It takes a village (or sometimes an army)
by Azzandra

Summary

Agatha raised by Jägers AU. That's pretty much it.
“Vot trouble haff you gotten uz into dis time?” Jenka asked in an accusing tone.

“Vell,” Maxim said, fidgeting with the brim of his hat, “ve got a Heterodyne, don't ve?”

The young child turned her serious gaze to Jenka.

“Do you know where my Uncle Barry went?” the girl asked.

Jenka’s eyes slid the the three Jägers crowded behind the girl. Dimo shook his head slightly. That was extremely worrying. Master Barry was out there, somewhere, alive, and yet unnervingly out of reach. *Again.*

Still, the girl was Heterodyne through and through. The smell was unmistakeable.

“No,” Jenka replied to the question, and the little girl's face twisted to dismay.

“Ho, but iz okeh,” Oggie rushed to say, sitting down on his haunches to be at her eye level, “ve search for him, yah?”

“Yah, yah, ve find him again,” Dimo added. “No vorriez.”

“Really?” the girl Heterodyne asked, sounding vaguely dubious.

“Ve promize,” Jenka said.

After all, Jenka thought, they found one Heterodyne, and it only took them several years to accomplish this feat. How much harder could it be to find another one?

A brief stint following the remnants of Barry Heterodyne’s scent turned into a dead end and, because trouble doesn't travel alone, they also ran into a malfunctioning battle clank.

“Oop, hyu schtay here,” Dimo said, picking up Agatha before she could wander closer.

“I know!” she huffed, offended, as she tried to squirm loose. “I just wanna see what it does!”

“It sqvashes leedle gurls,” Maxim supplied, before he and Oggie sprang at it, weapons brandished. It went down so quickly, that it was barely a fight at all, but at least it made a satisfying boom.

In the end, Agatha had to assuage her curiosity by poking through the smoldering wreckage with a stick. The Jägers hovered nearby, ready to intercept any piece of the clank that might still pose a danger.

“I don't think Uncle Barry was here,” Agatha said as she poked a brassy piece of plating.

“Hyu don't?” Dimo asked carefully.
“No, ’cause he woulda beaten that clank,” she continued with childish self-assurance.

“Hy guess hyu iz right,” Jenka said, but rather than look at Agatha, she caught the gaze of her fellow Jägers. “Master Barry vasn't here.”

All their expressions were variations on displeased, but they had the same understanding. A Heterodyne in hand was worth two in the bush.

“But what about Uncle Barry?” Agatha asked, absolutely stricken.

“Ve tek hyu to hyu family home,” Oggie replied, giving her the kind of wide smile that only a Heterodyne would find reassuring. “He knowz de vay.”

“Effen if he hazn't bothered to uze it all diz time,” Maxim muttered under his breath.

“Home?” Agatha repeated, looking thoughtful.

“Yah, Mechanicsburg. Und den ve come back to look for hyu oncle,” Dimo assured.

“You're-- You're gonna just leave me there?” Agatha said, looking quite alarmed. “Alone?”

Jenka sighed in the way she did when she tried to abstain from facepalming.

“Ov courze not,” Jenka said firmly. “Hyu vill haff plenty ov people to look out for hyu. But if hyu vant uz to stay, ve vill.”

“I don't... like to be left,” Agatha said quietly.

“It iz not pleasant,” Dimo agreed, patting her on the back.

Compared to the grueling years spent on a seemingly futile errand, transporting a child through the Wastelands seemed like a welcome challenge.

Even the parts that were, indeed, genuinely challenging.

It wasn't as if Jägers didn't have any experience with young Heterodynes. Indeed, the Heterodyne family did not abide shyness of Jägers in their heirs, not even if they were impressionable young children. Especially not if they were impressionable young children.1

It was just, well, usually the Jägers weren't the ones solely entrusted with a Heterodyne child's upbringing. There were other people tasked with the day to day things that children required, like deciding what to clothe them or which foods they were allowed to eat in what order or when touching something would be merely educational instead of permanently crippling. And sometimes that person was the scariest piece of architecture this side of the Ural Mountains2, but at least Castle Heterodyne was vested in keeping its Heterodynes largely intact until they had the opportunity to produce more heirs.
And it also presumably had some method for persuading a recalcitrant child to go to bed, even if that involved the bed having bars.

Tragically, the abandoned house they used as shelter for the night did not have the convenient child-sized cages that Castle Heterodyne did. They had to put her to bed the old-fashioned way. And Agatha was not amenable to that.

“I'm not tired,” Agatha insisted, not even removing her attention from the book in her hands.

“Ve must vake op early tomorrow,” Dimo said. “Hyu get crenky ven hyu iz sleepy.”

Jenka, far less inclined to be cowed by a five year old, Heterodyne though she may be, swiped the book from Agatha's hands.

“Hey! Give it back!” the girl shrieked, jumping to her feet.

“Dere, zee?” Dimo threw his hands up. “Vot did Hy say? Crenky!”

“I'm not cranky! She stole my book! Give it back!” Agatha made to take the book back, but Jenka was already holding it out of reach.

“Hy giff it back if hyu ken tek it back,” Jenka replied.

Agatha made a frustrated sound and hopped up, trying to grab it. She continued hopping for several minutes, her face reddening in frustration and exertion both. Jenka dangled the book casually, perfectly willing to attract the ire of the young girl if that meant she would wear herself out in the process and go to sleep more willingly.

Eventually, Agatha stopped, shrieked in frustration, kicked at Jenka's shin and then flopped on the floor with her arms crossed, muttering something that, in best likelihood, fell along the lines of promises to 'show you, show you all'. Heterodynes tended to be precocious ranters.

“Hoy, did you giff hyu uncle diz moch trouble, keed?” Maxim asked, looking up from where he was cleaning his sword.

Agatha scowled, clearly torn between continuing her rant and answering the question. She huffily turned away from Jenka, ignoring her with all the dignity a girl barely out of toddlerhood could muster.

“Uncle Barry told me bedtime stories,” Agatha said. “About him an' dad an' the places they visited and stuff.”

“Oh, vell, vhy didn't hyu say so?” Oggie said. “Ve gots de Heterodyne schtoriez too!”

“...Really?” Agatha blinked.

“Yah, ve iz Jäger, keedoh, ve uzed to ride vit de Heterodynez!” Oggie continued, crouching down next to Agatha. “De old vuns, at leazt!”

“Um,” Agatha tilted her head slightly, “but Uncle Barry said the old Heterodynes were bad people.”
“But dey vos fun bad pipple,” Oggie said, grinning. “Und dey vos hyu anceztors! Hy tell hyu all about dem if hyu get in bed first.”

Agatha regarded Oggie wide-eyed for a few seconds, ruminating on this offer for a few seconds.

“Okay!” she said finally. “But I’m not goin’ to bed ’cause you tricked me, I just wanna hear the stories.”

“Ov courze,” Oggie said and took Agatha's hand, leading her to the next room where they'd set up the bed for her. He threw one last smug look over his shoulder, because the situation called for a little gloating.

There was some eyerolling at Oggie, but he turned out to be a better storyteller than any of them expected. He told Agatha about the time her great-great-great-granduncle Persiflat Heterodyne used a set of giant magnifying lenses to set a troublesome neighbor's castle roof on fire, and even with the girl interrupting to ask questions which clearly exceeded Oggie's limited understanding of science, he managed to make the story sound engaging.

“Hyu tink she gon’ be like her poppa?” Maxim asked during a lull in the story, when Agatha asked a particularly tricky question that she was unwilling to let Oggie gloss over.

“Hy tink she vill be Heterodyne in de end,” Jenka replied, tapping the spine of Agatha's book.

The title, in flowery cursive, was '101 Elegant Death Ray Designs for the Fashionable Gentlewoman'.

There weren't always houses. Usually they camped under bridges or in caves or under the wide open sky, always avoiding towns or well-intentioned good Samaritans who might get the mistaken impression they'd be saving a child from becoming a Jäger snack. They picked up things for Agatha on the way—clothes, soap, a hairbrush, a plush toy, a book, little bits and bobs of mechanisms which kept her busy for hours.

Agatha rode with Jenka on Füst when she was tired or when the terrain was rough, but sometimes she insisted on walking, darting back and forth to look at whatever caught her interest. It was an endearing sight, even if not exactly safe.

On one notable occasion, she wandered right up to a feral construct sleeping under some shrubbery. The creature was a mix of large cat and bull, clawed limbs and taurine head complete with almost a dozen horns going every which way. The creature's fur was dappled in brown and gray, so it was no surprise it remained hidden from sight even when it was the size of a cow.

It opened its eyes to come face to face with the girl and it was just as surprised by Agatha as Agatha had been by it. Luckily, the few moments of frozen shock had been just enough to Maxim to dart in and scoop Agatha up. Going too fast to change directions, Maxim then stepped over the creatures head and used its grotesquely hunched back as a springboard, leaping well out of its reach.

Though the maneuver was elegant enough that Maxim knew he was going to be bragging about it at Mamma Gkika's for the next fifty years, it unfortunately ended with him hitting the ground with his back, so hard that even Agatha let out a pained “oof!” The construct shook its head and nasty horns,
opening its maw to display jagged rows of mismatched teeth.

Luckily, by that point, the other Jägers rushed in. Dimo's knives bounced off the construct's hide like it was rubber, and all Oggie accomplished was getting his halberd stuck in its mess of horns. This at least gave Maxim enough time to scurry to his feet and retreat a ways, because the construct bellowed like a mad thing and turned its murderous gaze towards Agatha.

Füst plowed into the construct, putting his whole weight into it, and managed to topple it, allowing Jenka to slash at its underbelly with a short, thick blade she produced from her boot. Blood spurted from the wounds and onto Jenka's arm, smoking and burning through her sleeve. She hissed, but scored another cut before jumping out of the creature's reach. Füst growled, but the construct twisted it head suddenly. It pummeled Füst in the face with the handle of Oggie's halberd, still stuck in its horns, and hard enough that the bear reeled back.

“Dem, I hate it vhen dey got de acid blood,” Oggie groused.

“Go for de eyez,” Maxim yelled, even as he dodged one of the construct massive clawed paws.

“Hoy, no backseat fightink!” Dimo chided. He recovered his knives and crouched, prepared for another go at the creature. It wasn't a bad suggestion, but it wasn't also like Dimo was new at this kind of thing.

Oggie jumped to grab onto the handle of his halberd and Jenka flanked the construct from the other side, grabbing onto one of its jutting horns and digging in her heels. The creature had a moment of indecision, not knowing who to gore first, and Dimo took advantage of this moment to leap down hard on its head and sink a knife into each of its eyes.

The construct opened its mouth to roar, but instead collapsed onto the ground, its limbs twitching spasmodically in a way that indicated it was already dead but its brain was sending out random impulses.

The Jägers retreated to a cautious distance and waited until the construct stopped moving.

“That was scary,” Agatha remarked, though she sounded more impressed than scared.

Maxim placed her down on the ground with a sigh.

“Dot iz vhy hyu stick cloze,” he said. “Hyu hurt?”

Agatha didn't reply, but she seemed intact. All her attention was taken up by the dead monster, which she regarded with wide eyes as she padded closer.

“Is it a construct?” she asked in an awed whisper.

“Yah, iz prob'ly some madboy's experiment vot got looze,” Dimo said as he gripped the handles of both his knives.

He tensed as he got ready to pull them out, but he needn't had bothered. The hilts did not resist and Dimo ended up stumbling backwards, almost falling over.

“Vot der dumboozle?!” Dimo turned around to show the hilts—and only the hilts—because the blades themselves had been burned down to corroded stubs. “Go for de eyez, he sez!” Dimo
muttered with a dark look at Maxim.

“Vell, iz not like Hy force hyu!” Maxim shrugged, and grinned.

Jenka inspected the blade of her own blade with dismay. It didn't look quite as bad as Dimo's knives, but it was ruined all the same.

“Dem, dis vas my favorite gutting knife,” she muttered, displeased.

She looked down when she felt a tug on her cloak. Agatha was looking up at her.

“You're hurt,” Agatha said, pointing to her arm. There was an acid burn over most of Jenka's forearm.

“Vot, dis?” Jenka flexed her hand a few times—carefully, because it pulled at her skin painfully, but to demonstrate that she still had full mobility. “It vill heal.”

Agatha peered at the wound dubiously.

“But,” she said, “don't you need a doctor?”

Jenka sighed.

“Ve iz Jäger, ve only let de Heterodynez do vit de doctorink,” Dimo explained.

“Why?”

There was a moment of silence as Jenka, Dimo and Maxim looked at each other, trying to decide what to say (not so much Oggie, who was struggling to get his halberd loose from the construct's horns, and failing miserably, if one were to judge by the steady stream of imprecations he hissed).

“Because ve don't trust anyvun else,” Jenka finally replied.

“Oh, but...” Agatha grabbed Jenka's hand, frowning in thought. For a few moments, Jenka thought Agatha would insist on the doctor. “I'm a Het'rodyne,” she said instead.

“Hyu iz a leetle hopped-op brat,” Jenka laughed, not unkindly.

“Hyu vill not be a Heterodyne proper until der Kestle recognizes hyu,” Maxim added.

“Und vot vill you do ennyvay out here?” Jenka asked, gesturing vaguely to the surrounding forest.

Agatha bit her lip, but she frowned like she was thinking fiercely. Apparently she did not have a good grasp of rhetorical questions yet.

“We need to... rinse the wound first!” Agatha said, probably remembering some instructions she’d learned once. “In, uh... running water.”

“Dere vos a stream dot vay,” Dimo said, pointing to the direction they came from. Jenka threw him a glare—*don't encourage her!*—but Dimo only grinned in response, looking profoundly amused by the entire situation.
“Good!” Agatha said. She perked up with confidence. “An’ we need to remove any clothin’ an’ stuff from the wound.”

In the end Jenka let herself be dragged along, even though she complained the whole way about how this wasn’t necessary.

“You saw what happened to Dimo’s knives!” Agatha said with finality.

“Jäger iz made ov sterner stuff den Dimo’s cheap toyz,” Jenka muttered, prompting an offended noise from Dimo.

But Agatha was clearly bent on being stubborn about this, and while Jenka was perfectly capable of weathering the girl’s temper tantrums at this point, the boys were making encouraging remarks to Agatha, egging her on.

Jenka’s sleeve was cut away and the burned spots were cleaned, and Jenka was forced to admit it did feel better now that all traces of the acidic blood were gone. By that point, the skin had mostly healed and bandages were unnecessary, but Agatha insisted because it was ‘proper procedure’, even if she could barely pronounce the phrase. But Jenka bandaged herself, because she could do a better job one-handed than Agatha could do with both her stubby little child hands.

It was, Jenka had to admit, not so bad. And though she’d been patched up by Heterodynes before, usually for much more grievous injuries, it was the first time one had ‘kissed it to make it better’.

“Vot iz hyu eediots looking at?” Jenka asked the other Jägers, who were regarding her with identical toothy grins.

“Vot?” Maxim raised his hands defensively.

“Nothink!” Oggie squeaked.

“Iz goot to haff a Heterodyne beck, yah?” Dimo asked, looking sly.

Jenka’s eyes slid to her bandaged arm, and towards Agatha who was happily washing her hands in the stream, as if she was coming out of major surgery. Strangely echoed in her naïve medical ministrations was a hint of that… possessive kind of affection Heterodynes had towards their Jägers. It was a strange thing to be reminded of, especially since it was something she only noticed in retrospect.

“She iz not Heterodyne yet, she iz annoyink leetle bug,” Jenka grumbled, but without any heat behind it.

They resumed their journey, Agatha once again riding on Füst, because if nothing else, it kept her out of trouble. She curled up against Jenka and apparently fell asleep, but after a while, she started humming.

No, she started heterodyning.

The boys’ ears twitched, and even though they didn’t say anything or even turn around to look, Jenka knew they caught the sound. It had been… years, since any of them had heard it. It was familiar.
It felt like returning home, even though they were not there yet.

It didn't take long until they ran into more detached Jägers.

It was evening and they were camped around a fire. Jenka was polishing a sword she'd picked up recently, from the flaming remains of a merchant's wagon (the wrecking of which they were not responsible for, and in fact had not even witnessed), while Dimo was poking at the fire. Maxim and Oggie were bickering over a handful of berries they'd picked up from a bush along the way, because they couldn't agree whether or not they were poisonous. Füst was sleeping, curled up behind Jenka.

Then the winds shifted. Dimo sniffed the air and grinned. Füst lifted his head, rumbling warningly.

“Hoy, iz dot hyu, Laszlo?” Dimo asked, tilting his head towards the edge of the clearing.

Agatha's head whirled around just in time to see the aforementioned Laszlo step out of the shadows, a towering green and tusked Jäger, with a mace hanging heavily on his belt.

“Vell, vell, vell, if it izn't Dimo,” Laszlo drawled, as his eyes slid over everyone in slow appraisal. “Und Jenka—haff not seen hyu since de sackink of Brassov. How hyu been, gurl? Ognian! Dot hyu, brodder? Und I see leetle Maxim is vit hyu, ohoho.” His gaze finally settled on Agatha. “But who iz hyu bite-sized companion dere?”

“I'm not bite-sized,” Agatha said indignantly. Then, after a moment's thought added, “Unless your mouth is real big.”

“Ve found a Heterodyne,” Maxim answered, not with a small amount of gloating.

“Vaat?” Laszlo frowned, tilting his hat back so he could scratch his forehead. “Und vere iz diz Heterodyne?”

Everybody around camp gave him blunt, exasperated looks, except for Agatha, who very helpfully raised her hand and beamed.

Laszlo's brows rose slowly.

“Her?” he mouthed, pointing at Agatha in bewilderment. Then he stepped closer, crouching on the ground next to Agatha and inhaling deeply. By the time he exhaled, he looked positively gobsmacked. “She iz Heterodyne!”

“Hyu don't zay!” Oggie snickered.

“Vell!” Laszlo said, sitting down on the ground and regarding Agatha in wonderment.

“I'm Agatha,” the girl said, extending a hand.

“Laszlo,” the Jäger said, shaking her hand rather dazedly, though with gentleness. It was not every day a Heterodyne actually had to introduce themselves to a Jäger.
“It's very nice to meet you,” Agatha said quickly, like something she memorized without really processing the words. Then she returned her attention to a handful of gears and other mechanical doodads that she was tinkering with.

Laszlo picked himself up and retreated closer to the other Jägers, not consciously, but because hundreds of years of being in the Heterodynes' service had conditioned him to steer clear of them when they were working on anything.

“Ve ken go home?” Laszlo asked, turning to Dimo.

They all smiled then, as sharp as Castle Heterodyne's cutlery drawer, and vicious enough that nearby forest-dwelling creatures felt a chill down their spines. Even Jenka, behind her mask, had a leer wide enough that it reached her eyes.

“Ve ken go home, brodder,” Dimo said.

By morning, Laszlo was joined by Matia and Korvin, who groused about Laszlo haring off like startled dinner. They were not as tall as Laszlo, and while Matia was a muted blue, Korvin was a green so bright he might as well have been glowing. Laszlo greeted them with a lazy wave of the hand.

They complained a bit too loudly, because Dimo, Oggie and Maxim simultaneously shushed them, pointing to a sleeping Agatha.

“Vot iz dis,” Matia grumbled, “iz hyu vet nurzes now?”

“Oh, yah, vell, hyu know, iz de economy,” Oggie replied very seriously.

“Dimo keeps loosink his knives,” Maxim added, shaking his head sadly. “Gets verra expensive after a while.”

Dimo threw Maxim an annoyed glance.

“Und ve get paid even better if ve ecktually return de cheeldren aftewards,” Jenka added, before Dimo could say anything. Dimo huffed and crossed his arms, seeing his opportunity to defend himself lost.

Laszlo only sat there with a knowing smile.

“Hoy, Matia,” Korvin whispered, “Hy tink deze guys know someting ve don't?”

“Hy haff a hard time beleefing dot ov any group dot includez de likes ov Ognian,” Matia snorted.

Perhaps a bit too loudly, because Agatha chose that moment to wake up. She yawned loudly and crawled out of the improvised bedroll, seating herself on top of it with her legs crossed and blinking blearily.

“G'morn'n','” Agatha mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

“Hyu ken sleep a leetle more if hyu vant,” Dimo informed her.
“But I’m not sleepy anymore!” Agatha replied, becoming wide awake at the mention of sleep.

“Ov courze, vhen iz hyu effer?” Dimo sighed.

“Matia,” Korvin whispered, elbowing his brother. “Matia, de gurl.”

“Yah, de gurl!” Matia said.

“De gurl, Matia--”

“Yah! Yah! Dot iz vot Hy vos askink!” Matia growled. “De gurl! Vot iz vit op vit de gurl?”

“Shot op und schmell her, hyu crenky eediot!” Korvin said, elbowing Matia with a great deal more force.

“Hullo,” Agatha said. Matia grumbled and kneeled down, sniffing at her.

“She schmell goot,” Matia said, frowning. “She schmell... verra nize... like...” He turned an incredulous stare at all the other Jägers.

“Hyu iz kiddink me!” Matia roared. “But how?! Vhere she come from?”

“Vell,” Oggie began, leering, “vhen two pipple iz dezirous ov each odder--” He was interrupted by a well-timed punch from Jenka.

“Dot iz a qvestion for Master Barry,” Jenka said instead. “But she iz de dotter ov Master Villiam, und she iz a Heterodyne.”

Matia gave Agatha a once-over. His sense of smell was not quite up to the other Jägers’ standards, but there was nothing wrong with his eyesight.

“She resembles de Miztress Lucrezia, iz true,” Matia agreed.

“Really?” Agatha asked, perking up with interest. “You knew my momma?”

“She vos... memorable,” Matia said diplomatically.

“Was she pretty?” Agatha continued, very seriously.

“Ho, yez, dot she vos,” Korvin answered cheerfully. Matia, who unlike Korvin had been in the crossfires of her fits of megalomania, only grumbled something vaguely confirmatory.

“An’ smart?”

“Vell, she had de Spark, so Hy guess zo,” Matia shrugged.

“Um, an’ did...” Agatha paused for a moment, trying to think of new questions. She brightened when she came up with one. “Did she like death rays?”
“Er...” Matia looked around, at a loss.

“Did she have any death rays?” Agatha continued, bouncing in place a bit with excitement. “Ooh! Did she make death rays?”

“Oh, now hyu gots her shchtarted,” snickered Oggie, who had started dreading Agatha's endless barrage of questions whenever he attempted to tell her a bedtime story.

Matia looked around for help, but in that very moment, everybody seemed to have discovered something that urgently need doing, like scrounging breakfast, or dousing the fire, or breaking up camp.

Agatha, for her part, managed to come up with twenty-seven questions that were variations on the “death ray” theme alone.

Steadily, the group of Jägers seemed to be swelling, becoming more and more of a band. Laszlo, Matia and Korvin were followed by two more in the next hour, and another three by the time the sun set.

“Ve iz going to start attracting attention,” Jenka warned, and so they agreed to disperse and take different routes once they started approaching more populated areas.

In a day or so, they would reach the Danube, and would have to cross it to keep heading east towards Mechanicsburg. Ordinarily, travelers heading to Mechanicsburg could take the ferries, all the way down the Danube and up the Dyne, and that would cut travel time quite a bit, even if it wasn’t as direct as land travel. But ferries were expensive and unlikely to take Jägers aboard, which was all just as well, since they kept to the wilds specifically to keep Agatha hidden from anyone's sight.

“Hokay, so vot's de plan here?” Laszlo asked eventually.

“Who iz hyu askink?” Maxim gave Laszlo a puzzled look.

“Ennybody!” Laszlo replied. “Doez even von ov hyu eediotz know vhere ve iz goink und vot ve iz doink vunce ve get dere?”

A few heads turned towards Jenka and Dimo, as they always seemed to do when troublesome thinking things were required of someone. Dimo grumbled something and then distracted Agatha by pointing out a flock of sparrows with butter knives ganging up on a hedgehog. The zoologically improbable farce seemed to utterly delight the young girl.

“Ve iz going to Mechanicsburg, of cauze,” Jenka replied to Laszlo's question, completely unperturbed.

“Und den vot?” Laszlo said. “Ve chust hend de gurl over to de Baron?”

“Vot iz wrong vit dat?” Korvin shrugged. “Eef de Baron vant to keep her safe unteel she iz all growed op, he iz de best for de job, yah?”

The older Jägers threw glances from one to another.
“Vot?” Korvin asked. “Iz Hy wrong?”

“De deal voz dot ve return to serve de Heterodyne vhen dey vos found again,” Oggie said.

“But she iz only leetle ting, und her oncle iz missink,” Korvin reasoned. “Eef de Baron tek care ov her, ve ken keep fightink for him--”

“Vot iz dis tok, ve dun need de Baron to tek care ov our Heterodyne,” Laszlo grumbled.

“Hy dun like it either,” grumbled Matia. “Iz politeeks.”

“Vell, politics iz for de generals,” Jenka said with finality. “Ve get her to dem.”

“Not to de vuns on Kestle Wulfenbach,” Laszlo grumbled.

“Ho, not effen,” Jenka scoffed. “No. Ve go to Mamma. Iz de best option, Hy tink.”

The conversation was settled after that, not least of all because the flock of sparrows with butter knives turned on Agatha that very moment, and her shrieks sent every Jäger moving at once.

At least the sparrows proved delicious when fried on a spit.

They broke up in smaller groups once they reached the Danube, scattering along the shore to each find their own means of passing over and agreeing to meet up again further down the road.

Dimo and Maxim took Agatha, though they gave most of the baggage to Oggie so they would be unencumbered if either running or swimming was in order. And by a stroke of luck, they came across a fisherman and his young son, ready to cast off for the day.

They gently menaced the fisherman into helping them across. The fisherman agreed and then stammered an advance thanks to them for not eating him or his son. He issued a very insistent advance thanks for not eating him or his son.

“Jäger don't eat people,” Agatha informed him cheerfully. “Not gamy enough for their taste.”

The fisherman's son, no older than eight, regarded Agatha with something akin to amazement.

“How do you know?” the boy asked quietly, as Dimo and Maxim settled into the boat.

“I asked,” Agatha said, and the 'well, duh' was implied, even if not spoken aloud.

“Why'd you ask?” the boy said, looking aghast at the thought of questioning a Jäger on any subject at all.

“'Cause that's what scientist do!” Agatha explained with a patient sigh.

“What, ask questions everyone else is too terrified to?” the boy frowned.

“Yep!”
The boy gave up after that.

Maxim grumbled at the tiny boat's every dip and wobble, as apprehensive as a cat to be so near water. Dimo rolled his eyes and elbowed the fisherman amicably.

“He iz afraid ov gettink hiz hair vet,” Dimo confided.

“Hoy, vimmin luff de hair,” Maxim shot back.

“It's very shiny,” Agatha said, nodding gravely. Then she her attention to the water.

The little boat's engine revved to life, after a few judicious whacks of the wrench. The fisherman remained silent, concentrating on either navigating the tricky currents of the river or really not thinking about what else the Jägers could do to him other than eat him.

But Agatha hadn't been near children close to her age in a long while, so she managed to engage the son, András, in conversation. She asked questions about the river at first, and then about life in his village. He answered, hesitantly at first, but as thoroughly as he could manage for an eight-year-old. The more enthusiastic Agatha's questions, the more freely he began to answer them. At one point, he called her 'mistress' and frowned a bit, as if not sure what just happened.

As they advanced across, they were narrowly missed by a seagull with a switchblade. It swooped down, smacked the water surface and flew up again with a fish impaled on its blade. Before it had the opportunity to fly away, however, a pale tentacle snapped out of the water, grabbing the bird and pulling it under.

“Hn, the chortling squid are migrating early this year,” the fisherman muttered.

“Why do all the birds have knives?” Agatha asked.

“Oh, that'll be old Count Bafflecog's doing,” the fisherman said, speaking for the first time. “Had this big idea, yeah? Swordsfowl. Thought birds were naturally gifted at swordplay. Was going to be his big, y'know, madboy thing, what everyone knew him for. Only he thought, well, he had to work his way up, you know? Can't just jump right to peacocks with rapiers. Started with sparrows. After that worked out well, he moved on to pigeons, and so on. Chicken 'round these parts will still stab a fella trying to collect eggs, but least we don't get any trouble with foxes no more. Though if you see a raven anywhere on yonder side of the river, I suggest you give 'em your money nice and quiet and walk away real slow. Buggers always seem to know where you live and they really hold a grudge,” he groused.

“Hy tek it de Baron vasn't happy vit de Count,” Dimo said, amused.

“Well, who's to know?” the fisherman shrugged. “Count got shanked pretty good by a swan 'fore the Baron got to him. Now his nephew's the new count. New count's not sparky, though, he's just a lazy fop. Spends all his time in Pest, like he's too good for us.” The fisherman scoffed. “In my day, nobility used to mean something. Now it's all 'oh, I don't want to live here, the dining room's haunted and the ducks raid the kitchens every day for bread'! Phooey, I say. Face those feathered bandit hordes like a man deservin' of a title.”

“Yah, de neighbors been slippink vitout de Heterodynes to keep dem sharp,” Maxim said.
“Ho, yez,” Dimo agreed. “Back in de day, dey vas made ov sterner schtuff. It vas vot made dem zo fun to sqwash.”

After that, the fisherman decided it was better to just shut up.

By the time they reached the other side of the river, the sun was high in the sky and Agatha complained that she was hungry.

“Uh, you don't eat people either, do you?” András asked, eying Agatha carefully.

“Blergh,” Agatha's nose wrinkled in disgust.

“Just checking.”

The fisherman grumbled under his breath, unhappy that he managed to completely lose a day of fishing. Dimo and Maxim jumped down as they neared the shore, the water being only waist-high and easy to wade through. But as Dimo turned to pick up Agatha from the boat, a shadow passed over them, strangely elongated and moving oddly. Dimo dismissed it as the shadow of a tree moving in the wind and continued reaching for Agatha, but in that split second the fisherman stiffened and started reeking of fear.

“Geisterdamen!” the fisherman hissed.

András pulled Agatha down to the boat floor and his father swiftly covered them with a tarp.

“Vot de--” Maxim and Dimo, both of them holding onto the edge of the boat as if afraid it would zip away from them, turned their heads to look at the cause of this commotion.

In looming, lazy strides, a giant spider passed overhead, traveling along the shore. Atop it rode a ghostly woman, white as chalk in the bright sun. The woman gave the group a brief, indifferent glance. Maxim and Dimo tensed, but she only carried on.

The fisherman gave a sigh of relief.

“They snatch children, you know,” he said.

“And cause revenants,” András added, poking his head out.

“Uncle Barry said the ghost ladies were big trouble,” Agatha said, watching the geister disappear into the distance. “An' he said it was real important to stay away from them.”

“Oh, is your uncle Barry Heterodyne?” András asked.

“Uh-huh.”

The whole exchange was so casual, that it took Dimo and Maxim a full twenty seconds to process the fact that an eight-year-old had not only figured out the truth easily, but had casually revealed it as well.

“Don't be silly, boy,” the fisherman scoffed. “He couldn't... be... the girl's...”
He trailed off, his jaw working soundlessly as he looked at the Jägermonsters for a long few moments. His mind was forced to work itself along trains of thought that were usually unfamiliar to him, if only because, like most decent, sober people, he tried to spend as little time as possible thinking about Jägers.

“Sweet fishgrease, you're a Heterodyne!” the fisherman burst, turning to Agatha.

“Yeah, kinda, but they gotta ring the bell first!” Agatha replied with a shrug, as casual as András had been.

Dimo facepalmed. Maxim was at a complete loss.

“But-- how-- when-- The Heterodyne Boys--” The fisherman finally settled on a question. “Wasn't the Heterodyne heir a boy?”

Dimo made a sign to Maxim.

“Oop, dere ve go!” Maxim said cheerfully, picking Agatha up on his shoulder. “Wave gudbye to der nize boy!”

Agatha waved to András, who waved back, and Maxim took her to the shore.

Meanwhile, Dimo reached up, grabbing the fisherman by the collar of his shirt and pulling him down to eye level.

“Now,” Dimo said, grinning sharply, “ve haff nize friendly converzation about vot happen to lips vot flap vhen dey shouldn't, yah? Great fon!”

“That doesn't sound fun,” the fisherman said.

“Vell, not for hyu, no...”

Agatha looked forlorn as András and his father sailed away.

“Vot is wrong?” Maxim asked.

“Nothin’,” Agatha said, but then continued with a pout, “I never get to play with any other kids.”

“Dun worry,” Maxim reassured her. “Hyu vill haff lotz of leetle minions in Mechanicsburg.”

“Really?” Agatha asked, perking up a bit.


Traveling with Jägers, Agatha realized, was different than traveling with Uncle Barry. They were a
lot louder, for one, and incrementally more cheerful the more of them you got together. Boisterous, was the word Agatha didn't yet have to describe it.

They were not as good at answering questions accurately, but they were also more willing to make the effort. A lot of the time, Uncle Barry would try to stop her inquiries with an 'I'll tell you when you're older'. The Jägers just gave her increasingly convoluted and incomprehensible answers until she gave up, which Agatha was begrudgingly forced to admit worked far too often. (She still hadn't figured out if they did it on purpose; she would need to conduct more tests, and was already working on a list of control questions.)

They were also slightly easier to convince into letting her do things which Uncle Barry wouldn't allow, like rummage through the remains of broken clanks and constructs, or poke at things with sticks. Granted, this habit got her more than one scrape or bruise, but the Jägers called this a 'learning experience', which Agatha was fairly sure Uncle Barry wouldn't have done. Whenever she injured herself, he always gave her that little sigh as he treated her. (He said it was because he worried about her, but Agatha couldn't help think, now that Uncle Barry wasn't around anymore, that he'd instead been disappointed in her.)

Traveling with Jägers was also, Agatha thought, a lot of fun in ways that traveling with Uncle Barry maybe hadn't been. She imagined this was what it was like having a big family, with a bunch of cheerful eccentric old uncles and also a grumpy aunt with a pet bear. And given that the only real family she could remember was Uncle Barry, he served as her only basis for comparison.

So she was worried when they started leaving the group, one by one, until she was left only with Dimo and Maxim. They all told her they'd be back, made grand promises to return with stories and candies and maybe the head of some interesting construct on a stick, until Jenka strictly forbid it on grounds that it was unhygienic. (Agatha still gave some whispered advice to Matia that if he was going to bring any organic parts, ice would keep them from rotting, but given how Jenka's head had swung around at that very moment and the glare she gave Matia, Agatha didn't get her hopes up.)

But it still made her feel anxious. It still made her feel a bit like getting separated from Uncle Barry, and it made her realize that she missed Uncle Barry. She missed him so much. She missed his stories, and his voice and his lessons and even the way he weaseled out of answering her questions. In between the pangs of loss she felt, she wondered if she should have done something differently, if she should have clung closer to him. Maybe she should have refused to go when he handed her off to Dimo, Maxim and Oggie, but then she felt vaguely guilty because the Jägers were nice and she would have hurt their feelings.

And now they were leaving her behind as well, for good reasons too, just like Uncle Barry had had good reasons, and they were promising to come back, just like Uncle Barry had, and...

And they did come back, eventually. Once they were past the river—the huge one, so big that you couldn't see the other shore—they started trickling back, one by one. Oggie returned with the bag (the one they kept for her, because Jägers apparently traveled light, whereas Agatha was always forced to change her clothes and brush her hair and all sorts of annoying things that Uncle Barry always insisted were important, too.) Then Jenka showed up again, just to check up on her, apparently, before leaving once more.

The others came and went. Laszlo popped in, ruffled her hair, and said he would be going ahead to check out the roads. Matia they only saw from a distance, when he signaled them to go around some town defenses. Korvin dropped in for an entire afternoon, sneaking Agatha a handful of sweets, as promised. ("Dun let anyvun see hyu eat dese before dinner," he'd said, winking at her. Agatha ate
them furtively, but perhaps not as furtively as she thought, since Dimo told her to slow down so she wouldn't get the hiccups.) Then Korvin left again by nighttime.

Other Jägers dropped in often, ones Agatha only ever saw: Yanos, Bulgar, Costi, Rerich, Mihail, and so on. She remembered their names because they all made a point to introduce themselves to her. They grinned at her or tipped their hats or asked her nosy questions about Uncle Barry, and then they were gone again, to wherever Jägers went when they weren't around.

Dimo, Oggie and Maxim tended to be constants, though. She wasn't sure what an 'honor guard' was, but it apparently had something to do with it. She heard the words whispered more than once, in a way that sounded important.

She listened to them talk, even when they tried to distract her from it, and she got very good at pretending she wasn't listening. Most of what they talked about was boring, the same questions asked in dizzying circles until they decided to leave it to the Generals, whoever those were.

Sometimes it was about the lands they were traversing, discussing the best routes or what they had to avoid. If she asked them questions then, they would happily tell her stories of old raids and whichever of her ancestors had passed through there. The Old Heterodynes didn't sound as bad as Uncle Barry made them out to be, just a bit scary. They also sounded kind of mean and inconsiderate to others, which was probably what Uncle Barry didn't like about them, but the Jägers always claimed they were 'fun' and the descriptions of their death rays sounded fascinating.

Other times, they talked about Uncle Barry and maybe her father, speculating about where they might have been or what might have happened to them. She found out this way that she had a brother, and she asked about him. She was informed that her brother was dead, and she felt disappointed about it, then she wondered if she ought to feel sad instead. That was what sisters were supposed to feel when their brothers died, wasn't it? Not just bothered that they'd lost a potential playmate. She decided to put the question aside and conduct investigations later.

Other times, they talked about people she hadn't met, like someone with a complicated title named 'Carson', or a Baron that they mentioned frequently. She didn't know who this Baron was until one of the Jägers called him Klaus. It sounded like a slip of the tongue, but the familiar name drew Agatha's attention.

“Klaus like from Uncle Barry's stories?” Agatha asked.

“Klaus vas friends vit hyu poppa und oncle,” Dimo replied. “So mebbe?”

Agatha thought back to her questioning Uncle Barry about Klaus, when she wondered if she could meet this person and ask him to tell her stories about her parents, and she remembered Uncle Barry's frowning and his evasive replies, and at the time she'd thought Klaus was dead and Uncle Barry was hiding this from her because he thought she was just a little kid, even though she was old enough to tie her own shoelaces, and she was very glad at the time to have figured this out so easily. ...Maybe she'd been wrong?

“I don't think they're friends anymore,” Agatha said. “Uncle Barry...” She frowned, because she couldn't remember what Uncle Barry had said, exactly, just her impressions. “Uncle Barry wasn't happy when I asked about Klaus,” she said eventually.

“Hy see,” Dimo had muttered, then turned to the other Jägers to continue the conversation, but the tone changed. Whatever information they gleaned from Agatha's vague warning, they factored it into
It was evening, and Agatha sat near the fire, her book tilted so it caught the light. Oggie sat down next to her.

“Ve iz near Mechanicsburg,” he said, and Agatha politely looked up from her book.

“Really?” she asked, and looked around as if the entire town was going to jump out from behind a bush to greet her.

“How, vell, only kind ov, ve still haff a veek or so ov walkink if ve keep to de back roads,” Oggie amended.

“That doesn't sound near at all,” Agatha said.

“Mebbe not to leetle gorls vit short legs, no,” Oggie said, grinning. Then he turned serious again. “Ve vill haff to keep hyu hid, effen from dose odder guyz.”

“What other guys?”

“De Jäger who vork for de Baron. Ve ken’t let ennyvun schtop uz vhen ve iz so cloze to Mechanicsburg, effen if dey iz Jäger. De Baron vould hear about hyu, und den it vould get tricky.”

“Oh.” They'd explained before, about the bargain they had with the Baron. “So you're keeping me secret so the Baron can still protect the Jägerkin until I'm old enough to do it myself?”

“Er...” Oggie looked a bit taken aback, because whenever anybody there had told her that they would keep her hidden, the only reason they'd ever given was keeping her safe. “Dot iz... an interesting vay ov lookink at it?”

“It's okay,” Agatha said, patting Oggie's knee. “I know you're all keeping me safe too.”

Then she returned her attention to her book. Oggie sat quietly for a while, before he wordlessly got up and walked away. Agatha could have sworn she heard a wet sniff.

“Um, did I make Oggie cry?” she asked, turning to Dimo.

Dimo patted her on the head.

“Hyu iz a goot gurl,” was the only thing he said.

“Hyu know vat? Hy tink ve iz near Zdranga!” Korvin said, as he emerged from some shrubbery and rejoined the group. “Hy recognize de mushrooms.” He pointed to the aforementioned fungus, which glared malevolently in return.

“Iz Zdranga not de village where hyu met dot milkmaid?” Oggie asked. “Vit de blue cowz und de beeg jugs--”
“Hoy!” Maxim punched Oggie in the arm.

“De jugs ov milk! I meant de jugs ov milk!” Oggie said defensively. “She had de beeg clenk jugs vot followed her around und ponched pipple!”

“Yah,” Korvin sighed, “de darlink Catinca! Hy neffer forget de vay she stab me in de ribs vit dot hay fork! She vos de very image ov grace und beauty. Hy still haff de scars.”

“Um, she sounds kinda mean,” Agatha said.

“Vell, mebbe ve vere raiding her village a leetle at de time,” Korvin conceded.

“Ho, more than a leetle,” Oggie snickered. “Dot vos a fon day!”

“Ennyvay, hy apologize for eatink her cow,” Korvin continued, “und she only tvisted de fork a leetle bit vhen she pulled it out, so Hy know she vos verra charmed.”

“Hyu tek too much romantic advize from Oggie,” Dimo muttered.

“She doesn’t sound like she wanted to be your girlfriend,” Agatha said.

“Luff iz a myzterious ting,” Korvin said. “Mebbe hyu vill understand vhen hyu iz older und find nize boy to stab.”

Agatha scowled and kicked at a rock.

“I'm pretty sure that's wrong...”

“Hy don't remember vot happened vit Catinca,” Oggie said. “Did hyu effer go on a date vit her?”

“No,” Korvin admitted rather begrudgingly. “She married de village preest. Had five cheeldren vit him. Hy met her grandkeed a few decades beck.”


Korvin threw him a glare.

“Hy tink Zdranga iz down de hill on de next bend,” Oggie pointed out.

“Ve keep avay,” Dimo said.

“Yah, yah, but iz no harm in chust lookink!” Oggie rolled his eyes. “Hyu know, for de noze-talgia.”

Indeed, once they went around the next bend of the treeline, they ended up on a hill overlooking the village of Zdranga.

Or at least, overlooking what had once been the village of Zdranga. The only sign of human life were the remains of houses long since destroyed. There was a sharp intake of breath on Korvin's part.

“It vosn't like dot vhen ve left!” Oggie said.
“What happened?” Agatha asked.


“But usually ve iz dose bad tings dot happen,” Maxim muttered.

“If there's nobody there, can we go down an' look?”

“Vot for?” Dimo asked.

Agatha shrugged.

“Maybe someone needs help...”

“Dot woul'd mean dere iz sumbody dere.”

“Then, uh, maybe we can figure out what happened?”

“Yah? Und vot if ve figure out becauze de ting dot did dis iz still dere?” Dimo asked.

“Den ve gets to fight! Vin-vin!” Oggie said cheerfully, before Dimo elbowed him sharply enough to make him double over and wheeze.

“Please?” Agatha said, with the sort of expression that could be described as weaponized cute.

“Iz for de Baron to figure tings out,” Dimo said. “He vants nize und safe empire, he vork for it.”

Left without any other argument, Agatha fell back on her only remaining tactic. She pouted.

“But Diiiimoooooo--”

“No. Ve iz verra close to Mechanicsburg,” Dimo said with finality. “Ve vill not risk it.”

Agatha screeched in frustration and stomped her foot, before folding her arms and glaring at Dimo. For a few moments, it looked like she was going to dig in her heels, but Oggie gave her an amicable pat on the shoulder and offered her a piggy-back ride, and also called Dimo a grumpy ogre very quietly behind his back, which made Agatha giggle a bit even though she was trying to look serious and angry. She accepted the piggy-back ride and they moved on.

They camped out a ways away from Zdranga, out in the woods in an old cabin which had escaped whatever disaster had struck the village itself. It was dusty, probably untouched for upwards of a year, and a bit mildewy due to a hole in the roof. There was a tied bunch of basil hanging from the rafters, long since dried out but still faintly filling the cabin with its smell.

They put Agatha's bedroll in the cleanest corner they could find, and then started poking around the cabin, in case there was anything dangerous there. They didn't find anything much more intimidating than a clockwork can-opener, but they also found a raggedy plush toy on top of a cupboard, and they handed it to Agatha.

She brushed off some of the excess dust, but the fabric was stained beyond recovery, and worn clean through in some places, exposing the stuffing.
“It's got wire inside,” Agatha said, poking her fingers through a hole in the fabric and feeling around inside.

“Don't cut hyuself,” Dimo said.

Agatha nodded distractedly, before remembering that she was angry at Dimo and turning her back to him.

“I bet I could make it move,” she whispered to herself.

The wire framework served no apparent purpose other than keeping the doll rigid, but depending on what she could find in the cabin, Agatha was sure she could get at least some kind of limited motion from the doll. The clockwork can-opener alone provided some interesting possibilities. She took out her latest book and turned to the pages she thought were most relevant.

She hummed to herself as she took apart the can-opener, a broken cuckoo clock and parts of the stove. The pieces were there, she could see the end result in her mind, but putting them all together was a frustrating chore, especially without tools. It seemed the moment she made one part work, another would fall apart, the mechanism she envisioned remaining just tantalizingly out of reach the whole time.

It was like a barrier she felt she could pierce if she kept at it long enough. Musical notes and gears, humming in the background of her mind, close enough to see but too far away to grasp properly. But she was getting closer every time, she was sure of it.

Uncle Barry never seemed like he was having difficulty when he was building or repairing something. He'd hold her in his lap sometimes, explaining what he was doing and why, promising that she would know how to do all of it herself one day, and how she could help people when she did. It was always 'one day' with Uncle Barry, some indeterminate point in the future when everything would fall into place easily.

Only it didn't feel easy to her, and she didn't know how soon that 'one day' was meant to be. It felt like a very, very long time since she'd last seen Uncle Barry.

She realized her humming had stopped for some time, and the mechanism still hadn't come together.

Agatha pulled her knees to her chest and pressed her forehead against them. She felt silly for being close to crying, even though she cried over other reasons all the time, loudly and with great verve. This time it felt worse, somehow.

“Hyu okey?” Agatha felt Maxim's hand on her back, rubbing in slow circles.

“Did Uncle Barry leave because I'm bad?” she asked. It was awful, she didn't want to know the answer, but she couldn't not ask.

“No. Hyu iz not bad, und hyu oncle didn't just leaff hyu.”

Agatha turned her head slightly, looking at Maxim from the corner of her eye.

“Hyu poppa und oncle neffer giff op on ennyvun, hyu know,” Maxim said confidently. “No matter how bad dey vere. Iz in all the stories.”
“...Yeah?” Agatha sniffl ed a bit, but raised her head.

“Hyu shouldn't giff op on him either,” Maxim continued.

“So he'll be back?”

“Who wouldn't want to return to schmott gorl like hyu?” Maxim grinned.

Agatha rather suspected that he was just saying these things to make her feel better, but she really did feel better, so she decided a hug was called for. Just because Maxim deserved it, and it was a complete coincidence that she really, really wanted one at that moment.

“Hy don't suppoze,” Maxim said, “dot hyu vill go to bed qvietly tonight?”

“'M not sleepy,” Agatha muttered against Maxim's shirt.

Maxim sighed. He didn't think he'd won that much good will anyway, but it was still worth the try.

1 And then, of course, there was Radovan Heterodyne, aged ten at the time, who after being foisted on the Generals so his father could work on an experiment in peace, ended up leading a raiding party all the way to Warsaw. “Well, at least he didn't cause any real trouble,” had been Lord Heterodyne's reaction when he received this report, before casting his attention back to his experimental musical guinea pig assassins.

2 The scariest piece of architecture on the other side of the Ural Mountains being, of course, the Great Wall of China, who was perhaps marginally less blood thirsty than Castle Heterodyne, but still maintained a higher death toll.

3 Persiflat Heterodyne had the unfortunate distinction of being the Heterodyne to have broken through the latest out of all known heirs to the family title, at the venerable age of 34. He proceeded to show them, show them all.

4 The city of Brassov is not especially known for its brass. It is, however, known for its bears. Most of its bears are not made of brass either.
Presenting Agatha to Mamma Gkika would have been a lot more dramatic if Gkika hadn't already known for some time about her coming. Still, the three of them all lined up behind the littlest Heterodyne, beaming with pride at their accomplishment.

“Hyu boyz did goot work,” Gkika told them.

“Ve snuck her into de valley in a sack,” Oggie offered, completely unsolicited. Dimo rubbed a hand over his face, because he'd still been hoping to keep that part part quiet.

“It was very scratchy,” Agatha added, wanting to be helpful.

She had, indeed, been smuggled through the pass in a sack, mostly because there were currently Wulfenbach forces stationed there, dealing with some minor crisis. It wasn't for very long, and once in Mechanicsburg, Agatha was safer than she'd be anywhere else in the world, but still; the sack had been rather scratchy.

“Vell, Hy tink dis deserves at least a round ov free drinks, yah?” Gkika said.

The rest of the Jägers in the bar had been listening intently to the conversation, even while pretending not to, and thus they all let out a whoop of joy. Gkika sighed because she hadn't meant for all of them, but let it slide. The return of a Heterodyne warranted celebration, especially after things had seemed so hopeless.

Agatha was too short for a stool, so Gkika picked her up and set her on the bar counter, where she could keep an eye on her, and then gave her a tall glass of non-alcoholic grape juice to drink. Agatha made a face after the first sip, unaccustomed to the taste.

“Iz goot for hyu,” Gkika said. “Healthy und such. Drink op.”

Agatha gave the glass of reddish liquid an appraising look, but in the end decided to test out Gkika's claims, which was all for the best, considering beer halls were not known for being teetotaler-friendly. That went double for any Jäger establishment, where punching was also an ever-present danger.

Dimo eventually launched into an abridged report, with Maxim and Oggie occasionally chiming in.

“Vot happen to Zdranga, Hy vonder?” Oggie asked when they got to that part.

“Tch. Dot vos bad schtuff,” Gkika shook her head. “Dere vos a Spark vot tried to attack Mechanicsburg vit a floodink machine last spring. Zdranga iz az far az he got before de Baron ketch him.”

“Vell,” Oggie muttered, “who did dot guy tink he vos, chust attacking Zdranga like dot.”

Zdranga had always straddled the line between being just close enough to Mechanicsburg to be protected from other invaders, but just far away that very few of the Heterodynes felt bad about
raiding it if they were bored on a lazy Sunday afternoon.

A lot of the newer Jägers tended to cut their teeth (usually considerably larger teeth after the transformation) on a casual one-day incursion of Zdranga. Gkika had sent more than a few of them that way. After a few hundred years of this, the villagers of Zdranga reacted to Jäger raids with a combination of mild annoyance, resignation and a sporting attitude, and after it was all over, sometimes the Jägers even helped mend some of the damage.

In summary, the Jäger attitude about Zdranga had been that only the Jägers had the right to attack it.

“Vhy vos dot guy comink to attack Mechanicsburg, ennyvay?” Dimo asked. “He haff sawduzt between hiz ears or zumting?”

“He vos vun ov doze false Heterodynes,” Gkika said.

There were scoffs around the room at that.

“Vot, like floodink vun leetle village vos going to fool ennyvun?” Maxim shook his head.

“Yah, Tengiz Heterodyne vunce flooded Mechanicsburg by accident while trying to fix a leaky sink,” Gkika said. “De Kestle still haz vater damage, and it took yearz to fish all de salmon from de bird baths.”

“Goot times,” someone muttered in the background. “Vas a pity de salmon ate all de birds.”


Gkika looked at her watch, and then at Agatha, who was busy trying to dismantle the beer tap and had not gotten very far solely because her physical strength was not on par with her ambition.

“Iz time to put hyu to bed,” Gkika said. “Hyu must be tired after de long road.”

“No, I'm not,” Agatha insisted while trying to improvise a rudimentary beer tap dismantling mechanism out of the broken off handle of a beer stein, her hair tie, and empty tin plate and a couple of corkscrews.

“Vell, ve leaff hyu to it,” Dimo said rather quickly, chugging the remainder of his beer.

“Yah, goot night,” Maxim added.

“Be nize to Mamma,” Oggie said, waving to Agatha.

And then they dispersed into the crowd.

“So—vot did hyu do to terrorize dose poor boyz?” Gkika asked, leaning against the bar.

“Nothing!” Agatha shrugged, not looking up as she tried to operate the rudimentary mechanism she’d created without it falling apart.

Before Gkika could say anything more, Agatha's hand slipped and the complicated array of junk held together by a bright green hair tie came apart rather spectacularly, all things considered, and little
bits shot off at great speeds.

“This was only the prototype,” Agatha assured Mamma Gkika, once the sound of shattered glass subsided.

Mamma Gkika tended to think of children as miniaturized Jäger, an impression which neither the young Heterodyne heirs nor the children of Mechanicsburg did anything to dispel. And if Gkika knew one thing about the Jägers, it was that sometimes there was nothing she could do to prevent one of them from doing something incredibly ill-advised, and the only way he’d learn a lesson was if he lost something just slightly more valuable than his head—like his hat, for example.

And Gkika applied the same principle to children, hence why Agatha spent the next morning looking groggy and out of sorts.

“Iz she sick?” Dimo asked Mamma Gkika when he dropped in for a visit. Agatha was perched on an armchair, with a book on her lap, but she didn't look like she could concentrate on reading. She gave Dimo a weak wave.

“No,” Gkika replied, looking down at Agatha with a sharp smile, “she chust didn't vant to go to bed last night. So she stay op for az long az she vanted.”

Agatha gave a slow blink and wilted a bit. Gkika's smile turned just a little bit sharper.

“I was up real late...” Agatha muttered unhappily.

“Und vot did hyu learn, sweethot?” Gkika asked.

“That little girls need their sleep even if they don't think they do,” Agatha recited dutifully. “Can I take a nap?”

“Iz not nap time yet,” Gkika replied. “Eef hyu wanted sleep, last night vos de perfect opportunity, wouldn't hyu say?”

“Urgh!” Agatha sighed and flopped dramatically back in the armchair, covering her face with her book.

Gkika gave Dimo an arch look, with the implied criticism that he and the other Jägers had coddled her. Dimo had the good sense to look a bit sheepish, even if he was grinning.

“Vell, Hy ken see she iz in goot hends now,” Dimo said.

“No! I'm not really!” Agatha protested. “Help!”

“She iz alreddy learnink all sorts ov important tings,” Dimo continued, unperturbed.

“Noooooo!”

“Hyu need any help vit her, ve iz sticking cloze for now,” Dimo finished.
“Verra nize ov hyu to offer, but Hy ken get my gurls to help out,” Gkika replied. “It vould probably be for de best. De leetle miztress needs de feminine influence in her life, yah?”

“What girls?” Agatha asked, perking up in curiosity.

“Hyu meet dem all soon,” Gkika said, patting Agatha on the head.

“Iz dot wise?” Dimo asked. “De Baron--”

“De Baron,” Gkika sighed. “It iz likely dot Klaus knows sumting about de gurl already. He iz a nozy vun, moch too goot at discovering secret tings. But Hy vill not tell de gurls who she iz, und none of the Jäger vill say a vord. De Baron vill suspect, mebbe he vill hear rumor, but he vill not know, not certain enuff to do anything dot vill offend a general und endanger de bargain. He needs de Jäger to fight right now. Mebbe for many years yet.”

“Dot sounds risky,” Dimo frowned. “For Miz Agatha most ov all, if Mazter Barry had goot reason to distrust him.”

“Ve watch und see vot de Baron doez,” Gkika said. “Ve haff nozy pipple too, yah?”

Dimo's eyebrows rose, but he seemed to catch Gkika's drift and only nodded.

“Tings vould be moch simpler if ve could trust de Baron,” Dimo said.

Agatha looked from one to the other, confused by the conversation and not really interested in it.

“If I can't take a nap,” Agatha said, “can I meet the girls instead?”

Gkika patted her on the head. She'd forgotten how relentless the masters could be, even as children.

Gkika had very few hesitations about introducing Agatha to her female employees. They were good Mechanicsburg girls, each and every one of them, their families having served the Heterodynes for generations. At some point, they would figure out the truth for themselves and keep their mouths shut, as loyal minions do.

For now, they seemed utterly taken with the little girl, even if Agatha was underwhelmed to discover that 'the girls' were actually quite a bit older than her.

“Look at her adorable little face!” one of the serving girls, Vera, cooed while pinching Agatha's cheeks. She was one of a dozen of the women who worked at Mamma Gkika's, and they were all crowded around Agatha in curiosity.

Agatha huffed and swatted away her hand, making all the surrounding women giggle.

“Stop pinching me!” Agatha said crossly, and the cooing only intensified.

“And where did you come from?” Aliz asked.
“Mamma says to say I fell off a wagon,” Agatha replied. “But I don't remember any wagons! There was just a bunch of walking. I did get to ride on a bear, though.”

“Really?” Aliz said, throwing a sideways glance to Gkika.

“She iz keeding,” Gkika said calmly. “Becauze dot's vot keeds do.”

“Oh, I could just eat her up,” Lene said, giving Agatha a short hug. This garnered a few looks from her colleagues. “Not that I would!” she added defensively.

“I don't know,” Daciana muttered, “I heard the stories they tell about your father from the time he rode with the Jägers.”

“It was barely a nibble!” Lene replied, this time affronted.

“Hoy, qviet down, dis iz not de time to tok about Lene's poppa,” Gkika interrupted.

“Yes, Mamma,” came the abashed chorus.

“Effen though it really vas chust a leetle nibble,” Gkika continued. “But Hy need hyu all to tek goot care of leetle Agatha. She vill be vit us for a while, yah?”

“Mamma, isn't she a bit young?” one of the women hesitantly brought up.

“Hy am not hiring her,” Gkika replied, rolling her eyes. “Hy am tekking care ov her for her poppa.” Which was technically true.

“Oh, well, that's alright then,” Ianca said, and reached over to pinch Agatha's cheeks yet again.

This seemed to be the final straw, because Agatha jumped back and produced a small death ray, aiming it at Ianca.

“Stop pinching me!” Agatha yelled.

Something in her tone was just biting enough that all the women raised up their hands. Ianca froze in place completely.

Gkika sighed.

“Hoy, iz dot Pyrrhus Heterodyne's Firespitter hyu got there?” she asked, plucking the weapon from Agatha's hands. “Iz okeh,” she assured the women. “She took dis off de trophy vall, it hazn't vorked in yearz--”

But when she jolted the death ray a bit too hard, an incandescent ball of fire shot out of the barrel and across the room. By mere happenstance, it missed everyone and flew into the wall of the empty beer hall. One of the girl jumped into action immediately and put out the fire with an extinguisher, because good reflexes made for lasting employment at Mamma Gkika's.

Gkika gave a sidelong look to Agatha, who was trying to look as innocent as possible. For a Heterodyne, she was actually doing quite well.
“Hy guess Hy vas wrong,” Gkika said slowly, disarming the death ray.

Agatha nodded quickly, looking relieved.

“But Hy dun tink hyu gots to worry about de pinching again,” Gkika added.

The women put their hands down slowly and nodded, still speechless.

Gkika very deliberately placed the death ray on the counter in front of the three Jägers.

“Hyu didn't tell me dot she vos breking through alreddy,” she said.


“Yah, und Agatha nearly blowed op vun ov my gurls' head vit it,” Gkika said.

“Dot ken't be right, dot ting hazn't worked in yearz,” Oggie frowned.

“Not until de leetle miztress got her hends on it,” Gkika said.

The Jägers gave the death ray a wary look, but they were not nearly as alarmed as they were proud of Agatha for her precocity.

“Vell, Hy suppoze dere vere... signs,” Dimo conceded. “But she iz so verra young! Iz too soon for dot, izn't it?”

“She iz Heterodyne,” Gkika replied. “Und a Heterodyne breaking through, it iz alvays big trouble for everyvun.”

“Goot ting ve knows how to duck,” Maxim said.

“It iz big trouble for de Heterodyne, too,” Gkika added darkly.

What remained unsaid, but understood by everyone present, was the ever-present possibility of death. Jägers could protect Heterodynes from a lot of things, but very seldom from themselves.

They looked off to the side, where a few Jägers were clumped around Agatha trying to teach her proper knife throwing technique. This ran into the problem that Agatha was still a small, uncoordinated child with the upper body strength to match.

Mostly her knives never reached the target, which had already been taken off the wall and placed in a chair at her height. But the Jägers weren't giving up easily, and they looked bent on figuring out the best technique for Agatha no matter how long it took. Mogoz, one of the smallest Jägers in the pack, was perched on the edge of the table like a gargoyle, taking Agatha's instruction very seriously. He was demonstrating the motions of a throw in slow motion for the girl.

“De Baron...” Dimo started hesitantly. “He iz intereszed in Sparks as vell, iz he not?”

“He iz,” Gkika confirmed. “But in dis case, it iz goot for leetle Agatha to be in Mechanicsburg. Dere
iz no better place to hide a madgurl in plain sight. De problem vill be vhen she decide to leaff, but Hy hope she vill be old enuff and have enuff sense to hide de Spark if she ever does dot.”

One of Agatha’s knives hit a glancing blow on the target board. A roar of celebration arose from the Jägers around her.

“Vot ve do until den?” Dimo asked.

“Ve do nothink,” Gkika stressed. “Hy sent a message to Carson, und ve vill discuss vot to do about leetle Agatha’s education.”

“Dot’s vot ve iz callink it?” Dimo snorted.

“Ve iz being dizcreet,” Gkika grinned. “Und for dot ve need to keep de death toll down.”

The crowd of Jägers around Agatha waited in tense silence as Agatha prepared to throw again. The girl frowned fiercely in concentration as she prepared. Holding up the knife and staring at the target, she began to heterodyne. The ethereal notes of her humming cut through the noise of the beer hall all the way to the bar. Heads turned towards the music, and the hush of anticipation fell over the room.

This time when Agatha threw, her knife actually hit the board. The Jägers exploded in applause.

“Dere vere signs, hmm?” Gkika gave Dimo a level look.

“Hokay, hokay! Dere vere obviouz signs!” Dimo burst, raising his hands defensively.

Gkika bowed out early that night, partly to put Agatha to bed, and partly because Carson von Mekkhan had sent a response. He promised to come over the next day, early afternoon, to meet the new heir. He somehow managed to sound curmudgeonly even in writing.

She was still looking at this note when Agatha padded out of her room. Gkika was about to send her right back off to bed with a word, but something in the way the girl was lingering in the door frame made Gkika hesitate.

“I wasn’t gonna shoot Ianca,” Agatha said so quietly, that if Gkika’s ears were not Jäger-sharp she might have missed it.

Gkika nodded and sat down heavily in the nearby armchair.

“Come here,” she said.

Agatha came over and squeaked when she was picked up and placed in Gkika’s lap.

“Vot do hyu tink vould haff happened if hyu shot Ianca?” Gkika asked.

“She, um... woulda died?” Agatha blinked.

“Hyu know vot it meanz vhen somevun dies, yez?”
“It's like, um... like they go away an' never come back?” Agatha ducked her head and picked at the hem of her nightshirt. It had been donated by one of the girls, though Gkika didn't know precisely which. Perhaps it had even been Ianca.

“Cept sometimes they can...”

“Yez, sumtimez, hyu get a madboy vot zap de dead und brink back sumting,” Gkika scoffed. “Sumting goot, vunce in a while, sumting bad more ov de time, but iz not de same as livink, iz it? Und dey ken't zap hyu if hyu dun got a head.”

Gkika could feel Agatha cringing, even if she couldn't see the girl's face.

“Dot iz vhy hyu haff to learn vot a lot ov hyu family learned de hard vay,” Gkika said, and placed a finger under Agatha's chin, gently tilting her head up. “Hyu don't aim a gon or a beeg monster or a killing machine at somevun unless hyu iz villing to go through vit it und deal vit vot happens afterswards. Iz vot ve call tinking ov de conzequences.”

Agatha remained silent for a moment, still sullen with guilt and chewing on Gkika's words.

“Did Uncle Barry or my poppa ever shoot anyone?” Agatha asked.

