

時雨沢恵一


KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト:黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

一つの大陸の物語

～アリソンとヴァイルとリアアとトレイズとメグとセロンとその他～

 電撃文庫

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト:黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI



一つの大陸の物語 〈上〉

～アリソンとヴィルとリリアとトレイズと
メグとセロンとその他～



シユトラウスキー!

メグミカ(メグ)

スーペール出身の、第四上級学校生徒。
リリアの親友であり、セロンの許嫁。
新聞部。



アリソンシュルツ

ロクシエ空軍テストパイロット。
リリアの母親。



セロン・マクスウエル

第四上級学校生徒。
メグへの片想いを成就させ、許嫁に。
新聞部。



ラリー・ハップバーン

第四上級学校生徒。
セロンの大親友。新聞部。



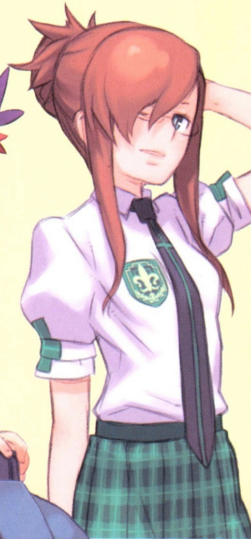
ニコラス・プラウニング(ニック)

第四上級学校生徒。実は男。
歴史ミニア。新聞部。



ナタリア・スタインベック

(ナシーヤ)またはナータ
第四上級学校生徒。ラリーの幼なじみ。大食漢。新聞部。



ジェニー・ジョーンズ

第四上級学校生徒。
大富豪の一人娘。新聞部部长。



リリア・シュルツ

ロクシエ首都、第四上級学校生徒。
アリソンの娘。本名が長い。



トレイズ

第四上級学校生徒。
ベネディクト&フィオナの息子であり、イクストローアの王子。



トラヴァース少佐

スーペール陸軍の少佐。
ロクシエ首都にある大使館勤務。



ベネディクト&フィオナ

ロクシエ唯一の王国、
イクストローアの女王とその夫。



Allison Schultz

A test pilot in the Confederation Air Force. She is Lillia's mother.

Major Travas

A major in the Royal Army. He works at the Sou Be-II embassy in Roxche.

Lillia Schultz

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School in Roxche's Capital District. She is Allison's daughter and has a very long full name.

Treize

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. He is the son of Benedict and Fiona, and is the prince of Ikstova.

Fiona and Benedict

The queen of Ikstova, the only kingdom in Roxche, and her husband.

Strauski Megmica

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School, originally from Sou Be-II. She is Lillia's friend and Seron's fiancée, and is a member of the newspaper club.

Seron Maxwell

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. His crush on Meg finally bore fruit, resulting in their engagement. He is a member of the newspaper club.

Larry Hepburn

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. He is Seron's best friend and a member of the newspaper club.

Nicholas Browning

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. In spite of appearances, he is not a girl. He is a history buff and a member of the newspaper club.

Natalia Steinbeck

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. She is Larry's childhood friend and possesses an endless appetite. She is a member of the newspaper club.

Jenny Jones

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. She is the only daughter of one of the richest people in Roxche, and is the president of the newspaper club.

〈上〉

序章	「懐かしい男」	9
第一章	「アリソンとヴィル」	19
第二章	「フィオナとベネディクト」	43
第三章	「リリアとトレイズ」	57
第四章	「メグとセロン、そしてラリーと ジェニーとナタリアとニック」	73
第五章	「謎の転校生」	85
第六章	「心配するは、我にあり」	105
第七章	「証言と推理」	123
第八章	「新聞部、動く」	159
第九章	「エデルマンの罪」	183
第十章	「追う者と追われる者」	207
第十一章	「狙撃」	229

一つの大陸の物語〈上〉

～アリソンとヴィルとリリアとトレイズとメグとセロンとその他～

〈下〉

第十二章	「トラヴァス少佐の戦い」
第十三章	「めぐりあい」
第十四章	「続・懐かしい男」
第十五章	「サイラス」
第十六章	「イクストーヴァへ」
第十七章	「思惑」
第十八章	「奪い合い」
第十九章	「真昼の夜の決闘」
第二十章	「ロクシェ首都」
第二十一章	「結婚式」
第二十二章	「終わりは始まり」

Prologue: A Nostalgic Face	9
Chapter 1: Allison and Wil	12
Chapter 2: Fiona and Benedict	22
Chapter 3: Lillia and Treize	26
Chapter 4: Meg and Seron, and Larry and Jenny and Natalia and Nick	33
Chapter 5: The Mysterious Transfer Student	38
Chapter 6: The Worry is Mine	44
Chapter 7: Testimonies and Deduction	51
Chapter 8: The Newspaper Club Takes Action	65
Chapter 9: Edelman's Crime	74
Chapter 10: The Pursuers and the Pursued	82
Chapter 11: The Shot	90

The Story of One Continent
~Allison and Wil and Lillia and Treize and Meg and Seron and Everyone Else~

Prologue: A Nostalgic Face

The 22nd day of the fourth month of the year 3306 of the World Calendar.

On the planet was but a single continent.

The large, oval landmass stretched to the east and west, divided vertically at the center by a great river and a massive mountain range.

The Central Mountain Range began at the great desert at the southern shores, stretching to the center of the continent. Its jagged peaks, some reaching up to 10,000 meters in height, stood clustered together.

The northern half of the continent was bisected by largest river in the world, the Lutoni.

The people of the continent had been split by the mountains and the river, each developing their own cultures, forging confederations and alliances, and warring against the opposing side.

But a historic discovery ended the possibility of a great war between East and West.

And hundreds of millions of people continued to live on the continent, each harboring their own hopes and worries.

“Ha! *You*, worried? I thought I’d sooner see pigs fly across the Lutoni!” spat a shriveled old woman.

“C’mon, Gran! I might look like this, but I’ve got more on my mind than I let on,” replied a bearded man.

The old woman and the man sat on a rug.

The rug was made of wool and bore layers upon layers of complex, intricate patterns that made it impossible to recognize any motif in the work.

The room was tiny with a black ceiling and walls, and it did not have a single window. The only light came from a small lightbulb. It was indeed very dim.

The old woman was curled cross-legged on a seat cushion, her posture making her appear even smaller than she was. Her loose attire was just as unusual as her rug, made as though quilted out of mismatched scraps of cloth.

Only 50 centimeters away was the bearded man, who faced her directly.

The man had the defined figure of an athlete. He also sat cross-legged on a seat cushion, looking like a child before the old woman.

He wore a tattered red-and-black checkered shirt and an equally patchy pair of jeans. His toenails poked out of the holes at the tips of his woolen socks.

His dark brown hair was haphazardly cut and swept back.

The man’s face was neither too clean nor rugged, giving him a nondescript look. His messy beard made it difficult to tell his age. He could pass for a man in his forties or thirties.

“Oh? Like what? Tell me,” the old woman prodded in displeasure.

“Hmm,” the man intoned, unable to answer.

The old woman scolded him. “I’d certainly love to know what is on that mind of yours, calling yourself an adventurer and wandering the world in your mid-thirties.”

The man scratched his head and awkwardly changed the subject. “Gran, you’re supposed to be a fortune teller, not a schoolteacher. And I’m just here to get my fortune.”

“I’m perfectly willing to tell your fortune, provided you can pay me. But where does your money come from? No doubt your parents back home, you miserable little leech!”

The man gravely shook his head. “Nah, I’ve never gotten a single Rox from my folks. Even I’m not bad enough to beg a retired couple for money.”

“Oh?”

“So I get my money from my sister.”

“That’s even worse! Your sister deserves better, the sweet thing!”

“It’s fine. She’s doing good without me. Last time I called, she said work was going well and she was having a good time. More importantly, let’s get back to business. I want you to tell me my fortune, Gran. Gimme some guidance on my life!” the man asked, taking out a bill from his pocket.

“Hmph. You don’t need a fortune teller to tell you that you need to find yourself a job.”

“C’mon, just a bit of guidance’ll do. Tell me whether to go east or west, and that’ll be enough for me. Just between you and me, I never had a lot of faith in your fortune telling even when I was a kid.”

“East, west, does it matter? I don’t need your money, so get yourself straight down to hell, boy.”

“I’m fine for now, thanks. Please, Gran,” the man said, putting the bill before the old woman.

“This much money’s only going to get you one answer,” the old woman said, taking the bill with a bony hand and slipping it into her pocket. She turned and picked up something.

“That’ll be more than enough for me,” the man replied with a shrug. The old woman put a large crystal before him.

The crystal was shaped like a human skull, polished to a shine.

“Whoa. Still as creepy as ever,” The man chuckled.

“And I see you’re still as tactful as ever, boy,” the old woman hissed with a grimace. “Now don’t move. Let me have a look at that hopeless future of yours.”

Taking a match, the old woman lit up a small clump of incense on a small bowl to her right. A faint white smoke rose into the air and a strange scent filled the room.

Then, the old woman picked up the crystal and stared into it. With a grim look she muttered in a mysterious language rife with harsh plosives.

“This is it! This is what I’m talking about! Using all this creepy mumbo-jumbo really makes everything seem more authentic.”

“Shut your mouth.”

The woman’s muttering continued for many seconds more in the white smoke.

As the incense burned out, the old woman gently put down the crystal.

“Well?” asked the man.

“Boy. Are you planning to return home anytime soon?” the old woman asked with a sharp glare.

“Huh? No,” the man replied at once.

“Really? Then perhaps I was wrong. Your fortune says that you will meet a nostalgic face by showing kindness to others.”

“Huh. Interesting. That’s very interesting.”

The man grinned. The old woman also put on a smile, her wrinkles deepening.

“I thought you didn’t really believe my fortune telling?”

“‘Never had a lot of faith’ doesn’t mean ‘didn’t have *any* faith’. I did believe you sometimes.”

“Hmph! Whatever the case, make sure to treat your nostalgic acquaintance well. And try not to let anyone know what a failure of a life you’re living.”

“Why not? I do have a job, and it’s called ‘adventurer’!”

“I’m telling you this for your own good, boy. Get your act together. You’ve got your health, if nothing else. You’ll find plenty of work at factories and farms.”

“That’s not my style, though. Oh well. ‘Show kindness to others and meet a nostalgic face’. Sounds exciting! Now where should I head next?”

The man stood with a smile and picked up the large bag behind him. It was a long, thin backpack about half his height to which was tied a tent, a sleeping bag, and other camping gear, as well as a leather jacket and a cap.

“Go visit your family before that. And don’t go dying on the streets, you hear me, Silas?”

“Whoa! It’s been a while since anyone’s called me that! Almost forgot my own name!”

“Do you not use your name anymore, boy?”

“Nope. I use whatever comes to mind. Sometimes I borrow someone else’s name or put a little spin on it. That’s generally how things come to mind, you know? By association.”

“Pah. It’ll do you some good to associate with people you can use your real name with. Otherwise you might lose yourself.”

“Like you, Gran? You know, I still don’t know your real name.”

The old woman was silent.

“Well, I guess that’s life too. Thanks a bunch. It was nice seeing you. I’ll come back and say hi again.”

“Next time you visit this place, I’ll be in the grave.”

“No way. You’ve still got a couple centuries left in you, Gran.”

The man called Silas hefted his backpack on his right shoulder, pulled open the curtain, and left the dark, cramped room.

“Hmph. A nostalgic face, eh? Interesting,” the old woman chuckled to herself.

Chapter 1: Allison and Wil

The 26th day of the fourth month.

The Roxcheanuk Confederation Capital Airport was locked in a cold rainstorm.

The record-breaking cold and snowfall of the winter had finally ended, but the day was a chilly one nonetheless.

It was still early in the morning. Raindrops as thin as threads of silk scattered quietly over the runway.

Running parallel to the paved surface of the runway was the taxiway, next to which was a large parking lot. Next to that was the single-story airport terminal.

Though the airport serviced the entire Capital District, it lacked the luxury and opulence of the city's train stations. Everything looked unpolished because the runway and other facilities were being shared with the Confederation Air Force.

Aeroplane technology had advanced in recent years, allowing crafts to cross Roxche from end to end in a single day. But trains were still the main method of long-distance transportation. Air travel was still limited to the rich and those who enjoyed unusual methods of transport.

A man and a woman stepped into the quiet terminal.

The man was wearing a navy suit and a brown trench coat. He was in his mid-thirties with short black hair, a pair of oval rimless glasses on his face. He was calm and composed, and had the look of a scholar. In his hand was a black attaché case.

The woman had long blond hair tied up in a bun. She was around the same age as the man, with bright sky-blue eyes and a spirited bearing. She wore a comfortable-looking pair of jeans, a bright red sweater, and a leather jacket. A cloth backpack hung from her shoulder.

The couple stopped in the middle of the large lobby.

"You don't have to see me off all the way, Allison. You'll end up waiting if the aeroplane gets delayed," the man said gently.

The woman called Allison responded with a reluctant look. "I guess you're right, with all this rain. And I do have work to do."

"A written apology?"

"Yep. They didn't like the way I took off with another unit's fighter craft. But I saved the daughter and the prince, so it's all good," Allison replied, then looked around to make sure no one was listening. "I got a massive deposit in Lillia's bank account two days ago. It was in the name of some company president I've never heard of, but it was the princess, right?"

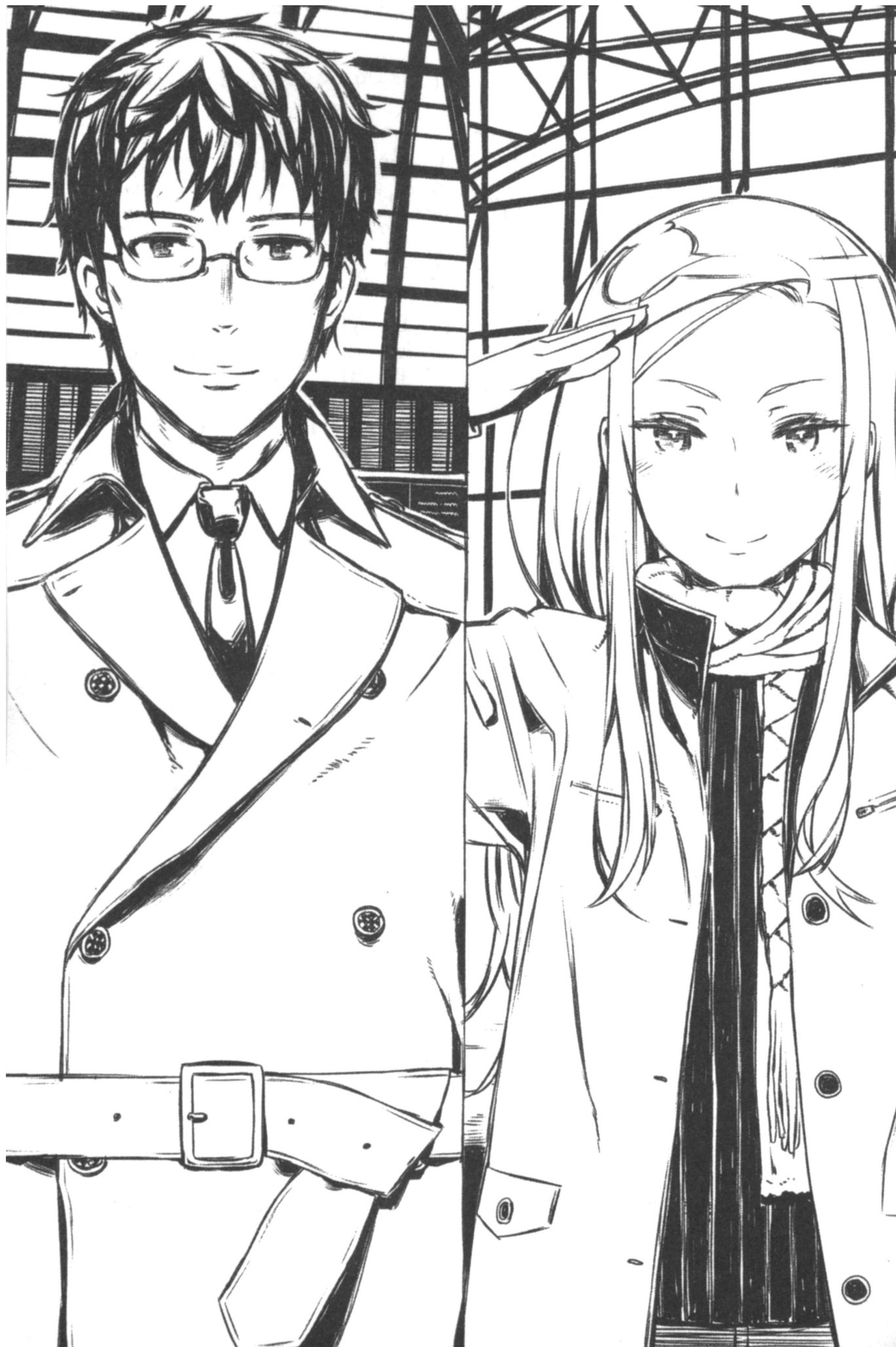
The man nodded slowly. "That was quick. Call it an apology from the lady and her family. They want you to claim that your daughter was in a minor traffic accident."

"I see. Well, I can't complain. I'll give the money to Lillia once she's 21."

Then Allison checked the watch on her left wrist. It was an expensive chronograph she received from a certain watch company to promote the product.

"As much as I'd hate to, I should get going now. Off to get an earful from the superiors!"

The man turned to face Allison. "Thank you for coming all this way to see me off, Captain Schultz."



“You’re welcome, Major Travas of the Royal Army. Thank you for your excellent service at the Sou Be-II embassy in Roxche. It has been an honor,” Allison replied solemnly with a salute, heels pushed together. Then her attitude changed. “Say hi to your mother for me! The salute’s for her!” she added with a wink.

Major Travas smiled. “I will. I’ll have to think about how I would convey a salute via telegram during the flight. Not that I’ll have any shortage of time.”

“Just curl up with a book and all those hours’ll fly by,” Allison suggested.

Disappointment rose to Travas’s face. “I don’t have a single book on me. I’ve sent my things ahead by ship and I didn’t get the chance to pick up any reading material yesterday. I wish airports had bookstores like train stations do.”

“Oh? Then here’s a little farewell gift from me,” Allison said, reaching into her backpack. She pulled out a thick book made of low-quality paper.

Major Travas’s gaze fell on the cover. It was blank save for the title, written in Roxchean. ‘Fundamentals of Flight for Beginners: A Textbook for Young Soldiers Bound for Airspace Defense, 3507 Revised Edition’.

“It’s next year’s textbook for students at the Air Force Academy. The education corps wanted me to check for errors. I haven’t read a page, but I’m too lazy to go through the thing so I’ll probably just tell them it was fine. You can’t really learn to fly from a textbook anyway. You gotta learn in the cockpit, flying over the sky.”

With a resigned chuckle, Major Travas received the book. “Thanks. I’ll have a good look through it.”

“Send me a telegram if you find any mistakes in it.”

“If I do, sure.” Major Travas said, smiling.

“Then see you later!” Allison replied, slightly raising her head and closing her eyes. She leaned forward.

Major Travas lightly put his lips over hers. “Yeah. We’ll take some time to talk soon.”

* * *

In the rain, Major Travas departed the Capital District.

He flew west in a state-of-the-art high-speed passenger aeroplane.

The streamlined craft had engines and propellers on each of its wings, and was equipped with 16 seats. However, only five of them were occupied. From Major Travas’s seat at the very back he could see four heads sitting at the very front row.

Roxche was composed mostly of flatlands with few mountains to speak of, which led to the early development of instrument flight. The aeroplane relied on its compass and altimeter as it flew into the clouds. There was almost no turbulence.

While the other passengers slept with blindfolds over their eyes, Major Travas took out Allison’s gift from the attaché case at his feet. He smiled as he recalled her comment.

“Learn to fly an aeroplane, huh. I’d never even considered trying.”

He opened up the book to pass the time.

The aeroplane landed to refuel and give the passengers and crew some time to rest.

The flight had taken them halfway across Roxche in one go. During the break, the crew would change shifts and the passengers would eat.

The aeroplane took off again past noon.

The clouds had cleared somewhat, giving way to glimpses of the sky. Below, brown earth awaiting the farming season went on without end.

Major Travas glanced out the window at times as he quickly read through 'Fundamentals of Flight for Beginners'.

The textbook included many diagrams and figures, and for ease of reading and understanding, included very few technical terms.

"Another one."

However, it was riddled with errors.

Some were simple spelling mistakes, others were labeling errors in the diagrams, and others were miscalculated figures.

Each time he discovered a mistake, Major Travas marked it off with a fountain pen and folded the corner of the page.

The aeroplane reached its final destination—Leonhart International Airport in the capital of the Republic of Raputoa—that evening.

"Done."

By then, Major Travas had finished going through 'Fundamentals of Flight for Beginners', having even revised some of the sentences.

The Republic of Raputoa was one of Roxche's westernmost member states. Its capital was Raputoa City.

The republic was positioned near the confluence of the Lutoni River at the foot of the Central Mountain Range, its economy heavily—mostly, in fact—reliant on agriculture. In terms of topography, it was vast and flat. On clear days, the distant peaks of the Central Mountain Range were visible from the southern parts of the country.

Across the Lutoni River was Sou Be-II, also known as the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa.

During the cold war, member states that bordered the Lutoni—such as Raputoa—were at the front lines of the conflict between East and West. But things were different now, as such countries leveraged their proximity to the West to serve as exchange points between the two sides.

Leonhart International Airport in Raputoa City was the largest airport in the area.

Flights to Sou Be-II operated by Western carriers operated out of the airport, timed to match flights arriving from the Capital District. And with the advent of air freight and specialized cargo planes, countless aeroplanes began to utilize Leonhart International Airport as a hub for local transport.

Major Travas's next flight, however, was not open to the public.

* * *

The 27th day of the fourth month.

“Good morning, Major!”

Major Travas had spent the night at a hotel in Raputoa City. He returned to the airport the next day.

“I’m Captain Barnett, and I have been tasked with transporting you back to the motherland. And this is—”

“Second Lieutenant Klee, sir!”

Two pilots saluted under the clear blue sky as Major Travas stepped out of the taxi. They greeted him in the official language of Sou Be-II, Bezelese.

Captain Barnett was an intimidating man in his thirties. Second Lieutenant Klee was in his twenties with a slender build.

Both pilots were in grey flight suits. The pockets in front of their thighs were bloated. On their shoulders and breasts were their badges of rank, name tags, and cards that indicated their blood types.

They stood in the most unassuming, inconspicuous corner of Leonhart International Airport. The area was used exclusively for cargo planes, never open to civilian access.

An aeroplane was parked there.

It was 15 meters in length with two engines and two propellers.

The craft was painted in varied hues of green and brown for camouflage. The lower half was painted grey to blend in with the sky when seen from below.

On the side of the cylindrical fuselage was the crest of the Curved Dagger and words written in Bezelese script. The aeroplane clearly belonged to Sou Be-II.

This model had originally been developed as a small bomber, but its excellent performance made it suitable as a scouter as well. This particular craft had been adapted for scouting, with a high-performance camera attached to the bottom of the fuselage and large windows on either side.

The aeroplane had flown in from the Royal Air Force Base near the Lutoni River early that morning to pick up Major Travas, an important figure in the Sou Be-II military. Naturally, the craft had permission to fly.

Several airport mechanics stood by the aeroplane, refueling and running final checks on the plane alongside the flight engineer. Because civilian crafts from the West routinely used the airport, there was no difficulty in the process.

Major Travas saluted the pilots and lowered his hand. The pilots did likewise.

“Major Travas of the Royal Army. I’m in your hands.”

“You can count on us, sir. We’ll take you to Sfrestus faster than any passenger aeroplane,” Captain Barnett assured him.

“Pardon me, Major,” Second Lieutenant Klee piped up, “but will you be granted an audience with the king when you return?”

“Yes. That’s part of my job as the field officer serving at the Sou Be-II embassy in Roxche,” Major Travas replied matter-of-factly.

Second Lieutenant Klee exploded with excitement. “That’s incredible, sir! I’m very envious. I’ve only ever seen the royal family at the National Founding Day ceremony from afar! You know sir, my dream is to fly the royal family’s VIP aeroplane one day. I know that’s still

very far off, but I volunteered for today's mission to prepare myself! It's an honor to be transporting you today, Major!"

Captain Barnett shrugged. "As you can see, Major, Klee here is still young and flighty, but he's not too bad of a pilot. I'll be doing most of the flying, of course, but the second lieutenant will pull his weight whether he likes it or not. Chief Master Sergeant Lod will be our engineer for today. I'll introduce him later."

"Thank you. May I board now?" asked Major Travas. Captain Barnett grinned.

