Transit umbra, lux permanet

by Inkblot0Blue

Summary

The UR-1 retrial was only a stepping stone for what would become a significantly more complex battle, on personal and professional levels for those who had become involved in it. In the weeks following Simon Blackquill's release and Phantom's detainment, a mysterious organisation known as SEIL steps in to call for the spy's extradition. The Prosecutors' Office and Interpol agree to collaborate to solve a series of international mysteries and figure out Phantom's identity and origin. But some things are best left alone, unsolved, as they race against time to salvage the truth lain in the past.
Prologue: Videotape

Chapter Summary

When I'm at the pearly gates// This will be on my videotape, my videotape//
Mephistopheles is just beneath// And he's reaching up to grab me

December 2, 2027

The sounds of an apartment door clicking shut and a happy relieved sigh ricocheted off the paper-thin walls, bouncing off the grey-scale gradients painted orange and yellow by the dim hues of sunlight struggling to dip down the horizon.

Bobby Fulbright had had a good day; he’d helped a little old lady with her groceries first thing in the morning, and Chief Gumshoe had said he was pleased with his conduct, and he’d closed that robbery case with one of the rookie detectives.

Except…

Bobby Fulbright was dead.

Eagle River had claimed his body a year ago, swallowed him up whole. He was never, ever going to be found again.

‘Bobby Fulbright’, on the other hand…Well, he was exhausted from his long but productive day, and he felt deserving of a nice bubble bath and some Chinese food. He had served justice today, after all!

Justice…and yet he was still nowhere close to finding Blackquill’s psychological report on him. And…he was fast running out of time, because Prosecutor Blackquill was going to be executed in—

But ‘Bobby’ didn’t dwell on that! Work was left in the workplace, and home stuff…at home.

‘Bobby’ looked around his tiny cramped apartment. It was about the size of a postage stamp, with cracks in the walls and palm fronds brushing against the cheap window panes. Good thing Bobby Fulbright no longer had to worry about supporting a family on his meagre salary.

He scampered into the bathroom and turned on the taps, drawing a bath. Steam rose from the tub, fogging up the windows and mirrors. It was now that ‘Bobby’ could feel comfortable in undressing; he did not know — nor want or care to know — what lurked behind this face. Perhaps one time he did have a face to a name and a name to a face, but that was far off in the past, abandoned somewhere, sometime.

He peeled off the silicone and then off went the platform shoes and the too-white suit, leaving him with an unremarkable, pale figure. This was all that was left from a time long gone, and even then, the human body could always be modified with exercise or overeating, porcelain or dark skin, battlefield scars or flawless features.

That dastardly scar on his hand was certainly still there somewhere though.
‘Bobby’ turned around, coming face to face with a record player perched on a rickety shelf beside some toiletries. He brought the needle to the record, and jazz began to spill out, cello thrumming and saxophone melodies curling about the bathroom, licking at the tiles, lapping at the ceramic furnishings.

Bobby Fulbright had liked to collect jazz records — Duke Ellington and such — and play them in his apartment at full blast, if his surveillance had been anything to go by. Bobby Fulbright had greatly enjoyed music, had been the life and soul of the party…

Bobby Fulbright was still very much dead, and there wouldn’t be a funeral for him anytime soon.

Well...there would be one, if ‘Bobby’ could get his hands on that damned psych report! Maybe he should get a stay of execution to—

No!

He would not think about that right now.

But...maybe ‘Bobby’ would enjoy the last moments he would have with Blackquill, regardless. Blackquill was being uncharacteristically nice lately, and he was allowing him to visit him in his cell and stay till very late at night...

It was just for work, of course. Work, which meant prying into Blackquill’s private life, trying to tear down those high concrete walls around his heart, peeling back that facade…

Blackquill wasn’t very forthcoming there though, and ‘Bobby’ could only gather so much from their meetings.

Oh well.

‘Bobby’ turned the taps, and stepped into the scalding water. Then he picked up the rubber duckies — another thing Bobby Fulbright had loved to collect — that lined the tub and threw them into the water with him.

He sat in the bathtub until his fingers became pruney like raisins and his voice grew scratchy and hoarse from the stupid tale he was enacting with all his rubber duckies; Prosecutor Mallard had provided the court with decisive evidence, aided by Detective Duck and the pathologist, Doctor Quack, which allowed Judge Fowl to render a guilty verdict.

There was some method to the madness; Bobby Fulbright had apparently relaxed in this manner, if his surveillance had been anything to go by.

Of course...Bobby Fulbright had also had children who had been young enough to know the joy of rubber duckies and a wife who had loved jazz.

Not that ‘Bobby’ would know anything about those things.

The record stopped, and he got out of the tub. ‘Bobby’ watched as the soapy water disappeared down the drain, sucked into an underworld that was all too familiar to him. He then dried off, dressed in loungewear, and padded into the living room where he ordered Chinese takeout.

The food came quickly — orange chicken and egg rolls — and he sat to eat on the sagging red leather couch, watching some mindless episodes of some mind-numbing reality TV show about rich housewives in Beverly Hills with boatloads of money whining about trivial matters.
All throughout, something nagged ‘Bobby’ in the back of his mind; he had something to do.

He knew he had something to do, and he’d been putting it off, much like a disillusioned teenager would procrastinate on their school assignment out of dislike for their teacher or the subject.

He was procrastinating because it was another assignment, interfering with his current tasks. It just added to the pile but… ‘Bobby’ was being paid quite handsomely for it.

His dinner finished, he moved into the small box-like bedroom, where his suitcase lay. He closed the blinds and began his preparations.

He set up a camera with a tripod by the door, scattered the takeaway boxes on the tiled floor — why Bobby Fulbright had chosen to live in an apartment with such furnishings, he would never know — and then, the pièce de résistance, he put on his trusty Noh mask.

Well, it wasn’t his Noh mask, but oh, how he could picture the expression on Blackquill’s face if he turned up to work like this!

‘Bobby’ could very easily remember those bright brown eyes, those deft fingers drawing for a sword and—

Metis Cykes slumped on the operating table. Dead to the world.

An unfortunate liability.

An unfortunate liability and yet he had inherited an excellent mask, its craftsmanship second to none. And that katana — now residing in some evidence locker deep in the precinct’s bowels — had been absolutely exquisite; it had cut through her like butter!

Such glee was unbecoming of him. It was probably Blackquill’s impending death that was causing him to reminisce like this.

‘Bobby’ turned on the camera and moved to sit cross-legged on the floor.

It was recording now. So he schooled his features behind the mask into a serious expression.

Now he was no longer ‘Bobby’. Now he was…

Someone. Anyone. No one.


He cleared his throat, and began to speak, the words flowing out crisp and clear.

“This is to be a short recording. I do not intend to take up much of your time, dear viewer. I’m just here to deliver a message: we cannot go on like this.

“And when I say ‘we’, I mean we as a society cannot go on like this. This world is sadly a corrupt, polluted, and miserable place. Ordinary people have become disillusioned with the status quo; with elites making decisions for them, and parliamentarians rubber-stamping decisions made by military governments, crippling whole regions in a vicious never-ending cycle of arms races and mutually assured destruction.

“You may say I am a paranoid populist for airing my concerns here. Of course, I am also being purposefully vague here, but certain individuals will know precisely what I’m talking about. I will divulge that I am a member of an organisation that, on paper, does not exist. An organisation that
has fought for a just cause: to destroy the old guard so that we may pave way for the forces of new.

“I admit it has not been an easy feat, especially for a little man such as myself who has had to resort to certain extreme measures. But...I am an optimist.

“You see, there is a proverb that I heard once, long ago, in a time and place I can no longer recall: one swallow does not make a summer. So, naturally, I do not expect progress to be quick and efficient.

“But...let us just say there are ways to speed up that process. And that is for you to find out, and for me to know. When that time comes...you will know what to do. After all…”

He thrust his fist at the camera.

“In justice we trust!” he boomed out.

The camera beeped rapidly, like a bomb about to detonate. The recording was over.

‘Bobby’ pulled off the mask and let out a tired exhale. Done. Now all that was left was save it on his computer and upload it. Then...his next orders would come, just as soon as he was finished with his current assignment.

Whenever that was to be. He really hoped he wasn’t too late.

The palm fronds outside smacked against the window panes. A loud thump-thump, somewhat akin to those stories about things that went bump in the night, stories that Bobby Fulbright read to his children at about this hour too.

He rose, padded to the door, and switched the room light off.

Back he went to his jazz records, his threadbare couch, and his terrible TV shows.

Back he went to being Bobby Fulbright.
The sounds of the airplane engine dying down snapped a rather tired — it had been a twelve hour flight from Frankfurt, after all — Franziska von Karma out of her reverie as she picked up her belongings and set foot outside the carrier, high heeled boots clacking noisily on the surface. Her black coat hugged her figure as the harsh wind whipped her up.

She grumbled. How it was that this city could have the harshest sunlight in January when its atmosphere was biting escaped her. At least it beat the subzero temperatures back home. One foot at a time, she casually took her time to go down the stairs, relaxed on her movements with nothing occupying her thoughts.

The quick bus ride to Border Control, and the relative ease of finding her baggage also surprised her. She hadn't been back to Los Angeles in at least two years, so it was quite possible LAX had managed to become more efficient in the time she'd been away. Whether it was related to some scathing remarks she had left in some travel review, or just down to management chopping and changing, she did not know.

But what she did know, was that she recognised the man greeting her at the Arrivals section, and she smirked. Shi-Long Lang looked the same as ever, dressed in a simple dark suit and tie, with his dragon-emblazoned jacket draped over his shoulders. His light brown hair was pushed back and rested below his chin.

As she approached him, the corners of his lips turned upwards in a smirk. He greeted her with a kiss to the cheek. "Long time no see."

"Indeed, Shi-Long Lang. When was it last?"

"January 2026. We'd just finished that case of bioterrorism," he answered, taking her bag and ushering her outside to the car park.

"What a long-winded case that was," she sighed in recollection, throwing him an exasperated look. "You know how I hate negotiations."

"That I do know," he said with a chuckle, as they reached the spot where the car was parked.

He unlocked the car and opened the passenger door for her, and then gestured at her with an upward nod of the head. "Your hair suits you."

At his words, she peered at her face in its reflection in the car window, running a hand through the
pixie cut, shaved on one side and hanging on the other.

"Thank you. It's far more practical to manage on a daily basis."

"I can imagine." he remarked, as he set about fitting her suitcase into the boot and slamming it shut. Then he checked his watch. Two in the afternoon. Franziska had got into her seat and strapped herself in.

"Your brother will be wondering where you are."

He got in beside her in the driver's seat, slamming the car door shut.

"Miles Edgeworth will never stop worrying. It's just in his nature," she said as she rid herself of her coat, revealing a navy pantsuit complete with a waistcoat and a bow brooch. On her belt, her coiled whip was strapped in like an accessory.

He grinned at her. "Then I guess we can just be late to the party to irritate Mr Chief Prosecutor."

She gave him a small, knowing smile, before he turned the ignition, letting the engine purr to life, and pulled out of the car park.

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Miles Edgeworth prided himself on many things.

One of those things was his ability to pick out individual colleagues for their potential to do well and seeing them succeed at what they did best, based on his core values of efficiency, hard work and loyalty.

Already nearly nine years ago now, he had seen potential in young Simon Blackquill when he had first introduced himself to him, sporting his short black hair, the curly locks falling into place neatly. He remembered their first conversation in vivid detail, wherein Blackquill had bowed and handed him a business card and requested to place his Japanese swords on display in his office's glass cabinet.

Miles, having found this request highly amusing, permitted him to do so, along the lines of "if it brings you calm, then so be it"; who was he to critique this young man? From then on, he managed, albeit briefly, to build a rapport with Blackquill and see him at work. A bright young man, so full of ambition and perfectly capable of achieving his full potential.

That was, of course, before Blackquill was incarcerated just shy of a year after their first encounter. Miles had visited him in prison the day after they had arrested him for his mentor's murder not as a prosecutor but rather, as a concerned individual. There was nothing much he could do for him at the time, and he had never really suspected Blackquill in the same manner he had suspected himself when he had been on the other side of the glass. But it was not his place to push Blackquill into speaking. Nevertheless, he vowed to keep a close eye on this now-silent, harrowed individual.

He had watched as Blackquill had implicated himself in the murder of his mentor — deliberately testifying gruesome details and arguing with the defence to shatter the notion of him being anything but a cruel murderer — and he had mourned the loss of a strong man, replaced by a cold facade that greeted him in subsequent meetings. Despite this...new shell that had become Blackquill, Miles intended to keep his vow, and he intended to keep Blackquill stimulated with new information and sources on the Phantom matter, and in doing so, he could see his colleague tackle the matter with renewed interest and vigour.

He could remember the way Blackquill's eyes flickered when he announced his decision to
reinstate his position as a prosecuting attorney, at least from prison and the quiet "Thank you, sir," that had passed his thin lips.

And the second "Thank you, sir," in the form of a nod of acknowledgement at Eldoon's stand where he had his first meal after his acquittal. Yes, Miles could safely say he was proud and relieved to see Blackquill finally come out of this whole ordeal alive. Dare he say, excited? Yes, he was excited to be working with Blackquill again – their work nine years ago cut short by those constraints.

After that dinner they had walked together around the blocking. It gave Blackquill a chance to stretch his legs after standing in court all day.

"Do you have a place to accommodate you?" Miles had asked, once again the concerned superior.

Blackquill nodded."My sister's living quarters shall be suitable for me."

"Good. I'd say, after the ordeal of today, a warm bed will be more than welcoming. You've deserved your rest," said Miles, smiling warmly at his colleague.

Blackquill nodded. It was understandable that he'd want to say nothing.

"I don't want to see you in work tomorrow." He added, licking his dry lips.

Noting Blackquill's confused expression, he elaborated, "You need your rest and I'm formally requesting that you take a leave of absence until you feel more at home with yourself and are ready to get back to work."

"Hm," was all Blackquill said.

"Please, do not worry about the Phantom situation; it'll still be there for you to pursue when you return," Miles reassured.

At those words, he sensed Blackquill's shoulders tense before he relaxed them again and sighed. "I shall accept your proposition then. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Consider it a Christmas gift of sorts."

The two men were back at the stand by the time their conversation had drawn to a close. "I wish you a good evening. I'll see you soon."

As Blackquill made his way to Athena who was waiting to walk him home, he followed with, "And you too, sir."

Then pausing, he added. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, indeed."

That had been three weeks now. The office had closed for Christmas and was back in full swing on January the 2nd. Miles found himself sorting through all the paperwork for Simon's exoneration and other legal affairs over the break. He took the 28th off out of remembrance but continued to work tirelessly. Today, however, presented him with a different sort of work day; a gala later tonight and an email from Lang that had come in a week ago with a request to 'discuss the spy situation' meant that he would be spending this morning and afternoon organising himself, rather than filing any new paperwork.
He had, however, managed to put in some time for a short meeting. The knocking of the door signalled as much and he let out a short "Come in."

The door opened. Blackquill entered and Miles observed him over the rim of his glasses. He looked less tired; the circles under his eyes had slightly faded. His hair was still unkempt, but he was somehow a little more presentable, in his clean suit with his surcoat placed on the coat rack.

Miles rose from his seat. "Good morning, Blackquill."

"Good morning, Edgeworth-dono."

"Please, take a seat," he said, gesturing at the sofa. "Tea?"

"Could I perhaps request matcha?"

"I certainly have some. It is a favourite of mine."

Blackquill looked on as he steeped the tea, mixing the matcha powder with the bamboo brush. Then Miles walked over to him with a small tray and set it down, before taking his own seat opposite him.

"How have you been these last few weeks?" he asked, taking a sip of his tea.

"As well as I can be," he started, picking up his cup of matcha, studying it. "I've signed over Aura's flat into my name, so I have official accommodation now."

"Good. Have you seen to her case?"

"Justice-dono managed to take on her case just after the holiday period."

"And?"

"Three years at a minimum-security correctional facility."

"I see," nodded Miles. "That's good."

Another sip, and another look at Blackquill over the rim of his glasses. "On another note, how have you been handling the press?"

A hesitant sigh and Miles saw that Blackquill had faced away from him. "Frankly not as well as I could be. My...reputation; it precedes me."

Seeing as Blackquill wasn't comfortable with elaborating further, he took over, "Well, my advice on such matters would be to ignore any press. Be it reporters or emails. It has served me well."

"...I see."

"But I don't expect it'll affect your work. You've much to offer, and I'm looking forward to seeing your performance in and outside of court."

At that, Blackquill lowered his head, staring into his half-empty cup.

"If I may, sir..."

"Yes?"
"I would like to offer my services in the Phantom case."

Miles leaned back in his seat, mulling over the proposition in his head. It was an understandable one, given that he had been an important asset in the last few years. Perhaps it was also an opportunity for Blackquill to showcase his work ethic.

"Well, it is very convenient of you to mention this," he set his teacup down. "Tonight I'm meeting with some Interpol colleagues to discuss the matter. You are most welcome to introduce yourself to them."

A small smirk formulated on Blackquill's lips. "I shall be honoured to."

"Good. The meeting is being held at the Gatewater Hotel's Conference Hall. I've arranged for it to coincide with the Prosecutor's Convention. It starts at six."

Blackquill downed the rest of his tea. "I shall be prompt then."

"But seeing as this is also your first day back and you appear to be in top form, I don't see why you can't start setting yourself up."

Blackquill tilted his head in confusion, eyes following Miles as he rose from his seat, moving to open a desk drawer and pluck out a small key.

"Room 1009."

He nodded to this, feeling the cold metal in his hand, and stood up, grabbing his coat off the rack.

"Until this evening, Edgeworth-dono. Thank you," he said as he exited the office, leaving Miles to clear away the tea.

Simon spent the remainder of his day organising his office. It was already equipped with standard things: desk; desktop computer; filing cabinets; safe; and a wall bookcase unit. So, with that in mind, he had called for the help of a legal aide to retrieve his possessions from the storage facility Aura had used to store some of his belongings following his incarceration; some decorative katana and wakizashi, hanging scrolls, Japanese knick-knacks and Taka's perch.

It took a bit longer than anticipated for him to figure out where to place his few possessions, what with cleaning and dusting them, and then hesitating for a while as he tried to get to grips with his surroundings. He eventually decided; the swords were to go on the cabinets below the window; the scrolls would hang above the leather sofa he had just ordered to come on Friday whilst he'd taken the time to set up his email and order a stack of business cards; and his little netsuke and fukudaruma would sit on the along the shelves of his large bookcase unit.

This all meant it was five PM by the time he was complete. Longer than anticipated, yet worth it and...it was nice to take a day out for preparing his space and his own mind for all that was to come.

The conference hall at Gatewater wasn't anything special; functional and simplistic in its design, making it a popular venue for conferences and conventions such as the one held today. Some round tables and chairs had been set up — a dinner was to be served later, for those that had requested it — around the room, with a lectern at the far end on the raised platform. To the side of the lectern, a string quartet was playing Schubert.
By the time Franziska had arrived, it was already quite crowded, with people she didn't recognise in suits mingling with each other over glasses of champagne and canapes. She wouldn't have been this late had her brother not picked the time to coincide with rush-hour traffic. At the same time, she couldn't fault him; an earlier start meant an earlier departure, which she wouldn't mind at all.

She checked her watch. Only five minutes to six.

"Bored already?" remarked the deep voice from behind her. Lang had returned from the bathroom.

"I don't normally go to these events."

"True, you don't," Lang confirmed. "But chin up, it's your baby brother who's running the show."

"I suppose you have a point there," she replied.

Franziska surveyed her surroundings again. No, she still didn't see anyone she recognised. Clearly Miles was also running late.

"It should be starting soon enough anyway," said Lang, and then gesturing at their surroundings, added, "I'll go get some champagne."

By the time Lang had returned with two glasses, the lights had dimmed and the conversations around her had drawn to a lull, with some people trying to get their last words in. The string quartet had left the podium. Well, she mused, their renditions of Schubert weren't that good anyway.

She took the glass from Lang as her brother emerged from the crowd. She gave him a once-over; Miles Edgeworth was dressed differently; Miles Edgeworth wore glasses now; and Miles Edgeworth was smiling.

Clearly something had changed in Los Angeles in the last few years, and she was going to pry it out of him. Well, she had better listen to what he had to say; maybe his manner of speech had changed while they were at it.

She watched as her brother set himself up on the lectern, tapping the microphone to test it was working, and adjusting his glasses before he spoke.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to welcome you to the thirty-eighth Prosecutor's Convention…"

Franziska breathed a sigh of relief. At least his mannerisms hadn't changed.

"...In this last year, much has been done to tackle the issues we currently face in the legal world. I am pleased to say that within Los Angeles alone we have halved corruption, false conviction rates are at an all-time low, and the Jurist system has passed its preliminary test stages."

Miles paused for a moment, letting his eyes survey the room in front of him.

"...And last but not least, the State of Japanifornia has agreed to a statewide legal reform. This should ensure that the Dark Age of the Law shall come to a close in the coming years."

Applause rang out. She and Lang shared confused glances; Franziska hadn't really heard of this so-called 'Dark Age of the Law' before. But from what she had gathered, it seemed to refer to the anarchy that constituted the last seven years. She had read, of course, of Phoenix Wright's disbarment and subsequently of Kristoph Gavin's alleged forgeries and his execution in early 2027. But beyond that...the term escaped her. Nevertheless, if that was what Miles Edgeworth had
decided to tackle in his term of as Chief Prosecutor, then so be it. It was about time.

"...There remains a lot to be done in this next year, but I, for one, am looking forward to working with you all. Let us have another productive year."

The second round of applause signalled that the speech had ended. The lights were turned up, brightening up the room again.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Lang said.

"No," she agreed, watching the crowd. Her brother, who was being accosted at every turn with platitudes, had stopped to talk to a tall, mangy-looking man. "He's not such a fool as he seems at times."

Lang chuckled. "Well, he has certainly grown since I last saw him."

Her brother and the man were now walking towards them. The string quartet had started again; it was Beethoven this time. "Indeed."

Miles smiled warmly when he approached them. "Agent Lang, Franziska, it is good to see you again."

Lang nodded in acknowledgement. "You, too, Mr Chief Prosecutor."

Franziska smirked, "Good evening to you too, Little Brother. Not a bad speech you gave."

"But not perfect?" he teased.

"No. Nothing can ever be perfect."

A flicker of something crossed Miles' features, and he settled into a smile. "Right you are."

Franziska harrumphed. "Well anyway, who is that man standing behind you looking so glum?"

At that, Miles chuckled, sidestepping to allow the man through into their circle. "This is Simon Blackquill. Notoriously known for having plunged the legal world into the Dark Age of Law."

Lang gave Blackquill a once-over, eyebrows furrowed. "What did you do?"

Blackquill smirked. "I murdered my mentor."

"Nah, you didn't," Lang said, relaxing. He turned to Edgeworth. "Stop playing games with us, Mr Chief Prosecutor. You think I don't know this guy? He's helped us find that Phantom bastard."

He clapped a hand onto Blackquill's shoulder at those words. "I'm Shi-Long Lang, the name you saw on the security clearances."

"Thank you," he muttered, bowing his head respectfully. "Your contributions did not go unnoticed."

"And I'm Franziska von Karma. I am an international prosecutor working alongside Interpol."

Blackquill nodded in acknowledgement. "I was witness to some of your trials as a law student, von Karma-dono. I admired your performance."

At those words, Franziska's face relaxed into a smirk; she was going to like this Simon Blackquill
character.

At this point Edgeworth interjected. "Seeing as we're all here, I think this gives us the perfect opportunity to discuss your memo, Agent Lang. Simon Blackquill would like to offer his services in the Phantom investigation."

Lang nodded, face once more serious. "I don't see a problem with that. Would be good to have you on the team." Then he pinched the bridge of his nose. "I have to say, we haven't gotten anywhere with the guy. Just sits in his cell. Doesn't say anything."

"Will you be on the task-force?" asked Edgeworth.

"Yeah. Right now we're just figuring things out; you see, usually he'd be out of our hair because he'd be sent back to where he came from. But Interpol doesn't have a record on who he is, so we're thinking of setting up some interrogations to ask him. Protocol and all that."

"That is a fair assessment to make," said Miles. "So you will be in Los Angeles for however long it'll take you to determine Phantom's origins?"

"That's the idea. Me and her both," he confirmed, gesturing towards Franziska.

"I doubt it will be an easy feat to accomplish, Lang-dono," remarked Blackquill, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah, well," he shrugged. "Lang Zi says, 'Wolves persevere on the hunt'. We'll get to the bottom of it."

At that, Lang checked the time on his watch. It was half-past seven. "I gotta go now. Conference call from Zheng Fa in about an hour that I need to prepare for."

With their goodbyes said, the group dispersed. Lang went to hail a cab, and the siblings began to talk amongst themselves.

Simon, happy with the way things had turned out, saw no reason to remain. He didn't care for alcohol or bite-size niblets with people he barely knew, so he decided to go home.

When he stepped out of the hotel, it was nearly dark outside, the sky painted in a beautiful midnight blue. Unfortunately for him, no stars would appear, given the city's notorious levels of light pollution. Nonetheless, it instilled in him a sense of calm as he walked to the bus stop.

*Take heart, the bejewelled night sky remains beautiful when viewed beyond bars.*

For the first time in a long time, Simon didn't feel the need to mull over events in his head. Or even to think, for that matter.

Chapter End Notes

Inspiration for Franziska's character design from [here](#) and [here](#).
Go to Sleep

Chapter Summary

Something for the rag and bone man"/ "Over my dead body"/ Something big is gonna happen/ "Over my dead body"

January 17, 2028

In the past week, Simon found himself waking up earlier with each day, meeting his niece Athena for a coffee downtown after her morning run, catching up with her regarding the latest shenanigans at the Wright Anything Agency and with her own friends. She didn't have to divulge this information to him, but seven years locked up in a cell had presumably led her to believe that Simon hadn't much by way of company.

She was right of course, and he didn't mind their conversations. At the very least they set him up in a somewhat good mood and whenever he walked into his newly refurbished office, he was met with a sense of tranquility and willingness to work hard.

Taka's presence this morning was also another motivator. He sat patiently on the windowsill as Simon set down his satchel onto his new sofa, procuring a small paper bag of beef jerky. He had spent his weekend relearning the recipe in Aura's — no — his kitchen and concluded that his batch would have to wait a couple of months before Taka could give an opinion on it and so the current batch he had in his hand was from the deli across the street that often provided sandwiches for the office at lunchtime.

He tore off a strip and gave it to the bird who munched on it happily.

"It seems that this establishment is reputable. I shall purchase from them again if you so desire," Simon muttered to him, stroking his plumage. "We also must rid of you of that striped kerchief. Perhaps a lighter colour would be more to your taste."

Taka cawed in response. Feeling satisfied with his breakfast and the attention he received, he spread his wings, and set off again. Simon wondered whether the bird still resided near the courthouse. He hadn't been there in near a month now.

He spent the majority of his first hour today working on answering emails, ignoring the requests for interviews by reporters and television crews.

It was ten in the morning when he heard a timid knock on his door, and he frowned. "Enter."

A young legal aide with mousy brown hair entered, looking thoroughly timid.

"There's a memo for you from the Chief Prosecutor," she squeaked out.

"Pray tell, why could he not relay it through his secretary?"

"He is out on business. And she asked me to hand it to you."
Simon knitted his eyebrows at that statement; he wondered if Edgeworth’s absence had anything to do with the Phantom matter. But he had said he would keep him informed if anything happened there, so Simon didn’t concern himself too much with this.

He dismissed the aide and took the memo and file. Flicking through it, it appeared to be a preliminary report of the murder of an unidentified man in a nearby neighbourhood.

The crime scene wasn’t far from the office’s location in Downtown LA, in Exposé Park.

Exposé Park wasn’t exactly known for its welcoming atmosphere, notorious for its gang shootouts between the Rivales and Cadaverinis in decades past, but it had clearly seen better days. In the last few years, the surrounding area had emerged as a sleazy, industrial part of the city that was quietly and unhurriedly morphing into a ghost zone; abandoned buildings with broken glass windows and crude spray-painted messages on chalky-white walls.

He had visited this area before, one time when it wasn’t swarming with investigators combing the grass and gravel. It had been a quick but enjoyable trip with Aura to meet Metis for the first time for lunch at a restaurant not so far from here.

But this was hardly the right time to be sifting through memories as a woman with a stony expression in a lab coat approached him from behind the police tape.

Simon produced his badge. "I apologise for appearing early but Edgeworth-dono requested my presence here. I assume you’re the detective…?"

Her face lit up at the mention of his superior.

"Detective Skye. Ema Skye," she answered. Then she lifted the tape to let him through. "You’re…Prosecutor Blackquill, right?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "I heard about Fulbright, by the way. I’m sorry."

"Yes, well…” he offered her a wan smile. I didn’t know him.

"He was a cool guy. Didn't mind helping me out sometimes," she said, guiding him to the site. "Anyway, we got this call at six this morning. A truck driver on his break found the guy."

Simon nodded, wrapping his coat closer to him.

"Well, here he is," Skye said.

She pointed out the simple-clothed body of a man lying in a patch of dry grass with her index finger. His skin looked waxy, as though he’d emerged from a Madame Tussaud’s, and his brown hair stuck to his forehead. His limbs were awkwardly splayed out, and Simon could see some very clear stab wounds on his torso. Despite the obvious signs of foul play, there was actually very little blood to be found.

Simon looked away from the sight before him, swallowing away his own recollection of discovering a body. He saw Skye approach him again, leaving behind men cloaked in white.

"The technicians had problems getting this out of his right hand. Rigor mortis, they said."

She held up an evidence bag containing a small green microchip. There were flecks of dried blood
"Is there a likelihood of grasping what is on the microchip?"

"I'll get it sent down to the tech guys later today, but in the meantime the coroner'll be busy performing the autopsy - I'll check in on that. But it should be fairly obvious what went down here; foul play or a mugging. And I'll get some of the officers to round up any witnesses and people to ID the victim, seeing as he didn't have anything on him."

Simon nodded in reply, registering her words. He turned around so that his back faced her. "Good. You can apprise me of the latest discoveries through the office telephone, Biscuits."

Skye scoffed, an amused expression on her face. "Biscuits?"

Simon nodded. "One would be a fool not to recognise those processed snacks that you love so much."

Skye checked her bag; sure enough, a bulging packet of biscuits was preventing it from closing properly. "Oh, these? They're called snackoos. You want one?"

Simon shook his head. "No, thank you, Detective."

She snorted, zipping up her back. "Suit yourself. You're a change from that glimmerous fop. But a nice change."

Then she offered, "How about I get you some tea? I can bring it over later."

"I would not mind."

"Cool, see you later then."

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After processing the crime scene and making notes, Ema was quick to get back to the precinct for the briefing and some lunch. Then, as protocol would have it, a call from the coroner to meet her. Ema grinned; this was the best part of her day when she got landed with a murder case.

The police morgue was a large rectangular room adjacent to the laboratory in the basement of the police HQ. It was a sterile room with equally sterile fluorescent lighting; a wall of metal fridges took up the left side of the room, with a dividing screen — typically used by the pathologists to put up x-rays or toxicology reports — on the right. Dead centre of the room stood two metal tables, one of which was covered in a white sheet.

Corrie Nøhr emerged from behind a curtain where one could see an operating table with various utensils adjacent to it in a small container. She was a slim woman in her forties dressed in blue scrubs, greying hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. She met Ema with a smile, crow's feet appearing at the corners of her eyes.

"Ema, come in. Good day?" she asked, her accent distinctively North Germanic.

"Not really. Loud phone call woke me up and then I got stuck with that." Ema said, indicating her head at the body.

"Yes, this one was quite a challenge. I'll let you figure it out." Nøhr said. She moved to lean against the divider and crossed her arms.

Ema pulled off the cover, staring at the nude form of the victim. "There's several bruises on the
ribs. I'm guessing they're broken. Punctured lung? Foul play?"

She circled the body. "Rigor mortis is still present. He was cold when the witness found him. Been dead at least seven hours by 6 AM. That makes it...11 PM when he died. There's the blood loss. But why three entry wounds? A frenzy? The bruising on the ankle means that he tried to get away and then got stabbed in the calf.

"But if the lung was punctured then he would've had about 45 minutes to live so then we take the blood loss into consideration. But the cut to his jugular vein would have drastically reduced his survival chances, meaning...it was the blood loss that effectively killed him. Right?"

Nøhr nodded, eyes glinting in the bright light.

"So hypothetically, he was attacked by an intruder who stabbed him in the ribs first and the lung got punctured, then as he fled he was slashed in the calf, grabbed again and attacked in the stomach and finally, judging by the bruising on the shoulder was finally slashed in the throat," Ema concluded.

Nøhr flashed her a grin. "I knew you'd get it eventually. Here, catch."

An astounded Ema lifted her hand to grab the folder.

"Thanks, I owe you one! I'll catch you around later," she said, grinning too as she pushed the metal bar to let herself out. Lab and the Prosecutor's Office.

It was two when Simon heard a knock on his door, and in came Detective Skye carrying several bulky folders, an evidence bag and a plastic glass of green liquid. Simon's eyes followed her as she set down the glass on his desk; she muttered something about it being a matcha milkshake, then straightened her back and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

"I thought you might wanna get the preliminary autopsy," she said, pausing the catch her breath.

Simon rested his chin in his hand, a smirk plastered on his face. "And I thought you were to inform me of developments via the phone, Biscuits."

"Yeah, well, you wouldn't want to receive these gruesome details on your cell phone. Also, you said you wanted tea."

"Oh?"

Skye dropped a large, baby-blue folder on his desk. Simon opened it, turning the paper-clipped pages, eyeing the cursive handwriting and red arrows around photographs of the crime scene and the body.

"Victim was Jacob Hawthorn, aged forty-two, worked here as a senior high prosecutor in the international division." Skye's finger tapped on a gruesome photo of the deceased male. "There were three entry wounds; one on his stomach which fractured the eleventh and twelfth ribs and punctured his left lung; another on his right calf which nicked his soleus muscle; and one on his throat. He died from the cut to the jugular vein. Forensics deduced that they were all from a long blade, and foul play is suspected judging by the various wounds. It's too soon to say how many people were involved."

"...And the microchip?" he inquired.
She produced a small evidence bag containing the green chip inside, Simon peered at it.

"The microchip has zero traces of DNA belonging to anyone other than the victim. I'll get Forensics to take another look at it, but the data relates to some court cases in Borgia that Hawthorn was handling."

"A murder with ties to the globe?"

Skye nodded. "That's what I was thinking but you'd better talk to your colleagues about it. See if anyone knew what he was working on."

"Thank you, Biscuits," Simon said, before adding with a smirk. "Ah, and thank you for the 'tea'."

"No problem. I'll keep you updated then."

"That would be helpful. If I find anything, I shall inform you as well."

Skye nodded, took away the evidence bag resting on his desk and walked out, wishing him a good rest of his day while she was at it.

A small smile crept up his lips. What was it she had said this morning? That he was a nice change. Well, so was she. He sighed. Then again, what did he know of his investigative partners?

He turned his attention to the matcha tea milkshake she'd bought him, and drank some. It...didn't taste bad at all, actually; a little too milky for his taste, but there was a hint of the tea there. He would have to ask her where she bought it, so he could return the favour.

Going back to the case at hand, and the advice Skye had left him with, the only clear option that presented itself would be to gain access to Hawthorn's office. Perhaps what was in there would aid in his investigation. Well, he would know that, wouldn't he, what with his own office being raided after Metis' murder.

Don't. He sighed. Yes, that was probably the best course of action for now.

He turned to his computer and began to draft an email when he heard soft pattering against the windows. Simon swivelled around in his chair; it was raining.

It rained the day she died, too.

A clap of thunder, and he turned back to his desk to complete his email.
January 18, 2028

At quarter-past eleven, Simon hauled in the last of the evidence boxes from Hawthorn's office down on the eighth floor, setting it down on the floor with a grunt. He stretched his arms above his head and surveyed his surroundings; stacks of paper in Borginian covered most of the sofa and floor while cardboard boxes marked 'International' sat in a small corner.

His email to Edgeworth yesterday afternoon had allowed him access into the evidence locker room and had subsequently allowed the police to seize the victim's belongings, in the hopes of finding something to indicate motive for murder. He moved to sit on the floor, dictionary and pen in hand, and plucked a file to study from this veritable mountain of paperwork.

But as Simon well knew from his childhood spent lounging on the sofa attempting to decipher the linguistic nuances in different manga editions, translation was no quick and easy feat. He enjoyed it nonetheless, as it allowed him to focus on the matter at hand rather than other aspects of this developing case, bringing him back into his analytical self. From what he could make out through all the technical jargon, this particular bilingual document seemed to contain a list of smuggling cases in Borginia. That was a start.

He made it through five more files when a quiet knock sounded out on the door and a petite woman Simon recognised to be Hannah Fright, Edgeworth's secretary, appeared in the doorway.

"Mr Blackquill? The Chief Prosecutor wants to see you. He says it's urgent."

The office was unusually dark, and crowded; the curtains were drawn and all the sofas seemed to be occupied. Edgeworth was seated on a sofa next to von Karma, with Lang on the opposite sofa, his laptop and a projector beside him which he was kind enough to shift onto his lap to allow Simon to sit down.

Now seated, Edgeworth cleared his throat to speak, adjusting his glasses. "I apologise for the abruptness, Mr Blackquill. This is rather a...delicate matter, as you can see."

"Quite alright, Edgeworth-dono." Simon crossed his arms. "I gather it is regarding our mutual friend."

"Yes," he confirmed. "Following the retrial where he was shot down, a video began to circulate the internet. It was made by him a few weeks prior to your set execution date, featuring him in the same Noh mask Ms Cykes described in her testimony. It appeared to have been on a private network before being distributed publicly. The media has no doubt caught whiff of it and
apparently so did the intelligence services. This prompted a...phone call this morning."

"A phone call?" echoed Simon, brows furrowed.

His question was met with Lang leaning forward in his seat, setting up a recording device on the coffee table. The play button was pressed and a smooth, clipped female voice came through the speakers, distorted by radio static.

"Good morning Chief Prosecutor, this is the Borginian Intelligence Services calling. We understand that one of our agents has been arrested in your country. His name is Erikh Qvinn, better known by the media as the 'Phantom'. Our government is calling for his extradition by martial law on charges of treason, selling state secrets and comprising the national security for the State of Borginia. We understand that diplomatic measures may be called into allowing for the legal processes to occur and the office of the district attorney has already been notified of this matter. If you permit us to hold a meeting with him prior to any legal involvement then we can meet in person to discuss his situation. Thank you for your time."

Edgeworth stopped the tape. "This came through my office telephone this morning, so I decided to contact Ms von Karma and Agent Lang, to inform them of the matter. While the telephone does display the contact details and which country the call is originating from — in this case Borginia — there is no plausible way to confirm the location of the caller."

"In any case, it may prove to be useful information. It is too early to say, but it is a start," von Karma said. She shifted in her seat, addressing Simon. "Let's set aside this phone call for the moment. I don't think you've seen the video, Simon Blackquill. Take a look."

She took out her tablet and showed him the video. A man in a Noh mask with a heavily distorted voice sat on the tiled floor of a relatively spartan room, Chinese takeaway boxes littered around him. There was nothing to provide this man's identity, but there was no doubt that this had been shot somewhere in the real and dead Fulbright's apartment.

Midway through, the voice changed and Simon's eyes widened.

"...In justice we trust!"

It was Bobby Fulbright's voice.

Or rather, who he had believed to be the real Fulbright. A supposedly upright man whom he'd never had the pleasure of meeting, beyond what he now knew to be a facade behind bulletproof glass that had spoken of rehabilitation and justice. Simon recalled dismissing him, for there was no need to be meddling in the affairs of a dead man walking, only to be told with a smarmy smile that he had no choice but to acquiesce.

Well, look where that led you.

von Karma took back the tablet. "I presume you can tell us if it is a genuine article, Simon Blackquill."

"It is," he confirmed quietly, hoarsely. He poured himself a glass of water and gulped it down.

Lang refilled his glass and handed it back to him. "Here."

"Thank you."

Lang nodded in acknowledgement, and stood up. "Well if the call is true, then it would be useful to
brief you on Borginia."

"If you could, Mr Chief Prosecutor," he gestured at the lights, before moving to set up the projector to connect with his laptop.

"Ah yes," Edgeworth acknowledged, as he went about dimming the lights and closing the curtains. With the projector on the table, and the screen displayed onto the cream wall behind where Franziska was sat, Lang set to pulling up a map of the world.

Lang zoned in on a small landlocked nation in Eastern Europe, bordering Russia and the Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia. "This is Borginia," he stated, and then, pointing his finger to trace a border in the north, he announced, "Above Borginia is Cohdopia."

Cohdopia was shown to be bordering Estonia to the west and Russia to the east, with a small strip of maritime control over the Gulf of Finland in the northwest and Lake Ladoga to the northeast. If Lang zoomed in further, it would show that both nations shared the lakes Peipus and Pskov with Estonia.

"Borginia is small but strong. It has good construction industries," he continued, waving the projector remote around in his hand. "Wood-processing in particular, and some textiles. The economic situation is...a bit messed up since 2025 when they had a recession. It relies on Russia for oil and gas, and exports from Russia have been falling. But their military is powerful as is their military intelligence."

He cleared his throat. "From that it's safe to assume that the Phantom — or Erikh Qvinn, but I won't call him that until I see some actual proof — works in the intelligence services there. But as with this phone call, I'll be properly tracing it, we could be put off the scent and for all we know he could be from South Africa. I'm not buying it just yet but the order seems legitimate in connection with the online video. He's a wanted fugitive and Fulbright was his last mission."

Lang turned off the projector. "If we're gonna allow him to be extradited then we will have to set up a meeting with his direct superiors. I don't care if it breaks confidentiality agreements, it has to be done to make sure we're not being set up. If they want to meet up with their guy, then okay. But we need our eyes and ears everywhere."

Edgeworth raised his eyebrows. "Agent Lang, you cannot honestly believe that these meetings can be set up, can you?"

"Come on, Mr Chief Prosecutor, don't tell me you haven't heard of this happening. Let them do what they need to do and we get intel from it. Win-win."

Lang's hazel eyes drifted. His arms were crossed as if to anticipate a challenge. "It's not like the DA's office isn't sitting on a mountain of bribery and corruption."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Edgeworth, brows furrowing in concern at Lang's words.

Lang put his hands out in front of him in a gesture of non-confrontation. "I'm just saying it as it is. Your so-called legal reform is gonna need to do a lot before it gets anywhere."

He folded his arms. "But hey, take it as a compliment - they've got you on the committee for the reform and you're the most moral one around. I trust you, for what it's worth."

With that, Lang stood up and began gathering up his belongings. "Anyway, tell me what the DA says, and then we can get onto the phone call data to verify it. See if the person who made the call is at that meeting."
"I have to rush now. Got a conference call with Lyon," grabbing his coat from the rack, Lang blurted out a quick "Bye."

With Lang's departure signalling an end to their meeting, von Karma was next to leave, detailing a meeting of her own in downtown LA. That left Simon and Edgeworth.

"Have you gathered much evidence from the case I gave you?" asked Edgeworth, breaking the silence. Changing tack would be best for now.

Simon looked up and nodded. "I have just garnered all the required materials to begin reading. I shall have to enlist in the services of a Borginian translator."

"Hawthorn's work was central to dealing with smuggling cases and missing persons if that is of any help to you. There also were some other things he was handling but the true scale cannot be determined until the police can inform us."

"The constabulary shall apprise me of the details. Or rather, Skye-dono will."

Edgeworth nodded. "How are you settling in with her...after your last one?"

Simon eyed him. His superior, sensing discomfort, opened his mouth as if to say something before closing it again.

"I apologise," Edgeworth said finally. "I spoke out of turn. Don't feel obliged to answer that question."

Simon shook his head. "Do not concern yourself, Edgeworth-dono. She...is a competent investigative partner."

A beat, and then Simon rose abruptly, fists clenched, and without looking at Edgeworth, said, "It does not matter any longer. I should be getting back to work now."

The door clicked shut before Edgeworth could comment any further.

Subject: Approval

Dear Lang and Franziska,

It has been brought to my attention late this evening that the DA has already approved the request. Do as you must to secure access to the interview.

Regards,

Miles Edgeworth

Chapter End Notes

Just so you can visualise it better, I made a [map of Cohdopia and Borginia](#).

As a basic key: black square means capital city, red square is a smaller town/city/village, and the grey lines running along Cohdopia indicate the old borders of Allebahst and Babahl.
Let me know what you think!
You and Whose Army?

Chapter Summary

You and whose army?// You and your cronies

January 20, 2028

The box-like room that served as a meeting room was damp. Damp, with a faint smell of piss permeating the air. He looked around him. Cement walls and linoleum floor. Linoleum was good for cleaning stains. It still didn't change the fact that it smelled like piss in here though. Damp, piss and bleach.

There was a sheet of glass that covered his side of the wall from the other. There were two chairs set up on the other side. The glass did not mean he could see his face. Tough.

He had not seen his face since he was put in his cell — oh, he didn't know how many days ago now — so that did not matter. He hadn't been told why he was here, or who he was for that matter. They just kept calling him "Guy". Was his name Guy? He didn't know that either.

All he knew was that there was a security camera looking right at him. He didn't like security cameras. They'd taken him from his cell to be cuffed by the ankles to a chair, to just sit and wait.

He craned his neck to look at the guard posted at the door, but his shackles refused to budge.

So he was to sit and wait and look ahead.

Well, goddammit.

"Why am I here?"

The guard did not respond. He stared at the security camera for a few more moments before concluding that any attempts to get an answer would be fruitless, so he settled back down in his seat.

If he wasn't going to get any answers, he might as well entertain himself. So, he simply amused himself by staring at his hands. He could see no blemishes; no scars; no moles or freckles. No veins, for that matter. Pale white. Boring.

A cell door slammed shut in the distance, and a guy inside the block screamed. He tutted. There was always noise. It never stopped. He had moved on to examining his nails by now. They had been clipped short, with no dirt underneath them. Equally as dull.

He was about to move on to his feet, when the door on the other side opened with a sharp squeak. Two figures had emerged. Two figures for two seats. He looked at them.

Ah, so that was why he had been summoned.

"Hello, Erikh Qvinn," said the woman in a nasal voice. He did not like her voice.
"Hello," he responded.

The man and the woman were brown-haired and blue-eyed and wore double-breasted suits. They sat down in front of him. She wore glasses. He had a scar on his right cheek, just above the cheekbone.

"Would you like to look at yourself?" asked the woman, pressing a mirror against the glass. "That's your face, Erikh Qvinn."

He lifted his head to meet his reflection, only to be met by a rather unremarkable face; a pair of hazel eyes offset by dark eyelashes set deep into angular features, with a smooth egg for a head, hair shorn off like a sheep in summer. A very everyday-man face, save for a deep scar dead-centre on the forehead.

So this was Erikh Qvinn's face, was it?

Erikh Qvinn moved his pale lips, moving his mouth into an upwards smirk, and then a thin line for a frown, and then allowed for the corners of his mouth to turn downward. Erikh Qvinn moved his dark eyebrows, scrunching them up and raising them, cocking one eyebrow; he could see the creases in his eyelids and the corners of his eyes. And Erikh Qvinn opened his mouth, a hollow laugh escaping him. He could see his teeth, pearly white, and he closed his mouth, resuming into a bored gaze.

She removed the mirror. They began pulling out files from their briefcases.

"I assume you know why we're here," she said.

Qvinn shrugged. His lips turned downward in a condescending smirk. "No."

"I am Rebekah Klaark and this is Johannes Birken," she introduced, indicating a hand at her colleague, who hadn't bothered to shave apparently. "We're from Central Command in Borginia."

Birken then chose to speak, his voice low in his throat, and Qvinn decided he much preferred this voice. "You have appeared on our radar as a mole. We have been conducting investigations into agents suspected of illegal conduct, selling state secrets and such. And you've appeared there more than once. Could you explain why?"

"The video explains it enough, don't you think," he stated, tilting his head to face Birken who maintained his neutral expression.

"The video explains nothing," Birken said with a frown. "I don't understand what you mean by 'destroying the old guard', as you put it."

A forced, lopsided smile escaped Qvinn. "It is what it is. You are of the old guard, of the days of the war. There is no need for you anymore, which is why we must pave way for the new forces, for this age of the law."

Then he leaned forward, eyes trained on Birken. "You should have died on the battlefield."

Birken did not respond. Klaark, however, did not kindly to those words.

"This is slander, Agent. You have verbally assaulted an officer, you have compromised our national security by appearing in a court of law unmasked, consistently physically assaulted a civil servant, one Simon Blackquill, with a taser. And that is only within this country's borders alone. There is evidence that indicates you having conducted your missions in an unethical manner."
"Show me your proof then," he spat out.

Four photographs were lined up in front of him. Klaark tapped at each one.

"These put you at various comprising zones unrelated to your missions. Here we have you near the Cohdopian embassy in Copenhagen in March 2025, then at the embassy in Moscow in February 2026 and again in Tokyo in October 2026. Most shockingly is this photograph taken of you in January 2027, meeting the former Cohdopian defence minister Papilio Machaon, bearing in mind that none of your missions have fallen under the joint forces of Cohdopia and Borginia. Supported by your vague references to being a member of an organisation in your video, this leads us to believe that you are allied with Cohdopia; need I remind you that diplomatic relations between the two countries are strained?"

He shrugged. "A few photos show nothing. Got any written proof?"

Instead of more paperwork, Birken pulled out a recording device and pressed play.

"Thank you. Tell Papilio I said hi."

Klaark continued, "This is a recorded conversation between you and a Cohdopian security official, one Kallima Inachus, just after your meeting with Machaon took place. We subsequently discover in March 2027, confidential military intelligence documents have been leaked. Documents which could've compromised our head of state and also could've given Cohdopia reason to believe that we wanted their resources."

She leaned forward, her icy blue eyes boring holes into Qvinn's. "Allow me to emphasise, since you clearly don't understand the severity of your actions. Your data was given to Cohdopia, with which we have a tense relationship with and years of war. Considering how sensitive it was, it could have easily escalated into a military standoff."

Another shrug. "Our region is always at war."

The officers opposite him chose to ignore his comment. They exchanged stern glances. Klaark turned her head to face him again. "Your treason is enough to put you to the firing squad. For that we shot you in the head at that trial lest you were to compromise our relationship with this country also. You're lucky you survived."

Qvinn stiffened. No reply.

"You're also lucky that Interpol caught you before we did. If not..." A smirk formed on her pale features, and she had her face pressed up against the glass. "You'd have received more than that pretty little hole in your head."

The muscles in Qvinn's bottom jaw were working, moving rapidly. He lowered his head.

"Why don't you tell Central Command that I will not be back. I would rather eat shit than go back there."

The smirk was still present. "Your message shall be passed on. Good day, Erikh Qvinn."

The chairs scraped again on the floor, the papers rustled and boots clacked on the surface. The two officers filed out without so much as a backward glance, only pausing to nod politely at the security guard who held the door on the other side. Qvinn did not look away from the door, until he was forcibly led back to his cell. The cell that smelled like damp, piss and bleach.
Aside from the sound of shuffling feet and the low hum coming from the ventilation system, loud silence filtered through the concrete walls and barred cells as Qvinn became nothing more than a light grey dot at the end of the hallway. Practically invisible.

Practically a Phantom.
It had just turned 8 AM when Miles pulled up at the Prosecutor's Office car park. He turned off the engine and unbuckled his seatbelt, and sighed. He didn't often come at this hour, usually opting to leave home earlier to arrive at 7 AM. But today he had woken up a little later having slept at midnight the night before, and right now, was feeling thoroughly miserable. This is why he didn't stay up till midnight.

It wasn't that he had intended to go to bed so late. It just happened that he'd got back home yesterday evening, walked the dog, fed the dog, made himself dinner and then just lay on the sofa for the better part of the evening, watching mind-numbing TV. The mind-numbing TV had made his mind wander and next thing he knew, he went to bed two hours after his scheduled bedtime.

He wasn't looking forward to today, that much was clear. Franziska's text last night partly explained the mind-wandering; they'd had the DA-approved meeting earlier that day, and she was going to come over this afternoon to bring him up to speed. Small mercies, he had to note, that it was her rather than Lang that would be meeting with him today.

He grabbed his coat and briefcase and exited the car, locking it behind him. For what it was worth, he was glad he had slept in his own bed than stayed at the office. His sleepless nights in his twenties were catching up to him fast these days. They did say that your thirties meant taking better care of yourself. At least he was doing that much. What did they call it? Striking a work-life balance. Yes, that was it.

