Holding Out

She told him to meet her in the basement where the gadgets lay. They needed testing.

"I'm not qualified," he said.

"How do you think you become qualified?"

It was not until afterwards that Edmond understood. Omni Spec was a bizarre institution indeed.

"I signed up for a job in biosecurity," he said.

"This is biosecurity."

The stairs that led down to the basement were old. They creaked at every step. Edmond suspected they were designed that way, as an added layer of alarm in case somebody intruded the house. He felt like an intruder now.

The basement was pitch black. Edmond could not even see his own hands as he held them in front of his face. An unseen door slammed shut behind him and locked with a click.

"I'm here," he called to the darkness.

The lights flicked on – pale, blue bulbs sprinkled over the ceiling like stardust. The lithe silhouette of a woman cast itself against the far wall like a ribbon.

"Good," she said, "Let's get you qualified."

Edmond looked around.

"Where are the gadgets?" he said.

The silhouette slipped across the room and wrapped her arms about his neck. He smelled the leather of her jacket and gloves.

“Me,” she whispered, “You.”

Edmond sucked in a breath to calm his pulse.

“We’re the gadgets,” he said.

“Clever,” the woman said, “Now, we have to test you. Are you ready?”

Edmond writhed out of her grasp.

“This is not the right job for me.”

“That is not your decision,” said the woman.

“It’s yours.”

“No. The All-Seers believe you have what it takes. I am here to test their belief through empirical evidence, not through my own judgement.”

Edmond knew then that he had taken the wrong turn a long time ago.

“What is this job?” he said, “Who are you?”

“My name is Faye,” the woman said mildly, “As for this job, I gather you heard about it through your university?”

“A friend signed me up,” Edmond said. He glanced over his shoulder at the basement door. It was no doubt locked. “I majored in biochemistry. I was told this company wanted a biochemist.”

“Oh, we do,” Faye said, “Amongst other things. But that is not why you are here. Dozens of people apply to Omni Spec on the monthly – people with far better credentials than you. Most of them never hear back from us.”

“What *is* this job?”

“A spy network,” said Faye casually, “You come here as a university graduate with resumes and certificates. You will leave as a spy with government secrets. If you pass the test, that is.”

“What part of me screams ‘spy’?”

“Not for me to say.”

“And if I fail this… test?”

“We wipe your mind. We send you home. You will not remember a thing.”

Edmond studied her face. Her eyes revealed nothing. Her mouth held a harmless smile. He looked away. An embarrassing thought nibbled at his mind. Despite the circumstances, his young, bachelor desires nagged at him. He wanted to compliment her. He wanted to ask her out. That elegant step, those rosy cheeks, those brown braids and silver eyes; she was disconcertingly pretty.

“Tell me about your friend,” she said. She was moving close to him again, “The one who signed you up for this job. Who is he? Or she? A fellow student at your university?”

“She is a family friend,” he said, “We’ve known each other for a long time.”

“What is her name?”

Edmond opened his mouth, then closed it again with a frown.

“You don’t get to know that,” he said, “Is this part of the test?”

“Everything is part of the test,” said Faye. Edmond stiffened as she laid her arms around his neck once more, “But I also want to have some fun. If you succeed, we will work as partners. If you fail, you will not remember me anyway. What is the harm in small talk?”

“You want something from me.”

“Of course. I’m a spy.”

Edmond glanced at the door once more. There was a keypad below the door handle that called for a four-digit code.

“Why did your bosses choose me?” he said, “What about me stood out to them?”

“My bosses,” Faye laughed. It was a jarringly light-hearted sound, “That is certainly one way to refer to the All-Seers.”

“Are they not your bosses?”

Faye’s embrace tightened around his neck; not enough for physical discomfort, but enough to send a new wave of chills down his spine.

“I would be careful to call them that,” she said, “In case you ever work for them, take this as a warning. Their preferred title is ‘All-Seers’. To call them anything else is a gamble that I –”

Edmond lunged for the door. He managed two steps before Faye wrapped her legs around his hips and wrestled him onto the cold, concrete floor.

“Don’t try that,” she said, “It will end worse for you. Tell me more about your friend. I want to know her name. I want to know her age and her occupation. I want to know what she told you about Omni Spec.”

“This is an interrogation,” Edmond grunted as she twisted his arm behind his back and held him paralysed.

“This is your test.”

Edmond feared his arm would break if he failed to co-operate. He once heard that skilled wrestlers could out-manoeuvre people twice their size, and it certainly seemed true in that moment. Faye’s stranglehold was inhumanly strong.

Play along, he told himself. His analytical mind kicked into gear. There was no doubt Faye knew the passcode for the door. He needed to trick it out of her. Somehow.