Gkika sighed.

“Hyu uncle und poppa shot pipple, yez. Dey vent out ov dey vay to avoid it, but sumtimez dey vos pushed into a corner, or dey needed to save sumvun, und dey had to. But dey voz heroes, dey believed verra few tings could be solved by shootink. So if dey shot anyvun, dey really meant it.”

“Oh...”

“So hyu remember dot, yez? Tinking ov de conzequences.”

“Yes, Mamma,” Agatha nodded.

Gkika didn't think Agatha completely understood everything yet, but she would at least think it over. She was a smart girl, she'd figure it out.

She hopped out of Gkika's lap, but didn't go back to bed yet, instead hovering in indecision.

“Vot iz it now?” Gkika asked.

“Do you know any bedtime stories?”

Gkika chuckled.

“Hy vill improvize,” she said, picking Agatha up and carrying her to bed.

Gkika suspected she was going to have to start improvising a lot.
Since Carson promised to come in the afternoon, perhaps in recollection of the fact that Gkika was not a morning person, at least she had time to make rounds in the infirmary before their meeting.

There were only three Jägers, each confined to his own narrow cot, all three injured in the same brief campaign against a surviving faction of the Black Mist Raiders.

She checked the first two Jägers while they were still deeply asleep, smelling faintly of the kind of alcohol they were definitely not allowed in the infirmary. She hoped they’d at least had the good sense to have their friends smuggle their drinks in, instead of moving around and aggravating their healing injuries.

The third Jäger, Boznik, was awake, and he kicked up more of a fuss when Gkika checked his shoulder. It was healing poorly—he’d been caught between two giant gears, and crushed more than cut. She’d already had to re-break his clavicle and rearrange more of his ribcage than she cared to. The fact that he could still wiggle his fingers and move his wrist a bit was impressive, but he’d still likely never regain full mobility in his arm without a Heterodyne's help. It was all the more frustrating for Gkika, since she’d seen the Masters treat Jägers in even worse conditions.

“How iz it today?” Boznik asked cheerfully, giving Gkika his most winning smile.

“Better den it vos yezterday, und dot’s all hyu ken ask for,” Gkika replied, trying to keep her tone light to distract from just how true that was. “If hyu iz not dead yet, hyu vill probably be plaguing uz for yearz to come.”

“Say, Mamma,” Boznik said as she measured out a dose of medicine, “if ve gots a new Heterodyne, vhy iz hyu still patchink us op?”

“Because she iz too young,” Gkika replied bluntly.

“Vell,” Boznik said, his tone turning speculative, “some ov de Mazters started off real young vit dis schtuff...”

Gkika paused to give Boznik her most scouring look. Boznik, for his part, maintained an expression of complete obliviousness. Gkika grew displeased as she began to suspect that Boznik was more aware of his situation than she gave him credit for.

“How young ve toking here?” Boznik asked.

“Young enuff dot my hat iz taller den her,” Gkika replied, “und Hy am preedy sure she iz tall for her age.”

“Hy see,” was the last thing Boznik said, before falling into a melancholy silence.

He accepted Gkika's medicine and nodded absently at her instructions to rest and not move his shoulder too much. Before Gkika left, she saw him pick up his hat from where it was hanging on the bedpost, and put it on his head, pulling it over his eyes as he sank into his pillow.

She didn’t think he was sleeping.
Carson von Mekkhan was at a complete loss.

“Well,” he said, squinting at Agatha with habitual suspicion, “the usual claimants aren't quite so...”

“Cute?” Gkika provided.


He needn't have bothered. Agatha was paying them no mind at all, because she was busy with her tinkering. Gkika had cleared off a corner of the room for Agatha to play in, and dragged one of the plusher rugs there for her, and in two days, Agatha had proceeded to make a mess of gears and small parts all over it. The oil stains alone would never come out of that rug again, but at this point Gkika still counted herself lucky that nothing had been set on fire.

At the moment, Agatha was working on a small mechanism, attaching gears to it and making them spin. Apparently finding something in the spinning unsatisfactory, she removed one gear and replaced it with a larger one. When this one also didn't live up to her standards, she replaced it with a smaller one.

“Vot hyu tink, ve send her into Castle Heterodyne?” Gkika asked, grinning.

“That won't be necessary. Castle Heterodyne is already a mess,” Carson replied, giving a pointed look to Agatha's surroundings.

Gkika laughed, before doing a double take.

“Agatha, gorl, vot are hyu eatink dere?” Gkika asked, crouching down next to the girl and forcing her palm open. There was a small yellow cube in it.

“Cheese,” Agatha replied.

“...Vhere did hyu find cheeze?” Gkika asked, because lunch had been just earlier and did not include cheese.

“It was in one of these things,” Agatha replied, picking up the remains of a mouse trap. Whatever automated mechanism was responsible for crushing rodents had been reappropriated by Agatha to make her little gear-spinning device.

“Dot iz for de vermin!” Gkika said.

“I found it on the floor,” Agatha shrugged.

Gkika did not facepalm at that moment, but only because dealing with Jägers for several hundred years had given her plenty of practice in self-control.

“Hyu ken't chust eat schtuff hyu find on de floor.”


“De Jäger haff stomachs like Castle Heterodyne haz acid pits. Anyting dot fallz in iz gone faster den it ken make a splash. Leetle gurls vot eat off de floor get sick.”
Agatha pouted, but relinquished the cheese.

“Und vot voz hyu doink vit de mouse traps, ennyvay?” Gkika asked.

“It's for Marshall Stabbypants,” Agatha said, and pointed to a ratty old doll with stuffing spilling out of numerous holes. “I'm making him legs.”

Carson leaned over to take a closer look at her work.

“How is it going?” he asked.

“We might have to amputate,” she said.

Carson coughed to cover a laugh.

“But it's okay, his new legs will be way better,” Agatha continued.

She returned her attention to her work, starting to hum to herself. Carson listened to the sound for a few second, before taking a few steps back. Gkika watched his expression swing wildly from hope to incredulity.

“Is she actually--”

“Ho yez, she iz heterodyning. Iz not de first time,” Gkika said.

“She's very young,” Carson said. “She can't be breaking through already, can she?”

Gkika shrugged.

“We see if de Marshall gets hiz legs und find out, yah?”

Carson sighed.

“She'll be all kinds of trouble to raise, won't she?”

“Dot iz de t'ird qvestion in a row dot hyu asked vhen hyu alreddy know de answer.”

“Well,” Carson smiled grimly, “I'll admit the evidence is certainly mounting in her favor.”

Of course, meeting Agatha had been the easiest part of the day for Carson. The following conversation with Gkika was not so easy on his nerves. She relayed all the information she had about Agatha, and the little they knew about Barry, even if it didn't answer any questions.

Carson, ever practical, did not engage in pointless speculation, but focused on the future.

“I can make arrangements,” Carson insisted. “Find a perfectly nice family--”

“No, she iz staying here,” Gkika replied. “She iz safe here.”
“This isn't really the kind of place to raise a child,” he said.

“Ve iz not raisink a child, ve iz raisink a future Heterodyne.”

Carson huffed rather loudly at that, but didn't argue.

“It's not that I don't trust you or the other Jägers, you understand,” Carson said. “But children need more than just safety.”

Gkika rolled her eyes.

“Ho, don't effen schtart vit me. My boyz iz alreddy spoiling her rotten.”

“I meant she might require companions of her own age,” Carson said.

“Vell, vot about dot grandson of yourz?”

“Vanamonde...?”

“Bring de leetle guy, Agatha vill get a kick out ov him.”

“Hmph. I suppose someone has to.”

“Givink hyu trouble?”

“He learned to roll his eyes last week and hasn't stopped since,” Carson muttered.

Gkika laughed.

“But Van is going back to school in the fall.”

“My condoleancez to leetle Van, den.”

“I'm sure he'd appreciate them. But no, I bring it up because it might be a good idea to send Agatha to school as well.”

“Hy dunno 'bout dot. Hy alvayz thot keeds should be left to run amok for az long az possible.”

“Once she is recognized as a Heterodyne, she will have the rest of her life to run amok,” Carson pointed out. “Until then, we must prepare her in every way we can.”

Gkika sighed.

“Hy suppoze. Hyu vill make de arrangements?”

“Of course. And I will bring Van around sometime soon.”


“Yes, well, I do insist she keep him roughly in one piece.” Carson rose from his seat, grunting as his bones cracked with old age. “I should take my leave now.”
“Hoy, Agatha, say goodbye,” Gkika prompted.

Agatha turned around and blinked owlishly as she was jarred out of her fugue.

“You're leaving?” she asked, looking at Carson.

“I'll be back soon enough,” Carson promised.

“Oh, okay. Will you bring me candy?”

“I suppose I have to, now,” Carson answered after a beat.


“And already she's demanding tribute,” Carson remarked to Gkika. “I'll put that down as a good sign.”

After Carson left, Gkika consulted her watch.

“Tch. Hy should check in on de boyz,” she said. “Hyu play dere und stay out ov trouble, yez? Hy vill be beck before hyu even notice.”

“Yes, Mamma,” Agatha replied, without even looking up.

Boznik was only lightly napping, but he still had a moment of confusion when he awoke. It was dark, and he belatedly remembered his hat was covering his face.

He'd been woken by the sound of the door, but he didn't hear Mamma Gkika's distinctive footsteps. He tilted back his hat and was startled by the sight of a little blonde girl standing by his bedside.

“Hi.”

Boznik blinked and looked around the infirmary. The two other Jägers, Gersh and Toma, were gone, probably off to sneak a few drinks in before Gkika could return to check on them. Or maybe Boznik was dreaming and that explained their absence more adequately.

“Hallo,” he said cautiously, trying to figure out if Gkika's medicine was now making him hallucinate. It already made him feel a bit fuzzy at the edges, but he didn't think it was that strong.

“Do you want this cheese?” the girl said, offering a piece. “It's from the mouse traps. Mamma says I'm not allowed to eat it 'cause it's from the floor an' I'll get sick but it's fine for Jäger.”

Boznik very slowly reached out with his good hand and took the cheese.

“It's really good,” she added.

“Tenk hyu?” he said to what he was rapidly becoming convinced was a real girl and not some manner of apparition.

He ate it and had to admit it really was good cheese.
“I’m Agatha,” the little girl said, sticking out a hand.

Boznik shook the tiny hand, still somewhat bemused by the entire situation.

“Hy would be Boznik,” he replied, smiling. “Doez Mamma know hyu iz in here?”

Agatha shrugged and looked away.

“So she does'n't know.”

Agatha shrugged again.

“I jus' needed more mouse traps,” she mumbled.

“Vot for?” Boznik asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

Agatha brightened up and apparently took this as her cue to hop up on Boznik's cot and tell him all about it.

“I'm buildin' a clank!” she said. “Only it's a real small clank but it's gonna move an' stuff an' it's gonna be really really great!”

Agatha swung her feet over the edge of the cot as she chattered away happily, and for Boznik's part, several pieces slid into place as he realized this little girl was the Heterodyne. She was, indeed, tinier than he’d expected, but this close, he could smell it, that distinctive Heterodyne scent that every Jäger recognized on some level.

The Heterodyne heir had just offered him cheese, Boznik realized. Delicious cheese, at that.

Well, he thought as he lied back and listened to Agatha go on, she sounded like a smart girl.

Still years off from being able to fix anybody up, that much was obvious even to Boznik. But well worth the wait, he decided, just to have a Heterodyne back.

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1 The best innocent mien had been perfected by Iscarriot Heterodyne, who could look downright angelic even while in the act of physically stabbing someone in the back. He was a real people person.

2 A Pyrrhic victory, in Europan parlance, refers to the inexplicable event in which a Spark defeats you even though he spent the entire battle dealing grievous damage only to himself. Pyrrhus Heterodyne single-handedly managed to embarrass an entire generation of heroes.
Agatha was getting used to Mamma Gkika's. It was loud and busy and it smelled strange, but it was interesting in its own way, and it was full of Jägers, which Agatha counted as an upside in any situation.

Gkika allowed her to run around occasionally, under the condition she didn't cause too much trouble. Agatha didn't really see what trouble she could cause, when she was just a little kid. She was especially unclear on what Gkika considered to be trouble, because the Jägers had at least one scheduled brawl every day, and Agatha was pretty sure that kind of thing was considered trouble anywhere outside Mechanicsburg.

 Probably she wasn't allowed to shoot death rays at anyone, Agatha reasoned, which was all just as well. She wasn't planning to. And anyway, there weren't any other death rays on the trophy wall that Agatha could identify, so that was that until she could build her own.

But something else had drawn Agatha's attention on the trophy wall now, and she weaved her way through the crowd, dodging past busy serving girls.

“Don't run, sweetheart, you'll trip,” Lene called out off-handedly, and Agatha slowed down the next few steps. She sped up again once Lene wasn't paying attention.

The Jägers were far less concerned, and threw Agatha amused smiles as they moved to let her pass.

“Vot's de rush?” a particularly large Jäger asked, ruffling Agatha’s hair as he moved his bulk slowly out of the way.

“Science waits for no one!” Agatha declared as she shook off his hand and zipped away.

“Tch. Keeds dese days,” the Jäger shook his head. “Dun even schtop to giff a proper rant ennymore.”

“Yah, now iz all, vot hyu call it. Vun-linerz,” a second one agreed. “In my day, ve had de real qvality monologuing.”

“Ho yez, some ov de masters could go on for hours. Now dot vos stamina.”

They knocked their drinks together in an unspoken toast.

Meanwhile, Agatha had reached the wall, and had spotted her quarry. It looked a bit like a fishing rod, if fishing rods were designed with the primary purpose of maiming people. It also looked like it might have the bits she was hoping for, but she wouldn't know until she took it apart, and she couldn't do that until she took it off the wall.

She dragged a chair in front of the trophy wall and climbed on it, but she didn't come anywhere close to reaching it. She jumped a bit, frustrated, and then tried to climb higher by way of the chair's backrest.

This predictably sent the chair toppling over, but Agatha barely had time to shriek before she was caught.
“Oop, dere ve go,” Maxim said as he hoisted Agatha into his arms. “Dot woud haff been a nazty spill.”

“Maxim!” Agatha chirped happily. “Can you get me that?” She pointed to the item she wanted.

“Vell,” Maxim said, “Hy woud, but Mamma sez hyu izn’t allowed anyting off de vall until hyu iz beeg enuff to get it hyuself.”

“But I was getting it myself,” Agatha argued. “You just... interrupted. So you have to get it for me now! ...Please?”

Maxim wavered for a few moments.

“Hy could neffer resist a nize gurl askink for anyting,” he sighed, and put Agatha down. But before he could do anything more, a hand clapped him on the shoulder.

“Which is why it’z a goot ting hyu got brodders to keep hyu out ov trouble,” Dimo said, keeping Maxim in place with a firm grip. “Hyu vould not vant to haff Mamma Gkika upset vit hyu, now vould hyu, Maxim?”

Maxim might have actually paled slightly at this.

“She doesn’t need to know,” Agatha said.

“Hy tink she vill notice de trophy vall beink stripped bare,” Dimo said.

“I wasn’t gonna take everything!” Agatha replied. “Just that thing!” She pointed to the desired item.

“Hy saw dot ting rip de arm clean off a Jäger vunce,” Dimo said. “Iz de last ting hyu should be playink vit.”

“I wasn’t gonna to play with it,” Agatha scowled. “I need it for science!”

“Dot iz effen less reassuring.”

Agatha stomped her foot in frustration.

“I’ll be back!” she warned, before she stormed off.

Dimo and Maxim watched her disappear into the crowd. They could trace her path by the Jägers subtly moving to make way for her, and occasionally they could spot the mop of her blonde hair. She was making her way towards the back rooms.

“She needz it for science,” Maxim echoed, elbowing Dimo playfully.

“Hmph. Iz going to be a real terror, dot vun.” Despite himself, Dimo cracked a smile.

“Ho, yez! Now all ve need to do iz vait until she iz less small und sqvishy. Dot iz de easy part.”
Carson was stirred from his reading by Arella's voice calling him. It was unusual that Arella didn't come to him instead—she was mindful of his old age, even more than Carson himself felt necessary—but she didn't sound like she was in any trouble.

He walked into the parlor and was stopped in his tracks by the sight that greeted him.

One of Mamma Gkika's serving girls was there. He dug around in his memory for her name. Daciana. Right. The Prisnel family's youngest daughter. Carson knew that lot. Good head for numbers, bad eye for distances. Her great-grandfather had been Ominox Heterodyne's head minion, back in the day.

Alongside Daciana was Agatha, looking unharmed, but openly curious about her surroundings.

“What's wrong?” Carson asked.

“Agatha caused a bit of a... situation,” Daciana explained slowly.

Then she paused, apparently at a loss as to how to continue. By the looks of it, she'd departed rather suddenly. She had only a coat over her scanty work clothes.

Carson gave Agatha a stern look. The girl at least had the decency to hang her head, even if she didn't look particularly contrite.

“Well, if they'd just given me the thing when I asked for it...” she muttered.

“Was anyone hurt?” Carson asked.

“No, no, and nothing was even damaged, really. I think everything should be fine once we, er, pry it loose,” Daciana said. “But Mamma thought it would be good for Agatha to be away for a few hours, so she doesn't get any more, um, ideas.”

“I don't see how that would work, I can get ideas anywhere,” Agatha pointed out.

Daciana laughed nervously and patted Agatha on the head.

“It was Mamma's idea to bring her here,” she stressed.

“Well, if it's for a few hours, I suppose--” Carson started.

There was the sound of quick footsteps on the stairs, and Van poked his head out of the stairwell to see what was happening.

Agatha perked up at the sight of another child. She enthusiastically waved at him. Van gave a puzzled wave back, before turning a questioning look to his grandfather.

“Van, why don't you entertain our young guest in your room?” Arella said, gently pushing Agatha towards him. “Her name is Agatha.”

“Okay,” Van said, and took Agatha by the hand to lead her upstairs. “Hi, Agatha, I'm Van.”
“Hi!” Agatha said in response.

After they disappeared from sight, Daciana sighed and pulled her coat closed.

“I should be getting back,” she said. “One of the other girls will come to pick Agatha up.”

“I take it,” Carson said conversationally, “that after today, Mamma might be more open to sending Agatha to school come fall.”

“Master Heliotrope,” Daciana replied, “after today, Mamma would be open to sending Agatha to apprentice with the corpse carts, as long as it kept her busy.”

Van was proud of his room—most of his classmates couldn't brag of having their own room yet—and Agatha seemed adequately impressed by it, so he didn't mind terribly having to entertain her. It was small, but it had the basics: a bed (neatly made), a desk (still a bit big for him, but he'd grow into it), a wardrobe and a set of shelves. A toy chest was shoved in a corner, half-hidden behind the wardrobe.

“This is a nice room,” Agatha said, standing transfixed in front of his shelves. They were full of a few books and various knick-knacks he'd scrounged up from around the house to fill the gaps.

“Thank you,” Van said, trying not to preen too obviously.

Agatha spotted an hourglass at her eye-level, and reached for it. It was one of the overdesigned spring-loaded kind; you only had to touch it and it turned by itself, and Agatha poked at it a few times, sending it swinging in continuous arcs. Van liked it because it was decorated in silver and little trilobites.

So he was alarmed when Agatha picked it up and tried to take it apart.

“Hey!” he yelled, and snatched it from her hands. “What are you doing?”

“It moved pretty slow,” Agatha replied. “I was gonna fix it.”

“It's an hourglass! It isn't racing against anyone, it can move as slow as it wants.” He placed it back on the shelf, fussily adjusting its position. “And anyway, what do you know about fixing anything? You're what, seven?”

“My uncle says I'm almost six!” Agatha said. “And he was going to give me something for my birthday, because it's traditional.”

“Oh. When's your birthday?”

“I don't know! My uncle probably knew. But I haven't seen him in a very, very long time.”

Van thought about this for a few moments.

“So your birthday could have already passed?” he asked.
Agatha slumped, looking a bit sad.

“I guess? So maybe I'm already six?”

“That's almost old enough to go to school,” Van said.

“Yeah! Mamma says I'm probably going in the fall.”

“I'm going too!” Van added quickly. “But I've already been for one year, so I'm going to be in second grade.”

“Ohh. Maybe I'll be in second grade too!”

“You can't be in second grade unless you finish first grade!”

“Says who?”

“It's the rules! And anyway, you need to learn all that stuff in first grade, like reading and writing and math and invasion preparedness.”

“I know how to read!”

“Well, that still doesn't mean you can cut it in second grade. We're learning the multiplication table this year. You have to memorize that!”

“Oh why do you need to memorize a table?” Agatha asked, frowning in confusion because she was picturing a literal table.

Inordinately proud of being so much more well-informed than a mere six-year-old, Van walked over to his desk and picked up a sheet of paper, presenting it to Agatha.

Van had transcribed the multiplication table in neatly distributed squares. His handwriting had the overwrought perfection of a small child whose mastery of the pen was a recent accomplishment, and he added fancy little curlicues to his twos and sevens, which Agatha didn't particularly care for but Van thought were fancy.

But if Van was waiting for Agatha to ask for some clarification on what the numbers on the paper meant—after all, Van had needed it explained to him by an adult, and he was in second grade—he only continued to look at the paper, her expression shifting from mildly curious, to fascinated, to something infinitely more alarming.

“Oh, I see!” Agatha said, grinning more widely than Van thought was possible. “So this is multiplication! Yes, yes, I see! It's so simple! I should have thought of this myself! Hee hee.”

Something in her tone sent a twang of warning in Van's minion hind brain, but unsure of what was happening, he could only quantify the feeling as a combination of fear and excitement.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” Van said very carefully.

“Do you have more stuff like this?” Agatha demanded.

“...I have my textbooks for the next year.”
“Can I see them?”

“...Sure.”

He wasn't sure why he was allowing a six-year-old to push him around, but he removed the neat pile of textbooks from the shelves and handed them over to Agatha.

By the time his mother knocked on the door and entered the room, Agatha was on the floor with every book open around her, and Van was right next to her, telling her about school and trying to answer her confusing questions. *(Of course* the school didn't have brawls. *Why would a school need to schedule regular brawls?)*

“I thought I'd bring you some snacks,” Arella said, putting a tray of jam and pastries on Van's desk.

“Thank you, mother,” Van said politely.

He elbowed Agatha sharply when she didn't say anything.

“Thanks, Van's mom,” the girl said quickly, before returning her attention to the books.

Arella stifled a bit of laughter at that.

“You're welcome, dears,” she said. “I won't interrupt your fun.”

After she departed, pulling the door behind her, Van threw Agatha a glare.

“You can't call her 'Van's mom', that's weird!” he said. “You have to call her 'Mistress Heliotrope'. Or 'Frau Heliotrope'.”

“Why?”

“'Cause that's our last name!”

“That's a weird last name.”

“Oh, yeah? What's yours?”

“Mamma says I can't say.”

“Why? Are you criminals or something?”

Agatha thought about this for a few seconds.

“No?” she ventured.

“I mean, it's okay if you *are*, Mechanicsburg has always taken in all sorts of people, my grandfather says,” Van added.

“I don’t think we're criminals, I'm just not allowed to say because last time I said I caused trouble.”

“Huh.”
Van stayed quiet for the next few minutes, inspecting Agatha as she was reading, on the look out for some clue.

“Are you pirates then?” Van asked in a lower voice.

“No! And anyway, aren't pirates a type of criminal?”

“Well, my family totally has a secret name, too!”

“Uh-huh.”

“No, really! Everybody knows.”

“So then it's not secret.”

“It is secret! It's just not secret from the people who already know it!”

Agatha scoffed.

They continued to bicker on the subject for the next half hour, but in the end, neither one revealed their secret surname.

By the time Carson decided to check on Van and Agatha, there was distinct giggling coming from the room.

“Still alive in there, m'boy?” Carson asked, poking his head in.

He then instantly had to duck, because at some point Agatha managed to convince Van to let her take apart his fancy hourglass, his clock and a few other things, and had built a miniature catapult to shoot paper balls.

Carson thanked his stars Agatha had limited herself to harmless ammunition. He knew expecting her not to build projectile weaponry of any sort was simply too much to ask.

“We're fine, grandfather,” Van said, sheepishly moving his leg to hide a pile of paper.

“Berenice is here to pick you up, Agatha,” Carson informed her.

“Oh.” Agatha looked crestfallen. “Can I come and play with Van some other time?”

“Oh.” Agatha looked crestfallen. “Can I come and play with Van some other time?”

“Of course,” Carson assured her. “But hurry along downstairs, Berenice has to get home soon too.”

Agatha bolted past Carson and noisily made her way downstairs, greeting Berenice loudly.

“She's weird, but she's kinda nice, in a scary way,” Van said.

“Heh. You don't know the half of it,” Carson said, grinning. “Now, clean up that mess. Dinner will be ready soon.”
Van looked around him, blinking in surprise as if noticing the mess of small parts and crumpled paper all across the floor for the first time. Carson tried not to laugh.

Mamma Gkika did not look especially annoyed when Agatha returned, so the girl made a beeline for her and latched onto the Jäger's leg in a hug.

“Hyu had fon on hyu visit?” Gkika asked, picking Agatha up into her arms.

“I did! I did! Van had books and he goes to school too and he let me take apart his clock. It was a really nice clock!” Agatha took out a handful of springs and gears from her pocket and showed them to Gkika. “And he said I should say I was sorry for causing trouble.”

“Hy see. And iz hyu sorry?”

“Um. Yes?” Agatha said. “Causing trouble isn't what I was trying to do.”

“No, hyu vaz trying to get dot maiming rod off de vall, yah?”

“Since I said I was sorry, can I get it now?” Agatha asked.

“No,” Gkika said firmly.

“But--”

“Hyu dun know de firzt ting about dot vall. Hyu know vot dot leetle toy hyu vant so moch doez?”

“Dimo said it ripped someone's arm off,” Agatha said.

“It didn't rip *somevun*’s arm off, it ripped a Jäger's arm off. Hyu know whoze?”

“...No? Does it matter?”

“It vill matter to hyu vhen hyu iz a Heterodyne. It vill matter a lot.”

“Because I'm going to fix Jägers when they get hurt? Like Boznik?”

Gkika sighed, because she could just imagine how Agatha knew about Boznik. She wondered if locking doors would help, or if it would simply give Agatha another problem to obsess over. Probably the latter.

“Only Boznik's hurt *now*,” Agatha continued, frowning.

“He vill be fine,” Gkika assured gently. “He iz alive, he ken vait.”

“...Okay,” Agatha said faintly. “So whose arm was it?”

“Vnarsh's,” Gkika replied. “Den he ponched de madboy vot did it so hard he bounced off a vall and into a vat ov acid. It vos verra impressive, everyvun agreed.”
Agatha giggled a bit.

“Dot iz vhy dot ting iz on de vall, yah? Iz a trophy, to remember de goot fights.”

“Oh. Do all the things on the wall have funny stories?”

“Sum ov de storiez iz not so fonny, but ask de boyz. Dey luff to tell all about it.”

“Okay!”

“But hyu leave tings where dey are, yez?”

“...Yes, Mamma.”

“Goot gurl.”

It was quiet for a while after that, both Agatha and the Jägers being unusually well-behaved. Even the infirmary was empty. Boznik had been patched up as far as Gkika could stretch the patch job and then sent off with firm orders to stick to light duty for the foreseeable future. At least knowing there was a Heterodyne now would prevent him from jumping into any fights he knew he couldn't win. Gkika had lost a few that way; hopeless cases, but she still felt each one as a terrible, needless loss.

The glut of the Jäger army had been taken up north by the Baron to fight against the Polar Lords, so the downstairs bar was quiet as well, enough that sometimes the Jägers even complained about the tourists being too loud and off-key.

What they didn't complain about was that the serving girls had more time to give them personalized attention, and they certainly vied hard for it at every opportunity. Without as much to do, the girls indulged them whenever possible, to the point that, a few times, Gkika had to tsk them for shirking on the job.

Gkika didn't mind the quiet, while it lasted.

Agatha seemed to have gotten over her building frenzy. Gkika could tell the girl wasn't done breaking through—with Heterodynes, the final stages tended to be more spectacular than not—but she'd reached a point of relative equilibrium for the moment.

Agatha's visits to the Heliotrope residence became a regular thing. She enjoyed playing with Van and she was delighted by all the books that could be found there, especially when Carson allowed her to borrow a few.

She was also delighted by the sights of the town, which she only ever got to see on these short walks, and often managed to convince her escort to take circuitous paths and short side-trips. None of the girls told Gkika this directly, but given the kind of things Agatha described, it was clear they
were taking the scenic route. Agatha was curious about everything and everyone in town, and even when receiving answers, she often demanded to see things herself.

A couple of weeks before the school year began, Carson took Agatha to the school to be tested. ‘Five or six’, as her age had been given, was a bit young by the Schoolmaster's assessment, and he wanted to make sure she was apt enough to start that year.

Carson informed Gkika that the Schoolmaster had assigned Agatha to Mister Gavril Taramtut's “special” class.

“Van says that's where they put the extra scary kids,” Agatha informed her.

“Ho, vell, hyu'll fit right in.”

“I'm not scary!” Agatha replied, frowning slightly. “All the Jäger say I'm adorable!”

“Dot should haff been hyu firzt clue, den.”

But the Wulfenbach armada eventually returned from the north, and brought with it victorious Jägers. As inevitable as gravity, those Jägers returned to Mamma Gkika's.

There were two kinds of Jägers who came straight to Mamma's after a campaign: those with wounds and those with stories.

Miroslav had both. His knee had been injured, and Jäger or not, knees were always a bit tricky to put back together. Gkika had patched him up and summarily ejected him from the infirmary to make room for more critical patients.

There was an air of joviality in the bar that night. The campaign had been a bloody one, but most of the blood had belonged to the other guys.

Miroslav had set up at his favorite table with a stein of beer. It didn't take long for Miroslav to be joined by three other cheerful Jägers. They shared stories back and forth for a while, laughing and ribbing each other good-naturedly, and Miroslav even got to tell how he managed to make a great sky wurm tie itself in knots.

“Hoo, boy, dot guy ridink it vos not pleazed,” Miroslav grinned. “Hy dun know vot he vos shoutink at me, but chust to be on de safe side, Hy vos verra inzulted.”

“Hy know vot he vos shoutink at hyu,” Arvo snorted, “und barely any ov it vos not true.”

There were guffaws around the table, but Miroslav was still grinning.

“But how did hyu get hyu knee messed op?” Greigor asked.

“De vurm took a leetle nibble,” Miroslav said. “Schpat me back op right avay, though!”
“Vell, at leazt ve know sky vurmz haff ecktual tazte,” Hust commented.

Miroslav snorted into his stein as he drank, but he almost choked on a mouthful of beer when he noticed a small girl peering at him over the edge of the table.

“Vot der dumboozle?!?”

She was short enough that only her head was visible—large green eyes and an unruly mop of blond hair—but she put her forearms up on the table and raised herself up as far as she could.

“What's a... sky verm?” she asked, imitating the unfamiliar word with accent and all, and not quite getting it right.

The Jägers all turned to look at the little girl in stark surprise.

“Hoy, diz not a place for leetle keeds,” Arvo told her. “Who let hyu in?”

“I live here,” Agatha replied, in a tone that very much indicated she was stating something that should be obvious.

“Boyz,” Hust exclaimed suddenly, “dis iz de Heterodyne gurl Ognian voz tellink me about!”

“Vot?” all the other Jägers around the table said, their heads swinging around from Agatha to look at Hust instead.

“Yah, Ognian vos detached, hyu remember?” Hust continued.

“Hyu telling me Ognian found a Heterodyne?” Miroslav asked, highly dubious. “Ognian. Hyu sure 'bout dot.”

“Vell, he vazn't alone,” Hust shrugged.

“Who vos he vit?” Arvo asked.

“Maxim, Hy tink,” Hust said. Miroslav and Arvo's expressions were still frozen in incredulity. Greigor raised an eyebrow. “End Hy tink Dimo vos vit dem too.”

“And Jenka,” Agatha added.

“Ho, vell, Jenka, of cauwze,” Arvo nodded. “Dot mek more vit de sense.”


“I'm Agatha!” she said. “And it's really good to meet you too, but what's a sky verm?” Her second attempt didn't get her anywhere near the actual word either.

“A... a sky wurm,” Arvo corrected gently, dropping the Mechanicsburg accent to enunciate better, and wincing a bit for it. “Iz like a beeg lizard dot fly.”

“How big?” Agatha asked, her eyes widening.
“Verra big,” Miroslav said.

“Huge,” Hust added.

“Long,” Greigor piped in, gesturing for emphasis.

“How does it fly?” Agatha continued.

“Fazt,” Miroslav said.

“High,” Hust added.

“Like an angry banner in a tornado,” Greigor explained in an unusual fit of lyricism. “Dot eats pipple,” he also added after a moment of reflection.

“Hy dun tink dot iz vot she vos askink,” Arvo remarked.

“I meant what does it use to fly...?” Agatha specified.

“Oh! Vell, it haz vings.” Greigor replied.

“Beeg vings,” Miroslav added. “Und powerful jaws.”

“Vhy dun hyu sit down und ve tell hyu all about it?” Arvo said.

All the Jägers around the table made approving noises at the suggestion. New audience meant they could tell their stories all over again.

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Miroslav scoffed.

“Arvo, chust let her ponch sumting alreddy!” he groused.

Arvo scowled at Miroslav from where he was sitting on his haunches, showing Agatha how to make a fist correctly.

“Hyu shot op, hyu used to brek hyu fingerz ponching schtuff all de time when hyu vos human,” Arvo replied.

“Iz true!” Greigor added cheerfully. “Remember dot krezy madgirl vot broke hyu entire hand?”

“Hy vazn't effen goink to hit her!” Miroslav defended himself. “She chust attacked me vit her face! Hy tink her jaw vos made ov metal!”

“No, Hy wasn't,” Miroslav muttered, rubbing his right hand.

“Hyu still *iz,*” Hust said, cackling.

Arvo ignored them in favor of continuing his lesson. Agatha absorbed everything with the rapt fascination of a Spark, which was a bit eerie coming from such a small child. But he couldn't deny she made for a good student. He told her to keep her wrist straight, and she aligned her hand accordingly, watching the way the bones of her arm shifted under her flesh with a critical frown on her face. When she had it, she looked back at Arvo for more instructions. He demonstrated the motions next, slowly.

Once he was sure she got the basics down, he spread his palms open in front of her and told her to hit them.

“Hyu do de vun-two, like Hy showed hyu,” he said.

With a fierce frown of concentration, Agatha made two jabbing punches to Arvo's hands. They landed about as hard as Arvo expected from a six-year-old, but he grinned nonetheless.

“Hyu'z a natural!” Hust said appreciatively.

Agatha blushed at the compliment and hopped from one foot to another, excited.

“Next ve teach hyu how to hit *ipple,*” Arvo said.

He was interrupted by a feminine voice calling through the crowd.

“Agatha!”

(Miroslav flinched. Hust snorted at him, earning himself a dirty look in return.)

Vera made her way through the crowd and walked over to where Agatha was.

“Sweetheart, it's late,” she was saying. “Mamma's busy, but she sent me to put you to bed.”

“Nooooo!” Agatha whined. “Can't I stay up just this once? They're teaching me how to punch people next!”

Vera gave a sidelong glance to the Jägers.

“Really?” she asked, more them than Agatha.

“Well, she *iz* goink to school soon,” Arvo said, as if that explained everything.

“Please, Vera? Please, please? Just this once!” Agatha wheedled.

The Jägers all turned hopeful eyes to Vera. Faced with so many earnest wide-eyed kicked puppy expressions, Vera wavered.

“I suppose,” she said, “that Mamma would consider this an important life skill.”

Agatha squealed happily and hugged Vera.
“Yes, yes, but only for an hour,” Vera said, patting Agatha's head. “I'm coming back later and then you'll come with me without arguing!”

Agatha nodded eagerly.

It was around the early hours of dawn when the bar was mostly cleared out that Arvo and Miroslav lingered, finishing their beers.

“Hyu know,” Miroslav said, “Hy neffer liked dot Lucrezia.”

“Hoy, hoy,” Arvo replied without much fire, “careful now, she vos still de Lady Heterodyne.”

Miroslav snorted.

“Hy neffer underschtood,” he said, “how a perzon like Mazter Villiam pick a gurl like dot to marry. He vos beeg hero, yah? Hyu'd tink he'd notize.”

Arvo made a non-committal noise.

“Hyu tink she tek more after her poppa?” Miroslav asked. “She look a lot like her momma, but she ain't got dot same poizon in her mind. Only Hy dun remember Mazter Villiam beink moch like Agatha at dis age.”

“Hyu tink she tek a leetle bit after her oncle,” Arvo commented.

Miroslav considered this.

“Yah, hokay, Hy ken see it,” he conceded.

“Mebbe a bit more after her gran'poppa,” Arvo added.

Miroslav and Arvo shared a sly smile. Then they clunked their steins together and finished their beers.

The Central School of Mechanicsburg had come into existence almost two centuries prior, when a particular seneschal came to the conclusion that the life expectancy of future minions could be much improved if the children of Mechanicsburg were given access to a basic and consistent scientific education.

This meant, of course, that the children would first need to be taught to read, write and do simple math, but being the pragmatic sort, the seneschal decided they should also be educated in other skills the Heterodynes might find useful, such as mechanics, siege tactics and time-efficient interrogation methods.
The curriculum had suffered some modifications over the years, as time and technology marched on, with perhaps the most drastic being the elimination of the popular torture device workshop during the tenure of the Heterodyne Boys. But the Central School remained Mechanicsburg's premier institution of education, even after the Quasicatholic School was established alongside the Red Cathedral. Though the Quasicatholic School offered a secular curriculum, it had never really gained any popularity with either the Jewish or the Bizarrethodox Christian communities of the town.

The school building itself was quite grand, a stout and morose three-story monstrosity, oppressive to the human spirit just by its mere existence. Often the first sight that greeted children entering through the gates was the wrought iron skeletons on them, and the front doors were intricately carved with trilobites and the same skeletal motifs.

Agatha, for her part, had never seen a school before, and thus lacking a basis for comparison, merely accepted its appearance as typical.

Van certainly gave no indication that anything was amiss. He peered through the crowd, trying to spot his classmates. The crowd gathered in the school's courtyard was a mix of parents, teachers, but mostly children of varying ages. When Van finally spotted someone he knew, he let out a cheerful shout and waved. Another boy trotted up to Van, grinning widely, and they began talking about their respective summers.

Agatha stuck by Arella, uncertain what to do. Van seemed engrossed in his conversation, and Agatha would have felt awkward trying to insert herself in it.

“Oh! I played a lot with Agatha this summer,” Van said suddenly, remembering her presence. “This is her,” he added.

The other boy turned to her, a curious look on his face. Agatha waved shyly.

“Hi!” he said. “I'm Johann.”

Agatha glanced up at Arella briefly before replying.

“Um, hi. I'm Agatha Heliotrope,” she said slowly.

“Didn't know you had a sister, Van!” Johann said, surprised.

“I don't!” Van sputtered. “She's not my sister! Ew!”

“Hey!” Agatha shouted indignantly.

“She's... my cousin,” Van mumbled, his face going red.

That had been, at least, the agreed upon lie. She could hardly have been signed up under her real name, and more than merely using an already established pseudonym, Carson thought it would be wise for him to have some justification for his interest in Agatha's education.

Of course, when he'd introduced Agatha as his grandniece to the Schoolmaster, he'd received quite the level look in return, not least because the Schoolmaster was at least passingly acquainted with
Carson's family tree.

“Grandniece,” the Schoolmaster had drawled, the word dripping with disbelief. “Really.”

Carson, in response, gave him the kind of withering glare that made even Jägers pause, though admittedly only for a few seconds.

But while Carson might have ridden with Jägers in his youth, the Schoolmaster had worked in the Mechanicsburg school system for fifty years, and was thus less than affected.

“I don't know what you're up to, you old coot,” the Schoolmaster had said after a long pause, “but your...'grandniece' had better be far less interesting than I suspect she is.”

“You were always good at setting yourself up for disappointment,” Carson had replied.

But the Schoolmaster relented and the school records reflected that an Agatha Heliotrope was to begin school that year.

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“You know,” Johann remarked, “I don't remember you mentioning a cousin, either.”

“Well, I just met her this summer,” Van replied, but he still shifted uncomfortably.

“Agatha's family is only recently returned to Mechanicsburg,” Arella interjected. “Van, why don't you go with Johann? Find the rest of your friends. I'll take Agatha to find her class.”

“Okay, thanks,” Van said, relieved to change the subject.

“Good day, Frau Heliotrope,” Johann said, and then both boys were off.

Arella took Agatha's hand, and ambled into the crowd as well.

Finding Agatha's teacher was not hard, as he was a regular costumer of Heliotrope Scribe and Book Works and Arella was familiar with him. He was, in fact, the man in a hideous lime green military greatcoat, trying to wrangle a small but persistently wild group of children.

“Where did that Vasilovici boy get to again?” he was asking, clearly frustrated as he waved a piece of paper.

“Oh,” a little girl replied, “was he the one who was trying to squeeze through the fence bars?”

The man rubbed a hand over his face.

“Please tell me he didn't escape,” he said.

“No, of course he didn't! He's stuck.”

He sighed deeply.

“Right. Well. I see I will need to borrow the steam-powered bar spreader and the vaseline again,” he
said. “On the first day. Of course.”

He noticed Arella and Agatha at that moment.

“Ah, Arella, hello,” he said, and looked down, following his instinct to seek out the child that a parent usually came attached to. “And this must be your niece you were telling me about?”

“This is Agatha,” Arella confirmed. “Agatha, this is Mister Taramtut. He'll be your new teacher.”

“Welcome, Miss Heliotrope,” he greeted, and made a note on his paper. “That means everybody is here. Save, of course, for Mister Vasilovici.”

He pronounced the last two words in a tone one might use upon encountering one's nemesis for the first time. In Taramtut's case, of course, that wasn't very far from the truth. Years as a teacher had taught him that nothing was more vital to setting the tone of the teaching environment than identifying early on who in his latest class would be That One Kid.4

“Now if you'll pardon me,” Taramtut said, “I have some bar spreaders to find. You children better be in this exact spot when I come back, or you will discover how inventive an angry man with a bar spreader can get.”

He slunk off towards the school building, muttering to himself.

Arella released Agatha's hand and gently pushed her towards the children.

“I'll be around,” Arella assured Agatha, “but why don't you go meet your classmates?”

Agatha nodded and stepped up to the group. The rest of the children watched her for a tense moment, curious eyes assessing her, before they went back to doing whatever they'd been doing before. By the looks of it, laughing and plotting mayhem.

But a heavy-set girl with dark skin and glossy black hair stuck out her hand.

“Hi!” she said. “I'm Petra Fiddler.”

Agatha took her hand, relieved, and introduced herself.

“This is Ducky,” Petra said, gesturing to a pale girl with mousy hair standing by her side. She was the same who had informed Mister Taramtut of the delinquent Vasilovici's whereabouts.

“My name,” the girl sniffed, “is Evdokia Xypolitos.”

“But everybody calls her Ducky,” Petra said.

Ducky shrugged and nodded in resignation, and then she practically snatched Agatha's hand to shake it.

“You have a nice name,” Ducky said, giving Agatha an interested look. “Agatha Heliotrope. Are you Greek?”

“Not everyone you meet is Greek!” Petra said, visibly exasperated. “Stop asking people that!”
“I’m Greek!” Ducky argued.

“No, you’re not!”

“Well, but my family’s Greek, though.”

“Your family has been in Mechanicsburg practically forever!” Petra said. “You're Mechanicsburgers.”

Ducky looked down, abashed, and scuffed her shoe against the ground. “We're Greek Mechanicsburgers, though...” she muttered quietly to herself, and Petra rolled her eyes, but dropped the argument.

“You two know each other?” Agatha asked.

“Oh, sure!” Petra shrugged.

“We're neighbors,” Ducky added. “We play a lot together. And we're in the same secret children's society.”

Petra shushed Ducky immediately with a hissed “Secret!”

“What about you?” Petra asked. “I don’t remember ever seeing you around Mechanicsburg!”

“I haven't been in Mechanicsburg long,” Agatha shrugged. “My family's from here, though.”

“Mechanicsburg's the best place to live,” Ducky said definitively. “Everyone I know says so.”

“Everyone you know already lives here,” Petra snorted.

“Well, that just proves my point, doesn't it?”

Petra couldn't argue with that.

Agatha stared openly at the classroom around her. The rows of desks, the chalkboard, the teacher's desk were expected, as Van had described the general layout of a classroom to her.

But furniture alone did not make a classroom. Every centimeter of the walls was covered with various maps, charts and schematics. From the ceiling, strange stuffed birds and spherical contraptions hung. There was a stuffed large cat of some sort in the corner by the door, frozen in a hunter's prowl, and a series of cabinets on the opposite wall. The back of the classroom was occupied by a variety of other instruments, mechanisms and strange objects, cluttered over the last two rows of desks. There was also, that Agatha could see, a glass tank with something moving around inside.

It was just as well that Mister Taramtut's class was small, no more than sixteen children in all, because it was already a snug fit.

The children picked out their desks as they walked through the door, either by happenstance or
preference.

Agatha was been a bit slow, gaping as she had been at the classroom around her, but she managed to take the desk behind Petra and Ducky. Unfortunately, this had somehow ended with her as the deskmate of Vasile Vasilovici, who was a scowling boy, taller than Agatha by a head and visibly unhappy to be there.

“Now,” Taramtut said, as the class quieted down, “try to memorize your seat, because that is where you will be staying for the foreseeable future.”

A boy raised his hand.

“Yes, Mister Winkler?” Taramtut said, after a moment of hesitation.

“But I have to be home by curfew,” the boy said quite seriously.

“I meant,” Taramtut said slowly, “that you will be sitting in these seats while you are at school. I did not mean you are not allowed to ever leave them again.”

“Oh!” Winkler blinked. “You really should have been more specific, sir.”

“I can already see,” Taramtut said, “that I will find myself being extremely specific with you about a great range of things, Mister Winkler.”

The boy grinned obliviously while Taramtut resigned himself to the knowledge that it was going to be a long four years.

Agatha's deskmate raised his hand.

“Yes, Mister Vasilovici?” Taramtut nodded.

“Can we go home now?” the boy asked.

“What can I say that will make you less likely to attempt escape?” Taramtut asked tiredly.

“Yes, please go,” Vasilovici replied.

Taramtut was unamused, and once again regretted the fact that Bill Heterodyne had prohibited the use of shackles in schools. The Old Heterodynes had been altogether much more reasonable about such things.

“Mister Vasilovici,” Taramtut began, “believe me that I do not want you to be here any more than you do. Alas, we are both subject to the rules of conduct that bind us all within the confines of this school, and thus you and I will have to learn some way of tolerating your presence in this classroom.”

“But can I leave?” Vasilovici persisted.

“No.”

Vasilovici slumped back in his seat, crossing his arms.
“Any other questions?”

Another raised hand.

“Yes, Mister Engel, let's hear it.”

“When do we learn explosions?” Engel asked.

“I am afraid,” Taramtut replied, “the school hasn't had a demolitions course in well over half a century, Mister Engel. The constant property damage was getting to be a strain on the town treasury, from what I gather.”

“But my brother says he learned lots of explosions at school,” Engel said.

Taramtut blinked.

“Well,” he ceded, “I admit we do have our fair number of... exciting mishaps, especially when we have students breaking through, but those are usually accidents, and the school does not condone them.”

“So we'll definitely have explosions?” Engel asked, suddenly cheerful.

“After this conversation, I can feel that possibility becoming more likely,” Taramtut replied, and then made a note to himself to look up Engel's older brother.

For the rest of their short time together that day, the children found numerous other highly alarming questions to ask Taramtut. But by that point he'd adjusted his expectations in accordance to his class, and so by the time it was over, since nothing had been blown up and Vasilovici had failed in his two attempts to escape, Taramtut decided the first day of school had gone exceedingly well.

Gkika spotted Agatha the moment she returned, carrying a stack of books clutched to her chest.

“How vaz school?” Gkika asked.

“It was good!” Agatha replied. “I met a lot of new kids today. The material sound interesting. We're going to have explosions.”

Gkika nodded and ruffled Agatha's hair.

“Soundz like hyu'll haff a lot ov fun den.”

1 No, it wasn't.
A safe assumption to make, as a lot of mothers and mother figures in Mechanicsburg held to the same opinion.

The seneschal Gyula von Mekkhan had had some peculiar views on children, also shared by his brother, who served as the first Schoolmaster. They were both convinced that children found skeletons extremely jolly, and had thus decided to cover every surface of the school in them. While in any other town, this would have revealed itself to be a horrendously bad decision leading to countless traumatized children, the children of Mechanicsburg were usually quite inured to the aesthetics of their home town by the time they reached school age, and if they felt anything at all about the school's choice of decoration, it was merely a mild puzzlement about why it was so overdone.

Every class has That One Kid. You know who That One Kid is. You class probably had one too. If you think your class didn't have one, that's probably because you were That One Kid.

Mister Taramtut could already see himself reaching depths of exasperation that he hadn't experienced since the Foglio boy was still in his class.
It was the most sweltering summer Mechanicsburg had seen in nearly two decades, and Agatha Heterodyne, fifteen years of age, barely noticed.

Partly it might have been because, at the top of the observation tower, where she happened to be at that very moment, there was a slight cooling breeze. Mostly, it was because she was busy fussing with a rather complex set of binoculars of her own design.

Agatha made a thoughtful noise and turned a small crank on the side of the binoculars. The image zoomed in quickly. She adjusted a dial, and the blurry image came into focus slowly, but on a weather vane instead of the window Agatha wanted. She sighed and slowly panned down, seeking the window again.

She found it, but whatever she'd spotted moving inside was still once more. Or maybe she got the wrong window.

Agatha sighed and wished, not for the first time, that everybody allowed her to go inside her own damn castle, instead of being limited to these unsatisfactory surveys from afar.

She glared at the binoculars, as if they were the cause of her troubles. That wasn't fair, she knew. They were perfectly well-made binoculars. She'd managed to adapt the prism design some Italian Spark had come up with and produce a pair that was lighter, more compact and far more versatile than anything currently on the market.¹

But there was always room for improvement, Agatha decided. Adjustable eye pieces allowing for variable interpupillary distances? Also a tripod. No, no, gyroscopic image stabilization! Even better!

Agatha took out a notebook and started sketching.

Ducky paced along the base of the Observation Tower, in tight rapid circles that would have made most other people nauseous. If any of the people passing by had any opinions about the lanky teenager spinning around in place like a toy clank with a broken wheel, it was nothing they verbalized.

She was interrupted only by the arrival of Petra.

“Ducky, what are you doing?” Petra asked, planting her hands on her hips and scowling. “You were supposed to be home an hour ago. Your mother was looking for you!”

“Agatha's got my sunhat,” Ducky replied as she ceased her pacing. She gestured upwards.

Petra looked up, squinting against the sunlight.
“I just didn't want her to get sunstroke,” Ducky sighed.

“I'm sure she'll give it back the next time you meet,” Petra said.

“Unless she uses it to build something,” Ducky said.

Petra opened her mouth, but closed it again. Petra had lost her two good hair pins and an electric lamp and countless pens to Agatha's fugues in the past.

“What is she doing up there, anyway?” Petra asked instead.

“I think she's looking at Castle Heterodyne again.”

“She's not supposed to go in there, you know!” Petra said.

“I know!” Ducky said, her tone turning defensive.

“I'm just checking,” Petra said. “Because you were supposed to keep her away from the lava cannons, too.”

“I know,” Ducky sighed.

“The gunnery post melted.”

“I know,” Ducky said, more abashed.

“The Baron sent a questor,” Petra continued.

This time Ducky just winced.

She was fortunately saved from further reprimand by the arrival of Vanamonde, who'd just turned the corner, spotted them, and changed direction towards them.

“Have you seen Agatha?” Van asked as he walked up to them.

“Nope,” Petra replied.

Van stared at her for a moment. He did his best 'I am older than you and also I will be seneschal one day so you better cough up Agatha's location right now' glare, but Petra never made anything easy on him if she could help it. Since she was only serenely staring right back at him, he shifted his focus to the more malleable minion.

“Evdokia,” he said calmly, “have you seen Agatha?”

“Um.” Ducky's eyes darted towards Petra, who was shaking her head infinitesimally. “She's up in the tower,” Ducky replied.

“Thank you,” Van said, and swooped past them.

“Ducky!” Petra hissed, exasperated.
“He called me Evdokia!” Ducky whined. “Only my grandmother calls me Evdokia! I got flustered.”

Petra sighed.

“And anyway,” Ducky continued, this time more belligerent, “isn’t he going to be the seneschal? I’m pretty sure we’re supposed to listen to him!”

“Ducky,” Petra said, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder, “if we start listening to him now, he’s not going to be able to appreciate it properly later.”

Much to Van's relief, Agatha was not doing anything more alarming in the Observation Tower than tinkering with something while wearing an ugly sunhat. Good grief, that was an ugly sunhat.

“There you are,” he said.

“Here I am!” Agatha replied, and with a few deft moves, snapped the parts in place and closed the casing on whatever it was she was working on.

“Are those binoculars?” Van gaped.

“Yep!” Agatha replied, holding them out with pride.

“Whatever for?”

“For seeing far away,” Agatha replied. “Obviously.”

“I meant,” Van said, “why would you build binoculars when you have a perfectly serviceable telescope right here?”

He spread his arms to gesture at the gigantic telescope that was, indeed, occupying most of the Tower's observation deck. Agatha looked at the telescope, then back at Van, blinking slowly.

“I'm not sure I understand the question,” she said.

“...No, I suppose it was pretty silly of me to ask,” Van admitted.

Suddenly suspicious, he looked off into the distance towards Castle Heterodyne.

“You're not planning to go into the Castle, are you?” he asked.

Agatha rolled her eyes, but didn't deny it.

“Well, obviously I'll have to go in eventually...” she mumbled.

“Agatha,” Van said very slowly, “Agatha, remember the lava cannons.”

Red rose to Agatha's cheeks.

“That was a minor setback,” she said vehemently, and Van wondered just how many Heterodynes
had uttered variations of that phrase over the centuries, often to their own seneschals.

“The Baron sent a questor,” Van pointed out quite reasonably.

“I know!” Agatha snapped, tone edging into Spark anger.

“Alright,” Van said, careful. “We all just want you to stay safe.”

Agatha scowled, but when she spoke again, she sounded calm and reasonable.

“I know that, Van. It’s kind of hard to miss, in this town,” she said. “But staying safe doesn’t mean I have to stay useless.”

Van’s eyebrows rose.

“You are not useless! Why would you even say that?” he said, genuinely affronted by the mere suggestion.

Agatha growled in frustration and crossed her arms.

“There’s so much I could do if I could just—” She stopped talking abruptly and scowled. “If I could just be the Heterodyne,” she finished in barely more than a whisper.

Van understood what she meant, partially. He was no stranger to secrecy, but Agatha suffered under the constant burden of having to restrain herself so she did not draw undue attention.

The month the questor spent poking around Mechanicsburg had been particularly unenjoyable for Agatha, and when a Heterodyne was in a mood, Mechanicsburg felt it. Van still remembered the tension and irritation that permeated the town during that period.

“You are the Heterodyne!” Van assured. “You are. You're just... biding your time.”

“Feels more like I'm wasting it,” Agatha said sullenly.


“You make it sound like I'm some cackling villain waiting to spring up and crush the Baron,” Agatha said.

“Well, it's not a course of action I'd advise,” Van said, “but if you really wanted to--”

“Van!” Agatha gave him a shocked look.

“And cackling is said to be very therapeutic--”

“Stop! That's terrible!” Agatha exclaimed, a grin threatening to escape her. “You're not supposed to be leading me into villainy!”

She swatted at his arm playfully. Van laughed, but surreptitiously rubbed his aching arm. Spending so much time with Jägers had not left Agatha with a light touch.

“You caught me,” Van confessed, putting a hand to his chest dramatically, “I really want to be your
evil adviser. Mostly for the wardrobe. I've always wanted to wear one of those black capes with the high collar. I'm told they looked quite fetching on my great-great-grandfather.”

This time Agatha grinned in earnest.

“Anyway, what are you even doing here?” Agatha asked him.

“Oh! I was just dropping off your mail at your lab,” Van replied. “You got those medical journals you were waiting on. But I didn't find you there.”

And he got worried, but he didn't mention that part. He'd started doing a lot of that since his seneschal training began in earnest.

Either way, Agatha's face lit up in interest when he mentioned the journals.

“Wonderful!” she said, and turned to the stairs, climbing down two at a time.

Van sighed, but ran after her. Good thing his grandfather had also suggested endurance training.

Petra and Ducky were still loitering at the base of the tower when Agatha came storming out. She passed them by without even looking their way, and continued down the street at a steady clip.

Van ran out of the tower as well, but gave up on trying to keep up with Agatha.

Instead, he turned to Petra and Ducky.

“I wish you two would remember that you're supposed to be keeping her out of trouble,” he said sternly.

“You say that like she's not the one always getting us into trouble!” Ducky said.

“I don't see what you're expecting us to accomplish,” Petra sniffed, “by just throwing us into the jaws of a Spark like that.”

“Ducky's a Spark too, and you seem to have her perfectly well in hand,” Van replied.

“Wow,” Ducky whispered after a stunned moment.

“That is not the same thing at all,” Petra snorted.

“Not even close.”

“Ducky is nowhere near to being in Agatha's league. No offense.”

“I'm more offended Van would even make the comparison,” Ducky said. “I am clearly more of a danger to myself than to others!”

Van grimaced, mostly because he didn't want to admit they were right.
“Just... She seems to be going through something,” Van said. “Please keep me posted on her whereabouts.”

“Don't we always?” Petra replied.

Van looked unamused.

“Informing me after everything's already been blown up to high heaven doesn't really help, Petra.”

After that, he harrumphed, bid them a good day and departed.

Petra and Ducky watched him leave, but it was only after he disappeared from sight that Ducky flinched in realization.

“My sunhat!” she said, patting at her own head as if to verify she was still missing it.

“Oh no, what a pity,” Petra said in an insincere deadpan. “And it was so pretty too.”

“I know,” Ducky sighed.

Agatha entered her lab by means of a cellar door in a back alley a few doors down from Mamma Gkika's. She bypassed the booby-traps reflexively, hung up the binoculars and sunhat on a hook by the door and turned on the lights.

It hadn't been very difficult for Mamma to find Agatha more space for her work, once it had started to overflow from her room and into the common living space. And it hadn't been much of a choice, as trying to get a Spark to sleep when surrounded by their equipment was usually only accomplished when the Spark fainted from exhaustion. Gkika couldn't have Agatha missing nights of sleep in a row, especially not school nights. Keeping bedroom and lab separate helped a lot with that.

The lower level of Gkika's was part of Mechanicsburg's extensive underground, and knocking down a wall was easy enough for a Spark and a motivated Jäger. Over the next few years, Agatha had not only cobbled together an impressive beginner's laboratory, but had also extended into two other chambers and stumbled upon the Red Heterodyne's misplaced lab.

Agatha had also built several other exits and a few hidden escape routes, which Gkika considered to be just good sense.

At any rate, Agatha's lab was a clutter of salvaged and refurbished equipment as well as finished and half-finished creations. The heavy equipment was lined along the walls of her main lab, with some smaller pieces relegated to the two secondary labs.

Cabinets and shelves filled every space left along the walls, and the center of the room was taken up by two tables: a sturdy wooden one and a stone slab. Agatha's workbench was tucked away in a corner, but turned at an angle so she could easily look up and sweep her gaze over the entire lab. In the early days, she found out that working with her back to the lab made it harder to notice when something, say, caught on fire.

The contents of her lab indicated that she favored mechanics. There were numerous little clanks
running around at any given moment, very helpful and quite adorable, as Ducky often remarked, but this didn't stop Agatha from cannibalizing them for parts or rebuilding them better whenever the fancy struck her. Not at first, at least. She changed tack quite a bit after the uprising.

The medical journals Van had brought her were stacked neatly on her workbench. Before she began reading, she went through her usual routine, checking up on everything.

She checked on various minor experiments first, as was her habit, and on those which did not require too much individualized attention. She adjusted dials, and checked the power readings for the lab to make sure they were constant.

Most of her equipment being second hand, fluctuations in power levels could cause them to break down. At first, Agatha had simply repaired and rebuilt everything as it broke, but Ducky, who had a brilliant mind for equipment maintenance even if she didn't have much of a Spark to speak of, pointed out that fixing the problem at the source would be more efficient. They spent an amusing two weeks rewiring the entire laboratory, and barely anything was blown up, though that last part might have been because Petra had been there to keep a close eye on them.

After finishing the routine stuff, she moved on to the important projects.

Unfortunately, her first stop on this list did not exactly start her off well.

When she opened the decanting chamber, the first thing Agatha noticed was the smell, even through her mask. She put on a thick pair of rubber gloves, and fished out the arm she'd been growing.

The tissue had become necrotic in her absence. The skin, which was supposed to be a pale pink, was gray marred by uneven patches of black.

She dropped it back in and let the lid fall closed with a resounding metal bang. In a fit of temper, she punched the evac button, and the contents of the decanting chamber were drained out and sent into Mechanicsburg's medical waste pipelines.

She regretted it immediately; she should have studied the arm closer and tried to figure out what she'd done wrong, but she'd done that before, and it hadn't helped much. There was something wrong with her process, some flaw she couldn't pin down yet, and the problem had begun to frustrate her. She didn't have the proper equipment, and the one she'd built for the job did not work in the ways she needed.

She stripped off the gloves and mask, throwing them into the nearby sink.

The medical journals might have contained the answers to some of her questions, but she didn't feel like reading them anymore. She pushed them aside.

She needed something else to work on, something that would distract her from her failure.

She took out the sheet of paper she'd been working on right before leaving to conduct another survey on Castle Heterodyne.

It was the rough draft of a letter. It started off “Esteemed Doctor Beetle,” with a scribbled note on the margin: 'check if that is correct form of address'. The rest of the letter was not much better. Half a dozen different questions she'd started phrasing and then crossed out.
She had countless questions. Long complicated questions, questions which sprang from other questions, but phrasing them in a way that didn't make her sound like some boorish amateur was difficult.

He'd been, after all, teacher to both her parents and to her Uncle Barry, even to Baron Wulfenbach. Even if he didn't know her relation to some of his most famous former students, Agatha could not stomach the idea of embarrassing herself in his eyes.

And then there was the other issue, that he might find it suspect that some girl from Mechanicsburg would write him out of nowhere, asking about his theories on self-aware automata consciousness. Depending on how much he knew about Castle Heterodyne, her questions could lead him to conclude that she was planning on doing something... ill-advised.

She couldn't think of a way to sound casual about her inquiry without being astoundingly opaque, and she couldn't think of any way of extracting practical information from Doctor Beetle without sounding incriminating.

With a heavy sigh, she rose from her workbench. It was clear she would not accomplish anything significant today.

Agatha found herself, as she often did, heading towards the infirmary. It was a short walk from the entrance connecting her lab to the living quarters she shared with Gkika. She often poked her head in just walking by, checking who was still there, asking if they needed anything. She summarily ignored their requests for beer or visits from the girls, but sometimes they managed to goad her into staying and entertaining them.

Today, the five patients were playing cards, clustered in the back, having dragged a chair between two beds. When Agatha peered in, they gave startled looks towards the door, and then relaxed when they realized she wasn't Gkika.

“What did Mamma say about bed rest?” Agatha asked sternly.

The Jägers threw each other uneasy looks.

“Ve iz on de beds!” Guvar said defensively.

“Und ve iz engaged in verra reztful activitiez,” Charb added.

“Dun tell Mamma Gkika!” Tibor begged.

The other Jägers hissed at him to be quiet. Václav, who was sitting next to Tibor, gave him a sound smack upside the head.

“Hyu iz uncriminatink hyuself!” Václav said in a much too loud whisper.

“Vot iz dot?” Tibor asked, equally loud.

“Iz vhen hyu act like veakling und de odder criminals leave hyu behind to tek de fall,” Václav informed him.
Tibor started looking worried.

“Vot iz hyu trying to say?” he asked.

Václav made a gesture—a finger across the throat—that with Jägers could mean either to cut the chatter, or imminent decapitation.

