her right, there was a woman dressed in a habit beaming with joy.

Next, Amelie pointed her baton to the left. “Disintegrator Doll.”

“As you command.”

On her left, there was a boy wearing a top hat and a slender suit.

Flanked on both sides by her loyal subordinates, Amelie smiled. “These two are Belias’s aides-de-camp. They’ve put down countless spies in their day.”

“Well, good for them.”

“Programme Number 4.” Amelie gave her conductor’s baton a big wave. “Show our guest some hospitality.”

Apparently, that was how she gave the aides their orders.

All Sybilla was able to see was the woman called Lotus Doll and the boy called Disintegrator Doll launching themselves forward like shots from a gun. Thanks to Amelie’s impeccable leadership, the duo was able to dash in perfect harmony and leap at Sybilla from the left and the right at the exact same time. Sybilla was pretty sure that if that was the extent of it, she would have been able to fight back...

...but then *she got kicked in the gut from straight ahead.*

It was Amelie. She’d closed in on Sybilla while Sybilla was distracted by the aides.

You’re gettin’ in on the action, too?!

The entirety of the flying kick's power came from Amelie's head-on charge, but because of that, Sybilla wasn't able to completely blunt the impact. Her body slammed into the wall behind her, and the knife she'd been holding slipped from her hand.

Lotus Doll and Disintegrator Doll each grabbed one of her arms. The way they were moving was highly polished and had doubtless been orchestrated in advance. It revealed once more what Sybilla had already learned at the watch store—that under Amelie's leadership, her subordinates operated in perfect sync. For all of Sybilla's honed athletic abilities, there was no way for her to fight back against them solo. There was nothing she could do.

"How many should we break, Master?" Lotus Doll calmly asked as she traced her fingers across Sybilla's abdomen, just below her breasts. She seemed to be enjoying the sensation. Clearly, she was referring to Sybilla's ribs. "I would like to break three. Last time, Disintegrator Doll got to break two more than me."

"Because you're bad at this," Disintegrator Doll objected. "You even puncture their lungs sometimes."

"Let me break three, Master," said Lotus Doll.

"Let me break four, Master," said Disintegrator Doll.

With Lotus Doll's voice coming from Sybilla's left and Disintegrator Doll's voice coming from her right, it was like they were singing alternating verses in a duet.

"She's impudent."

"I concur."

"She needs to learn where she stands."

"We need to teach her."

"What a pathetic spy."

"What an embarrassment."

"She found out that her allies died."

"She came rushing over."

"She spent three weeks getting nowhere."

"She scuttled around like a rat."

"Then she got captured."

"She's going to get tortured and die."

"We should bury her alongside Avian."

"She's just as incompetent as they were."

"Those scum tried to kill the crown prince."

"They did fail, though."

"Then they got killed."

"That's right, they died just like that."

“Was it a schism? A fight? An accident?”

“The only one who knows is Cloud Drift.”

“We want information on her...”

“Master commands it...”

““...so we’ll be breaking your ribs on both sides, dear guest.””

Malevolent smiles spread across both of their faces in unison.

Each of them was holding a large hammer, and they made sure Sybilla could see them raise their implements aloft.

Amelie spoke up in a dull voice.

“Sadly, it would appear that we have a new guest joining us.”

A wave of icy malice washed over the room.

The sadistic smiles on Lotus Doll’s and Disintegrator Doll’s faces stiffened. They quickly released Sybilla’s arms and got ready for battle.

“You’ve really enjoyed yourself tormenting my subordinate, haven’t you?”

It was Klaus, Lamplight’s boss. Brimming with wrath, he stepped into the interrogation room.

Every Belias agent aside from Amelie recoiled. Klaus hadn’t introduced himself, but his presence spoke for itself.

“Boss...,” Sybilla choked out. Klaus nodded, then strode all the way over to her side. Lotus Doll and Disintegrator Doll fell back and placed themselves in a position where they could defend Amelie.

Amelie gracefully gave him a small bow. “I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure, Bonfire. I am ‘Puppeteer’ Amelie, servant to the Fend Commonwealth’s CIM and master of the counterintelligence team Belias.”

“You know who I am?”

“There have been rumors going around for a while about an odd man who calls himself the Greatest Spy in the World.”

“...As a spy, I’m not too happy about this fame I’ve earned.” Klaus let out a long breath. “Well, it is what it is. Can I convince you to let my subordinate go, Puppeteer?”

“You cannot. We suspect that Avian is behind a failed attempt on the crown

prince's life, and this young lady is a person of interest. Releasing her isn't an option."

"Hmm... That's the first I'm hearing about this."

"Depending on how things play out, this could well spell the end of the CIM's partnership with your Foreign Intelligence Office."

The two teams' bosses stared silently at each other. Sybilla could feel her skin crawling.

Klaus dropped his voice an octave. "I could always take her out of here by force, you know."

In contrast, Amelie just softly smiled. "I would recommend against it, dear guest. If you put so much as a scratch on my subordinates, the CIM will have no choice but to regard the Foreign Intelligence Office as a foe. For all your talents, you're but a single man. Are you confident you'll be able to protect the Republic when the CIM brings its full force to bear against it?"

Klaus knit his brows in confusion. "I don't get it."

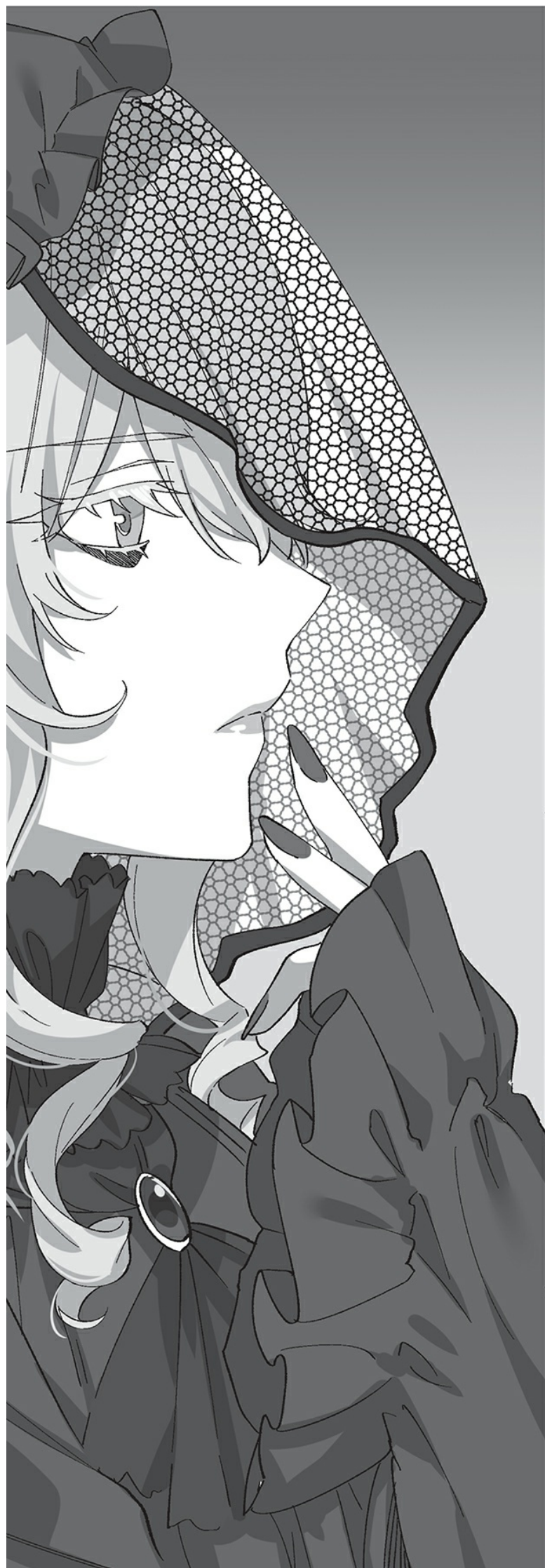
"Hmm...?"

"Why would me attacking you cause a rift between our nations?"

"I should think that would be obvious, dear guest."

"But who would report it? All of you would be dead."

At some point, Klaus had drawn his gun. The intensity he was displaying was so uncharacteristically raw that Sybilla's palms started sweating. There was no affectation or hesitation in his voice. He was just stating the pure, unvarnished truth—that if he wanted to, he could kill every last person in the building and casually stroll out the front door.



“.....”

Amelie’s expression didn’t waver.

The air in the room was so tense, not a single person was breathing.

The first person to break eye contact was Klaus. “...No, this is fine. I have no desire to turn this into a bloodbath.” He leaned down toward Sybilla and brushed the dust off her shoulders. “Magnificent,” he told her. “You did a fantastic job buying time.”

“Was that supposed to scare me?” Amelie looked at him mockingly. “Allow me to repeat myself. For all your talents, you’re but a single man. There’s no way you could exterminate us all. My subordinates would flee in all different directions, and one of them would succeed in informing my superiors about your crime.”

Klaus looked back at her, nonplussed. “.....”

“What a trifling bluff.” Amelie sneered. “If you try to take that girl from here, we’ll stop you. With all our might.”

“Let’s not walk into any pointless fights. I don’t know anything about ‘Cloud Drift’ Lan’s whereabouts, nor does Sybilla. And this is the first we’re hearing about Avian trying to assassinate the crown prince.” Klaus shook his head. “Torturing us wouldn’t give you the information you’re looking for. Do you really still want to fight me?”

“.....”

“If anything...shouldn’t we be looking into pooling our efforts?”

“Excuse me?” Amelie squinted at him in surprise.

Klaus went on. “You want to capture Cloud Drift because you suspect she was involved in the attack on the crown prince. We want to ask her questions because she’s Avian’s sole survivor. Our goals are one and the same—finding ‘Cloud Drift’ Lan. Am I wrong?”

Amelie laid a hand over her mouth in contemplation. “I see. So that’s the way you would have us handle this.”

“If you refuse, I’ll have no choice but to use force to protect my subordinate. Would you like to see if I’m bluffing now?”

As Klaus calmly made his threat, Sybilla couldn’t help but be impressed. Both sides had come in hot, but ultimately, they were all asking the same question—where is “Cloud Drift” Lan?

Klaus’s overwhelming might had turned the situation from a one-sided torture session to an even negotiation.

Gauging Amelie’s reaction, she already knew just how unbelievably powerful Klaus was. It wasn’t necessarily good for a spy to have a reputation that preceded them, but here it worked in his favor. Thea manipulated people by deftly using their desires to her advantage, but Klaus employed a different negotiation style—a style centered around his unassailable strength.

Amelie righted her toppled-over chair and sat in it. One of her Belias subordinates brought over some more tea.

There was only one glass.

The tea was milky white with only a touch of brown—probably mostly milk. Amelie sipped it down with great relish.

“I refuse.”

Her smile was soft, but her tone was anything but.

“We have no desire to quarrel with the Din Republic, either, but our positions here are far from equal. The crime Avian is charged with is a serious one, and we could just as easily announce that fact to the world. No, there’s only one arrangement I’m prepared to accept—*one where you and your people serve us unilaterally.*”

“Fine by me,” Klaus replied succinctly. “It’s all the same, in the end.”



An hour later, Thea came to the interrogation room.

Thea was a Lamplight member who was normally in charge of the team’s command and control. Her figure was alluringly curvy, and her dark hair was

long and beautiful. Her code name was Dreamspeaker. In Fend, she'd been working undercover in a nightclub.

She'd been called to the room because there was a role she needed to play.

"Sorry 'bout this, Thea," Sybilla said.

"Oh, don't worry about me. Jobs like this are what I'm here for," Thea replied with a shrug. "You go find Lan, okay? She's probably off somewhere crying about how 'Lo, she doth be alone.'"

"That sounds like her, all right."

They exchanged a light high five, and Sybilla left the interrogation room.

When Thea went in, in her place, they fixed restraints around her neck and wrists. Each of the heavy iron manacles was attached to the interrogation room's wall with a chain. Upon seeing the setup, Thea briefly bit her lip in discomfort before smiling. "I suppose it's nice to do some bondage play every now and then," she joked.

"Allow me to reiterate," Amelie said with a satisfied nod. "If you fail to find Cloud Drift within twenty-four hours, the hostage dies."

That was the condition Amelie had set forth—that as long as Lamplight was participating in the search, they would have to give up one of their members as a captive. It was an insurance policy to make sure Klaus couldn't just flee. If Lamplight ran away, or if they tried to turn on Belias, Belias would kill the hostage.

Thea's job was to be that hostage. It was a dangerous task, but she'd accepted it nonetheless.

"You all will aid us in our search, dear guests," Amelie said. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

The woman called Lotus Doll and the boy called Disintegrator Doll smiled.

"We'll provide backup."

"I hope you work quietly."

"For Master's sake."

"For Master's sake."

""Shut up and serve us, dear guests.""

The woman in charge was dressed in Gothic garb, the two aides-de-camp were a woman in a habit and boy with a top hat, and the rest of the dozen-odd members behind them were all clad in black. By any objective measure, it was a pretty eccentric roster.

Belias was a counterintelligence team belonging to the Fend Commonwealth's intelligence agency, the CIM, and Lamplight was a rising star in the Din Republic's intelligence agency, the Foreign Intelligence Office.

Now the two teams were about to embark on a joint search mission. Their objective: to find "Cloud Drift" Lan, the spy charged with attempting to assassinate the crown prince.

Sybilla's gun had been returned, and she hid it in her clothes as she lined up by Klaus's side. "Sorry about all this. Didn't think things would get so messy."

"Don't worry about it. With that big a roadblock in our investigation, we were always going to have to reach out to the CIM eventually," Klaus replied gently. "Like I said earlier, you did a good job holding out until I got there."

"I'm great at puttin' up with shit. Still, I'd rather not go through that again."

Klaus gave her a small nod. "Then, let's get started. Our grief isn't going to shoulder itself."

"Yeah," Sybilla muttered back. The whole reason they'd come there was to avenge Avian. She thumped Klaus on the shoulder, then strode forward.

With pain in their hearts, Lamplight got to work.

A battle was about to begin in the Fend Commonwealth—a battle for them to mourn their comrades.

Chapter 2

Searching

When Sara left the changing room, the air's cold chill rushed over her skin.

She wiped her hair with a bath towel as she headed for the kitchen. Upon reaching the fridge, she took out a bottle of milk and slowly drank it down. Her puppy, Johnny, looked at her pleadingly. "It'll just make you sick," she gently reminded him.

Sara knew that if she didn't dry her hair right after she got out of the bath, it would make her already-curly locks even more unruly. As she headed over to grab a comb, she caught a glimpse of the living room. Due to the apartment's small size, it was never hard to find out what her roommates were up to.

"....."

There was an ash-pink-haired girl sitting on the sofa.

Her name was "Forgetter" Annette, and between her large eye patch and her messily tied-up hair, her appearance was somewhat striking. She was normally a bundle of chaotic energy, but at the moment, she was staring silently at the television.

The CRT TV was right in the middle of displaying a news broadcast.

"We now bring you information about the terrorist bombing that targeted Crown Prince Darryn last month."

On the screen, a strong, handsome man was waving. The man was Crown Prince Darryn, Queen Ribault's firstborn son and the person slated to someday lead all the nations of the Commonwealth. The news report started by going over the details of the attack.

"On the day the crown prince visited the National Physics Research Center, a suspicious package was seen at the site. When one of the employees touched

the package, it exploded. Two died, and another ten were wounded. The authorities are doing everything they can to locate the party responsible—”

Word of the attack had been sweeping the nation, especially because the perpetrator was still at large.

The newscaster went on to speak on behalf of the people, talking about how angry they were at the terrorist and how anxious they were that the culprit had yet to be found. Crown Prince Darryn was tremendously popular with the masses, and ever since the war, he'd been making sure to attend all sorts of diplomatic events so he could build positive international relationships.

“Crown Prince Darryn majored in physics as a student and received incredible marks. The purpose of his visit was to cheer on our domestic researchers, several of whom were friends of his from university—”

From there, the newscast listed out facts about the crown prince.

“...What in the world's going on with this country?” Sara muttered lifelessly.

An attempt had been made on the crown prince's life, and her own countrymen had lost their lives there as well. She wanted to believe that the two things had nothing to do with each other, but...

...I'm worried.

It felt like her heart was going to shrivel up.

In fact, I'm scared...everything about this country frightens me...

Avian was far more skilled than Lamplight, and their loss had been giving Sara chills ever since it happened. She'd only just gotten out of the shower, and her skin already felt clammy.

Before she knew it, she had wrapped her arms around herself.

“Yo.” All of a sudden, Annette spoke up. “I'm curious about this dude.”

“Huh?”

“He makes me feel itchy.”

Annette's gaze didn't budge from the television. She seemed keenly interested in Crown Prince Darryn.

Sara gave her a puzzled look. “Wh-what do you mean?”

Annette offered her no reply. She just kept staring intently at the screen. What was it that right eye of hers was seeing?

Then Sara noticed that Annette was fiddling with something between her fingers.

That’s one of Miss Lan’s strings...

Annette was playing cat’s cradle with a special type of string as she watched TV. The string was thin, flexible, and strong. One of Avian’s members, “Cloud Drift” Lan, used it as her weapon of choice.

It was a surprising sight.

I was never really sure if Miss Annette liked Avian the way the rest of us did...

Sara thought back.

She reflected on how she and Annette had spent the honeymoon.



It was ten days into the honeymoon, and while Lamplight and Avian were starting to get along like a house on fire, there was still one big elephant in the room: Annette and Lan’s relationship.

Apparently, Lan had called Annette a runt back in Longchon. Annette had a major complex about her height, and the insult had invoked her wrath. She’d mercilessly thrashed Lan and forced her to kowtow half naked. Even after all that, though, Annette had yet to forgive her. Every time Lan visited Heat Haze Palace, Annette would immediately attempt to capture her, and Lan would destroy various odds and ends as she fled as fast as she could. Both Lamplight and Avian were just about sick of it.

On the tenth day of the honeymoon, they decided to open up peace talks.

Over in Heat Haze Palace’s main hall, a certain someone stood before Sara and Annette and bowed.

“Would you please consider letting bygones be bygones with Lan?”

That someone was “Glide” Qulle. Qulle wore a large pair of glasses and kept her jade green hair tied up behind her in a ponytail. She was a pretty reasonable person by Avian’s standards, and she handled most of the team’s planning and coordination.

She pressed her hands together apologetically.

“Why are you the one asking, Miss Qulle?” Sara asked.

“Because if Lan came and apologized herself, Annette would just try to kill her again.”

“And why did you ask for me to come?”

“...Sorry. I don’t have any real confidence in my ability to get through to Annette directly.”

Qulle’s expression conveyed pure exhaustion. By the look of it, she’d already tried talking to Annette, and her attempt had ended in failure.

Over to Sara’s side, Annette puffed up her cheeks. “No matter what you say, I’m not gonna forgive her, yo!” She crossed her arms and refused to even look Qulle’s way.

Qulle smiled and offered her a baked good. “Come on, there’s no need to be like that.”

The treat seemed to tickle Annette’s fancy. “Hmm?” she said as she looked right back over.

Sensing that she was getting somewhere, Qulle made her case. “Lan’s really sorry about what she said. She even went and bought you these cookies from a popular shop. ‘I fear I have besmirched Dame Annette’s honor most egregiously,’ she said.”

“Huh? She did?”

“She did. So I was really hoping you two could make up,” Qulle implored her.

Without missing a beat, Sara spoke up as well. “I’d really appreciate it, too, Miss Annette.”

She laid a hand on Annette’s back.

Annette could be childish, and there were definitely times when she took things too far, but Sara knew she wasn't actually heartless.

“.....”

Annette looked back and forth between Sara's face and the proffered cookie. She pursed her lips.

“You know, I came up with a plan,” Qulle said, clasping her hands together in excitement. “There's a really pretty waterfall about a two-hour drive from here. The two of you can go there together, then shake hands and bury the hatchet. When you do, the rest of us will be waiting at the top of the waterfall. We'll drop balls that say ☆ CONGRATULATIONS ☆, and they'll float on past to celebrate your—”

“THOU'RT WIDE OPEN!”

““What?””

All of a sudden, a figure descended from the ceiling.

It was a girl with dark-red hair and dignified features—“Cloud Drift” Lan.

Lan ignored Sara's and Qulle's dumbfounded stares and used the string extending from her fingers to tie up Annette. The strings undulated like they had minds of their own as they wove their way around Annette's limbs.

Nobody had noticed her until the very moment she'd chosen to make her presence known.

“Ha-ha! Behold my liecraft—Covert Ops!” She let out a booming laugh as she deftly manipulated her string. “And paired with my special ability Detainment, no less! Resistance without foreknowledge of the technique doth be futile!”

By that point, Annette was already completely locked down. She was tied up from head to toe.

“U-ummm...” Over to the side, Qulle rubbed her temples. “What do you think you're doing, Lan?”

“Prithee forgive me for deceiving thee, Sister Qulle. Had I not acted thusly, capturing this fiend would have been beyond me.”

“I...see...”

“But ah, what a splendid gambit. Thy dreadful reconciliation plan was a work of art. Even Dame Sara was taken aback. Surely, a proposal that disastrously tacky could only have been meant as a distraction.”

“...Huh? I-it was tacky?” Qulle froze with her eyes wide. After a moment, she slumped her shoulders. “I spent all night coming up with that...” Behind her glasses’ lenses, her eyes appeared to be swimming with tears.

“Now then, vile runt! Not even thou couldst escape from this!” Lan, in contrast, was on cloud nine. She stood before Annette’s bound-up body and chortled. “Brace thyself! Now, thou shalt know disgrace! I intend to return thy malice a hundred times over, and all the while, I shall call thee runt until—”

She trailed off midsentence.

A series of blades had just popped out of Annette’s clothes and sliced through the string.

“What.....?”

“I figured you were plotting something, yo.”

Annette gave her body a shake, and an avalanche of knives and drills came tumbling out of her skirt. She’d planned for just this eventuality.

She picked up the largest of the drills and flipped it on. With a loud *VRRRRRRRRRR*, it began spinning fast and hard enough to bore through human flesh with ease.

Lan’s face froze. “Ack—”

“I was nice enough to let you beg for your life once, but twice is a bridge too far, yo.”

“MY SINCEREST APOLOGIEEEEEEEES!”

Lan began fleeing, and Annette clutched her drill as she gave chase. The sound of a window shattering echoed from down the hallway, followed by Monika’s roar of “Quit breaking every damn thing you see!”

Sara and Qulle were the only two people left in the main hall.

“...I’m so sorry about this, Sara.”

“No, no... It’s not your fault...”

Both of them had been little more than spectators in the farce that had just played out.

“Actually, Sara, why don’t you and I be friends? I feel like we have a lot in common,” Qulle said. Her face was the portrait of exhaustion. “Honestly, you’re probably the only person across both teams who understands what I go through. I swear... Why do we surround ourselves with such lunatics?”

The look in Qulle’s eyes was so pitiable, there was no way Sara could have possibly turned her down.

That marked the beginning of Sara and Qulle’s relationship as conversation buddies. That said, over 80 percent of their chats involved Qulle saying “Get a load of this, Sara!” and griping about her teammates. She would complain about how Vindo and Lan never listened to her, about how Vics and Pharma kept going AWOL, about how she could never tell what was going on in Queneau’s head, and about how Lamplight’s members kept making fun of how tacky her ideas were.

It a lot of ways, Qulle was Avian’s peacemaker. The team’s members were all prideful to a fault, and the fact that they’d been able to cooperate at all despite not having a boss until just the month prior was entirely thanks to her.

That was who “Glide” Qulle was—smart, diligent, and the long-suffering brains behind Avian’s operation.



Annette muttered something.

“What?” asked Sara. She’d been too lost in thought to catch what Annette just said.

A fair bit of time had passed since they had found out about Avian getting wiped out, but Sara’s heart still ached. She knew that this was no time to be losing herself in sorrow, but whenever she let her mind wander, their smiles were always the first thing it dredged up.

“The fog,” Annette repeated, “is getting thicker.”

“I guess it is, yeah,” Sara said. Outside the window, their view of the town was becoming white and cloudy as the fog started to roll in.

With that, Annette sprang to her feet. “I’m heading out for a bit, yo.”

“Huh?” Sara said, surprised.

Annette hummed to herself as she strolled on past. All the while, she continued playing cat’s cradle.

At present, it was already two in the morning.

“Bro gave me some secret orders,” Annette said gleefully on her way out.

Before Sara had a chance to ask what those orders were, Annette had already charged out the door and vanished.



A thick fog hung over the city of Horough, and the view from the car window was so cloudy and white that it was like sitting in smoke. The fog had been coming in nightly of late, likely as a result of air pollution. All the charcoal the factories burned turned right into smoke and soot and dissolved into the air, and the sulfur dioxide gas the diesel cars emitted accumulated near the ground. That was what formed the visibility-hampering fog.

The Fend Commonwealth was one of the world’s foremost industrial powerhouses, and ever since the Industrial Revolution, it had been building massive factories all around Horough. In the century prior, the nation had been dubbed “the world’s workshop.” The Great War’s ravages had allowed the United States of Mouzaia to steal the title over to its own continent, but even now, the area around Fend’s capital was full of factories of all sorts.

As a result, though, the air pollution was really quite bad. Horough’s fog was heavy, thick, and deep, especially around the Houses of Parliament. Come nightfall, it was impossible to see farther than an inch in front of your face there.

“Seriously, what the hell,” Sybilla grumbled from the back seat. “How’s the

fog in Hurough this damn thick?”

““Shut up.””

She got her response from two directions simultaneously. Sitting to her side, there was a kindly looking woman dressed in a habit—Lotus Doll—and steering the car from up in the driver’s seat, there was a suit-clad boy wearing a top hat —Disintegrator Doll. The two Belias aides were taking Sybilla somewhere and sitting in a way that boxed her in. Another Belias car was following along behind them.

“Look, I’m not makin’ fun of your city or nothing,” Sybilla said, waving her hands defensively. “I’m just sayin’, aren’t you scared having to drive through the night fog like this?”

“You get used to it.” “It’s why we’re taking it slow.”

“Oh, huh.”

“There’s nothing for you to be worried about.” “But don’t even think about trying to use the fog to escape.”

The two aides spoke with perfect synergy. They differed in age and gender, and they didn’t look like siblings, either. There was something uncanny about seeing two people so wildly different sync their speech so precisely.

Sybilla laid her hands behind her head and crossed her legs. “Hey, as long as it’s safe, that’s all that—”

A loud *thump* sounded out.

The car shook, then skidded to a stop.

“““”””

There was a protracted silence.

It was hard to see in the fog, but it looked like something had just popped up in front of them.

“What the hell did we just hit?” Sybilla shouted.

The two aides cocked their heads. “““Who knows?”””

Disintegrator Doll stepped out of the car for a moment, then quickly returned.

“It was just a branch from one of the roadside trees. It must have fallen off,” he reported.

“That’s good to hear,” Lotus Doll murmured expressionlessly as they set off again like nothing had happened.

Something about those two really threw Sybilla off her game.

Eventually, the car came to a stop at a building just off the Turko River.

“We’re here, dear guest.” “This is where the Avian hideout we found is.”

The two aides explained the situation as Sybilla got out of the car. She traced her fingers across the car’s dented hood, then went inside.

Avian’s base was in an apartment, or as they called them in Fend, a flat. Immediately after the Industrial Revolution, the machine shops they had built around the Hurough outskirts gave rise to a huge population boom in the city. Word had it that the housing situation was so bad that they had to cram seven or eight people into a single tiny room. Things had gotten a lot better over the hundred-odd years since then, but even so, the building they’d arrived at was dark, cramped, and permeated with the smell of dust.

Apparently, Avian had set up shop in the second-floor corner unit of the seven-story building.