"I'm afraid you'll have to make a trip to the bathroom first, sir. You won't find one onboard."

* * *

<This is Osprey 34, contacting the Leonhart International Airport control tower. Over.>

<This is control. Communications clear. Over.>

<This is Osprey 34. We are prepared for takeoff. Requesting permission to taxi. Over.>

<This is control contacting Osprey 34. Taxiway is clear. No crafts on standby for landing. The airport is yours. You have permission to taxi. I repeat, you have permission to taxi.>

Major Travas sat in the cabin of the scouter craft, listening to the exchange that occurred in Bezelese.

The aeroplane was not a large one by any means, but it was equipped with sturdy seats. Major Travas sat in one of them with the seatbelt fastened.

Because it would get cold at higher altitudes, he wore an Air Force-issue leather jacket over his suit in lieu of his trench coat. His attaché case and rolled-up coat were secured under his seat with a strap.

The aeroplane's exposed interior bared its extra fuel tank and countless pipes and wires.

Several meters ahead was the cockpit with Captain Barnett on the left and Second Lieutenant Klee on the right. Behind them to the right was Chief Master Sergeant Lod, focused on the many instruments before him.

The engines on either side of the aeroplane roared loudly enough to drown out any conversation and shook the plane. Everyone onboard wore a headset and had a microphone fixed to his neck.

<We'll be taxiing and taking off shortly, Major. Please make sure your seatbelt is fastened,> Captain Barnett instructed. Major Travas pressed the talk button by his neck, speaking to everyone onboard through the internal line.

<Seatbelt secure.>

<Then let's head on home.>

Captain Barnett slowly pushed the throttle forward.

The morning sun glinted off the scouter plane. The plane's sturdy tires rolled across the rough pavement.

No other aeroplanes were preparing for takeoff or landing. The Sou Be-II aircraft cruised down the taxiway and came to a full stop at the southern end of the runway for another exchange with the control tower.

<This is control contacting Osprey 34. Do you copy? You have permission to enter the runway and permission for takeoff. Have a safe trip.>

<This is Osprey 34. Copy that. Entering runway, preparing for takeoff. Thank you and your country for your assistance and hospitality. May good winds blow across both East and West! Osprey 34 out.>

The scouter craft taxied onto the runway. Captain Barnett turned the control stick to make a 90-degree turn. Soon the aeroplane was looking straight down the runway.

Then Barnett pushed the engine to maximum output in one go. A powerful roar shook the fuselage and the world around them as the aeroplane accelerated.

Major Travas looked out the window on his left and mumbled to himself without pressing the talk button.

“This takes me back. It all started when we took off from Raputoa all those years ago...”

The scouter craft with the crest of the Curved Dagger took off, carrying Wil.

Soon the scouter craft was headed northwest.

With the concrete jungle of Raputoa City below, the aeroplane slowly ascended. The world outside grew distant.

<You’re clear to take off your seatbelt, Major,> said the captain.

<Thank you,> Major Travas replied, <I don’t mean to question your skill, Captain, but I would prefer to keep my seatbelt fastened while I’m on the craft.>

<That’s an excellent attitude to have, Major. And to be perfectly honest, it makes us feel a lot better. You never know when we’ll have to make a sudden swerve to avoid an enemy attack. Not that that’s very likely in this day and age.>

<I’m glad to see that our Air Force is always prepared.>

<Thank you, Major,> said Captain Barnett, <Now, this craft will be cruising northwest for about an hour, at which point we will cross the Lutoni. Once we’re over the border we will continue on to the Iltoa Mountain Range, then head due west over the mountain range and land at the Lillianne Royal Air Force Base in the afternoon. You’ll have time to eat and stretch your legs there, Major.>

<Very good. It’s been quite some time since my last visit to Lillianne. I’m looking forward to seeing the beautiful peaks of the Iltoa Mountain Range.>

<Of course. The snow hasn’t melted off the peaks yet, from what I could see. You’ll also be able to see the railroad tracks and the lakes. Have you heard of barrier lakes, Major? They’re long, narrow lakes formed by avalanches.>

<Yes. I’ve seen one in person, actually, from a train. The one with tracks running on either side.>

<Yes, that’s the one. The tracks and lakes make for beautiful landmarks. I’m sure they’ll be beautiful today as well.>

<If I happen to be asleep then, please do wake me up. This is an order.>

<Ha ha! Yes, sir!>

That was when Second Lieutenant Klee decided to join the conversation. <Major Travas, may I ask you more about your duties in Roxche? Just for future reference, sir.>

<Of course. If you have any questions, I'd be happy to answer them—to a reasonable degree of detail, of course.>

<Thank you, sir. What was it like working at the embassy, with all the cultural differences? Wasn't it difficult?>

Major Travas, who had once been a Roxchean named Wilhelm Schultz, fell into thought before he finally responded.

<It wasn't particularly difficult living in Roxche. Whether we're from the East or West, we're all humans. And as long as we can communicate with each other, we can reach a mutual understanding with each other. Naturally there are many differences in our ways of life, but I can look back on even the misunderstandings we had with a smile. And I have to add, Roxchean cuisine is to die for.>

Then came the next question.

<It might be rude to ask, sir, but I've heard that you're quitting your job at the embassy. Working at the embassy is supposed to be a highly privileged task, so could I ask why you decided to return home?>

It was indeed a rude question. Captain Barnett shot Second Lieutenant Klee a look and shrugged. But Major Travas did not seem offended in the least.

<Because I'm leaving the military. My resignation will be processed once I reach Sfrestus.>

<Wh-why?>

Second Lieutenant Klee was the only one to speak, but it was clear that the other men were equally shocked.

Major Travas decided to answer.

<I am the only heir to House Travas, and I have a duty to carry on my family's legacy. Once I leave the military I plan to assist my mother with her work. I felt that my work at the embassy was sufficient service for the motherland. Now I will devote my time and efforts elsewhere.>

<I see. That's very unfortunate, but you have a noble reason, sir. Might I ask what your family's work is?>

<Of course. My mother heads a foundation that provides assistance to children in need. It provides scholarship opportunities to academically-inclined orphans in Sou Be-Il, including study-abroad programs in Roxche. It's important for young people to go out and see the world. I intend to use my experiences to expedite my mother's work, traveling between Roxche and Sou Be-Il.>

<That's wonderful, sir. I'd want my kids to do work like that someday. Although I'd have to get married first.>

The scouter craft was cruising over the plains.

Thirty-kilometer strips of land on either side of the Lutoni River had been designated as a buffer zone. Military personnel could not be positioned in the buffer zone, as part of an agreement set out during the war. Civilian presence was also heavily limited. There were no farms to be seen, the land left as uncultivated wilderness.

The Lutoni flooded regularly, which meant that the closer one went to the shore, the fewer trees there were.

Even before the buffer zone was created, the banks of the Lutoni had been difficult lands to live on. It would have been hard to settle the area without building embankments along the entire river—a task that would take more than 300 years, considering the Lutoni's length.

Major Travas leaned in towards the window.

It was still too early for buds to be sprouting. Most of the plains and fields were still brown.

When he looked up, he saw the Lutoni River.

The dark water flowed in a straight line from south to north, cutting across the flatlands. Hundreds of meters in the distance, he could make out Sou Be-II territory.

<Second Lieutenant. Could I leave the controls to you for a moment?>

<Yes, Captain. Second Lieutenant Klee, prepared to take the flight controls.>

<Second Lieutenant Klee, you have the flight controls.>

<I have the flight controls.>

<You have the flight controls.>

After the practiced exchange, Second Lieutenant Klee took the controls. Captain Barnett took his hand off the controls and turned.

<Apologies, Major, but I'll be taking a short break. I actually haven't had breakfast yet.>

<Don't worry, Major, the captain definitely didn't sleep in,> said Chief Master Sergeant Lod, defending the pilot, <He was just too fired up about doing check-ups on the craft that he didn't get the chance to eat.>

Second Lieutenant Klee did not join the conversation, focusing instead on the controls.

Captain Barnett unbuckled his seat belts, pulled out his headphone cable, and entered the cabin. He walked down the aisle comfortably, passed Major Travas, and squatted before a large metal box at the back of the plane.

Then he unlocked the box and opened the lid.

From the box Captain Barnett produced a wooden case the size of a dictionary. A sticker labeled 'BARNETT LUNCH: TURKEY SANDWICH, CHOCOLATE BAR, WATER' was stuck to it.

Captain Barnett closed the metal box, walked past Major Travas, and stopped not at the pilot's seat but behind Chief Master Sergeant Lod. He unfolded a chair affixed to the left-hand wall and plugged in his headset cable again.

<Pardon me, Major. These meals are for pilots only,> he explained, <We have meals prepared for us for long-haul flights. Everyone has a different menu in case of food poisoning. Mine today is the turkey sandwich.>

<I had no idea. Fascinating.>

<This is actually supposed to be my lunch, but I would appreciate it if you'd turn a blind eye on this breach of protocol for today. We pilots do it all the time. I can buy something to eat at Lillianne for my meal.>

<Ah, I remember doing the same with my own lunch boxes when I was a student,> said Chief Master Sergeant Lod.

Major Travas chuckled. <I'm very busy enjoying the scenery outside, Captain. I didn't see a thing,> he said, turning his gaze to the window.

The Lutoni River coursed majestically below. Soon the aeroplane would cross the border and enter Western airspace.

<Then if you'll excuse me.>

Captain Barnett put his lunchbox on his lap and pulled off the pieces of tape securing the lid from either side. Then he opened it.

Ssst. There was a scraping noise. Then a puff of white smoke.

"Hm?"

Captain Barnett furrowed his brow.

The box exploded.

* * *

That day.

A man from the Republic of Raputoa was fishing alone on the Lutoni when he spotted an aeroplane crash in the distance.

The unfamiliar aeroplane had flown over his little boat only a few minutes earlier, before zooming off into the distance and hobbling to the left and then to the right.

Then it leaned, tilted all the way to the right and quickly lost altitude.

The aeroplane disappeared past the riverbank—

Never to be seen again.

The man immediately decided to report nothing.

He did not contact the police or the fire department for help, for fear that he would be prosecuted for his illegal fishing.

Chapter 2: Fiona and Benedict

Nestled in the middle of the desolate Central Mountain Range was a lone country.

The Kingdom of Iks, a member state of Roxche and the East's only monarchy. Its new official name was 'Ikstova'.

Iks shared a border with the southwestern edge of the Republic of Raputoa, near the northern end of the Central Mountain Range. The entire kingdom was situated around a long, narrow lake in the mountains.

Lake Ras, measuring at 100 kilometers in length and 40 kilometers in width, was at the center of the little kingdom defined by the lake and the nearby valleys. The people of Iks were a hardy folk who braved temperatures far below freezing during the winter. The nation's economy was based largely on forestry, agriculture, and fishery, as well as its rising star, tourism.

Iks was home to a very different culture than that of the lowlands, which was why it had been the last to join the Confederation.

Two incidents in this tiny country's recent history made waves in the world.

One was the revival of the queen in 3287.

Princess Francesca, who had been believed dead with her family after a fire tore through the royal palace 29 years ago, had suddenly announced her survival to her people.

Borne on an aeroplane flown by Major Carr Benedict of the Royal Army—the Hero of the Mural—the princess had descended upon a political rally in Kunst, Iks's capital city. There she revealed that the fire at the palace had, in fact, been the work of terrorists.

She uncovered the true culprit behind the incident, Owen Nichto, just as he was running for parliament under the assumption that public interest in the case had died down. She cornered him on the spot.

In the end, Nichto took his own life and the truth behind the case never came to light, but the people of Iks were ecstatic at the revival of their young, beautiful queen.

The other incident was the announcement of the Ikstova Pass only four months ago.

Queen Francesca had announced the existence of the pass to her people and the world during her annual new year's address.

Knowledge of the secret pass in the Central Mountain Range had been passed down through the royal family in the 400 years since its founding. The Central Mountain Range, long considered impossible to cross, had turned out to be hiding a deep valley that connected the Kingdom of Iks to Sou Be-II.

The announcement of the Ikstova Pass, as the valley had come to be called, was an earth-shattering event not only in the East but in the West as well. If the pass had been revealed to the world during the war, it would have been used to escalate the conflict further.

Not only that, if the pass had been unveiled during the war, Iks's royal family would have been criticized for hiding its existence. But now that war had become much less likely, the public lauded the royal family for their decision.

Once the danger of avalanches abated during the summer, the royal family would gather researchers from East and West to man an expedition of the valley.

Perhaps the valley would one day serve as a trade route between Roxche and Sou Be-II.

In that case, Iks—with its already-booming tourism industry—would only grow more prosperous.

Supported by her husband Sir Benedict and their daughter Princess Meriel, Queen Francesca reigned over the tiny kingdom and grew more beautiful by the year.

Roxche's only royal family and its unusual kingdom would continue to shine as the crown jewel of the Central Mountain Range.

“And that is the content of the article. Will you make corrections, Fi?”

“Is the ‘grows more beautiful by the year’ part really necessary?”

A man and a woman sat in a small log cabin in a village nestled in a valley, conversing in Roxchean.

The man was in his forties with a beard covering his face and his long hair tied into a ponytail. He wore a green-and-black checkered shirt and brown cargo pants.

The woman was in her late thirties with short black hair and an attractive countenance. She was in the country's traditional garb, a mosaic-patterned dress made of layers upon layers of cloth.

The log cabin was humble in construction, with a small living room outfitted with a kitchen. The living room was furnished with the bare essentials, like a table and chairs for two and a simple shelf.

Displayed high up on the wooden wall were three intricate wooden plates. They were carved with a bunch of grapes, a bird with its wings spread wide, and a flower pointing to the lower left respectively.

On the wall by the door was a gun rack supporting a hunting rifle and a large handgun equipped with a stock. The rifle was an ordinary model used by the Roxchean military. The handgun, on the other hand, was a powerful model capable of automatic fire.

Though it was nighttime, melting snowbanks glowed deceptively bright outside the lace-curtained window. The full moon shone brilliantly over the world.

The man and woman sat on a rug before the glowing fireplace. Both were leaning on a large, fluffy cushion.

The man was holding a piece of paper, from which he had read to the woman. It was entitled ‘Introduction to Iks for Capital District Travel Magazine, First Draft’.

“It sure is, Fi, if my eyes aren't mistaken,” Carr Benedict—the Hero of the Mural—said in Bezelese and kissed his wife on the cheek without hesitation.

“Then I don't think I need to change anything. It's succinct and to the point,” replied Queen Francesca—who was actually Francesca's twin sister Fiona—with a smile.

“Then we will respond tomorrow at the latest. I will call the Capital District,” Benedict replied in Roxchean, folding up the paper and putting it in his breast pocket. “Now, shall we have a husband-and-wife conversation? I have a very important matter to discuss,” he whispered into his wife's ear.

“Yes, dear?”

“Actually...” Benedict began, his crow's feet growing more prominent as he smiled, “I need an aeroplane. Please, could you somehow give me the budget?”

“Hmm...” Fiona looked up at the ceiling. “But you already have four.”

“Of course our house, I mean, the royal family of Ikstova, has four aeroplanes already. One practice biplane, one small seaplane, and two surveillance crafts we used to find the pass. Does something not occur to you, Fi?”

Fiona stared into Benedict’s grave eyes for 10 seconds. She shook her head.

“Mm...no.”

“It is shocking, but we do not have even one amphibious craft!”

“What?”

“Do you know what an amphibious craft is, Fi? It is an aeroplane that can land on the lake if we must, and can also use the frozen lake as a runway. We do not have a single one of these aeroplanes! My word! What will we do in an emergency?”

“Er, we could use a seaplane in the summer and a regular aeroplane in the winter, like we always have?” Fiona said, her dark eyes staring into her husband’s.

“Oh. Er...yes, but...”

Fiona continued to stare.

“B-but, we might end up having to take off on the runway, or on the water. We never know what might happen! For example, when we found the pass early this year! If we had taken the seaplane, we could not have landed in the valley. An amphibious plane will help the expedition in the summer. What could be more convenient?”

“Is that really the only reason? We’ve known about the expedition for a while. Why bring up the amphibious plane now?”

“Erm...”

“Benedict.”

“...Actually, I received a telegram from the aeroplane manufacturer who works with our friend. They had several units of the newest model left over because of budget cuts to the military. But they could not bear to destroy the crafts they had worked so hard to make, so they will offer them to Ikstova for a reduced price.”

“I knew it. Just like with those awkward observation crafts.”

“Well, yes, but those two were introduced by Major Travas—Wilhelm Schultz.”

“I wonder how he is? He said he was going to quit work at the embassy, but does that mean he’s going to leave the military? Will he finally marry Allison and live with his family in Roxche? Is that even possible?”

“I am sure that no matter the challenge, they will emerge victorious. Wil is an amazing man.”

“Yes. He’s just like a magician. A magician who changed the world, and my life...” Fiona trailed off nostalgically. Benedict brought the conversation back on track.

“Er, let us continue with the discussion. This time, the contact came to me directly. They are offering me one amphibious craft along with spare parts. They are willing to have it delivered immediately. And as for the price, they are offering a friendship discount...” Benedict began writing a number on the floor.

“Honey.”

Fiona pulled away from the cushion and sat facing her husband.

“Yes?” Benedict replied. Fiona was serious.

“You’re a pilot, and I understand that you want to fly. It’s part of who you are. I enjoy flying with you too. It reminds me of the first time we flew together, with you in the pilot’s seat. But we already have four aeroplanes.”

“Oh. Er, yes. We do.”

“And I understand that you want to help a friend in need. That’s something to be proud of. But you can’t just buy a new aeroplane like you’re bringing home a stray kitten. Of course we could afford one, but a large chunk of the funds will have to come from the people’s tax money.”

“Y-yes. You are right.”

“But I don’t want to turn down a rare request from my husband, either.”

“Really? Oh, Fi.”

“So I have a proposal.”

“Yes? Do you need compensation? I will do anything. I will be a better husband and a better father who serves the queen faithfully!” Benedict declared, putting a hand on his chest.

“All right,” Fiona said with a smile, “What do you say to my getting some new cameras? I had about five models in mind.”

“Please wait a moment. Five is too much.”

“It’s cheaper than buying an aeroplane.”

“When you buy one aeroplane, you do not need to replace it for many years. And their sizes are very different.”

“But I want those cameras as much as you want your aeroplane.”

“You already have many cameras.”

“You already have four aeroplanes.”

“They are for different purposes. They are almost different machines.”

“The cameras are for different purposes too. I need a small one so I can carry it around anywhere, and a large one for spectacular landscape photos. They’re almost different machines.”

“But...”

“What do you say?”

“You are right, but...”

“Think about it this way...”

The pointless argument continued to midnight, at which point the couple was exhausted.

“Let us stop fighting. We can simply buy both!”

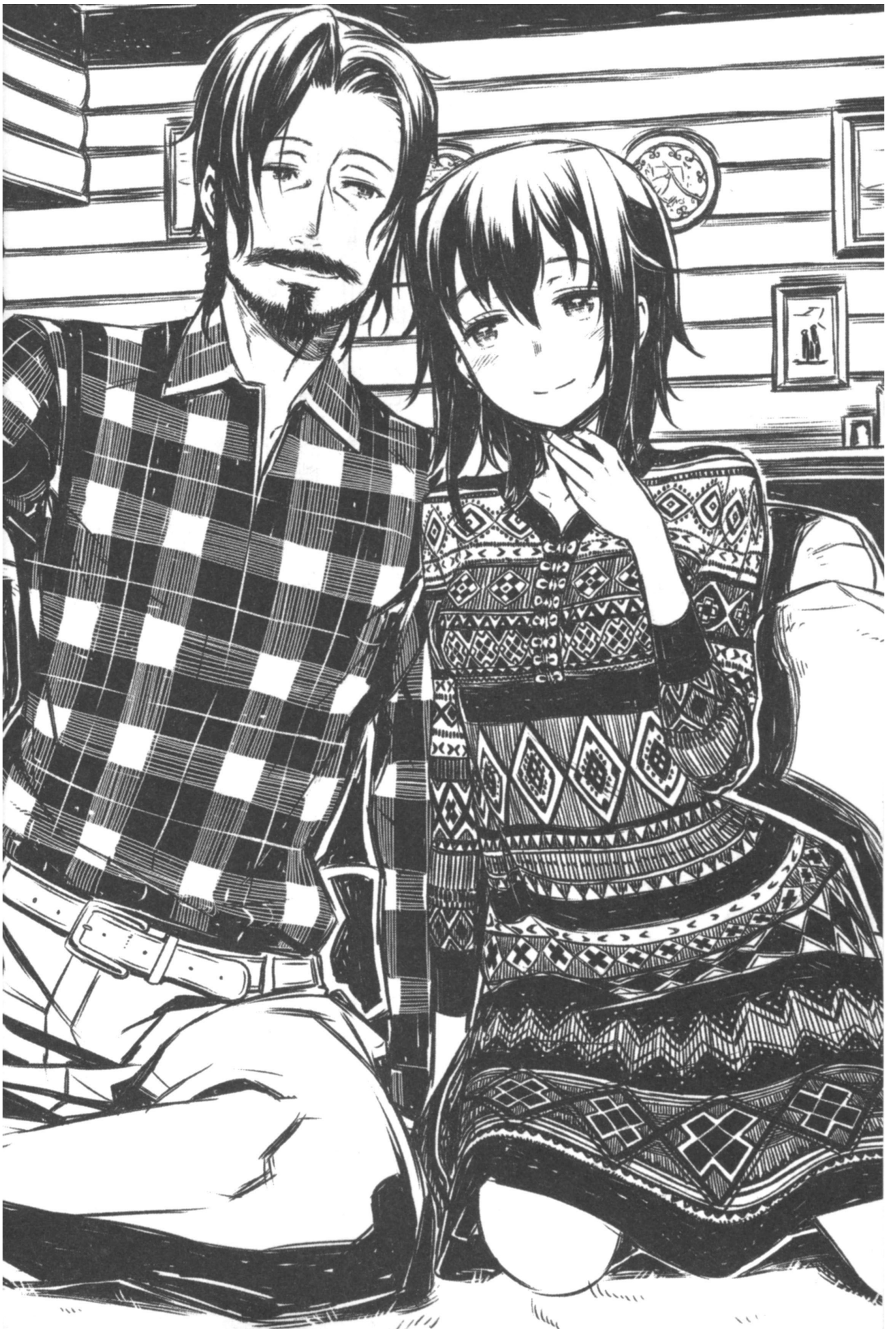
“You’re right. We shouldn’t be arguing like this. We’ll get both the amphibious craft and the cameras!”

In the end, the queen and her husband agreed to wring out their budget for both their desired gadgets and sealed their truce with a kiss.

“Come to think of it, do you think our son Treize is doing all right in the Capital District?”

“Come to think of it, yes. I think he is.”

Then their thoughts wandered to their son, who had just begun attending secondary school in the Capital District earlier that month.



Chapter 3: Lillia and Treize

The 10th day of the fourth month of the year 3306.

Roxche's capital was situated in the northeastern part of the continent.

The capital city had been created at the founding of the confederation, well away from the border and any coasts from which the enemy could mount a sneak attack.

The city, measuring at about 30 kilometers in diameter, was known as the Special Capital District and was not a part of any Roxchean member state. The word 'capital' in Roxchean referred not to the capital of a member state, but the Capital District.

The city infrastructure had been planned meticulously, as it had not taken the place of any preexisting settlement. Key government buildings formed the core, with a business district encircling it, which was itself encircled by a residential district.

The city was a sprawling metropolis of buildings, covered mostly in brown brick and pavement save for small bubbles of green in the parks. It was an unusual sight in Roxche, which was composed mostly of vast, green plains.

The Capital District was Roxche's largest, most inhabited, and most densely populated city.

It was the center of Eastern culture and a subject of admiration for those who lived outside.

On the outskirts of the city, in the 9:30 direction, was the 4th Capital Secondary School.

Students between the ages of 12 and 18 attended secondary school for the purpose of moving on to university. As apparent from its name, the 4th Capital Secondary School was the fourth to be built in the Capital District, its student body numbering at over a thousand.

The campus was surrounded by apartment buildings, each side measuring at approximately 600 meters.

It housed many buildings, a large athletics field, gymnasiums, and a student dormitory in both neat and haphazard formations.

There was a light westerly wind and a slight cloud cover on that warm day.

Two girls in green uniforms and spring coats were on the grounds of the 4th Capital Secondary School.

One had long brown hair.

The other, black hair tied into pigtails.

The brown-haired girl smiled as she said something, holding out a photograph to her friend.

The pigtailed girl stared at the photo. Three seconds later, she lost consciousness.

The brown-haired girl panicked.

* * *

“Spill it, Treize! Who was this mysterious ‘Hilda’ from the train?!”



It was evening on the same day, in a deserted classroom.