Agatha tried not to roll her eyes. She entered the infirmary proper, closing the door behind her.

“You can play a few more hands,” she said, walking up to them, “but Mamma might be dropping in early for check-ups today.”

The Jägers tipped their hats and rumbled thanks.

Agatha shook her head. She looked down at the spread of cards on the chair. By the looks of it, they’d been playing for a while.

“Just get to bed soon,” she said. “I don't even know why you all thought this was a good idea. Guvar is blind, Fyodor is rhinohiding and Charb is missing an arm.”

“Hy haff many odder clever limbs,” Charb said, grinning as he held cards in his remaining hand.

“Hy tek it hyu iz not counting hyu head,” Václav muttered.

“Iz Fyodor not vell?” Guvar asked, puzzled.

The other three Jägers, possessed of slightly more sight, turned and looked at Fyodor. He was sitting stiffly, face carefully blank.

“Hy dun know vot hyu iz tokking about,” Fyodor said, trying to appear casual and failing on account of the sweat beading on his forehead. “Hy... am feelink... great...”

Agatha frowned.

“Feelink... fine?” Fyodor corrected himself tentatively.

“You need to go lie down,” Agatha said.

“Iz not necessary.” Fyodor said. His eyes darted around the room, seeking support from the other Jägers, but they all looked rather more worried.

“Yes, it is necessary!” Agatha said, and the next words very much came out in her ranting voice. “You have just come off major surgery! If you had a lick of sense, you wouldn't even be trying to stand up right now, much less trying to keep up with the rest of these clowns!” She gestured towards the other Jägers. They had the decency to look mildly sheepish. “Look at them! Not a single one is even in pain! Guvar could dance a jig if he wanted to, because there damn well isn't anything wrong with him other than what is going to be a very much temporary case of blindness!”

Guvar brightened up at the word 'temporary'.

“The only reason we didn't strap you down,” Agatha continued, “is because your internal organs are
such a horrible mush, we were worried it would make things worse! But rest assured, if you do not get back into bed at this very moment, I will go to my lab right now and build a clank with the sole purpose of standing over your bed all day and knocking you out with a bludgeon every time you get the fool idea to move! And after that, I'm telling Mamma on you!"

“...Yez, Mistress,” Fyodor choked out.

Agatha blinked at him, her expression shifting from angry to concerned.

“Fyodor, are you about to faint right now?”

“...Mebbe.”

He started pitching forward just as he said the word, but Agatha was prepared.

“Guvar, move!” she yelled, and pushed the blind Jäger aside. She grabbed Fyodor by the shoulders and pushed him backwards on the bed. He was about as responsive as a rag doll.

“Vot iz it?” Guvar asked, sprawled on the floor and bewildered. “Vot happened?”

Václav helped turn Fyodor onto the bed, and Agatha lifted Fyodor's shirt to expose the surgery scar. It was healed in uneven patches, the accelerated healing of a Jäger too overtaxed to do much more than keep him together. But worse, Fyodor's usually silvery skin was marred by a large ugly dark bruise, extending almost across his entire torso, around the half-healed, stitched together cut from his surgery.

“Charb, get Mamma,” Agatha snapped. “Tell her Fyodor's been bleeding internally. Go!”

Charb was across the infirmary in two leaps and crashed right through the door, unhinging it. The other Jägers stepped back, knowing full well the rule about giving the doctor room to work.

Agatha tried not to think how much and how long Fyodor had to have been bleeding to cause him to faint. The troublesome thing about Jägers was that they made terrible patients; they tended to think that just because something didn't kill them instantly, they could just wait it out and the injuries would eventually heal. But there was no way Fyodor could have known he was bleeding on the inside. Even the pain—after the surgery he had—likely did not feel unusual.

She flung open drawers and the doors of cabinets, gathering the needed medical supplies and equipment as fast as she could. Fyodor would need to be cut open again, there was no way around it.

“Vaz... schtupid ov me,” Fyodor rumbled unhappily.

“It was nothing you did,” Agatha said, as she filled a syringe with a clear liquid from a bottle. It was something she did, most likely. A complication from the surgery. She missed something, or she screwed something up. Or maybe there really was nothing she could have done differently, but even so. She would have to do much better next time.

“We just need to fix this,” she said, trying to sound reassuring as she jabbed Fyodor with the syringe. Soon enough, his frail grasp on consciousness disappeared.

Agatha rolled up her sleeves, put on a pair of medical gloves, and got to work.
Hours later, after the grueling, frightening surgery was over and done with, Agatha found herself stumbling into her room and peeling off a blood-splattered shirt. Her mind still felt sharp with Spark-induced alertness, and when she looked at the clock, she was surprised by how late it was, because she didn't feel tired at all.

She went to the wash basin and scrubbed off as much of Fyodor's blood as she could. The smell of antiseptic lingered, sharp in her nostrils, and probably the scent of blood, as well, to someone with sharper senses.

Too tightly wound to go to sleep, Agatha changed and left her room again.

Agatha got as far as the hallway before she had another minor crisis. She'd intended to go into the infirmary, but Mamma had gently ejected her from there just minutes earlier, with the understanding that Agatha would go to sleep and not spend the night fretting.

Agatha could have gone to the lab, but that would have been counterproductive to sleep.

Perhaps she should have gotten a nice relaxing book and done some light reading before bed. She still had a whole stack of books that Petra and Ducky had pushed on her. She was fairly sure Petra had even snuck her the newest Heterodyne Boys novel, weaseled between a schmoopy romance about a hapless minion falling in inadvisable love with a Spark girl and a terrible pulp adventure about airship pirates battling some tentacled horror from outer space.

But instead Agatha found herself slipping into the bar and settling behind the counter. She fell smoothly into the rhythm of filling orders alongside Vera, who was tending the bar that night.

She was halfway to filling a stein when she noticed how eerily quiet it was. Not completely silent, of course. The room was full of Jägers. But it was hushed.

Agatha looked up to see a lot of expectant stares.

“What?” she asks, perhaps a bit harshly.

Charb was sitting at the bar, nearest to Agatha, and he looked back to the other Jägers. When nobody else stepped forward, he begrudgingly accepted the responsibility.

“Vell, about Fyodor...” he started.

“Oh! That's all? Fyodor's going to be fine,” Agatha said. “Eventually.”

There wasn't quite a cheer, but a happy murmur rose throughout the room.

“Dot's goot!” Charb said, grinning widely.

“I didn't realize Fyodor was so popular,” Agatha remarked.

“Hy dun tink he iz,” Charb shrugged. “He chust owez a lot ov guys money.”

Agatha gave a fondly exasperated sigh, and Charb hid a grin behind his drink.
“But if Fyodor iz fine, vhy iz hyu so miserable looking?” he asked.

Agatha stopped as she was wiping the counter top.

“I'm not miserable,” she said, and straightened her posture. “I'm just a little tired.”

“Mm-hm.”

“From surgery. I'm tired from surgery.”

“So hyu learned de lying from Fyodor den?” Charb asked glibly.

Agatha huffed, but stopped the pretense.

“I guess,” she said after a prolonged silence, “I feel like I'm stuck in a rut.”

“Iz not surprising,” Charb said.

“Ah, so everyone can tell,” Agatha muttered. “Wonderful.”

“Ho, no, iz not vot Hy meant!” Charb said. “Iz chust dot hyu iz getting about dot age.”

“What age?”

“De raiding age.”

“By raiding age you mean--”

“De age vhen mozt Heterodynes schtart raiding.”

“So you're saying I am reaching the genetically predetermined point of manifestation for a certain phenotype typical of Heterodyne consanguinity.”

“Hy... dun know enuff of dose words to know if dot iz vot Hy am saying,” Charb admitted. “All Hy know iz dot hyu iz getting about de age vhen mozt pipple in hyu family vant to go out into de vorld und leave der marks. Sumtimes literally.”

“Well, I'm hardly going to go out to raid anyone,” Agatha said.

“No, de Baron vould sqvish hyu like a leettle mouse.”

Agatha tried not to look as indignant as she felt.

“Well, I like to believe I would be that easy to--”

“But hyu poppa und oncle also began vit de heroing at dis age.”

“...Oh.”

They had, hadn't they? Her father had been a year older than she was at the moment, her uncle a year younger... They'd gone out and started redeeming the family name.
“I'm hardly going to go heroing, either,” Agatha said, considering the question. “But...”

Her mind started whirring with possibilities.

Petra was woken by a persistent tapping on her window. Tap tap tap tap.

Since her bedroom was on the second level of the house, she reflexively grabbed the gun from underneath her pillow and jumped out of bed.

Rather strangely, there didn't seem to be anyone at her window. At least not until she looked closer and realized that one of Agatha's little clanks was there, doing all the tapping.

She opened the window, and the little clank made its strange noises at her. Petra got the distinct feeling she was being scolded because she hadn't moved quickly enough. Petra huffed and shoved the clank off the windowsill. A little propeller sprang out of its top, and it flew towards the ground, making angry little tinny sounds all the way down.

Agatha was in the streets, making beckoning gestures to Petra.

Petra sighed deeply, but she pulled on a pair of trousers into which she stuffed her nightgown, and then she grabbed a length of rope from under her bed.

This was hardly the first time Agatha whisked her away in the middle of the night to work on some incredibly urgent project. Petra briefly considered going back to sleep, but dismissed the notion immediately because, well, now she was curious. Agatha's projects were never boring.

She climbed down with practiced ease. The moment she touched the ground, Agatha gave her one of those wide grins that made her look rather too much like a Jäger for most people's comfort.

“How would you like to go to Beetleburg?” Agatha asked with no preamble.

Petra blinked.

“I think I'd rather be back home before dawn,” she replied.

“No, no, not right now,” Agatha said, “I mean in the fall. Transylvania Polygnostic University! It's too late to register for the entrance exams, of course, but we could audit some classes! See what's what! We'll take Ducky, of course. Van might want to tag along too, but I suppose we'll live. What do you say?”

Petra stared for a moment, then licked her lips nervously and looked to the side. Seeing that Petra was not immediately taken with the idea took some of the wind out of Agatha's sails.

“Agatha, um. I was going to mention this later,” Petra said, “but I'm going to be a bit busy come fall.”

“With school, yes, but we wouldn't be gone long, a few weeks at most, we wouldn't miss much--”
“No, not school,” Petra sighed. “It's. My father. We've been talking. He thinks I'd cut it pretty well as a merchant, or at least better than any of my brothers. He wants me to take over for him once his Wandering Liver Syndrome starts getting worse.”

Agatha's expression turned blank with surprise.

“Oh,” she said faintly. “He wants you to take over so soon?”

“Not immediately, but he means to take me with him on his trip to Galați this fall,” Petra shrugged. “We're leaving in a few weeks, once he gets his caravan together.”

“A bit late in the year for a trip,” Agatha remarked, crossing her arms casually and trying to appear unaffected.

“Well, he says that with his luck, if he doesn't make the trip this year, the city might get sacked by cossacks or eaten by land clams over the winter. Anyway, I'd... only be gone a few months.”

“I see,” Agatha said, then shrugged. “Well, that's fine. I suppose we could audit during the spring semester, that's when the more interesting medical lectures are going to be, anyway.”

“I don't think you're thinking this through completely,” Petra said.

“What am I not thinking through?”

“Begin with, is Mamma Gkika even going to allow you to leave?”

“I don't need her permission!” Agatha huffed, completely unconvincing to both Petra and herself.

She'd played the 'I am the Heterodyne, obey me' card once, when she was younger and going through one of her more intense Spark-induced episodes, and Gkika had responded by picking her up and dunking her into a barrel of cold water. That had snapped Agatha out of her fugue in a hurry, and had also taught her to not try that kind of thing ever again.

“Right,” Petra said, “sure. But even so—Agatha, you've never left Mechanicsburg before. You have no idea what's out there.”

“I can defend myself,” Agatha replied.

“No, I know that. My real worry is if the rest of the world can defend themselves from you.”

“I'm sure I don't know what you mean,” Agatha said.

“Agatha, you can't stand tourists. Last time you were minding the upstairs at Mamma Gkika's, you punched out a man, then threatened to have him and his friends stuffed, mounted, and donated to a museum as unique specimens of stupidity.”

“I wouldn't have gone through with it!”

“No, of course not! You always do say that taxidermy is a terrible waste of good parts. But you don't know how to handle people who aren't from Mechanicsburg. How long before you do something that... well. Something a bit too Sparky for your own good? And with nobody else around who will cover for you.”
Whether Petra was talking about angry mods or the Baron, it didn't much matter. Neither was a welcome prospect.

Agatha growled in frustration and slumped against a nearby wall.

"It's not fair!" she hissed. "I'm not allowed to do anything for the town, and I'm not allowed to leave either! What am I supposed to do with myself?"

"It's not that you aren't allowed to leave, you just--" A thought occurred to Petra. "You just need to ease your way to Beetleburg."

Agatha looked up, raptly paying attention to Petra.

"Yeah, you know. Start small. A day trip outside the walls."

"There's hardly anything interesting a day's trip around Mechanicsburg."

"...There might be," Petra said. "I hear they're rebuilding Zdranga."

"Are they?" Agatha remembered Zdranga vaguely, or at least the sad remnants of it. Over the years, she'd occasionally heard about plans to have it rebuilt—it was near some of the best grazing grounds this far up the mountains—but she didn't think anyone would actually get around to it.

"Sure, my father saw them working as he was returning from Lviv last week. I understand they've been having some trouble setting up the defenses."

This caught Agatha's attention.

"I could help with that," she said, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. "It would be fairly easy, I think. More than a day's work, though, if they want the job done properly."

"There you go!" Petra grinned.

"Depending on how much work they've done already," Agatha said, mostly to herself, "I could do a basic defensive perimeter or modify the existing one—" She got a faraway look on her face, and Petra could almost hear the ideas buzzing in Agatha's head.

She then jumped to her feet and, with nary a word of goodbye, sprinted away down the street.

Petra sighed and eyed the rope leading up to her window. She'd made her bed, now she had to lie in it. After she climbed the rope back into her bedroom, of course.

Agatha's entire walk back home was a bit of a blur, and she was almost surprised when she found herself climbing down through one of her lab's secret entrances.

She stalled in the lab, trying to prepare herself for the inevitable confrontation with Mamma, but then decided that if she didn't do it now, she would lose momentum, so she headed towards the infirmary.
Gkika was in the same spot as before, by Fyodor's bed in the far back. The other Jägers were gone. They'd been gathered up around Fyodor after his surgery, so Agatha could only guess what they'd done to be ejected from the infirmary, but none of them were in terrible condition. What Gkika usually expected from Jägers on bed rest was for them to get into slightly less trouble than they usually would. Anything more would have been too time consuming to enforce.

Agatha walked as quietly as she could. Strangely, it wasn't the sight of Gkika that made her rethink everything, but of Fyodor, still on the bed and connected to various healing apparatuses, strung together in improvised configurations that Agatha had half-guessed at and half revolutionized.

Some of the devices were keeping Fyodor's organs working, others were pumping him with drugs. Either way, they were buying Fyodor the time he needed to heal, and that was as much as Agatha could do within the limitations of her medical knowledge and available resources. If Fyodor weren't more durable than a baseline human, he would be long since dead.

Gkika didn't look up from the gauge she was watching. She tapped it twice.

"The needle on that model doesn't stick," Agatha said softly.

"Hyu'd know," Gkika said, smiling very slightly.

"When you sent me to bed, I didn't think you'd be spending all night here instead," Agatha said.

"Ov cauwze Hy vill. But vhen Hy sent hyu to bed, Hy ecktually thot hyu'd sleep." Gkika sniffed at Agatha. "Hyu vent outside."

"I..." Agatha swallowed dryly. "I needed a walk," she said, and turned to the medical equipment. She tightened a tube and adjusted a valve without even really thinking about it.

Gkika made a pleased sound as the gauge's readings changed.

Fyodor still looked like death only very slightly warmed over. There were deep black circles around his eyes, and though Agatha knew his gray complexion was perfectly normal for him, it didn't help her impression that he looked worse than he should.

Agatha wasn't sure how long she spent staring at Fyodor before she felt Gkika's warm hand envelop hers.

"Hyu know, he'd be dead if hyu vasn't here," Gkika said.

"Oh—no, I'm sure they would have gotten you the moment Fyodor fainted," Agatha shook her head.

"Dot iz not vhat Hy meant." Gkika gestured around Fyodor's bed, to the gently humming machinery. "Hy could not haff done vhat hyu haff done here. Vitout hyu, he vould haff died."

"Oh... I..." Agatha's mouth went dry. She rather irrationally felt like she was about to cry, though she wasn't sure why. She hadn't done that much. It certainly didn't feel like she'd done enough.

"Now," Gkika said, grinning at Agatha and putting her arm around the girl's shoulders, "vhy don't hyu tell Mamma vot hyu vant to do?"

"What I want to...? I don't understand..."
“Charb vas here earlier,” Gkika said. “Ve had a verra nize conversation. He seemed to tink hyu had sumting on hyu mind.”

“I don’t,” Agatha shook her head.

Gkika sighed. When she spoke, her tone wasn't harsh, but it was still deadly serious.

“Keedoh, der Jäger iz supposed to be keepink op vit hyu, not holding hyu beck. Hyu vant to be Lady Heterodyne vun day, hyu need to schtart acting like it now.”

Countless conversations with the Jägers over the years had left Agatha with a vivid understanding of the rather idiosyncratic Heterodyne version of noblesse oblige. And Agatha wasn't sure the callousness of some of the previous Heterodynes was something she was able, much less willing, to emulate. But absolutely none of them had ever coddled the Jägers, not even Bill and Barry, and that was the way the Jägers liked it.

Agatha suspected that, if she were at that moment to tell Gkika that she wanted to go to Beetleburg and visit the university, the Jäger would let her go without a word.

“I hear they're rebuilding Zdranga,” Agatha said instead. “They're having trouble with the defenses.”

Gkika nodded.

“Yah, dose bee cannons keep goink off at de vorst times. Iz verra fonny, but sumvon should go und fix op sumting better for dem.”

Agatha turned and hugged Gkika.

“Thank you, Mamma.”

“Dun tank me,” Gkika said, squeezing Agatha to her chest. “Chust tink ov dis az stayink out ov trouble practice. Hokay?”

“Okay,” came Agatha's muffled reply.

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¹ Sparks rarely sold their best stuff on the open market. Whether this was because they jealously guarded their designs, because they worked for the Baron, or because they managed to blow themselves up before getting around to it varied from Spark to Spark.

² After taking a look inside she'd then immediately locked its doors again and tried to forget it
existed, but still.

Chapter End Notes

For those unaware, this fic also updates on the Girl Genius kink meme. It can be found here. Updates on the meme are usually shorter, less carefully edited, without footnotes, but more frequent. So whatever floats your boat.
The summer before she left for university felt like the busiest Agatha could ever remember having.

The first notable event of the summer were her entrance exams at Transylvania Polygnostic University. These went off without a hitch, and she stayed in Beetleburg long enough to arrange for lodgings. On the whole, the trip proved far less eventful than everyone feared, and Agatha tried not to feel disappointed about not getting the opportunity to use the death ray she'd built especially for this occasion.

Secondly there was her seventeenth birthday party. Her actual date of birth being a mystery, the Jägers had taken to celebrating it on the anniversary of the day she was first brought to Mamma Gkika's.

Agatha worried, since the Jägers knew she'd be leaving Mechanicsburg soon, that they would make too much of a spectacle out of the entire thing. Luckily—or perhaps luck had less to do with it than the fact that she was hardly the first Heterodyne to leave Mechanicsburg—they had limited themselves to putting on a slightly bigger party than in previous years.

The only unexpected surprise in the entire thing turned out to be the ridiculous size of the cake, as large as a table.

“Ve commissioned de Bakers' Guild,” Dimo explained, grinning widely.

“Yes,” Van said with a tired sigh, “Jägers ordering a giant cake. I'm sure that was in no way suspicious.”

“Ve vaz verra sneaky,” Dimo added. “Ve had de dizguizes und effryting.”

“Jägers in disguises ordering a giant cake,” Van shook his head, then looked at the heavens beseechingly, “Now I know nobody noticed anything strange.”

“Ov courze not,” Dimo said. “Ve could teach hyu a ting or two about beink sottle, Meester Bossy-Pents. Effryvun in town knows hyu iz gon be de seneschal.”

“Of course they do! That's the point!” Van said.

“Ho! See?” Dimo turned to Agatha. “Und he criticize uz!”

Agatha's shoulders were shaking with laughter. She wasn't sure at what point Van had refined his 'long-suffering seneschal putting up with Jäger antics' routine, but given the amiable pats on the back he was receiving at the moment, the Jägers appreciated his efforts.

Dimo went off to get a refill on his drink, and several other Jägers followed, giving Van and Agatha some relative privacy in the chaos of the room.

“Happy birthday, Agatha,” Van said more soberly, and produced out of his coat pocket a small box covered in mauve wrapping paper. “And good luck at university.”
“Thanks, Van,” she said, and accepted the gift. “Hold down the fort for me, yeah?”

“Of course,” he replied, insulted she'd think otherwise.

After a moment considering the gift, and with images of Jägers wearing funny fake mustaches in her mind, Agatha threw Van a slightly worried look.

“They didn't actually—”

“Red fire, Agatha, no,” Van replied, suppressing a laugh. “I placed the order for them. Though the specifics were all their idea, and I emphatically take no credit for that part.”

Agatha gave a slightly daunted look to the cake.

“And yet, I don't think we'll have leftovers,” she said.

Spurred by curiosity, Agatha unwrapped Van's gift. Inside the box was a shiny golden pocket watch, beautifully made and engraved with the trilobite on the cap. Van took the box so Agatha could handle the watch properly.

“A little something to help you get to class on time,” Van said.

“It's gorgeous,” Agatha said, turning it over. The back declared it as made in Mechanicsburg, but this wasn't a cheap trinket sold to tourists. This was expert craftsmanship, meant to last long enough to become heirloom.

“Also, if you pop open the back,” Van said, “the parts can be used to make one of those miniature multi-tools. You know, just in case you're stuck in a tight spot without your tool belt.”

Agatha gave a startled blink, and then opened the back of the watch to check. It was a wonderful bit of Spark work—little parts were stowed unobtrusively between gears. To Agatha's trained eye, it was clear how they could be taken out and put together, though perhaps to anyone without the Spark the entire design would have seemed impenetrable. She could even name the precise craftsman who'd made it—Agatha was familiar with the work of all the minor Sparks in Mechanicsburg.

“Van, you're wonderful!” Agatha declared. She hugged Van with one arm and kissed his cheek noisily.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Van said, rolling his eyes with a good-natured smile. He patted Agatha on the back lightly, but he also looked quietly smug, like the proverbial cat who framed the dog for eating the canary.

She closed the watch and slipped it into her vest pocket.

“Guess now I'll really have to miss you while I'm gone,” she said, smiling widely.

Van put a hand to his chest as if wounded.

“My lady! Do you treat all your fake cousins with such cruelty?”

“I wouldn't know, my sample size is too small,” Agatha said. “And anyway, there's winter break, so
“It's not like I'll be gone for too long.”

“Maybe you should be,” Van said, lowering his voice.

Agatha’s smile vanished.

“What? Why?”

“Mechanicsburg has been crawling with strangers lately,” Van said.

“Well, yes, don’t we encourage that?”


“Aren’t people like that always poking around Mechanicsburg? Maybe some new fake Heterodyne is making a play. It's been a few years, we're about due.”

“No, they're not here about a fake Heterodyne, Agatha. The rumors have gotten worse, and a lot closer to the truth, no matter how much misinformation we sow. I have it on good authority that the Baron sent people to make schematics of Zdranga’s defenses. And for every Smoke Knight we identify, there are probably ten traipsing around right under our noses undetected.”

“Van, you hang out all day in a coffee shop. How do you even know this?” Agatha frowned.

“Because I hang out all day in a coffee shop,” Van said. “What do you think it is I do there?”

Agatha had to admit to herself that she hadn't considered the question seriously until just then. She knew that Van did a lot of things. She'd somehow missed the fact that, sometime in the past few years, he'd become quite capable at a lot of those things. She guessed that might be the drawback to knowing him since he was a slightly ridiculous young boy.

“Allright,” she said, even as she adjusted her assessment of Van. “So I'll be extra careful about keeping a low profile in Beetleburg.”

“I appreciate it,” Van nodded.

“But once I graduate,” Agatha said grimly, and she didn’t have to continue, because Van understood.

“We'll be ready for you,” Van said.

Agatha and Van were soon drawn back into the festivities, and managed to put the grave conversation out of mind for the night.

The Jägers gave Agatha their own gifts, usually either small weaponry or clothes. They tended to do this every year, giving her entire stacks of clothing they’d knitted themselves to keep her warm over the winter, and though the sheer volume was overwhelming (even if every Jäger limited himself to one article of clothing, there was still an improbably large number of Jägers who knew how to knit), Agatha did regret having to inform them that she’d actually stopped outgrowing clothes.

She had, at this point, an endless supply of mittens, socks, stockings, scarves, sweaters, shawls and other assorted woolly paraphernalia. She strongly suspected her feet may never suffer from a lack of coziness for as long as she lived.
Other gift-givers presented themselves to Agatha throughout the evening, usually having to squeeze through the wall of jovial Jägers that seemed to surround her at any given point.

Petra presented Agatha with a lovely bag, made of soft iridescent black leather that had to be Spark-produced.

“It’s very durable,” Petra said.

“We know because we tested it!” Ducky added, and then produced a small blowtorch to prove just how inflammable it was.

After a small fire was put out (and Agatha inspected the bag to notice that, indeed, it had remained completely undamaged), a slightly embarrassed Ducky gave Agatha her own gift, which happened to be a leather roll full of custom tools.

Ducky had been increasingly scarce since she'd started apprenticing in her cousin's machine shop, but now at least Agatha knew what Ducky was up to in her free time. It was clear Ducky had made all of the pieces herself; a lot of them were refined versions of tools Ducky and Agatha improvised throughout their childhoods and respective breakthroughs.

It made Agatha feel melancholic. She might therefore have hugged Ducky a bit too tightly, judging by her breathless gasps.

The party continued throughout the night, though it finished in Gkika's living room in the early hours of the morning, with Agatha surrounded by, as far as she could tell, all the women of her immediate acquaintance.

At first Agatha put it down to coincidence, until one of the newer serving girls, Pavela, handed Agatha a bag of Trusty Maiden's Weed.

“Don't give me that look,” Pavela said, “you're old enough that you should be drinking it already.”

“Thank you,” Agatha replied, if a bit strained. But rather than that being the end of that particular interlude, it turned out to be just the beginning.

It wasn't as if Agatha was ignorant of sex. That was rather hard to accomplish when you grew up living at Mamma Gkika's. And even if she hadn't had the... basic mechanics... figured out by now, then some of the filthier novels Ducky and Petra had lent her over the past few years cleared up a lot of the finer points.

No, what Agatha was ignorant of, apparently, was men. The advice she was being given presented her with an image of the relationship between the genders that made her feel vaguely indignant on behalf of women everywhere.

And also slightly befuddled. The boys in Mechanicsburg had certainly always kept a respectful, if not outright fearful, distance.

“Dey better haff,” Gkika muttered.

The occasional harassment by tourists was easily warded off with a swift kick or a brandished weapon, and any tourist fool enough to press on even after that point was taking his life into his own
But Agatha was informed, at great length and in almost uncomfortable detail, about all the ways she could be manipulated, pried or coerced into doing things she might not wish, and she was given a plethora of advice about how to establish her boundaries in situations in which inflicting outright bodily harm was unfeasible.

Agatha came away from this discussion with the decision that if she ever decided she required a man for anything, she was going to assemble one in a lab.

At any rate, even this gathering dispersed, and Agatha found herself on a mid-morning walk through Mechanicsburg, accompanied by Petra and Ducky. The air was crisp and still cool, even though the sun was shining, and at this hour, the streets were busy with townsfolk more than tourists. In the distance, between buildings, she could glimpse Castle Heterodyne, managing to loom menacingly even while half-collapsed into itself.

Agatha felt a pang of loss, even though she knew she would inevitably return. She tried to memorize the look of the streets, the smells, the feel of a busy summer morning. She set that image in her mind, a portrait of Mechanicsburg, gilded by sunlight.

Agatha almost didn't notice Petra hooking her arm around Agatha's.

“You know, you used to heterodyne during tests,” Petra said, apropos of nothing.

“...Did I?” Agatha asked, blinking.

“Oh, yes. All the time,” Ducky said, chuckling. “Mister Taramtut used to get that look on his face.”

“What look?” Agatha asked, as Ducky latched onto Agatha's other arm.

“You know the look,” Ducky replied. “Like that face he made when Vasile melted the bars on the classroom window with acid and then just as he was almost free he tripped on the windowsill and scratched his face up?”

Agatha laughed, reminded of her old deskmate and amateur escape artist Vasile Vasilovici.

“I think,” Petra said, “that the only reason you stopped heterodyning during tests was because they got easier for you.”

“I think maybe so,” Agatha conceded, and then seriously wondered just how early everyone in Mechanicsburg had really known who she was. A few puzzling early memories suddenly made a lot more sense.

“You still do it all the time, though,” Ducky added. “Especially when you're thinking hard about something. And you tend to think about stuff all the time.”

“Yes, alright, I get the hint,” Agatha said.

“We think you shouldn't do that in Beetleburg,” Ducky continued.

“Yes, Ducky, thank you,” Agatha said.
She didn't say that if they were so worried about her, they could come along. Agatha didn't think she was capable of being quite that selfish. Not out loud, at least, but she could easily bury any twinge of resentment she felt.

Ripping Petra and Ducky away from their lives just as they were beginning to make something of themselves would not be a kind thing to do, all the more for the fact that Agatha was sure she could.

The right inflection, an intriguing project, the correct invocation of her Heterodyne birthright, and they would go along with almost anything, often against their better judgment. Agatha had observed this effect carefully over the years, and had sometimes tested its limits, but it was not something she ever consciously used, except when she was in the deepest reaches of the madness. Trying to exert that kind of control over people felt like it came at the expense of loyalty, and on the whole, Agatha found herself preferring loyalty, even if it meant she had to live up to her end as well.

And right at that very moment, it meant Agatha had to swallow her irrational feelings of abandonment, grip her friends' arms tightly, and ask them about their plans for the next year.

"Since father is indisposed these days," Petra replied, "I'm going on the next trip alone."

She looked so smug about this, that Agatha had to ask for details.

"I'm making it an overwinter trip," Petra said, and after a suitably dramatic pause added, "to Paris."

Ducky guffawed.

"Well sure," Ducky said, "why not go all the way to the Lost City of Ioph while you're at it?"

"Mm, no," Petra waved a hand lazily, "I'd need airships for that. I shouldn't get too ambitious on my first solo trip."

Agatha then shared a look with Ducky. It was their 'and they call us madgirls' look.

"So I guess Ducky's the only one who will be staying in Mechanicsburg," Agatha surmised.

"Oh, no!" Ducky shook her head. "I actually got a job out of town."

"What? But your apprenticeship--" Agatha said.

"Yeaaah, my cousin locked me out of the machine shop," Ducky confessed. "Until I reimburse him for all the, uh, explosion damage, he says my apprenticeship is suspended. But that's okay! This job in Balan's Gap is pretty sweet! They're replacing all the old street lights with the new English kind."

"Ducky, if your cousin locked you out, how did you make the tools for Agatha?" Petra asked.

"Oh, I made a copy of the key," Ducky said, and reached into a pocket to pull out a complicated brass key.

"Where did you make a--"

"In the shop! Okay? I squeezed in through the back window!" Ducky dropped the key back into her pocket and huffed indignantly. "Geez, like I was going to let a locked door, some booby traps and a few guard clanks keep me from finishing Agatha's gift."
“So that time you asked to borrow our ladder,” Petra started saying.

“No, that was for a completely different thing,” Ducky interrupted. “Don’t worry about that.”

By the look on Petra's face, she was definitely worrying about it.

“I'm going to miss the two of you so much,” Agatha sighed.

What kept Agatha busiest that summer, however, was the fact that she'd accelerated the health plans of a lot of her patients. She was not going to be able to treat any of the Jägers until the next summer, a fact that the Jägers took in stride, even if she did not.

At any rate, the patients she still had were not numerous, so much as a bit tricky.

“Alright now,” Agatha said, as she hefted a device which looked like the unholy offspring of a pair of opera glasses and an elephant gun. “For the next part, you need to stay perfectly still.”

Guvar couldn't see what was going on, but judging by Agatha's voice, he could tell that if he weren't blind, he would very much be worrying about something. His nostrils flared nervously, but the smell of brass and oil wasn't telling him much.

“Don't move,” Agatha said.

She aligned the device so it was aimed at his eyes and pressed a button, making the device whirr to life. There was a crackling, and an ominous chugging, but although Guvar tensed up, there didn't seem to be anything happening.

“It's better if you relax,” Agatha advised.

“Vell, dis izn't so bad,” Guvar allowed. “Vot vould happen eef Hy vos moviieeeEEAARGH--”

Agatha pulled back the device as Guvar clutched at his face.

“Hokay, dot answerz dot,” Guvar wheezed out.

“No, don't rub at your eyes!” Agatha said. She grabbed his hands and pulled them away from his face. “Er...”

“Vot iz it?”

“Nothing to worry about. Some bleeding was to be expected.”

“What?”

“I said don’t rub your eyes!” Agatha said firmly. She picked up a strip of cloth, poured something decidedly medicinal smelling, and wiped around Guvar's eyes. “There we go, no need to touch.
Now, do I need to bandage your eyes, or can you control yourself?”

Guvar huffed.

“Vot do hyu tink?”

“Alright, then. Bandages, and maybe some kind of cone around your neck.”

“Hey!”

Agatha had only just been joking about the cone—she was fairly sure he could have chewed his way through it anyway—but she did bandage his eyes.

“I'll come check your progress tomorrow,” Agatha said, “but you should be regaining your vision already, considering how fast Jägers heal.”

Guvar hummed.

“Hy tink Hy vos. Thot mebbe Hy vos imaginink it, though.”

“Really?” Agatha asked, scientific fascination overcoming her concern.

“Tink Hy saw... Vhen hyu vas gettink de bandages.” He reached out a hand and found Agatha's shoulder, and from there he caught a lock of her hair between his fingers, experimentally rubbing at it. “...Hyu haff yellow hair.”

He sounded uncertain, distantly hopeful.

“Oh, you’ve never seen me before,” Agatha realized.

While a lot of Jägers made Agatha's acquaintance over the years, that was still a small number compared to the entire army. And Guvar had come to Gkika's already blind.

“But yes, you're right. That's splendid,” Agatha said, grabbing his hand excitedly. “I didn't expect color vision to return so soon!”

Guvar gave his widest Jäger grin. Agatha spent the next few minutes babbling happily about the science involved.

She wasn't sure why, but after leaving the infirmary that day, she felt much better about leaving.

For the following year, Agatha would be renting a room from one Hortensia Protopopescu, an elderly widow whose late husband had been a patent lawyer—a most perilous career choice, and one that lead to his demise when a dissatisfied client turned an army of genetically engineered carnivorous field mice on him. That same client deeply regretted the action when he was subsequently sued for violation of intellectual property and found himself without a lawyer, but then, Sparks could rarely be accused of putting too much forethought into their decisions. Or at least not about things that mattered.
His widow inherited the house, of course, but she lived with her daughter and son-in-law, and thus rented the two story building out to students.

Agatha knew this because Madame Protopopescu insisted on telling her about it at great length.

“It's why I only rent to young women, you see,” Madame Protopopescu explained with sniff. “You don't really see many of them get up to this silly Spark business.”

Agatha refrained from saying anything on the subject.

She took a closer look around the sitting room. It was a small, but well-kept, with tasteful furnishings. There was a wide double-window, giving the room an airy feel. There were two doors, on opposite sides of the room, and an additional one which Agatha knew led to a washroom, cramped but in good repair.

Things didn't look to be much different from her visit in the summer, except there were small items—a newspaper, a samovar, a stray hairbrush—lying around. It seemed to Agatha that someone else was also living here, which her landlady rather suspiciously failed to mention back in the summer, when Agatha could have still looked around for alternate housing.

“Your room is the same I showed you, but I am afraid you will be sharing this space with another girl,” the widow Protopopescu continued, pointing her walking stick to the door opposite Agatha’s, “and I am told by the neighbors she can get quite loud.”

Well, that explained it.

“Loud?”

“She's a musician,” Madame Protopopescu said, in the same tone of voice one might say 'highway bandit'.

The indicated door opened and a girl around Agatha's age walked out. She was a bit shorter than average, with dark hair and an otherwise plain face saved by a cute nose.

“I'm a music student,” the girl said peevishly. “And if I want to keep it that way, I need to practice.”

Madame Protopopescu gave the girl a cool look, very poorly hiding her disdain.

“You shall have to work it out amongst yourselves,” Madame Protopopescu told Agatha, before handing her the key and departing.

The girl watched her go, then extended a hand and a smile to Agatha.

“Mara Nastur,” she introduced herself.

Agatha accepted the hand and introduced herself as well.

“That can't be all your luggage,” Mara remarked, pointing to the bag hanging from Agatha's shoulder.

“Oh! No, the rest is coming,” Agatha said.
“Someone bringing it up?” Mara asked, picking up the hairbrush from where she'd left it on a nearby table.

“Sort of.”

Just then, the windows burst open, and a large lobster-like clank carrying a large traveling chest on its back crawled inside.

Mara shrieked and jumped behind an armchair. She swung the hairbrush wildly for a few seconds, before realizing she wasn't being attacked and freezing in place.

She cleared her throat in embarrassment.

“That's your luggage, isn't it,” she said, face rapidly turning red.

“I'm sorry, the clank still has some trouble with stairs,” Agatha said, flipping a switch to put the clank in stand-by.

“But scaling a wall, entering through the second floor window and scaring the living crickets out of innocent bystanders is no problem?” Mara asked, glancing out the window. Nobody on the street seemed to have been as ruffled as her. This did very little to help with her embarrassment. “Most people would call that a bit of a design flaw. I'd talk to your mechanic about it.”

“Oh, of course,” Agatha laughed nervously. “My mechanic.”

Mara shook her head, recovering quickly. Agatha made the clank walk as carefully as possible towards her room.

“So you're from Mechanicsburg,” Mara said idly.

“You can tell?” Agatha asked.

True, there was a trilobite ostentatiously marking her clank, and trilobites studding her traveling chest, and all the buttons on her coat, as well as a locket at her neck, but that didn't necessarily mean anything these days. At a glance, someone might just assume she was a very dedicated Heterodyne Boys fan.

“Your accent,” Mara replied. “It's... noticeable.”

“Really?” Agatha frowned.

This came as a bit of a surprise to her. She supposed that maybe the Jägers had given her a bit of a flawed understanding of what qualified as a noticeable accent. Sometimes she could hear herself truly lapsing into the accent if she spoke with them for an extended period, but she didn't think it was that bad the rest of the time.

And anyway, Mara didn't make it sound like a criticism. She spoke with a slow Slavic drawl herself, something Moldavian if Agatha had to guess.

This suspicion was confirmed when Mara explained she was from Fălticeni, the name of which Agatha recognized not so much from geography lessons as from stories Jägers used to wistfully tell
about raiding and pillaging it repeatedly over the centuries. Apparently they had good fishing there.

If Mara noticed Agatha's sudden awkwardness, she made no remark about it.

“I'll let you get settled in,” Mara said. “But if you have time before classes start, I'll show you around Beetleburg. How's that?”

“Sounds great,” Agatha said.

As it turned out, she had more than enough time before classes started. Unpacking took very little time, and there were still two days until the school year officially began.

Though Agatha had wandered about Beetleburg for a bit, learning the major landmarks, Mara had had an extra year to learn all the ins and outs. The first day alone, Mara spent just pointing out places with decent, affordable food for students.

“Trust me, you'll be thankful for this knowledge a few weeks from now,” Mara said. “I have this theory that Doctor Beetle is secretly turning all the students at TPU into swarms of locusts, because there's no other explanation for how hungry we are all the time.”

Agatha could have explained at that point that sustained mental effort for extended periods of time often necessitated an increase in caloric intake, but she was pretty sure Mara was joking. Hopefully. Agatha continued to pay half-attention to Mara's continued monologue, dispensing information like 'this place serves the best borscht this side of the Dniester' or 'if you want to catch a table here, be prepared to fight dirty', but mostly Agatha observed her surroundings.

Beetleburg had been a great deal quieter in the summer, though still fairly busy. Now with all the students returned, Agatha found the entire mood of the town different. Charged, somehow. Eager. Stimulating.

Agatha found herself musing that it felt a lot like Mechanicsburg during lightning storms: full of potential. Agatha had been told that very few of the Heterodynes could let a lightning storm pass without putting it to some use, twisted and diabolical though that use might be. Agatha could believe that. She could often feel herself get excited at the first sound of thunder, and, used to the creative verve of their Masters, Mechanicsburg was also more animated than usual during these times. Even Castle Heterodyne, apparently, would get peppier than usual during lightning storms—although, Agatha had seen the lightning collectors on the roof, so she thought the Castle's good cheer might have had other root causes.

The exact nature of the excitement in Beetleburg was different, of course. Mostly it was less visceral, and probably with a much lower chance of someone getting electrocuted or turned into a shambling abomination.

Agatha noticed Mara had stopped talking.

“I'm sorry,” Agatha said, “I wasn't paying attention, was I?”

“It's understandable,” Mara said, “I was pretty overwhelmed when I first got here, too. But I think I
can find something for you to focus on.”

Mara tugged Agatha along as she took a sharp turn onto a new street.

Agatha inhaled sharply.

Both sides of this street had nothing but storefronts. All the storefronts were of bookshops.

“Yes, I thought you might like that,” Mara said smugly. “Now, don’t buy everything at once.”

But Agatha was now paying even less attention to Mara than before.

They stumbled back to their shared lodgings late after dark, arms laden with stacks of books. Even Mara had given into the temptation, though she said she’d squandered most of her food money for the week.

“I'll build you a kitchen and stock it myself,” Agatha told her, still flush with bookbuyer's excitement.

“Great flaming wheel, please don't,” Mara said, pulling a scared face, “I might have to cook!”

They piled books onto the sitting room table, nosing around in each other's purchases.

“We're making a lot of noise for such a late hour,” Agatha said at one point. “Won't the downstairs lodgers complain?”

“No, no,” Mara replied, “the Sienkiewicz sisters are both quite conveniently deaf.”

“Mara!”

“What? They don't mind it, I don't see why I should!”

They turned in late that night, woke up just as late, and the next day they went back out into Beetleburg, and Mara got to finish her tour.

Classes started, and Agatha, as much as she had been looking forward to it, found herself feeling the first prickle of nervousness.

But the first week went without a hitch. Most of the professors laid out their curriculum and expectations of the students clearly. The hints Agatha got of their upcoming lessons were tantalizing, to say the least, and though the other students often looked daunted by the volume of classwork, Agatha found herself confident that she could handle it.

Agatha also started seeing Mara far less often. They woke at different hours, and Mara spent every moment she could in the University's various music rooms, practicing playing a truly impressive
number of instruments. Whenever Mara was home, either early in the morning, or late at night, she practiced even more. Agatha could see why Mara had difficulty keeping roommates, but having lived her entire life at Mamma Gkika's, Agatha was capable of sleeping through almost anything.

Perhaps the only eventful part of that first week happened during the tour of one of the student labs.

Professor Wodeboggle, head of the Department of Inapplicable Theory, had drawn the short straw that year, and had thus been put in charge of introducing the new students to the labs where they would be working. He was a lanky, pale man with a tendency to wear an excessive number of scarves even in the summer heat, and he managed to put his distaste for students aside long enough to present the labs with some enthusiasm.

The labs at TPU were far beyond what Agatha had ever seen first hand, and it put even her own to shame. More used to workshops than laboratories, it was quite a revelation to see the rows of shiny specialized equipment and neatly cleaned glass cabinets of lab utensils.

The other students were somewhat less reverent of the working space, because just as Professor Wodeboggle was telling them for the fifth time not to touch anything, one of them reached out and pressed an admittedly tempting-looking red button.

There was an ominous hum, rising to a pitch. Agatha turned around to see a clank with an “Out Of Order” sign whirr to life, rise up and produce long pincer arms which clacked threateningly.

Professor Wodeboggle swore colorfully, and most of the students took this as their cue to duck for cover.

The student who'd activated the clank was the only one who didn't follow, remaining frozen in the headlights of the clank as it stepped out of its corner on piston legs.

More exasperated than concerned, Agatha kicked a chair, sending it sliding across the floor and crashing into the student's legs. It knocked him over just in time to avoid getting decapitated by a pincer.

There were a few tense moment as the clank processed this change in circumstances. The student, having regained his wits, scurried away, but the clank had already lost interest in him. A single orb-like eye looked to the ground, tracing the path of the chair straight back to Agatha.

*Of course it did,* thought Agatha with a heavy sigh.

Agatha looked around for something, anything, but no immediate weapon presented itself. The clank advanced on her, one grinding, deliberate step at a time, and yet fast enough to close the distance in seconds.

There was a wooden cabinet to Agatha's left, unlocked, and she opened the door just in time to block a pincer. The cabinet shook, the wood groaned, and Agatha's arm felt the shock of the impact all the way up to her shoulder, but the clank hadn't been prepared for the obstacle.

“A-ha!” Agatha said, and took a non-euclidean electromagnetic tuning fork from inside the cabinet.

She didn't even turn it on, because the moment she shut the cabinet door, the clank took precious seconds to process things, and Agatha jabbed the handle end of the fork at its chest—pressing its off switch.
The clank shuddered and collapsed to the ground, all its lights blinking out one by one. It still wore its 'Out of Order' sign, now slightly askew.

Students peeked out of their hiding places to give Agatha incredulous looks.

The Professor, carrying something that was a bit gun-shaped, but not a death ray that Agatha could tell, sighed in relief.

“Well done, Miss,” he said.

“If I knew you were going to handle it,” Agatha started, pointing to the device in Professor Wodeboggle's hands. A plaque on the side said 'Clankblaster mk. 3'.

“Oh, thank the flaming hell of Vulcan's forge I didn't have to use this thing,” the Professor said, shaking his head at the device. “Two times out of seven, it just supercharges whatever it shoots and sends it rampaging across campus. ”

“I can see how that could be a problem,” Agatha agreed, and resisted the urge to offer to improve it.

“Still better than the Mark Two. We used that one on the portable oven in the faculty lounge once. I lost my best scarf to that oven,” the Professor said mournfully. “But you managed it with almost no property damage! Nearly unprecedented! Good show!” Then he gave a look over Agatha's shoulder, and his expression soured. “Oh, and you saved that idiot's life, too. But under the circumstances I'll let that pass.”

Agatha turned around to be faced with the student who'd activated the clank. He took Agatha's hand before she could react, and shook it with a slightly manic look in his eyes.

“I almost got the haircut of my life!” he declared dramatically. “I am Kyril! And I am also eternally grateful!”

He failed to mention if that was his first name or his surname, but if he continued to be as cautious in the laboratory as today, Agatha supposed she'd find out at his funeral.

“Agatha Heliotrope,” she said in response. “Nice to meet you... Kyril.”

Kyril seemed to recover enough that he finally saw Agatha, and when he did, he gave her a long look up and down. His eyebrows quirked in interest. His grip on her hand tightened a bit, and a smile oozed its way onto his face.

“I will be your adoring slave from now on,” Kyril whispered.

Agatha promptly extricated her hand from his grasp.

The tour continued, and Professor Wodeboggle decided that instead of requesting anything of the students, he would do better to simply relay amusing anecdotes of all the gruesome ways careless students had died over the years.

Since there was no other incident like Kyril's, this method seemed to have better success.
The semester marched on.

Agatha discovered, by way of her medical electives, that self-tutelage was no replacement for a solid institutional education, at least not where cutting people up and tinkering with their insides was concerned. In retrospect, she realized that it was fortunate that all her patients so far had been the resilient sort.

Mamma Gkika taught Agatha a lot about sheer brute force battlefield medicine, and to a point, she had even explained why and how something worked. But she was not a doctor or a Spark, and Agatha had had to either research things herself, reason them out using her limited knowledge, or merely experiment until she got it right. This led to Agatha having some curious blank spots in her medical knowledge, and some strange misconceptions about physiology that might have been accurate for Jägers, but would not exactly apply to humans.

There was also the fact that, while she'd come up with some brilliant solutions in the past, Agatha realized in light of her newly gained knowledge that she'd several times taken the long way around, out of sheer ignorance that a simple solution existed. She'd, in fact, been reinventing the wheel. A lot.

This was not to say Agatha was discouraged. Quite the opposite, it was exciting for her to learn something new and go over past treatments she'd done on Jägers to see what she could have done different. It was an interesting exercise, especially when a lecture dragged on. Her notes tended to be an incomprehensible mess of actual class material and her own flights of fancy, sketches of future experiments she'd like to try, or theoretical contraptions she planned to build at the right time and place. If anyone else requested to borrow her notes, Agatha made excuses, and she'd begun to develop a much messier handwriting to justify her refusal.

All the classes were interesting, and Agatha was particularly taken with Doctor Beetle's. For a Spark with as much natural curiosity as Agatha, accumulating knowledge in such volumes was leaving her downright giddy with excitement. But hiding the fact that she was a Spark was already beginning to irritate her. While nobody asked to copy her notes anymore, she occasionally really did want to talk to somebody about the ideas she had. And it wasn't as if there was nobody to talk to; there were a few Sparks among her classmates, and some of them seemed... well, not completely clueless, but she couldn't if she was going to keep a low profile. She'd promised Van.

Unfortunately, while she managed not to draw any attention for being a Spark, she did find other avenues of making herself known. Within the first two weeks, aside from saving Kyril's rather worthless head, she also managed to fish out Professor Vogel from drowning in a vat of plum syrup, quell an uprising in the mold culture lab, and oil that one permanently squeaky door hinge that had been driving everyone mad for years. By the end of the first month, she'd already saved two different classes from blowing themselves up, and stopped another clank rampage courtesy of the Clankblaster.

TPU was, it seemed, a breeding ground for disaster, and this wouldn't have been half so bad if most people didn't react to disaster by standing slack-jawed in its path.

But either way, she'd gained a measure of notoriety around campus, and Agatha mostly didn't know what to do with this. People often talked about the things she did—and that was not unusual in Mechanicsburg, where anything she did throughout the day would be common knowledge in the whole town by supper—but here there were strangers speculating about her, about her origins, about
her intentions, about her behavior, about her morals, and Agatha wasn't sure she liked this sort of scrutiny from anyone outside Mechanicsburg.

And of course, all that attention did lead to other things as well...

As her last class dismissed early due to a slight fire issue, Agatha found herself with some time to spare until the next one. She walked along the campus greensward, enjoying the unusually sunny autumn day, when she passed two students and they did a doubletake.

“That's her,” one of them hissed, loud enough that Agatha wondered if she was supposed to hear. “Agatha Heliotrope!”

Agatha continued on her way, studiously ignoring the two even as she felt them trailing after her. She thought, at first, that they were going to approach her, but as they did not for several minutes, Agatha took a turn around one of the buildings and waited for them right around the bend.

The two rushed past the corner and stopped in their tracks as they came face to face with her. One was a lanky and bespectacled young man and a slightly older, ruddy-faced woman wearing too much perfume. She recognized the woman by smell, if not by sight, as someone she shared several classes with.

“Hello,” Agatha said. “You seem to know my name, but I don't know yours.”

The young man gaped at Agatha momentarily, before turning to his companion and whispering, “She talks like a Jäger!”

The woman winced.

“You'll have to forgive him, Miss Heliotrope,” the female student interjected, giving her companion a pointed look, “he's just a simple country boy.”

The aforementioned simple country boy slouched sulkily.

After issuing the apology on behalf of her compatriot, the woman finally got around to the reason they were following her. She asked Agatha along on a trip up to the mountains, to search for the lair of one Andrei Sevenclanks.

Agatha stared blankly for a few moments, unsure if she was supposed to know who that was.

“Oh, you don't know! Andrei Sevenclanks, he used to be a bandit around these parts,” the woman explained, gesturing vaguely into the distance. “Quite notorious, actually! The Baron put an end to him some years ago. But not even the Baron ever found Andrei's secret lair, where all his ill-begotten loot and last frightful creations are said to still reside.”
That sounded like the blurb on the back of a really bad pulp novel. There was no way that trying to break into the lair of a notorious Spark criminal was going to end well for any of the people involved. It would be dangerous, irresponsible, and with a high chance of failure, and even if they did find some way past the defenses, whatever lurked inside might be infinitely more deadly.

And red fire, did Agatha want to go along!

But if people were talking about her already, she could just imagine how much more they'd do it if she also went off adventuring, and on purpose this time.

She turned them down.

The two students were disappointed, but told her the offer was still open if she changed her mind.

Agatha sighed and headed for her next class, full of sullen regret.

Agatha was not late for her next class, but as she walked into the lab, she noticed all three other members of her work group had already arrived.

Ana Lugojean, the most high-strung member of the group, was gesturing angrily as she spoke in a low hiss. As Agatha came close, she caught the tail end of Ana's rant.

“--you can't just leave it like that! The point wasn't just to make it work, it was to follow the assignment!”

Agatha could already guess what had happened. If Agatha had learned anything since arriving at the University, it was that nobody wanted to be the one working on a group project with a Spark. Usually, that was because there was a good chance of suddenly finding oneself a minion for the Spark, but even when that wasn't the case, one still ended up having to work with an egomaniacal genius who thought he knew better than everyone else. And no matter how easy-going or accommodating the individual Spark was, eventually, he would think he knew better.

Emil Radog, the source of their frustrations, stared down at Ana completely unruffled.

“Making it work was the assignment,” he replied sedately. “Just because I found a better way than the professor's--”

Ana screeched and grabbed her hair, as if ready to pull it out.

“What happened?” Agatha asked, stepping in before Ana could give herself an aneurysm.

“He changed the project,” Ana said, seething.

Emil had the decency to at least look mildly apologetic.

“I'm sorry, but I found a better way--” he began, before Ana placed a hand over his mouth.

“Don't you dare start ranting,” Ana growled. “Not after what you did. I hereby suspend your ranting
rights.”

Now Emil actually looked put out now.

“But I wasn't--” he started saying, muffled by Ana's hand.

Ana shushed him, though it sounded more like an angry hiss.

“Agatha, we're done for,” Ana said, wildly looking around the room. “This idiot has doomed us.”

“I'm sure he hasn't doomed us,” Agatha said, and popped open the casing to have a look at Emil's modifications.

Oh. Yes, they were quite extensive. And Emil had displayed a very creative approach to corkscrews and shoelaces. She had to commend him. But the professor would certainly dock points for the shoelaces.

Vuk, the final member of the group, a mumbling Serb who avoided speaking with the same verve that some cats avoided water, let out a long whistle.

“Doomed!” Ana hissed again.

“We can fix this,” Agatha said.

She could, at least. She glanced up at the clock. There were only three minutes until class started, maybe four until the professor arrived. Plenty of time for a Spark, though how she was going to explain it without revealing she was one was more of a conundrum.

Two and a half minutes.

Well, she knew this would happen eventually, no use getting a bad grade just to delay the inevitable.

She reached in and ripped out all the topmost components.

Her three colleagues gasped, and Ana looked on the brink of an aneurysm.

“Why did you do that? Now we have nothing!” Emil said, as Ana's hand fell limply away from his mouth. Ana clutched her chest and went pale.

“Quiet, you,” Agatha snapped, and Emil's jaw shut almost by itself. “Now hand me that scrabblewelder, three screws and half a sheet of paper.”

All three of them hastened to obey, including the stricken Ana. Agatha worked in a flurry, liberated from her pretense, even if for the shortest time.

She finished in three minutes exactly. The professor entered the lab just as she screwed the casing shut.

Ana and Vuk gave Agatha grateful looks, but they didn't seem to suspect anything. Emil, on the other hand, gave her a wide smile. That was slightly more suspect, but didn't necessarily mean anything. Agatha wasn't sure what she'd done, but she was going to have to live with it now.
The professor, at least, was exceedingly pleased with their good work.

Still riding high on their wave of success, Ana invited all of them for drinks at the Painted Crow.

“Ooh, yes, what a grand idea,” Emil said. Ana threw him an exasperated glare, because he was clearly the one she least wanted to accept the invitation.

Vuk muttered something vague in assent, and also possibly in Serbian. He rarely spoke clearly enough for people to identify what language he was using.

“The Painted Crow, that's the place off the Thieves Market, isn't it?” Agatha said.

Mara had given her some dire warnings about it. Apparently it was the kind of place you frequented only if you viewed pickpocketing as a hobby and outright theft as just a bit of fun. Some of the best beer in Beetleburg, though, so people still risked their pockets for it once in a while.

“That's the one!” Emil said.

“Then I'm going straight home and having a wholesome cup of tea instead,” Agatha said drily. “But thank you for the invitation.”

Maybe she'd go to the Painted Crow sometime, but right now, she suspected it would make her a bit too homesick for Mechanicsburg.

Though the three of them were momentarily disappointed, nothing could quell their good cheer, so they waved goodbye and took their leave, hanging off each other like they were drunk already.

Agatha departed at a much more sedate pace, and she was almost out of the building when she heard someone call out to her.

“Miss Heliotrope, a moment of your time?”

Agatha turned to Professor Wodeboggle down the corridor, waving her over. As she approached, she was somewhat surprised to discover that Professor Wodeboggle was accompanied by Doctor Beetle, who gave her an assessing look.

She straightened unconsciously and affected her most respectful tone.

“Yes, Professors?” she said.

“This is her,” Professor Wodeboggle addressed Doctor Beetle. “Do try to keep her in one piece, Tarsus. At least until we retool the Clankblaster.”

Doctor Beetle gave a vague smile and waved Professor Wodeboggle off. Professor Wodeboggle nodded to Agatha once, and departed.

Agatha wasn't sure what was going on, exactly, but she suspected she was in store either for a great honor, or a terrible trap. It didn't help that she'd never quite worked up the courage to ask Doctor
Beetle any questions in class. Not that she was afraid, exactly, but she didn't want to sound stupid and make a horrible first impression, a point which was becoming moot now that Doctor Beetle was aware of her and she was making a first impression regardless--

She straightened up a bit more, and almost had to stop herself from tipping over.

“Miss Heliotrope,” Doctor Beetle spoke, “I'm given to understand you are a very useful person to have around.”

“It's not on purpose,” Agatha said. Then blinked, and resisted the urge to smack her forehead. “I mean, thank you, Professor. I try to keep out of trouble. It, uh. It hasn't been working.”

“I disapprove of student heroics, of course,” Doctor Beetle said, reciting the phrase as if out of obligation. “But I do find myself in need of a lab assistant.”

Agatha's heart skipped. He couldn't possibly be asking her--

“The last one came down with a mild case of self-vaporization, I'm afraid,” Doctor Beetle continued, “but I trust you won't get involved with kind of nonsense. You seem like a robust young lady.”

He gave her a critical look-over after that, and nodded in approval.

“No, sir! I mean, yes! Thank you, sir, I won't disappoint you!” Agatha tried not to babble, but she was feeling an odd disconnect between her mouth and her brain, and left to its own devices, her tongue seemed inclined to grope around for words like it was looking for them in the dark.

Doctor Beetle looked amused, and maybe a little bit flattered to have left a young woman so flustered.

“Come tomorrow morning before classes to my lab,” he said. “You will report to Merlot, my second in command. Let's see if you last the month. I assure you, Miss Heliotrope, this will not be an easy job.”

“I wouldn't expect it to be, Professor,” she replied, finally coming to grips with herself. “But I promise I'll be the best assistant you've ever had.”

“Keep yourself alive,” Doctor Beetle said, “and you'll certainly be an improvement on my last one.”

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Agatha did not have any classes with Professor Merlot, but she'd heard stories, usually from tired students shuffling out of classroom with dead looks in their eyes. She had no idea if he'd heard any stories about her, but Agatha suspected Merlot would be giving her the same sour look regardless.

She stood perfectly still as he glared at her.

“Do you have any experience as a lab assistant?” Merlot asked.

“Ah, no, not as such,” Agatha said. She didn't think having her own lab in the basement of a bar counted, and at any rate, she didn't think mentioning it would impress Merlot in any way. He looked
like he worked very hard not to be impressed by anything.

Merlot scowled. The expression was perfectly at home on his face.

“Can you follow basic instructions?” Merlot said, obviously deciding that he was going to have to lower his standards considerably if he was to get anywhere with her.

“Yes, of course.” Agatha tried to keep from sounding as insulted as she felt, but she didn't quite manage it. “Tell me what to do and I'll do it, Professor,” she added quickly.

“Very well,” Merlot said, probably sounding indulgent by his standards. “You will be in charge of the labs.” He gestured widely. “All of them. The Master's will be your priority, but you will also be managing the rosters for the teaching labs, keeping all of them stocked, overseeing maintenance, and making sure everything runs smoothly.”

“Got it.”

“I'm not done, Miss Heliotrope.”

“Oh.”

Merlot then took Agatha on a fast-paced tour of Doctor Beetle's laboratory, and gave her rapid-fire explanations and instructions regarding all the duties expected of her. He went over lab rules, routines she should know about, and he finished by outlining Doctor Beetle's current ongoing experiments and how she was expected to assist on them.

And once he was done, he quizzed her on everything, perhaps expecting that she hadn't been able to keep up. But as she answered each question and repeated back everything he'd said, his face took on a look of begrudging acceptance.

“Very well, Miss Heliotrope,” Merlot said. “Next we'll have to see how you actually perform these duties.”

“So is that all, Professor?” she asked.

“Certainly not, Miss Heliotrope,” Merlot replied, suddenly gleeful. “We've just been over the basics. I still haven't explained any of your secretarial duties.”

“Oh.”

As Agatha returned home that night, her mind abuzz with everything she had to keep straight, she had a moment when she wondered if the last lab assistant vaporized herself on purpose.

Lab assistant or not, she did still have to turn up for classes, and she did, the next day, only to find
the teaching lab empty and Emil perched on the windowsill, smoking.

He smiled across the room at her and waved her over.

“Morning,” he said, and then looked down at his cigarette case with a frown. “I never know if I should offer women cigarettes or not. On the one hand, seems rude not to, but if my mother knew I was offering any decent young ladies my devil weed, she'd twist my ear off.”

Agatha laughed.

“I don't smoke anyway,” she said. “Where is everybody?”

“Oh, Castanetti finally popped,” Emil shrugged, and pointed to the corner, where there was evidence of a small fire having recently been put out. “Professor got the brunt of it. So betting pool's over, he was a Spark after all.”

“Hah,” Agatha said, because that had been a sucker's bet. She'd pegged Castanetti as a Spark on the first day, when he thought to concoct a new type of pesticide out of iron filings and cream cheese. And failed. “Emil, you have classes with Merlot, right?”

Emil sighed dramatically. “Don't remind me,” he moaned.

“So what's his deal, exactly?” she asked.

“Hates Sparks,” Emil said. “Personally, I think it's jealousy. Any Spark in his class will agree with that assessment.”

“I see,” Agatha said, blinking.

“So are you a Spark, Agatha?” Emil asked, giving her a sly grin.

Agatha gave him a withering glare. Emil fumbled with his cigarette case.

“I mean, not that there's anything wrong with that,” he said quickly. “I'm one too, you know.”

“Yes, I do know,” she drawled sardonically.

Emil coughed.

“Yes, well. It was a surprise to my folks, you know,” he said. “Never had a Spark in the family. Found out the bad way, too.”

“Which bad way?” Agatha asked, because she could think of several just off the top of her head.

Emil took a drag on his cigarette, exhaling slowly. The smoke was tinged slightly pink, and aromatic. Agatha found she didn't mind it all that much.

“Well, my grandfather has this watermelon farm, down by the Danube,” Emil started. “Ma sent me there for a summer. Said some hard work would teach me a thing or two about not being a lazy bum.” Here he paused to give Agatha an embarrassed look. “She thinks university students are a plight on modern society.” He coughed. “Anyway, there I was. Hot sun. Clean, fresh country air. Bored out of my skull, and on the brink of a breakthrough. And nothing but melons for miles.”
“Oh dear.”

“I have nothing against melons, mind you. Delicious things, watermelons. Good business in the summer. And so I thought, well, what if someone tried to steal the melons?”