“Okay,” he said, “Her name is Lilian.” He had to concede something. A first name felt harmless enough, “Is this how it worked for you as well? Did you go through what you’re putting me through now?”

Faye gave him a rueful smile.

“Good try,” she said, “I would not be where I am if I gave away such information easily. Tell me more about Lilian. She signed you up, you say? How did she do that?”

Her grip was like a steel vice on his wrist. If he wanted to outfight her, he needed a weapon. He had nothing. A pen, perhaps, tucked away in the pocket of his jeans. Small good that would do. All a pen could do was stab, and not very deeply at that.

“Can I choose to fail this test?” he said.

“Easily,” Faye said, “Tell me everything you know about your friend Lilian, and you will fail. I will let you go.”

“What will you do with that information?”

“None of your concern.”

“What will you do to me?”

“You can go on living your life as you did before. You will not remember a second of this.”

“Ah,” said Edmond, “That’s too bad.”

“You wish to be loyal to your friend,” Faye said, “But loyalties expire quickly down here.”

“I don’t want to forget you.”

That gave Faye pause.

“What?” she said.

“I’m going to suffer anyway,” Edmond said. For a moment, he gave up all thoughts of pretence and spoke as openly as he could, “With a broken arm, or a bruised hip, or the guilt of betraying my friend. Let me be honest. I think you are beautiful. I want to take you out for lunch. If I saw you anywhere else – in a library, in a park, at a train station – I would avert my eyes and walk the other way in fear of embarrassment; but what do I have to lose now? I am done for either way. I want to pay you a compliment while I can.”

Faye’s hold loosened for a second. Just a second.

“Is this a trick?” she said.

“No,” said Edmond, “This is small talk. If I am doomed to forget you, at least tell me something about yourself that is worth forgetting. How did you get here? Is Faye your real name? Do you have a favourite food? A favourite colour?”

“You cannot talk your way out of this test.”

“I know that. You have my arm at your mercy. You have my legs paralysed. You have me locked in a room with nowhere to go until I give up everything I know about my friend Lilian. Like I said, this is just small talk – soon to be lost when you wipe my memory clean. Unless, of course, you think that your interrogation skills are subpar, and that I will pass this test despite your efforts.”

“Oh you won’t pass,” Faye said, “Every generation of spies is more capable than the last. My skills surpass those of my predecessors. They pushed me to my limits, but I passed their tests.”

Edmond turned his face down to hide his smile. He couldn’t outwrestle her, but he could prod at her pride.

“So you copied their methods,” he said, “May history repeat itself.”

“No,” Faye said. Her placid demeanour gave way to a hint of ego, “I have far more ways to make my subjects talk than they ever did. In fact …” she grinned, “Maybe I can show you how versatile my arsenal is. Enough with the small talk – let’s have some real fun, why don’t we? I bet I can make you spill your beans without a hint of physical pain.”

At this, she briefly let him go. He scrambled to his knees, surprised, but in an instant she was back on top of him. This time she held him down with just one hand, and used the other to unzip her jacket and reveal a black singlet beneath.

“I know, I know,” she cooed, as Edmond heard his own heart beating wildly in his chest, “I know the way you look at me. I know what you want me to do to you. You know, Edmond, that you are heavier than me. If you managed to sit yourself on top of me, I would be unable to move; but wrestling is all about using your opponent’s weight – and weaknesses – against them,” she shifted her body weight so that she pinned him to the floor face-up. She

teased her fingers over his jeans and found the fly. She unzipped it with an agonizingly slow stroke, “So start talking,” she whispered, “While I have my fun.”

Edmond’s mouth went dry.

“Faye…” he said.

“Yes,” said Faye, “Tell me everything.”

She traced one finger up and down the inside of his thighs. With her other hand, she untied the laces of her black combat boots.

Edmond folded.

“Her name is Lilian,” he said between moans, “She was my roommate throughout my undergrad. She studied a double degree of law and environmental science. She – Oh!”

Faye had removed her boots and stripped off the thick socks beneath. Her bare soles were pink and pale and smooth as porcelain. She had untied her braids, too. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders like a hessian scarf. She lifted his shirt and blew gentle raspberries on his belly. The combination of danger and pleasure sent Edmond’s senses into a frenzy.

“She learned about Omni Spec through her professors at the university…”

His act, which had begun as a ploy, had turned into genuine ecstasy. It took conscious effort to remind himself that escape remained his top priority. His mind worked overtime to withhold the most important pieces of information about Lilian from Faye, slip in strategic half-lies that muddied the truth, and process the overwhelming emotions that rose from the space between his legs all at once.

Through the thick haze of pleasure, he sensed an opening.

“Faye…” he gasped, “Tell me I am wrong, but I think you are enjoying this as much as I am.”

She paused. Briefly. That was enough.