“C’mon, Lillia. Strauski must’ve told you by now. And could you please try to remember that three of my ribs are still healing?”

The brown-haired girl from earlier was gripping the collar of a black-haired boy.

Both were in uniform, with green blazers and a skirt and pants respectively.

The boy was Treize Bain.

He had transferred to the school and moved into the dorms on the 2nd day of the month—eight days earlier. He was 17 years old, and had a slender but strong build thanks to his regular exercise regimen. On his left wrist was a chronograph.

The girl was Lillia Schultz.

She was 16 years old and a fourth-year at the school. Her hair cascaded down to her waist.

‘Lillia Schultz’ was the shortened form of her name (which she preferred to use), her official name being ‘Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz’. It was an unnecessarily long name by any standard.

The light of dusk seeped into the empty classroom.

The room was at the top floor of the building, and Lillia and Treize sat by the windows—as far from the hallways as possible. The curtains were closed to keep them hidden from anyone who might be on the grounds.

The situation almost had the makings of a romantic tryst, but reality was not so sweet.

“Urgh...fine. Can’t exactly interrogate you when we’re both on our feet,” Lillia said, slowly letting go. “Now siddown!”

“Is that an order, milady? And is this going to take long? I have to go back to the dorms and catch up on the curriculum,” Treize complained, making his displeasure clear. Lillia glared.

“That will depend on the answers you present, Your Highness.”

“Please don’t call me that. And please stop acting so formal, milady,” Treize begged, grabbing a chair off the desk and turning it over to sit.

“All right.” Lillia took a seat opposite him, letting her hair fall over the back of the chair. She seemed extraordinarily unhappy. “I won’t call you that. I won’t call you ‘Your Highness’ at school, okay?! And I won’t call you that outside, either! You’re just Treize. Always have been, always will be!” she hissed, in Bezelese like the rest of their earlier conversations.

Relief flooded Treize’s face as he smiled and placed a hand over his chest.

‘Treize Bain’ was a fake name. ‘Treize of Ikstova’ was the official designation he received, as Treize was one of the few people in the world permitted to add the title ‘of Ikstova’ to his name.

Officially, the royal family of Iks was composed of Queen Francesca, her husband Sir Benedict, and their so-called only child, Princess Meriel.

Treize was Meriel’s twin (the twins would always argue about which one of them was the elder) and a child of Queen Francesca, but his existence was not revealed to the world because of an ancient rule in the royal family. The rule, however, had only been put in place only to protect the secret of the Ikstova Pass. Now that the pass was known to the world, the rule no longer needed to be enforced. Perhaps Treize’s existence could be announced to the world someday.

But currently, he was only officially known to Iks's royal guard, leading figures in the Roxchean government, and the royal families of Sou Be-II, with whom the Ikstovan royals had exchanges.

Allison Schultz, a longtime friend of Queen Francesca, was also naturally in the know.

Allison's daughter and Treize's childhood friend Lillia Schultz had recently—and very loudly—joined this privileged group of insiders.

“Nobody's gonna believe me if I tell them, ‘Oh, the mysterious transfer student is actually a prince from some faraway kingdom’. This is like a bad radio drama!” Lillia cried.

“That's cruel of you,” Treize sighed, puffing up his cheeks.

“And then they'll start thinking I'm some sort of hopeless romantic!”

“Oh. Right.”

“This is no time for ‘Oh right's!’”

For some time, Treize calmly responded to Lillia's rage, allowing her to vent.

“So the lady in this photo is Princess Matilda of Bezel? First in line to the throne?”

“Yeah.”

“Ugh! If I'd known ahead of time, I wouldn't have shown it to Meg! She's completely obsessed with royalty—do you have any idea how hard it was to explain my way out of this?!”

“How did you explain it to her?”

“I used a lifetime supply of the word ‘coincidence’! I even told her I took a train from the Port Watts area! I've never *been* to Port Watts!”

“Ah, that's from the fake itinerary they announced, right?” Treize nodded.

According to the official itinerary of Princess Matilda's visit to Roxche the previous month, the princess had gone from the Capital District to Port Watts by train before returning home on a battleship.

However, the princess at Port Watts was a decoy. The real Princess Matilda had quietly visited the Kingdom of Iks before heading north by train with Treize and their bodyguards—Major Travas's team—when she was caught up in a certain incident.

“So I had to tell her, ‘I actually wasn't allowed to take a photo but managed to get special permission but I'm actually not allowed so please don't actually tell anyone’!”

“That's a few too many ‘actually's in there.”

“And whose fault is all this?”

“Okay, okay, I'm sorry.”

“Anyway, I think I managed to convince Meg. I swear, I was sweating bullets back there...” Lillia exhaled. “Treize...”

“Yeah?”

Lillia leaned in close and lowered her voice.

“I wanted to clear something up. Who in the Capital District knows about you except for me and Mom and Major Travas? Spill it.”

She was demanding that Treize reveal a national secret. But he complied without hesitation.

“Let’s see...a few people high up in the Roxchean government. Not exactly sure how high or how many, though. Of course the president knows. I met him once before I started class here. He was a nice guy.”

“The pres-! Never mind. Not like he’s ever gonna come to our school. Who else?”

“A pair of royal guards. They’re a married couple living in the Capital District. Right now they’re staying at a rented apartment in the area, and if anything happens while I’m here they’ll claim to be my distant relatives and act as my legal guardians. They’re taking care of my motorcycle too.”

“Two guards, huh. I can’t believe you brought a bike.”

“I mean, I don’t know the Capital District too well, and I need to get around somehow...”

“Most normal secondary school students here don’t drive themselves, you know! Please don’t ride your motorcycle to school in uniform or something. It’s not against the rules but you’ll stick out like a sore thumb! You can take it outside the city, though.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. ‘Don’t bring the motorcycle to school’.”

“And what about your royal pendant? You have to change with your classmates for gym class and stuff. Our school has swimming classes too,” Lillia explained, more serious—and worried—than before.

Members of Iks’s royal family were required to always wear a golden pendant that proved their identity. The pendant was engraved with the royal’s personal crest.

“People here probably don’t know about the royal crests and stuff, but still...” Lillia trailed off. Like many people outside Iks, she had not recognized the pendant when she saw it for the first time.

“Thanks for being so concerned,” Treize replied with a smile, “but that’s not a problem.”

“Yeah?”

“I know most secondary school students—especially boys—don’t wear jewelry. And I know the school only lets you wear accessories for religious reasons. So I spoke to Mother and got special permission to not wear my pendant while I’m here. I left it at Ikstova.”

“That’s a relief. So you got the queen’s permission...which means it’s a breach of royal custom but you get a pass.”

“Uh-huh. It’s the first time anyone got this kind of permission in our 400-year history.”

Treize seemed completely oblivious to the scale of the permission he had received. Lillia shook her head in disbelief. “Well, all right. I guess I don’t have to worry about the pendant.” Then she paused. “You left your guns back home, right? Didn’t bring a handgun to the dorms for ‘personal protection’ purposes or anything like that?”

Lillia was half-joking when she tossed out the question.

But Treize looked away.

Lillia froze.

“You didn’t...”

“I-it’s okay.”

“How?”

“It’s stowed securely in my safe with the ammu-”

Lillia did not let him finish.

If anyone had been in the hallway, her voice would have pierced their eardrums.

“TREIZE! Do you have *any* intention of living like a normal student here?!”

* * *

It was only after the sun had completely set that Lillia finally finished educating Treize on the ways of student life at a Capital District secondary school and allowed him to return to the dorms.

In the lobby, Treize ran into a classmate and RA who helped him settle in at the dorms.

The RA was in a school-issue tracksuit and on his way out for a routine run around the campus. He greeted Treize and gave him a curious look.

“Is everything all right? You look exhausted.”

Treize answered just as Lillia had instructed him earlier.

“Oh, no, nothing. It was some personal and really trivial stuff. I’m just a little tired. Wonder how long we have until dinner...”

“Not long. They’re serving steak tonight. It’s only twice a month and really good, so the lines’ll be longer than usual. If you wait too long you’ll miss it when it’s piping hot, so I suggest lining up ahead of time or near closing time once the lines are gone.”

It was great advice. Treize nodded.

“Thanks for the info. All right, time to get some protein into my system. Oh, but I have to clean up my safe...”

Treize staggered up to his floor.

His room was at the very end of the hall on the highest floor of the building. It was hard to go up and down the stairs every day, but his window gave him a great view of the front gates, the roundabout outside it, and the apartment buildings surrounding the campus.

The RA watched Treize depart, wondering what had driven him to such a state.

“Well, I guess that’s his business.”

But he quickly shrugged off the thought and went on his way.

* * *

The spring dance party took place three days later.

Hosted by the school, it was only open to students in their fourth year or higher.

The talk of the campus in the aftermath of this year’s party was the couple who stepped up first, dancing with spectacular skill and a confusing mix of hostility and attachment.

Chapter 4: Meg and Seron, and Larry and Jenny and Natalia and Nick

The 15th day of the fourth month.

The clouds cleared away in the afternoon, letting the sun shine warmly over the campus. “Is no one here yet today? That’s unusual.”

Seron Maxwell was the first to arrive at the newspaper club office.

The old building on the edge of campus that housed the office cleared out early, as it was not used after class hours. While the newer buildings on the premises were filled with voices, this one alone remained silent.

The newspaper club office was situated at the center of its ground floor.

Formerly an ordinary classroom, it was the most luxurious space on campus.

Part of the room was partitioned off as a darkroom, its windows covered and a door installed to block out light completely. The renovation was the work of professional hands. Inside, the darkroom was equipped with everything a photographer could want for developing film.

The other half of the former classroom was furnished with a pair of luxurious sofas, a coffee table, and two seats. It was enough to host a tea party for eight. Of the campus facilities, only the school’s cafeterias and lounge could boast the same.

A hot plate and sink were installed in the corner, alongside a dish rack housing a tea set.

The work desks and chairs at the sides of the room were much more sturdy and expensive than those in the classrooms. Two sets of curtains, one of beautiful lace and the other of thicker material, decorated the windows.

Most unusual of all was the telephone, a luxury item that many households could not afford to own.

Almost anything was possible in the newspaper club.

—For some reason, a large guitar case also sat in the office.

Seron Maxwell was 16 years old and a fourth-year student.

He had a 12-year-old sister and a mother who ran Roxche’s most successful frozen food business. Because his hometown was so far from the Capital District, he had lived in the dorms since his first year.

With his good looks and intelligence, and his polite demeanor, Seron could almost pass for being perfect—indeed, he had been asked out many times—but for a long time he had been plagued by the weakness of being unable to confess to his crush.

But two months earlier, in the second month, he overcame many hurdles and the problem was finally solved.

The confession of a lifetime had been changed into a proposal by the misunderstanding of a century. But Seron saw no need to correct the happy mistake, so he never did.

As a result, he now had, not a girlfriend, but a fiancée.

That did not change much about his life, however. He continued to attend classes, study hard, and devote time to club activities, just as he did before.

Part of the reason was that his fiancée was also a member of the same club.

Seron took off his jacket and hung it up, then opened the curtains and windows.

The office was warm thanks to the school's around-the-clock heating system. Seron let fresh air into the room and shut the windows again before it became too cold.

Then he filled a kettle with six cups' worth of water and put it on the hot plate.

Time passed in silence before the kettle began to hiss.

"Hey! Just you today, Seron? Then I guess I'm second."

Larry Hepburn entered the room.

Larry had been Seron's best friend since the beginning of secondary school. He was in the same year, but he was 15 years old because his birthday was still a month away.

He had short-cropped blond hair with blue eyes, and had a sturdy build thanks to daily exercise. He was also slightly short for his age, a fact he was quite conscious of.

Being the second son of a prestigious military family, Larry dreamed of moving on to a military academy in the future like the rest of the men in his family. Unfortunately, his grades outside of gym class were not quite up to par.

"Hey there, Larry. How're you doing?"

"Great as ever! You?"

"Running every day's doing wonders for my sleep. I feel more rested than before. By the way, I put the kettle on for you."

"Thanks, buddy. I'll take care of the rest!"

Larry, the designated tea-brewer who also happened to be the best at the job, took off his jacket and pulled on an apron.

Seron took a seat on the edge of the sofa to stay out of Larry's way.

Larry heated up the teapot, added the leaves, poured the water, steeped the tea, and expertly made preparations.

"Good afternoon. Ah, just the two of you today? We men have the office to ourselves, I see."

The androgynous Nicholas Browning entered the office.

He had long hair with emerald eyes and a slender build with feminine looks. If not for his uniform, he could easily pass for a girl.

"Hey Nick." "Afternoon."

Larry and Seron greeted him. Nick gave Larry a brief nod in return and went to the sofas.

Each member of the club had a designated seat. It was an unspoken rule that the boys sat on one side and the girls on the other. Nick sat on the opposite end of the boys' sofa from Seron.

Larry prepared three cups of tea and served the others, then took off his apron and sat in a single seat.

"Thanks, Larry." "We always appreciate your service." Seron and Nick started on their tea.

"Nah, don't mention it." Larry nodded and took up his teacup as well.

Each member of the club also had a designated teacup. Larry's was smaller than the others and decorated with lovely pink flowers.

The boys relaxed, soaking themselves in the aroma of tea to enjoy an elegant evening.

“This is the first meeting since the spring dance, is it not? The dance certainly was a wonderful experience,” Nick remarked. Seron nodded.

“You can say that again!” Larry chuckled, having thoroughly enjoyed watching Seron dance with Meg. “Though I’m not sure I wanna remember how *I* ended up dancing. By the way, that couple that stepped up first was really good.”

Suddenly, Nick leaned forward. “Yes! About that,” he paused. “Pardon me. I suppose I should save this discussion for when the others are with us.”

“Huh? Sure.”

Larry nodded and did not pry further. He asked the others if they wanted refills. Seron nodded.

The club office was stocked with snacks to go with tea, but because one of the girls became inordinately angry when the boys dug in without her, they decided to stick simply to tea.

“Yo, guys. Haven’t served the snacks yet, I see. I approve.”

The girl in question—Natalia Steinbeck—entered the office.

She was tall for a girl, with long pinned-up brown hair and oval glasses. Natalia was also known for always wearing stockings or tights under her skirt. Like the others, she was a fourth-year.

“Cause you always make a scene when we start without you, Lia,” Larry grumbled. He had been her next-door neighbor and childhood friend, but until their reunion the previous summer he had all but forgotten her.

Larry was the only one who called her by her childhood nickname, ‘Lia’.

“Hey there, Nat.” “Good afternoon, Nat.”

The others called her ‘Nat’.

The snack of the day was crunchy wafers from a famous department store. Natalia grabbed the tin from the shelf and pulled off the sealing tape.

And with a thud, she placed it on the table. Larry shook his head as he brewed her tea.

“Couldn’t you put that on a plate and make it look a little more, I don’t know, appealing?”

“At my level, presentation might as well be an optical illusion. It just doesn’t make the food taste any better. The world is divided into two kinds of foods—good food and not-good food. It’s clear as night and day. As different as Roxche and Sou Be-Il.”

“Thanks for the uselessly large-scale comparison. Here’s your tea,” Larry said. Natalia gave him a scowl.

“Couldn’t you serve that tea with a bit more pizzaz? Like ‘Here is your tea, milady’.”

“Must be nice being you, Lia. You’ve got nothing to think about but your own stomach.”

The four club members were enjoying tea and wafers when the others arrived.

“Hey there.” “We are here.”

One of the two was Jenny Jones. She was a fourth-year like the others and had recently turned 16.

Jenny had a petite build with short red hair and large eyes, like a small animal. She was the daughter of the family that owned Jones Motors, Roxche’s largest car company, and was the president of the newspaper club. She was the one who had paid for the office’s luxurious facilities.

Jenny pulled her camera bag off her shoulder and placed it gently on a desk.

The other club member was Strauski Megmica.

She had fair skin and long black hair tied into pigtails. Meg was the only club member from Sou Be-II—she had taken a year off school after moving to Roxche, so she was a year older than her classmates at 17.

Meg was Seron's fiancée.

Larry greeted them first.

"Hey there, Jenfie. Megmica."

'Jenfie' was Jenny's childhood nickname. Larry was the only one who used it, however.

"Yo chief. Hi, Megmica."

Because she was the vice-president of the club (at least in name), Natalia often called Jenny 'chief'.

"Good day." Nick nodded, sipping on his tea.

Then it was Seron's turn. First he greeted the president.

"Hi Jenny."

Then he turned to his longtime crush and now-fiancée.

"Hey there, Meg." The greeting was not much different from the others.

But the only club member who called her by her nickname—

"Good evening."

And the only one she greeted with a beam—was Seron.

From the office, they could hear the sports clubs practicing in the distance.

"I'd like to get started on our next issue soon," Jenny said, draining her cup.

The newspaper club usually posted their papers on the campus walls.

In the past, Jenny's rampage and outrageous articles led to a decline in membership that eventually left her the sole member of the club.

The newspaper club had been stripped of official status (yet still managed to keep an office on campus), leaving Jenny to work alone and put up papers guerilla-style, only for the teachers to tear them down again.

But now the club had six members and even a supervisor, restoring its status. Its publications were no longer torn down unless they got in the way of something else.

The most recent publication featured an article by a Raputoan exchange student about life in the Capital District and the school. It was a humble travelogue of sorts and was received quite well.

"So on that note, I need ideas."

No one responded to the president's call. That was when Nick finished chewing on and swallowing a wafer.

"If I may! I have something to discuss," he said with a beautiful smile.

"Ah, up to no good again, Nick?" Natalia grinned. Nick gave her an oblivious look.

"Whatever might you mean?"

"Just wanted to try saying that."

"Don't bother with four-eyes, Nick," said Larry, "So what did you have in mind?"

“You mentioned that you wanted to talk about something earlier,” said Seron, “What was it?”

“Indeed. Allow me to begin,” Nick said, taking a sip of tea.

Chapter 5: The Mysterious Transfer Student

“The dance party two days ago was magnificent. I had a wonderful time, myself. But more importantly, do any of you recall the pair that stepped up first? The couple that flaunted their incredible dance skills.”

“Of course!” Meg cried, raising her hand.

Seron nodded. “They’re both classmates of mine. And I see the guy at the dorms often.”

Larry was next. “Yeah. Seron told me.”

“I know *of* them,” said Jenny, “Never talked to either of them, though.”

“Megmica’s friend Lillia Schultz, and the transfer student she’s been friends with for a while. What was his name again? I swear I’ve heard it before.” Natalia wondered.

“His name is Treize Bain,” said Nick, looking around at the others, “He is a year older than us, but transferred into the fourth-year classes.”

“Just like Megmica,” Natalia noted. Meg nodded.

“And about this Treize Bain—it seems that there is quite a bit of mystery about him.”

“Mystery?”

“Yes, Nat. Mystery.” Nick held up his left index finger. “Supposedly Treize is a transfer student from the Kingdom of Iks. That begs the question: why? Iks is located all the way at the western edge of Roxche, in the middle of the Central Mountain Range. In addition, few people our age would dare to interrupt their studies to switch schools. And as Seron has noted, Treize lives in the dorms, implying that he has not simply been caught up in a sudden family move. Curious, is it not?”

“Yeah,” said Jenny, “I guess it’s not common. You don’t have to travel halfway across the continent to find a secondary school. And even if he really just wanted to attend a secondary school in the Capital District, there must be a reason why he chose ours. The fact that he’s friends with Lillia Schultz isn’t reason enough. Not many parents would give their kid permission to move for something like that. So, what else?”

Nick held up his thumb. “Seron and Megmica may know already, as they are his classmates, but Treize Bain is quite the accomplished student. Pardon the expression, but for a ‘country bumpkin’ from Iks, he does not seem to be having much difficulty keeping up with our curriculum. Even more remarkable as the transfer exam and classes at our school are on the challenging side. Do you not agree, Seron?”

“I suppose,” Seron said. Meg, who was also in the same class, did not object.

Nick continued, “He is also remarkably athletic. According to an acquaintance, the gym teacher was astounded by Treize Bain’s skill on the horizontal bars. He performed several giant swings back-to-back before being asked to come down, at which point he let go of the bar and landed on his feet several meters away. I am told that he strode back to his place in line afterwards as if nothing had happened.”

Larry’s eyes turned to dinner plates. “Talk about some crazy semicircular canals. You can’t pull off a move like that unless you’ve been turned upside-down a lot. You think he might have been a gymnast back in Iks?”

“It is indeed a possibility, but if that were the case, he would have joined the gymnastics club by now. And the story does not end there!”

Nick was unusually excited. “What happened next?” asked Seron.

“The teacher then asked him to demonstrate another maneuver. I fear I do not know the name of the technique, but it was one that requires the dynamic use of one’s upper body. But Treize Bain declined, saying—” Nick paused dramatically, “—‘I’m very sorry, but I broke my ribs recently and have to wait for them to heal’.”

Silence fell over the room.

“...Then you mean he pulled off the dance with broken ribs? Wow.”

“Come to think of it,” said Seron, “I remember hearing something about that at the beginning of the term. When Treize was introducing himself.”

Lillia had smacked Treize, shoved him against the blackboard, and shaken him by the collar.

If Treize’s ribs had already been broken before that point, Lillia’s actions were cruel indeed. Neither Seron nor Meg decided to reveal her ruthlessness to the others.

“Then I guess the ribs are starting to heal. But it’s still pretty crazy. Forget the pain—what if he fell doing the giant swings and hurt himself again? He could have punctured his lungs if they broke. Is he not scared? Or maybe he knows himself well and has confidence because he’s faced something even scarier and won,” Jenny speculated in a rare show of awe. “But either way, that takes ‘gymnast’ off the list of possibilities.”

“Why, chief?”

“A professional wouldn’t do something that reckless.”

“Aha.” Natalia nodded. Nick continued.

“That is not all. Treize Bain has shown talent in sprinting, long-distance running, swimming, and all sorts of other activities. Every sports club in the school is determined to recruit him, using any means necessary. Although it seems he has managed to elude them so far.”

“I see him at the dorms often,” said Seron, “and he’s always studying. After class he holes up in the study rooms. I can tell he’s a hard worker.”

“Indeed. A diligent student who never once stops in his journey of self-improvement. He is a determined one indeed, if he is not even tempted by the entertainment the Capital District has to offer.” Nick nodded. “Ladies and gentlemen! Here we have a talented and earnest transfer student veiled in mystery, his timing and reasons unknown. Just who in the world could this enigmatic young man be?!”

It was a theatrical declaration that bordered on the melodramatic when combined with Nick’s remarkable performance.

“What’s your take?” Natalia asked, picking up yet another wafer. She was the only one still eating.

“Excellent question, Nat. Here is my hypothesis...” Nick said, putting a hand on his chest. “The transfer student Treize Bain...is a morderca!”

“A what?” Natalia furrowed her brow. Nick deflated slightly.

Seron glanced at Meg.

She did not seem to want to say anything. So he explained in her stead.

“‘Morderca’ is a Bezelese word for a certain type of armed group. It comes from their word for ‘assassin’. The morderca worked as spies and killers in the past. They were different

from special forces or people who worked for kings or intelligence agencies. They were like a mercenary force composed of entire clans or villages, who worked for whichever kings or militaries hired them. Think of Roxche's free knights or knights-for-hire. The difference is that each individual morderca is a trained fighter. Even now period novels and films feature them and their superhuman feats."

"I expected nothing less, Seron. A gold star for you."

Larry, who also knew a little about the morderca, turned. "But Nick, I thought morderca didn't exist anymore."

"Indeed, perhaps not as they had in the past. But perhaps Treize Bain is a descendant? It seems quite plausible to me," Nick replied.

Larry shrugged. "I dunno..."

"Now that you mention it," Natalia said, glancing at Larry, "the Hepburns used to be knights-for-hire back in the day too, eh? Hey there, warrior descendant."

Meg looked up at Larry, surprised. Larry put on an embarrassed look.

"Can't believe you managed to remember that with your intelligence, Lia. You must've heard it from my mom or your mother. Yes, we were knights-for-hire, but that was a really long time ago. Our family founder was a mercenary and sometimes we served whoever paid the most, but not after we swore fealty to Venerus II 490 years ago."

"That's enough of the history lesson," Jenny said, bringing the conversation back on track, "The important thing is figuring out whether this Treize Bain is a morderca or not. Thing is, this guy's from Ikstova, which is in Roxche. How do you explain that, Nick?"

"Indeed, Iks is an Eastern country. But earlier this year I devised a theory that may support my hypothesis. In fact, that Treize Bain is from the Kingdom of Iks seems to me further proof that he may be a descendant of the morderca. I would not suppose so if, for instance, he had transferred from the Republic of Raputoa."

"And what is this theory?"