“Was watermelon theft common around those parts?” Agatha asked.

“No idea,” Emil shrugged, as if it didn't matter. “I never asked. But definitely nobody was going to try after I was finished with them.”

“What did you do?”

“Just a bit of gardening,” Emil said. “But, well, let's just say those watermelons sure could defend themselves by the time I was done with them.”

“Oh dear,” Agatha said again, hiding her face in her hands and trying not to laugh.

“In fact, they were very... proactive about it,” Emil continued. “So much so that, ah, the Baron had to intervene. Emphatically so.”

“I take it the melons didn't make it.”

“I thought I wasn't going to make it either,” Emil confessed. “All the melons were put down. The farmers were compensated. And I was packed on an airship and delivered to Castle Wulfenbach.”

“So you were arrested?”

“No,” Emil shook his head. “I was offered a job by the Baron. A lab, an assistant, and all the work I wanted to do, on anything of my choosing, for the benefit of the Empire.”

“A good deal,” Agatha said.

“A fantastic deal!” Emil said, gesturing with his cigarette. “Better than I deserved, according to my grandfather. I've spent every school break working for the Baron. And as soon as I graduate, I can go to Castle Wulfenbach and stay there full time. I'm looking forward to it.”

Agatha folded her arms and regarded Emil silently.

“And you think that if I was a Spark, I'd get a good deal too,” she said, finally understanding the point of this watermelon anecdote.

“Well, wouldn't you?” he asked. “You seemed like a pretty strong one to me, though I admit I didn't get to see much. You definitely put the whammy on Ana. Never seen her obey someone so quickly before.”

“Maybe that's because she's never in an agreeable mood when she's around you,” Agatha pointed out.

Emil shrugged. “Just goes to prove my point, really.”

“But that assumes that I'm a Spark,” she said.
“Oh, and you aren't?” Emil asked with a conspiratorial grin.

Agatha sighed. Emil had good intentions, but he was missing some vital information. Yes, the Baron would be happy to hire her if she were only a strong Spark. But she was also a Heterodyne, and no matter the reasons for staying hidden all these years, it was past the point of looking innocent. When she revealed herself, she was going to do it from behind Mechanicsburg's fully restored walls.

“Let's say I'm only a student for now,” Agatha replied. “And I will remain just a student until graduation.”

“Gotcha,” Emil said. “But I think everybody on campus already knows you're not just a student, Agatha.”

“What else could they possibly think I am?” she scoffed, maybe a bit too defensive.

“I could make you a list,” Emil snickered. But no matter how insistent Agatha got, he refused to explain what he meant.

By the time Agatha got home, Mara was already in her room and practicing. She was playing a jaunty tune on an instrument Agatha couldn't identify, except that it sounded like a marginally more somber kazoo. The door was halfway open, so Agatha pushed it wide to announce her presence.

Mara, balancing herself on the back legs of her chair while propping her ankles up on her nightstand, stopped playing and looked at Agatha. She had nothing but a leaf in her hands, and had been blowing along its edge to produce sound.4

“That can't possibly be for school,” Agatha remarked, momentarily forgetting why she was there.

“Shows what you know!” Mara replied, grinning. “Professor Gallivant's Pseudoinstruments class. I can play a mean fish scale, too.”

“Oh. Well. You're very good.”

Mara preened a little. Agatha got the sense not many of Mara's roommates had been so supportive.

“Anyway, you needed something?” Mara said.

“This is going to sound a bit strange, but...” Agatha tried to figure out how to phrase things so she didn't sound utterly self-centered, and then gave up. “I know people talk about me around campus.”

“Uh-huh,” Mara said, suddenly really interested in inspecting the striations on her leaf.

“What is it, exactly, that they've been saying new about me lately?” Agatha continued.

“Oooh, this is probably because of Kyril's editorials, isn't it?” Mara said.

“You know Kyril?” Agatha blinked in surprise.
“Nobody's lucky enough not to know Kyril,” Mara snorted. “He pokes his nose in everything. And he writes for the student gazette.”

“...There's a student gazette?” Agatha felt faintly ill as she realized where this was going.

“Sure,” Mara said, shrugging. “You might have seen it around the school lavatories. Anyway, Kyril's been pretty fixated on you since the semester started. He, uh... He calls you his 'comely blonde savior’.”

“He what.”

“I'm filtering here, of course. He calls you a lot of things he seems to think are compliments.”

Mara glimpsed at Agatha's face and decided it would be prudent to not be the one going into detail about this.

“You're not going to kill him, are you?” Mara asked. “Only if you do, I think I'd feel responsible.”

“I am not going to kill him,” Agatha promised.

Oh no, she was going to get a hold of as many back issues of the student gazette first. And then she was going to devise a punishment proportionate to the crime.

Death rays were still going to be involved, though.

Despite initial misgivings, Agatha adjusted to her new position quickly. While Merlot was merciless, demanding and unforgiving, Professor Glassvitch was much more pleasant to be around, and at the very least more sympathetic.

And of course, Agatha did appreciate getting to be so close to Doctor Beetle. She enjoyed hearing about his work almost as much as he enjoyed talking about it, and he was prone to rambling quite a bit. All his notes were in code, of course, and Agatha could have probably cracked it if she'd put her mind to learning how, but it was hardly necessary, and it would have hardly been right.

Instead, every moment she wasn't in class, she spent in the lab, or occasionally running around campus on some secretarial business. Doctor Beetle apparently ran Beetleburg out of his laboratory, and any administrative duty he passed on to Merlot would trickle down to Agatha eventually.

It kept her out of trouble, at least. She certainly didn't feel like she had the time to go off chasing bandits or exploring the basements of delicatessens for lost civilizations. Though she did still somehow manage, on a regular basis, to walk in just at the moment someone or something needed saving. It explained a lot about how her father and uncle might have started their careers as amateur heroes. She had a hard time not intervening as well.

She wondered if she'd be such a busybody if she hadn't grown up in Mechanicsburg, where she could walk up to someone and offer assistance and know that her offer would be accepted because she was a Heterodyne, and everything in the town was her business by sheer dint of that.
She wondered this while signing for a delivery of lab supplies, because the delivery man was a patchwork with some glaring construction issues.

“Tha's th' las' crate,” the construct said, his metal jaw moving sluggishly.

Agatha tapped her pen against the side of the clipboard, but didn't give the delivery man his copy of the receipt yet. He waited in sullen silence as Agatha was trying to phrase things delicately in her head.

“You want I sh'd stick aroun' so ya finish yer starin’?” he asked after a few seconds.

“Oh-- no, I-- Your jaw, it just--”

His eyes narrowed, and Agatha thought he'd get angry, but instead his gaze dropped to the ground. He seemed ashamed, which startled Agatha. Was she responsible for that?

“Is an eyesore, yeh,” the man mumbled.

“No, I meant it's just not screwed in properly,” Agatha said quickly. “I'm familiar with this model, it's notoriously finicky. Here--” She took out a screwdriver out of her pocket, and the delivery man recoiled as if she'd produced a venomous snake.

Agatha froze for a second, looking down at the screwdriver, and then back at him. She very slowly offered it to him, handle first.

“Second screws down from the hinge are redundant,” she said slowly. “But they can cause pressure on the skull, especially if screwed too tightly. It... must be giving you terrible headaches, but it's an easy fix.”

The man stared at her, working his jaw slowly, as if chewing on her words. A hand went up to his jaw, feeling along the side.

“Yes, those ones,” Agatha said as his fingers brushed over the appropriate screw.

“Haff m'own screwdriver,” the man said slowly, looking at her hand.

“Oh good,” Agatha said lightly, and pocketed the screwdriver. “This is my favorite one, anyway.”

He left after that, casting indecipherable looks over his shoulder at her until he was out the door and out of sight.

Agatha could only hope she hadn't committed a grievous error.

Three weeks later, she accepted a delivery from the same construct. This time, he saluted her loosely.

“Big thanks, Miss Heliotrope, big thanks,” he said, enunciating clearly.
“You're doing much better?” Agatha asked, grinning as she signed her fake name with more flourish than usual.

He snapped his jaw once for emphasis and then grinned.

“But if you don't mind, Miss,” he said. “I've also got this bother with my leg…”

Agatha didn't mind at all. And she didn't mind it three days later, either, when he brought along one of his friend who had some trouble with a faulty lung. Or later, when she was asked along on a quiet trip into the university basements, with a bag of tools and medical instruments.

No, she didn't mind. It felt like her life was settling back into a familiar type of normal.

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1 Ducky was masterful at getting into places she wasn't supposed to get into. She maintained, however, that it didn't really count as burglary unless you take something, and so she'd brought her own materials for the tools.

2 Later she would amend this statement to “it's not really burglary unless you take something the owner will notice missing” while stuffing a box of toothpicks into her pocket.

3 Not the kind of tone one would use in Mechanicsburg, however, where a lot of the older segments of the population still referred to banditry as “a good day's work”.

4 It sounded something like this.
“Second semester, same as the first,” Mara said.

It was six in the morning. This was one of the few occasions when Agatha and Mara actually crossed paths anymore, when they both had to be at the University early. They decided to walk together that day, since neither was in a hurry.

“I wouldn't say exactly the same,” Agatha said.

“Well, not for you, maybe. You've been coming up in the world.”

“Coming up in the world? Really?” Agatha snorted.

“Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't describe it as such until you ended up running the whole town,” Mara said, grinning. “But for the rest of us, working that close to Doctor Beetle is pretty impressive.”

“Hm,” was Agatha's only response, and she pulled up her scarf a little, hiding her face against the cold. She didn't mention that she had her own town to run, and certainly didn't want Beetleburg. Though, admittedly, if she did want Beetleburg, she was sure that she could take it. Not that she would, of course not! But the point was that she could.

One of the clockwork soldier clanks passed them by, jerkily trying to find its footing. The streets were de-iced, but nobody had yet shoveled the resulting mixture of salt and melted snow, and it was as hard to walk over as sand.

Agatha could hear the clank's internal gyroscopes straining to compensate for the strange terrain. By the irregular clicking she was picking up, it sounded like they were a bit slow and out of sync with each other. If they weren't in need of recalibration before, they would be after a short jaunt down this messy street.

The lab was empty and quiet, making the rattle of Agatha's keys sound abnormally loud as it echoed down the corridor. She undressed slowly, stripping off her gloves, hanging up her coat, scarf and ushanka, and then she headed for the beverage dispenser in the corner, filling it with water and turning it on. She'd put together the device out of an old Turkish samovar she'd found in a closet, two empty canisters and a salvaged miniature filtration system, and it could now make tea, coffee and cocoa, all of such quality that even Merlot had found it in him not to complain about her wasting time on silly projects when she should be working.

She checked up on everything that needed checking and prepared Doctor Beetle's instruments for the day, and then she sat down and had a cup of tea, thinking intensely.

Professor Glasswitch was the next to arrive, and by the time he finished unbundling himself from several layers of winter garments, Agatha already had a cup of coffee ready for him.

He held the warm cup tightly and inhaled deeply, perking up just at the smell.

“Thank you, Miss Heliotrope,” he said, beaming. “You are a gift from above.”
“It's just pretty good coffee, Professor,” she replied with a slight grin. After a certain debacle a few years back, she wasn't allowed to make really good coffee anymore.

Merlot arrived just then, and if the cold bothered him at all, it was hard to tell. He bore the same sour expression he did most mornings.

“I hope you've prepared everything,” Merlot grumbled to Agatha. “The Master wants to start working as soon as he arrives.”

“Yes, Professor,” Agatha replied. “Would you like some tea?”

In fact he did, and he accepted a cup with a muttered thanks. She never offered him coffee; she didn't think he drank it, and anyway, considering how cranky he usually was, she wouldn't want to see him caffeinated on top of that.

With Merlot mollified for the moment, Agatha went back to the filing room, in search of the clank maintenance records.

The notes on their creation were in code (predictably), but from what was not encrypted, she surmised that the army hadn't undergone any upgrades or significant modifications in over twenty years.

She could understand a Spark's waning interest in past projects, of course, but considering the fact that these clanks were almost the entirety of the town's defenses, it seemed a bit reckless to Agatha to neglect them so. Even in times of peace.

“Miss Heliotrope, what are you doing here?” Merlot's voice came from behind her, startling Agatha so hard she dropped the ledger she was holding.

Merlot snatched the ledger up before she could, and looked it over with a frown.

“What's this, then?” he asked.

“Clank maintenance records,” she answered, voice perfectly neutral.

“I can see that, Miss Heliotrope. What business do you have with them?” Merlot asked pointedly, waving the ledger.

Not the same you would, Agatha thought peevishly, because she knew of Merlot's habit of trying to break Doctor Beetle's code so he could read Beetle's notes. She'd caught him at it enough times, though she hadn't let on that she knew what he was doing.

“I was looking for information regarding special wintertime maintenance procedures,” she replied.

“There aren't any,” Merlot replied. “Procedures are the same year round.”

“Oh—well. Shouldn't there be?” she asked.

“The Master doesn't think they're necessary,” Merlot replied. “What should concern you right now, Miss Heliotrope, is assisting Doctor Beetle with his experiment. Run along.”
He was clearly in the mood to be unreasonable, so Agatha knew this was her cue to leave.

Doctor Beetle was already starting on his latest experiment. The past weeks had been all set-up and preparation, but now he was actually getting into the thick of things, and he was deep in the grips of a fugue. The large equipment dominating the center of the room hummed industriously, its lights blinking in and out at steady intervals as it awaited its final transformation at Doctor Beetle's hands.

“Ah, good!” Doctor Beetle said, spotting Agatha. “Miss Heliotrope, attend!”

Agatha smoothly picked up what she was meant to be doing; operating dials and switches, monitoring readings and handing Doctor Beetle instruments. Necessary work, though not very flashy. She fell into it easily, needing no more than a fraction of her attention to keep track of a dozen different variables.

Professors Glassvitch and Merlot handled the more interesting parts, Agatha thought. They helped Doctor Beetle with the building and the improvised re-engineering that made up the glut of the work.

She itched to walk up and join in, just roll up her sleeves and start working. She could see what was taking shape, understand its purpose and function in a way neither Professor Glassvitch or Merlot could. She could see the way she'd improve on it, the way she'd do things differently.

But she had to remember that she was a student. This was an accomplished Spark's project she was being critical of. Outdated operational methodology! An inefficient power supply configuration! An antiquated paradigm of basic construction! And yet Doctor Beetle achieved his results. And yet he managed to think up ten different ideas that would never have occurred to Agatha, because he was still one of the greats, and still one of the strongest Sparks she was ever likely to meet.

She was learning, oh yes. What could Doctor Beetle achieve if he'd just catch up on the work of other Sparks, and read about the latest innovations in his field? What could he achieve if he wasn't old-fashioned and stuck in his ways? He was still one of the most brilliant minds of his generation. But there were new generations now, and new principles, and new theories, all ripe for being warped by the cunning mind of an able scientist, and Doctor Beetle was missing out on so much of that.

He would never accept criticism, Agatha knew. Not from anyone, but especially not from a mere student and lab assistant.

Doctor Beetle was in a good mood, as he always was after a successful experiment. He was seated, enjoying a cup of tea and looking over the lab as a king might look over his domain.

This was as good a time as any to broach the subject, thought Agatha.

“Doctor Beetle,” she said, while tidying up a tray of instruments, “I'm curious about something.”

“Do tell, Miss Heliotrope,” he said, giving her an amused look.

“I just wondered if you've ever revisited the designs of your clanks since creating them,” Agatha said.

“I did in the early days,” Doctor Beetle replied, hiding a nostalgic smile behind his cup of tea. “It
took me a while to perfect the design. Years, really. I was very keen on having not just an army, but the best ever built!” He was getting ready to embark on a long lecture, which was often the case when his work was involved.

“And it really was the best fighting force of its time, Doctor,” Agatha said, nodding seriously.

Was, she'd said, and she could see that past tense pass hitting the audience.

Doctor Beetle frowned only very slightly, freezing in place with the cup of tea halfway to his lips. Across the room, Merlot turned around very slowly, giving Agatha an incredulous look. Even Professor Glassvitch stopped what he was doing to look shocked.

“Your army set the bar. Even to this day,” she continued, her tone perfectly innocent, “so many people still see your work as the standard they need to beat.”

This sounded more like a compliment than a challenge, and Doctor Beetle, being more used to receiving the former from students rather than the latter, accepted it as such. Of course she wouldn't insult him. Of course she was in awe of his brilliant mind. That was the world Doctor Beetle lived in.

His forehead smoothed again, and this time the smile he gave Agatha was shrewd.

“And do you think that any of them have succeeded?” he asked.

“I wouldn't know, Doctor,” Agatha replied.

She really didn't, but her money was on yes. She'd seen the clanks up close enough times to have made a complete inventory of all their faults. But even if all of them were corrected, she still wouldn't bet that nobody out there had ever improved on Doctor Beetle's designs. That's what designs were for, after all; being improved upon.

“I think you're the only person who could ever be the judge of that,” she continued. “I'm just a student, after all.”

“Yes, you are, Miss Heliotrope,” Doctor Beetle said. “Yes, you are.”

He continued to drink his tea. Agatha continued to tidy the lab. He didn't say anything else, but he was clearly thinking hard about some things.

Agatha was pleased. If she'd learned one thing since she started assisting in the lab, it was the importance of delegating. As long as Doctor Beetle was the one worrying about the clanks, it meant she didn't have to.

“Is that a new arm, Islick?” Lilith asked as she placed a plate of snacks on the table. All the other card players looked at Islick after she spoke.

Islick grinned—an impressive sight coming from someone with a mouthful of razors instead of teeth
—and extended his metallic arm to demonstrate its range of motion.

“What if I told you, Mrs. Clay, that it's the exact same one?” he asked proudly.

Lilith raised an eyebrow. Adam looked up from his cards, curious and alert.

“Then I'd say someone did a very good job on it,” she replied, because the arm looked much different from his old rusty one.

Islick rolled up his sleeve, past where the metal was attached to his flesh. The old corroded cuff had been replaced by a sleek new one, and the attachment looked far less painful than the previous one.

“How did you do it?” Lilith asked, intrigued.

“Miss Heliotrope did this for me, she did,” Islick reported proudly.

Lilith and Adam both leaned in to look at it. It was good work, they had to admit. Whoever Miss Heliotrope was, she didn't seem to be the usual brand of butcher preying on constructs who couldn't receive help from proper doctors. With Islick's permission, Adam ran his hand over the joints, testing how smoothly they moved.

The other two card players, Vislana and Georg, made appreciative sounds.

“New lung, and she took out that nasty extra cow's liver troubling me. Said my old Master was a complete dunce for putting that in there! Hah!” She snickered.

Georg removed his breathing apparatus from his face for a moment.

“New feeding tube,” he reported in a long, dry hiss. He didn't start coughing right away, which was usually the case when he tried to talk like this, and added, “rrrhemooved fungus colony from gas tank...”

He placed his mask back on his face and breathed in deeply, his six eyes blinking one at a time. The wet suction that Lilith had grown accustomed to hearing from Georg’s breathing apparatus was absent, almost eerily so.

“And what does Miss Heliotrope charge?” Lilith asked.

“Oh, she doesn't charge,” Vislana said, “she says she just enjoys the work.”

“Does she?” Lilith said, skepticism bleeding into her words. “She isn't a Spark, is she?”

There were a few sheepish looks shared between Islick, Georg and Vislana, all three of whom had said or implied on previous occasions that they would never trust another Spark again.

“Well, she says she doesn't want anyone to be thinking she is one,” Vislana answered eventually. “But...” She shrugged. Everyone here could probably spot a Spark from miles.

“And you trust her,” Lilith said.

“Sure we do,” Islick shrugged.

“Why?” Lilith asked.
This question seemed to cause confusion among the group.

“Because she's... nice?” Islick ventured eventually. Georg and Vislana nodded.

“She is nice!” Vislana said. “There's something about that girl, you just want to like her.”

“Haahaaard workherrrr,” Georg added.

“And doesn't talk down to us, neither,” Vislana added. “Lilith, you should meet her! You'd like her.”

“Yes, I think we will meet her,” Lilith agreed, catching Adam's eye.

It always paid to make sure. And for Miss Heliotrope's sake, Lilith hoped she was exactly what she presented herself to be.

All in all, Agatha's second semester went off smoothly, even considering the fact that she now also had classes with Professor Merlot. She kept her head down, took notes more seriously than in other classes, and made sure to keep her tone polite at all times.

This proved wise on her part when it became obvious that Merlot was the type to hold grudges. Students who tried to correct him or did not show him the proper respect would be singled out. Then Merlot hounded them with increasingly difficult questions until they didn't know the answers, at which point he would ridicule them for their ignorance. This behavior was made all the worse if the student in question was a Spark.

But Merlot was a predictable type of awful, and by this point Agatha knew how to navigate his moods. What was more surprising was that he was not half bad as a professor. He knew his subject in and out, his lessons were well-structured, and the reading material he assigned was comprehensive and thorough. The only thing that brought down Merlot's performance as an educator was his personality.

Unfortunately, most of the students in his class did not have such a nuanced view of Merlot. The Sparks were the worst about it, perhaps thinking that Merlot couldn't possibly treat them any worse than he already did. They antagonized him in any small way they could—asking questions they knew would derail the lesson, whispering among themselves, building small disruptive devices—and this fed into Merlot's already hostile attitude towards students. And Merlot did not hesitate to take out his frustrations on even the innocent students. It was an endless cycle of resentment and petty revenge that made Agatha want to put everyone in a row and knock their heads together like a life-sized Newton's cradle.

As she contemplated this vivid mental image, she spotted movement from the corner of her eye, accompanied by a reflective glint. Glass, or metal? Either way, Agatha moved quickly.

The sound of her textbook hitting the desk resounded in the classroom, the sound bouncing off the walls. Merlot, who'd been writing on the blackboard, stopped mid-formula and turned around, singling Agatha out almost instantly as the source of the noise. She was in the third row, and not hard to spot, considering the first two rows were always empty in Merlot's class.
Everyone went unnaturally silent as they waited to see what would happen next.

“Miss Heliotrope, what exactly do you think you're doing?” Merlot asked, just a hair short of livid.

“It was just a bug, Professor,” Agatha replied, voice perfectly level and unafraid. She pressed her book down harder, and the sound of small metal parts crunching together was unmistakeable in the tense silence of the classroom.

Merlot's nostrils flared like he was an angry bull, and Agatha was sure she was in for it. He looked at the textbook, and he had to have figured out what had happened. She expected him to explode into a rage, start ranting and berating the entire class.

But then he only turned back to the blackboard and picked up where he left off.

There was a very quiet, collective sigh of relief.

Agatha removed her book and looked at the little broken flying device. It was in pieces and bent out of shape, but it looked as if it had been insectile in appearance. It also had a needle attached. She turned and looked towards the back rows, where she knew the usual Sparks and class clowns were seated. She put on her worst glower, and she knew the guilty party by the way he slid down in his seat.

She gestured, from her eyes towards him. *I'll see you after class.*

“Why should we worry? She's just a lab assistant!” Dimitris Zappas pointed out quite reasonably.

He and his small posse of fellow Sparks were decidedly *not* running, but advancing briskly in a direction coincidentally opposite to that which they assumed Agatha would take.

“I dunno, Dimitris, I heard stories,” a nervous voice put in, and there were murmurs of agreement.

“Come on, now, what's she going to do, tattle on us to Doctor Beetle?” Dimitris snorted. “She's not even a--”

The small group came to a sudden and uncoordinated halt as Agatha chose that moment to step out from a side corridor and straight into their path. After everyone was done accidentally stepping on each other and smacking into the backs of the person before them, they took a second to cringe guiltily. Dimitris, at the forefront of the group, found himself alone as the other four students inched back.

“Hello, Mister Zappas,” Agatha greeted affably.

Dimitris drew himself up, vainly attempting to maintain his dignity.

“Miss Heliotrope,” he nodded in greeting.

Smiling faintly, Agatha reached into her pocket and took something out. What she held in her open palm looked very much like the dragonfly miniature clank Dimitris built during Merlot's class. But it couldn't be. Agatha had destroyed it, they all heard, and anyway, this one looked... different.
“I thought maybe you'd want this back, so I repaired it for you,” she said.

With a faint buzz, it came to life. Its eyes lit up—no, it definitely didn't do that before, Dimitris would have remembered that part—and its wings now flapped so fast they produced a loud whine. And was the needle bigger? The needle definitely looked bigger. It was the exact same needle, though, so Dimitris wasn't sure how that would be possible.

“I also added some new features of my own,” Agatha continued.

The little dragonfly flew so fast that Dimitris couldn't even follow with the naked eye, but after a short circuit around Agatha, it stopped and hovered in front of his face accusingly. For something lacking an expression, it did a fine impression of glaring. Dimitris leaned back and as far away from it as he could.

“Would you like to see some of those features?” Agatha asked, but underlying the sweetness in her voice was something ominous.¹

“No, Miss Heliotrope,” Dimitris replied.

“Good call,” Agatha said, grinning widely at him.

The dragonfly flew back to her, and settled on the lapel of her coat like a strange brooch.

“I couldn't help but notice, Mister Zappas, that you and your associates seem to have a lot of spare time and energy on your hands,” she said, fussily adjusting the little dragonfly.

There was a lot of hemming and hawing from the group.

“Perhaps what you need,” Agatha said, her voice cutting through the murmured objections, “is a way to channel all that restlessness before it gets you in trouble.”

They fell quiet, all five students throwing each other uneasy looks. She clearly believed it was only a matter of time before they got into trouble, but none of them wanted to take on extra work if they could help it.

So it all came down to whether they feared Agatha more than they liked being lazy.

“What did you have in mind, Miss Heliotrope?” Dimitris asked warily.

The opportunity to meet the mysterious Miss Heliotrope came soon enough. She operated her medical practice out of the underground labs and underused storage facilities of the University, but had recently settled in the boiler room of the Department of Experimental Political Science building. None of the students or even the faculty noticed anything strange, but considering that they spent all their time consumed completely by their rarefied theoretical praxis, the whole building could have blown up under them and they'd only complain about the noise making it hard to hear themselves
To conclude, it was a good choice of location.

“And real cozy in this weather,” Islick added cheerfully, as he led Adam and Lilith through the twisting underground corridors of the building. It was, indeed, unusually warm for the basement.

They understood why once they entered the boiler room and were greeted by a monstrous contraption which might have at one point been a boiler but was now an entire heat-producing power plant. It might have been cobbled together, but not badly so, and though it was massive, it was also very quiet.

“Miss Heliotrope said the last boiler was a disgrace,” Islick explained. “Had us get her the parts, and she fixed it herself, she did. Don't think anybody upstairs noticed it was fixed, but they don't come down anymore to chew my ear about how the heating's not working properly!”

He gestured for them to follow, and walked around the boiler.

A corner of the room was set up like an infirmary. Two beds, a white privacy screen of sorts, tables with clean instruments set out. There was medical equipment, too, old or salvaged, but also custom built items which neither Lilith nor Adam could guess the purpose of. Sparkwork.

Agatha did not notice the new arrivals. She was seeing to a patient seated on a low stool before her. His head and shoulders were a tangle of tubes and wires, clamped together and out of the way so Agatha could work at something at the back of the construct's head.

Turned away from them, all Lilith could see was a white labcoat and long blond hair, tied back. But she could hear the young woman just fine, and when she spoke, it was almost startling to hear the familiar Mechanicsburg accent in what sounded like Lucrezia's voice.

“I don't like what I'm seeing here, Herr Giszt. The infection should have at least started clearing up by now, with the medicine I gave you. But if anything, it seems to have gotten worse!”

“Oh...” the construct said, his voice low and resounding, but his tone hesitant. “The medicine...”

“Have you been taking it?” she asked.

“Well... you see, it's just that the medicine you gave me... it's very bitter, Miss Heliotrope...”

There was a short pause.

“Herr Giszt, you realize I can't do anything about this bone spur until the infection heals, yes?” she said.

“Maybe... it'll heal by itself...” Herr Giszt opined.

“Oh, sure. Or maybe,” and here Agatha's tone took on a note of intensity, not quite Spark harmonics but getting there fast, “maybe I can figure out a way to work around the problem. Yes, it should be quite interesting, why, you might help advance medical science by years, and I'm sure I could make it so it would hardly hurt at all--”

“I'll take the medicine!” Herr Giszt yelped. “I will this time, I promise!”
“Wonderful,” Agatha said, her voice perfectly level once again. “In that case, I'll close you up here, and you can come back in eight days.”

At some point, Lilith grasped Adam's hand and squeezed it, half out of shock and half to check that he heard it too. He had, his face was slack with surprise as well.

It couldn't be Lucrezia. It couldn't be Lucrezia for any number of very good reasons. But seen from behind—hair just a shade off, her voice the same—both Lilith and Adam expected to be confronted with a ghost the moment she turned around.

Agatha finished sewing the patient up and peeled off her gloves.

“And you can take the medicine with sugar, Herr Giszt,” she was saying as the construct departed, “as long as you please take it.”

“Understood, Miss Heliotrope.”

Lilith and Adam had time to compose themselves before Agatha noticed them, but it was still almost disappointing when she did not react with recognition. There was no reason she should have, except for eyes like Lucrezia's, and the echo of Bill's features in her face. So many pieces fitting together, except not really. So many things obvious, yet inexplicable.

“Oh. New patients?” Agatha asked. “But if it's not urgent, we might have to reschedule.” She took out a heavy pocketwatch with a trilobite on the lid and checked the time. She winced slightly. “Never mind, too late to get to class now. How can I help you?”

“These are the Clays, Miss Heliotrope,” Islick said, gesturing broadly. “Adam and Lilith Clay. They...” Here he paused, glancing back at them uncertainly. “They wanted to meet you, pretty much.”

Agatha took this in stride.

“Alright. Hello, I'm Agatha Heliotrope,” she said, extending a hand.

Lilith took it in both of hers, and held it as if to reassure herself that Agatha wouldn't melt away like some apparition.

“We've heard of the work you do,” Lilith said, keeping remarkably calm under the circumstances.

Agatha's face went blank at this statement. But her eyes darted towards boiler, then to the medical equipment, and Lilith could almost feel the girl wince internally. She was trying to hide that she was a Spark—and that part didn't surprise Lilith even a little, because even discounting the fact that she could very well be Bill and Lucrezia's daughter, Spark girls had been mysteriously disappearing for years, with no adequate explanation as to why. Likely she was thinking that she was failing miserably if her work had attracted the attention of strangers.

No, Lilith thought. By Heterodyne standards she was downright inconspicuous. Perhaps she'd inherited Lucrezia's skill at subterfuge. Perhaps she wasn't a Heterodyne at all, and it was all just wishful thinking on their part. But with Islick there, they couldn't exactly broach the subject without revealing things which Miss Heliotrope did not want revealed.
“We're from Mechanicsburg as well,” Lilith said, and Agatha perked up.

“Really?” Agatha looked from Lilith to Adam, now more relieved than anything.

“We haven't been there in a very long time, though,” Lilith added. “You probably weren't even born yet.”

“Ah.” Cautious again, but not scared.

“Islick,” Lilith said, turning to give him a wide smile, “thank you for the introduction. We can find our own way back, though, so please, don't let us keep you from going about your day.”

“Oh, it's no bother, Mrs. Clay,” Islick said, giving a salute and a small smile. But he left anyway, allowing them their privacy.

Once Islick was out of earshot, Lilith turned her attention back to Agatha.

“I believe we're acquainted with your parents, Miss Heliotrope,” Lilith said.


She retreated by the table with the tray of instruments, sorting through them absent-mindedly. And assessing them as weaponry, if Lilith didn't miss her guess. She was being very casual about it, but Lilith and Adam had what might be called an experienced eye. Adam rubbed at his nose to hide a smile behind his hand.

Lilith took off her glasses, exposing her mismatched eyes, and took a deep breath. Adam pressed a hand against her back, lightly, in reassurance.

“We do have a great number of questions for them,” Lilith said, “though I think at least a few you could answer yourself.”

“I don't know who you think I am--” Agatha said, looking up from the instruments, and then she paused, and blinked. “I don't... Uh...”

Lilith could see Agatha's mind whirring with realization and unsure what to believe. But whatever conclusion Agatha eventually came to, it left her just as shocked by the Clays' existence as they'd been by hers.

“I've never met my parents,” Agatha blurted out. “I don't remember them, at least, but I'm pretty sure they're dead. And I haven't even seen Uncle Barry in well over a decade.”

Lilith exhaled sharply, looked to Adam. It was what they'd suspected for a long time, but it brought a sharp pang of pain to lose them all over again.

“I see. Well, that explains some things,” Lilith said. “Heliotrope. As in Heliotrope Scribe and Book Works?” Agatha nodded. “Then that means the von Mekkhans have been keeping you safe.”

“Oh-- yes, kind of,” Agatha said, suspicions melting away. “Technically, though, Mamma Gkika's been raising me.”

“Mamma Gkika,” Lilith repeated flatly. “Gkika has been raising--” No, there was an even more
pressing question than that: “Where, exactly, has she been raising you?”

“Well, in her home, obviously,” Agatha replied, puzzled by the question. “At the bar. Where else?”

Lilith covered her eyes with her hand. Adam gave Lilith a sympathetic pat on the back and then to Agatha an apologetic look.

“It’s really a lot less rough than it used to be,” Agatha said, twigging onto the problem. “The upstairs, at least, since that part serves human tourists. I mean, it’s pretty loud and sometimes the tourists can get insufferable, but I was always safe with the Jägers, and Mamma's girls looked out for me, not to mention Mamma--”

Lilith gave a weak laugh, strange and tinged with disbelief.

“I think we’re getting a bit ahead of ourselves,” Lilith said, “going over the details of your upbringing before we’ve even gotten a hug out of Bill’s only surviving child.”

“Oh,” Agatha said, and stepped out from behind the table, opening her arms uncertainly. “Well, of course--”

The next thing Agatha knew, she was swept up into a smothering hug. Lilith did take note that Agatha had a scalpel concealed up her sleeve, but was not surprised by it.

“I don’t suppose Gkika still allows her girls to ply their more unsavory trades there, does she?” Lilith asked.

“It makes them very popular with the tourists, actually,” Agatha replied, voice muffled by Lilith's chest.

Oh, good grief, Lilith thought, unsure if she was appalled or amused. As in most matters even peripherally involving Jägers, she was probably both.

Mutual questioning soon turned from testing, to curious, to genuinely interested. Almost twenty years was a lot of time to catch up on, especially with people you'd never met before. Agatha could hardly believe it, but she was talking to Punch and Judy, who were alive and who'd known her parents and uncle better than just about anyone, and who were family too, of a sort.

“You never returned to Mechanicsburg,” Agatha said, as they walked the campus grounds together. She had no more classes for the day, but she was expected at the lab soon, so they agreed to meet again later in the week for a proper visit over tea.

“We were retired,” Lilith said. “And after all this time, we didn't think we had any reason to return.”

“That can't be true! What about the people in Mechanicsburg who missed you?” Agatha said. “A lot of people thought you were dead disappearing the way you did. And you could have--” Agatha faltered a bit at this point. “If you'd at least visited once in a while, you might have met me, you
Lilith was silent for a few seconds.

“You're right,” she said, reaching over and squeezing Agatha's shoulder. “You have to understand, even when we lived there, we spent most of our time away from Mechanicsburg, accompanying Bill and Barry. And after that, well, the town was crawling with tourists, and we didn't want the attention. But there were other things keeping us here, as well. The machine shop, of course, and my piano students, and,” Lilith smiled warmly, “the children.”

“Children?” Agatha blinked.

“Some years ago, we took in a few orphans,” Lilith said. “We couldn't have any of our own, but there are always little ones in need of homes. And they were unlikely to get taken in by anyone else.”

“Constructs?” Agatha surmised.

“A Spark's experiments,” Lilith said. “Most people found them a bit unsettling, but they weren't dangerous. Klaus made arrangements for the rest of the children, last we heard. And also for the Spark who experimented on them to be sent to Castle Heterodyne.”

“Oh—well.” Agatha tried not to laugh at the absurd thought that the Baron regularly sent misbehaving Sparks to her house.

“Agatha, do you know how to play the piano?” Lilith asked suddenly.

“No, not really,” Agatha replied. “I know a few others. And a friend tried to teach me how to play the harmonica once, but we ended up trying to invent a better one instead.”

“And did you succeed?”

“Um, yes, kind of,” Agatha said. “We were a bit too successful, actually. We donated to the city. I think they still use it for demolitions.”

Lilith and Adam laughed quietly, sharing a look. Agatha wasn't sure what it meant, exactly, except perhaps that Bill and Barry had similar work methods.

“The family's always been musical,” Lilith said. “If you'd like to learn, I think you'd do well on the piano.”

“I think... I'd like that,” Agatha smiled.

Mister Tock loomed into sight, and they slowed their steps.

“I suppose I'll see you in a few days,” Agatha said.

She was hugged again, by both Adam and Lilith, and then Lilith kissed her forehead.

“We'll be looking forward to it,” Lilith said. She took Adam's arm and they started walking towards the gate.

Agatha considered watching them go, but that felt entirely too soppy, so instead she turned around
and started walking towards Doctor Beetle's lab.

As it happened, this took her through the quad, where she found the misbehaving Sparks from Merlot's class. She'd almost forgotten about putting them to work on clearing the snow, but she was jarred out of her thoughts by Dimitris Zappas calling out her name.

“Miss Heliotrope! What do you think?” he asked, leaning on his snow shovel and gesturing smugly around the quad and along the cobbled paths, clear of the stamped-down snow previously concealing them completely.

A few of Dimitris' friends were still industriously clearing a last stretch of the path leading towards one of the buildings. A passing student with his nose in a book strayed too close to the working Sparks, and they yelled and made threatening gestures with their shovels—*Can't you see we're working here?*—then once he was scared off, they returned to their task with their sense of self-importance a bit more buoyed.

Agatha had forbidden them to build anything to help them with the task, and that had worked out well, for all that she spotted a suspicious plume of smoke coming out of one shovel. Unwilling to be humbled, they instead chose to assign special importance to their task, and even dubbed themselves The TPU Snow-Clearing Committee, an institution which would no doubt become quite prestigious by the next winter, given how gullible certain elements of the student body could be about some things.

“You're all doing very well, Mister Zappas. I daresay you all have a talent for this kind of thing,” she said.

Dimitris brightened at the praise. He reached into his coat and took out some blueprints.

“I sketched some ideas,” he said, “because after becoming acquainted with the mechanics, I'm certain I can create something which will dispose of snow efficiently! But I know you said no building anything, so if you could just approve these--”

He thrust the blueprints into Agatha's hands. The top proclaimed “SNOWNIHILATOR 5000”.

“I can have the prototype ready by tomorrow,” Dimitris added with a hopeful air.

“I'm sure you could, Mister Zappas,” Agatha said, looking over the blueprints. She was rather shocked at the lack of flamethrowers, but maybe those were on the second page. The design looked astoundingly practical at first glance. “However, why don't we save these for next year?” she said.

“You can test the prototype over the year, work out all the kinks, and then reveal your final design in style.”

Dimitris' eyes glazed over a bit at the word 'style', no doubt as he was imagining the over-awed masses looking at his creation in wonderment.

“After all, the Snow-Clearing Committee will need to do something to top your performance this year,” she said, “and it's always good to have something in reserve. Right?”

Dimitris took the blueprints back.

“You know, I do have a few more ideas for improvements, now that I think about it,” he muttered as he stared at the papers.
“Of course you do,” Agatha said. “Good luck, Mister Zappas.”

She suspected she'd regret encouraging this by next year, but with any luck, Dimitris and his friends would be kept busy and out of trouble until April.

Nearly a year away from Mechanicsburg, and Agatha was afraid she'd forgotten it.

The coach Agatha took from Beetleburg stopped at one of the outlying villages, mostly to avoid the glut of tourists pouring into Mechanicsburg every summer, but it was a short walk into town from there, and Agatha had only taken along one bag. She stopped in front of the gates for a few moments, staring up at the giant trilobite cradled by a skeleton, and everything down to the air she breathed in suddenly fell into place, familiar. She was home once again.

She encountered Carson on his regular bench at the gate, but to her surprise, he was accompanied by Van. How he knew she'd be returning on this particular day was a mystery to Agatha, because she couldn't think of anything else short of fire that would remove Van from his coffee shop.

He rose up in one fluid motion, smiling and holding himself proudly, and Agatha could tell he was about to say something flowery and unnecessarily official.

“Van, your hair!” she said, foregoing a greeting altogether.

He'd bleached part of it, the top of his head now a nice blond shade. Van's mouth closed with a snap and his hand twitched, as if he was stopping himself from touching it.

Carson, rising a bit slower, all his joints creaking with age, coughed into his hand and hid a smile.

“Yes, well, I'm an adult,” Van said, “if I can be entrusted with the well-being of Mechanicsburg in your absence, I think I can also be trusted with making decisions about my own appearance!”

“I know,” Agatha said. “I was just going to say it suits you.”

“...Oh.” Van looked surprised for a split second, then a bit embarrassed. “You think it looks good?”

He passed a hand through his hair, tousling it just so.

“It looks great,” she said. “Now, am I going to get a hug, or do I need to start waxing poetic about your waistcoat for that?”

“Well, I did get a new silver chain for my watch—” Van laughed. He opened his arms and got the wind knocked out of him when Agatha pounced him for a hug. “Nice to have you back,” he wheezed out.

“Yes, welcome back,” Carson added, which made Agatha move onto him next. She hugged him with a bit less force, but with just as much enthusiasm.
“It's great being back,” she muttered into Carson's shoulder. For a second, she wasn't sure if she wasn't going to start crying. It always seemed silly to her that people should cry when they were happy, but she was starting to maybe understand how it happened.

But she collected herself, and as Van walked her to Mamma Gkika's, she asked to know everything that happened during her absence.

The upstairs of Mamma Gkika's was just as loud and obnoxious as Agatha remembered it—that is, only marginally more so than the downstairs. When she and Van arrived, they were greeted not only by the cheesy beer hall music which seemed to so entertain the tourists, but also by the sight of Mamma Gkika lecturing one of them on proper behavior.

“--and if hyu dun know how to keep hyu hends from getting into places whref dey don't belong, Hy vill be verra glad to relieve hyu ov dem. Hy know sumvun who vill mek much better use ov dem den hyu, and Hy vill mebbe not haff de patience for anesthetic first, yah?”

The terrified man nodded quickly and Gkika released his collar, sending him sprawling onto the floor. He scurried away fast and Gkika gave him one last grin, though it would have been more accurate to say she exposed her rows of jagged teeth at him.

“If you meant me, I certainly don’t want his hands,” Agatha said, “I don't know where—mmph!”

Agatha found herself picked off the ground bodily and crushed against Gkika's ample chest.

“Velcome home, sveethot!” Gkika said, putting Agatha back down. “Let me look at hyu! Haff you been eatink vell? Did hyu haff fon in Beetleburg? Hyu crush anyvun interesting?”

Agatha laughed, feeling generally giddy about everything. They were starting to draw attention from the patrons.

“Hoy, mind hyu own business!” Gkika snapped at them, but she couldn't hold back a smile. “Iz chust my daughter home from university! She iz a verra schmott gurl, Hy vill haff hyu know.”

A few of the tourists, proud parents themselves, raised their various containers of alcohol in toast to Gkika and congratulated Agatha, before politely returning their attention to boozing and leering.

“Better go downstairs,” Agatha said, unable to resist a lopsided smile before adding, “where it's quiet.”

Gkika laughed, then herded Agatha and Van through the back and down the stairs.

The moment they reached the downstairs, Gkika drew in a deep breath and bellowed “Boyz, look who's back!”

In waves, every Jäger in the room looked towards Agatha, and promptly abandoned their seats and even their drinks. Like excited puppies, they surrounded Agatha from all sides, welcoming her back and asking her questions all at the same time.
Agatha laughed and tried to calm them down, but answering all their questions at once was proving difficult, which was how she ended up perched up on the bar counter, with a captive audience, telling them all how she managed to stop a steam-powered butter churning clank from agitating the entire faculty of the Department of Agricultural Science, and when she said “agitating”, she meant they would have all ended up as sticks of butter if she hadn't been there to jam the clank using nothing but a wedge of cheese, a length of rope and a straw broom.

This went on for hours, and when Agatha ran out of things to tell them, it was the Jägers' turn. They had stories of various minor military engagements throughout the year, most against wayward Sparks, and even several amusing anecdotes about life on Wulfenbach Castle. Griping about the Lackya seemed to be the newfound Jäger pastime.²

None of them had managed to injure themselves beyond Gkika's abilities to fix them, so Agatha found herself without patients, but they *did* manage to injure themselves, and glossed over those parts of their stories sheepishly. Agatha rolled her eyes, not in the mood to lecture and knowing that attempting to advise Jägers to be careful was both a waste of time and mildly insulting.

At some point through the day, Van took his leave, and the Jägers grew slightly less overwhelming. Agatha remained cheerful—partly because they kept handing her steins of beer and by the end she was probably a bit tipsy—but having not eaten anything all day, or indeed unpacked, she had to bow out as well. The Jägers accepted this with their usual good cheer.

When she got to her room, she fell onto her bed and curled around her pillow, sniffing it. It still smelled like her hair: soap, vinegar, and the slight astringency of disinfectant. Just different enough from her pillow in Beetleburg that she noticed.

She changed from the sober black skirt and waistcoat she'd been wearing in Beetleburg into something more comfortable, which meant in this case her old work clothes, and then she ventured out of her room.

She was drawn to the kitchen by the smell of Gkika's cooking, which generally tended to involve finding the largest, most succulent piece of meat in the marketplace and throwing it in a pan. Gkika did try, over the years, to ensure Agatha had a healthy and balanced diet, as befitting a growing child. But Gkika also remained unwilling to compromise on her personal 'meat with every meal' rule, even if it meant getting creative about how to include it (a fact which resulted in Agatha having some strange notions about salads, but by Mechanicsburg standards, that didn't even qualify as an eccentricity).

After dinner, Agatha wandered into her lab. Not everything was where she'd left it, but the little clanks she'd left behind had behaved themselves admirably, considering that nothing looked broken. There wasn't even any dust.

She turned on some of the equipment, but she didn't do anything else, instead just sitting in the semi-darkness and listening to it hum. This, too, was a piece of home she'd been missing.

She was decidedly not moping when she heard the door from the street outside Mamma Gkika's open, and the traps being deactivated one by one. And she definitely did not jump out of her seat when she heard familiar footsteps on the stairs.

Petra sashayed into the lab as if she belonged, looking older, and much dressier than Agatha thought she remembered, but still with the same sly smile.
The two girls flung themselves at each other in a sudden impromptu competition to see who could give the most bone-crushing hug. Petra won by a small margin, but only because Agatha was feeling a bit silly and nostalgic.

“Well, I was afraid you'd forgotten all about us!” Petra said.

“What, me? You're the one always running off!” Agatha retorted. “Weren't you gone all winter?”

“I was!” Petra said, delighted. “Europa is actually far more entertaining than I gave it credit for. Do you know, once I was outside Wulfenbach lands, I actually had bandits try to rob me!”

“Oh, how did that work out?” Agatha asked.

“Marvelously. They all had quite the lovely caches, and they were so very chatty once you got them talking, so I managed to triple my inventory by the time I reached Paris.” Petra smiled again, just slightly vicious. “And of course, I have to thank you for those little modifications you made on my wagons. They came in very handy.”

“Well, of course they did,” Agatha sniffed, just a bit proud. “What about Ducky?”

“Oh. Ducky.” Petra tapped the top of Agatha's workbench in exasperation. “I don't know. If she's not in town, she's probably still around Balan's Gap somewhere. I passed through there on the way back, but I couldn't find her. Her supervisor told me she just up and disappeared one day.” Petra rolled her eyes. “I didn't stick around to wait for her to turn up again.”

“Right,” Agatha snorted. “So. What trouble do you think she's gotten into this time? Ran off with the circus? Kidnapped by a cult? Shanghaied by airship pirates?”

“Well, it doesn't really matter, does it?” Petra shrugged. “We'll find out once they realize they bit off more than they can chew. Maybe she'll bring back a nice souvenir! Hopefully not an ear.”

“You need to let that go, Petra. She only brought back an ear once, and it wasn't even fresh.”

“Ugh, I hope she didn't fall in with another pack of archeologist adventurers,” Petra shuddered. “There are only so many preserved body parts I'm willing to tolerate over the course of a friendship.”

“Oh, no, I guess I'll have to rethink your Christmas gift,” Agatha said with mock-disappointment. “What will I do with all that formaldehyde now?”

Petra cuffed Agatha's arm, grinning.

“Nice to be home again, though, isn't it?” Petra said.

Agatha looked around the lab, listened to the distant rumble of brawling Jägers, and agreed.
Whatever that something was, if it came from the mouth of someone wearing a trilobite and offering to demonstrate their invention, it tended to instill an inexplicable feeling of terror into anyone who heard it.

Added to the already established pastimes of antagonizing Boris Dolokhov and accidentally breaking stuff. A bored Jäger could be a terrible thing.
Misdirection

When Ducky was ten, during a town-wide marathon game of knock knock run, Siggy Oessler from down the street bet her a shiny pfennig she wouldn't be able to get past Frau Hoogle's dog.

Agatha and Petra were appalled.

“You can't do that!” Agatha said, upon hearing the terms of the bet.

“Not for a pfennig!” Petra added. “That dog's worth a castlemark, at least!”

“Petra,” Agatha hissed, “you're not helping.”

“Yes, I am!” Petra protested, before turning to Ducky again. “A pfennig's too little. Make it for more.”

But Ducky refused. It was, after all, a very shiny pfennig, fresh from the mint. It reflected the sun like a little mirror, not yet scuffed, yellowed or greasy from passing through too many hands. And even if she weren't fixated on that bright little coin, Ducky would have still done it for free, because Siggy Oessler was an asshole, and it was probably her civic duty to prove that smug bastard wrong.

“I can do it,” Ducky said confidently.

Ducky had no idea if she could do it.

Frau Hoogle's dog was terrifying. It had iron teeth, like the dog constructs that saints had in stories, though Ducky was fairly certain Frau Hoogle wouldn't qualify as a saint in any religious denomination known to Europe. The dog was kept tied in her tiny courtyard, where it snapped and growled at anyone getting too near the gate.

As Ducky climbed up on top of the gate neighboring Frau Hoogle's, she reassured everyone that she had a plan.

Ducky did not have a plan.

So as a dozen kids swarmed on top of every elevated surface available nearby in order to see inside Frau Hoogle's courtyard, and as the dog huffed in anticipation of snacking on a skinny ten-year-old, Ducky had no more idea than anyone else about what she was going to do.

Later, she would remember only a blur, as her pulse pounded in her ears and her hands ached.

What the other kids told her happened was that she jumped as far as she could from the tall fence separating Frau Hoogle's courtyard from the neighbor's. There was a lattice over the front half of the courtyard, from the gate and almost halfway to the door, meant for grapevine which hadn't really grown all the way over it. Ducky grabbed onto the lattice, arms and legs both, hanging on for an amount of time which was widely disputed—anywhere between a few seconds and a few minutes. Either way, it was enough for the dog to leap and snap several times, not quite reaching Ducky.

And after one such leap, Ducky looked over her shoulder, waited for the dog to hit the ground with its front paws again, and untangled herself from the lattice, dropping directly onto the animal's head,
knocking it silly.

This is where Ducky's memory picked up again. She remembered the thud and the yelp, and the collective gasp from the children watching. She remembered scrambling to her feet, heart thudding all the way up to her fingertips, and slamming her knuckles into Frau Hoogle's door in triumph.

Then she turned around and said “Hah!” as she sought out Siggy Oessler among the throng of children, so she could rub his face in it.

Unfortunately, that was when Ducky forgot the “run” part of “knock knock run”. She didn't hear the door open, but she felt Frau Hoogle's wrinkly hand clamp down onto her shoulder.

“Well, well, well,” the old woman said, as she turned Ducky around. “If it isn't the Xypolitoses' little Ducky, come to visit! Do come in, sweetheart.”

Ducky cast a desperate look over her shoulder, but the rest of the children had all dispersed already, and there was no rescue for her as she was drawn into Frau Hoogle's house, served stale jam, and forced to listen to the old woman complain for three hours about her children never visiting.

But Siggy Oessler never bet against her, ever again.

Ducky rubbed her thumb and index together, as if still holding the shiny coin. She didn't have it with her, she'd left it in Mechanicsburg, on her nightstand. But she still smiled, and then looked down, past the grate, and into the tunnel.

She wouldn't be dropping on anyone again, she didn't think. That first Smoke Knight hadn't been expecting her to do something quite so stupid, and that was probably the only reason she managed to get the jump on him. No matter how good your training, a person falling on your head steel-toed boots first was going to knock you out.

Ducky was just glad his neck snapped in the process, she wouldn't have been able to stomach slitting his throat. She'd still have done it, she would have just felt awful about it afterwards. She could be squeamish about blood.

The rations she pilfered off his corpse were delicious, at least. He had other entertaining things, like poisons and knives, but she left those behind. The poisons were very helpfully labeled, but Ducky didn't have much of a head for the chemical stuff. And the knives were probably poisoned too, so she didn't want to accidentally kill herself by forgetting that and using one to cut off a wedge of cheese one day.

But she gathered up all the other helpful knick-knacks, like the tiny red flashlight, a set of downright enviable lockpicks and a quality lighter. Other small devices were found, and though Ducky couldn't figure them out right away, she took them along to disassemble and rework later.

For now, she stayed hidden, napping in snatches before some noise startled her awake.
There were things other than Smoke Knights in the tunnels. There were also Geisterdamen, and monsters.

The Smoke Knight were easy. They were humans. They were well-trained humans, but even when trained to be unpredictable, they still fell into predictable patterns, as opposed to Ducky, who managed to be an agent of chaos the like of which most Smoke Knights were not prepared to deal with.

The Geisters were strange, but interesting. Ducky found some of their underground lairs, though mostly so she could remember where not to go. The first one she found by accident, turning a corner and stumbling right in the middle of it, but she hid in a crevice before she was noticed and observed them for a while. She learned a lot, though almost nothing of their gibberish language. She stole from their supplies a few times, as opportunity arose. They made delicious cheese out of spider milk. The entire process was fascinating.

The monsters were easy by comparison. They were very different from the ones in Mechanicsburg, though Ducky was not surprised that Mechanicsburg would have better monsters. The ones under Sturmhalten managed to be both less friendly and less scary. Ducky was not especially impressed, but she avoided them either way.

Everything else, Ducky dealt with in turn. She had a respirator stolen off the dead Smoke Knight, and she was observant enough to notice when they used gases. She was slippery enough to elude all their search grids. And people? People were easy. People were ambulatory monster-food, and Ducky learned quickly the territories and appetites of everything that lived in the tunnels.

Ducky wondered how long she spent in the tunnels. She had a watch, but she looked at it so infrequently, that the numbers soon became meaningless. She took it apart a few weeks—a few days? A few months?—into her tenure as a sewer-dweller.

In an abstract sense, Ducky knew she ought to be planning her escape. But escape tended to not seem like such an immediate need compared to eluding capture, or scrounging food, or avoiding messy death. Escape sounded like work, or at the very least something she would need to put thought into.

It was much easier to wait for serendipity to strike. Maybe the ceiling would crash down, maybe a door would open, maybe Ducky would be exploring the tunnels one day and she would step out into the light, blinking, and feel a cool breeze on her face. Maybe someone would come, though Ducky hoped they wouldn't.

She really, really hoped they wouldn't, not for her.

When Ducky was sixteen, she walked into the kitchen one day and sat down across the table from
her father.

“Poppa, what if I went to university?” she said.

Achim Xypolitos lowered his newspaper for only a moment and gave Ducky a look over his glasses.

“What would you be doing at university?” he asked.

“Attending,” Ducky said.

This actually made him put the paper down, and he stalled a bit by folding it with extra care.

“Ducky, darling, you don't want to go to university,” he said patiently.

“Yes, I do!” she said, offended. “Agatha always says I could do well in school if I tried!”

“Ah, there we have it. Agatha. She wants to go, doesn't she?”

“I don't see what that has to do with it,” Ducky muttered, as she stared down at the table.

“You hate school. So if Agatha doesn't have anything to do with it, what does?”

Ducky remained silent.

“Look, Ducky,” her father started more kindly, “you have to play to your own strengths.”

He got up from the table and ambled over to a cupboard. He took out a small pot, and upended it on the table. It was filled with scraps of paper—old receipts, odd documents, even Ducky's birth certificate. Among the papers were gold coins.

Achim picked out the coins one by one, slowly stacking them to one side.

“Your cousin Nistor is looking for another apprentice at his machine shop,” he said.

“Nistor doesn't like me,” Ducky said, scrunching her nose in distaste, because the feeling was mutual.

“He likes money just fine,” Achim said. “And you can have this money to pay for an apprenticeship, or you can have it to go to university. It's your choice. I know that with both of your friends leaving, you're going to have a hard time. But, Ducky—”

Ducky looked up into her father's warm brown eyes.

“You should remember, the Heterodynes always return.”

What was it she said?

She couldn't remember the exact words. She'd been drugged with something, though she couldn't tell
at the time. Everything seemed clear and bright and warm. Nothing to be alarmed about.

She said--

What were the exact words?

She said “Lady Heterodyne--”

No, before that. There was something about Lucrezia Mongfish. They weren't even talking to Ducky. But someone mentioned Lucrezia.

And then she said, “Oh. The Lady Heterodyne's mother.”

And the old man—the prince—he grabbed her shoulder and said...

Something. The exact words didn't matter this time. He asked her to repeat herself. He asked about Lady Heterodyne.

Ducky was confused for a moment. “Who?”

There wasn't any Lady Heterodyne in Mechanicsburg yet. There was Agatha, but she was just Agatha, and her mother was named Gkika.

No, but there was. There was a Heterodyne, because Ducky could remember, in that moment, a million conversations with the words “When the Heterodynes come back--”

But if the Heterodynes weren't back yet, then there wasn't really a Lady Heterodyne. That was the truth too. There were too many things true at the same time, and they all slipped around Ducky's mind like oily marbles. She had to think hard to put them in order, and she wasn't going to do that for an unpleasant old royal.

She didn't answer his question, but she did say the truth.

“The Heterodynes always come back,” she said.

The prince gnashed his teeth and ordered her strapped to a table.

But at no point did she say Agatha's name.

And the straps weren't very good, anyway.

When Ducky was eight, she and Petra and Agatha sneaked into the Red Cathedral.

They didn't really know what to do once they were inside—sneaking in was as far as they thought out their endeavor—but they wandered around, snacking on communion wafers.

It was not long until the crypt-dwellers found them.
Even worse, it was Ducky's own great-great-great-grandfather who found them. He lectured Ducky for what seemed like hours, while Agatha and Petra stood to the side, eyes to the ground, scuffing their feet against the floor. They were completely ignored as Ducky's undead ancestor scolded her.

But the point of the tirade was, he wasn't angry at her for sneaking in.

He was angry at her for getting caught.

---

Was Ducky getting tired, were the people searching for her getting smarter, or were the tunnels becoming more dangerous?

Ducky skidded around a corner. It was a sharp ninety degrees turn, but she had a hook in her hand, and she grappled the corner as she turned, narrowly avoiding a dunk into sewer water. She liked the hook.

Was she getting weaker, or were they getting better at chasing her? She couldn't remember them managing to stay on her trail for so long until now.

Was she running out of clever plans, or were they learning her tricks?

“Stop!”

Okay, no, they really weren't learning a thing if they thought just yelling after her was going to make her stop.

Ducky figured out much too late why they yelled it, though.

She'd been herded this way. A catwalk was missing, leaving only a dead drop in its place. Too far to jump. Or so they hoped.

Ducky ran faster. She prepared the hook. All she needed was to grab onto the opposite edge. Her hand would hurt. It would hurt a lot. But they wouldn't be expecting it.

She jumped. She reached out with the hook, as far as she could.

She missed.

She missed.

She missed.

It was a very long drop, and she realized halfway down there was no chance she'd survive it.

---

Ducky placed the shiny coin in Petra's open palm.
“Thank you, but I prefer paper money,” Petra said, giving the pfennig a dubious look.

“It's for luck,” Ducky said.

“I don't think they sell luck this cheap,” Petra replied.

“I hope you get robbed by bandits,” Ducky said.

“Why, thank you!” Petra beamed. “I hope so too!”

The clank girl was pretty, in a polished metal sort of pretty that girls shouldn't be.

Cold, hard fingers pressed against Ducky's jaw, turning her face to one side, then to the other. Trapped in a chair, surrounded by an array of cold brass and rubber tubing, and pumped up with drugs, Ducky couldn't do anything to stop her even if she wanted to. After a short internal review, Ducky decided she didn't want to. Pretty clank girl deserved a turn being the one staring at someone else like an abomination of science.

“Has she said anything useful yet?” clank girl asked.

“She's even more useless now than before we revived her,” the balding old man growled. “She suffered damage to her frontal lobe in the fall. When she's not lying, she's confabulating.”

“Oh, my,” the delicate clank princess said, releasing Ducky. “Using the truth serum would be quite pointless, then.”

The old man slammed his fist into a table, making everything on it rattle. He looked foiled. Ducky wasn't sure what she did to foil him, but she was sure she must have been responsible for it, and took pride in her work.

“We're mapping her cognitive patterns right now,” explained a young man with auburn hair, as he fiddled with equipment. “We need to establish a baseline for interrogation and—”

The old man stalked out of the room, growling imprecations under his breath. The younger man and the clank girl watched him leave in silence. A few seconds passed—a door was slammed somewhere far away.

“Call me when you get to the fun part,” the clank said, her voice both syrupy and synthetic, before she signaled her attendants and left the room as well.

The young man sighed, and turned to the equipment currently ensnaring Ducky. As far as Ducky could tell, the adjustments weren't necessary. He fiddled while he was deep in thought.
Ducky's mother sold tchotchkes to tourists.

It wasn't a very impressive job, but Dafina Xypolitos woke up early every morning, took her tray of gaudy cheap trinkets, and headed out for whichever gate was first on the schedule that day.

Dafina was extremely particular about her schedule, which she determined after years of ongoing observation and in-depth statistical analysis. There were still charts and notes all over the kitchen, tacked on cupboard doors and wallpapering every exposed bit of wall.

It was still a bit of a mystery whether Dafina was a Spark or not, and even Ducky's eventual breakthrough never definitively proved anything, though Agatha certainly went on about genetics for quite a bit when the subject was brought up. Ducky thought maybe her mother was just a very strange person.

But the point was, when she was not busy crunching numbers, Dafina sold tchotchkes to tourists. And when Ducky was still young, and nobody was available to watch her, she would bring Ducky along.

“There's a sucker walking through that gate every minute,” Dafina told Ducky. “Well, through all of them really. Actually, we'd need to know the exact number of suckers walking through each gate every minute and calculate the average-- okay, look, there's a conceivably high number of suckers walking into Mechanicsburg all the time. Are you paying attention, Ducky?”

Ducky was not, but neither was Dafina to whether Ducky was paying attention or not, so when Ducky nodded, she carried on.

“And it's our job to take advantage of them at a ratio which does not compromise the economic viability of the tourism industry in Mechanicsburg.”

Ducky nodded, even though she didn't understand half the words her mother used at any given time.

But she did grasp the essentials: the world was full of suckers.

It seemed the more time passed, the more the chemical haze lifted, leaving Ducky with both clarity and a number of strange sensations. There was an itching sort of pain going up the right side of her face, but besides being a little distracting, it wasn't bothering her too much.

She remembered who she was, and where she was, and how she'd gotten here, though the details between falling and becoming aware of the lab were inaccessible at the moment. It didn't matter, as far as Ducky could figure. She couldn't have revealed anything important, or she wouldn't still be alive. Not after the things she saw down in the tunnels.

No, she was still alive, for now, stuck in a somewhat uncomfortable chair.

And there was Tarvek across from her, of course. There was always Tarvek.

He was always in the lab with her, because the other two couldn't be bothered. Anevka only dropped in once or twice, to check if it was time to start the torture yet, and grew bored quickly. Aaronev
came to check on Tarvek's progress once in a while, before growing frustrated again and leaving. After the first conversation, he didn't mention Lucrezia again, but Ducky still remembered that one surreal detail, even if she couldn't figure out how it fit with anything. When he talked at all, it was about his spies in Mechanicsburg, and awaiting for new reports which never seemed to satisfy him.