He could safely say he was trying to strike that balance. He opened the fire door that led him up into the lobby. He had his own house now; a single-family home in the suburbs. His younger self would've shuddered at the notion, but years of sparse flats and rented rooms in foreign cities meant that he had come to appreciate mundane things, like houses with white picket fences. And it was a nice house, with a porch that he could sit on in the evenings; with a garden for the dog (Pess had sadly passed away a few years ago now, and he had since acquired a new canine companion; a Golden Retriever aptly named Blondie, thanks to young Trucy's contributions) to run around in; and with a swimming pool for him to get some exercise in over the weekends.

He nodded a good morning to the receptionist in the lobby, and then walked straight towards the fire stairs. Before he could grab the handle to open the door, a hand shot out in front of him.

"Oh, morning, Mr Edgeworth," greeted the feminine voice.

A small smile passed him. "Good morning, Detective Skye. I see you're taking the stairs."

She opened the door to let him in. "Yeah. Elevator was too slow."
"Ah, it usually is at this hour. What are you doing here?"

She held up the bags on evidence in her free hand. "I've gotta drop these off at the tenth floor."

"Prosecutor Blackquill's case? How is it faring?"

She grimaced. "The data is...It's all a mess, put it that way."

"A mess?" he prompted, taking the stairs two by two.

She came to a stop, beckoning him downstairs again. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"We found a microchip on Hawthorn and it turns out he was working on stuff that were on Interpol's servers," she whispered. "I haven't told Blackquill yet. Just about to."

"That isn't unusual for an international prosecutor in his standing. But I do understand that it would be a muddle to get through." Miles said, furrowing his brow. "And I presume you cannot access what is on those servers at the moment?"

Ema shook her head. "No. I'd have to get permission."

He would have to get ahold of Agent Lang, in that case. "I'll see what I can do on my end."

She nodded. "I'll tell Blackquill all that."

"While you're at it, could you ask him to meet me in two hours' time?"

"Sure."

The rest of their walk up to the tenth floor continued in silence, until Ema stopped outside the corresponding fire door and smiled at him.

"Have a good day, Mr Edgeworth," she said before she disappeared into the hallway.

"You too, Detective Skye."

He finally made his way up to his fifteenth floor office, nodded a good morning to Hannah Fright before seating himself at his desk. As his laptop booted up, he checked through his schedule for the day before moving to his email.

**Subject: Evidence query**

**Dear Agent Lang,**

*I'm writing to inquire about a Jacob Hawthorn's casework with Interpol. He was a prosecutor under my jurisdiction with sensitive information on his person, who was found murdered on January 17. It may help the investigation team in charge, to allow them access to his work with Interpol.***

**Regards,**

*Miles Edgeworth.*

Now he was to wait for a response. In the meantime, he could only busy himself with some unfinished paperwork until his set meeting with Blackquill. He hoped the man was doing alright; he hadn't seemed very comfortable at their meeting the other day.
At 10 AM on the dot, Blackquill entered, looking somewhat pleased with himself. Miles wondered if Detective Skye had a hand to play in his subordinate's amusement, but nevertheless, it was calming to see him like this.


"I did. Please, make yourself comfortable," said Miles. He moved to sit down opposite his colleague. "I am sure Detective Skye has informed you of the current issue in your victim's records?"

"She has," he confirmed. "It is tedious."

"Unfortunately, this is not uncommon. International prosecutors often find themselves with casework that is tied to Interpol. For us to obtain it, we need to gain permission from them."

"I see." Blackquill leaned back in his seat. He looked to be contemplating the situation. Then he asked, "Would that imply the international constabulary will take control of this case?"

Miles furrowed his eyebrows. "It is too early to say at the moment. But it seems likely. I am sure you are aware of the terms of jurisdiction?"

"Is that not the case for our mutual friend?" Blackquill didn't look at him when he said that.

"It is indeed the case; Interpol takes control of the overall investigation, but collaborates with local police authorities to reach the truth of the matter."

"Ergo, Skye-dono will remain in charge here then, should this prove to be an international matter."

"Exactly," confirmed Miles. "You will also then be asked to liaise with Interpol on any of your findings."

"Understood." Simon crossed his arms. "On that note, Edgeworth-dono…"

"Yes?"

"It appears the deceased was investigating smuggling rings and espionage agencies."

"Again, not unusual, given the scope and breadth of Interpol's activities."

"Furthermore," continued Blackquill. "Do you not find it intriguing that the phone call from these alleged Borginian officials came on the morrow of discovering this murder? Bearing in mind that the victim was focused on investigations in Borginia."

Miles frowned. "I have to admit, it is a little unusual. There may be no connection whatsoever between Mr Hawthorn's casework and Borginia, be it in the form of their intelligence services or their criminal activities. But...I find myself sincerely doubting that."

"Hm." Blackquill rose from his seat. "Indeed. Well, do inform me if the jurisdiction is passed on to Interpol. I shall do my best to comply with their investigation."

"I shall, Mr Blackquill. I have contacted Agent Lang, in any case."

Satisfied with his response, Blackquill nodded and left, leaving Miles to get back to his work.

For the rest of the morning, Miles busied himself with sorting out the court docket for next month and sending reviews to the P.I.C. There was only so much he could do for the time being with
regards to the court docket; he had managed to schedule appeals and civil court cases that had been in their preparation stages for a while now, meaning they had been on a waiting list to have their cases seen to. Criminal courts did not have that luxury; there was a significant degree of spontaneity he had to account for, so it was left to circumstances at the time. For example, had Blackquill managed to find a suspect in the Hawthorn murder already, his case would be heard on Monday morning. But as there was no suspect and with the investigation in its nascent stages, his case would not see a courtroom anytime soon.

At around noon Ms Fright had brought in his customary sandwich and salad, leaving him to make tea. He would check his emails for a second time at lunch. Over his sandwich, he logged in to his email and found a reply from Agent Lang. Or rather, from Franziska on his behalf.

Subject: Re: Evidence query

Dear Miles Edgeworth,

At the moment we cannot safely provide access to Jacob Hawthorn's documents. I will meet you at 3 PM to discuss this further with you.

Regards,

Franziska von Karma

True enough, Franziska turned up at his office at 3 PM. By then, he had sent off reviews to the P.I.C regarding prosecutorial misconduct in his office, singling out a few names for consideration. Over the last few years, under The Honourable Justine Courtney's direction — she still presided over high-profile cases at times — the committee had developed to become a more reliable regulatory body that he could trust in their conduct as an overseer in the legal world. He hoped he would continue to see a solid working relationship between the P.I.C and the Prosecutors' Office through the process of the legal reform.

The ever-familiar sounds of high heels clicking on wooden floorboards was enough to indicate his visitor. Franziska set her belongings down on the sofa and sat down.

"I apologise this visit’s short notice, Miles Edgeworth," she said, waving off his offer of tea; force of habit of his, to offer tea to visitors. "But it was important to convey this information to you in person."

She did not wait for him to respond. "First of all, Jacob Hawthorn's murder was not random."

His eyes widened. He sat back down at his desk. "What do you mean?"

"We have received similar reports from overseas," she placed three baby-blue case files on the coffee table. "Three other international prosecutors were found dead in obscure locations. Furthermore, every one of those prosecutors were liaising with Interpol and were found to have microchips on their person."

"That coincides with Mr Hawthorn's murder. Detective Skye informed me of a microchip this morning."

"Precisely. Moreover, it is important to note that these microchips all contained Interpol files."

"Hm." he paused, searching for something to say. He recalled Blackquill's concern earlier today. "Were these lawyers all working on cases related to Borginia?"
"I cannot say for the moment," she crossed her arms. "But is highly probable."

"I see. Out of curiosity then, these other murders...where did they occur?"

"Two of the victims were found dead in skips in London. Another in Frankfurt. The New Scotland Yard and the Hesse State Police have already handed over jurisdiction to us, so it is natural then that we will expect the same from here."

"That is understandable. And of course, you can expect the LAPD's full cooperation. It is Simon Blackquill's case."

"Very well then. I will leave you with these copies of the current preliminary case files, for reference. I will let you know if any more murders crop up."

"Thank you, Franziska. You're most helpful."

"Hmph," she picked up her belongings. "Do not expect any special treatment in this matter, Miles Edgeworth."

He smiled wryly at her. "I don't."

Then he furrowed his eyebrows. "I do have one question, however. Unrelated, perhaps."

She raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"The meeting between the so-called Phantom and his supposed superiors. How was it?"

"It appeared to be civil. We were able to confirm the caller's voice matched with that of a woman present at the meeting. I cannot disclose any more details."

"I see. Then, will we be seeing these officials any time soon?"

"Perhaps, but I cannot say we know when. Agent Lang will see to those preparations. He is the lead investigator in these murder cases now."

"Very well, then. I shall pass this information on to Simon Blackquill and Detective Skye. In the meantime, would you—"

"Yes, I will accompany you for brunch on Sunday," she finished for him.

He smiled. "In that case, see you Sunday morning."

She nodded, put on her coat and exited. "Good day, Little Brother."

"Good day."

Following through with what he had said, he asked Ms Fright to scan the documents Franziska had left him. With that done, he collated them into a PDF file and emailed them to Detective Skye with accompanying notes. Skye replied shortly after, thanking him for the information and informing him that at the moment, their investigation had hit a dead end with regards to the lack of Interpol intelligence. She and Blackquill were now to play the waiting game and see how events would unfold over the next few days. Miles acknowledged this grimly and Blackquill's short and brusque email confirmed as much, but he reaffirmed that he would fully cooperate with Interpol.

That done, Miles' day was brought to a close. He'd had a long but productive day today, and was pleased with his efforts. Until Monday then, when he would have to tackle new issues. But so far,
so good; everything that had been in his in-tray this morning was in his out-tray. Now, at 6 PM, he could go home, relax with a movie or a book and take it easy for a couple of days.

And with that, he turned off his office lights; vibrant advertisement signs and firm logos glared in neon at him in the darkness. There were still plenty of lights on in the skyscrapers nearby. But he was not to feel guilty any more for leaving work at all for that matter.

He was quite ready to enjoy his weekend.

At 11 AM sharp, the doorbell rang. Miles dried his hands on a tea-towel, before reaching for the door, careful to avoid the bicycle in his hallway. This was what he had been waiting for all weekend.

Brunch was only something recent they had begun to do, whenever Franziska could spare a moment to visit him in her very hectic schedule. The fact that it had now extended to his house made him happy, as their previous brunches had been held in small French cafes, English and Irish pubs, or hotel restaurants where she was staying at, with only an hour to catch up between themselves.

"Hello, Franziska," he greeted her as she strode into the hallway, in her hands her handbag and a large duty-free bag. Blondie sniffed at Franziska, happily wagging her tail.

"Hello, Little Brother."

After taking off her shoes and coat, she presented him with the bag. "Your birthday present. I was unsure that I would be able to get it sent on time, so I decided to bring it with me from Germany. Happy Birthday."

Taking the aforementioned bag, he smiled, "Thank you. Even if it is five weeks early."

"You may open it before brunch."

"Very well then," he said, taking it into the living room. After making themselves comfortable — he in an armchair and her on the leather sofa — Miles turned to the contents of the bag. He pulled out a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and a large burgundy-wrapped box. Trust Franziska to go by his favourite colour scheme, he mused. The box rattled in his hands. He tore off the wrapping paper and revealed his present: a Lego Creator set of the Steel Samurai. Judging by the box cover alone, it contained all the Edo-period buildings that had prominently featured in the series and the Shogun's castle. There were even little Lego figures of the Steel Samurai, his family, and the passersby in the series.

When he looked up, Franziska was smiling wryly at him. "I thought you would like it. You never were very good at hiding your foolish love for that thing."

"I do like it very much. Thank you, Franziska," he stood up and patted her on the shoulder. That was as far as they went for physical affection. "You have given me something to occupy my spare time with. But for now, I am sure you are hungry."

"You surmise correctly." Franziska joined him in the kitchen.

He laid out the plates on the kitchen counter, while she set about tossing the salad he had finished making when she'd arrived. Then he tore off some smoked salmon into a pan with butter and set about whisking eggs in a bowl with some milk, salt and pepper. Then he poured the mixture in, quickly stirring it around before he divided the scrambled eggs between the plates. He took the
orange mimosas out of the fridge, and set everything on the table.

They sat down to eat. Over smoked salmon and scrambled eggs, Miles queried. "What are we to do about the meeting with the Borginian officials?"

Franziska set down her knife and fork. "That is something we will discuss at the office tomorrow. For the moment I do not wish to discuss work matters."

"I'll agree with you there; I find it is best to separate work life from life. Is that something you have considered these days?"

Franziska tilted her head to the side. A pensive look preceded her. "Sometimes. Not often, mind you."

"I have been trying to take time off myself," he chuckled to himself. "Alas, to no avail."

She sipped at her orange mimosa. "Have you considered going somewhere new by yourself?"

He shook his head. "I haven't had the time, but I would like to go to South America. Their political situation has improved in recent years."

"I have not been to South America. Agent Lang has, if you would like any recommendations. Though it would be a foolish conversation to have."

Miles nodded, mulling the offer over a forkful of eggs. "I'll consider asking him then; I was thinking of taking a summer holiday for a change. Once this matter is resolved."

Franziska helped herself to some salad. "Hm."

Sensing a slight lull in the conversation, Miles chose a different approach. "So, what have you been up to lately? I have not seen you in at least six months, no?"

"I have not done very much in my private life, if you must know. I have been in touch with Adrian Andrews, however."

"Oh?" he tilted his head questioningly.

"She is well. She has since decided that marketing was not a field where she could be perfect in, so she went back to university for psychiatry. Last I spoke to her, she has been working in a mental health clinic."

"What does she specialise in?"

"Cognitive behavioural therapy, for general disorders. Depression and anxiety, and the like. I would not know. I have never been afflicted with a mental health condition."

He peered at her over the rims of his glasses. "Is that suitable for her, given her history with mental health?"

"Yes," she raised an eyebrow. "In fact, she tells me she finds it empowering. To help the helpless, so to speak."

"Ah. Well, that is good for her then. I shall be sure to place her name on our intranet resources page for mental health."

Franziska frowned. "...What is that?"
“Something I implemented recently. Given the high-stress environment we work in, I have been encouraging my colleagues to seek help if necessary. They can access helplines or services, covered by our health insurance provider and I do not need to be notified of this, as it is rather discrete, unless the matter escalates.”

"...Has it escalated yet?"

He leaned back in his seat. "Thankfully, no. But I do worry for some of my colleagues at times."

"Then again," he put his hands up in the air in a gesture of defeat, "It is none of my business."

Franziska inhaled, then exhaled slowly. "I cannot imagine having your position as Chief Prosecutor."

He claimed the last dregs of his mimosa. "Well, you were always independent, Franziska. There's nothing wrong with that."

She did not choose to comment on that. Instead, she changed the subject. "Seeing as I am hardly in town, I can never keep up with your colleagues and acquaintances, but I have noticed you do not work with Scruffy anymore."

Miles shook his head. "On the contrary, I work very closely with Chief Gumshoe these days."

"Chief...?" Franziska prompted.

"Yes. He's been made Chief of Criminal Affairs for five major precincts, which enables me to liaise often with him on matters of crime and public health," Miles elaborated. "Regarding his private life, he married Maggey Byrde several years ago, and they've just had another baby, Rose, who's been made my goddaughter."

Surprise preceded Franziska as she put her knife and fork on the plate. "I am...glad to hear it. May he be happy then."

Miles smiled at that. "Yes, indeed, may Gumshoe be happy."

He began clearing away their plates, moving into the kitchen. "And what about you? Are you happy?" she asked.

He frowned, the question blindsiding him slightly. "Happy, in what sense?"

"Domestic bliss, Little Brother," she gestured at his kitchen. "This is quite a spacious home. More than enough for you and your dog."

"Yes, well..." he trailed off, a wry smile tracing up his lips as he began stacking the dishwasher. He relented. "Perhaps I am planning to expand on the number of residents."

She did not ask him to elaborate any further, and so he didn't.

The rest of Franziska's visit passed in relative bliss. She was able to stay for the afternoon, and so after brunch they had taken the time to walk Blondie along the beachfront a half-hour's drive from where he lived — Franziska had called her "a perfect dog", so there was something to be said for that — and then they had come back, to relax. They watched To Kill a Mockingbird on his DVD player. After that, Franziska saw fit to take her leave.
"It is good to see you are well here," said Franziska as they reached the door of his house. She set about putting on her coat and then her shoes.

"Indeed."

Tying her coat, she announced, "I may visit you at the office tomorrow to discuss work."

"Naturally," he crossed his arms. "But...it was nice to not talk about work today."

"Yes." She paused momentarily on the doorstep, eyes on the ground as if searching for something else to say. "Good night."

"Good night."

On Monday, as he had expected, Franziska showed up to his office with the intention of discussing work. With her, she had brought her tablet and a manila envelope.

"Hello, Miles Edgeworth," she greeted him. "Agent Lang apologises he could not attend this meeting, but matters at the Zheng Fa consulate took precedent."

"Not an issue." Miles said, extending a hand. "Please, take a seat."

"No tea, please." she remarked, noticing how he had immediately jumped to the tea cabinet again. "I have only an hour to spare."

He nodded, placing the tea bags back in the drawer. "Certainly. Then, please, take it away."

Franziska inhaled. "I have received permission for you to listen to an audio file of the Borginian meeting from last week."

"Very well, then."

She handed him her tablet and earphones for him to listen to. It was a ten-minute audio clip, that had been cut down to the most important bits from its original forty-five minutes. Plenty of the information was redacted, he noticed, in the jumps in audio. But the last line Phantom said caught him; it had been uttered with such force and clarity. By voice alone, it was hard to imagine Phantom as an emotionless being. Then again, he hadn't yet had the opportunity to meet the man in person.

Handing the tablet back to Franziska, he noted, "There certainly appears to be a polarity in opinion between the two of them. It is interesting that they mentioned the video themselves. That would confirm Blackquill's statement that it was Phantom who made the video."

"Indeed. As you would have noticed, for time reasons and for national security, we redacted the critical information that was discussed. It would be an issue if this audio clip were to be leaked. Therefore, I'm entrusting this transcript..." — she patted the manila envelope— "...to you."

"Was it relevant information?" he asked, taking the envelope from her.

"Not necessarily to Interpol. But within the context of their conversation, yes." She stowed the tablet away. "Since you asked on Friday, we have taken the opportunity to contact Rebekah Klaark and Johannes Birken to schedule a meeting with them, based on the information they shared with us in the telephone call you received last week." 

"I see. Have you prepared anything yet?"
"We are waiting on a response from them, but I would imagine the meeting would concern the possibility of Phantom's extradition to Borginia or him remaining in Interpol's custody. If the Republic of Borginia manages to extradite him, he is out of our hands. What they do is up to them."

Miles nodded in understanding. Clearly this was a delicate matter. He rose to his feet.

"The least we can do is try," he said. "I won't keep you any longer then. Let me know of any developments when you can."

"I will." Indicating this meeting was over, she collected her belongings. "Have a good week, Miles Edgeworth."

"And yourself, Franziska," he replied, closing the door behind him.

It was going to be a long and busy week.
Chapter Summary

What's that?// (I may be paranoid, but not an android)// What's that?// (I may be paranoid, but not an android)

January 26, 2028

It was quarter to three in the morning and Johannes Birken hadn't managed to get to sleep yet.

This wasn't something unusual. It just...happened from time to time.

He had gone to bed at eleven, after he had said a goodnight to Klaark. He had brushed his teeth, flossed and even plucked his eyebrows. He had trimmed his nails too, before he had stripped down to his boxers, and got into bed, and turned out the light. The room was dark as he liked it. He couldn't sleep if there was any light, even if that light came from the small crack between the door and the floor. Everything in his night routine was perfect. He had set the alarm for 7 AM sharp. This meant he would get his seven-point-five hours of sleep. Four sleep cycles worth of sleep, and feel refreshed in the morning.

Except, he hadn't managed to get to sleep. He had been awake for two-and-a-bit sleep cycles. He had tossed and turned, perhaps trying to find the most comfortable position — this wasn't a bed he was used to — but to no avail. He had fluffed up the pillows and even rearranged them into an L-shape; two pillows for his head, and one pillow for his side. But this also hadn't proved to be effective. He had thrown the covers off, and then pulled them back up again, and off and up again. He had even tried to count back from one hundred. Then he had tried blinking as many times as he could in a minute to shut his brain off.

No. None of that had worked. He had exhausted all his options. But thankfully for Johannes, this was an issue he had encountered before. There was no specific reason to his sleeplessness, so he need not dwell on that, but there was a specific remedy he had in mind: hot chocolate.

He sat up in bed and retrieved his socks from the floor. They were grey, with sushi rolls on them. Johannes liked patterned socks — why be boring and wear dark socks when there were plenty of more interesting patterned socks to wear under combat boots? Klaark didn't like that he did that, though. She said he was being unprofessional. Well, it didn't matter anyway; he was decent at his job, and no one saw his socks. Just the other day he had managed to infuriate Erikh Qvinn. That was a good one. He liked to infuriate Erikh Qvinn. He was an odious little man.

He got out of bed, and fumbled around trying to get to the door. This was the one disadvantage of loving the dark so much; he couldn't actually find his way out if he needed to. But he had managed to find the door handle without bumping into anything, so that was a success, and he turned it. Socked feet padded gently on the wooden floorboards. The kitchen was diagonal to his room. Klaark's room was at the far end of the hallway he was now standing in. He hoped he wouldn't disturb her.

He tiptoed into the kitchen, and closed the door behind him. He turned on the side light beside the
sink. It was a nice orange light, and it bathed his skin in orange. He liked orange; it marked the white scars on his chest. He was very...proud of those scars. Now with a source of light, he could go about locating this hot chocolate powder.

He was glad he had managed to bring this particular hot chocolate from Borginia. Klaark said it was stupid, because they would get stopped at Customs in the airport. Well, Klaark was wrong, because it was sitting on the kitchen counter next to the tea and coffee. He could only get this hot chocolate at a particular Swiss chocolaterie in the north part of Skande.

He grabbed a mug from the cupboard above him and set about spooning the powder into his mug. He got the milk out of the fridge and added a little bit to the powder, stirring it together. Dark brown chocolate sludge emerged from the mixture.

"What're you doing?"

Klaark was leaning against the door frame. Clearly he had disturbed her sleep. Johannes frowned. "I'm making hot chocolate," he thrust the mug into her face to show her. "Would you like some?"

"No," she snapped. "You need to go back to bed."

"Drinking hot chocolate will help me go to sleep."

She rubbed at her eyes. "You mean to tell me you haven't slept yet?"

"No."

She sighed. He didn't like her when she was like this. "Did you have nightmares again?" she asked exasperatedly. "Is that why you couldn't sleep?"

"No. I just didn't sleep."

"I'm asking because it's such a regular thing with you."

"I know." he poured the rest of the milk in and stirred the mixture. Some cocoa granules floated up to the top. Not a problem. "You know it was just a war."

She eyed him curiously; he was staring intently at his mug. "It's not just a war if you have to take medication for it."

Johannes swallowed. "It was many years ago." He turned to face her, mug now in his left hand. Her eyes darted between his face and the old skin graft on his left arm. It was hard to ignore that scar. "We fought. We protected. We killed. We served our country."

There was no emotion behind his voice when he said that. It was all very matter-of-fact. Klaark nodded slowly. "As we are doing now. Protecting our country."

He took a big gulp of hot chocolate, tipping his head back. "Yes." Another big gulp. He set the mug down on the kitchen counter. He had finished his drink.

"Now you need to go back to bed. For the morning."

"For the meeting, I know." He put the milk back in the fridge, and the hot chocolate back between the coffee and tea. "You don't have to remind me."

"Sometimes I feel I have to. Like last week."
Ah yes, last week, when he'd overslept before their meeting with Erikh Qvinn. It didn't matter, because Erikh Qvinn was oblivious to the whole thing. "Then good night." he announced, and brushed past her. He did not look at her. He went straight for his room.

The hot chocolate worked, prevailing once more, because after getting under the covers, Johannes managed to sleep finally.

He awoke at the sound of his set alarm blaring at him from the bedside table, and he switched it off. He had managed to sleep a little, but it was far less than the seven hours he should have had. That meant he would need to make up for it tonight by sleeping early. He still couldn't quite get used to the time zone here; it was daylight when he was used to it being nighttime.

Well, it was something he was just going to have to get used to for the next few days. Maybe weeks. He didn't know how long he would stay here. Their colleagues had said it was a precautionary mission: get there, assess the situation and move forward. They would not interfere. He hoped they didn't. He hated interference.

Like right now, Klaark was in the bathroom, which meant he couldn't go to the toilet. Johannes stood, shifting his balance from one leg to other. He heard the water run down the sink; she should be washing her hands then. Then no water. The rattle of the towel holder as it squeaked. Then the door opened.

Klaark had wet brown hair in a towel and a navy blue blouse on. Nothing on her lower half. He tried not to stare.

"Hello, Birken," she said. "Did you sleep?"

"Yes," he said slowly, avoiding eye contact.

"Good. We will head out in half an hour."

After that, he was able to go about his morning routine. Shower, shave and dress. Today it was their olive green uniforms. Olive green with gold buttons. He liked this uniform better than the dark one, not that he knew why. Olive green trousers and double-breasted jacket, and tie and cap. Light green shirt. Black boots. He had a couple of medals on the breast of his jacket.

He checked himself in the bathroom mirror, before sliding on his black beret. Now he was sufficiently presentable. It wasn't often that he got to deck out in full military attire. There were the annual ceremonies of course, in Skande, and the military parade that accompanied it, or occasionally travelling abroad on official business. But travelling abroad for Johannes was rare — he much preferred the comfort of his desk and the cold northern weather with it — so he didn't mind wearing it out these days. The only gripe was that it may be too warm for Japanifornia. Oh well, he mused, at least it was wintertime here.

Klaark met him the hallway with a thick manila envelope and an apple.

"Your breakfast," she announced, offering him the fruit. He took it.

The ride to the Prosecutor's Office was quiet, save for him eating his breakfast. He made quick work of it, working his way down to its core, before discarding it in a paper bag. He looked over at his companion, who was busy examining the documents in the envelope, and then looked out the window. It was a clear day in Los Angeles. No clouds.

He tapped his thumb against his index finger. One-two-three, one-two-three.
Palm trees dotted the streets, swaying in the very light, cool breeze. The Prosecutor's Office came into view. It was an imposing brutalist structure. Not a very tall building compared to the neighbouring, towering skyscrapers, but somehow it exuded a sense of authority.

"You do not have to speak at this meeting. Leave it to me." Klaark finally said.

He nodded slowly. One-two-three, one-two-three.

They pulled up outside the building, and got out. He surveyed his surroundings. He hadn't noticed the car had diplomatic plates. Or a little Borginian flag on it. He frowned. They weren't officials in any sort of way — they weren't politicians or diplomats — so why had Klaark authorised this? Was it even up to her? Well, he assumed so, since he left the work to her. He had just tagged along. That's what they always did; travel in pairs, and one would cover. He was the cover.

One-two-three, one-two-three. He stood on the pavement as she spoke to the receptionist.

"Birken!" she called out to him. Well, he had to go to this meeting, didn't he? No choice. At least the office had a nice interior design; wood panelling and grey carpeting. Burgundy and gold accents. Not so different from the government offices at home.

She beckoned to him impatiently with her hand, ushering him into the elevator. She pressed the button for the fifteenth floor.

One-two-three, one-two-three, he tapped out. He was going to be bored.

"Stop fidgeting," said Klaark.

"Sorry."

He put his hand in his pocket.

The elevator doors opened. What greeted him was much the same; wood panelling and grey carpeting. There wasn't much on this floor. There was a desk to his right, and double-doors, flanked by two guards. There were only two more doors in this hallway. There was no one sitting at the desk. But he did hear the sounds of a photocopier going off, and there was chatter coming from inside the room with the double-doors.

The guards eyed them when they presented their IDs. The man in particular stared at him.

"Mr Johannes Birken…?"

"Yes," he responded automatically.

It was true he was difficult to discern from his photograph. Then again, wasn't everyone?

The guard slowly nodded. The doors opened.

What greeted them were more burgundy and gold accents; an office complemented by mahogany furniture and thick hardback legal tomes in a particularly muted colour palette of dark reds, purples and blues and greens. There was a faint smell of lavender. Two sofas flanked the large desk. A third sofa had been placed right in front of the desk. On the coffee table was a tea set with cups and saucers, and two glass pots.

The four occupants of the room were standing. Their chatter had ceased, but now Johannes could get a good look at them.
"Welcome," greeted the burgundy one. He had a pleasant polite smile, and he looked smart in his suit. But he had a frilly thing on his neck that reminded him of eighteenth-century military uniforms. He would not have wanted to live in that century.

"I am Miles Edgeworth, Chief Prosecutor," he said. Edgeworth then gestured at the really tall guy in the black. "This is Simon Blackquill, my subordinate."

Simon Blackquill? He had heard of him from somewhere. Probably related to the odious little man.

"...And these are Interpol Agents Shi-Long Lang," — yeah, he looked like a wolf — "and Franziska von Karma," — she looked scary, and it certainly didn't help that her hair was so terrifyingly blue — "who have flown in recently for this meeting."

"I am Rebekah Klaark," said Klaark. "And this is my colleague, Johannes Birken."

One-two-three, one-two-three. He nodded at them solemnly. Blackquill was eyeing him. They took their seats. He sat next to Klaark. The cups and saucers clinked together.

"Coffee, Mr Birken?" asked Edgeworth.

"Yes, please. With milk and two spoonfuls of sugar." He didn't like coffee and tea, but he couldn't very well ask for hot chocolate here.

Edgeworth handed him the cup. Now that they were all seated with their beverages, their meeting could start.

One-two-three, one-two-three. He was glad he didn't have to speak.

"I am glad you could make it to this meeting. The request was on such short notice." said Edgeworth, stirring his teacup.

Klaark nodded. "Not at all. It was an urgent matter we had to address as soon as possible." She took a sip of coffee. Klaark didn't like coffee, even though there was a tin of it on the kitchen counter. "We work in Borginia's Central Command for internal and external affairs. That means we work in intelligence as high officials."

The blue one — von Karma? — spoke; she had a haughty voice, with an accent to it. Something Germanic. "And what does your job entail?"

"We investigate claims of misconduct in field operations and missions. It's part of a wide open investigation. I am head of department in military intelligence while Birken heads field operations."

"I gather you are here to inform us on Erikh Qvinn?" Miles said, taking a small pastry from the plate.

"Erm..." he hadn't intended to speak. That was what Klaark has said, right? And she was giving him the look, at the moment; she would clench her jaw and furrow her eyebrows. He wanted to say something, and now all eyes were on him. "Yes. He's been on our radar as a potential disruptor and has unethically conducted his last five assignments, of which includes the recent assignment in the United States."

"I gather you mean Bobby Fulbright," surmised Blackquill. Johannes picked up on a hitch in his voice.
Painful, wasn't it, to speak of a man one never knew.

He was about to respond, when Klaark interjected. "Yes. The way he conducted his mission by physically assaulting you under the guise of a persona was not received well by the higher-ups."

She pulled out a thick file from the manila envelope and placed it on the table. The insignia of a raven with an arrow was emblazoned on the cover, the heading written in Borginian and English script. Ah, this was not good.

"Seal?" echoed Blackquill, looking up from the folder in front of him as he read the logo phonetically.

She corrected him. "SEIL. Skande Espionage and Intelligence Locators. It's based in Skande, Borginia's capital city. That is the organisation that falls under our jurisdiction and at which Erikh Qvinn worked."

The wolf man — Lang — took the document with a quick "May I…?" invitation, which Klaark nodded at. He leafed through the pages, scouring through the mission statements of the organisation. von Karma leaned over to have a closer look, pulling out a loose page. Johannes could see it was Qvinn's profile; a mugshot of a man with a gaunt face and deep set dark eyes. He looked slightly different from his mugshot now. At least they had redacted much of the information in it, not least for the sake of Blackquill who was still eyeing him most peculiarly. It was like his eyes were boring into him, trying to catch something.

One-two-three, one-two-three.

"And what is its main aim?" Blackquill asked a question. Blackquill was looking at him.

Johannes tore his gaze away from the file in Lang's hands. "To ensure the safety of the Borginian people," he replied, looking at the top of Blackquill's head.

"So you say. But that does not necessarily mean safeguarding non-Borginians."

"Well," Klaark gave a small apologetic smile. "We do not assign the cases. We just investigate conduct. The safety of the Borginian people is our aim across the board. I'm sure you'd understand."

She turned to look at him. He was still looking straight ahead. Another one of her exasperated looks. Why was she trying to get him to talk? She said she'd handle it. Oh well. "Because Erikh Qvinn is a Borginian citizen, we want to extradite him for his crimes as a result. He is a threat to Borginia and to you."

"Yes, you had said you wished to extradite him over the telephone," noted Edgeworth, setting his empty teacup down. Johannes realised he hadn't touched his coffee. Not a loss. "I would understand from that then, that you are aware of the protocol?"

Protocol? Klaark hadn't really spoken about it. She just assumed he would tag along and...tag along he did, under the fine print of 'protecting our nation'. He just wanted to be back in Skande. It was getting stuffy in here.

He noticed she was speaking slowly now. "If we win the appeal and extradite him, then we can first put him in front of the Board of Ethics, which would strip him of his military honours, and then try him in the Skande Supreme Martial Court for his crimes against our state." she rubbed at her ring finger. "If that succeeds then his penalty is either death or life imprisonment. Usually in
cases of treason, it is death."

Board of Ethics? There was no such organisation. They only had the martial courts, and the civilian courts. Was Klaark lying?

Edgeworth nodded. "I see. An appeal is indeed the best course of action in these cases." he coughed. "Should the extradition request be accepted and the state loses, the matter will no longer be in Interpol's jurisdiction but rather in the Republic of Borginia's. How you would then choose to proceed is entirely your decision to make within your country's laws."

Klaark raised an eyebrow. "And if we lose the case?"

"You could always appeal to the Supreme Court. The jurisdiction would remain with Interpol until a case has been established against him."

"May I ask why you would move to indict him for treason?" von Karma asked. Her arms were crossed.

"Because..." he found himself speaking. "Because there is evidence to suggest he has been engaging in illegal activity with Cohdopia, with whom we have a tense relationship."

"I see."

He hoped she wouldn't ask any further questions. He couldn't find a way to bluff; all he knew was all he was supplied with. Nothing more, nothing less.

She didn't ask any follow-up questions. Good. Instead, she merely exchanged glances with Lang, who had nodded in response.

"In turn, what would you do if we lost the appeal?" asked Klaark.

He hoped they would lose. He didn't want to have to work with the odious little man more than he had to.

One-two-three, one-two-three.

Lang spoke up. He had a gruff voice, not dissimilar to an animated cartoon wolf. "We would move to interrogate him first on his crimes here, starting from when we first knew of him in 2020, to as recently as last December. From there, we would try him for those crimes, or collaborate with partner institutions to catalogue any other crimes and have him extradited to be tried in those courts."

Lang tilted his head. "Either way, it mean you would have just as easily got rid of a morally corrupt agent and placed him behind bars. Not so different to your own idea."

Their plan sounded better to Johannes. Let them work with the odious little man. He had seen enough firing squads already.

"When is the earliest we can hold this appeal?" Klaark asked, scratching the back of her ear.

He saw Edgeworth exchange glances with Blackquill before saying, "Next week should be suitable. It would allow time for both sides to collect evidence for their requests. Simon Blackquill will be heading the appeal on our side."

Ah yes, that's where he remembered him from. He was in the courtroom when Erikh Qvinn was
having his temper tantrum. When Erikh Qvinn was shot. He clenched his jaw. Maybe it would've been easier if they killed him there and then.

"Very well," Klaark planted her hands on her lap and passed a wan smile Simon's way. "That's that sorted then."

She rose and placed a hand on his shoulder. She wanted him to get up. He still hadn't drunk his coffee. Oh well. He could make hot chocolate when he got back. "You may keep that document I lent out. I have an extra copy."

Johannes furrowed his eyebrows; she didn't have another copy.

von Karma nodded. "Thank you, Rebekah Klaark. I'm sure it will be useful."

At that, the rest of them rose and one by one, they shook hands. Blackquill only eyed him still, and nodded.

With this ritual complete, Edgeworth opened the door for them and said, "We shall see you at the appeal then."

And then they were out the door, going back down the elevator and into the car.

One-two-three, one-two-three.

Onwards with the sham trial. But first, hot chocolate and rest.
Simon's boots thudded on the concrete pavements, at a regular pace which would enable him to get to Justice Square in half an hour from the Prosecutor's Office.

The appeal was being held in a courthouse that he was unfamiliar with. Perhaps he had been in there once before, but he couldn't quite recall. There were three main courthouses dotted about the city. There was the newly renovated one he had been in most frequently, and then there was another one somewhere close to Sunshine Coliseum which he heard handled civil cases more than anything else, and then this one, which he presumed to be the oldest, not least because it was prominently featured in court sketches in newspapers and for the fact that many of his colleagues had made their debuts here.

He, meanwhile, had never had the chance to debut there. It had been undergoing renovations when he had taken on his first criminal case; larceny, if he recalled correctly.

Eventually the courthouse came into view, a large imposing Greco-Roman structure, and he made his way up the steps, and passed through the security check. A bailiff ushered him into the courtroom. Courtroom number four.

Simon inhaled and then exhaled slowly.

Bloody hell.

Now he knew why he was so unfamiliar with this place; he hadn't been here in seven years. Seven years, when he had stood on that witness stand and testified to committing murder; his sister up in the gallery about to be held for contempt of court if she didn't stop disturbing the proceedings; and...of screaming little girls, yelling that his heart was screaming he hadn't done it.

It didn't matter now. He was here for an entirely unrelated matter. This courthouse had also seen plenty of his superior's battles with corruption, taking down smuggling rings and challenging authoritative committees...and just being within its walls was enough to evoke a sense of heaviness to these proceedings.

Simon checked his phone; they weren't due to start for another half-hour.

A text notification pinged on his phone before he stowed it away. But this was not the time to be checking such messages. 9 AM meant breakfast and work, the former of which he hadn't indulged in as he wasn't hungry.

He just wanted to get this over with.

The media presence wasn't helping. Normally media weren't allowed in court — and if they were,
then only in the form of court sketch artists — but given the international scale of this incident, several news outlets had essentially set up shop in a designated part of the gallery. The rest of the gallery was taken up by other lawyers, law students and other curious individuals. He hadn't had this much media presence at his own trials…

Perhaps that had been for the best. He clenched his fist. The room had become infested with artificial lights and tapes whirring and the nasal voices of reporters recapping recent events...of which, most was classified. From snippets he could overhear, the main consensus was that Phantom was just that: a Phantom. Only today might they get a glimpse of what he looked like.

*I haven't even seen him myself.*

He could contend himself with the fact that the man's face would be blurred in newspapers and on television screens. They had to have some degree of anonymity, these international spies. Anonymity was a luxury he could not afford.

A side door opened, and flanked by two bailiffs was a pale man of average height and build in a harsh orange jumpsuit. For all the talk, the Phantom was so......unremarkable in appearance. Unremarkable; utterly and completely normal. Forgettable, even. He was looking down, at nothing in particular — perhaps contemplating the tile design — and he looked positively neutral. The guards made quick work of seating him in the defendant's seat.

Reporters made a beeline for the Phantom, thrusting their cameras and recorders into his face.

"...What do you think about..."

"How do you feel…"

"Is there…"

He did not pay attention, choosing to stare at his feet. The bailiffs made a ring around him, quelling the reporters. Clearly now was not an appropriate time for interviews.

Nothing new to Simon. He just wished they would hurry up already.

Then, the Borginian officials arrived clad in olive green and they took their places at the bench opposite him, taking out their files and conversing amongst themselves; the woman looked furious, and the man...not so much. If anything, Simon tilted his head to get a better look at them, he looked bored. At the meeting last week, Johannes Birken had struck him to be an odd fellow, not least for his quiet nature, and the strange stronghold his colleague seemed to have him in. It was as though he didn't want to be here, or rather, had no idea why he had been tasked with things he was meant to do.

Breathe in, breathe out. It felt like some horrid parody of his life was playing out right in front of him. Simon tried to focus on the casework in front of him. He had transcripts, and the files they'd shared with him in last week's meeting, and some of his own chicken-scratch notes. He had looked over them last night on Aura's threadbare sofa in the living room, and then again this morning on the bus ride to the Prosecutor's Office. It wouldn't hurt to look over them again but...the words felt very heavy, and stuffy. And he couldn't concentrate.

There was too much noise around him, and too much running through his mind, and too much going on...In any case, he should be prepared. Never mind not being used to this particular environment. He had been in courtrooms before. He had had media in his face before.

It was just...a question of being able to get through it. Simon closed his eyes, and allowed himself
one deep slow breath, in and out his nostrils.

He only opened his eyes when he heard a door open. The judge had entered. Simon took a good look at him; a balding man in his late fifties, with grey-blonde hair combed back and a neatly-groomed beard.

Simon watched as he walked up the steps to his bench, took his seat and calmly set his belongings on the table. Then he cleared his throat, drawing the attention of all the personnel in the room.

He placed his glasses on, glanced at the court docket and then raised his head, addressing the room. He began to speak, a distinctly Canadian accent filtering through.

"Good morning. Today's legal proceedings cover an appeal drawn up by representatives of the State of Borginia against the LA County's Prosecutor's Office on the matter of the extradition of Erikh Qvinn." He paused to glance around the room. His eyes fell onto the gallery. "May I remind visitors and media personnel that there will be no unauthorised flash photography, video recording or speaking during this hearing. Should any of the rules not be followed, I shall remove the gallery from this courtroom."

Simon could hear the faint rustling of items being placed in bags.

"...I now invite the plaintiffs to present their resolution."

Klaark nodded in acknowledgement. She stepped forward, grasping a sheet of paper.

"Your Honour, members of the court, as representatives of the State of Borginia we would like to call attention to section thirty-three of our penal code. This states that any member of intelligence services or any citizen found holding information that poses a threat to us is thereby charged with treason and possession of sensitive material, a crime which is punishable by death, inviting them to be transferred to our nation where legal proceedings will be held under the martial court.

"Mr Erikh Qvinn is a Borginian citizen working in external governmental affairs and has been in possession of sensitive material on at least ten occasions. We would like to extradite him back to Borginia, for the purposes of questioning him over his activities and to commence legal proceedings under the martial courts. We would like to ask you to understand the situation and invite you to present your verdict as an approval of this resolution."

The resolution was submitted into the court record. The judge furrowed his eyebrows at this last statement. "If I may, Ms Klaark."

"Yes?"

"Can you ensure that Mr Qvinn will be met in Borginia with a proper, full trial before his verdict is determined? I ask this because precedent has shown on some occasions that individuals have been extradited from this state, for crimes punishable by death, and have been executed without trial. Or if a trial was held, then it was a sham trial."

Klaark opened her mouth and closed it. She nodded. "Yes. Yes, I can reassure you of that. I can refer you to Borginia's human rights record, collated by Amnesty International."

"I see. Right." An uncertain look preceded the judge. The expression was only there for a moment before he faced Simon and said, "Mr Blackquill. Your statement, if you please."

Simon swallowed. He glanced at his notes. No, the words still felt like lead. He opened his mouth, and then closed it again.
He took in a deep breath. He had to say something, didn't he? He raised his head; his eyes fixed on the wood panelling above Klaark and Birken. He spoke slowly.

"Your Honour...The Prosecutor's Office, in conjunction with Interpol, maintain that Erikh Qvinn's acts in this country have had severe consequences, in individual cases and within the Research and Development sector. Therefore, we would like to question him on his alleged involvement in these affairs. I would like to stress that as this is not a criminal case, we do not wish to indict him at the moment. The position being taken is that we would keep the defendant in this country, so that he does not pose a security threat to other nations.

"Furthermore," he added. "I would like to raise the point that we has no obligation to surrender this man to the Borginian authorities; as he was arrested here, the state's legal authority takes precedent."

"Thank you, Mr Blackquill." The judge paused, before addressing him again, frowning, "Incidentally, were you not previously involved in the Phantom case?"

"I was." Simon swallowed. "In 2020, prior to my incarceration."

"Yes, I thought it was that. I am well aware of the UR-1 incident," he said, eyeing Simon over the rims of his glasses. "I apologise for that particular injustice done onto you."

*It was a choice I made.*

Simon lowered his head. "It is quite alright, Your Honour."

The judge nodded. He moved onto to ask for evidence from the plaintiffs.

Klaark continued. "Your Honour, we have a statement issued by our government formally asking for the extradition. I'd like to add it to the court record."

The file was passed to the judge. Simon raised an eyebrow; they hadn't shown that at their meeting a week ago.

"I'm sorry, Your Honour, but the prosecution was not made aware of this information beforehand. Had this statement been passed through earlier then it would have gone through diplomatic channels, not through the courts here."

"The prosecution raises a good point. Ms Klaark, what is the meaning of this?"

She opened her mouth. Then promptly closed it. Another male voice piped up. "This issue was on such short notice and the request so soon, it was necessary to present it today. My apologies." Simon looked at the speaker. Birken. He was tapping his thumb against his index finger; just as he had done last week. Same one-two-three pattern.

"May I interject?" asked Simon. The judge nodded. "Borginia has yet to ratify an extradition treaty with this country. The plaintiffs would have to provide evidence that their request has passed through in the capital."

The judge nodded. "You raise a good point, Mr Blackquill. Ms Klaark, do you have anything verifying this?"

"A verification?" she echoed. She frowned. "This request was approved by the government in
"I understand. But has it been approved by the Borginian ambassador and his counterpart here?"

"...No."

"I see. Then I'm afraid your request for extradition will have to be rejected."

"What do you mean, Your Honour? The request came from our country, shouldn't that be accepted?"

"Not in this situation. As I have just asked, Ms Klaark, and Mr Blackquill has said, the request from Borginia's government is not enough. It would need to be ratified by a diplomat representing Borginian affairs here and that duty falls to the ambassador." The judge leaned forward. "Have you made an attempt to contact the ambassador?"

"As my colleague said, this was on such short notice, we—"

Simon cut her off. "Your bureau contacted the Prosecutor's Office a fortnight ago. I would've assumed then that you had engaged with the Ambassador."

He passed the transcript to the bailiffs. "My superior, Edgeworth-dono, received a phone call from these officials detailing who Erikh Qvinn is. May I inform the court that we have yet to see valid proof that the man in front of us is the so-called Erikh Qvinn?"

"We provided the Prosecutor's Office with Erikh Qvinn's file."

"In which a significant portion of the information was redacted. Not even his place of birth is accessible." Simon said, pulling out a manila envelope. "If you will."

The file was handed to the bailiff who then passed it to the judge. The judge took a moment to read through the evidence Blackquill had provided. He nodded his head at intervals. Around the room, fingers tapped away on laptop keyboards. If the journalists could not take photos and record, the least they could do was write.

Finally, the judge adjusted his glasses and spoke. "...Ms Klaark, this appears to be a fault on the part of your delegation."

"Your Honour?" her eyebrows were raised in confusion. Beside her, Blackquill saw the flicker of a smirk on Birken's lips. He was still tap-tapping away.

He held up the documents. "Had you wished to extradite Erikh Qvinn properly, you would not have contacted the Prosecutor's Office in this county, as they do not have jurisdiction over this matter. Instead, you would have either gone through, as Mr Blackquill called it, 'diplomatic channels' had you suspected this man was a Borginian citizen, or your government would have contacted Interpol directly for you to claim custody of him."

The judge handed back the documents to the bailiff. "Moreover, from the transcript of the telephone call, it appears that this is a solo mission between yourself and your colleague. There is no indication that you are acting on behalf of any government authority. I have not heard of intelligence services broadcasting their suspects in this manner."

He paused, peering at the plaintiffs over the rims of his glasses. He slowly continued, selecting his words carefully. "I can only assume you are here with ill intent."
The gallery erupted at that last statement. Simon surveyed his surroundings; indeed, the journalists and reporters appeared to be talking frantically among themselves. Some were leaning over the gallery with their voice recorders whirring.

*It isn't implausible. Much as he would have...*

"Order!"

*Much as who would've what?*

It didn't matter. Simon had lost his train of thought.

"Order!" boomed the judge, slamming his gavel down forcefully. The gallery had begun to settle down. His eyes fell onto the defendant's chair. "I would like to invite the defendant to the stand."

A bored Qvinn was led to the stand. The judge addressed him.

"Mr Qvinn, as it now stands, you have two options. You are either to be extradited to Borginia, where you will await trial, or you will continue to be held by Interpol, and questioned about your activities in Japanifornia." The judge extended a hand in his direction. "Do you have any requests, or comments to make? Comments that you would like this court to hear?"

A dull, deep voice emerged from the man. "With all due respect, Judge, maybe the Republic of Borginia should be held accountable for the crimes they claim I have committed. After all," he shrugged. "I was only following their orders."

The gallery erupted once more. Simon's eyes widened. Qvinn was smirking. A perfect copy of Simon's smirk.

*Of course he'd know how, the bastard, he's been with me a year.*

"Order! It is like a madhouse in here! Order!"

As the gallery quietened down for the second time, Klaark began to speak.

"The Republic of Borginia is concerned about the handling of sensitive material and espionage outside its borders. We maintain as a state that the protection and safety of our citizens is of utmost importance and that the data leaked by Erikh Qvinn could have had disastrous consequences on a national and international level."

Simon responded. "If you are very much concerned about national security, then fear not. Under Interpol's jurisdiction, the details of Erikh Qvinn's crimes would be revealed and he would receive a fair trial at the International Criminal Court in the Hague."

Then he tapped a finger to his temple. "All I can gather from your argument is that you wish to eliminate this man."

"Do not misconstrue my words, Prosecutor!"

"I am not misconstruing your words. I am merely concerned for the defendant, should he be placed in your custody."

*Concerned? Bloody hell, what are you saying?*

He saw a flicker of a smile of Qvinn's face greet him. Breathe in. Breathe out.
Klaark's nostrils flared. "I will not have slander!"

The gavel banged. "I ask that the plaintiffs calm down. Mr Blackquill raises yet another good point; I am not convinced of your intentions here, Ms Klaark, nor am I convinced of Borginia's stellar human rights record."

"But, Your Honour—"

He raised a hand before she could argue. "This is no longer a matter for this court. Any pressing affairs your nation may have can be taken up with the United Nations Security Council. Since we are going around in circles here, I'd like to move to the verdict. Mr Blackquill, do you have any closing remarks you wish to make before I pass down my verdict?"

Simon shook his head.

"Then I think we have heard quite enough." the judge harrumphed. "The resolution submitted by the Borginian delegation is hereby rejected. The defendant, Erikh Qvinn, will be taken into custody by Interpol forces, to await interrogation at a further date."

The slam of the gavel rang through the courtroom.

"Court is adjourned."
The balcony didn't provide much solace.

There was a view, at least, from Aura's apartment, of other concrete blocks with dimly lit shopfronts and names of supermarkets lining the road. Some trees. Pavement. Cars. The air smelt horrendously polluted; winter smog seeped into Simon's nostrils and he wrinkled his nose. It was 8 PM.

8 PM at prison meant evening roll-call and quiet time. So right now, Simon didn't quite know what to do with himself. After the verdict was announced, he'd gone back to the office, filed the case paperwork, gone down to the cafeteria to get an egg salad sandwich for lunch, and then answered some emails. It had all been very methodical until it was time to leave, when he realised he had a place to go back to. He could have stayed, and worked a bit longer, and maybe tried to translate some Borginian documents. But custom, or rather, Edgeworth's new policy, dictated that unless there was a massive conference, the office would be closed after 7 PM.

And so here he was, in his own flat, without a clue as to what to do. He hadn't made dinner, as the egg salad sandwich had sufficed to keep him satiated, so that was off the list of things to do. He hadn't gone shopping because Aura had left plenty of stuff behind. And he hadn't gone to bed yet because...

His phone rang from inside the bedroom. That was why he hadn't gone to bed yet. 8 PM meant evening roll-call and quiet time, so no; no calling at this hour, no texts, no nothing. He moved back into the flat, intending to let it keep incessantly ringing. Still, he checked the caller ID for good measure, and then grimaced.

Athena was ringing him.

He hovered over the button for a moment, hesitant. He didn't mind texting her sporadically, or even meeting up with her on occasion – though they had not done that in at least three weeks – but calling...it introduced something new. There was something about phone calls he didn't quite like; perhaps it was the feeling of being trapped? An intrusion of sorts, being intruded on in his quiet hours...

After the seventh ring, he responded with a tentative "Hello?"

"Hey..." came the voice on the other line, equally as uncertain in tone. "Am I calling at a bad time?"

"No...no..." he mumbled. Yes, it's a bad time.

Athena cleared her throat on the other end. "I wanted to see how the appeal went? You asked me to
check in with you."

Simon furrowed his eyebrows. *Did I?* Details of text messages weren't something he kept in mind. "Ah, I see," he responded, not entirely sure of what he was saying.

The line grew silent on the other end for a few seconds. "...Did you forget that?" she finally asked.

"Hm," he responded, neither indicating yes or no.