He rolled onto his belly and pushed up with all his might. She unpeeled from him like a scab. He wasted no time pressing his full weight onto her ankles and pinning them firmly to the floor. He felt her writhe and wriggle beneath him, twisting and turning to land a punch on him. A few times, she almost did.

But he held firm.

“If I manage to sit myself on top of you,” he said, “You won’t be able to move. Isn’t that right, Faye?”

Faye only grunted and tried a different way to escape. Ever so stoic. Edmond had to admire that.

“You are a deadly spy,” he said, “And an excellent interrogator. I almost told you everything I knew about my friend. I am not as good of a spy as you are, but I only need one, small piece of information out of you. Would you care to give me the passcode to the door?”

“Of course not,” said Faye cooly.

“That’s too bad,” Edmond said, “I’m sorry, Faye, but I must find a way to make you talk.”

He stared down at the bare soles before him.

“I have been through worse than anything you can offer,” Faye said.

“No doubt,” Edmond said, “Like I said, your skills far surpass mine… But tell me, Faye, are you ticklish?”

Faye laughed.

“Really?”

“I’m only asking.”

“No.”

But her toes wriggled as she said that. Edmond’s chest swelled with hope. Even trained spies found it hard to hide their reflexive reactions, it seemed.

“Then I suppose I just have to try my best.”

He placed his fingers on the sides of her feet and tapped them up and down. Her feet moved. He turned the taps into strokes. They moved again. He felt her calves tense and stretch beneath him like springs. Her body went rigid like a board.

“Faye,” he said, “I hate to tell you, but I think your feet are ticklish.”

Silence.

“This is fun,” he said, “You know, it’s a shame you are trapped in the life of a spy. You’ve been very kind to me today – as kind as you can be as an interrogator, I imagine. If we had met each other somewhere else, if our lives had been a little different, I think we would have gotten along as friends, or even something more; don’t you think?”

Silence.

“I know many men see you as only a pretty thing,” Edmond continued, lengthening his strokes so that they travelled from her heels to her toes and back again. Her calves continued to struggle, “And you are very pretty; I confess as much myself. But you are more than that. As a spy, I’m sure you have very few opportunities for honest conversations, or honest compliments. There are very few times you can truly enjoy yourself away from the

eyes of your bosses – of the All-Seers. Wasn't that why you decided to have some fun with me earlier?" he smiled, "I just want you to know that despite all the things you put me through, I know you could have put me through much worse; I am grateful that you didn't, and I am happy that I met you. One day, I hope to meet you again. We can grab a coffee somewhere, or play tennis in a park. We can go on a date if you like, or not if you don't. I can show you all the things that normal people do."

He curved his fingers so that his nails dragged along the pink flesh where her soles met the tops of her feet.

"But for that, I need the passcode to the door. So pretty please, can I have it?"

His new technique proved effective. Her soft soles wrinkled and rippled like strawberry cream. Her calves were not only tensing now, but fighting. The sound of heavy breathing filled the basement.

"There is no shame in being ticklish," said Edmond, "Let it out, Faye."

"Hrrrnnnn…" Faye said.

Edmond moved his hands to her heels and scratched them lightly.

"Hmm… hmm… hmm!" Faye gasped. Her toes splayed like an accordion.

"The heels are usually the least ticklish parts of a person's feet," Edmond said, "I wonder what that means for you, Faye."

"Uff… hmm…"

"You wish to remain composed, but composure expires quickly down here."

He dug his nails in a little harder. Instant spasm.

"Huh…!"

“The passcode, please.”

Huffs of air escaped from Faye’s nostrils like bubbles from a can of soft drink. Edmond changed the pattern of his scratching from up-and-down to side-to-side.

“Hehehe… Hmm… Hah!”

Faye’s body wriggled like a hose. Her brows furrowed. Her eyes turned up to the ceiling one moment and down to the floor the next, as though looking elsewhere would relieve the unbearable sensations. Her mouth twisted into a forced, uncomfortable grin.

Edmond made his way to the arches.

“Hhhhhhnnnn! Hee… hee…”

Faye’s toes twitched and crunched and trembled in turn. Her immobilised ankles tensed into iron nodules. Her calves pumped up and down like steam pistons. The room was filled with huffs and gasps and the sound of fabric brushing against concrete as Faye’s body slithered back and forth on the ground.

“Hmm hah! Hee!!”

“The passcode, Faye.”

“Hah! Hah!” Faye gasped, “Hehehe!”

Edmond slipped his fingers up and down her pale arches. The soft flesh crimped and curled beneath his touch. Her feet were slightly sticky with sweat and black fluff left over from her socks. Edmond made a mental note to wash his hands later.

She was at her limit. He could feel it. Her brow was furrowed in the way most brows did when their owners saw something exceptionally cute or touching. Her eyes were squeezed shut. She was biting her lips, but giggles kept escaping.