And in the meantime, Tarvek sat there with Ducky, trying to untangle the mess in Ducky's head. It was strange to realize that her brain was making up false memories all on its own. On some level, she found it amusing; she was so good a liar, she was even fooling herself. But it proved additionally convenient because it meant any information she gave under the truth serum was inherently untrustworthy. They first needed to figure out a way of distinguishing between the times she was lying on purpose and the times she was lying accidentally. They needed what they called a baseline for interrogation.

Establishing a baseline turned out to be a lot of questions while Tarvek looked at jagged lines on the paper a machine spat out. Sometimes he made annotations or circled a particularly interesting peak. It was the kind of tedious busywork that would have bored Ducky to tears, and she didn't know how he had the patience for it.

The questions weren't all that interesting, either. They had to be ones that he knew the answer to, so he'd know when she was telling the truth or not. He asked about things she was hired to do while in Balan's Gap, he asked general questions about Mechanicsburg, he asked her to name the color of the rug or how many fingers he was holding up. He didn't seem to mind when she lied, even if it was right to his face. It just gave him more data to compare.

He asked her to tell him her name a lot. Ducky's favorite questions (inasmuch as she could like any part of his tedious repertoire) were the ones that she could answer honestly and still be lying. She had a private little laugh about compound errors, though she couldn't remember where she'd heard the phrase.

At one point, he frowned at the paper and the results which weren't adding up.

“Are you under the impression that you've been lying about your name?” he asked, because he was clearly putting this down to confabulation. “Because we've independently verified that you're Evdokia Xypolitos. If you think differently, I'd be curious to know what you think your name actually is.”

Ducky laughed.

“I didn't actually expect you to catch that one,” she said. “Do you know, the only one who ever calls me Evdokia is my grandmother?”

His eyes darted to the jagged lines again.

“I didn't account for that,” he muttered, and made some notes. “Then what does everyone call you?”

“Oh, lots of things, depending on how annoyed they are,” Ducky replied distractedly. She was leaning forward as far as she could to catch her reflection in the glass of a nearby cabinet. “I'm missing an eye!” she said once she did. “I only noticed that now. Did I poke it out when I fell? It was the hook, wasn't it? I poked myself in the eye with the hook. Typical.”

There were stitches on the right side of her face, explaining the aching itch. It looked like they were still healing.
Tarvek sighed. He reached for a syringe and a bottle filled with a clear liquid.

“Look, I can see this is very upsetting for you,” Ducky said, “but I'm sure you can manage without the sedative.”

He gave her a sidelong glance. Ducky blinked guilelessly, as if she'd just been joking; as if she hadn't noticed how uncomfortable he was with this situation.

“I think this process will be easier on you if you're sedated,” he said.

“Well, yes, the constant questions are pretty awful, but I like needles even less,” Ducky said. “So, no, thank you.”

“How about this: you tell me what people call you and I forgo the sedative,” he offered.

Ducky opened her mouth, ready to weasel her way out of telling him, but in the end, she just grinned and leaned back.

“Sure, okay,” she said. “Hello, Tarvek, I'm Ducky.”

He raised an eyebrow, then looked at the readings, and nodded once, satisfied.

“But I didn't say you could call me Tarvek,” he said, giving her a pointed look.

She shrugged. “Well, it's too late now.”

---

When Ducky was fourteen, she broke through.

She would have thought that being a Spark involved becoming smarter somehow, and that a breakthrough would change things, make her think more clearly.

What she remembered was feeling driven and angry and screaming at people a lot. She remembered her hands cut up from gears and wires, because her brain was going too fast, and she couldn't quite catch up. Too many new ideas, clogging up every corner until there was nothing left but the ghost-images of mechanisms like blueprints in her head. No time for writing them down, when her hands could barely keep up with building them.

Everybody kept telling her, “Ducky, you need to calm down.”

And every time they did, her hands clenched around half-finished devices, and she thought, 'If I hear it one more time, if one more person tells me to calm down, I'll-- I'll--'

Then Agatha came along; Agatha who was a year younger, and chubby and with blemishes on her face, but still as confident as she'd be later, when she grew up gorgeous. She looked at the mess in Ducky's room, and frowned.

She said, “Ducky, you need to work.”
And Agatha’s voice cut through the clutter in Ducky’s mind like a hot iron: painful and bloodless.

Yes, she needed to work. Thinking would come later, but for now she needed to work.

“Come on, tell me.”

“No.”

“You have to! I answer your questions, don’t I?”

“You’re a prisoner, I’m not giving you much choice in the matter.”

“I think you really have no idea how uncooperative I can be when I actually try.”

Tarvek sighed heavily, not looking up from his notes.

“Yes, Anevka is my sister,” he said.

“Uh huh. Was it a difficult birth?” Ducky asked.

“Obviously that isn’t her original body,” Tarvek said. “It’s in the catafalque. She died, during one of my father’s experiments. He was... inconsolable.”

“So you decided to build him a brand new creepy daughter to cheer him up so he could get right back to killing more girls?” Ducky asked.

Tarvek looked up sharply.

“I don’t know why I talk to you,” he said quietly.

“It’s probably because you don’t have any friends,” Ducky said, and she could tell she’d struck a nerve by the way he tensed. For a second, she thought he would sedate her again. She tilted her head and looked around the lab. “I guess it’s just as well, it doesn’t look like it’s safe to be your friend in this place.”

Now he was perturbed, and the way he was looking at her, it was as if he was reassessing his entire opinion of her. Because Ducky noticed, or because he didn’t expect her to be smart enough to notice?

“See? Not as dumb as you thought I was!” Ducky declared cheerfully.

“No, I suppose not,” he said, suspicions momentarily abated.

He got up from his seat, walked around the table. Ducky thought, for a second, that he was going to sedate her anyway, but instead, he reached over Ducky’s head and removed an entire piece of the machinery behind her chair. Then he sat down and started modifying it.
It was too quiet; Ducky kept expecting humming to start, and when it didn't, it felt strange, like a staircase ending sooner than expected. She watched him work.

When Tarvek finished, he moved to replace the piece, and Ducky turned her head to see what he was doing. She couldn't see much, as the helmet over her head was in the way, but it was on her left side, where she still had an eye, so she did manage to catch a glimpse.

“Oooh, but did you fix the power fluctuation issues? I keep feeling nauseous whenever the readings go over sixty-seven percent,” she said.

He frowned.

“Which readings?” he asked.

“Second gauge on the left? No, my left. Oh, wait, I meant your left. No? One of the lefts. That's the one.”

Now that he knew which gauge it was, he returned to the readouts of her brain activity, currently being spit out by the machine, and checked the jagged lines for whatever it was he was looking for.

“Sixty-seven percent,” Ducky repeated. “Bad nausea. Really bad. If you didn't account for it, then the sudden change in physical condition might be giving you false results.”

“Either you're lying right now,” he said, “which would mean the equipment isn't picking it up, or you're confabulating, in which case modifications are pointless.”

“Or I'm telling the truth,” Ducky said.

“Why would you do that?” He shook his head.

“Well, see, if I lied all the time, then people wouldn't believe anything I said anymore, so I tell the truth a lot so people will be more likely to believe my lies.”

He now bore the pinched expression of exasperation many people often did while conversing with Ducky. He hadn't built up a tolerance yet, so he actually took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly.

“I meant,” he said, “why would you point out the problem, considering the situation? This isn't like the questions. You're not required to help me.”

“I just don't like seeing someone's experiment have unresolved technical issues,” Ducky said.

“You're not going to try to convince me you prioritize scientific pursuit over you own well-being,” he said flatly.

“I'm a Spark, of course I do,” Ducky scoffed.

“We have you tied up!” he said. “In the very device you're trying to help me improve!”

“Huh. Then I guess you really owe me,” Ducky replied.

He sighed and dropped the matter. Then he left the room. A few minutes later, he returned only to
have her taken out of the chair and escorted back to her cell.

The next time she was brought back to the lab, Tarvek very carefully hooked her up to the machine. He wasn't ignoring her exactly, but he seemed to be deep in thought about something. As he was making the final connections, he pointed out some modifications to Ducky.

“No wonder you were feeling nauseous, the feedback was considerably higher than my projections,” he said.

“Really? Looked to me like it just needed a new gauge.”

“It did need a new gauge. The old one was faulty. That was why I didn't catch it sooner.”

Ducky actually snickered.

“Just so we're clear, I'm laughing at you,” Ducky said. “Your entire experiment was almost compromised by a faulty gauge.”

“Yes, thank you,” Tarvek replied coolly.

“I'm not saying you're bad at this, but would you like me to double check your work?”

“You're being obnoxious on purpose now,” he said.

“I'm always like this. You should know that by now. But I promise to be slightly less like this if you let me streamline your machinery.”

“You're not in a position to negotiate.”

“I'm not even in a position to scratch my own nose, but I'll negotiate all I want, thank you very much.”

Tarvek walked around the device, adjusting dials and checking connections instead of giving Ducky any further attention.

“So,” Ducky said after a while, “about this nose itch I'm having...”

“You'll live,” Tarvek replied.

“Oh, come on! Would it kill you? Because I certainly can't live like this!”

Tarvek sighed.

“Why?” he asked. “Why is this the thing that you choose to complain about? You have been kidnapped, lost in the sewers for weeks, hunted, and killed during pursuit. Now I'm working to extract information from you, and you're joking like we're old friends, and trying to be helpful. Being helpful. You can stop attempting to endear yourself to me, it won't work.”
“What, exactly, do you think won't work?” Ducky asked.

Tarvek dropped any pretense of working on the device and paced until he was right in front of Ducky, brittle with anger.

“I won't help you escape,” he said firmly. “You cannot be allowed to leave and reveal anything of what happened to you in Sturmhhalten. You're going to die here.”

Ducky looked at him evenly. He wasn't angry at her. If anything, he was angry at himself, and the way he uttered those words sounded a lot like he was repeating something someone else told him to remember.

“Oh, I know that,” she said. “If you think that's what I'm planning, you're seriously overestimating the scope of my ambitions.”

Surprise flashed in Tarvek's eyes, but before he had a chance to respond, Ducky continued.

“It's not like I think I can get out of here,” she said. “I know I'll end up dead. But I also know that you're probably going to be here when I do, because you're always here. You're too afraid of what might happen if you're not here, because the old man and the fancy doll might not be as considerate of my comfort as you are. You've got scruples, unlike those two vipers you're related to. And that's why, when I die, I want it to hurt.”

“...What?” Tarvek blurted out, eyes wide in shock.

“I want it to hurt you,” Ducky continued. “I want you to feel miserable about it. I want you to feel like a complete heel. We're going to be great friends, you and me. We're going to talk. We're going to bond as you work. I'm going to help you work the kinks out of the process. It's going to be fun. And when I die, you are going to suffer.”

There was so much venom in Ducky's last words, that Tarvek involuntarily took two steps back. He leaned back against a table, shocked and uncertain how to react.

“And now that you've informed me of all this,” Tarvek said coldly, “what incentive do I have to participate in your twisted little game?”

“Forgetfulness,” she replied.

“I don't need—”

“I'm not offering it to you now,” she said. “That's for later. Because trust me, by the time this is over, you're going to want it. I'm never going to tell you what you want. You can hook me up to your machines, you can try to divine the truth, you can even sic that marionette you call your sister on me. She seems like someone who knows how to wield a knife like an artist. But there's just some things you can't make a Mechanicsburger do. There's some things you can't make me do. We serve the Heterodynes. The rest of the world can burn.”
He didn't go back to sedating her, but he didn't look comfortable around her, either. He was polite. He spoke softly, when he spoke to her at all. He was cold and aloof.

He worked in complete silence.

“Now you're just making me feel bad,” Ducky said. “I'm sorry. It's not about you. It's just the last thing I can do anymore.”

“I understand,” he said, his voice faint.

“I don't think you do,” Ducky said. “I was never good at anything else. I have to do one thing right before I die, even if it's dying before I reveal anything.”

He remained quiet.

“And I think...” Ducky started again, uncertain and barely above a whisper, “I think you're the only one who's going to feel bad when I'm gone.” The only one in this viper's nest, she thought, as the jagged lines danced across paper. That was true.

Tarvek didn't react, but she knew he heard. She knew that deep down he still needed to believe he was a good person who was forced to do bad things.

She could see it in the slow unknotting of tension in his shoulders how he let down his guard again.

After a while, tentatively, he showed her the modifications he was making on a piece of the machinery, and asked for her opinion. Ducky made a quip about going to the corner store for condensers.

By degrees, they fell into companionable banter.

And Ducky rubbed her thumb and index finger together, imagining a small, shiny coin between them.

---

When Ducky was eleven, she skipped school to avoid a test she knew she was going to fail.

It didn't seem fair that she was expected to actually sit for an hour doing nothing, when no matter how hard she tried, her page was still going to be mostly blank when she turned it in. She knew she wasn't smart, but she wasn't willing to have her face rubbed in it.

“You're not stupid,” Agatha always told her, “you just need to apply yourself.”

But Agatha didn't understand, because Agatha was smart. She grasped everything easily. She never needed anything explained more than once. She even corrected the teachers. Agatha didn't understand because she'd never been anything less than brilliant her whole life.

Petra was more direct.

“You're lazy and you give up at the very first obstacle!” she'd say, as she tried to figure out the mess
Ducky usually made of her homework. “Stop making up stuff! If you don’t know how to solve the exercise, you can’t just bluff your math. You need to actually learn the formulas.”

Ducky thought about it as she wandered through Mechanicsburg. Petra was wrong too, in some ways. Ducky wasn’t lazy, she just wasn’t good at stuff.

The only thing that managed to jar Ducky out of her bitter inner monologue was the inviting smell of fresh baked pastries. She sniffed the air, and her eyes went right to the greasy paper bag in a boy’s hands, bearing the name of a bakery and still steaming.

Hungry, Ducky fished through her pockets, and produced only a shiny pfennig. She rubbed it for good luck.

“Hey, kid,” she whispered to the boy, as she trotted up to him.

He turned his head. He was accompanied by two adults, standing before a vending stall and arguing over a decorative plate. Tourists, the whole lot of them. After a while, you could tell just by look.

“Hey, kid, wanna see a coin trick?” Ducky asked, grinning at him.

“I’m pretty sure I’m older than you,” the boy replied, blinking slowly as he looked down at her.

“Growing up in Mechanicsburg adds five years,” Ducky replied. The boy frowned in slight confusion, but before he could say anything else, Ducky asked again, “Wanna see a coin trick?”

The boy looked over his shoulder at his family, still not paying him any attention, then back at Ducky.

“Sure,” he said, with a smirk. “Let’s see if you’re any good.”

Ducky grinned and went through a few coin tricks—simple sleights of hands her father showed her—all very quickly. The boy’s two accompanying adults weren’t even done haggling with the vendor by the time she finished.

“Oh, well, that's nothing special,” the boy sniffed when she was done, playing at worldliness. “I could learn to do all that myself, if I wanted to.”

“You're right, I guess,” Ducky sighed, and pocketed her coin. “Sorry to bother you.”

She turned around and walked down the street and around the next corner. Then she took a few more turns, and, once she judged that she'd made a clean escape, she sat down on the curb, opened the paper bag and took a look inside. She was delighted to discover that the boy’s bag contained two apple strudels. If he hadn’t noticed the absence of his pastries yet, he was certainly going to notice soon, because they both looked and smelled delicious.

She ate one of them right there, and saved the second for later.
“I know I shouldn't be, but I am worried about her,” Agatha confessed, her fingers picking at piano keys randomly.

“Who says you shouldn't be worried about her?” Lilith asked.

“Nobody, I guess.” Agatha shrugged. “But she goes off like this all the time, there's no reason to assume this time it's serious.”

“Except she's never been gone this long before,” Lilith said.

“Well, she's never gone for as long as she's gone until she's gone for longer,” Agatha said, then blinked. “...Did that make sense, what I just said?”

“I'm going to assume it makes more sense if you know the young lady in question,” Lilith said, amused. “You said her family is Xypolitos?”

“You know them?”

“I know they're... slippery,” Lilith said. “Is her family worried about her?”

“Well, her mother threatened to rent out her room if she doesn't return soon. So yes, I think they're starting to worry, too.”

“And you want to go look for her?”

Agatha gave Lilith a stricken look.

“I feel like I should have been looking for her already,” Agatha said. “By this point, her trail's probably gone cold.”

“You hardly could have predicted she'd be missing for so long.”

“That's just it, I don't even know for sure she's missing. For all I know, she's off somewhere having the time of her life.” Agatha slammed her hand down on the piano keys.

Lilith took Agatha's hand into hers.

“I think,” Lilith said, “that either she is in trouble, in which case someone does need to look for her, or she's not, and a show of concern from her loved ones might impress upon her the importance of informing them of her whereabouts in the future.”

“So I should look for her.”

“That's up to you,” Lilith said. “But I think that right now, abusing my piano won't help you find her any sooner.”

Agatha gave a sheepish smile.
“Sorry,” she said. “I'll make it suffer by resuming practice, then.”

“Oh, come now, you're actually starting to get good,” Lilith said.

Agatha grinned, momentarily pleased, even if she still couldn't shake her worry.

There was an unseasonably early snowfall that year, in late September, followed almost immediately by warm, sunny weather which was rapidly turning Beetleburg into mostly mud and slush.

Agatha made her way from Clay Mechanical to the University without incident, and without being waylaid by anyone along the way. But she was barely past Mister Tock when Dimitris Zappas came running in her direction, looking wild-eyed and disheveled. Hardly a state foreign to Sparks, but something in his demeanor made Agatha actually pause.

“Miss Heliotrope,” Dimitris said, skidding to a halt and having to catch his breath before he could continue.

“I don't suppose this is about the Snownihilator?” Agatha asked, recalling some rumor about students going outside Beetleburg to test it before the snow melted. She could just imagine what might have happened; maybe the machine went berserk and leveled some village, and now there was a mob on Dimitris' tail.

“No! Well, yes! It is, but not about it!” Dimitris said, barely coherent. “We were testing outside Beetleburg! And it was all going quite well, I think, there was some trouble with the steerage, but really that was more operator error than anything, and it isn't like anyone is going to miss those trees, I'm more concerned about that dent in the front--”

“Mister Zappas,” Agatha interrupted, “is this relevant information?”

“Hm? Oh. No!” He wrung his hands, distraught again. “Miss Heliotrope, we found something, out in the woods!”

“What did you find?” Agatha asked, now impatient.

“We--” Dimitris swallowed and lowered his voice. “We think it's a hive engine.”

It was a hive engine.

“Should we really have it here?” Agatha asked, staring up at the horrific device as it occupied much of the secondary lab. It was much bigger than Agatha expected, but then, it seemed fitting for something which had caused so much fear and destruction to loom large.

“The Master knows what he's doing,” Merlot replied, but there wasn't much reprimand in his voice. He was just as unsettled as Agatha. As anyone would be, faced with a hive engine.

“Still, to bring this thing here,” Glassvitch said, shaking his head. “I'll be glad to see it gone.”
Merlot folded his arms and scowled.

“We all would,” he muttered. “But are we going to stand around rubber-necking until it's gone? There's work to do.”

Agatha and Glassvitch shared a look—neither was sure much work could be accomplished while the hive engine was still there—but they uneasily returned to their tasks. Glassvitch and Merlot had their own experiments to see to, and Agatha had a stack of paperwork almost as tall as she was to get through and sort out.

Merlot worked as he usually did, furiously, pushing himself as remorselessly as he pushed his underlings. But once in a while, even he threw an uneasy look over his shoulder, to the thing occupying the secondary lab.

When Doctor Beetle finally returned, he looked calm and collected. Agatha handed him paperwork which absolutely needed his attention, whittled down to only a thin stack, and she hovered near him as he perfunctorily leafed through it and signed.

“Will the Baron's people be arriving soon?” she asked as she was handed the paperwork back.

“No,” Doctor Beetle replied. “They don't need to know about this.”

“You mean—at all?” Agatha asked, almost dropping the stack of paper in surprise.

Doctor Beetle gave her an avuncular smile.

“In time, Miss Heliotrope, in time,” he said. “But meanwhile, we have an unprecedented opportunity.”

Opportunity to become revenants, perhaps, Agatha thought, though now she understood that Doctor Beetle had an ulterior motive for smuggling the hive engine back to the lab in secret, other than his excuse that the population of Beetleburg shouldn't be alarmed to its existence.

“The Other's technology is far beyond anything known to science,” Doctor Beetle continued. He was using his ranting voice, oh dear. “The technological advances we could make by studying it, why, just think, Miss Heliotrope—”

He continued in this vein for quite some time, and Agatha did think, a lot, because Doctor Beetle was in the process of falling victim to the most basic forms of Spark hubris. She was tempted, so very tempted to go along with him, to share his vision, to follow wherever he led. But she was not a minion by nature. And although she admired the man deeply, what he was about to do was a step too far for Agatha.

And maybe Ducky was still somewhere in the back of Agatha’s mind, even when she had more immediate concerns, because in that moment Agatha did something she was sure Ducky would approve of, and shamelessly lied right to Doctor Beetle's face.

“But, Doctor, I already sent word to Castle Wulfenbach,” Agatha said, affecting the meek body language of a lackey confessing to a mistake.

Doctor Beetle was completely thrown by Agatha's words. His fugue fizzled out on its own.
“I was thinking that you're so busy,” Agatha rushed to say, “and it was such a small thing, I was sure it fell within my--”

Doctor Beetle cut off Agatha with sharp gesture. His expression was stern.

“I'm sure you meant well, Miss Heliotrope,” he said, sounding disappointed rather than angry. “Nothing to be done about it now... But in the future, do consult with me before contacting Castle Wulfenbach for anything.”

She was not prone to making mistakes, and until now, her work had been exemplary, so he was finding hard to reproach her. But he looked put out by the entire situation.

“I'm sorry, Doctor Beetle,” she said. She didn't quite hang her head, because that would have been laying it on a bit too thick, but she did sound apologetic. “I'll go drop off the paperwork,” she said.

He waved her off, sighing to himself.

Agatha shrugged on her coat and left. She ran to the administrative offices of the university, and she did indeed drop off the paperwork, shoving it into the hands of a surprised functionary.

But more importantly, she sent a missive to Castle Wulfenbach. Unless Doctor Beetle demanded to see the exact moment it arrived there, he wouldn't know she sent it after their discussion instead of before. But even if he did, and took her to task for it, she was going to stand by her decision. A hive engine was involved; this was hardly the time for her academic career to take priority.

That night, Agatha slept uneasily, her dreams clogged up by strange nightmares about hive engines and Ducky becoming a revenant, which was nonsensical because Ducky was a Spark; whatever trouble she was in, at least she was immune to slaver wasps.

Agatha gave up on sleep more than woke up, so she waited until Mara woke up as well, and they had a small, quiet breakfast together.

Mara, who was not a morning person despite waking up early nearly every day of the week, actually frowned in concern at one point and asked Agatha if something was wrong.

“Nothing's wrong,” Agatha said.

“Something's really wrong if you're worried,” Mara insisted. “Is the town going to blow up? Are we blowing up? Are we all going to die and I woke up for nothing? You'd tell me, right?”

“Mara, we are not blowing up,” Agatha said slowly. “It's just a big day at the lab today.”

“Yeah?” Mara said, unconvinced.

“The Baron might be sending some people,” Agatha added.

At least Mara accepted this explanation.
They started towards the University together, as they did on some days, and Agatha was almost convinced today was going to be a completely regular day. Then Mara stopped in her tracks and, being arm in arm with Agatha, dragged her to a halt as well.

“I think that was a Jäger!” Mara whispered, tugging at Agatha's arm and indicating a certain direction.

Agatha looked, startled, and caught glimpse only of a flamboyant hat bobbing away through the crowd. Probably a Jäger, yes. This meant Wulfenbach forces were already in town.

Profoundly ambivalent about the situation, Agatha prodded Mara to walk on.

“Though I guess it isn't as much of a big deal to you,” Mara said, “being from Mecahnicsburg and all...”

“The Jaegers aren't allowed in Mechanicsburg,” Agatha said. “Not until a Heterodyne is in residence again.”

“Oh, then I guess you wouldn't be used to them?”

“I wouldn't say that,” Agatha grinned. “You'd actually be surprised how often I've had the opportunity to bump into one.”

“So why are they here?” Mara asked.

“I told you the Baron was sending some people, didn't I?”

“But you didn't say why,” Mara said. “And you must know, because you work with Doctor Beetle!”

“It's definitely not because we are blowing up,” Agatha thought she should reiterate.

Mara's face heated at that; that had seemed like a more reasonable conclusion to draw when she was still sleepy.

“Well, obviously not,” Mara muttered, “who'd even suggest such a thing?”

Agatha tactfully dropped the subject.

But the town really was crawling with Jaegers, and it didn't take long for Agatha to be spotted. They grinned in her direction and waved, trying to be subtle, so of course Mara couldn't help but notice.

At one point, a couple of Jaegers even came up to Agatha and Mara, as they waited at the side of a road for a wagon to pass.

“Nize day, ladies,” one of them said, tipping his hat as he grinned.

Agatha recognized him as Garbov. She once had to realign his jaw while he tried to talk the entire time. She recognized his companion, as well, as Gherasim, the one who kept pestering Garbov with questions while Agatha was working on his jaw.

“Und gettink nicer all de time,” Gherasim agreed, winking at Mara.
Mara froze in surprise at first. Agatha thought she might have to extricate the poor girl from this situation. She could hardly handle normal human boys looking at her for too long, Jaegers was probably too much for Mara.

But then Mara blushed profusely and giggled. This only seemed to encourage Gherasim, who waggled his eyebrows at her.

“Going to de Univerzity, iz hyu?” Garbov asked, actually managing to sound casual.

“Of course,” Agatha said. “Keeping the peace, are you?” She managed not to smile as she said this.

Garbov beamed.

“Hyu know how it iz,” he said, “vhen de Baron travel sumvhere, vit all de pipple who woud vant him dead, ve need to mek sure none ov dem iz waiting for him dere already.”

Agatha raised an eyebrow at this. Mara wasn't paying attention to the conversation—Gherasim hit her with an awful pick-up line that made her laugh a strange high-pitched laugh and hide her face against Agatha's shoulder—but Agatha appreciated the warning. She hadn't expected for the Baron to come himself.

“If you'll excuse us,” Agatha said, “you seem to have broken my friend here.”

“Yah, iz common effect,” Gherasim sniffed. “Jäger charm is potent schtuff.”

“So iz hyu breath,” Garbov muttered, elbowing Gherasim. “Haff a good day!” he then said more pleasantly to Agatha and Mara. “Keep out ov trouble, yah?”

“We'll see,” Agatha said, grinning at them.

She dragged Mara along.

“I don't get it, do you know a lot of Jaegers, or can they just smell the Mechanicsburg on you?” Mara asked, still a bit red in the cheeks as they continued on.

“Let's say it's a little of both,” Agatha replied.

“I can't say I approve of bringing the hive engine into town,” Klaus said.

Wulfenbach scientists were milling around the hive engine, alternately monitoring it and preparing it for transport. The Baron observed these proceedings with some detachment while talking to Doctor Beetle.

Gil had watched with only marginally more interest, but his gaze kept straying to the rest of the lab, and within minutes, he wandered off to inspect a set of blueprints pinned to a board.
“Well,” Doctor Beetle said, “I thought it would be best not to simply leave it out in the open like that. The students who found it were Sparks, after all. They might have gotten... ideas.”

The corner of the Baron's mouth twitched, like he was about to say something and changed his mind.

“And you kept its presence here a complete secret, of course,” Klaus said, his voice even and implying nothing.

“Of course,” Doctor Beetle said. “Nobody but my most trusted people know about it.”

“And the students who found it,” Klaus added.

“I'm given to understand,” Doctor Beetle said, “that my assistant had a very serious conversation with them and we can be assured of their discretion in the matter.”

“Still, I would like to have them interviewed,” Klaus said. “I want to know exactly where and how they found this hive engine.”

“If you wish,” Doctor Beetle shrugged. “Miss Heliotrope--”

“Yes, Doctor?”

Doctor Beetle's assistant, prompt and efficient, seemed to be everywhere at once, helping the people coordinating the transport of the hive engine and making sure they did not damage anything in the lab. But she still managed to be within earshot of Doctor Beetle the entire time, ready to do his bidding, and he scarcely needed to call her name for her to appear at his side.

She also had a thick Mechanicsburg accent which Klaus found a bit disconcerting, but which at least explained her efficiency.

“The students who found the engine,” Doctor Beetle started.

“They should all be in class right now,” Agatha said. “But I can have them pulled and brought here immediately.”

“There's no need to disrupt class,” Klaus said. Not so much because he cared about their education, but there was no need to cause a commotion and provide more fodder for the rumor mill. He remembered well, since his own time at TPU, that the only gossips worse than students were usually the professors. “But I would prefer my people talk to them sooner rather than later.”

Boris, who was himself never far away from the Baron's side, neatly stepped up next to Agatha.

“I will take care of it, Herr Baron,” Boris said. “With Miss Heliotrope's assistance.” He nodded at her, with enough deference that Klaus rather thought Boris admired the young woman's work ethic and competence.

“Of course,” she said, nodding in return.

Then there was a loud clanging as something got knocked over, and she rushed off to see to it (“Hoy! Don't touch that!”).

“An interesting character, your Miss Heliotrope,” the Baron remarked.
“The best assistant I’ve ever had,” Doctor Beetle said, sounding pleased. “I’ll have to persuade her to stay on after she graduates.”

Someone to watch closely, then, Klaus concluded. He made a note to have someone look into Miss Heliotrope.

“While I'm here,” Klaus addressed Doctor Beetle, “I was wondering if you'd like to indulge my curiosity. I've heard that you've been making some modifications on your clanks.”

Gil's head turned right around, and he was watching for Doctor Beetle's reaction almost as closely as Klaus was.

But Doctor Beetle did not look nervous or guilty. Instead, his face lit up with scientific enthusiasm.

“Actually, I've been making improvements,” he said, clapping his hands together and smiling widely. “I may be old, but I'm not out of the game yet, Klaus. I'll be very happy to show you. After all these years, I could still teach you a thing or two.”

“I'm sure you could, old friend,” Klaus replied, already somewhat relieved.

Beetle did not sound like a man planning a violent uprising, as Klaus had feared upon hearing that he was overhauling his clank army. But still, even if he wasn't, Klaus considered it was worth looking into his recent activities. One never knew where betrayal could come from, and it paid to be prepared for every outcome.

With the hive engine sent ahead to Castle Wulfenbach, and most of the personnel with it, all that remained was a token security force to guard the Baron and his son.

Doctor Beetle insisted on showing one of his new improved clanks to them. He laid out the mechanical principles behind his work, and followed up with a practical demonstration. One of the clanks, with the casing of its torso removed, was made to walk back and forth as Doctor Beetle explained the modifications it underwent. The exposed gears turned quietly, producing only a slight whirr, a smooth and pleasant sound of mechanical efficiency.

And Gil was beginning to understand some of the admiration Klaus had for his old teacher. Doctor Beetle's new clanks were of a finesse and efficiency that looked like it might rival that of the Wulfenbach armored clank forces.

Gil observed the clank closely, but his father was downright fascinated, so much so that even the frown which seemed a constant on his face lately lessened a bit. He asked for permission to disassemble the clank further.

“Please do,” Doctor Beetle replied. “I wouldn't normally allow this for just anyone, but you were, after all, one of my brightest students. Now--”

He turned around and was greeted by Agatha carrying a roll full of screwdrivers.

“Ah, thank you, Miss Heliotrope,” Doctor Beetle said, selecting an appropriate screwdriver. “Of
course,” Doctor Beetle continued, “the mechanical functions are the more obvious improvements, but I've also taken the opportunity to expand greatly on certain aspects of the clanks' artificial consciousness which I had not fully explored in the past.”

Klaus selected a screwdriver as well.

“I'd expect as much,” he said, before turning to Gil. “Doctor Beetle was always the leading expert in the field.”

“It is something of a passion,” Doctor Beetle said modestly.

“I seem to remember the course you used to teach on the subject,” Klaus said. “I think more of the students in your class went on to have scientific breakthroughs in clank design and operational paradigm than in the rest of Europa combined.”

Doctor Beetle preened a bit, and this led to reminiscing about the past. The clank was broken down into parts with expert speed by Klaus and Doctor Beetle as they talked, leaving Gil feeling like the third wheel.

Not that he minded much. Gil noted with some amusement that his father seemed to actually be having fun. That wasn't something he got to witness very often.

“Excuse me.”

Gil had to step out of the way as Doctor Beetle's lab assistant came through, carrying a set of specialized tools on a tray.

Doctor Beetle didn't pay her much mind, but as he continued chatting, she handed him the correct tools one by one. He was demonstrating the way the clank's powercore was put together, all tiny bits put together in the kind of complex array that usually only made sense to a Spark. But the assistant—Miss Heliotrope—seemed to have no difficulty keeping up with Doctor Beetle's explanations, and seemed also to be able to intuit which tool he would need next without him asking for it.

She was very good at her job, Gil reasoned. She probably assisted Beetle in building the powercore in the first place. She proved that she was very familiar with Beetle's work style and had been anticipating his needs all day.

But Gil still found himself compelled by the sight, for reasons he couldn't really articulate.

The clank was now stripped down to its smallest components, all arranged in a neat pattern on the floor. Klaus was giving Doctor Beetle several suggestions for how the clanks might be improved. Gil assumed this meant that the Baron was now adequately convinced that Doctor Beetle was not planning an uprising against the Empire, but knowing his father, it was likely that he also wasn't sharing his best ideas with Beetle, keeping those in reserve for improving the Wulfenbach clanks instead.

Either way, they weren't paying much attention to anyone else.

Agatha was no longer needed for the moment, and so was off in a corner, talking with the Jäger commander, probably about Mechanicsburg things. Gil couldn't guess what those things might be, and they were talking in low voices, so he couldn't hear either, but as he approached, they both fell silent and turned to look at him. There was something remarkably similar in their expressions, Gil
discovered; like expectant predators.

“Miss Heliotrope, was it?” Gil said.

Agatha stared at him silently for a few seconds—probably thinking he was either an arrogant twit or a dullard, because Doctor Beetle had been calling her name all day, so anyone with a functional pair of ears and a smidgeon of attention ought to have already known that for sure. Gil tried not to wince.

“Yes,” she answered slowly. “And you must be the son.”

Well, he probably deserved that. He gave a short self-deprecating laugh.

“I'm Gil,” he said, grinning at her.

This seemed to mollify her a bit. She actually, briefly, returned the grin.

“Agatha,” she said. “Was there something you needed?”

“No.” Gil gave a look over his shoulder, at Klaus and Doctor Beetle absorbed in their work. “No, just keeping out of the way for now. I don't suppose there's anything else interesting to do around these labs?” He gave her the most winning smile he could.

“There's plenty,” she replied pleasantly.

“Really?” Gil actually perked up at the thought.

“If you're a registered member of the faculty or have a written permission slip from a University official,” Agatha continued.

“...Oh.”

“In the meantime, I can offer you refreshments,” she said, also looking at the Jäger, who was busy tapping the glass of a goldfish's bowl at the moment. “Coffee, tea, cocoa?”

“Vot about beer?” he asked, looking up from the terrorized goldfish.

Agatha swatted his hand when he tried to tap the glass again, and picked up the fishbowl, holding it out of his reach.

“Coffee, tea, cocoa?” Agatha repeated more firmly. The Jäger looked disappointed and shook his head.

“I'll have coffee,” Gil said.

“Coming right up.”

Agatha passed the goldfish bowl to Gil, and turned towards a device on a nearby workbench. It looked like it had started out as a samovar and undergone several industrial modifications along the way. All she did was crank a lever, and steam started billowing from the top.

In less time than it took Gil to look the device up and down, Agatha turned back around and presented him with a steaming cup of coffee.
“Thank you,” he said, shifting the bowl to the crook of his arm and accepting the cup with his other hand. “That was fast.”

“I'm sorry I didn't give you more time to mentally prepare for it,” Agatha replied, giving him a slanted grin.

“How does it work?” Gil asked, easing the fishbowl onto the workbench as he inspected the device closer.

“It makes beverages,” Agatha said. “It's hardly rocket science.”

“Did you build it?” Gil said, resisting the urge to take the device apart. But Agatha was starting to look impatient.

“It's a refurbished old samovar,” Agatha said. “If you take it apart, I'm throwing you out of the lab. And Doctor Beetle would support my decision, because everybody is very attached to the coffee it makes.”

Curious, Gil took a sip of his coffee and had to admit he could see why they would be.

Doctor Beetle bellowed for Agatha again, and she rushed off. Gil frowned as he watched her go, his instincts tingling with the feeling that there was something going on here that he should investigate. His instincts had always been right about this sort of thing in Paris, though admittedly that usually led to getting himself in trouble.

“Did she seem defensive to you?” Gil asked the Jäger.

The Jäger was leaning on his elbow against a workbench, his expression grave as he regarded Gil.

“Dot iz de kind ov gurl hyu don't vant to cross, sveethot,” the Jäger said, unusually serious for once. Since Gil had seen the way Jaegers were around von Pinn, he didn't know how to take this particular piece of advice. He'd certainly never seen a Jäger ever follow it.

“I'm not taking it apart, I'm only going to take a look,” Gil said, putting his cup of coffee aside, and glancing towards Agatha to make sure she was still busy. “I won't even touch anything.”

“Hmph. If hyu vant,” the Jäger shrugged.

“Right,” Gil said as he eased a panel off the machine. “Great risk yields great reward, as they say.”

“Ho, dot iz vot iz called... statitztical outlier?”

“You're been around too many scientists, Unit Commander,” Gil replied.

The Jäger gave Gil a fangy grin.

“Yah, iz de kind ov job vit high turn-over.”
If Klaus seemingly forgot about Gil the entire time he was discussing clankwork with Doctor Beetle, he gave his son his full attention on the airship ride back.

“Father, about Miss Heliotrope,” Gil said. “Beetle's lab assistant.”

“I know who you mean,” Klaus said, his face unreadable.

“Did you think there was something... odd about her?” Gil asked.

“I take it you did,” Klaus said.

“Maybe it's nothing,” Gil shrugged. “But in case it is something... I'd like to go back to Beetleburg, for a day or two.”

“Might I remind you that you're no longer a free agent,” Klaus said. “The moment I recognized you as heir--”

“I'll be very careful,” Gil said quickly. “And it's only a couple of days, how much trouble could I possibly get into?”

Klaus sighed deeply.

“How much, indeed,” he muttered, then shook his head. “We have other people we can send to investigate Miss Heliotrope.”

“So you admit she's worth investigating.”

“I am not yet an addled old man, I do notice things,” Klaus replied, sounding grumpy but not particularly insulted. Gil still felt a little guilty about insinuating otherwise. “Why do you think you'd be more qualified for this task than anyone else?”

“I already have my suspicions about her,” Gil said.

Klaus raised an eyebrow. “And are these suspicions you'd like to share?”

“After I test my hypothesis,” Gil replied.

It would probably take more convincing before Klaus accepted, but Gil knew he would manage it when he saw that first glint of curiosity in his father's eyes.

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1 This was at least better than turning incoherently belligerent and running into a lamppost, which was Mara's usual reaction to anyone flirting with her.

2 Though the knowledge of fluid mechanics which Agatha employed in building it did come from a
class about rocket science.
A Riddle in Beetleburg

Mechanicsburg was clamming up.

It had been a poor move to send as many spies poking around that town as Aaronev had sent, but impatience and obsession were a bad combination. Tarvek went over the reports the spies sent back and when he compared them to the older ones, found them to be full of exponentially more misinformation. It had to be intentional. Mechanicsburgers knew someone was looking for Lady Heterodyne, and were closing ranks.

Tarvek pointed this out to his father, expecting nothing at all to come of it, but Aaronev fixed his son with an unexpectedly lucid expression and agreed.

“But we still have that girl,” Aaronev had said. “And I still think she knows something. Have you finished the preliminary phase?”

“Almost,” Tarvek replied, though there wasn't much else to do.

“See that you do,” Aaronev said. “The Geisterdamen are getting restless. They want their Lady back as much as all of us.”

Tarvek had nodded and then made his excuses to leave, returning to his lab where Ducky was awaiting another day of testing.

“Did you bring me a coin?”

The question threw Tarvek for a loop, not least of all because Ducky's eager-child-on-Christmas-Day voice was at odds with the gravity of her situation.

“Yes,” he replied, reaching into his pocket. She'd asked for one the other day, claiming she wanted to show him a trick. “Though I don't see what you're planning to do with it, since I'm not going to unshackle you--”

Ducky twisted her wrist and the shackle keeping it pinned against the arm of the chair popped open. She grinned and extended her hand, waiting for the coin.

Tarvek stared at her for a long time.

“No,” he said. “Now I'm worried about what you're going to do with this coin. How long have you been able to unlock those?”

“Since the first day?” Ducky shrugged. “My father's a locksmith, he thinks knowing this stuff is important.”

“Your father is a tax collector,” Tarvek corrected, because this was information reiterated in several documents from Mechanicsburg and Ducky's memory was still unreliable without mechanical assistance.

Ducky rolled her eyes.
“Oh, I’m sorry,” she snorted, and popped out of the other shackle as well to make air-quotes. “I meant he’s a ’locksmith’. A lot of people still aren’t happy about paying taxes. Not one of Bill Heterodyne’s more popular decrees. Before that, if the town needed money or anything else, we just went and took it from the neighbors.”

“You're suggesting that in Mechanicsburg taxes are collected through burglary,” Tarvek said flatly.

“Poppa always says, it’s not burglary if you leave them a receipt,” Ducky replied primly, leaning back in the chair and crossing her arms. “Can I have the coin or not?”

“What did you even use to pick the locks?” Tarvek asked.

“Not a coin, obviously, since I don't have one,” Ducky replied, slouching unhappily.

“Evdokia.”

“Taaarvek,” she sing-songed back.

Tarvek sighed. She was trying to distract him by acting petulant. The more stern he tried to be, the worse she would get. He learned that the hard way.

He pulled a chair up in front of hers, and once he was seated he presented the coin to her. She looked surprised for a moment, before she snatched it up.

“Ducky, what are you still doing here?” he asked, keeping his voice soft. “You could have escaped a long time ago.”

“Tried it once already. Didn't work out so well for me, did it?” Ducky replied, as she familiarized herself with the coin's feel and weight. “What, you want to talk me into escaping again?”

She grinned, though really she only momentarily flashed a canine at him, more threat than joking.

“They're going to interrogate you soon,” he said.

“They should be interrogating me already. You finished your part,” Ducky said, casual as she flipped the coin between her fingers. It slipped between them and she caught it again, resuming the exercise. “You've been lying to them, haven't you?”

She sounded delighted by the idea, like she was proud of him for it. Tarvek found it a bit patronizing.

But was that why she unshackled herself? Because she knew her time was near to running out?

Tarvek looked at the coin. ...She couldn't use that to kill herself, could she? Surely she wouldn't try, she knew they'd just revive her again.

She dropped the coin again, picking it up quickly from where it fell in her lap, and then hissed in frustration.

Oh.

“I didn't think to mention... You might have some issues with fine motor skills,” he said. “Because of your brain injury.”
She glared at him. Actually glared, not cheerfully antagonistic, not playful, not frustrated. This was a baleful expression, fit for the descendant of bloodthirsty marauders and morally deviant minions.

Tarvek was just about ready to push his chair back, put some distance between them, but just as quickly Ducky's expression cleared, and she looked down at the coin with a studied expression of disinterest.

“Sure,” she said, her voice not quite cracking. “Fine. It's a good thing I'm dying, it's not like I can be of use to-- to anybody anymore.”

Just like that, the loveable scamp act fell to pieces, and Tarvek saw himself confronted with only a frightened girl who, despite her claims otherwise, didn't want to die.

And, despicable as that might have been, he saw opportunity in what she'd just revealed. A plan began forming in his mind.

“Ducky,” he said, plucking the coin from her fingers and taking her hand. “There's still something you can do.”

She gave him a dubious look.

“The Geisterdamen,” he said, “are getting ready to attack Mechanicsburg. You were down in the tunnels, did you see--”

“Hive engines,” Ducky said, hushed.

Tarvek nodded.

“Lady Heterodyne would want to know about that, wouldn't she?” he said.

Ducky chewed on the inside of her cheek, conflicted. She'd done nothing but deny the existence of any Heterodyne, but now hive engines were involved, and Tarvek was banking on the fact that Ducky had the same natural aversion to slaver wasps as her fellow townspeople.

“I'm sure she'd like to know a lot of things,” Ducky finally replied, “but I think she'd prefer to hear them from someone whose brain isn't mush.”

“I know,” Tarvek said. “It's why I'm offering to come with you.”

And there she was, surprised again.

“You just want me to lead you to her,” Ducky scowled.

“I do, but only me, I promise. My family won't know. Nobody but us will know, if we play this right.”

“And then what?” she asked.

Then Ducky wouldn't need to die. Not that any of the others had deserved to die any more, and quite a few of them had probably deserved it less, but Ducky was the only one he could save, and the only one offering an important enough reason to defy his father.
But more importantly, if he played his cards right, neither would the Lady Heterodyne need to be pointlessly destroyed. If he could win her favor by warning her of the impending danger, or by returning a captured minion, it would open an entirely new set of options for him, and he could even force his father and the Order to go along with them.

“Then I assume Lady Heterodyne saves Mechanicsburg,” Tarvek said, omitting the part where she’d have the Storm King by her side.

He could just imagine the stories they'd tell about that day, but he was getting ahead of himself. First he needed his chance to meet the Heterodyne Girl.

“Think about it overnight,” Tarvek said. “But remember that your time is running out.”

He placed the coin back in her hand.

“Please,” he said.

She nodded distractedly, staring at the coin in her palm.

Later, Ducky flopped down on the bed in her cell, and held the coin up to the low lamplight. It was a silver Pax-Guilder, but not worth nearly as much as her shiny pfennig, as far as she was concerned.

Right at that moment, Tarvek had to be outlining his plan to the old prince, probably colluding with him to make the escape seem realistic enough. Ducky wagered she and Tarvek were going to get 'almost caught' at some point. That kind of thing always happened in plays. It was very dramatic.

Personally, Ducky always preferred it when the lab or the secret lair exploded right as the heroes made their escape. Maybe she could arrange something like that, in addition to the other thing she had to do before she left Sturmhalten.

Gil wasn't sure where to start, but he did know with whom.

Tracking down Dimitris Zappas and his posse was not difficult. Their unofficial student committee was set up in the attic of the Advanced Mechanics building. Gil found it without any difficulty, and though he had to duck so he wouldn't brain himself against the rafters, the space was cluttered with half-built devices which gave it a cozy atmosphere.

Dimitris Zappas and the two others who found the hive engine were huddled in a corner by a blackboard, having a strident disagreement over some calculations. Dimitris was waving the chalk with authority.

Gil watched and listened for a bit. He didn't know Dimitris or his associates personally, beyond what he saw of them while they were being interviewed, but he knew their type. He'd encountered similar
individuals during his own education: Sparks of middling talent who blustered and tried to cow those without their gifts, yet folded into simpering minions the moment a more powerful Spark rolled their way.

And they'd all been so painstakingly polite to Agatha, too.

Gil strolled up to the blackboard, swiped the chalk out of Dimitris' hand, and corrected the calculations himself. Then he looked at the three stunned students with his most Klausian frown.

“Don't worry, I'm just here to talk about Miss Heliotrope,” Gil said. “I'm sure you're all very relieved.”

The students gave each other concerned looks, because being relieved implied they'd just avoided some unpleasant fate they had not been previously aware of. They nodded vigorously. They knew Gil as the Baron's son and did not want to test just how much authority he had to make their lives unpleasant.

“What do you want to know?” Dimitris said.

Finding back issues of the student gazette was easy. There were usually stacks of it in utility closets, in case anybody needed paper to put down during messy work, and Dimitris was only too happy to show Gil to them.

Reading the gazette was a much more difficult task. It was sensationalist, misspelled tripe as far as Gil could tell. Articles were crammed onto the page in the tiniest font they could get away with, possibly so more inane rambling could be fit in.

“Do people actually read this?” Gil asked.

“No, of course not, nobody does,” Dimitris shook his head. Then, picking up an issue, he said, “Oh, this is the one exposing Professor Gascard as an advance scout for that insectoid civilization.” Dimitris then proceeded to turn to the article in question.

“That's nice, but we're looking for mentions of Miss Heliotrope,” Gil said.

Dimitris removed a page from the gazette he was reading and passed it to Gil without looking. Gil glimpsed a horoscope he suspected was produced through questionable scientific methods.

“Other side,” Dimitris muttered.

Gil flipped it around and found an editorial. It didn't mention Agatha by name, but it was effusive on the subject of an attractive young woman who saved the author from certain death. The danger was sketched out in only vague terms, as opposed to Agatha, whose exact shade of hair color apparently warranted two paragraphs.

“This is the first one?” Gil asked.

“Mm-hmm.”
“Is this in any way accurate?”

Dimitris made a so-so gesture, without wrenching his attention away from his reading material.

“Were you there when it happened?”

“When what happened?”

Gil ripped the paper from Dimitris' hands.

“This garbage will rot your brain,” Gil said, throwing it aside.

Dimitris sputtered.

“It's not like I read that kind of stuff,” he defended himself, “...often.”

“Tell me about Miss Heliotrope,” Gil glanced at the page again, “saving this person from 'an unstoppable clank rampage'. Were you there?”

“Yes, I was there,” Dimitris muttered.

Gil was not expecting the gazette to be helpful in any significant way. Comparing it to the scandal rags which used to misrepresent his adventures in Paris would have been too generous, and it had a certain slapdash quality which made Gil think the student gazette was being printed in somebody's dorm room. Not to mention that someone on the writing staff seemed to be smitten with Agatha to an unhealthy degree.

At least he had a starting point. The gazette was bimonthly, but it narrowed down dates and places for incidents which were, to Gil's good fortune, usually very memorable. He tracked down numerous people who'd had contact with Agatha, often after being saved by her. He wrung them for every drop of information he could, and if they wanted to know who he was and what right he had to ask, he'd give his name as Gil Holzfäller and hint that he was one of the Baron's questors. This handily shut down any line of inconvenient inquiry.

But while he got a lot of information, very little of it struck him as useful. He was told, by the various people Gil spoke to, that Agatha was a hero, that she was a criminal, that she ran the town, that she was actually a clank cleverly disguised as human, that she mind-controlled Beetle, that she was Beetle's daughter, that she was the Baron's daughter, that she was a renegade bandit queen living in exile to redeem herself for past sins, that she made excellent cheese, that she made excellent cheese out of people, that she could travel through time, that she could control monsters--

“I suppose next you're going to tell me that she's a long lost Heterodyne, too,” Gil groused at one point.

“No, that's just silly,” the student he was talking to replied. “She's from Mechanicsburg. If she really was a Heterodyne heir, she'd be running the place, not just living there. Obviously.” He looked at Gil as if he was stupid for even suggesting it.
“Obviously,” Gil repeated faintly.

But what Gil learned was that despite being present for the events in question, an improbable number of people were willing to accept the ridiculous version relayed in the gazette over their own memory of it. Rather than beat his head against this wall, Gil opted to cut to the chase.

He found out that the student gazette was not printed out of someone’s dorm room. It was in fact made with a portable printing press in perpetually changing locations. In fact, it took quite some doing to find its current locations because, as Gil was able to glean, if Miss Heliotrope ever got her hands on the editor-in-chief, it would not end well for him.

That week, the writing staff was churning out its regular stream of semi-fabricated nonsense in one of the storage rooms of the Art building. When Gil walked in, all three members of the writing staff froze in terror, like small animals staring into headlights.

“I'm looking for Kyriil,” Gil said.

There were uneasy glances between the three—two young men and a woman wearing excessive perfume.

“He's gone out,” one of the young men said.

“Gone out.”

“Home. Gone home. He's not in Beetleburg anymore.”

“Really,” Gil said evenly.

“He's joined an expedition to the Americas.”

“So he's an American?” Gil asked.

“Oh—yes, sure!” the man replied, now enthused by his own story. “He has finished his work here and will return home with all the strange ancient secrets he collected while traveling this land--”

“You're Kyriil,” Gil interrupted him.

The man's jaw dropped in shock.

“Why—how did you know?” he asked, giving Gil the most astounded look.

“I have my ways,” Gil replied, opting for an air of mystery instead of informing Kyriil that after reading his editorials, it was hard not to recognize the exact brand of dramatic embellishment he employed in his made up stories.

This left the writing staff in awe.

“You're not here on behalf of Miss Heliotrope, are you?” the woman asked.

“No.”

There was a collective sigh of relief.
“I am here about her, however,” Gil continued. And this made them all uneasy again.

“You're not going to tell her about us, are you?” the other young man asked.

“Gustav!” Kyril hissed, signaling him to be quiet.

“Not if you cooperate,” Gil said. “But really, what do you think she's going to do to you if she finds you?”

“Well... you know...” Gustav blinked uncertainly. “She's from Mechanicsburg.”

“And?” Gil asked, when it was obvious Gustav wasn't going to continue.

“And,” another slow blink, “that's all?”

“My granny used to say Mechanicsburg is where hell sprung a leak,” the woman interjected. Kyril and Gustav nodded gravely. It was unclear if they agreed with the sentiment or if they believed it to be true in the literal sense. Considering the usual content of the gazette, it could be either one.

Gil rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“I can see this is going to be a long conversation,” he said. “Please have a seat.”

There were only two chairs in the room, but they all rushed to obey. Kyril sat down on a stack of newly printed gazettes, smudging the ink. Gil couldn't help from sighing.

Gil tried not to think of catacombs as he walked through the basement level of the Experimental Political Science building. The sinister stories Kyril had filled his head with were probably no more reliable than anything else he said. Agatha couldn't possibly be experimenting on anyone here. She seemed like a nice girl, and certainly not one to chop up the student populace for parts in order to build her own shambling army and take over Beetleburg.

But he was still a bit jumpy when he heard a shuffling pair of footsteps down the corridor. The man who turned the corner was rough-looking, and when he lifted his lamp to get a better look at Gil, he scowled.

Gil recognized the signs of a construct, old scars and mismatched parts fused together along old scars. He moved like his body had long since grown into its flaws, so he couldn't be Agatha's work.

“Who in the cripes're you?” the construct demanded.

“Mimmoth inspector,” Gil replied promptly. Bandying around the word 'questor' would have probably just put him on the defensive.

“Mimmoth inspector?” the construct repeated. “You got a badge or somethin', boy?”
“Why would I need a badge?” Gil said. “What possible reason would anyone have to impersonate a mimmoth inspector?”\textsuperscript{1}

The construct chewed on this information slowly.

“We-ell, we ain't got any mimmoths here,” he said eventually.

“I'll be the judge of that,” Gil replied, imitating the haughtiness of a minor bureaucrat perfectly.

“You'll be judging that without a lamp, then?” the construct replied.

“I... have excellent night vision,” Gil faltered.


He brushed past Gil after that, taking the lamp with him and disappearing around the corner. Gil blinked, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness again.

He was going to have to go check that boiler room.

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Finding the it wasn't hard. All someone had to do was follow the pipes.

The boiler room door was open, letting out a steady orange light suggestive of flickering fire. Gil tiptoed closer, not planning to announce himself until he'd taken a look around.

The corridor leading up to it was cluttered with old chairs, mostly broken and perhaps slated for the boiler, and shelves and cabinets with a variety of uninteresting junk. It was because of the clutter and the shifting light that Gil didn't notice until the last moment something unpeeling itself from the shadows above a cabinet and pouncing down.

He jumped out of the way at the very last moment, barely dodging the assailant and accidentally knocking himself into a shelf.

Something crouched before him—like a cat, but the wrong stance and size, so a construct—and Gil saw a flash of fangs and claws before he kicked at its chest. The construct let out an 'oof' and hit a stack of chairs.

This time it jumped to its feet and yowled, the sound more grating than threatening.

Its face was misshapen, not really human and not really feline, managing to be the very worst combination of features from both. But its eyes were alert, and its teeth looked sharp.

Gil prepared himself for a fight.

So did the construct.
“Hoy, what's that racket?” came an irritated shout from inside the boiler room.

The construct looked alarmed for a moment, and then jumped back, perching on a chair and turning into the very picture of innocence as it started grooming a forelimb. Where moments before it had looked ready to rend Gil to pieces, not it scarcely seemed to notice his existence.

Agatha poked her head out through the door, frowning as she inspected the hall. She looked far more suspicious of Gil than of the construct, however, which made him feel just a bit slighted. He had been the one attacked, after all.

“What the dumboozle do you two think you're doing?” she asked, emerging into the hallway and crossing her arms.

She was wearing a lab coat splattered with blood, as well as other, less easily identifiable fluids.

“I wasn't doing anything!” the construct defended itself, in a high-pitched whine. The next words were inflected strangely. “He was rude!”

“I wasn't the one who attacked--” Gil said, feeling that he should defend himself.

“He kicked me!” the construct interrupted, back to whining. “It hurrrrt!”

“You jumped on me! Miss Heliotrope, I was jumped--”

Agatha raised a hand, and given how grim and disapproving she looked at that moment, Gil fell silent.

“Viga, why don't you go find some philosophy students to play with?” Agatha suggested. “I think there are still a few who haven't heard your riddles yet.”

The construct shrugged, and in one fluid motion jumped to her feet. She slunk off without another sound, disappearing into the shadows.

“And you, Herr Wulfenbach,” Agatha continued, “will explain your business here, yes?”

Her tone was light, but in that dangerous way Jägers had when they asked questions. As long as you cooperate, we're all friends here. As soon as you stop, some of us are dinner. Gil found it a bit disconcerting coming from a human, but then, they did say a lot of strange things about Mechanicsburgers.

“I was looking for you, actually,” Gil replied.

“In a university basement?” Agatha asked dryly.

“Well, I found you, didn't I?” Gil retorted.

Agatha stared at him.

“Yes, you did,” she said. “Congratulations. Can I show you to the exit?”

“Won't the students be alarmed if they see you like this?” Gil asked, gesturing to her blood-spattered lab coat.
Agatha looked down at herself, and seemed to only now remember she was wearing it.

“Fine, wait here,” she said, and turned back into the boiler room.

Gil did no such thing, instead following close on her heels.

“Miss Heliotrope, I really did want to talk to—whoa.” He stopped in his tracks, distracted by the boiler.

It couldn't possibly be standard issue. Momentarily losing sight of Agatha, he circled around the boiler. He couldn't take it apart while it was turned on, of course, but just inspecting it from the outside, he knew he wanted to.

“Miss Heliotrope, you built this!” he said.

“There's no possible way you could know that,” she retorted, coming to stand beside him and frowning at the boiler in concern.

Gil grinned, because he'd just been guessing, but knew by her reaction he was probably right. It looked like the boiler partly operated by the same principles as the beverage dispenser she'd 'refurbished', if by refurbished she actually meant invented from scratch.

“Tell me about it,” Gil requested.

Agatha looked startled. “What?”

“Explain to me how it works!” Gil said, increasingly giddy. “I have so many questions, like--”

In a rush of excitement, he grabbed her hand and pulled her around the boiler, pointing to a particular part which had piqued his interest. It looked like a knot of pipes to the untrained eye, but a Spark knew better.

“Are these solenoid valves? How are they powered? What do they regulate?” Gil went on in this vein for a while, asking increasingly technical questions. “How does it all work?” he asked at the end, looking at her with Spark-fevered eyes.

He was also still holding her hand, and Agatha was disconcerted for a moment.

“Well,” she said, dignified, “if you must know...”

Gil beamed at her in a way that made her think he really did want to know. And she did want to tell someone who would understand. Which didn't make this a wise course of action, but it wasn't like the moment she confessed she was a Spark he'd immediately tell everyone. Emil figured it out and hadn't told anyone. Everyone in Mechanicsburg knew and the secret had been kept for well over a decade. And Agatha suspected the campus was full of people who suspected the truth but never said anything about it. She had been less than cautious a few times.

It couldn't hurt to tell one more person. And if it did, then she'd handle it.

“I think I still have the schematics around here somewhere, actually,” she said.
Gil was delighted.

The schematics of the boiler were joined soon by the blueprints for all the medical equipment. An entire drawer of loose paper—sketches and notes that Agatha would absent-mindedly make in between patients—was emptied and gone over with new eyes. Gil took out his notebook at one point, and though it was only a third of the way used, they filled it up to the last page with ideas, bouncing back and forth between them, building on each other's suggestions, negotiating stylistic preferences.

Hours passed, during which confused patients would walk in on Agatha and Gil discussing things like mechanical innovations, or physics, or music, or revolutions in the gastronomic sciences, and the conversation would easily flow back to medicine without even a hitch.

Though mistrustful at first, the construct patients were won over with relative ease by Gil, who had a good hand with medical instruments and did neat, painless work while cheerfully telegraphing his every move and offering explanations at the patient's request. The fact that Agatha vouched for him didn't hurt either.

Agatha took this opportunity to observe a few techniques that she'd read about but hadn't yet gotten the chance to see in practice, and in exchange she showed Gil some of the quick and dirty tricks that practicing improvisational medicine had taught her. She didn't mention she'd learned most of it on Jägers, though, instead making vague assertions about having practiced on Mechanicsburg constructs. Which wasn't exactly untrue. She'd treated many of the tunnel-dwellers and monsters in Mechanicsburg over the years, though usually for much tamer things, like botched tooth-filings, funguses or splinters.

They didn't quite notice when the patients stopped arriving, though, being in the grips of their fugues and busy upgrading all the medical equipment with limited tools and parts.

What they did notice was when a resounding thud made plaster from the ceiling crack loose and fall all over their notes.

They both stopped working and looked up at the same time.

"Is that normal?" Gil asked after a few seconds of silence.

"It's not Tuesday," Agatha replied, and Gil assumed that was a no.

There was another thud. Then another.

"I think I'm going to check that out," Gil said. He reached for his coat, where he'd flung it aside.

"No," Agatha said, replacing her lab coat with her regular one, "I'm going. It's not your responsibility, and if you get flattened, I'll be the one who has to explain to the Baron how his son got reduced to two dimensions while on campus."

"Well, that would be unfortunate, but I actually have a lot of experience in not getting flattened," Gil replied, following Agatha as she stormed out the door.
“What a specific skill,” she said, sounding amused.

True to his word, Gil avoided getting flattened.

Unfortunately, his strategy for avoiding it was to jump on top of the gigantic clank on a rampage.

Agatha weaved her way between the clank's stomping feet, and hurled herself at a student to push him out of the way as well. After that, she picked him up from the ground by the lapels and shook him.

“Mister Crainic, what have we discussed about unauthorized simulations?” Agatha yelled in the dazed student's face. “It's not Tuesday and I don't see Professor Opatrna supervising!”

“It wasn't supposed to be activated yet!” the student replied, quivering at being the recipient of Agatha's anger. “I was doing last checks, and I accidentally hit the 'on' switch!”

“Great, where's that switch?” Agatha asked.

“The shoulder,” he said, pointing a trembling finger.

“This one?” Gil yelled, having slipped onto one of the massive shoulder plates.

“Other one!” the student yelled.

Gil managed to do an impressive leap onto the other shoulder and hit the switch.

“Nothing’s happening!” Gil yelled, alarmed as the clank attempted to shake him off.

“Oh, well, the 'on' switch only turns it on,” the student explained, sounding a bit too condescending, all things considered.

“Where’s the ‘off’ switch then?” Gil shrieked.

“The side of the torso,” the student said, pointing to the corresponding place on his own body.

“Under the arm!”

“Great,” Gil said tightly. “Thanks.”

Agatha, who had a good eye for when a rampage was under control, had disappeared for a few moments, and returned carrying a wrench.

“Gil, jump on top of its head,” she yelled.

Gil, hanging from one of the clank's arms, did as instructed. The clank raised both arms to grab at him.

“That metal bit sticking out, that's the switch?” Agatha asked.
“That’s it,” the student replied.

She raised the wrench over her head, and putting her whole body into the motion, threw the wrench. It flew in a graceful arc through the air and struck the switch hard enough to break it off. But the clank shuddered after that, and grinded to a halt. Gil slipped off it and landed on the ground. He was breathing heavily, but looked otherwise unharmed.

“Had fun?” Agatha asked.

“Let’s go for coffee next time,” Gil said.