"So, how was it?"

"It went fine. We have custody of the Phantom now."

"Well, that's good, no?"

*No, it isn't.* "Yes. Very good."

"So what now?"

*I have to deal with him.* "Interpol will take control."

"That's good. You'll meet new people then."

*I already have."

"...Simon?"

He realised he hadn't responded to her last statement. This is why he didn't like phone calls; momentary silence meant worry and concern, and he was having none of it tonight.

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed," he announced. Not a lie.

"Oh, okay. Um, good night."

He hung up without repeating the greeting, and set the phone down on the bed. Simon swallowed the growing pit in his stomach. Not that the feeling would go away. Maybe turning off the phone would ease him. He rubbed at his ear, red and numb from the pressure he'd been applying to it. He closed the balcony door that he'd kept open. A loud bang resonated through the room for a second. The bedroom door shuddered behind him.

He pattered into the living room. Perhaps, something to read would lull him to sleep. Aura's place didn't have much in abundance, apart from books. It was something of a lifesaver. He eyed them on the bookshelf. *Transformational Syntax,* he mused, coupled with *Morphology* and *Mathematical Linguistics.* Metis' books, no doubt, perhaps from her Master's degree. He quietly removed them from the shelf, heading back to the bedroom, and set them aside on the bedside table.

After stripping down to an old faded t-shirt and boxer briefs, and getting ready for bed, Simon untied his hair, carding through the thick strands; straggly and in need of a brush. But honestly, the temptation was low. So, he climbed into bed, with a book. Linguistics was interesting enough; he'd taken it as a module in university, and found it quite fascinating. Not to mention his mother being a linguist herself. But familial sentiment wasn't necessary.

As he started to read, he felt his mind wander, to events of the day. Not just events of the day, but as his eyes scanned the technical jargon, he lost his concentration, extricating himself from the thoughts of meals in prison and the way he'd attempted to read at night with his eyes straining against the dim moonlight. Aura, no doubt, doing the same. The selection of books would probably
be much more varied in her correctional facility. Words felt like lead; and Simon didn't appreciate the fact he couldn't concentrate. He set the book down, and turned off the light.

Sleep did not come easy to him. Not that it ever had, given the last seven years and now being brought back into a world outside cells and damp concrete walls. But for just once since he had been released, he wished for sleep to greet him.

Yet, no matter how many times he willed himself into slumber, with his eyes shut and his hands gripping the bed sheets, his mind simply refused to cooperate. He tried to focus on breathing slowly and deeply and on nothing else. But still sleep just wouldn't come. His chest was constricted and his lower body tingled and he tiredly, angrily, pulled the covers off.

_Bloody hell._

He dragged himself to the bathroom. Without switching the light on, he fumbled around, feeling for the sink. He managed to turn the tap on, letting the water run to a desirably freezing temperature. He let his hands meet the water as he cupped them, bringing it to his face, freshening him up. He did this three more times, before he breathed a sigh, and steadied his hands on the sink.

Without seeing it, he could hear the water as it sloshed into the sink and continued down the drain, gurgling down the pipes. It gave him momentary comfort to listen to it. Then he switched off the tap and reached for a towel to dry himself. Perhaps having done this, he would be able to get some sleep.

Tomorrow came, and Simon, having managed to catch just a couple of hours of sleep eventually, arrived at the office. He hadn't bothered to get ready properly, opting to shower and shave in the office's facilities in the basement above the underground car park, which housed a meditation room Edgeworth had installed in his tenure as Chief Prosecutor. Something about the need for relaxation in the workplace — another one of his reforms — and a place away from the stresses of work life in a fast-paced firm. Admirable, but Simon wondered whether it was actually being put to use.

Freshened up, face gaunt but the stubble shaved and his hair washed and brushed, he made his way upstairs to his own office. The morning light had only just managed to surface through the fog, bathing his office in its greyness.

A flood of emails awaited him, consisting mostly of press alerts — the hearing had been less than twenty-four hours ago — which he ignored in favour of a particularly pressing one from Edgeworth.

_**Subject: Morning appointment**_

_Dear Simon,_

_Please come see me at 10. I wish to discuss yesterday's proceedings with you._

_Regards,_

_Miles Edgeworth_

Right, he hadn't managed to meet with his superior yesterday, since he'd holed himself up in his office. Up he went, then.

Edgeworth greeted him with a polite smile, extending his hand to the sofa. Routine as usual.
"Good morning, Blackquill."

"Good morning." he replied, taking his seat. No tea today, just talk, it seemed. The chief prosecutor had already placed a light blue case file on the coffee table.

Edgeworth confirmed as much, as he slipped into discussion. "The Judge's Council, with Chief Justice Chambers' approval, has given the green light to proceed with the interrogation whenever you see fit. Preferably in the first few weeks of February, as the caseloads have shifted and we restart the monthly court cycle."

"I see. In that case, I shall prepare for that. I can arrange a meeting with him, and proceed from there. Whether he is willing to cooperate, will be something to keep in mind."

It was more of a mental note than anything. They had to be realistic, of course, given the nature of international relations. That, and the newspapers prying into every corner. Of course, an international spy would cause a ruckus, he noted to himself.

"Indeed. The trial revealed its own things. Namely, that the Borginians place importance on their national security. The Phantom, or rather Erikh Qvinn, is a threat essentially, regardless of us having custody over him." Edgeworth tapped at the file. "We have to tread lightly. Negotiate, I suppose."

"Yes." Simon shifted in his seat. "I fear...I may not be the best candidate for this, Edgeworth-dono. Given my prior affiliation with the man, and yesterday's proceedings."

Edgeworth eyed him curiously through the rims of his glasses. "Your performance yesterday was fine," he moved to sit down opposite Simon. "I do understand why you may be apprehensive but after all, it was you who came to me to put this matter to bed."

"Indeed," was all Simon had to say.

There was a momentary silence.

"Mr. Blackquill--" Miles stopped himself and shook his head. "Simon, really, how are you?"

Blackquill eyed him.

Surely, I haven't indicated any cause for concern.

Edgeworth, noting the forcefulness of his question and the discomfort, elaborated. "I mean, settling in. I worry I've thrust this entire matter into your hands without a proper discussion."

The second person of the week to express concern over his well-being. But this time he couldn't extricate himself from the situation as he had been able to last night.

He hadn't spent much time at Aura's flat, granted, with the sleepless nights and the work-filled days forcing him out of there. Aura was just as spartan as he was. After all, that was what she knew after the death. There would be no more...no more shared flats with joint leases. They weren't a sentimental pair, even with the keychain on the apartment keys that she'd bought in Japan on a trip with Metis — back when they'd been engaged and the silver ring and photograph tucked away in the bedside drawer. And there would've been an alternate universe where they'd've been happy. But such a universe did not exist — seven years of his prime spent rotting away in a dank cell.

"...Simon?" Edgeworth's concerned voice pulled him out of his reverie.
"It's alright, Edgeworth-dono." He hated the honorific now. Hated the distance. Hated the solitude he'd surrounded himself with, when he buried himself into his work.

*Work is all you know now, after years of incarceration out of your own choice for your...niece.*

"I shall tend to the Phantom," he whispered as he rose, referring to the earlier conversation. He didn't look at Edgeworth.

"Have a good day, sir," was all he said in the end, with a stiff nod before leaving the office.

The dank interrogation room was depressing to return to. Aside from being an overall bleak room, with cement walls and tiles that had not seen a mop and bucket in years, with the grime poking through the dips in the tiles, and a smell not dissimilar to chloroform, it acted as a holding pen for memories. Of long-gone prisoners, who'd been visited throughout their sentences, not entirely sure of when they would be executed; or of prisoners who were innocent and were wasting their lives inside; or of...sporadic visits, as in Simon's case. Sporadic visits and conversations with Edgeworth behind bars, when he'd peered at him through his glasses, the same look of concern etched on his face as he'd done so this morning.

...And of that Fool Bright with his booming laughter.

But he'd never truly met Fulbright. No. And try as he might to conjure up an image of a man truly passionate for justice and rehabilitation, he was left with the destroyed mask in the courtroom in December.

His leg bounced. He hadn't been back here since the day he left. The day he hadn't expect to leave, with the noose around his neck, pulling the life out of him. With his neck snapping much the same way as the door on the other side opened.

The chair legs scraped horrendously. Simon winced.

"Hello, Prosecutor," he said in a voice. Not Fulbright's. He had adopted a transatlantic accent. "What do you want?"

Qvinn raised his head at those words. Sallow cheeks, bald, and bloodshot eyes; dark circles under his eyes streaked purple and black, and his skin pale. He looked sick.

Simon cleared his throat. "I have to come discuss the terms presented yesterday in court," he laced his fingers together. "As you would recall, you are now in the custody of Interpol, with the prospect of interrogation. The judge has concurred that now is a suitable time to question you, for your actions in this state, and to a larger extent, your occupation."

Qvinn did not react in any manner. A salt pillar could have replaced him in the few seconds Simon had spoken.

Simon slowly continued. "...While this shall...be approached through legal means, I would like to ask you myself as to why you have willingly placed yourself in this current predicament as opposed to scurrying off to some godforsaken corner of the world."

Again, salt-pillar-man sat there, not looking at anything in particular. Then he shrugged at Simon.

"I have no reason."

Blackquill opened his mouth to ask another question, but Qvinn continued. "The other day I woke
up, and I ate some disgusting yoghurt. As I ate breakfast, I thought to myself, that I would betray my superiors. I just decided there was no need to it anymore."

There was a brief pause after the sentence passed between them, he leaned back in his chair, drawing circles on the table with his finger. "Mr Blackquill. This was the same way I decided to betray you too."

Simon swallowed, training the man with an unreadable expression. Qvinn shrugged again.

"For those two actions, I did not have orders. So I exercised free will." Qvinn paused and then nodded. "Yes, that is the right phrase."

"So nothing in particular prompted you to accept your current situation?"

"No."

Qvinn inspected his palms now, some imaginary freckle proving quite interesting.

"Can I ask something."

It was phrased more as a statement than a question.

"What is it?"

"Are you the right person to be questioning me."

And again, before Simon could ask, Qvinn continued, "I read your case file, you know that."

They stared at each other for a moment; the tug of a smile on Qvinn's lips that was always so chilling. Eyes trained on him. It was a haunting scrutiny; the very same every night outside his cell door; the eyes that always watched as he pored over papers. His leg bounced again.

"Anyway," Qvinn started, the smile pulling up further to the corners of his mouth. "I am willing to share information provided my identity isn't compromised."

He splayed his hands out in front of him. "I am an open book."

Yes, in justice we trust indeed.

"I see," Simon mumbled. "You will be sent a copy of the terms of your interrogation procedures to your cell later this week."

The smile disappeared from Qvinn's face. "You are not questioning me today."

"No." The chair scraped; Simon rose. There was no courtesy of eye contact this time around. "This meeting is over."

Salt-pillar-man was back; Blackquill heard as he rose silently, and complied to the cuffs being placed on him again. He heard footsteps and then the clang of the door as it shut behind him. He let out a long breath from his nostrils, before stepping outside himself.

When he got out of the room, Simon had made a beeline for the bathroom. Past the urinals, and the cubicles and straight for the sinks. No soap dispensers - he didn't need them. Tap on. Let the water run. Cup his hands. Wash his face. Rinse and repeat three times. Tap off.

No paper towels. Only hand dryers. He shook his hands to remove excess water, rubbing them on
his trousers as well, for good measure. Then he left the bathroom.

Simon was halfway back to the office when his phone rang on the bus. He checked the caller ID. Detective Skye. It was 12 PM now, which meant work at the prison, two hours before phone calls began. It was work now. This call was at the right time, and he had been meaning to contact her.

He picked up. "Biscuits, how have things been progressing?"

"Hey to you too, Blackquill," he could hear rustling on the other end. Snackoos probably. "Just wanted to let you know what's up with the murder case."

"Yes, go on." The bus moved again, and he steadied his hand on the handle, thumb hovering close to the stop button. Three more stops.

"Right, so as you know we've hit a bit of a dead end, but Agent Lang has just informed me that gaining custody of Qvinn means that we have access to Hawthorn's casework simply because of the circumstantial nature of the motive at the moment. He said it's not normally protocol but y'know, he was happy to give database access."

Simon hummed in agreement over the line, Skye continued. "Because of yesterday's court day, I decided to look into things. Most of the stuff's redacted anyway, but from what I've managed to get, Hawthorn's work covered a major organisation, alongside some other international incidents. He was rarely, if ever, in town. He worked with another law firm in Frankfurt."

"Any details on this organisation?"

"You probably know more than I do. It's called Skande Espionage and Intelligence Locators. SEIL, for short. Pronounced like 'seals', the animals. It's a Borganian company."

Simon eyes widened. He pressed the stop button. He lowered his voice. "Now, why would an international lawyer be prying into Borgenia's secret service, pray tell?"

"That, you'd have to give me more time on. It's basically marketed as a shell company on any web searches if you try and search for it."

"I do hope we're not implying what we're implying. If that is the case, then we find ourselves…" Simon trailed off, and the bus doors opened. He got out, greeted once again with the smog of polluted Los Angeles. He changed tack. "I was aware of his work on intelligence services in Borgenia but I was not aware of this close connection to this particular one."

"Yeah. Exactly. I mean, all the other organisations were y'know, just IT companies or those that dealt with armaments. Espionage. But not like this."

"Indeed," replied Simon.

"Look, we're gonna have to tread lightly and legally here. You dealing with him?"

"Him. He swallowed the growing lump in his throat. The pit in his stomach rumbled again. "As far as Edgeworth-dono's concerned, I suppose…I am."

"Okay. Just remember to fill in the paperwork for that beforehand. The guards there in solitary can be really anal about that."

"Duly noted," and before he could forget, "Ah...Thank you for keeping me apprised, Biscuits. I
shall work on that now."

"Sure. I'll swing by later and put the casework in your tray. Or if you're not there, then the cubbyhole."

"Cubby...hole?" He remarked, trying out the words on his tongue. He had never heard of such a thing in a workplace environment. Yes, certainly, he recalled as a child using cubbyholes he'd purchased from a massive furniture retailer, to store his clothes and toys in. But Scandinavian ergonomics aside, the word eluded him.

"It's on the first floor. It's where we detectives put documents that you need, out of hours. Have you seen the rows of basically cupboards down next to the reception? It's like a safe basically. We slot in documents and you open it up with a code. Basically a tight-security mailbox. It's in the lobby, with all the armchairs to meet clients. And those really ugly orchids."

He couldn't recall such a location in the office. Well, maybe the 'really ugly orchids', as the detective had so elegantly put it. Miserable plants, was what Simon always had in mind when confronted by them. Perhaps an Edgeworth-era policy the man had installed. Ergonomics and meditation. Whatever else Edgeworth had installed, he'd soon find out for himself. "I cannot say I was ever aware of it. But, yes, I suppose you might as well place it in there."

Skye chuckled on the other line. "Guess you learn a new thing everyday. Alright, I'll do that."

"Yes, very well then." Simon allowed himself a small chuckle. "Good day, Biscuits."

"Good day to you too."

As soon as the call ended, Simon found himself in what was apparently the lobby. The detective had described it correctly. Ugly orchids and all intact. The sofas were of a burgundy shade and Simon mused that it appeared his superior had added his own interior decorations into the workplace. Truly a fascinating character was Miles Edgeworth.

The row of cubbyholes beckoned to him, lined with what appeared to be letterboxes, precisely as the detective had described. As though they had been removed, screws and all, from an apartment building's lobby and placed them in this office, simply with a few hundred rows lining two walls. Alphabetically by surname as well, he noted, as he saw his name marked close to the door, just surpassed by a few surnames. He'd need to acquire the code...or key for them. The sunlight streamed through, bathing the room in an orange hue. It was getting late. He hadn't eaten today yet.

Acquiring what appeared to be some sort of bento box from the cafeteria, he climbed up the stairs two steps at a time to his office and slammed the door shut, dropping his satchel and lunch, he leaned against the door. He stood there, letting his arms fall to his sides as he concentrated on breathing. Closing his eyes, he tried to focus on white noise. But alas, to no avail. He pushed himself off the wall, picking up his satchel and lunchbox again.

Upon sitting down at his desk, Simon noticed the blue folder in his in-tray. Not Detective Skye; she had mentioned the cubbyhole just now. This would have to be Edgeworth's secretary. Sure enough, it was, as he leafed through the pages. It was a dossier on the rules and regulations surrounding interrogation conduct. A copy of which he would have to give Qvinn later this week. He set to work.

The next few hours consisted of Simon underlining various key notes, scribbling onto the legal pad notes on interrogation conduct. He also made a mind map of Hawthorn's death, drawing a straight line between the victim's name and SEIL. A strange coincidence. He munched through his rice and
chicken, occasionally alternating it with salad and vegetables. It had been a while since his last encounter with Japanese food that hadn't consisted of just salty shochu ramen.

Work and food had made a welcome change nonetheless. By the time he had signed off the last piece of paper of the interrogation forms to consent to his role as interrogator, he could definitely say he felt calmer than he had last night. The paperwork to hand in to the guards was also complete.

He concluded his day by closing the folders, and placing them in his satchel, before turning off the light. As he reached the lobby, he paused for a moment at the cubbyholes, before deciding against picking up what Skye would have dropped off by now. Tomorrow then.

It was 8 PM again when he got home. Evening roll-call and leisure time. This would mean dinner time now.

He rummaged around in the fridge; some of Taka's jerky in a box, and some vegetables. Mushrooms and bell peppers. If there was perhaps some form of...tofu, then he could consider a stir fry. Aura didn't seem the type to keep such a product in her house, and he hadn't done much shopping for the flat since he'd signed it over into his name. He checked the cupboards. Flour. Sugar. No pasta or rice.

_What on earth does Aura eat?_

He sighed, closing the cupboards and the fridge door. No dinner tonight then. He would have to go shopping...for food and other items. Household items. It was a concept that eluded him, what with the...three square meals a day and his thin mattress he had grown accustomed to. He almost missed the damn routine.

But right now, he could not think anymore. He could not think of food, or toiletries to purchase, or meetings to attend. Right now, Simon wanted this day very much over, and he would not let his insomniac state invade him this evening. He stripped down to his boxer briefs, brushed his teeth, and collapsed into bed. Sleep soon followed, gluing his eyes shut and his mind stopped racing, instead categorising in his subconscious. Finally asleep.

Midnight blue had engulfed him.
No Surprises

Chapter Summary

A heart that's full up like a landfill// A job that slowly kills you// Bruises that won't heal// You look so tired, unhappy

February 7, 2028

Monday lulled by for a change, instead of crashing into Simon's face in the form of a 7 AM alarm. As he got dressed, ready to head to Penn E. Dent Prison, he remembered he was out of food in the kitchen. He had made some mental note of this the night before, but exhaustion had dragged him to bed by then.

Managing the flat had honestly not been much on his mind this weekend, what with how busy the week had been. He had managed to send the interrogation paperwork to Qvinn, receiving a signature in return with one letter that distinctly like a 'B', set to start questioning today, and he had begun cataloging evidence and notes with Skye and Edgeworth before the appeal had swept them up; the latter glad that he was making progress despite everything. Still concerned for his well-being, but Simon did not hold him to that.

He finally managed to visit his sister as well, glad for the change from glass-panelled meetings to simply sitting together in the prison visitor centre, in plastic chairs with cups of miserable coffee. Seeing her in the orange jumpsuit that was prison garb was nothing short of surreal. That, and her hair was growing out of its purple dye at the roots, pulled back into a simple ponytail.

"How are you?" he had asked.

His sister had scoffed. "About as well as I can be. I mean, for this sort of place, it's not bad for thinking."

"No," he leaned back. "I assume you have a wider selection of books to peruse as well. I can bring some over for you if you want."

"If you want to, sure," she had replied, not paying much attention to his words; her focus solely on the coffee in front of her.

Well, he'd have to pursue some line of conversation, didn't he?

"I've been taking up reading again," he had said. Then, for good measure, "I hadn't realised you'd kept a lot of Metis' books."

Indeed, it had caught Aura's attention. She levelled her gaze with his. "They occupied my thoughts at night," was all she said on the matter.

Talking about books wasn't going to get him very far. Well, he could pursue the only available subject of conversation.

"Speaking of...her," he swallowed. "I do not know if I should make this information available to
you, but, I am in the process of, well, interrogating her killer."

Aura had merely nodded, processing the information.

He then added, "I will, of course, inform you of any relevant developments when there is clearance. For now, I'm afraid you'll be kept in the dark."

She tipped back her head, claiming the last dregs of her coffee. She set the styrofoam cup down with a disgusted look on her face; as though she'd been sucking a particularly sour lemon. "Honestly, Simon, I don't need to know. It's enough he's caught. Do with it what you will."

"Very well then," he nodded, hands fidgeting with his own half-empty cup.

He leaned back in his seat. This conversation was more than over. He looked around, surveying the room. A vending machine, guards posted at every corner in their light blue garb, and a dozen prisoners and their families conversing in the lull of the Saturday afternoon. He scratched at his arm. "...Have you-have you considered visiting the psychologist here?" he finally asked, tentatively.

She eyed him slowly. "No."

Thin eyebrows raised. "Why, are you considering seeing one?"

"No."

Fingers drummed on the plastic table. "Well, if you're considering it, you've had to handle a lot more shit than I have."

He watched as she fidgeted with the coffee cup, twirling it around in her hands. She shifted in her seat.

"On another note..." she started. "...The flat. I don't care what you do with it. You can move out if you want."

His brows furrowed. "Why would I do that?"

She shrugged. "Okay."

The fingers twirled around the cup again. He watched as it was catapulted into the air, landing back on the table with a dull thud. "Well, if you're so intent on staying there, do with it what you like. I don't care if you want to paint it black like some emo shit, or...I don't know. Make it your place."

She crinkled the cup, not looking at him.

"I see."

Cup well and truly abused, Aura set it to the side. "So what'll you do for the rest of the day?"

"Nothing, really, I suppose."

"How nice."

They had said their goodbyes soon after and Simon returned home. His weekend had been nothing short of uneventful. He slept, trudged through *Transformational Syntax*, and decided psychology tomes would be best to acquire. He didn't go to the library, or the bookshop for that matter, to acquire said books. Or do the food shopping. Or start on Aura's suggestion of decorating. He had
simply shut off for the weekend.

And now it was already Monday. A lull, rather than a crash, despite the bumpy bus ride he was now taking.

His phone pinged with a notification, and he checked it.

_Athena [8:01 AM]: Hey, just checking in. How are you? Are you sleeping?_

He swiped the message to the left, selecting the option to remove the message from his screen. He did not need to be bothered with things cluttering his lock screen. Besides, it was work now. 9 AM meant breakfast and work, according to the prison timetable. That still rang true for now.

When he entered the interrogation room, Qvinn was already waiting for him, ready to talk. The man gave him a flicker of a polite smile — perhaps something he had practised in his mirror — and watched as Simon set himself up.

Simon set down his satchel, presumably on the ground next to the chair, Qvinn could not quite tell by the thud alone, and took out some files. He discarded them carelessly onto the desk, throwing a couple of ballpoint pens on top of them. He then straightened his tie and brought the tape recorder closer to him, from where it had sat on the far left corner of the table.

Then Simon switched the recording machine on, allowing it to warm up to their surroundings.

"What would you like to ask me about today." stated Qvinn. "As I said before, I am an open book."

Simon pulled his chair in. "I wanted to start our interrogations by gaining some context. Your superiors at the trial mentioned a conflict between Borginia and Cohdopia. Would you be able to explain that?" adding, "It would be of use to me to develop my understanding from a native than consult the literature."

Qvinn drummed his fingers on the tabletop, looking around him. "You recall our conversation last week," he said.

"Yes?"

The man pressed his fingers together, practising some sort of pout. Simon swallowed. His throat was dry - he ought to start bringing water with him in his satchel.

"I said that I am a traitor. Of course then I do not know if you took it seriously."

Simon chose not to respond and the man in front of him shrugged. "Well, anyway, I guess I meant traitor not just in the way I worked with you, but just in how I work anyway."

"I would derive from that then that you have been supplying intelligence to Cohdopia?"

Qvinn nodded. "The Cohdopians give me better offers, in exchange for information. Military intelligence."

Simon nodded and folded his arms.

"Do you want a historical account."

"If you could, that would be helpful. Preferably in chronological order."

Salt-pillar-man returned for a brief moment. "This is not different from how you conduct your
interrogations outside," he said.

"What are you implying?"

A smirk graced the corners of his lips. "Maybe I was expecting you to act differently, than when I worked with you."

*It had started.* Qvinn was hunched over, giving a little pout, and Simon could just almost see him wearing the tinted glasses and the white suit and the...

And…

Then…Qvinn shrugged again, and didn't say anything. Simon didn't know what to do with this follow-up to his sentence. Had he expected the Phantom to blow up in his face? Yes, the man was daunting…and unnerving, but...

But Qvinn took no notice of him. He just stared at the table, opened his mouth, and began to speak slowly and robotically.

"In 2009, Cohdopia erupted into inter-ethnic civil war. A Babahlese soldier shot an Allebahstian civilian in Primidux. War. Borginia was allied with Allebahstian military forces. Borginian troops conscripted, into Allebahstian groups. Their army supplied arms and air support. Russia backed the Babahlese Separatist Army. The Flower Corps versus the Wingéd Resistance."

He was about to continue when Simon posed him a question. "Were you among those conscripted?"

"I do not have an answer to that."

"Your profile provided by your superiors after the appeal said you completed military service in Cohdopia in…" Simon delved under his interrogation notes to find the photocopied document from the meeting. "…in 2010." he announced, setting the paper back down. "Would that shed some light onto your memories?"

"I am not the topic of conversation," came the flat response.

Seeing as pursuing this line of question would lead him nowhere now, Simon dropped it. Qvinn, satisfied with the silence, continued his robotic timeline of events.

"War over. Ceasefire agreed by the UN. Demilitarised zone established in September 2012. Country split in two." Qvinn raised his head to look at Simon. Simon Blackquill had a very pale face, he noted. He decided to change tack. "Do you want me to talk about my employer."

He watched as Simon furrowed his eyebrows at the question and then nod, supported by a hoarse "Yes," and then, "If you are willing to disclose such information."

Qvinn leaned back in his seat, his shackled hands falling to his groin. Simon watched as the man's pale face receded into its bland and blank expression. Salt-pillar-man, about to make a speech.

"SEIL was created out of the civil war. Joint effort by Borginia and the new Kingdom of Allebahst. Diplomatic alliance. Allebahst wanted to build their state. Best way? Industrial espionage. Babahl had a technology sector. Why not. Borginia could use that as well.

"SEIL had three branches at first. Borginian Secret Service, Allebahstian Secret Service, and Dual Corps. They wanted a good relationship with each other. But it is useless. Borginia and Cohdopia
have always been enemy states in history. Good relations means better access. Means easier espionage."

He splayed his hands out on the table. "Then reunification in 2019 stopped that. Espionage on each other carried on, but Allebahst merged with Babahl into its own national intelligence service. Distance. A joint secret agreement, and SEIL was now only Borginian."

Salt-pillar-man stopped for a moment, allowing Simon time to finish his notes. He continued. "Cohdopia approached me in 2020. After the reunification. They wanted to spy on Borginia. War was not something a new state needed." he paused, withdrawing his hands from the table, balling them into tight fists. "Political information, on its functions and governance. And military too. I think I was posing as an archivist. I can not remember."

The cold eyes fell on Simon. "I did not care. Whoever paid me most, I did it. Borginia, Cohdopia...does not matter. I had no allegiance. Not good for them. Good for me."

He paused, watching as Simon scribbled on the legal pad in chicken scratch, before he quipped. "My superiors asked me at the meeting if I understood the consequences of my actions. I told them I would rather eat shit than talk to them."

At that last sentence, Simon took his eyes off the paper to look at Qvinn when he said that. He half-expected the man to grin, in some overly confident manner, perhaps. But no, nothing.

Simon switched off the tape recorder after that. "Is that enough for you today?" asked Qvinn.

"Yes. That should suffice, in helping me develop the overall background," said Simon as he rose from his seat. He paused, before adding, "I shall set up a meeting later this week to discuss this further."

Salt-pillar-man stared at the wall. He had retreated into himself again. There was nothing Simon could quite do about it. Simple questions followed by...not so simple answers, and there was nothing more to say about it. It wasn't...monotony, but there was a lot left to be desired.

That being said...there was always next time. He had to pace himself, didn't he? That's what Edgeworth had said last week, before he'd clocked out for the weekend. To not rush the process. Even if it meant slowly packing away his belongings. Salt-pillar-man watched as his satchel reemerged from under the table, and Blackquill carefully put away the papers and pens, different to when he had come in.

The familiar sound of shackles being removed, the chair scraping, and Simon simply stared at the floor as he heard the receding footsteps. Qvinn was out of the room now. He exhaled sharply, before reaching for the door handle.

Well, that was that for today.

After his long meeting, Simon decided to finally do something about the state of his accommodation. It would be a way for him to quietly process what had just occurred, without ruminating heavily on it. Just simply keeping his head down on the bus, focusing on the landscape that surrounded him.

The sun filtered into the bus through the trees, occasionally blinding him. Biting wind painted an entirely different view on the weather in winter. It was quite deceptive. The roads could do with some work, given the amount of potholes and poorly conceived pathways. New tar and gravel mixing in with the old to create uneven routes that the bus bumped over; chairs rattling and people
swaying on the rails as they stared dead-eyed at their phones.

Simon retrieved his phone from his coat pocket, and checked the lock screen. The time read 10:42 AM. No new messages, thankfully. He then unlocked it. There were, however, a good 306 unread emails. Mostly press, but he assumed there would be one or two important ones.

Indeed there was Detective Skye, who had attached a few more PDF files and photos, alongside the contents that he had retrieved from the cubbyhole last week on Thursday. He hadn't had the time to look through them, what with being swamped with the interrogation and Edgeworth assigning new cases as the month's court cycle started and cataloguing other evidence. There had been other paperwork too, and...it had been so hectic a week he had crashed onto his bed on Friday night and read, as he ate the remains of Aura's sugary chocolate cereal, before he threw out the carton. And then didn't buy new groceries.

Nothing from Edgeworth, which was a relief. But there was an email from Franziska von Karma. He wouldn't open it yet. He stowed the phone back in his pocket. He had made it to his stop just as the bus had jumped over one last pothole that sent him a few centimetres up into the air before being abruptly sat down again. Pulling himself up, he exited, and found himself outside...well, a hypermarket.

It was along a strip mall, designed in much the same way as service stations on motorways when he would go on road trips with his parents from London up to the north. It had always been trips up to industrial cities that Simon didn't much care for but his sister and father had loved them, so he was just left to grin and bear it, with his mother telling him to behave himself. There were rows of shops, all painted in this dull beige to suit the climate. A pet shop, which made him grimace again, the hypermarket, some gardening shops and a nail salon.

He sighed. It had then dawned on Simon that he had not gone shopping in years.

Of course, he knew how to shop: pick up things off shelves, put them into a basket or trolley, and walk away. He knew of Saturday mornings spent doing the shopping with his mother, filling up the trolley with the usual necessities. The usual necessities that he did not possess for the time being, because he'd been so...swamped in his work and without routine and handling his brain and...

It was just so easily forgotten; to take care of himself, that is.

And here he was, learning how to...take care of himself at a strip mall, when he ought to be back at the office answering emails, and debriefing Edgeworth and seeing what on earth was going on with Hawthorn's case that he still hadn't looked at.

Nevertheless, dilly-dallying on the matter would not get him anywhere. He had to be rational about this. He stomped in the direction of the hypermarket.

As soon as he entered he was mildly surprised by how normal it was inside.

Well, of bloody course it would be normal.

Small children toddled around the place with their parents to do the weekly shop; old women browsed at clothing too garish and too embarrassing to be found anywhere else; and teenagers bunted off, looking for sweets and packs of cigarettes.

Don't think. Get what you need and get out.

Simon made his way through the aisles. It was quite large all around; with a bakery slotted in next to kitchen appliances and fresh vegetables. He didn't need any of this. Just the bare essentials. Aura
had made that much clear, at least implicitly then. He knew the way she gave him a once-over and mentally categorised his well-being. It was nothing new. Simon had learnt to manage his sister and she, in turn, tolerated his antics.

Necessities…food, laundry and toiletries. That was what the weekly shop was. A weekly shop he had not done for well over seven years. Seven years too late to be relearning the way society functioned. The way you had to move to get out of someone's way, as they carted their overloaded shopping trolley through the aisles.

Then there was the wide selection in products to purchase. So many damn tins of the same type of beans at ranging prices.

As he manoeuvred his way through people and products, he began to muse how much he missed the simplicity of hard beds, routine exercise, reading and three meals of slop a day. This faffing around was infuriating; dithering at aisles to determine what carton of eggs to purchase, or whether they were packed in recyclable cardboard cartons or not, or if they were brown or white eggs or free range or or or...

He could not take it at this point.

He stood still, legs firmly planted into the ground as he looked at the label of some chocolate bar. He needed to calm his mind down, and he'd gone to a stupid place to do it.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

He just had to not think. Just place items in the cart, and act like a normal man on a shopping trip. His attire didn't exactly make him blend in. Nor did the hair. The stares said as much. He wondered how many of these people had seen his mugshot on the evening news in the last few weeks.

And then Simon finally, finally made it to the checkout line.

He then realised he didn't have a bag. Well, his satchel, yes, but that was strictly for work. He wondered if they had paper bags. Better for the environment, quite durable, and easily recyclable. He looked around for a bag. In Europe they had these bags hooked on the ends of conveyor belts. Here, biodegradable plastic bags sat sadly on the ends of conveyor belts, neglected. And then...yes! They had them hooked onto the ends of another conveyor belt, and Simon snatched one up quickly. Then, a second bag for good measure.

The cashier gave him a polite smile as she scanned his items. Her name tag said Maria, and she had mousy brown hair tied up in a short ponytail. She had painted her fingernails midnight blue, he noted, as she scanned his items through. He didn't realise how long he had been staring at her until she'd rung him up for the price. Forty-five dollars, and twenty-five cents, she said. He took a moment to process the information before he handed over the cash. He needed to get a credit card, he reminded himself, and to make a bloody checklist of things he had to do outside his work life.

Then Simon set about arranging his purchases into the two brown paper bags. A set of dark blue towels in the bottom; some white bed sheets; a toothbrush; toothpaste; shampoo and conditioner; a set of razors and shaving cream in one bag. Then a carton of 10 eggs; tofu; soba noodles; potatoes; courgettes; frozen peas; onions; garlic; some salmon; seaweed and soy sauce in another. How...Japanese of him.

He exited the shop, exhaling perhaps the longest breath he'd ever held. The pit in his stomach rumbled.
It was then that Simon decided he would fully follow his sister's advice for the day. No, he was not going back to the office with his groceries, and he would not be admonished for it. Besides, Edgeworth had been concerned for his well-being. This should soothe him. Simon snorted at the thought, before turning left to inspect the other shops.

The rest of his afternoon consisted indeed of a much-needed shopping trip. He acquired some pots of paint — white and dark pewter grey — and some rollers. An apron, some cooking pots and a set of three knives, for the kitchen. For the office, an arranged tray of succulents that he could tend to. Now with three very full bags in one hand, and the pots of paint in the other, there was no other choice but to take a taxi home.

By this time of day, the sky was a little darker. 3 PM and on the prison timetable that meant...going back to the prison ward. That meant going home now. For today at least. The flat was still sparse and dank, but he hoped his purchases could make it a more...suitable place to live in.

He went about putting the food in the fridge and cupboards. Then to put the towels and bed sheets in the washing machine – Aura thankfully had some washing detergent – and while that was going, he set up the clothes line on the bedroom balcony. Washing done, and on the line it went. Then he made dinner – baked salmon with courgettes – and started on a new book: *Underground* by Haruki Murakami. After two chapters, satisfied he'd made a start, he put his plates in the dishwasher. Then for the rest of the evening, he tended to the succulents, watering them and plucking old leaves, ready to bring them into the office tomorrow.

At 9 PM. his bed called for him. After changing into sleepwear and a quick brush of his teeth and a floss, he was out like a light.

It was a couple of days later when Simon finally had a moment to settle down and review the investigation into Hawthorn's murder, and tend to his neglected emails.

**Subject: More evidence**

*Dear Simon Blackquill,*

*Agent Lang and I have been investigating the Skande Espionage and Intelligence Locators, and we believed it to be of use to you to inform you of a recent connection we have established between the agency and a now-defunct smuggling ring.*

*Attached is the case file Miles Edgeworth worked on, alongside Jacob Hawthorn's scanned notes. Use them as you see fit.*

*Do not hesitate to ask for further assistance.*

*Regards,*

*Franziska von Karma*

The email had come at a convenient time for him today. He had managed to set up a meeting with Detective Skye to go over the case. In spite of the jurisdiction of Hawthorn's case having shifted to being placed under Interpol's command, the officers were cooperating with the LAPD. As she was head investigator of the LAPD branch, she appeared to be on working terms with Agent Lang and Prosecutor von Karma, which made for a suitable arrangement and the easy flow of information.

He had an hour before their meeting was due to start, so tending to some paperwork would be useful way to spend his time, and at ten in the morning, a knock on the door sounded.
"Enter." he said.

Detective Skye made her way in with coffee and case files. She said a quick "Hey", as she set down the coffee on his desk - two takeout coffee cups in a little cardboard container - and placed a ring binder in his in-tray. Taking one of the cups, she made herself comfortable on the sofa.

Simon looked up briefly at the detective; she was inspecting his office again as she usually did now. Not that he minded. In fact, Simon enjoyed her presence, and the way she carefully paid attention to detail, what with the little netsuke lining his bookshelf. No doubt, she would have noticed the new succulents on the cabinet under his window, beside some psychology tomes he had lined up and an English-Borginian dictionary. *A Very Short Introduction to Cohdopia* and its counterparts *Borginia*, and *The European Union*, were stacked up on the other corner. He had finally managed to go to a bookshop last night.

Just as Simon had signed off on the last document, Skye, satisfied with her look-around, turned her attention towards more pressing matters, opening up her own identical ring binder.

Simon pulled the coffee cup and files towards him, opening the provided ring binder of information. He had already pulled up the interrogation notes on his laptop. In another tab, Hawthorn's online work profile.

"I wanted to start at the beginning to refresh ourselves. So, what have you found out more about of our victim?" he asked.

Skye turned over the pages in her binder. "Well, since we called, I managed to get a better outline on him. He was an international prosecutor, based in LA for the last few years since 2025, looking into Borginia. I found out he was part of the Borginia Tribunal, looking at war crimes committed by the state. The tribunal also met in Frankfurt, which is why he was also working there. He did six months rotation between here and there."

Simon nodded as Skye spoke. "The reason why he was handling missing persons reports and smuggling rings and those organisations and companies is because of that. Borginia had a civil war in the nineties, after the USSR broke up. There were reports of human rights violations and torture by the army. So, he was investigating that."

"Where was he based before Los Angeles?" he asked, reaching for a pen to mark down the key information.

"The Hague, and before that Primidux, Cohdopia's capital, actually."

"Was he looking at Borginia as a country or areas of government?"

"Well, the tribunal had different functions, of course. Because he got tasked with looking at war crimes with a team, he was looking at the military and internal service. National security."

"Then I would say that was where SEIL comes into play and why he had a wealth of information on them."

"Yeah, I'd say as much."

"Adding to that," Simon started, pointing his pen at the computer screen. "I received an email from von Karma-dono the other day."

Skye sipped at her coffee. "And?"
"Well, before broaching that topic, I wanted to further make mention of the interrogations I have been conducting."

"Yeah?" prompted Skye, as she leaned forward to hear him better.

"As I had cited the need to acquire a contextual framework, our spy shared with me earlier this week the origins of the espionage agency. Being that it was borne out of the Cohdopian Civil War of 2009 to 2012, von Karma-dono's email and its attachments pertain to that time period."

He motioned at Skye to get up and approach his desk. He had brought up Hawthorn's investigation notes on the computer screen. "The email detailed a case concerning a smuggling ring from a decade ago. The Allebahstian ambassador to the United States, a Quercus Alba, was convicted of first degree murder and trafficking of illegal goods. It was a ring heavily based around the Allebahstian diplomatic and political circles, that had facilitated a counterfeit money-laundering scheme in Zheng Fa.

"As far as the literature is concerned," Simon gestured towards the books on the cabinet. "Borginia was a diplomatic ally to Allebahst following the disintegration of the unified state. It is implied that Borginian intelligence services, as an ally of Allebahst at that time, were aiding and abetting in the trafficking of illegal goods."

"It is still an ongoing investigation, albeit on a much smaller scale, but it was an area the deceased was working on as well. The reason being, post-reunification, after the dismantling of Allebahstian side of SEIL, Borginian oligarchs may have begun operating their own, insofar as the victim's scribblings are concerned, since his notes mention a case you've worked on, being the Borginian cocoon smuggling case in 2026 with the murder of Romein LeTouse."

"Mind, this is all circumstantial. But it suggests the notion that the Borginians had fingers in many pies with regards to Cohdopia. The appeal was a clear example of that, as you would have seen from the court footage, had you tuned in that morning."

Skye hummed in agreement. Simon watched her. She tapped at the screen.

"Well, you definitely looked into this," she finally said, in an exhausted tone.

"I admit, it is a lot of information to take in." Then Simon furrowed his eyebrows, as though trying to look for the right words. "But...Do not worry yourself, Detective. You have been a great asset to this investigation. Given how hectic these last weeks have been, your investigative work has been far-reaching in the toughest of deadlocks."

Reassured by his words, she gave him a little smile. It didn't quite reach her eyes. "Thanks for that. It's just really stressful sometimes. I've been projecting a lot. It's unprofessional of me."

"Well, rest assured I shall put you in line on any counts of unprofessional conduct."

"Okay." she nodded, sitting back down on the sofa and reaching for the now-lukewarm coffee.

"Returning to the subject at hand, if you wish to familiarise yourself further, I can offer you my acquired literature," prompted Simon, as he gestured again at the books on the cabinet.

Skye shook her head. "No, thanks. I think I've got a clear idea now."

Simon nodded. "Very well then."

"Yeah...I think we've generally established some sort of motive. Lots of work relating to Borginia,
got on their radar, and got silenced."

"Yes, precisely."

"Also, Mr Edgeworth sent me an email - I don't know if you got it - about three other international lawyers found dead. May be related, but we can't really speculate." Skye finished her coffee, setting the cup aside. "Anyway, it's under Interpol, so that's not my area."

"No, but it is useful to keep abreast of similar ongoing matters." Simon leaned back in his seat. "Well, since we seem to have sorted out that line of inquiry, what'll be our next course of action?"

"I think you need to continue getting information out of Qvinn, and I'll work on establishing the timeline of the night of Hawthorn's death and his movements before that. We've been so focused on the motive and background really, what with the mess with the Borgia, so I think I'll work on that."

"I am in agreement."

"Okay, well, we'll do that then." she rose from her seat, picking up her bag. She gestured at his desk. "You can keep that binder. I know your office is getting super cramped now with all this, but it'll help to have the second copy with you."

"Ah, yes, thank you."

"If I come up with anything, as usual, I'll call."

"Very well," he nodded. "Have a good rest of your day."

"You too."

The door clicked shut behind her, signalling the return to the standard routine. Simon finished his coffee and went about organising his papers. He printed out Hawthorn's notes, placing them in the ring binder Skye had provided, and set aside any Phantom-related information in its own separate binder. That included interrogation notes, and SEIL investigation notes he'd acquired from von Karma and Hawthorn. Next, in a plastic wallet, he placed his meeting minutes, and any other relevant papers that didn't have a place in the ring binders.

Once he had finished that, it was lunchtime. Another quick bento box from the cafeteria – he really ought to start making his own lunches now – and he tended to his emails. Edgeworth had posted the next week's court docket, and he responded quickly to some new colleagues' questions. Then, he set about writing an email to von Karma.

Dear von Karma-dono,

Thank you for the attachments. I have since met with a member of the investigation team to discuss Hawthorn's case. The next course of action will be to establish his whereabouts prior to his death.

Enclosed are my latest interrogation notes. I have been attempting to establish a general background for SEIL to gain the suspect's trust and willingness to divulge information about his role. But I'd like to ask for some guidance with regards to other points of discussion to follow aside from SEIL in and of itself.

Thank you for your cooperation,

S. Blackquill
He sent off a couple of other emails after that, before setting his laptop aside and tending to the unfinished paperwork. A couple of hours and another cup of tea, he had finished that and set it aside in his out-tray. He was finally glad to say it had been a productive afternoon, now approaching evening outside. The time on his office clock read twenty-two minutes past five.

One more check of his emails, and then he would go home, have a shower and make some dinner for himself. He deserved a reward for his work today.

Sure enough, when he opened up the inbox, he saw that von Karma had been quick to respond.

Dear Simon Blackquill,

Thank you for sharing your interrogation notes. I understand he is being quite accommodating in his responses.

To answer your question, some points to consider would be the motives behind the crimes first committed in Japanifornia in 2020 with his emergence, and from there we can establish a timeline of events.

Regards,

Franziska von Karma

He leaned back in his seat, processing the response. Yes, a timeline of events sounded a suitable place to start in determining the man's origins.

...His origins. Did the man actually want to know of them? The impression the last few meetings had left on him was that the man had seemed perfectly content with breezing through people's lives like a ghost...one mission after another before there was some sort of end to it. Killed in action, perhaps. He didn't know.

What was it he had said at the retrial? That he had no... "self." He was no one. He was nothing but an endless abyss.

In that sense, Simon was no different.

Not one bit different in the way he had breezed through schools, with superficial friendships and rapport with teachers, before moving abroad and repeating the cycle. Then came university...he didn't remember much of it. Aside from, well, perhaps an interesting professor here and there. Then the space centre…

I should ask him about the space centre.

Family. He had a family at the space centre. Then he wasn't breezing through life, killing time. He was living, with his sister, in their shared flat. She'd come home late, or sleep over, and they'd make dinner...all of them together, at the dinner table, in a small but cosy flat. There used to be rugs and feature walls, and photos of him and Aura; Aura and Metis; Metis and Athena...and loads more books and interactions, laughter and TV shows marathoned together on cold winter nights.

They had been a family.

A family that he and his sister deserved, after everything that had come to pass in London and New York. What disappointments they were to their parents, he mused. He doubted they thought of them anymore. Some unspoken pact between them to never speak of the two disgraceful children they had brought into the world.
Two...fucked up children.

And as quickly as the presence of family came, it was snatched. Back to breezing through life as it were of his own accord...the crossing of the River Styx so bloody close...and yet so far away again.

He had lived to see the beginning of 2028, watching the fireworks from his balcony. He should've been happy...perhaps felt at least some sort of smidgen of positivity or optimism at the start of a new chapter in his life. But frankly, the whole experience had been nothing short of surreal, and it hadn't quite registered to him there and then...the...sheer weight of it all. He had just been frustrated by the loud bangs that rattled his bedroom door when midnight struck; not much sleep that night.

He remembered Athena had called him earlier that night. She had invited him to some...New Years Eve party that the agency was hosting, with what appeared to be half the bloody Prosecutor's Office in tow. Well, no, not half of the office. That would be an exaggeration. Just the eccentric lot of them. He declined, of course. He still declined to attend social functions. It was easier on him.

Someone like Hawthorn would probably have been at home, looking at Borginian documents over dinner, than counting down the start of the New Year. Perhaps, or Hawthorn spent it with family and friends, as is typically the case.

There was no use thinking about it. He swivelled around in his chair. He wanted to get dizzy, and get sick and feel nauseous So that he could expel these painful...and horrible thoughts, and just leave. To run away, as he always did. The spinning stopped as the chair settled itself in front of the window.

It had stopped raining a while ago. The silhouettes of a murder of crows flying across the city dotted the light grey skies. He could see the hazy circular outline of the sun as it hid behind the clouds, refusing to come out into the open. The smog acted as a thick layer, coating the city with its grimy pollution, sinking onto the high rise buildings. Los Angeles had cleaned up its act, all things considered, in their efforts to tackle pollution and climate change. Still, the smog remained.

There would be no family for him to return to tonight. And there was nothing he could do about it. His mood had soured. So much for the productive day he'd had.

Well, off home he went.

Thursday followed in a bit of a monotonous blur for Simon. Wake up, head to the office, and do more investigative digging. Skye hadn't come bearing news, so he didn't bother her. He had a meeting with Edgeworth about his progress, who seemed pleased. Athena tried calling him twice that day, but he left the phone ringing and the messages unanswered.

Today was Friday, which meant it was the second interrogation session of the week. He had waited until late afternoon to make his visit, spending the morning in preparation, gathering the necessary materials for this meeting. He made sure to get some lunch as well. It was already three in the afternoon when he made it into the interrogation room.

"What would you like to ask me today," parroted Qvinn.

Simon comforted himself with the fact that things were much the same here. The same manner of speech, and the same way in which he carelessly threw his documents onto the table, and set up the recording device. One thing was different: he had brought his office laptop with him.

"I would like to ask you about the Cosmos Space Centre," said Simon, pen in hand.
"What about it."

"I'd like to ask why it was of particular interest to Borginia. I was under the impression that Borginia was more concerned with ascertaining Cohdopia's then-current political situation with their reunification only a year old."

A shift in his seat, and his shackled hands sunk down on the table. "If I may remind you."

"Yes?"

"Monday I said that in 2020 I was approached by Cohdopia to supply intelligence after reunification. While I was working with Borginia in this particular matter as a mole, the Cohdopians still had a stake in this matter. Win-win for both sides. Or lose-lose."

"According to my notes, you were caught on Interpol's radar in August 2019 for-"

"September 2019. Zheng Fa," corrected Qvinn. "...I was caught regarding the counterfeit bills. The Allebahstians and Borginians wanted them flushed as soon as possible."

Simon nodded slowly, scribbling on his legal pad.

A smile crept up Qvinn's lips. "I never was able to correct you back then. It is nice to be able to do that now. Without tazing you." he tilted his head, and furrowed his eyebrows. "Did you enjoy that, by the way."

I didn't. Simon swallowed. "Regardless, you had made your mark there. A voice recording obtained by an informant there was sent back to Interpol. Through appropriate channels, it landed in the hands of Metis Cykes, putting you on the spot to make your move in October 2020,"

"Exactly." Qvinn leaned back in his seat. "There are two things to keep in mind. One, that the intelligence I would get would benefit both countries and two, I needed to protect myself."

"What did this intelligence consist of?"

"Borginia wanted in on the Research and Development programme at Cosmos. The rockets they were building would help for military intelligence on building missiles. The robotics technology would also help them, and the technology sector. Killer robots. Service robots...You name it, they had machinations for it."

He shrugged. "I did not care what they used it for. I was ordered to go in and get the intel on their behalf. Worried about some Cohdopian attack."

"How were you able to get into Cosmos? It was a high-security facility?"

"I was an undergraduate student at Stanford doing an internship. Got into the HAT-1 programme." Qvinn leaned back in his seat. "My name was Matthew, and I liked astrophysics. I had black hair and blue eyes. Matthew was well-liked. He was goofy."

He shrugged. "Anyway, the Borginians wanted me to test the capabilities of the HAT-1 rocket."

"So you sabotaged the rocket that Solomon Starbuck was to be on?"

"Yes."

"Whatever for?"
"They wanted to test the capabilities of the rocket as a weapon, so they had me fiddle around with it. That way, they could see what could and couldn't be tampered with. The sabotage threat also provided a distraction, for me to obtain the psych report."

"So, by October 7, you were poised to murder Metis Cykes?"

"Metis Cykes was an unfortunate liability," said Qvinn, inspecting his cuticles. "She was intelligent, no doubt, and that was the risk. I could not risk my identity being revealed."

Simon swallowed. "The footage from the day of the murder is remarkable, in that a good seven minutes have been shaved off."

"Yes. Footage that will never be recovered."

Simon placed his office laptop on the table, and booted it up. He logged in, and accessed the video playback software. "This is the remaining footage that was shown at the trial," he said, turning the laptop so that Qvinn could see it. Only one minute remained. Out came the Phantom, skirting about the hallway. Despite the wound on his hand, and his suspicious nature, he looked calm and collected. "I can only infer you'd become well aware of the centre's layout, thus being able to dodge the security cameras."

"Yes."

"But what was in the seven minutes preceding it?"

Qvinn sat back in his seat. He surveyed Blackquill's face; an unreadable expression had remained steady on his features throughout this interrogation, but...how long could it last?

"In the seven minutes preceding that footage, I engaged Metis Cykes in conversation on the way to her lab from lunch. Student and doctor. There is footage of me as Matthew, the Stanford student. She had a spare moment. Her partner was out of the lab. I took the opportunity." Qvinn crossed his arms. Simons's jaw clenched. "Metis Cykes did not expect it. I threatened her. She did not fight back. I stabbed her. Then moments after, the footage shows Athena Cykes entering the room, as I had been searching for the report."