"It began with the announcement of the Ikstova Pass, which proved that humans have been able to traverse the Central Mountain Range on foot for a very long time. I spoke about this with Larry earlier, but I posited that perhaps Iks's royal family, who were hiding the existence of the pass, were originally Westerners who had crossed over into the East through the pass. Then it is possible that the descendants of the morderca may be living in Iks—perhaps no longer in the *function* of assassins, but still with the skills passed down to them from their ancestors!" Nick declared, and took a sip of tea.

"Hm. I see." Jenny nodded.

"I don't see any particular inconsistencies," Seron said, taking into account the fact that Nick's theory was simply a theory and nothing more.

"Dunno much about that stuff, but it sounds pretty cool. And it's making me thirsty," Natalia said, and asked Larry for more tea.

Meg remained as silent as before.

Larry poured Natalia the last of the teapot's contents. "So what's this morderca descendant doing at our school? Is the faculty hiding something big? Like a treasure or something?"

It was an understandable question.

Nick's response—

"I can say for certain that I have no idea!"

—Was disappointingly resolute.

Larry shook his head in disbelief. "Well, I guess it sounds pretty interesting. But what exactly would you want to do with Treize Bain?"

"The answer is obvious, Larry. In which club office are we seated?"

"The afternoon tea club—I mean, the newspaper club. So you want us to investigate this guy and figure out who he is, why he's at our school?"

"Precisely."

"Hmm... What do you say, Jenfie?" Larry turned to Jenny, then rose to put the kettle on again.

"Well..."

Jenny crossed her arms and fell into thought as she usually did.

All the while, Seron kept his eyes on his fiancée.

She was still silent, and a little hesitant on top of that.

"Well," Jenny finally broke her silence. "I suppose we *are* out of gossip to cover. There's no real reason not to do it. Figure out Treize Bain's secrets, I mean."

"Excellent!" Nick exclaimed. But Seron was not so excited.

"But if Treize really is a morderca and hiding the fact, it's something he obviously doesn't want other people to know. Wouldn't there be consequences if we revealed his identity?"

Nick's response was simple and clear.

"No true morderca would be clumsy enough to be discovered by a group of teenagers. And even should we manage to find evidence of such, I shall leave the matter of publishing the content to Jenny's judgement."

Seron fell silent.

"That is pure evil, Nicholas Browning. And brilliant." Natalia turned to Jenny. "Well, chief?"

The final decision was Jenny's. She nodded.

"I guess we'll begin the investigation tomorrow. We'll start by quietly collecting any rumors that are going around about this guy. Don't be too forward—remember, we don't want him to find out we're investigating him. Don't go out of your way to ask strangers. And if you're lucky, you just might find someone with some info. Be discreet about it. The next meeting is in three days. I'm busy with other things tomorrow and the day after, so I have to go straight home after school. Sound all right?"

It was a proud show of her leadership as president and editor-in-chief.

"Sure." "All right." "How exciting."

Meg alone said absolutely nothing as she sipped on the remainder of her cold tea.

Seron watched her in silence.

The meeting that day ended before the sun went down.

After making the decision to investigate Treize, the club moved on to chatting about other things. The meeting had turned into a tea party.

Jenny and Meg, who were usually picked up at the roundabout outside the gates, called their respective bodyguard-drivers (who were on standby in the area) on the office telephone. Larry washed the cups and teapot and placed them on the racks.

“Let’s get going,” said Jenny, picking up her camera bag, “Someone shut the curtains.”

Recently, the club had been closing their curtains to prevent anyone from peering inside from the central gardens. This time, Nick volunteered for the job.

“Hold on, Nick. I’m staying behind today; I can take care of it,” said Seron.

“Oh? You’re staying?” asked Jenny. As she had no objections, she took out her key and put it back where it was.

“I need to talk to you about something, Meg,” Seron said, “It’s not going to take too long. I can walk you to the gates after.”

Natalia reacted immediately. “Whoa! You are a brave man, Seron. Now let’s see if I can find someplace to watch you two from. Don’t worry, I won’t interrupt or anything.”

“Shut up, Lia. —Don’t forget to lock up,” Larry said. He neatly folded his apron and placed it on the shelf, then pulled on his jacket. And then he pushed the others out of the office. “See you guys.”

Meg’s face was a mess of anxiety, disappointment, and amusement. everything canceled out into an expression she almost never wore.

Seron waited for the others’ footsteps to fade before he finally spoke.

“Sorry, Meg. I promise it won’t take long.”

“Y-yes! B-but! That is! Not until marriage!”

“Huh? No, er, th-that’s not what I meant.” Seron looked away, blushing.

“Pardon? Yes.”

Meg looked into his eyes.

“About the investigation.”

“Oh. ... Yes.”

“I can tell you’re not keen on investigating Treize.”

“...As expected from you, Seron. You are right!” Meg did not hide her anger and nervousness. “I am opposing investigating Treize. He is the friend of my friend Lillia, and anyone has a secret that they do not want people to know.”

“Yeah.”

“But last time...it is exactly the thing I did. I pushed a person to a corner and pulled up her secrets. I said that I was the right one, forwardly, and proudly.”

“Mm.”

“And as a result, I pushed that person to a corner. So someone like me who has done this, I do not think is allowed to be proud and say, ‘everyone must stop this’.”

“Mm.”

Seron quietly listened to Meg and nodded his head.

“Treize, a morderca? It does not seem true at all. No, I will rather be happier if he is a clumsy morderca,” Meg chuckled sadly.

“You can tell her, Meg. I just wanted to tell you that,” Seron said, meeting Meg’s gaze.

“Yes? Tell to whom? And what?”

“You can tell Lillia Schultz about the club investigating Treize.”

Meg was silent.

“Even if the others find out you leaked information, I’ll be on your side. I can even tell them that I told Schultz, too.”

“... You are an amazing person, Seron. I think that you can see all of my thoughts.”

“You don’t have to waver between Schultz and the newspaper club. Everyone has a secret or two. But this time, let’s make it a secret that we’re keeping together.”

“Oh my goodness! You are very cool, Seron!” Meg beamed, her burdens lifted. “Then I will telephone to Lillia later! I will tell Lillia to tell Treize to be careful! Then Treize will be! There will be a smaller possibility of finding out!”

“Yeah. Sounds good.” Seron nodded firmly and glanced at his watch.

His mother had bought him the Whitfield wristwatch when he first entered secondary school. It would fetch a high enough price to take Seron home from anywhere in Roxche.

“We shouldn’t keep your driver waiting too long. Let’s lock up and go.”

“Yes! But before this, please tell me the time!”

“Hm? Aren’t you—”

Seron pointed at her left wrist.

Meg was also wearing a Whitfield luxury wristwatch, a ladies’ version of the one Seron wore. It was the first thing that rose to Seron’s mind when his mother pressed him to think of an engagement gift.

“Yes! I am wearing the wristwatch! It is a very correct watch but I wish to know your watch’s time.”

Though confused, Seron read out the time on his watch to the second. Being mechanical, their watches could be thrown off by several seconds every day.

“Thank you! I will set my time now.”

Meg wound her watch, matching Seron’s time to the very second.

“Here!” She smiled, holding out her wrist.

Seron switched to Bezelese. “There is no guarantee that my time is accurate. Is this all right?”

“Yeah!” Meg replied in the same tongue, “I like being on the same time as you!”



Chapter 6: The Worry is Mine

<Schultz residence!>

<Hi Lillia. Sorry for calling so late.>

<Meg! Don't worry about it. Mom's been busy the past few days and she's putting in overtime tonight too.>

<Phew... I needed to tell you something really quickly.>

<Yeah? Whatever it is, I say bring it on. So much has happened recently I don't think anything will surprise me anymore.>

<—and the newspaper club's going to try and investigate Treize.>

<...>

<Lillia?>

<Uh-huh. Yeah. Wow! Uh! That's surprising! Yep. A real shocker!>

<Hm? Y-yeah. I'm sorry I couldn't stop them.>

<Don't apologize, Meg. It's not your fault!>

<Well, er, I suppose Treize doesn't actually have any secrets to uncover, but you should tell him to be careful anyway.>

<...>

<Lillia?>

<Y-yeah! Of course he doesn't have anything to hide! Yeah! Thanks for the heads-up, Meg. I'll let him know!>

<Yeah. And I just thought of something. I don't know if this'll work, but...>

<Mhm?>

<Maybe you and Treize could come visit the newspaper club. If you just talk to the members I'm sure they'll stop suspecting him. And once you become friends, they might call off the investigation. I should have introduced you all at the dance...>

<Y-y-y-yeah, good call!>

<I'll introduce the club members to you, so introduce us to Treize!>

<R-right!>

Meg put down the receiver.

“I thought you said it was rude to call somebody this late, Big Sis,” Kurt pointed out, shooting a disapproving look. He was the older of Meg's two younger brothers. Johan, the youngest, was already in bed.

Strauski Kurt was 12 years old with dark hair and fair skin like his sister. He looked—and was—energetic and outgoing. At the start of the year, he joined his sister at the 4th Capital Secondary School, and got a ride to class with her in the mornings.

Kurt's Roxchean was much better than his sister's. He was on par with native speakers, and spoke Roxchean even at home with his family.

“It's fine! This was important business. Anyway, why are you still awake? You'll catch cold if you stay up like that.”

Kurt had just come out of the bath, and was in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts instead of his pajamas. He was drying off his hair with a towel.

“Sure, sure. The bathroom’s free,” he said, taking out a bottle of milk from the fridge and gulping down three glasses in a row. Then he put the nearly-empty bottle back where it had been. “Good night,” he said in Roxchean.

But just before he left the living room, Kurt stopped.

“Oh!” He turned with a grin. “Was that Big Bro Seron? Should I have been more tactful?”

“No, I was talking to Lillia.”

“Oh, the hero? So how important exactly is ‘important’, anyway?”

Meg’s answer was clear and decisive.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but it’s not anything national secret-level. Good night, Kurt.”

* * *

Allison Schultz made it back home just past midnight that day.

“Why won’t this written apology just write itself...?”

“Welcome back, Mom. Here,” Lillia said, holding out a cup of tea with extra sugar and milk for her exhausted mother.

“Oh? Oh! Thanks, honey.”

Allison collapsed on the sofa without bothering to change out of her uniform. The uniform had been murky red since the Confederation Air Force’s establishment, to the servicemen’s chagrin.

“You’re writing that cause you took off with that fighter plane to save me, right?”

“Yeah. Wish the bigwigs would just pull those sticks out of their—”

“Thanks for rescuing me, Mom.”

“It’s every parent’s responsibility to save their children, sweetie.”

“With an anti-aircraft machine gun.”

“Sometimes that’s necessary too. Thanks for the tea.”

Lillia, who had gone out of her way to stay up that night, asked her mother an important question. “Say, I was just curious. What happens if Treize’s identity gets out?”

Being unaffected by hot foods and drinks (unlike a certain someone), Allison drank her tea and responded without even blinking.

“Hm. It’ll probably be the biggest scandal of the year. You’ll get journalists swarming the school every day, making a big fuss. It *is* a national secret, after all.”

“Gaaahh...” Lillia groaned, looking up at the ceiling.

Allison remained completely ignorant of her daughter’s plight. “Nice and sweet. Steeped to perfection,” she sighed lazily, holding the cup of tea.

* * *

The next morning.

By the time the fourth month was halfway through, spring was encroaching ever more by the day. The skies over the Capital District that day were clear with the sun shining warmly.

The 4th Capital Secondary School slowly came to life.

Sports clubs finishing their morning training exercises ran for the showers in the club building.

The showers were by no means under-equipped, but there was a rush for the booths every day as students tried to leave themselves ample time to change and get to class.

As a general rule, student facilities operated on a first-come-first-served basis. Older students were not afforded any leniency over their juniors.

The campus was also dotted with students who arrived early by habit, rather than being dragged in for club activities.

The early-to-class group came to school early to avoid the hustle and bustle at the gates. They would spend their extra time studying in the classrooms or chatting with their friends.

In the dorms, meanwhile, most students were having breakfast at the cafeteria. Many of them were not even in uniform yet. As they did not have a long commute or any need to fight the crowds at the main gates, dormitory students had more relaxed morning routines.

And yet one of them decided to leave the building early.

A dark-haired boy in uniform with no jacket. The absence of a sweater showed that he was likely used to cool weather. In his hand was a large leather suitcase.

Seron spotted the boy from the cafeteria doors and followed with his eyes.

“Is that Treize? He’s going to class early today. And why is he carrying a suitcase?” he wondered. “But I guess I shouldn’t think too much about it.”

He headed back to his own room.

Just as Seron arrived at his room to change into his uniform—

“Morning, Lillia,” Treize said and entered the classroom. Only one person was inside. She turned.

“Mm. Morning.”

“Huh?”

Treize froze.

There were dark shadows under Lillia’s eyes. Her usually tidy hair was a mess.

Treize took a seat next to her. “What happened?”

“It’s nothing—actually, it *is* something. About you.”

“About me?” Treize repeated, shocked.

“I need to talk to you. About who you are.”

It was not the answer Treize had been hoping for. He deflated.

“Sorry for calling you out so early. But I have to let you know,” Lillia said quietly.

Treize also lowered his voice. “I live at the dorms so it’s all right. It must’ve been harder on you, commuting to school so early. So what is it?”

Because the classroom was not used for any morning classes, they would not likely be interrupted by other students (barring someone getting lost). But Lillia still exercised the utmost caution.

Each time they heard footsteps outside, they would pause. And in between, Lillia told Treize everything she had heard from Meg the previous evening.

“I see,” Treize replied, nodding again and again. “Thanks for being concerned about me.”

“I-it’s not like I was worried or anything! It’s, er, you know!”

“No I don’t.”

“You *know*! It’s—well—you know it’ll be bad if people find out! So be careful around the newspaper club! And stop sticking out so much!”

“All right, all right. But I really don’t think it’s something worth worrying about...”

Treize’s response was too indifferent for Lillia’s liking. She frowned.

“Why not? You should be more careful!”

“But,” Treize argued, “they don’t have any proof.”

“What?”

“You know, lack of evidence. Proof that I’m...you know,” Treize explained, avoiding the phrase ‘prince of Ikstova’. “They can interrogate me all they like, but I just have to not tell them anything. To use an extreme example, even if someone who knew—like you—told them, I’d just deny it and demand proof.”

Lillia froze for a full dozen seconds. Then she finally spoke.

“Y-you’re right!” She clapped brightly. “That’s right. They have no proof.”

Relieved, Lillia exhaled and sank against the back of her chair. She looked up at the ceiling. “All that worrying for nothing. That was stupid of me.”

“More importantly, it’s pretty cool they think I’m a morderca! Maybe I should just say that I *am* one.”

“Are you stupid?!”

“I admit I messed up in gym class. I’ll try not to stand out too much anymore.”

“Please. And you know—”

“Hm?”

“I think I kind of get what you’ve been going through all this time. Or I guess I was forced to understand.”

“Yeah?”

“I was forced to understand.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I was forced.”

“Yeah.”

“*Forced.*”

“Oh, I get it. You didn’t *want* to understand. You didn’t want to understand how I felt all these years, trying to hide the truth from you. You want to get angry at me because I was deceiving you this whole time.”

“Hey, there’s such a thing as being too on-the-nose, you know?!”

“I’m going to class,” Lillia finally said, her eyes full of sleep.

“I’ll walk you there.” Treize got up after her and opened the classroom door. Then he closed it behind them.

Lillia thanked him quietly and realized at that point that Treize was carrying a large suitcase.

“You’ve been lugging that thing around?”

“Oh, just starting today.”

The halls were a little more crowded than earlier. Lillia and Treize continued to chat as they walked. The former sounded much more relaxed.

“Why? Isn’t it a hassle?”

“Yeah, but I’ve been carrying around study guides lately. I borrow a lot of big books from the library and I need to bring along my gym clothes too,” Treize replied nonchalantly.

“What?” Lillia uttered, frowning her brow. “But why would you need a suitcase?”

“Huh? To bring my stuff with me to classes...?”

“Why don’t you just use a locker?” Lillia tilted her head.

“What?” Treize did as well.

Several minutes later, they stood in the locker area in the main building.

The main building was situated at the center of the campus, with most of its first floor dedicated to student-use lockers.

The tall, narrow lockers were made of wood with slits cut into the tops and bottoms of the doors. The sight of such doors lined up one after another almost made the halls look like a graveyard, but unlike a real cemetery, the locker area was always bustling.

Students at the 4th Capital Secondary School were always busy moving from one class to another, and the sheer size of the campus did not help matters. So most students kept their things in their lockers to lessen their burdens.

Those who had just arrived were at their own lockers to take out things like textbooks and notebooks, putting away things they did not need—like gym clothes, in the case of sports club members.

“Oh, so *that’s* how it works!” Treize exclaimed.

“A-are you serious?!” Lillia stammered. “They didn’t tell you when you first transferred in?”

“They said there were lockers in the main building, but I thought they meant these things were like coin lockers. For keeping stuff at school for long periods of time. I had no idea everyone got their own! It certainly makes classes easier!”

“I don’t believe this...”

“So how exactly do you use a locker?” Treize asked.

Lillia explained. Treize probably had a designated locker somewhere, which he should mark out with something like a name tag for ease of identification. He should buy a small lock with a key or a rotary combination lock, which he could buy at the campus store.

“I see. I see.”

“And they have temporary lockers around too, just to let you know. You can use one for now if you can’t get your locker number immediately.”

“Really?”

“Over here.”

Lillia led the way to the corner of the locker area, at the edge of the main building.

“Right here.”

It was a section of lockers all lined up together.

The lockers themselves were no different from the rest, but they were situated in an alcove at the corner of the building. None of them were marked with names.

“These are the temp lockers. They’re not assigned to anybody. Anyone with too much stuff for one locker can use one of these, though one locker is enough for most people. I’ve never used it myself.”

“Hm. It’s definitely big enough to fit all my textbooks and clothes,” Treize mused, scrutinizing the lockers. “These locks mean someone is using them, right? I don’t think there are any left.”

“That’s funny. Last I checked, a lot of them were empty. Were the temp lockers always this popular?” Lillia wondered.

“Oh well,” Treize replied, “I’ll just go to the office and get my locker number. Thanks, Lillia.”

Chapter 7: Testimonies and Deduction

Testimony 1.

Witness: Arthur Sears and Sophia Ulericks. Sixth-year students, president and vice-president of the drama club.

“A transfer student from Iks? That’s pretty unusual.”

“I haven’t seen him in person. Why the sudden curiosity, Nicholas?”

“I wanted to get your advice, actually. The transfer student is a friend of Megmica’s friend, and the newspaper club expects he will become one of our friends in the near future as well. We are planning a welcoming party for him and wanted to surprise him with something connected to his homeland.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Yeah. It’s not easy for transfer students to make friends.”

“And that is why I am now asking friends and acquaintances about Iks for research purposes. Do you know anything at all, SC Arthur? SC Sophia?”

“Hm...the thing is, I’ve never been to Iks. And I don’t know anyone who has.”

“Me neither. We’d love to help, but...hey, come to think of it, I think Ms. Krantz said she’s been there before.”

“Perfect. I shall ask for her advice when I can. Now, what about this transfer student? Have you heard anything about him?”

“No. Not at all.”

“A little. The girls in our club were chattering about how he’s handsome, smart, and athletic. Someone asked him out already, but he turned her down saying he wasn’t really sure.”

“Oh? Could you elaborate, SC Sophia?”

“I mean, this is all third-hand stuff, but apparently a friend of a club member fell for the guy at first sight. Something about him being really exotic. But she was shot down.”

“Fascinating.”

“So she asked him, ‘Do you already like someone?’ If he did, she’d just give up on him.”

“And what did he say?”

“It was kind of weird. Apparently he got all serious and said, ‘I don’t know. I don’t know right now. I wish I did’.”

“He does not know his own feelings? Curious.”

“Yeah. The girl was confused too, but she took the hint and gave up. That’s about all I know.”

“I see. Thank you for your cooperation. And I apologize for taking up so much of your time.”

“Not at all, Nicholas. We owe the newspaper club.”

“If anything else happens to bother you, do let us know, both of you.”

“Ha ha! Sure thing.”

“Actually, there *is* something that’s been bugging me for a while now.”

“Yes, SC Arthur?”

“Has the newspaper club been using the temp lockers en masse recently?”

“No, I don’t believe so. Is something the matter?”

“Well, they’ve been nearly all occupied for the past two months or so. It’s kind of a bother. Frankly, it’s really making trouble for the club.”

“Has the drama club always been using the temporary lockers?”

“Yeah, for passing on finished props and copies of scripts. You leave the stuff in a temp locker with a lock. Everyone in the club knows the combination, so you can come by at your leisure to drop off or collect something, even on days without meetings.”

“Ingenious! Is this method exclusive to the drama club?”

“No, practically every club has been doing this for the past few years. If it’s a temp locker with a rotary combination lock, it’s probably being used by a club. We try to keep it hush-hush because temp lockers are supposed to be for individual students, though.”

“I see. Perhaps the newspaper club could also—”

“That might not be a good idea. More importantly, maybe you could publish a paper calling for the school to install more temp lockers!”

Testimony 2.

Witness: Lena Portman. Sixth-year student, president of the orchestra club.

“Treize Bain? I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of him. Who is he?”

“A fourth-year who just transferred in this month, SC Portman.”

“Wouldn’t you know more about the fourth-years than I do, Natalia Steinbeck?”

“Not necessarily. Okay, so if you don’t know Treize, what about Iks? Do you know anything?”

“I have never even visited the country. Is that all? I’m very busy today.”

“But lunch period’s not even close to over.”

“Unlike someone else, I am always occupied with club activities. I have to drop by the music room to collect my sheet music.”

“Huh? Doesn’t the club have a temp locker?”

“Ignorant as ever. Temporary lockers have been in short supply recently. They’re practically useless, with the number that are available now.”

“That’s news to me.”

“Useless, just like a certain someone I don’t have to name.”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about, but she must be a real lazy bum.”

“I’m talking about you! Come out to practice once in a while!”

Testimony 3.

Witness: Ms. Leni Krantz. Home economics teacher.

“Well, if it isn’t Larry Hepburn.”

“It’s been a while, Ms. Krantz. Thank you for everything last summer.”

“I should be the one thanking you. You did a great job!”

“Thank you, Ms. Krantz. Just out of curiosity, I wanted to ask if it’s true that you’ve been to the Kingdom of Iks? SC Arthur told me about it.”

“About three years ago, yeah. I do enjoy traveling.”

“What’s it like? I was kind of interested in going myself, but I don’t know many people who’ve visited Iks.”

“It’s wonderful! How do I put it? ... What do Capital District people like us usually think of when we say ‘mountain country’?”

“I’m not sure. ... Steep mountains, heavy snowfall, people living in humble and traditional ways?”

“Exactly. It’s like the quintessential mountain country, straight out of a book.”

“I see. This might be kind of a strange question, but just how traditional are these people? Do they cook over wood-fired stoves, for example?”

“The capital city Kunst and Mushke have gas. Other areas are still on firewood, though. Smaller valleys don’t even get electricity.”

“That’s incredible. Then they must still pass down a lot of traditional arts.”

“Hm. They’re really good at gold-crafting. Like, middle-aged women crafting the most intricate gold jewelry you’ve ever seen like it’s child’s play.”

“What about in terms of combat?”

“Ah, there’s the Hepburn I know. Hunting is important there, so apparently all the men are good with rifles. You’re not considered a man if you can’t fire a gun.”

“I see. What about martial arts?”

“I don’t think I’ve heard anything about that.”

Testimony 4.

Witness: Stella Whitfield and Margaret Whistler. Third-year students.

“Oh, SC Maxwell. Good afternoon.”

“G-good afternoon, SC Maxwell. It’s b-been a while.”

“Yeah. Hi there.”

“I heard you’re engaged to your classmate. Congratulations.”

“Congratulations. I-I think I should go.”

“Huh? A-am I interrupting something? Sorry.”

“Don’t worry, SC Maxwell. Actually, Maggie found a new crush and now they’re together. You turning her down turned out to be a good thing.”

“...I-I see.”

“I haven’t thanked you properly yet, have I? I’m so grateful for all your help, SC Maxwell.”

“Oh. No problem.”

“I should get going now.”

“W-wait. I wanted to ask you something.”

“Yes? Linus is doing very well, by the way. Grandfather’s proud of him too.”

“That’s good to hear. But I wanted to ask you about something else. Do you by any chance know anything about Ikstova?”

“The Kingdom of Iks? No, I’m sorry.”

“Oh, I see. Sorry for taking up your time.”

“Is this for the newspaper club?”
“I guess you could say that.”
“I don’t know much about Iks, but something has been a little fishy lately.”
“Yeah?”
“Actually, I should say something smells nice. Around the temp lockers.”
“What?”
“I’m really sensitive to scents, you see. And I can smell roses and something citrusy when I walk by the temp lockers.”
“...”
“Isn’t that strange? I think it is.”
“...”
“See you, SC Maxwell.”