“This is where they were staying...” Sybilla gasped.

She opened the door.

Inside, the room was basically empty. There was a bed and a cabinet, nothing more.

“We already retrieved all their personal effects,” Lotus Doll explained. “Do you see any clues, dear guest? We’d like you to survey the scene.”

Sybilla searched the room. However, there wasn’t exactly that much to search. All of Avian’s belongings had already been removed, and the unit was only the size of a one-bedroom apartment. She decided to check behind the furniture.

“Huh? What’s this?”

When she stuck her hand beneath the bed, there was a clattering sound. She tried grabbing whatever it was, and when she pulled her hand out, she was holding a thick fountain pen.

“Looks like there were still some personal effects, after all.” Disintegrator Doll walked over and snatched away the pen. “We’ll hold on to this, just in case.”

“Hey, wait! I wasn’t done—”

Sybilla’s voice went rough, and she tried to reach for the pen. The moment she did, though, a pair of shadows moved in unison. The woman coiled her arm around Sybilla’s, and the boy wrapped his hand around Sybilla’s throat. It was a brilliant piece of work. In the blink of an eye, they had her completely subdued.

“You’re really starting...” “...to get on our nerves, dear guest.”

Each of her ears picked up a different threatening voice.

“——!”

With her body locked down like that, all Sybilla could do was groan.

I knew it. These guys are no pushovers!

The two dolls were first-rate players who’d protected their nation by helping Puppeteer capture scores of spies. Weaklings didn’t get to fight on the shadow war’s front lines.

“We aren’t allies by any stretch of imagination. Do remember that,” Lotus Doll said.

“It would be so trivial for us to kill you,” Disintegrator Doll said.

“Master Amelie watched you.”

“She gauged your skills.”

“You’re third-rate.”

“Laughably weak.”

“Have you ever actually beaten a spy?”

“I doubt it.”

“A nobody who only knows violence.”

“A nobody with a few hit man tricks.”

“Maybe you and your friends ganged up.”

“Maybe that let you take down a single foe.”

“That’s the most you could hope to do.”

“...Is what Master Amelie determined.”

“In other words, to us...”

“To first-rate spies like us...”

““...you’re an insignificant third-rate failure.””

Sybilla couldn’t help but click her tongue.

The analysis they were whispering in her ears was all indisputably true. Most of Lamplight’s members, Sybilla included, had never taken down an enemy spy solo. Their only real accomplishments of note were taking down Corpse’s apprentice as a group and defeating a handful of civilians who’d been under Purple Ant’s control. Not once had they ever beaten an active-duty spy. They hadn’t even been able to beat Avian.

What was truly impressive, though, was the analytical abilities it would have taken Amelie to piece that together over the course of their brief interaction. Deduction alone couldn’t have gotten her there. She probably operated under similar principles as Klaus—her mountains of experience had honed her intuition, allowing her to jump straight past logic and arrive directly at the truth.

It made sense, then, why two people as skilled as Lotus Doll and Disintegrator Doll were so slavishly devoted to her.

“...Is that right?” Sybilla muttered lifelessly. They let her go, and she plopped her butt down on the ground.

In the end, she never managed to get the fountain pen back. “This guest of ours has some awfully sticky fingers,” Disintegrator Doll said as he passed the pen to his partner, Lotus Doll.

After taking it, Lotus Doll said “I’ll report in to HQ” and then stepped away.

Sybilla let out a long exhalation, then shook her head.

“Are you sad?” Disintegrator Doll asked.

“What?”

Sybilla looked up at him.

The boy took off his top hat and rotated it between his fingers. “I’m asking how much it hurts to lose your countrymen. Enough to make you sob into your pillow for three days straight? Were you dating any of them?”

“...The hell are you on about?”

“Our relationship is antagonistic at the moment, but...once this is all over, I’d be happy to at least hear you out.” He put his hat back on. “We don’t have time for that now, of course. Protecting Prince Darryn is our top priority. I expect you to pull your weight.”

“.....”

Sybilla wondered what emotions he’d felt as he said those words.

...I don’t get these people one bit.

It was a peculiar feeling, but for the time being, she just quietly replied, “I know that.”

At that point, Lotus Doll came back. “We have new orders.”

She started out by whispering in Disintegrator Doll’s ear. “Got it,” he said with a nod. The two of them stood side by side and turned to look at Sybilla.

Disintegrator Doll smiled ominously. “It’s time for our next mission, dear guest.”

“Cool, what is it? If it’ll help us find Lan, I’ll do any—”

“Strip.”

“.....”

““We said, strip.””

That was the last thing she’d been expecting the aides to demand of her.

“Wait, what? What? Whaaaaaaaaaaaat?”



Thirty minutes prior, Klaus and Amelie had been driving through a Fend suburb as well. The two of them were sitting in the back seat and looking straight ahead, their gazes never meeting.

“Our foremost priority is to ensure Prince Darryn’s safety,” Amelie dispassionately explained. “He’s as important to this nation as the sun in the sky is. We have a responsibility to immediately apprehend any who would cause him harm. That’s the duty we’re charged with.”

“And you suspect that Avian, and thus Lan, is going after him,” Klaus replied, sounding thoroughly annoyed. “But that isn’t possible. The Din Republic has no reason for wanting Prince Darryn dead.”

“Why did Avian attack him, then?”

“Your premise is fundamentally flawed. Show me your evidence.”

“No.”

“...Fine. In any case, we need to find Lan as fast as humanly possible. Somebody else is pulling the strings here, and having Lan tell us what’s really going on is going to be the best way to protect the crown prince.”

“What an awfully convenient hypothesis.”

“Is it, now?”

“Well, I suppose that doesn’t really matter. We need to capture Cloud Drift—before she has another chance to attack Prince Darryn,” Amelie coldly declared. Klaus just shook his head.

The two of them continued trying to sound each other out for a little while, and as they did, the car made its way onto a mountain trail. After driving up the road for a bit, it arrived at a clearing. The mountain overlooked the capital, and about halfway up, a small area had been partially developed. The ground was flat, and there was a modest two-story building with a crane, an excavator, and other heavy machinery.

“They were planning on building a resort hotel here,” Klaus explained, “but the plans fell through before construction was finished, and the site’s been abandoned for nearly four years. The building there is the admin cabin they built to oversee the construction from.”

Amelie got out of the car and let out an impressed murmur. “So you’re saying that up here in the middle of nowhere—”

“That’s right,” Klaus confirmed. “The Din Republic’s been using it as a comms station.”

Amelie headed into the admin cabin with five of her subordinates in tow. Their destination was a room tucked away in the corner of the second floor.

They passed through what used to be an office and found the door. It was locked.

Klaus took the key he'd brought with him and opened it up.

Inside the tiny room, there was a large transmitter with a blinking red light. It was clearly drawing power, and when they flipped the light switch, the whole room lit up.

"This is where Cloud Drift sent her final message?" Amelie asked.

"That's right," Klaus replied from the back of the group. "She told our messenger that everyone on the team but her was dead, then went dark. That watch store where you picked up Sybilla was the first clue we've gotten as to her whereabouts."

Amelie's subordinates got to work ransacking the comms station. As they did, Amelie stayed right by Klaus's side. She brushed her gloved hand across the transmitter and tilted her head. "Is this sand? No, it's likely bits of bread..."

Sure enough, the device was positively covered in breadcrumbs.

"And is this a label? The handwriting differs from Cloud Drift's."

Hanging from the device's front, there was a large piece of paper. It read *Hold out for as long as you can!*

Amelie frowned. "What's the deal with the sappy advice?"

"Beats me," Klaus replied. "Lan is an odd one. I can never tell what she's thinking."

"....."

Amelie stared motionlessly at the transmitter. Then she called for a chair, plopped herself down, and went silent.

Klaus carefully observed her. He had close to zero intel on Belias, meaning that they must have come to prominence recently. Purple Ant's massacre in Mitario had caused dizzying shifts in the espionage landscape. The question was: Exactly how skilled was that Gothic witch of a woman?

"There's an odor," Amelie said. "Sewage, most likely. However, it hasn't

permeated the entire admin cabin evenly. Somebody's been frequently coming in and out." She looked over at Klaus. "Have you been keeping this building under watch twenty-four seven?"

"No, we haven't. We don't have the manpower for that, not with how far this place is from the city."

"Interesting. From here on out, Belias will be keeping this comms station under constant surveillance."

She snatched away Klaus's key, then began briskly giving orders to her people.

Then she ran her fingers along the transmitter once more. "By the way, dear guest, as far as Cloud Drift's profile goes..."

"Sure, I can give you a basic over—"

"'Cloud Drift' Lan. Age sixteen. Has a lively and honest personality but a habit of making thoughtless comments. Generally cowardly, but with firm convictions, and operates mainly through ambushes and other covert actions. Those are all just my conjectures, but I trust they're largely accurate?"

"....."

That was enough to strike Klaus speechless. The answer Amelie had given was all but perfect.

"I'll take that as a yes." Amelie nodded in satisfaction. "Cloud Drift needs to be constantly alert, but she also wants to get in touch with her allies. As I see it, she's been using her specialized hiding techniques to stay out of sight as she travels back and forth between this comms station and a spot where spies are liable to gather."

"Impressive. I came to the same conclusion. I haven't had any success figuring out where that might be, but—"

"That's because you don't know Horough like I do."

Amelie picked up a small piece of rubbish from the comms room floor. It was a scrap of red cloth less than an inch long.

"This came from a Claudinette carpet. They only sell this material to palatial buildings at least twenty thousand square feet, and they only started offering

this color seven months ago. With a little digging, we should be able to narrow down the location Cloud Drift has been staking out. As far as I know, though, there's only one place it might be." Amelie laid out her hypothesis without so much as a wasted breath. "Heron Manor. That's where Cloud Drift's been going."

"....."

After saying her piece, Amelie strode out of the comms room without so much as waiting for Klaus's response. As Klaus watched her go, he silently delivered his verdict.

The woman had earned nearly perfect marks. As far as players in the shadow war went, "Puppeteer" Amelie was decidedly first-rate.

"I have another job for you and your people, dear guest."

"Hmm?"

Amelie gave Klaus an unnerving smile. There was something almost sadistic about it.

"I'm going to need you to dance like there's no tomorrow."



Heron Manor was a mansion belonging to the wealthy David Kris. He was a member of the fabled bourgeoisie who'd come into prominence managing large factories, and every weekend, he would throw a big soiree. The parties were called Heron's Banquets, and though the membership fee was steep, the Banquet was open to any who could afford it. The event had made quite a name for itself, and each week, over two hundred politicians, bureaucrats, and wealthy people of all stripes gathered together to attend.

The party's main event was its ballroom dancing. Dinner was served buffet style, and much of the hall was full of people dancing the waltz to a live orchestra. Make no mistake, though—the dancing was no casual affair. For the participants, it was a trial. The host, David Kris, had a saying: "Seeing a man dance will tell you everything you need to know about him." When you watched someone dance, you could tell a lot about their pedigree, their

abilities, and the way they treated others. Thus, you could ostracize any and all impostors—people who came from poor families who couldn't afford dance instructors, people who lacked the talent to learn, and people who didn't possess social connections to find a good partner alike. Though the accuracy of Kris's theory was debatable, the people who attended his parties tended to share his beliefs. No matter how shrewd someone was when it came to business, anyone who couldn't waltz well would be mocked and struggle to find a partner. Conversely, a strong performance on the dance floor could take an entrepreneur with no meaningful accomplishments to their name and give them promise in the eyes of the crowd.

The Heron's Banquets looked elegant at first glance, but some referred to them as the quintessence of high society.

The evidence suggested that "Cloud Drift" Lan had been frequenting Heron Manor. The parties' structure made them the perfect spot for spies to congregate, so given the fact that she was hoping to run into her countrymen, Heron Manor was the ideal place for her.

There was a good chance she was going to be there that very night, but there was one problem. Given how guarded Lan was being, there was a danger that she would hide herself too well and they would end up missing her. If they wanted to avoid that outcome, they needed to stand out as much as possible. And there was just one way to do that—dancing the waltz more beautifully than anyone else in Heron Manor!

—is how the situation was explained to Sybilla.

"...I mean, I get it, but like," she grumbled in a subdued mutter. At the moment, she was frowning and holding a certain something that Belias had procured for her. "Even so, what the hell?! Did they run outta cloth when they were makin' this or something?!"

The something was a crimson dress.

The moment Sybilla spread it out, she could immediately tell how daring its design was. Its backside had almost no fabric at all, leaving the wearer's back almost completely bare, and the front wasn't exactly modest, either. Any way she wore it, it would undoubtably leave her entire clavicle exposed. And while

the skirt section did have multiple layers of red cloth laid over each other, each swath had large slits cut in it, as well. It was the kind of dress that only a bona fide harlot would actually wear in public.

Sybilla tried to impress that fact upon the aides, but according to Lotus Doll, dresses like that were well within the party's norms. After handing it over, Lotus Doll and Disintegrator Doll made their demand again, sounding somewhat annoyed.

"Just put it on already." "This is the easiest way for you to stand out."

"I feel like it'll make me conspicuous in a *bad* way..."

"We'll be dancing right alongside you." "You'll have plenty of backup."

With that, they shoved her into a side room in Belias's headquarters. The room was all but empty. It had a pair of small shelves, but there was nothing on them.

"I swear, I'm gonna get you guys. You're gonna pay for this if it's the last goddamn thing I do."

Rather than lending an ear to Sybilla's complaints, though, the aides simply closed the door on her. Then they locked the room from the outside. Apparently, that was where they wanted her to wait until the party started. The room didn't have any windows, so escaping wasn't really an option. Over in the corner, they'd left her some water and a few biscuits.

...How the hell do you put on a dress, again?

In addition to the dress, they'd also given her a corset and some chest pads to wear, but she couldn't remember how to use any of them. She'd learned how back at her academy, but she used those skills so infrequently that they'd completely slipped her mind.

As she racked her brain, she looked up and made eye contact with someone wholly unexpected.

It was Klaus.

Klaus had already finished changing. He was wearing a very white dress shirt, a very black jacket, and a dark bow tie. At the moment, he was using the full-

length mirror over in the corner to adjust his collar.

“.....”

Sybilla gave him a wordless scowl.

The fact that the two of them were meeting back up was all well and good, but there was one big problem.

“...You know they told me to change in here, right?”

“That makes sense. I just finished getting dressed myself.”

“Get the hell out.”

“I can’t. My instructions are to wait here until it’s time for us to leave.”

Again, the room was empty save for a pair of shelves. There was nothing she could use to obstruct his view.

“...I’ll step away from the mirror and turn around,” Klaus suggested. “I’m afraid that’ll have to be good enough.”

“You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me...”

Sybilla slumped her shoulders and buried her face in her hands, but she couldn’t bring herself to demand that Belias offer her a different changing room. They were all elite spies there. Gritting her teeth and putting up with it was the professional thing to do.

She gave up and started getting changed. She’d picked up on the fact that Klaus didn’t have much of a libido, and whatever desires he did have, he’d never once directed them toward her or the others. She did trust him not to do anything sketchy.

However, that wasn’t to say she had *no* reservations.

She felt her heartbeat accelerate as she began taking off her clothes. She glanced over her shoulder just to be sure, but Klaus remained utterly motionless. She was taken by an odd sense of disappointment, but she wasn’t at all sure what kind of reaction she would have wanted out of him, so she decided not to think too hard about it.

The dress’s measurements were perfect, and memories of how to don such

garments slowly came back to her as she slid the bright-red silk over her skin. Once she was almost done putting it on, though, a realization dawned on her.

“...Hey, you got a sec?”

“What is it?”

Klaus walked backward toward her.

“Wh-what the hell, man?! Gimme some space!”

“The room is bugged. If we’re going to talk, we need to do it quietly.”

Sybilla’s face went red-hot, and she shook it as she hurriedly leaped away. All the while, Klaus was as calm as could be.

Sybilla took a deep breath to compose herself. “N-nah, it’s not about the mission,” she said at her normal speaking volume. “I need you to do up the zipper on my back. I can’t reach it on my own.”

In order to allow the dress to hug its wearer’s skin as tightly as possible, it had one last zipper to keep the whole thing pinned together. Sybilla wasn’t happy about it, but she had no choice but to show Klaus her back.

“Got it. I’m turning around,” Klaus said. Then he did just that.

Sybilla revealed her exposed back to Klaus. When recollections of how little fabric there was on that side flashed through her head, she hastily bit her lip to shut that train of thought down. At least she wasn’t showing him her ass.

“.....”

For a little while, Klaus didn’t go for the zipper.

Sybilla turned around and glared at him. “Quit starin’.”

“...Right. Sorry.”

She saw how earnest his expression was, so she knew he wasn’t thinking anything untoward.

She gave her body a light twist and looked at her own back in the mirror. It was pale, slender, and devoid of any excess fat. However, though it was difficult to spot at first glance, there was also a thin line just above her hips.

“The others all know about it. I’ve had it for a long time.”

The line was a scar. Sybilla had once taken a knife wound there, and the injury’s traces still lay across her waist. Fortunately, the dress cleanly covered up that spot.

“It made me think,” Klaus said softly.

“Huh?”

“That scar is a testament to your bravery and your kindness. I know it’s not something to comment on lightly, but I feel like it’s something you should be proud of.”

“Thanks. But you should save the compliments for Grete,” Sybilla replied with a laugh.

Klaus said nothing.

The instructors at her academy had probably told him all about the spy they called Pandemonium. They had told him about Sybilla’s origins—that she was the eldest daughter of a vicious gangster.

After the war, there was a group that had continually looted and robbed in the Din capital. The nation was a mess, and they took full advantage of that fact to line their pockets by attacking and robbing anyone they found, even women and children. What’s more, the group’s leader was a genius when it came to killing. He slaughtered his way through anyone who crossed him like it was a game. Uwe Appel was an active politician at the time, and to borrow Uwe’s words, it was like the man was descended from the Devil himself.

“...The Cannibals.”

That was the gang’s name.

Sybilla laughed self-mockingly. “In the world I lived in, violence was just a fact of life. I don’t even remember who it was that cut me anymore. All I know is that I’m lucky I got off with just a scar.”

“.....”

“Back there, it was steal or be stolen from.”

Sybilla's father had murdered people before her very eyes, her father's enemies had gone after her and her siblings to get back at him, and her father had committed acts of violence against her himself. It was the kind of city where as soon as you set foot outside, you could get beaten up for the sole crime of being too young to fight back.

"Have you told the others about your past yet?" Klaus asked.

Sybilla shrugged, a little more dramatically than she meant to. "It ain't exactly the kind of thing that comes up in small talk."

I'm gonna be carryin' this scar for the rest of my life.

As that thought crossed her mind, Klaus gently reached for the zipper.

"Hold on," Sybilla said softly.

"What's wrong?"

Sybilla gave Klaus's puzzled question a quiet reply. "Could you touch it? W-with, like, your palm...?"

Klaus nodded and moved his hand over to the scar. His fingers hesitantly brushed it, and a moment later, he gently pressed his palm against it.

Warmth slowly spread from that spot, like she'd just huddled up to an open-air fire.

It felt kind of nice.

"...Are you still donating to that orphanage?" Klaus asked in a soft voice.

Sybilla smiled. "Yup. All my bonuses go straight there."

"That's bold."

"I don't want to worry about figurin' out specific amounts. Plus, I get my living expenses paid separately."

"If you're ever hard up, let me know."

"I'll be sure to do that. But I'm not stoppin' those donations any time soon." Sybilla looked away bashfully. "That place is the closest thing I've got to a home. They're the ones who sheltered me and my kid siblings. Sometimes, I like to close my eyes and just picture it. My donations, makin' sure my brother and

sister can eat as much as they want... Them, smilin' like idiots... Even though I can't see 'em, that's enough."

When Sybilla imagined her siblings running around happily, it filled her heart with warmth. That was what drove her.

"That's enough. And that's why I don't want anyone takin' anything more from me." Sybilla's lips trembled.

Those words came from the heart. After a childhood where she'd had everything stolen from her time and again, that was the one desire she'd never let go of. When she said it, though, images of the Avian members' corpses flitted through her mind.

Sybilla pointed at the zipper and gestured for Klaus to do his thing. He quickly removed his hand from her back and pulled the zipper up. The dress tightened around her body.

She did a twirl in front of the mirror, and the dress's skirt spun a little. She'd initially assumed that she would look ridiculous in it, but it was actually surprisingly decent.

"I'm ready—ready to get revenge for what was taken."

Klaus's sole reply to that was a brief "Magnificent."



After waiting around for five hours, Belias took Sybilla and Klaus to Heron Manor. The building was as massive as a palace, with a rose garden stretching from its front gate to its entrance that took three whole minutes to traverse by car. When they opened the door, they were greeted by dozens of servants. Once Sybilla was done getting ready in the powder room, the servants led them to the main hall.

The hall was a gigantic atrium that could have fit at least five tennis courts in it with ease. A chandelier glittered from its ceiling, and the orchestra standing atop the main stage started playing as though to welcome them in. People poured into the hall without end and began exchanging pleasantries and small talk. Aristocrats and politicians numbered among their ranks, of course, but so

did movie stars and comedians. There was a buffet laden with rows of delicacies near the stage.

That extravagant dance party was only made possible because of the ludicrous wealth its host had hoarded by fulfilling the government's special wartime procurements. Upon seeing its excesses, Sybilla kind of understood how the communists calling for a revolution felt.

At six PM, the orchestra stopped playing, and the guest of honor, David Kris, said a few brief words. From there, everyone was free to eat and drink as they pleased, but unsurprisingly, the main center of attention was the dance floor. A number of mixed-gender pairs headed straight for the wide-open space in the center of the hall, and the magnates in attendance turned their gazes toward the floor so they could watch the evening's festivities.

Sybilla and Klaus were standing right at the center of it all. Each dancer faced their partner and stood with their backs straight. The massive chandelier hung directly over their heads.

"I knew it'd be embarrassing, havin' all these people starin' at me," Sybilla said.

"Just follow my lead, and you'll do fine," Klaus replied.

Then Sybilla heard a voice coming from her earring—or rather, from the radio embedded within it.

"Do you read me, dear guest?"

The voice was Amelie's. She was watching the two of them from somewhere in the venue.

Sybilla lightly tapped the earring. That was her way of signaling *I read you*.

"We're searching the entire grounds, but we've yet to locate Cloud Drift."

"Figures. She's pretty damn good at hiding."

"Indeed. We suspect she's either cleverly disguised herself or is using her formidable hiding techniques to remain out of sight. In short, you two are up."

"Right."

“Be conspicuous, dear guest. Conspicuous enough to draw Lan out of hiding.”

Sybilla slumped her shoulders. “So basically, we’re just bait. That’s fucked up.”

“It’s the only choice we had. Just put up with it until we find Lan.”

Klaus didn’t exactly look pleased, either. The fact that they were having to obey another team’s orders was causing him no shortage of stress.

“You would do well not to underestimate this manor,” Amelie said, sounding a little vexed. *“Just so you know, standing out here will take more than your average dancing skills. Entrepreneurs and declining big fish gather here from across the nation in hopes of turning their fortunes around.”*

Sybilla shot sidelong glances at the nearby pairs. Many of the pairs contained men in dapper new suits breathing excitedly and women whose faces were red from the sheer tension of it all, but there were also pairs standing tall and composed. For the latter group, this likely wasn’t their first rodeo.

The point of the party was to let the magnates judge people by the quality of their dancing. It sounded laughable at first, but in truth, it was surprisingly logical. By and large, there were three types of people who were good at dancing: people from reputable families who’d received a special education from a young age, people with the wealth or connections to hire good instructors, and people with the raw ingenuity to improve at dance through self-study. As such, any newcomers to the scene invariably drew attention.

The orchestra’s conductor gently gripped his baton.

The pairs gathered in the hall bowed to each other, then placed their arms around each other’s shoulders.

“When dancing, two people have to act as one. No matter how perfectly Bonfire leads, an unskilled partner will cause his footwork to fall apart. The two people need to make sure their coordination is impeccable,” Amelie warned her. *“It won’t be easy, dancing a perfect waltz without any sort of proper practice.”*

Sybilla grinned. “Whaddaya think? Sounds like they’re worried about our coordination.”

“It would seem so.”

Sybilla offered Klaus her hand. “That’s pretty fuckin’ funny.”

“That it is.”

Klaus took Sybilla’s left hand and slid his left arm around her waist.

The conductor brandished his baton, and the violinists all began playing dance music. The piece was in triple time, and it rang light and resonant through the hall.

As the performance began, Sybilla, Klaus, and the other pairs began moving. The mixed-gender pairs started rotating counterclockwise across the floor. With wine glasses in hand, the spectators glanced at each of the two dozen-odd pairs, but soon enough, they all found a single duo demanding their attention: Klaus and Sybilla.

“Hmm...?”

There was a fair bit of surprise in Amelie’s voice.

In that moment, the two of them were shining brighter than any other duo by far.

Neither of them had spent much time at all ballroom dancing. Klaus’s old teammate “Flamefanner” Heide had taught him the basics, and Sybilla had spent a handful of hours studying it at her academy, but that was about it. However, there was something they had that the other dancers didn’t—their outstanding athletic skills and honed physical abilities. Klaus led powerfully, and Sybilla maintained her posture from the tips of her toes all the way through her core to her fingertips as she followed, turning one moment then coming to a perfect pause the next. The tempo of their movements was nothing short of exquisite. They had the crowd’s full attention, and they moved gallantly to the center of the hall—

“Huh?” “Hm?”

—at which point they *tripped and tumbled to the ground*.



While the Heron’s Banquet was going on, things at Belias’s headquarters, the

Kashard Doll Workshop, were silent. Most of its members were away, and the few who remained were hard at work poring over documents. The only sounds that filled the building were the unfurling of maps and the turning of pages as the Belias members tried to use Cloud Drift's previous activities to deduce where she might be.

Down in the basement, a girl was waiting for an opportunity to get her hands on some intel.

...I'm surprised at how decently they treat captured spies around these parts.

That girl was Thea. As Belias's hostage, Thea was in the middle of enjoying a tea cake in her isolation cell. Despite being a cell, though, the room was clean and furnished with a desk, a chair, and even a few books for her to occupy the time with. Once evening fell, her captors brought her a meal replete with tea and cakes. Her hands were shackled, but she had enough freedom of movement to get the food into her mouth.

An experience in her past had left her with zero good memories of being a hostage, but Belias had been downright gentlemanly with her, and they showed no signs of planning on torturing her. They'd taken her freedom, but that was all. As far as she could tell, they meant her no harm.

In that case, perhaps I should be a bit greedy...

She silently ran the cost-benefit analysis. Any tiny scraps of information she could get on Belias would be invaluable. She summoned up her courage and directed a question past the cell door. "Excuse me? I'm so sorry to bother you."

The only person outside her cell was the single surly guard sitting across from it. He was a young man with glasses and a lean face. ".....What?" he replied, annoyed.

"Would you mind bringing me a damp towel? This sweat is killing me. The nights here are cold, but it's terribly warm down here in the basement."

"....."

"I know it's rude of me to ask, but it would mean so much if you could wipe me down. My hands can't reach behind my back, you see."

She writhed a little and gave him her most bewitching smile. However, the man's reaction was ice-cold. "There's something you should know."

"...Hmm?"

"The only reason you're still alive is because of Bonfire. Harming you and making an enemy out of him would be more trouble than it's worth. If not for that, we'd be torturing you this very moment."

"Oh no, a threat? How ruthless."

"Sorry, but your transparent tricks aren't going to work."

The man shook his head as though to say the conversation was over. Thea had shot her shot, and she couldn't even get him to look at her. All she'd done was failed to get a conversation started, but she felt defeat's cold sting all the same.

These people aren't messing around...