"The girl attacked me with the utility knife. There is no mark. I wore gloves." He raised a pale hand for Simon to see. There were no blemishes, let alone deep knife wounds. "That is where the footage you see starts. Me emerging from the lab. Anything preceding that would have incriminated the true Matthew from Stanford."

Qvinn shrugged. "I had not found the report, and I had the other issue of my blood on the moon rock. I returned to the scene to dump the jacket. The rest is history."

He laced his hands together. "It is nothing personal. The service says that threats must be eliminated. It was a mission I had to conduct. If it did not succeed, then plan B would proceed."

Simon frowned. "Could you elaborate further on the subsequent plan?"

"If I had not managed to obtain the psychological profile, then I would have to take on a new identity and infiltrate to retrieve it. That is where you come in. They said that was the simplest option. Pose as a detective, one who does not raise too many questions, who focuses on rehabilitation over incarceration. That way, I get to Simon Blackquill. I build a rapport with him. I get the profile."

*He's certainly thought far ahead.* Simon nodded slowly. "And the rocket?" he asked.
"It survived, and the moon rock sent into space. The Borginians brought me back after that. They had ruled the mission a failure officially. I was confined to desk work for a year. Unofficially, it was a success, because I had tapped into the communication system at Cosmos."

Qvinn leaned forward. "It is a shame about Dr Metis Cykes' death."

Simon ignored his last statement. His mouth was dry. He swallowed. "Inform me of your second visit to Cosmos, which resulted in the HAT-2 sabotage and the murder of Clay Terran."

"Because of the communication system in place, I learnt that Director Cosmos was trialling a HAT-2 programme, with the intention of bringing back the Hope probe. They put me in the field in 2026 with the plan B: search and destroy any evidence that revealed my identity."

"Ergo, the moon rock encapsulated within the Hope probe and the psychological profile?"

"Yes," he shrugged. "It was a necessary mission. Posing as Bobby Fulbright meant I could access the necessary files." He tilted his head, scrutinising Simon's face. "You never were forthcoming with information, were you."

Simon's leg bounced. He chose not to respond. Qvinn dropped the matter. He had retreated back into being the salt-pillar-man.

"The threat was sent to the director, and with that I could infiltrate the space centre. The plan, like last time would be to set up the bombs as a distraction and sabotage the rocket, in order to search for the moon rock located in the Hope probe. I had been placed on security detail as Bobby Fulbright. After the first two bombs went off, and the astronauts were evacuated, I was made aware of the fact that they had the Hope capsule on them."

Qvinn looked down, inspecting his cuticles. "As with Metis Cykes, Clay Terran's death was an unfortunate necessity. I could not risk any witnesses, even if unconscious."

He looked up again. "However, I had to abandon retrieving the Hope capsule. The director had his own plans to sabotage my mission by distracting me and switching the launchpads. I would have to plot my escape quickly, by jumping to the emergency ladder I had put up earlier."

Simon interjected. "If you would recall, it was mentioned in court that one would have to suppress their fears in order to make that jump. Wright-dono concluded from that then that one would have no fear, and ergo it would be the Phantom."

Qvinn nodded. "There was no question of fear. It was necessity, to do what needed to be done. Protection."

"After the event, I fled the centre, to return again later once the murder had been called in. The police confiscated the undetonated bomb and the Hope capsule, to be used as evidence in the Starbuck trial. From there, I posed as a bailiff and stole the remote-controlled detonator while the bomb-disposal guy and the detective were arguing. It was detonated with the intention of removing any traces of the moon rock from the capsule."


There was a moment of silence between them after he had finished speaking. Simon had stopped the tape by then. Qvinn could hear the scratches of ballpoint pen on paper. Eventually, Simon set his pen down, and looked at the man in front of him. He snorted. A smirk played on his lips. "It appears you are a most incompetent 'spy'."
"That is what you think." Qvinn merely smiled. "But did you really suspect me."

_I don't know if I did or didn't._

Qvinn closed his eyes, rotating his head on the right side for a few seconds, before transferring to the left side. Then he opened his eyes again. "Any other questions."

"No. That was insightful." he swallowed. "That concludes this line of questioning today." The rustling of papers confirmed as much, as they were forcefully shoved into a satchel.

Simon rose to his feet, nodding at the guard on the other side of the panel. He watched as Qvinn's shackled ankles were set loose, as he was escorted out. The pale man stared at him for a moment, jumpsuit far too baggy on him. He was salt-pillar-man again.

"Good weekend, Prosecutor," he said, before disappearing behind the door.

After freshening up in the bathroom before he got out of the prison, Simon decided to walk home for a change. A stupid decision, given that it was raining and there were plenty of affordable public transport options — well, not plenty, given Japanifornia's public transit infrastructure — to take him back home. Of course he hadn't thought on an umbrella either. But he was going to stick to it. He needed the exercise. At least, that's what he told himself.

Lightning pierced the sky, ripping its sludge-grey apart in white, tearing its fabric apart even for a couple of milliseconds, before disintegrating against the concrete. A thunderous boom followed shortly after. Simon walked slowly, almost deliberately so.

_Breathe in. Breathe out._

Ragged short breaths filled his lungs, trying in some way to force him to breathe properly. He gritted his teeth and swallowed. The air whistled out of his nose. Another boom, another crack, and another sheet of rain drowned him. The surcoat was sure to be ruined in this weather.

At last, he managed to get into the apartment building, soaked through and dripping wet. His shoe-prints left dirty brown marks on the stairs as he climbed them to the third floor.

He made a beeline for the bedroom once he'd got into the flat. Dinner could wait. Methodically, he peeled off his clothes, discarding them with such perfect carelessness. Then came his underwear and socks. His feet were cold. He walked to the bathroom.

One look at the mirror confirmed his thoughts of the day: _Aura does not need to know about this._

Simon heaved a sigh, leaning over to switch the tap on, letting the cold water run in the shower, before the generator kicked in. After a few moments, steam rose. It stuck to the tiled surfaces like a sheet of cling film. Like cling film he used to use to cover the chocolate puddings he used to make on nights when he was stressed during exam season. The reflection of his exhausted face obscured from his view by the fogged-up steam. Small mercies, he noted, getting into the shower.

The water was lukewarm against his body. The shock of the outside cold from not quite registering the heat. He looked down at himself, as the water ran down his back; his frozen, pale body was almost skeletal in its appearance. It was an anatomical disaster. The veins far too grey, and skin too white, and his ribs jutted out. He leaned against the tiles, sliding down to the ground, hugging his knees against his chest. And then he turned his head, eyes focusing on the patterns in the shower curtain, cheekbone resting against his knee.

By now the water had warmed up to him.
A shaky breath, a gulp, and then...

And then he closed his eyes, letting the water engulf him.

...Just for a minute. Maybe two...he would rest like this.

This would be enough for now.
February 13, 2028

It wasn’t enough. He still had to face his sister at his next visit a couple of days later.

“You look like shit, Simon,” were the first words out of Aura’s mouth when she saw him. There wasn’t any tone behind her words. A mere statement, designed to describe the situation. Just matter-of-fact. Matter-of-fact, as she always was.

Simon took his seat opposite her. The chair scraped harshly against the linoleum floor. It was a busy Sunday afternoon, and all around them conversations were buzzing. His ears picked up snippets; of children and schools and court dates. Sunlight streamed in from the small barred windows, catching Aura’s cold grey eyes squinting at him.

“Hello to you too, Aura,” he greeted, trying to school a bland smile onto his features.

She raised her eyebrows, her mouth a thin line. He knew she wasn’t stupid; years of sitting opposite him had made her a master of scrutiny. He scratched at his wrists, and tried to look at anything but her.

She had said she didn’t need to know what went on, and that was his justification for now. *She doesn’t need to know. She cannot know. She will never know.*

“So…how are you?” she asked, once she had finished giving him a look-over.

He looked up to meet her gaze; Aura had leaned back in her seat, her fingers drumming against the plastic armrests. He swallowed. “I am…alright. Busy. I haven’t been getting much sleep.”

She nodded slowly. “...Do you eat?”

He nodded. That was a good place to start. A good distraction. He had gone on his shopping excursion, hadn’t he? “I stocked up on food.”

“That doesn't answer my question.”

“One meal a day,” he relented. “I keep a routine of sorts.”

“...Okay.” she said, not entirely convinced. Her thumb ran along the edge of the armrest. “...I guess it’s better than the slop they serve here. I don’t know how you survived the last seven years.”

*I don’t quite know myself. “You’ll get used to it.”*

“I’d bloody well have to, wouldn’t I?”
“Hm.” he frowned, trying to look for something to say. He laced his fingers together. When had her nails grown so long?

“I took you up on your offer last week,” he finally found himself saying.

Aura’s expression morphed into confusion. He filled her in. “The flat. I bought some paint for it.”

“Hmph. I didn’t think you were serious,” she muttered, leaning back in her seat, her eyes focusing on an imaginary speck of dirt on the table. “But that’s good of you. Lord knows I’ve neglected the place.”

“Hm. I haven’t done anything yet.”

Aura nodded acknowledgingly. “Well, let me know how you get on with that.”

A small smile tried to make itself known on his lips. “I never was one for decorating.”

“No.” she deadpanned.

Well, that was the end of that small burst of conversation; stupid of him to bring up the flat. He scratched his arm.

“Is there anything you’d like me to bring…for next time?” he asked tentatively.

“I…” Aura started, then she closed her mouth and shrugged. “Not particularly, no.”

Silence once more created a gulf between them. The conversations around them continued to buzz, to rise and fall, and to talk of domestic matters that he...had never had the privilege of experiencing, because he—

“I have laundry duty at four,” Aura’s words cut into his thoughts. That was his cue to leave.

Simon stood up and listened for the footsteps of the guard, and the tinkling metallic sound of the cuffs being placed on Aura’s hands. The conversations around them began fading out.

“Simon?”

His head snapped up. “Yes?”

He saw her eyebrows furrow and her jaw clench, her eyes focused on the shackles in front of her. “...Never mind.”

“I see,” he swallowed; his Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. “Well, I’ll leave you to it then.”

She said nothing else, and he watched as she was led away, disappearing from his view. Until next week then. He turned on his heel and made his way to the exit.

Once out of the prison’s grounds, Simon scoured the bus timetable. He decided beforehand that he wasn’t going to go home just yet, for there was a place he wanted to go to first. A place he had never been to before, because he had never anticipated that he would ever go there.

He had, however, expected he would be buried there. Just...well, clearly not yet. Not as soon as he had anticipated.

Gourd Lake Cemetery was, thankfully, only a short bus ride away and relatively close to where he now resided. That latter fact was only to be expected; Aura, naturally, would have wanted to be...as
close as she could be to her fiancée.

And to me, when I was due to make my crossing.

Still, not quite yet.

The gravel crunched beneath his old hiking boots — he had found them, among other clothing items, stashed away in the back of one of the storage closets in the flat — and the warm rays of sunlight caught his exposed pale arms.

The sun felt too harsh and too bright for this. For what he was about to embark on. And his clothes too casual. This was meant to be a solemn moment. But there was nothing he could do about it. He had to soldier on.

He meandered through the various plaques, headstones and statues, trying to find the one he was looking for. He hadn’t bothered to look online beforehand, to find out where she was interred, but the black Japanese headstones gave him a good inkling.

He was right. It didn’t take him much time to find it; a long black marble stone bearing her name, Metis Cykes, in English and Japanese. He crouched down to inspect it; dust had settled on the surface, spread out thinly. Her grave had been neglected in recent months, understandably so.

With a brush of his hand, he tidied away the dead red rose petals and the burnt incense sticks. Then he stood up again and placed a hand on the top of the stone.

There was nothing he could say. After all, what could he say? What could he do?

Had all that he had done been in vain?

He looked away, his jaw clenched, his eyes shut tight. No. Right now, her murderer was sitting in a dank cell on a paper-thin mattress; her daughter was safe; and her fiancée, well, she was alright.

His thumb ran along the character engravings that spelled out her Japanese name. He could not recall if Aura had mentioned the details of the funeral. He hardly recalled anything in the aftermath of his trial. But it appeared she had had a traditional Japanese funeral; she had been cremated, her bones had been picked out and placed in an urn, and her ashes had been sealed in the crypt under his feet.

A humourless smile made its way onto his lips. It was what she would have wanted.

And what about him? Where did he stand in all this?

He was the one who had led her into an early grave. He was the one who made her an “unfortunate liability”.

The chime of a text message rang out in the deserted cemetery. So much for trying to have a solemn moment.

He brushed away the dust on his fingers, before he turned away and left the cemetery. On his way home, he stopped in at a flower shop to purchase a bouquet of marigolds, poppies, and white carnations, and some incense sticks. When he got back, he placed the flowers in a vase on the living room table, made himself a bowl of soba noodle soup for dinner, and lay on the sofa reading until it was time to go to bed. He refused to check his phone for the rest of the day.

After going about his nightly routine, he lit the incense in a small jar and the scent of sandalwood
wafted out from the sticks. Then he climbed into bed. He ignored the book on his bedside table; Murakami would have to wait for another night.

Simon shut his eyes tight and let his hand fall to his side. It was best he just try and get some sleep, for tomorrow wasn't going to be any easier on him.

He let out a heaved sigh, and then, turning his body, he moved to switch off the bedside light. He hadn't bothered to draw the curtains; the bright yellow city lights danced on the ceiling and the wall in front of him. The shadows flickered against the light, scuttling about the room; the shadows of cars zoomed past quickly. But the palm fronds were ever-present, rustling against the window-panes. That was a sound he would have to get used to.

For now though, it was a calming sound; a reminder of palm trees, and white sand beaches, and him as a lanky adolescent jumping into the sea. He let the memory play out into a dream, with him swimming and swimming and swimming away, the water lapping at his pale skin, and the waves leading him elsewhere...

And he was calm. He was at peace. He was asleep.

The incense stayed burning beside him all night.

“Did you have a good weekend.”

He was back here. There was a rustle of fabric as Simon settled into his chair in the interrogation room.

“Yes, I did,” he replied quickly. Automatically.

Qvinn narrowed his eyes and squinted at him for a split-second, before schooling his features back into that neutral bored look. Simon clicked the button on the tape recorder and relayed the customary introduction, before settling down in his seat for a moment to collect his thoughts.

He wasn't sure where to start.

He was back here, after all that had been revealed a mere seventy-two hours ago. Horrific though the revelations had been, Simon had expected them.

But just where was he meant to go from here? Was he to continue to press on further? To ask more questions about motive for murder? To scream at how many lives had been lost in the fallout?

...Or was he meant to sweep it all under the rug? Bottle it all up, bottle everything up, shove everything down because that was the only way he was able to cope?

To the Phantom sitting across from him, this had been nothing more than a job. He did not care about the consequences of his actions. Moreover, he could not feel the guilt, the remorse, the... sheer weight of it all.

“...What are your questions for me.”

The monotone words pulled him out of his thoughts, and Simon shifted in his seat and cleared his throat.

“Today I’d like to make internal inquiries into your employers,” he said. The words left his mouth before he could catch them. Simon supposed he would have to run with it; it would prove useful,
he hoped, to his colleagues.

“I’d like to ask about about your organisation itself,” he clarified. “Its innards; the manner in which it operates and governs. The manner in which it keeps you all in line.”

“You want names.”

He sucked in a breath. “Not necessarily,” he said.

Then with a pause, he added, “Of course, if it is of benefit to you to reveal them, then...by all means, you are welcome to do so.”

There was a glint in Qvinn’s eye, and his neutral facade evaporated; a thin line replaced his mouth. “You are trying to manipulate me, Prosecutor.”

The quiet voice was harsh, raspy, and not at all familiar. Simon crossed his arms. He hadn’t thought of it that way when he said the words but... If that was the conclusion that he had drawn, then he would run with it.

Simon leaned forward to press his lips to the microphone, his words low in his throat. “I assure you I have not been putting anything into your head. You are the one who produced that assumption.”

Qvinn’s jaw clenched, and he turned his chin up. “You should know that I am immune to your advances, Blackquill.”

Do not falter. A smirk crept up Simon’s lips. “Oh, I am well aware of my previous attempts to draw information out of you, Fool Bright.”

I never knew the poor man but...two can play at this game.

Simon lowered his head, not caring to look at the Phantom as those words left his mouth. There wasn’t a second to consider them, as the sound of a shackled fist slamming down on the metal table caused him to jump.

“That is not my name!”

A... visceral reaction? Was he...was he producing an emotional response?

Simon steeled himself. He would have to be sure of that... psychological studies be damned, Simon reproduced the smirk, eyes trained on Qvinn’s.

“Is it not? I know of you only as Fool Bright, I’m afraid. It would be a great injustice to such a man if we weren’t to honour his memory.” The harsh overhead fluorescent lights caught Simon’s hawk-like eyes. “After all, you’ve been honouring it for the last year.”

Simon stood up and balled his fists. He would maintain his control in this situation.

“On a further note,” he continued, glaring down the man, “were you not the one who said you did not care for your colleagues? You claimed to be a traitor, did you not? A self-professed one too!”

A sharp metallic shriek sounded out as Qvinn lunged forward, his fingers gripping the glass that separated them. There was shuffle of footsteps as two officers emerged to restrain him.

Spittle flew out of his mouth. “You are the traitor, Blackquill! You promised—”

“I did no such thing.” Simon snapped back, his lip curled up in disgust. He jerked his head towards
the guards. “We are done here. You may—”

“Fine, I’ll talk!”

It was a pathetic whimper, but it forced Simon to sit back down again. He could feel the blood rush to his temples. His leg bounced. “...Will you, Fool Bright?”

“Yes!” he answered his voice strained. He was still contained in a vice-like grip.

Simon brought the pad of paper closer to him, and scribbled onto it. “I see you are capable of producing emotion then. That is a breakthrough.”

“What are you—”

“You do not ask the questions. I do.” Simon interrupted forcefully, before he nodded at the guards, who released him from their hold. Qvinn crumpled unceremoniously against the table. “Now then, the structure of your organisation, and be quick about it.”

Simon watched with a horrible sense of glee as the man cautiously climbed back into his seat. The feeling flickered for only a brief split-second, before it extinguished as he further observed those angry features disappear once more; the salt-pillar-man had reemerged.

Qvinn’s voice echoed hollowly in the dank room as he spoke out. “SEIL was founded with the intention of spying, as you know. Higher-ups decided it was easiest to structure and fill the ranks with military personnel. Everyone from agents to directors served in the military. Did not matter which one. Borginian or Allebahstian. Did not care. So long as you served. Could still serve.”

Qvinn paused, and Simon expected him to continue his monologue but instead was greeted with silence. Clearing his throat, he turned back a few pages in his legal pad. “You mentioned last week that your coalition was severed into three equal units. Would the military personnel have been placed within their ethnic groupings?”

“Alllebahstian branch had Allebahstians. Borginian branch had Borginians. Dual Corps had both, and maybe some other nationalities. As I said, it did not matter.”

“And had you all served in the civil war?”

A shrug. “That was the expectation, seeing as it was a new organisation borne out of said war.”

Right, they were making a start. “Could you list the departments?”


“And within those ranks, I would assume there to be subcategories?”

Again, the response was clipped, short, in staccato. “Field operations. Telecommunications. Elite training. I do not remember them all. It is useless information to me.”

Was Metis’ life useless information to you too?

A deep breath, he really needed to not think right now.

He soldiered on with his questions. “The two officials we met for your appeal, they claimed to lead field operations and military intelligence. Would this happen to be accurate information?”

Qvinn looked up to meet Simon’s unreadable expression “I do not know. I did not meet them
before here.”

“How can you be so certain in your claims?”

A shrug. “I can not.”

Simon scribbled a memo down; that information might come in handy some point later. Then he set his pen down and laced his fingers together.

“Where did you fall in line?”


“Were you employed initially as such, or did you receive formal training?”

Another shrug. “I do not recall.”

“Was it possible to traverse through the ranks, by ways of promotion?”

“If you wanted to.”

“And did you seek to do so yourself?”

“I do not recall.”

Another deflection. He had begun to inspect his cuticles.

Pursuing this line of questioning wasn’t going to get him further, so Simon pulled out last week’s notes from his satchel and changed tack.

“Had the scope of the organisation changed following reunification?”

A nod of the head as Qvinn moved to inspect the nails on his left hand. “Smaller numbers. Less personnel, but same tasks and missions.”

Simon marked that down. The pen in his hand stalled and his brow furrowed.

“Did your employer engage in extrajudicial justice?”

Qvinn narrowed his eyes, reading in between the lines. “You mean my sniper attack.”

Simon nodded. A quiet fell on the room, and Simon’s ears strained to pick up the electrical hum from the fluorescent lights above and the jangling of keys as the guards shifted their stances.

“Yes,” replied Qvinn quietly, a thick Eastern-European accent filtering past his lips.

Simon leaned forward, trying to catch Qvinn’s gaze. “...Do you suppose the sniper could have been one of your contemporaries?”

Qvinn matched Simon’s posture. “Could have been. They were all military personnel. Knew how to wield a gun. Shoot to kill.”

“Could it have been one of the two individuals we met who represented you — who wielded their swords on their masters’ behalf?”

Qvinn reclined in his seat, and the corners of his lips turned upwards in a smirk. A new accent — one much more familiar to Simon’s ears — registered.
“You might well think that. I could not possibly comment.”

Was he...provoking him? With Received Pronunciation of all things?

He forced the thought out of his head, but not for long, for Qvinn had another thing to say.

“Do you know what you said some days before your execution.”

Simon’s head snapped up and his eyes widened before he could register the reaction.

He is intending to get a rise out of me! But...

But Qvinn, as usual, paid him no heed, staring at the space where the microphones stood.

“You said this was the calm before the storm,” he answered for him, snatching Simon’s voice out of his throat as he caught the last words in the sentence.

He wouldn’t.

...Would he?

Had he said that? Surely he would remember saying something like that, but...

But the days as of late had all melded into one, making it hard to separate various moments, even if it had all seemed so important at the time. He opened his mouth and closed it again; was he expected to produce an answer?

Thankfully, before he could prepare a response, Qvinn shrugged dismissively. And then...

And then, in a perfect replica of Simon’s head-turn he barked out, “Guard, I am done here.”

How dare he...

Simon’s feet felt glued to the ground, and he could only keep his eyes locked the man — no, the monster — in front of him as he was unshackled from the chair and then stood up tall to his full height. Even though he was considerably shorter than Simon, the power-play was there, taunting him.

And Simon could only look on with utter defeat and disgust as the salt-pillar-man disappeared round the door.

Athena [Yesterday at 16:47 PM]: So I’m going into court tomorrow. But I didn’t see you on the court docket for this month. You doing okay?

Athena [8.28 AM]: Hey, hope you slept well. How’s things been? What did you do this weekend? I’m doing pretty okay. Busy weekend. Jogging. Saw Junie. She’s been studying for her finals - I hope she does good!!

Athena [8.30 AM]: I’ll catch you later after the trial.

Athena [14:51 PM]: I tried to come by but the receptionist said you’re not in??

Athena [14:54 PM]: Anyway trial got extended by another day. Do you know a prosecutor called Sebastian Debeste?? Just asking bc I wondered if you knew him from before. He’s a few years younger than you.
Rest and relaxation would evade him for the rest of the week, but thankfully so would Athena’s unanswered texts.

In the meantime, work had proven productive. The rest of Monday and all of Tuesday had been taken up by audio transcriptions, and further compiling interrogation notes. Simon had decided, based on von Karma’s emails, and the success of his interrogation — loathe as he was to admit it — last week, that the best course of action was to aim for balance in his discussions. Each interrogation session, he would aim to draw out something new; in some, he intended to draw out information on Qvinn’s missions, and in others, information about his background and his career. That way he’d create an equilibrium between what Interpol wanted, and... what he himself wanted.

And what did he want? Closure? Revenge? Some semblance of understanding?

Simon did not know.

But what Simon did know was that he liked routine.

He was still loosely following his...prison timetable as a template, but at least he had a system in place. It did help that a lot of what was on that timetable had constituted work, so making that switch from there to his new environment had been relatively easy. Well, as easy as it could be for him.

He looked around his office; it was looking more and more like his own space with each passing day, save for the towering cardboard boxes that posed an eyesore. Simon had made a start on them prior to the appeal, and then some in the last couple of weeks, but it was becoming increasingly clear that going through them himself would take up far too much time.

Luckily for him, routine meant that on Wednesdays he would meet with his investigative partner to go through their case, and it wasn’t long before a familiar knock — three short raps — sounded on the door. In came Detective Skye, up to her arms in files and coffee. Simon rose from his seat, wordlessly taking the coffee cups from her hands and setting them down on his desk.

Skye sank down on the sofa with a sigh. “Morning.”

“Good morning to you too, Biscuits,” he returned, eyes following her movements as she began to prepare her notes to get started. “Postpone that, will you?”

At his words Skye pointed at her files for clarification. He nodded and beckoned her over to his corner of the office, where the eyesore stood resembling a chaotic ‘moving house’ situation.

Simon opened up one of the boxes and, tossing her a file, said, “I would like to direct your attention to the victim’s various scribbles. It is imperative that we examine their contents.”

Flicking through it, she asked, “You want to go through them right now?”

“If you have sufficient time. I would not wish to take you away from your other engagements.”

Skye shrugged before following up with another tired smile. She moved to help him move the
boxes into the centre of the room. Once they’d hauled the last box into the circle, she answered him.

“Don’t worry about time. I’ll let you know when I have to go — need to close a bike theft case tonight.”

He nodded. “Understandable.”

Anticipating a heavy workload, Simon unbuttoned his waistcoat and rolled up his sleeves. At his cue, Skye decided to do the same, draping her lab coat over the arm of the sofa and rolling her own sleeves up.

Sitting herself back down on the edge of the sofa, she glanced down at Simon, now sitting cross-legged opposite her. She cracked her knuckles. “Let’s do this.”

“Yes, indeed. Let us make quick work of this.”

Quick work, it was not. But with the aid of the coffee the detective had brought along with her, their laptops, and the large Borginian-English dictionary, they were able to make progress sorting through the victim’s files.

They managed to work out a system, though it had taken at least an hour of back-and-forth discussion; Simon would hand Skye a file, she would read it and then determine where it would go with a colour code, and then he would place it in its designated pile.

So far, there were four main piles; unrelated casework (both domestic and international); tribunal matters (though Simon found that the majority of paperwork pertaining to that was already in his possession on his computer); the victim’s personal affairs; and other miscellaneous papers that had found their way in the boxes.

Thankfully once they’d established their system, it was fairly easy to sort the files out. The plan being that they would be able to take the paperwork they needed as evidence, and the rest would be taken to the chief prosecutor for archival purposes.

At some point in the afternoon, with the sun hanging low in the sky, bathing the office in an orange glow, he asked Skye if she was alright with him playing some music to bide their time. She agreed, and soon, a falsetto male voice accompanied them.

“Radiohead?” Skye smirked, recognising the vocals. “Didn’t know you liked them.”

Simon mirrored her expression. “Who do you take me for, Biscuits?”

She chuckled as she placed another file into the pile for unrelated casework. “I don’t know. Just...I didn’t expect you to listen to music. At least, not on the inside.”

The smirk evaporated from his face, replaced by a darkened expression, and Skye, realising the words that had so easily slipped out of her mouth, looked away, ashamed.

“...Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that, Prosecutor Blackquill,” she said quietly.

_Prosecutor Blackquill._

The title sounded so awfully formal on her lips. Distant. Impersonal.

But wasn’t that who he was? Weren’t those adjectives so perfectly aligned with how he had
behaved — continued to behave — towards himself and to others around him for years?

Simon swallowed the lump in his throat. Without looking up at her, he replied in a low voice. “I do not take offence to your words, Biscuits. You weren’t to know.”

Then, meeting her eyes, he humoured her with a reminiscent smile. “We were permitted musical devices inside on account of good behaviour. It helped bide the time in there.”

Skye bowed her head for a moment, and then tentatively lifted it again; he saw she was biting at her lip. Then, a small reassuring smile made itself known on her face, trying to show that all was well between them.

“Hey, you did say you’d make sure I stayed in line.”

They quietly sorted through another five files before Skye asked, “You mind if I choose something?”

“By all means, have at it.”

A few taps on his laptop keyboard and she turned it around so that he could see the album portrayed on the screen.

“Here. Dunno if you’ve listened to this one before — it’s called *Cuttooth*.”

He had not, and she shifted the laptop to her left. She clicked play, letting the sounds of drifting guitars, wandering basslines and haunting voices wash over them, dampening their thoughts. At around the three-minute mark in the song, Simon noticed he hadn’t handed her another file, but, judging by the look on Skye’s face, she hadn’t noticed either.

Then she said something rather peculiar. Rather... *personal*.

“I have a sister in prison,” she announced in a far-off voice. “You might have heard of her. Lana Skye.”

Simon nodded, faintly recalling the name, and she continued. “Well, everyone in *here* knows of her. But yeah...I don’t know why I’m telling you this. I just—I guess I should’ve known better. Her in prison. You being in prison.”

A small smile traced his lips. “Once more, Biscuits, you weren’t to know. Do not concern yourself any further with this.”

There was a momentary silence between them. He felt her eyes on him, as though trying to gauge what to say next. He still wasn’t used to this, to practical strangers peering at him. Simon kept his gaze trained on the hardwood floor.

“I, too, possess a sister who resides in the clink,” he found himself saying. “In there, on my behalf.”

A cocked eyebrow. “She try to save you or something?”

“One might say that.”

Skye leaned back on the sofa. She ran a hand through her hair. “Mine too.”

Facing her properly now, his grey eyes meeting her teal ones, he could hardly mask the wry smile forming on his lips.
“You mean to tell me you’re a cold-blooded murderer?”

She barked out a laugh. “No! But...I see where you’re coming from. The whole big sister protection thing.”

That was rather an apt way of putting it, but it conveyed things perfectly.

“...Lana’s in minimum now.” she continued. “Got transferred on good behaviour two years ago.”

Simon tilted his head. “Likewise, with regards to the former.”

“Weird, isn’t it? Hey, maybe they’ve met.”

He snorted. “I wouldn’t call it ‘meeting’, Biscuits. It is hardly a place to sit and chat over tea and crumpets.”

Her lips turned up in a small smile. Simon wondered for a moment if there would be another time they would be able to do this; to sit cross-legged on hardwood floors and to sift through decades of someone’s work and call it bonding.

“Ah, you’re right, who am I kidding,” she replied, leaning forward to retrieve another manila envelope. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

Their moment over, they busied themselves with finishing off the file-sorting, the *OK Computer* album accompanying them. They managed to perfectly time Simon placing the last file in a pile with the closing bars of *How I Made My Millions*.

When the document landed with an anticlimactic *thwap*, they breathed a collective sigh of relief. Skye stood up and stretched her arms above her head; he grimaced as he heard her joints pop.

They took a five minute break to make themselves presentable again in their clothing, and for Skye to grab some snacks from the cafeteria downstairs. She threw him a chocolate bar when she came in again. Simon tore off the wrapper, unable to suppress a small grin at the fact that she seemingly knew he liked dark chocolate with hazelnuts.

He turned his attention back to their work. “Seeing as we’ve concluded our tasks, perhaps now you can inform me of your investigative findings.”

Skye set her ring binder down on her lap. She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Okay, so I know we said last time we’d start to focus on his movements, but...some very interesting things came up when I was trying to establish his timeline of events the days before he was killed.”

Breaking off a piece of chocolate, Simon raised his head, eyebrows furrowed. “And what, pray tell, would those things entail?”

Skye sighed. “I was looking into his personal life, just to see what kind of guy he was, and—”

“And?” he encouraged, popping a piece of chocolate in his mouth.

A sharp inhale. “He was half-Cohdopian.”

“A dual national? That is hardly—” Then Simon’s eyes widened, and that gave Skye more than enough to go on.

“What we were saying last week,” she confirmed, casting his mind back to their previous meeting. She handed him a folder, and he flicked through it; photocopies of passports, a marriage certificate,
and a curriculum vitae among other things. “He had a Cohdopian wife, lived in Primidux for ten years, got citizenship.”

“Any offspring?” he asked while leafing through the pages, carefully not to get any melted confectionery on them.

Skye shook her head. “No. He divorced his wife around the time he moved to Holland. But that’s not what I’m trying to get at. I checked his financial records, and...he was supposed to fly out to Primidux the day after he was killed.”

“What ever for?”

“Apparently there was a conference he was attending. And...all the people in the Borginia Tribunal were gonna be there.”

Bloody hell.

Simon closed over the foil wrapper tightly, pocketing the remainder of his chocolate bar.

“That’s not all,” he heard her say. With a solemn face, she added. “You know those three lawyers who were killed?”

“The ones you mentioned but last week?”

“Interpol found more. So, it’s now five dead lawyers. They were all on the Borginia Tribunal. And they were all Cohdopian dual nationals.”

Simon leaned back in his seat, trying to take in the information. He rubbed at his temples. “Are you absolutely certain in your findings, Skye-dono?”

There was a flicker in her eyes; the emphasis on her honorific title denoted the seriousness of the situation at hand. She set her jaw, and matched his expression. “I am. Everything I’ve told you is in these files. You can call up Agent Lang to check. And there’s probably more in what we’ve just gone through.”

“I see,” he muttered. He cast a look out the window; the sun was beginning to set. “This places us in a dilemma.”

“You want me to help walk you through it?”

“Please. Seeing as we’re just talking possibilities, we could each profess whatever we like,” Simon moved to retrieve a scrap piece of paper from his bin and smoothed it out onto his desk. With a marker pen he drew some boxes and an arrow on it, and Skye shifted her binder, moving to stand closer to him, all-ears.

“Returning to our conference last week, we hypothesised that the victim met his untimely end for he was intimately aware of Borginia’s war crimes. It may have simply been the case that he was regarded as a pesky lawyer poking his nose into the affairs of others.”

He turned back to face her, a pensive expression on her face. She tugged at a strand of hair. “…It wouldn’t be unusual. But that just—it seems off. Like, something’s missing.”

“Precisely. Here we have six murders; six barristers who, we are to assume, through their work, put Borginia’s nose out of joint. That would be motive enough for murder. However, if we are to involve their nationalities...”
He trailed off, mind racing with theories, possibilities, ideas. He tapped at the paper. In a low voice, he added, “We must first ascertain whether or not these barristers were killed as a result of their work or otherwise.”

Skye raised an eyebrow. “What would ‘otherwise’ mean here?”

His mien darkened. “Other...more nefarious purposes, say, to be played as pawns or scapegoats in a wider conflict. And I very much would wish to be proven wrong in this regard, Biscuits. So, I ask, have you been able to glean any further details about those murders?”

A grimace. “I wasn’t able to get access to the autopsy reports. But Agent Lang did say they were all stabbed, with signs of foul play.”

A deafening silence fell on them, broken by their whistling inhales and exhales. Behind them, the orange hues of the Los Angeles sunset had morphed into mute pink and purple tones. Simon crossed his arms.

“...I fear, in that case, this is not the work of a mere serial killer operating across time zones, but an institutional attack intended to cut down those that oppose the current regime in Borginia. Not to mention, the potential to destabilise the region....” he trailed off, his eyes meeting hers.

He elaborated on his unspoken thoughts. “All this would indicate that not only has the jurisdiction for these crimes shifted, as we have already noted, but the entire battleground. No longer is it a matter for Interpol, but for the bloody politicians and parliamentarians!”

Yes, that sounded about right. Dread grew in the pit of his stomach, and he drew in shaky breath.

"...To this end, we had better raise the matter with Edgeworth-dono, lest we get too ahead of ourselves."

They exchanged solemn looks, before they hurriedly grabbed their belongings, and marched out of the office. As he took the stairs two by two, hearing Skye's footfalls behind him, a small question niggled Simon in the back of his mind.

Had this all been the calm before the storm?

They weren’t immediately able to relay their concerns and findings to the chief prosecutor. However, after a discussion with Ms Fright, the delicate nature of their predicament had warranted them a quick email response from him and a kick up the priority ladder.

And so, Friday afternoon found the two of them seated beside each other in Edgeworth’s office. Skye had taken charge of the meeting, in her capacity as lead investigator, with Simon interjecting here and there. Thankfully Edgeworth had managed to assure them, in no uncertain terms, that he would look into the matter and see what he could do to help them in their investigation. Until then, they had to wait it out and pursue other significant lines of inquiry.

With that, and the work week drawing to a close, they decided to momentarily set aside the case. Skye had gone back to the precinct to close her lower-level cases, whereas he had decided to tend to his emails.

The press emails had significantly reduced over the last couple of weeks, so there were only one or two emails Simon had to properly curate to some junior prosecutors. He had never seen hide nor hair from these colleagues, though they seemed to want for his expertise in criminal psychology and obscure aspects of legalese. He was happy to indulge, if it meant taking his mind off his own
work matters, though it did remind him of his… isolated approach to work.

Maybe when he was rid of this Phantom affair he would find the time to be able to forge connections with his subordinates; bar Edgeworth, he was sure some of them had been around since he had first made his debut.

Once he’d sent his professional opinions out, he decided to save his paperwork for next week and set about packing away his belongings into his satchel, before he left the office.

En route home Simon attempted a mental list of things to do over the weekend. He supposed he ought to really get on with decorating the flat, now that he’d made Aura aware of his efforts, and perhaps try and unwind, though he did not hold out much hope for the latter. Not to mention, he noted with a grimace, he still had messages to respond to.

Ah well, at least there were some leftovers in the fridge for his dinner and he could catch up on some Steel Samurai reboots. That sounded like a plan.

What Simon did not anticipate when he got into the flat was a visitor.

“Kee-eeeeee-ar!”

A harsh cry sounded out for a couple of seconds followed by the fluttering of wings, and a pair of talons dug into his messy mane.

For the first time in weeks — no, months — his posture relaxed and his tired, exhausted features softened.

“Hello you,” he greeted, addressing his avian companion with raised eyebrows and a wide affectionate smile.

He felt his hair tug and pull as Taka settled into his ‘bird’s nest’. “What brings you to my lodgings?” he asked, tiptoeing around the flat to take a seat on the threadbare sofa.

Contrary to popular belief, Taka was his first and only fine-feathered companion. It had been a friendship first forged in his late teens the summer before he was set to attend university; he had partnered with a master falconer, partly because his parents had forced him out of the house to spend his time in nature, and partly because he always had an affinity for animals despite being a terrible one to name them. Aura would never let him live down the time his ten-year-old self decided to name their new family cat ‘Neko-sama’; they did eventually call her ‘Catpernicus’ after the mathematician Copernicus, which was no better.

Despite all these years of training and raising Taka, Simon hardly knew how he’d managed to survive the trials and tribulations of modern life with its vehicles and electrical cables. To say nothing of the fact that ninety-percent of his avian companions did not live to sexual maturity.

In response, Taka preened his feathers. Simon rolled his shoulders, careful not to disturb the bird.

“Incidentally…” he began in a low but gentle tone, as he began to remove his boots and coat, “I am reminded of my intentions to provide you with a new kerchief, given the unsuitability of your current one.”

He stifled a yawn as he tried to loosen his tie. What a horrible week it had been.

“However, I’m afraid my fatigue is getting the better of me, so you shall have to wait till it be morrow. In the meantime, I expect you to earn your keep and not sully my lodgings with your
dinner.”

A caw.

“Good.”

That was another thing he would have to place on his weekend agenda. Not that he minded; it would be an excuse to keep him busy, as well as to properly clean out the storage closets before he embarked on any decorating. Aura did say she hadn’t want for anything at their last meeting, though the look she had given him and the manner in which she had fidgeted begged to differ. And thus, Saturday was taken up in its entirety with tackling the cupboards in search of any skeletons of the past, in sweatpants and a ratty old university t-shirt.

He began with the closets in the hallway closest to the door; he had made a start here last weekend, pulling out boxes of his old clothes that Aura had packed away after his incarceration. He couldn’t recall, much like the details of the funeral, whether she had mentioned what she had done with his possessions; if she had, he probably would have told her to give them all away and she would have defied him, owing to her *stubborn* desire to prove his innocence.

Stubborn, and yet… here he was, heart beating and brain functioning.

Simon gingerly took out the musty old cardboard boxes and set them all in a row on the ground, ready to examine them. Though this time there would be no one to aid him in his endeavours, and no bonding moments; he was entirely left to his own thoughts.

Aura hadn’t labelled anything in her grief-addled state, so he was forced to rip open the festering wounds. He pulled a long box towards him and carefully opened it along the seams.

He wasn’t prepared for what would greet him.

His mentor’s old clothes; yukata, haori and kosode in blues, greens and yellows. He gulped, and placed a gentle hand on them, feeling the silk fabric between his fingers. Such beautiful, bespoke patterns; although Simon could hardly remember much about her, he could at least recall how handsome she had looked in them.

Simon carefully folded the clothes back into box, and moved onto the next oblong parcel.

If the first box had been difficult, then the second one was worse; Metis’ wedding kimono, complete with tsunokakushi stared up at him.

She must have begun wedding preparations before...

Simon smoothed the fabric, but his hands were shaky, and his jaw clenched. He swallowed the lump in his throat. He could remember their engagement announcement; it had been an unusually cold April evening, and Aura had popped the question. A bitter smile traced his features; how happy she had been, how happy they had all been, at the talk of weddings and of combining English and Japanese traditions...

Simon opened up another box in an attempt to distract himself. He supposed he ought to stop altogether but a nagging thought poked in his head: he had to soldier on, if he was to work through his grief somehow.

Another few boxes — all Metis’ old things that he barely registered in his mind — before he found the perfect distraction. A small smile formed on his lips as he turned the blue paisley neck scarf
over in his hands. Yes, Taka would like this. Simon scrambled for the kitchen, a harsh whistle emitting from between his lips.

It didn’t take long for Taka to reappear on his windowsill. “Right then, let us see if this appeals to you,” he murmured, trying to restrain the shakiness of his vocal cords. He brought his fingers to the hawk’s neck to remove the old scarf and secure the new kerchief.

Taka hopped around the kitchen counter, looking somewhat confused. “Do you like it?” Simon asked with a concerned frown.

He cawed, and perched himself on Simon’s shoulder; a positive response. “Good.”

There was perhaps more he wanted to say to the bird, perhaps more affection to give, but Taka wasn’t interested; he flapped his wings and departed once more. Simon watched as he soared through bright blue skies, the orange hue of sunlight accentuating his tawny feathers and red tail. And for a moment, pride swelled in Simon’s chest.

He padded back into the hallway to continue his cleaning efforts. By mid-evening, he had sorted through most of the boxes, setting aside certain items he would keep himself to decorate the flat with; a couple of hanging scrolls, an old kimono, and plenty of photographs. In addition, he had set aside a few other items and wrapped them up in a padded parcel for Aura tomorrow.

Simon went to bed that night with one thought in mind; he would proudly serve his mentor’s memory — her death would not be in vain.

“‘You’re not looking much better,’” Aura greeted, her eyebrows raised.

“I’d wager it is better than looking like human excrement,” he replied once he’d made himself comfortable in his plastic seat.

She rolled her eyes, and Simon thought for a moment he could spot the memory of a small smile. “Don’t be facetious.”

“I am not being facetious,” he returned, half-serious, half-teasing.

An exasperated sigh passed her lips. “...How was your week?”

“Busy, as ever. I wouldn’t want to bore you with such minutiae.”

“No.”

And now the predictable silence had settled in, forcing them to fidget awkwardly in their seats and looking around them at the other visitors and inmates.

“I—” Simon began, breaking the nervous quiet. Aura turned to face him. “I don’t suppose you’ve made any acquaintances.”

Aura shrugged. “I got someone sent to the SHU last Tuesday.”

“Aura—”

“What?” she interrupted. “It’s not like you didn’t do the same.”

He couldn’t argue with that, so he kept his mouth shut. Her words had become sharper and more venomous over the years with each passing visit, and he had long since learnt it was best he just
listen to what she said.

A sharp inhale. “So you haven’t been keeping yourself out of trouble,” Simon concluded.

She twirled a strand of her wiry hair around her fingers; the dye was growing out fast by now with the cheap soap. “I don’t know what you expected, Simon. I’m in the slammer — shit’s bound to happen.”

“Hm,” he answered dismissively. Then he leaned forward, adding, “Speaking of your current accommodation, I found myself in conversation with a colleague of mine.”

An expression of curiosity appeared on her features as she leaned forward and rested her chin in her hand. “Oh? You’ve got friends now, have you?”

He ignored her remark. “She mentioned she had a sister in here, by the name of Lana Skye.”

Aura leaned back, a searching look on her face. “Never heard of her.”

Then a small smirk crept up her lips, and her fist connected lightly with his shoulder in a playful punch.

“Why, is my dear baby brother trying to get me a prison wife?”

“Hardly. Merely that—”

She shut him down quickly with a frown. “It’s not happening, Simon.”

Simon winced inwardly and lowered his head. Of course, that had been stupid of him. He could at least take solace in these bitterly uncomfortable moments, as Aura’s native London accent would creep back into her speech.

“...Anyone else drop in on you?” he asked eventually after another predictable period of quiet had passed them.

“No,” A yawn. “And the princess hasn’t bothered to show her face around these parts.”

He nodded slowly, and then with a tentative smile he added, “Well, I brought something for you.”

Aura scrunched up her eyebrows, cautious look preceding her. “What is it?”

“A...belated Christmas present, if you will,” he muttered. She raised an eyebrow; a skeptical look sat on her face. She watched him pull out a brown package from his satchel and slide it across the table to her. Out of the corner of his eye he could see a guard step closer, a wary look on his face.

Wordlessly, Aura grabbed it, and teared open the seal, unceremoniously dumping the contents onto the table with a clatter; an old handwritten letter, some rather musty engineering books, and a few photographs.

“I was in the midst of my preparations for redecorating the flat, and I thought you might benefits from some of these items, seeing as they’re of sentimental value. But I did not know if you wished to wear your ring—”

“Simon?” she interrupted, and he looked up to meet her stony glare. “Shut the fuck up.”

A shaky sigh and Aura pinched the bridge of her nose. Her hand pawed at the pictures.
“And just what the *fuck* am I meant to do with these things? Cry myself a river?” With a brush of her fingers, she shoved the items aside. “Are you taking the piss?”

He opened his mouth to respond but Aura had already continued.

“Yes, you are. And just what the *fuck* am I meant to do with these things? Cry myself a river?” With a brush of her fingers, she shoved the items aside. “Are you taking the piss?”

He swallowed the hard lump in his throat, though that did nothing to assuage his fast-beating heart climbing up his chest. He looked away.

*She doesn’t need to know. She cannot know. She will never know.*

“...Because if you are, I’d much rather you spit it out. God knows I’ve had enough of your shitty twisted games in the past several years.”

Underneath the table Simon rubbed at his wrists. Then turning his head to meet her gaze once more, he schooled a reassuring smile onto his face.

In a quiet but confident voice, he said, “There is nothing to tell.”

Aura leaned back and crossed her arms, her mouth a thin line.

“Alright. Fine. But that means that if there really is something you want to tell me, you won’t get another chance.”

*She doesn’t need to know. She cannot know. She will never know.*

He lowered his head, and repeated, “Truly, Aura, there is nothing to tell.”

There. The damage had been done.

Another bitter silence, and then an announcement over the tannoy; visiting hours had come to an end, and the inmates were to return to their blocks.

Aura made to stand up. In their last moment of absent conversation, she had cleared up the items and placed them back in the package. Now she held it in her hands gingerly. “I’ll keep this on one condition.”

Simon tilted his head. The same wary-eyed guard had come a little closer to their space, ready to usher Aura back to the bunks. She ignored him and instead looked down on Simon; though he had surpassed her in height since his pubescent years, she still managed to hold sway over him, still managed to remind him of days when she would stand over him, a veritable giant in clunky boots, chasing him about the garden.

“You bring the ring with you next time.”

Before he could respond, she said, “Now scram. Laundry isn’t going to do itself.”

Edgeworth called him into his office on Monday morning.

“Good morning. Have a seat.”

Simon mumbled the greeting back before moving to sit on one of the plush sofas.

Edgeworth, as to be expected, had already prepared for his arrival, and he looked on as his superior
poured steaming tea out into the cups — Earl Grey, it seemed, which he did not mind — and set small chocolate biscuits out, before he handed a cup and saucer to Simon.

“Drink, drink,” he said encouragingly, and Simon wordlessly accepted it, carefully not to spill any on himself. Did he really look so tired that Edgeworth had noticed? Or was it merely that he was rushed? Simon hoped for the latter.

It was the former.

“...You look pale. Have you been sleeping?”

He looked up. Edgeworth was seated across from him, his own cup and saucer in hand, though that did not detract from the concern that controlled his face; his eyebrows were deeply set into a furrow and the corners of his mouth were turned downwards, almost mournfully.

Simon distracted himself by taking a sip. The heat burned down his throat. “I have been sleeping relatively well,” he assured quietly.

The concern remained. Now Edgeworth’s words were low and quiet; uneasy.

“I merely ask, Simon, because I do not wish to see your performance affected.”

Simon schooled his features into a wan smile, tilting his head.

“You worry yourself to death, Edgeworth-dono. We have discussed this before.”

He still hated that honorific, hated that distance, hated that solitude.

“...I am progressing well in my work,” he added emphatically.

A tight smile made itself known on Edgeworth’s lips.

“I suppose I do worry too much about my subordinates. But, Simon,” — he really did like saying his name, didn’t he? — “you are allowed to confide in me, should you not be feeling up to it in your work. And if not that, then in someone else. Or at the very least, utilise the resources on the intranet.”

Edgeworth eyed him over the rim of his glasses. Despite the grave expression on his face, Simon could see those grey eyes glinting in the sunlight.

“You’re a good man, with a good head on your shoulders. It would be a shame to waste such potential.”

Simon bowed his head and said nothing. Thank you for your concern.

A sigh passed through Edgeworth’s lips, and Simon breathed a mental sigh of relief himself that the conversation had met its end.

“Anyway, I suppose you can deduce why I’ve called you in here this morning.”

Simon cocked an eyebrow, recalling their meeting last week. “You have...tended to the matter? So soon?”

Edgeworth cleared his throat. “After you and Detective Skye came to me with your concerns, I got in touch with Agent Lang and Ms von Karma. We came to the conclusion that, in order to fully grasp the situation at hand, one ought to visit the region at the heart of all this.”
“To Borginia?”

He shook his head, and corrected him. “To Cohdopia. I have arranged to meet some individuals there to discuss these matters.”

“I see.”

“We decided on Cohdopia seeing as a lot of what we’re dealing with, on the surface, is heavily linked to it. There are the Cohdopian murder victims, for a start, and plenty of their work pertained to that area. And of course, Erikh Qvinn has demonstrated plenty of links there gleaned from his years of espionage. Furthermore…”

Edgeworth’s eyes narrowed, his tone grew grave. “We cannot be entirely sure that the Borginian officials we met were genuine articles.”

Simon nodded slowly, taking in the information.

“...In any case, Ms von Karma and I hope that we can gain some insight by being there. At the very least, we will come away with a clearer understanding of the geopolitical situation.”

At that, Edgeworth set down his empty cup and saucer. “After all...I have always made it a part of my creed to take everything into account, to inspect every nook and cranny, no matter how insignificant those things may seem. You might be surprised to find out those things may hold the key to the truth.”

Simon tilted his head. “Admirable words, Edgeworth-dono. Advice no doubt obtained from your years of sparring on the battlefield.”

There was a slightly reminiscent look in those grey eyes. “Yes. My...investigations over the years were very valuable in teaching me to value, above all else, the pursuit of the truth. I hope one day you will come to see what I mean.”

Simon drained his cup. He wondered if there was some meaning behind those words. The pursuit of the truth had led him to lies, all carefully crafted under the guise of protecting his niece. Lies he had come to believe for so long.

Ah well, none of that mattered now. Setting down his own empty cup and saucer, he cast aside his thoughts, lifting his head to ask a question. “And when will you be departing for Cohdopia?”

Edgeworth adjusted his glasses. “At the earliest, next week, for a few days. Prosecutor Gavin will take care of matters here while I’m away. I’ll keep you updated over email.”

That all sounded very well for Simon; that would give him some undisturbed time to interrogate the Phantom and continue to work with Skye over the next week. Of course, in between all that he would have to try and survive another week in his personal life, but...that much was to be expected.

He rose from his seat, brushing off any crumbs that had settled on his trousers. “Likewise, I shall keep you apprised of any matters here.”

“Naturally,” said Edgeworth with a nod. He rose to his feet as well, and gestured to the exit. “I won’t keep you here any longer.”

Simon walked to the door, and then, turning the doorknob slightly, he turned back to face Edgeworth.
“Godspeed, sir,” he murmured, and took his leave.

The storm had begun to brew.
February 28, 2028

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Primidux International Airport. The local time is half-past ten in the morning and the temperature is three degrees and it is partly cloudy. For your safety, please..."