Testimony 5.

Witness: Lillia Schultz, fourth-year student.

“Hey there, Meg.”
“Hi Lillia. You look happy today.”
“I guess you could say that.”
“Sorry for making you worry the other day.”
“It’s okay. By the way, do you still have a spare lock?”
“For a locker?”
“Yeah. You said you bought two but you’re only using one now, right? Could I borrow the extra?”
“Sorry, I gave it to Kurt.”
“Oh, I see! That’s a shame.”
“Is it for Treize?”
“Yeah. He’s been here for days, but he didn’t even know about the lockers until now! I told him to get a lock at the school store, but apparently they’re always sold out.”
“Oh. They might only stock them at the beginning of the term. Wait, that’s funny. I swear I saw a few just last month.”
“Mm. Yeah, apparently demand skyrocketed out of nowhere and the store doesn’t have any left.”
“Oh.”

* * *

The 18th. After school at the newspaper club office.

“Hm. So is this all we’ve got?” Jenny asked once everyone had given their reports. She was sitting cross-legged on the sofa, her underwear nearly showing. But as Jenny always sat in this position and her underwear never did show, the boys sitting across from her were unfazed.

“That’s all we could get,” Larry declared, reaching for a cookie.

The snack of the day was an assorted set of cookies from a rectangular tin. The flavors ranged from chocolate to coffee to black tea and even fruit.

“Hey, the chocolate flavor is mine!” Natalia shot him a glare, fixing her glasses. Larry was frozen. “I came to school today just to have that cookie.”

Larry relented. “Then I guess I’ll try the sugar-coated one,” he said, moving again.

“That’s mine too! I chose the 4th Capital Secondary School to eat that cookie!”

“Then I’ll take apricot.”

“Oh no you don’t! I was born to eat this flavor.”

“Banana.”

“I created this world to have that cookie!”

“How much bigger can you get?”

Nick turned away from the argument with his usual elegant smile. “We’ve only just begun, Jenny. I am certain that there is more to this case.”

Meg and Seron did not actively speak up. They chose to sit by and watch.

Natalia, however, did speak—even as she munched on her cookie. “Something’s up, though.”

“Like what, Lia?”

“Still clueless, Inspector Hepburn?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Use that head and deduce stuff, Larry. Most of the testimonies mentioned the temp lockers.”

“Hm? You’re right. But that’s not much of a deduction so much as an observation.” Larry said with a nod.

“It’s decent info,” Jenny agreed, “but nobody ordered an investigation into the lockers.”

“Until this investigation, I had no idea that clubs used the temp lockers,” Seron remarked.

“I have also gotten one more knowledge today,” Meg nodded, “It is low but very convenient, I think.”

“Maybe we should grab one for ourselves too,” said Larry.

“Good call! We’ll keep a second snack stash there for lunch period!”

Finally, it was Nick’s turn.

“Just a moment, everyone! I believe we may be veering off track. At this rate, we may end up covering the temp locker case for our next issue instead.”

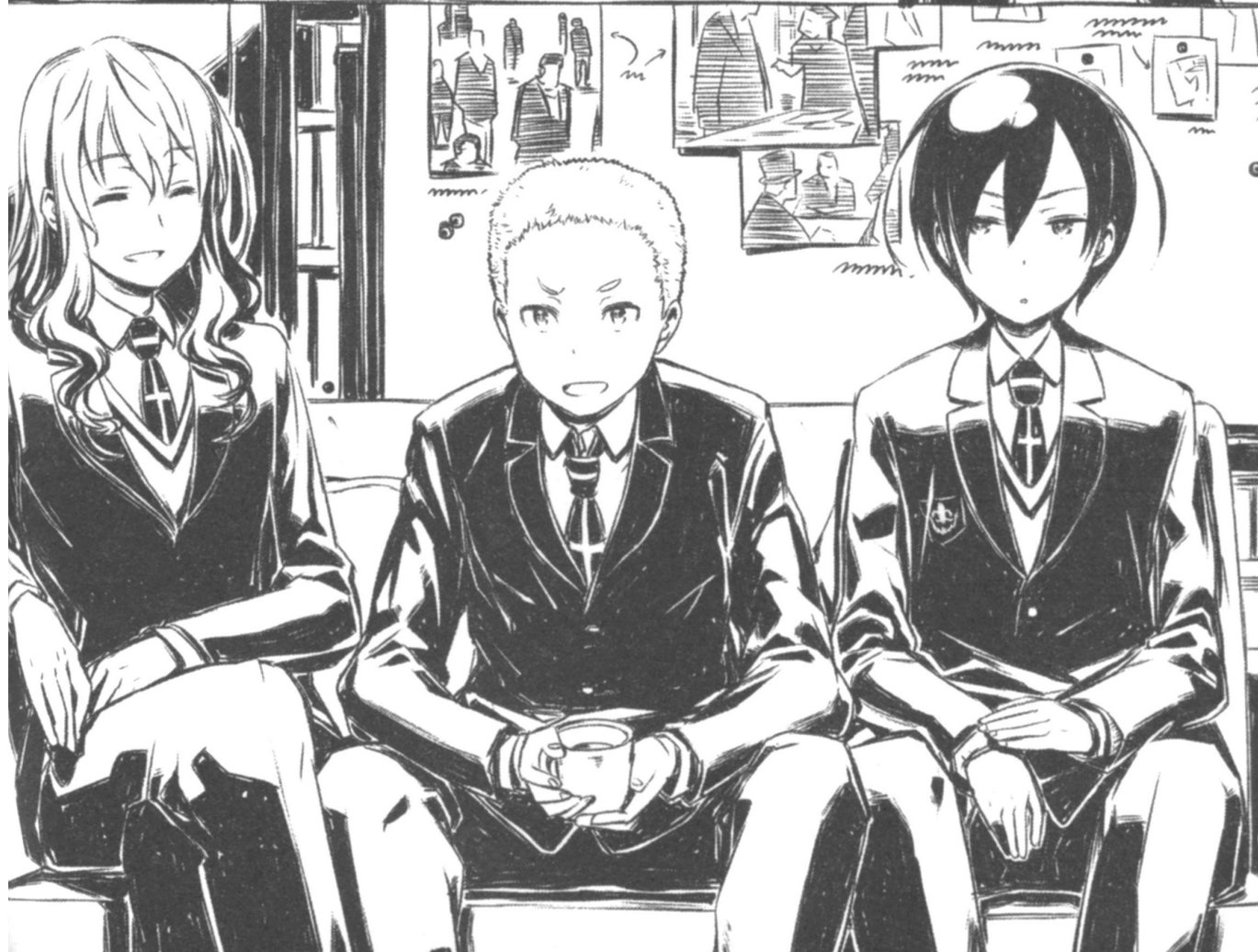
But without any additional information on Treize, not even Nick’s attempt at correcting course could help them. Everyone silently continued snacking on cookies.

“Maybe we should just ask the guy up front,” Larry said between munches, “‘We wanna write an article on your secret, so spill your guts’.”

The joke fell flat, but Natalia responded anyway. “Good call. But only if you can get us some truth serum,” she said, popping two cookies into her mouth.

“President, what do you think of the others’ overwhelming enthusiasm?” Nick remarked snidely.

“Not much I can do about it,” Jenny said simply, “Not until we can actually get some concrete information.”



Nick deflated. “I see. So not even your renowned information network has anything about this transfer student.”

“He only just transferred in. I’m sure we’ll have more info to work with by this time next year.”

Meg said nothing as the others chatted on, but internally she was relieved. With a smile on her face she picked up a cookie. When she met Seron’s gaze, she grinned.

Seron shook as he reached for his teacup.

Jenny was still sitting in a precarious position. “Anyway,” she said with a bite out of her cookie, “what gets me is the stuff about the temp lockers. Although I guess that doesn’t have anything to do with our case.”

“You’re sounding more uninterested than usual,” Larry said. “Maybe we should move on and figure out what’s happening with the temp lockers after all. We’ll write an article about it, like there’s some big mystery there. We could say there’s a monster in there or something. We’ve been publishing serious stuff so far, so maybe the club could go back to its roots this time.”

Jenny, who had once approved of any article with a title that ended in a question mark—
“No.”

—Rejected Larry’s suggestion.

“Why not?”

“Because...”

Everyone but Nick—who already knew the answer—turned to Jenny.

“Because I wrote that one early last year. ‘Two-headed talking snake spotted on campus?’”

Yet again the meeting ended with nothing but teacups and cookie crumbs to show for it.

After everyone’s enthused or incredulous reactions to Jenny’s revelation, no one brought up their next article again.

The topic had moved on to academics and the exams that slowly drew near. Meg talked about the talented new recruits at the chorus club, and Larry and Seron discussed their training regimen. As for Nick—

“I suppose no one here is interested in the thrill of adventure and discovery. Perhaps I should join the history research club,” he sighed loudly. No such club existed at the school.

The sky began to glow red—

“Wow, look at the time. All right, people. That’s it for our little tea party,” Jenny declared, rising as she clapped her hands. Everyone began packing up.

“Can’t wait to get home and get some grub...” Natalia muttered as she put away the day’s empty cookie tin.

“How do you not get fat eating like that?” asked Larry.

“Probably a sign from the gods to eat more,” Natalia replied.

After cleaning up the office, the newspaper club walked to the gates together and said their goodbyes. Seron alone remained on campus and went to the dorms. The others headed home.

Several minutes later, Seron entered his room and changed into his green-and-cream-colored school-issue tracksuit, and switched to running shoes.

He left the building again and did warm-up exercise as he always did, then began running around the near-deserted campus.

After one lap around the large school premises, he followed the training regimen Larry had set for him.

He sprinted across a stretch of the grounds, hung from the horizontal bars, did sit-ups on the grass, and more. Seron usually repeated the exercises once a day; twice a day if he had time early in the morning.

After working up a good sweat, he drank water from the tap on the grounds and headed back to the dorms.

He hung up his sweats in his room—which was slightly larger than the other rooms thanks to his status as an RA—and changed into a T-shirt and shorts to head to the baths.

The dormitory baths were massive.

The facility could give even a hotel bathhouse a run for its money with the variety of baths—each filled with water of different temperatures—and the number of showers. Students loved the baths as well. A little-known fact was that even non-dormitory students were allowed to use these facilities.

Seron rinsed off the sweat at a shower booth and washed himself. Then he slipped into a warm bath away from anyone else.

As he sat in a daze, determined to soak himself, he spotted another student approaching from his right. But it was hard to tell who he was, as the skylight was open and steam was filling the room.

The boy had short black hair and a toned build, about as defined as Larry—who never missed a day of training—or more. Seron, who had only recently begun to work out, was no match.

“Hey there, Seron,” the boy said, taking a seat next to him.

Seron could finally see his face, though the voice had given it away a little earlier. It was Treize Bain, whom the newspaper club had attempted to investigate.

“Hi. Don’t think I’ve seen you at the baths before.”

Treize nodded. “Yeah. I only just found out that this is when it’s least crowded,” he said, leaning back. Treize sighed with his gaze on the ceiling before turning to Seron. “Thanks.”

Seron was not expecting to hear such a thing. “Huh? For what?”

“For going out of your way to betray your club by warning me about the investigation,” Treize replied nonchalantly. Seron furrowed his brow.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Why are you so sure I did something like that?”

“A few reasons,” said Treize, “First, I heard about the investigation from Lillia. She didn’t say who she heard it from, but from the level of detail and from the fact that it’s recent information, I can only conclude it must have been her friend, Strauski. Lillia introduced me to her once, and she’s much quieter than Lillia. Struck me as the type to waver between the newspaper club and her best friend, mulling over the problem on her own.”

“And?”

“Then someone must have given her the push she needed to tell Lillia. They did this for the sole purpose of making Strauski feel better. Then who could it be but her boyfriend and fellow newspaper club member, Seron Maxwell?”

“You got me. Nice detective work.”

“So that’s why I have a reason to be grateful. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

For some time, Seron and Treize sat dazed in the bath without a word.

But Seron looked up at the ceiling and finally broke the silence.

“Actually, it turned out that we didn’t manage to get any information on you. No one has any motivation anymore. I doubt we’ll be doing much more digging after this.”

“That’s good to hear,” Treize chuckled.

Seron cast Treize a glance. “Yeah. Everyone has things they want to hide.”

“Oh? What makes you so sure I have secrets?” Treize asked, surprised.

“Most people would get upset if they found out they were being suspected of something groundless. But you didn’t seem that way at all. In fact, you seem downright relieved.”

“Well, this time you got *me*. Nice detective work.”

“I can’t imagine what kind of secrets you might have, but I won’t pry. But…”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe you and Schultz should come visit the newspaper club sometime.”

“Hm.”

“That’ll put Meg at ease, and you’ll also be able to clear up any confusion and suspicion with Nicholas Browning, the resident history buff who got us started on this investigation in the first place.”

“Ha ha! I’ll talk to Lillia about it,” Treize chuckled, and added quietly, “School really is a fun place.”

“I gather you didn’t attend secondary school back in Iks?”

“Huh? Oh, no. I lived in a tiny valley in the countryside. I was homeschooled by the old people there.”

“I have to admit, it’s pretty amazing that you’re still managing to keep up with our curriculum,” Seron said.

“Thanks.” Treize nodded, making a point of neglecting to mention the kind of people who were responsible for his education. “But I still have a long way to go, as a student. I didn’t even know how to use a locker until Lillia told me the other day. She was appalled when she saw me carry my stuff around in a suitcase.”

Seron recalled seeing Treize with a suitcase before. Treize continued.

“But when I went to the student support office, they didn’t know my locker number. I looked into it, and it turned out they’d actually completely forgotten to assign me one! One of the teachers made a mistake.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“So I finally managed to get a locker assigned today…” Treize began, but Seron finished his sentence. “But the school store was out of locks?”

“How’d you know?”

“One of the few results of our investigation. Meg says that Schultz told her about it.”

Then Seron briefly went over the testimonies the club had gathered.

He explained that the temp lockers had nearly all been occupied for the past two months, making things difficult for the clubs that used them in secret. That that was probably the reason for the store being sold out of locks. And that there was a pleasant fragrance around the temp locker area.

Beads of sweat formed on Treize’s face as he listened on. He finally spoke.

“You think that’s...maybe...or I guess not. It’s kind of a stretch, but...”

“Hm?” This time, it was Seron’s turn to be confused. “Does the situation ring a bell?”

“I...guess you could say that.”

“Please tell me, if you don’t mind.”

“Hm. Where do I begin? Okay, so the thing with the lockers did remind me of something, but it’s not a pleasant story. Are you all right with that?”

“Sure.”

“This was in Ikstova, two years ago. There was...an incident.”

“What kind of incident?”

“Someone found a dead baby in a coin locker in the busiest district of Kunst, our capital city.”

“Wh-what happened?”

“A young woman had given birth in secret, but she didn’t know what to do with the baby and ended up killing it.”

“...And?” Seron urged, looking a little sad. Treize continued indifferently.

“The woman thought about how to dispose of the body, and in the end she wrapped it up, put it in a bag, and put the bag in a coin locker.”

“But the smell would give it away soon, wouldn’t it?”

Treize shook his head. “This was in the middle of winter. It was inside a shopping arcade, but it gets very cold in Ikstova. The locker was practically a freezer.”

“But don’t coin lockers have a limit on how long you can store something? If you keep something there too long, the manager opens it up with a master key to clear it out. The limit is three days here in the Capital District.”

“Yeah,” Treize replied with a nod, “Back in Ikstova it’s five days.”

“So the manager found the dead baby?”

“No.”

“...I get it!”

“Did you figure it out, Seron?”

“She must have taken out the bag at regular intervals and moved it to a different locker.”

“Exactly. The woman was young and worked full-time, so she’d go to the locker on her way to work and move the bag. She told the locker manager that she was actually doing some seedy work on the side and needed to keep her change of clothes in the lockers, and managed to convince him. The baby’s body completely mummified over the winter and didn’t rot when spring, even summer came. The woman spent an entire year desperately paying to switch lockers.”

“So how was she found out?”

“It was kinda ironic, actually,” Treize said with a shrug. “We get a lot of visitors in Ikstova, but a few of them are criminals who’re out to take advantage of the tourists. Some of those people decided to break into the coin lockers in the bustling shopping arcade. Swiped the master key while the manager wasn’t looking and swept the lockers clean. Can you imagine what it must have been like, finding the mummified baby in there? The group got arrested afterwards and the dead baby case came to light.”

“I’ve never heard about any of this.”

“Probably cause Ikstova is so far out in the boonies. It was a big deal there. The queen personally gave a statement on the case, and there were big debates about distributing birth control and even about abortion—but that’s kind of going off-track. What I want to say is that people have used lockers to commit crimes.”

Seron wiped the sweat off his face with a towel. Then he got out of the bath and sat on the edge so he wouldn’t get dizzy. Treize followed suit.

The baths were getting crowded, but no one had yet gotten to their area.

Seron understood what Treize was driving at. “In other words, you’re saying that someone might be using the temp lockers for something shady.”

“Yeah,” Treize replied, not looking as grim as Seron, “But maybe not. It’s just a possibility.”

But Seron remained as serious as ever. “The temp lockers suddenly filled up two months ago.”

“Then it can’t be a coincidence, you mean. Someone—or some people—are behind it.”

Seron nodded. “Yeah. It’s hard to believe that there was a sudden spike in temp locker demand for no reason at all.”

“Then we’ll call our culprits ‘them’ for now,” said Treize, “They want to hide something in the lockers, and managed to get a bunch of them to do just that. Just like the woman I told you about.”

“Yeah. And whatever it is they’re trying to hide, it’s something they can’t dare bring home. ... What bugs me is the sheer number of lockers they’re using. Do they really have that much of whatever it is?” Seron speculated.

“No, I don’t think so,” Treize replied, “It probably fits into one locker. But if they keep going back to the same locker every time, someone’s bound to notice.”

“I see! The fact that most of them are locked doesn’t mean they’re all storing something.”

“Exactly. They probably keep their items in one or two of the lockers. The rest are just decoys or spares.”

“So they snapped up all those lockers so they could use any of them at any given time. That explains why the temp lockers always seem to be occupied,” said Seron.

“Yeah. It definitely reduces the risk of discovery. And it’ll help them if someone does catch wind of something fishy going on with the lockers. I don’t know who they are, but they’ve really put some thought into this. That makes it even more shady.”

“Right. You’re saying that the amount of precautions they’re taking is making this even more suspicious.”

“Exactly,” Treize nodded. “Suppose the item is something minors aren’t allowed to purchase, like pornography or liquor. Would they really need to go to such pains to hide the

stuff? The locks must have cost them a small fortune, and even if you get caught, at worst you'd just get a scolding from the teachers.”

“Yeah.”

“Mhm.”

Then Seron spoke. “Then the only thing that justifies so much precaution...is something that might get them arrested.”

“I agree,” said Treize, “My guess is that they're hiding drugs.”

“Why?” Seron asked, eyes wide.

“D'you mind if we stay in the bath a little longer?” Treize asked, and sank back into the water. “Man, that feels nice. Baths really are the best!” he cheered in a daze.

Seron also sat back in the water, closer to Treize than before.

It might have looked a little strange for two boys to sit almost shoulder-to-shoulder in such a large bath, but Seron did not have time to consider such things.

“What makes you so sure that they're hiding drugs?”

“I don't have any proof, but,” Treize said, “you said one of the girls noticed a fragrant smell, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

“Women have a keener sense of smell than men. So even if *you* didn't smell anything, if the girl said she did, there must be something fragrant there. Someone must be spraying perfume in the lockers.”

“So someone—no, the culprits—”

“Yeah. ‘Them’. And if they're even spraying perfume there, it means they're hiding something that gives off an odor. Something illegal that smells...”

“Drugs, definitely,” Seron said, and came to a realization. “Hey, I think I know! The Blue Rose, the Roxchean drug! Apparently it has a really distinctive scent.”

Treize nodded. “Exactly. So they call it ‘Blue Rose’ here. In the south people call it the Capital Drug as a jab.”

Seron exhaled loudly. “If those drugs are being hidden in the temp lockers—”

“Yeah. *If*.”

“Then our culprits have to be students here at the 4th Capital Secondary School.”

“Yeah. Secondary schools are bubbles, in a way. Lots of security that keeps everyone but faculty and students out of the premises. And someone would have noticed by now if a faculty member were regularly using the temp lockers.”

“Then it's pretty clear what the students are doing,” said Seron.

“Yeah. They're runners. They're probably not *producing* the stuff on campus—it's not impossible, but unlikely. Because if they were the producers, they'd want to get the drugs out of their hands as soon as possible. They wouldn't stash it on campus. And it's even less likely that they're selling the drugs on the school premises. So the only possibility left is that they're transporting the drugs for someone else. I doubt that students would be part of a drug cartel, so whoever these people are are probably just cronies. They might not even know what they're transporting.”

“So they're runners and custodians at the same time. They must be receiving the drugs somehow outside campus, probably in busy areas in the city, and hiding them in the temp lockers



at school. And they—or someone else—pick up the drugs from the lockers on demand and hand them over to someone else.”

“Yeah. But I think we’re dealing with an individual here. The runner doesn’t have anyone else working with them,” Treize said.

“Why? It would be less conspicuous to have multiple people be part of the transportation process.”

“It’s because having more than one person opens up the chance of conflict. What if one person gets scared and decides to sell the others down the river? What if one person starts suspecting the others of being sell-outs? And having just one person on the job makes it easier to take care of them in case something happens. You could write it off as an unfortunate accident.”

“I see. Then this case probably isn’t limited to just our school.”

“No. The same thing must be happening in other secondary schools in the city too. It’s a clever plot, abusing the security of secondary schools for criminal enterprises.”

Seron went silent. So did Treize.

Soon they both climbed out of the bath and strode to the change room. They wiped themselves down, put on their clothes, and guzzled water like no tomorrow.

Then they collapsed on a bench.

“I feel dizzy...” “I feel dizzy...”

The other students stared, astonished, as Seron and Treize continued their conversation with flushed faces.

“That was a nice chat, Seron. Kinda stupid, though.”

“Sure was, Treize. So what were we talking about again?”

“What *were* we talking about?”

“What was it again?”

Chapter 8: The Newspaper Club Takes Action

“We have to stake out the temp lockers!”

It was rare for Seron to raise his voice, even at the newspaper club office.

The club had gotten together for afternoon tea once more, this time with a side of the Capital District crisps so infamous for their strong, addictive flavor. Everyone turned mid-bite.

“Oh, er, sorry for raising my voice like that. There’s been something on my mind recently. Something I want to investigate with the club.”

“What is it?” asked Larry.

It had begun raining without warning that day, and the downpour was getting worse. Seron spoke up so his voice wouldn’t be drowned out.

He explained the conclusion he and Treize had reached the previous day.

However, Seron neglected to mention Treize in the conversation, as that might make the others more curious about him.

As the members sipped their tea or munched on crisps, Larry spoke.

“If you’re right, this could be a really big problem! Let’s look into it!”

“It is a little scary!” Meg chimed in.

“Excellent deduction, I must say,” said Nick, “A mystery worth pursuing as a club. Ah, please don’t take my words as sarcasm—I do not hold any grudges for my investigation proposal being ignored.”

“It sounds reasonable,” said Jenny.

“Not to me, it doesn’t,” Natalia shook her head. “Anyway, are we out of crisps already? What’s that little pile over there? A sacrifice for the gods?”

“That’s Seron’s share,” Larry uttered.

“Too bad,” Natalia sighed, pouting.

Seron looked up. “You can have mine if you want, Nat.”

“Egad! I could swear Seron just spoke in the voice of a god!”

“Don’t spoil her, Seron.”

“If you keep that up, Larry, I’mma spend my whole life trying to ruin yours.”

“Not surprised you wouldn’t have anything better to do with it, Lia.”

“Then you can just have half of my share, Nat.”

“Sweet!” Natalia grabbed exactly half of Seron’s pile of crisps and began to munch away. “But seriously, how’re we gonna do this? How’s the stakeout gonna work?”

“I wanted Jenny’s opinion on that,” said Seron.

Jenny folded her arms and fell into thought. “Hm. We *could* take turns keeping an eye on the locker area between classes, but considering it’s exam season, that’s not really realistic.”

The others nodded. As students used the time between classes to get to their next class, it would be too conspicuous to stand around in the locker area instead of moving.

“We must remember that according to Seron’s theory, an anonymous student is frequenting the lockers,” said Nick, “so will it be possible at all for us to pinpoint the student we are looking for? And even if we do find a suspect, it will be difficult for all six of us to remember this student’s face.”