She hadn't been pulling out all the stops, but she could tell now that Belias wasn't the kind of opponent that would fall for a half-hearted attempt at seduction. Making haphazard passes at a counterintelligence unit seemed like a bad idea. When the man threatened her, he'd meant it—at the moment, Thea was being granted her tenure on life by the slimmest of margins. The equilibrium there was a tenuous one. If Belias changed their minds, they could snuff Thea out with trivial ease. Any attempts she made at gathering intel could well prove fatal. She was safe for now, but she had no proof that that would continue being the case.

Without meaning to, she bit her lip.

"Poor thing," the man muttered. "...It has to wear away at you, having your own foolish countrymen turn to base terrorism like that."

In all likelihood, those words weren't actually meant for Thea. He was simply commenting on the genuine pity he felt for her.

That was why it hit Thea so hard.

Foolish? What does this man think he's talking about?

She could feel heat rising up from the pit of her stomach, and she had to

choke back an involuntary urge to refute his statement. She didn't care what he said about *her*, but Avian was a different story.

As Thea sat there with her life in immediate peril, her thoughts turned to a woman: “Feather” Pharma, an Avian member she'd gotten especially close with.



It was sixteen days into the honeymoon, and for better or for worse, two weeks had been plenty for the two teams to abandon their modesty around each other.

Once they finished their training for the day, one of the Avian members made an unexpected declaration.

“Tonight, me and the other ladies are gonna have a sleepover here, 'kaaay?”

““““Go home!!”””””

The speaker was a plump woman with long, unkempt hair—“Feather” Pharma.

With her as their ringleader, the female Avian members—her, Lan, and Qulle—ignored Lamplight's demands as per usual and swarmed up the stairs to the second floor. Whenever one of them found an empty room, they would ooh and aah and start setting their luggage down.

By that point, there was no stopping them.

Dinner and bath time that evening were a good five times noisier than usual, and when night fell, Qulle made the inane suggestion that they stay up all night playing I Spy, Lan found herself getting chased around by Annette again, and Pharma started pursuing Erna after deciding to use her as a body pillow.

By the time Pharma visited Thea's bedroom, it was already past midnight.

“Hey, Thea, hey, Grete—let's have us a girls' talk!” Pharma said excitedly.

She had Erna's limp body tucked under her arm. Erna herself was fast asleep. She'd been unable to escape from Pharma, and after getting captured, she'd decided to just accept her fate as a body pillow and dozed off.

“Can you please at least knock?” Thea said with a frown.

“...There really is no controlling you, is there?”

The other person with Thea was a girl with bobbed red hair and a glass-like fragility who occasionally stopped by Thea’s room—“Daughter Dearest” Grete. She frowned as well.

Pharma plopped down on the bed and laid Erna’s sleeping head on her lap. Thea sat down on the bed as far from Pharma as she could, and Grete took a seat in a chair.

“I certainly have nothing against talking about romance,” Thea said as an icebreaker, “but honestly, what about Avian? You are a coed team, after all. Have any love affairs ever blossomed in your neck of the woods?”

“I’m curious, as well. Love between spies is a topic I’m quite interested in...” Grete gave Pharma a fervent look. Given she was madly in love with Klaus, it was no wonder she was so keen to hear about the subject.

Pharma laid a finger on her chin. “I wouldn’t say never, buuut that’s not really our vibe.”

“Oh?”

“Fascinating...”

“Vics is a total hunk, don’t get me wrong, but I could never get serious with a teammate. It’d be too messy. And the others probably all feel the same way.”

Thea and Grete both let out impressed noises. The two of them spent most of their time with the same insular group, so there was something really exciting about getting to hear gossip from outside their own circle.

Pharma playfully went on. “For me, see, what really gets me going is falling in love with my enemies.”

““What...?””

“You know how sometimes you’re in a foreign country, and you have to infiltrate a hostile org? Well, when I do, I like to get real close with one of the guys in charge.”

“Isn’t that incredibly dangerous, though?” Thea chided her.

“Look, I like what I like. Here, I can show you.”

Pharma rose from the bed and spun in place.

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

It didn’t look as though she’d done anything special, but something about the air seemed to have fundamentally changed. Thea’s heartbeat quickened, and her body broke out in a damp sweat. Her eyes started drying up, at which point she realized that she’d been forgetting to blink. She couldn’t move an inch, yet at the same time, every alarm bell in her head was going off.

To be blunt, she was distressed. She didn’t know why, but there was no denying it.

“Isn’t it unsettling?” Pharma let out an amused laugh. “It’s just a bit of psychological manipulation. I’m using subtle movements of my body to make men feel uneasy so they become dependent on me. I love it. That’s what really gets my blood flowing, you see,” she said, casually stating the outrageous. There was an ominous smile plastered across her face. “It’s oh so stimulating, you know. *Having love and lust all swirling together behind enemy lines—one wrong move means you’re dead.*”

Her eyes were filled with a deranged sort of glee. She gazed at Thea and Grete for a little while to gauge their reactions.

“.....”

The ensuing silence lasted for a good long while. Thea cocked her head. She wasn’t sure what Pharma’s aim was.

Then Pharma let out an excited “Ooh, right!” and clapped her hands together. “Since we’re all here, we should get everyone together and see who has the raunchiest story!” She shifted Erna’s head off her lap and laid it to the side, then charged out of the room.

Thea and Grete stared blankly after her.

“...Well, she certainly stays true to her desires.”

“...Perhaps too much so.”

At that point, there was really nothing else they could say.

From then on, Pharma often slept over at Heat Haze Palace and made no small amount of trouble for the girls. As far as spies went, she was a good deal more touchy-feely than most. She would wrap people up in embraces with no regard for the time or place, and she had zero qualms about barging into people's private spaces.

Thinking back now, her behavior probably stemmed from the unshakable confidence she had in her abilities. She used everything from her respiration, her tone, the way she moved her fingers, the way she turned her neck, and the myriad rhythms, timings, and spacings thereof to send people's emotions into disarray. Merely standing across from someone was enough for her to toy with their heart.

That was who "Feather" Pharma was—a fearless mentalist and a master of cajolment.



.....What an odd, odd person she was.

Pharma came across as gentle, but in truth, she had the most extreme talent in all of Avian. Thea had the ability to forge amicable relationships with her enemies, but what Pharma did was something else altogether. She got people addicted to her and dominated them into partnerships that way.

Thea had learned a lot from her.

She shifted her attention back to her cell. After observing every last one of its details, she slowly closed her eyes. As she feigned sleep, she placed a hand up to her ear and focused her senses.

It didn't take long for her to figure out what had changed.

There are fewer footsteps up in the hallway than before. Most of Belias is out doing fieldwork.

Once she finished her analysis, she sucked in a deep breath.

If I want to make a move, it's now or never...!

Trying to gather intel from an enemy base was a risky move, and the guard had *just* reprimanded her. Given her weak mental fortitude, she had no confidence she could pull it off. Making the attempt would be totally out of character for her.

I have to take joy in being behind enemy lines.

I have to let my pounding heart drive a surge of lust.

“I’m sorry to keep bothering you,” Thea called to the man in the hallway. “But I’m afraid the stress is getting to me. I really need to use the bathroom.”

The response came immediately. The guard sounded just as annoyed as before. “...Can’t you just hold it in?”

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but I really can’t,” Thea replied with a smile. “You wouldn’t want anything to happen, would you? If my boss came back and found my clothes all soiled, I fear it wouldn’t reflect very well on you.”

It was silent for a bit.

Eventually, the cell door swung open, and a woman dressed in a suit came in. She wore a serious expression and looked to be in her midtwenties. Another Belias member, no doubt.

“I’ll take you there in his stead, dear guest.”

She briskly unfastened Thea’s shackles, then replaced them with a different set of shackles and a leash. Apparently, they were going to keep her restrained while she went back and forth. Considering that she was a hostage, it was a logical enough measure.

Thea smiled merrily. “I get a woman to escort me? How lovely. It would have been embarrassing having a man come along.”

“Master’s orders,” the woman responded in a businesslike tone. “We like to avoid running into any issues. There are some men who get loose lips around women as attractive as you.”

“How wonderfully sensible. Perhaps I should be taking notes.”

“There’s a reason we all respect her so much.”

After replying, the woman went silent as though to make it abundantly clear that she wasn't going to give away any unnecessary information.

The people here are like stone walls, Thea thought as they went down the corridor. Just like the guard, the woman wasn't giving her an inch. Plus, seduction was going to become that much harder now that she wasn't dealing with a man. *But the thing is, no human is infallible.*

Thea chuckled and put on her most mature smile. "Are you sure that won't backfire, though?"

"Huh?"

"After all—you prefer women yourself, don't you?"

The woman whirled around and stared at Thea in astonishment. The look on her face was one of pure shock, and Thea met it with a composed smile.

"How could you—?"

"I can tell these things. Haven't you ever seen someone and you just *knew*, despite not knowing why?"

That was a lie.

Thea had no ability to peer into someone's heart that quickly. She'd simply made a guess based on the level of respect the woman had shown toward Amelie. However, that was fine. The lie was all she needed, regardless of whether she had any basis for her claims. Just to say something unexpected enough to draw the other party's attention and make their eyes go wide. Just to shake her opponent with how confidently she was willing to state it.

Because once she'd stared them in the eye long enough, Thea *did* have the power to peer into their heart.

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

As Thea whispered silently to herself, she took a step toward the woman and gave her the kind of smile one would a close friend.

"Shall we have us a little chat in the bathroom?"

"Huh? What—what're you—?" the woman stammered, glancing down in

embarrassment.

“This must be fate at work. I have a feeling that you and I are going to hit it off splendidly.”

Thea reached out with her shackled hand and stroked the woman's cheek.

Once she'd looked into someone's heart, Thea had never once failed to turn them into putty in her hands.



Over at Heron Manor, the worst dance in the manor's entire history was just getting started.

“Sybilla, you need to gently face the moon like an injured heron fighting through the pain.”

“How the hell’s that supposed to tell me ANYTHING?!”

“Then you need to go left as though you were going right.”

"See, now I think you're just doin' this shit on purpose!"