Miles tuned out of the landing announcement as he undid his seatbelt and rubbed at his eyes. It had been a long couple of days of flying from Los Angeles to Zurich and then to Primidux, on top of adjusting to the time zones. But the hotel room in Zurich had been comfortable, and he had enjoyed walking along the lake in the evening after dinner with his sister, so there really wasn’t much to complain about.

Next to him, Franziska was standing in the aisle with her carry-on suitcase, looking as presentable as ever. She had already turned on her phone, scrolling and checking for any messages or emails.

The cabin crew announcement droned on. “...On behalf of iFly airlines and the crew, we would like to thank you for joining us on this trip, and we look forward to having you on board with us again soon. Have a nice day.”

Fairly standard protocol after that; get off the plane, queue at immigration, where the officer checked his visa permit and asked about the nature of his visit — “Business” — and stamped his passport — “Thank you” — then baggage claim and out into the open. Franziska flagged down a taxi for them.

A chilly breeze swept through the taxi stand, and Miles pulled his coat closer to him. A cab pulled up, and they put their suitcases inside. Franziska gave the driver the destination, and they set off.

The drive was quiet and Miles was grateful for that. He had always disliked the small talk when he landed in some places, that he had to endure from some chatty but polite and well-meaning taxi drivers. Long flights and tiredness made that talk so much more hellish, especially nowadays when he found it difficult to cope with jet lag. So the quiet, just looking out the windows, helped to put his thoughts in place.

The sun crept out from behind the clouds, illuminating the highways. They crossed a bridge, and coniferous trees and patches of greenery poked out from the concrete roads as the car descended. The road signs indicated various destinations: Primidux in ten kilometres, Centaurea in forty-five kilometres, and Dianthus in two-hundred-and-five kilometres. The car changed lanes, making way into Primidux.
More greenery emerged as they pulled off the motorway, and buildings began to crop up in full bloom; a few offices, some major banks, and some old buildings, all in similar style and build.

Neoclassical and Gothic architecture weren’t things Miles was unfamiliar with. On the contrary, having spent more years in Europe than in Japanifornia, he had developed a sort of fondness for such architectural styles. He had concluded at some point they were far easier on the eyes, and suited the old cities that they stood in, compared to young Japanifornian concrete jungles.

Primidux was a strange capital city in that sense; much like Berlin it retained old elements from pre-war days, and yet, every so often, one could see the cracks in the structure; the roads where old walls once stood, when they had been erected during the divide, and the relatively new postmodernist apartment blocks on what had been the Babahlese side of the city. Today, integration seemed to be a large mish-mash of architectural styles colliding with each other. And somehow, it all worked; it was history on display.

If Miles weren’t a lawyer, he had always thought architecture an interesting field. What he would design, he did not know, but the interest was there. Perhaps he could procure a book on style in Primidux, should he have the time to visit a bookshop. This trip couldn’t all be about work and having never visited Cohdopia before, he could benefit from some cultural excursions.

Seeing as he knew Franziska had been here before, he decided to comment on this.

“Would you mind if we do some sightseeing? I would like to know more about Cohdopia.”

She shrugged and mindlessly began to finger the brooch on her neck. “I don’t mind. It would make a change.”

“Good,” he mused, before turning to look back out the window again. The time for sightseeing would come later then. Now it appeared they had entered the city, as they passed yellow trams and grey buses. He caught a few place-names: Alstroemeria-tér and Lycaenidae-utác.

The car crawled to a halt and the driver exited, opening the door for them. Franziska got out and tended to payment, as he moved to pick up their hand luggage. They had made it to their destination, and right on time too.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs occupied a large imposing steel and glass structure. It wasn’t quite Spring yet here in the northern hemisphere, so dead bushes and hedges lined the building. Soldiers dressed in dark green uniforms flanked each corner, their rifles standing at the ready. The Cohdopian flag blew softly in the breeze.

Miles looked around him. At the centre of this road stood a massive fountain, and branching out from it were all the administrative buildings, splitting into their own districts. Clearly this was the political heart of the city.

What little sunlight there was served to illuminate the golden statues on the fountain, of people extending themselves towards the sky. It was not clear who these people were, at least not from a distance. Were they national leaders? Martyrs? Or simply remnants of Greco-Roman nostalgia, that he had seen in other European cities?

“Hello, hello!”

Miles turned around to face the source of the baritone voice, and smiled. Colias Palaeno was descending the steps that led into the ministry, with outstretched arms, ready to greet them. The man looked the same as ever. His long thick blonde hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail, and
grey streaks lined his short sideburns. Crow’s feet had also made an appearance on his smiling face. But other than that, he looked healthy and strong for his age, dressed in a cornflower-blue checked suit, complete with his signature waistcoat and a bronze butterfly pin that sat on his lapel.

“It has been a while!” Palaeno said jovially. “Ms von Karma,” — he kissed her on both cheeks — “and Mr Edgeworth,” — he shook his hand — “Do come in!”

After a standard security check, they were ushered into the main hall. A cool blue light emanated from the marble floor, bathing the room. In the centre stood an old oak tree, its gnarly branches reaching far out to the tops of the building. A winding staircase was placed around it, providing a gentle contrast between nature and modernity.

They took the stairs up to Palaeno’s office on the top floor; it featured the same interior design, all metallic and chrome, but done in a tasteful manner. Tea had been set up for them on a low table, served in blue china cups, and they took their seats on the leather sofas.

At last, Palaeno breathed out a sigh and smiled. “Please, help yourself. It is good to see you two again.”

“Likewise, Mr Palaeno,” responded Franziska, smiling gently at the man.

“It has been a long time, hasn’t it? Ten years?”

“Yes, it has,” she confirmed. “Last we saw you, you had been made Ambassador just after the reunification.”

“Yes, that’s right. It was a position I most enjoyed. Japanifornia is a place I’d love to come back to,” he leaned forward, placing a sugar cube into his tea and stirring it. “How are things there?”

“Relatively peaceful,” said Miles, helping himself to a small chocolate éclair. “We’re conducting an overhaul of the legal system at the moment. Reforming what should’ve been done years ago. I’m on a committee reporting to the Supreme Court.”

“How exciting! We haven’t had a chance to reform that here yet, but rest assured,” said Palaeno, chuckling. “There’s plenty Cohdopia still needs to work on.”

“So, what have you been up to since then?” asked Franziska, crossing her legs.

“Well,” Palaeno started, stretching out his legs before taking a sip. “When my term as ambassador ended in 2022, I came back here. I spent two years as chairman of the Diplomatic Advisory Board. Then there were the elections in 2024, and the prime minister was very kind to offer me a position in his government. So I’ve been the foreign minister ever since, and I enjoy it.”

“And what does the Ministry of Foreign Affairs do?” asked Miles, finishing up his éclair.

“Well, we work on a number of things. We are responsible for foreign policy and representing Cohdopia abroad. That means we help Cohdopian citizens abroad; we promote Cohdopian business and trade agreements; and we protect Cohdopia’s security through our work with various organisations,” he explained. Placing a hand on his chest he added, “My job as the foreign minister means I report to the prime minister on those key matters. I essentially represent my colleagues in diplomacy, who do most of the work. So I am hardly in Cohdopia.”

“It is good we caught you while you were here,” answered Miles with a small smile, as he set about making himself a cup of tea.
Palaeno chuckled and set his teacup down. “Yes, it is! I got your emails. I’m happy to provide you with information, if it helps.”

“Well, we are currently working on several key classified investigations, that concern Cohdopia to some extent…”

Miles exchanged glances with Franziska. She nodded for him to proceed. “We just have a few questions to ask you, with regards to Cohdopia and Borginia.”

Palaeno nodded, a businesslike expression on his face. “Go ahead.”

“Well, for a start, how would you describe relations between Cohdopia and Borginia at the moment?”

“At the moment?” Palaeno cleared his throat. “At the moment, it’s quite...tense. My Borginian counterpart, Andreja Amantes, and I have been holding summits and meetings together to try and strengthen ties between our countries. But…” a humourless smile graced his features. “Well, it is difficult.”

“I understand the tension is related to land matters?”

“Yes, we have an ongoing border dispute. Nothing new. Some forty years ago, Borginia held land in what is now the south of Cohdopia. There was a brief war, and we claimed the land. So ever since, some Borginian nationalist groups have been trying to rally support to take that land back.”

A sip. Then he added, “Ms Amantes and I have agreed, at least, that we cannot annex that land to Borginia. We have seen countries do that in the past, and, as history has taught us, it is painful for all involved.”

“I see. But I imagine that one border dispute isn’t all that constitutes this tense relationship?” asked Miles, his eyebrows furrowed.

“No, of course not,” Palaeno poured himself a second cup of tea. “There are sometimes border skirmishes — intimidation tactics, you could say, actually — often started by young inexperienced Borginian soldiers. Those are every six months or so, as of the last few years.”

Miles carefully set down his teacup. “And…are these dangerous?”

“Potentially. But see, that’s why we have diplomacy. As someone once said, it is best that the diplomats are constantly talking than not. When they are not talking, that’s when you get war. Luckily, well, Ms Amantes and I are talking.” Palaeno leaned back in his seat. “Also, as you may be aware, it is not worth the risk for us to go to war. Cohdopia is a member of NATO, and the Nordic Council and Russia wouldn’t want a war on their doorstep.”

There was a lull in the conversation, as Franziska scribbled notes onto a legal pad.

When she had put her pen down, Miles asked another question, “What about espionage?”

Palaeno furrowed his eyebrows in confusion, and Miles cleared his throat before elaborating, “Does espionage contribute to the tension?”

Without a beat, Palaeno answered. “Yes, absolutely,” his thumb stroked the rim of the teacup. “What drives espionage is tension and conflict. Or rather, the threat and fear of conflict. Cohdopia maintains espionage in the interests of national security and Borginia the same.”
“Could you provide us with a couple of examples of this?”

“Of this tension-driven espionage?” he sighed. “May I suggest ethnic tensions?”

The questionable look on the prosecutors’ faces motioned him to elaborate. Palaeno paused for a moment, as though to collect his thoughts. He opened his mouth, and then closed it again, trying to ascertain what to follow up with next.

Eventually he said, “You see, ethnicity is behind a lot of this conflict. Not just between our two countries but within Cohdopia itself, as you both saw with the embassy years ago.”

Miles nodded. Of course, the civil war had played a prominent role in recent history. He remembered the day the war had broken out; it had been plastered all over the newspapers that his mentor had left behind on the breakfast table that morning. For what it had been worth, Manfred von Karma had always insisted that he and Franziska keep themselves well-informed on current affairs and to read around the subject, something that had carried through into their adult lives.

Palaeno continued. “...For example, I am ethnically Babahlese. When I was younger, it was difficult for me to go to university or to join the civil service, because those institutions favoured Allebahstians. In Primidux itself, it was also hard for me to get an apartment or to open a bank account. The term you would use would be racism, I think?”

“Institutional racism, to be more accurate,” confirmed Miles, tapping his finger on his opposite upper arm, a thoughtful expression on his features.

“Yes, exactly,” Palaeno agreed, setting his cup down on the table. “Institutional racism and discrimination that...was built over decades since the 1800s, which eventually just imploded in 2009. The war forced us to have a conversation about it. The reunification, too, meant we needed to keep the conversation going. Not just a conversation between the Babahlese and the Allebahstians, but between Cohdopians and Borginians.

“When I took office, our government made it part of their manifesto to continue the dialogue, by means of...engaging with ethnic minorities and different communities.”

A half-smile appeared on his features. “Now...I am not allowed to give you my personal views, but...as a diplomat I can only give my full support to a continuation in dialogue.”

“Do your colleagues in parliament agree with you on this, Mr Palaeno?” asked Franziska.

Palaeno tilted his head, the half-smile still on his face.

“I cannot comment on that, unfortunately,” he leaned forward in his seat, with his elbows propped on his knees and laced his fingers together. “But, if you perhaps rephrase the question...?”

Franziska pulled out a sheet of paper from her folder. “In that case, going back to what you were saying about ethnic tensions contributing to espionage, could you tell us anything about Papilio Machaon and Kallima Inachus?” she asked, passing him the sheet with their names on it, included with a newspaper clipping.

“Ahh, I see,” Palaeno’s eyes scanned the paper. He handed it back to her. “I can only provide you with what I know.”

“Oh of course,” assured Miles.

Palaeno once again assumed his sitting position of leaning forward with his fingers laced together.
His eyes focused on a spot on the floor. “Papilio Machaon was Minister of Defence until he resigned in April last year. Reason being some documents were leaked to the press that implicated him and a security official, Kallima Inachus, in dealings with Borginia. Both were arrested for treason in May, for sharing military intelligence with Borginian officials.

“Their trial began in November, and…” he trailed off for a moment, a bitter smile appeared on his features. “Well, as you can expect, it was very swift. They were sentenced to life in prison just before Christmas.”

He straightened up, levelling his gaze with them. “Some...conservative groups have argued that they committed treason because they are ethnically Borginian, and wanted to see Borginia as the main regional power but…That is neither here nor there for the government.”

There was a moment of silence between them, broken by Palaeno’s hands slapping his knees. “I think…” he pursed his lips momentarily. “I think you would find you would have better luck with such details of espionage if you spoke with my colleague Ms Erynnis Tages. While my job description does include protecting Cohdopia’s security, she would be best-informed as she’s the current Minister of Defence. If you want, I can put you through to her…?”

“Actually,” Miles glanced over at Franziska, who shrugged at him, “that would be most helpful.”

“Alright then.” Palaeno smiled. “If you’ll excuse me…”

The foreign minister walked to his desk and punched in a number into his office phone. He brought the receiver to his ear and waited for the phone to ring. What followed was a conversation in rapid Cohdopian — a language Miles could not quite place linguistically, for it sounded like nothing he had heard before — interrupted occasionally with brief bouts of laughter. Miles barely had a moment to look around the room when the receiver clicked.

Palaeno sat back down again. “She would be happy to meet with you tomorrow morning at nine for a meeting.”

“Perfect,” said Franziska, settling back into her seat. “And returning to Papilio Machaon…”

“Yes?”

Papers rustled. “Would you be able to tell us anything about this?”

She handed him a photograph. Palaeno’s mien morphed into one of questioning and confusion. He pointed a finger at the figures.

“That’s Papilio, definitely,” he answered, gesturing to the image of a blonde man with a full beard in a slim pinstripe suit.

“But, the other man…” — too blurry a figure to truly make out — “I don’t know who that is.”

He handed the photo back, which Franziska promptly tucked back into her folder. “Why?” he asked.

Miles answered. “Well, the information regarding the circumstances surrounding the photograph are a secret, as I’m sure you’d understand, but…”

Franziska finished for him. “Mr Palaeno, have you ever heard of SEIL?”

“SEIL?” he echoed. A serious expression appeared on his face. “Of course.”
“We believe the man in that photo is a SEIL agent.”

Palaeno’s eyebrows furrowed. “But, Ms von Karma, that cannot be right. You see, SEIL cannot possibly be operating now. It was dismantled during the reunification negotiations.”

“How do you mean?” questioned Miles. “Do you mean Cohdopia was aware of SEIL?”

“Well, yes. When we were split, of course. I don’t know if you know, but Allebahst and Borginia were allied, and SEIL came out of that alliance. But when it came to reunification, of course we couldn’t have such an organisation. The Allebahstian negotiators dismantled SEIL, and in its place we established the Cohdopian Intelligence Bureau. Borginia also absorbed their half of SEIL into their intelligence service under presumably a new name.”

“...I see.” Miles swallowed the lump in his throat.

“But if you are suggesting that man is a SEIL agent, then...” The corners of his mouth turned down in puzzlement. He sighed. “That’s something you’ll need to discuss with the defence minister tomorrow. I’m not aware of that situation, because it is at her discretion. I apologise I cannot be of more assistance in this.”

“That’s quite alright,” assured Miles.

*This has placed us in quite a predicament.*

He laced his fingers together. “Moving on entirely from that, how are matters these days here with regards to the smuggling ring?”

Palaeno tilted his head to the side, his bright blue eyes meeting Miles’ gaze.

“Things are...better. We have, since the reunification, repaired our relationship with Zheng Fa, with whom we now have a free trade agreement. Their economy seems to be improving these days, according to reports from the Treasury. But, otherwise, work never stops. We have been cooperating with Interpol with our red notices,” — at this, Palaeno gestured to Franziska — “but naturally these investigations take time to clear up, even once the leader has been removed.”

“I assure you, Mr Palaeno, that Interpol is making good progress on quashing any duplicate rings,” said Franziska.

Then she then turned to Miles, addressing him. “We have in recent years been noticing smaller-scale copycats try to fill the vacuum left by Quercus Alba and the Amano Group. We have allocated Interpol’s resources in border management to law enforcement agencies across this region to combat this.”

“Yes, as Ms von Karma said,” confirmed Palaeno, turning to Miles again. “Cohdopia has benefitted from this support. We have been able to reduce the number of crimes committed along our borders, and we’ve been doing more random stop-searches. But, of course, this has made my job difficult.”

“How do you mean?”

Palaeno chuckled to himself. “In diplomatic terms, I have to appease and assure our neighbours. Diplomacy is all about letting them have your way, you know? And with Borginia especially, that is what is crucial.” He shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of stoicism.

He glanced at the clock, before turning back to them with a neutral smile, “I am afraid I cannot say much more, as duty calls. But...I hope what I have told you has been somewhat helpful for your
investigations."

“Rest assured, Mr Palaeno, that what you have provided us with has been incredibly valuable,” reassured Miles. He made a mental note to do some research later.

Palaeno’s features softened. “I’m glad to hear it. Truth be told, I had no idea what to expect from our meeting. But, it has definitely helped me brush up on my knowledge!”

They laughed politely at that, before they rose to their feet and collected their belongings.

“It was a great pleasure to see you both,” said Palaeno as he walked them to his door. “Please, let me know if I can be of further assistance.”

“Incidentally…” a small smile appeared on Miles’ features. “We were planning to do some sightseeing while we were in Primidux, and I wondered if you would be able to point us in the right direction…”

Palaeno positively beamed at those words, chuckling. “Not a problem, Mr Edgeworth! In fact, I’ll take care of that myself!”

They were ushered downstairs to the reception area, where Palaeno bestowed a veritable stack of maps and travel pamphlets onto him. Perhaps it was nostalgia that prompted him to do this, given the foreign minister’s insistent manner of promoting tourism many years ago as ambassador. Nonetheless, Miles did not feel overwhelmed in the slightest and in fact, he felt rather pleased at the notion that he’d be able to relax somewhat.

Satisfied, they said their goodbyes shortly after on the steps outside the ministry, before the siblings hopped on a tram to their hotel.

“I think I like Primidux,” remarked Miles from his seat, as he looked around their compartment. They had passed some stops already, and it was a quiet, empty ride, as all the passengers were seated. He liked that the tram was painted yellow; the pleasant colour contrasted quite nicely with the bleak weather and the architectural mish-mash surrounding them.

“What do you like about it?” asked Franziska, looking up from her phone.

“It is a new place. I’ve been to plenty of places around the world, all with their own character and charm. Some I disliked, and some I liked. But…” — a half-smile appeared on his face — “I don’t quite know what it is yet, Primidux has got its own…unique character, do you know what I mean?”

At his words, Franziska took the opportunity to look out the window; the tram had just arrived at its next stop — Scaevola Aemula- tér — where they could get a clear view of the sludge-grey Nymphaea River, meandering through tree-lined walkways and small brooks where swans and cygnets rested. On the other side of the river stood the tall imposing glass skyscrapers of the business district.

“…I think I do see what you mean,” she replied. “I believe it is the chaotic nature of this city that you like.”

“Ironic, isn’t it,” he noted around a small smile. “I am a man of order, and I enjoy chaos.”

Franziska scoffed at his words, unable to hide a teasing smirk creeping up her lips. “I cannot deny you that, Little Brother.”
No she couldn’t, could she? He did seem to attract chaos wherever he went. Not just through his childhood experiences, but also through the people around him; his partner, his colleagues, and people he had met in his investigations and cases over the years...It was no wonder he’d developed wrinkle lines in his twenties.

But...he could not deny that the chaos had been worth it.

They got off at the next stop. Their hotel was located in Old Primidux, which housed medieval and early modern buildings and facades, with cobbled walkways and nineteenth-century street lamps.

The hotel itself was nothing spectacular; a boutique fare that served breakfast daily and had all the necessary amenities. That being said, it had a very neat and tasteful design, with gold and cream accents and paintings of Primidux in the different seasons lining the walls.

Once checked in, he and Franziska agreed to meet in the lobby in an hour’s time, allowing themselves a few moments to get settled in and for Miles to collect his thoughts; it was rather surreal being back in a hotel, after having become adjusted to a...for lack of a better term, a rather suburban lifestyle. Since last year in particular, his previous lifestyle of lecture halls, airports, and forgettable hotel rooms could not compare. Especially not now that his partner and daughter had just moved in the other weekend.

Miles set his belongings down as soon as he got inside the room and sank down onto the bed with a sigh. He rubbed at his face, and took off his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. A shower might do him some good.

But before that, he turned on his phone. His tired features softened into a smile when he opened the messaging application.

Wright [8:01 AM]: Hey, you. Hope the flight was alright? It was a busy day here. Miss you.

The time readings confused him for a moment, until he reminded himself that it was currently nighttime in Los Angeles. Another text notification pinged on his phone.

Trucy [9:42 AM]: Hey Papa! We’re taking good care of Blondie so don’t worry! Also, don’t forget to send pics please!

He smiled at the pictures of Trucy and Blondie on their evening walk; they got along very well together, even if she did sometimes try to play tricks on the dog. He had to account for more of that when she would be preparing for her newest show. Well, he wasn’t going to harass them at this hour with a phone call, so he sent the both of them reassuring messages that all was well and that he would send photos promptly.

Then he set aside his phone to check his organiser. Their meeting with Palaeno had been a success, so that left them with Tages tomorrow and then a solo trip up to Dianthus the day after to meet with an academic before heading back home. That all sounded good; things would be relatively busy, but he would have time to squeeze in some sightseeing.

A quick shower, and he changed out of his suit, opting for a slightly more relaxed pair of grey slacks and a maroon sweater. Then he layered up with his coat, scarf and gloves and left for the lobby.

“Are you ready?” he asked, as he approached Franziska, who stood waiting by a plant pot. She had also changed into more casual attire; a navy cashmere coat and slacks.

She nodded in response, before she pushed the hotel door open for them, and they set out into the
With maps and guidebooks in hand, they made their way back to the political heart of the city, where the glorious fountain stood, and where the golden statues towered above them. There were a couple of other brave tourists milling around, but otherwise the place was entirely free for them to roam.

According to the book in his hand, Primidux owed its name to King Primidux, a legendary ruler who once united all the tribes in the region, and whose love for his Queen made him the subject of many folktales and myths. It was said that it was here that King Primidux laid the first stone that would put this city on the map and in chronicles for centuries to come.

It wasn’t hard to see why the king was such a revered figure, with his chiselled golden features, making him out to be a majestic and courageous figure in his armour. Miles was reminded of similar statues he’d seen at what had then been the Allebahstian embassy.

“...Ah yes, the king who resembles your beloved Steel Samurai,” teased Franziska beside him.

“Hush, you,” he muttered, feigning exasperation at her. Franziska merely smirked in reply, and then disappeared round the another corner of the fountain to discover what else adorned it.

She was right though; King Primidux, at least in various artistic representations of him, did bear a strong resemblance to his favourite — dare he say it — superhero; there was something about the king’s build, and his stern expression that commanded power and respect.

Miles moved on. Beside that statue stood other large golden statues of Cohdopian royalty, some on horseback, others seated, and a few standing tall; Prince Solidago, King Papilio and Queen Linaria among them. None of them matched King Primidux in stature and aura, however.

There were also, he noted, no statues of former statesmen or national heroes that one might see adorning other capital cities around the world. Perhaps war wounds were still too fresh to erect such effigies. But also, harking back to their conversation with Palaeno, had there been such statues, they would most likely have been of people of Allebahstian origin.

“...Come look at this,” beckoned Franziska, and he followed her voice around the corner. He saw she was pointing at a small marble statuette at the base of King Primidux’s figure. “That is the queen that spoke of love to him.”

He adjusted his glasses to take a look.

“So it is,” he remarked.

It was a tiny figure in comparison, but it emphasised her long locks of hair and her curvaceous naked figure, seated side-saddle; she exuded femininity.

With a small teasing smile, he added, “Well, she hardly resembles the Pink Princess.”

Franziska rolled her eyes in mock exasperation.

“Fool,” she said quietly, before stepping closer to get a better look at the statue. “She must have been brought back here recently. Lang and I didn’t see her here last time.”

He furrowed his eyebrows.
Seeing as Franziska hardly mentioned the more personal aspects of her life, he took her up on her statement. “Ah, so you’ve visited this particular monument before?”

She nodded. “We went on a walking tour together to see the main outside attractions after the Quercus Alba trial.”

He hummed in response. When they had just about exhausted themselves exploring the fountain, he called out to her. “Shall we continue?”

On their brisk walk to the Cohdopian National Museum down barren streets with the harsh bitter wind biting at their backs, he asked, “Would you say much has changed here in the last decade?”

Franziska frowned, as she sidestepped a puddle on the pavement. “How do you mean?”

“Since you were last here. I don’t mean in the political sense, seeing as we’re well aware of developments. But…the infrastructure; the overall development here. Have things changed?”

Franziska let out a long sigh. He could see that pensive look in her eyes; it was one that she used to do in court years ago. She hardly set foot in court these days, but since then her mannerisms had hardly changed.

“I would say that a lot has changed in the last decade. Look around you,” — with a twirl of her gloved hand, she gestured at modernist buildings and limestone statues — “None of this was here before. None of these statues that we have seen were there before. Only King Primidux, and he was a source of propaganda. There were a lot more nationalist elements. Plenty of disused buildings. This is all new and renovated.”

He nodded slowly, before passing a smile her way. “I see.”

“Hm. It certainly isn’t a perfect city,” she said. As they turned the corner, weaving through the throngs of people making their way out of the train station to their left, she added quietly, “but as I said to you earlier, it has a respectable chaotic nature to it.”

They shared a contemplative glance and said nothing more as a seventeenth-century country manor cropped up behind large oak trees that invited them into the Prince’s Park. Chaotic as Primidux appeared to be, the park provided a brief respite. Unfortunately with the weather, many of the trees stood out, their bare limbs stark against the grey skies; dead flowers and leaves cropped up around bright green patches of grass.

They entered the manor which housed the museum. Once they had paid for their tickets and stowed away their coats in an adjacent cloakroom, they split up once more, each to their own corner of the building.

Miles found himself climbing up the creaky wooden stairs to the top floor, where exhibits on Cohdopian history and culture were held.

The interior was rather pretty; high ceilings adorned with frescos and bright blue wallpaper that offset the mahogany upholstery, and as he made his way around, admiring the place, he found himself in a small room that explained the Cohdopian language. Apparently, it was in the Finno-Ugric family tree, though it shared no relatives nor had any roots, seemingly emerging from nowhere. Linguists had noted it shared some syntactical features with Hungarian, but not enough to establish a link. So that explained why he could not place the language when he’d heard Palaeno on the phone.
Following the map Miles then made his way downstairs, ignoring the geography and arts exhibits, in search of a large art nouveau mural of Cohdopian national heroes, which had only been painted in the last decade in an attempt to unify the nation. There seemed to be an even distribution of both Allebahstian and Babahlese figures from politicians to scientists, and military leaders to artists.

Beside the mural was a set of glass cases that displayed architectural models of Parliament and the Prince’s Palace, along with inscriptions of how the government worked here; the head of state was Prince Gladiolus, backed by a unitary constitutional monarchy led by Prime Minister Pieris Mannii.

Feeling a tension headache come on, Miles decided to stop there. He had seen plenty, and discovered plenty. Before he returned to the entrance, he made sure to visit the gift shop, Unfortunately there weren’t any particularly appealing books, but he did buy several bottles of Babahlese ink, a couple of postcards and a traditional wool scarf he thought would suit Trucy.

“Good?” he asked Franziska when she reemerged.

She nodded as she slipped her coat back on and they exited the museum. “Yes, it was very informative. What did you discover?”

He relayed his findings to her, and Franziska listened attentively, interjecting here and there to correct him.

“...which explains their current state,” he finished. He let out a long sigh; his clouded breath mingled with the cold air like a plume of white steam. “And what did you learn?”

“There was an exhibit on classical music…”

Franziska continued to explain the nuances of Cohdopian folk dances, which led them onto the broader topic of ethnomusicology. Trust Franziska to go in search of music, seeing as they had been raised with it under his mentor’s strict tutelage. Miles wondered if she still played the clarinet; he certainly hadn’t kept up with his violin-playing. He did have a piano in the living room though; he hoped Phoenix hadn’t already desecrated it with his ghastly playing.

Their discussion, and their subsequent vaporous breaths, died out as soon as they reached the southern gates of the park, leading them into a new area to explore with wide neoclassical buildings and small stone structures with colourful shuttered windows. They walked around in silence for a moment, their heels clacking on the pavement, before stopping in a cafe for coffee and rhubarb tart.

The cafe was housed in a dilapidated ramshackle medieval structure, yet it somehow managed to stay upright, boasting warmth and comfort inside, with simple dark wood tables and chairs close together and the freeflow of conversations steeped in warm drinks that fogged up the windows and raucous laughter that bounced off the walls.

“This is very good,” Miles half-shouted across the din around his second bite of tart.

Franziska hummed in response around her cappuccino. Then, setting her cup down, she leaned forward with an all-knowing smile pressed on her glossy lips.

“So, how has my dear little brother been since we saw each other last?”

“Very well, thank you,” he peered at her, his fork perched mid-air, “Why?”

She pressed her cheek into her hand; she had taken her gloves off, and he could see her nails painted in a baby blue. “You mentioned last time we were together that you had planned on
expanding on the number of residents in your household.”

“I did,” he confirmed, placing a morsel of tart in his mouth. The waiters had begun to light candles.

She leaned back, stretching her arms in front of her. Her sapphire bracelet glinted in the dim light. “Well? Has Phoenix Wright been well?”

“I— Well, that is— Nngghooh!”

He felt a familiar sharp searing pain cut across his shins.

“Was that your whip?!?” he whispered harshly with gritted teeth.

“It has a mind of its own. Consider it a display of affection,” she answered with a smirk, and recoiled her whip into her belt. “But come now, Miles, you’re a terrible liar.”

“Oh, do go on,” he grumbled, reaching down to rub his leg.

Franziska set down her cup with a clink. “It was clear from your living arrangements and the boxes in the hallway that you were anticipating new arrivals. I deduced that seeing as my little brother wouldn’t be expecting guests anytime soon that he must have his own foolish fool. And because you are hardly the type of man I would assume to have heterosexual inclinations, then it must be another man with whom you are foolishly intimate. And who else but Phoenix Wright to be that man?”

“Nngh…” he reached back up to cross his arms. Was he really that obvious?

She tapped her finger against the rim of her cup. “You have been together for some time, have you not?”

Miles pinched the bridge of his nose. “Ever the observer, aren’t you?”

“Unlike yourself, I happen to pick up on behavioural cues,” she answered with an amused smirk as she began cutting into her tart.

“Have you? I hadn’t noticed,” he replied sarcastically.

She ignored him. “Moreover, I never believed your constant back and forth to and from Europe to be merely for ‘research purposes’, as you put it.”

He grimaced inwardly; yes, that had been a rather foolish explanation, hadn’t it?

“So, does he track mud into your home with that squeaky old bike of his? And most importantly, how is my dear niece?”

Miles held up his hands in a gesture of defeat. “Well, you’ve got me, Franziska.”

Franziska positively grinned and popped a piece of tart into her mouth at that revelation. She nodded for him to elaborate.

“Wright and I…have been together for some years now. It had been… a case of mutual affection for quite some time before that, but we didn’t pair up till much later.”

“Mnhm…” hummed Franziska; with the calculated look in her eyes, it seemed she was trying to piece together a rough timeline. He turned around behind him to catch her line of sight; a row of teddy bears in different shapes and sizes sat on a wooden slat above them, in traditional handknit
jumpers and hats. He had to admit it was rather cute.

“And then…” he began, bringing her back into their conversation. “Then we didn’t fully establish our...relationship till I went back home for good, and... Well, I helped him manage Kristoph Gavin, and persuade him to get his badge back. So here we are.”

Franziska dabbed at the crumbs on her plate with her fingers. “Does he still have a motley crew hanging off him, helping him with all his foolish cases?”

“Oh, you didn’t have to remind me, Franziska,” he groaned, hiding his face in his hands. Then he leaned forward and hissed out, “His first case when he got his badge back — would you believe it, he defended an orca! An orca! For all my efforts, of course he went and did that!”

A smirk escaped her. “That sounds just like his foolish self.”

“He’s got a couple of new associates. One Apollo Justice, who’s rather...loud and hot-blooded but he’s learnt to stand his ground. And Athena Cykes. She’s...capable, though she still has a lot to learn. You haven’t heard of them, have you?”

Franziska shook her head, though the response was much to be expected; jetting around the globe liaising with many other law enforcement agencies and governing bodies meant she wouldn’t have bothered accessing information about her old stomping grounds.

Miles cleared his throat and continued, “Let’s see...Wright still manages to visit the Feys up in Kurain every other month or so. But last I heard Maya Fey’s going abroad for some training.”

Franziska raised her eyebrows in curiosity. “Where to?”

Miles frowned and tilted his head. “I’m not quite sure. Wright didn’t tell me where exactly, but it’s some tiny country in the Himalayas.”

“I see. That is…certainly unique.”

“Hm. You haven’t seen him in a while, have you?”

“Not since Christmas 2025, before I left for a case in Denmark with Lang.”

“Ah yes, that was it,” he confirmed, vaguely recalling the event; it had been Franziska’s first Christmas with him in years, and she and Trucy had got on like a house on fire.

A small smirk traced up her lips. “I had the inclination then that you had become an item then, though you said nothing of it.”

“Nngh...well, yes, you were right to assume that.”

“And how did you finally profess your foolish feelings for Phoenix Wright?”

“I wouldn’t have thought you the gossiping sort, Franzi—Nghooh!” he yelped, as he felt the sharp crack of the whip cut across his calves.

Franziska stowed her whip away again. “I am not. Merely curious.”

“Right, well. It...was rather cliché.”

Raised eyebrows. “Oh?”
“Yes,” he said, leaning back in his seat with a contemplative expression on his face. “I had taken him on vacation to France for his Thanksgiving break. Took him along the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, and, well, we spoke about things and we, uh, became physically affectionate.”

Franziska snorted. “I do not need that image in my head, Miles. But…that does indeed sound rather cliché. And how did he take it?”

“Very well, I hope. He hasn’t kicked me to the kerb yet, has he?”

“Hmph,” she scoffed, unable to hide a teasing smirk. Then she cleared her throat and straightened up in her seat, “And how is dear Trucy Wright?”

Miles smiled at the mention of the young woman. “Trucy, you’ll be glad to know, is doing remarkably well for herself. She’s decided not to attend college, but to continue building up her troupe.”

Franziska nodded slowly. “Yes, I had wondered about that. With her career in the performing arts, she does not need to immediately seek out higher education. She can always return to pursue a degree.”

Miles cleared his throat. “Precisely my thoughts. And it shouldn’t be too difficult to get her foot in the door. She and I have discussed touring beyond Japanifornia to other states, and then seeing from there. But, anyway, she asks after you.”

“Does she?”

“Quite often. She asks me how Aunt Franziska is doing, and where Aunt Franziska is… She does look up to you, you know.”

If Franziska was touched by those words, she didn’t show it. Though Miles did detect the faintest hint of red on her cheeks and a small smile tracing up her lips.

“Well, let her know she is welcome to contact me anytime,” she said, before she quietly added, more to herself, “That has given me an idea for her birthday present.”

“I’ll pass that on,” he said with a small smile and a nod her way.

Franziska laced her fingers together. “In any case, you seem much happier, Miles Edgeworth.”

“I suppose I am…” he wondered, trailing off; the last decade had certainly had its ups and downs, but he could say, at the very least, that things had changed for the better.

Franziska cut into his thoughts. “Supposition is not enough. You are happier. And though Phoenix Wright and I may not have discussed this subject formally, he does know I will bring my whip out of partial retirement should anything befall you!”

“Rest assured nothing will befall us anytime soon. But…you will be the first to know.”

“Hm,” Franziska nodded, and took a moment to look out the window; the bright orange street lamps flickered like fireflies in the twilight. The harsh breeze whipped up little flurries of leaves, gliding across the pavements, before being squashed underneath roaming cars in the rush hour traffic.

“I…” Miles started, and Franziska returned her attention to him with one raised quizzical eyebrow. “I do hope I am not being presumptuous here…”
“Yes?”

A soft sigh. “Well, seeing as you asked about my relationship, might I inquire as to yours with Agent Lang?”

Franziska leaned back in her seat; her hand gripped her whip for a moment, her knuckles turning white.

“‘You are not being too presumptuous,’” she finally said, almost too quiet for him to hear. “‘We...have an arrangement of our own.’”

Miles nodded slowly. “‘I see. And...are you content?’”

“I am satisfied. It suits us both, as we are often not together.”

“Well then, I’m glad to hear it,” he said. “‘I imagine you are able to spend more time with him now that you’re both in the same country?’”

“You could say that. We are staying together in rented accommodation.”

“Ah, you hadn’t mentioned that before.”

Franziska shrugged. “‘It was not relevant information to divulge.’”

“I see.”

“But...” Franziska continued with a small frown. “‘Do not presume that I have only heterosexual inclinations.’”

“Oh? I—” Miles closed his mouth, biting back a smile. “‘That is, good for you.’”

“Hm,” she hummed, and turned her head back to the scene outside; the traffic had slowed, with cars crawling to a halt along their stretch of road. Dry brown leaves sat lamely on the sides of the pavement, fluttering at intervals.

“I’m glad we could have this conversation, Franziska,” he said quietly. The barest hint of a smile traced its way onto her face. “‘You do know I value your company.’”

She rolled her eyes as she turned to face him again. “‘And there you go being a romantic.’”

“I am not a romantic!” he sputtered out, before yelping out as he felt pain shoot across his kneecaps under the table. “‘Ngh! What was that for?’”

“‘Just to remind you you’re a foolish fool, Miles Edgeworth,’” she said, as she stowed her whip away again. Then she raised her hand, signalling to a waiter for the check.

“But...a happy fool at that,” she added after she paid. “‘And I like to see my little brother happy.’”

Those words stuck in his mind as they walked in comfortable silence to the tram stop. As they hugged their coats closer to them, and shoved their hands deeper into their pockets, their breath mingling with the bitter cold air, Miles could indeed say he felt happier.

At Franziska’s insistence, they made it to the Ministry of Defence to register at half-past eight.

Unlike the foreign ministry, the defence ministry seemed not to care for decorum. Basic
practicality shone throughout the place, from the simple smart dress of the civil servants to the unadorned walls and offices. The only hint of design was in the dark green wallpaper and the dark wood panelling and flooring. Some potted plants also stood about in the reception hall.

They didn’t spend much time waiting, as a tall brunette woman dressed in a light grey plaid suit and loafers approached them, a polite smile gracing her pale freckled features.

“Mr Edgeworth and Ms von Karma? I am Erynnis Tages, Minister of Defence,” Tages greeted, and shook their hands, clear blue eyes darting from one to the other. Miles spotted a silver wedding band on her finger as she gestured for them to follow her. “Do come in.”

They found themselves in a small nondescript conference room. On the table was a jug of water, and a basket of breakfast pastries. Tages signalled for them to help themselves as she walked past to take a seat on the other side of them. Franziska took a croissant, and Miles set out a chocolate croissant on a napkin in front of him; given their early-morning rush, neither of them had had a chance to take breakfast. It was a bad habit, he knew, to skip breakfast; but provided he only did it occasionally, away from the watchful eyes of the Wrights, it would be alright.

Tages cleared her throat and eyed them with a serious demeanour. “So I understood from the foreign minister you are here on business?” she asked coolly.

Franziska answered. “We are international prosecutors liaising with Interpol. We have been making inquiries into Cohdopia and Borginia.”

She steepled her fingers. “Mmhm. Interesting. And what are you making these inquiries into?”

Miles cleared his throat. “Well, before we start with that,” he shifted in his seat. “If you don’t mind, Ms Tages, explaining your position?”

Tages’ broad shoulders relaxed. With her hands she made a circular gesture around the room, and said, “This is the Ministry of Defence, the headquarters of the Cohdopian Armed Forces. That means we manage the day-to-day running of the armed forces, contingency planning and defence procurement. Our principal objectives are to defend Cohdopia and its interests and to strengthen international peace and stability.”

Once again steepling her fingers upward, she said, “Those are the tasks set out for me as the defence minister. Does that explanation suit you?”

“Yes, thank you.” He folded his arms, his right index finger tapping his left upper arm. “And do you liaise with the foreign minister, seeing as the both of you serve to protect and defend Cohdopia?”

“Yes, of course. But we communicate through our cabinet meetings every Friday, not alone. That means all the cabinet is aware of our goings-on.” Tages tapped the tips of her fingers together. “So now that I have explained myself, tell me how I can be of help to you.”

Franziska began producing documents from her briefcase, as Miles spoke. “We’ve been making various inquiries into Borginia, and at several points in our investigations we have come across certain references to Cohdopia. We wondered if you would be able to help us in explaining some things.”

“I could help.” Tages nodded, an unreadable expression on her face. “You must understand, however, that you won’t always get answers to your questions. A lot of the information we’re dealing with here is classified, in the interests of national security.”
“Naturally. We would not wish to impose.”

Miles noticed her shoulders relax once more. Then he turned to Franziska, who like yesterday, pushed some files towards the woman.

“Would you able to tell us anything about the men in these photos, Ms Tages?” she asked.

As with Palaeno yesterday, Tages easily marked out Papilio Machaon but stopped at the other blurry figure. “...I cannot say with certainty who that other man is. Is he of importance?”

Franziska debriefed her. “The other figure in the photo has come to our attention as an international spy. We have referred to him as the Phantom in our investigations.”

They saw Tages’ eyes narrow. “I see.”

Tages rose abruptly from her seat, and turned toward the window, her wrists clasped behind her back as she surveyed the world below them; the sun’s rays were trying to poke through the clear grey skies, and the naked trees rustled in the breeze. There was a faint sound of morning traffic.

A sharp inhale, and she turned back to them, steeling herself with a tight hand on the windowsill. “What I am about to divulge to you is very sensitive information, so I will only say this once,” Tages said in a low voice.

Franziska nodded, and wordlessly brought her biro pen to paper.

Tages moved to sit back down again; with the sun’s rays now filtering through, creating low shadows in the conference room, they caught the defence minister’s face, exposing little freckles and moles. “Our intelligence services have been investigating this man as a person of interest for a long time now. In fact, Cohdopia was the first country to request that the Interpol put him on a red notice.”

“When was that?” asked Miles.

“We had him put on red notice in 2019, just eight months into a reunified Cohdopia. We had a terrorist attack in Anthyllis, a small town in the southwest, at a Christmas market, where a group of armed people drove a van into the market stalls, got out, and began to attack the visitors and proprietors with knives. Our police force managed to arrest three of the five men; a mixture of Borginian nationalists and Babahlse separatists. But the other two had fled the scene, and so we immediately sent out red notices and alerts to our neighbouring states.”

“How were you able to identify the two people that had fled?”

Tages brought her hands together, tapping the tips of her fingers. “For one of them, we had previous arrest records to identify them. And for the other one, the one you know as the Phantom, we also had records on him.”

“This is all new to us,” remarked Miles. “How was it that you had previous records on him, given his propensity to change his appearance at will?”

“We...had him on file with a dishonourable discharge from the army.”

“From the Cohdopian Army?”

“Yes,” she confirmed, nodding.
Miles frowned. “But we have received reports indicating he is a Borginian SEIL agent.”

“That cannot be right,” she said slowly, furrowing her thin eyebrows. “SEIL does not exist any longer. And I can say with certainty that this man is Cohdopian.”

*Cohdopian?*

Miles adjusted his glasses. “Mr Palaeno mentioned that first part too. We are aware of how the organisation came about, and how it was dismantled. But…we were contacted by individuals who claimed they were from SEIL.”

Tages shifted in her seat, the frown still set deep into her pale features. “How did they approach you?”

“They phoned my office, seeing as the Phantom was held in custody in my jurisdiction, and claimed to be the Borginian Intelligence Services, wishing to extradite him. We subsequently set up a meeting with them and they introduced themselves as Rebekah Klaark and Johannes Birken from Borginia’s Central Command for internal and external affairs,” Miles explained.

Tages nodded slowly. “Anything else?”

He crossed his arms, tapping his index finger against his upper arm; a pensive look preceded him.

“They gave us a name for him — Erik Qvinn — and said they wished to extradite him. We held an appeal, but found that they hadn’t gone through the necessary diplomatic channels to secure the man’s extradition. The appeal was dropped, and he has since been held in our custody for interrogations.”

He paused, before adding, “To support their claims, they had provided us with documents that displayed SEIL insignia on them.”

“Do you have copies of this?”

Franziska fished out a folder and slid it across the table to the defence minister. Tages produced a pair of oval glasses from a case and began to read, muttering the words under her breath. She looked back up at them; her stony features broke out into a small polite smile.

Tages put her glasses away. “These are all fabrications. Let me explain.”

She then rose from her seat and frogmarched to the other side of the long table where a whiteboard stood. With a black marker pen, she began to write down several words in Borginian and Cohdopian.

Tages tapped the board. “There is no such thing as the Borginian Intelligence Services, or Central Command. Borginia’s counterpart to our Ministry of Defence and the Cohdopian Intelligence Bureau is the Department of State Security.”

“Can you corroborate that?” asked Miles.

“Yes, but wait till I am finished,” she answered curtly, before spelling out a few more terms on the board. “Then there is SEIL. Mr Palaeno said to you that SEIL was dismantled during the negotiations, and he was right. What he forgot to add is that during those negotiations it was agreed that we would come up with new names for our secret services. In other words, no one can claim SEIL or its full name as theirs. Just in case you thought Borginia had rights to use the name ‘SEIL’.”
She continued, her eyes narrowed. “Furthermore, it would be highly unusual for any intelligence bureau to contact a district attorney’s office anywhere in the world. If Borginia or Cohdopia wanted him, either Andreja Amantes or Colias Palaeno would have negotiated his extradition with your country’s foreign minister,” she added.

“Well, when you put it like that, these individuals have behaved suspiciously,” said Miles. Then he shifted in his seat, getting a better look at the defence minister who had begun to wipe the whiteboard clean. “And with regards to him being Cohdopian?”

“Ahh,” she remarked, before turning around and moving to sit back down again. She laced her fingers together. “Erikh Qvinn is his nom de guerre.”

“What does that mean?”

“All Cohdopians who enlist in the army are allowed to choose their own names. We all have very similar names and surnames, so it is easiest to pick non-Cohdopian pseudonyms. Actors’ names, old politicians, fictional heroes, etcetera. In his case, Erikh Qvinn is the name of a Borginian war hero.”

*Does that mean there’s a soldier out there calling themselves the Steel Samurai?*

Miles dismissed the thought with a clearing of the throat.

“...And does this apply to individuals who enlisted during the separation?” he asked.

Tages nodded, a wry smile playing up on her lips. “On both the Allebahstian and Babahlese sides. It is quite clever actually, because he enlisted before the war as a Cohdopian citizen, and was discharged dishonourably as an Allebahstian, when they were allied with Borginia at the time.”

Franziska pulled out a piece of paper. “...But we also have him on record as having completed his Borginian military service in Cohdopia in 2012.”

Tages frowned. “I would need to look at those documents to verify. Most likely they are also fabricated.”

There was a brief moment of contemplative quiet, allowing them to focus on their surroundings; traffic outside had subsided or now, interrupted only by the occasional wailing police or ambulance siren and the rattling of tram carriages as they glided up and down the streets. The sun’s rays had retracted, leaving the room feeling more fluorescent and colder than ever.

Tages broke the silence. “As the defence minister, I am more concerned that there are individuals out there masquerading as SEIL.”

Franziska answered for her. “Is that because the organisation no longer exists?”

“Exactly,” confirmed Tages with a nod in her direction. “Especially because it can be seen as an attempt to undermine national security. Both here...and in Borginia. It is an act of provocation, designed to further strain our already-precarious relationship.”

“Given their previous actions, and based alone on Erikh Qvinn’s attempts to sabotage matters and events on an international scale, it can be said that these individuals know precisely what they are doing by exploiting an unstable region,” Franziska thought aloud.
Then she turned to Miles, adding, “And we have already seen this exploitation occur, have we not?”

Tages turned to face him, her mouth a thin line.

“Indeed, we have. Interpol has been investigating a series of murders of Cohdopian dual nationals, all lawyers who were working on the Borginia Tribunal,” said Miles.

“...That is a grave thing,” muttered Tages, before she looked up and raised her eyebrows. “All within your borders?”

He shook his head. “No. We have come across one murder on our soil, with the rest taking place elsewhere. We apologise we could not bring this up sooner, but we have been making an effort to keep this information out of the media.”

Tages nodded. “No, no, it is understandable. We must all maintain our secrecy where necessary. And in this case especially...with our region how it is...” she trailed off before sucking in a deep breath. “The question now is how we, as a nation, should prevent this from...escalating into a full-blown international incident.”

“That would be up to your government, would it not?” Franziska asked; beside her, Miles noted her thumb running along the edge of her coiled whip.

“It would,” Tages leaned back with a soft sigh. She fidgeted with the ring on her finger. “The best way to do this would be...to release information about SEIL, about Erikh Qvinn, to Interpol. It would be in the interest of international peace and stability, which is in line with our party manifesto.”

“Do you have records on SEIL that would enable you to do this?” Miles found himself asking.

The defence minister turned her head slightly to meet his gaze.

“We have...preserved our records on SEIL since the reunification. They are sealed, in the Centaurea Archives. Everyone listed as...a SEIL agent...is in there. Both Borginian...and Cohdopian,” she answered slowly.

Then she furrowed her eyebrows, and tilted her head. “Or, actually, Borginian and Allebahstian.”

“So no Babahlese on file?” asked Franziska.

She steepled her fingers. “No...they have their separate records from then. But because...they were not in SEIL, they are perhaps not relevant to this discussion.”

Miles leaned forward in his seat and tapped the table with his index finger. “But, Ms Tages, I was under the impression that all the documents from that time period had been destroyed.”

Tages frowned. “You are mistaken. If they had all perished, then we would not have known how to restructure Cohdopia, would we?”

Then a small smile made its way onto the the defence minister’s face. “Ah...now I remember you two. You prosecuted Quercus Alba, did you not?”

“...That is correct,” answered Franziska for them.

Tages’ straight-back posture relaxed a little.
“I can understand your assumption now, Mr Edgeworth,” she answered softly. “It is true that we did lose some important information along the way. But nothing related to what we are dealing with right now.”

“I suppose that alongside his nom de guerre, his real name would be on record?” Franziska asked.

“...Yes. If it is not redacted, of course,” she answered with a polite smile; crow’s feet creasing the corners of her eyes.

Then she slammed her hands down on the table with a sense of finality. “In that case, in the interests of international security, Mr Palaeno and I can bring up this matter in our next cabinet meeting with the Prime Minister. If we are successful in getting this through parliament, we can grant Interpol access to our files on SEIL in Centaurea. If not...I wish you all the best in your endeavours.”

“That’s very reasonable,” answered Miles; that would be the best solution.

He glanced at Franziska who, with crossed arms and a thoughtful expression on her face, added, “I am in agreement. We shall hand over Interpol’s findings on the Cohdopian victims in exchange for these archives that would help find their killers.”

“Precisely,” Tages nodded, smiling. “Then we are in agreement.”

They all rose from their seats and collected their belongings. They shook hands with each other, and Tages insisted they help themselves to more pastries, lest they be consumed by her colleagues, before walking them up to the reception to say their goodbyes.

“I wish you both a good day. Please, take the time to enjoy what Primidux has to offer,” were the minister’s parting words.

And with that, Miles and Franziska left with a sense of accomplishment; they could put their work to the side, and live in the moment, free to continue with their city tour under overcast grey skies and a striking chromatic landscape.

Dianthus was about a three-hour train ride northwest from Primidux. A small university town situated on the banks of the Gulf of Finland, it wasn’t hard to see why it was a popular destination with its white sand beaches and old medieval and prehistoric monuments that had stood the test of time on such a precarious landscape.

Despite it being the off-season and a biting cold day, there were throngs of senior citizens stepping off coach buses and trains, descending on the place like a swarming plague of locusts in their neon walking gear speaking in all sorts of tongues. Looking around him, Miles felt very out of place in this demographic, even if he did get teased at home for his grey hair and glasses and get called “Gramps”.