Larry agreed. Seron nodded. "What if we took photographs, Jenny? We can take snapshots of the locker area from afar during breaks. We'll get a few days' worth of photos and see if we can find any suspicious students who are using multiple lockers by themselves."

Jenny grinned. "We don't have the time or manpower to take snapshots with a telephoto lens like that. But I have a better idea. One that'll let us take photos intermittently and from up close."

"Really?" Natalia's glasses shone. "I'll give you Seron's crisps if you tell us how, chief."

* * *

Three days later. The 22nd.

It was just before noon. The weather was clear.

The locker area was deserted because it was the weekend. Seron, Larry, and Jenny excused themselves into the building, claiming that they wanted to take photos of the campus as part of club activities.

As usual, they were in uniform. Jenny was carrying a rangefinder and a leather camera bag. Larry and Seron hefted a large duffel bag and a hard case.

Though most of the faculty were gone for the weekend, the campus was still being patrolled by security personnel and school staff.

"Tell me if you see anyone coming," Jenny said, standing before one of the temp lockers.

The locker was at nearly the center of the temp locker alcove. Seron had found it empty by chance two days earlier and quickly claimed it with his own three-year-old lock, leaving his own locker empty.

Jenny received the key from Seron.

"Here I go. Is the coast clear?"

"Yeah." "Yes."

When her guards gave the signal, Jenny set boldly to work.

She took out a large pair of cutting pliers and clamped them around one of the four slits on the locker.

"There."

She twisted. There was a cutting noise as one of the slits fell to the floor.

The lockers at the school were so old that many were missing a slit or two. Breaking a slit on purpose, however, was sure to get the students in trouble with teachers.

Jenny quickly slipped the broken piece into the locker and moved on to the next stage of her plan.

She opened the duffel bag and took out a small tripod, setting it up inside the locker with the legs still closed. She adjusted its height and secured it to the back of the locker with tape.

Then she took out the camera from the hard case and set it on the tripod.

The camera was a large model, which looked like a rangefinder with a second machine strapped to the back. A thick power cable ran from the body.

Jenny took out a large box from the duffel bag. Slowly, she placed it on the bottom of the locker. The locker creaked under the weight. Jenny plugged the end of the power cable into the socket in the box.

“As amazing as ever,” Larry remarked as he stole glimpses at Jenny’s work.

Jenny had brought in a state-of-the-art surveillance camera. It was a model used for observing animals, photographing celestial bodies, and spying on people.

The large box at the floor of the locker was a battery. The camera was equipped with a small motor for winding the film and pressing the shutter, and a mechanical timer.

The camera would activate automatically according to the settings Jenny determined. The shutter would activate on its own and the film would wind slowly and quietly.

“You said you borrowed this from your uncle, right? How much does all this gear cost?”

“You’re better off not knowing. If it gets stolen, you’d have to work at our company for three years straight to pay for it.”

“Scary. Maybe I should put my lock here too, just in case.”

Finally, Jenny loaded a 36-photo roll of black-and-white film into the camera.

Because the camera was a half-size model, which could split each frame into two, they would be able to get 72 photos on one roll of film.

Jenny adjusted the exposure and shutter speed with intuition borne of experience, and took great pains to get the lens settings exactly right. The wide lens had a full view of the entire temp locker area.

“Perfect. Now let’s try a test run.”

Jenny pressed the switch. She set the timer to go off once every 60 seconds, then shut the locker and locked it.

Then, the newspaper club members wandered the locker area pretending to go about doing club activities.

The camera went off once a minute, the sound of the shutter filling the locker area. But it was quiet enough that the typical ambience in the locker area during the week would drown it out completely.

“What if someone finds out?” Larry wondered.

“Then we can argue that the newspaper club is doing observational shoots of the locker area. If our suspect finds out, we just have to turn the tables on him and get answers out of him.”

“Right.”

Satisfied with their results, Jenny, Seron, and Larry went through the motions of photography in the locker area for another half hour before officially ending the test shoot.

They retrieved the film from the camera and headed to the office. Jenny immediately got to work on developing the roll. In the meantime, Seron and Larry picked up lunch at the dormitory cafeteria.

Lunch that day was rye bread sandwich filled with potato salad and crunchy bacon bits, each served with a single apple. Larry had also packed chicken and cream stew with a generous serving of diced carrots.

They had lunch in the newspaper club office.

“I wonder how long this will take. More than a day, I bet,” Seron speculated. Larry responded between bites of his sandwich.

“Maybe we should schedule three days for this? Break times are always at the same time every day, so if we set the timer for just those windows, 72 photos are gonna go a long way.”

“That won’t work,” Jenny said, sipping stew from a teacup, “The timer’s set to go off once every five minutes. I’m starting the camera every morning and having it take all 72 photos every day over the six hours we spend at school. We’ll have to retrieve the film and go into development every day.”

Seron nodded. “Yeah. That way we’ll get two shots of each break period, raising our chances of finding the suspect. And we can’t discount the possibility that the suspect might use the lockers during class hours, either.”

“I see,” Larry admitted.

After lunch, they examined the photos Jenny developed.

If they zoomed in and printed selected portions of the photos, they could get a decent snapshot of people using the lockers. The lockers to the left and right of the camera were naturally out of the frame, but there was nothing the club could do about that problem.

“Excellent. We’ll put our plan into motion tomorrow.”

“That’s our Jenny for you,” Seron said, satisfied.

“...Aww, no need to hold back on the compliments.”

“I’m impressed too! The newspaper club rules!” Larry cheered, slapping Jenny’s skinny shoulders.

“Heh. Next time, you can applaud me when everyone else is around,” Jenny said with a rare smile.

“Now for the most important part,” said Seron, “What happens once we pinpoint our suspect?”

“Hm...that’s a tough question.”

Jenny fell into thought. Larry was taken aback.

“Hm? We just have to contact Mr. Hartnett, right?”

Hartnett was an investigator from the Confederation Police who had met the newspaper club the previous summer. He had helped the club during the incident at Ercho Village as well.

“Can’t do that. We have no proof that we’re dealing with drugs, let alone anything even close to being illegal. Or should we get Nick to threaten our suspect into opening those lockers for us? What if it turns out the guy was just exchanging a lovey-dovey diary with his girlfriend?”

“T-true.”

“Then we’ll have to keep tabs on him or her for the time being,” said Seron.

“Yeah. We’ll figure out what to do *after* we find our suspect. So for now, let’s trust our gear and wait. I’ll develop the film after each roll.”

“Then I guess we won’t have much to do for now, huh,” Larry remarked.

“What about studying?” “Study, Larry.”

* * *

The 4th day of the fifth month.

The first exam season of the year entered its second half.

Club activities were officially halted during the exam season. Faculty members explicitly gave out warnings to students who failed to comply. Even the newspaper club, with its merely nominal advisor, did not dare enter or exit the club office when others could see.

Jenny alone continued to work, coming early to school every day to discreetly open the locker and retrieve the film, insert a new roll, and reset the mechanism again.

She would develop the roll over lunch and print any photos that depicted people. Jenny also made sure to charge the backup battery during that time.

Seron or Nick would help Jenny switch the heavy batteries after class. Larry volunteered, but he was ordered to spend his time studying instead.

And because the club did not hold meetings, Seron found himself spending more time with Meg at lunchtime than before.

Whenever they sat together on the cafeteria terrace under the warm sunlight—

“Look, there they are.” “Oh, the ones who got engaged?”

—They would hear students whispering about their new relationship.

“It does not bother me! Because it is true!” Meg said with a smile, finally getting used to the attention.

For lunch, Seron had a sweet-and-sour hamburger with avocado and a side of warm vegetable salad with anchovy dressing.

Meg had a thick mixed cheese risotto with a side of chicken breast salad.

Meg watched the students at the next table rise before she whispered to Seron, “It is about the ‘camera’...how is the work going?”

It had been 12 days since they began surveillance.

“Jenny hasn’t gotten anything significant yet. I don’t think she has enough information right now,” Seron replied, “But she does say we have a lot of photos to go through. I’m going to drop by the office today and have a look.”

“May I go together?”

Seron was silent.

“My grades have risen recently as well.”

“All right. Then I’ll see you after class, Meg.”

“Yes, Seron!”

After class.

Seron arrived at the office earlier than usual.

When he unlocked the door, he found Jenny already hanging up the printed photos to dry with laundry clips.

“Hey Jenny. How’s it going?”

“Ah, good timing. Come have a look, you two.”

“Who?”

Seron turned in confusion.

“Oh no! I am caught!”

Meg had been a second away from giving him a light push on the back.

“Ah!” Seron flinched. “I-I didn’t notice you there, Meg.”

“Hee hee. I took off my shoes and put down my footstep sounds. I will wash my socks at home,” Meg replied with a smile, passing Seron and entering the office. She took a seat on one of the sofas and put her shoes back on.

Seron put a relieved hand on his chest and shut the door behind him. He put down his bag and went to the desk Jenny gestured him towards.

Jenny was laying out photographs over the entire desk. Each print was 25 by 30 centimeters in size.

Because the photos had been taken from a fixed angle, the backgrounds were naturally all identical—the temp lockers lined up to the left and right.

The photos also depicted students at, coming to, or leaving the lockers.

The subjects varied wildly in profile.

“I obviously didn’t print the ones without any people. I placed the photos in chronological order, starting from the top left. No one visited during class hours, although maybe the camera just never happened to catch anyone then,” said Jenny.

“Have you found anyone suspicious yet?” Seron asked.

“Not until today. In fact, not until just now,” Jenny replied with a grin. She began to point at some of the photos, starting from the left. “Look here. This one, this one, this one, and this one.”

She indicated six photos in total. Seron leaned forward to have a closer look.

But when he noticed Meg come up next to him, he stepped back.

“Hold on. Let me grab ‘em for you,” Jenny offered, carefully picking up the six photos. She moved to the sofas and lined them up on the coffee table.

Seron and Meg sat side-by-side on one of the sofas. They took some time to look at each photo before passing it on to the next person.

“It’s definitely the same person.”

“I see now! It is this boy!”

The same student appeared multiple times against the static background.

He was short with a skinny build, but not young. He was probably a fourth-year like Seron or older. The boy had fair, slightly long and disheveled hair. One of the photos had a clear view of his faint, soft-spoken countenance.

“He’s not the only one who showed up multiple times,” Jenny explained, “but I’m pretty sure this is our man.”

“What makes you so certain, Jenny? Do you know who he is?” “But, with this photo alone I cannot know that he used different lockers in one day.” Seron and Meg asked at the same time. Seron continued. “Or did he show up at exactly the same time of the day each time?”

“No, it’s always random. The timestamp’s on the bottom right corner.”

The bottom right corner of each photo bore a timestamp calculated based on the timer settings and the number of photos taken. The six photos had been taken during morning break times, lunch periods, and after school. There was no set pattern.

“Wait a second...” Seron muttered, slowly checking the dates on the timestamps again. “The first photo’s from the 24th of last month. So morning, 10 days ago. Next was lunchtime on the 26th. The next two are from the 28th, in the morning and after school. And the last two are from the afternoon of the 2nd. ...I get it!”

Seron looked up. Meg was waiting curiously, and Jenny was grinning.

“Jenny, these photos were all taken on rainy days.”

“Bingo. Excellent memory, Seron.”

“Oh! Now that I hear it, these days were certainly rainy days!” Meg exclaimed. Jenny continued.

“I went through our mountain of photos, trying to find as much of a pattern as possible. First I looked for people who always accessed the lockers at set times, but no dice. And I didn’t find anyone who always used a different locker, either. I mean, that’s not possible with timed photographs to begin with. You’d need a movie camera for that.”

“Yeah. But—”

“This guy is the only one who fits our profile and has a set pattern. He only visits the temp lockers on rainy days. In other words, he’s making exchanges of some sort outside campus on rainy days. It’s the perfect weather for illicit dealings, since the rain hinders visibility and hides most smells.”

Seron gave a satisfied nod. “You’re amazing, Jenny. Now we can focus on tailing this student for the next few days. We have the evidence we need.”

“Thanks.”

“Jenny, you are awesome!”

“Aw, shucks.”

Seron put down all but the one photograph that clearly depicted the boy’s face. “Our next course of action is to find out who this student is. That can’t be too hard for you, right Jenny?”

“Is that even a question? We’re having a meeting two days from now, on the last day of exams. Let the others know.”

* * *

Two days later. The 6th.

Exams were over, and the weekend was coming up. The weather was clear.

As though making up for the doom and gloom of exams, the campus was bustling with activity. Clubs were back in business, and the shouts from sports clubs and the music from the orchestra echoed in the distance.

“You don’t need to be at the orchestra, Lia?” Larry asked as he aired out the office.

“Nope~! Cause we got the chief’s orders~ to assemble~!” Natalia sang, strumming her guitar from atop a stool. “Anyway~ what about your exams~? Didn’t forget to write your name~?”

“No way!”

“Then~ that’s two points for each of your electives~”

“I studied hard this time. I’ll manage to pass, at least.”

“That’s a real~ humble goal~”

“Shut up.”

By the time Natalia finished playing several songs and Larry aired out the room and prepared tea, everyone was present.

Pound cake from the Capital Department Store and six cups of tea were placed on the coffee table.

“You can start eating, guys. Just pay attention,” Jenny said, and explained the thought process behind pinpointing their suspect. “That’s about it. I guess we don’t exactly have a surplus of evidence, if I had to say. Any questions so far?”

“Ooh, me! Do we have more cake?”

“Larry, open up the second box.”

“Right...”

“Any other questions?”

Noting that everyone was waiting for her to continue, Jenny took out several photographs.

The photos were of the suspect. Jenny did not have to explain who had taken them.

Several of the photos were full-body shots of the boy on campus, taken from a distance with a telephoto lens. One photo was a snapshot from relatively up close. Though the photos were black-and-white, the subject’s face was clear.

“Excellent as always, Jenny. I would hate to make an enemy of you,” said Nick.

Larry served Natalia more cake and took a seat. Jenny explained the results of her two-day investigation.

“His name’s Julio Edelmann. Seventeen years old. He’s a fifth-year—never been held back and has decently high grades. He lives at 3-4 South Avenue in the Capital District, so he has a long commute. He’s not in any clubs, and people don’t know much about him because he has no friends. I mean, not that I could dig around that much without arousing suspicion, anyway. Does anyone know anything at all about our suspect here? Anyone ever take any classes with him?”

Everyone shook their heads. Jenny continued.

“I tailed him for a bit yesterday and today. Unfortunately, he never once went to the temp lockers. Obviously, since it didn’t rain. The locks he seemed to have used came from the campus store, nothing out of the usual. That’s all for now.”

“Thanks, Jenny,” said Seron, “Wo his name’s Julio Edelmann, huh. It feels bad to just call a senior-classman by name, but while we’re in the office, let’s just call him ‘Edelmann’. Remember we can’t refer to him directly when we’re outside.”

“So, what are we to do with this Edelmann character? We have no proof that he is engaging in illicit business, so I suppose hiding out near the lockers and threatening him there is out of the question for the time being?”

“You’re pretty fired up about this, Nick. I think we should keep our eyes on him on rainy days, and tail him once he starts moving?” Larry suggested.

“I guess so,” Jenny admitted.

Natalia finished her slice of pound cake and asked the question on everyone’s minds. “How?”

“I’ll ask Kurtz and Litner for help.”

Edward Kurtz and Elsa Litner were Jenny’s bodyguards. Kurtz was a well-built man in his forties, and Litner was a woman in her late twenties. The newspaper club members had met them at the summer camp.

“We’ll have them follow him on foot or by car if necessary. We could tail him personally, of course, but I’m gonna leave most of that work to Kurtz and Litner. On the one-in-a-million chance that Edelmann really is a drug runner, we’ll be facing actual criminals. There’s no such thing as being too careful. We’ll do what we can on campus and gather intel, then call the police. I won’t hear any objections on this matter.”

Everyone responded with grave nods.

“But hey,” Larry said, brightening up, “it’s not like we know what he’s hiding yet! Maybe he’s just hiding a surprise present for his mother.”

“Why would you hide that in a school locker?” Natalia pointed out.

“How should I know?” Larry shot back.

Chapter 9: Edelmann's Crime

The 9th day of the fifth month.

The weekend came to an end and classes resumed again. It was pouring.

Up early as usual, Seron gazed blankly at the misty world outside his window.

“Today might be the day...”

He slipped into a telephone booth in the dormitory lobby.

It was still raining heavily after school.

Edelmann stood in the temp locker area. Like in the photographs, he was slight of build and looked very reserved. He had light brown hair. Edelmann had a bag slung over his shoulder and a large umbrella in hand.

Immediately, he walked over to one of the temp lockers and unlocked it.

He opened the door and squatted there. He put his bag down before him and put something inside, shielding the locker from view.

Then he stood again and slung the bag over his shoulder. But instead of putting the lock back on the door, he looked around and headed to an empty locker. He checked that there was nothing inside before putting the lock on it.

A girl was using another of the temp lockers at the same time, but she did not pay his actions any mind.

Slowly, Edelmann headed for the main building doors.

“He’s coming!” Larry hissed. The others quickly hid.

Seron and Jenny were working with Larry that day, pretending to chat by the the locker area while taking turns keeping an eye on the temp lockers.

Seron, Jenny, and Larry walked about 10 meters down the hall away from the locker area. When they looked back, Edelmann was passing.

“So our hunch was right,” said Jenny.

“I didn’t get a look at what he was taking out, though,” Larry noted.

“Whatever it was, it wasn’t large or heavy,” Seron said.

The three newspaper club members left the main building through a different door, then quickly strode to the gates with umbrellas in hand.

For security purposes, the campus only had one set of gates for student use. That made it easier for the club to track their suspect.

Jenny and the others rushed out the gates and loitered at the roundabout, pretending to wait for a friend.

Not long afterwards, Edelmann emerged with his bag. He was hunched over, making his silhouette look even smaller. He almost melted into the crowd of students, but the newspaper club desperately kept their eyes on him.

Edelmann left the roundabout bustling with cars waiting to pick up students, and headed for the thoroughfare.

“So he’s taking the tram after all.”

The newspaper club approached a car much smaller and more affordable than the others at the intersection.

A plain black Jones Motors car often used as taxis in the Capital District.

“Your turn, Kurtz,” Jenny said, opening the passenger-side door.

Rather than his usual black outfit, Kurtz was wearing a plain grey suit and carrying a common office bag and a black umbrella. If not for his build, he could easily pass for an ordinary businessman.

“Of course, Miss Jenny. Please do not exit the car under any circumstances. —I’m counting on you, Elsa,” he said to the black-haired woman in the driver’s seat, and began to tail Edelmann on foot.

“Let’s go.”

“Good afternoon, Ms. Litner.”

“Thanks for helping us out.”

Jenny, Larry, and Seron folded up their umbrellas and piled into the back. No one took the passenger seat, which was too exposed. They half-closed the curtains on the windows in the back.

Edelmann and Kurtz soon disappeared into the crowd. It would take some time for the car to follow, as the intersection was so busy.

“Edelmann’s going to take the tram to Capital West Station. Then he’ll transfer to the Circle Line and get off at Capital South, then transfer again to the North-South Line,” Jenny explained with a map of the Capital District metro system. Both the Circle Line and the North-South Line were short routes that only ran inside the city.

The car would wait for Edelmann and Kurtz at Capital West Station. Litner drove through the city, which was not yet packed with rush hour traffic.

“Then he’ll be passing a lot of busy areas,” Seron commented from Jenny’s right.

“Busy areas means lots of people,” Larry added with a smile, “which means he’s got a lot of opportunities to exchange his goods.”

Kurtz would tail Edelmann for a time, and once Edelmann made contact with someone, Kurtz would simply remember the face of the contact and pull out immediately. Even with the firearm he was permitted to carry, Kurtz had no intention of potentially getting involved with a drug cartel.

The car reached Capital West Station surprisingly quickly. Kurtz and Edelmann probably were probably not there yet, as the tram had many stops on the way.

Litner positioned the car so they could see the aboveground platform in front of the station. They could make out the faces of the disembarking passengers.

Tram after tram came and went, dropping off passengers bound for Capital West Station. Though the rain continued to batter at the world, there was still some time until they lost visibility at sunset.

Yet another tram arrived, passengers spilling from the two cars.

“There! The second car!” Larry cried. Edelmann and Kurtz emerged.

“If he doesn’t have any other stops to make, Edelmann will head straight into the station,” Seron said. And as the newspaper club and Liter watched, Edelmann went down the covered

platform and walkway towards the station with the other passengers—but did not enter the station building.

“Whoa!” “Ah!” “...”

Edelmann opened up his umbrella and left the walkway.

He was headed not towards the department store by the station, but the small entertainment district behind it.

At night, the alley would be filled with the glow of neon restaurant signs, but no store was open at this hour. For now, the area was deserted.

“He might really be a runner after all,” Larry gasped.

“You never know,” Jenny said snidely, “Maybe he’s just going to check out the stores.”

Kurtz began tailing Edelmann from a slight distance. He took extra precautions because it was so deserted.

“I’m moving in,” Litner said, driving from the street to the one-lane alley. She slowly followed Edelmann and Kurtz while pretending to be looking for a place to park.

With his excellent eyesight, Larry was the first to notice the discrepancy. “Hey, was Edelmann always holding that bag?”

Jenny and Seron strained their eyes. They could just make out Edelmann and the bag over his shoulder. And the cloth bag he held in his left hand.

“Is that for his lunch or something?” Jenny wondered. The bag was indeed just large enough for a lunch box.

“He must’ve taken it out of his bag,” Seron hypothesized. Just then, Edelmann turned left and entered an even narrower alley.

Though he was now out of sight, the car could not simply pursue him outright. Instead, they let Kurtz follow on foot.

Dozens of anxious seconds passed before the car reached the corner. Instead of turning, however, Litner stopped.

On their left was a small alleyway crowded with stores that had not yet opened for the evening. The alley was not nearly wide enough for the car.

Edelmann stood in the middle of that alley. He was slowly walking about 50 meters ahead. Kurtz followed at a distance.

Without warning, Edelmann threw the cloth bag.

The bag disappeared from sight deeper into the alleyway. Edelmann did not walk any further. He turned on his heels to head back to the station.

It looked almost as though he had just realized he had taken a wrong turn.

Though taken by surprise, Kurtz turned faster than Edelmann and rushed to one of the stores. He pretended to have come out of the store at that moment, even waving at the deserted entrance to cement the act.

“Wow,” Larry exclaimed.

Edelmann spotted Kurtz, but he simply passed him by with head bowed.

An eye-catching secondary school uniform passed by a conspicuous grey suit.

“I’m moving us a little further ahead, Miss Jenny.”

Edelmann would soon pass right in front of the car. Litner drove out of his way, parking the car about 30 meters down the road.

A small truck approached from the opposite direction and rushed past the car.

As Larry, Seron, and Jenny watched Edelmann out the rear window, they spotted the back of the truck.

The truck continued straight for Edelmann.

“Huh?” “Hey?!” “Oh!”

Three sets of cries punctuated the air as the truck accelerated.

Edelmann finally noticed the oncoming truck. His eyes widened in fear, but it was too late for him to react.

As everyone prepared for the inevitable impact, a strong arm grabbed Edelmann by the collar and hauled him aside.

The moment Edelmann’s stiff body was pulled away, the truck made contact with thin air.

The truck quickly changed course and continued down the road as though nothing had happened.

“Mr. Kurtz did it,” said Seron.

Kurtz was soaking wet from the rain, holding Edelmann in a bridal carry. He bolted towards the car, and the moment Litner reached over to open the passenger-side door, he got inside.

Forcing himself and Edelmann into the single-person seat, Kurtz slammed the door shut. “GO!”

Litner coolly put a foot on the gas pedal. “What about the umbrella and the bag?”

“I have them, naturally. The boy’s not injured, either,” Kurtz replied.

The overstuffed car drove through the rain and straight back onto the thoroughfare.

The streets were more packed, and the number of similar models on the road helped camouflage the Jones car.

“You were right about this boy, Miss Jenny!” Kurtz exclaimed, “That was too close. Much too close for comfort!”

Jenny and the others leaned forward. Edelmann was unconscious, his eyes rolling back.

“Good work, Kurtz,” Jenny said, giving Kurtz a pat on the shoulder, “You can expect a bonus.”

“Thank you, Miss.”

“Mr. Kurtz!” Larry cried, “That truck was about to run him over!”

“Indeed it was. Did you see him throw the small bag earlier?”

“Yes, we did,” Seron replied, “So that was how he passed on the packages. The culprits must have picked it up by now. They were planning to silence Edelmann by having him get caught up in an ‘accident’. Probably not because they noticed us, judging from the timing. Today just happened to be the end of his usefulness to the criminals.”