Klaus's instructions were a good ten times more abstract than normal, and Sybilla, for her part, was making no efforts to keep her voice down as she let him know how she felt about that fact. The spectators around the hall could do nothing but stare blankly at them. Each and every one of them was thinking the same thing.

~~~~~"What a pair of complete oddballs..."~~~~~

Their bafflement was understandable. The duo had performed flawlessly at the start, but ever since they took that big spill, they'd been completely out of sync. Under normal circumstances, people who danced that poorly were simply kicked out of the hall. The strange thing was, though, that each side of the pair was clearly a skilled dancer. Each movement they made spoke to their well-trained cores, and the way they used the tempo made it clear that they were no amateurs.

For all that, however, their chemistry was atrocious. It was like they were on two totally different pages. The direction each party wanted to move and the

way they wanted to time their steps never seemed to line up, and they constantly bumped into each other and fell down all over again. The spectators had never seen dancing that erratic, and they had no idea how to respond.

In the end, the two of them both lost their balance at once—

“Hmm?” “Ah!” ““Y-you two?!””

—and the Sybilla-Klaus pair ran straight into the pair dancing beside them, comprising Lotus Doll and Disintegrator Doll. The four of them all crashed into a nearby table, yanking down its tablecloth and sending its plates full of food tumbling to the floor.

Sybilla reached out to try to break her fall, but she collided with Lotus Doll, and Klaus’s back slammed into Disintegrator Doll. They all tumbled ingloriously beneath the table.

*“...Well, I suppose that’s certainly one way to make yourselves conspicuous,”* Amelie said in exasperation through the radio. *“I see now. The Greatest Spy in the World... When he truly gets going, I suppose nobody can keep up.”*

Despite the situation, her analysis was as composed as ever.

Sybilla brushed off the shish kebab that had landed on her shoulder and crawled out from under the table. Then she glared at Lotus Doll as the latter came up from beneath the tablecloth with a dazed look on her face.

“We’re swappin’!” Sybilla roared.

“What...?”

“I can’t take this shit anymore! You go dance with my damn boss!”

In practical terms, they stood a very real chance of getting kicked out of the party. Lotus Doll’s eyes went wide, and Sybilla gave her back a hard shove.

Lotus Doll didn’t seem to know what to make of that, but eventually, she got her orders. *“Dance,”* Amelie said through her radio. *“And tell Bonfire to hold back this time. If that man harms one of my subordinates, there’ll be hell to pay.”*

“Understood.”



Klaus took Lotus Doll by the hand and headed back to the dance floor. Instead of leading forcefully like he had a moment ago, he began dancing at a slower pace. His gaze was focused directly on Lotus Doll, which caused her cheeks to flush.

After checking to make sure that everything was squared away on that front, Sybilla headed over to the waiting room. The room adjoined the hall and was designed for people to fix their clothes and makeup in, and fortunately, it was currently unoccupied. A series of chairs and large tables were scattered haphazardly across the room.

Sybilla fanned her bright-red face and plopped herself down in one of the chairs. “Well, that was embarrassing as all hell!”

“Oh yes. It was most unbecoming.” The reply came from a boy in a formal suit—Disintegrator Doll. Like a good chaperone, he’d followed right behind her. “I’ve never seen a dance grab that much attention before, nor do I expect to ever see it again. What a fascinating show you put on. I thought the laughter would never cease.”

“You makin’ fun of me?”

While Sybilla was in the middle of glaring at Disintegrator Doll, the waiting room’s door swung open and a woman clad in a Gothic outfit came in. It was Amelie. Apparently, not even an event like the one they were attending was enough to get the spy known as Puppeteer to change how she dressed.

“You get full marks, young lady,” Amelie said.

Sybilla shrugged. “If you’re just here to make snide comments, your guy here beat you to it. So, you find Lan?”

“No. Neither hide nor hair.”

“What?”

“In the moment after you clumsily tripped, and all eyes in the hall were on you, my people and I checked the audience—but not a single one of them offered any sort of unusual reaction.” Amelie gave her hand an uninterested wave. “The party’s been going on with no major disturbances or any real trouble to speak of. The only thing resembling a problem that’s come up is that

the staff is in a tizzy over some food thief.”

“Over a what now?”

“They say an entire serving platter of food disappeared.”

“The hell’s up with that? You think Lan’s behind it?”

“That would certainly be amusing, but I very much doubt it.”

From the sound of it, they had a truly audacious robber on their hands.

“Getting back to the topic at hand, though,” Amelie said, “there’s only one conclusion to be drawn—Cloud Drift isn’t in Heron Manor. Our suspicions were off the mark.”

“So all that dancin’ was for nothing?”

“There’s no need to be so discouraged. We simply need to revise our initial hypothesis.”

Amelie sat down in the chair beside Sybilla’s. Without missing a beat, Disintegrator Doll poured her a cup of tea from the pot sitting in the corner.

“Sybilla...I have a question for you, given your position as Cloud Drift’s friend.”

“As her friend...”

*“Does Lan truly want to get in contact with Lamplight?”*

Sybilla grimaced. “Whaddaya mean? Of course she does.”

“Are you certain? After three weeks have gone by and she hasn’t shown her face around you so much as once?”

“.....”

“If she wanted to, surely she could have found you by now. Spotting you would have been simplicity itself if she was anywhere in Heron Manor, and that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Can you really attribute your failure to join up with her to simple bad luck?”

Sybilla crossed her arms and let out a low grumble. “Maybe she’s hurt real bad and can’t move around much,” she speculated.

“That isn’t possible. We found hair and fingerprints at the watch store from

last night that we suspect belong to her. Up until at least last night, she was hale and hearty enough to fire off those shots we found.”

“...Oh yeah, right.”

“I suspect our profiling on her was incorrect—as was Bonfire’s.”

Sybilla’s instinctive reaction was that there was no way that could be. Klaus’s outstanding intuition couldn’t possibly have led him astray, and with the way Amelie had cold read Sybilla’s abilities during their first meeting, she was no slouch, either.

If that was the case, though, then how could she explain how “Cloud Drift” Lan had evaded them both so successfully?

As Sybilla sank into thought, Amelie lowered her voice a smidge. “It’s entirely possible that Cloud Drift was the one who killed the rest of Avian.”

Sybilla’s eyes shot wide open. “The fuck?” It was a horrible theory, one that had never so much as crossed her mind. “There’s no goddamn way she—”

“If anything, isn’t that the most logical conclusion? It explains both why Avian fell and why Lan doesn’t want to meet up with Lamplight.”

“B-but she’d never...”

“Don’t be naive. If there’s one thing this world has scores of, it’s wretched, miserable traitors.”

“.....”

Under the weight of Amelie’s cold stare, Sybilla found herself at a loss for words.

Then the waiting room door swung open and a woman in a dress came charging in. Sybilla assumed it was another attendee until the woman whispered something in Amelie’s ear. In truth, it was an undercover Belias agent.

Amelie grinned. “Ah, perfect timing. Come with us.”

“Kay...”

“I have something interesting to show you.”

Disintegrator Doll pulled back Amelie's chair, and Amelie rose to her feet. It wasn't clear when, but at some point, she'd produced a conductor's baton.

Sybilla didn't know where this was going, but she didn't like it one bit.



Sybilla could still hear the sound of violins. Despite the disturbance she and Klaus had caused, the dance party had continued going on strong.

Amelie headed outside and circled the manor with seven of her subordinates in tow. A place like Heron Manor must have had guards, but they didn't pass any. Amelie's people must have already cleared the area.

"Is Lotus Doll still dancing inside?" Amelie asked from the front of the procession.

Of her two trusty aides, the boy was the only one present at the moment.

"We'll be fine without her, Master," Disintegrator Doll replied proudly.

"How heartening to hear."

"It's very unlike her, getting so giddy about dancing with an attractive man. You should fire her."

"Well now, I'm not so sure about that."

Sybilla frowned at the corny conversation. "H-hey, where exactly are you takin' me—?"

"As you may recall, I explained how Heron Manor was the perfect spot for spies to congregate."

Amelie came to a stop.

They'd just arrived at the rear of the building. Due to the overgrown trees and shrubbery, it was hard to see much of anything back there.

"I'm told we just located some Galgad spies. How sad for them, truly," Amelie said, not sounding sad in the slightest.

"Here, use these," Disintegrator Doll said as he handed Sybilla a pair of binoculars. She poked her head out of an opening in the foliage.

Behind the manor, there was a patio where an assortment of men and women were taking in the night air. It was a place where people could go for a reprieve from the hustle and bustle of the party inside. For whatever reason, there was an almost salacious atmosphere to the way the guests there were chatting with their wine glasses set off to the side.

“Uh...”

“The pair by the fifth window from the right.”

Even with that description, it took Sybilla a minute to figure out who she was supposed to be looking for. At first glance, the people in question looked like nothing more than a well-to-do middle-aged couple. They were nigh indistinguishable from half the other guests, and nothing about them screamed “spies” whatsoever.

However, Belias was convinced that they were enemy agents seeking to undermine their beloved nation.

“You think they got somethin’ to do with Lan?”

“Alas, I suspect their motives for being here are completely unrelated. My men caught them discussing how to blackmail a member of our military whom I’m not at liberty to identify.”

Sure enough, that didn’t sound like it had anything to do with the search for Lan. Sybilla tilted her head. “From lookin’ at them, I never even woulda thought they were from Galgad.”

“They aren’t. They’re Fend citizens who forsook their patriotic duty and became filthy rebel traitors conspiring against the Crown.” Amelie raised her conductor’s baton. **“Programme Number 96. Programme Number 65. Programme Number 1.”**

The Belias agents scaled the building.

All in all, there were nine people pleasantly chatting on the patio. Suddenly, all of them looked at the night sky.

Some fireworks had just gone off.

As they did, the four Belias agents leaped from the roof and snatched away

their targets. What’s more, all the sounds they made while doing so were covered up by the noise from the fireworks. They had just kidnapped multiple people in the space of a few seconds while remaining completely undetected by everyone else in the area—it was nothing short of a magic trick. One person covered each target’s mouth, and another grabbed their legs and dropped them off the patio.

After the woman landed, one of the agents pressed the woman’s neck against the ground with their knee. Another firework burst out, as did the sound of bone shattering.

“Wha—?”

“Only one of them needs to survive for questioning.”

The woman, whose cervical vertebrae were no doubt broken, didn’t move. She’d died instantly. However, her male partner was still resisting. When the Belias agents dropped him off the patio, he wriggled free from his restraints and made a break for the rear garden’s trees.

Amelie waved her baton. **“Programme Number 95.”**

“If you seriously think you can escape from Master—”

Disintegrator Doll cut the man off like he knew where the man was going to run before the man himself did. He was holding a large hammer.

“—then you’re so thick that it’s actually funny.”

A series of dull thuds followed.

Disintegrator Doll had struck the man several times in rapid succession. The man soon sank to his knees, at which point Disintegrator Doll grabbed him by the collar and began dragging him over to Amelie.

By the time the fireworks show was over, all the Belias agents were safely back behind cover, and the people on the patio began exchanging their thoughts about the fireworks, none the wiser as to what had just transpired. They didn’t even notice that the couple who had been there moments before was gone.

“.....”

Sybilla was struck speechless at what Belias had just accomplished.

Eventually, Disintegrator Doll got to Amelie and offered her his captive. The look on his face was that of a proud hunting dog displaying the spoils of his chase. The man was still conscious, but his limbs were hanging limp as though all the strength had left his body.

“Disintegrator Doll deftly broke his ribs,” Amelie said. “It’s impressive work, considering the care he had to take not to damage any of the target’s organs. That said, if our new friend tries to move, his broken ribs will dig into his skin in an exquisitely excruciating way.” That certainly explained why the man wasn’t moving. “If not for Bonfire, this is the exact same torture you would have been subjected to.”

The threat wasn’t the least bit veiled.

At a glance, the man Disintegrator Doll had dragged over looked like an ordinary, kindly citizen. He was a little on the rounder side, but that just made him come across as even more harmless. It was the kind of guy you would expect to find working at some local restaurant.

“The pleasure is mine,” Amelie said with a smile. “I’m with the CIM. I assume any further explanation would be redundant.”

“P-please, I just want to live...”

Hearing the term CIM was enough to tell the man everything he needed to know. The Fend Commonwealth’s intelligence agency was the subject of awe and fear among its people.

“I-I’ll tell you everything... Who I work with, anything else you want to know... I’ll sing like a bird.”

“Take him back to headquarters and hand him off to the torture squad, if you’d be so kind,” Amelie spat.

One of her agents shoved a gag in the man’s mouth and stuffed him into a large duffel bag alongside the woman’s corpse. The man twisted and turned to try to resist, but all that did was cause his broken ribs to stab him, and he let out an agonized cry.

Amelie watched them all go. “He turned on his colleagues like it was nothing.”

From beside her, Sybilla shot her a glare. “...What’re you tryin’ to say?”

“That it doesn’t take much to get someone to betray their nation and their allies,” Amelie replied softly. “And Cloud Drift is no exception.”

That was why she’d made Sybilla watch. Either that, or it was another attempt at intimidation. Perhaps she wanted to show Sybilla an overwhelming display of force to shake her up and get her to give away information she didn’t mean to.

If her goal was to scare Sybilla, it had worked. Belias had slain their own citizens like it was nothing. It wasn’t Sybilla’s first brush with homicide—she grew up surrounded by violence, she’d lived in the world of espionage for the past ten months, and even Avian had killed mafia members in order to carry out their mission in Longchon—but the person Belias had just killed was someone that by all rights they should have had a duty to protect.

“...What is it that lets you go to such lengths? They’re your own people.”

“Our duty to protect the Crown takes precedence over any and all moral rules.”

“What?”

“Our righteousness is absolute,” Amelie declared. “We are always just, and we do not err.”

Her tone was sharp. Its raw pressure left no room for debate.

All the agents standing around Amelie and glaring at Sybilla had eyes burning with purpose. Their pride was a force that had protected the Commonwealth for many an age.

“Now then, young lady, I trust you understand the stance we ought to take? If there’s anything you’re still hiding from us—”

“Master.” Another one of Amelie’s agents came running over. The Belias members looked over at him disinterestedly, but when they saw how pale he was, they were struck speechless. “Something terrible has happened.”

His voice was hollow from shock.



“Crown Prince Darryn was just assassinated.”

Everyone present gasped. Not even Sybilla had anything to say. They all just froze, as though time itself was standing still. For Belias, that news was unthinkable. Protecting that man was their entire *raison d’être*.

Amelie let out a lifeless moan. “This can’t...be happening...”



The Belias agent quickly delivered the world-shattering news.

As Prince Darryn was returning to the palace from a visit to a Ministry of Defense research institution, he was shot with a rifle as he stepped out of his car. The bullet flew with pinpoint accuracy, weaving past every member of Prince Darryn’s security detail and blowing his head clean off. The prince had a number of counterintelligence teams aside from Belias in charge of protecting him, and not a single one of them was able to prevent the assassination.

Sybilla intuitively grasped just how little sense it made. The upside was just staggeringly nonexistent. Fend was the second-largest military superpower in the world, and it was impossible to imagine this act of terrorism having enough benefits to outweigh the cost of making a foe out of the entire Commonwealth. The Fend populace’s grief would send the country into turmoil for a short while, but it wouldn’t last long at all. Only the most deranged of revolutionaries would think that something like this was a good idea.

There could be little doubt that it was an act that would turn the entire world against its perpetrator.

For the first little while, Sybilla flat out didn’t believe the news, and the Belias personnel probably felt the exact same way. Nobody said a word as everyone got in Belias cars and drove to the scene of the crime. When they arrived at the palace in Horough, they found a swarm of people despite the late hour. The local police were regulating traffic and keeping people from coming in, but despite the way the masses were being kept out, word of what had happened would eventually spread.

The palace’s entrance was sprayed with bright-red blood. There was just

enough of it on the ground to all have come from the same person. The body had already been moved, and police officers and CIM-looking people were shouting angrily as they rushed to and from the area. Their eyes were bloodshot from their efforts to track down and detain the sniper.

Amelie grabbed Sybilla and Klaus by their collars and violently dragged them to the scene. "This is where Crown Prince Darryn was killed," she said pointedly. "Search, dear guests."

"I dunno what you want us to do...," Sybilla said with a frown. Amelie could show her the murder scene all she liked, but there wasn't much Sybilla could actually do about it. The body wasn't even there anymore.

"Search it, you cur!" Amelie growled. She didn't often raise her voice like that, but now she was taking all her vitriol and slamming it right in their faces.

Belias had failed in their mission. They'd failed to capture their suspect from the first assassination attempt, and they'd failed to prevent the actual assassination from occurring. And it wasn't just Belias's responsibility, either. The Fend Commonwealth's entire CIM intelligence agency had been bested.

"Taking it out on us isn't going to get you anywhere," Klaus said, shaking his head in disappointment. "There aren't any signs that Lan was behind this. Show me the evidence you've been keeping from us. It might be important here."

Amelie was having none of it. "You really think I'll just hand you our top-secret intelligence?" She gave an irritated click of her tongue. ".....The bullet that killed His Royal Highness was manufactured in the Din Republic."

"I don't doubt it. But that alone isn't proof that Lan did anything."

"Do you have any other suspects in mind?"

"Finding those is your job."

"....."

"I fear I'm repeating myself, but Lan had nothing to do with this assassination."

"You need to tell me everything you know, now. Or the hostage dies."

"I've already told you everything I can," Klaus replied, giving Amelie a pitying

look. “Now, what’s the plan? Are we continuing the search? What can we do to help? Or are you going to insist on torturing your hostage, knowing full well it means that one of us doesn’t make it out of this alive?”

Amelie released their collars.

“Just go.”

“What...?” Sybilla said.

“You’re in the way. I’ll release the hostage, too. It’s not like you people were ever going to be able to catch Cloud Drift anyway.” With each passing word, Amelie’s voice trembled a little more. “I had the honor of meeting His Royal Highness once... I’m but a humble denizen of the shadows, yet he offered me a smile all the same. He was our light, and it was up to us to protect him. He gave us hope all the way through to the Great War’s end... I knew that protecting him was our duty, and yet...”

She buried her eyes beneath her fingers. Teardrops began spilling between them.

“Oh, Prince Darryn...”

She fell to her knees atop the wet ground and began loudly sobbing. Sybilla had always assumed that she was an emotionless automaton of a person, but clearly that wasn’t the case. The iron mask had been stripped off, revealing the crying woman beneath.

Klaus tapped Sybilla’s shoulder. “Let’s go. There’s nothing we can do here.”

“Yeah,” she replied.

Amelie and her people were about to devote their full efforts toward finding the sniper. The two of them would only be a nuisance.

“I just want to know one thing.”

A voice came from behind them. When they turned around, they saw that Amelie’s eyes were red and puffy.

“Are you our enemies? Or our allies?”

“Allies,” Klaus answered. “We have no intention of opposing the Fend

Commonwealth.”

“Then find Cloud Drift and bring her to us as fast as you can.”

“And what will you do then?”

“Torture her, then dispose of her.”

Amelie’s tear-dampened eyes were incandescent with rage.

“And know that if you try to shelter Cloud Drift from us—the CIM will devote everything it has toward destroying the Din Republic.”

Klaus offered no reply to that.



The world was starting to warp.

Ink black malice had stolen yet another ray of hope.



It started raining that night, and the droplets pounded hard on the windows. The weather report said the rain was supposed to stop later that night, but it certainly wasn’t showing any signs of letting up. The echoes of the pattering rain were so intense—like it was trying to wash the entire town away.

“.....Yeep.” Erna was in the kitchen simmering a milk soup. She balanced an ice pack on her head as she stirred her spatula. “I made so much. Too much, even.”

She continued mixing the butter, flour, aromatic vegetables, and bacon around in the pot. Then she scooped some out onto a small dish and blew on it several times to cool it down enough for a taste test.

As soon as she bit into the vegetables, though, she couldn’t help but sigh.

“.....This isn’t right.”

They were cooked all the way through, and she’d made sure to buy them as fresh as possible. However, something was still off.

*Queneau’s vegetables were so much tastier than this...*

Erna closed her eyes and tried to figure out what the difference was.



It was twenty-four days into the honeymoon, and Avian and Lamplight had gotten closer than ever before. Lamplight’s vacation had just ended, and they were starting to get back to their domestic missions. They often asked Klaus for advice when they reached dead ends in their tasks, but he tended not to be much help, and it was in times like those that having Avian around proved to be a godsend. The Lamplight girls hated to admit it, but their missions always seemed to go smoother when they followed Avian’s advice.

The two teams were deepening their bonds both on and off the clock. However, that was precisely what made one thing stand out—namely, the fact that one of Avian’s members didn’t engage with Lamplight at all. Instead, he spent most of his time over by the planters he’d set up by the edge of the yard.

“.....Aye. They’re getting ripe.”

The person in question was “South Wind” Queneau, a large man who wore a disturbing mask. His massive frame made him look almost ursine, and instead of greeting any of the girls, he just kept to himself and quietly watered and fertilized his vegetables.

Where did he get the nerve to set up a vegetable garden in a yard that wasn’t even his? What was he trying to accomplish through his visits to Heat Haze Palace? The girls had more questions than they knew what to do with, but when they tried asking his other male teammates Vindo and Vics, the only answers they got were “Hell if I know” and “Mysterious, isn’t he? ♪” By the sound of it, their relationship with Queneau was mostly just professional.

In the end, Lamplight decided that they had better occasionally keep tabs on their suspicious colleague. That day, it was Lily and Erna who were keeping an eye on him. They kept watch from the shadows and observed him to make sure he wasn’t getting up to any funny business.

“Seriously, who goes and plants a garden in someone else’s yard?” Lily asked.

“We need to be careful. Avian isn’t bound by common sense,” Erna replied.

Queneau crouched down in front of his planters with his back turned to them. The two of them continued their hushed conversation.

“He’s acting so weird. He just moved a bug onto my flowers.”

“You grow flowers, Big Sis Lily?”

“Yup. Most of them are poisonous, though. There are some species that are hard to source, so I grow them myself.”

“Wow, how diligent.”

“That’s why Queneau’s vegetables are my rivals!”

“Shh. If you raise your voice like that, he might hear you.”

Queneau turned around. “.....Nay. I could hear you the whole time. You’re very noisy.”

““?!””

The man’s voice was low and deep.

Too embarrassed to keep hiding, Lily laughed awkwardly and strode out into the open. Despite Erna’s shyness, she summoned up her courage and followed along after.

“I’m just gonna ask you straight up, then,” Lily said as she stood across from Queneau. “Why don’t you pester us like the rest of Avian does?”

“.....Because this is my role,” Queneau replied with a small nod. “...I’m Vindo and Vics’ shadow..... There’s no need for me to stand out. I exist to remain hidden to the end... I came here as an ally of Avian... It was duty, nothing more...” Each and every one of his words rang with an unmistakable weight. “.....It’s better that I not draw attention.”

His voice had a very Zen sort of acceptance to it. Lily and Erna sensed in him an uncommon degree of resolve. Vindo and Vics were both tremendously talented individuals, and there had to have been times when being around two people that skilled made a person feel small.

Lily and Erna gasped. “Could it be?” “Are those your convictions as a spy talking?”

“.....No, I’m just shy.”

““That’s such a dumb reason!”” the two girls shouted, unable to stop themselves. “But I totally get it!” Erna said a beat later.

Queneau looked at Erna through his mask. As a fellow shrinking violet, perhaps there was something he saw in her.

“.....You’re different.”

Erna tilted her head. “Huh?”

“...You’re not a Bloodfolk... But you exist in a similar space... In that case... Behold. This is my technique...”

Queneau spread his hands out wide.

“I’m code name South Wind—and it’s time to howl unseen...”

In each hand, he was holding a tube. They were thin and made of rubber, and each extended into the planters by his sides—the ones where he’d planted his vegetables. Cracks spread across the soil like a chick hatching from its egg, and not a moment later, the cords and vegetables went flying into the air.

The tubes had just burst into flames.

Fire billowed up all around Lily and Erna, surrounding them. Neither of them had even noticed that the planters were rigged that way, but clearly, the tubes had been full of oil.

“.....This world is too radiant for me.....,” Queneau said as he watched the flames rise into the sky. “...It’s full of things that would suffocate a man as twisted as I... But look. Because of that...the flames that hide until the very, very end, then rise on up...possess a special beauty... The color of those flames is the true shape of my soul...”

When he lifted his face, it created a small gap between his mask and his skin. The expression just barely visible through that opening was as innocently radiant as a child’s.

The flames soon died down, and when they did, a wonderful smell rose up from the turnips and carrots littering the ground.

“...A ladybug stopped by a moment ago. They’re helpful insects. I had to move it so it wouldn’t get caught in the fire...” Queneau picked up a scorched turnip and peeled back its skin a little, revealing the juicy flesh beneath. The raw thermal power had steamed it almost instantly. “.....The vegetables are roasted. They’re fine to eat once you peel the skin... I know that my teammates have been causing you a lot of problems. Go ahead and share these with your friends...”

Queneau scooped the scattered vegetables into a basket and handed it to Erna. The turnips and carrots he’d carefully grown were far larger than the kind you could buy in stores, and their quality was fantastic. It was clear just from looking at them how delicious they’d be to bite into.

Lily looked at him agape. “Wait, is that why you’ve been out here for basically this entire month?”

“.....Aye.”

“What an absurdly upstanding guy!” Erna yelped.

Queneau didn’t interact with Lamplight with any sort of regularity. Thinking back, he probably saw the world through a different lens than most. Much like Lamplight’s own Annette, he operated on principles that normal people couldn’t hope to understand. Hearing the sheer ecstasy and pleasure in his voice the moment that fire filled the sky was enough to get a glimpse of how dangerous he could be. Around Lamplight, though, he kept that danger hidden away and interacted with them as a model senior spy.

That was who “South Wind” Queneau was—an engineer who operated at the crossroads of instinct and reason.



As Erna put out the stove’s fire, a series of knocks echoed out: two loud knocks, then one quiet one, then another loud one. That was the code they’d settled on ahead of time so they could let the others know they’d gotten back safely without being tailed. Erna immediately opened the door and found Sybilla standing outside looking like exhaustion on two legs. “Big Sis Sybilla!”



Sybilla waved. “Hey, I’m back.” She’d gotten caught in the heavy rain, and her clothes were sopping wet and dripping on the floor.

“Good work today,” Erna said, handing Sybilla a towel.

“Thanks... Wait, huh?” After wiping her head dry, Sybilla gave Erna a puzzled look. “What’s up with the ice? Is there something wrong with your head?”

“I just hit it a little.” Erna readjusted the ice pack perched on her noggin. “I’ll be fine, though. More importantly, what about you?”

“Me? I’m aces. I just needed to let off some steam.”

“What do you mean?”

“A lot of shit’s gone down today. Hard-core, messed-up shit.”

Sybilla stripped out of her soaked clothes, then set them to dry by the fireplace and sat down in nothing but her skivvies. She quickly summed up what had happened—how she’d gotten captured by a team called Belias, how Belias suspected that Avian had made an attempt on Crown Prince Darryn’s life, how they’d gone around the city searching for Lan, how she’d danced the waltz at a place called Heron Manor, and how she’d heard about Prince Darryn’s sudden passing.

Erna’s eyes went wide. There had been a number of surprising bits of information in there, but none were more shocking than the final reveal. “Prince Darryn is dead...?”

“As a doornail. And everyone’s got a whole shit ton of questions. The whole thing doesn’t make a lick of sense.”

“That news is going to shock the world.”

“The problem is, Lan’s their main suspect,” Sybilla muttered with a brooding look on her face. “As her allies, that’s a whole ’nother can of worms we gotta deal with.”

She was absolutely right—there *were* a shit ton of questions that needed answering. Why did Avian get wiped out? Why was Belias so convinced that Avian was behind the failed assassination attempt on the crown prince? To that point, who was it that actually killed him? And to what end?

Sybilla scratched her head.

“It’ll take some work sorting through our information,” Erna said.

“True that,” Sybilla replied with a nod. “For starters, though, I need to get some food in me. I’m starvin’.”

“I just finished cooking. Where’s Teach?”

“He said he was gonna come over once he picked Thea up from Belias’s base. He should be here soon.”

“...You might not want to be in your underwear, then.”

“Yeah, true. There’s only so many times I can let the guy see my unmentionables in one day.”

“Only so many times? You mean he already saw them?”

“Gah! I-it’s just a turn of phrase! Forget I said that!”

“Yeep! Quit poking my cheeks!”

“Aight, I should probably go take a shower.”

“Good idea. You need to make sure you keep warm.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want to catch a cold.”

“Oh yes, verily.”

A new voice joined in.

Sybilla turned and saw Lan, who’d just gotten out of the shower.

“Thou had best take thy shower posthaste, Dame Sybilla. ’Tis imperative one stays in good health.”

With that, “Cloud Drift” Lan—the very person Belias was so fervently searching for—gave her a big smile.



## Chapter 3

# Counterattack

Once Sybilla was finished showering, she helped herself to some of the dinner Erna had made. A sigh of satisfaction escaped her lips as soon as she had her first mouthful of the pea, onion, and bacon-laden milk soup. She then tore up some bread and dipped it in the soup, and that was delicious, too.

Lured over by the scrumptious smell, Lan and Erna joined her at the dining table. Lan seemed especially hungry, and she gobbled down just as much bread as Sybilla.

“And? What didst thou learn?” Lan asked cheerfully. “Did dealing with Belias in the flesh bring thee any closer to the truth?”

“Lemme turn that question around,” Sybilla replied. “What’ve you been doing all day?”

“Napping.”

“Damn, must be nice.”

“I had little choice in the matter. ’Tis of the utmost importance I not be found. Going for a stroll was hardly an option.”

Lan let out a big yawn. Sure enough, it appeared as though she’d just woken from a long sleep. Upon seeing her refreshed expression, Sybilla told her the truth. “Well, you’ve been accused of attempting to assassinate Crown Prince Darryn.”

“What?” Lan sounded absolutely flummoxed.

Sybilla went on. “Actually, forget attempting. He just got killed, and you’re their main suspect for that, too.”

“WHAAAAAAAAAAT?” Lan gawked at her and leaned over the table. “I know not what thou meanst! Prithee, explain!”

After shouting for a bit, she grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. After flipping through a couple channels of static, she got to a news programme. Scrolling across it, there was a breaking news chyron informing the channel's viewers that Crown Prince Darryn had been assassinated.

"Gack!!" Lan shrieked. She reeled backward. "This makes no sense! It makes no sense!" She began rolling around on the floor. The constant stream of unexpected information she'd just received had overloaded her brain.

Right as Sybilla decided to just ignore her, a pair of footsteps came thundering down the hall.

A girl rushed into the room, making no effort to hide the contempt on her face. It was Monika. "Shut UPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!"

"Gyah!"

Monika charged into the room, leaped into the air, and after performing a beautiful front flip, she slammed a high-speed ax kick into Lan's abdomen. "I'm sorry, did you *forget* that staying hidden is your absolute, utmost priority right now?" She crossed her arms, no less furious than before.

Lan writhed on the ground and clutched at her stomach. "Th-that seems like hardly any way to treat an invalid!"

"Then quit screaming. You're supposed to be laying as low as you possibly can."

"I—I understand that. Verily, I do..."

"From here on out, one tiny slipup could get us all killed. Next time you break a rule, I'm going to punch you into next week."

Monika's voice was unshakably stern, and Lan furrowed her brow in displeasure. "Thy clemency leaves much to be desired..."

Sybilla couldn't help but snatch glances at their exchange. "Hmm?" Erna asked, still holding her dinner spoon. Sybilla gave her nose an awkward scratch. "Nah, it's nothin'. I'm just feelin' a bit sentimental."

There was something truly moving about seeing Lan smile like that. Back when they linked up with her, she'd been wearing a very different look on her