After touring Old Primidux and lunching at an upscale restaurant serving traditional fare, they made the bold, and perhaps brash, decision to see a performance of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg at the Cohdopian State Opera last night. Thankfully the production did not disappoint, allowing him and Franziska to bond in German. Over the years they had grown so used to speaking English, even in their own company, so to speak German was... rather rare nowadays.

Miles did appreciate the opportunity though. He was glad for the fact that, though they hardly saw much of each other, their relationship had become stronger over the last decade. In fact, he found himself missing her company on the train ride this morning. Franziska had stayed behind in
Primidux today; Agent Lang was stopping over for the day on a layover from Haibin, Zheng Fa’s capital, to Lyon.

His eyes searched the crowds; Miles feared if he stepped out of the train station that the individual he was meeting would have a harder time finding him. It didn’t help that said person was also in the same age range as all the tourists.

He felt a hand tap his shoulder from behind. “Mr, ah, Miles Edgeworth?”

Miles turned around to face the source of the reedy voice.

“Senecio Scopolii,” he introduced himself, shaking his hand weakly. Scopolii appeared a rather unremarkable figure; a man in his early seventies of short stature with a wide muscular frame, dressed in jeans and a button down shirt underneath a tweed jacket.

“Pleasure to meet you,” said Miles, returning the handshake with slightly more vigour.

“Heh, pleasure’s all mine, Mr Edgeworth,” he replied before letting go and pushing his round glasses up his crooked nose. “So, um, welcome to Dianthus.”

“Yes, it’s rather pretty.”

“Ah, good, good,” he said, as he moved jerkily about the station.

“Hm, ah, I thought I would take you out for a walk along the gulf, but, uh, unfortunately it is quite cold. So, I’m sorry, but we will have to stay indoors so that we don’t get sick!” he said, chuckling nervously.

“That is quite alright. In fact, I would not be opposed to having our meeting a cafe,” reassured Miles.

“Hm, alright,” Scopolii said, patting his chest. “Uh, this way.”

They exited the train station through a slightly obscure route that took them down a marble staircase and underneath the town, which led them directly down a medieval walkway with limestone walls.

Miles touched the walls, feeling the rough texture underneath his palms. He turned to face Scopolii, who was walking rather quickly, weaving in and out of the crowds.

“This is rather old,” he commented.

Scopolii’s bushy white eyebrows inched upwards.

“Hm, what? Oh! Yes, yes. From the middle of the fourteenth century,” he shouted back hoarsely.

Miles brushed past the throngs of people to fall into step beside the man. “Of course, you’re a historian.”

“Yes, yes. I’m a, um, professor of early modern history at the University of Dianthus,” he announced. Then, without being prompted, he added, “I focus on political and military history in this region. So, uh, my research interests include the Borginian-Cohdopian Commonwealth, political alliances, the nature of warfare, and systems of governance.”

“Yes, which is why I arranged to meet you. You see, I wanted to gain a better understanding of Cohdopia, and its long history with Borgia. I learnt a bit while in Primidux and read some articles
on the train coming here, but...I thought it best to consult with an expert.”

“Ah...heh,” Scopolii chuckled to himself. “Primidux is, uh, a little bubble in itself. You would not
learn much about our history there.”

Miles frowned and opened his mouth to object, but the professor waved him off with his hand.
“Bah. I’ll explain when we sit down somewhere, Mr Edgeworth.”

Miles kept his mouth shut for the rest of the walk; it was much more beautiful here, with blue
skies and the sun poking through, brightening up the place. They plodded along the waterfront,
where Lake Phragmites drained into the Gulf of Finland, on concrete and cobbled paths, careful to
duck as seagulls swooped past, stealing morsels of food from small screeching toddlers.

“Ah, here we are,” Scopolii announced, breaking the blissful silence as he turned off into a side
street.

They stopped in a tiny beachfront cafe next to a green-domed Orthodox church. Scopolii
immediately switched into Cohdopian once they entered, greeting the locals who sat on barstools
— all pudgy men and women with short blonde or salt-and-pepper hair in jeans and windbreakers
— with warmth and confidence.

Miles took a seat by the window, content to watch the world for a moment as he pulled off his scarf
and gloves. A chair scraped up in front of him, and the professor plonked down. His fingers began
to fidget with the cutlery and glassware.

“In, ah, this area, we do not speak much English. There are not a lot of Cohdopian, um, speakers,
so we always try to speak it in this country,” he explained with a shaky smile. “Um, we are very
proud of our culture and history.”

“Yes, I noticed. What’s the population here?”

“Ah, three million. In Dianthus, it is just fifty thousand people.”

“Not a big country then.”

“No...No, it is not big.”

A young blonde waiter came up to them, speaking rapidly in Cohdopian. Miles assumed it was
related to drinks orders, and sure enough, Scopolii asked, “What would you, um, like to drink? Tea,
coffee? Something to eat?”

“I will have black tea, and perhaps a slice of rhubarb tart, if you have any?”

The professor relayed the order to the waiter, who scratched his stubble and confirmed they did.

“Magad,” said the professor as the waiter left.

Miles leaned forward. “‘Magad’ means ‘thank you’, I’m guessing?”

“Yes, it is means thank you. ‘Sia’ means ‘hello’, ‘dagam’ is ‘please’, and ‘vizek’ is ‘goodbye’,” he
answered and then raised an eyebrow. “Ah, Primidux does not allow you to speak, um, much
Cohdopian.”

Miles pretended he hadn’t heard that last sentence, and the professor cleared his throat, drumming
his fingers on the table.
“So yes, uh, welcome to Dianthus. It is the ancient capital city, right in Allebahstian heartlands. It is, uh, said that the royal family originated from here.”

“That’s rather interesting,” said Miles. “In fact, I had hoped you could provide me with a brief history of Cohdopia to start things off.”

The professor jumped up in his seat, looking rather invigorated. “Certainly, certainly. Um...so Cohdopia is an old country. Founded in the 1100s if we believe the myth of King Primidux, and it, um, became a Christian country under King Xyris in 1224. Since then, it has seen itself through centuries of conflict and occupation and rule...”

The waiter brought over their drinks and pastries, and Miles began to eat his tart as he continued to listen.

“...First starting with the Mongol invasion in 1294, which was, um, disastrous. But for a long time we maintained a foothold here. Never a regional powerhouse, um, but we did consolidate some power until the, uh, emergence of the Swedish empire in the 1600s. We then became the Borginian-Cohdopian Commonwealth right through to the Great Northern War.”

Scopolii let out a sigh and began to stir his cup of coffee. “Then we became absorbed into Russia. Luckily, uh, we were quite autonomous, and we became independent from Russia after the First World War. We...uh were in a sticky situation in the Second World War, fighting Russian and Borginian Soviet forces, and allied with Germany. But, um, we got through, and held our ground through the Cold War.”

He took a sip. “Ah, unfortunately the Cold War actually turned hot for us, uh, because we had several battles with Borginia. But we stayed strong, and took back our land and our, uh, borders!”

“Yes, I heard about a border skirmish some forty years ago where you reclaimed land in the south.”

“Borginia has, uh, wanted to undermine us for centuries. It is nothing new, that they now want to steal that land again. At least the government isn’t so stupid as to fall for that.”

Finishing his tart, Miles followed up on that point. “Do you not trust in the current administration?”

Scopolii leaned back in his seat. “No, no,” he rasped out, and banged his fist on the table. “Absolutely not,” he emphasised.

“Hm,” Miles said nothing more; perhaps that was a point to return to later. He continued to listen to the professor.

“...Ah, everyday it is a new struggle. After the Cold War, and the fall of the USSR, we had to increase our defence spending and our security to avoid another war. It is, ah, not easy, when we have these skirmishes every few months. We are constantly on high alert.”

“Is Cohdopia a military state?”

“Pah, of course. This is my, ah, specialty. Cohdopia has always been a proud militarised state since the 1200s. Any battles we lost, we took the opportunity to learn from our opponents. That is how we have survived this far. Even when we were occupied, and under other rule, we stayed on top in other ways. In, ah, parliament we had nationalists campaigning for our autonomy, and then our independence.”

Miles sipped at his tea, the liquid burning down his throat. “If such unity was in place then, then
why all the bloodshed and grievances that led to the civil wars and tore the country into two?”

Scopolii dabbed at his forehead with a tissue. “Ah, this is not an easy question. To put it, ah, simply, the Allebahstians always lived here to the west, and the Babahlese to the east. We mixed and traded for a long time, as two separate tribes. Then during the Commonwealth and the Russian occupation, we were clumped together as one state, one people, which was, uh, not the case. This created an artificial relationship, because we were now forced to work together, with different, ah, interests and goals in mind from everything to independence and government structure.”

He crumpled the tissue. “This created a fragile unity only in the interests of breaking away from our, uh, oppressors. When that was all said and done, we wanted to go our separate ways, be our separate peoples. The kingdom always lay here to the west, so we came to see the Babahlese as our subjects, and we sometimes put pressure on them. And they did try to break away several times, and finally did in 2009.”

“I see. And what was the general atmosphere at the time?”

“Here, in these heartlands, it was mostly relief. Relief that we knew we were the true state. We, uh, occupied the most territory and held sixty-five percent of Primidux. Relief that the Babahlese finally got their own state and could do as they, uh, pleased.”

Scopolii downed his mug of coffee. “So when we spoke of reunifying, many were opposed because it, uh, meant starting all over again. But apparently many people were glad to reunify, because there were inter-ethnic families, who had been split, or that the politicians had come to enjoy and exploit this fragile unity of ours.”

Scopolii shrugged. “And here we are today.”

Miles nodded slowly, taking in all the information. “I see. Thank you for your explanation.”

“Bah, it is my job. I have made a career out of all this mess,” the professor grumbled. He drew out his wallet, throwing down some banknotes and coins into a little ashtray on the table. “I have some, uh, places to show you.”

Scopolii rose abruptly from his seat and made a beeline for the bar-stools to say goodbye to the locals and patrons before disappearing out the door. Miles could only scramble out of his seat and clumsily mutter out “Ah, vizek” before pushing the door open and catch up to the professor.

“Where are we going?” he asked, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice.

The professor did not answer at first, fishing out a packet of cigarettes from his trouser pocket. He pulled one out, and held it in the knuckles of his index and middle finger, before bringing it to his face and lighting it with a lighter. He took a long drag on it, letting the carcinogenic fumes permeate the sea air, such that Miles set his jaw and began to feel queasy.

Waving his cigarette in the general direction of where they were headed, Scopolii motioned for him to follow.

“We will, ah, walk along the front to the old castle.”

Miles fell into step behind him, manoeuvering himself in such a manner so as not to breathe in the disgusting smoke; he could at least comfort himself with the statistics that smoking had severely declined in the last decade.

Another long drag, and the ash at the end of cigarette dropped unceremoniously to the ground.
Scopolii gestured with his head out to the sea.

“We, ah, have military exercises here with NATO. The navy, on the sea.”

“Here?” echoed Miles.

“Yes. We, ah, also have some down in the forests. Just kilometres away from the town.”

“But why?”

The professor flicked his cigarette on the ground, and let out one last wispy exhale. “This, ah, way we are far away from the border with Borgia and we can simulate attacks.”

Miles frowned. “Are you anticipating one soon?”

Scopolii turned to meet his gaze, cold eyes meeting his. “We are always on the lookout.”

“Despite the government’s push to keep dialogue going?” he countered.

“Bah, the government’s a joke!” he grumbled. “We must always anticipate an attack, because they always provoke us. They have already started to exploit local grievances!”

The mention of exploitation reminded him of yesterday’s meeting with the defence minister; how grim it was, to see where all her work took her. He was about to say something when Scopolii continued, flailing his arms about. “Look in front, ah, of you! All this is gone.”

Miles took a guess. “The local residents have departed?”

Scopolii nodded, a grave look preceded him. “Ah, yes. There are almost no more Allebahstians in the heartlands.”

“But the people we met in the cafe? And in the train station?”

“The tourists, ah, they all come from the east. And there is almost no one under fifty in this town left.”

The professor was right; everywhere Miles looked, the majority of the people were ageing, trekking along concrete paths with their Zimmer frames and hiking kits, or young families out for the day. There was hardly anyone in his age group, to say nothing of adolescents and students.

“Why?” he asked.

Senecio dug his hands into his pockets and harrumphed. “Instability. Why would, ah, anyone want to live in this region full of conflict, hm? This is why we don’t have, uh, much tourism, or economic opportunities in the area.”

Miles looked around him; it was such a shame really, to see all these abandoned timber-frame and stone structures, glittering in the sunlight. “I suppose all this land will be reclaimed by the forest and sea at some point,” he mumbled quietly, adjusting his glasses.

The professor tutted. “Ah, exactly, exactly as you say.”

They continued to walk up a sharp incline on a grassy hill till a concentric castle emerged. The receding sunlight emphasised the ruins; the jagged stones that stuck out of the walls and the crumbling turrets. Once they got to the top, the professor tapped the stone and caught his breath. Miles observed the world below them; here he could catch a better view on the waves lapping up
the shore and naked trees swaying in the breeze.

“It is rather beautiful, however,” he murmured as Scopolii came to stand beside him. He turned to the man, and asked, with a frown, “Would you mind telling me where you stand in this politically, Professor?”

A heavy sigh, and Scopolii scrunched his bushy white eyebrows together. “I am an old hand, Mr Edgeworth. I fought in wars under the, uh, command of General Alba. I supported his ideals, which were those of the, um, Allebahstian Royalist Party. It’s, uh, not called that anymore. Now it is, ah, the Isékhaz, which translates to ‘Fatherland’, a Cohdopian conservative party.”

Miles’ mind latched onto the professor’s first part of his sentence.

“General Quercus Alba?” he clarified.

“Oh, yes, yes. Ah, a brilliant mind. He, ah, never wanted to go into politics. But he did influence plenty of decisions the country made.”

“I see,” he replied automatically, not quite listening. “And the current government — which party is that?”

Scopolii kicked at the gravel with his boots. “It is, ah, a coalition between some centre-left and green parties. I do not support them.”

“Why not?” he asked curiously, reminding himself of the professor’s earlier statement in the coffee shop.

Miles hugged his coat closer to his body in an effort to combat the cool sea breeze that blew through them.

“They are, ah, too...appeasing. Too soft,” explained Scopolii. “If we, ah, want to assert ourselves as the main power in this region, then we must, ah, do it with force. Otherwise, the Borginians will trample us!”

Miles furrowed his eyebrows. “But would you not agree as a historian that a continuous dialogue between opposing forces prevents war?”

A sliver of a smile appeared on Scopolii’s leathery old face. “And do you not remember where appeasement got us before, hm?” He shook his head.

“And what about the Borginia Tribunal, where the majority of the lawyers heading that are Cohdopians? Would that not create a further rift? A potential conflict of interest?”

“Ah, on the contrary, Mr Edgeworth, it is good that there are Cohdopians on the tribunal. As I said just now, we need to consolidate our power. We need to show that they can be held accountable for their crimes,” countered the professor, before he quickly added with a shake of his head, “I support the opposition’s policies; we need to close the border for a start. We must not allow them in our country! We must block their accession to NATO, and to the EU too!”

“Would that not risk demonising and alienating an entire population?”

A condescending smirk, and a chuckle emerged from the professor’s pale lips. “It is, ah, difficult for those who do not come from these regions to understand years of bad blood and conflict. I do not mean to, ah, offend you, Mr Edgeworth, but trying to change our, ah, views does not go down well here.”
Scopolii clapped his gloved hands together and eyed him seriously, as though he were about to scold a child. “You are a tourist. You have your own national problems. Please do not compare them to ours.”

It was a silent walk back to the train station, tinged with a mixture of carcinogenic smoke and bitterness. When they had finally made it onto the train platform, Scopolii had bid him goodbye, harrumphed, and disappeared back down the stairs like some animal finally released into the wild.

Miles spent the train ride back staring out the window, eyes zipping past flatlands, thinking.

“How was your meeting with the professor?” asked Franziska as they strapped themselves into their seats.

It was the next morning, and they were about to take off on a long-haul connecting flight to New York, with an overnight layover before they returned to Los Angeles. Needless to say, travelling to and from tiny European countries was a hassle, and it was going to be an exhausting couple of days. However, Miles comforted himself with the facts that his business class accommodation had never failed to make him as comfortable as comfortable on a plane could be, and that he would soon be reunited with his partner, their daughter, and the dog.

Speaking of them, Trucy had greatly appreciated his pictures of Primidux and Dianthus, saying they would help her in her art exams, and Phoenix had been keeping him updated with the latest agency shenanigans.

Adjusting his seatbelt, Miles answered. “It was...enlightening.”

Leaning backwards in their seats to allow a flight attendant to pass through, Franziska replied with a frown, “You do not sound very sure of yourself.”

Miles sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well...put it this way, it was educational but it left a lot to be desired.”

“Hm. Why is that?”

“I’ll explain it more once we take off, but...Professor Scopolii and I did not exactly see eye to eye, which made for quite a frustrating meeting.”

“But is that not the one of the core elements of academia; to collaborate, disagree and debate with one another until you reach a certain conclusion?”

Miles chuckled to himself. “Hardly, Franziska. That is the case for us lawyers. The academics, on the other hand, will argue to the death and never reach a conclusion. That is why it was so frustrating.”

Franziska crossed her arms. “Hmph. Are you not an academic yourself?”

Miles tilted his head, a pensive expression on his face. “Perhaps...but I wouldn’t say I count. I don’t use my doctoral title, nor did I write my thesis in flowery legal language. And furthermore, I haven’t made a career out of it. Being in the legal world...it invigorates me in a way that cannot be put into words.”

“Hm...well I will wait on a further response when we’re in the air.”

“Yes, indeed,” he leaned back in his seat. “And in the meantime, might I ask...how was Agent
A small smirk traced up Franziska’s lips, and Miles thought he caught a reminiscent look in her eyes. “He is well, but very busy. Hence we were not able to spend much time together.”

Noticing his curious look, she elaborated, “He has been following up leads related to our investigation, as well as juggling his own tasks with the Zheng Fa police.”

“Yes...that does sound rather stressful,” remarked Miles.

Franziska shrugged. “It is what he wants to do. He would rather fly around the world tending to his casework and serving his country than sit behind a desk everyday.”

“Hm...That reminds me, any news from the Cohdopian cabinet?”

Franziska shook her head. “I checked the news the past few days, and I have come up with nothing. It is evident they would need time to deliberate this issue.”

“Of course…”

Anything else Miles wanted to add was soon drowned out by an announcement over the loudspeaker and the routine safety procedures. After stowing away his tray table, and picking up the familiar hum of the plane’s engines kicking into gear, he said, “Well, we’ll just have to wait and see.”

They exchanged glances, before turning away to gaze upon the world outside as the plane taxied out onto the runway.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, this is the longest chapter I’ve ever written, and it really was my biggest excuse to nerd out! I spent many hours researching for this, everything from scientific names for flowers and butterflies to Baltic geography to listening to The Documentary podcast on the BBC World Service and checking out the actual Interpol site. Perhaps it ended up being a little excessive, I don’t know, but I very much enjoyed writing it and I’d very much like some discussion about this, about my theories on Cohdopia and Borginia, their histories and their cultures.

Also, I just wanted an excuse to delve into Edgeworth’s personal life, seeing as I’ve grown fond of Wrightworth and wanted to drop in the very rare Langziska.

So yeah, drop me a comment and let me know what you thought of this chapter! Onward to the next chapter where we return to our regularly scheduled programming with Simon back in LA!
March 6, 2028

*Thwack!*

The sound of a newspaper being slammed against his desk startled Simon, causing him to yelp and jump out of his seat.

"Oh, shit, sorry!"

Simon's head snapped up; Detective's Skye's anxious face greeted him, her hand on her cheek. He sighed, and softened his features into a smile, raising his hand in a gesture of peace.

"At ease, Biscuits. I only ask for posterity that you refrain from doing that again," he said in a gentle tone, and lowered his hand so that it rested on the desk again. Simon inclined his head to her. "Now then, good morning."

His words hadn't quite settled her, given the tight grip she had on her bag strap. Nevertheless her face relaxed as she gave him a shaky smile.

"Morning," Skye replied, her eyes darting from his face and the newspaper in front of them. "Ah, I'm here because Edgeworth wanted you to see this."

Simon pulled the copy of *The Morning Times* towards him; a picture of a well-dressed man with a blonde ponytail shaking hands with a decorated military official took up the front page, alongside some smaller photos of a brunette freckled woman, a greying man, and a sitting parliamentary assembly.

"Revealed: Cohdopian Intelligence Bureau spied on Babahlese members of parliament 'for years'. Cohdopia has opened up their civil war archives after passing a historic Freedom of Information Act in an attempt to bring transparency, peace and stability to a region mired in conflict," he read aloud.

Simon's eyes widened, as he met her cautious gaze. "Biscuits, this is unprecedented."

Her face split into a grin. "I know. Guess we can really get to work now, huh?"

"Yes...Well, it appears leaving this matter to the parliamentarians has allowed them to hone their dull blades," he answered, fingers drumming against the newspaper.

"Sure seems like it." Skye confirmed. "Well, Edgeworth wants to see you in his office as soon as
"Very well then, I shall hasten toward him," he said, striding across his office to pick up his surcoat from the coat rack. Turning back to face her, hand turning the doorknob, Simon frowned. "Ah, had you intended to come to see me for another matter?"

Skye trotted up to him, bag banging against her thigh. "Nah, I was on my way up to see the fop for a larceny case, but I got caught in the stairwell for this."

Simon was about to interject but she waved away his half-formed thoughts. "It's fine though. You want me to come with?"

"No. I shall apprise you of the details later," he replied, already one foot in the lift. Skye gave him a thumbs up as her figure disappeared behind the closing doors.

Though it was a short ride up, it allowed Simon a brief moment of to centre himself, taking deep breaths before stepping out into the foyer. Ms Fright, upon seeing him, immediately ushered him inside.

A look of bemusement preceded Simon as he stepped into the office. "von Karma-dono."

Franziska von Karma was seated on one of the plush sofas, her legs crossed together. A polite smile flickered on her features.

"Simon Blackquill. It is good to see you again."

Simon inclined his head towards her, before turning to Edgeworth who stood with a hand on the back of the other sofa. "Sir."

"Good morning, Simon. Please, have a seat." Edgeworth greeted, before sitting down beside von Karma. "I called this meeting so we could have a chat about what we were able to achieve in Cohdopia, and to check in with you and your progress. So, Simon, let's start with you. Tell us about last week."

Simon sighed as he recalled how unproductive the last two weeks had been. "I fear…our mutual acquaintance was less than forthcoming at our last encounter. Although, I admit I did use some force on my part, which might have… dehorted him from any further utterances."

"What sort of force are we talking about, Simon Blackquill?" von Karma asked with a raised eyebrow.

Simon tilted his head, his lips curled up into a small smirk. "Force… of a psychological nature. A little…trick I learnt from my mentor, to goad him into revealing details of his organisation and himself. Alas…"

He expected to be pressed further but thankfully Edgeworth quickly moved on. "I see. Anything else?"

Simon frowned. "No. I was obliged to attend some departmental meetings, however."

"Good. That's very good," Edgeworth said, nodding. "I don't suppose you've heard the news?"

"Yes, Skye-dono provided me with a copy of The Morning Times. It appears you were able to get the parliamentarians to cooperate."
"Indeed we were. I'll let Franziska give you the rundown."

Simon listened intently as von Karma explained in detail what they had discussed with both the foreign and defence ministers, their discoveries, and how those concerns had been brought up to the cabinet and then to the parliament.

"...And so, as you have read in the newspaper, the bill was passed with an overwhelming cross-party majority," she concluded.

Edgeworth spoke. "And as I understand it, the mood in Cohdopia right now is one of… I wouldn't call it jubilation, but—"

"It is one of budding trust," von Karma interrupted, thumb running along the edge of her coiled whip. "The people are beginning to feel they can trust their institutions. There are critics, of course, who argue the government has only passed this bill in a deliberate attempt to bring their approval ratings back up or that this is mere political grandstanding."

"But so far, they do appear to be following through, as several hundred requests for information have already been made according to another news source," Edgeworth said, before lightly clearing his throat. "What the article didn't mention was that the Cohdopian government has also given Interpol exclusive access to certain archives not yet open to the public concerning SEIL."

Simon raised his eyebrows. "I see. That is… already even more positive news."

"We are hoping that these archives will lead us to our spy's identity. It would facilitate identifying him, and his previous personas, so that further charges can be placed on him. Not to mention further information regarding the legitimacy of the organisation that approached us," Edgeworth said. "So you shall certainly have your work cut out for you once Agent Lang has secured access to the archives."

"And when can we expect Lang-dono to have achieved that?"

"Within the next few days. We're just waiting on him at this point." Edgeworth said. "But yes, we are moving rather quickly at this point."

"Hm. Well, I appreciate being in the know," said Simon, passing them both polite smiles. He rose from his seat. "If that is all, then… I shall be taking my leave."

"One moment, Simon." Edgeworth raised a hand to halt his actions, causing Simon to lower himself back down on the sofa.

"Sir?" he asked, a quizzical expression on his face.

Simon watched as Edgeworth strode up to his desk, unlocked a small drawer, and took something out of it. He walked back over to Simon, and held out a paper bag for him.

Simon gingerly took the bag, opening it up carefully to reveal an elegant blue ink pot with a golden butterfly adorning the lid.
"It is a bottle of Babahlese ink. I thought you might see fit to use it on your paperwork," Edgeworth explained as he examined it.

"I see. Er, thank you, Edgeworth-dono," Simon said, rather unsure of himself. An awkward smile traced up his lips. "I shall have to reenlist in my quills, in that case."

"Glad to hear it. I'll see you soon then."

Simon rose and bowed stiffly. He exited as quickly as his long legs could carry him. He had barely crossed the threshold back into his own office and thrown the paper bag onto the sofa when his phone rang in his pocket.

"Simon Blackquill," he stated into the receiver.

"Hey, uh, I'm gonna need you to come to the precinct real quick. This is urgent."

Detective Skye's office was a tiny, cramped, and dark space, filled wall to wall with filing cabinets and bulletin boards. Test tube racks and ring stands holding coffee mugs stood haphazardly about the place, on top of paperwork and thick organic chemistry textbooks. A ratty swivel chair typically reserved for guests was piled high with case files and evidence boxes.

With hardly enough room for the both of them, Simon was forced to stand in the middle of the doorway, leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed. A sliver of sunlight was trying to poke through the open slats of the Venetian blinds, casting yellow lines onto a large rectangular box that sat unopened on her desk.

"This was waiting for me when I got back. No note, no return address. Just a box," she explained. "I don't know what to do with it."

Simon walked into her office, closing the door behind him with a bang. He shuffled about, careful not to bang his hip against a corner cabinet, and loomed over the box.

"Were you expecting a parcel to arrive?" he asked, eyebrows furrowed.

Skye shook her head. "I get all my packages delivered to my house, never through here. Which is why I called you over."

"The only thing to be done then would be to slice it open."

With a resigned sigh Skye rose from her seat and crossed the two steps to the other side of the room, where she snatched up a pair of latex gloves and a box-cutter from her cupboard. Then she returned to the desk, putting on her glasses and the gloves, and buttoning up her lab coat.

"Ready?" she asked, box-cutter in hand, and Simon nodded for her to proceed.

He watched with hawk-like eyes as she cautiously made the first incision, making sure not to damage the cardboard itself. A couple more cuts, and she was able to lift the box flaps. One flap, two flaps, and then all four flaps. Skye set the box cutter down, and beckoned for him to look inside.

Clear ziploc bags, and lots of them. Not stacks of them, as though a bulk purchase had been made, but ziplocs stuffed and crammed full of things.

Simon cleared his throat. "These are..."
"Evidence bags," she said, scrunching up her eyebrows. "And...they've got all our precinct details on them. But...these aren't from the evidence lockers."

Her fingers gingerly pried between the different bags. There was a bloody switchblade knife, with a very obvious fingerprint on the handle; a black ski mask with some brown hair fibres stuck to the inner layer; a large yellow ring binder, stuffed full of papers, and, peeking out from the bottom of the box, a green microchip.

"Shit," Skye exhaled.

Simon inhaled sharply through his nostrils. "This is certainly bizarre."

"Is it what we think it is...?"

They turned to look at each other with expressions of utter bewilderment; this was evidence for Jacob Hawthorn's murder. Evidence that they hadn't found at the crime scene, neatly catalogued and presented to them.

"...You had better start by making Forensics conversant with this evidence," said Simon quietly, gesturing at the box.

Skye tugged at a strand of hair thoughtfully. "Yeah, no, definitely."

"For we will need to determine...the origin, among other things you are no doubt privy to with regards to evidence law," he continued slowly, crossing his arms. "...And to enlist in the help of the Informatics team, with the purpose of tracing the package back to the post office from whence it came. Perhaps, we will find that the sender had been recorded for posterity on filmless film."

"Right," she nodded. "I'll deal with those things today. Call forensics to pick this up, and then get the tech guys to take over when they're done and trace it."

Simon nodded. "We will not apprise Interpol of anything for the time being. Until this matter is addressed, I will place my other sparring sessions on hold."

"Alright. I'll keep you posted."

After a heavy but fragmented sleep, Simon returned to the office the following morning with the intention of getting some of the more boring and mundane administrative details taken care of, lest they all be buried underneath another pile of work.

He first went downstairs to the Japanifornia Bank branch office located on the third floor and made an application for a credit card and finalised some key bank details. When that was done Simon went back to his office, answered some emails, and filled out an online passport application; Edgeworth's trip abroad last week had reminded him of the potential for business trips, not to mention it was always good to have an updated ID.

By the time all that was done, it had gone noon. Detective Skye had yet to text or phone him, so with nothing else to do, Simon made the conscious effort to head down to the cafeteria for some
lunch, seeing as he had eschewed breakfast.

It had been a couple of weeks since he had last been down here, and even longer since he'd sat down for a meal. The hot food options didn't appeal to him, so Simon settled on a couple of chicken salad sandwiches and a packet of kettle-cooked crisps; some vague old memory of service station sandwiches in the bleak Scottish midwinter nagged at him.

He sat down at a corner table close to the doors, the sunlight catching his pale skin, and quietly munched on his sandwiches. Minute by minute, the cafeteria filled up, and the relative peace was replaced very quickly with loud conversations, uproarious laughter and the chinking of cutlery against plates.

As Simon fished out the remaining crisps from the bag, he overheard snippets of a conversation being conducted behind him.

"—so worried, Herr Dirigent?"

"Wha— Oh! My Zhengfainese friend is coming over soon. I haven't seen him in ages!"

A Zhengfainese friend...could that perhaps be Lang?

"That is good, nein?"

He frowned into his empty packet.

_You idiot. There are plenty other Zhengfainese on the planet, never mind this city._

"Yeah!" yelled out the tenor voice. The outburst was accompanied by the sound of something rapping sharply against the edge of the table. Simon countered with loudly scrunching up his crisp packet. "It's been about five — or was it four? — years since he came over to see…"

Simon did not care to listen to anymore, and stalked off.

He was relieved when, at about two in the afternoon, three routine short raps sounded out on his door. He set down his book — he was still trudging through _Underground_ — as Skye bustled in with her baby-blue folders and takeaway cups.

"Hey," she greeted as she approached his desk and set down a steaming cup. "I got you black tea today."

"Ah, much obliged," said Simon. He popped the lid off to check inside; the heady bitter aroma assaulted his nostrils. He frowned into the cup, before throwing a bemused glance her way. "Why the sudden change?"

Skye looked up from the files she was sorting out. "I figured you needed a pick-me-up," she said matter-of-fact.

_I wouldn't have thought I looked worse for wear._

"Anyway, let's get started," she followed up hurriedly.

"Yes, let's." Simon breathed out. "Do you mind if I sit beside you?"

"No problem," she said, making space for him on the sofa. Simon sunk down onto the leather cushioning, and set his cup down on the floor beside him. Skye passed him a folder.
Flicking it open, he asked, "So, what have you managed to ascertain?"

"So...first things first, the evidence is genuine. But we have problems."

"As to be expected," he muttered, eyes scanning the meticulously organised sections and neat cursive handwriting.

"We'll start with the evidence. So, the knife," Skye began around a mouthful of croissant, washing it down with some coffee. With her head, she motioned for him to turn to the relevant page. "Three and a half inches, or ninety millimetres, long. Made in the style of the Italian stiletto switchblade; long sharp blade, and needle-like point."

"I would not have thought you could procure such blades anymore," he said around a gulp of tea.

"You can't." she confirmed with a solemn look. "This is a classic fifties-era switchblade, and they're illegal pretty much everywhere now. Also, look, the manufacturer's name has been filed off."

Simon peered closely at the photo. "Was the coroner able to, at the very least, determine where it came from?"

"Dr Nøhr thought maybe somewhere in South America or Eastern Europe, where there's still pockets of violence. You'd have to look at weapon laws to really check though."

"It certainly appears capable of leaving horrible gashes upon one's person."

"Moving on..." she cleared her throat, and motioned for him to turn the page once more. "The blood on the knife matches that of the victim; A positive. The deep stab wounds that were made in the body also match this type of knife and length."

Skye then pointed at an enlarged image of the handle of the knife. "But, they couldn't trace the fingerprint on the handle. Dr Nøhr said that it's a very well-preserved sample, which is great to see, but it doesn't match anyone on the crime database here. They didn't have enough time to check against the national database."

Simon nodded slowly.

"...The ski mask — nothing special. Just a one size fits all. Ribbed texture. Hundred percent soft acrylic. It can be bought anywhere. But," she emphasised, "the brand label appears to have been cut off with scissors."

"It would seem so," he remarked, noting a rectangular strip of missing fabric.

Skye popped the last bit of croissant into her mouth. "...There were some very nice hair samples that were left behind in the mask, fully preserved with the hair follicle. Dandruff and sweat samples were also collected from the mask, and they were all a match. Not to the victim, but to someone of Caucasian descent."

"We can surmise then that the individual who possesses such DNA is our murderer."

"Not just that. We can safely say that person is the killer."

Simon's eyebrows rose behind his mop of a fringe. "Oh?"

"You know the ring binder we found in the box? I had Dr Nøhr make photocopies of what was
inside while she dusted it for fingerprints," Skye said as she pulled out a thick folder. "There weren't any prints to be found, but that's not the point. Check it out."

Simon took the ring binder from her, fingers brushing past hers, and set it down on his lap. His eyes widened as he tried to discern the text in Borginian.

"This is…"

"SEIL data," she finished. "You see that string of numbers at the bottom of the page?"

He did. A long string of seemingly random numbers stared up at him. Simon thumbed through more thick pages; the same sequence was repeated consistently.

"I bet you that's someone's ID number, and they deliberately leaked this out for us."

Simon frowned. "But on what grounds would someone be willing to place themselves in the line of sight, to release these documents?"

Skye shrugged. "Maybe someone dissatisfied with the regime. I hear Borginia's pretty authoritarian. President's some kind of dictator. We'll definitely need more evidence though."

"And what of the small microchip?" he asked, handing her back the bulky file.

"Same as the one we found at the crime scene; same make, same colour, same documents. It's just a copy. I've put tech on it just to be safe."

"Good idea," he said, draining the last of the tea. "And now onto the areas of concern, I would assume the issue that takes precedence is whether or not I shall be permitted to produce this evidence in court?"

"Yep." Skye leaned back in her seat and exhaled sharply. "It's even tougher now that Edgeworth's gone and done a review of evidence law."

He vaguely recalled the details. "When did that reform take effect?"

"Oof...about a year ago now? Just after the whole jurist trial run." she answered, twirling a piece of hair in her fingers. "So yeah, Dr Nøhr told me that it's not enough to just have the evidence cross-referenced with what was found on the crime scene. She, as the court representative for Forensics, has to prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that this evidence is genuine."

Simon leaned back in his seat and glanced at Skye. "And she cannot?"

"No, because we don't know what we're working with here. We don't know where this evidence came from, whether it's been forged or tampered with, maybe even fabricated."

"I see," said Simon, sucking in a deep breath.

"Also..." began Skye, and he turned to face her once more. "Even if we get this admitted into the court record, that doesn't mean it's going to be useful. This evidence might get thrown out because of parallel construction."

"Wilful concealment."

"Exactly," she said, her eyes meeting his. A small, tired smile traced up her lips. "Maybe we'll get lucky, and someone'll get a charge of evidence concealment slapped on them."
Skye sighed, and began closing up the folders. "Well, we'll wait and see what the tech guys say. But yeah, that's where we're at right now."

He watched for a moment as she cleared up the files, placing some on his desk. Then she slumped back down next to him, her arm draped over the headrest.

"How about you? How was your meeting yesterday?" she asked.

It took a few moments for Simon's brain to catch up with her words; with how busy and hectic the last day had been, he'd almost forgotten he'd been to a meeting. Simon shifted in his seat, and cleared his throat.

"Well I have some news to impart there myself," he said.

Skye motioned for him to continue, her hand disappearing into her satchel.

"It... appears that clandestine negotiations were held to permit us access to certain documentation pertaining to the identity of our mutual acquaintance."

Her eyes widened and she stopped rummaging in her bag. "What? That's great! I mean, have you —"

"I have yet to look at any of it," he finished for her. "Lang-dono has to perform the last necessary protocol checks. However, once he has completed that, then... I hope, I shall be granted permission to view them."

She whistled. "Yeah, that'd be really helpful for us."

"Indeed it would. In fact... I had intended to ask for your assistance in this endeavour."

"To go through the archives?" she clarified.

"Yes."

"Oh yeah, sure!" she nodded, and pulled out a plastic bag. It crinkled in her hands. "Celebratory snackoo?"

Simon's lips turned up in a small smile as his fingers reached for the packet. "Alright then."

"You can have two. Go on, get some sugar in your system."

"If you insist," he said, a wider smile appearing on his features.

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment munching on their chocolate biscuits, and Simon felt a warmth bubble up in his stomach; he'd grown to enjoy these productive meetings with her.

Skye rose from her seat and stretched; he grimaced slightly when he heard her vertebrae pop. Then she pulled out her phone, scrolling through her notifications.

"Agh, I have to go. Departmental meeting, you know the drill," she said glumly, picking up her bag and the folders.

Simon rose and followed her to the door. She stalled for a moment, biting her lip. "Call me up when the archives are ready."

"Will do," he said, turning the knob to let her out. "Ah, have a good rest of your day, Biscuits."
"You too."

They exchanged small smiles and she disappeared down the hallway, his eyes following her for a moment too long. Simon retreated quietly back into his office, tidying away their empty cups and balled-up tissues.

That done, he sat back down at his desk and turned on his laptop; a couple more hours of work could get done, now that a sufficient stack of emails had piled up in his inbox over the course of the day. He thought about emailing Edgeworth about the developments in their case, but ultimately decided against it; it could wait until after the Informatics Unit had come back with their results.

The more he worked, the darker it became outside as the sun slipped under the horizon, bathing his office in a deep blue. It wasn't until he heard a new email notification ping on his screen that he realised it had gone eight.

Subject: Archives

Permission obtained. Archives open for viewing from tomorrow at the Law Library.

Regards,

Shi-Long Lang

Simon leaned back in his seat, and drummed out a little rhythm with his fingers on the desk.

The storm has approached us.

The next morning saw Simon outside a redbrick building next to one of the newer courthouses. It was still very early, barely dawn, but he would be lying if he didn't say he was eager to get on with things.

Eager, or just unable to sleep; he'd had another bad night, tossing and turning, with images of Metis' dead body prodding at his subconscious. The incense sticks that he lit every night now had done little to quell those horrible, horrible thoughts. He still hadn't got back to Athena's many texts.

Simon sat down on the concrete steps that led into the library, his satchel at his feet and his reading material — A Short History of Cohdopia and Borginia — in his lap. Every so often his eyes scanned the words, barely taking them in as he thumbed the pages mindlessly, wondering how much was left of the chapter on medieval warfare to read.

At times he lifted his head to survey his surroundings; the city was waking up, and with it the birds began to chirp, and cars stopped and started with the growing morning traffic. Little by little the sun's golden rays peeked out from below the horizon, blues merging with pinks and oranges, and the moon gave way to the thin wispy clouds. Simon had always liked sunrises and sunsets here.

He was thankful for moments like this where he didn't necessarily have to think about anything, have to do anything, have to speak to anyone. But the novelty wore out on him as he checked his phone; it had only just gone eight, and he was itching to be let in, and to work.

It wasn't long before he heard sharp and clipped footfalls and his head snapped up to locate the source.

"Good morning, Biscuits," he greeted Skye as she sauntered up the steps into the library, barely stifling a yawn.
"Morning," she said, rubbing at her eyes and moving to sit down next to him.

They spent a couple of moments in companionable silence, him reading and her texting, until Lang showed up in clunky combat boots carrying a stack of boxes.

"Alright you two. Help me with these. There's more in the car," Lang said, gesturing to the car park. "And be careful with them. These are highly classified documents."

They set about retrieving large hefty cardboard boxes from Lang's four-wheel drive and bringing them into the library; Lang had booked a private room for them to work in, undisturbed, with a large conference table and a floor-to-ceiling window that provided them with plenty of natural light.

Once Simon had set down the last of the boxes and Lang had locked the car, they all took their seats on plastic chairs, each taking their own side of the table.

Lang produced some documents from a plastic wallet and cleared his throat. "Before we get down to business, I want you to read your security clearance forms, sign them off and get yourself a couple of dictionaries," he explained, before raising one thin eyebrow. "Have you both had breakfast?"

Simon exchanged glances with Skye before they turned back to Lang, shaking their heads.

Lang nodded. "Good. Lang Zi says, 'Always start a hunt on an empty stomach'. I'll treat you to lunch later."

"Oh nice," Skye grinned, leaning back in her seat. "Can always trust someone who buys you food."

Lang barked out a laugh. "It's no problem. Chop, chop!"

They quickly signed off on the security clearances and procured a couple of bulky Cohdopian-English and Borginian-English dictionaries. Seated once more, Lang launched into conversation.

"Alright, I want to explain some things about what's in and isn't in these records," he said, hands splayed out on the table in front of him. His hazel eyes darted between them.

"So, as a general rule in Europe, government records are selected and released when they turn thirty, and sometimes twenty. But with an FOI act, some records can be transferred before that time limit." Lang explained. "With Cohdopia, they never ratified that treaty on archival transfer, until just this Monday, meaning a lot of papers are now being transferred."

"Hope the people in the archives are being paid overtime," Skye muttered under her breath, crossing her arms.

"I heard that, Detective," Lang said, glaring at Skye, before he broke out into a toothy smile. "I hope they're being paid too."

"Yup, I trust him," she whispered, earning a small smirk from Simon.

"Anyway, back on the subject… these archives hold government records, administrative papers on citizens, military service records, yadda yadda," Lang's hands patted the box in front of him. "What we have with us today are records Interpol has received through this new FOI act. Records which are not accessible to the public, and probably won't be for the next twenty or so years."

Lang's gaze settled on Simon for a moment. "These are SEIL files, everything from its inception to
its dissolution, from 2012 to 2019. So that's military records, agent files, email exchanges, top secret letters from higher ups, maps, pictures...You get the idea."

"That's—That's a lot to get through. Not to mention this is before we all went completely digital," Skye frowned.

"It is. And it's up to us three to get through it all. These archives are so top-secret, I couldn't even get my men in on it," Lang said. "So I'm counting on us. The sooner we can get through all this, the sooner we can file our charges and make our arrests. We all clear on that?"

Skye and Simon exchanged affirmative glances, before nodding at Lang.

He clapped his hands together. "Alright then, let's get started."

They began dragging random boxes to various corners of the table and opening them up.

"Agent Lang...these boxes don't have, y'know, labels on them to say what's what," Skye announced, her face a picture of puzzlement as she inspected them.

Lang grinned. "That's the beauty of this, Detective. Get over your fear of the unknown."

Simon felt a small smile trace up his lips at the exchange, before he reached out for one of the larger boxes and began opening it up carefully with the box cutter. He coughed slightly as he felt the musty stale air and dust tickle his nostrils. Carefully he began pulling out large thick wads of wafer-thin paper.

A couple of moments later, Lang spoke up again. "Also...you're welcome to take notes, but not to take out these files. I don't want the Cohdopian ambassador breathing down my neck."

"What about notes related explicitly to these records?" Skye asked, spinning her pencil around her fingers and thumb.

"Those are fine. Just make sure you know which records you're talking about. Maybe write the record number, or a small summary. Knock yourself out."

And with that, they set to work. Sunlight spilled into the room, brightening up their surroundings, and the rays danced around the numbers and letters that they tried to decipher with their heavy lexicons.

Much of what they found, to Simon, was fascinating, albeit probably irrelevant. There were maps that detailed large swaths of territory in the borderlands, with notes penned in Cyrillic and Cohdopian, printouts of long email exchanges, and diplomatic letters sent back and forth between various army generals. At one point Simon found himself poring over a top-secret Allebahstian government file that had called for thousands of military records to be expunged, ordered by Quercus Alba himself.

And before they knew it they found themselves lost in between the thin sheets, drinking in the harsh, cold words of a time gone by, a time still fresh in the minds of millions halfway across the globe.

At lunchtime, Lang sighed resignedly as he slammed another set of maps down on the empty chair next to him. "Okay, time for food. I know a good place by the beach."

They set down the papers and clambered into the car. As the car inched through traffic at a snail's pace, Simon listened with mild interest to Skye and Lang's conversation — something about
Edgeworth and forensics exams — as the city's vista stretched out for miles.

The restaurant Lang led them to was tiny, sandwiched between two other small but overcrowded eateries, with a smattering of tables and chairs, almost all occupied by men and women in professional clothing. They were shown to the table closest to the window, providing them with a view of the beach. Simon barely paid attention as Lang launched into a conversation in Zhengfainese with a waiter.

Skye tapped him gently on the shoulder. "What's got you so quiet?"

He flinched at the sudden contact, before turning to face her with a furrowed brow. "...I was wondering how long it has been since I last set foot on a beach."

"You wanna go for a walk along the front after lunch then?" Lang asked, catching wind of their conversation as the waiter stalked off.

"If...if it not too much trouble, Lang-dono."

Lang relaxed in his seat. "It's no problem. I haven't been by the sea in a long time myself. Might do us all some good. What do you say, Detective?"

Skye nodded. "Fine by me."

The food soon arrived and they quickly polished off the shrimp and crab dumplings, the steamed pork buns, and the vegetable stir fry. As they ate, Lang kept up a running commentary on Zhengfainese culture and cuisine, explaining how it being a tiny island in the middle of the South China Sea meant it was equal parts isolated from and influenced by potential occupiers.

Once their bellies were filled, and Lang had happily paid for the meal, they set out on the boardwalk. They quietly took in the waves glistening in the sunlight, the feeling of the sand softly crunching underneath their feet, and the loud incessant cries of the seagulls.

Somewhere in the back of Simon's mind, a series of memories called out to him.

Memories of home. A home that he would perhaps never return to — not soon, anyway.

Skye trudged up to him, carrying her shoes. "So, how're you finding it?"

"It is...relaxing," he answered quietly, candidly. Years of sitting on the gallows made the experience all the more surreal.

You're not supposed to have this.

"...I used to live in France, you know, back when I was studying to be a forensic scientist," Simon glanced at her; a reminiscent, and somewhat bitter, expression sat on her face. "Me and a few friends, we'd take the trains up and down the country to the beaches, just to have a break from all the work."

"...What happened to that career?"

"It went down the drain. Came back here, got shifted into Homicide. It has its perks but..." she trailed off for a moment, kicking the sand with her toes.

She shrugged. "Don't worry though. I sat the state test back in December. I should be getting the results soon so...if it's goes well, I get into the Forensics department under Dr Nøhr. If it
doesn't...I'll never try again."

"I don't suppose you've heard the old proverb of 'nanakorobi yaoki'?" Simon asked, the words falling fluidly off his tongue. "'Fall seven times, stand up eight'."

Skye nodded. "I have. But you can explain it."

"What it means, Biscuits, is that it is not of import what befell you, but rather, what you do after that to remedy it."

_That proverb condemned you to gallows._

"...You can call me Ema, you know."

Simon frowned, taken aback for a moment by the way their conversation had turned. Ahead of them Lang was walking briskly, his arms outstretched to feel the ocean breeze course through his fingertips.

"Ema..." he tried out; the name sounded foreign on his tongue.

Ema giggled.

Simon mirrored the small smile on her face. "...I suppose it is only polite to extend the same courtesy to you. I ask only...that you keep it to our private interactions."

"Sure, if that's what you want...Simon."

They left the beach shortly after and the rest of the afternoon passed without much to report on, save for Ema asking for him to bring in evidence from the Hawthorn case tomorrow.

Once Lang and Ema had both left, frustrated with their lack of progress, Simon decided he would leave after reading one more file. However, one set of financial statements turned into three pages of email exchanges, two army discharge papers and a series of cartographic markings. So much for that ordinance to have him out of the workplace by seven each night; he was only grateful that this was a library, and not the office, where he could almost imagine Edgeworth's disapproving gaze.

He didn't get home till half-past one, and Simon soon fell asleep on the sofa to the static hum of the television.

It was in the sluggish lull of Friday afternoon, with the sun beating down on them, that they finally made a breakthrough.

"Agent Lang? Come look at this," Ema beckoned as she stood over one of the smaller boxes. Lang crossed over to her and took the folder from her hands.

"Erikh Qvinn..." he read aloud, as his finger traced the piece of paper made translucent by the sun's rays. "...Get over here, Blackquill."

Simon scrambled out of his seat as Lang thrust the paper in his hands.

"We may have just figured out the spy's identity," he said, licking his lips.

Simon peered closely at the photo of a young man with brown hair cropped short in a red army uniform. His eyes widened; the man peering up at him was the same one who stared at him blandly in the interrogation room.
There was no mistaking it.

Simon swallowed the lump in his throat as his eyes trailed the page. "Nerium Oleander…?"

"That's an Allebahstian if I ever heard one," Lang said.

"He was born in Dianthus," Simon read from the page.

Lang slapped his thigh. "Yup. Sounds right."

"Uh, Agent Lang…?" Ema called out with two open files in her hands. "Do you recognise these people?"

"Huh... You know what, I do, Detective," he said. "Johannes Birken and Rebekah Klaark. Borginians."

"Those were the two that had conferred with us, no?" Simon asked.

Lang nodded. "They were. Apparently these were their real names as well, not some confusing nom de guerre nonsense."

Ema frowned, meeting Simon's gaze. "Hey, could you pass me those rings binders there?"

"What's in those?" Lang asked suspiciously.

"Oh, we got this mysterious package in the mail the other day. I sent it down to Forensics to have them see what it was, and they confirmed it was evidence from the Hawthorn murder. This was one of the items that showed up — SEIL data."

"One of our hypotheses was that whoever produced these documents for our viewing would be the murderer," Simon elaborated. "We would have informed you sooner, but we wished to make absolutely certain that we possessed enough evidence before we brought forth our findings to you."

Ema looked up, her face a picture of triumphant glee and uncertainty. "The numbers match...with Rebekah Klaark's ID."

"Are you positive, Skye-dono?"

"Look. And...that's not all." Ema turned to face Lang. "It also lines up with those documents they gave you during your meeting before the appeal."

"Not so fast," Lang said with a frown. He pointed at the ring binder. "This mysterious package...was it sent to Criminal Affairs?"

Ema nodded. "Sent straight to my office."

A grim look preceded him. "Funny, the other police forces who've had dead Cohdopian lawyers on their soil also reported the same thing in the last few days."

Simon's eyes widened. "What?"

Lang ignored him. Addressing Ema, he asked. "Was there a duplicate microchip among the stuff you found in that package?"

"...Yes."
Lang slapped his thigh again. "The other police forces have reported the same to me."

Simon sunk down into the nearest seat. "Are we to assume then this is part of some wider conspiracy?"

There was a burning fire in Lang's eyes. "Yep. I think we can safely say that naming themselves SEIL is a deliberate attempt to throw people off the scent. They're pretty much all Borginians, right?"

"I would believe so," Simon said, a thoughtful expression on his face.

Lang circled the room. "Maybe for some patriotic reason or other, they don't like that the Cohdopians are prying into their national affairs. Maybe they're a fringe group, seeking to destabilise things further in the region for some reason or another? Maybe it's not just lawyers that are being killed or being caught up in this conspiracy...though I haven't been shown any evidence to suggest that."

Simon nodded, taking all this in.

"...But all that still leaves a lot of unanswered questions," Lang continued animatedly. "Like, who's in on it? Why call themselves SEIL, when it was dismantled? How many people are involved? What do they have to gain? Is the smuggling ring involved? How does this...what's his name again?"

"Nerium Oleander," Ema read aloud from the paper.

"Yeah, how does this Nerium Oleander factor into all this? Was everything he said a lie? Is he covering for them?"

Simon sighed. "I would...have to hold another conference with him, though he may not be receptive."

"Lang Zi says, 'Every little bite helps kill the beast!'," he said, baring his fangs in a grin. "Before you set another interrogation with him...I'm going to need to get a certified Borginian translator to translate what's in those ring binders. Not just the evidence you've gathered, but the same binders from the other five dead Cohdopians."