“And let the students get crushed?” Agatha said. “I’m considering it.” She eyed the undaunted Mister Crainic, who was checking his clank for damage.

“What’s this thing for, anyway?” Gil asked, jabbing a thumb at the clank.

“It represents the Roman Empire,” the student replied snootily.

“...Okay,” Gil said.

“Some of the students find it helpful to have a visual aid,” Agatha said.

Gil looked up at the clank, at least ten meters high and as bulky as a tank.

“Well, at least they’ll see it from the back row,” he said.

Professor Opatrna showed up soon enough, and she began applying a vicious tongue-lashing to the entire student populace. This scattered most of the rubbernecks, and served as Gil and Agatha’s cue to make their departure.

It was well past sunset at that point, and late even accounting for how early it got dark at time of year. When Agatha checked her watch, she made a face.

“I was supposed to be at the lab hours ago,” she said.

“Will you get in trouble?” Gil asked.

“I can make excuses tomorrow,” Agatha shrugged.

“That's good,” Gil said. “So...” He floundered for a subject for a few moments. “You’re pretty handy with a wrench.”

Agatha raised an eyebrow.

“If you liked that, you should see what I can do with a parascopic Bistle crank,” she replied, flashing
him a grin.

Gil almost tripped over his feet.

They ended up at a student cafe just off campus, pleasantly crowded and livened by the hum of conversation. They managed to grab a booth in the back, and ordered hot cocoa to shake off the chill.

“Mine's better,” Agatha said about the cocoa. “But I still haven't figured out how to give it the spicy bite this one here has.”

“We could save some for chemical analysis,” Gil offered.

“You know, I plan to do that every time I come here, and then I drink it all anyway,” Agatha replied.

Gil looked into his cup with interest.

“Do you suppose it's because of something they put in it?” he asked.

“Far be it from me to speculate... but they do charge for refills,” Agatha said conspiratorially.

“Devious,” Gil said, and took a big gulp of his cocoa.

“I'll have to bring a chemical kit with me one day,” Agatha said, draining her cup.

Gil didn't say anything right then, but he did give her a very peculiar look.

“What?” Agatha asked, unnerved.

“Miss Heliotrope, you're a Spark,” he said.

Agatha shushed him, and looked around. Nobody seemed to be paying attention to them, though. She leaned over the table.

“Yes, you are,” Gil preempted her.

Now Agatha looked dismayed, because she had intended to deny it, no matter how incredibly silly it would have been. After all this time, it had become reflex.

“If I wanted people to know about that, they'd already know,” she said instead.

Gil leaned closer too.

“I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to,” he promised. He was solemn enough that Agatha believed him.

“Thank you,” Agatha said, feeling awkward about it.
“I used to have to hide my Spark too,” he said suddenly. “It was the hardest part of... of everything.”

“There's just nobody to talk to,” Agatha sighed.

“Yeah,” Gil laughed humorlessly.

“And you can't just go in and fix everything,” Agatha said, rubbing her forehead.

Gil smiled warmly and began reaching across the table, his hand inching closer in that careful way he'd telegraph his movements as he treated the constructs down in the boiler room. Agatha felt strangely endeared by his caution now, when earlier that day he hadn't even thought about it before taking her hand.

They were interrupted by a waitress appearing out of nowhere. Gil was startled and snatched his hand back.

“Refills?” the waitress asked.

Agatha nodded and surrendered her cup. Gil discovered a newfound interest in the table top, but handed his cup for a refill as well, even though he hadn't even finished his cocoa. The waitress accepted both cups and disappeared again, as suddenly as she'd popped up.

“I could protect you,” Gil said after a while. “If that's what you're afraid of.”

He sounded earnest, but there was just enough fire behind his words that he didn't come across as naïve. He probably could. He had the resources of an Empire to back up that promise. But she couldn't explain the real reason for hiding.

“I can protect myself, thank you,” Agatha replied drily.

“By hiding who you are?” Gil said.

“I won't be hiding forever,” Agatha said.

“You don't have to hide now,” Gil said. This time he didn't hesitate, he clasped one of her hands in both of his. “If you come with me to Castle Wulfenbach, you'll be safe.”

Agatha pulled her hand back as if burned.

“Excuse me?” she said. “Taking me into your impossible to escape air fortress is supposed to make me feel safe?”

Gil reddened at the implication.

“No, I didn't mean it like that--” he started.

“But it would be 'like that',” Agatha replied. “And if I don't agree to go, what? You'll tell everyone what I am? You'll prove how much I need your protection?”

“No, of course not!” Now Gil looked a bit sickened. “Do you really think that's the kind of person I am?”
“I have no clue what kind of person you are,” Agatha replied. “That's the problem, I only just met you.”

“Well, I wouldn't do anything of the sort! But I want to help you, and I thought you'd want that too, since we--” Gil's voice started to rise, so he cut himself off, giving a brief glance around. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to come on too strong, you're just-- You're the first girl with the Spark I've met and I thought we were getting along,” he finished in an embarrassed mutter.

He rubbed a hand over his face, neatly avoiding having to look at Agatha.

“We... were getting along,” Agatha said after what seemed like an unbearably long time. “We are. I think. Are we still?”

Gil brightened again, straightening in his seat and looking up at her with a small smile.

“I'm assuming, as long as I don't promise to whisk you off...”

“No, no whisking of any kind on either side,” Agatha agreed with a soft laugh.

“Oh, but I wouldn't be opposed to being whisked off a little,” Gil said, looking hopeful now that he knew that was a possibility.

“I think your father would object,” Agatha pointed out.

“We could build a decoy,” Gil said.

When the waitress returned to their table with steaming mugs, she found them giggling and scribbling on napkins.

It was almost dawn by the time Agatha got home, such an absurd hour that she ran into Mara on the staircase as the latter was heading off to class.

“Agatha, where have you been?” Mara demanded, looking wrung out, as if she hadn't slept the night before.

“I was-- working all night,” Agatha said. “I'm sorry, I didn't realize you'd be worried.”

“You picked the worst possible time to go off gallivanting with a toolbox,” Mara groused, throwing a look over her shoulder and up the staircase. “There's an awful one-eyed girl looking for you.”

“There's a what now?”

“A girl with one eye!” Mara said. “I think she's from Mechanicsburg. She kept me up all night teaching me to play cards while we waited for you. I barely managed to escape just now!”

“I'm sorry,” Agatha said, having an awful premonition about who it might be. “I'll handle it, you go.”

“Please,” Mara said, “do whatever it takes to get her out of the house.” Mara hurried down the stairs.
“Just don’t promise her money back,” she added over her shoulder, “I won it all fair and square.”

Agatha rushed up the stairs and flung the door open.

“Ducky, where have you been?” Agatha demanded.

Ducky, who had been reclining on the sofa and emptying her sleeves of playing cards, flinched and scattered half a deck over the floor. One of her eyes was indeed missing, and half of her face was patched together after what Agatha suspected had been some manner of brain surgery.

“Sturmhalten,” Ducky replied, startled and guilty.

Agatha grabbed Ducky by the shirt and hauled her off the sofa and into a hug that made her bones crack in protest. Agatha only released her when she started wheezing for breath.

“Now,” Agatha said, expression turning stern, “what did you do?”

Ducky grinned.

† The answer would shock and confuse decent upstanding folks.

‡ Philosophy students and faculty members alike were notoriously susceptible to riddles, which were known to bring the entire department grinding to a halt for weeks as the answer was debated. Nobody outside the Philosophy Department noticed any difference.
There was probably some simple trick to regaining depth perception. Ducky didn't know, though she was sure Agatha would. As it were, trapped in a cell and with limited resources, Ducky decided to experiment on her own.

The heavy silver coin made resounding metallic clacks as it hit the wall, ricocheted against the floor, and flew up into the air again, back towards Ducky. She missed the coin the first dozen times she tried this, and she had to scramble to catch it before it fell into the small grated drain in a corner. After that, she took the washbasin and placed it over the drain. It was good that she did. The coin seemed to be attracted to that drain, and the old washbasin, already old and battered, got a few more chips out of the deal.

Ducky reworked her angles after that—it was like an exercise in applied physics, minus that silly math business that gave her a headache—and now she didn't even need to get up from the mattress to catch the coin again. She threw it, it hit the wall, the floor, and then, with a dull smack, her hand.

The skin of her palm was red and stinging, but her arm wasn't tired, and Ducky found that the repetitive motion helped her think. She didn't miss the coin anymore; she still didn't have depth perception, of course, but at least she knew she could compensate.

She only stopped when she heard distant talking in the hallway outside her cell. The guards had come earlier to inspect the strange noises in her cell, and had barked at her to stop what she was doing. She very politely invited them in to stop her themselves, which by their expressions they took as a trap, because they didn't dare step inside, and mostly just ignored her after that.

But this was different, and Ducky had been waiting for it. She pocketed the coin; she'd need it later.

She rose up, straightened her clothes, an old threadbare set probably belonging to one of the servants; which she didn't mind, but she did wish for her boots back, because a good set of steel-toed boots could save your life in a pinch.

The door slid open.

“Ready to go?” Tarvek asked.

He threw Ducky a bundle. It was a warm coat, a scarf, a cap and a decent pair of winter boots. Tarvek had foregone his fancy clothes as well, opting for something more low-key and practical.

“Don't worry about me,” she said, because he'd been nice and deserved some warning. Not that he deserved to understand it was a warning.

He gave a look over his shoulder, as if worried someone might come along.

“Quickly, then,” he said.

Ducky pulled the boots on and dressed in a hurry, then followed Tarvek out.
“I don’t suppose you brought a map,” Ducky muttered.

“There’s no need, I know the way,” Tarvek said.

“Oh, of course. You know it,” Ducky retorted. “Just you.”

“All the more reason to stick close to me, then,” he said.

She didn’t think there was a map, anyway. But Tarvek wouldn't have given her that opportunity to give him the slip, and until they were out of Sturmhalten, at least, she'd need to follow his lead. He hoped so, at least.

“We need to get past this hallway, and we'll reach the entrance to one of the secret tunnels,” he assured.

Oh, but the hallway was probably patrolled of course. And sure enough, they drew the attention of guards. This was it, the close call that would sell this escape business as real, thought Ducky tiredly. She'd spent the last few weeks either in a cell or strapped in a chair, she wasn't in shape for this tedious running business.

She started lagging behind at one point, so Tarvek pulled her along into a relatively hidden recess, where the guards missed them as they ran past.

Ducky slouched against a wall, trying to catch her breathing. Her legs felt weak after being overworked. There was a jabbing pain in the side of her torso that she hadn't felt since her school days. She'd need to pace herself until it was really time to run.

“We need to move, they'll double back any moment,” Tarvek said.

“Alright, alright,” Ducky sighed, and followed him.

She stopped in the middle of the hallway however, looking around with interest.

“What is it?” Tarvek asked.

“I know this part,” Ducky said.

Tarvek wasn't sure that he liked the glint in her eyes just then, but he liked it even less when she turned around and started walking in the completely wrong direction.

“No-- wait--”

He tried to reach for her arm, but she twitched her shoulder like a petulant child shrugging off an adult and avoided his grasp.

“This is the way to your father's lab,” Ducky said.

“Yes, but--” Tarvek passed her, putting himself in her path. Only then did Ducky stop. “How do you know that?”
“I remember it, this is where they took me through,” Ducky said, crossing her arms. “I memorized the layout. Poppa always says, scope your exits.”

“Your father, the burglar,” Tarvek said slowly.

“Well, of course, why else do you think he says it?” Ducky replied, and made to go around Tarvek. But he shifted his stance, making it clear he intended to block her progress.

“That was months ago, and you were heavily drugged,” Tarvek said.

“I don't see how that's relevant, it's not like the hallways rearranged themselves since then.”

“Fine, yes, you're right. What do you think you're going to accomplish if you go to the lab? My father is most likely in there,” Tarvek said.

“Oh, you think?” Ducky asked, frowning as if gravely considering matters.

Before Tarvek could say anything more, Ducky headbutted him in the face.

Tarvek stumbled back, his vision going white as the pain exploded from his cheekbone and radiated outwards. He reached out—to catch Ducky, or to brace himself against something to keep from falling over. Ducky was already running down the hall by the time his vision recovered.

He cursed himself, trying to shake off the dizziness before he turned to run after her. He hadn't been prepared for that. She hadn't shown any sign of getting ready to attack, just the sudden flash of violence, so quick he didn't even process what had happened until after it was already done. But he should have guessed she'd do something like this.

The door to the laboratory was locked when he got there—and Ducky had to have done that, because Tarvek could hear explosions and shattering glass, something crashing around inside. What was happening?

He was ready to break down the door when it opened again, smoke pouring out as Ducky emerged with her scarf pulled over her mouth and nose.

“What did you do?” Tarvek asked, trying to go past her and into the lab.

“Who keeps boobytraps activated while he works?” Ducky complained, but she wouldn't let Tarvek look. She kicked the door closed again. “Ugh, what a mess.”

“What did you do?” Tarvek asked again, grabbing her by the shoulders as madness started creeping in his voice.

“I'll tell you when the guards aren't after us,” Ducky replied. “Run!”

No, the pretense had gone too far, Tarvek had lost control. But before he could devise another course of action, before he could come to grips with the way the situation had spiraled unexpectedly, Ducky shoved a shoulder into him, and pushed at him to move.
“Come on, come on, run!” she said, rushing him.

Tarvek made the next mistake then, and listened to her. There really were guards coming, brought down on them because of the commotion in the lab. And Tarvek should have dropped the entire act then, and restrained Ducky, and waited for them to arrive.

But then, swept up in Ducky's frantic insistence to run—he would sort it out later, he'd sort it out once he was out of the immediate area—he didn't realize he'd made a mistake until he skidded to a halt in front of a contingent of guards, with Anevka at their head.

There were a few seconds of stunned silence, as the guards looked at Tarvek, and then at Anevka, and Anevka looked at them both, assessing, speculating.

And then Ducky said matter-of-factly,

“I guess we shouldn't have stopped to kill your father along the way, huh?”

Tarvek gave her a shocked look. She couldn't possibly be that stupid. She had to know what she'd just done.

And she responded with a look of such innocence, that Tarvek knew she'd done it on purpose.

Anevka's fixed smile turned subtly sharper.

“So that's how you escape Sturmhalten,” Ducky remarked cheerfully as she wrung water from her hair. “I knew you could do it for real, if you were motivated enough.”

The tunnel by which they made their escape was one known only to Tarvek, an escape route he'd mapped secretly in case he ever needed it. The water they'd had to swim through at least didn't come from the sewers, but that was small comfort with how cold it had been.

The tunnel was warm here, heat seeping into the ground from the foundry above. The walls were lined with patches of yellow-green moss, glowing faintly. It was as good a place as any to dry off before going out into the winter cold.

Tarvek, after he finished pouring water out of his boot, gave Ducky a withering glare.

“You planned this entire thing!” he accused.

“I like to think I improvised the best parts,” Ducky retorted cheerfully. Tarvek's frown deepened. “Oh, what? What are you going to do about it now? The way I see it, you either crawl back to your sister and hope she's in a listening mood, or you crawl to Lady Heterodyne and hope the same. Even not knowing a single thing about Lady Heterodyne, which one of them do you feel like taking your chances on?”

Tarvek held her gaze for a second more before sighing, all the fight draining from his body. He leaned against a tunnel wall, slicking wet hair out of his face.
“I suppose you guessed it wasn't a real escape,” Tarvek said. “It's why you killed him,” he added, voice faint. But he sounded more thoughtful than sad.

“No, that's not why I killed the old man,” Ducky said, looking surprised at the mere suggestion.

Ducky walked up to Tarvek and put a hand against his shoulder, squeezing hard as she stared into his face. She was grim, the stitches on her face making her look strange and dangerous in the faint phosphorescent light.

“I killed him because he was a threat against the Heterodyne,” Ducky said, for once completely humorless. Tarvek could feel his shoulder going numb where her fingers dug into it. “And the only reason I didn't kill you when I had the chance is because you're not going to be any kind of threat to her.”

“I promise I won't,” Tarvek said.

“No,” Ducky said, shaking her head, “I didn't ask you to promise, I was telling you. You're not going to be a threat. She's not going to be as easy as me.”

“Ducky,” Tarvek said, as he removed her hand from his shoulder, “absolutely no part of dealing with you could be described as easy.”

They slept in the tunnel that night, and then spent the next day tracking down the caches Tarvek had set up along its length. They held a variety of useful items; money, well-forged papers, even dry rations. Not clothes adequate for the weather, but this sidetrip gave them enough time to dry off, and eat some of the rations. They were edible, nutritious, but by design also inodorous and bland in taste.

Ducky complained, but then again, she kept up a constant chatter of minor complaints, and Tarvek suspected it was to fill up the silence. He barely spoke two words to her after their last chat, and though she accused him of brooding, he honestly did have a lot of things to think about.

The tunnel went all the way out of Balan's Gap and out in the wilderness, where Tarvek had not had the time or foreknowledge to arrange any transport or provisions. But it also had a few other convenient exits along the way, one of them coming out into an alley in town, from behind a well-concealed door.

The wind was biting once they emerged, just before dawn. To Tarvek's surprise, the town was in full bustle and appeared to have been that way for a while. He kept Ducky from stepping out of the alley.

“Cover your stitches,” he said. He stuffed his own hair into the collar of his coat, took off his glasses, pulled his cap lower over his face and affected a slight slouch.

Ducky sighed, looking put-upon, but she parted her hair on the opposite side and let it fall over the stitched on her face. She clumsily tried to braid her hair, but wasn't very good at it, so she took the scarf from her neck and wrapped it around her head instead, before placing her cap on top.

Tarvek looked personally offended by her appearance.
“S’cold,” Ducky said, holding her coat closed at the neck and stomping her feet.

Tarvek had to sigh and accept this, because Ducky did indeed look like someone who’d chosen warmth over dignity.

“This is very strange,” Tarvek said, once they emerged onto the street.

The crowds were going about their day, and Ducky fell into the rhythm of elbowing her way through them and hissing imprecations at anyone who bumped into her. Tarvek, appalled by this behavior, took the more high-minded approach, and got jostled shamelessly for it.

“No, this is pretty standard,” Ducky said, making a rude gesture towards a burly man who had the nerve brush past her a bit too roughly.

“I meant,” Tarvek said testily, “that the town doesn't appear to be in mourning.”

“Well, maybe your sister zapped your father right back,” Ducky suggested.

“It doesn't really work like that with Fifty Families,” Tarvek said.

“Oh, it doesn't work like that,” Ducky repeated mockingly. “Well, I'm sorry, I wouldn't know. I'm morally opposed to that kind of thing.”

“You're morally opposed to revivification?” Tarvek asked, no doubt getting ready to point out she'd been brought back to life as well.

“No, to royalty,” Ducky replied.

“I'm almost afraid to ask this, but on what grounds?” Tarvek said.

“On the grounds that you all put on airs about who's more inbred than the other like that's an achievement and not just gross.”

Tarvek was actually stunned silent for a few moments, so Ducky took advantage of this to pat his arm sympathetically.

“Oh, but don't worry,” Ducky said, “I'm sure you're no more inbred than you need to be.”

“I'm not at all inb--” Tarvek stopped himself and sighed. By the way Ducky was grinning, he suspected she'd pounce on whatever he was going to say and turn it around on him. “Never mind,” he said. “This isn't the time or place to discuss genealogy.”

They passed a couple of guards just then, peering intently into the crowd in a way that made Tarvek anxious.

Ducky looked completely unflappable as she passed right by the guards, and even elbowed one of them a bit while giving a perfunctory excuse. The guard shrugged her off as a mere annoyance, not even looking at her face. In a few moments, he ran up to a woman to demand she take her hat off so he could look at her face.

Ducky raised her eyebrow mockingly at Tarvek, showing just how much she thought of his guards.
“Anyway, you were saying something was strange,” Ducky said.

“Yes,” Tarvek said, picking up the thread of conversation. “Traditionally, when an old prince dies, the town is sealed off. Nobody is allowed to leave or enter, and nobody is allowed to walk the streets during the night. Not until the funeral. But...”

Tarvek gave a puzzled look around. Dawn was only just arriving, the streetlights still on as the skies turned from dark to a confused gray. Yet there were people all around them.

“If Anevka really wanted to catch us,” Tarvek continued, “that could have given her the perfect excuse to box us in. But by the looks of it, you'd think my father wasn't dead at all.”

He looked at Ducky questioningly.

“Well, maybe he survived that gaping hole in his chest,” she shrugged.

“How gaping, exactly?”

“Let's just say it gave me a nice view of the wall behind him.”

Tarvek's steps faltered, and Ducky actually reached for his arm to support him. He waved her off, however, his posture stiffening, and continued to walk.

“Well, not like it was his head, and if your sister got to him in time--” Ducky started.

“No, like I said, it doesn't work like that within the Fifty Families,” Tarvek dismissed the suggestion. And even if it did, Tarvek didn't say out loud, it was hard to imagine Anevka reviving their father anyway. “But Anevka must have some kind of plan in motion. Things are... conspicuously normal at the moment.”

“Feels like something's waiting to spring from the shadows, huh?” Ducky said.

“Exactly like that,” Tarvek agreed, sweeping his gaze over the town. People were going about their day. There was no obvious danger, other than a few more guards than usual, and even they weren't very effective. There seemed to be no method to their search. It was all very... perfunctory.

No, Tarvek thought. Not waiting to spring from the shadows, but from underground.

Lost in thought, he barely noticed they were approaching one of the gates of the town.

“We're not going to walk right out the front gate,” Tarvek said.

“Sure we're not,” Ducky replied. “We'll hitch a ride.”

“All the way to Mechanicsburg, I presume,” he replied, not sure if he was being sarcastic. For all he knew, that was exactly Ducky's intention.

“No, don't be silly, they'll be expecting that,” Ducky replied.

There was a long line of wagons, trickling along towards the gate. Ducky dragged Tarvek along, walking up and down the line of wagons, scrutinizing each and every one. Tarvek was worried she'd
attract the attention of the guards at the gate, when she made a sound as if she'd found what she was looking for.

She grabbed Tarvek's arm deliberately and dragged him along straight towards the wagon stopped at the gate. The driver was showing a guard traveling papers and was just being waved through when Ducky yelled.

“Hoy boss, what's the big idea?” she blustered. “Leaving us behind like that? What, did you think we'd walk?”

The driver of the wagon and the guard both turned astounded gazes on Ducky. Then the driver, scowling, spat on the ground.

“Hy thought you lazy buggers were asleep in the back!” the driver groused, in a thick Mechanicsburg accent to match Ducky's. “No doubt touring the taverns again, eh? Figures the only thing you useless sods do when you're not sleeping is drinking!”

“Never mind where we were!” Ducky shouted back as she climbed onto the driver's seat. “You don't pay us enough to hang around and listen to you kvetch about your wife all day!”

Tarvek followed her, only because the ridiculous spectacle seemed to be working. The guard was goggling at them, taken aback by the heat of the argument. He even shared an embarrassed look with Tarvek as Ducky and the wagon driver went on to insulting each other's lineages most inventively. There was not a flicker of recognition in the guard's eyes.

They were well out of sight of the gate when Ducky and the driver ceased bickering as loudly as possible.

“And where have you been since last spring, missy?” the driver asked, voice turning from belligerent to gently chiding. “Your mother's been threatening to rent out your room, you know.”

“Oh, she'd never do that, Herr Oessler,” Ducky replied, grinning. “Momma doesn't even like it when family stays over for dinner, she'd be clawing at the walls with a stranger in the house.”

“Hmph. Can't help notice you didn't answer the question,” Herr Oessler pointed out.

“Fine, I was kidnapped for a bit,” Ducky replied.

“Kidnapped, eh?” he looked back Ducky and towards Tarvek. “So now you're bringing the new boyfriend home to your mother?”

Tarvek felt himself turning red at the implication. Ducky snickered.

“Not that kind of kidnapping, Herr Oessler!” Ducky replied.

“Well, don't see why you'd be taking him home with you otherwise,” Herr Oessler said, now visibly confused.

“I'm not! We're going to Beetleburg,” Ducky said.

“Beetleburg--” Herr Oessler frowned thoughtfully.
Tarvek was curious now. Ducky seemed to have a plan, seemed to have had one from the start, but she failed to mention any part of it to Tarvek in advance. She was nothing but prattle and noise and unilateral decision-making, he discovered.

“You remember my friend Agatha who goes to university there, right?” Ducky asked.

“Yeah, think I do,” Herr Oessler replied slowly. “Taking him to her, are you?”

“Sure, I always bring Agatha and Petra souvenirs,” Ducky grinned.

Herr Oessler was quiet for a few moments.

“I'd hate to see what you're bringing Petra,” he muttered after a while.

“Well,” Ducky sighed, “she was opposed to ears, so a whole person probably won't go over well. I'll have to pick up something different for her on the way back.”

Through the curtain of warmth and muffled silence, a repetitive noise scraped at his consciousness.

Tap, tap, tap. Flares of pain, bringing with them flashes of almost-waking.

Confusion persisted, but eventually he opened his eyes, wearily trying to find the source of the noise. His chest throbbed, an uncertain diffuse pain completely different from the sharp twinges of the taps.

It took a few moments for Aaronev's brain to catch up with his eyes. But the sudden wash of horror awakened him completely. He was floating, suspended in warm, viscous liquid. From the other side of the glass, the cold smile on Anevka's doll-like face greeted him, and he had the dreadful feeling he was on the wrong side.

Aaronev touched the breathing mask on his face, and then slapped a hand against the glass, as hard as the goo around him permitted.

Anevka turned away, to Lady Vrin.

“There we go,” she said to the Geisterdame. “Alive and well, didn't I tell you?”

Lady Vrin nodded reluctantly.

“I suppose you will proceed with your plan?” Anevka asked sweetly.

Lady Vrin looked at her sharply.

“I suppose you would stop me?” the Geister retorted.

“Goodness, no,” Anevka replied, sounding shocked. “Quite the contrary. I would like to participate.”

Lady Vrin did not seem convinced.
“Why?” she asked.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Anevka shrugged. “Father has been so tediously predictable these past few years, has he not? But what has this pointless pursuit gotten him but a string of failures? It would do us all good for someone in this family to be successful at something for once.”

“Your brother was quite successful at escaping you,” Lady Vrin pointed out.

Anevka gave a rasping mechanical chuckle.

“All the more reason to hurry, wouldn't you say?”

Lady Vrin's mouth twisted unhappily, but she had to agree.

“We do not require your assistance,” Lady Vrin said, “but we accept it.”

“How lovely,” Anevka said. “Ah, but first, a small matter...”

She gestured towards the attendants carrying her catafalque. They were all pale, trying to avoid looking at Aaronev, but worry was etched on all their faces. Poor fools, who did not know they should be worrying for themselves most of all.

Lady Vrin nodded.

“You will forget this conversation,” she ordered. “Your prince is convalescing. His daughter rules in his stead until he is well.”

Anevka looked very pleased.

“He will be well?” Lady Vrin asked. Not that she cared overly much for Aaronev, but she did find him more trustworthy than his children, if not by much.

“Oh, eventually,” Anevka replied carelessly. “I wouldn't just let him die, of course. I do need someone for maintenance.”

Lady Vrin nodded and departed, going to prepare the Geisterdamen for war. Anevka left the laboratory after her, not giving so much as a backward glance.

Aaronev was left alone.

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Herr Oessler was not headed for Beetleburg, but he did make a detour to drop Ducky and Tarvek off at a town with an airship dock. They took the next airship passing through, and fortuitously, they were in Beetleburg by evening.

“Why are we here?” Tarvek asked once they arrived. He’d hoped Ducky would have prattled the reason by now, but she remained hopelessly fixated on complaining about the cold.

“Are we expected elsewhere?” Ducky said. “Is your sister throwing us a tea party in Sturmhalten
maybe? Or do we want to be in Mechanicsburg right now? Gee, I hope they don't miss us too terribly when they shake the town like a cheap snowglobe trying to see if we fall out.”

“Is Beetleburg really an improvement, though?” Tarvek asked, as he took in the streets. “There are Jaegers about,” he added in a lower voice. “That can't be good.”

“Are you sure that's not just your guilty conscience talking?” she said.

Tarvek grew annoyed.

“If you don't find Empire presence concerning, I certainly do,” he replied. “We don't know why they're here. Can you be sure it's not because of your friend?”

This remark finally seemed to have struck some alarm bell inside Ducky's head, though Tarvek couldn't be sure why. She chewed the inside of her cheek, and a slightly worried frown creased her forehead.

“You're right,” she said. “We should ask them.”

This was not the outcome Tarvek had been hoping for. Ducky bound off towards the nearest Jaeger.

“Hey, you with the hat!” she shouted cheerfully.

The Jaeger turned just as Ducky skidded to a halt next to him. Then his puzzlement turned to a leering grin, and Tarvek hung back, trying to seem unobtrusive.

“Ho, iz leetle Ducky!” the Jaeger declared cheerfully. “Vot hyu doink so far from home?”

“Came to visit Agatha,” Ducky said, and jabbed a thumb towards Tarvek, “with an out-of-town friend.”

The Jaeger looked Tarvek over, his countenance noticeably cooler than it had been while talking to Ducky. But Tarvek didn't think the Jaeger had recognized him or guessed at his identity, and that was at least a small comfort.

“Hyu been getting into trouble?” the Jaeger asked, tapping the side of his face. “Dot iz sum nize stitching hyu haff dere. Verra fine vork.”

Ducky smiled shyly, like a girl being complimented on a new hair ribbon.1

“Aw, you think?” she said. “I haven't had a good look at it yet. You don't think it's too much?”

The Jaeger shrugged.

“It suits hyu, Hy tink,” he said. “Hyu kem to Miz Agatha about dot?”

“Oh, no, it's healed fine, I think,” Ducky said, running fingers over the stitches. “I'm here about a completely different thing. I'm not sure where she lives, though.”

Tarvek bit his tongue as Ducky completely missed the chance to ask the Jaeger what he was doing in Beetleburg. He was afraid he'd be stuck listening to their smalltalk all day, but he didn't think intruding on their conversation would yield anything useful.
“Vell, hyu iz a schmott gurl, und hyu can find it,” the Jaeger replied, patting her shoulder. “Mebbe hyu shouldn't keep hyu friend out in de cold.”

Ducky sighed, giving Tarvek an annoyed look. Tarvek wasn't sure what he'd done to warrant it, but he had the strange feeling that there was a level to the conversation he wasn't privy too. This just made him more curious.

“Hy and de boyz found diz place vit great beer,” the Jaeger continued more cheerfully. “Iz called De Painted Crow.”

“It's good, is it?” Ducky asked.

“Und varm,” the Jaeger continued. “Hyu haff time for a drink, yah?” He grinned at Tarvek.

“Wait,” Agatha said, “you left the prince of Sturmhalten in a disreputable tavern with a bunch of Jaegers? Has he been there all night?”

Ducky squinted at the window. It was grayish morning outside.

“Maybe,” Ducky grumbled. “If I didn't run him off yet, I'm sure he can stand a few Jaegers for one night.”

Agatha sighed, because she suspected that was true.

“What's with all the Jaegers, anyway?” Ducky asked.

“They're probably here to keep an eye on the Baron's son,” Agatha said.

“The Baron has a son?” Ducky blinked slowly. “Didn't think I was gone that long. When'd he pop out?”

“He's a grown man,” Agatha replied, rolling her eyes. “The Baron's just been keeping him secret for most of his life.”

“Oh. Well, that's slightly more interesting,” Ducky said approvingly. “So you want to meet Tarvek?”

“How sure are you, about the hive engines?” Agatha asked.

“The issue isn't really if I'm sure, now is it?” Ducky said, tapping her skull. “It's whether I'm right.”

Agatha sighed again, and took Ducky's hand.

“You worried a lot of people, Ducky,” she said. “Your mother threatened to rent out your room.”

“I heard,” Ducky snickered.

“And you got your cousin Nistor in a lot of trouble,” Agatha continued.
“Ooh, did Guildmaster Katzen lecture him on how he obviously wasn't ready to have a Spark apprentice?” Ducky asked with a mean-spirited smile. She disliked her cousin about as much as he disliked her.

“Yes,” Agatha replied, without any amusement, “and Nistor is still out the money you owe him for fixing up the shop after your explosions.”

“I guess he really wasn’t ready for a Spark apprentice, then,” Ducky said smugly.

“You realize, after this, he is also going to make you pay him back for all the fines he incurred on your account.”

“I think we’ve established already that Nistor’s ambitions exceed his ability to achieve them,” Ducky sniffed.

Agatha let the matter drop for now. Ducky could run circles around her cousin, but if she planned to take on the Guild, she would soon run into a very polite and soft-spoken wall named Guildmaster Ezra Katzen.

“I need to go to the labs and make my excuses,” she said. “If what you’re saying is true...” She shook her head. “Pack my bags,” she said. “We might be returning to Mechanicsburg sooner than I expected.”

“What about Tarvek, though?” Ducky asked.

“After you finish packing, get him here,” Agatha said. “I’m going to deal with him, one way or another.”

Doctor Beetle wasn’t at the laboratory, which Agatha found unfortunate, because if she was leaving, she would have liked to tell him in person.

“Miss Heliotrope, you skipped out on us yesterday,” Merlot said as she walked in.

“I’m afraid it's not going to be the last time,” Agatha said. “I need to leave Beetleburg for a while.”

“This wouldn't have anything to do with the young man you were entertaining yesterday while you were supposed to be scrubbing the beakers, would it?” Merlot asked, his tone insinuating.

“Oh-- I guess I'll have to tell him too,” Agatha sighed. It figured rumor would fly fast. “But no, this is a family emergency in Mechanicsburg. I'm leaving today. I... don't know when I'm coming back.”

Glassvitch and Merlot both stopped what they were doing to look at her.

“But surely you are coming back?” Glassvitch asked.

“I hope to,” Agatha said. “I don't actually know-- Well, I'll know if that's possible once I see the situation back home. But please tell Doctor Beetle I don't expect him to hold my position until—or if
—I return. It's been an honor working with him.” She smiled. “And with you as well, Doctors.”

She surrendered her keys and left soon after that.

Merlot was speechless for a long time.

“We'll have to break in a new assistant,” he said when he finally spoke again.

Glassvitch patted Merlot on the back sympathetically, but didn't say anything. He'd known the man long enough to recognize when he was inconsolable.

Tarvek had no idea why Ducky brought him to the lodgings of her friend Agatha, but the moment he sat down on the sofa, he felt several days' worth of weariness catch up with him. He was filthy and exhausted, and his eye was still black and swollen from Ducky's headbutt.

He felt out of place in the quiet homeliness of the room, in a way Ducky obviously didn't, judging by the fact that she was balancing herself on the back legs of a chair with her feet propped up on the table. If she fell and hit her head again, Tarvek was going to let her handle the brain damage herself.

Nobody was home at the moment, and if Ducky hadn't mentioned talking to Agatha, he'd almost be afraid Ducky had broken into the house. But instead, she had him wait here, as she had him wait all night with a bunch of rowdy Jaegers—who did not threaten him in any way, but nor did they let him out of their sight.

“What are we doing here?” he asked, even though he knew he was setting himself up for yet more verbal runaround or ridicule.

“You want to meet Lady Heterodyne?” Ducky asked, unusually frank for once.

Tarvek hesitated for a fraction of a second—a trap? A test?—but nodded firmly. He hadn't thought this was a possibility. He'd thought Ducky avoided taking him to Mechanicsburg to keep him away from Lady Heterodyne.

“Well, if Agatha thinks it's okay, you might get to do just that,” Ducky said. “Better hope you make a good first impression.”

Tarvek thought that his chances of that were pretty shot at this point, but he sat up straighter and concentrated very hard on not falling asleep.

He must have, anyway, though, because the next thing he knew, an indeterminate period of time had passed and Tarvek was startled by the door opening and a young woman letting herself in. He rose.

“Agatha, look!” Ducky pointed to Tarvek, not bothering to move from her position on the seesawing chair. “Souvenir.”

“You shouldn't have,” Agatha replied dryly.

There did seem to be genuine fondness under it, though, and Tarvek took notice of it.
“You would be Tarvek,” Agatha said, all her attention bearing down on him.

“I would be Prince Aaronev Tarvek Sturmvoraus of Sturmhalten,” he said, and then on a gamble added, “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Lady Heterodyne.” He bowed, all while watching her reactions closely.

This surprised her. She didn't look at Ducky with annoyance, as he would have expected from anyone else in this situation—because Ducky didn't know, or because Lady Heterodyne trusted her minions implicitly? Either way, it wasn't as if Ducky told him, or even really let anything too incriminating slip. It was just a bit of speculation on his part—a blonde woman of the right age for it, and a few other points of possible genetic similarity to the portraits of Lucrezia he'd seen. It was a guess on his part, but a safe one under the circumstances.

There was a thud as the front legs of Ducky's chair hit the floor, and she sat down properly.

“I hit him in the face pretty badly,” Ducky said, thus convincing Tarvek that he was right.

“Yes, I can see,” Agatha replied, her eyes never leaving Tarvek. She seemed speculative. “But let's turn to the issue of hive engines for a moment.”

Tarvek lowered his gaze and nodded in resignation. Ducky had been in the tunnels for weeks, it was no surprise she'd seen the engines. But he hadn't expected this to be thrown in his face, and was not prepared for it.

“Ducky told you about my father's... activities,” he said.

“Ducky told me about what you've been up to in Sturmhalten, yes,” Agatha said, “and we'll have a long talk about that, but we'll be doing it in Mechanicsburg. It'll save us all on time.”

“Oh, what are we going to do?” Ducky asked, jumping to her feet.

“What I should have done already,” Agatha growled, anger roiling in her voice. “Hive engines!” she spat. “I've been puttering around Beetleburg, and Mechanicsburg has been defenseless this entire time, and with Sturmhalten so close! No, this is no longer an acceptable situation. We're going home and I am fixing things.”

Ducky was startled and delighted.

“Fixing things?” she asked. “You mean fixing everything?”

“Everything,” Agatha confirmed. “Did you pack?”

“Yes, Mistress!” Ducky chirped. “And I brought down your clank from the attic!”

“Good. I have one more thing to do before we leave.” Then Agatha turned to Tarvek. “As for you--”

“Whatever you require of me, my lady,” he said quickly.

“Well, that's good, because I'm going to need all the Sparks I can get to pull this off,” she mused.

By the look on her face, she didn't really believe she could trust him as far as she could throw him.
That was good. It meant she'd keep him close. He could work with that.

Too wired to sleep from all the excitement the night before, Gil spent the next day in the inn room he'd paid for, and was doing his level best to write a report of Agatha's activities in Beetleburg that managed to elide the fact that she was a Spark. This proved a tricky, but he needed to get his story completely airtight before he presented it to his father. Klaus would latch onto even the most minor of details and figure out the truth if Gil wasn't meticulous enough.

He was mostly done when the knock on his door came. Gil was annoyed, but there was something very persistent in the knock that made him want to see who it was.

“Agatha!” Gil grinned, momentarily delighted before he saw how grim she looked. “What's wrong?”

“I have a favor to ask you,” she said, “because I'm about to cause the Baron a lot of trouble.”

Gil was both intrigued and suddenly worried.

“It's... very nice of you to warn us in advance,” he said, and now noticed that Agatha wasn't alone.

There were a couple of people with her, tall, grave-faced and, if Gil didn't miss his guess, constructs, though the latter was well-disguised.

“This is Adam and Lilith Clay. I need you to take them to the Baron,” Agatha said, gesturing towards them. “They're going to explain everything to him.”

“What about you?” he asked. “Are you in trouble? I can help--”

“Not right at the moment,” Agatha said firmly. “Your help might cause more complications than it would solve. But please, take Adam and Lilith to the Baron, and after you get the whole story, if you still want to help... you'll find me in Mechanicsburg.”

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1 Though in most parts of Europa, obvious signs of experimentation or of being a construct could mark a person as undesirable and put them at risk of being persecuted, in Mechanicsburg these same things tended to be taken as a sign of the Master's favor, and thus highly desirable. Aesthetics did tend to run contrary to most of Europa in Mechanicsburg.
Agatha's return to Mechanicsburg had quite a bit less panache than Tarvek imagined it would. In a display of caution that would have been atypical of her ancestors (up to and including even her heroic ones), she decided to keep it a secret.

Tarvek wasn't sure if 'the Sneaky Gate' was its official name or if it was simply a Mechanicsburger joke, but the entrance took Agatha, Tarvek and Ducky through underground tunnels, heading for Mamma Gkika's. The constructs in the tunnels did nothing to hinder their progress, limiting themselves to grinning from the shadows or the occasional cheery greeting, but Tarvek still felt apprehensive. Agatha looked thoughtful; he didn't know enough about her to guess if she was currently contemplating feeding him to the monsters.

Emerging into the Jäger bar was almost a relief, strange as the thought was. Even as he blinked against the sudden light, Tarvek felt as if he was being brought in on something. The atmosphere in the bar was lively, but tense. Expectant. The buzz of pre-battle excitement.

General Gkika stepped up to greet them, looking sharp in every sense of the word.

"Ve vere told uz hyu vere coming," she said, saluting loosely. "Ve iz reddy if hyu are." Then Gkika's eyes slid over to Ducky and Tarvek. "Welcome beck, hyu leetle brat," she said with fondness. "Hyu momma almost rented out hyu room, I'll haff hyu know. Und vot iz dot, hyu new boyfriend?"

"Gross," Ducky laughed. "He's a prince."

"Iz dot so?" Gkika looked back at Agatha. "Vot iz nize gurl like Ducky doing vit one ov doze?"

"Souvenir," Ducky answered with a grin.

"He's going to make himself useful to us shortly," Agatha said. "Get Van and the Elders. I have orders."

It was almost imperceptible, but Gkika snapped to attention. This was not a good-natured Jäger indulging someone, this was a general obeying her Heterodyne. She knew now there was no need for pretense in front of Tarvek, and so she affected none.

"Van iz here alreddy," Gkika reported. "So iz Carson. Ve send for de odders right away."

"Good! Thank you. We should set up somewhere quiet, maybe in the back," Agatha said. "But first... Ducky."

The girl straightened up a bit, trying to look dutiful. It was not a natural look on Ducky--it made her look just slightly manic.

"I have orders for you first," Agatha said. "Pay close attention."

"Right!" Ducky said, almost vibrating with excitement.

Agatha took out a pen and a slip of paper. She began writing down something.
"You will be going to the hospital," she instructed.

"Right."

"You will find Doctor Gadzinka," she continued.

"Uh-huh."

"And you will give her this note," Agatha finished, handing the slip of paper to Ducky. "It's very important Doctor Gadzinka gets it, and it's also very important you be the one to deliver it to her personally."

"Ooh!" Ducky squinted at the paper. "Is this in code?" she asked in a loud whisper.

"No," Agatha answered flatly. "Now go, quick."

"Yes, Mistress!" Ducky barked, saluting with military precision and then spinning around to head through the door.

Tarvek watched her half-run towards the door, stumbling into furniture or bar patrons only a few times.

"You sent her for a medical examination, didn't you?" he asked.

"It's a good thing she can't read Polish, or I'd have to have her hogtied and dragged all the way there," Agatha sighed. Then the moment of fondness disappeared and she fixed Tarvek with a stern look. "I trust you don't have any pressing medical issues I should know of?"

He bowed his head.

"I am at your disposal, my lady," he replied.

She regarded him quietly for a moment more, before nodding to herself.

"You're coming with me, then."

In the back room of the bar, in what looked like a very homey living room (apart from some questionable decor choices), Agatha and her council of war were gathered around a table.

She told them about the hive engines and Ducky's misadventures, omitting nothing of Tarvek's role in the matter. This earned him a few looks, ranging from hostile to speculative, but he remained quiet and well-behaved the entire time.

"There's no way around it, I'll have to fix the Castle," Agatha concluded as she finished relaying the facts. "I will be going in as soon as possible. Ducky can't join me, but the others we discussed on previous occasions will be needed. Everyone who can still come should start preparing now."
The people gathered around the table—Gkika, the seneschal, the town elders—all seemed to have nothing but approval for this course of action, though they each expressed it differently. The rumble of conversation died down the moment Agatha raised her hand for silence.

"But first," she said, "I think it's time we did something about the delinquent elements in our town. Van, you will work with Tarvek. He will give you information on every spy he can recall ever being sent to Mechanicsburg, whether on his family's behalf or on anyone else's. Check it against your own list. We will remove every single foreign agent from this town at the same time, so we can make sure none of them have time to hide. We'll leave the tourists for last, but we'll need them removed too before the bell rings."

She swiveled in her chair to look at Tarvek.

"You know how this works, yes?" she asked. "Please the Heterodyne, and you will be rewarded. Cross me and... well. I'll fill in that blank when I get to it."

She didn't seem to be trying to intimidate him. If anything, the smile twitching at the corner of her lips seemed friendly, like they were in on the same joke.

He bowed his head, nonetheless.

"Then I will try to please you, my lady," he said, keeping his tone even and neutral.

But the elders around the table still snickered at this reply.

"Looks like the Castle will have to get the seraglio ready first thing," someone commented a bit too loudly.

Agatha huffed and tried to look dignified, but at that point she was blushing as hard as Tarvek. By the look she was giving him, she was blaming him entirely for this turn in the conversation.

That was fine; Tarvek was blaming himself as well. He made a conscious effort to steer away from any distant suggestion of innuendo when he spoke up again. With this crowd, it proved a harder task than he imagined.

Tarvek spent the rest of the day with Vanamonde von Mekkhan and an ever-changing roster of Mechanicsburgers whose exact roles and jobs he could not pin down, and through concentrated group effort, the list of spies and foreign agents, both confirmed and suspected, was elaborated at a fairly good clip.

Van, to his credit, seemed to have a good grasp of the situation, aware of the major players and what to look out for. Tarvek contributed the details and in-depth analysis. And for everything else, the unknown Mechanicsburgers came, to drop some piece of gossip or information that might help. A great deal of it was useless, but hidden in the midden were nuggets of gold. Not all of it, but enough that Tarvek saw their value.

It was after an elderly woman with strange, equine teeth trapped Tarvek in polite chit-chat for twenty minutes and then tried to pickpocket him that Tarvek was informed, by an annoyed Van, that these were regular townsfolk, having no other training than what they'd received in school or merely by
At any rate, even with most of his attention taken up by his work with Van, Tarvek did notice that preparations were underway. Supplies were gathered up and packed with unsurpassed efficiency. A cadre of minions had been assembled, according to a list Agatha and her advisors had put together in preparations for this day, and if Tarvek didn't miss his guess, Agatha was at that very moment giving final instructions to her minions who could not follow her into the Castle, as well as the Jäger General.

There was no doubt in Tarvek's mind that once Agatha set foot in the Castle, she would not step out again until—and unless—it was repaired and had recognized her as Heterodyne.

And just as he was thinking of Agatha, she started making her way towards them, stopping by Van's shoulder to peer down at the lists before him.

"How are things going here?" she asked.

"Quite well, actually," Van replied. "We think we've got a good plan in place to remove them all."

"'We'?" Agatha repeated, and looked at Tarvek with a half-smile.

"He's been useful so far," Van admitted, almost begrudgingly. He still felt obligated to mistrust Tarvek on account of the entire hive engine implications, but they had been working well together all day.

"Then we'll take him along with us," Agatha said.

"Take him where, exactly?" Van asked.

"We're going to have a chat with the Castle before we go," Agatha replied, and made a curious downward pointing gesture. Van seemed to instantly understand what it referred to, because he balked.

"My lady, I have to advise against taking him along on," Van hesitated for a second before continuing, "on that particular errand."

"I know you do, Van. But he's a powerful Spark," Agatha replied, "and he'll be helping fix the Castle anyway. I'd rather keep a close eye on him until we're inside. "And he can't escape, she did not add.

"Very well, my lady," Van conceded.

Tarvek politely pretended they did not just have a conversation about him as if he wasn't even there.

"Now, anything else?" Agatha asked.

"I've secured a contact inside," Van said. "Find Professor Hristo Tiktoffen. He'll appraise you of the situation and help you reach the vital systems. Things should go faster after that. And remember, my lady," Van's face grew serious, "the Castle is your lair. They've just been fixing it up for you."

Agatha grinned at Van.
"Got it," she said. "Big bad Heterodyne returning home."

"Exactly," he said, and rose from his seat. "Now, we should attend to our final business, and we'll have you inside before twilight."

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Gil did not know what to make of Adam and Lilith Clay. They were warm, polite and open, except regarding who they really were, how they knew Agatha, why they had to meet his father and what Agatha was about to do that warranted she send envoys to the Baron.

The thought that they might be assassins or working for one of the Baron's numerous enemies certainly did cross Gil's mind--several times--but the fact that Lilith calmly maintained the Baron would understand once they met with him inclined Gil to believe them. Constructs who built quiet little anonymous lives inside a town's walls tended to not want to put them in jeopardy, after all. And they did mention they had children waiting for them back home. All of Gil's instincts told him to trust them.

Still, when they finally docked with Castle Wulfenbach, he did insist they go through the entire security protocol, and they acquiesced without any apparent resentment.

After that long and complicated affair was done, they proceeded to the lab where the Baron had been holed up.

Klaus was leaning over a table, watching the whir of a set of servos with a critical frown on his face. He did not notice Gil stroll in, nor his company.

Boris was attempting and mostly failing to bring attention to a report on traffic through a mountain pass.

"The Counts of the Green will be colluding again this year to run up the prices on early harvests," the Baron muttered in reply, waving off the report without even reading it. By the harmonics of his voice, he was in the middle of a fugue. "Have someone fetch them for me so that we might have a constructive discussion about fair trade practices." Then he adjusted the servos and watched as they whirred at a slightly different speed.

"Yes, Herr Baron," Boris replied, shuffling away the report into his other papers. "You might also want to know your son has returned."

"Send him to me immediately," Klaus replied, adjusting the servos again.

"Yes, Herr Baron," Boris replied, crisply turning on his heel to face Gil. "Your father wishes to see you, Master Gilgamesh."

There was not a hint of mockery in Boris's voice.

"Thank you, Boris, I'll see him right away," Gil replied, unable to resist a smile.

Klaus only then noticed Gil, and gestured for him to approach.
"Ah, good, you're here," he said, pleased. "What have you to report on the girl?"

"It's all in here," Gil said, passing the carefully edited account of Agatha's Beetleburg adventures to his father. "She's something of a... hero, actually."

"Is she, now," Klaus said wryly, skimming through the report.

There was something in his father's tone just then that made Gil raise his chin and try to stamp down a blush.

"Also, there are some people she'd like you to meet," Gil added, sweeping aside to present the Clays.

They'd been lingering by the doorway, out of the way and partially out of sight, but now they stepped forward, the both of them, wide smiles on their faces.

"Hello, Klaus," Lilith said, with a familiarity that puzzled Gil.

Klaus dropped the papers he was holding, pages scattering to the ground to Boris's displeasure. The look on the Baron's face, however, was slack-jawed amazement. A sound escaped him, very strange to Gil's ear until he realized it was a strangled laugh.

"Punch! Judy!" he exclaimed, stepping forward and reaching out to them, one hand grasping at each Clay's arm, as if he was trying to convince himself they were not apparitions.

"It's been too long," Lilith said.

Gil and Boris exchanged equally bewildered looks, but not nearly as much as when Klaus gave a full-bellied laugh and embraced his old friends.

It looked, astoundingly, and for a minimum of at least several seconds, that the Baron was actually joyful.
Early evening rolled over Sturmhalten, but it did nothing to slow the activity of its market. Newly installed lamp posts lit up one by one with strong, steady light, and the evening crowd, released from their dayjobs, set out to do their shopping. Vendors who catered to tourists and travelers throughout the day changed their tack once actual inhabitants of Sturmhalten came by their stalls, the conversation turning like a tide from practiced polite chit-chat to gossip and rumors.

"Heard there was some commotion at the Rusted Swan last night," a customer would say, for example, while weighing two wireclippers against each other.

"Always some sort of commotion there," the vendor would reply. "You buying or just pondering the metaphysical implications of an ergonomic handle?"

"Heard one of the guards were involved in a scuffle, though," the customer continued. "Thought that was strange, they usually have better heads on their shoulders than that, and most know to give exact money and never open a tab. And I'll ponder anything I damn well please, I'm the customer here and it's my money--"

But the vendor was not listening, instead staring up and into the distance with a fixed, shocked expression.

"Oh, no, this is the oldest trick," the customer muttered, putting the wireclippers down. "I turn around and look, and next thing I know I've got a toolbox stuffed down my pants and you're counting my pay for the week!"

But instead of any coherent reply, the vendor merely wheezed *Wulfenbach*.

The market had all gone strangely, eerily quiet, all at once. Whispers rose in the silence, sharp and worried in a way that made everyone still out of the loop turn and look towards the sky, which had suddenly become extremely fascinating.

Castle Wulfenbach hung in the air above Sturmhalten, surrounded by a veritable armada of airships.

The final preparations consisted, in large degree, of bickering about whether everything was packed. But there was nervousness rather than any genuine rancor underlying it, and it seemed everything was well in hand by Van's unconcerned attitude. Certainly nobody had taken out any weaponry, at least, Tarvek mused.

"It's time to go," Agatha told Van. "Get Carson, we're going to make this quick."

Tarvek joining them was a given, though the two leering Jaegers that tagged along were perhaps entirely for his benefit. Agatha and Van led the procession and Carson assumed his position just behind Tarvek. He could feel the old man's gaze peer into the back of his neck, like an itch at his nape, and so did nothing to provoke him. There was something in the former seneschal's manner that suggested he was every bit as dangerous as the Jaegers, and probably quite a bit more wily to boot.
They went through long, winding tunnels under Mechanicsburg, varying in how old or well maintained they were. Things winked and grinned at them from the dark, but Agatha only acknowledged them with a nod of the head and moved on. They came out, surprisingly, into the Heterodyne family crypts, meaning they had to be somewhere under Castle Heterodyne.

It was, actually, quite the fascinating trip, and Tarvek was glad to have been taken along, even with the lack of trust that denoted. Though over the years he'd accumulated every scrap of information he could about Castle Heterodyne, it was still poor substitute for seeing it all in person. Even the crypts offered a fascinating insight into the family's history, though he couldn't resist a snort when he passed Bludtharst Heterodyne's grave and took in the words chiseled there.

From the crypts, Van took out a set of keys and opened the way to another chamber, and Tarvek immediately eyed the interface chair at the bottom of the stairs, unmistakably vintage Heterodyne in design. It looked well maintained, recently oiled and primed for use. Van entered a sequence, and Agatha looked towards Carson expectantly.

Carson raised a hand and shook his head.

"This one's for your seneschal to do, my lady," he said.

Agatha turned to Van in surprise. Van tapped his forehead.

"Had the holes drilled after you left for university," he explained. "They healed quite nicely."

She pushed his hair back and peered at his scalp with open interest.

"I'll say," she muttered, amazed. "There's barely even a scar! This will be fascinating. Have you used the chair before?"

"Just the once," Van replied, exchanging a look with Carson.

Then Van took a deep breath and sat down in the chair purposefully, strapping on a helmet.

Tarvek expected something unpleasant from the device, but Van's scream almost made him jump out of his skin. He looked towards Carson, who was grim-faced but hardly alarmed about this state of affairs.

"Ho, good lungz," one of the Jaegers said, and by the tasteless comment Tarvek guessed there was nothing to be alarmed about yet. That was good to know, since blood had started trickling from under Van's helmet.

"It has been forty eight million, two thousand and sixty-nine seconds since this system was last activated," Van muttered, his voice no longer his own. Then his head jerked suddenly, and a leering grin began spreading across his face.

"Lady Heterodyne, I presume," the creature employing Van's body said. "Vanamonde did mention you would be here the next time I sank my teeth into his fresh young brain." It seemed to look her up and down, even without eyes. "Though I must admit, I did not expect... a girl."

"Your disappointment has been noted," Agatha deadpanned. "On to more important business, however, I'm here because you need to be fixed."
"Yes, yesss," Castle Heterodyne hissed, "finally! Oh, how I've been waiting for this. I thought the day would never come."

"Strictly speaking, the day wasn't suppose to come yet," Agatha said. "But circumstances have forced my hand. Any way you could help?"

"I am, alas, limited in that regard," the Castle admitted. "The prisoners have fixed enough of me that I am much more coherent than I once was, but my subsystems remain mutinous." Van's lip curled into a sneer. "It will take a proper Heterodyne to attend to them."

"So, then, you have nothing for me?" Agatha surmised.

"I would not say nothing," the Castle replied slowly. "I can offer you a map, if you can make it to the Masters' Library."

Suspicion flickered across Agatha's face. "Ah, but making it there is the real challenge, I take it."

"As I said, my subsystem remain mutinous. And without my guidance, also stupid."

"Yes, I suspected as much," she muttered. "But the map--it can show me the breaks I need to fix, yes?"

"If you can make it, yes," the Castle replied. "Though at the moment I suspect you may have more pressing concerns." It sneered again, but there was restrained delight there, too. "Mechanicsburg is being attacked."

Van's body jerked in place, and then, in a sudden motion, he ripped the helmet off, gasping in pain.

"The Black Gate," he panted, as blood dripped down the sides of his face. "There's something attacking at the Black Gate."

Klaus was not pleased with what he found in Sturmhalten.

Though to be more accurate, he was displeased about what he failed to find in Sturmhalten.

"No hive engines, sir," Sergeant Scorp informed him. "Recently collapsed tunnels where we were told they'd be, though. If it were my guess, I'd say they bugged out, pardon the expression. Recently, too, by the looks of it."

"And has the Vespiary Squad canvassed the town?" Klaus asked.

"That's the worse news, sir." Sergeant Scorp hesitated before he continued. "The town... it's all revenants, sir."

"What do you mean, 'all revenants'?" Klaus frowned.

"All the townsfolk. They seem normal, nothing wrong with them on the surface, but the weasels are screeching up a storm. We thought maybe there was just something in the air here, but the few folks we found who ain't trippin' up the weasels are from out of town. Doc Bren says," and here the
sergeant lowered his voice, "the townsfolk are all of them wasped, they just don't know it."

A chill ran down Klaus's back. Gil, who was standing close enough to hear the sergeant's report, stiffened even more than usual for an outing with his father. He stopped rifling through debris to walk over and stand near the Baron.

They were in Aaronev's half-burnt laboratory. There had been, by all indications, a brief but violent struggle. A table had been upended, and a cabinet half-collapsed over it, but the fire suppression system had been apparently damaged by an unwisely-placed trap, and had only managed to save part of the room from the ashes.

It was regrettable that in this process, many of Aaronev's notes had also been damaged. The ones that survived were already in the hands of the Empire's best cryptologists, but for now, if any answers were to be forthcoming, they would have to look to another source.

"Where is the Princess Anevka?" the Baron demanded.

"She is with her father at the moment," Boris answered. "Shall I have her brought here?"

The Baron scowled, thinking of the unwieldy catafalque following her around. He felt too impatient to wait for that nonsense to be moved about.

"No, I will go to her."

Gil followed Klaus as he stormed out the door, and down the hall to where Aaronev was being treated.

Though they'd had their differences in the past, Klaus did regret having to see Aaronev in such a state. Lucrezia's weak-willed lackey he might have been, but Klaus had also considered the man a colleague at some point. Now he was bed-ridden, and more tubes were coming out of him than a cathedral organ. His daughter--or, at the very least, the clank operating under the pretense of being his daughter--never left his side, choosing to be with her father even as Wulfenbach forces went over the castle with a fine-toothed comb.

When Klaus strode through the door, Anevka turned her fixed metallic smile upon him.

"Is there something wrong, Herr Baron?" she asked, sounding girlish and guileless even with the slight fizz of her voicebox.

Aaronev, experiencing a spell of consciousness, had the wherewithal to pull off his oxygen mask and look at Klaus.

"Are you aware your town entire population has been wasped?" Klaus asked.

The blunt question made Anevka's eyes widen in amazement, and her hand fluttered delicately to her mouth. Yet her voice was harsh when she answered.

"Then the depths of my brother's depravity are far greater than I ever suspected," she said.

Klaus's lip curled in distaste.

"You are blaming your brother for this then?"
"A man capable of turning on his own father," Anevka replied, and placed her metallic hand over her father's where it lay beside him on the bed, "is capable of even worse things where mere common folk are concerned, wouldn't you say?"

"Unless he was turning not merely on his family, but on his accomplices in crime," Klaus said, and turned his gaze on Aaronev.

The man was still weak from what Klaus suspected had been a revivification process, and not mere healing as Anevka insisted. But he seemed perfectly coherent, though pale. He looked in the middle of whipping himself into an indignant lather, despite being suspiciously silent so far.

"Father is a victim in all of this, and he is still too weak to be subject to interrogation. With all due respect, Herr Baron," she added the honorifics belatedly. "You may speak with me, but please let him rest and recover."

The point became moot when Boris knocked on the doorframe and stuck his head into the room.

"Herr Baron, a situation has arisen," the secretary announced calmly. But the interruption itself was enough to indicate that the situation must have been grave.

"I do plan on having that discussion with you, Your Highness."

Klaus turned on his heel and swept out of the room. Gil lingered only to nod to Anevka and Aaronev, before following his father. Once they were far enough from the room that even the guards were out of earshot, Klaus and Gil fell into step alongside each other, following Boris.

"What was your read of the room?" Klaus asked.

"When you told them about the town being wasped, Aaronev didn't seem surprised," Gil said. "He looked at Anevka."

"Yes, a curious slip."

"Unless it was deliberate."

Klaus remained silent, and Gil took this as a sign to continue.

"If he hadn't known about the town, he would have been surprised. But he wasn't. And he didn't even feign surprise, which he would have if he truly wanted to play innocent. Instead he both signaled to us that he knew about it, and looked towards Anevka." Gil frowned as he considered the situation. "He must know that even if he convinced us that only Anevka and her brother were responsible for this, we still would have held him culpable for keeping their secret. So. Why does he want to incriminate Anevka?"

"Why does he, indeed?" Klaus asked, prompting Gil to follow his line of reasoning.

"Because he's under her power somehow, and he resents it? She has been speaking for him since we got here. In fact, he hasn't said a word. What is it she doesn't want him to say?"

"A very good question," Klaus muttered. "Boris, where in the devil are you taking us, exactly?"
"Ah, my apologies, Herr Baron, I did not want to interrupt. The Delvers have discovered something."

"In a place like this, I'd expect them to discover plenty of things," Klaus groused. He had people poking at every inch of the Castle, and the Delvers, whose entire specialization was in discovering secret rooms and passages, usually found more than their fair share of things. But usually the knowledge came Klaus's way through a report, not a field trip.

"I am told this needs to be seen to be believed," was the answer Boris gave.

Klaus and Gil shared a look, but went along.

The room they were led to was indeed something that needed to be seen to be believed. Depictions of Lucrezia filled the room wall to wall, and Klaus felt somewhat less surprised than he should at the disturbing display.

"According to the Delvers, there was something more here," Boris said. "Something removed in a hurry. A device of some sort."

"How big?" Klaus asked.

Gil glanced at his father.

"Do you think Tarvek might have--"

He cut off as they came on to the part of room which once housed the device—cables dangled from the ceiling, and an empty chair stood beneath them. Subtle singes and old drops of blood under the dusty place where once a panel had been installed suggested uneasy things.

"No, it was too large for one person to carry," Klaus concluded.

"Though the young man was in the company of an accomplice," Boris said. "A Mechanicsburger, according to our sources."

"Father, you don't think he is heading for Mechanicsburg, do you?" Gil asked.

Klaus crouched on the ground, inspecting whatever clues might have been missed. The chances were low—his hiring policy was weighed heavily in favor of people who didn't miss things—but it was worth a look.

"Possibly," Klaus said. "If you are concerned for the young Heterodyne, however, I am sure you know very well that she can handle trouble. You are, after all, the one who crafted the report on her with such care."

Gil turned red down to his hair roots at that remark. He knew that eventually he would have suffered the consequences for editing the report on Agatha to elide any mention of her Spark, but he didn't think it would be so immediately.

"Excuse me for a moment, Father," Gil mouthed and left the room.

Klaus chuckled as Gil disappeared through the door.
Gil was halfway down the hall already, when his brain caught up with his eyes and he doubled back a bit.

Punch and Judy, looking as serene and sympathetic small-town folk they pretended to be, were consoling a weeping servant. Judy was just handing the bawling woman a handkerchief while Punch patted her back with a large hand, nodding along.