face—the grief-stricken expression of someone who’d tasted all the despair the world had to offer. Even now, her body was still swathed in bandages.

Sybilla quietly closed her eyes.

Then she turned back the clock.

She thought back to how hopeless they’d felt when they first learned that Avian had fallen.



Lamplight left for Fend the moment they found out that Avian had been annihilated. There was no time for them to cry, only to act. They refused to accept that the news was true, instead believing that the report was mistaken, and that Vindo would greet them with a characteristically snide “You really think I would die like that, ladies?” as soon as they arrived in Fend.

In the girls’ eyes, Avian existed in a league of their own.

Even when they laid eyes on the photo they stole from a newspaper company, they assumed that it must have been doctored. It wasn’t until they met up with Lan that they finally came to terms with what had happened.

When they found her in the comms station up in the mountains, she was lying on the floor looking like the very portrait of death. She hadn’t been changing the blood-soaked bandages wrapped around her belly, and her eyes were devoid of light. It was obvious from the pallor of her skin that she hadn’t been eating properly, either. Later on, they discovered that she hadn’t set foot outside the station since her team got wiped out. When the Din messenger couldn’t get ahold of her, they wrote her off as MIA.

“It doesn’t...make sense...”

The only things she moved were her lips, and her voice was empty of its jovial thee-and thou-laden affectation. The girls had no idea what to say to her.

“What happened, Lan?” Klaus said as he knelt by her side. “You can take as long as you need, but I’d like to know. Sara, can you come hold her hand?”

Sara did as instructed, crouching down beside Lan and swaddling Lan’s

wounded hand in hers.

Lan slowly began getting the words out. "...It was five days ago. At two AM, they charged into our base and opened fire. There were over ten of them. Vics smashed down a wall to clear an escape route, but they had us surrounded..." She trailed off for a moment, then gulped in anguish. "Queneau was the first to die. They tossed a grenade, and he threw himself on it to save the rest of us. That was when Vindo gave up on getting everyone out alive. He ordered us to run while Pharma distracted them, and Qulle used the time that bought us to throw me in the river..."

"....."

"It washed me downstream, and I survived, but...I passed out from my wounds. After I came to, I found out the others were dead from a nearby radio..." She trailed off again. Her body was quivering. A moan spilled from her mouth, followed immediately thereafter by a throat-rending scream. "Ah... Ahhh... AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

As she raised her voice, she wrenched her hand from Sara's grasp and barreled out of the comms room, but as soon as she entered the hallway, she tripped and tumbled forward headfirst. Vomit spilled from her mouth—mostly just pure gastric juice. As she lay with her face in her own puke, she began loudly wailing. "I'm sorry, Brother Vindo...! I'm sorry, Brother Queneau! I wasn't able to do anything! You all saved me, and I could do nothing! Now it's me! It's just me! Sister Qulle is gone! Sister Pharma is gone! Brother Vics is gone! They're all gone! I wasn't able to save any of you! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorryyyyyyy!"

Her repentance went on and on, and she apologized to her teammates over and over again. Tears and snot trailed down her face as she called out their names. For a girl of just seventeen years of age, it was too harsh a loss to bear.

"Thea," Klaus said. "Can you look after her? I'm leaving her in your hands."

Thea had an ability that let her peer into other people's hearts, and with a quick nod, she helped Lan to her feet and guided her to another room. The others could still hear Lan's sobbing well after she'd faded from view.

"Losing your brothers and sisters in arms is never easy." Klaus's comment

echoed lifelessly through the room. He turned his gaze over to the girls. “I imagine you all feel the exact same way.”

Silence.

Not a single one of the seven assembled girls said a word. They were all straining their ears listening to Lan, and each of them was reacting in a different way.

Sybilla’s eyes brimmed with tears, and she was clenching her fists in frustration. Grete was hanging her head with her eyes closed. Monika’s complexion was unchanged, but she was quietly rubbing her fingers together. Sara was trembling as big soppy tears poured from her eyes. Annette was staring at the ceiling with her mouth hanging open. Erna’s eyes were red and puffy, and she was clasping her hands together as though in prayer. And Lily was looking at Klaus as though she’d just made up her mind about something.

They had no choice but to accept that it was real.

Having infiltrated the Fend Commonwealth, the first thing Lamplight did was make contact with the local police so they could ID Avian’s bodies. The official story was that Avian was a group of travelers from the Din Republic who died under mysterious circumstances. The police had photographed all their corpses as well as written up full autopsies.

“Flock” Vindo was dead. He was covered in gashes and the blood of his foes.

“Lander” Vics was dead. He’d been shot protecting Pharma in his arms.

“Glide” Qulle was dead. The back of her neck had been hacked up by some sort of strange bladed instrument.

“Feather” Pharma was dead. She’d been shot in Vics’s arms.

“South Wind” Queneau was dead. Everything from his waist down had been completely blasted away.

The reports of their demise were undeniably true.

“Right now, we have one job,” Klaus said, alone in his practicality. “We need to find who it was that killed Avian. We’re not letting them get away with this.”

The seven girls nodded in unison.



“Who are we even up against...?” Lily said quietly.

“That’s the first thing we need to figure out,” Klaus replied. Then he called for Grete by name, and the red-haired girl stepped forward. “I need you to lay a trap as ingenious as a ray of light peeking through a rift in the clouds.”

“...The raid our enemy conducted on Avian was perfectly orchestrated. They must have conducted a detailed investigation afterward. That would have told them that an Avian member survived, and they’re probably pursuing her this very moment,” Grete replied without hesitation. “In other words, you’re suggesting that we use ‘Cloud Drift’ Lan as bait to draw the assailants out?”

“Magnificent.” Klaus gave her a satisfied nod. “I’ll leave the specifics of the plan up to you, but we need to set traps throughout the Fend Commonwealth. Thea’s going to be busy for a while tending to Lan, so I’m counting on you.”

Grete’s expression hardened, and she clenched her fist in front of her chest. “Understood. I’ll make sure we bring the perpetrators down.”

With that, the girls all made to leave the comms station. They all wanted to get to work avenging Avian as soon as they could. However, one voice rose up and stopped them.

“Could I have a minute first?”

The voice was Lily’s. For some reason, she was raising her hand in the air as high as it could go. “This is just a hunch, but I get the feeling that this battle’s gonna be really brutal. Avian was so much stronger than us, and they all...” She trailed off, gulping rather than finishing the thought. Then out of nowhere, she let out a strange cry of “Hoorah!”

The others all looked at her in dismay, and she ran out of the room only to return a moment later tugging Lan and Thea along behind her.

As she did—

“Hoo! Hoo! Hoorah!”

—she gave a far more enthusiastic cheer than the situation called for and started taking the others’ wrists and making them hold hands with the people next to them.

Something was brewing.

As the others stared at her in bewilderment, Lily finished linking everyone, Klaus included, into a big circle. Lily stood at the circle's center, and after doing a big spin—

“I wanna see some smiles!”

—she pressed a finger against each of her cheeks and beamed.

Before anyone had a chance to figure out what the hell she was on about, she joined the circle herself and linked hands with her neighbors.

Eventually, Klaus took it upon himself to play the straight man. “What exactly is this?”

“I dunno, call it a battle huddle.” Lily grinned. “We need to make an oath. I don't want anyone else to die here. We're all gonna make it back to Heat Haze Palace, and we're all gonna make it back alive. I need everyone to promise me that.”

Strained smiles spread across a couple of the girls' faces. It was such a Lily thing to do. No matter what the situation was, she never let her smile fade, and she never stopped trying to cheer up her teammates. Hers were less the actions of a spy and more those of a schoolgirl. It was like they were all part of some after-school club.

However, her words hinted at how harsh this undertaking was going to be. She knew, just as they all did, that they were throwing themselves headlong into peril. The elites had perished in that very land, and now it was up to Lamplight to inherit their task. It was an Impossible Mission in every sense of the word.

Klaus nodded. “What she's saying certainly sounds childish.”

“Rude?!”

“But it's also extremely important. Allow me to echo her words—it's time we made a promise to all make it home alive.”

As he spoke, everyone in the circle squeezed down on each other's hands.

Each and every one of them was determined to keep that promise.

From there, the girls spent the next two weeks carefully laying their traps. As their lure, they sent Lan out to cause commotion by shooting up buildings all across Fend and writing messages on their walls in her handwriting. The longer they kept it up, the more they were able to narrow down their target.

There was a group searching for Cloud Drift with dogged tenacity.

For Klaus's part, he gathered intel by getting in touch with one of their double agents in the CIM. Spies were often kept pretty siloed and didn't tend to have much information on their allies, but over time, the name of a group started popping up. Apparently, a spy team that reported directly to the top brass was in hot pursuit of a spy named Cloud Drift.

At that point, the girls set up their fourth decoy—the attack on the watch store.

Two spies walked down Fillade Street in the dead of night. Nobody else was around. There was Monika, who was hiding her face behind a mask, and there was Lan, whose head-to-toe bandages were fluttering in the night breeze.

“We shall start here this time, methinks.”

Lan picked the lock on the watch store's back door and slipped inside with ease.

She'd been sobbing inconsolably during their reunion, but now, thanks to Thea's therapy, she was able to smile again. Her injuries kept her from operating at her full capacity, but her skills were just as elite as they had been before.

Monika followed along after her. She glanced around to make sure that the store had ample mirrors in it.

“I'm going to cause a commotion here,” Monika explained, “then take photos of whoever shows up. If any of them match the people who attacked Avian, we'll know we've got our target.”

“'Tis understood,” Lan replied.

That was the whole idea behind the incidents they were causing. By using Avian's sole survivor Lan as bait, Monika was able to use her special creepshot

talent to take everyone who came to the sites of their staged attacks and capture them on film.

Monika opened the store's front door from within and unscrewed her camera's lens cover as she stepped outside. "You go ahead and write something damning. I've got some fiddling I need to do outside," she said on her way out.

"How do you mean?"

In her hands, Monika was carrying an assortment of tools. "I'm going to mess with the streetlight to make it flicker like it's dying. That'll help hide my camera's flash."

Without a moment's hesitation, Lan gave her reply. "Then there is but one passage that suits the occasion."

She fished a can of spray paint out of her pocket and began writing in big letters, violently etching her message in red on the watch store's wall.

## **WE ARE AVENGERS FROM THE LAND OF IMMORTALS BURN HOT AND RAISE A GLASS TO RESURRECTION**

Monika cocked her head. "What does that even mean?"

"Nothing at all. Little mattered except that it be in my handwriting, no?"

"I mean, I guess so."

"'Tis the same as what we painted on the Heat Haze Palace wall. There is naught but one image that doth suit the union of Lamplight and Avian." Lan smiled nostalgically. "The bird of fire, the phoenix—this inscription is the verse of our two teams."

"Ah," Monika murmured.

Naturally, she knew all about the legends surrounding the phoenix. It was a mythological bird that burst into flames at the end of its life, and in doing so, was resurrected. It was a symbol of both death and rebirth.

"I shan't sell my life cheaply," Lan said. "Even if the fires of hell should consume me, I shall rise again as many times as it takes. No trial nor tribulation hath the power to daunt me. I shall inherit their will and their souls, and in this

very land, we shall take flight once more as the bird undying.”

Monika stared at the verse as though transfixed by its radiance. Eventually, a quiet whisper escaped her lips. “.....That’d sure be nice, wouldn’t it?”

“Hmm?” Lan replied. She hadn’t quite caught that.

“Don’t worry about it,” Monika replied evasively, then got to work on the streetlight.

Ten minutes later, Lan shot out the watch store’s show window, and the alarm bell began blaring.

In a house a little ways off from Fillade Street, another two spies were waiting on standby.

Grete put her radio up to her ear and listened to the encrypted message. After decoding the complex cipher entirely in her head, she relayed the information to the girl beside her.

“I have word from Monika. She says that the group gathered at the watch store is the same one that attacked Avian.”

“——!”

Sybilla’s eyes went wide. She’d been in the middle of doing her warmup stretches.

Grete lowered her radio. “At long last, we have our confirmation.”

“Sure looks that way, yeah.”

Sybilla sucked in a deep breath. After a long investigation, they finally had a name. She was more than a little shocked. The group in question had no real reason to be attacking the Din Republic. For Avian’s killers were none other than—

“Belias—the group that attacked Avian was a counterintelligence unit working for the Fend Commonwealth’s CIM.”

Grete began leafing through the documents she was holding. “The team operates under the leadership of a spy called Puppeteer. They don’t interact much with Fend’s other teams, so there are many mysteries surrounding them.

We have no idea why they went after Avian. I assume they were operating under secret orders from CIM leadership, but that doesn't explain why—"

"Nah, keep it to yourself." Sybilla waved her hand and cut Grete off. "I don't wanna know any more than I have to. The less intel I have goin' in, the easier it'll be to play dumb."

"But..."

"I gotta get goin'. It's time to let Belias catch me."

Sybilla loaded her trusty automatic and stowed it away in her jacket. Then she steeled her resolve and popped a caffeine pill to wake herself up.

"The people we're dealing with shot Avian on sight," Grete warned her.

"Yeah, and that's why I'm the best one for the job. The boss is too strong, so he can't exactly play the captive. Plus, I've got the most stamina to handle how long this is gonna take, too."

"....."

"Don't worry. I'm done lettin' people take stuff from me."

With that confident declaration, Sybilla turned and quietly headed for the front door.

"You know, I think of you as one of my truest friends," Grete called after her. Sybilla stopped and turned back around, and Grete offered her a clenched fist. "During the Corpse mission, and during the whole bridal affair, you've always been right there by my side. Let's you and I pull the wool over Belias's eyes together."

She tilted her head to the side and gave Sybilla a small smile.

"You got it," Sybilla said, raising her hand in turn.

"...Good hunting."

"Right back at ya."

With a cheeky grin, Sybilla gave Grete a fist bump. Then she squeezed her fists tight again and dashed out into the foggy Horough streets.

That brought things right back to the present.

After feigning ignorance and heading to the Fillade Street watch store, Sybilla got apprehended by Belias and taken to their interrogation room. Then Klaus rescued her just as they planned, and they and Belias began searching for Lan together.

During that time, Klaus stayed with Amelie's unit and took them to various sites across the Fend Commonwealth.

All the while, the Lamplight girls continued laying their trap.



A series of knocks echoed out in the rhythm they'd decided on ahead of time. Sybilla could hear some familiar voices from beyond the door, and when she called them in, the door swung open.

It was Klaus and, behind him, the newly liberated Thea. Now there were six spies in the apartment—Sybilla, Lan, Monika, Erna, Thea, and Klaus. The others were all still hard at work.

Everything was going exactly as they'd planned it.

The girls all gathered around Klaus. "Good work, everyone," he said. "We have confirmation. There's no doubt in my mind that Belias is the group that attacked Avian."

If Klaus was willing to state it that confidently, then the others had no reason to doubt it. Either he'd picked the information up himself on intuition, or Thea had gathered it by using her position as a hostage.

*I guess we were all tryin' to trick each other,* Sybilla mused.

Lamplight had been hiding the fact that they'd already made contact with Lan, and Belias had been concealing the fact that they were the ones who'd killed Avian. Their joint search had been an alliance in name alone, and both sides had spent the entire time trying to con the other. Amelie's words rang truer than ever—theirs *was* a world in which people could work together, but they could never be friends.

"However, we've run into a bit of a complication," Klaus said. His expression darkened a smidge.

“Hmm?” Sybilla said with a tilt of the head.

“It’s odd,” Klaus replied. “For whatever reason, Amelie and her people honestly believe that Avian was trying to kill Prince Darryn.”

“These charges are utterly false!” Lan shouted. Unable to contain herself, she took a big step forward. “We had nary a reason to go anywhere near the prince! Our only aim here was to—”

“Oh, I don’t distrust you in the slightest.” Klaus gave her a gentle, pacifying look. “But a lot of things make sense now. The way Belias went in on Avian with guns blazing seemed excessive, but if they were trying to protect the royal family, then I understand their logic. They can’t afford to show mercy to people who threaten the Crown, and they didn’t have time to capture you all and get you to confess. Fend is a nation that makes brutal choices sometimes—like shooting first and asking questions later.”

Lan bit her lip. “.....”

“Belias is operating with as much conviction as we are.”

Sybilla had picked up on that. Amelie had come across as almost eerily unfeeling, but her eyes had burned with purpose.

“But if that’s true, then the reason they’re chasing Big Sis Lan...” Erna gulped. “...is because they want to execute her.”

That was almost certainly the case.

Once again, it made Sybilla appreciate just how close they’d come to killing her. If not for how valuable a potential source of information she’d been, Amelie would have likely shot her on the spot.

“There’s a mastermind pulling the strings here,” Klaus said. “Someone is lurking in Fend’s shadows. They destroyed Avian by feeding Belias false information, and once they were done pinning false charges on Avian, they went and assassinated Prince Darryn themselves.”

“But who could it be...?” Thea frowned. “Who has the power to manipulate an entire intelligence organization so thoroughly or the skills to assassinate a royal who was being guarded so—”



A loud *bang* cut her off.

It was the sound of Lan slamming the table. Tears were pooling in her eyes. “Do I understand thee correctly?” She pounded the table again, hard. “Brother Vindo and the others were killed over a simple *misunderstanding*?”

“That’s the long and short of it,” Klaus replied.

“.....”

“That’s exactly what we’re going to explain to Belias. There’s no sense in us making enemies out of the Fend Commonwealth. We’ll arrange a meeting between Lan and Belias, talk things over rationally, and prove that the culprit behind Prince Darryn’s assassination is still out there. That’s all there is for us to do.”

The girls were at a loss for what to do about the truth that had just been dumped in their laps. Everything Klaus just said was an undeniable fact. There was no room for counterarguments. Belias had been hoodwinked, meaning that they were victims in all this. They’d annihilated Avian because they were convinced that doing so would keep their nation safe. There was no malice behind the act. They’d simply carried out their mission with hearts full of unshakable conviction.

Furthermore, it was just like Klaus said. Fighting the Fend Commonwealth would be a bad move. There wasn’t a single upside to be found in a minor rural nation like the Din Republic showing aggression against one of the world’s biggest superpowers. They would get obliterated, just like Amelie threatened.

“But...,” Sybilla interjected.

“...But what?”

“But if we do that, how the hell’s Avian supposed to rest in peace?!”

Klaus blinked slowly.

Lan’s eyes went wide, and Sybilla gave her shoulder a hug before closing in on Klaus. “I get that they had their reasons, but Belias agents were the ones who shot Avian dead. You want us to just pat ’em on the back and be like, ‘Hey, guys, heads up, you got tricked’?”

“.....”

“You’re seriously gonna let them off the fucking hook?”

“.....”

It took Klaus a good long while to answer.

He cast his gaze down a bit as though in regret, squeezed his eyes shut, and opened them back up with considerable force.

*“I’m not letting anybody off anything.”*

A shudder ran through the room. The raw malice he was exuding was enough to make every one of the girls hold their breath.

He shook his head. “I phrased that poorly. Don’t get me wrong. I have no intention whatsoever of forgiving those cretins. I don’t care what Belias’s reasons were—their actions were completely and utterly unacceptable.” His phrasing was downright vitriolic. In all their days, the girls had never seen him brimming with such rage. “Belias is our enemy, and we’ll be carrying our revenge out immediately.”

“B-but...,” Thea said, hesitantly cutting in. “How exactly do you intend on doing that? They’re already convinced that Lan killed Prince Darryn. If we attack Belias, it could cause an all-out war with the Fend Commonwealth.”

“I’m well aware of that. We’ll be carrying out our revenge in a manner befitting our profession.”

“What do you mean?”

“Given the situation, this was going to be our only option anyway. As things stand, I have little confidence that Belias would be willing to hear us out in good faith.”

Eventually, Klaus explained everything, laying out the exact details of the revenge they were about to carry out.

“The others have already gotten to work. By the time the night’s over—”



After hearing the specifics of their little operation, the Lamplight girls began making their preparations.

Monika rushed out of the apartment in no time at all. After briskly finishing her prep, she left without saying so much as a word to the others.

.....?

Something about her felt odd to Klaus. She hadn't said a single word in the meeting they just had, either. Monika wasn't exactly warm and fuzzy, even at the best of times, but still.

As he pondered the matter, one of the other girls came over to him.

"That caught me a little off guard."

It was Erna. She leaned against Klaus like a child wanting to be doted on.

"What did?"

"How mad you were back there." Her expression softened a little in delight. "Did you like Avian, too?"

"...I did." Klaus nodded. "It wasn't as much as you all, but I spent a fair bit of time with them, too."

"I see..."

"Like I said earlier, the pain of losing your allies isn't the kind of thing you get used to." He shook his head a little. The image in his mind was that of Vindo—a man whose heart burned with the fires of revenge. If the timing had worked out a tiny bit differently, Vindo might well have ended up joining Inferno. "If not for that, I might not have made such a violent call."

".....?"

"It's an option I don't like resorting to, but situations like these are where *she* truly shines."

Erna looked at him in puzzlement, but Klaus said nothing more. There would come a time when he had to tell the others about a certain someone's true nature, but that time had yet to arrive.



Amelie stopped by a large building that sat on the bank of Horough's Turko River. Allegedly, the building and the four towering spires that flanked it had once been an execution ground. Political prisoners had been marched to the gallows there one after another and slaughtered, and at night, rumor had it that you could still hear the cries of the dead coming from within. Ravens sat atop the building's fences, casting malevolent stares at the city beyond.

That was where the Fend Commonwealth's intelligence agency, the CIM, kept its headquarters.

After going in, Amelie was shown to a room on its uppermost floor. There was a large screen in the doorway, preventing visitors from getting a good look at the situation within.

A deep male voice came from beyond the screen. "...What the hell has Belias been doing?"

Other voices from within spoke up in assent. "Pathetic." "How could you people allow the crown prince to die in such a way?"

If the rumors were to be believed, there were five people in there. The room was home to Hide—the CIM's leaders and the people Belias reported to. The CIM had dozens of different teams, and Hide managed them all.

Amelie bowed low. "I have nothing to say in our defense. If my life would be enough to atone for this failure, then I lay it at your feet." No response came from beyond the screen. It would seem that her apology was of little interest to them.

Amelie raised her head. She could feel her palms growing sweaty. "I have something I need to confirm."

"...What?"

"Are we truly certain that Cloud Drift was the one who made that attempt on Prince Darryn's life?"

"You would ask that, after all that's happened?"

"I just need to be certain. Is Team Avian truly our enemy?"

When Amelie posed the question, she knew full well that her life might be

hanging in the balance. However, there was something she couldn't get off her mind—how insistent the young lady named Sybilla she'd spent the day with had been. Under normal circumstances, Amelie wouldn't have given her the time of day, but in the wake of Prince Darryn's death, Amelie's heart was wavering ever so slightly. She could still remember the contempt Klaus had had in his eyes, too.

Again, there was no response from behind the screen.

Amelie continued explaining herself. "The people guarding Prince Darryn were the best of the best. There were eight soldiers and twenty spies keeping constant watch on anyone who approached him. Based on what we know about Cloud Drift, there's no way she could have broken through their ranks."

"....."

"Are we sure that the information about Avian being involved in the failed assassination attempt is actually true?"

Klaus had demanded that Amelie produce her evidence on more than one occasion. Amelie had refused each and every time, but the truth of the matter was that she didn't actually have anything of the sort. Belias was a special ops team that followed the orders of Hide, the highest authority in the CIM. They didn't examine the grounds for each of Hide's instructions.

Were Avian really terrorists?

The question refused to leave her mind.

Eventually, she got a reply. "Spies are pawns." The voice was bitterly cold. "What kind of pawn questions its master? Is this an attempt to escape responsibility? How far Belias has fallen."

"....."

"Hurry up and find Cloud Drift. And when you do, kill her."

"...I fail to understand the logic behind that order. If Cloud Drift truly did play a part in the assassination, she couldn't have done it alone. Would it not be better for us to torture her, rather than killing her on the spot?"

Amelie was risking her life questioning her superiors like that. However, there

was no fervor behind the answer she got. “Don’t let us down more than you already have. Slaughter any who dare stand against the Crown.”

“.....”

“Our righteousness is absolute. We are always just, and we do not err.”

Amelie had heard those words time and time again. Never once had she ever doubted them, and yet—

“You believed in that righteousness *when you attacked Avian*, did you not?”

“.....”

Amelie had been the one taking point during the raid on Avian. She and her people stormed their base, and when the youths sensed that something was off and tried to flee, her team had mercilessly bombarded them with hand grenades and shotgun blasts. When they tried to flee into the Turko River, her agents had hunted them down and cornered them.

The raid took them over an hour, but ultimately, they succeeded in annihilating Avian. Amelie confirmed the bodies of the five youngsters herself. The orders may have come from on high, but she and Belias were the ones who carried them out. Amelie had killed scores of people, including her own countrymen, because she believed doing so was right. It was far too late to turn back now.

“Of course.” Her tone was resolute. “I apologize for speaking out of turn. I hope you can find it in you to overlook my shameful behavior.”

She curtsied low.

“I’ll make sure that she dies. Avian took up arms against the Crown, and with Cloud Drift’s execution, they will be no more.”

There was no reply from beyond the screen. That meant Hide was satisfied, she imagined.

Amelie bowed again, then left Hide’s room. She was lucky to still have a job after a failure that absolute, and she knew it. Now that the CIM leadership had dispatched her once more, there wasn’t a second to waste. She needed to find and execute Cloud Drift for Prince Darryn’s murder as fast as humanly possible.

That was Belias's job, plain and simple.

*But how can I do it? Not even her own Din allies were able to track her down.*

Her thoughts turned as she strode through the CIM headquarter hallways.

Something didn't add up.

Cloud Drift was alive; the writing on the watch store wall was proof of that. However, she wasn't trying to meet up with her allies. If she was, she would have surely found them back at Heron Manor. The logical conclusion was that she'd betrayed her people and turned to base terrorism, but the problem there was how unequivocally Sybilla and Klaus had rejected the possibility.

Someone was lying. There was noise mixed in with her intel, and there was one possibility that came to mind.

*Has Lamplight already found her and is choosing to shelter her?*

The theory had been bouncing around in her head for a while. Perhaps Lamplight had come to them planning on concealing the truth.

*Was I too hasty in releasing the hostage? No, antagonizing Bonfire any further would have been folly... This is no time to be aimlessly adding to our roster of enemies...*

The man was a nutjob who called himself the World's Strongest, but the raw skill she'd glimpsed in his behavior was well befitting of the title. She had no desire to invite his hostility.

Amelie's thoughts kept turning.

*Something smells fishy...*

She had what some might call a hunch. Puppeteer was the boss of a counterintelligence team that had protected its nation for years, and her honed instincts were telling her that something was amiss.

*That's right. Now that I think about it, there was something strange about Avian's corpses.*

By the time Amelie made that connection, she was standing in front of her destination. The headquarters had a private room set aside for Belias's use, and

Amelie needed to catch some shut-eye. It had been days since she last got a decent night's sleep.

When she opened the door, she saw Lotus Doll standing holding a teapot by the room's several couches.

The woman in the habit looked at her gently. "I made you some tea, Master."

Amelie offered her subordinate some words of thanks for her consideration and gladly took the tea. As she took her first sip, the tea leaves' aroma slowly seeped into her nostrils.

"This smells delightful. You've improved your skills." The rich fragrance helped set Amelie at ease. She smiled at Lotus Doll. "And your performance at Heron Hall tonight was impeccable. You picked an excellent opportunity to take over for that young lady and dance with Bonfire."

"I'm afraid I can't take credit for that. It was the young lady who suggested we trade places."

"In any case, it gave you the perfect excuse to come into direct contact with Bonfire. Did you plant the homing device?"

"I did, Master."

"Splendid work. The CIM developed those microscopic trackers in secret. Not even he could spot something so small. Let me know as soon as he makes a move."

Amelie hadn't *really* set Klaus and his people free. She had little faith that continuing to work with them would produce any actual results, so instead, she turned them loose to see if they did anything suspicious. Besides, sticking so close to Klaus made it harder for her to safely access the classified information she needed to do her job.

"Now that she's killed His Royal Highness the crown prince, we absolutely can't let Cloud Drift get away. We're going to do whatever it takes to put her down. Our justice is absolute."

"Of course, Master." When Lotus Doll spoke next, her expression was tense. "I actually had two pertinent pieces of information I wanted to report."



“Two pieces? Let’s hear them.”

Right as Amelie leaned in to listen, a realization struck her. Her other aide, the one who always worked in concert with Lotus Doll, was nowhere to be seen.

“Actually, before that,” Amelie said, raising her hand to cut off Lotus Doll. “Where’s Disintegrator Doll?”

“He stepped out to take care of some business,” Lotus Doll replied calmly. “He suggested that he had something that was weighing on his mind...”



The boy named Disintegrator Doll walked through the back streets of Hurough. The rain was still coming down hard. The fog meant that visibility was terrible, and as soon as he left the streetlights, he could barely see his own hand in front of his face. Every breath he took made his throat feel that much damper.

There was something he needed to make sure of.

Once news of Prince Darryn’s death spread, things in the Commonwealth were going to get pretty chaotic for a while, and Belias was going to have its hands full rooting out enemy spies. Disintegrator Doll needed to get his confirmation before information started flooding in and it became hard to get intel on smaller stories.

His destination was a road with poor visibility in one of the city’s suburbs. There was a bouquet lying by the side of the road.

He grimaced. “.....Who put that there?”

Then, a beat later, he had a shocking realization. There was a young girl with an umbrella standing right beside the bouquet. She was an adorable child who looked to be no older than twelve or so, yet she was standing there in the fog after midnight.

She must have been the one who laid the bouquet there. Disintegrator Doll walked over to her. “Did someone die here?”

“Yeah. A blond girl passed away last night,” the ash-pink-haired girl replied

cheerily. Her appearance was highly peculiar. She wore a large eye patch over her left eye, and her hair was messily tied into a pair of ponytails. “She was the victim of a hit-and-run.”

There was something strangely chipper about her reply.

“That’s a sad story,” Disintegrator Doll said with a frown. “But it’s odd, too. There wasn’t anything on the news today about a body being found.”

“I carried it over to my cot, yo.”

“You did?”

“Yup. I don’t have any other family.”

“I see... So you’re a street urchin.”

It made sense. Several of Hurough’s suburbs were homes to communities of orphans. There were places where social services didn’t reach, and the children there lived on the streets by working as errand boys for the mafia or relying on handouts from churches. The ash-pink-haired girl was one of those urchins.

Disintegrator Doll gave her a bow. “I work with child welfare services. Would you mind showing me the body? I might be able to help arrange a burial.”

“You got it,” the girl replied cheerfully. “It’s this way.”

She led him down a back alley.

During Hurough’s population boom, the city had lined its alleys with wooden shacks. There weren’t nearly as many of them nowadays, but homeless people and orphans still squatted in them sometimes. Just as Disintegrator Doll had suspected, the place the girl took him was dark and hidden away from prying eyes. He stealthily drew his hammer, taking care not to let the girl notice what he was doing.

“I was pretty surprised, yo.”

“Hmm?”

The ash-pink-haired girl gleefully turned around.