Ema nodded and turned to Simon. "We'll also need to wait for the results to come through from the tech guys."

Simon pondered all this for moment, before asking, "Lang-dono...would you mind telling me the other constabularies that are involved in this affair?"

"Let's see...I have New Scotland Yard for two murders, the Hesse State Police for one, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police for another, and the Quebec Provincial Police for one as well. So, a truly international matter."

Ema groaned. "Just makes me wonder why we can't ever have a normal straightforward killing."

Lang barked out a laugh. "That'd make your job a bit too easy, Detective. Trust me, I've seen my fair share of weird and wacky cases in Zheng Fa."

"Guess it comes with the territory," Ema said resignedly. If the library didn't prohibit food and drink, Simon was sure she'd be munching on some snackoos right now.
Lang clapped his hands together as he checked the clock on the door. "Well, let's come back to this next week, but good work today. I spoke to the librarian — she said we can keep this room for as long as want, just in case you pups were going to be worrying about keeping all these files safe."

"You heading out now?" Ema asked.

Lang nodded, shrugging on his jacket. "Duty calls at the Zheng Fa consulate."

"Ah, all the best, Lang-dono," Simon said, and Lang was out the door.

"You doing much this weekend?" Ema asked a couple of hours later as they exited the library.

"I don't believe so," Simon said with a frown, shifting his satchel from one shoulder to the other. "I'll probably pay a courtesy call to my sister. I've been neglecting her as of late."

"Huh. That reminds me, Lana's due to be paroled soon. Good behaviour, you know," Ema added before jumping up animatedly. "Oh, there's my roommate!"

Simon looked out onto the car park, where a blue coupe stood, engine purring.

"I...wasn't aware you possessed a co-tenant."

Ema smiled humourlessly. "Have you seen the rent in this city?"

He had indeed.

"Anyway it's chill. We've lived together for like three years now, but she's mostly abroad with Interpol," she explained. "...You want me to introduce you?"

Simon relaxed his shoulders. "Why not?"

"Okay, just give me a moment."

Simon looked on as Ema tore down the steps and spoke through the car window to someone.

The car door opened and a woman of slender build with raven-black hair pulled back in a ponytail and sunglasses emerged. Though she was still dressed professionally, it looked more relaxed in the evening sun, with the sleeves of her salmon pink blouse rolled up, complementing her navy capris and white sneakers. An impossibly long blue scarf trailed behind her as she walked up to him with a grin on her face.

"Simon, meet Detective Kay Faraday. Well, not so much a detective anymore; she's a cybercrime consultant, and security analyst." Ema said, and Simon noticed a beautiful tattoo of a raven on Kay's left forearm. "Kay, this is Prosecutor Simon Blackquill, my current investigative partner."

"Hey. I feel like I've heard of you before," she said, taking off her sunglasses, giving him a searching look as she shook his hand firmly.

"Ah..."

Kay waved him off with another grin, her earrings — were they shaped like keys? — jangling as she did so. "Don't worry though. I used to work with Mr Edgeworth, so I'm sure he'd have nothing but good things to say about you. You're working with Wolfy at the moment, right?"

"I presume you are referring to Lang-dono?"
The gold raven pin on Kay's scarf glinted in the sunlight. She nodded. "He's a good guy. Don't tell him I said this, but he's also really a big softie."

A smirk traced up Simon's lips. "I'll keep that in mind."

Kay giggled, crow's feet appearing at the corners of her eyes as she did so. "Well, it was nice to meet you."

"Likewise." Simon said. "Ah, enjoy your weekend."

Ema beamed at him and waved as they retreated to the car. "Will do. See you Monday!"

He watched the car speed off, finally exhaling a deep breath he'd been holding in.

His stomach rumbled.

Ah, he hadn't even bothered to eat today; so much for telling Aura he had a routine of sorts.

Well, he was in no mood to procure groceries, which left him with the option of trying out a restaurant.

Yes, that's what he would do. The question now...was where? He didn't much fancy the standard burger and fries places, nor did he particularly feel like going for tacos, or salty ramen.

Simon fished his phone out of his pocket — he ignored the stacks of unread messages — and checked the map, tapping on the icon for Japanese restaurants. At the very least he'd be going for familiar foolproof cuisine, and not some soggy excuse for fish and chips. He had learnt *that* lesson after he'd regrettably stomached it one night in university during a particularly hungover episode.

With his fingers Simon zoomed in on a place a couple of blocks away, aptly named The Whet Noodle. It appeared to have good reviews, and a decent menu.

*The Whet Noodle....Now where have I heard that before?*

Somewhere in the recesses of his brain, a vague half-formed memory tugged at him.

He ignored it, and set off in the direction of Little Tokyo, his boots slapping against the hard concrete. Cars zipped past him in the rush-hour traffic as he weaved in and out of the crowds. Dark wood facades and paved streets cropped up, and Simon found himself relearning the routes; he'd been here before, when he was much younger, much more innocent, much...*happier.*

It didn't take long to find the place. His fingers brushed past the blue noren curtain and he stepped into the shop. A wave of nostalgia hit him; dark wood panelling, high stools and tables set out in front of the kitchen area, and plenty of small Japanese knick-knacks, amusing mascots, and wall hangings.

"Is this establishment...open?" he asked cautiously into the emptiness; he had come rather early.

A clatter sounded out, and he could hear a pair of feet shuffling up the gangway. A young, pudgy man with ropey brown hair emerged from the kitchen.

"Hic! Oh yeah, sure, make yourself comfortable," he said by way of greeting, extending a meaty hand into the restaurant. "Welcome to The Whet Noodle."

Simon peered closely at him, taking in the sleepy eyes and the foul stench of alcohol that emanated from his indigo happi. He looked...*familiar*, but Simon could hardly place him.
"What you be wanting?" he asked as Simon positioned himself on a high stool. "You like kitsune soba? I got all this tofu that needs using."

"That would be acceptable," he answered mindlessly. Admittedly he wasn't the biggest fan of deep-fried tofu, but he wasn't in the mood to argue.

"Okay then," the young man grunted, as he began to chop up the ingredients and turn on the gas burners.

A few moments later he placed a white cup in front of Simon. "Have some sake. It's on the house."

"Ah, thank you," Simon mumbled.

"You look like you've had a busy day," he added in a half-shout over the clatter of pots and pans.

The lad wasn't wrong there. Simon pulled up his satchel and took out his book, flicking through the pages to pick up where he left off the other day. He got through a chapter and a half before the young man spoke up again, his speech somewhat slurred.

"Murakami? I heard o' him. He writes weird shit. Supernatural an' all that."

Simon set his book down. "Hm. His literary works do not much appeal to me, but this particular one is nonfiction, and focuses on a series of interviews conducted in the aftermath of the Tokyo subway attack," he explained.

He wasn't sure why he was indulging him in conversation. Perhaps it was the tiredness, or perhaps it was loneliness. Either way, he didn't give two figs about it.

"Ah yeah, I remember my dad telling me something 'bout that. Scary shit, man. I'm glad nothing's happened since," he said, splashing soup into Simon's bowl. "So, you Japanese yourself?"

"A hāfu, to be precise." Simon answered, bringing the cup to his lips. "Though it is hardly anything to comment on, given the demographics of this city."

"Fair point. I'm a hāfu m'self!" he said enthusiastically. "Japanese an' Hispanic blend."

"English," Simon offered, before downing the sake; it burned on its way down. But it was a warm burn, reminding him of warm summer evenings with Metis, nursing a bottle while working through psychology papers. A bitter smile flickered on his lips for a moment.

"Ohhh, that explains the accent!" he nodded, sprinkling chopped scallions into the bowl. A toothy grin slid easily past his lips. "'Ello guvnor! Fancy a cuppa?"

Simon let out an amused exhale at the terrible Cockney accent. "I can assure you, almost no one in the East End speaks in such a manner anymore."

The young man snorted with laughter, before setting a steaming bowl down in front of Simon. "Well, here ya go. One kitsune soba."

Simon nodded in thanks before taking up the chopsticks. He began slurping at his noodles, muscle memory catching up to him.

"This is bloody good," he said in awe, lowering the bowl for a moment.

The young man chuckled, his double chin wobbling. "Glad t'hear it!"
"You have the makings of a good soba chef in you, lad."

"Thanks, man. I 'ppreciate it." he said, watching Simon quickly down his meal. Thin eyebrows raised, he asked, "Say...don't I know ya from somewhere?"

Simon froze; the not-so-vague memory tugged at him, though he still couldn't place it. He cleared his throat, frowning. "Probably not. I have not ventured out here in many years."

"You lived outside town or something?"

"...Something along those lines, yes," Simon said quietly, claiming the last dregs of soup before he set the bowl down with an unintended slam.

The loud noise didn't faze the young man, as he swayed clumsily on his spot.

"Huh. I've never lived anywhere other than here. Like, I've visited other places, but..." he trailed off before waving a dismissive arm. "Eh, you're probably right. I serve so many people a day. Kinda becomes a blur."

"Indeed."

"You can leave your bowl on the counter. I'll clean it later."

"Thank you," said Simon.

They tended to payment, with Simon mindlessly stuffing a wad of bills into the young man's hand. A yawn escaped him as he handed Simon his receipt and change.

"Have yerself a good night."

"Good night."

He did not have a good night.

The visitor's room was, as always, packed on a Sunday afternoon.

"Hey stranger. Long time no see," Aura greeted with a small smirk, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. "Have you got what I asked for?"

Simon produced a small white-gold ring from his pocket and slid it across the table to her. He lowered his head; experience taught him that he wasn't always privy to Aura's private moments. He listened as Aura snatched the ring up, and eventually slid it onto one of her fingers; probably the left ring finger.

"...I would've taken her surname, you know," she said quietly, almost too quietly.

Simon looked up to face her; she wasn't looking at him, but rather, beyond him, staring at the blank wall behind them. Her weathered face was marked with blotchy red stains.

"...And cast aside your heritage?" he asked, equally as quietly, thumb pressing mindlessly into scars on his wrist.

Aura gave an indifferent shrug, before the predictable silence set in for them, and their ears straining to listen to the normal, domestic conversations around them.
"Would that mean you…would have had the same surname as that of your daughter's?"

Aura's eyes narrowed. "She's not my daughter."

"She's my niece," he countered.

A sigh, and Aura dragged a hand through her hair; her black roots had come back in full force, sliding down her fringe.

"Not now, Simon," she said in a weary tone, and Simon was struck for a moment by how like their mother she sounded.

The harsh sunlight filtered into the room, creating shallow shadows against the stark plastic tables and chairs.

"Anyway…" began Aura. "You seeing anyone? Been out much lately?"

Simon frowned. "No… What compels you to ask?"

Aura shrugged and shifted in her seat, putting one foot up on the chair in a harmless act of rebellion. "I figured since you didn't show the last couple of weekends, that maybe you'd gone and found someone else to harass."

"Ah, no. I was… preoccupied with decorating the flat," he replied, resting his hands on the table. It was a barefaced lie; the paint pots still sat unopened in a sad corner of the living room, even with the reorganised boxes, and tarpaulin sheets scattered all over the floors.

Aura grunted. Another bout of quiet passed between them.

"...Well, since we're on the subject, do you have someone to talk to?"

Simon frowned. He hesitated for a moment, shifting in his seat.

"Athena…has attempted to contact me," he finally said, and continued forcefully, "But I have not responded yet."

"Hm," she hummed disinterestedly, pulling out a loose strand of black hair and letting it drop to the floor. "How often?"

"Every other day for a while… though she hasn't said much in the last couple of weeks."

Aura tutted.

"...What is it?"

"Nothing. Just…" Aura made a vague gesture with her hands. "I don't know. You spend seven years sitting across from me, not saying a word, and now all of a sudden, you—you—"

"I what?" he coaxed through gritted teeth.

Aura sucked in a deep breath. "You want to be talkative, you want to discuss deep-seated personal shit, you want to dredge things up… I mean, have you not stopped to consider how I might be feeling in all this? I don't know if you're playing mind games with me, or if you genuinely want to… I don't know, to show me some semblance of affection."

Simon swallowed the hard lump in his throat. Though his body itched for him to look away, he
kept his gaze trained on her exasperated face.

_She doesn't need to know. She cannot know. She will never know._

"It's just— Do you see what I'm getting at?" she continued. "I mean, come on, Simon, at least give me some indication as to what's going on. I can't bloody well read your mind."

He lowered his head at those words, staring at the linoleum floor. "I apologise if I have given you those impressions. I did not intend for that with these visits," he said, unable to hide the bitterness in his voice.

"Then what were your intentions, hm?"

"I don't know," he answered flatly, looking away.

"You don't know. Perfect." she slammed her hands down onto the table with force.

"Aura—"

She shushed him. "No, Simon, just listen, will you?"

He crumpled back into his seat; part of him wished the ground would just swallow him up whole. Anything would be better than this.

"You know what I think you should do? I think you should talk to your niece." Aura dropped her foot to the floor and leaned back in her seat with her arms crossed. "I don't care if it's mundane shit, but like… just talk to her. Dunno if it'll do you good but…"

"I didn't think you would care," he sneered.

"Yeah, well…" she shrugged. "At least you'll have someone who can actually read minds."

"With the aid of her mothers' research efforts and construction," he said quietly.

"Simon." she cautioned.

He could have retaliated, said something else to rile her up. But instead he rose from his seat, and beckoned to the guard.

"Right, well, I'm off. I'll see you next week."

"Yeah, I'm not holding my breath."

He picked up the phone as soon as he got home.

Chapter End Notes

Inspiration for Kay's design come from _this excellent comic!_
Chapter Summary

Who do we go from here?// The words are coming out all weird

Chapter Notes

I hadn't intended to write such a long chapter here, but I suppose the plot bunnies just took hold of me and, well, it's high time Simon got some help and made friends!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

March 12, 2028

Simon [18:16 PM]: Apologies for not responding sooner, but I was bogged down with work.

Simon [18:18 PM]: Which answers your questions as to why I have not been at the courthouse; matters have become rather complicated.

Simon [18:18 PM]: Hopefully they shall be resolved soon.

Simon [18:19 PM]: But I won’t speak further on the matter.

Simon [18:26 PM]: I am otherwise fine.

Simon [18:28 PM]: I am not aware of a Prosecutor Debeste personally. Would you be able to describe him?

Simon [18:31 PM]: Aura is fine as well, to answer that question.

Simon [18:53 PM]: Would you be open to setting up a rendezvous soon?

Athena [19:11 PM]: Holy hell, Simon! I’ve been worried sick abt you!!

Athena [19:11 PM]: Yes, ofc I want to see you!!

Athena [19:12 PM]: We have back to back cases here atm, so you wanna meet up Friday evening?

Athena [19:13 PM]: I can take you out for Japanese.

Athena [19:13 PM]: Or like just coffee.

Athena [19:14 PM]: Up to you tho!!

Athena [19:17 PM]: Abt Debeste, he’s kinda short.

Athena [19:17 PM]: But like, everyone’s short compared to you lol.
Monday came, and with it the three familiar raps on Simon’s office door.

“Good news!” Ema announced as she swung the door open into Simon’s office.

“Morning,” she added with a grin on her face, as Simon took the takeout beverages from her hands.

“Good morning, Ema,” Simon said, unable to keep the smirk from appearing on his lips; her energy was infectious, in spite of his lack of sleep. “What good news have you to disclose?”

“Well, first, sit down again,” Ema said.

Simon furrowed his eyebrows in curiosity as Ema pulled out a thin laptop from her bulky satchel and set it down in front of him. She bustled over to his side of the desk, logged in and clicked on a video file.

She pressed play, and Simon watched as a dark-haired man with a vacant expression on his face and a large box tucked under his arm sauntered up to what appeared to be a counter. There was no audio, but the man set down the box and began to converse with the clerk on the other side of the counter.

“Is that not…” Simon began, cracking open the lid to his drinks cup — black tea, again — but Ema shushed him, directing him to look back at the scene unfolding before them.

They watched as the man tended to payment and the box was labelled and set aside. The camera zoomed in to read the address details on the box. Ema paused the tape and tapped at the screen.

“That’s the precinct address,” Ema muttered. “You see that string of numbers on the side of the box? That’s my ID number and my office number.”

Simon nodded, before bringing the cup to his lips and taking a long drink; he felt the caffeine begin to replenish his energy levels. He watched intently as the man on the screen turned away from the clerk, shoved a receipt in his pocket and winked at the camera before exiting the premises. The video cut out then.

Simon set down his steaming cup and turned to face Ema, who was already midway through her coffee. “Explain.”

Ema gulped down the rest of her coffee before she began. “The tech guys managed to trace the barcode from the box to a Japanifornia Mail office in the Gourd Lake neighbourhood, registered on February 12. So, two of my colleagues went in to ask after it and they managed to secure this security camera footage.”
“That would’ve been the week after the appeal had been conducted.”

“Yeah. They interviewed the clerk about that — some small fry, college kid — and he said he was asked to keep it on hold till the twenty-eighth.”

Simon frowned, finger circling the rim of his cup. “But...would that not have compromised the materials held within, as the body had been discovered near a month prior?”

Ema shook her head. “If kept in the right conditions, evidence can be preserved for a long time. Dr Nøhr also checked out the box and the ziploc bags, and they matched suitable short-term conditions. If that box was kept around long enough, of course...the things inside would start to deteriorate.”

“I see,” Simon said. “And the man captured here for posterity, we have encountered him before, have we not?”

Ema nodded as she threw her cup in the bin beside his feet. “Yup. That’s Johannes Birken. So we can definitely say he and Rebekah Klaark collaborated on this, what with documents we found inside the box, seeing as we found her ID number in the SEIL archives the other day. I guess he could be called Klaark’s right-hand man at this point.”

“Yes, that would be a reasonable conclusion to draw.” Simon took a sip and pondered for a moment. “Hm...it is something to be mindful of, however this individual could merely have been posing as a messenger on his sovereign’s behalf.”

“Yeah, that’s true, if you look at it from the ‘don’t shoot the messenger’ angle.” Ema conceded. “We shouldn’t speculate, but I’d say the fingerprints and DNA evidence we found belonged to him. He is Caucasian, and they don’t get whiter than up in northern Europe.”

“Hm. In that case it would be a question of placing him at the scene of the crime on the night of the murder.”

“Yeah, about that...I’ve two ways to go about that. The first will bring the witnesses back in for questioning, see if anyone can cough something up that would help us.”

“Yes. Perhaps you could start with individual who first laid eyes upon the victim.”

“My thoughts exactly. Problem is...he’s a trucker. He could be anywhere in the country right now. Or maybe even over the border.”

“See what you can manage then.”

“I will,” Ema said, closing the laptop lid. “And the second thing I was thinking about; I could’ve sworn I saw fingerprint files in the identity documents we dug out. So I was thinking...of asking Agent Lang if he would allow me to take those files and let Dr Nøhr run some tests.”

Simon drained his cup and threw it in the bin. He turned to Ema, concern etched onto his features. “Under more normal circumstances, I would permit it, Ema. But...given the precarious and unpredictable nature of the situation, and of our...foreign vigilantes, we’d best wait for Lang-dono’s instructions.”

“You’re probably right.” Ema sighed, before stowing away her laptop. “What’re you gonna do in the meantime?”

Simon crossed his arms. “Taking note of Lang’s questions the other day, I plan to prepare myself
for my interviews with our intelligencer.”

“Okay,” Ema said, shouldering her bag. “So, see you around then.”

“You too.”

He stared at the the door long after she left.

The next few days were split between the small library booth and the office in a flurry of paperwork as Simon set about penning down his questions and his points of contention as he pored over old archives. By midday on Thursday, after several long nights in the library, Simon could safely say he’d made his preparations, and so he shut the files and headed down to the office cafeteria for lunch; a sort of a reward for his hard work, not to mention his failure to eat in the last few days.

But when he made it there, it was jam-packed, with disorderly queues and very few available chairs that didn’t have bags and coats draped over them.

Simon scanned the room, and his eyes fell upon an empty chair close to the door, with the table occupied by a familiar duo; a man clad in purple and black with platinum-blond hair was seated in the chair beside the barren seat, and a young man opposite him with wiry brown hair in a ponytail, dressed in something that resembled an orchestra conductor’s concert dress, in maroon and grey tones.

Simon narrowed his eyes; he was no stranger to Klavier Gavin, having first met in their years of innocence, before murder and forged evidence swept them up as paragons of the so-called ‘Dark Age of the Law’, and being reunited once again last year under Edgeworth’s strict command that Gavin act as his companion.

Simon recalled their reunion as supremely awkward, him led into the office reception by chains with ‘Fulbright’ in tow and Gavin staring up at him in bewilderment.

“Gavin-dono,” Simon had greeted calmly and coldly.

Gavin, for his part, had smiled — though it had been a dim, tired smile — and his voice had been hoarse and quiet.

“Herr Jailbird, please, call me Klavier. Gavin was my brother,” he had said.

Simon had been struck in that moment by his candour, though he had hidden it with a smirk and rolling the feather in between his lips.

Of course…Kristoph Gavin had only very recently been made an example of; executed with only the coroner and prison warden in attendance.

Their interactions since then had been very mixed, swinging between extremes, until his retrial had swept away any bad blood between them, allowing them a moment to acknowledge each other at Eldoon’s noodle stand, and Simon was surprised by how, despite seven years with altered personalities and appearances, Klavier was still the same as ever, picking at his food and flirting with anyone and everyone.

Simon quickly bought a sandwich pack and a packet of crisps and hastened to their table, picking up their conversation as he approached them.
“...Gunpowder residue, ja?”

“Sunflower residue?”

“Ach, nein…” Klavier chuckled.

Simon cleared his throat, and Klavier whipped his head around to face the source of the noise. His bright blue eyes widened, before his face relaxed into a practised smile.

“Ah, Herr Samurai! Do you need anything?”

“...I wished to inquire as to the availability of this seat. This canteen is chock-a-block with people.”

“Ach, of course. Please, have a seat.” Klavier said, moving his belongings onto the floor.

The man in the conductor’s uniform frowned, a bemused expression sat on his features. “Chocolate block...?”

Simon took his seat. “Chock-a-block,” he repeated. “It is an adjective, to mean ‘crammed full of people or possessions’.”

“Oh, okay! I’ve learnt something new today then!” he shouted out, the little cowlick on the top of his head sticking up. Then he leaned forward and extended a gloved hand towards Simon. “Oh, I’m Sebastian Debeste. It’s nice to meet you!”

Simon shook his hand, noting the prosecutor’s badge that sat on his lapel, glinting in the sunlight. “Simon Blackquill. I do not believe we’ve crossed swords before.”

Sebastian frowned. “No, I don’t think so…”

“Sebby and I were classmates at Themis,” Klavier added around his cup noodle. “I call him ‘Herr Dirigent’, because he’s always dressed up in this red orchestra getup of his.”

“I’ve only mastered the fundamentals of the German language, but I am to assume ‘Dirigent’ means ‘Conductor’?” Simon asked.

Klavier flashed him a million-watt smile, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Genau,” he answered. “Where did you learn German?”

“Compulsory school education.” Simon said. “German was one of my GCSEs.”

Sebastian rejoined the conversation, puzzled once more, rapping his baton against the table. “GCSEs?”

“General Certificate of Secondary Education,” Simon answered. “Academic qualifications obtained by school students in the United Kingdom, bar Scotland, intended to examine one in across a wide range of subjects.”

“Oh, okay.” Sebastian said, taking big bites out of his sandwich “So...you’re not from here?”

Simon shook his head as he popped open the crisp packet. “No. My sister and I were born and bred across the pond, in London. The offspring of an English father and a Japanese mother.”

“So what brought here?” Gavin asked, waving a hand to decline Simon’s offer of crisps.
“Education, and a career transition.” Simon answered. Then he added, without a care for the words tumbling out of his mouth, “My father, having toiled away for years with the Royal Air Force, took it upon himself to retire early. My mother, a professor in applied Japanese linguistics, wished for a more stimulating academic environment. And I, having passed my GCSEs, wished to further my studies.”

“Oh, cool,” Klavier quipped. “My grandparents emigrated from Germany during the war.”

Simon smirked. “Yes, I’d the impression you weren’t entirely German.”

“Hey...the Euronock charm works great for sales, ja?” he said, flashing him an easy smile.

Simon shoved crisps into his mouth. “At the very least, it is part of your heritage.”

“I’m Jewish,” Sebastian said, rejoining the conversation.

“That’s rather fascinating,” Simon said. “I have no religious background, though I do find myself appreciating Shinto and Buddhist traditions.”

“Huh.” Sebastian said. “...Do you think you’ll go back to across the pond?”

Simon frowned. “Perhaps. Whilst I read law at university here, I took on several optional modules in English law. So...if I wished to pursue that further, I could do so and practise as a barrister with the Crown Prosecution Service.”

“Well you certainly look like you’d fit in the English courts,” Klavier chuckled, before carding a hand through his hair, untangling the knots.

“Yes...” Simon began, frowning into his crisp packet. “However, I remained here as my sister resided here and indicated I’d find the climate and environment more invigorating. Though...her wishes came with their...consequences.”

He looked up to face the two of them, uncertain as to how his words would be met, but Klavier and Sebastian merely motioned for him to continue as they munched on their food. Around them the conversations rose and fell, and raucous laughter sounded out from one of the tables.

“...And for the moment I intend to root myself here and see that my case is put to rest,” he said quietly.

“...The Phantom case?” Klavier queried.

Simon nodded.

Sebastian sat up in his seat. “Oh! My Zhengfainese friend and I, we corroborated— sorry, collaborated on a case involving the Phantom. Um, we were with Chief Prosecutor Edgeworth in Borginia.”

“Shi-Long Lang?” Simon assumed, recalling the conversation he had overheard last week.

“Yes! You know of him? I just saw him the other day! He said my instigations— sorry, investigations then were very helpful.”

Simon nodded; he would have to take those cases into account in his final preparations. “He is providing me with great support in our battle to slice down the Phantom and his organisation.”

“...I hear that Fräulein Detective is working with you?”
Simon allowed himself a small smirk as he polished off the last of his food. “And a little birdie told me she is glad to be rid of you.”

Klavier laughed easily. “You two seem like you’d, how do you say, ‘get on like a house on fire’?”

Simon leaned back in his seat, smirk still in place. Klavier’s assessment was rather accurate; they did get on like a house on fire, and they were producing good results, and he was getting to know her—

“Oh! I have a case to prosecute this afternoon!” Sebastian announced, shooting up from his seat and frantically grabbing his belongings. “Gotta go, Klavier, Mr Blackquill!”

Simon’s ruminations were quickly set aside as goodbyes tumbled out of their mouths. The cafeteria was beginning to let up a bit now.

Klavier rose from his seat. “We should probably get back to work, ja?”

“Yes, I suppose we should.”

They exchanged polite glances as they picked up their belongings and discarded the remains of their food packaging in the recycling bins, and Simon silently followed Klavier into the lift.

Klavier pressed the buttons for the eighth and tenth floors, and Simon noted their offices still occupied the same floors they did years ago.

As the lift slowly crawled up, Klavier cleared his throat. “Ah...just something I wanted to say before I got out...”

Simon frowned, brows furrowed underneath his mop of hair. “Yes?”

Klavier was hesitant as he spoke, staring at his boots and fiddling with one of his rings. “I...Thank you for the way you were with Sebastian. He...well, things were difficult for him for a while. His father, Blaise Debeste, was...Well, just thank you for taking the time to listen to him and correct him.”

Simon looked away, suddenly very interested in the chrome interior of the lift. “It was hardly a strenuous task.”

He lifted his head and smiled easily, too easily. “No, but...it hasn’t always been that way for him. He’s doing much better.”

A ding sounded out as the lift doors opened. “Ach, this is my floor. Tschüss, Simon.”

Simon.

Klavier waved and smiled as he stepped out, leaving Simon with a bemused expression on his face as the lift doors shut again. But any questions that were forming in his mind were quickly expelled by the ping of an email notification, and Simon fished his phone out of his pocket.

Subject: Translation

Documents have been translated. Meeting tomorrow morning at 8 in Law Library.

Regards,

Shi-Long Lang
Simon [18:49 PM]: Sebastian Debeste looks just as you described him.

Simon [18:59 PM]: As to your suggestion, tomorrow evening would be suitable. After six. You may decide upon the location.

Athena [19:38 PM]: Oh hey hey!!

Athena [19:38 PM]: Lol I’m happy I could describe him correctly!!

Athena [19:40 PM]: For tmw, pizza? You can come over to my place!!

Athena [19:40 PM]: Meet me outside the new courthouse??

Athena [19:42 PM]: Trial today was good. Should’ve seen the look on Payne’s face lol.

Athena [19:45 PM]: But I’ve missed going up against you in court.

Athena [20:12 PM]: How’re you doing??

(Seen at 20:12 PM)

Lang wasted no time as he ushered them back into their library booth, a pair of ring binders tucked under his arms.

“Sorry it took some time, but I had to get these translations out as quickly and securely as I could. Now that they’re here, let’s just jump right in.” he said, closing the door behind them and slamming down the binders. He lifted his head, a thin line for a mouth. “First, I wanted to start with Detective Skye.”

Ema’s head snapped up; the harsh bright sunlight coming through the window caught her bleary eyes. “Yes?”

“I believe you sent me an email saying you managed to trace your box and your guy?” he asked.

Ema nodded. “That’s right. Johannes Birken, the very same one in those identity papers we discovered last week, was recorded on camera. We believe that he is Rebekah Klaark’s right hand man, and they’re involved in this murder.”

“Good. Thank you,” he said, and exhaled sharply through his nostrils. “We’ll get back to that later. For now, I want you to check out these translations. I’ve already looked at them, of course, but…” he trailed off, sliding the binders their way.

Ema and Simon exchanged bemused glances before Ema reached out for the translation and flicked it open. Simon watched as her teal eyes traced the pages, widening in horror.

“Fuck,” she swore, looking back up to Lang. “Is this— Is this for real?”

A solemn nod was her answer. She shoved the file Simon’s way.

As Simon read through the pages, the pit of dread grew in his stomach. Lang spoke up.

“These...These documents are kill orders, essentially. This one explains in very fine detail why Jacob Hawthorn is to be killed, when and how he is to be killed, and who will be the one to kill him, who will tamper with the crime scene, who is to leak evidence to the police and how...all
wrapped in a nice bow of ideology and propaganda against both Borginia and Cohdopia.”

“The victim is to be stabbed a minimum of three times, and the knife shall not be kept in his body — he must know what it feels like to suffer a slow and painful death, and to suffer the consequences of his actions.” Simon read aloud.

Beside him, Ema shuddered. “You know, I’ve worked homicide ever since I got here, but...that’s gotta be some next-level shit.”

The corners of Lang’s lips turned downward. “The other binders I had translated were pretty much identical to this, save for the victims’ names. The motive boils down to the same thing; they pay with their lives for their involvement in the Borginia Tribunal.”

Ema’s fingers brushed past Simon’s as she took the translation from his hands. “And actually...they’re pretty vague on that front. They don’t say why they don’t approve of their involvement in the tribunal.”

“No. Further investigation would be required. But what we can say for now is that these murders were definitely premeditated, and as you...” — he nodded at Simon — “...suggested last week, part of a wider conspiracy.”

Simon raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

Lang moved to stand by the window. “New Scotland Yard has managed to establish links between their two murders with a couple of Borginian and Cohdopian people approaching them with strange requests to extradite individuals held in custody for various major crimes.

Lang pressed his hand on the window, palm leaving an imprint on the glass. "And we’ve done so ourselves; you have Johannes Birken and Rebekah Klaark on record as having approached us in a dubious manner, as established by the Cohdopian defence minister, and the both of them in a private meeting with this Nerium Oleander, and then we have this mail office video of Johannes Birken that links him to the crime scene at the very least.”

Ema leaned back in her seat. “I’d be very interested to know the identities of those who ‘leaked’ the other ring binders, as we found out ours was released by Rebekah Klaark.”

“Good point, Detective. I was able to provide archival access to select members on the other police forces, and they were able to identify those numbers as belonging to people we have on file even in this very room.”

“And?” Simon prompted.

Lang took a seat, and drummed his fingers on the table. “It seems that for every murder victim, there are two people behind the scenes. So they come into the country under the guise of ‘extraditing’ an insurgent to take back ‘home’, and while they’re there, they kill a lawyer. One of them poses as a leader, and liaises with the big guns—”

“That would be Rebekah Klaark,” Ema confirmed.

“—Right. And the other would do the dirty grunt work.”

“Johannes Birken.”

“Exactly.”
Ema frowned. “Weird though, that no one would think to check their extradition requests.”

“Well, some were smarter than others. The British threw out those requests immediately, whereas here you went to the whole effort of having an appeal before we realised something was up.” Lang said, and shrugged. “But hey, better safe than sorry.”

“The main concern I have…” Simon began.

“Yes?”

“...is why would these individuals willingly place themselves on the front lines of the battlefield; willingly supplying us with information about their identities and their crimes? Do they intend to be prosecuted?”

“You raise a good point there,” Lang noted. “We don’t know their motives yet. As I said last time, there could be a bunch of reasons, which means you can now start to interrogate Nerium Oleander about all this; sink your fangs into him, and bring us back the answers to those questions.”

“Well,” a small smirk traced up Simon’s lips. “Rest assured I have already prepared my notes for my next sparring session with him.”

“Good man.” Lang grinned, before bringing his hands together, deep in thought. “That reminds me of something else to keep in mind; we’ve only had six of twelve lawyers on the tribunal killed. Was that premeditated too, to ‘offset the balance’, so to speak?”

Simon jotted that down; it was indeed something to be aware of.

“Going back to these gruesome details on the murder…” Ema said, directing their attention back to the translations with the tap of her finger. “It says here that they were ‘to recruit someone to clean up the crime scene’ after the murder was committed, using ‘any means necessary’.”

Lang tilted his head. “Well, that would mean you’d have to question the witnesses on scene again.”

“Already ahead of you there,” Ema answered before turning to Simon. “I’ve gotten our trucker to come in on Tuesday morning for a quick chat.”

“Who’s he?” Lang frowned.

“He’s the one who first discovered the body,” Ema explained.

“Ah, Lang Zi says, ‘First come, first suspected.’” Lang said. “That makes me ask, why didn’t you arrest someone at the crime scene in the first place? Isn’t that what the police here usually do?”

“Ah. Several reasons for that, actually,” Ema said. “One, we couldn’t identify the victim right away, so we couldn’t determine if anyone at the scene had a connection to him. Two, none of the evidence pointed to anyone on the scene; there was no forensic evidence to suggest a presence, until that box came through last week. And third, the...chief prosecutor, and the police chief, are trying to implement reforms to the way we conduct investigations, so as not to arrest innocent people immediately.”

“I get it,” Lang said, nodding understandably. He rose from his seat and collected his belongings. “Well, that’s all I have for you pups now. I have to run — plane to catch — so I’ll keep you posted with any more information.”

“Oh wait! I remembered something!” Ema announced, jumping up in her seat.
“Yes, Detective?” Lang asked, hand on the door handle.

“I was wondering...if you’d be okay me taking out the ID files and running some fingerprint tests for Johannes Birken with the murder weapon?”

Lang grinned. “I don’t have any problems with that. Actually...I’ll suggest the other detectives do the same.”

“Thanks!”

“If that’s all...I really need to get going.”

“Of course!”

“Safe travels, Lang-dono.”

They watched Lang’s retreating form for a moment, before returning to their work.

“...Bienvenue!” Athena announced, swinging the apartment door open a couple of hours later.

Yellow assaulted Simon’s sight as he stepped into her flat; sunny yellow curtains framed the windows and bright yellow wallpaper with quaint little birds and flowers adorned the walls, complemented by cream and white accents in the cupboards and sofas. A wall tapestry featuring constellations hung above the TV.

“Oh, Junie’s coming ‘round later. She’s just gotta finish up at the library,” Athena chirped, turning her key in the lock.

“I was not aware...we were having company,” Simon said in a faraway voice, still taking in his surroundings. He could almost see Metis’ touch in the way Athena had arranged everything in the hallway and living room; there was an organised chaos to it all.

Athena’s eyes widened, her voice rising in pitch. “Oh, um, well, she lives with me now!”

That explained all the flower accents; orange and yellow tulips sat in a little vase on the bookshelves, while a row of succulents happily took up the windowsill, and some hanging plants peeked out from the kitchen.

“I would not have thought the little sunflower was in need of accommodation,” Simon muttered, setting down his bag and gingerly taking a seat on the cotton sofa.

Athena’s cheeks reddened.

Oh.

Simon swallowed. “She’s your—”

“Girlfriend!” Athena finished for him, giggling as she kicked off her shoes.

“Ah.”

Athena fidgeted. “Hey, um, I’m gonna get changed. So like, make yourself comfortable. You can get yourself water, and then we can order pizza!”

“Very well then,” he called out, listening as a door clicked shut somewhere in the flat.
His leg bounced, and his hands gripped at the coarse fabric of his surcoat. His eyes scanned the few thin books on the bookshelves; mostly fiction, it appeared, of the fantasy and science fiction genres.

Of course, technology had significantly advanced in the last decade, with many reading on electronic devices. Perhaps he was one of the few examples of a time gone by, gone so quickly.

Somewhere, a door opened with a creaked and Athena returned with her hair down in a yellow turtleneck and a pair of jeans, stretching her arms above her head.

“Pizza?”

Food. Good; that was an easy impersonal topic, right up there with discussing the weather and the state of the economy.

“I suppose,” Simon said.

Athena hopped off the sofa and darted into the kitchen, returning with a stack of takeout menu brochures.

“Junie likes thin-crust cheese pizza so I’ll get her that, and I’m getting myself a Hawaiian!” she announced, thrusting the menus into his hands.

Simon looked up, meeting her gaze with a smirk. “You would dare desecrate your pizza with such an abominable combination of flavours?”

“Hey! It’s actually really good!” she protested.

“Have it your way then,” he said. He turned over the laminated paper in his hands. “I suppose I shall partake in a mushroom pizza.”

“Okey dokey!” Athena announced before disappearing back into the kitchen to put away the menus and make her call.

“...They said it’ll take forty minutes,” she said, slumping down on the sofa beside him.

“Hm.”

“So, how’ve you been?” she asked, smiling. She picked up the bunny plushie that was hidden between the throw pillows, moving its felt paws between her manicured fingers in a waving motion.

Simon found himself smiling at the toy bunny; once upon a time, he would have manipulated the bunny’s limbs with his fingers, getting Athena to giggle, and clearing away all her momentary sadness and discomfort.

*Cease these melodramatic thoughts.*

“Alright,” he answered, a little too quickly. Then he followed up flatly with, “Well, naught but a considerable amount of work.”

“Oh, okay,” she said, setting the bunny down with a frown. “You got custody of the Phantom, right…? I can’t remember, because it’s been so long since we last spoke. Um…”

“Yes. We did obtain custody of him.”
“Uh huh.”

A momentary silence; Athena fidgeted, picking up the bunny and setting it back down again.

“So, um, you’re getting to know your new detective, right?”

Simon nodded.

“What’re they like?”

_I feel as though I can bring myself to trust her._

“Suitable.”

“But...you’re doing okay, right?”

_I wouldn’t know._

“...Athena?”

“Yeah?”

“I would appreciate it if you would you stop with your questions. I didn’t come here to be interrogated.”

“Oh, okay. Um...I’m sorry I made you feel that way.”

There was hurt in her words and Simon grimaced inwardly. “What’s on your mind?”

“I—” Athena began, letting out a deep sigh. “Just, you have so much discord in your heart, Simon. It’s kinda hard to ignore.”

_Of course, her bloody Mood Matrix would have detected something._

“I see.”

“I mean, I can’t pick up discord in your texts... but that’s because you haven’t said a word, in what, over a month?”

Her shoulders rose and fell. Her words were punctuated with hurt and worry.

“I just...do you know how worried I was? And now you sit here and act like nothing’s happened and—” she closed her mouth, swallowing.

Simon’s eyes stayed glued to the spot above the TV. “...I do not know what you are referring to.”

A bald-faced lie, and Athena’s exasperated sigh rang out in the thick air. “...I dunno, everything!?”

“Perhaps it is merely that I do not wish to disclose details with you, on matters which you are not privy to. Had that not crossed your mind?” he said, voice dangerously low.

“You say that, but your heart’s screaming out in protest, Simon,” Athena countered.

“Is it?” he asked monotonously.

“Yes!” she snapped.
Simon turned his head to meet her gaze; her cheeks were bright red and he noted tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. He frowned, and looked away.

“Do you know, you’re awfully obtuse,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

Simon turned back to face her, jaw clenched. “I did not call upon your aid, because I did not need it. You simply attempted to weasel your way into my personal life with your incessant texts, and I’d have thought the underlying meaning would’ve been glaringly obvious when I parried those questions on my well-being.”

Athena shot out of her seat. “But I am a part of your life, Simon! You can’t just ignore that!”

“You say that, but you refuse to respect my lines of demarcation! These aren’t so much worries and concerns, as interrogations!” he shot back, trying to keep his voice level.

Athena opened her mouth to argue back, but Simon held out a hand to stop her.

“Furthermore,” he began through gritted teeth, rising from his seat, “you’ve been behaving in this... abstruse manner — implying I need some bleeding saviour — for the last several months! Do yourself a favour and disabuse yourself of that absurd notion.”

Athena placed her hands on her hips. “Are you saying that because you don’t want to involve me? Because, like, if you don’t—”

Simon sighed. “Must I repeat myself? You are not tasked with being my saviour; what goes on in my life is none of your bloody business.”

“But I feel it is my business!” she cried out, clenching her fists.

Simon grabbed his coat and satchel. “I refuse to listen to anymore of this rubbish!” he yelled out, crossing into the hallway. He jiggled the keys in the lock angrily, forcefully swinging open the door.

“I’ll be taking my leave.”

“Wait, Simon!”

The door slammed shut behind him.

Simon walked as quickly as his long legs could carry him down busy streets, his eyes focused on the concrete pavements he walked on, avoiding human contact as he angled his body around immobile crowds of tourists and groups of rowdy teenagers and twenty-somethings starting their night out.

Now what?

Now what indeed.

He did not know where he was or where he was headed, beyond knowing that he did not want to go home quite yet, as the sun began to set against the backdrop of palm trees.

And so, when he found himself faced with the blue noren curtain, he did not hesitate to step into the little soba shop; perhaps some actual food and drink would sustain him, and perhaps he could
get himself piss-drunk.

“Oh, hey! It’s you again!” greeted the cheery voice.

“Ah, hello, lad.”

“Damn man, you look rough,” the pudgy man said, taking a cursory glance at him.

Simon let out a humourless exhale. “One could say that,” he muttered, in a tone that suggested he did not wish to speak further on the matter.

Thankfully, the young man cottoned on. “Huh, well, welcome back to The Whet Noodle!”

Simon perched himself on a high stool, setting his satchel down at his feet. “I’m famished. What do you suggest I partake in today?”

The young man handed him a small laminated menu and set a glass of water in front of him.

“Uh, for appetizers, there’s the chicken karaage or...there’s gyoza. You could also go for the vegetable tempura medley. And then for soba options, kake soba with kamaboko, or tanuki soba.”

Simon barely glanced at the menu before thrusting back into the young man’s hands. “I shall have the chicken karaage, kake soba with kamaboko topped with an egg, and a bottle of junmai sake.”

The young man nodded, slotting the menu back into a wooden crate, before he disappeared into the back of the kitchen. Simon bent down and pulled out his book from his satchel and began to read. He was halfway through a paragraph when two bottles were set before him.

“I have goriki junmai and kiku masamune taru sake. Which one d’ya want?”

Simon’s eyes darted between them. Perhaps he wouldn’t get piss-drunk but…

“The latter please,” he said, clearing his throat.

The young man nodded and returned the goriki junmai to the back of the kitchen before pouring out Simon’s glass.

“Oh, you’re still reading Murakami,” he said, nodding his head at the book pinned down by Simon’s elbow.

Simon glanced down. “Yes. I am towards the end of it. If you’ve a moment, I highly recommend it.”

“Huh.”

Simon took a sip of his sake, noting its dryness. “Your...establishment, it isn’t always this quiet, is it?”

The young man shook his head as he chopped ingredients up. “Nah man. In a half-hour it’s gonna be real packed and my prep guys will come in from out back to help with service. But also, you come in at really weird hours. Like, before food rush hour,” he said. “But like, I ‘ppreciate it. Change of pace, ya know?”

“Hm,” he mused, before returning to his book.

A few paragraphs later, his chicken karaage came out and he savoured every bite of it, pushing
down bitter memories of Friday night chicken shop dinners as a young boy.

“Once again, I commend your culinary skills,” Simon said quietly, earning him a wide grin, before the young man returned to preparing soba and Simon back to his book.

He finally finished the book, snapping it shut just as the piping hot bowl of soba was set down before him, glistening in the dim light. He enjoyed it vigorously, slurping down the noodles and indulging in the rich broth and the salty fishcakes. And before he knew it, he’d set down the bowl with a sense of finality, a satisfied smile on his face.

The young man moved to retrieve the polished dishes from his spot, eyeing him cautiously. And then—

“Hold up! I remember who you are — you’re Simon Blackquill!”

Ah, fuck.

Simon froze in his seat. Of course, he was hardly an unfamiliar face to news bulletins.

“...Yes?” he cautiously asked through gritted teeth; he’d already had one confrontation in the span of an hour, and he still had enough energy to muster another one.

The young man slammed his fist down on the counter, the bowls and plates rattling as he did so, causing Simon’s head to snap up.

“Simey Blackquill! Hey, it’s me, Bucky? D’ya remember me?!” he said, laughter bubbling in his throat.

Simon’s eyes widened, as he took in the ropey brown hair, the wide frame, and the gap in his teeth.

“...Bucky?” he voiced hesitantly, hoarsely, swallowing the lump in his throat.

Bucky grinned. “You used to tutor me for English and Japanese at the library downtown, remember? An’ you helped my dad here.”

Simon leaned back in his seat. The memories were surfacing again, memories of a time he wished to forget.

Despite his thoughts, a small smile traced his lips. “Oh yes. Yes, now I recall! You were an utterly terrible student. I had to manipulate you into completing your homework.”

Bucky chortled. “Yeah, I remember! Not that it matters now, ya know, I dropped outta high school.”

“Ah.”

Of course, the world continued to revolve and evolve as he had stayed stagnant, confined to petty prison politics and certain death.

You’re not supposed to have this.

Bucky shrugged as he tended to the dishes, scrubbing them as he spoke. “I wasn’t book smart, ya know? I always liked doing stuff with my hands. Like, cooking...or like, being useful, running a business.”

“I have learned our society places little value or merit in occupations that do not require further
study in the conventional manner of degrees and dissertations.” Simon said, staring into his sake. “One can see such education would be lost on you, and be a waste of time, through the superb quality of the food you have produced and the success of your establishment.”

“Yeah, see, I had my guys from high school telling me I wasn’t gonna amount to nothing if I just sat an’ made soba all day. But ya know, I put my whole into this.”

“I can certainly regard that enthusiasm in you. You are proudly upholding the work ethic your father instilled in me when I took this on as a part-time job.” Simon said, before claiming the last dregs of his sake. “Speaking of, how is he?”

Bucky grew silent for a moment, a glum look emerging on his face. “Ah, m’dad, he...he died when I was fourteen. Lung cancer, ya know.”

Simon averted his gaze, focusing on the snack packets of wasabi peanuts at the far end of the counter.

“...My condolences,” he muttered quietly.

A thin smile slid up Bucky’s lips as he dried and stacked the clean crockery. “S’arright. Ma’s better than she used to be. I’m kinda surprised the whole family held up, ya know.”

“...That's good to hear,” Simon said.

“You want anything else to eat? Tea? Coffee? I have desserts; I get them delivered by this great woman — she used to be an actress, Katherine Hall —”

“Ah, thank you for the offer, but I shouldn't partake any further,” Simon interrupted. “I should take my leave...”

“Oh. Oh! Yeah, service is gonna really start in five minutes, an’ my guys are gonna start coming in now.” Bucky said rapidly, averting Simon’s gaze.

They tended to payment, with Simon paying by card so as to avoid wasting any more time faffing about with cash and getting his change, and having to retrieve his book and his satchel from underneath his feet, and oh God, he just wanted to leave—

“But yo, it was real nice to see ya again, man. Come on by anytime.” Bucky said, smiling as he handed Simon his receipt.

“Likewise. Goodnight.” he muttered, and stalked out of the restaurant.

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**Athena [21:01 PM]:** Hey, I’m sorry about today. I should’ve respected your boundaries and known you weren’t comfortable with talking.

**Athena [21:03 PM]:** I also don’t think I’m the right person to talk to. I think you would really benefit from getting outside help tho.

**Athena [21:05 PM]:** You don’t have to. But like, think about it at least.

**Athena [21:05 PM]:** I want you to be okay, Simon.

**Athena [21:08 PM]:** Here’s the names of some good psych ppl I’ve been recommended previously. I’ll just leave it here if you wanna take a look.
Athena [21:08 PM]: Also check your office’s mental health resources?

Athena [21:11 PM]: Again, I’m really sorry. I do worry about you. Get some sleep? I don’t know what else to say.


(Seen at 22:45 PM)

So be it, Simon thought as he scrolled through the texts again next morning.

He clambered out of bed, and set himself up at the kitchen table — the sunlight casting lines down his pale arms, illuminating all the scars that had accumulated there — with a mug of coffee and his laptop.

As he scrolled through several websites advertising psychotherapists and their services, a pit of dread began to well in his stomach.

The more he went through, the more he tried to justify his searches in his mind as simply a case of being curious as to see what sorts of services psychotherapists offered and how they’d be able to convey their sessions.

But as his eyes took in the almost patronising descriptions about ‘life transitions’ and ‘alignments’, Simon wondered if there was any merit to Athena’s concerns.

She was young, and brash, and had...indeed been witness to some of life’s harshest truths, he couldn’t deny that, and Aura did say he ought to speak to someone, seeing as he’d had ‘to handle a lot more shit’ than her.

Then again... What rubbish, Simon thought as he vetoed a series of therapists offering nonsense such as hypnotherapy and claiming to have ‘healing powers’.

He wasn’t even sure what therapy would entail; perhaps a general psychologist would suit him best, not a specialist.

But the majority of them, once he’d weeded out all the hypnotherapists and the so-called life coaches, focused on marriage and family.

...Did he have family problems?

Of course he did. That was half the bloody reason he was online.

But was it the source of his mental imbalance?

Not quite.

Frustrated with himself, he slammed down the laptop lid. He would return to the matter later. When that would be, he did not know. But he did spend the rest of the day marathoning the Steel Samurai, riffling through a whole season and falling asleep on the sofa with the afternoon sun beating down on him.

Sunday morning Taka visited him, tapping on the kitchen window with his beak.

“Hello, old boy,” Simon greeted him as let him in, feeling a tired smile creep up his lips.
Taka hopped onto his shoulder and nipped at his ear, demanding scritches. As Simon stroked his plumage, he felt all his clouded thoughts wash away for a brief moment; that paisley neckerchief suited him quite handsomely.

“I suppose I’d better get on with my task. You will accompany me, won’t you?” he said softly.

Taka cawed, and Simon once again brewed himself a pot of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table.

Perhaps it would be best if he refined his searches; he narrowed down the list to counsellors specialising in mood and anxiety disorders, and even further to a couple that had suitable qualifications and could accept his insurance.

It was lunchtime by the time Simon fired off some overly formal and awkwardly worded emails when Taka decided to take his leave; mating season was upon them. He wondered if Taka had already acquired a companion in the last several years.

He fixed himself a lunch of onigiri, miso soup and tsukemono and watched three episodes of the Pink Princess Reboot — it seemed better than the original both in storyline and in the accuracy of the fight scenes — burying himself under a large fuzzy blanket with the laptop at his feet.

After the third episode, which ended on a cliffhanger with a confrontation between The Pink Princess and the Evil Magistrate, Simon resisted the urge to continue onto the next episode by checking his emails. He found one response, from a psychotherapist located twenty minutes away from the office, asking him if he was free tomorrow afternoon.

And with that, following several more episodes, very little sleep, and a tedious day at the office compiling his interrogation notes, Simon found himself at 5 PM in a building with grey tiled floors and walls the colour of vomit.

That’s not very encouraging, is it.

One sweeping look at his surroundings told him this centre served no particular demographic, with everyone from wailing schoolchildren to exhausted middle-aged professionals and teenagers with the music blaring out of their headphones and hoodies zipped up to the top, huddled on sagging leather sofas.

Simon turned his head, where the receptionist’s desk stood, with a horrible pop-art collage framed above the mousy woman occupying the post.

Poor woman, Simon thought to himself, to have to be constantly surrounded by us demented and deranged folk.

He approached her slowly, and cleared his throat.

“I am here to see a Munira Alim? This is to be my first consultation,” he announced hoarsely.