Gil wasn't sure what was happening exactly, but the servant was blubbering apologies, both for her state and for something else that Gil didn't quite catch.

He filed this away for later, however. He had different concerns for now, and he reached Aaronev's sick room just in time to cross paths with a nurse.

"Oh, I'm afraid he's out like a light, Herr Wulfenbach," the nurse explained, shaking her head. There was a syringe on her tray, and a vial with a transparent liquid. "His scheduled painkiller. Strong stuff."

"That's alright, he's not who I'm here to see."

The nurse shrugged and went her way, but from her seat next to Aaronev, Anevka turned her head to look at Gil. Her hands were delicately folded in her lap, and her head was tilted at a demure angle, but Gil got something of a chill looking at her. Not because she was a clank, necessarily--he would have liked to believe he was above such prejudices--but she was one of Tarvek's relatives, and that meant she couldn't be nearly as harmless as she presented herself.

"Herr Wulfenbach, what an honor," she said.

"Your Highness," Gil replied neutrally.

His gaze flicked over to Aaronev for a few moments. The man was unconscious, as expected, and looking particularly waxy at the moment. There was nobody else in the room, even Anevka's attendants off somewhere to get questioned.

"I must admit, I grow tired of interrogations," Anevka said smoothly, "but I am willing to subject myself to more questions at the hands of an... intriguing enough interrogator."

Gil felt a twinge of awkwardness at this, as he always did when faced with such comments from young women, but he'd had enough practice handling this sort of thing in Paris that he merely cleared his throat and smoothed over it.

"I'm glad to hear it. I promise I'll be as unobtrusive as possible," he said. "I was wondering about Tarvek."

"Ah. My brother," Anevka raised a hand to smooth down a lock of her perfectly coiffed wig. "The pathological does fascinate, I suppose." She did not sound happy to be talking about this.

"I keep hearing about his having a Mechanicsburger accomplice. Care to shed any light on that?"

"A criminal, as far as we could tell," Anevka replied. "Some cut-throat that he smuggled into the castle in order to send after our father. As soon as she was caught in the act, she didn't hesitate to sell
him out. They both escaped before we could properly mete out justice, I am afraid."

And that was certainly odd, in Gil's opinion. He knew Tarvek well enough—or had known him at one point—to realize that if Tarvek wanted Aaronev dead, he would have come up with more clever plans than hiring a random Mechanicsburg thug. Not that those didn't exist, and not that Mechanicsburg wasn't close enough to justify one of them being in Sturmhalten, but that was the other weird part about this story.

It probably wouldn't have sounded as odd to someone who did not know about the Heterodyne's existence. Many people still believed Mechanicsburgers were free agents, absent of the loyalty that characterized them throughout the generations, and content to be the tenders to a tourist trap. Gil knew now that this was not true, with the existence of Agatha, and the Baron had also clued him in on the particular brand of fanatical loyalty that Mechanicsburgers had for their Heterodyne. One of them wouldn't be off assassinating the rulers of neighboring lands without say-so from their Heterodyne, and Agatha couldn't have issued such an order. Gil felt it deep in his bones that she wouldn't have.

So Anevka either did not know about the Heterodyne, or knew but thought that nobody on the Wulfenbach side was aware of her. Either way, Gil's instincts told him she was lying about something.

He decided to play along with her gamble, and see what else she wanted him to believe.

Anevka, as expected, spun him an interesting yarn about Tarvek's degeneracy, about his entrapping and destroying a whole slew of vibrant young women for some sort of vague nefarious purpose. She never went into specifics, and didn't betray any knowledge that would inculpate her, but the whole story, even if partially fabricated, gave Gil the creeps.

What was Tarvek involved in? What did the young women have to do with wasping an entire town, if they had anything to do with it at all? How much of what Anevka said could be relied upon?

Gil was mulling over these questions as he stepped out onto the hall and ran into Punch and Judy. They looked perturbed.

"Is your father nearby?" Judy asked.

"I can take you to him," Gil said, and they fell into step as they started down the corridor. "Is something wrong?"

"Obviously," Judy said, gesturing to their surroundings. "But there may be something in particular wrong pertaining to young female Sparks disappearing."

Young female Sparks. Not just young women, Gil realized, but young female Sparks. Anevka did not mention that part.

"Was it because this is where they were disappearing to?" Gil asked.

Judy's expression turned even more grave.

"Let's compare notes," she suggested.

And so they did, putting together Anevka's dubious story with what Judy and Punch had extracted
from the disconsolate servants. There were holes in both stories--the servants apparently were unable, or unwilling, to give the whole story. But in bits and pieces, it did emerge that there was some experiment being performed on young female Sparks. They were seeking a particular one, a special Spark who fulfilled some set of conditions, and apparently they had never found her.

"Agatha," Gil blurted out suddenly, as the thought struck him.

"She is a very strong Spark," Judy agreed. "Maybe the strongest of her generation. Even if they were not seeking her out in particular, she likely fit the criteria, whatever that may be."

"There was a device in a secret room," Gil said, running a hand through his hair. "It was taken, probably at the same time as the hive engines. And Tarvek disappeared around that time, too."

"At least he doesn't know where Agatha is," Judy said. "She'll be safer than anywhere in Mechanicsburg."

Gil gave a hollow laugh, because this was likely the first time in quite a while anyone would consider themselves safe within Castle Heterodyne. But then, Judy did have a point. For Agatha, this was not a prison sentence, this was homecoming.

"Come on, I'll show you the secret room," Gil said. "It's something you really should see."

They talked some more as they headed to the strange shrine to Lucrezia, but at this point they were going in circles. There was not enough information yet, and even at his sparkiest, there was only so much Gil could extrapolate from the information they did have.

Punch and Judy's expressions were quite something as they stepped into the secret chamber.

"I see Aaronev has been coping well with Lucrezia's disappearance," Judy remarked dryly.

Gil snorted and turned to his father, but he could see, on the other side of the room, that the Baron's expression was thunderous and growing more so as Boris gave a report. Gil moved swiftly to hear the tail end of it.

"--but the attacks are currently concentrated on the Black Gate, and the other two are holding."

"Mechanicsburg is under attack?" Gil asked, eyebrows rising.

"It is," Boris confirmed crisply.

"By who?" Gil couldn't hide his incredulity.

"According to reports," Boris said, straightening his glasses, "by Geisterdamen."

Gil felt the air get knocked out of him at this.

Geisterdamen. Attacking Mechanicsburg. After leaving with hive engines, with a device that needed a particular female Spark to obtain some result, so soon after Tarvek's disappearance in the company of a Mechanicsburger.

It was all converging on Mechanicsburg. Where Agatha was right now. Where Agatha might need him right now.
"Thank you for the report, Boris," Klaus said, nodding his thanks. "The situation in Sturmhalten is stable enough for now, and I suspect we have collected as much of the time-sensitive information as we could. We can leave behind teams to collect the rest of what we need, and organize the quarantine of the town. We will return to Castle Wulfenbach for now, and establish how to proceed from there. Gilgamesh--"

Klaus turned to look for his son, but found only conspicuously empty space instead.

"Where is Gil?" Klaus asked.

Punch and Judy looked at each other for a moment, then both of them shrugged.

Klaus pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't even know what he'd been expecting. He should have married that boy off when he still had the chance.
As the crow flies, the distance between Sturmhalten and Mechanicsburg was actually quite small. Travel distance tended to be inflated by the mountainous terrain, which made routes much more circuitous, with peaks and dips and, in one case, a very diverting cave where enterprising vendors had carved skulls into the walls to sell allegedly cursed souvenirs. As tourist traps went, Gil couldn't personally see the appeal, but one probably had to have very specific tastes to enjoy that kind of thing anyway.

But more to the point was the fact that, if one took to the air instead of the mountain passes, and one also possessed an adequately agile flying machine, the distance between Sturmhalten and Mechanicsburg in a straight line could melt away in minutes.

A good thing, since the wings were doing quite a bit of melting away themselves by the time Gil reached Mechanicsburg. His crash landing into a deserted market square turned into a barrel roll out of the way of the flying machine's engine exploding.

"Well," Gil said, resigned, as bits of debris clinked off the pavement all around him, "at least I don't need to stress test it anymore."

Gil mentally filed away the data he had gathered from that hasty flight for when he would build the next model, and then turned his attention to the square around him.

It was eerily deserted for this time of day. Mornings in a town this size would have the markets busy and milling with people. Yet closed stalls and garbage were the only remnants of human presence. The strange silence in the square was instead underscored by distant sounds of fighting in some other part of town; thuds, and booms, and gunshots and the occasional piercing scream that managed to cut over it.

Towards the fighting it was, then.

Petra daintily lifted the hem of her skirt and stepped over the severed limb of a huge white spider. The leg twitched unexpectedly, and she shrieked and whacked it with her sword, before kicking the limb away.

The rest of the militia squad tried not to snicker.

"Oh, haha, very funny," Petra said grimly, before pointing to Siggy Oessler. "Laugh it up, Siggy, but I know how many spiders you used to chop the legs off of as a child, and you're the one who should really be worried here!"

Siggy Oessler had the good sense to stop laughing and shift awkwardly in place, glancing nervously to the shadows. Any vengeful spiders had certainly had a long few years to plot their reprisals.
Though at the moment, it was the Geisterdamen's huge spiders that proved problematic. The other militia squads had managed to bottleneck the Geisters near the gate, but a few spider-riders had managed to simply step over the fracas and into the town. There was no telling what chaos they could cause, or what chaos they intended to cause, for that matter.

Squads had dispersed after each spider and its rider. Petra's squad followed one of them, and they'd managed, thanks to Piotr Viornich's lucky hand-cannon, to chop off at least one leg and a half off the spider.

The Geister had shrieked as if she'd been the one injured, and had turned her baleful glare down on the townsfolk, but then she'd pulled the reins hard, and turned the spider to climb over the rooftops, steering away from them.

Petra was glad she'd put on her practical boots that day. She'd had a feeling there would be plenty of running, though maybe not after a giant albino spider.

"Where is she going?!" Petra muttered, as the dozen-strong squad rushed down weaving and intersecting streets, trying to keep the spider in sight.

"I hear spiders swallow an average of seven people over their lifetime," Maria Tropot said, making Siggy Oessler lag behind quite a bit.

"Not the relevant answer to any question, Maria," Petra hissed out sharply and she ran.

They turned a sharp corner, and skidded to a halt, almost falling over each other as they windmilled their arms to stop their momentum.

They found the spider, or, at least, found its component parts. The off-white ooze from which the spider's legs emerged was still smoking slightly. A red splotch showed where the Geister had probably been caught in the same beam from a death ray.

And then Agatha stepped forward, death ray still aloft, her expression grim. Tarvek and Van were several steps behind, looking queasy from the smell of burnt spider. Carson, on the other hand, was completely unphased by the spider-guts littered around him.

"Is this who came through the Black Gate?" Agatha asked, her eyes falling on Petra. The rest of the squad shrank back, letting the Heterodyne's chief minion field this one.

"They didn't come through the Black Gate. There are some attacking on the outside of the Black Gate and the Red Gate, but the Geisters that got through sprang from underground." Petra said, and dug through the satchel on her hip to bring out a circular device. She presented it to Agatha. "There was a tunnel, filled with these things, just near the gate. The gargoyles said the devices make it so the Castle can't feel whatever it's attached to. Whatever town defenses are still working can't even get a lock on these things."

Agatha looked downright grim, and it wasn't an expression many people had seen on Agatha before.

"And where would the Geisters get these?" Agatha asked, picking up the device and turning it over. Everybody shuffled in place uncertainly, until Agatha turned to Tarvek and made it clear who she was expecting to answer the question.

Tarvek adjusted his glasses, looking suddenly very worried--for his own well-being, if not for the
"The Geisters were always Lucrezia Mongfish's creatures," he said. "If she wanted to work unobserved by the Castle, it's likely... well, the former Lady Heterodyne had a lot to hide, to put it lightly."

"Including a tunnel leading to the outside," Agatha mused. She skewered the device with a glare, but after a moment, she seemed to shake it off, and put the matter aside for later. "Right. Did anyone see where the tunnel ended inside Mechanicsburg?"

"We didn't follow it," Petra replied, "but it was in the direction of the Castle, if you're thinking what I think you're thinking."

"Well, it is your job to think what you think I'm thinking," Agatha said, and gave Petra a toothy grin. She turned to Van, Carson and Tarvek. "We may have just found our way in."

Klaus returned to Castle Wulfenbach with Punch and Judy in tow, and not a moment too soon, given the sudden clamor of activity which the attack on Mechanicsburg had stirred.

Not just on Castle Wulfenbach, it seemed. Reports were incoming from across Europa. Nothing definite yet, nothing too overt--a sudden flurry of correspondence from the desks of the Fifty Families, a few spies being shuffled around, a few agents being recalled--but he had the reports compiled, and he left orders for everything to be passed to the Deep Thinkers for analysis. Klaus had the feeling that Sturmhalten was a thread which, if pulled, would unravel an entire continent-spanning plot, but with Mechanicsburg being attacked just as the conspiracy in Sturmhalten was revealed, he suspected the greater danger would come from those waiting to see how everything panned out before acting.

"The situation in Mechanicsburg can be destabilizing to the entire Empire if not handled right," Klaus said, almost musing out loud to Punch and Judy.

They both agreed, stony-faced, but he could see the direction in which their loyalty was being pulled. Bill and Barry had been benevolent creators, never ones to exert control over their constructs, but they had also been staunch friends. This tied Judy and Punch to them--and to Bill's daughter--more tightly than any compulsion or conditioning.

Klaus tried not to sigh, though he did rub the bridge of his nose as he considered.

"I will have to speak to the Generals," he said. "I assume the young Lady Heterodyne is already attempting to repair the Castle?"

"If she thinks the town is in danger," Judy said haltingly, "especially by a threat like slaver wasps, I don't think she'd hesitate to go in."

"And there is the matter of Tarvek Sturmvoraus to consider," Klaus said, mulling over the information. "He was seen with one of her minions."
"Yes, about that. I don't suppose there's any information about who that might have been?" Judy asked.

Klaus looked over to Boris, who was hovering nearby as solicitously as ever. The secretary rifled through a few pages, found one of the few papers salvaged from Aaronev's notes.

"The only Mechanicsburger mentioned in recent records that we could find was one young woman named Evdokia Xypolitos," Boris said, presenting the paper to Judy.

"Ah," Judy said, her eyebrows rising.

"Does that tell you something?" Klaus asked.

"Only that she's a friend that Agatha had misplaced for a while and was worried about," Judy said.

"Misplaced," Klaus echoed incredulously.

"If you ever met a Xypolitos, you'd understand the wording," Judy gave a fleeting smile, before turning pensive. "But this does raise some... questions."

"We will have to table those questions for later, then," Klaus said. "Ideally after we've found them. Boris?"

"We have questors looking into the issue," Boris replied.

"Good. And on Mechanicsburg?"

"For now the fighting seems contained," Boris said, adjusting his glasses with one arm, and using two more to sort through papers for any relevant documents. "They have requested aid in evacuating visitors, however, so we have redirected the closest airships. The Radaghast's Reverie, the Rozen Maiden and the Torus of Benevolence for now. We have also offered troops, to bolster local defenses, but the Mechanicsburgers insist they have things well in hand." He sniffed, as if to demonstrate what he thought of that notion.

"Good," Klaus said, his fingers drumming against the surface of his desk in a nervous tattoo as he considered. "Now comes the hard part."

"Shall I summon the Generals, Herr Baron?" Boris asked grimly.

"It hardly seems avoidable," Klaus replied, sighing. "Things will have to be hashed out before the Heterodyne publicly declares herself. It would be just as disastrous for her as for us, if it seems like she's stolen the Jaegers out from under us."

"Good luck, Klaus," Judy said.

"You're not coming along?" Klaus asked, almost taken aback.

Judy and Punch looked at each other, sharing one of their wordless looks. Klaus had almost come close to deciphering those looks of their before circumstances separated them for so many years; now it seemed that hardly any time had passed, the the scene remained as familiar as in his youth.

"I know it doesn't seem like it, Klaus, but Adam and I really are retired," Judy explained, apologetic
but firm.

Klaus couldn’t precisely argue with that.

"We're none of us as young as we used to be," he said.

"Thank goodness for that," Judy grinned. "All that adventuring was going to do us in eventually."

Klaus found himself laughing.

As Gil made his way through town, he came to note that it wasn't nearly as eerily silent as he first assumed. The streets were mostly clear of children, the elderly or the infirm, but squads of Mechanicsburgers still patrolled, ready to engage the enemy wherever it may attack. Despite reaping the benefits of the Wulfenbach peace, it seemed Mechanicsburgers had not slouched in their siege preparations.

Gil kept clear of them; it seemed like the cautious thing to do at this point. He was not Mechanicsburger, and he didn't think his mimmoth inspector routine would hold up. The militia would likely find him suspicious and try to detain him, and that would have been a tedious waste of time. Instead, when he heard the patter of feet against the cobblestones, he ducked out of the way and waited for them to pass.

Luckily, it was as he was clinging to a drainpipe, waiting for the patrol to pass him, that he overheard them as they quietly chatted.

"Lady Heterodyne should be inside the Castle by now," one said to another.

"Would be nice to see this place fend off a siege when it's in top shape, eh?" the other replied.

So, Gil at least had more of an idea of where to go than he did when he crashlanded.

He made his way deeper into the town, and around the more crowded areas around the Castle. Tourists had been herded here for safety, and Gil could see the airships with the Wulfenbach insignia bobbing in the air above, slowly working on evacuating everyone in an orderly fashion.

The tourists seemed more inconvenienced than alarmed, when it came down to it. The true extent of the danger probably hadn't had the time to sink in yet, because they clustered in groups and griped about their holiday being cut short. This was, Gil had to admit, probably better than the panic that would ensue if they knew there were Geisters probably hoisting wasp engines this way as they spoke.

Wulfenbach soldiers and airmen were on the ground, ushering the tourists in small groups towards the airships. Gil could have melted into the group of tourists here, evading the suspicions of the militia, but then he risked being recognized by one of his father's men. If he strayed too far away, however, the militia patrols would spot him.
He weaved indecisively at the edge of the crowded streets, avoiding anyone looking too officious, trying to figure out what his best approach would be. He stayed within eyesight of the statue of Bill and Barry Heterodyne, using it as a reference point as he rounded the neighborhood, trying to figure out if he should risk the main gate or try to find some secret entrance.

He was so absorbed by this question, that he didn't even notice when he backed up into an alley and right into someone.

"Oh, sorry--" Gil started, as he was jostled, and turned to face a blond man in a white airman coat. He nearly jumped out of his skin, belatedly remembering that he was trying to avoid running into any Wulfenbach personnel. The coat of arms at his throat felt like a hot brand just then.

The airman, a blond man chewing on a pipe, looked straight at that coat of arms, and then at Gil's face. Gil didn't recognize him, but then, there were thousands of airmen in the Wulfenbach fleet. There was only one Baron's son.

A dizzying moment passed as Gil felt the airman's scrutiny, and then there was a puff of the airman's pipe.

"Careful 'round here, sir," the airman drawled. "There's an evacuation under way. Should queue up over there."

"Th-thank you, yes, I think I will," Gil said, regaining his composure, and then turned to stroll away with a stiff fake casualness.

Gil ducked into an alley he made sure was empty this time, and sagged against a wall.

Well, he really ought to be more careful than that, he decided, as he took stock of the crowd.

"Psst. Hey, kid."

Oh, what in the screaming hells-- he made sure this time there wasn't anyone--

He whipped around. Out of the shadows oozed a young woman in an ugly overcoat, several sizes too big for her, and steel-toed boots. She wore a hospital gown beneath the coat, and one side of her face was sewed up, along the side and over her eye. Despite all obvious and undeniable indications that she was an escaped patient, she grinned at him.

"Hey, kid, you wanna get inside the Castle?" she asked.

"I don't know what could possibly make you think that," Gil replied. "Also, I think I'm older than you."

"Growing up in Mechanicsburg adds five years," she said dismissively. "But hey, if you don't want me to show you my incredibly convenient way in, that's your look-out, buddy."

"Wait," Gil said, but then hesitated. She had a heavy Mechanicsburg accent, so he could believe she knew a way in. But he wasn't sure why she'd tell it to him. "Are you... running some sort of scam?"

"Uh, yeah, that scam's called 'get yourself someone with depth perception before you travel down the trap hallway!'" she replied. "You want in or what?"
"First of all, even putting aside the fact that you are obviously an escaped patient, possibly from an asylum if not the hospital--"

"Hey, I'm no more criminally insane than anyone else in Mechanicsburg," she said, looking peeved.

"That's hardly reassuring," Gil said. "But putting that aside, why do you even want to get inside the Castle? What's in it for you?"

"The Heterodyne's in it for me," the girl replied. "Could say she's in it for all of us. And if she's going to get the place up and running again, who in their right mind wouldn't want a piece of that?"

"That's--well, that's fair," Gil acquiesced.

"Yeah?" The girl's face lit up in cautious hope.

"Sure. Let's do this."

"Awesome, lemme just... get rid of the scrub first," she said, lazily jabbing her thumb at something over Gil's shoulder.

Gil whirled around to see the airman from before blocking the mouth of the alley. He seemed completely unalarmed for having just heard two evidently crazy people plotting to get into the most dangerous piece of living architecture anyone on the continent had ever devised.

"You! I-- what--" Gil sputtered, even as the Mechanicsburger girl stalked past him, producing a scalpel from her pocket. Gil saw the flash of metal, and instantly clamped down on the girl's arm, stopping her in her tracks. Other than the fact that this was neither the time, nor the place, he couldn't exactly let Wulfenbach troops be assaulted in dark alleyways on his behalf.

"Thought you might need some back-up, sir," the airman offered, touching his hat in a gesture that wasn't quite a salute, "since you seem to be so intent on throwing yourself into danger."

"You know who I am," Gil concluded.

"Yep." It was a dry pop of a word, but firm in a way that made it clear he wasn't going to get turned back.

"I suppose you'll insist on coming along," Gil continued. It was doubtful a single airman could drag Gil back to his father, and by the looks of him, the airman realized as much as well. He must've been a smart man to conclude so quickly that the only option he had in protecting the heir to the Wulfenbach Empire was to lend support, and given where he was headed, Gil considered he might need all the support he could get.

"S'pose so," the airman said, just as dryly.

The girl's head shot around, and she looked between them, evidently not understanding the undercurrent of the conversation, save that her planned stabbing had just been cancelled. She looked far more disappointed by this than Gil would have liked.

The airman gave a crisp salute.

"Airman Third Class Axel Higgs, at your service," he introduced himself.
Tarvek had known first hand the fanatical loyalty of Mechanicsburgers to their Heterodyne, but now with so many of them in one place, he could see the way they orbited their Heterodyne.

Agatha walked briskly towards the Black Gate, and Petra's squad fell into step with her, ignoring Tarvek almost entirely. Carson and Van had departed, going back to Mamma Gkika's to coordinate the city's defenses; they were more useful on the outside, anyway. Tarvek had at least time enough to have a quick exchange with Van before he and Carson left, and managed to extract a favor from him. By the pleased look on Van's face, the young seneschal was going to have a lot of fun getting that favor repaid, but it couldn't be helped at this point.

Agatha, meanwhile, was planning to get into the Castle.

"We won't know what we'll encounter," Agatha said.

"Uh-huh," Petra agreed, and signaled one of the squad. The young man saw the signal and hoisted a satchel off his back, emptying it of several items, which he handed off to his squad-mates.

"So we'll need tools," Agatha continued, not even noticing. "A versatile set, we don't want to be weighed down too much. Weapons, of course. Ideally we'd take parts, but we don't know what we'll need in advance, so we'll just have to improvise once we're inside."

The young man who emptied his satchel pounded on a passing storefront's door and disappeared inside. Agatha didn't notice, and hardly slowed, but the young man caught up a few blocks later, running up with two satchels this time, halfway filled.

"You don't know how long you'll be in there, do you?" Petra asked.

"As long as it takes," Agatha said.

"You'll need rations, then," Petra said.

At this, everyone in the squad rummaged through their own satchels and pockets, and an impressive numbers of crackers, dry fruit and cured meats were produced, and packed efficiently into the satchels even as they walked. Two canteens of waters were also attached to the outside of the satchels, and one was handed to Tarvek.

"And help," Petra added.

"It's best not to go in with a large group," Agatha said. "Extra hands are always useful, but too many people, and it's going to be hard to maneuver through the tighter places."

"Right," Petra agreed, and wordlessly pointed to a few people on the squad. There were nods, and then a quick shuffling of weapons and supplies, equipping the individuals that Petra had pointed to.

Tarvek was impressed despite himself.

By the time they reached the vicinity of the Black Gate, Tarvek could see the remnants of battle.
Blood splattered the cobblestones, though either townsfolk or Geisterdamen who had died seemed to have been carted away already. One spider, upended into a rooftop, had still not been removed, and its legs arched over the streets.

The large thoroughfare leading through the Black Gate into town was interrupted by a large hole through the middle. This was to be their way in, Tarvek surmised.

"I should warn you, I don't think this was all the Geisters," one of the townsfolk said. "We took a look down there as we were picking up stragglers. We think the ones with spiders came up here because the tunnel got too tight for them on ahead, but anyone on foot might've just gone on."

"We'll keep a look out for them," Agatha nodded, as she prepared to rappel down. "With any luck, they'll have triggered the traps for us, too!"

A few of the minions tittered, less at the joke and more, perhaps, at the thought of invaders being messily splattered by the town defenses.

Either way, as everyone there knew, the traps were going to be indiscriminate until Agatha had the Castle back under control. Tarvek did not exactly look forward to the gauntlet that awaited them, but he found himself eager to see the Lady Heterodyne officially in charge of her own town.

The girl, who had introduced herself only as Ducky, did tell the truth about knowing a way into the Castle. It first involved going down into the sewers, which she claimed to be full of monsters usually. Gil didn't see any, so he was as pleased as anything to not have the distraction.

But then around the time Ducky used a crowbar to pry the planks off a covered shaft, Gil started having some second thoughts.

"Technically this used to lead straight into an acid pit," she said, to many alarm bells going off in Gil's head, "but there hasn't been anyone to refill them, so nowadays it's just used as a drop point for contraband."

"Didn't realize smuggling was such a boom business down here," Higgs remarked dryly. Gil didn't know the man well enough to guess if it was some sort of joke.

"I assume the contraband is for the prisoners working inside the Castle?" Gil asked.

"Yeah, sure," Ducky shrugged. "After the nyar-spiders get their cut."

Gil didn't even want to guess if that was a joke.

The shaft was greasy, and by the smell of oil and lard, Gil guessed that was to lubricate the way for whatever was getting dropped down there. Ducky went in first, with almost too much gusto, and led the way with shrieks of excitement that echoed through the sewers. Or at least, Gil hoped those were shrieks of excitement.

"Well, sir, after you," Higgs motioned towards the opening.
Gil pulled his coat tight to make sure it wouldn't snag, and slipped through the hole and down the shaft. It was thankfully large enough for a person even of twice his size, and as he slid down at ever increasing speeds, the shaft walls blurring past him, he understood Ducky's impulse to shriek.

Just as he was approaching the end, and beginning to worry about the speed of his descent, the shaft changed angles so abruptly that it knocked the breath out of him. But at a softer angle, he was at least not gaining any speed, and he started bracing his heels against the shaft as he saw the first hint of light at the end.

He still came down at uncomfortable speeds as the shaft spat him out--and straight into a foamy substance that exploded into flakes around him.

He felt the hands on his shoulders as Ducky pulled him out of the thankfully soft substance that pillowed his fall, and she helped him clamber to his feet on the solid stone floor. Just in time for Higgs to come sliding out and send flakes flying everywhere as well.

"Packing peanuts," Ducky clarified, dusting off the substance. She picked one flake off her clothing-they were a pale brown, but looked like soap shavings--and she ate it.

"Is that really edible?" Gil asked, taking a closer look at a few of the flakes, and sniffing them. They didn't smell like much of anything.

"It's not... inedible," Ducky said slowly. "But a touch of pica goes a long way."

Gil dropped the flakes immediately.

There were footsteps outside the room now, and voices beyond the door. The convicts probably thought there'd been a supply drop, and would be bursting through the door at any moment to investigate.

"So what's the plan?" Gil asked, keeping his voice low.

Ducky seemed to contemplate the question as she slowly chewed.

"I think the expression is... 'to clean house'?" she said, and grinned.

Violetta Mondarev had, despite her limited skill as a Smoke Knight, more than enough self-awareness to realize that her job as secretary to Mechanicsburg's burgermeister could be performed by someone with even half her brain and a quarter her literacy. She knew, of course, that thinking was not a huge requirement for this assignment. Even if technically she was there to spy, it didn't seem like there was much worth spying on in the burgermeister's office.

So she resigned herself to years of boredom in glorified exile.

However; and this was quite a large 'however'--Violetta was still, at the end of the day, a Smoke Knight. And no matter how much of a failure she was as a Smoke Knight, the fact that something was definitely happening in Mechanicsburg was a bit too blatantly obvious for even someone like
her to fail to notice.

It felt like someone had kicked a hornet's nest somewhere just out of sight, so only angry buzzing could be heard coming from somewhere, with no clear idea of where. First it was all the different Order spies and Smoke Knights pouring into town. That was strange enough, and Violetta's curiosity was naturally piqued.

Whatever they were searching for, she certainly wasn't privy to; above her clearance most likely, though obviously if any of them ever asked for her help, she'd have to obey, no questions asked. (Nobody asked for her help.)

But then the situation took its more curious turn, when all the spies and Smoke Knights noticeably—or at least noticeable to another Smoke Knight—began disappearing.

She almost thought she was imagining it at first. Maybe some of them had finished their assignments and gone back to report. But all of them? And so suddenly? Violetta had to consider that there was something far more insidious going on, and she was the only one left to notice.

She tried not to let on that anything was amiss. She showed up to work every day, at the burgermeister's office, ready to tackle her paltry tasks. She sat at her desk in front of the typewriter, she adjusted the desk lamp just so, she made sure the burgermeister's coffee was ready for him on his desk, and she waited to see if anything would be different, or new, or even anywhere in the remote vicinity of interesting.

But if there was something exciting happening in Mechanicsburg, this was clearly something that didn't involve her. The locals were abuzz, like that proverbial hornet's nest she couldn't see, but there was nothing to indicate what had worked them up in such a lather.

Not until the morning the town was attacked.

Violetta was far away from the walls, so she never got to see anything first hand. The burgermeister's office was central enough that it was both far away and safe from whatever happened there at the gates. But Violetta got to see first hand that strange Mechanicsburg synergy in action. One by one, store fronts were closed and locked, up and down the street. And very suddenly, the populace disappeared off the streets, to be replaced by citizen militia patrols.

Runners came from the Black Gate to report on the happenings there, and a few more came from around the town, reporting smaller, sporadic attacks, but it didn't seem like the burgermeister's office was doing much of anything to organize, and even more oddly, it didn't seem like organizing was needed. Or, rather, it wasn't needed from the burgermeister. Someone else in Mechanicsburg was running a very tight ship, indeed.

It left Violetta some time to fret about the other aspect of this. Geisterdamen. There were Geisterdamen attacking Mechanicsburg. The disappearance of the Smoke Knights seemed a lot more sinister all of a sudden, and it left Violetta wondering if she had to start worrying about her own impending disappearance.

Then the burgermeister called her into his office, and handed her an envelope.

"Violetta, you know Mamma Gkika's place, yes?" the burgermeister asked, looking unusually tense.

"Uh... yeah, it's hard to miss," she replied.
"Good, good," the burgermeister nodded. "Take this down to Mamma Gkika's. Carson Heliotrope should be waiting there for it."

Now this definitely piqued Violetta's interest, and also made her apprehensive. She didn't know how the other Smoke Knights in the town had been taken out, but surely it wasn't by being ambushed at a rowdy tourist trap. Still, she was hardly in the league of other Smoke Knights, and she didn't know what precisely was making her paranoid in this situation.

"Sure thing," she said, in her most harmless, affable chipper.

She left right away, and made a convenient detour through a side alley, where she used the perfectly innocuous everyday items in her pouch to open the envelope, read it through, test it for every type of invisible ink she could, and then reseal the wax. The letter was a very boring account of an old book that was found in the town archives, and a request for Herr Heliotrope to help authenticate it.

She supposed there was nothing very strange about that request. The Heliotropes ran an old book shop, if Violetta recalled. And there was absolutely no code or secret message that she could identify.

For some reason, this made Violetta even more suspicious. This seemed like an exceedingly strange time to be sending such a letter. Was she not meant to know what was in it? Was this some sort of trick or test? Did the burgermeister have it in for her?

There was hardly anything too dangerous in this errand itself. Mechanicsburg was locked down, yes, but this was very far away from the fighting, and the militia were running around keeping things safe. As she approached the touristic parts of Mechanicsburg, there hardly seemed to be anything amiss about the town.

She saw the Wulfenbach airships moored over this part of town. A Wulfenbach official had helpfully informed the burgermeister that the Baron had sent a few airships to help evacuate the tourists by means of air, since the gates seemed to have been targeted in the recent attacks. The tourists had been herded to the city center, accordingly.

Violetta felt the temptation, as she wended her way through the gathered crowds, to disappear into them. Here, among all these people, she would be just another face, and she could squirrel herself away on one of the Wulfenbach airships and be safely off to Sturmhalten before the day was out.

The problem, of course, was that she'd have to be off her head to do such a thing. She'd had no orders to depart Mechanicsburg, and despite all her suspicions and all her questions, and all her deep abiding hatred for this awful posting, leaving right now would still be dereliction of duty. It would reflect horribly on her in a way that simply being ill-trained didn't.

So she pushed on through the crowds, and on to Mamma Gkika's.

The bar was not as rowdy as Violetta expected. There were certainly more than enough scantily-clad Jaeger barmaids around, but it seemed they were working harder on turning the patrons out into the streets than serving them anything. Instead, all the activity in the bar seemed to revolve mostly around townies scurrying about, going in and out of the back room.

By the makeshift armor and weapons so many of the locals were wearing, Violetta suddenly had an inkling of who was organizing the militia so well. She didn't know why this thought made her feel safer. By all accounts, there was no reason for it.
But it felt nice to know that someone other than the feckless burgermeister had taken the reins, even if that person was likely the large intimidating matron in charge of this bar.

Violetta walked up to the bar, where a half-distracted barmaid was putting away glasses.

"I have a letter for Herr Heliotrope," Violetta said, "and I was told I could find him here."

"Ah," the barmaid peered at the envelope, with the burgermeister's seal, with a look on her face that very eloquently said of the burgermeister: 'what does that guy want?'.

She didn't get to answer, however, before a young man sidled up to Violetta, took the envelope from her hand, and gave her a wide smile.

"Well," the young man said, looking absolutely delighted. "You must be Violetta Mondarev. Your cousin Tarvek spoke quite highly of you."

Along with Tarvek and four of the townsfolk, Agatha descended into the tunnel and made her way through it as quickly as possible.

The tunnel did indeed tighten quite a bit as they approached the Castle, just as Agatha had been warned. The devices pinned to the walls, that were presumably there to jam the Castle's internal sensors, were also clustered more closely as they made their way deeper in. If this was indeed her mother's handiwork, Agatha expected to run straight into one of her labs soon enough.

There were a few traps along the way; not Heterodyne ones, though, just simple booby-traps that Sparks always seemed to set up almost as an afterthought around their labs. They were hardly enough to slow down a determined group.

And no Geisters along the way. For some reason, this felt more unsettling than just coming face to face with them.

They emerged out from the tight tunnel into a room, eventually. The Geisters had very helpfully broken through a half-collapsed entryway and taken off its hinges what might have once been a secret door. They were nowhere in sight, however, as Agatha and Tarvek stepped into the room, and the minions followed.

The light was tinged both green and red, not emanating from one source in particular, but seemingly reflecting from the emergency lighting and the warning bulbs of disaffected equipment. Luckily, the group had lanterns, which proved just as useful here as in the tunnel.

This was, unmistakably, a lab. Abandoned long ago, but used extensively at some point. The equipment was elaborate, of high quality, obviously sparkwork in some cases. Throughout the room, there were old traces of someone having spent a long time there. Here, a comfortable armchair and a stack of books, there, a tea set with dregs still encrusted on the bottom of a cup.

"This was Lucrezia's lab," Tarvek said suddenly, his eyes roaming through the room almost fretfully, as if the woman herself was going to jump out from behind a growing vat and yell 'surprise!'.
"Not all of it," one of the minions said--Constantin Turluk, one of the more elderly townfolk, though obviously still robust for his age. He had a row of small exhaust pipes coming out of one shoulder, poking through a row of notches in his work shirt, and they puffed out small clouds of steam as he spoke. Apparently this apparatus had kept his lungs in working order for three generations of Heterodynes; the man had mentioned to Tarvek, almost off-handedly, that he’d been around for old Saturn’s reign.

"Some of this looks like older equipment," Agatha said, surveying some of the growing vats. "Looks like she repurposed one of the Red Heterodyne’s vats here."

"Sure, why reinvent the steam-powered wheel when you can just steal one?" someone else shrugged; Maria Tropot, one of the younger minions in town. She’d been part of Petra’s squad. "Not like she was just going to haul her own stuff in."

"See if you can find any notes," Agatha said, as she looked around the room. "We don't have time to stay here, but if there's anything important, I'd rather take it along for later."

"Lady Heterodyne," Tarvek started, and then his voice gave out as his eyes fell to the room’s only exit.

Agatha’s head turned to Tarvek, and then to follow his gaze.

There was a splatter of blood there. Nothing too large, because they hadn’t even noticed it upon entering the room, but it was there. A tiny trickle, leading to a limp, ghost-white hand splayed on the floor.

A hand attached to nothing else.

The minions produced weaponry almost instantaneously. Constantin even handed Tarvek a miniature death ray, the dainty kind that socialites sometimes kept in small clutch purses, and Tarvek felt too apprehensive to perceive this as any kind of insult at this point.

Agatha picked up an electric arc cutter from a nearby workbench, and she flicked it on. Lightning danced between its prongs, casting shifting shadows across her face. She looked serious as the grave, all good humor drained away from her. Even Tarvek had never found himself at the end of that particular grim expression, and he considered that he had done more than enough to earn it.

They stood frozen, apprehensive; listening. Now that it was quiet, and they were all but holding their breaths, they could hear movement that they had missed before. There was the slow drag of feet coming from a darkened hallway, beyond the gory remnants of the Geister. A steady clack and shuffle, like the heavy footfalls of a large clank. Bipedal, Tarvek estimated. Two meters in height, at least.

"We can hear you," Agatha called to it, "come out."

There was a pause in the shuffling step, a small, puzzled cessation of noise as if the clank was recalculating.

"This might be the time to mention," Constantin muttered in Agatha’s direction, "that the Castle had a lot of defenses that went haywire when it got blasted to hell by the Other."

"So I assume a firm command isn't going to cut it?" Agatha asked.
"Eeeeh..." Constantin made a so-so gesture.

The shuffling steps started again.

"Lucrezia!" came the clear, but artificial voice as it echoed from the hallway. "You've returned!"

She had to lean down to fit through the doorframe, but with a clockwork grace that belied her tattered exterior, Otilia, Muse of Protection, eased herself through the entrance.

Tarvek felt his breath catch. Awe grew in his chest, a warm swell that sharpened into alarm as the Muse's expression twisted to a contemptuous grimace. Her eyes swept over the group almost ravenously, seeking something.

"Where is Lucrezia?" the Muse demanded. "She has betrayed the House of Heterodyne. Give her to me, or I will crush you all."

"Lucrezia isn't here," Agatha said.

Otilia's eyes zeroed in on Agatha. There was a crazed light to them, one Tarvek would not have suspected the Muse of Protection capable of. She moved then, so swiftly that nobody in the room had even the time to flinch, and her hand enclosed around Agatha's throat, pulling her off balance, if not entirely off her feet. Otilia's eyes narrowed as she looked into Agatha's face.

"You cannot trick me, Lucrezia!" the Muse spat out. "I would recognize your voice anywhere, treacherous creature! Did you think that shedding your skin like a snake would help you escape?"

"I am not," Agatha gritted out, "my mother! I am the Heterodyne!"

And then, with a single rapid motion, Agatha brought the electric arc cutter up, and cut clean through the clank's forearm, sectioning it from the body. She freed herself from the clank's grasp, even if not from the fingers still clenched around her throat, and stumbled back.

Otilia suffered a single moment of confusion, but that was enough for several things to happen: first for Tarvek to almost have a heart attack at seeing an original Van Rijn treated in this manner, second for Agatha to beat a hasty retreat, and third for all four of her minions to snap out of their stupor and jump Otilia at the same time.

Maria shot off a grapple gun at Otilia's legs, the magnetic grapple swinging around them three times and then tying itself off. Constantin, hoisting what looked like a harpoon gun, shot off a spear-like projectile through one of Otilia's shoulders, but instead of sinking in and through, the tip wedged itself between the plates of her shoulder, and broke off uselessly.

The other two minions, Dana and Lukas, jumped to tackle Otilia, using nothing but a powered glove, a portable magnetic field generator, and a great deal of pluck--for which they were flicked off like annoying flies.

"Stop!" Tarvek found himself yelling, approaching the Muse with a confidence he didn't entirely feel.

But this was the moment of truth. He had very little to lose anymore, and this was going to come out anyway. It might as well come out while he proved himself an asset to Lady Heterodyne.
The words were on his lips, the admission that he was the Storm King, and then just as Otilia's eyes fell on him and she shifted her weight to attack him, he felt Agatha's entire body weight slam into him and push him aside, out of the way of the Muse's wide swing.

"Lukas, the magnetic field sorter!" Agatha called out, as she dragged Tarvek back from the fighting. "Use the grappling line! We're going for the ceiling!"

Lukas picked himself up from where Otilia had tossed him, and shrugged off the pack with his magnetic device and he ran towards Maria. She was doing her best to keep a hold if the grappling gun as Otilia struggled, and with Constantin and Dana offering a distraction, Otilia barely noticed the minions work.

Agatha jumped into the fray herself, using her electric arc cutter to jab at Otilia. It seemed largely ineffectual, since Otilia slapped off each clumsy attack with her intact arm, but Tarvek realize it was all a distraction.

The magnet was attached to the line, and Lukas worked the settings on the magnet's attached device until the now magnetized grappling line began twisting in the air like a thrashing snake.

Tarvek hadn't understood Agatha's vague instructions, which was perhaps the point, but her minions seemed to have read her mind, because as Agatha distracted Otilia, the grappling wire's erratic thrashing suddenly seemed not so erratic: the line formed six loops in the air, and then the loops fell around Otilia and abruptly tightened, with all the strength of the magnetic field possessing them.

Maria detached the grappling wire from the gun, and handed it to Contantin, who attached it to his large harpoon projectile, and shot it into the ceiling.

Otilia let out a roar of anger as the plan played out, and she found herself hogtied upside down and dangling from the ceiling.

Everyone in the room pulled back from her as she thrashed around and snarled, but with a few more twists of the dials on Lukas' magnetic field sorter, the line tightened around her. Her chassis creaked in protest, and only then did Otilia stop struggling.

"Everyone sound off," Agatha said, slumping against a nearby workbench while still holding Otilia's detached arm.

"I'm fine!" Dana said, pulling herself to her feet while pressing her sleeve to a gash on her forehead.

"Alive," Constantin said, his eyes not leaving Otilia as he reloaded his harpoon launcher.

"Happily alive," added Lukas, considerably more affected.

"Still kicking," Maria added as well, then turned to Tarvek when he didn't speak. She elbowed him, but he was looking at Otilia so intently, he almost didn't notice. He seemed perfectly intact, however, and since he was shoved out of the way before the fracas really began, nobody particularly worried about him.

"So is she one of the Castle defenses?" Agatha asked, gesturing to the captured clank.

"No," Tarvek said, still much too fascinated to tear his eyes away. "She," he gestured to Otilia, "is
one of the Muses."

Chapter End Notes

I updated! I know, I'm just as shocked as you are!
As Lilith told Klaus, and truly did mean: she and Adam were retired. They had done their adventuring, they had found their new place within Beetleburg, and now they had their adopted children to think about and care for.

That they had let themselves be dragged along into this issue had more to do with the fact that Agatha, in her own way, was family too. Simply because she lacked any rapport with Klaus didn't mean the two had to be enemies, and Lilith was only too happy to facilitate understanding between the two of them.

But Lilith, despite her retirement, had not lost that streak of selflessness that had once had her tagging along with the Heterodyne Boys, saving people across Europa. And neither had Adam. And she could already see how it was getting them in the middle of other people's trouble once again, when she felt Adam's hand on her shoulder, stopping her in the middle of a corridor.

They were on their way to the docking bay, to catch the next airship to Beetleburg. They'd left the kids in the care of friends for now, some of their construct acquaintances who would understand the children's special needs, but it still irresponsible to be away for too long. They wanted to be home as soon as possible.

But Adam's expression was pulled into a frown, brows knitting together in worry rather than anger. He gestured subtly, little more than a bob of the chin, and Lilith looked into the direction he indicated. Two Wulfenbach soldiers and a man in a labcoat were apparently trying to herd a clank doll along.

"Come now," the man in the labcoat said, probably going for soothing and instead landing on condescension, "you will feel much better once you are in the mechanics lab."

The clank, dressed in nothing but a white shift, teetered on her feet like her gyros were drunk, graceful movements cutting off into mechanical stutters. There was evidently something wrong, but given how everyone was trying to usher her along without touching her, there was probably also something dangerous about her.

"I d-d-don't require maintenance from from you," she replied, with a vulnerability that seemed disturbingly realistic in a clank. "Where-where-where is Prince Tarvek?"

The man in the labcoat gave a hissing sigh, clearly exasperated, and he glared at the two Wulfenbach soldiers.

"This is a waste of time, just pick her up already," he told them in a stage whisper, as if the clank was right there to hear him.

"Answer's still no," one of the soldiers replied. "She zapped the last fools to manhandle her, and the Baron said to talk her into coming anyway. You're the smart guy here, so do some talking."

Labcoat was clearly displeased to be told off in this manner, so before he could take it out on the clank, Lilith interposed herself between them.

"Hello," Lilith addressed the clank, "do you need any help?"
"I can-can-can walk," the clank replied.

"That's not what I meant," Lilith said, looking askance to the man in the labcoat.

This seemed to change something in the clank's demeanor, some tension loosening now that she was treated with even a modicum of kindness.

"I want t-t-t-to see Prince Tarvek," the clank said, and teetered forward, towards Lilith. "It's im-
important."

"Prince Tarvek is currently... away," Lilith said. "Nobody is quite sure where he's gotten to."

The clank looked at Lilith then, her expression strangely wounded. Lilith had known that look in the face of many abandoned creations. Betrayal had a way of looking the same no matter how monstrous the face. And the clank really was quite lovely, her expressions so much more vivid than the clank body that the Princess Anevka had.

It made Lilith wonder.

"I'm sure," Lilith said, "that as soon as he's found, he'll be happy to know you're safe and that you've been waiting for him. Is there anything I can do to help in the meantime?"

"I require maintenance," she said, her voice low, the stuttering of her voice fading as she grew contemplative.

"We can perform it in the mechanics lab, as I've already said," the man in the labcoat interjected, his voice a contemptuous sneer.

Oh, Lilith didn't like him. And by the look on her face, and her defensive posture, the clank didn't like him either. Good instincts.

"We're no Sparks, but my husband is a blacksmith," Lilith said, gesturing to Adam, whose quiet presence at her side was keeping the labcoated man at bay. "Would you like us to have a look at you?"

The clank looked at Lilith, and then Adam, apparently considering. With a final, furtive glance at the man in the labcoat, she turned towards the Clays.

"I-I would, thank you," she said.

"What's your name?" Lilith asked, offering her arm to the clank.

"Tinka," she said, and accepted the arm.

"Tinka," Lilith repeated, "I'm Lilith. It's nice to meet you."

Agatha ran a hand through her hair, momentarily overcome with disbelief.
"One of Van Rijn's Muses?" she repeated, as if she could have somehow misheard Tarvek's explanation.

"Otilia," he replied.

"And she's just been knocking about in Castle Heterodyne this entire time?" Agatha threw her hands up. "Since, what? The reign of the Storm King?"

"Eeeeh..."

Everyone turned to look at Constantin, who was rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

"Not for nothing, Mistress," the old man said, "but the Castle tends to have more stuff lying about and taking up closet space than we were ever able to keep track of. A lot of it even stuff we got from old family enemies."

"Like a Muse," Agatha said.

"Hard to name a more famous enemy than that guy," Maria opined from the edge of the group.

"True enough," Agatha agreed, folding her arms, as she looked up at the Muse still hanging from the ceiling.

The grappling line made a threatening creaking sound as the Muse struggled against the bonds, and everyone broke off just to watch, tensely, as the clank failed to squeeze free. This failed attempt was accompanied by hissed imprecations aimed at Lucrezia and her entire lineage. Agatha tried not to feel too insulted on behalf of the half of her genetics she got from that side of the family.

"Hard to believe she's the very same Otilia," Agatha said. "She sounds a bit more like... the Castle."

"I am the Castle!" the Muse shouted down unexpectedly, making Tarvek flinch. "I am Castle Heterodyne! And I demand you useless worms release me at once."

"I'm sorry, did you just say you're Castle Heterodyne?" Agatha asked, looking up at the Muse, and then at Tarvek with mounting disbelief.

The Muse--or rather, the Castle--gave a scowl at being questioned.

"Oh," Tarvek made a small, disappointed noise, deflating at this revelation. "Lucrezia was... experimenting with consciousness transferal. That's why she--that's why the Muse body was in her lab."

"Yesssss," the Castle hissed. "That traitor thought it amusing to confine me to this... shell. She is a blight to the House of Heterodyne, and she will pay for this insult."

"But then, where is Otilia?" Tarvek asked.

The Castle's gaze shifted to fix on Tarvek, strangely beedy and unsettling for coming from such an elegantly constructed face.

"She has been displaced as well," the Castle replied, "and poured into that... flesh construct which Lucrezia decided to use as nursemaid."
The Castle then looked over to Agatha, and sneered.

"Where is the Lord Heterodyne?" it demanded. "Where is his brother? I demand to speak with them."

"Lord Heterodyne is dead," Agatha replied bluntly. "And Uncle Barry is... missing. For now, I am all you have. I'm Agatha Heterodyne."

This seemed to send the Castle into a fit of hissing denial, as it shook its head, and attempted to shake free once again.

"You! You are Lucrezia's daughter then," it said, "if what you say is true."

"I am," Agatha replied. "And you are Castle Heterodyne, if what you say is true. If we are both who we say we are, then there's absolutely no reason we shouldn't work together... now is there?"

A tense moment followed, their eyes locked as they took measure of each other. Agatha was merely waiting, as the Castle considered its option and worked through the calculus itself. Eventually, it must have reached the inevitable result, because with a growl, it shook its head.

"You will prove it," the Castle said.

"If you'd like," Agatha said in turn.

"I think it means in the chapel," Constantin said to Agatha in a low voice.

"We were going to have to get to that eventually," Agatha shrugged. "If the Castle really is fractured across subsystems, then having the chapel's confirmation will be a lot of help going through." Then, after a few moments of tapping her chin in thought, she continued, "And having a mobile part of the Castle's consciousness might help the process of integrating all the subsystems, too."

"You're thinking of using this part--" Tarvek gestured to the Castle, "--as a master override for the others?"

"Unless we can arrange for a hard reset to all the systems at once, this might be our next best option," Agatha said. "But we might get to that point anyway, depending on how many pieces the Castle's consciousness is broken into. Taking this piece along will expedite our passage for now, at least."

"So... we're cutting it down, then?" Maria asked, pointing to the hanging clank.

"We are," Agatha said. "Whether we'll reach the library, or the chapel first, I think it will be useful."

"And if you are not who you say," the Castle clank said, its voice a low warning.

"Yes, yes, I get the picture," Agatha rolled her eyes.

The minions dutifully set to loosening the line holding the clank, and with some expert dial-turning on Lukas' magnetic field sorter, they lowered it to the ground slowly.

The Castle clank shed the line with obvious distaste once it was on its feet, but did not set to attacking anyone right away.
"Sorry about your arm," Agatha said, holding the limb out. "We should be able to attach it back."

Tarvek took the arm gingerly from Agatha, inspecting the clean cut of it, wincing.

"We should be able to micro-weld each connection," he said. "It's not complicated, but it is time consuming. And given the delicacy of Van Rijn's work, it's possible it won't be quite the same ever again."

"I can do without it, for now," the Castle clank said, shaking its bare wing struts. It shifted its body as if testing its limbs, and then picked up a piece of rebar off the floor, testing its swing.

"What I'd like to know," Tarvek started, and then glanced towards Agatha. She didn't look particularly annoyed with him at the moment; more curious than anything, so he continued, "Where is Otilia's mind?" He turned to the Castle clank again. "You said she was in a nursemaid?"

"Young Master Klaus Barry's nursemaid," the Castle clank said, growing even grumpier. It seemed that, for all the years it had missed and for all that the world had passed it by, it was still aware of the fate which had befallen Agatha's brother--and its failure in protecting the boy. "It was a construct body Lucrezia built special for it."

Though he was hesitant to poke at this scab, Tarvek couldn't help wanting to know.

"Do you know where she is? Is she still alive? Still in the Castle?"

"I don't know," the Castle clank replied, turning to look at Tarvek with narrowed eyes. "It bears no importance in the current situation. After I have been fixed, I will be in the position to check, if the Heterodyne so wills it, but until then, lackey--"

"Alright, alright," Agatha gestured to stop the argument in its tracks. "So we're all going to need to get to it. Current priority is to get to the library so we can see all the breaks. We'll fix anything else on the way there."

"The chapel should be the highest priority," the Castle clank began.

"And if we knew where it was, we'd be going straight for it," Constantin agreed. "But considering how much you've changed layout since you lost your wits, do you have any damn idea where the chapel has gotten to?"

The Castle clank opened its mouth then closed it again.

"Hm. The leathery old minion makes a good point," the Castle admitted.

Constantin muttered something vaguely uncomplimentary under his breath in return, though age and sun damage had indeed done his skin no favors, so he could hardly protest on that front.

"The Castle--I mean you--the you in the crypt," Agatha floundered a bit, "said it could provide a map in the library. Once we see the map, I'll be happy to drop in at the chapel and go through all the tedious minutia of getting confirmed. But for now, we need to keep moving. I don't suppose you know what the Geisters are doing here?"

"Dying, same as anyone," the Castle clank replied, and then produced a mean-spirited chuckle.
Coming from Otilia's voicebox, the sound was ill-fitting and all the more disturbing.

"These ones, sure," Maria pointed to the gory remnants of the Geisters in the hallway. "What about all the other ones under Mechanicsburg? This tunnel isn't the only one they used to get in. We don't even know how many might've been making their way here."

"Admittedly, I am not in... top form anymore," the Castle said, looking annoyed to even have to admit this sort of thing. "But many traps are automated. Even without me in direct control, interlopers will find their visit... most uncomfortable. Heh heh."

"Great. So we'll just... have to deal with that as we get to it," Agatha said. "They can't be any worse than anything else we'll encounter on the way."

"Oh, I'd be surprised if they were!" the Castle agreed.

"Let's just go," Agatha sighed. Lucrezia's lab was starting to unnerve her, anyway. She was all too ready to face a raving mad Castle Heterodyne instead.

Lilith had not been incorrect when she said that neither she nor Adam were Sparks. Tinka was very evidently in need of repair, but even with a lifetime of accumulated mechanical knowledge and interpreting sparkwork, the help they could render was somewhat limited in scope.

Instead, they fell back on what they knew best, and tried to lift her spirits. Tinka seemed considerably reassured by Lilith and Adam's presence, especially when they kept the huffy Spark out of sight. Seeing his opportunity to study Tinka foiled, the man who'd brought her on board wandered off to rummage through some of the other things confiscated from Sturmhalten.

The two Wulfenbach soldiers did stick around for a time, having been given orders to make sure Tinka did not harm anyone, but as she seemed perfectly sweet-tempered and uninclined to make any move against the Clays, the soldiers merely stood by the door and out of the way.

Tinka was, despite her obvious malfunction, a terribly complicated piece of technology. Once the outer plating came off, Adam's forehead wrinkled in consternation at what he was seeing. Lilith was at a loss as well, though she did imagine, with a slight twinge, what Bill and Barry's reaction might be. It seemed precisely like the kind of thing they would get very excited over.

It seemed, also, like the kind of thing they might have been able to help with. They were enthusiastic Sparks, but never let themselves be so far gone as to harm their patients. And, lacking the Heterodyne Boys' particular Sparky skill, Lilith and Adam fell back on the playful reassurance they would have employed instead.

"We'll have you spick and span, you just watch," Lilith said, and Adam nodded as well, giving Tinka a placid smile.

Tinka nodded.

"I nee-need maintenance," she repeated plaintively.

Lilith only wished she could give as much as Tinka needed. Klaus was going to have to take a look
at Tinka. He'd know what to do. And he would take care of Tinka, too, Lilith was sure. He'd fix her and find her a place within his Empire, as he did for so many creations who lost their old masters. She and Adam set to cleaning and fine-tuning everything they could feasibly clean and fine-tune without damaging.

Tinka was a delicate piece of work, with a lot of complicated, tiny components, so they were at this task for a while. Lilith made sure to speak up and explain to Tinka everything they were doing, so as not to concern her. It seemed that someone had already mucked around with her insides carelessly, and Lilith would have very much liked to have a chat with whoever that was.

Eventually, the two Wulfenbach soldiers were called to other duties, and they were replaced by two Jägers.

Jaägers had been doing double-takes all day, as Lilith and Adam were spotted making their way across Castle Wulfenbach. Some even stopped to send cheerful greetings their way. But between the Jägers' duties and the Clays' hurry to leave, there had been no time to stop and catch up.

These two, however--Glardnab and Viktor--actually managed to finagle themselves into this assignment, and instead of standing guard by the door like the human soldiers had done, they draped themselves over the nearby furniture, near enough to talk, but also careful not to loom over Tinka, instead keeping themselves level with her eyeline.

They made Tinka nervous at first. She was clearly unaccustomed to Jägers, and clammed up at first. But with enough clowning, and after letting Tinka know that she was actually being worked on by Judy and Punch, yes, *the* Judy and Punch, the same ones from the Heterodyne stories, Tinka seemed to take things in stride.

"I was-was-was traveling with a circus. They-they did Heterodyne plays," Tinka explained.

This piqued Lilith's attention.

"A circus? When was that?" she asked.

"Be-before Sturmhalten," she said.

"Dot soundz like a goot time," Viktor remarked. "How come hyu left?"

That was an excellent question, in Lilith's opinion. Tinka tilted her head, looked in the distance as if considering.

"I was confiscated by order of the-the old Prince," she said eventually.

"Dot vos not nize," Glardnab muttered.

"It-it did not seem so at first. How-however... at the time, Anevka Sturmvoraus was dying. Prince Tarvek was-was-was doing all he could to save her. You have s-s-seen his work?"

"I've seen Princess Anevka's body," Lilith said, and she worked to test the joints of Tinka's arm. "He did this to you to save his sister?"

Tinka's eyes found Lilith's, her expression growing dour.
"Prince Tarvek did n-n-n-not do this to me," Tinka said, her voice low and serious. "It-it-it was his father. Prince Tarvek will-will-will fix me."

Lilith wished she could believe it as easily as Tinka did. However, Anevka had been inhabiting that clank body for some time already, from what Lilith heard, and Tarvek had not managed to fix Tinka yet. If he intended to even do so. It seemed to Lilith that snatching her from that circus had done Tinka nothing but disfavors.

Still, as Lilith met Adam's eyes, they shared a thought. Tinka had indeed been in the Sturmvoraus household for a while now. She did not seem unintelligent, merely temporarily impaired. And she could be a terribly useful font of information if asked the right questions.

"Tinka, the Baron is attempting to find Prince Tarvek right now," Lilith said. "But he's not had a terrible amount of success, and the things Anevka is saying about him are incriminating, to say the least."

Tinka's expression grew pinched. It was a slow thing, with a few mechanical twitches, but she was clearly unhappy with this information, and showing it. The expressiveness she had even now, broken, was impressive, and it was a wonder to think what she would have looked like and moved like before she was broken.

"It would help a great deal," Lilith continued, "if he was here to defend himself. Or at the very least, to explain what has been going on in Sturmhalten."

"The-the Baron can h-h-help him?" Tinka said.

"The Baron can help you, as well. If you'd like," Lilith offered.

This seemed to send Tinka into a reverie, as she looked away and to the floor, her expression growing slack and her eyes dimming. There was a whirl of gears, subtle but unmistakable, as if her system strained to work and reason normally despite its inefficiencies. She was thinking very seriously about Lilith's words, so Lilith stayed quiet and let her work through it in her own time.

It seemed that minutes ticked by before Tinka's whirring subsided, and she raised her gaze again to look at Lilith.

"If-if the Baron can help Tarvek, I will do anything I-I can to help him," Tinka said.

"Thank you," Lilith said. "I will talk to the Baron as soon as possible. I'm sure he'll be very grateful for any information you have."

"It-it is a selfish thing of me," Tinka said, suddenly looking much wiser than one would expect from her porcelain-doll appearance. "I wish to be-whole again, so that I may serve my prince. I am not entirely sure, how-however, that he would approve of me t-t-taking this course of action on his behalf."

"Hopefully he'll understand," Lilith said.

"H-h-hopefully," Tinka said, and smiled. "And hopefully," she continued, "I-I will not think better of it once I a-am myself again."
The whole thing had been coming apart at the seams ever since the Baron dropped in on Sturmhalten. As Anevka sat in her well-appointed guest room, carefully separated from her father, she had nothing to do but ponder on all the ways this situation was not working out the way she wished.

The hope had been for Vrin to cause enough of a commotion as to draw the Baron away from Sturmhalten. After he left, with everything he plundered—even with her father, if he wanted, because Anevka wouldn't have seen it as much of a loss—Anevka planned to take a sudden trip abroad, visiting relatives. She'd always wanted to see Paris, after all.

Though, perhaps it was precisely Vrin's distraction that kept the Baron from figuring out everything yet. Anevka rather suspected that if he knew the full story and her involvement in everything, he would have pulled the plug on her already, in more than one sense.

Well, the Baron had indeed taken everything but the kitchen sink from Sturmhalten. He'd taken her father as well. And then he'd taken Anevka along, despite her protestations that Sturmhalten was in dire need of leadership. The Baron had insisted her presence was absolutely necessary on Castle Wulfenbach, and anyway, was she not terribly concerned about her father's health? He'd steamrolled her, in that implacable way of his that had helped him build an empire.

So she'd been given these guest quarters, which were very ostensibly not a prison cell. But just as surely, her strong boys had been called away after moving her catafalque into the room, allegedly for them to rest.

Anevka was no fool. She knew her attendants were being quarantined as revenants, and she knew that without them to move around her catafalque, she was effectively pinned in place until the Baron deigned to offer any of his own men as aid. So far, she was too proud to ask for such a thing.

But escape was starting to feel like more of a necessity with every minute.

Pinning everything on Tarvek had been necessary, no matter how regrettable. It had won her plenty of time, and by extension it had won Vrin time as well. But waiting for Vrin to bring her Lady back and hanging any hope on Lucrezia being inclined to intervene on Anevka's part was foolish to the extreme.

Being on Castle Wulfenbach wasn't giving Anevka as much room to maneuver as she would have liked. She gave a baleful look to the catafalque, and the tubes tying her to it. Doubly a prisoner: to the Baron, and to her own inert body inside that contraption.

Tarvek had been responsible for its creation and maintenance. He'd done as good a job as he'd been able, but Anevka did occasionally begrudge him the limitations that he'd saddled her with. Better than death was one thing, but her situation could have certainly suffered improvement.