“I never thought a guy like you would go and mow down a little girl like that.”

“.....”

Disintegrator Doll's expression didn't so much as twitch. He was used to having to feign tranquility.

"What are you talking about?"

"Last night, when you had that white-haired girl in your back seat. You ran right into that blond girl, but you drove off like it was nothing."

"....."

"You even got out and checked to see what had happened. It was pretty cruel. You looked down at her like you couldn't care less, then left without even trying to give her first aid."

"....."

Disintegrator Doll nodded. *I knew it.*

There had been a witness.

He knew he'd sensed someone watching him from within that night fog.

The night prior, Disintegrator Doll had *run over a blond girl* when Sybilla was riding in the back seat. Then he drove off after lying about her having been a branch from a roadside tree. Letting the foreign spy sitting in his back seat get her hands on blackmail material hadn't been an option.

"It was for the good of the nation," Disintegrator Doll replied. "I was in the middle of a mission to protect the crown prince. I wasn't going to stop just because I ran over some destitute child." He spun the hammer in his hand. "This error cannot be seen. Thank you for bringing me somewhere so deserted. Now I can eliminate the witness in—"

Disintegrator Doll numbed his emotions and allowed pure logic to take over. As he raised his hammer into the air, though, he was struck by a belated realization.

*Wait, if she knew I ran that girl over, then why did she agree to go along with me?*

Normally, the question would have come to his mind immediately. For some reason, though, it had taken him longer this time. He'd been negligent. After all, *it was just so unthinkable that a girl with a smile that angelically innocent could*

*be harboring evil within her.*

Suddenly, he noticed that his right hand wasn't moving. It was all bound up with string. As a matter of fact, the wirelike string that had just shot out from behind the building was pinning his entire right arm in place.

"Turns out her string's pretty handy, yo."

The girl happily tossed her umbrella aside.

The ash-pink-haired girl—"Forgetter" Annette—normally kept her madness hidden away, but once she even assassinated the Galgad spy Matilda, who had raised her like a mother. By behaving like an innocent young girl, Annette was able to keep people from noticing the deadly weapons she employed. She'd taken Lan's Covert Ops liecraft and adapted it into a technique that could completely and utterly conceal the danger she posed.

Tinkering × Hidden Evil = Innocent Slaughterer.

"I'm code name Forgetter—and it's time to put it all together, yo."

With that, Disintegrator Doll's right hand *fell off*.

A massive blade flashed before his eyes. By the time he could react, the amputation was already complete. Everything from his wrist down had been lopped clean off with the hammer still clutched in its grasp.

Agony shot through him, and he crumpled to the ground. He desperately grabbed at his wrist with his left hand to try to stem the bleeding, but to no avail. Pain like nothing he'd felt before in his life burned its way through his brain.

"Ah, ahhhhh! AHHHHHHHHHHHH!" he screamed.

Terror began gnawing away at him from within. He knew that if he retrieved his hand quickly enough, there was a chance that Fend's cutting-edge medical treatments could sew it back on, but—

"You know, I think you and I are a lot alike," the ash-pink-haired girl said with a delighted laugh. "Back at Avian's base, you asked Sybilla how it felt to lose her countrymen, remember? I thought that was pretty funny, yo. I mean, you're the ones who killed them!"

They'd been observed, even back then? Disintegrator Doll hadn't noticed a thing.

The girl put her foot on his fallen hand. "So I've got a question—how do *you* feel right now?"

There before him stood a great evil.



The order Klaus gave the girls was a simple one.

*Abduct every single Belias member in a single night.*

*Don't give them a chance to call for help. Wipe them off the face of the earth without letting a speck of dust remain.*

For this to work, they would have to commit a perfect crime.

What Lamplight needed to do was kidnap Belias without leaving behind a single scrap of evidence that they'd harmed them. That way, no conflict would arise between the Fend Commonwealth and the Din Republic.

Sorrow for the loss of Avian weighed heavy on Lamplight's hearts as they got to work.

*You have one job: Destroy them.*

## Chapter 4

# Lamplight and Avian



It was twenty-eight days into the honeymoon, and Avian had just gotten their next mission. Soon, they would be leaving the Republic's borders.

That day, Klaus and Vindo shared a meal, just the two of them. Klaus was the one who'd invited Vindo when they wrapped up their training. "How about a drink?" he'd suggested. Vindo had been surprised, but he took Klaus up on the offer. At the moment, the two of them were both spy team bosses. Their dinner they would share as equals.

Klaus chose a restaurant near the harbor famed for its seafood and white wine. It had private rooms, making it the perfect spot for holding confidential discussions. Their room's window offered a view of the large cargo ships coming and going in the harbor, and the air had that unique sea breeze smell.

Vindo was a bit of a glutton, and he gobbled down his food and put away wine like it was water. However, he held his drink well, and his face refused to go flush no matter how much he drank down. *It's no wonder Granny G took a liking to him*, Klaus mused.

"Firewalker" Gerde was a sniper who used to be one of Klaus's teammates on Inferno in addition to having been Vindo's mentor. Despite her advanced age, she drank like there was no tomorrow. She and Vindo probably made for a surprisingly compatible duo.

During their meal, Klaus and Vindo's conversation went in all sorts of different directions. They talked about how Inferno had saved Vindo's hometown during the Great War. Klaus and Flamefanner had yet to join the team at the time, but Hearth had been in her prime back then. They talked about "Sky Monk" Adi, Avian's old boss. She hadn't been the most proficient spy around, but Vindo had

adored and respected her. They talked about ways to be a good spy team boss. They talked about how best for Klaus to handle Grete's romantic interest in him.

"By the way," Vindo said as dinner was coming to a close. "Your team is worse than useless."

"You still feel that way?"

All of a sudden, Vindo was picking a fight. Klaus had assumed he was joking, but the look in Vindo's eyes was dead serious. "Your training method's warped their development. They're idiots with atrocious fundamentals, and yet when the chips are down, they start punching way above their weight. It's so volatile I can barely stand to watch them."

"But that's what makes them so interesting, isn't it?"

"True," Vindo replied with a nod. "They have that going for them." He downed his entire wine glass. "We've been with them all month, so we gave them some pointers. Now they're at least passable. We focused on drilling the basics into them."

"I really appreciate it."

"We were already there to train, so we figured we might as well." Vindo gave Klaus a piercing stare. "That's what you were after all along, wasn't it?"

Klaus nodded. He was guilty as charged. "It was under my tutelage that they lost to you. It pained me to realize how powerless I was as a teacher, but I knew that relying on you was the best option I had."

"That's insipid."

".....?"

"There's more to being a teacher than just teaching. Fostering an environment where your students can freely exchange ideas is a key part of the job. That's way more important than protecting your own pride."

"....."

"Magnificent—that's what you like to say, right?"

Klaus's eyes went wide. Vindo had completely blindsided him there. It had been a long time since Klaus had felt that way, but to his surprise, it was an oddly pleasant feeling. *I guess there's more to teaching than I realized*, he thought. He was impressed at how much more he had to learn. As an instructor, he still had more than his fair share of shortcomings.

"Granny G," he said, then corrected himself. "Gerde asked you to look out for me, right?"

He'd already heard about Vindo's encounter with Firewalker. Vindo had been working for the Naval Intelligence Department at the time, and Gerde had entrusted him with both her technique and a request.

"Yeah." Vindo nodded. "She told me to lend you a hand."

"Well, you've gone above and beyond. I'm blessed to have an ally like you."

"Ugh. Who wants to get a compliment like that from another dude?" Vindo grimaced in displeasure. He seemed legitimately annoyed.

"Oh, don't be like that," Klaus said with a shrug.

"Someday, I'll surpass you. Enjoy looking down at me while you still can."

"Well, well, well. You sure about that, now?"

"And it's not just me. Monika, Vics, Pharma, Grete, Queneau, Thea—the next generation is coming up strong. Avian's learned a lot this past month, too. It won't be long before we come for that throne of yours."

Klaus could imagine nothing that would make him happier than the future Vindo was laying out. "I'll be looking forward to it," he replied.

The younger generation was improving by leaps and bounds as though Vindo was pulling them up himself. His raw preeminence inspired the people around him and was driving the whole world to advance. Lamplight had never had a rival like that, and it was motivating them like never before.

Klaus thought back to what Gerde had said.

*"...Little Klaus is awful at relying on people, you see."*

Beneath her harsh demeanor, the old bag had really been worried about him,



and she'd reached across time to send him a rare gift.

*Thank you, Granny G,* Klaus said silently to himself. *You left me something truly precious—a new friend.*

Klaus had been forced to fight on his own after Inferno went down, but now those days were behind him.

"We're setting out for Fend the day after tomorrow," Vindo said. "It's just about time to say good-bye."

"That it is. But I'm sure we'll meet again someday."

"Seems likely."

"Don't go dying, now."

"Oh, please."

Both of them knew.

In their world, people died all too easily, and that went doubly so for spies. The two of them had both had to overcome the deaths of their teammates to get where they were.

"Besides, even if I do die," Vindo said, taking another swig of wine, "I'm not going down for free."

With that, the honeymoon's twenty-eighth day came to a close.

Lamplight and Avian were fast approaching their parting.



Amelie set aside the matter of Disintegrator Doll's persistent absence and had Lotus Doll deliver her report. As Lotus Doll put it, there were two things that had caught her attention in the reports she'd gotten.

"As per your instructions, we had two of our people hide in the woods to observe the Din Republic comms station. Their reports suggest that nobody's gone anywhere near it, but..." Lotus Doll handed Amelie a sheet of paper. "When I looked into it just to be safe, I discovered that the station's occasionally been broadcasting an odd signal."

“It has?” Amelie frowned.

The spot Lotus Doll was talking about was the place Klaus had taken her that afternoon—the comms station Din had built in the admin cabin of a long-abandoned construction site deep in the mountains. There were signs that “Cloud Drift” Lan had been using it as her headquarters. Now, that same comms station was sending out some sort of signal?

“That’s peculiar. The transmitter in that room was fairly rudimentary. It wasn’t built to be operated remotely or on a delay. It can’t send out a signal unless someone is operating it in person.” The only explanation was that somebody was there in the room. The problem was that their lookouts would have noticed anyone trying to sneak into the building. “What message is it transmitting?”

“A series of nonsensical words. However, their format resembles that of an archaic Din cipher.”

“.....”

The inexplicable situation gave Amelie pause. There was one possibility that immediately sprang to mind.

*Could Cloud Drift have slipped past our guards and made it back into the comms station?*

“...Why were you looking into the signal in the first place?” she asked.

“The fact that Lamplight failed to meet up with Cloud Drift despite knowing about the station was bothering me,” Lotus Doll replied without a moment’s hesitation. “I thought there might be some sort of secret passage there that even Lamplight overlooked.”

“That makes sense. We’ll need to investigate that posthaste.”

“The other thing I wanted to report has to do with the homing device I planted on Bonfire.”

Lotus Doll handed Amelie another document. She’d planted a transmitter on Klaus during their dance, and according to the location data contained in the report, Klaus had simply stayed holed up in his hotel.

“...What kind of spy simply lazes about in his hotel on the same day Prince Darryn gets killed?” Amelie muttered. “He must have noticed the transmitter. Impressive, seeing through our nation’s microtechnology like that... So? What about it?”

“No, no. The document I wanted you to look at was the second one, Master.”

“The which?”

“I planted a pair of transmitters; one on Bonfire’s collar, the other by his waist. It would appear he hasn’t spotted the latter one yet.”

“——!”

Amelie’s eyes went wide as she flipped through the second report. The data within described plain as day how Bonfire had only stopped by his hotel briefly before then relocating to one of Horough’s urban areas. It might well be a trap, of course, but that would be interesting in its own right. It would at least let Belias know how he really felt about them.

“This is some brilliant work you’ve done, Lotus Doll.” Amelie clapped her hands together. “I must say, I’m a bit surprised. It’s not like you to display so much initiative.”

Belias was a team that revolved entirely around Amelie. The vast majority of what they did involved her coming up with plans and her subordinates dutifully carrying them out. It *was* the most efficient way to take advantage of her intellect, but she often found herself wishing that her aides would be a little more autonomous. As such, she was amazed at the progress Lotus Doll was showing.

“Prince Darryn was important to all of us,” Lotus Doll replied with a bow. “If it’s within this marionette’s power, then I’m prepared to do whatever I can.”

“True... He really was...” It would seem that Amelie wasn’t the only one mourning the crown prince. She took a deep breath. “We’ll divide Belias in two.”

Under normal circumstances, splitting the team was an option she never would have considered. Now that they had two issues that both demanded their attention, though, she didn’t have much of a choice.

“Lotus Doll, I need you to take the lead of our agents and track down Bonfire’s homing device.”

“Yes, Master...”

“I’ll head for the comms station.” As Amelie gave her orders, she rose to her feet with a baton in hand. “If Cloud Drift is there, I’ll kill her where she stands.”

Exultation welled up within her heart. She was ready to resort to whatever methods it took to avenge the crown prince.

After entrusting ten of her agents to Lotus Doll, Amelie took her remaining eleven agents and got moving. They’d been working for over a hundred hours straight at that point, but not a single one of her people so much as grimaced. Prince Darryn’s death weighed heavy on all of them, and morale was high. No matter what hardships awaited them, they were certain they could overcome anything.

Amelie and her team took three cars up into the mountains in the Horough outskirts and arrived near the construction site, then killed their lights to mask their approach and continued driving into the woods. The rain had stopped, and while the ground was still wet and muddy, it wasn’t bad enough to limit their mobility.

“Stop the cars here,” Amelie ordered. “If we drive any closer, anyone in the comms station is liable to notice us.”

She got out of the car and used the trees for cover.

Right as she was about to start ascending the mountain slope, she noticed something unusual about one of her agents’ cars.

*That’s an odd dent.*

She was confused for a moment, but she soon realized what had happened.

*Ah, that’s right. Disintegrator Doll mentioned that he ran over a girl. He’s been gone for a while now. I wonder if he was successful in silencing the witness.*

If word got out that a CIM agent had run over one of their own citizens, it would cause a massive scandal. Sometimes, protecting their nation meant stamping out problematic rumors before they grew legs.

*I'll need to make sure I discipline him later,* Amelie thought as she started hiking up the mountain path.

It didn't take long for her to meet up with the agents who had already been stationed near the construction site. When they spotted her, they greeted her with tense nods. "The signal is still going out. Someone must be there in the building," they reported.

"Did you ever leave your posts unattended, even just for a second?"

"No, Master. We've been standing guard as a pair. Not a moment's gone by that we haven't had eyes on the station."

The agent's voice rang with confidence. They were telling the truth.

Amelie still had no idea how people were getting in and out of the station.

"Whoever's in there might try to flee through a secret escape route like they did the last time we came here. We need to be quick about this," Amelie told her agents. All in all, there were thirteen of them now. "Surround the admin cabin. I want everyone in there apprehended."

Even if it wasn't Cloud Drift, anyone they found in there was inherently suspicious. Amelie's agents held their guns at the ready and silently moved to encircle the building. There would be no escape for anyone within, no matter which way they tried to run. Finally, Amelie took four of her agents and stormed the building. It had been a mere forty-eight minutes since she got the report from Lotus Doll. Considering the time it had taken them to get there, it was a blisteringly fast response time.

They went into the oblong admin cabin and headed for the far end of its second floor. When Amelie got to the door, she heard noises coming from within.

*...Looks like someone was in there after all.*

She shot a hand sign to the agents behind her.

*Programme Number 36. Fire at will.*

The order was for them to mercilessly gun down anyone, even if that person was an innocent civilian or a lost child. Worst case scenario, they could always

just make the body disappear. Considering how dangerous the situation would be if they really were up against a foe, it was the logical call for her to make. They weren't soldiers, and they weren't cops. They were spies, and that meant doing whatever was necessary to safeguard their nation.

Amelie reached for the comms room's doorknob. The door was locked, but one of her agents produced a picking tool and had it unlocked in no time.

"Go."

Amelie threw open the door, and she and her agents thrust their gun points inside with their fingers on the triggers. Each and every one of them was prepared to open fire at a moment's notice—

".....Is that a pigeon?"

—but what they found inside left them baffled.

Sitting in the comms room was a bulbously pudgy rock pigeon pecking away at the breadcrumbs atop the transmitter. Clicking noises rang out each time its beak struck one of the transmitter's buttons.

There was nobody else in the room.

That was the source of the secret message—a pigeon sending out gibberish?

As Amelie and her agents froze, the pigeon noticed that the door was open. Sensing its chance, it flapped its wings and flew out of the comms room. None of the Belias agents could bring themselves to shoot it, and once it took off, it left the building through a broken window before any of them had a chance to catch it.

The bird had a specific destination in mind—the girl standing on an elevated area overlooking the construction site. She was timid-looking and had a newsboy cap sitting atop her brown hair.

Amelie read the girl's lips from afar. "Good work, Mr. Aiden. It couldn't have been easy, waiting until so late to start eating. I'm really proud of you."

*Did she get the pigeon to sneak into the comms room?*

Amelie immediately dismissed the theory. The comms room had been locked, so given that nobody had gone near the admin cabin, that wasn't possible.

There was only one person who could have made the situation come to be. It was the man who'd *gone into the comms room with her and stayed there until right before she locked the door*—"Bonfire" Klaus. When he exited the room, he must have taken the pigeon he'd secretly brought with him and left it behind. However, Amelie had had no idea that he'd been keeping an animal hidden on his person. A feat like that would have required impeccable technique and a perfectly trained bird.

Right as she reached her conclusion, she heard a gunshot.

"Master!"

The next thing she heard was her agents' screams.

"Somebody destroyed our radios!"

She hastily cast her gaze out the admin cabin window to the construction site beyond.

Everything outside was filled with a blinding light.

Visibility up in the mountains wasn't always great, so the construction site had been furnished with powerful floodlights. Now those floodlights were illuminating the entire area, and the previously mournful-looking cranes and trucks were standing out against the darkness like props on a stage.

"Hello, ladies and gentlemen of Belias."

And there, at the center of it all, stood "Bonfire" Klaus.

Two unconscious Belias agents lay at his feet, as did the radios Klaus had destroyed.

"Now you can't call other teams for help." Despite how far away he was, his voice carried unsettlingly well. "I know this must seem abrupt, but I have some unfortunate news for you. As of tonight, Belias no longer exists."

Amelie's agents recoiled and let out small moans at the sudden appearance of such a mighty foe. Klaus had planned everything. He hadn't found just one of Lotus Doll's homing devices—he'd found them both.

"Don't let him rattle you!" Amelie shouted. Then she took a step forward and glared down at Klaus through the window. "It's a shame, Bonfire, it really is. So

the Republic intends to make an enemy of the Commonwealth after all?"

"Who can say?"

"Were you the one who ordered Prince Darryn's death, too?"

"....."

For all the questions Amelie threw at him, Klaus offered her nothing. He simply stared at her with a gaze that seemed almost pitying in its coldness. "I'm in no mood to talk things out with you right now," he said with a shake of the head. "When you people attacked Avian, did you give *them* a chance to explain themselves?"

"....."

So he knew that Belias was involved in Avian getting wiped out.

"It's a shame, Amelie. It really is."

Klaus took out a hair tie and fastened his long hair behind his head. Then he took a big step forward with a revolver in his right hand and a knife in his left.

That was the stance of a man who was ready for war.

There was still a good sixty feet between them, but the raw menace he represented came through loud and clear. Amelie knew exactly what he was after.

*He intends to wipe out every Belias member here...*

Klaus was going to have his revenge by massacring Belias. If he successfully killed all of them, then he'd be able to avoid all-out war with the Fend Commonwealth. That was why he lured them to an isolated spot in the mountains and destroyed their radios.

Knowing all that, there was only one way Belias could emerge victorious.

*We need to get someone, anyone, out of here.*

Counting Amelie, they had fourteen people there, and if even one of them survived, they could report Lamplight's crimes to the CIM. That way, their allies would at least be able to avenge them.

They needed to do whatever it took to get someone out alive.



“Master, head for the back entrance,” the man beside her whispered. “We’ll slow him down while you slip out the back and make for the cars hidden in the forest.”

“You have it backward,” Amelie said with a shake of the head. “I’ll hold Bonfire off. I’m not certain exactly how strong he is, but even if the rumors are to be believed, my sacrifice should still be enough to buy you at least five seconds.”

“But...”

“Now, hurry. If he finds those cars, we’re finished.”

Amelie stepped forward as she reprimanded her panicking subordinates. If she didn’t show her face, Klaus would get suspicious.

*I’ll see that the truth gets reported, even if it costs me my life.*

As the person who walked them all into his trap, it was up to her to take responsibility. She and the seven remaining agents outside the admin cabin were going to have to stop Klaus. Meanwhile, her four agents inside the cabin would make a break for it out the back. That was the best option available to them.

Klaus had yet to make his move. He simply stood motionless, defending his position under the floodlights’ glow. Whatever his plans were, they didn’t involve coming after them just yet.

*...Why isn’t he doing anything?*

Amid the silence, Amelie’s thoughts turned.

*Ah, that makes sense. He can’t afford to let anyone escape, so he needs to maintain a position where he can observe everything that happens.*

The problem was that maintaining the deadlock wasn’t going to get him anywhere.

*...Is he waiting for something?*

The moment that realization dawned on her, she gloated internally. Now she understood why Klaus was acting so boldly. He was trying to goad them into attacking him.

“I know how we can win.”

“Huh?” her agents replied doubtfully.

“I have reason to believe that Lamplight hasn’t found our cars yet. If we escape into the woods, his plan will fall apart. That’s why he can’t afford to carelessly come after us.”

Amelie’s realization put the initiative back in Belias’s hands. She shot a hand signal to her agents: *On my mark, scatter to the winds*. No foe could possibly chase down a double-digit number of people all fleeing in different directions, no matter how superhuman they were. Her agents relayed the hand signal to each other, making sure they all had the message. In the space of an instant, all her agents—not just the four inside the admin cabin, but the seven outside, as well—knew the plan. Now all Amelie had to do was work out the perfect timing.

However, that was when Amelie noticed some suspicious movement in her peripheral vision.

*What’s going on with that crane?*

Someone must have been operating it, as the abandoned mobile crane from the construction site was slowly extending toward the night sky. There was nothing there, though, so Amelie had no idea what its operator hoped to achieve.

A blond girl stood beside the crane. The fact that the floodlights didn’t reach the cliff’s edge she was standing on made her seem strangely ominous.

A powerful gust of wind blew by.

The construction site sat in an open area high in the mountains, so strong winds probably blew through it all the time. However, this one’s timing couldn’t have been worse. It caused the crane to topple over—right toward the blond girl.

“How unlucky...”

The girl watched it all unfold with an oddly absent-minded expression. From the way she was acting, it was like she’d known it was going to happen. She smiled as though she’d known that raising the crane’s center of gravity would

make it topple over—like she'd *loved* that fact.

"I'm code name Fool—and it's time to kill with everything."

The crane practically grazed her as it collapsed by her side, taking it and the vehicle carrying it careening over the cliff's edge. When it landed, it crushed the trees beneath it and sent a deep boom and tremor across the entire mountain.

Amelie knew exactly what the goal behind the accident was. The crane had destroyed their one escape route—*the cars they'd parked hidden in the forest*.

"Now you have nowhere to run."

Klaus finally made his move. He vanished, and the next time Amelie spotted him, he'd already closed in on one of the agents hiding outside the cabin. The agent just barely managed to shoot at him, but Klaus casually swatted away the bullet with his knife and smashed his revolver's grip into his opponent's jaw.

Amelie had lost yet another agent.

"Now your annihilation begins," Klaus growled. "It's high time you took a turn tasting the despair of being hunted."



Thea shuddered from her vantage point a safe distance from the construction site. "You really are something else, Erna."

Ahead of her, she had a clear view of the cliff. When the crane fell down, it had crushed all three of the cars Belias took to get there. Not a single one of them had emerged unscathed.

"Today was a special occasion," Erna said quietly from beside her.

Behind them, they could hear gunshots. Lamplight and Belias's battle had just begun in earnest. Combat wasn't Thea's and Erna's forte, which was why they were stationed away from the battlefield. The only Lamplight members who were directly participating in the fight were Sybilla, Monika, and Klaus.

A mountain wind buffeted Thea as she stood atop the cliff and looked down at the crane.

"It's easier for accidents to happen on windy days like today," Erna explained.

“Between that and the mountain terrain, all I had to do was move the crane to the right spot.”

“Oh my, you drove the crane yourself? That’s impressive.”

“It wasn’t easy, but I got it done,” Erna said. She triumphantly planted her hands on her hips. “My legs could only just barely reach the pedals.”

Thea had never seen Erna look so proud. It was surprisingly moving. “How did you know Belias’s cars were here?” she asked.

“I planted a homing device on one of them.”

“Really? When?”

That wasn’t the answer Thea had been expecting. Belias watched their cars like hawks, and Thea had no doubt that they would apprehend anyone who so much as looked at them funny.

“When they ran me over,” Erna replied. “I let them hit me on purpose so I could stick the device on.”

“.....”

A chill ran down Thea’s spine at the nonchalance of Erna’s answer. Ever since Erna learned the art of liecraft back in Longchon, her techniques had gotten more extreme than ever. Alarming though her methods were, she’d grown into quite a capable operative who dove unflinchingly into disasters to manufacture tragedies. Thanks to Accidents × Starring in Her Own Productions = Catastrophe Creation, Erna was taking full advantage of her talents.

As an aside, Erna had blunted the impact from the hit-and-run and emerged with no wounds save a bump on her head thanks to some body armor that Annette whipped up.

“Annette also bugged a ballpoint pen, and I planted that on the car, too, so that Big Sis Sybilla could retrieve it and trick our opponents into taking it from her.”

“You really pulled out all the stops, didn’t you?”

“I’d say that what you did was even more impressive, Big Sis Thea.” Erna clenched her fists in delight. “Even as a hostage, you managed to scoop up

loads and loads of intel on Belias.”

“Why, thank you.” Thea patted Erna’s head for the compliment and smiled. During her time as Belias’s hostage, Thea had successfully twisted a female agent around her little finger. That was how they’d known that Belias had exactly twenty-six members, and without that information, they never could have carried out their plan. “I can’t take all the credit, though. Up until now, I never would have been able to intentionally get captured as a way of gathering intel.”

“Hmm?”

“If Pharma hadn’t taught me that, I wouldn’t have been able to accomplish a thing.”

Thea buried her face in her hands. She’d taken a while to realize just how impactful those chaotic days had been to her. It wasn’t until it was almost time for Avian to leave that she finally understood why it was they’d been coming to Heat Haze Palace every day.

All that time, Avian had been teaching the Lamplight girls their techniques. Sure, wanting to train with Klaus had been part of it, too, but Avian had gone above and beyond in showing Lamplight their spy skills and unique talents.

Erna sadly hung her head. “...I learned what I did from Queneau, too.”

“Feather” Pharma had endowed Thea and Grete with her technique—the art of charging boldly behind enemy lines so they could use their abilities to their fullest.

“South Wind” Queneau had endowed Erna and Lily with his technique—the art of remaining unseen and destroying their foes without ever being noticed.

Over the course of their interactions during the honeymoon, Avian had guided the washouts to even greater heights.

“Belias used to have forty-nine members, and it used to have five aides-de-camp, as well,” Thea said softly. “But when they launched their assault on Avian, they lost twenty-three people, including three aides. Vindo, Vics, and Pharma took out nearly half of them for us.”

“It makes sense, given them.”

“If not for that, this whole ordeal would have been a lot more treacherous for us.”

To be fair, even the remaining twenty-six members still posed a major threat. Not being able to let any of them escape was a constraint that meant that, on his own, not even Klaus could deal with them all. If they screwed this up, it could mean all-out war between the Fend Commonwealth and the Din Republic’s spies, and what’s more, Belias was a counterintelligence unit that specialized in neutralizing enemy agents. They were the exact kind of first-rate spies that the girls had yet to successfully overcome.

“Let’s do this.” Thea drew her gun. “This time around, nobody’s going to stop us. Victory is ours to take. We’re not washouts anymore. We have the greatest of elites by our side.”

Erna sucked in a deep breath and took her place by Thea’s side. “I know.”

Avian had put their lives on the line to fight the good fight in Fend. Even when faced with a surprise raid, they’d still managed to get Lan out alive, and the whole reason Lamplight was able to operate at the moment was because of the intelligence Avian had left them.

Erna wiped away the tears spilling from her eyes. “With Lamplight and Avian working together, there’s no enemy we can’t beat.”



Klaus relocated again.

He was likely moving to take down his next target. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before he wiped them all out.

A thunderous *crack* split the air.

It was no gunshot. It was the sound of Amelie clapping her hands together. Her disquieted agents returned to their senses and focused their attention on her.

Amelie took a deep breath to fire herself back up. Now that they’d lost their

escape route, it was time to come up with plan B.

*He's come prepared, no doubt. Trying to flee at random in the forest at night is too dangerous to be a feasible option. That said, duking it out with Bonfire would be tantamount to suicide.*

Amelie didn't know any specifics, but from what she'd heard, "Bonfire" Klaus's combat prowess was terrifying to behold. In short, there was only one real answer.

*We need to engage the opponent, and we need to do so in a way that doesn't involve fighting him.*

Amelie bit her lip and withdrew her weapon from her pocket.

Anyone without prior knowledge who saw it would no doubt laugh at her, and even people entrenched in the world of spy work would probably stare at it in bewilderment. Hers was about the least lethal weapon imaginable.

It was a conductor's baton.

What's more, the baton had no special features to its name. It was merely a stick. Yet in the hands of the woman who bore the name Puppeteer, that baton freely wielded had the power to strike down any foe.

Amelie gave her baton a sharp flourish, and the loud crack through the air caused her well-trained subordinates to snap to attention.

"We're not fleeing," she declared. "However, there's no need to fight Bonfire directly. We're going to take one of the girls hostage."

Klaus had brought a number of his subordinates along, and as Amelie understood it, Klaus held deep attachments to them. Taking one of them hostage should be an effective tactic against him.

"Mechanical Doll, **Programme Number 5.**" Amelie flicked her baton to the side. "Exorcism Doll, **Programme Number 23.** Intercourse Doll, **Programme Number 34.** Fallen Doll, **Programme Number 183.** Divider Doll, **Programme Number 217.** Imitation Doll, **Programme Number 63.** Dusk Doll, **Programme Number 2—**"

She was giving each and every one of her agents their instructions.

The fact that she could give orders with mere baton gestures instead of needing to vocalize them was yet another of Amelie's virtues. That was Puppeteer's true strength—her ability to direct up to fifty people as if they were extensions of her own body.

"We have our pride, too, you know." Amelie pointed her baton straight at Klaus. "The pride of a counterintelligence unit that's defended this nation through thick and thin!"

Her ten agents sprang into action, shooting suppressing fire at Klaus and searching for girls to use as hostages all at the same time. This was nothing like the banal fear-based control Purple Ant had once used. The devotion Amelie's charisma inspired in her units didn't lessen their skills in the slightest. To the contrary, their steadfast devotion drew out 120 percent of their strength.