Edmond turned his hands sideways and raked outwards on her arches.

“Hahaha! Hahaha! Hahahahaha! Fuck!!”

There it was. The first laugh.

“You are strong, but you *are* ticklish, Faye.”

“Ugh! Ahaha! Hahahaha! No!”

“Passcode?”

“No! Hahaha!”

Edmond turned his rakes into spiders. The unpredictable movement triggered a new level of struggle in Faye.

“Haha!” she hooted, “HAHA!!”

He moved onto the balls of her feet.

“NO!”

“No?” he mused, “So you did know you were ticklish, then? You even knew your most ticklish spots.”

She was really laughing now. She could hide it no longer. Her soles crimped and struggled as much as they could.

“HAHAHAHAHA!”

The laughter was deep and forced. Faye slammed her hand onto the concrete floor and writhed and jerked like a beetle flipped onto its back.

“HAHAHA! Please! HAHA! WAIT!”

“The balls of the feet are usually the most ticklish parts of a person’s feet,” said Edmond, “Though they rarely know it. Unlike the arches, which are sensitive to light tickles, the balls respond to harder stimuli. I learned that through tickle fights with my sister. Can I have the passcode, please?”

“HAHAHAHAHA!” Faye screamed. She shook her head back and forth and sent her hair flying.

“No?” Edmond said.

“HAHAHA – ugh!” Faye choked, “No! HAHAHA!”

Edmond was disappointed.

“I’m almost out of ideas,” he said, “But I have one thing left to try. How ticklish are your toes, Faye?”

Faye whimpered.

Edmond picked his way through her toes one by one.

“HAHAHAHA! EDMOND! STOP! Please! PLEASE! HAHAHA!”

“You have some of the most ticklish feet I have ever seen, Faye. I almost feel sorry for you, but I need the passcode.”

“OH – GOD! AHAHAHA!”

Edmond couldn’t help but admire her. There were tears in her eyes, but she wouldn’t give up.

“I’m sorry, Faye,” he said, “This will be gross. Forgive me.”

He bent down and slid his tongue between her toes.

“What – Oh – GOD! HAHA! WAAAHH! STOP!!! HAHAHA! OHHH!! SHIT!”

He licked inside the crevice between her toes and the balls of her feet.

“HAHAHA! OH! OH, FUCK! THAT TICKLES SO BAD, OH MY GOD!!!! PLEASE!! PLEASE!”

“Passcode.”

“HAHA! OKAY! OKAY!”

He stopped. She gasped and panted and coughed the rest of her laughter out. Her hair had matted onto her cheeks in a wet sheet.

“So,” he said, “Passcode, and let’s get out of here.”

She turned her head to glare back at him. A look of defiance returned to her eyes.

“Like fuck I would tell you!”

“Okay,” said Edmond, and went back to her toes.

“Wait, wait, WAIT! PLEASE! WAAAAAHH! OH GOD, NO! PLEASE! PLEASE!! HAHAHA!”

It wasn’t enough, Edmond realised. This could go on all day. His brain searched for one last trick, and found it in his jean pockets.

“Have you ever had a tattoo before, Faye?” He brandished his pen, “Or a pedicure? It doesn’t get everyone; but for some people, sharp, rough things skittling across their soles can be unbearable.”

Faye had experienced neither of those things; but her dread was palpable, nonetheless.

Edmond began to write on her feet.

“Hah! Huh! WAAAH! OH! OH! NO, NO, NO! STOP! STOP – AHAHAHAHA!”

“It seems you are one of those people, Faye.”

“STOP! I’LL TELL YOU! I PROMISE! I PROMISE! OH! OH! PLEASE!!! STOP, STOP, STOP! For the love of God, Edmond, STOP!! HAHAHAH!!”

“I think I should take you to experience a pedicure some time, Faye,” Edmond said, and added a few, final scribbles before he stopped.

Faye collapsed onto the concrete, totally spent.

“One – eight – five – three,” she said, “Take it and leave. Fuck. That was horrible!”

“Thank you,” Edmond said. He walked to the basement door and entered the code. It opened. He made to walk out, but stopped and looked back.

“Faye,” he said, “You are a kind person; I had that suspicion at first, but I’m sure of it now. You are kind and you are strong. Stronger than the All-Seers. Stronger than Omni Spec. I know you hate doing whatever they are forcing you to do. So when you make it out of here one day, please give me a call. I would love to get to know you better.”

For the first time, Faye gave him a genuine, unforced smile.

“Don’t be silly,” she said, “I don’t even have your number.”

“You do,” Edmond said, “I wrote it down for you.”

As he walked out of the room, Faye turned her feet over to inspect her soles. There was a streak of blue ink traced onto them, spelling out a phone number.

Fin.