She wished, not for the first time, that her Spark had not been hindered so much by this device she was stuck inside. It was some limitation of the clockwork, or of the interface. She had all the knowledge from before, all the memories, but when she tried to enter that heightened state of creation and revelation that she remembered as a Spark, it felt as though this clank body could not strain so far. The fugue never seemed to gather enough steam for her liking, and the true heights of madness eluded her, not as if they were far away, but as if they were just in front of her, separated by a glass panel. It was frustrating to the extreme.
There'd been adjustments over time, of course, and Tarvek had even been working on helping her function as a Spark again. But, alas, he had not managed it to her satisfaction. In some undefinable way, it did not feel the same. And impatient though she was to do her own work once again, Anevka was also not above using Tarvek as a proxy. He was guilt-laden enough that he all but jumped at her every request. Poor boy and his scruples, where did those get him in the end?

Now Anevka was truly feeling the absence. If she could but figure out some mechanical solution to her current situation, it would make escape much more likely.

And because she had to at least try, she rounded the catafalque, and cracked the lid open. She had seen Tarvek perform maintenance once or twice at the beginning, but she'd been powered down for anything more significant than minor adjustments. She could figure it out, though, surely. It was her own body inside the thing, after all.

She pushed the lid with some trepidation. Steam curled into the air in soft tendrils, tinted red from the lights within. She didn't look down into the catafalque until the lid was pushed over the side, and then when she did glance inside, her hand twitched and sent the lid clattering noisily to the ground.

"Princess Anevka?" one of the servants from the other room called--one of her guards, rather; the Baron's dogs, meant to sniff out any treachery on her part.

"Oh dear, I'm being clumsy," Anevka called out to them, "Don't mind me!"

The door cracked open despite this, and a servant poked their head in, blinking at the scene before them.

"Do you mind, dear?" Anevka said, quietly venomous. "I'm performing some maintenance, and I'm hardly decent in here."

They couldn't see inside the catafalque, but the servant flinched and apologies, retreating back to the sitting room and closing the door.

Anevka's attention drew inexorably back to the contents of her sarcophagus. It was a wonder her voice did not shake. It was a wonder she did not scream.

The catafalque was *empty*.

Why... was the catafalque...

Where was...

Who was...

She stumbled back, and when the tubes around her back dragged, she kicked them away. She would be hyperventilating if she had lungs, but she did not. Instead her gears whirred and clacked alarmingly, sending some lights inside the catafalque flickering.

She was not-- She was not--

Had she ever been--?
She pressed her hands against her face, hissing. Her voicebox crackled on the sound, distorting it. Her fingers curled as if ready to crack her faceplate and rip it off. For the first time, she found a depth of feeling that eluded her in the same way a fugue usually did. A grief that she knew she ought to be feeling, but that remained just beyond her reach.

If she was not Anevka Sturmvoraus, then who was she? How much had been a lie? Had it all been--?

No. No, she had to calm down. There were too many things to account for. Tarvek had not created a sister from scratch. Aaronev had not seemed suspicious of any of her behavior, and though he was never an attentive father, he could be a profoundly suspicious man in some respects.

If she was not Anevka, then Anevka was dead. And she had every right to usurp that identity for her own.

Oh, but how this explained things.

Shakily--and how strangely that she shook when so many physiological factors were missing--she approached the catafalque again, and inspected it.

She was not a Spark in the same way anymore. Likely though the original Anevka had been, that Spark had been lost in the copy. But she still had all that knowledge, and she could make an analysis of Tarvek's work. The device, so unwieldy, had indeed been used at some point as a medical suspension pod. She could still see all the tubes and devices which had once kept a body alive. Seamed on the inside was a panel, corresponding to where the tubes emerged from the catafalque.

The panel did nothing more now than record readings. The tubes, as they were, had no other purpose than maintaining the illusion that nothing had changed.

So... this clank had once been truly controlled by the original Anevka.

How far back, she wondered? She thought back to Tarvek's behavior, and to how his work on the catafalque had dropped off over time, replaced instead with an interest on improving her clank body. When had he lost interest? When his real sister died? When he realized the clank masquerading as her was only a copy?

Or did he still consider her his sister? He was a sentimental little thing, her brother. Given to fancy and boyish delusions.

She could not decide if Tarvek was much colder and unfeeling than she gave him credit for, or all the more a soppy sentimentalist.

Either way, it hardly mattered.

Anevka saw herself freed. Family sentiment had been nothing but a burden. Holding her back, like the tubes tying her to this absurd dead weight. Something to drag around pointlessly.

It was better, in both cases, that she was not free to sever bonds.

She hoisted the lid back on the catafalque, and sat down quietly on the bed, thinking.
Progress through Castle Heterodyne alternated between slow and circuitous. The death traps were one thing, and at least they kept everyone on their toes, but having to backtrack when they reached a collapsed hallway, or an impassable chasm, was more frustrating than anything.

Fortunately, backtracking tended to be less perilous than forging ahead. Agatha was correct that the piece of Castle consciousness currently inhabiting Otilia's body would be useful. Between Agatha and Tarvek, they'd worked out a devilishly elegant solution for transmitting an override signal from the clank body's voice box, cued specifically to the Castle. As soon as the clank body stepped into a part of the Castle that was active, their Castle clank could override the rebellious other piece of itself. It at least made things safe for however long it took to fix that particular part of the Castle.

So far the biggest resistance came from the Castle's traps. Many were autonomous and functioned even without the Castle's control, so they ended up having any number of things hurled their way: projectiles, fire, genetically modified wasps...

In one case, a suit of armor, which everyone had to distract while the Castle clank attempted to connect to it and override control. Everyone had danced around it quite a bit to bring it down. Agatha had punched it head on for some inexplicable reason.

Tarvek palpated her hand afterwards, feeling for broken bones.

"Just bruised," was his diagnostic. "I still can't believe you tried to punch it in the face. It was solid metal!"

"It went down, though, didn't it?" Lady Heterodyne grinned, wide and vicious and entirely too proud of herself for how silly that move had been.

Tarvek sighed over her bashed knuckles, but he had to admit, he had been just a bit... impressed, when she punched the thing and it actually staggered back a step. It had given her minions the opening they needed to clothesline it and rip out its power source.

"Did you learn to fight from a Jäger?" he asked.

"No, of course not," Lady Heterodyne replied, almost indignant. "I learned to fight from a lot of Jägers."

Tarvek very nearly cracked a smile, because of course she had.

"Not to criticize, my lady, but it shows," he said instead.

"Hah! Thanks," she said. Then she poked at his chest. "What about you?"

"Me? Fight?" He made a dismissive gesture, and affected his best aloof princeling demeanor. "I'm royalty, Lady Heterodyne. I have always had bodyguards for that sort of thing."

Her eyebrows rose.

"Sure, but I've seen you move back there," she said. "You may have had bodyguards, but you're clearly doing rather well without them."
"I..." He was torn on how much he wanted to admit, but she looked at him with such earnest focus, that he was having a hard time considering the matter objectively. The Lady Heterodyne's attention was heady up close. And intellectually, he also knew it was dangerous, though she had not done anything to prove it yet. But Heterodynes were always dangerous, even the good ones. "I did receive lessons alongside some of my Smoke Knights," he said in the end, settling on a harmless enough truth.

If asked, nobody in his family would have believed he took those lessons to heart. He'd cultivated a careful air of inattentiveness that fooled most of his relatives, and all of his cohorts.

He did not know how much of that he could conceal from Lady Heterodyne, and he didn't know the circumstances under which concealing the extent of his skills was even going to help him, but it suited him, for now, to let her make her own assumptions, as everyone else had.

"Smoke Knight training, huh?" she said. "I'm told that's really impressive."

"It--well," Tarvek pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he recalculated the impact of his words. "I'm sure I, personally, am not as impressive as you imagine."

"Don't sell yourself short," Lady Heterodyne said. "Like I said, I saw you move back there. Lukas almost got decapitated, didn't he? That's why you knocked him down."

Lukas almost certainly would have been decapitated, if Tarvek hadn't shoulder-checked him in time. Tarvek rather thought he'd managed to make it look like a plausible accident, but Lukas, even after getting a nasty goose-egg on his forehead, hadn't seemed terribly resentful over it. Perhaps because he'd seen his life flash before his eyes just earlier and that had put things in perspective.

Tarvek had not expected Agatha to notice, though. Hadn't she been in the middle of fisticuffs with the armor clank at that moment?

"Maybe it was very fortuitous clumsiness on my part," Tarvek argued.

Lady Heterodyne's eyes narrowed, like she was peering into Tarvek, and as far down into him as she could see.

"Maybe," she said, sounding utterly unconvinced.

"Or maybe," Tarvek continued, deciding not to wilt under the attention, "losing even one of our numbers would have been too great a loss of manpower, and I made a pragmatic decision."

"Mmmaybe," Lady Heterodyne said, a bit more softly, but looking still as unconvinced.

"Or, I could just be trying to win your favor," Tarvek offered.

Lady Heterodyne gave a quiet huff of laughter at that.

"It's all layers with you, isn't it?" she said. "Motives and plausible deniability, all the way down."

"It's like that with everyone, my lady. I don't think I'm all that unique in that respect," he said.

"What would you even do with my favor, if you had it?" she asked.
It wasn't the question Tarvek had been expecting yet, and he didn't have an answer prepared.

"I suppose it would depend on what you needed from me," he said. "I'm not entirely clear on why you even brought me along, considering your first impression couldn't have been a good one." 

"Oh, but you don't know everything Ducky told me about you," Lady Heterodyne said, giving another grin.

"What did she say?" Tarvek asked, suddenly cautious.

"Maybe once we reach your creamy center, I'll tell you."

"She told you I had a creamy center?" Tarvek asked, not sure if he liked that idea.

"I think the more important part of this metaphor is where I'm sinking my teeth into you," Agatha flicked his shoulder like she was chiding him for missing the point.

"I am yours to do with as you please, my lady," Tarvek replied, with the utmost dignity.

Agatha seemed amused by this, regardless.

"Yes, that's what Ducky said about you," Agatha remarked.

Tarvek didn't have time to react, because the Castle clank approached them then, grinning. It moved like a stalking predator, and the expression on its face tended to put Tarvek on the defensive.

"We are near it now," the Castle declared. "As I recover pieces of myself, I have begun to remember things which I'd forgotten. I know where the chapel is now."

"Anyway, I think this is going well," Ducky declared. She swung her legs as she sat on the beam, and looked entirely too comfortable for the fact that there were people roaming around looking to kill them.

Gil, currently holding on for dear life to a chandelier that he had to share with Higgs, had been in enough bad situations to agree with Ducky's words, if not her carefree cheer over the whole thing.

"Could be going better," Higgs deadpanned.

The conversation cut off as different faraway voices echoed down the corridor. Soon enough, two Geisters rounded the corner, deep in conversation.

Ducky had pulled her feet up. She was skinny and the beam was wide enough that it could conceal her fully. Gil and Higgs had no such luxury on the chandelier, but Ducky was clearly not losing any sleep over it.

They all stilled, quietly tense as the Geisters passed below. The ghost women talked in their strange language to one another, but given their demeanor, they did not seem to be searching for anyone at that moment. They proceeded down the corridor, and around the corner, though nobody up in the beams relaxed again until the sound of a faraway door closing, drowning out their voices completely.

"Sounds like they gave up looking for us," Ducky said, once the Geisters were well away.
"What makes you say that?" Gil asked.

"Oh, I learned a bit of their language when I was lost in the sewers in Sturmhalten," Ducky explained, in a way that only raised so many questions that Gil wasn't sure which to begin with.

"How much did you learn?" Higgs asked, apparently having less difficulty with asking.

"Enough to get away from them," Ducky said, grinning, "so aren't you glad you brought me along?"

"Technically, I think you're the one who brought us along," Gil pointed out.

"Huh." Ducky considered this for a moment. "Then I guess you two owe me."

"Sure, why not," Gil said.

"So what were those two saying?" Higgs asked. He proved far less easy to steer off subject by Ducky than Gil was, which at least made Gil happy to have brought him along.

"One was saying... something about the work of their goddess. Or their mother? I think their mother-goddess. They talk about her a lot, so I know that word, but I don't know if she's a real person or not. She's real important to them, though. The other was saying something about someone, I think us, not interrupting something or other. The search for someone, I think, but definitely not us. I think it was just one person."

"That's vague," Gil said. "It sounded like a longer conversation than that."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I guess instead of eavesdropping I should have walked up to them and asked if they were selling any phrasebooks," Ducky huffed. "Maybe some treatise on grammar."

"Sorry, I didn't mean--" Gil threw his hands up, trying his best to look appeasing. "You're right, that's more than either of us understand."

"She got the gist of it," Higgs said, as he considered the empty hallway. "We shouldn't need any more, should we, sir?"

"I guess not," Gil agreed, though he wasn't sure he shared Higgs' certainty that there wasn't anything important that Ducky might've missed. "So what's next?"

"Ooh!" Ducky raised her hand suddenly like she was in a schoolroom, and grinned as she waved it, eager.

"Yes, Ducky," Gil said, since she was apparently waiting to get called on.

"Well, since they were so concerned about us interrupting," Ducky said, "we could go and do that?"

"You're not even sure what they were concerned about us, specifically, interrupting whatever they're doing here," Gil pointed out.

Ducky shrugged. "Nope, no real clue."

"I'm here to search for Lady Heterodyne," Gil continued. "I'd prefer not to get sidetracked."
"Good for you," Ducky snickered, "but I'm here to serve Lady Heterodyne. And I think she won't be happy about all these ghost ladies in her house. So anything we can do to interrupt their plans is something that's going to help the Heterodyne. I'm going after them."

They both looked to Higgs, who'd been quietly contemplating the middle-distance, and looked around as he suddenly discovered he would have to be the tie-breaker.

"Lady Heterodyne would probably be grateful for us getting her house in order, sir," Higgs said.

"She might also be in need of help right now," Gil argued.

"Oh please, she's not helpless," Ducky scoffed. "I'm pretty sure she's going to be just fine even without you underfoot. Haven't you heard, too many minions ruin the plot?"

"I've literally never heard that," Gil said. He turned to Higgs. "You think this is the smart move?"

"Wellll," Higgs temporized, "I'm no Spark, sir, but it seems like we know where we can find the Geisters, and we don't know where to find Lady Heterodyne. Would be more expedient to help her this way, wouldn't it?"

So, Gil had to concede defeat on this matter. Still, he found himself hoping that Agatha was alright, and that she would be happy about this in the end.
Critters of Improbable Size

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gil was starting to have second thoughts about this plan, though it would have perhaps be more accurate to say that he continued to have second thoughts, as he'd had them since stepping into Castle Heterodyne in a continuous process.

Regardless, as they barreled down the corridor on top of a cat clank, holding on for dear life as Ducky shot a beam gun at every doorway to collapse it, all Gil really had time to do was hold tight and try to steer the clank and possibly not kill them all in the process.

"Hold it steady!" Ducky shrieked from where she was sitting at the back of the clank, turned around so she had a clear shot at everything.

"This is harder! Than! It looks!" Gil gritted out, as his hands dug wires. He'd managed to pry off a panel on the back of the cat clank's neck, and had effectively hotwired it, but it still seemed to have a mind of its own at times. So far Gil had figured out 'go fast' and 'go forward' and possibly 'go left' if the last few turns had no been coincidence. He had not figured out 'stop' yet, but considering the squad of furious Geisters behind them, he wasn't inclined to look for that one yet.

"Swing the next left," Higgs yelled in Gil's ear. "We'll be back at the door we started!"

"Excellent spatial reasoning, Mr. Higgs!" Gil yelled, just so he would get some yelling in as well, and pulled hard on the wires. The cat clank turned.

The inertia almost threw them off as they rounded a corner, and then Gil started recognizing the corridor as well. They'd managed to round the Geisters' outpost within the Castle, and collapse almost every doorway around them. They were very nearly blocked off, if they could get that final door and the contingent on their tail.

Here they were, nearly there. And then, as they nearly zoomed past the first door they'd collapsed, Gil found the 'stop' command, and pulled on the wire hard. The cat clank skidded to a halt abruptly, metal screeching against stone floor as it slid several meters, almost sliding right past the door.

"The hell?!" Ducky yelled, and gestured towards the supposedly collapsed doorway.

It had been melted away with some kind of acid. Just beyond the doorway, Gil could see a writhing mass of slime creatures, bright green and almost phosphorescent in the dimness of the Castle.

"They brought the monsters from Sturmhalten?!!" Ducky yelled, jumping off the cat clank, clearly annoyed. "That's cheating!"

"Ducky--" Gil turned to look at her anxiously.

The Geisters running after them caught up just then, and they looked none too pleased about anything that had been happening so far.

"Ducky, get back on the clank," Gil yelled.

Ducky shot off a few more prolonged beams from her gun, cutting along the corridor and towards the Geisters. She managed to cut through an arch just above them, collapsing a few heavy stone. A
few of the Geisters retreated to avoid getting crushed, but the ones in front, more agile, instead pressed forward, closing the distance fast.

Higgs grabbed Ducky by the collar and hauled her back on top of the clank, and then Gil made it move again, and they ran.

"So that was a bust," Ducky said, as soon as they were far away. She looked like she was having a proper sulk about it, too.

Gil slowed down the cat clank. They were no longer in danger, at least, so there was less justification for risking a broken neck.

"It'll take them a while to clear all the damage, at least," Gil said. "And they might have to move all their stuff to somewhere safer now. Or stay there and really entrench themselves, which would still take a while."

"The Castle can delay them all by itself," Ducky muttered, still unhappy. "I wanted mayhem, not mild inconvenience."

"I'm sure even mild inconvenience helps," Gil said peaceably. "Right?" He looked to Higgs for support.

"Every little bit, sir," Higgs agreed in that dry way of his. "What about the convicts?"

"Oh, you think they might help?" Ducky asked, perking up.

"We could ask them." Higgs pointed.

It seemed that in their distracted state, they had failed to notice that they had come to a stop from their chase right in the middle of a wide corridor marked with chalk. Their path one way was stopped by a group of rough-looking individuals wearing trilobite-marked collars. Their path the other way was stopped by a different collection of rough-looking individuals, wearing just the same.

From the group split off one single middle-aged man with an affable expression, as he walked up to them.

"It's always good to see new faces in here," the man remarked, with a politician's smile. "Though usually it's folks who are... similarly inconvenienced to us."

His eyes darted to their necks, free of any collars. Faced with these many convicts, Gil couldn't help but tense up. Higgs still seemed as relaxed as ever outwardly, though Gil guessed he was anything but.

"Still," the convicts' representative continued, his sharp eyes settling on Gil, "I'm sure there's a lot we can do to help each other out."

"I'm sure there is," Gil said cautiously. "I'm Gil Holzfaller. And you are?"

"Ah, how rude of me. Of course." The man sketched a small bow. "Hristo Tiktoffen. At your service... Herr Hölzfaller."
Van took another sip of his Heterodyne-blend coffee as he studied the map unraveled before him. The impromptu central command which had sprung up under Mamma Gkika's had seen activity slow once the attacks on Mechanicsburg had been dealt with. Following the lull in activity, now there were only a few indispensible individuals still operating out of the place: Van being one, and Mamma Gkika the second.

Members of the Elders Council rotated in and out, depending on who was feeling more fretful at the moment, but other than that, so far, the more intense activity came from various people coming in for scheduled reports that Van was expecting. With Mechanicsburg in such a delicate transitional period, he could barely afford a slip-up on this front. If the Geister attack had been good for one thing, however, it had neatly concealed the presence of a Heterodyne so far, and her entry into the Castle. If they managed to keep this under their hats, then the new Heterodyne would certainly still catch Europa with its pants down. Van tried to not grin too widely as he pondered this particular mental image.

No, for now he had to consider the issues before him, and make sure that everything was well in hand for when Agatha made her reappearance. And that meant dealing with... this mess. Whatever this mess was even supposed to be.

The Baron had sent troops on the ground, to help deal with the Geisterdamen. The town had graciously accepted, of course. Rejecting any help from the Baron at this conjecture would have been politically rash.

And the troops had been some of the Empire's best, so they absolved themselves of their duty brilliantly. No Jägers, naturally, no matter if the Baron already knew about the Heterodyne, but perfectly capable human troops nonetheless. There was, however, the one issue that bothered Van.

"Where are the rest of them?" he asked, gesturing to the map in frustration.

Little flags marked all the Geister attacks, and they were almost exclusively on the outer bits of the town, near the gates that faced Sturmhalten. They'd poured out from the tunnels, from the roads, from the weaker points in Mechanicsburg's defense. And the town had had no trouble defeating these incursions. That was what perplexed Van. The Geisters had gone down too easily.

And now there'd been no word of an attack in nearly two days.

"Mebbe dey weren't all coming dis vay," Gkika suggested. "Dey might haff split off, and dis vos all dey sent to Mechanicsburg."

"Do you actually believe that?" Van asked, peering at the General.

Mamma Gkika muttered under her breath, but then shook her head. She looked more grim and focused than Van had ever seen her.

"No. Iz all verra suzpicious. Mein gut tellz me dis vos a feint."

"So what is their master plan, then?" Van asked.

"Who knowz?" she shrugged. "De Baron took de Geisters dat vere caught alive, but he sez no luck. Dey iz not tokking. A few iz already dead now, so dey iz running out ov pipple to qvestion."

"Let me guess. They killed themselves rather than talk?" Van asked.

"Dey iz loyal to their miztress," Mamma Gkika said with a scoff.
"Well, I understand the sentiment, at least," Van grunted and returned to studying the map. No amount of scowling at the map was going to show anything different, though. If there were more Geisters somewhere underground, they'd so far managed to evade the Mechanicsburg militia, the Wulfenbach soldiers, and the sewer monsters.

"She vill be fine," Gkika said, tripping straight through Van's thoughts and to the heart of his worries. "She iz de Heterodyne, hyu don't tink sum leedle albeeno scary gorls iz gonna be a problem, do hyu?"

"But--" Van pointed helplessly to the map, and to the outlines of the Geister tunnels they had been able to locate, traced in red. If Gkika was right and this was a feint, then what they were clearly trying to distract from, was the Castle. Lure their attention to the gates, the obvious vulnerable points, and distract them from the fact that they were most likely headed for Agatha.

"Dere iz notting ve can do now," Gkika insisted. "She vill be fine for now, und once de Doom Bell haz rung, my boyz vill be ready to haff her back."

"There may be an issue with that," interjected a new voice.

In the usual rotation of people coming in to report, Van had, reluctantly and against his better judgment, come to accept the presence of a Vespiary Squad captain. Masked and hooded, with a wasp eater draped over the shoulders, Captain Černý's quiet presence might have been unnerving by some people's standards. In Mechanicsburg, that marginally counted as making a fashion statement.

"The terms of the agreement between Mechanicsburg and the Wulfenbach Empire were very clear," Van began.

"The terms are not in question," the captain Černý said, inclining their head in Van's direction. "The Baron is prepared to adhere to the agreement, and release the Jägers back into the Heterodyne family's service. Given, of course, that the Heterodyne is not compromised."

Gkika gave a muted scoff, which Van was too polite to echo.

"Compromised how?" he asked. "Speak plainly."

The captain's head tilted towards the door, and around the room, and Van gave a heavy sigh, but reached into his coat for one of the tiny clanks that Agatha had left behind. He cranked the key on the clank, and it began emitting a tuneless sound, not quite music, but too structured to be random.

"Now nobody can listen in," Van said.

The captain's head bobbed in acquiescence.

"This concerns certain revelations which have come about following Sturmhalten," they said.

"About the wasp engines," Van said, and captain Černý gave no indication of surprise that Van knew about them.

"In part," the captain said. "There were several disturbing discoveries in Sturmhalten, but in the course of... certain investigations, aboard Castle Wulfenbach, there was discovered a type of wasp which could affect Sparks."

Gkika and Van gave the captain mirrored, incredulous looks.

"This, in addition to the discovery that the true purpose of wasps may have been as a mechanism to
instill complete obedience to the Other in its subjects, and that shamblers were merely an unfortunate statistical extreme, has added some unfortunate complications to the proceedings in Mechanicsburg."
The captain had delivered all of this in an even, perfectly reasonable.

Van sank to the nearest chair, scrubbing a hand against his face like he was trying to wake up from a nightmare. Gkika looked down to the map, lip curling in disgust, and growled.

"I'm sure you understand how--" the captain began.

"Ve get it," Gkika cut them off.

"The Baron has to consider that--" the captain began again, only for Van to wave them off this time.

"We understand fully," Van assured. He rose up again, primly straightening his coat. "The Baron's concerns are natural, and of course, we will comply fully to any tests the Baron insists on."

"I will let my superiors know, then." The captain's head bobbed in acknowledgment, and they turned to leave. The weasel draped across their shoulders rose and turned to give a sharp-toothed grin to Van and Gkika as the captain disappeared through the door; a good reminder of the Vespiary Squad's importance in the struggle against the Other.

Van's hand reached to the clank still emitting its discordant tune on the table, but before he could switch it off, he thought better of it, and turned to the other side of the room.

"Violetta," he said, and the Smoke Knight swept out of the shadows where she'd been waiting.

"That sounds like stuff above my paygrade," Violetta muttered, looking over to the captain.
"Honestly, that sounds like stuff above yours, too," she added to Van.

"Obviously it's something we need to deal with," Van said. "Have you finished everything on your list?"

"Uh, yeah," Violetta said. "Some of this stuff was easy even for me."

"Well, the Baron never really put much effort into stopping us from repairing the town defenses. He focused more on sending people back to wreck them once they were fixed."

"So you gave up eventually, huh?" Violetta asked.

"There wasn't any pressing need," Van shrugged.

"Until now?" Violetta raised an eyebrow.

Van shrugged even more theatrically.

"Hopefully the Baron will be concerned with other things until the Lady declares herself," he said, "and afterwards the point will be moot anyway."

"And if the point becomes not so moot before she does?" Violetta asked. "Think you'll be able to fend off the entire Wulfenbach Empire with some screaming guns and a few gargoyles lobbing grenades?"

Van's grin in response was toothier than Violetta expected, and Gkika actually guffawed.

"Ah, keed," Gkika said, fondly patting Violetta's back; Violetta staggered a bit under the weight. "Hyu've got a lot to learn about dis town."
"Okay," she said, but Violetta was still dubious.

"Now," Gkika began, and drew their attention back to the map. "All dis schemink in backroomz is fon, but howz about ve start doink dot proactive ting now, yez?"

"This is becoming upsetting," Agatha said, inspecting the rubble before her. She kicked at a piece of stone as she considered the complete mess before her.

"I am sorry, Mistress," the Castle clank apologized, though it looked far more despondent about the damage than even she did. "The library is beyond the damaged corridor. I was certain the path was open the last time I checked."

"The Geisters did this, didn't they?" Agatha asked. "It's fresh damage. And the convicts are supposed to be helping fix you, not destroying you further."

"It does seem the Geisters are responsible," the Castle clank agreed, and paced back and forth as it glared at the damage. "However, I have regained enough of my consciousness to have mapped out the major areas of damage."

"A few more pieces, and you may be able to pull yourself completely together," Agatha said. "You'd need, what, about seventy-five percent control of primary central functions to be able to forcibly integrate the rest?"

"Seventy-two percent," the Castle clank agreed, "and the process would go even faster once I regained control of the town primary functions as well. I'd be able to fix any remaining breaks myself then."

"There you go. We're close. How much do you have so far?"

"Thirty-six point oh four percent, mistress."

"...Could be closer, then. Alright." Agatha ran a hand through her hair, thinking. "Taking the long road might help us recover a few more pieces for you. But in the meantime..."

"In the meantime, the Geisters would also have time to enact more of their plan," Tarvek interjected. "And by going the long way, you may even be playing into it."

"Because they're after me?" Agatha asked.

"Clearly they are. And narrowing your path means narrowing the possibilities for where you might be. Fewer places for them to search," Tarvek said.

This seemed to cast a pall over the group, as they considered that Tarvek may be fully correct about it. Just hours ago, they'd run across a Geister patrol. The Castle clank had been ready to tear into them, as had the minions, but Tarvek advised against it, and then Agatha agreed. A missing patrol could have been just the sign they needed to focus their search for Agatha. They couldn't afford the risk.

"Alright, then," Agatha said. "Do we need the library right now?"

"We do need the library eventually," the Castle muttered. "One of my major consciousness cores is
"Don't worry, it's not like they'll get to keep it," Agatha said. "For now, though, we circle back and prepare. We can do more with thirty-six percent of the Castle than they can, I'll bet."

"An excellent idea, Mistress," the Castle clank purred in agreement. It flexed its wings in anticipation, and turned its head upwards, seemingly staring at the ceiling, though Agatha knew this was its posture as it sorted through information. "And now that I have consolidated with so many parts of myself, I have also recovered some of the more vital information you will need to repair me."

"That's what I like to hear. Where are we headed?"

"The Movement Chamber, Mistress. I have located my power stores."

"So. Sewers, huh?" Violetta said, as she passed leering monsters in the shadows. She couldn't see them properly, but their teeth glistened from the lamplight. "You take me to the nicest places," she muttered to Van.

"The general takes credit for this one, I'm afraid," Van replied, gesturing to Gkika. "Where are we going, precisely?"

"Ve going to one ov de old underground kennels," Gkika said, as she led the way.

"Like for the monsters?" Violetta asked, blinking.

There was a threatening hiss from somewhere dark.

"The, ah, monsters aren't kept in kennels," Van corrected gently. "Until there's a Heterodyne installed who orders otherwise, Mechanicsburg has agreed to keep the monsters underground. But, technically speaking, they're citizens, not pets."

"That's right!" a disembodied voice called out from the shadows of the sewers.

"Oh, okay. So then, what are you keeping in kennels?" Violetta very reasonably asked.

"Some ov de old defenses," Gkika said. "De reely old vuns. Onez so old, dey vos replaced by better ones, und relegated to storage."

"Ones that the Baron is unlikely to know about?" Violetta concluded.

"Iz not worth bothering Klaus vit dem," Gkika said, flashing a grin over her shoulder. "Dey iz just sum old junk dot the family forgot about, after all. Hardly effen dangerous."

"Unless hyu know how to uze dem," another Jäger spoke up, from the rear of the group.

That was the other thing Violetta was wondering about. At least a dozen Jägers were trailing along after them, for some reason. Violetta had learned enough about the hospital Gkika ran to understand why they were under Mechanicsburg--apparently that didn't count as 'in the town' according to the letter of the agreement with the Baron--but she didn't understand why Gkika had requested volunteers and then gathered up this group to take along with her on this trek through the scenic sewers of the town.

"So what are these old defenses?" Violetta asked, since it seemed this was what everyone was
"A ting of beauty!" one of the Jägers in the back declared almost dreamily.

"They were called diggerpups back in the day," Van said. "Old burrowing clanks that were used to fend off underground assaults."

"Dot vos before de Kestle's reach vos expanded to de town," Gkika said, "und ve still had to find underground invaderz by ourselfe. Dose old burrowers vere qvite de ride, hoo boy!

"Dot vos before ve gotz underground sqvid tings instead," another of the Jaegers piped in. "Der squid is classier, but Hy miss dose diggerpups sumtimez."

General sounds of agreements floated from the back of the group.

"So, you're going to use the diggerpups to find and stop the Geisters?" Violetta asked.

"Dot iz de plan," Gkika said.

"What do you need me for?"

"Ve-ell," Gkika scratched her cheek a bit awkwardly. "Gettink into de kennels und powerink op de clens may be a bit ov an issue. Dey neffer de most... co-operative ov de Mazters' creations."

"Not like uz. Ve iz complete sveethots," came the comment from the group of Jägers, and they all began bantering furiously for about half a minute.

Violetta barely listened, however, because she was already assessing the assignment she was about to be given.

Gkika explained everything simply. The diggerpups had rechargeable power cores. With a zap from a portable lightning lamp, which Gkika produced and handed to Violetta, they ought to be ready to go right away. Unfortunately, only one lamp was even left anymore that worked on the diggerpups, and they needed to be lit up in very rapid sequence to avoid, as Gkika put it, 'cataclyzmic rabid de-sync... sumting or odder. It had lots ov de bad Spark words in it und ve don't want it to happen'. That was where Violetta's Smoke Knight training would come in handy.

"Sounds simple enough. So I've got to get in, power them up, and try not to get... what, bitten to death? Stomped? Cut up?"

"Eaten und turned into coal," Gkika clarified. "But hyu gots de spirit, ho yez!"

"I guess!" Violetta threw her hands up. "But then my question is, what are these guys here for?" she gestured to the Jägers behind her.

"Dey iz here for de dangerouz bit, ov courze," Gkika said.

"Ve ride!" the Jaegers triumphantly declared, and then cheers rose up.

Though he had not had the opportunity to use it, Tarvek found himself quite glad for the fact that he'd kept the death ray that Constantin had slipped to him on the first day inside the Castle. He had it crammed into a pocket where it wouldn't be obvious, and Constantin hadn't asked for it back yet, which hopefully meant he'd forgotten about it.
Or maybe he hadn't. Maybe even Lady Heterodyne knew about it, and they let him keep it because they thought there wasn't much damage he could do with it, and anyway the Castle was dangerous. He needed all he could to defend himself.

Never did he think he would be this glad to have the death ray again, because never had he ever thought to encounter quite this combination of past acquaintances in this place.

It started when they decided to take the library. It was time; they'd repaired everything they could up to this point, and the library possessed too large a piece of the Castle's core for them to ignore. If that meant rushing a room full of Geisters, then that was what it took. The Castle clank would take control of the room and crush them in due order anyway. The risks, they decided, were minimal, and the rewards would be worth it.

What Tarvek should have known was that no good plan went unpunished.

That was why, when they finally rushed the library--he, Agatha, and her four minions plus the Castle clank--what they found instead of a nest full of Geisters was... inexplicable.

"I guess we know where the convicts ended up," Agatha remarked with amazement as she watched the room full of Sparks and minions busy with their work.

The library seemed to have been set up as a central hub of sorts. The convicts were clustered in work groups, some referencing the holographic map display and heading out for marked breaks through the heavily guarded door, while other groups returned to check in. Someone had set up a desk right next to the holographic map, and seemed to be coordinating efforts.

Agatha's group had burst through one of the library's concealed side-entrances, ready to face a room full of Geisters, and had instead been met by this very picture of industry.

Now people were starting to notice them, and people slowed in their steps and turned to look at them with narrow-eyed gazes.

A middle-aged man, the same who had been coordinating activities, peeled away from the group and approached Agatha with an unctuous smile on his face.

"Newcomers!" he declared, looking delighted. "We were told to expect you. Let me guess, you are--"

"Agatha!" Ducky's shriek cut across whatever the man was going to say next, as she waved from where she was perched atop a cat clank. "Hi! Hello! You're here, finally! I told these guys all about you!"

The man who'd sidled up to Agatha made a clearly annoyed face at being upstaged, but he gathered himself up admirably.

"She's been very informative," he admitted begrudgingly. "Pardon me, I am--"

"Hristo Tiktoffen," Tarvek provided.

"Ah, you know of me," he said, smiling as he peered at Tarvek.

Tarvek could see Tiktoffen was trying to place him, and possibly mentally untangle where on the web of loyalties they were, relative to each other. He was spared the effort when Agatha spoke.

"Of course, my lady," Tiktoffen said, perfectly agreeable, and sketched a bow. "I am your loyal servant."

Tarvek barely restrained himself from snorting at that, but he resolved to give Agatha a word of warning later.

"It's very good to meet you, Herr Tiktoffen," Agatha said, nodding at him in greeting, "but if you'll excuse me for a minute, Ducky, this is not the hospital! What do you think you're doing here?"

She turned to roar the last bit towards Ducky so suddenly, that Ducky startled and slid off the cat clank, hitting the stone floor in a heap. She sprang to her feet quickly, however, and waved her hands defensively as Agatha was rounding on her.

"Hey hey hey! This one isn't on me!" Ducky said quickly. "This guy dragged me in here!" And she reached behind the cat clank to pull someone from their work and tug them into Agatha's path. Blinking and just taking note of his surroundings was none other than a grease-stained Gil.

Agatha halted mid-step, slack-jawed like Ducky had just performed some magic trick, and Gil, looking like he'd been caught just as flat-footed, stumbled a bit and then righted himself as he pulled himself free of Ducky's grip.

They were staring at each other for just a moment too long when Tarvek walked up to Agatha, looking surprised in a completely different way.

"Gil Hölzfaller!" Tarvek declared with a burst of contempt. "I should have guessed this would be where you 'd end up!"

"...what?" Agatha blurted, now blinking at Tarvek.

"Sturmvoraus," Gil hissed, his expression turning thunderous. "You've got a lot of nerve saying that about me, when you're the fugitive from the Empire."

Tarvek bristled from toes to hairtips at this remark, like an angry cap fluffing up.

"Oh boy," Ducky whispered, and inched back to crawl under the cat clank and between its paws, where she could observe gleefully without getting caught in the crossfire.

"You two know each other?" Agatha asked, putting a hand on Tarvek's shoulder, and raising another hand towards Gil. She had no idea what this was about, but the two looked ready to tear into each other, and this did not seem like the moment.

"This miscreant," Tarvek explained, with a dismissive gesture towards Gil, "was once a student on Castle Wulfenbach, if you can believe it.

"Oh boy," Ducky muttered, faintly light-headed as she realized that Tarvek had no idea who Gil was. She turned towards Gil to wave at him. "Hello, Gil."

"Are you alright, Agatha?" Gil asked in return. "This snake hasn't done anything to you, has he?"

"You two know each other?" Tarvek now asked, torn between outrage and disbelief.

"We'll draw a chart with who knows who later," Agatha said.

"I know both of them, too!" Ducky called out unprompted from under the cat clank.

"For now," Agatha said more firmly, "we have some catching up to do, yes?"
Tarvek and Gil shared a glare laden with half a lifetime's weight of hatred.

"Good," Agatha said, before either one could start talking again. "Now," she turned back towards Tiktoffen, who was patiently waiting for this scene to wrap up, "what can you tell me about the Castle?"

Hristo Tiktoffen, it turned out, could tell her quite a bit.

News of Princess Anevka's escape reached Klaus as quickly as possible, that is to say just as he was about to enter a meeting with the Jägergenerals for another round of negotiations, thus compounding his headache in the most efficient way possible.

"When I'm done here," Klaus said to the trembling functionary who'd rushed over to report, "someone will have to explain to me in very small words how she managed to haul off this airship with catafalque and all."

"Ah, well, Herr Baron, she... ah... didn't. Take the catafalque, that is," the functionary said, increasingly nervous.

Klaus stared for a moment, then turned to Boris.

"I'll sort this out, Herr Baron," Boris assured, and took the nervous underling aside to press him for every detail.

When Klaus went into the meeting, he guessed by the way all the generals were leaning forward with interest that they'd overheard the exchange just outside the door. On Klaus' side of the table, all the advisors exchanged uneasy glances, or pretended to be absorbed in the paperwork before them.

"Hyu lozt one of hyu Sturmhalten clenk gorls, Klaus?" General Goomblast asked, with a leering grin.

"The most troublesome one to lose, at that," Klaus confirmed with chagrin.

"Hm. Ve iz schtill hyourz to command if hyu need help vit anyting," General Zog added.

"Only until the Doom Bell rings," Klaus said, "and how long do you think it's going to be until then?"

"Vell... Hy am not sayink it vould not be a race againzt de clock," General Zog shrugged, trailing off.

"It might be an even shorter race than you assume," Klaus said. "We've received some very strange reports of tremors in the area, with Mechanicsburg as the epicenter."

The generals exchanged looks with one another, and Klaus didn't know particularly what messages those looks were meant to exchange, but he could at least tell that they had no more of a concrete idea about the origins of these tremors than he did. Klaus sighed.

"I suppose we will sort it out later," Klaus conceded. "For now, there are other matters we must discuss--"

The door cracked open to admit Boris, and Klaus didn't think anything of it until the secretary walked up to him, and stood at the Baron's shoulder, waiting to report.
"Now what?" he asked.

"It's about those tremors, sir," Boris said. "It seems they were, indeed, leading up to something." He looked to the other occupants of the room. "The Generals will want to see this as well, sir."

Violetta returned to the Observation Tower by scaling up the side and then moving up right behind Van as he was peering at the Castle through a pair of binoculars.

"Doesn't the telescope work?" Violetta asked, and Van flinched violently and clutched at his chest like he was narrowly containing an impending heart attack. Violetta used all her self-control and Smoke Knight training not to smirk.

"Violetta! You're back," Van said, smoothing down his vest and pretending like he was not just about to fall off the tower in shock. "Yes, yes, of course the telescope works." He handed her the binoculars, which were a lot heavier and over-engineered than the ones Violetta was used to. And more covered in trilobites, now that she noticed.

"So, I gave the grenades and the nets to the gargoyle," Violetta said, and raised the binoculars to her own eyes, just to see what Van was finding so interesting.

"Perfect," Van said, and, putting his hands on her shoulders, turned her slightly. "The big tower towards the east."

Violetta looked where he indicated, trying to figure out what was so interesting about it. The tower had probably been winged by debris back when the Castle was attacked, because it sported a large hole along its side. At first, Violetta tried to look through the sizable crack, assuming Van had been interested in something inside.

"So was that the last thing that needed fixing before the big bad Heterodyne comeback party?" Violetta asked, as she watched and waited for something interesting to happen.

"I instructed everyone not to crack out the confetti cannons just yet," Van said with a sigh, "but yes."

"Dunno about confetti, but I heard Lady Vitriox say something about a glitter gun," Violetta offered.

"Wonderful, someone's going to put out an eye with that thing before Agatha even declares herself," Van muttered.

Violetta was about to say something smart in response, but as she opened her mouth she soon forgot it open. The crack in the tower she'd been watching started slowly bricking itself up, on its own.

"Did that tower just zip itself up?" Violetta asked, astounded.

"The Castle is capable of manipulating its own architecture," Van explained smugly. "That makes it capable of a certain degree of self-repair."

"Uh-huh?" Violetta pried her eyes away from the binoculars to give Van a look. "That why it needed a Heterodyne before it could put itself together?"

"Yes, well, as I said, a certain degree," Van replied.
They were interrupted by a tremor, which made the tower sway alarmingly, and the telescope rattle.

"That felt a bit stronger than the others," Violetta said, a few moments after it stopped.

"The fighting must be getting intense down below," Van said. "It's a good sign, probably."

"Or the Jägers got squelched and now the Geisters are going to bring the entire town down," Violetta said.

"Oh ye of little faith," Van replied, ready to roll his eyes again.

But then another tremor started. The tower began swaying again, rattling even louder, and Van and Violetta abandoned dignity in favor of holding onto the nearest solid surface.

When the tower began losing bricks, Violetta knew the tremor wasn't going to stop anytime soon. She grabbed Van under one arm, and with a grapple-gun in her other hand, she left the tower just before it crumbled apart.

They landed on the nearby roof just as the earthquake stopped, and just in time to see the Observation Tower's roof crumble.

"That couldn't have been the Jägers," Violetta said.

"Uh..." Van's face had turned a few shades paler as he pointed over Violetta's shoulder.

She whipped around, her own horror rising, and her first hysterical thought was that she certainly wasn't going to need binoculars to see what had caused the earthquake.

It was a giant hive queen, crawling out from the cracked earth and overturned cobblestones to tower over the stout two-story buildings around her. And following her, like a frothing tide, were smaller but no less deadly hive warriors.

The piece of the Castle still stuck in Otilia's body grew incrementally more grumpy about the situation the closer it got to being reintegrated with the rest of the consciousness, but Tiktoffen seemed curiously unaffected by this. If anything, the man could barely contain his fascination with the Castle, and as he helped attach the transfer cable to the Muse body, he even struck up conversation.

"It must be confounding for you to be stuck in so humanoid a form," Tiktoffen said. "Especially considering how vast your real body is."

"It's an annoyance," the Castle groused. "But I do find there are... unexpected benefits that will have me missing this body."

Tiktoffen's brow furrowed, and he paused as he was screwing the cable into the clank's torso to look at its face.

"Benefits?" Tiktoffen asked, baffled and not even trying to hide it.

"Oh yes," the Castle clank confirmed, with a leering grin stretching across its borrowed face. It raised its hands demonstratively, holding them at Tiktoffen's head level. "For example, the ability to crush a
head with my very own bare hands. I never knew how satisfying the sensation could be!"

"Oh," Tiktoffen said faintly. "Those kinds of benefits."

Then he wisely finished his work and backed away slowly.

"All set, Lady Heterodyne," Tiktoffen reported.

Agatha, standing by the library's holo-projection, nodded in thanks. She squinted at the read-out.

"We should be getting seventy-two percent after this," Agatha said, "but it might be a narrow thing."

"There are a few breaks that are getting fixed right now," Gil said. "They're minor but they should inch us along a bit more."

"We should integrate everything as quickly as possible," Tarvek interjected. He was standing at Agatha's other side, but his body language was such that if he could have put the entire Castle between himself and Gil, he certainly would.

"We should," Agatha agreed. "I want to know what the Geisters have been up to as soon as possible."

"Well, then." Gil gestured to the nearby console and its large, ostentatious switch. Gil was quite sure a button would have done the job just as well, but Ducky had sprung up with the switch as they were assembling the system, and insisted it needed to be included 'for the aesthetic'. "Would you like to do the honors?"

"Don't mind if I do!" Agatha replied, her grin growing wide and toothy. "Castle! Ready?"

"Ready, Mistress," the Castle clank confirmed, matching Agatha's smile only too perfectly.

She flipped the switch, and for a second all the lights in the library dimmed, and the projection cut out. The Castle clank slumped against the wall, the light going out of its eyes as well.

For a moment, everyone in the library held their breath, eyes going to the ceiling as the loudest sound was the crackle of torchlight. The buzz of activity seemed to dampen as anticipation rose, and there was more than a little nervous shuffling.

Then, after an appropriately dramatic interval: the room burst into bright light. The holographic projection flicked back on, every detail crisp and clear. Far away, there was a grind of gears, of things being shuffled around and pulled into place with satisfying clacks, like a giant beast cracking its joints.

"Castle?" Agatha asked.

"Yes, Mistress! I'm back!" the Castle replied, not concealing its glee. "Aaah, it's been too long! So much fun we will be having!"

"Um, not to interrupt," Gil said, "but--"

He pointed to the projection.

"Seventy-one percent?" Agatha said, a bit shrill. "Seventy-one percent!"

"Seventy-one point six!" the Castle said. "But don't worry, Mistress, most of the leftover is the town itself, which is only partially integrated for now. I'm sure there's nothing--hm."
The Castle cut off with a thoughtful sound that set Agatha's teeth on edge.

"What now?" she asked.

"Pardon me, Mistress. I have partial awareness of the town at the moment, and it appears they are dealing with a bit of an infestation."

"Infestation?" Agatha squinted suspiciously at the ceiling.

"A very large bug," the Castle said. "Currently rampaging through the Tumbles." After a moment, the Castle added, "Ah, and it's got a lot of little bug friends!"

"Hive warriors?" Tarvek asked in a frightened whisper.

"I believe so, yes," the Castle confirmed, its previous buoyant mood disappearing.

Before Agatha could react, Gil grabbed Tarvek by the collar, nearly hauling him off the ground, and shaking him.

"You know something about this!" Gil yelled, accusatory, and more angry than Agatha had known he could get.

"I don't!" Tarvek shouted back, scowling. "It was a natural deduction, which you would have made had you spent a moment thinking about it instead of manhandling the nearest person you disliked!"

"That's enough," Agatha said, and broke Gil's hold on Tarvek. She shouldered her way between them, pushing Tarvek back and glaring at Gil. "Tarvek isn't personally responsible for what's happening outside, and considering the town was already crawling with Geisters, he's right that you could have taken a moment to think about it."

Gil pulled back, first surprised, then looking appropriately chastened.

"I'm sorry, Agatha," he said, shame-faced.

"I appreciate it, but I'm not the one you should be apologizing to," Agatha said, and turned away to the projection.

Gil glared at Tarvek for a moment, who was holding himself stiffly without Agatha's protection, jaw clenched and fists tight.

"I'm sorry," Gil gritted out like the words physically pained him.

"I'll take your apology into consideration," Tarvek replied haughtily.

Agatha was no longer paying any attention to the exchange. The holographic projection had changed to show a fuzzy outline of what the Castle could perceive of the happenings in town, and judging by the sharp-edged insectoid silhouette looming over the stout houses of the town, the Castle wasn't exaggerating about the monster rampage currently taking place.

"We need to do something about this," Agatha said. "Is Franz--"

"Ready to go as soon as the Doom Bell is rung," the Castle confirmed. "However, it appears there is a new contender in the field."

"What new contender?" Agatha asked.
"I can't be certain about it, my current sensory situation being what it is, but..."

"But?"

"But I believe a giant weasel just fell from the sky."

As Klaus observed the situation below on the monitors, he had to admit that Dr. Bren had indeed pulled through once again, providing the solution to a problem nobody had even anticipated.

"Theoretical projections did indicate the potential for gigantism in certain variations of hive queens," Dr. Bren informed the Baron, a manic grin splitting his face. He tapped his fingers together restlessly, just barely containing himself from going off into a rant.

"Your foresight is appreciated, Doctor," Klaus replied, and made a mental note to have a certificate drawn up to acknowledge Dr. Bren's invaluable contributions to his field. Preferably before the good doctor burst from excitement.

"Oh, it's really nothing I--Rip her head off!" Bren suddenly shouted, making Klaus nearly jump out of his skin. Thankfully, Dr. Bren had been addressing the image on the nearby monitor, where it seemed the giant wasp eater was making inroads on chewing the hive queen's head off.

"Quite," Klaus said faintly. Everyone else in the room seemed just as deeply absorbed into watching the fight, and in the back, a blackboard had apparently been appropriated by someone running a betting pool. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw General Khrizhan writing down odds.

Klaus sighed, and turned his attention instead to the rest of the fight on the ground.

The hive warriors which accompanied the hive queen were less visible than their outsized counterpart, but even on the monitors, Klaus could see the quick movements of the Vespiary Squad engaging with them.

It was going to be a hard fight.

As the Baron and his retinue continued observing the ongoing struggle between hive queen and wasp eater from Castle Wulfenbach, Van and Violetta found themselves in the unfortunate position of wishing they were the ones with tickets in the nosebleed seats instead of currently occupying the first row to a nightmarish performance ripped straight out of some sort of collective Europan unconscious.

They managed to slide from the rooftops to street level, with the intent of making their way quicker to safety, but the hive warriors managed to swarm the streets at improbable speeds. What was meant to be just a wild dash to Mamma Gkika's turned into a demented game of hide and seek as they alternated between wild dashes and hunkering down to hide in tight corners.

It was partway through that Van realized he was only slowing Violetta down, but he'd be lying to
himself if he didn't admit he was grateful she hadn't left him behind.

"In here," he tugged her along, as he found a door unlatched. Violetta, watching the other end of the street anxiously as hive warriors dashed past, didn't even look as she inched backwards after Van, trusting his lead.

"Now what?" Violetta asked, once they were both lying low under a window, peeking through the shutters.

"Now we need to fight," Van said, his mind already going a mile a minute as he tallied up Mechanicsburg's resources. The militia, the workshops and their tools, the monsters who could be deployed; and then the other things, that would skirt the limits of their agreement with the Baron: the Jägers underground, and... the town defenses which had been fixed. If they deployed those, there'd be no doubt Mechanicsburg had broken the agreement. In a pinch, Van was ready to do it anyway, but he had to weigh it against the difficulties that would create for Lady Heterodyne.

"No," a voice grinded from the walls around them, and Van flinched. "Now you need to get the hammer."

"...Castle Heterodyne?" Van asked, blinking, then turned to Violetta. "You heard that too, right?"

"Creepy voice just now?" Violetta deadpanned.

"Oh good, it wasn't just in my head," Van said, unaccountably relieved. He hadn't heard the Castle's voice since connecting with it in the Crypts. The possibility that he was hearing things wasn't as frightening as the one that the Castle would always have a direct line to his brain.

"What's that about a hammer?" Violetta asked.

There was the clanking of footsteps coming from behind them, as a suit of armor moved of its own accord. Violetta tensed, but Van gestured for her to stand down.

"The hammer for the Doom Bell," the Castle explained, its voice now coming more focused, and apparently from the armor. "Once you ring it, Franz will be woken, and he'll mop up those interlopers putting holes in my town."

"Of course!" Van slapped his forehead. "Franz! But, does that mean that Agatha...?"

"She has been accepted as the Heterodyne, and she is ready to declare herself," the Castle replied, sounding entirely too pleased. "It's why we require the bell."

There was a crash from outside, and the ground shuddered underfoot.

"Among other reasons," the Castle drawled.

It was at that moment that a hive warrior chose to crash through the window, and Van avoided being crushed only by Violetta's quick reactions. He was sprawled on the ground when he looked up, and witnessed the clank armor grab the hive warrior by the head, and crush its head into paste.

Van tried not to gag. The suit of armor seemed to look at its hands, every line of its body forlorn.

"It's just not the same thing," it sighed, much to Van and Violetta's confusion. Then it turned its helmet towards Van for a final time. "Now go! Repair the Doom Bell!"
"Well, it's been nice knowing you folks, but it's time to admit that these bug guys have us over a barrel," Siggy Oessler whispered to the other two people hunkered down with him.

"Behind a barrel," wheezed the injured vesper just barely keeping his guts on the inside.

"Two barrels and a crate," Petra corrected further, as she peered over the said cover. There were a couple of hive warriors just around the corner, visible only by the occasional skitter of feel or the sight of a bladed appendage. Without the vesper's help, and only Siggy Oessler at her back, Petra wasn't confident about facing two hive warriors.

"Vasile had the right idea," Siggy muttered. "Where'd he run off to, anyway?"

"He was heading towards the school, last I saw," Petra said.

"Hoo boy. It really is the end of the world, then," Siggy remarked.

From ground level in Mechanicsburg, it certainly seemed that way. The militia was trained to deal with any range of invaders and unexpected situations, but the swarm of hive warriors were more like a force of nature. Without the Jägers, the biggest opposition the hive warriors encountered were from the Vespiary Squads, and even they seemed to be scrambling a bit.

Luckily, the town was already under siege protocol when the assault started, so apart from the militia and the Baron's forces, there were no civilians or tourists to get cut down in the onslaught.

But Siggy had started making noises about regretting that he joined the militia, and Petra, from her position metaphorically over a barrel and literally behind a couple of them, couldn't find it in her to upbraid him for it.

Before Siggy could go on another tangent of complaints, Vasile Vasilovici returned, slipping down next to Petra.

"Where did you go?" Petra whispered.

"Got help," Vasile shrugged, and as Petra continued peering over the cover and out into the street, she heard the tell-tale metallic footsteps of a clank.

"You didn't," Petra said.

"I did," Vasile confirmed, as the retrieval clank that had been the bane of his truant schoolboy days dashed into the street and promptly attempted to wrestle the two hive warriors.

The clank was getting torn apart, but it was putting up enough of a fight to provide a distraction. Petra signaled Siggy and Vasile to pick up the vesper, and led the way through a knot of alley.

It was slower going than intended, and the route unfortunately took them far too close to the fight between hive queen and giant weasel.

Far, far too close.

Petra jumped back as a giant insectile foot blocked her path, and the entire group froze for a few seconds before scurrying back into the shadows.

A splatter of blood smacked against the pavement, like someone had upended an entire bucket of the stuff from a window. It was too vivid red and mammalian to be from the hive queen, and that did not
bode well.

Petra inched closer to the corner to look around, and up.

The hive queen and the weasel seemed to be at a stalemate. The weasel was missing two of its six appendage, and its mouth was snapping wildly, frothing like a rabid animal, as it tried to grasp the hive queen's throat. The hive queen, unfortunately, was keeping him at bay, her scythe-arms locked against the weasel's claws, drawing blood from its paws.

They were pushing one another, each trying to topple the other, but despite the fact that the weasel seemed to have suffered the more grievous injuries, they were still evenly matched.

"Do you still have grapple line?" Petra asked Siggy and Vasile, almost too afraid to speak louder than a whisper.

"I'm out," Vasile shrugged.

"I have a roll left," Siggy offered.

"Do it," the vesper whispered to Petra in short a short gasp, before being wracked by a quiet fit of coughing. He understood what Petra intended.

There was only the quietest thunk as the grapplehook hit the wall on the opposite side of the street, and dug into the masonry. The other end, Petra looped through two different windows, and tied it off.

The line was solid, the architecture even moreso... the hook might not be buried deeply enough, but it was still Mechanicsburg-make, so she had confidence enough in it.

Everything was tied off solidly when the weasel made it final push, with the last of its strength. The hive queen screeched, the sound a bit too high and desperate to be anything but alarm, and then her ankle hit the grapple line, her balance wavered--

The fall was slow and loud, and the thunk of the two beasts hitting the ground was an awful, meaty sound. There was a bit more thrashing around, screeching, a final clash of which Petra and her companions saw only the twitching and scraping of feet.

Then there was a long death rattle, as the weasel succumbed to its injuries.

Time seemed suspended as they sat in that alley and listened, and waited. It might have been moments or minutes, but eventually the vesper broke the spell.

"I'm gonna need your sword," he told Petra.

Petra looked like she was going to argue at first. He was a wreck, more torn up than even the weasel. He was dying. But then, if Petra understood one thing, it was that what you died for, or who you died for, still mattered.

She nodded.

"What are you going to do?" Siggy asked, agape as the vesper took the sword and slowly shuffled out onto the street.

"Finish the hive queen," the vesper replied.

They helped him through the back alleys until they emerged out onto the street again just a little
beyond the hive queen's head. The giant wasp eater was still draped over her, pinning her down even in death. The hive queen was just as immobile, but the vesper had the right idea. One had to make sure.

The vesper walked out by himself, each step heavier and slower, but he approached the hive queen and brandished the sword.

He nodded at Petra one last time before he lifted the sword, and set the tip to drive it into the hive queen's eye, and presumably into its brain.

He did not even get the sword sunk halfway into the hive queen's eye when she screeched, the sound unholy loud and angry, and in a movement so quick that the eye couldn't even track it, she slashed with her scythe-like forelimb straight through the vesper.

Petra, Siggy and Vasile watched with slack-jawed shock as the queen seemed to get her second wind. She shoved off the weasel to clamber back onto her feet.

They ran into the nearest alley so fast they may as well teleported, and crouched down in the shadows, shaking.

"We're gonna die, we're gonna die, we're gonna die," Siggy muttered to himself, looking clammy and pale.

"Shut up, no, we're not," Petra replied, though she was trembling as well.

"The wasp eater's dead!" Siggy hissed. "Who do you think it going to save us now?"

As if in response to Siggy's question, at that very moment, the Doom Bell rang, its sound washing through them like a wave of unholy omens crashing down all at once on their heads.

"That's who," Petra said, just as Siggy fell on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Last chapter whoo! I posted it first to Ao3 instead of dreamwidth even though I usually do it the other way around, but it's a special occasion, so natch.

There's an epilogue left, but that will be much shorter than this chapter.

Also, for anyone who hasn't seen it, I had this little bonus bit about Agatha's dress sense in Beetleburg.
Epilogue

The smell of roasted bug rose up from Mechanicsburg. Though the giant wasp eater had been airlifted away so Dr. Bren could have his specimen back, the hive queen had instead been taken apart by industrious Mechanicsburgers: the head to be hollowed out and hung in one of the Castle's trophy rooms, the shell sectioned off for material among the town's smiths and artisans, and the meat as the main course for the Jägers' feast.

"I think," Gil remarked, as he stared out the window at the rowdy gathering of Jägers grilling insect meat, "that Dr. Bren would have appreciated having the hive queen for dissection as well."

"Well, tough," Ducky replied. "We killed it, we keep it."

Gil sighed heavily, but turned away from the window to pace for a bit.

Ducky herself was sitting perched on the arm of a sofa, going in on a large sandwich. Gil learned from her complaining that she'd tried getting some of the grilled hive queen from the Jaegers, but neither wheedling, stealing nor bribery got her anywhere, so she returned to Castle Heterodyne to choke her misery down with food she snatched from the kitchen.

Why she decided to stay with Gil in this antechamber as he waited to meet with Lady Heterodyne, he couldn't quite figure out. Not until Agatha came in, trailed by Tarvek, and Ducky perked up like the curtain had just come up on her favorite show.

Gil gathered himself up, at least trying to seem like the serious envoy for the Wulfenbach Empire that he was meant to be.

"Lady Heterodyne," Gil greeted, and then his eyes slid to Tarvek, and his tone turned frostier. "Sturmvorauras."

"Nice to see you, Gil," Agatha replied, her face splitting into a grin.

She nodded to Higgs as well, who up until then had been quietly filling his pipe in a corner of the room. He grunted and inclined his head, apparently quite happy to fade into the upholstery while more important people were around. Ducky, on the other hand, had no such inclination, and loudly chewed as she watched everything unfold.

"Ducky, I think Petra was looking for you," Agatha said.

"Aww, really?" Ducky sounded genuinely disappointed.

"The Castle will help you find her," Agatha said, and before she even finished the sentence, the floor had already opened up under Ducky, and both she and her sandwich were gone before Agatha had time to blink. "Uh, Castle, the door would have been fine."

"Pardon me, Mistress, but that one seemed like the mouthy type," was the Castle's answer.

Agatha shook her head, but let it pass.

"Are you staying for the celebrations?" Agatha asked, gesturing towards the window. The sounds of rowdy revelers was audible even from this far up over the town.

"I'm staying for the negotiations as well, actually," Gil said. "The Baron's people are all itching to
hammer out that agreement, so I thought I'd... smooth the way."

"A likely pretext." Tarvek muttered to Agatha, just loud enough to Gil to hear.

Gil's eyes narrowed as he looked at Tarvek.

"Pardon me, Lady Heterodyne, but I don't suppose you've changed your mind--" Gil began.

"Tarvek still has asylum in Mechanicsburg," Agatha said firmly.

"It's going to be a sticking point during negotiations," Gil said.

"Regardless, he stays."

Tarvek straightened up, managing to look quite smug about having the Lady Heterodyne's protection.

"And anyway, Tarvek is going to be helping with the negotiations," Agatha added.

"He-- what." Gil blinked, bewildered.

"Well, you didn't think I just decided to give him asylum so he could be my fashion advisor, did you?" Agatha said, smiling guilelessly. "Though he's quite good at that part, too."

"Oh, it's simply that you wear everything well, my lady," Tarvek said with blatantly false modesty.

"You're making fun of me," Gil said.

"Yes," Tarvek said.


Gil huffed a dry laugh and shook his head.

"I'm looking forward to these negotiations, Lady Heterodyne," he said, perfectly frank.

As night started to set over Mechanicsburg, the populace merely turned on the lights and continued the revelry. Shadows turned sharper and flickered as the Jägers proceeded to grill into the night, the fire leaping as they laughed and poked at it. The human townsfolk contented themselves with variable snail-based foods.

In the dimness, Agatha slipped almost unseen, save by the person she intended to find.

Presumed Airman Higgs saluted loosely as Agatha approached.

"Didn't have any trouble slipping away from Gil, did you?" she asked.

"Not in this place," Higgs replied, gesturing to the chaotic streets. "Said I was going out for a drink. 'Sides, I think you got him all twisted up about Prince Sturmvoraus."

"So, nobody suspects a thing, then?" Agatha asked, tilting her head.

"Not so far. Think I should stick around? Keep an eye on Wulfenbach?" Higgs asked, as they both turned to amble down the street, vaguely in the direction of Mamma Gkika's.
"At least while the negotiations are underway," Agatha said. "And maybe a bit after. But I trust the Baron to want us on his good side."

Higgs made a thoughtful sound in his throat.

"I know both Gil and the Baron would be very upset if they found out about you," Agatha said.

"Wasn't gonna say anything," Higgs grunted.

"But you were thinking it."

"Allies are not the same as friends. 'Course I was thinking it. But no sense getting me out if relationships're gonna sour in the future. That's when you're going to need to know what they're thinking."

Agatha sighed, blowing a lock of blonde hair out of her face.

"I thought being the Heterodyne out in the open was going to be at least slightly easier," she muttered.

"Could be," Higgs shrugged. "Came easy to some of your ancestors, the way they did it."

"There's the rub," she said. "I don't plan to do it the way they did it."

"Follow in your father's footsteps, then?"

"...No, not quite like that either." Agatha looked over her shoulder, at the laughing people jostling each other in the streets.

"You'll figure it out," Higgs assured. "You seem like the figuring type."

Agatha laughed at the almost nonsensical compliment.

"Why, thank you, general. I do enjoy a bit of figuring every once in a while." She gestured with her head towards Mamma Gkika. "Come on," she said. "Tonight, the drinks are on me."

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