Amelie leaped out of the second-floor window, and as she did, she used her baton to pull her agents' strings. What she was giving them were prearranged orders called programmes. For example, there was Programme Number 23—the order to snipe the target's right foot, close in to a distance of twenty-three feet, switch off with an ally to the rear, and rotate around to the left to provide covering fire to block off the enemy's escape routes. There were over two hundred such programmes, and all of them were exceedingly detailed. Amelie had drilled each of them into her agents so they could draw on them if the need arose. Thanks to the auditory processing abilities she used to grasp everything that was happening on the battlefield, the superhuman intellect that let her deduce the most effective strategies, and most importantly, the magnetism that allowed her to inspire absolute trust, Amelie was able to engineer coordination on an incredibly precise scale.

Five of her especially well-trained agents moved to surround her. That deadly sequence of moves had allowed them to capture countless spies, and yet—

"I know all that."

—there was one brave soul who charged in to break that very formation.

A young woman rushed out from behind the building at a breakneck speed to face them. It was Sybilla. The Belias agents tried to draw a bead on her, but a hawk and a pigeon swooped out of the sky and messed up their timing.



“**Programme Number 25,**” Amelie calmly ordered. She and her agents switched from guns to knives and moved to intercept Sybilla.

“I’m code name Pandemonium—and it’s time I cleaned you out.”

That was when her body *flickered*.

“——?! ”

Amelie gasped.

It wasn’t just her malice and her hostility. Her entire *existence* had vanished. It wasn’t possible, yet that was how Amelie felt. By the time she was able to perceive Sybilla again, it took everything she had just to dodge to the side. If Amelie hadn’t been so completely focused, she might well have given Sybilla an opening to fatally stab her.

Fortunately, all of her agents managed to avoid getting struck as well. Instead of attacking, Sybilla had simply run right past them. Amelie whirled around to shoot her in the back, but when she tried to swap her gun back to her dominant hand, she found that it was gone.

*She stole it?*

Amelie gasped yet again.

“And I get that you’ve got responsibilities and shit.”

Sybilla came to a stop a short distance away. In her hands, she was holding six guns. She nimbly disassembled them and scattered their components to the ground.

“But the thing is that we’ve got stuff we can’t give up, either.”

With their firearms lost, Amelie’s squad fell into disarray. Amelie heard a pair of screams from behind her as Klaus took out another two of her agents.



It was twenty-nine days into the honeymoon, and Vics had continued his surprise attacks on Sybilla all the way through to the end. He was strangely sadistic for how demure he looked, and once again, he came to her and said, “You ready to go on that group date? ♪” Sybilla did her absolute best to try to

flee, but Vics overpowered her with his liecraft and raw strength and captured her anyway.

“You’ll have to try a lot harder than that. ♪” Even that night, with their farewell fast approaching, Vics still grabbed Sybilla by the ankles and hoisted her into the air. “Guess I’ll mark you down as a male RSVP for that group date. ♪”

“I DON’T WAAAAAAAAAAAAANNA!”

Once he had her in his grasp, there was no way for her to escape that monstrous strength of his. He hauled her off with her body still suspended upside-down. Sybilla’s wardrobe was pretty masculine to begin with, so all Vics had to do was mess with her hair a bit to get her looking like a strapping young man.

Sybilla’s head dangled by the floor as Vics dragged her down Heat Haze Palace’s hallways.

*This has gotta look sketchy as hell. I mean, he’s literally kidnapping a seventeen-year-old girl.*

There were plenty of things wrong with that picture, but ultimately, it was what it was. If anything, it was Sybilla’s fault for not being able to escape from him. She still hadn’t mastered liecraft—the one technique that would allow her to pull one over on her betters.

“Hey, what do you think I should do about my liecraft?”

When she shot Vics the question, he turned back and looked at her. “Hmm?”

She’d tried and tried, but she’d never been able to find a style of deception that meshed well with her abilities. She’d come up with a couple of potential options and even tried them out on Vics from time to time, but none of them had borne fruit.

She choked back her shame and asked him straight out for advice. “Brains aren’t my strong suit, so I’m no good at tricking my opponents. What the hell am I supposed to do?”

Vics burst into laughter. “Dang, you really are kind of a dunce. ♪”

“Shaddap! You think I don’t know that?!”

“That’s not what I mean. ♪ I gave you a hint, back at the very start. ♪ I guess you never realized. ♪ That kinda hurts, you know? ♪”

“Huh...?”

“I *steal their attention away*—and stealing’s what you’re good at, right?”

Sybilla painstakingly looked up and found Vics shrugging at her in exasperation.

Vics’s liecraft, Concealment, involved him hiding weapons and tools away in his thick muscles. Refusing to let his opponents see how he was going to attack them until the last minute kept them constantly on their toes, and the ability was broadly useful in other aspects of intelligence work as well.

Vics was describing it as “stealing his opponents’ attention away,” and he’d said the same thing when he showed it to her on a previous occasion, too. Now it finally clicked for her. There were more kinds of deception than leading people astray with mind games. In a sense, stealing people’s weapons was a form of deception as well.

“As things stand, it’ll be a while yet before you figure out your liecraft ♪,” Vics said, laughing. “For now, there’s another method you’d be better off trying out. ♪”

Sybilla tilted her head. “What’s that?”

If there was some sort of secret trick she could use, she was all ears.

“Letting someone else deceive people for you ♪,” Vics replied nonchalantly. “For a bonehead like you, sometimes the best call is to leave it up to someone smarter. ♪”

“Huh? But that’s got plenty of problems of its own, right?”

“Nah, it’s fine. ♪ I mean, that’s what makes you so strong. ♪” A hint of gloom entered Vics’s voice. “I could never do something like that. I’m too much of a coward, and I let my stupid pride get in the way. That’s why Vindo and I don’t work well together. I meant what I told you back in Longchon, you know. It’s ridiculous how hung up you get on petty labels like ‘washouts’ and ‘elites.’”

“.....?”

Sybilla wasn't quite sure what to make of Vics's sudden soul-baring. That was the first time she'd ever heard him talk about his feelings like that. He glanced away bashfully, clearly not having meant to say as much as he did. If anything, though, his awkward laugh did give Sybilla an even bigger window into his complex.

It reminded her of something he'd said back during their fight in Longchon.

*“I want to put up better results than Vindo. ♪”*

It would seem that there was some discord between Vindo, who'd secured the top score on the academy graduation exam and even risen to being Avian's boss, and Vics, who'd had to settle for second place.

“The way I see it, you've got it all ♪,” Vics said, gazing at her in admiration. “You've got the athleticism to react at the drop of a hat, you've got a mindset that lets you build bonds of trust, you've got the reckless bravery to hand off your decisions, and you've got a team that has faith in you to have their back. ♪”

“.....”

“Being able to coordinate with others is a key weapon in your arsenal.”

In the end, Sybilla would have been hard-pressed to say that she fully understood how Vics felt deep down inside. However, the techniques he beat into her through brute force were with her for good.

As far as spies went, he was an ambitious one. He kept it concealed beneath his frivolous grin, but in truth, he was brimming with drive. Apparently, even his womanizing ways were just another part of his training. Negotiating with female opponents was one area where his skills actually surpassed Vindo's.

That was who “Lander” Vics was—a spy who hid his true self behind a smile and fought with a combination of power and finesse.



Amelie stared in horror at the scene unfolding before her.

They were being crushed.

They were being crushed.

They were being *crushed*.

It went without saying, but there was no stopping “Bonfire” Klaus. Amelie ordered her agents to buy whatever time they possibly could, but Klaus took them down with his knife one after another with an almost mocking ease. The Belias members who still had guns all tried firing at him at once, but he deflected their bullets without breaking a sweat.

However, that much was in line with Amelie’s expectations. If it had just been him they were fighting, they might well have found a way to pull through. Now, though, the subordinates she’d stood beside to protect her nation were getting overrun by a group of young girls. Her agents who’d lost their guns could do nothing but brandish their knives and throw rocks at the girls, but a resistance that meager could never compete with a group of trained spies with firearms. Some of her agents tried to take cover behind the side of the building, but when they did, they discovered that their foes had anticipated that move and rigged the area with traps. Once their legs were sliced up, it was even harder for them to flee.

Up above, a large hawk was flying circles through the sky. It was like it was there to keep an eye on Amelie and her agents as they tried to stay hidden. They shot at it, but the hawk’s dark body allowed it to quickly melt into the shadows and disappear from sight.

Perhaps it was time to try a dangerous all-or-nothing escape through the forest—

“Too slow.”

They heard a new girl’s voice, and bullets flew with unparalleled precision to deny them that escape route, too. One of the agents got hit in the leg and crumpled to the ground.

For an instant, Amelie caught a glimpse of someone up on the building’s roof—a girl with cerulean hair. Something near the girl’s hiding spot was catching the light, and that something was a set of mirrors. Amelie spotted at least five

of them. The girl was doubtless using them to keep watch in every direction at once.

Amelie simply couldn't believe it. She was losing one agent after another.

*It doesn't make sense... The young lady was such an amateur...*

Amelie still remembered the impression she'd gotten from Sybilla when they first met. Sure, Sybilla had been acting back then, but everything about the way she carried herself spoke to an unmistakable lack of experience.

*Those girls couldn't possibly have been reliable spies.*

Every so often, Amelie had gotten a whiff of the inferiority complexes they'd felt toward Avian. It wasn't just Sybilla, either. From the way Sybilla had been talking, that was a feeling her teammates had shared, as well.

Amelie's intuition was time-tested and battle-forged. It never let her down.

*...They must be improving at a terrifying pace!*

That was why her initial read had been off. The girls' skills were developing so quickly that their self-evaluations hadn't had time to catch up yet. And what's more, that transformation they were undergoing...

*They're trying to become something. Something unthinkable... Something beyond the pale!*

The girls were striving to reach the grand stage where Amelie and the first-rate spies she fought did their scheming.

*I have to eliminate them here.*

Amelie steeled her resolve.

*If I don't kill those girls now, each and every one of them could become a threat to my nation someday.*

As soon as she arrived at her verdict, she heard a set of voices coming from behind her.

"Master!"

She whirled around.

A pair of large cars had just stormed onto the construction site. The cerulean-haired girl shot out their tires, so both cars spun out, but they reached Amelie in one piece. Riding inside were the ten agents she'd sent to work with Lotus Doll.

"What are you all doing here?" Amelie asked.

"Lotus Doll's orders. She said to come here as fast as we could."

What a fantastic call that was.

Amelie had split their forces to minimize their risk, but having backup show up now was a godsend. What made Lotus Doll's decision even better was that Lotus Doll herself wasn't in either of the cars. If worse came to worst, at least she would survive to report Lamplight's villainy to HQ.

They still had a shot at turning the situation around.

Amelie took an automatic from one of her agents, then gave the order. **"Programme Number 92."** That was the formation Belias took in order to launch counterattacks.

*People who gain strength too quickly often let that very same strength consume them!*

She calmly analyzed the situation.

Lamplight was going to get impatient. They'd been a hair's breadth from wiping Belias out, and even though Belias had backup now, the girls wouldn't be able to bring themselves to stop. They would keep charging in, out of a refusal to relinquish the upper hand. And when they did, Belias would spring their trap. Belias had experience on their side, and that was what was going to turn the tables.

*They'll give us the tiniest of openings, and in that opening, we strike.*

Sure enough, one of the girls came barreling out from behind the building.

"Capture the reckless young lady!" Amelie shouted.

Her agents opened fire on Sybilla from their positions within the cars.

"I"

Sybilla hurriedly dodged to the side and took cover behind a nearby road

roller. Naturally, Amelie wasn't about to let that opportunity slip by her. If they could capture even just one of the girls, they could force Klaus into a hostage exchange. It was the last way Belias had left to fix the situation.

Amelie waved her baton. **“Programme Number 45.”**

That was the order to launch a do-or-die offensive. Eight of her agents got in formation and headed for the road roller to capture Sybilla. They ate a couple of shots on their way there, but their attack was unrelenting.

When they surrounded Sybilla, she stood bolt upright. She offered them no resistance.

Klaus was nowhere to be seen anywhere around her.

*That's right, that's Bonfire's weakness—his inability to coordinate with his teammates!*

Amelie had already seen that for herself.

*When you truly get going, nobody can keep up with you. Why, you can't even dance with them properly!*

All Amelie had to do was take advantage of that rift and capture one of his teammates when they fell out of formation. She gloated to herself at how reality had played out just the way she'd planned it.

“You still don't fuckin' get it, huh?”

Then Amelie heard a voice. Her eyes went wide with shock.

Sybilla was staring mockingly at her from across the road roller.

“You seriously think that him and me have bad chemistry?”



Amelie's analytical skills only got her partway to the truth.

The fact of the matter was that the girls had never truly done battle by Klaus's side. Even when they were on the same mission as him, they usually operated independently of one another with the girls relegated to supporting roles while Klaus stepped in and fought solo at all the most dangerous moments. It was no



lie to say that Klaus had been unable to collaborate with his subordinates.

When Vics had watched Lamplight as an objective outside observer, though, there was one girl who caught his attention—the one girl who harbored the potential to be able to truly gel with Klaus. None of the others could have pulled it off. Monika had the athleticism, but she lacked the mindset to be able to coordinate well with others. In contrast, Grete had excellent rapport with Klaus, but she lacked the ability to keep up with his movement.

Eventually, there would come a day when they were up against a foe too powerful for Klaus to handle all on his own.

It was in times like those that Sybilla would truly shine.

The two of them had confirmed that fact back at Heron Manor, right before they began waltzing. They'd placed their hands on each other's hips and looked each other in the eye, and when Amelie scolded them, they'd shared a short exchange.

*“Whaddaya think? Sounds like they’re worried about our coordination.”*

*“It would seem so.”*

*“That’s pretty fuckin’ funny.”*

*“That it is.”*

In that moment, Klaus and Sybilla achieved perfect harmony.



Amelie couldn't stop them in time.

The whole thing seemed to play out in slow motion. As soon as her eight agents surrounded Sybilla, Sybilla's body rose lightly into the air, and Klaus emerged from beneath her. He'd been hiding behind the road roller.

“I have to ask,” he said as he pulled Sybilla toward him, “how much longer should I keep playing along with this game?”

The two of them held each other's shoulders and did a dramatic twirl. When they did, Amelie's agents got sent flying. Klaus had taken the lead and spun Sybilla as she kicked the guns out of the Belias agents' hands, then shifted his

hand down to Sybilla’s hip and fired his own gun in one fluid motion, shooting out the agent’s knees with unerring accuracy.

The way their bodies were changing places over and over, it was like they were doing the waltz as they unleashed their attacks. Theirs was a dance of bullets and roundhouse kicks. Klaus pulled Sybilla’s body, and she leaped through the air. The way she wove through the enemy bullets while firing off flying kicks was almost captivatingly elegant.

*That clumsy dance of theirs was just an act?*

Amelie realized now that she’d been played, but it was far too late to do anything about it. All she could do was watch powerlessly as her agents fell, one after another.

There was nothing for her to conduct.

Every single one of her people was within Klaus’s and Sybilla’s attack range. Each time Klaus reached out as he spun, another Belias agent fell to one of his backhand chops. Meanwhile, Sybilla danced to his tune and shot anyone in the feet who tried to flee through his blind spots.

It was a beautiful sight, enough so that Amelie was captivated despite herself. Fleeing wasn’t an option. She was already surrounded, and she could sense the numerous guns being pointed her way.

With a backhand chop of her own, Sybilla knocked out the final Belias agent. Amelie’s entire force was gone.

“It’s over.”

Klaus’s words echoed across the construction site. Sure enough, Amelie was alone now.

“.....”

It took a good long moment for reality to sink in. Amelie’s pride refused to let her acknowledge her defeat.

*It can’t be... We’re not supposed to err...*

She’d served the CIM for over a decade. First, she was hired to do grunt work for a top team called Retias, but after pressing her nose to the grindstone, she

got recognized for her talents and was assigned to work in domestic counterintelligence. Eventually, the agency's governing body, Hide, took a liking to her and appointed her as the boss of Belias, the counterintelligence unit that answered directly to them.



Everything she'd done, she did to protect her nation.

The Fend Commonwealth had been in an economic slump with no end in sight ever since the Great War, and Amelie had people she loved. She had parents. She had siblings. She had friends. She even had someone she pined for, though she'd fallen out of contact with them without ever telling them how she felt. And most importantly, she had the Crown—and the way it carried the hearts of all the people of the nation.

Amelie had bested countless enemy spies in the name of righteousness. Never once had she let her prey escape her.

Now, though, she was experiencing the unmistakable taste of defeat.

Perhaps her fate had been set in stone the moment she failed to protect Prince Darryn.

*...So this is where I die.*

As she stood in the center of the construction site, she quietly accepted that she'd been beaten. It wasn't as if the possibility had never crossed her mind, after all. She just hadn't thought that today would be the day it happened.

The good news was that she had one faint hope still remaining.

*Thank goodness I sent Lotus Doll off separately. At least she'll be able to report what happened.*

Disintegrator Doll's disappearance meant it was safe to assume he'd already been taken out. However, Belias still had one aide left—Lotus Doll, who'd started taking initiative in the wake of Prince Darryn's death. When Amelie failed to return, she would be smart enough to figure out what fate had befallen her. Then she would report that news to their CIM brethren and get them to acknowledge the Din Republic as an enemy state.

Their deaths wouldn't be in vain.

Upon realizing that, Amelie closed her eyes in relief. All they needed was one person. As long as Lotus Doll survived— “As I already told you—”

Then she heard Klaus's voice.

“—we’re wiping Belias off the face of the earth. Every last member.”

Amelie felt a chill. It was like he’d read her mind, and that one phrase was more than enough for her to picture the worst. It felt as though the ground was crumbling beneath her feet.

Without Amelie noticing, a new person had shown up in front of her. Amelie gasped, and her eyes went wide. For that person was none other than...



Seven hours prior, Lamplight’s adorable silver-haired leader had been hiding in Heron Manor.

“Heya there! It’s your girl Lily, the super-undetectable spy who’s being sneakier than sneaky can be!”

At the moment, she was hiding in *a very particular spot* and surveying the hall. The party was just about to start, and Lily had successfully sneaked in unseen by getting there before Belias had a chance to put the manor under surveillance. Now she was making sure to remain undetected as she helped herself to the full serving platter of food she’d stolen. As it turned out, the food thief that the staff was panicking over was none other than Lily.

“I gotta hand it to Queneau, that stuff he taught me was pretty clever. You stay hidden until the very last moment, and then *bang!* You hit ’em with the finisher! It’s a pretty dang stylish move. Heh-heh, I feel more spy-like than ever,” she said, sounding entirely pleased with herself.

The party got underway shortly thereafter, and once the host, David, finished giving his speech, the orchestra starting playing and the waltzing began. Lily could just barely make out Sybilla and Klaus slowly twirling their way around the hall. They started out in perfect sync, but out of nowhere, they tripped over each other. They quickly got up, but from that point on, they started falling more and more out of rhythm, and their footwork got worse and worse.

Klaus and Sybilla were executing their *intentionally poor dancing* to perfection.

“That’s some good coordination they’ve got going, that’s for sure. Classic

Teach. He's doing a great job matching Sybilla's timing. I guess I have to give him props for that," Lily said, nodding in satisfaction. Then she paused. "Actually, didn't they used to be married or something?" She vaguely remembered there being some big kerfuffle about brides at some point.

Then she quietly got ready.

Out on the dance floor, the duo raged and got in each other's way as they made their way across the hall. Their path led them straight toward Disintegrator Doll and Lotus Doll, who were searching for Lan as they danced. When the two pairs collided, all four of them went flying, toppled to the ground, and rolled *right under the table where Lily was hiding*.

"But when it comes to working with Sybilla, I'm the best in the biz!"

Sybilla used the tablecloth as cover as she shoved Lotus Doll over. She looked Lily in the eyes and shot her a silent message. "*She's all yours.*"

Lily grinned. "*You got it.*"

In Lily's hand, she was clutching a poison needle.

"I'm code name Flower Garden—and it's time to bloom out of control."

Klaus crashed into Disintegrator Doll, sent his tiny body flying, and rolled across the floor himself in a way that blocked the boy's vision. As he did, Lily briskly stabbed her needle right into Lotus Doll's neck.

With that, their plan came to fruition.

The girls' scheme spanned the whole of Fend. Thanks to Monika's creepshots, they determined that Belias agents were the ones who attacked Avian. Thea got taken prisoner, and in doing so managed to get intel on their inner workings. Annette created a fountain pen with a built-in wiretap. Erna let herself get into a traffic accident so Belias would stop their car and give her a chance to plant the pen. Sybilla quickly retrieved the pen and got Disintegrator Doll to confiscate it and give it to Lotus Doll. Once they'd listened to Lotus Doll's voice over the wiretap, Lily knocked her out at Heron Manor. And Sara used her animals to send out a suspicious message.

The girls devised countless plans, all of them revolving around Sybilla.



For this one, though, the most important player of all was the girl who mimicked the voice she heard over the wiretap and figured out Belias's inner workings in a heartbeat.



Standing before them was a woman in a habit. She wore a gentle smile as she stood across from Amelie looking down at her. There was something oddly unsettling about her outfit's jet-black fabric and how completely unsullied it was. She wasn't saying a thing—just simply standing there like some sort of decorative ornament.

It was Lotus Doll—the Belias aide who had no reason to be there in the mountains at that abandoned construction site.

“Lotus Doll...?” Amelie couldn't believe her eyes. She'd instructed her aide to go on a different operation, so why was she there? “You need to run! Get out of here as fast as you can!”

Her voice was practically a scream. It didn't make sense. Why was Lotus Doll being so reckless? The only correct choice for a spy to make there would be fleeing. There was simply no way Lotus Doll was going to be able to defeat Bonfire and save Amelie all on her own.

Lotus Doll just kept on smiling.

“.....”

Upon seeing the pity in her expression, Amelie realized something.

At the end of the day, who was it that had made Lamplight's attack possible? It was the person who'd told her about the bug on Klaus and the mysterious transmissions. The person who'd taken all the agents who should have been on a separate op and led them straight there.

Thinking back, there had been hints. Amelie herself had even picked up on the fact that something was different when Lotus Doll served her that tea.

*“This smells delightful. You've improved your skills.”*

She should have paid more attention to how different the tea she brewed



tasted.

“You have my gratitude, Amelie,” the girl who looked like Lotus Doll said in a voice that wasn’t Lotus Doll’s at all. “Thanks to you, I was able to spend some time waltzing with the boss.”

She tore off the mask covering her face.

Amelie hadn’t known.

She hadn’t known that there was one person besides Thea who’d inherited Pharma’s technique of wreaking havoc behind enemy lines. She hadn’t known that there was a girl who’d hidden her gushing affection toward Klaus and taken bold action in hostile territory.

*“I’m counting on you.”*

With those words from her beloved to fuel her, Grete impersonated an enemy full of love.

Disguises × Forbidden Love = Mask of Fondness.

“I’m code name Daughter Dearest—now, let’s fill this time with laughter and tears.”

When the red-haired girl serenely made her declaration, Amelie realized the big mistake she’d made. The person she most needed to be worried about hadn’t been Klaus or Sybilla at all. No, Lamplight’s real trump card was the girl who’d taken Lotus Doll’s place and masterminded everything from behind the scenes.

Amelie’s strength drained from her, and she sank to her knees.

That there was the moment—the moment where Belias was well and truly annihilated. They hadn’t seen through anything, and they hadn’t been able to put up a fight. Lamplight had simply obliterated them.

However, there was one thing Amelie just couldn’t wrap her head around.

*When in the world did they swap Lotus Doll out?*

Disintegrator Doll had been constantly by her side, and even when he hadn’t been, Amelie or one of the other Belias personnel had been instead. They’d

never given Lamplight a window large enough to pull off a swap that audacious.

The red-haired girl strode past Amelie and walked over to Sybilla.

“Heya,” Sybilla said as she gave her a small wave. “Good shit, Grete. You nailed it, like always.”

“I couldn’t have done any of it without you. Nobody else could have stuffed Lotus Doll under the table while dancing with the boss as brilliantly as you did.”

“Thanks. I gotta say, though, dancing really ain’t my scene.”

“Well, I thought your dance with the boss was quite graceful.”

“It was nothin’ compared to yours. You looked like you were havin’ the time of your life out there.”

“Oh yes. I was able to get my hands all over him.”

“You’re blushin’ up a storm there.”

“Hee-hee. I can never thank you enough for swapping partners the way you did.”

Hearing their conversation was enough to let Amelie fill in the blanks. They’d made the swap at a moment that by all rights should have been unthinkable.

It was back at Heron Manor, when Sybilla took Lotus Doll down with her during the dance.

Lamplight had done it in full view of everyone at the party. They’d shoved Lotus Doll under the tablecloth, put her to sleep—they must have had a poisoner hidden there or something—and swapped her out for that Grete girl. Then they hadn’t wasted a moment in having Sybilla trade partners with her so that Klaus could take Grete across the dance hall and keep her away from Disintegrator Doll.

Lamplight was a group of professionals. Fooling a bunch of onlooking civilians would have been child’s play for them, and what’s more, they’d chosen the one moment when Belias took their eyes off Klaus and Sybilla. Amelie herself had described it as such.

*“When all eyes in the hall were on you, my people and I checked the audience*

*—but not a single one of them offered any sort of unusual reaction.”*

They knew that as soon as they made that scene, Amelie and her agents would have no choice but to search for Lan. Lamplight had *stolen Belias’s attention away*.

What an unbelievably bold scheme. They’d made the swap right after intentionally gathering all the partygoers’ attention.

“If you’re looking for your aides...” “We just nicked ’em,” Grete and Sybilla declared victoriously.

Belias hadn’t just lost—Lamplight had mopped the floor with them. They hadn’t seen through a single one of Lamplight’s traps, leaving Lamplight free to toy with them as they wished. They’d taken everything Amelie had and left her with nothing but despair.

Her head sank, and her knees dug deeper into the ground.

Eventually, a stream of girls trickled out from behind the building’s cover and moved to surround Amelie. All of them still carried hints of childishness, and their appearances were clearly those of girls rather than women.

*We lost to a group of children?*

Amelie could feel her heart start to tremble, but she quickly corrected herself.

*No, what we saw was just a glimpse. Omens that, someday, these girls could topple nations.*

What was it that had driven the girls to improve so quickly, she wondered? Was it Klaus’s teaching? No, it couldn’t have just been him. Her intuition guided her to the answer.

*Was it Avian?*

She had no idea why the team’s name had just crossed her mind. It was a mystery even to her.

Klaus stood before her. “Puppeteer, you and your people have committed the gravest of sins.” Amelie’s skin prickled from the sheer force of his hostility. “I imagine you had your reasons. However, that doesn’t justify your actions. Assaulting Avian without so much as giving them a chance to explain

themselves, killing my friend, and making my subordinates cry are all serious offenses.”

In his hand, he was holding a gun.

“Have you made your peace?”

Amelie knew.

She’d seen more captured spies meet their ends than anyone. They weren’t just killed. They were subjected to unending torture. Eventually, they would lose their minds and cough up whatever intel their captors wanted them to. It wasn’t the kind of thing you could endure with grit and conviction, not when they pumped you so full of drugs that your very personality shattered. All that awaited her was a despair blacker than the deepest darkness.

Amelie pulled a knife out of her pocket—and pointed it at her own throat.

She held its grip in her right hand and steadied its blade with her left. She was scared, but she didn’t waver.

“Good-bye, dear guests.”

She steeled her resolve and pressed the knife in.

The moment before it reached her throat, though, someone grabbed her by the wrist—Sybilla. Her expression was determined, and her grip stopping Amelie from committing suicide was firm.

“Please, just let me die,” Amelie pleaded. “Let me end it here.”

Sybilla’s gaze burned with an uncommon zeal. “No can do. You’ve got intel we need.”

Amelie tried to fight back by pressing the knife in even harder. “.....You have a brother and sister, don’t you?”

“What?”

“Our bugs caught your entire conversation in the changing room. They can pick up even the quietest of whispers. You would do well not to underestimate our nation’s technology.” Amelie gave her a triumphant smile. “Well, I have a family, too. Please, let me die. At least grant me that one small mercy. I would

rather die with honor than give up information and betray my family, my country, the *Crown*.”

“.....”

“I’m sure that someone like you can appreciate that—someone compassionate enough to donate her entire wages to the orphanage where her brother and sister live.”

Every word Amelie was saying was the pure, unvarnished truth. After listening to Sybilla’s story, Amelie had empathized with her. She’d heard what Sybilla said back in the changing room about her grim past—about the way she’d desperately fought to rescue her siblings from the brutal world of gangs. Amelie could tell how kind Sybilla’s heart was from how much she still cared about them.

Surely, Sybilla of all people would let her kill herself.

However, Sybilla shook her head. “It’s the orphanage where they *lived*.”

“.....?”

“My siblings are dead. They got killed. Thanks to my old man, there were loads of folks who had it in for ’em.”

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Amelie’s eyes went wide.

If that was the case, then her story didn’t line up.

“But you still continued the donations—?”

How must Sybilla have felt, saying those words?

*“Sometimes, I like to close my eyes and just picture it. My donations, makin’ sure my brother and sister can eat as much as they want... Them, smilin’ like idiots... Even though I can’t see ’em, that’s enough.”*

“It’s pathetic, I know.”

Sybilla’s shoulders slumped. Amelie could do nothing but stare back at her.

“So I’m beggin’ you.”

Sybilla wound her fingers around Amelie's and skillfully plucked the knife from her hand.

"I'm beggin' you—please, don't take anything more from me."

## Epilogue

### Joint Mission

A few days before Lamplight set out for the Fend Commonwealth, Klaus had a meeting with C, the Din Republic's spymaster, in the Foreign Intelligence Office headquarters. After C briefly explained that Avian had been eliminated, he asked Klaus to take over their mission.

After fighting back his grief, Klaus turned his thoughts to his new task. This wasn't his first time losing comrades, and he knew that no matter how heartrending a tragedy it was, he needed to keep moving forward.

"What was Avian doing in Fend anyway?"

"They were on a mission related to Inferno's downfall," C replied. The man had silver-grey hair and eyes as sharp as a hawk's. He tossed the file sitting on the table to Klaus. "There's still a lot we can't explain about Inferno's destruction, and I tasked Avian with looking into one piece of it."

Klaus nodded. There were a lot of mysteries that remained around the annihilation of the legendary spy team he'd loved like a family. What drove "Torchlight" Guido to betray them? Why was Veronika in Mitario, when she was supposed to be part of the bioweapon retrieval mission?

All they had in the way of clues were the six corpses that had been delivered to the Foreign Intelligence Office.

There was "Hearth" Veronika, the team's boss who'd been killed by Purple Ant in the United States of Mouzaia.

There was "Firewalker" Gerde, the old lady sniper who'd died in an unknown location and been covered in deep cuts.

There was "Soot" Lukas, the prodigy gamer who'd died in an unknown location with the right half of his body burned to a crisp.

There was “Scapulimancer” Wille, the fortune teller who, like his twin brother, had died in an unknown location with the left half of his body burned to a crisp.

There was “Flamefanner” Heide, the erotica writer who’d died in an unknown location by poisoning and was found covered in flowers.

And there was “Torchlight” Guido, the combat specialist whose corpse was a fake and who was known in the Galgad Empire as Bluebottle or Blue Fly.