“It was a very close shave,” Kurtz said, pulling Edelmann’s bag off his shoulder, “If you hadn’t tailed this boy today, he would have lost his life.”

“Where shall I take us?” asked Litner.

Kurtz responded. “The police, obviously. We’ll ask the Capital District Police Force for official protection.”

“Understood,” Litner replied, turning to head for the Capital District Police Headquarters.
“No! Not the police! They’ll kill me!”

The car continued to drive through the rain.

“Calm down, young man. Glad to see you’re awake,” Kurtz said gently to Edelmann.

In the back, Jenny held a finger over her lips to silence Seron and Larry.

“Wh—who are you?”

“Just a passerby. That was very close, young man.”

“O-oh...thank you...”

“Have you calmed down a little? All right, let’s talk. Sorry it’s so cramped in here, first of all. Now, why can’t we take you to the police?”

Edelmann trembled in Kurtz’s arms.

“Th-they threatened me. Said they’d kill me if I went to the police...”

“Who?”

“I-I don’t know! The other day I found three holes in the wall at home. I thought it was weird, and then one of those people told me that those were bullet holes and that they could kill me whenever they felt like it!”

“That certainly sounds very dangerous. So these people were having you transport something? Do you have any idea who they are?”

“N-no! Not at all!”

“And what about the goods you were transporting for them?”

“I don’t know anything! They said they’d kill me if I looked inside! I didn’t see anything! All I know is that the stuff was small and light!”

Edelmann’s terror paralyzed his senses, almost acting as a truth serum. Kurtz took advantage of his panicked state.

“Why were you doing something so dangerous? For the money?”

“No! No! They *are* paying me a little, but I didn’t touch that money!”

‘*So they’re paying him. Probably a ploy to make him feel less guilty,*’ Larry thought.

“Then why did you start working for them in the first place?”

“Th-they tricked me...it was all a trap.”

“What did they do?”

Edelmann broke down sobbing. Tears ran down his face and he began sniffing.

“I was at the station...when this beautiful lady came up to me...said she wanted to get to know me...and we did...and I thought we were a couple...I was happy...then one day these scary guys came in...said she was his girl...I was so scared...”

‘*A honey trap! Talk about old school!*’ Larry thought.

“I see. I see. If it was a beautiful woman, I suppose it’s understandable. Were they big?”

Litner gave a disapproving grimace.

Edelmann—though sobbing—replied resolutely. “Yes...and soft.”

“So that’s how they forced you into this. Understandable.”

Kurtz never once clearly stated exactly what was so understandable, but he continued the questioning.

“And they must have given you all the instructions. About how you should use the school lockers and transport the goods. None of that was your idea, was it?”

“N-no...it wasn't.”

If Edelmann had been calm, he would have wondered how Kurtz knew about the lockers. But he was in no state to be suspicious.

“They said no one would ever find out...that I just had to play dumb even if someone noticed...and that other students were doing the same thing for pocket money.”

“Of course. What else?”

“On rainy days...someone always comes up to me when I'm on the way to school...and gives me the package...and a letter saying I should toss the package here at a certain time on the next rainy day...”

“Is that all? No contact information?”

“No...I'm not allowed...to contact them...”

“I see. Now, one last question. Just out of curiosity, I mean.”

“Yes?”

“Does anyone at your school know about this?”

“No...I haven't told anyone.”

“I see.”

Kurtz glanced back.

When his eyes met Jenny's, the latter nodded. She had no more questions.

“Then what should we do now? It'll be best to get you under police protection...”

“No! Let me off here!” Edelmann cried, lashing out. Kurtz restrained him mercilessly.

“Calm down. Why are you so afraid of the Capital District Police?”

“Because—”

“Yes?”

“They have friends on the force! They told me so!”

The dull rumble of the engine.

The crashing of the tires against puddles on the road.

The sweeping of the windshield wipers.

The tapping of raindrops against the roof.

An ambient silence filled the car.

“It's not impossible, Miss,” Kurtz finally said.

“You'd know better than I do, Kurtz,” Jenny said, finally breaking her—and Seron and Larry's—silence. “We'll forget the Capital District Police for now.”

‘Mr. Kurtz has a history with the police? Maybe he used to be part of the force,’ Larry thought to himself.

“AAAAAH! Wh-wh-wh-who are you?!” Edelmann exclaimed, finally realizing that three of his fellow students were sitting in the back.

“The people who saved your life,” Kurtz replied with a smile, “And don't you forget it.”

“So what now?” Larry asked.

Seron thought for a moment before responding. “We can’t send him home, and we can’t go to the Capital District Police Force. Then the Confederation Police is our only option, but if we go to them without concrete evidence and they turn us away, it’s over.”

“True.” Jenny nodded.

“SC Edelman,” said Seron, “will you get in trouble with your parents if you were to stay out of the house for a few days? Would they be all right with you staying over at a friend’s house for a few days now that exams have ended, for instance?”

“Huh? Y-yeah, I don’t think they’ll mind...not that I have any friends to crash with, anyway.”

“Good. Driver?” Seron said, pointedly avoiding Litner’s name, “Please take us back to the school.”

* * *

Thanks to the rain, the world grew darker much earlier than usual.

The car drove into the roundabout in front of the 4th Capital Secondary School with the headlights on. Most students were getting into cars headed home. But the Jones car dropped off its passengers instead.

The four students and the bodyguard ran to the gates without even an umbrella and checked in with the security guard before disappearing inside.

Several minutes later, an announcement was broadcast throughout campus.

<Mr. Mark Murdoch. Mr. Mark Murdoch. The newspaper club has a visitor. Please make your way to the club office immediately. I repeat—>

Mark Murdoch, the nominal advisor of the newspaper club, had been reading through a magazine in the staff bathroom.

When the announcement came on, he cringed and glared at the speaker on the ceiling.

“Up to no good *again*, the little troublemakers?”

* * *

“More tea, Mr. Murdoch?” Larry offered.

“No thank you. Hmph.”

Mr. Murdoch sighed loudly as he reclined on the sofa.

Before him were three club members, the bodyguard who had supposedly come to visit the club, and a fifth person.

“Wh-wh-what do I do...?”

A sobbing fifth-year student whom he had never taught before.

The newspaper club filled in Mr. Murdoch on the details.

“Tch. Do you children *enjoy* making trouble for no good reason? Damn it! Can’t you act more like regular secondary school students?!”

From his usual attitude in class, it would be difficult to imagine Mr. Murdoch swearing. But he showed no such reservations here.

The curtains were shut. The world outside was pitch-black, and the rain was growing heavier.

“All right. Let me go over this again. No one knows what was in those packages, and you have no other information?”

“No,” Jenny replied.

“And what are the chances that the truck driver simply made a mistake?”

“Not zero. Then since it’s getting late, do you propose we leave SC Edelmann out in the cold so he could get another truck accidentally barreling his way?”

Mr. Murdoch shook his head. “So what do you want with me? I suppose you’re going to coerce something out of me again?”

“Exactly. Glad you’re quick on the uptake, Mr. Murdoch.”

Edelmann stared at the exchange, which was unthinkable for an ordinary student and teacher. He watched blankly as though half-asleep.

‘Poor guy. He’s paying a heavy price for that honey trap,’ Larry thought, looking at Edelmann.

The club had already called Edelmann’s family to inform them that he would be staying with friends to study for the next few days.

“Seron will give you the details,” said Jenny. Seron stepped up.

“Mr. Murdoch. We need you to hide SC Edelmann for tonight, and maybe for the next few days,” he said, “It’s too dangerous to take him outside campus now. The drug dealers may try to arrange an accidental death for him again, or he may be contacted by a corrupt police officer. We could prevent the former situation, but the latter is something we can’t do a thing about.”

“Of course. But what do you want from me? The campus is safest, true, but you could easily arrange him a room at the dorms for him, Maxwell.”

“True,” Larry mumbled. The dorms were on campus, which meant it was sequestered from outside contact. And the dorms also had spare rooms that could be rented by visitors.

But Seron shook his head.

“There’s a chance that the criminals may attempt to snipe SC Edelmann from one of the many apartment buildings in the area. Not only that, SC Edelmann would be plainly exposed to other students. And what if our corrupt police officers decide to enter the premises under the pretense of an investigation? Above all, we can’t risk getting the dormitory students involved.”

‘Nice, Seron. You’ve really thought this through,’ Larry thought to himself, but did not say a word.

“And that is why we need your help, Mr. Murdoch.”

“Oh? And what could someone like me possibly do for you?” Mr. Murdoch replied snidely with a shrug of the shoulders.

“Please let us use the basement room.”

Chapter 10: The Pursuers and the Pursued

The 12th day of the fifth month.

Bemarté Park was in the Capital District's old city center.

It was a beautiful spring afternoon. A man sat alone on one of the benches.

He was in his late forties with cropped blond hair. The man had a large build and wore a commonplace grey suit with a very loose navy tie.

The man munched alone on a sandwich, a poor fit for the atmosphere in the park. A woman visiting the park with her child had pointedly chosen the furthest possible bench from him to sit at.

Upon closer inspection, it might become apparent to some that there was an unnatural bulge under his left arm—a holstered gun concealed under his jacket.

“Hmph. That was all right.”

The man finished his sandwich, rolled up the paper packaging, and tossed it at a garbage can three meters away. It landed inside the can.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” a younger man said between gasps, rushing into the park.

The younger man was in his twenties, wearing a navy suit with a tie. He had a slender build with brown hair and grey eyes, almost with the looks of a film star. In each hand he carried a paper cup filled with coffee.

“You’re late. I’ve finished my lunch already.”

“Then I suppose you could call this dessert, Inspector.”

“Tch. You eat up too.”

The younger man complied and started on his own sandwich. Though he was in a rush, he was a little slower and calmer than the inspector.

The inspector paused between sips of coffee and exhaled.

For a time, he listened to the sound of children playing in the park.

“Tell me. What made you decide to join the force?”

The younger man looked up, having finished his sandwich.

“That’s an unexpected question, Inspector.”

“I was just curious.”

“Well, I just wanted to keep the city safe.”

“Don’t make me laugh. I get you’re young and talented, but don’t bother trying to be the hero of the city. You’re never gonna wipe every drug cartel off the face of the continent. It’s a never-ending battle.”

“Oh? That’s not an answer I expected from the man who saw through the Dezer Pharmaceuticals executive’s fake suicide case and destroyed an entire cartel single-handedly.”

“I’m only stating the facts. And...I just got lucky with the Dezer case. The cartel was just small fry, too. There’s plenty more corruption to deal with out there. Now let’s get to it,” the stoic middle-aged man said, getting up.

“Of course, Inspector. We’ve still got work to do.” The younger man stood as well.

The empty cup the inspector tossed at the garbage can missed its mark.

“Get that for me.”

“Right, sir.”

* * *

That evening.

“Hey there, Meg. I never see you going home this early. What’s up?”

Lillia spotted Meg ahead of her on the grounds of the 4th Capital Secondary School. Meg turned with a smile, her pigtails bouncing.

“Hi Lillia! The newspaper club hasn’t been doing much these days, so I’m pretty much free. The chorus club is off today too.”

Lillia and Meg walked together conversing in Bezelese.

Other students stared curiously at the use of the foreign language.

“Really? I’m surprised. Don’t you guys at least get together for tea and snacks at the newspaper club even if you don’t have much to do?”

“The thing is...we’re under an activity cessation order.”

“A what?”

“I don’t know much about the details, but Jenny says we’re on information lockdown.”

“Huh?”

“It means we’re limiting the number of people who know about it to make sure things turn out all right. Apparently it’s easier for the club right now if only the people directly connected to solving this problem know about it.”

“R-right...” Lillia was no stranger to being entrusted with confidential information. She smiled. “Well, I guess they don’t want to disrupt your normal life.”

“That’s right. We’re normal secondary school students, so we should live normal lives!” Meg replied, beaming. She and Lillia left out the gates.

“Look at ‘em, smiling without a care in the world. Rich kids make me sick.”

A man watched the smiling girls from a distance through a pair of high-power binoculars. He was on the fifth floor of an apartment building across from the school, overlooking the front gates and the intersection. Beyond the gates he could see the classroom buildings on the left and the dorms on the right.

The man was about 30 years of age and wearing brown pants and a leather jacket. He was clearly not the type who made an honest living. He peered through the half-open window shades.

There was no furniture in the room.

The unit, forcefully rented two days earlier, only received the barest amounts of electricity. It was messy, with piles of store-bought food and bottles of water.

The man was accompanied by another, younger man who wore jeans and a black sweater.

The man in the sweater boiled water on a portable stove (instead of the disconnected built-in stove in the kitchen) and brewed tea. “Are you sure the kid’s gone back to campus?” he asked, handing a mug to his companion.

“He never went back home. Where else could he be? We’re switching shifts. Wanna at least drink tea in peace.”

The man in the sweater nodded and picked up his own pair of binoculars from the window. And he glanced at the photograph on the wall by the window frame.

The photo depicted Julio Edelmann, topless and face contorted in sobs.

The man in the leather jacket sat down on the bare floor and started on his tea. “It’s gonna be a battle of attrition, but we just have to find that sorry face and be done with it. It’s too bad the car accident plan didn’t work out, but what can you do. Once we get the order, we shoot his head off. Same for any students or guards who happen to be around. Make sure they don’t find out what we were really after. Make it seem like it was just some lunatic shooting at random. Well, the police will take care of that part for us. We just have to make sure we take off right.”

“Sounds easy enough. Shoot as much as we like, then go to another country,” the man in the sweater replied, and peered into his binoculars. He spotted a man in light blue coveralls.

The man in the coveralls was in his twenties. He had brown hair, a grimace on his face, and a large toolbox in hand.

He stuck out like a sore thumb among the students in expensive uniforms. The students gave him less-than-warm looks.

The man went up to the gates and spoke to the security guard. Several minutes later, a teacher in his fifties came to get him. The man in coveralls spoke again to the guard before disappearing inside.

The man in the sweater watched it all happen.

“A repairman of some kind. He just went inside,” he said.

“We don’t care who goes inside,” the man in the leather jacket replied dismissively, “All we need to know is who comes out.”

* * *

“Seron Maxwell! Where do I even start?” scolded the man in blue coveralls. “First off—why is this basement room still accessible? Why is Murdoch your advisor? And why do you have to stick your nose into such dangerous business?!”

The rapid-fire questions came from Theodore Hartnett, an investigator from the Confederation Police.

Roxche had multiple police forces. Each member state had its own force, as did the Capital District. The military also had a military police for internal incidents. The Confederation Police, however, had the largest jurisdiction, being in charge of cross-border incidents.

The Confederation Police was one of the most powerful organizations in Roxche and a symbol of awe and fear to citizens. At times the Confederation Police intervened with local investigations to take charge, earning them the enmity of other police forces.

The basement room was currently occupied by Hartnett, Mr. Murdoch (who had smuggled Hartnett into the school in the guise of a contractor), Seron, Larry (who was celebrating his birthday that day), Jenny, Kurtz, and Edelmann himself.

Other than Edelmann, who had collapsed into his chair, everyone was standing.

The room had no windows.

Three doors led out of the stone-walled room. The dimly-lit room was large enough, furnished with a small dresser, a rocking chair, a bed with metal framing, and the barest essentials. The walls were even adorned with several paintings.

The 4th Capital Secondary School had originally been built on top of an old building, and the basement of the building had remained, forgotten, under the campus.

Mr. Murdoch had discovered the basement several years earlier, installing electricity, water heating, and even plumbing to create himself a small private room.

And for about two years until the previous summer, he had hidden his younger brother in this room. The incident with the brother was when the newspaper club and Hartnett first became acquainted.

Seron answered Hartnett's questions one by one.

"I'm sure you realized when we brought you in today, but the entrance that had been sealed was the second entrance."

"Damn it! Why didn't you say anything about this?"

"Because you never asked. Didn't Mr. Murdoch tell you about it during questioning?" Seron played dumb. Mr. Murdoch looked away. The byzantine basement room could be accessed through a storehouse in the old school building. Mr. Murdoch was the teacher in charge of that storehouse.

"Forget questioning, we should have tortured you when we had you in custody!" Hartnett hissed at Mr. Murdoch.

"As for Mr. Murdoch's status as our advisor, Jenny simply deemed that he was the right man for the job. Mr. Murdoch...happily accepted our request upon returning to his post."

"You're threatening *teachers* now? I don't believe this..."

"And as for your final question, we stumbled upon this case by pure coincidence. But if we hadn't, SC Edelmann here wouldn't be with us anymore, wouldn't you agree?"

Edelmann twitched.

"As much as I hate to admit it." Hartnett ground his teeth.

Edelmann had been living in the basement room for the last three days. He ate and slept there, and Seron had bought him a tracksuit at the campus store to wear in the room. Edelmann was also attending classes every day and calling home at regular intervals from the newspaper club office to tell his parents that he was all right.

"I have some questions for you, Edelmann. I need you to be honest with me," Hartnett said, giving him a sharp glare.

"Y-yes, sir."

"You said you never looked inside the packages?"

"That's right..."

"How big were they? Were they heavy?"

Edelmann put his hands together to form a circle. "They were about this big, in small plastic bags. But they were heavier than they looked."

"Do you remember the face of the man who threatened you? Or do you have a photo of the woman?"

"No..."

Hartnett turned to Seron. "It's hopeless. This isn't enough for the Confederation Police to act on," he sighed. Hartnett was only at the school at the personal request of Seron and Jenny, not as an investigator on duty.

"But you don't really think those were packs of flour SC Edelmann was transporting, do you?" Jenny pointed out.

"Yeah! We all saw him nearly get killed!" Larry agreed.

"Mr. Hartnett," said Seron, "this particular incident with SC Edelmann may only involve our school, but the same thing must be happening at other schools around the Capital District as well. Maybe even at your own alma mater."

Hartnett furrowed his brow. "I never told you where my alma mater is."

"No, but you probably went to one of the seven other capital secondary schools, am I wrong?"

"What makes you so sure?" Hartnett asked. Seron's answer was immediate.

"When you first visited the newspaper club office last summer, you spotted our lunches and said, 'So this is the 4th's famous cafeteria food'. Only students from other secondary schools in the city would call this one 'the 4th'."

Hartnett could not retort.

"After that, you asked for our cooperation in your investigations without a hint of shame. You asked us to lend a hand if ever there was a crime involving the school. I had the feeling then that you must have gone to a secondary school, and that perhaps you had been witness to a case that had never been solved."

Hartnett remained silent.

"SC Edelmann's safety is a serious concern to us, but he's safe here for the time being. But there may be other unwilling runners out there being targeted for the next unfortunate accident. People will suffer. People will mourn."

"Argh! Enough, Seron! I *know*! You think I don't want to do something about this? Damn it all! Look, there's so many awful people in the world that the Confederation Police already has its hands full. It's not gonna act on a case without any evidence!" Hartnett spat.

It was only then that Kurtz broke his silence. "Mr. Hartnett. Isn't there anyone in the Capital District Police whom you can deem completely trustworthy?"

Hartnett shook his head. The Capital District Police and the Confederation Police were separate organizations that were not on good terms with one another. Kurtz knew that well.

"I see..."

"Man... police officers are supposed to be good guys, not criminals," Larry sighed.

Police officers caught working with drug cartels were bound for prison and their lives would be ruined—which was why such people were very thorough about hiding their tracks. It would not be easy to find someone truly trustworthy.

"Then I guess it's up to us," Seron said. "Is there anyone in this school with a connection to the police?"

Jenny was in agreement. "We'll have to ask everyone we can. It's not likely, I mean, but better than sitting on our hands."

"All right! Let's do this!" Larry nodded. Seron turned to Hartnett.

“We’ll contact you as soon as we find someone who fits the bill, Mr. Hartnett. When the time comes, could you claim to have been the one keeping SC Edelmann under protection?”

“Of course. I’ll claim that I coincidentally happened upon the scene, saved him, and kept him here for his protection. The brass’ll be nosy about this, but I’m sure I can come up with something.”

“Thank you,” said Seron.

Edelmann, who had said very little until then, finally spoke.

“Th-th-thank you.”

“Don’t worry, young man. We’re not going to let you die. Let us adults handle it,” Mr. Murdoch said in a reassuring tone.

Seron, Jenny, and Larry exchanged glances, shrugging.

* * *

Around sunset.

After saying goodbye to Edelmann at the basement, and Mr. Murdoch and Hartnett at the gates, Seron, Jenny, and Larry returned to the newspaper club office.

“Are we really gonna find someone?” Larry wondered.

“It’s not gonna be easy,” Jenny replied with a sip of tea.

“We’ll call the other members for help too. But don’t tell them any of the details. All they need to know is that we’re looking for a police officer we can trust. If anyone asks why, just say there’s some trouble in your neighborhood or that you’re trying to find someone. It doesn’t matter. In fact, we’ll be better off all using different excuses,” Seron said, “But the problem is, how long will we be able to keep SC Edelmann down in the basement like that?”

He looked up at the ceiling.

* * *

Seron, Jenny, and Larry braced themselves for a battle of attrition as they contacted the others.

“Found one. A Capital District Police Force investigator we can trust.”

The very next day, Natalia brought them the information they needed.

“What? What’d you say, Lia?” Larry—wearing an apron—gasped.

Seron, Jenny, and Nick (who happened to be in the office that day) looked up in shock. Meg was at the chorus club that day at Seron’s request.

“Huh? I found someone. Somebody I know knows a trustworthy guy from the police,” Natalia repeated herself, munching on a waffle.

“That was fast! But, er...is it legit?”

“Hey, don’t bait me with a compliment if you’re gonna doubt me afterwards. Our informant is gonna be here soon. Private Hepburn, prepare another cup on the double!”

Just as Larry prepared a new cup of tea, there was a knock.

Jenny opened the door greeted the guest.

“Good day.”

The guest was none other than Lena Portman, the blond empress of the orchestra club.

When Portman took a seat on the sofa, Larry quickly served her tea.

“My my, I’m impressed. Thank you. Do you always drink tea like this in your club? No wonder Natalia Steinbeck never attends orchestra practices.”

“Aw, shucks, SC Portman.”

“I don’t think that was a compliment, Lia.”

“By the way, where might Miss Strauski Megmica be?” Portman wondered.

“She’s not here today,” Seron replied. Portman shot Natalia a nasty look.

“Whoops,” Natalia shrugged.

“...Never mind. I’m here on different business today.”

The war ended without even starting. Jenny said, “We’ve been told that you know someone trustworthy on the Capital District Police Force.”

“I certainly do. I don’t know what you people are doing and I don’t want to know, but I can vouch for this man. He can be trusted.”

“What kind of man is he?” asked Seron. “And if it isn’t too much trouble, could you tell us how you came to know him?”

“You’ll keep this a secret, of course?” Portman demanded. Everyone nodded firmly.

“Very well, then. At the end of last summer, a middle-aged inspector visited my family. I spoke briefly with the man at the door. I can’t say what about, but I will state that I am absolutely certain that this man will not let evil go unpunished.”

Seron and Larry exchanged glances. Larry was entirely unimpressed—which showed on his face, but he said nothing.

“We won’t pry about your conversation, SC Portman. But was the conversation enough to convince you of this inspector’s character?” asked Seron.

“It was. I’ll also add that I spoke with my parents on this matter recently as well. They were in agreement with me. They said that the man was trustworthy, and that I should go to him should I ever find myself in trouble. I have faith in my parents’ judgement. This man can be trusted. Is that enough for you?”

Lena Portman—and the Portman family—had a secret.

Lena, the only child of the Portman couple, was not related to them by blood.

Sudden infant death syndrome had robbed the Portman couple of their infant daughter. The death led the couple’s relatives to even suspect them of murder, and the couple was almost driven to suicide—which was when a friend stepped in and gave them a tip.

“There’s a man in Tolcasia they call ‘Master’. He sells orphans to people in richer states.”

It was human trafficking under the guise of providing orphans with loving homes. A large number of children sold to the Capital District were never heard from again. No one knew what terrifying things must have happened to them.

The Portman couple invested a fortune into snatching away a little girl who resembled their daughter from a deviant said to buy and eat young children.

Then the couple destroyed their real daughter's death certificate. The girl they bought replaced the dead one.

And so, Lena was raised as the daughter of the Portmans—as their biological daughter, from a legal perspective.

After the sudden death of the Master, the Capital District Police obtained information on the human trafficking cases and visited the people who had bought children from him. Their intention was to pressure these people, to let them know that the police was on to them.

The inspector who always wore a grey suit was one of the men sent out to do the work of warning the inhuman buyers of children.

He visited the Portman couple and found that they were lovingly raising the girl they had bought. And the couple asked him to overlook their crime.

The inspector walked down to the door, deep in thought, when Lena confronted him.

“It's not like my biological parents are out looking for me now, is it? I'm never going back, you hear me? This is my home! The people in there are my real parents!”

Even Lena, who knew that she was not her parents' daughter, had protested to the inspector.

And the inspector kept silent on the matter.

Afterwards, the Portman family had a discussion about the inspector.

And they came to a unified conclusion.

‘The man is trustworthy. Go to him if you ever find yourself in trouble.’

Seron looked at Portman.

“Is that enough for you? That is all I have to say.”

Portman was smiling. Elegantly, beautifully, and honestly.

“Then...”

And without knowing the reason behind Portman's unwavering faith, Seron took the next step.

“...Will you introduce us to him?”

Chapter 11: The Shot

The 17th day of the fifth month.

“The tip was right. See the grey suit over there?” the man in the leather jacket said with a grin.

“Finally,” the man in the sweater replied.

Both men watched through their binoculars as the blond man in the grey suit was led through the gates by a boy with black hair. His profiled face briefly came into view.

“An inspector from the Capital District Police. He’ll bring out the patsy soon. Kill them both.”

“Right.”

The men watched everything from an apartment building overlooking the school gates. They were surrounded by garbage.

All around them were empty liquor bottles, food packages, garbage cans overflowing with unfinished food, magazines, once-worn underclothes, and rotting leftovers from the past six days of surveillance.

It was a sight enough to give the landlord a heart attack.

In the hallway leading from the room to the front door was a 10-liter canister labeled ‘gasoline’. But the container actually contained kerosene.

There was a shelf for flowerpots jutting outside the school-facing window. A pair of scope-equipped bolt-action rifles stuck out of the open panes above it, just barely out of view. The shades concealed the barrels of the rifles.

The guns were military-issue weapons once used by the Confederation Army. Now outdated, they were a common and affordable model anyone with a driver’s license could purchase.

The room was furnished with an equally commonplace desk and cushions, which acted as makeshift tripods.

The men began loading their rifles with 7.62mm full metal jackets.

They would open fire when the target reached the gates, about 100 meters from the window. It was an easy distance to make with the rifles they had.

Though the room was dark, the world outside was drizzled in warm afternoon sunlight.

The man in the sweater loaded five rounds into his magazine.

“Here goes.”

Slowly, he raised the shades. Little by little, so that it was impossible to tell they were moving at all. Finally, he stopped when the shades were halfway up the height of the window.

The man peered into his scope without putting his finger on the trigger.

The crosshairs came into view. He took aim at the bobbing heads going out the campus gates one after another.

Then the man looked up with a deranged grin.

“Ha! Personally, I’m hoping to get a couple of girls—first- or second-years, preferably. Something so small and fragile that her parents’ll want to kill themselves after I kill her. I’ll let you take care of the inspector. That all right with you?”

“You’re disgusting. Don’t expect a long life with an attitude like that. But fine. Whoever gets fewer heads pays for drinks tonight.”

“I’ll take you up on that offer. It’s not like we’re gonna miss from this range with our models.”

“Lemme go over the plan one last time. After opening fire, you spray kerosene around the place and leave. I’ll set fire from the outside. I’ll drive, too. Once we’re out of the Capital District, we ditch the car in the Leine and board a cargo ship.”

“Right. Looks like it’s goodbye to the Capital District for a while. Should have had some crisps yesterday.”

The hitmen finished their preparations and waited for the suit-clad man to emerge again with the target in tow.

Twenty minutes passed.

The men peered into their binoculars impatiently.

“They’re late.”

“Yeah. I’m dying to fire a few shots already.”

But the time finally came.

“There!” cried the man in the leather jacket, spotting their target. “At the doors to the building further inside.”

The man in the sweater turned to the doors.

There walked the inspector the men had spotted earlier, along with the patsy.

The two targets were accompanied by a bald teacher in his fifties, who walked ahead of them as though he were a human shield.

They were followed by a handsome student with black hair, a rather short boy with blond hair, and a petite girl with red hair. The hitmen did not know what they had to do with the targets.

The hitmen put down their binoculars and took aim.

More and more students began pouring out of the buildings, but it was not yet crowded enough to impede the snipers.

The group was walking calmly to the gates, as though nothing was wrong. They had 30 meters left.

“Don’t open fire yet. Wait for them to leave the gates and reach the roundabout. I’ll shoot the patsy first, and after that you’re free to do as you please.”

“Right.”

Side-by-side, the snipers took deep breaths. They had done such work many times in the past, but could not help their quickening pulses.

There were 30 meters left.

The oblivious voices of the students rode the wind and reached the hitmen’s ears.

“Lemme teach you a lesson, kids; today is the last day of your lives.” The man in the sweater grinned and took aim at the redheaded girl’s body.

As the target moved, the barrel of the rifle tilted down.

Twenty meters left.

“Get ready.”

“Right.”

Two index fingers began to bend.
Ten meters.
Nine.
Eight.
Seven.
Six.
Five.
Four.
And—

Two bullets flew over the 4th Capital Secondary School campus.

“Hm?”

The moment he set foot outside the gates, Mr. Murdoch looked up.

“What’s wrong, sir?” asked Seron.

“Did you hear that?” Mr. Murdoch replied with a question of his own.

Students were chattering, engines were humming, and people were going to and fro on the streets.

All Seron heard was an everyday ambience.

“No, Mr. Murdoch. Did you hear something strange?” Seron asked.

“It must have been my imagination. Never mind,” Mr. Murdoch said with a shake of the head, and continued to walk. He followed behind the Capital District Police Force inspector and Edelmann.

The inspector and Edelmann got in the luxury car that had been waiting for them.

Mr. Murdoch, along with Seron and the others, made sure that they were safely in the car before passing by as though they had nothing to do with the departing duo.

When Seron cast the car a quick glance, he spotted Edelmann looking his way between the closed curtains.

‘Thank you,’ said Edelmann’s lips, over and over again.

Once the car had left the intersection, Seron and the others turned back and re-entered the school.

“Hm...” Deep creases dug into Mr. Murdoch’s forehead as he fell into thought. “Two rounds...” he muttered to himself. Rifle rounds flew faster than the speed of sound, creating a brief but sharp, explosive noise.

It was as though he had just heard the same noises that had haunted him on the battlefield 30 years ago.

But Mr. Murdoch was no longer on Lestki Island with its trenches and wastes.

The campus was exactly the way it always was. The rumbling of cars outside the gates, the sound of honking, and carefree young voices.

“This is ridiculous. I must be getting old.”

The former soldier shook his head as he went back inside.

* * *

A few days earlier. The 12th.

It was later in the very day the policemen had their chat in the park and Hartnett visited the campus.

Treize had gotten used to student life and avoided the scrutiny of the newspaper club.

“A peaceful life in the Capital District. A relaxed school life. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted,” he mumbled, lazily stretching in his dorm room.

That was when an announcement came over the speakers.

<Delivery for John Aylward, Catiua Nelson, and Treize Bain. Please come to the staff office and pick up your packages. I repeat—>

“Sweet! Must be a care package!” Treize cheered, getting up and putting on his tracksuit jacket over his green t-shirt.

Treize did not have many personal belongings in his room.

A few sets of clothes, including a leather jacket, hung from the otherwise sparsely-populated closet.

Textbooks and notebooks were atop the desk, and next to it a large and a small bag.

He also had a small, open box containing a camera from his mother. The camera had once been used as a weapon, and was broken as Treize had expected, but it had been repaired and was again in usable condition.

Finally, deep in the back of his closet, was a small safe containing a handgun and bullets.

Treize grabbed his room key, locked the door behind him, and went down the hall and down the stairs.

“Hey Treize! If you got snacks from home, you better share some of that!” said a fellow dormitory student.

“I wish!” Treize replied, and went all the way to the staff office next to the lobby on the first floor.

There was a large window in the wall of the office, but Treize knocked on the door anyway before entering.

“Hi, I’m Treize Bain. I’m here for my package.”

“That was quick!” said a matron in her forties, “Just sign here.”

Treize signed the form. “Which one is mine?”

“The one on the floor.”

“*That* one?”

“Mhm. Be careful taking it upstairs.”

Lying on the floor was a cardboard box about 150 centimeters in length and 50 centimeters in height and width.

Though the box had been wrapped up with tape, one of the corners had been completely crushed—likely because of its size.

“What the heck...”

“The papers say it’s some sort of athletic gear. I hope they didn’t break anything,” the matron said, and held the door open for Treize. Treize thanked her and hefted the package with both arms.

“Urgh...”

“It looks very heavy. Do you know what’s inside?”

“I have no idea, ma’am,” Treize lied.

Treize carried the box to his room, careful not to hit anyone on the way.

As soon as he and the box were in his room, Treize locked the door behind him and even put on the chain lock.

And gingerly, he began to open up the cardboard box with a pocket knife.

Inside was a long, thin, heavy object secured with cloth and string. And a wooden box.

His suspicions confirmed, Treize left his room again without unwrapping the object.

Making sure to lock the door behind him again, he headed for the telephone booths in the lobby.

“What the heck is this supposed to be?!” Treize demanded under his breath, checking that no one was around him.

<Your High- I mean, Young Master, we were expecting you. I see that logistics services in the Capital District are unrivaled indeed. Have you opened it up yet, sir?>

The voice on the line belonged to a relaxed middle-aged woman. She was a member of the royal guard, who resided in a nearby apartment.

“Like I need to open it up to tell what it is. *Please* don’t do this. I’ve gotten in enough trouble with Lillia! She told me to act more like a normal secondary school student!”

<Young Master, I have an urgent matter to discuss.>

The woman’s tone changed without warning, going cold and calm as ice.

“What is it?”

Treize’s voice went calm as well.

<Observers, sir. On the fifth floor of the apartment building across from the roundabout at the gates. The fourth window from the right. We spotted binoculars between the window shades two days ago in the evening.>

“...I trust your judgement,” Treize replied quietly. He knew very well that no member of the royal guard would be mistaken about something so serious. “Who are they?”

<We aren’t sure yet, Young Master. We went to gather information yesterday morning and learned from the neighbors that people had moved in recently, but the new residents haven’t shown themselves or even greeted anyone.>

“That’s not unusual in the Capital District, though.”

<No, sir. But we staked out the residence and managed to catch a glimpse of the residents. Two men, one in a leather jacket and the other in a sweater. Both highly suspicious.>

“And?”

<They returned to the residence soon after and are still keeping an eye on the school gates. We haven’t spotted a gun yet, but we sent you the package just in case.>

“In case of what?”

<In case they are assassins targeting you, Your Highness. We must strike before they can. The balcony of your dorm room is positioned well enough to shoot them both, although the reverse will also apply.>

“W-wait a sec! Why are we going in that direction? Didn’t you contact the Capital District Police?”

<We did, sir.>

“And?”

<We did contact them. We left them a tip about two suspicious men in the residence; but they did not respond. When we pressed the police, they simply replied that they could not follow up without sufficient evidence.>

“Knowing you, you two probably tailed the guys, right?”

<Of course, sir. We spotted the men contacting a man in the city. The man was in a suit. We followed him and saw him enter the Capital District Police Headquarters. Then we learned that the man was a police detective.>

“What in the world is going on here?”

<We are unsure, Your highness. But we have determined that among those at the school, you are the most likely target of an assassination attempt.>

“And?”

<We will continue our surveillance, sir. You’ll find a radio in the wooden box; make certain that it is on at all times when you are in your room. We also have a map marked out with safe travel routes on the campus. Please make use of them, even if it inconveniences you slightly. Do *not* step out onto the balcony, and do *not* use the main gates. You may use the doors behind the dormitory building, but please inform us beforehand if you ever plan to leave the campus.>

Treize nodded firmly. His eyes fell on the students relaxing in the lobby.

“All right. Thanks. I don’t want to get anyone dragged into this mess. I’ll make sure they’re okay.”

<We expected nothing less from you, Young Master.>

After the phone call, Treize rushed up the stairs.

“Was it food, Treize?”

“If you enjoy textbooks with a side of dictionaries, sure.”

“As if! Not like it’ll make me smarter or anything.”

After the exchange, Treize returned to his room.

He opened the wooden box and did as he was instructed. Inside was a small radio, a pair of binoculars, and live ammunition.

He pulled off the cloth around the sniper rifle and the metal cylinder.

The brand-new sniper rifles used during the new year’s eve commotion in Ikstova had been donated to the royal family in the immediate aftermath. The rifle was a lightweight model with a thin frame. One pull of the trigger could release up to 10 rounds.

Metal ornamentation decorated the left side of the gun, along with a scope capable of 4x to 9x zoom.

The cylinder was a silencer made by an Ikstovan artisan. It suppressed the sound of the gunshot so that the shooter did not have to wear ear protection. It came in handy in the snowy valleys of Ikstova, where avalanches were always a concern.

“Why is this happening? Lillia’s gonna get so mad if she finds out...” Treize sighed, trembling. “It’s not easy trying to be an ordinary secondary school student.”

Afterwards, Treize followed instructions and remained on campus, using only the routes marked out by the royal guard to keep himself safe from snipers.

Though he had been looking forward to gym class, he was forced to give excuses and sit out when the class went out into the grounds.

“You’ve been acting kinda fishy these days,” Lillia said one day over lunch. Because they were in the same classes, she had noticed the change in his behavior quickly.

“You got me. I’ve been trying not to stand out recently,” Treize replied with a half-truth.

“I guess that’s all right,” Lillia replied, nodding. “You know, Meg says we should go visit the newspaper club sometime. But I guess we can do that later.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Lillia.”

Treize also began to scope out the apartment building.

Because it would be too risky to observe from his own room, he looked for empty classrooms after class hours, traveling through the buildings instead of going outside. He would peer slightly out of the curtains and observe the apartment with his binoculars.

Just as the guards had said, the men were at the window every day.

However, they only kept a close eye on the school during the mornings and afternoons when students were coming and going to and from school. The rest of the time, the men were eating, napping, or even drinking.

“What are they up to?” Treize wondered on the way back to the dorms, when he ran into a familiar face. “O-oh. Hey there, Seron.”

“Treize. Fancy meeting you here.”

“I’ve been dropping by the library on the way back to the dorms these days. What about you? Shouldn’t you be at the newspaper club?”

“Things came up and we put our activities on hold for now.”

“By the way, Lillia told me that we could drop by the club some other time.”

“Yeah. Now’s not the best time, I think. I’ll talk to you later.”

Treize gave Seron a wave as the latter departed, and noticed something. Seron was carrying freshly-laundered clothes. A box containing neatly-folded T-shirts, shorts, and underwear.

“Is he changing at the school? Is the newspaper club holding some sort of overnight event here? Must be fun,” Treize muttered. “...I can’t let these people get dragged into this.”

Gravely, quietly, he continued walking down the hall.

“I can’t let Treize get dragged into this...” Seron also muttered to himself as he walked in the opposite direction.

* * *

Five days later. The morning of the 17th.

It was early enough that almost no one in the dorms was awake.

<Young master!>

A sharp hiss woke Treize from his slumber.

“Whoa!” he cried, sitting up.

<Young master, please wake up.>

This time, the voice from the radio under the bed whispered quietly. Treize put on his headset and set up the microphone.

“Morning. I’m listening. You’re up really early today,” he replied, glancing at the clock. It was six in the morning. The sky was clear.

The radio transmission was from, of course, the royal guard—the wife of the pair.

<We’ve spotted movement, sir. Both men have taken out their rifles. They may make their attempt today. Please be prepared.>

“Roger that. I’ll stick to the plan.”

That day, Treize did not go to class.

He made sure, however, to visit the cafeteria and have breakfast. There he picked up bread and fruit, along with bottled water and juice.

Upon returning to his room, Treize removed his mattress from the metal frame and pushed the frame next to the window with the curtains still drawn shut.

He fixed thick, heavy metal plates to the side of the bed frame with metal wire and cutting pliers. The royal guard couple had sent him the plates one by one over the past few days.

The bed frame had been transformed into a shield. Treize’s room was now a shooting range.

Treize inserted the barrel of the silencer-equipped rifle into a small gap in the shield, then placed a cushion under the gun.

He equipped the magazine and operated the lever. This first round was loaded into the firing chamber with a metallic noise.

Arming the safety, Treize took a seat on his desk chair.

And he finally opened the curtains and the window.

Treize took aim. Through the scope he could see the unit where the snipers lay in wait. The shaded window looked close enough for him to reach out and touch.

Treize did not move.

He remained still in his chair with his aim fixed on the window.

Around when the students had all made it to the campus and classes had begun, the husband of the royal guard couple sent Treize a transmission.

<They’ve begun moving, sir. The men are readying their guns.>

Indeed, the men were bringing their rifles to the window. Treize could see the muzzles.

But the rifles were aimed, not at Treize’s room, but the gates.

<They are using binoculars, sir. They may not have discovered your room yet, but please do not let down your guard.>

“Right.”

Treize waited.

For the following eight hours, he was constantly listening out for orders, and constantly ready to open fire.

He ate with the gun still aimed.

He did his business in an empty bottle with the gun still aimed.

“The most important thing in hunting is not the ability to read the target’s movements, or even one’s marksmanship skills. It is patience. The kill belongs only to those who wait.”

Treize remembered the lesson from his old teacher, who had passed away on the first day of the new year.

He became one with the rifle. He became part of the barrel.

It was after class, when the chattering of students was beginning to fill the campus.

<They’re moving, Your Highness.>

Treize tensed at the title that was usually off-limits. He pressed the call button with his left hand.

“I see them. They’re raising the shades.”

<They’ve loaded their weapons and are ready to fire.>

Treize could also see the nearly-imperceptible movements of the muzzles jutting slightly out of the window.

Because of the lighting, he could not see inside the unit and he could not make out the shooters’ faces. But that was not a problem.

“Are they both right-handed?”

<Yes, sir.>

“That’s all I need to know.”

From the angles of the muzzles, he calculated the positions of the snipers’ heads.

<The muzzles are moving. They’re taking aim at the gates.>

The words and the images caught Treize off-guard.

“What? What are they doing?”

<Two possibilities, sir. One, they have mistaken someone else for you. Two, you are not the target,> the guard replied in an eerily mechanical tone. Treize had to make a snap decision.

“Either way, I can’t let them shoot. Worst-case scenario, I get expelled or arrested for murder.”

<We knew you would say so, Your Highness. Gods save Ikstova. The decision is yours, sir. We are ready.>

Treize pulled the trigger.



Two suppressed gunshots resounded through the air.
Two shells popped out of the rifle, hit the inside of the shield, and fell to the floor.
Two bullets flew faster than the speed of sound, connecting the dorm room at the apartment unit across from the gate.

Inside the unit, the man in the sweater lost his head.

The bullet entered his right temple, blowing off his cranium from the side of the head to the back with tremendous force.

Zero point three seconds later, the second bullet hit the man in the leather jacket directly in the right shoulder, shattering bone and changing course as it pushed out his back and hit a pile of garbage.

“Gah!”

The man screamed as he fell to the floor. The rifle he never got to fire fell on his head. The scope struck him hard on the forehead and left a deep wound.

“Aaaaargh...”

But he did not have time to feel that impact.

“Help...got shot...”

The moment he forced himself up and turned to his partner, he spotted the younger man who had ended the last day of his life. His body was bent forward, brain spilling out of his skull and eyes bulging wide.

“Huh...?”

The door seemed to open behind him, but the man heard nothing more.

Everything from his shoulder to his back throbbed in pulsating pain. His vision swam.

“Who...?”

And there, he spotted a middle-aged woman, the type he might spot grocery shopping in the neighborhood—

—and the tip of the exceedingly ordinary hardware-store hammer she had swung without a word.

<Excellent work, Young Master. Leave the rest to us. Focus on cleaning up your room. We apologize for forcing you to miss classes today.>

Treize was on standby, ready to fire a third shot if necessary. But he was now clear to relax.

Taking his right hand off the gun, he armed the safety again.

“Phew...” he sighed. “If Lillia finds out about this, I’m a goner...”

The neighbor of the snipers Treize had shot was a curmudgeonly old man.

He walked into the hall as he left to buy groceries like he always did.

That was when he ran into a middle-aged couple, both wearing aprons and rushing up and down the stairs with armfuls of garbage bags.

“Haven’t seen you around here. Moved in recently?”

Not at all, the couple had replied, claiming to be janitors.

The people who had rented the unit had taken off without paying the rent, so the landlord had asked the duo to clean it out, they claimed. They added that they would be finished by nighttime.

“I see. I’ve seen them a couple of times. Shady fellows. Ain’t no future for young people who don’t even bother greeting their neighbors,” the old man snorted.

The couple heartily voiced their agreement.

* * *

<Yes, this is Hartnett.>

<It’s me.>

<Ah, Inspector. How did it go?>

<I suppose I can tell you, as much as I’d hate to. Edelman and his family will be taken into protective custody. We have a lot of questions for them.>

<Excellent. And I presume information on their location will be shared only on a need-to-know basis?>

<Of course. They’ll be in a safe house. If their location gets leaked, we’ll know immediately who the mole is.>

<You almost sound as if you want a leak to happen.>

<Don’t be a smartass. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s a *clever* smartass.>

<Thank you, sir.>

<Tch.>

<Apologies. I have some movement to report as well. Do you have time?>

<Go ahead.>

<We’ve pinpointed someone who may have a connection to the organization. He may not be connected directly to the case, but we ID’d him anyway.>

<In other words, you’re telling the Capital District Police to keep its mitts off this one?>

<I’m glad you’re quick on the uptake, sir.>

<Tch. Give me the details.>

<Right. There’s a possibility that a Westerner may be involved with one of the larger drug cartels on our radar.>

<...Go on.>

<He lives in the Capital District. We can confirm, however, that he cleared all legal procedures for entry and residence.>

<So he was working undercover.>

<Yes. He must have been planning to map out a new distribution route for Western cartels, getting in contact with Eastern groups regularly. Of course, our investigation hasn’t even scratched the surface yet.>

<Don’t bother telling me if you’re not gonna give me the details. Just listening to this crap is sickening. I almost want to strangle the guy myself.>

<I see you’re quite unfond of Westerners, Inspector.>

<Sure. Although I suppose a youngster like you wouldn’t understand.>

<Please do not let your personal sentiments hinder your work.>
<Weren't you telling me to *not* get involved in this case? This is a riot.>
<If it makes you feel any better, I could give you his name and you can write it down on your targets for shooting practice.>
<Oh?>
<The man's name is Travas. He is a major in the Royal Army and served as a military attaché at the Sou Be-II embassy in Roxche until recently.>
<...>
<Hello?>
<Hm. A soldier?>
<Yes. We don't have all the details yet, but he seems to be quite capable.>
<I see.>
<Do you know him, Inspector?>
<No.>
<...In any case, multiple sources have cited his name. Please do take care. However—>
<Yes?>
<It seems the man left the Capital District last month for Sou Be-II for some reason. We've been tracking his whereabouts but ran into a wall.>
<What?>
<It seems that he may have been killed in an aeroplane crash.>

* * *

Just as the Capital District Police inspector demanded more information from Hartnett—
“Schultz residence.”
Lillia took a telephone call.
“No, my mother's out right now. I'm not sure when she'll be back. I could take a message if that's all right.”
She still had a pen in hand from doing homework in the living room. She began to jot down the message on a notepad.
“Yes, go ahead.”
The person on the other end of the line spoke.
“What?”
Lillia froze.
“Major Travas...is dead?”

* * *

Late that evening.

“I'm home. Man, I am starved.”
Allison returned in plainclothes. Lillia greeted her, handing her a note.

“Welcome back, Mom. Someone left a message for you. I don’t really know what to say, so I’m gonna go to bed now.”

Allison received the piece of paper and watched her daughter go to her room. Then she flipped it over.

Scrawled in trembling letters were the words:

‘Call from embassy. Major Travas dead. Plane crash. Military plane from Raputoa. Went missing. Body found by Lutoni. ID’d by clothing. Face badly damaged. Cremated on scene. No funeral. Contacted Sfrestus, home. Got word he was mom’s (your) friend. So they called.’

Allison read the note to the end and glanced again at Lillia’s closed door.

“I’m sorry for worrying you, Lillia...” she trailed off, hanging her head.

When she looked up again, however, she was smiling.

“Playing dead again, are we?”

-To be continued-



今頃明かしてみる

表紙わ
『メグとセロン』一巻の真実!



メグ
昨日明日一

じゃ
わ



このあと結局

メグは隣に座らなかったし
その上、部長に全部見られてて
記念写真まで撮られたセロンくん..
それが一巻の表紙になったのです。
.....でしたが。

表紙わ
ついにこの『一つの大陸の物語』で
隣に座ることができました!
ついでにリアの幅寄せもプラスで
圧迫祭りです!良かったわ!

あ
セロンくん



それでは『一つの大陸の物語』
下巻でお会いしましょうー。
黒星紅白でした。



『アリソン』『リリアとトレイズ』『メグとセロン』

“一つの大陸の物語”シリーズ

Playback