It was unclear what they’d been doing and where they’d been doing it just before their deaths. Guido had strategically sent Klaus off at the time, so Klaus had no firsthand knowledge of what Inferno had been up to.

“One of the most important tasks we need to complete is figuring out why exactly they died. Whatever that reason is, it likely has something to do with the covert maneuvers Serpent has been making across the world.”

“I agree.”

“The task I gave Avian...was to figure out exactly how ‘Firewalker’ Gerde died.”

Klaus’s eyes went wide at the unexpected piece of news. He scowled at the man across from him. “Why didn’t you send me instead?”

“Flock had made contact with Firewalker in Fend five months before her death, and I’d heard that Avian improved by leaps and bounds during their mission in Longchon. I figured they were the right people for the job.”

“But that doesn’t mean—”

“Besides, I had important counterintelligence ops I needed you for. I stand by my original decision.”

*But that decision led to Avian getting wiped out.*

Klaus was furious, but he knew that this wasn’t the time to be pointing fingers. Right now, he needed to find a way to shed light on the mystery of how Avian got killed. “So who was it that butchered Avian?” he said, giving voice to the question that had been constantly swirling through his head.

“The one lead we have,” C replied, handing Klaus a single sheet of paper, “is



this message Flock gave to our messenger right before he died.”

“Vindo sent a message? What did it say?”

Klaus swiftly scanned the document.

*We found Firewalker’s legacy. I’ll relay the details in person.*

Klaus stared at the page in shock.

Standard operating procedure was to give confidential reports verbally to avoid the risk of having the communications monitored or intercepted. Whatever information Avian found, it must have been incredibly sensitive.

*Was that why they were killed?*

It was too early to draw any firm conclusions, but it was hard to imagine the timing of their deaths to be a mere coincidence.

“I have a mission for Lamplight,” C told Klaus. “First, I need you to go to Fend and find out why Avian died. Second, I need you to eliminate whatever foe engineered it. Third, I need you to get your hands on this legacy of Gerde’s Avian found.”

Klaus knew what missions like that were called. Of the many types of missions spies undertook, the most difficult ones were the ones where they had to take over for another team that had been deemed incapable of continued operation and succeed where they had failed—Impossible Missions.

With that, Lamplight got to work.

Multiple groups of spies were cooking up schemes in Fend—and Gerde’s legacy sat at the center of their conflict.



With the battle finished, Lamplight had completed the first of their tasks.

Up in the mountains on the edge of Hurough, Klaus and the girls finished tying up the twenty-four Belias agents. The aide named Disintegrator Doll wasn’t there, but according to Annette, she had him in custody, and Lotus Doll was locked up somewhere else as well.

Lamplight made sure to give first aid to all the people whose legs they'd shot. Nobody was going to be dying there—not unless Lamplight resumed their offensive. Now Belias's lives rested solely in Klaus's hands.

“...Why take hostile action against us?” Amelie asked.

Klaus hauled Amelie over to the admin cabin. He left everyone aside from her tied up in a line over to the side of the construction site with a couple of armed girls watching over them to make sure they couldn't run away or kill themselves.

“I don't understand what the Din Republic's motives are. You killed Prince Darryn, you captured us when we started looking into his death... What do you hope to achieve?” Amelie asked after having been separated from her subordinates. Her voice positively dripped with frustration.

“That's a fair question. I suppose I should start by explaining myself.”

Klaus opened the door to one of the empty rooms. There was a girl wrapped up in bandages sitting inside with a cheerless look in her eyes.

“‘Cloud Drift’ Lan...!” Amelie growled.

The androgynous, dark-red-haired girl quietly bowed. “Verily. I am she.”

“Bonfire?!” Amelie's eyes went wide. “You were working with her this whole —”

“Thine accusations were unfounded. Avian had naught to do with Prince Darryn's assassination,” Lan said, answering in Klaus's place. She clenched her fists in frustration for the briefest of moments, then bowed even deeper.

“I ask that thou believeth me. Avian is innocent. We inflicted not the slightest harm on the Commonwealth.”

“You have the *nerve* to lie to my face...?”

Amelie's voice was brimming with rage, and her legs tensed up. She was radiating an icy bloodlust like it was taking everything she had to resist the instinctive urge to try to murder the girl standing before her.

“Amelie, I ask this of you as Belias's boss,” Klaus said, reining her in. “Would you please hear her out? She has every reason in the world to want to kill you,

yet she's suppressing that desire and bowing her head to you. All we want is an honest dialogue."

"You want to *talk*? After everything you did to me and my—"

"What I did was the only way you were ever going to listen to what Lan had to say."

"....."

"If you refuse to even have a conversation with us, I'm going to have to turn to my last resort. I'd prefer not to elaborate on that."

Amelie knew exactly what he was alluding to—torture. Klaus's last resort would involve killing her agents in front of her, one after another, until her heart was shattered and her personality itself was gone. If he wanted to, he could start doing it at the drop of a hat.

She bit her lip in frustration, then ultimately nodded. "...Fine."

Lan told her everything—about how Avian came to Fend looking for a spy who'd gone missing, about how Belias had attacked them out of nowhere, and about how Prince Darryn had never so much as entered their thoughts. The whole time she was cogently laying out her story, Amelie listened in stoic silence.

"So tell me." Once Lan was done, Klaus shot Amelie a question. "What basis did Belias have for deciding that Avian was involved in the crown prince's assassination?"

"...Our orders from our superiors."

"You killed Avian without so much as seeing the proof?"

"Those were our orders." Amelie's voice was devoid of passion. "We have our own way of doing things here. Pawns on a chessboard don't question the players' intentions."

"And those CIM superiors, that was Hide?"

"...That's right. I'm surprised you knew. I don't know any of the particulars."

Klaus was familiar with the name, but little more. The Fend Commonwealth's

CIM intelligence agency was headed by Hide, a group composed of five spies whose identities were a mystery even to their direct subordinates.

Amelie regarded him doubtfully. "Are you suggesting that they lied to me?"

"I think that's safe to assume, yes. Either there's a double agent involved, or somebody tricked them, too. Whatever the case, there's a rot festering in Fend's innermost circles," Klaus concluded. "I suspect that it was a Hide member who helped facilitate Prince Darryn's assassination."

"That's impossible!!" Amelie screamed. "You people have no evidence for any of these claims! You're just feeding us convenient lies to manipulate Belias into doing your bidding. Go ahead, tell me I'm wrong!"

"I'll remind you that you have just as little evidence as we do."

"But—"

"Is the great Puppeteer really such a fool? Did you really feel nothing after hearing Sybilla's and Lan's pleas? Are you really so credulous as to blindly believe a superior you've never even seen over the truth staring you right in the face?"

"....."

Amelie said nothing. There was a conflict raging in her eyes, as if the very idea of doubting her superiors was unthinkable to her.

"...We have no reason to trust you," she muttered quietly. "You harmed my people... And what's more, if you had just told us the truth from the outset, we might have been able to save Prince Darryn."

"I told you over and over that there was no way Avian was behind the attempt on his life. You just never listened."

"But..."

"We've offered you substantial concessions, Amelie. You killed five of my countrymen, all of whom had promising futures. I'd appreciate it if you didn't test our patience any more than necessary."

"....."

Amelie sank into an uneasy silence.

Klaus shook his head. "...Forget it. I don't have time for this. You're going to tell me everything, or Belias all dies."

"....."

"If you're a spy, you'll do what's best for your nation's stability. You can either get eliminated blindly believing in a boss you could credibly suspect of having turned traitor, or you can choose to pay lip service to what I'm telling you and live to fight another day. What's it going to be?"

Klaus's threat had a definite menace to it. If Amelie refused to talk, he was prepared to kill every last member of Belias. The only way for him to protect his nation was to prevent anyone from finding out about the crime Lamplight was committing. The girls had good hearts, so seeing that would probably traumatize them, but the situation was forcing his hand.

Amelie buried her face in her hands. ".....What is it you want to know?"

She was finally willing to cooperate.

Klaus offered her a chair. "Tell me about how Avian died. Something must not have added up."

"But...how do you know that?"

"I just do."

Amelie gawked at him.

After hesitating for a moment, Klaus decided to elaborate. "Someone of your caliber should never have been able to kill them."



Klaus's suspicion turned out to be true. Belias had failed to finish off Avian.

"It's true that we attacked them," Amelie said, sounding rather displeased, "but the fight turned messy, and we sustained serious losses. We found their bodies at dawn, but we don't know who exactly killed them."

The only person Belias was certain they'd killed themselves was "South Wind" Queneau, who'd protected his allies at the start of the battle. That wasn't to say there was a chance that the others had survived, mind you. All their bodies were accounted for. But it was someone else who'd driven the nail into their coffins—and someone else who had killed them. Amelie's theory was that some of her agents had died taking Avian down, but Klaus intuitively knew that that wasn't it. Vindo had been on track to becoming one of the most talented operatives in the world. Not even sacrificing their lives would have been enough for the likes of Belias to take him down.

At that point, Klaus forced Amelie to tell him where she'd found the bodies. Unsurprisingly, the spot she told him about was different from what had been reported in the newspaper. Vindo and the others had fled upstream along the Turko River, no doubt to draw their pursuers away as Lan floated with the current, and had ended up on a hill lined with plum trees. The lifeless trees' branches were barren of fruit, and there was a murder of crows nearby pecking away at a dead cat.

At four AM, Klaus took a few of his subordinates to the hill. "Search the area. They left us some sort of clue here; I'm sure of it."

Vindo would never have gone down for free. He would have carved a coded message into one of the trees. Klaus didn't have any evidence to support that theory, but he believed in Vindo all the same. The thing he was most curious about was the "legacy" Vindo had mentioned, but—

"Actually, now that I think about it," Sara said as she shone her flashlight at the plum trees' roots. "Do you know anything about this legacy, Miss Lan?"

"Nary a thing," Lan promptly replied. "We often undertook different tasks, and the night Brother Vindo brought us together to share our findings was the very night Belias descended on us."

"Oh..."

"My regrets know no bounds. Even now, I know not where I need direct my rage."

Lan had decided to grit through her injuries and take part in the search as well. She had a grave look in her eyes as she, too, held a flashlight alongside

Sara.

Meanwhile, the two usual suspects were squabbling as noisily as ever.

“Get your fuckin’ rear in gear! You barely even did anything on this op!”

“‘Cause I was stuck in place! I had to stay hidden until the party wrapped up, remember?!”

The suspects, of course, being Sybilla and Lily. The two of them were diligently searching their area, but they spent the whole time loudly flinging insults at each other as well.

To be fair, Sybilla had a point. Lily’s involvement *had* been pretty minimal that time around. All she’d done was wait under a Heron Manor table and use her poison to put Lotus Doll to sleep when Sybilla shoved her down there. From that point on, she’d had little choice but to remain hidden so Belias couldn’t find her.

Sybilla gave Lily a swift kick in the rump, and the latter scurried onward. After lighting a fire under her teammate’s ass, Sybilla got back to work herself.

Klaus walked over to her looking downright exasperated. “You know it’s all right for you to take a break, right? You’ve already put in the most work of anyone.”

The five of them were the only ones up on the hill. They’d just finished an arduous battle, and the rest of the team had gone back to Belias’s headquarters to catch their breath. Right now they were probably drinking tea and poring over the new data they’d gathered.

Sybilla shook her head and turned her flashlight toward the next plum tree. “It’s fine. I wanna work.” However, her fatigue soon betrayed her. “Oops!” she cried as her foot got caught on a root.

Klaus reached out and caught her right before she fell. “Let’s go ahead and take five. Your body can’t keep going forever.”

“M-my bad...”

Sybilla’s cheeks reddened in embarrassment. She stepped away from Klaus and sat down at the base of one of the larger trees. Klaus didn’t want to leave

her on her own, so he went and sat down next to her.

The night felt eerily quiet compared to the battle they'd just been through. A chilly Fend breeze swept across the ground.

Sybilla's shoulder bumped into Klaus's. She rested her body ever so slightly against his. ".....You knew, right?"

Klaus wasn't sure what she was referring to.

As he was in the middle of pondering that question, Sybilla explained herself. "That my brother and sister were already dead."

"I did. Your academy instructor told me."

So she was talking about what she'd told Amelie. From the sound of it, she hadn't actually told any of her teammates what had happened.

After escaping her father's gang, the Cannibals, Sybilla and her siblings had been saved by an orphanage, and Sybilla headed off to the spy academy with her siblings' hopes resting on her shoulders—but then, four years later, her brother and sister were killed.

When that happened, Sybilla *snapped*.

Each night, she would sneak out of her academy only to later return to her dorm reeking of blood. Nobody but Sybilla herself knew what she was out doing during those times. What people *did* know was that she also started causing fights at school, and her grades plummeted. Considering that her exam scores hadn't been all that stellar to begin with, it put her within a hair's breadth of expulsion.

Klaus knew all that.

"For the record, don't you dare pity me," Sybilla said cheerfully. "I'm back on my feet, and my mission's still the same. I'm gonna get strong, and I'm gonna do whatever I can to make a world where no kids have to cry."

She let out the sad laugh of a person fighting back the pain hidden within their heart.

Then she looked straight ahead.



“And besides—”

“.....?”

Her gaze was resting on Sara and Lily as the two of them frantically rushed around.

“I’ve got them now. A gaggle of little sisters who give me nothin’ but headaches.”

“Ah,” Klaus said with a nod. Sybilla was probably including Erna, who called her Big Sis Sybilla as she adorably snuggled up to her, and Annette, who called her Sis as she leaped at her, in those ranks as well. As a matter of fact, she might have even been counting a certain cerulean-haired sourpuss, lovelorn redhead, and black-haired degenerate with dubious views on sexuality as well.

Sybilla lightly knocked her shoulder against his again. “And plus, I think of you as kinda like a little brother, too.”

“...Me? This is the first I’m hearing of this.”

“You’re a hell of a handful, too. I can’t let you outta my sight for a minute.”

“I’m feeling a little insulted right now.”

“I’m gonna protect ya. As your big sister, I’ll do whatever it takes and go wherever I gotta.”

There was something very noble about how frank her declaration was. That was what Sybilla was—she was sincere. There was no pretense in the way she cared about people, nor was there any in the way she mourned for the fallen. That was a rare quality in a world awash in pain; it was a rare quality in the profession of statecraft, with all its lies and scheming; and it was a rare quality in a group of girls who harbored as many insincerities and flaws as Lamplight did.

For the team, Sybilla’s enthusiasm was like a ray of salvation. Her ability to work with others was unmatched, and her raw strength let her smash through any and all hardships.

“Magnificent.”

All Klaus could do was applaud her.

Sybilla grinned in embarrassment. “You say that so much it doesn’t even mean anything to me anymore,” she said, pouting in feigned anger.

Then, after a pause, she let out a surprised “Huh?” She’d spotted something. “Over there...”

She shone her flashlight at the plum tree right in front of her. There were scratches on its bark like claw marks from a wild animal. At first glance, it looked like the work of a cat or a fox, but further inspection revealed that the marks had been made by a knife. It was a cipher only intelligible to Din spies—Vindo’s dying message.

The two of them rose to their feet and headed over to the tree. The bark had regrown somewhat over the intervening month, but they were just barely able to make out the words.

Avian had done it.

They’d escaped from Belias’s raid, killed several of their aides, gotten Lan out alive, and in the moments before their deaths, they even identified the mastermind and left that information behind. Those feats were far beyond the capabilities of the mediocre. Avian had been proud elites to the bitter end.

“I wish they didn’t have to die...”

A tear rolled down Sybilla’s cheek.

“Why does everything get taken from me...? Everything I care about...”

She sobbed as the loss struck her once again.



On the final night of the honeymoon, they threw an unforgettable farewell party. Avian was slated to leave for Fend the next day, and the spies made fools of themselves until the wee hours of the morning. The mural they drew on Heat Haze Palace’s wall that night was still there. Nobody remembered whose idea it was to draw it, but they all took turns adding a single red line until it was complete.

The painting was of a phoenix—the symbol of Avian and Lamplight.

Vics, the handsome man who'd spent the month teasing from the sidelines, grinned. "Feels like that month went by in a flash. ♪ I'm almost gonna miss you all. ♪"

"Awww, but now I'm gonna be all loonely. I hope we see you again," moaned Pharma, the woman who'd been wrapping them all in hugs.

Qulle, the girl who'd been left at the mercy of her idiosyncratic teammates, nodded. "Don't worry. Just like with Longchon, we might meet back up sooner than we expect."

"...Aye. It would be nice to go on a joint mission together," murmured Queneau, the taciturn man who cared more for his team than he let on.

Lan, the troublemaker who would end up being the team's sole survivor, smiled. "Ah, what a joy that shall be. I would like nothing more."

"Just make sure you don't get in our way, *ladies*," said Vindo, the young man who'd come to Heat Haze Palace the most often of all of them.

In a way, the phoenix painting was a prayer that all of them would survive. All of them wanted to meet again. However, that wish didn't come true.

Instead, the girls' hearts were rent by an unfathomably deep sorrow.



"This is horseshit...", Sybilla moaned through her tears.

The death of Avian's members had driven the Lamplight girls to great heights and left them with deep scars. Now the girls were imprinting Avian's final wishes onto their souls.

*Fuck. This.*

This wasn't the way any of them wanted it to go. They would have been fine remaining amateurs forever if it meant they got to keep looking up to Avian. Staying as washouts and seething with jealousy toward the elites would have been far preferable to having to suffer such a loss. Now they wanted nothing more than for Avian to mock them.

No matter how they tried to spin it, this conclusion was as far from a happy

ending as they came.

*To my dear washouts.*

Upon reading Vindo's carved testament, Sybilla let out a wordless sob. Because of her sincerity, the message struck her especially hard. Grief at her comrades' deaths washed over her, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Sybilla, you have a kinder heart than anyone," Klaus said as he came and stood by her side. "We'll mourn them by seeing this mission through to its end."

Vindo had left them a description of the people who killed him and the others.

Another group of attackers had shown up as Belias was conducting their raid and come to finish the rest of Avian off. They probably had some sort of connection to Belias, and in all likelihood, they were the same people who'd fed that false intel to Hide.

There had been two attackers—a many-armed man with dark eyes and a series of strange prosthetics on his right arm, and a girl with a sadistic smile and a pair of fissure-shaped scars on her shoulders.

Vindo had also caught the name the man used to address the girl: Green Butterfly.

There was one organization that code name immediately called to mind—a group of spies with names like Bluebottle (aka Blue Fly), White Spider, and Purple Ant who had plunged the world into chaos. Up until then, only Klaus and Thea had seen them as archenemies, and the rest of the girls hadn't had any personal stake in the fight. However, Vindo's message marked the moment when that group became enemies of Lamplight as a whole.

Serpent was lurking in the Fend Commonwealth.

After crying for a good long while, Sybilla looked at the sky. Klaus followed her lead. Up above, he could see the stars. Last night's downpour must have washed away the pollutants in the air, as the thick fog that normally shrouded the city was gone, replaced with a sky as deep and as blue as the sea twinkling with an uncountable array of stars. Their light was so frail they seemed liable to blow away in the wind. However, he couldn't tear his gaze from them. The

starscape was heartrendingly beautiful, and he could feel a nameless urge welling up deep inside of him.

“Let’s do this, Boss,” Sybilla said. “Lamplight and Avian. This here’s gonna be our first and final joint mission.”

## Next Mission

As Klaus stared at Vindo's final message, he felt an echo of the man's presence. Vindo had probably been killed just after writing it. He, Vics, Qulle, and Pharma had all been struck down, and Avian had been destroyed.

Serpent was hiding in Fend, and they had been for some time.

A many-armed man. A scarred girl. The pieces were coming together. According to Vindo, he'd met "Firewalker" Gerde when she was staying in Fend. One of those two had probably killed her, too. Despite her advanced age, Klaus doubted there were many spies who could have put Gerde down.

*I don't like any of this...*

Atop the plum hill, Klaus rubbed his chin and sank into thought.

"Lily, would you mind going on ahead and meeting up with the others?" he said when his subordinate came over. "I'm going to stay here for a bit. I need to figure out the best way for us to use *you-know-who*. The timing is going to be tricky."

"Oh, I get it." As soon as Klaus said the phrase *you-know-who*, Lily's expression brightened. "You're talking about the plan we discussed before we came over to Fend, right?"

"...Something to that effect, yes."

"You got it. In that case, I'm out!"

Lily gave him a crisp salute, then collected the other girls and headed off, leaving Klaus alone on the quiet hill.

There was something he needed to confirm.

Right before they set out for Fend, Klaus had devised a scheme. He knew that the battle ahead would be a harsh one, and in order to make sure they all survived, he relayed his new plan to the girls: Lamplight was going to accept a

new spy onto its roster.

More specifically, their new member would be operating differently than the eight girls did. They wouldn't always be joining in on group operations, but the plan was that Lamplight could call them in and have them use the full breadth of their capabilities when the need arose. That spy had certain skills the girls could never hope to mimic.

The girls didn't take much convincing. When Klaus introduced the new member to them, the girls offered up a round of applause.

*At the moment, their newest member was already there in Fend.*

*Right now, they're the one spy I trust more than anyone else.*

Klaus turned and faced the darkness. "Code name Insight—are you ready?"

He got no reply.

The concealed spy simply waited for the right time to carry out their mission.



Lamplight and Serpent were about to come to a head in the Fend Commonwealth, and this time, each team had prepared a trump card.

Lamplight had a plan centered around code name Insight.

As for Serpent, their plan revolved around—



"What! A! Disaster!"

In the center of Hurough, there was a large clocktower that both housed Fend's Houses of Parliament and served as a symbol of the nation itself. At the moment, though, there was someone very rudely standing atop it.

The girl gleefully shouted like she was howling at the moon. She was wearing a bold sleeveless dress, and her bewitchingly lustrous hair fluttered as it gleamed in the moonlight. Despite the roof's sharp angle, she twirled atop it as though she was dancing. Every so often, she would look at the sky and shout,

“What a disaster!” She seemed to be lamenting some sort of problematic situation, yet she was very visibly trembling with delight.

Running from her shoulder all the way down to her elbow, the girl had a large scar that resembled a bolt of lightning. What’s more, it had a matching twin on the other side.

She was Green Butterfly—a member of the Galgad Empire’s spy team Serpent. Although she was the team’s youngest member, she’d burrowed deep into the Fend Commonwealth and set countless schemes in motion there.

Atop the clocktower, she let out an exultant sigh. “I can’t believe Belias went down so fast. It’s kind of unreal. So that’s what the infamous Klaus is capable of, huh? We really can’t leave that guy unchecked. He’s just too darn strong.”

Green Butterfly had been watching the whole time. She’d sneaked into the party at Heron Hall to see Klaus’s skills for herself, and Belias had been none the wiser.

“You know, there’s this thing White Spider says.” The girl’s tone was playful. “He says that when you’re fighting that monster, it’s important to take the initiative and never let go of it. You gotta plunder everything you can before he has a chance to react, then just keep on making more and more quagmires for him to deal with.”

In her head, she turned over the advice she’d gotten from her teammate.

“If things go on like this, he’s gonna come kill me.” Green Butterfly laughed as she spun back around. “That’s why I’m burning through every plan I’ve got. And now it’s time for the most despicable strategy of all.”

With that, she smiled—*at the girl beside her.*

“I’ve got a new code name for you. Now your name is Scarlet Leviathan.”

“.....” The girl beside her offered her nothing in the way of a smile.

“Your last name was super fateful, so I liked that one, too, but it’s time for a clean slate, y’know?”

Green Butterfly patted the girl on the back and began humming to herself as she looked out over Horough’s metropolitan area. Then she spoke up and made



her declaration with her eyes open wide and her voice so loud and melodic it was like she was singing a song. “Now tremble, foolish masses! Etch this deranged, beautiful nightmare right into your marrow!”

That was who Serpent’s plan revolved around—Scarlet Leviathan.

Just like Green Butterfly said, the world was about to be engulfed in a sinister terror.



Lily and Sybilla headed for the Belias headquarters. Lan’s injuries were still far from healed, so she’d already tapped out, and Sara was taking her back to Sybilla’s hideout to recuperate.

At the moment, the rest of the team was over at Belias’s headquarters digging through every scrap of information Belias had collected. Amelie had given in to Klaus’s threats and showed them exactly where it was. Lamplight had the power to kill her entire team whenever they wanted. They would much rather it didn’t come to that, of course, but the option was available to them.

At the moment, it was five in the morning. The sun had yet to rise.

Lily and Sybilla pushed their bone-tired bodies to the limit and ran through the Horough streets.

“Now that I think about it,” Lily said, “were Serpent the ones who killed Prince Darryn, too?”

“Hmm? Oh yeah, I guess we never figured that out,” Sybilla replied with a nod. “There’s still a lotta questions there. Either way, though, they’re dead fuckin’ meat.”

“When morning comes, the whole world’s gonna descend into chaos.”

The two of them could feel it—there was a change taking place on a worldwide scale. For the next little while, the assassination was going to be the talk of the global town. That was what happened when a member of the Fend royal family got murdered.

However, they still didn’t know what the killer was hoping to achieve. These

weren't the Middle Ages anymore, and even in wartime, people didn't just go around offing other countries' royals. Doing that prevented the conflict from ever cooling off. If this really was Galgad's handiwork, then as soon people found that out, the entire world would turn against the Empire once more.

"Even if you just wanna cause chaos, there's gotta be a less risky way to—"

Midway through Lily's sentence, the two of them spotted something.

Fire.

Part of the city was ablaze. It was early enough in the morning that people weren't panicking in the streets, but those were unmistakably flames. And the building that was on fire was the Kashard Doll Workshop—*Belias's headquarters*.

"No way..."

The two of them screamed and sped up. That was where their teammates were. Had they managed to evacuate in time?

When they finished barreling to the workshop, they found two people standing outside in a daze: Amelie and Lotus Doll. They were standing stock-still, like they couldn't believe what they'd just seen. There were wounds on their foreheads from being struck with something.

"You...people...", Amelie rasped. "...inside... Your teammates... Why...?"

That was all Lily and Sybilla needed to hear for them to charge on in.

The fire had yet to engulf the entirety of the two-story workshop. It had started on the second floor, so the ground floor was intact. The two of them held their breath and rushed inside. The door right next to the entrance was wide open, so they could immediately see what was going on in the room.

Inside, *Grete was lying face-down with blood gushing from her back.*

As Sybilla stared in horror, Lily made a split-second decision. She grabbed Sybilla by the collar and tugged her farther into the workshop.

The thing was, Grete wasn't the only victim. It wasn't clear whether she was alive, and either way, she wasn't in good shape, but Amelie had said *teammates*, plural. There were other people who were hurt, and for that

matter, their enemy might still be somewhere in the building. Lily and Sybilla couldn't afford to check in on someone who might already be dead, not when their other teammates needed them as soon as possible. They steeled their hearts and made what they knew was the rational decision.

When they headed down the hallway, they spotted another one of their teammates slumped against the wall.

Thea was sitting on the ground, *cradling her broken, blood-drenched right arm.*

"Lily, Sybilla..."

She was still conscious. She gasped in obvious pain as she choked out the words.

"Upstairs..."

Lily didn't waste a second racing straight up. A few seconds later, Sybilla followed along after her. There were sounds coming from the second-floor workspace right next to the stairs, and the two of them dove through the flames to get there.

It felt like they were living through a nightmare. In all their lives, they'd never felt terror like this before.

They threw open the door and bore witness to the next horror.

Inside the burning workspace, *Erna was lying unconscious on the ground.*

Beside her stood Annette with blood trickling from her forehead. Annette was holding an iron rod, no doubt one of her inventions, and staring straight ahead with a dazed look in her eyes.

A moment later, her body went hurtling to the side.

With that, *Annette smashed into the wall and gushed blood from her mouth.*

Based on the amount of blood she'd just spat up, she'd probably suffered some organ damage.

Two girls were standing amid the flames. One of them had scars so large it looked like her arms had been split in two. She was the person from Vindo's

final message—Green Butterfly. But beside her, the person who'd just slammed Annette with her knife...

"I told you it was fateful," Green Butterfly said delightedly. "That code name of yours was like a preview. Although I guess it's Scarlet Leviathan now."

There, beside Green Butterfly, stood Monika with a knife clutched in her hand.

Lily and Sybilla froze. It was taking every mental resource they had to process the scene in front of them. That was how utterly detached from reality it was. Why was Monika with Green Butterfly? Why did she hit Annette with her knife? Was she the one who'd attacked Grete, Thea, and Erna?

Monika said nothing.

Instead, she hurled a glass vial onto the ground in front of her. The vial was full of liquid, and when it spilled onto the ground, it immediately caught ablaze. The fire surged and rushed forward to surround Lily and Sybilla.

Across the curtain of smoke, Monika turned around.

"———I'm sorry."

They thought they heard a quiet whisper, but it was quickly drowned out by the sound of the building crumbling as the fire ate through it.

Green Butterfly had called it fateful.

The traitor's name was "Glint" Monika, and that was what she was—a glinting blade coldly tearing through Lamplight's bonds.



## Afterword

I know the Volume 6 afterword isn't the greatest place for it, but I hope you don't mind if I take a moment to talk about my writing process for Volume 5.

I was wrapping up my manuscript for Volume 5 at the time, and it was getting to the point where I needed to think about the plot for Volume 6. There was one big question I was brooding over.

*Are the readers actually going to like Avian?*

*Spy Classroom* has a big cast at the best of times, and in novels where there's a limit to the types of information you can convey, you always have to make hard choices about what to depict and what to leave out.

Therein lay the question—how much screen time should I give to Avian in Volume 6?

Personally speaking, I love Avian. Love 'em to bits. I often spend my days fantasizing about stuff like them taking their graduation test and what it was like right after they joined the team and thinking, "I wonder if there's somewhere I could write about this?" But here's the thing: Writing is about communication between the creator and the audience! It doesn't matter how much I like them if I can't get that through to the reader! In the end, I decided to play it safe, keep the Avian flashbacks to a minimum, and stick to the tried-and-true nine characters + misc. supporting cast formula in order to keep the cast list manageable.

*Still, I really want to put more Avian in Volume 6!*

I flip-flopped back and forth all through the Volume 5 proofreading process, and as I did, I got a message from my editor. "Tomari's a busy person, so I would feel bad making her come up with character designs for the entire Avian roster..." Sometimes, that's just life. I was a little depressed about it, but I had no choice but to cut down on their screen time.

A few days later, though, I got a surprising message.

Editor: “Tomari just read Volume 5, and she says she wants to draw Avian!”

Me: “For real?!”

If I had Tomari’s illustrations on my side, then that changed everything. With that to spur me on, I was able to put all the Avian in Volume 6 that I wanted, from their interactions with Lamplight to their downfall to their bonds.

Thank you so, so much, Tomari. The only reason I was able to include them in Volume 6 was because you, my number one reader, gave them your seal of approval. In particular, I really love your designs for Vindo and Pharma.

Now then, a preview of what’s to come. It’s time for the girl who bears the brand of traitor to begin her fight. Season two is fundamentally a story about her, as well as about one other girl. I’ll do my best to write it well.

That said, I might put out Short Story Collection 2 first. Until then, that’s all from me.

*Takemachi*

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