The woman at the desk smiled, producing a clipboard and a pen for him. “If you could please fill in your details for me, that would be great.”

The papers seemed to contain basic details to fill in; name, age, sex, address, health insurance…All standard stuff he’d been through before. Simon rifled through those pages, before he discovered more; a consent form, a confidentiality clause, and a survey with all sorts of open-ended questions asking him to rate his mood and aspects of his health. He slowly worked his way through the forms, before handing it back to the receptionist.
The woman flashed him another smile as she took the clipboard from him. With a wave of her hand, she said, “If you’d like to take a seat, I’ll let Ms Alim know you’re here.”

Simon moved to sit down on the sofa closest to the exit, beside a teenager rocking back and forth in her seat. He glanced around the room once more, noticing decades-old LACMA exhibition posters and whiteboards with information written in English and Spanish.

Nothing new there then. He’d have thought these sorts of facilities would’ve upped their interior design game, so as not to make their clientele feel so… uncomfortable, what with the terrible fluorescent lighting that attempted to put a damper on what little sunlight tried to sliver through the entrance hall.

His leg bounced. He could reach for his new book in his satchel that he’d snapped up from the living room bookcase from one of Metis’ PhD projects, aptly titled *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*.

Or he could not.

Either way, he must’ve been stark raving mad to follow Athena’s advice and to actually spend his weekend searching up psychotherapists.

His leg bounced further, and the teenager beside him continued to rock back and forth.

“...Simon Blackquill?”

Simon’s head snapped up, and turned to face the source of the voice; a woman with olive skin and curly brown hair was standing on the edge of the waiting room. She cast a sweeping look around the room, her hazel eyes darting back and forth between the people seated on the sofas.

With gritted teeth Simon picked up his satchel and rose, walking briskly to meet her. She smiled as he made his way over, towering over her short and stout figure.

She extended a hand to him, shaking firmly. “Hi, I’m Munira. Please, follow me,” she said in a silvery voice.

He followed her down a narrow hallway, her blue tunic and flared trousers swaying as she ushered him into the office.

Simon stood by the door for a moment. It was much better in here; there was a little desk, and quaint turquoise figurines of pyramids, cats and scarab beetles carved out of limestone adorned the dark-wood bookshelves next to heavy diagnostic manuals and purple ring binders.

“Please take a seat.” Munira said, gesturing to one of the leather sofas by the window where a potted snake plant sat.

But of course, he wasn’t here to admire the decor.

Simon sauntered up to a sofa and threw down his satchel and coat before he settled into his seat uneasily, planting his hands on his knees. Munira took a seat opposite him, a gentle smile on her features. She clicked the pen in her hand and brought the clipboard on her desk onto her lap.

“Just so you’re aware, this first session is going to be me asking you questions and taking a lot of notes. If you have any questions for me, feel free to ask at any time.”

Simon nodded, noting the large jug of water on the coffee table between them.
Munira began by flipping over a couple of pages on the clipboard. “So, looking at your form, I understand you’ve been through counselling before?”

“I—” he shifted in his seat. “Yes. But not for many years.”

“Oh,” she said, scribbling something down.

“I was...sixteen. I’d just moved from across the pond to be here, and...I was having some trouble at school, with depression and social anxiety,” Simon explained; the words leaving his mouth before he could catch them. “But it was quickly remedied.”

“Oh. Well, if you feel like that was resolved then, we don’t need to go into it too much right now.” Munira said, a smile tracing up her lips. “I say to my patients that I focus on the present; so, what’s led you to come here today. Would you be able to tell me about that? About why you’re here?”

“I, ah—” A humourless bitter laugh escaped him. “I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to provide you with a clear starting point, nor a single reason.”

“That’s okay. You can start anywhere.”

Simon leaned back in his seat, trying to ignore his heart hammering rapidly in his rib cage. He swallowed, and stared at his boots. “I’m—I was in the clink for some time, seven years...for a crime I did not commit.”

Munira nodded.

“But...not under false pretences. I deliberately...placed myself there, in order to— to protect someone. I was due to be executed on the twenty-first of December.”

He was expecting some sort of reaction, but nothing came about; Munira merely nodded as she wrote that down.

Simon cleared his throat. “My sister...she instigated a takeover of the space centre, and kidnapped individuals...as a means to an end. She— She did it on my behalf, though I hadn’t asked it of her. I —”

Simon closed his mouth and furrowed his brow. He pulled a wry face as he swallowed. “Well, ‘desperate times call for desperate measures’, would’ve been her justification. She...She wanted to save me; to prevent my crossing over the Styx.”

He exhaled sharply. “...Surely you’ve heard of me? It feels as though the whole bloody populace knows of my existence, of the crimes I said I committed.”

Munira shook her head. “Like many people, I don’t follow the news unless it relates to my personal life. I wouldn’t remember your news segment anymore than that of another convicted criminal or ex-criminal. And I also don’t look up my patients.”

Simon let out an exasperated sigh. “Well, I’m liberated now. The...man who murdered my mentor in psychology, my sister’s fiancée, is currently in custody. And...I’m in charge of his interrogations; I’m a prosecutor.”

He looked on as she took her notes, pen nib rattling as she reached the end of the line.

“Moreover...I am expected to, I suppose, ‘lead a normal life’. To behave as though nothing has
happened in the last seven years of my life. My niece, Athena, whom I was protecting, has...attempted to engage me in activities, to occupy my mind, or to...rekindle our relationship, but...I fear it is rather strained. She has badgered me incessantly with her messages lately, and I only began to respond to them as my sister encouraged — or rather, nagged — me to do so.”

“It sounds like you’re going through a lot,” Munira finally said in a sympathetic tone, encouraging him to have some water.

“Were you assigned a parole officer?” she asked after he’d gulped down two glasses.

Simon shook his head. “As I was released for a crime I had not committed, I was deemed not to be in need of one. Thus…” he trailed off, before adjusting his posture so that he remained ramrod straight, as though he were about to meet the headmaster.

“Well, furthermore...the murderer...he was an international spy, and so he took on a variety of identities throughout his career. He murdered the man who was due to be assigned to me as my handler and investigative partner, and posed as him for a year…”

Simon sighed, and gritted his teeth. “I have nightmares, about him, about my deceased mentor, about my niece...I don’t sleep.”

Munira nodded slowly “What do you do when you can’t sleep?”

A hollow laugh rang out. “I distract my mind with serials of the Steel Samurai; I suppose I’ve a lot to catch up on there. Otherwise, I read. Nonfiction for the most part; psychological journals, books on linguistics, matters relating to Japan. And I bury myself in my work, for I feel that is all I know, all I can manage to grasp.”

Munira set down her pen, and laced her fingers together. “Thank you for sharing all of that; it’s really good that you’re able to vocalise what you’re going through.”

“I suppose,” Simon mumbled, looking away to stare at the oriental rug on the floor.

“Well, Simon, let me first reassure you that what you’re going through is completely normal and understandable in your situation,” she said soothingly and Simon looked up to meet her gaze. “A lot of ex-convicts do have a hard time adjusting to life outside, mostly because they’ve lost that routine they’ve had for years. They lose that routine, and they lose a sense of purpose, so they fall back into old habits.”

Munira tilted her head, tapping her pen against her clipboard. “The positive thing I see here with you is that you’ve acknowledged things are difficult for you right now, so you’re not completely on autopilot.”

“I suppose,” he mumbled again, before leaning back in his seat. “I do have some semblance of routine these days...though I’ve been building off my prison timetable.”

Munira frowned, readying her pen. “Could you walk me through that?”

“To provide an example, I do not respond to messages throughout the day as that time has been blocked off for work.”

“Okay.”

“I do so because it provides me some comfort. A framework to return to. Admittedly my affairs are far less regimented these days,” he elaborated. “But...I cannot deny my life in prison, while
harrowing at times, was tolerable; I grew used to three square meals a day, an hour of exercise, reading and solitary confinement.”

“So you feel like someone has pulled the rug out from underneath you?” Munira concluded.

“Precisely,” he said. “I feel— I am not meant to be alive right now. I feel as though I am in a waking nightmare. I feel unsure as to how to think, and my mind tends to run on self-deprecating rubbish these days.”

“Do you feel...that being around people makes you uncomfortable?” she asked, not looking up from her clipboard.

“Partly. I am not maladjusted with regards to social interactions, but I do feel...that the people I am close to pry and bombard me with their questions about my well-being,” Simon said. “My superior, a very respectable man, appears to have made his duty to ask after me. He has begun to refer to me with my first name, and to try and engage me in conversation about such personal matters.”

He crossed his arms, eyeing the landscape painting above Munira. “On the other hand, I have struck up new acquaintances with old colleagues at the office, and with my current investigative partner, as well as with a young lad I tutored before I was incarcerated. Those interactions have been… better to manage.”

“What about your family members, seeing as you said ‘the people I am close to’?”

“My sister...she tolerates me for the most part, for she has had to endure years of silence on my end. But she snapped the last time I visited her, thus nagging me to speak with my niece. And as I have already uttered, my niece is a serial offender of prying into my affairs.”

“Are your parents in the picture?”

Simon hesitated for a moment in his seat. “Ah...no. They— They disowned me when I was 23. Said I was a disgrace, and I brought shame to the family. Since then, I have maintained no relations with them, and it has been even longer for my sister.”

Munira nodded slowly, jotting all that down.

“And what about strangers?”

“I...” Simon opened and closed his mouth, hesitating for a moment. “I deliberately avoid such interactions when I can, for I fear I will be recognised. I do purchase items in bulk, so as not to nip down to the shops every week. I rarely stray from my lodgings or my work.”

“...So do you feel like people are walking on eggshells when they’re around you?”

“...Yes, one could say that. I ended up having a row with my niece on Friday regarding this matter of my silence,” Simon recalled, his eyes falling on Munira’s hands as she wrote. “I suppose that would provide you with a succinct reason as to why I am here; for she suggested I consult a professional in this field.”

Munira set down her pen, hazel eyes meeting his. “So people try to offer you help and support, but you don’t know how to deal with it.”

Simon sighed. “I suppose.”

“Well you’re here now.”
“I suppose.”

Munira nodded, and turned over the page. “From what I’ve seen today from you, in what you’ve just told me and in the forms, it’s clear that you’re having difficulties adjusting to your new environment.”

“Hm.”

“Adjustment disorders occur because of significant life stressors, and in your case it’s perfectly understandable; seven years is a long time away from society, not to mention you feel as if you’re in this strange state of being alive when you’ve been led to believe you should have been executed. So you have to not only adjust to that, but to everything that comes with it; friends, family, acquaintances, jobs, houses, chores...It’s no wonder you’re displaying symptoms of a depressive mood, social anxiety, social withdrawal and physical troubles such as not sleeping properly.”

“I suppose that’s an accurate assessment.”

“...And you say you’re working on interrogating the man who murdered your mentor?”

Simon looked away. “Yes. Though I haven’t been able to achieve much.”

“Is there any way you could take a break from that? You need time to process everything you’ve been through.”

Simon’s eyes widened. “No!” he shouted.

Munira, once again, showed no outward signs of surprise or shock.

“No...” he breathed out, once he’d composed himself again. “I requested to be put on this case. It...It is necessary that I learn the truth to my mentor’s...murder.”

“I understand. But if you’re going to continue with that, we’ll need to work out some healthy coping mechanisms so you can allow your brain to process these things. This man did pose as your colleague for a year, right?”

“...Yes, well— I don’t know! I don’t know what it is I want to do, or not. I...vacillate between extremes these days in my thoughts. I want to coldly discuss the crimes he’s committed...and I also want to ask him why. Why he led me on, when I—”

No, I won’t reveal that quite yet.

Simon closed his mouth, letting the words die on his tongue.

“That’s okay, Simon. You don’t have to know what you want to do.” Munira assured, crossing her legs. “But, because I’m thinking of how I can try to help you through this, is there anything you would like us to address first in your recovery?”

Simon crossed his arms, pondering for a moment.

“I...” he began, clearing his throat. “I suppose I’d like to commence with my relationships. Developing old bonds and forging new ones would facilitate everything else; I’d be able to lead a balanced life with my work and my leisure time, better manage my sleep, and perhaps even develop new interests.”

Simon leaned forward in his seat, tilting his head. “That would...also mean addressing the social
anxiety that has hindered me for years now. I was able to ignore it whilst in the clink, through constructing a facade, but I cannot abide it any further.”

Munira nodded, smiling. “That’s a great place to start. I’d be happy to work on that with you.”

“Hm,” he hummed.

“So, I’m going to set you some tasks for our next appointment — you don’t have to do them if you don’t want to.”

Simon tilted his head, frowning.

“What I’m going to suggest for you is journalling and charting.”

“What would either task entail?”

“So for journalling, I would like you to write anything that comes to mind about your day, what dreams you had; anything you feel is important to let out. You don’t need to show it to me, but it would be a good way to healthily express your emotions.

“And I’d like you to chart your sleep — so, how many hours you sleep a night — and your daily mood on a scale of one to ten; one being very low and unhappy and ten being ‘top of the world’. Another thing you could chart would be how many positive social interactions you have on any given day.”

“I see.” Simon mulled it over; it seemed manageable.

Munira smiled, crows feet appearing at the corners of her eyes. “...I will prepare a goodie bag for you for next time—”

“A goodie bag?” Simon interrupted, biting back a sarcastic retort.

Munira nodded. “Yeah. A goodie bag just contains a bunch of useful resources and treats that would be good for my patients. For you, I’ll compile some of my mental health resources tailored for patients who have come in from prison. A lot of those mental health concerns have to do with unemployment and homelessness—”

“Both matters which thankfully do not affect me,” he was quick to clarify.

“No, but some of the handbooks do help explain how to manage life outside, with some key information from the city hall.”

Simon nodded slowly; from the sound of it, this so-called ‘goodie bag’ would be miles better than the support he was given upon release, which had mostly consisted of being handed his personal effects on a tray and signing off some paperwork.

Munira eyed the small clock on the table. “Oh, our time’s up. So, when do you want to meet again? I’d like us to start with either weekly or fortnightly sessions.”

Simon tilted his head. “I am anticipating a heavy workload in the next week, so perhaps not immediately.”

“Shall we say the thirty-first? At five?”

“That would be acceptable.”
“Alright then, I’ll put you down for that,” Munira said, making a note of it in her organiser. A reassuring smile, and she rose from her seat to lead him to the door. Simon automatically followed, scrambling to collect his belongings.

“Well, it was great to see you, Simon,” she said after he’d made sure he hadn’t left anything behind on the sofa. Then her eyes widened and she quickly moved to retrieve something from her desk to hand him. “Oh, and here’s my business card if you need to email or give me a call.”

He stared dumbfounded at the card that was pressed into his hands before he met Munira’s gaze again. An awkward smile traced up his lips.

“Ah, thank you,” Simon found himself saying automatically, his voice miles away from his ears.

If Munira had cottoned onto his strange behaviour, she said nothing of it. Instead she firmly shook his hand and wished him a good week, leaving him to navigate his way out of the maze of offices, and back out onto the sunlit streets of a city that never slept.

Chapter End Notes

Inspiration for Sebastian's design come from this, this, and this.
March 21, 2028

Thankfully, Simon didn’t have to spend much time pondering his therapy session, as the next morning brought him to Criminal Affairs, and to Ema’s tiny office with the sunlight spilling in through the open window.

“Hey Simon!” Ema greeted, grinning ear to ear as she shoved papers into an open cardboard box. “I passed!”

“You...passed...?” he repeated slowly, before realisation set in and the corners of his lips twitched upwards in a smile. “But of course, your forensics exam!”

“You got it!” Ema said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “And...I got the highest marks in the state!”

Simon took in the flushed cheeks, the flyaway hairs, and the rings under her eyes, no doubt gained from anxious, sleepless nights. He stepped closer into her space, and extended a hand towards her.

“My heartfelt congratulations to you.”

She shook his hand firmly, beaming up at him. “Thank you!”

They let go, fingers brushing against each other for a moment. Simon looked away, staring at the open cupboard; to the side, her science equipment had already been packed away.

“As the old proverb goes, ‘keizoku wa chikara na’: ‘perseverance is power’,” he said quietly.

Ema stalled for a moment. “That...sounds quite nice actually.”

Ema stalled for a moment. “That...sounds quite nice actually.”

“So...I surmise then you’ll be moving out of this room.”

“Yup!” she said, picking the coffee mugs off the ring stands and placing them gingerly into a box. “All the way downstairs to Dr Nøhr’s — fucking finally!”

Simon chuckled, eyes following her about the room. Ema pointed at a tin box on top of her case files, still piled up as precariously as ever.

“Oh, and she made me these homemade butter cookies, with cute little Danish flags on them, so no more snackoos for me!”

“Good God, I shall have to retire your nickname then, won’t I?” Simon teased.
Ema giggled. “Tell you what, your bird can have the snackoos.”

Simon clutched his chest in a display of mock horror. “Taka will eat no such thing!”

They shared a jubilant laugh for a moment, before Simon straightened up. “Well, we’d best get on with this interrogation, lest we delay your job move any further.”

“Oh yeah! Almost forgot I still have to do this job.” Ema said, grinning sheepishly. She turned around to pick up the file under the tin. “Our eyewitness is in one of the interrogation rooms off to the side.”

Simon followed her out, careful not to bang his head against the door frame on his way out. Ema walked briskly down the corridor, greeting her colleagues who offered her their congratulations, lab coat billowing out like a fan behind her.

She stopped shortly at a closed door framed with opaque glass and scuffed lettering that read ‘Room 101’.

“Okay here we are,” she announced.

The door creaked open into a bare-bones, windowless room. Seated in one of the provided chairs was a small tubby man in a graphic tee and blue jeans. He gripped a coffee cup in his work-worn, calloused hands.

“Hi, thanks for coming.” Ema said, and the man raised his head, brown eyes darting between them under his red cap. “I’m Detective Skye, and this is my colleague Prosecutor Blackquill. How are you today?”

“I’m good,” he said quietly. “Happy to help where I can, ma’am, sir.”

“That’s good to hear. I see you got yourself some coffee,” Ema said, moving to sit down and open up the folder. “So, before we start I just want to confirm your name and date of birth.”

“Ah, sí, my name is Camilo Nero and my birthday is May 26, 1980.”

“Place of birth?”

“Tijuana.”

“And you said you’re a trucker?”

Nero nodded.

“So, you work the border route, or…?”

Nero nodded again. “Sí. I transport goods across the national border, into here and some of other states, Texas mostly. I make this trip usually about twice a day, six days a week.”

“What kind of goods do you transport?”

Nero scratched at his stubble. “Anything. Mostly produce, like vegetables and fruits. Sometimes it’s kitchen appliances, that kind of thing.”

“So do you live here?”

Nero shifted to the side in his seat, digging his hand into his deep pocket to pull out a thick leather
wallet. He opened it up, producing a creased, faded photograph of him with a woman and two children in the foreground, standing outside a small house.

“My family, I brought them over to LA fifteen years ago,” he said. “My daughters, they were born here.”

“Okay,” Ema said, turning over the page. “Well, we’re interested in your movements on the night of January 16 and the morning of January 17, when you discovered that body in Exposé Park.”

“Sí.”

“So, if I pull up your initial statement that you gave to the officers, it says here you were on a break in the park for breakfast and you discovered the body at 6 AM. Is that right?”

Nero nodded.

“Is that normal for you; to be out there at those times?”

“Sí.”

“Could you walk me through your daily routine?”

“I wake up everyday at 4, and I get to the lot at usually 6 or 7, and then I’m on the road from 8 in the morning to 10 at night. When I’m working the six days, I could be anywhere, but I always try to come home to LA on the seventh.”

“And so this day, you were at the park at 6 AM because...what?”

“I get breakfast at a food cart every morning wherever I am. That morning, there was a cart pulled up in front of the park — the park is ten minutes from the truck lot — so I got some chilaquiles con huevos and I was gonna sit down somewhere in the park and eat, but…” Nero pulled a grimace. “I found the body.”

“Okay. And what did you do when you found the body?”

“I felt very sick. I wanted to throw up. So I went into the restrooms, and came back to the body.”

Ema pulled out a map of the park. “Which restroom did you use?”

Nero pointed at a spot several feet away from the body. “That one.”

“So, a five minute walk?” Ema estimated. “But that leaves five minutes with the body unaccounted for. Anyone else could have found it.”

“No, no...I called the police from inside the restroom.”

“Were there any other persons in the lavatory?” Simon asked, leaning forward in his seat.

Nero shook his head. “I don’t remember…A-Anyway, the police came ten minutes later and I tried to eat my breakfast, but I was not hungry anymore.”

“Another stretch of time unaccounted for. Were you stood near the body eating your breakfast?”

Nero shook his head. “There was some benches nearby, so I sat there. That way, I could still look at the body, to make sure no one...no one else went near it.”
“Upon viewing the victim’s remains, did you attempt to check for vital signs of life?” Simon asked.

“N-no. He—he looked very dead. There was blood everywhere…and flies…”

“Alright,” Ema said, noting that down. “That pretty much matches up with your initial statement.”

Nero let out a shaky breath, and took off his cap, revealing a thinning hairline.

“You seem anxious,” Simon commented, giving him a wary look.

“Ah, no, just—I’m not used to this.”

Ema pulled out a glossy photo — an enlarged mugshot of Johannes Birken pulled from the archives, looking positively pubescent with somewhat feminine features — and slid it across the table.

“Moving on, Mr Nero, do you recognise this man?” she asked.

Nero rubbed at his forehead. “N-no.”

“You’ve hardly glanced at it.” Simon said.

“No. I don’t recognise this man,” he emphasised. “Wh-who is he?”

“This man is our prime suspect. Admittedly this is an old photo of him, which, scientifically speaking, means he’s definitely developed since then, but…” Ema trailed off, as she pulled out another, more recent photo of Birken at the post office. “But, do you recognise him here?”

“N-no.” he stammered out. “I’m sorry, I really don’t know this man.”

Ema frowned. “We’re not asking if you know him, we’re asking if you recognise him. Mr Nero, please, this is a murder investigation — any information you have would be a great help to us.”

Simon glanced at the man; beads of sweat were forming at his temples.

“…So, tell us, did you see this man anywhere at the park on the morning of January 17?”

“N-no.”

Ema changed tack. “So you say you work from 8 AM till 10 PM, and you’re usually on the road then, right?”

Nero nodded. “Sí…”

“So, I’m guessing because you were in LA, you were spending the day before with family.”

Nero nodded his head vigorously. “Sí, I stayed the night with my family. After I unloaded the truck at 10, I got home at...midnight.”

“Right, and because you said that the truck lot is ten minutes from the park...is that walking or driving?”

“Driving. I went home by taxi.”

“Okay. And you stayed at the lot all the while the truck was being unloaded?”

“S-sí.”
“What goods were offloaded from your lorry?” Simon asked.

“...I don’t remember, sorry. I do a lot of these loads and unloads every day.”

“Okay. So, on the night of January 16, and early morning of January 17, you were at the truck park, and then you went home by taxi. And I’m guessing, came back by taxi at 6 AM?”

Nero shook his head. “N-no. My wife dropped me off at the park in the morning. She was gonna go take our two daughters to swim class before school.”

“Right. And she dropped you off because you wanted to get breakfast there?”

Nero nodded.

“Why didn’t you get breakfast at home, if your whole family was awake then?”

“I don’t remember...”

Simon swallowed. “It seems a mite bizarre that you would not partake in breakfast with your family...”

“...Unless there was some specific reason you needed to be at the park,” Ema finished for him. “You say you were ten minutes from the park, and yet...you never went there and you don’t recognise this man...? Unloading trucks can take a while, surely—”

“Cállense ! Stop!”

“Mr Nero?”

“Stop, please...” he pleaded, sniffling. He buried his face in his hands. “Oh, Dios mío, ¿por qué me metido en esto? No manches, yo nunca quise ser parte de esto...”

“Mr Nero, we can’t understand what you’re saying,” Ema said, frowning as she made for the door. “I’ll get you a water, and you can try and calm down.”

“Dios mío ...” he breathed out, careful to avoid Simon’s eye.

Ema quickly returned with a couple of water bottles and handed one to Nero.

“Take deep breaths...” she instructed, listening and watching as his breaths deepened and his chest expanded. “Better?”

Nero nodded nervously.

“Okay, let’s take it from the top. So you do recognise this man?”

“S-sí ,” Nero began, before his face crumpled. “He said...he said he was going to kill my family. Please... solo quería que mi familia estuviese a salvo.”

“Cease your anxious jabbering, and drink.” Simon interjected in a commanding tone. His eyes followed Nero as he gulped down the water. “Now then, could you care to elaborate on your relationship to this man?”

Nero fidgeted with his cap, staring down at the ground. “He...sent me a text message a week before. It was el chantaje ...uh, I don’t know how you say it in English, but he said he was going to say bad things about me if I didn’t do something for him...oh Dios mío ...”
“Blackmail?” Simon assumed.

Nero’s head snapped up, revealing bloodshot eyes. “Sí!”

“He blackmailed you? Why?” Ema asked.

“He said...I was seeing other women behind my wife’s back. Which...which is not true—”

“Whether or not you were unfaithful to your wife is irrelevant,” Simon interrupted. “Get to the point.”

“N-no, it wasn’t just that. He also said he had proof I was doing el lavado de dinero for these drug cartels ...”

Nero snapped his fingers together frustratedly, trying to come up with a translation.

“Money laundering...?” Ema guessed.

Nero nodded. “And...that I was using my truck to carry drugs over the border. Dios míó ...”

Ema opened her mouth, about to ask another question, but Nero continued. “So, he said that if I didn’t want my wife to know, or my family to be killed...that I should agree to do what he says.”

“So, he asked you to pay money to him?”

Nero shook his head, sniffling. “N-no. It was much much worse. He— he wanted me to...”

“To kill?”

“No!” he cried out, before sniffling. “He— he wanted me to...to clean up for him.”

“Right. He had you come over and clean up the crime scene, scientifically speaking, to erase all traces of him ever having been there.”

“Sí .”

“Now that that has been established, would you care to provide us with an accurate and honest timeline of events?” Simon asked.

Nero fidgeted in his seat, gripping his cap so tightly that his knuckles turned white. “So...he texted me all that, and then— then he said, I should be in LA on the night of January 16. He said...he knew everything about me, about my schedule, and that I was gonna have to be in LA to see my family.

“So I really was on the road for work till that night, when he said I should be in town, because I was gonna spend January 17 with my family...When I was really unloading the truck, he texted me and said to come to the park. So I told a guy to watch my truck and call me when it was done so I could park it and go home.”

“So you went to the park?”

“Yes. He met me at the entrance, and took me inside...and the guy was fresh dead on the sidewalk. He was still...kind of breathing.” Nero said, grimacing. He looked up at them. “I— I would have helped him, but this guy was standing over me, and he said I needed to get rid of a bunch of stuff.”

“What did he have you do?”
“He made me wear gloves and he gave me these sandwich bags—”

“Ziplocs?”

Nero nodded.

“Did you see any writing or symbols on those bags?” Ema asked.

Nero shook his head. “No, it was too dark.”

“Okay, carry on.”

“Anyway, he said I was to take this knife, and put it in the bag. And he gave me this mask to put in another bag, and give him those bags. Then he had me soak up some of the blood with a towel, and to get rid of his footsteps on the mud.”

“You say the victim was on the footpath?” Simon asked.

“Sí. There was blood everywhere along this path…”

Ema handed him the map and a pencil, and Nero drew a long line along the footpath, ending in a cross at the spot where the police had discovered the body.

“So he had me get rid of the blood with water from the restroom and towels, and then I moved the body to the grass, where he was still bleeding… Dios mío …” he sniffed. “Then he gave me this plastic bag with his clothes and shoes, and said I needed to burn them with my own clothes.”

“And did you burn them?”

Nero buried his face in his hands. “No…I kept them in my truck…”

“Right. We’ll need to take a look at that later.”

“De acuerdo …It’s under my seat.” he said, voice muffled. He raised his head. “Then after all that, he told me to go to the video cameras on the lamps and break them.”

“To erase video footage,” Ema muttered.

“Sí. So I broke two video cameras, and he said to keep them.”

“And those are in the lorry as well?” Simon asked.

“Sí. All...under the seats. After I cleaned up, and took the stuff, he put this small thing next to the body—”

“Did it look like a microchip of some sort?” Ema interjected.

“I don’t know. It was very small…” he cleared his throat. “Sí, so he put it next to the body, and then said I could go, and I would need to come back in the morning and say I found the guy.”

“What did you do then?”

A shaky sigh. “I went back to the truck, and my guy had finished unloading, so I put the bags inside the truck, and then I went home by taxi, and showered. I took my clothes and put them in a garbage bag to put in the truck in the morning. Then I told my wife to drop me off there, because I wanted to do some stuff…”
“Run errands?”

“I told her something like that. So I got my breakfast at the cart and then...called the police.”

“So you did have several minutes unaccounted for in the morning.”

“Yes, I was very...very scared. I was in shock, because now I could see the body and—” Nero burst into tears. “Perdóname, Padre, porque he pecado...”

Ema rose from her seat. “Okay, I think we can stop there. You’ve said a lot today.”

“Sí...” he sniffled, dabbing at his eyes with the edge of his t-shirt.

She pulled out her handcuffs. “You understand, I have to arrest you now for being an accessory to murder, because you tampered with the crime scene and defaced public property.”

“De acuerdo. I understand.”

As she read out his rights, Simon stepped out of the room, beckoning to two officers standing by the water cooler.

“Poor guy,” Ema said, after the officers had hauled him off.

Simon frowned. “Hm. In any case, I wondered, will you be having a get-together then? To celebrate your new post?”

Ema perked up. “Oh, yeah! It’s actually after work tonight at the A Salt and Battery bar, with a couple of friends.”

“Assault and battery?” Simon echoed, eyes wide.

Ema grinned, enunciating the name so as not to mix the pun up with a very serious charge. “Perfect place for a bunch of law enforcement to hang out, huh? They do great fried chicken sandwiches.”

“I see.”

“Kay’s gonna be there, and I’m sure she’s gonna bring some old friends with her. I think she’s also ordered a cake in.”

“...I’ll certainly endeavour to make my presence known.”

Ema craned her neck up to face him. “Yeah...don’t try out any of the samurai swordplay shit; pretty sure the servers won’t like it,” she said, deadpan.

“I...had nothing of the sort in mind,” Simon said, though the mischievous schoolboy grin on his face betrayed his intentions.

Mock exasperation took over. “Fine — you can cut the cake!”

Simon bowed deeply. “I am honoured.”

They shared a laugh, before composing themselves as a couple of bemused detectives walked by.

Ema cleared her throat, trying to restore some semblance of workplace propriety. "But in the meantime, we need clear some things up with all the processing paperwork, and I need to move out of my office ASAP."
"Agreed. I shall tend to that upon my return."

Ema nodded, and started for her office. "Good, I’ll see you at six!"

"Ah, Simon. Good timing," Edgeworth said against the backdrop of a grey and overcast sky as Simon entered his office the next morning, somewhat hungover yet very content; Ema’s celebrations had gone on till late at night and had proven, surprisingly, to be incredibly fun. "We just called you in to give you a quick update."

"An update too confidential and too sensitive to be given by email," von Karma confirmed as he sat down opposite her.

"I see," Simon said, stifling a yawn.

Edgeworth’s eyes narrowed for a just a moment. "Interpol has released a number of red notices for individuals suspected of murder and terrorism, who are acting as part of the copycat group, including Johannes Birken and Rebekah Klaark."

"Understood."

"Furthermore," von Karma began, "a confidential list containing individuals we suspect to be members of that terrorist group has been shared with immigration authorities worldwide, with the orders to arrest them on sight if they are caught passing through national borders."

Simon leaned back in his seat. "Bluntly put, you are conducting a manhunt."

Edgeworth pushed his glasses up his nose. "One that is long overdue at that."

von Karma cleared her throat. "The judicial authorities of Cohdopia and Borginia, in their most recent negotiations over the last week, have agreed to put through extradition requests and have the members tried in their countries, respective of their nationalities."

"And you’ve gleansed the identities of these individuals from the archives that were released but a fortnight ago?"

"Yes, I did say we were moving rather quickly." Edgeworth said, before his gaze settled on Simon. "I intend for justice to be served, and the truth to be revealed. Not just for the Cohdopians and Borginians, who’ve suffered enough through their tumultuous shared history, and who deserve answers, but for individuals such as yourself, Simon."

Simon swallowed, and looked away.

"Miles Edgeworth and I intend to travel to Skande in two weeks to present our findings to the Borginia-Cohdopia summit, so that should give you ample time to gather more information from our so-called mutual acquaintance."

Simon turned to face her. "Well, I intended to resume my interrogations today."


Simon let out a breathless chuckle. "You certainly did say I’d have my work cut out for me."

"That we did," Edgeworth said, a wry smile playing up his lips. "Well, we won’t keep you any longer. As always, we’ll keep you informed."
“Of course,” Simon made to stand, and bowed automatically. “Good day to you both.”

“Good day, and good luck,” Edgeworth said, and Simon was quickly out the door.

“...Blackquill. Long time no see.”

Simon fixed him with a smirk as he sat down and pulled out a folder. “I have...in my possession information pertaining to your identity, Fool Bright.”

“What,” he spat out.

“Now, I hadn’t gone in search of such information, heeding your request not to have your identity revealed as part of our negotiations, but...we found ourselves in this situation...and not through pure coincidence.”

“Blackquill, you—” he began, eyes wide, but quickly faltered, resuming his salt-pillar expression.

Simon raised an eyebrow. “You...accept?”

He shrugged.

“Whatever.”

And with that, Simon began the interrogation by debriefing the Phantom on their recent investigative findings and their implications.

“...And thus our previous sessions must be stricken from the record, for we cannot determine if any of your comments were true,” he concluded, looking back up at the Phantom with a steely look in his eyes.

Salt-pillar-man greeted him back, and Simon cleared his throat.

“With that in mind, it is imperative that I ask for your cooperation. I shall provide you with information on your identity that will enable us to better understand your motives, your crimes and subsequently those of your ‘organisation’.”

“You ask for my cooperation,” he parroted back. A sickening smirk traced up his lips. “You sure about that, Prosecutor Blackquill?”

Fulbright... Fulbright’s voice, and before Simon could contain himself, his fist connected with the table and a loud thud echoed in the dank, depressing room.

“Are we clear on that?” he said, voice low.

The neutral face and the shrug returned. “Whatever you say.”

_I’d best keep my blade sharp, lest he strike me unexpectedly. Again. I can’t afford to cock any of this up._

Simon pulled out a thick binder with the SEIL archive data in it, opened it up and slid it across the table.

“...Erikh Qvinn is but one of your names.”

“One…”
“You recall, I said you were led astray by your colleagues upon their visit, for it was a mere nom de guerre.”

“Nom de guerre,” he parroted back.

“See for yourself.”

“Nerium Oleander,” he read aloud from the page, before looking up to face Simon again.

Simon tapped the page.

“You were born in 1993, in the town of Anthyllis, out of wedlock to an Allebahstian mother, Olea Capensis, and a Babahlese father, Pyrgus Malvae. I am told Cohdopian lines of descent are matrilineal, thus the waters of your mother’s womb were thicker than the blood bindings of your father, meaning you were registered as Allebahstian.”

He shrugged.

Simon pressed on. “Little of relevance is recorded on your formative years beyond where you were educated in the Allebahstian hinterlands and your parents’ civil status, but you joined the army at the age of 16, presumably conscripted as cannon fodder on the Allebahstian side when war broke out. Is this correct?”

“No comment.”

“Nonetheless, you celebrated your late teens and subsequently your age of majority during a violent and brutal warring period from 2009 to 2012. Thereafter, it appears you were recruited by SEIL as an espionage agent to find and retrieve information on Babahlese happenings. Is this correct?”

“No comment.”

Simon turned the page.

“In your archival records, in conjunction with the psychological profile produced by Dr Cykes in 2020, a formal psychiatric evaluation was made in October 2013, diagnosing you with depersonalisation disorder. Would you care to elaborate on that?”

The Phantom’s beady eyes narrowed for a moment, and he swallowed. “No comment.”

“I would like to assert that the diagnosis, irregardless of its origins, influenced your role in SEIL, allowing you to easily take on new personas at ease, to perform your operations, and thus effectively murdered your sense of self.”

“No comment.”

“There are lists pertaining to your activities between 2012 and 2019, all of which involved espionage and in counterintelligence in Babahl and beyond. The archives stop in March 2019, when Cohdopia was reunified. Is there anything you wish to address in regards to your jobs?”

“No comment.”

“You were in the right in a previous session when you stated that Interpol had taken notice of you first in September 2019 in Zheng Fa for your involvement in the trafficking of counterfeit currency and illicit goods.” Simon said. “Thus, there is perhaps some truth to your earlier utterances.
Nevertheless, Zheng Fa was but a footnote in what was to come.”

“A footnote,” he repeated.

Simon arched his eyebrows. “Oh? Would you care to comment on that?”

“No comment.”

So be it.

“I say a footnote, for you came to prominence later that year in December for partaking in a terrorist attack at a Christmas market in Anthyllis, prompted Cohdopia’s judicial authorities to issue your first red notice. Could you explain the motives behind that incident?”

“No comment.”

“Given the gap in your activities between March and September, I would assume that your organisation was formed in then. Were you involved in the founding?”

“No comment.”

“How many individuals were there? Were they all former SEIL members, perhaps disillusioned by the reunification?”

“No comment.”

“Was there a central ideology?”

“No comment.”

“How was it structured?”

“No comment.”

“Do the names Johannes Birken and Rebekah Klaark educe any thoughts or recollections?”

“No comment.”

Simon turned over the page. “What were your organisation’s motives behind their involvement in the GYAXA space centre’s research and personnel; the rocket sabotages and the murders of Dr Metis Cykes and Clay Terran?”

“No comment.”

“What were your assignments between 2020 and 2027?”

“No comment.”

“In your initial meeting with Johannes Birken and Rebekah Klaark — whose careers were recorded in these very same archives for posterity — they postulated you were embroiled in Cohdopian state affairs.” Simon said, pulling out a transcript. “Could you comment on this, bearing in mind any of their utterances must now be regarded as circumstantial?”

“No comment.”

“What about Papilio Machaon — does that name educe anything in you?”
“No comment.”

Simon wet his lips. “Moving onto—”

“...Blackquill.”

Simon looked up from the papers. The Phantom’s face wore a stony glare.

“I am in no mood to answer your questions. Come back another time.” he said, and jerked his head to the door.

The walk back to his cell was slow and steady, with the rattling of chains and the shuffling of footsteps. The low hum of the ventilation system above provided him with some white noise as usual.

The clang of the cell door opening and the guard’s gesture prompted him to step inside. He entered, awaiting further instructions.

Those instructions never came.

“Hello Erikh.”

He whipped his head around. A tuft of dark brown hair beneath a peaked police cap greeted him.

“You…!”

There was no time to register the voice, or the face, as he felt something sharp press against his throat.

On instinct his fingers shot up to his neck, grabbing at the length of wire around his throat. Sharp gasps of air, as he tried to claw at it to no avail.

“You should’ve known this was coming,” his assailant said through gritted teeth, tightening the coil around his neck.

A strangled scream escaped him. His legs thrashed around wildly, as he tried to both target his attacker’s shins and regain his balance. His vision began to blur as he tried to gulp in more air, but then—

He crashed to the cold concrete floor.

Pain shot up his knees, and his muscles twitched momentarily, and he coughed uncontrollably.

“But not just yet.” he heard somewhere, far away, as his heartbeat thudded in his head.

The cell door swung shut, and he listened as the heavy footfalls receded.

Specks of light darted around his vision.

“B-Blackquill,” he wheezed out, weakly, hoarsely, before darkness engulfed him.

Chapter End Notes
Big thanks to FanFiker-FanFinal for the Spanish translations, and helping explain the differences between Castilian and Mexican Spanish.

*Sí:* Yes

*De acuerdo:* Of course

*Dios mío, ¿por qué me he metido en esto?:* Oh, God, why did I get involved?

*No manches, yo nunca quise ser parte de esto:* I should never have agreed to be a part of this.

*Solo quería que mi familia estuviese a salvo:* Please, I just wanted my family to live.

*Perdóname, Padre, porque he pecado:* Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.
“...in a stable condition. Anyway, here you are.”

“Much obliged,” Simon mumbled to the nurse, and she nodded before leaving him standing outside a plain door on the private ward of the Dye-Young Clinic, flanked by two heavily-armed guards.

He hadn’t paid much attention to what the woman had said, but this presence was hardly a subtle cue for Simon, who walked up to them and presented them with his temporary ID — his passport still hadn’t made it back across the pond — and his prosecutor’s badge. One of them, a burly man built like a tank, turned the door handle.

“He called out for you, you know,” the stocky woman beside Tank said, handing Simon his belongings back.

The statement threw Simon completely off guard for a moment. He swallowed the lump forming in his throat.

“...Did he now?”

She nodded, and bounced on her feet, presumably stretching her legs; she seemed rather light and agile despite all physical evidence to the contrary.

“Yeah. Rumour has it he called out for you before he was out. We actually heard him this morning at breakfast, shouting your name.”

Simon’s eyes narrowed; that would be something worth following up on later.

Tank yanked the door open, and Humvee beckoned Simon to enter.

“Well, you’re here now. So you’d better see for yourself,” Humvee said.

Simon crossed the threshold into the sterile room.

“We’ll keep watch outside here,” Tank assured gruffly.

Simon nodded. “I don’t suppose there’s any more security detail on the premises?”

Humvee shook her head. “Chief of Police said he couldn’t get anyone else. But we’re on a rotating shift. It’s fine. Not like he’s gonna do much harm.”
The door swung shut behind him, and Simon’s eyes fell upon the pale figure huddled up in the bed. The Phantom perked up as soon as he noticed Simon, wrenching his arms free from his sides with such force that his pulse oximeter flew off his finger and fell onto the floor.

"Prosecutor Blackquill! You came for me!"

Simon’s eyes widened; Fulbright’s voice, again.

*Blade about you, once more.*

Simon inhaled sharply, and a smirk crept up his lips.

“I must say, your assailant must’ve conked you out well enough such that you’ve lost all sense of self again. Then again...I suppose that is to be expected,” he said, keeping his eyes trained on the Phantom.

The Phantom’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“No, you wouldn’t, would you.” Simon muttered under his breath, moving to take a seat and pull out his legal pad and a pen from his satchel.

The Phantom settled into his pillows; he hardly resembled the salt-pillar man Simon had seen in the interrogation room just yesterday, but a tired, weary man, who wanted nothing more than to become one with the furniture.

Simon cleared his throat. “Do not read anything into my presence. This is a mere courtesy visit, to ask a few questions.”

“Huh.”

“I suppose the most important question is that of your name. What should I call you?”

“Whatever you like.”

“Seeing as you raised no objections to my providing you with your identity yesterday, I shall call you Nerium Oleander.”


A smirk slid onto Oleander’s face. “…My shitty parents named me well, didn't they.”

Simon frowned. “Oh?”

Oleander shrugged. The accent stayed as he spoke. “Cohdopian names...they’re just so predictable.”

“In what manner?”

“You can tell where people are from very easily. And...the names, they say something about those people,” he explained. “My n— this name, it’s very clear where I am from, and what it means.”

Simon shifted in his seat, his eyes falling to the emergency cord by the bed. “So you are aware of
“Maybe. I don’t know. Give me time.”

Simon’s lips pressed into a thin line. “I’m afraid we possess very little time. The international constabulary has launched a manhunt for your colleagues, to retrieve them dead or alive.”

“Well, you’ve found me, haven’t you?” Oleander countered. “Don’t worry about me. Worry about finding the others.”

“Ah, speaking of your colleagues, do you recall saying you would ‘rather eat shit than go back there’?”

Oleander frowned. “...No.”

Simon jotted that down, and then raised his head again; Oleander was smoothing down the bed sheets.

“...How is your current condition?”

Oleander opened his mouth and closed it again; for a second it seemed he was faltering, but he quickly composed himself. “I am fine.”

“I was told you had beckoned for me.”

“Oh. Did I?”

Simon nodded, and Oleander shrugged; still maintaining the same gestures, it seemed.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re here now. So, how about those questions?”

Simon cleared his throat. “I suppose...were you able to discern your attacker’s face?”

“Maybe.”

“So you were.”

“You’re putting words in my mouth, Blackquill,” he said wearily.

Simon pursed his lips; it would be best not to argue with him right now. He moved on.

“Do you know what your assailant was clothed in?”


“Do you recall what you were attacked with?”

Oleander craned his neck, proudly displaying the thin purple line across his neck.

“I’m sure you can guess,” he said. Then he let out a tired sigh, and pressed his head back against the pillows, certainly determined to meld into his surroundings. “This is boring.”

Simon leaned back in his seat; an ambulance siren wailed somewhere outside. “I am not sure what you expected.”

Oleander lurched forward, eyes shiftily darting about the room, taking in the stock-photo paintings on the walls and the various monitors producing various readings. “Not much security in here,
considering you’re in the same room as a mass-murderer.”

“I was assured you’re being kept under strict watch.”

“Big Brother is watching you.” Oleander said monotonously, pointing at the security camera hidden away in a top corner. He turned his head, facing Simon head-on. “Tell me, Blackquill, do you think I should be put on trial?”

*What a bizarre question.*

“Of course I do. Along with your cronies.”

Oleander pondered those words for a moment. “My cronies, you say?”

Simon pressed on. “The members of your terrorist cell.”

“Terrorist cell.” Oleander repeated, considering the word. “Hm. People have different names for the things they do, don’t they?”

Simon’s eyes narrowed. “...Would you care to elaborate on that?”

He shrugged. “Not really. Not right now.”

Simon packed his pen and pad back into his satchel, before lacing his fingers together. “...I must say, you’re rather communicative today. Perhaps that attack did some good.”

A grimace crept up Oleander’s lips. “Well...I haven’t much choice, have I?”

Simon unfolded his hands. “It is, however, rather convenient, for I can pose several questions and points that you have as of yet failed to address or clarify. In other words, we must begin our interrogations afresh.”

“Oh, how tedious.” Oleander said, perfectly capturing Simon’s voice. He gave a dismissive wave. “I don’t care. Do what you must.”

Simon shot up from his seat. “In that case, I shall return tomorrow.”

“Why not start now?”

“I have other matters to attend to.”

“Not like I’m going anywhere anyway,” Oleander muttered, and jerked his head to the door.

Simon retrieved his satchel and moved to the door. He was about to turn the door handle when Oleander’s words shook him to his core.

“Oh, hey, Prosecutor Blackquill — in justice we trust! ”

Simon whipped his head around; a perfect — or what Simon assumed to be a perfect — replica of Fulbright’s smile was plastered on Oleander’s pale features, complete with a two-finger salute.

“Wh—”

Then the imitation was no longer there, up in smoke and mirrors, with Oleander shrugging in his stark hospital gown.
“More like, injustice, we trust, no?”

Simon pondered those awful words all night long, and into the early hours of the morning, until Ema’s phone call came as he slipped on his boots.

“Hey Simon!”

“Ema…”

Simon could almost hear her grimace down the line. “Oof, you don’t sound too good.”

A humourless chuckle escaped his lips. “No, I don’t. As to be expected.”

Ema cleared her throat. “Well, I called to let you know we got the security camera footage from the prison.”

Simon perked up slightly. “Oh yes?”

“I’ve already sent it to your email, but to give you a quick rundown; a prison guard assaulted him from behind with what looks like a wire coil. A few minutes longer, and he’d be down in the morgue.”

“Are you implying—”

“That that was deliberate on the assailant’s part?” Ema finished for him. “Yeah, I’m thinking it was his old crew sending him a message. And given what we know, the other footage we’ve acquired, and also just based on height and build alone, I’m gonna say that was Johannes Birken posing as an officer.”

Simon pinched the bridge of his nose. “That would be a reasonable conclusion to draw.”

“I’ve got the tech guys combing through the footage right now; we’re hoping the audio recording might provide us with some more details. Either way, we’ve put out some more charges for Birken and Klaark as per Edgeworth’s request.”

“Of course, the manhunt,” Simon said, recalling his meeting the other day. He sucked in a deep breath and exhaled sharply. “Excellent work, Ema. Do apprise me of any further details.”

“No problem! And of course, I’ll let you know if there’s anything new,” she confirmed. “So, you going down today to see him?”

*Unfortunately.* “…Yes.”

“Well, good luck! Swing by the lab if you need anything.”

“Will do. Ah, you’ve settled in comfortably there?”

“Very!” Ema said. There was a brief pause, and Simon heard something crash in the background. “Sorry, can’t talk more, gotta run! Bye!”

The line went dead, and the warmth that had been bubbling in Simon’s stomach for those few minutes quickly dissipated.

*So be it,* Simon thought, before pocketing his phone and tugging on his coat.
“Anthyllis. I was born in Anthyllis,” Oleander said as soon as Simon walked into the room an hour later.

“Sorry?”

“I’m Allebahstian. That’s why the name is so obvious.”
Simon moved to sit down, pulling out his writing materials. “So you are somewhat aware of yourself.”

“It came back last night, after I ate my shitty yoghurt for dessert.”

“Just as you had previously consumed yoghurt and decided to betray myself and your cronies.”

“...Yes.”
Simon made a note of that; Oleander’s memories seemed, at the very least, to be muddled with his sense of self.

“You were implicated in a terrorist incident in Anthyllis in December 2019.”

“I...was. Yes, I was.”
Simon frowned; it seemed all too easy to pull information out of him now. Not that he was complaining but…

“Would you care to elaborate?”

Oleander shrugged. “Simple, really. Group of us got together, and decided to ram a van into a Christmas market.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Oleander echoed. “Because we weren’t happy with how things were.”

“‘We’ being…?”

Oleander sighed exasperatedly. “We being...my comrades, my so-called cronies; this terrorist cell.”
Simon sat up in his seat. Oleander continued. “I think...we had all fought in the Allebahstian and Borginian armies during the war. Then we all joined SEIL’s ranks, until we found ourselves out of jobs when they decided to reunify. Group of us got together April 2019, decided we weren’t happy with the reunification, so we were going to send out some messages. Infiltrate a few places; cause mayhem and havoc.”
Simon’s eyes narrowed. “You mean to maim and murder innocent individuals.”

Oleander shrugged. “We did what we had to do.”

Simon clenched his jaw and looked away. “You had no business instigating terrorist plots.”

“It’s all in the past now,” Oleander countered, emotionless.
Simon’s lips turned downward.

“Hardly,” he said quietly.
“Whatever you say.”

Simon changed tack. “Your diagnosis. Your...diagnosis of depersonalisation disorder; I assume that it permitted you to easily slip into identities over the years?”

“Yes. You could call it that.”

“How many identities have you absorbed?”

“...Somewhere in the thousands. I cannot provide an exact figure. The...ones from my SEIL days, you can find in the archives, as you said the other day. The others...since 2019, I don’t know if there are records.”

“How many of you are there in your little cell?”

Oleander shrugged. “I don’t know. The numbers have gone up over the years as more and more people have...become disillusioned and disgruntled by the status quo.”

“...Why did your group name itself ‘SEIL’?”

“We were too lazy to name ourselves something else. Helped to confuse people, and we had all been members of that secret service so why not take it?”

“...Had you been aware of the naming laws stipulating that any abolished names and titles were not to be reused?”

“Yes.”

Simon moved down his earlier list of questions. “Johannes Birken and Rebekah Klaark.”

“Yes...what about them?”

“They seem to know an awful lot about you.”

“Our...group has no hierarchy to it. We know...of each other.”

“I was under the impression that relations between Borginia and Cohdopia are rather strained. Would your cell have had a hand in any of that tension?”

Oleander scoffed and crossed his arms. “The politicians do their part for us. We...facilitate it.”

“Papilio Machaon,” Simon offered.

“Exactly. Bumbling fool of a defence minister; couldn’t shoot a gun if he tried.”

Simon leaned back in his seat. “Has this been a common theme; playing politicians off against each other?”

Oleander stroked his chin in a mock show of consideration. Then his hand fell to his side and he fixed Simon with a bored look.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Oleander shrugged. “Because it’s fun.”
“Why are you wilfully providing information on your group and your activities, given your identity is now compromised?”

“That's the same question as yesterday.” Oleander said. “And again, my answer is that I don’t have much of a choice. And...I don’t know.”

He yawned. “Now go. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

“...One last question.”

“Did you intend to murder my mentor that afternoon?”

Oleander’s eyes narrowed and his lips pressed into a thin line.

“I think we both know the answer to that question.”

Simon didn’t.

Ema called again in the evening with the excellent news that they had managed to procure the audio recording, which apparently matched Birken’s voice, and indicated a need for tighter security over the weekend given the ominous words he had said.

Taka also came by in the evening, sensing Simon’s need for company and distraction, and Saturday was spending loafing around, watching a Pink Princess OVA, checking his emails and paying bills; his new passport was due to arrive by courier next Thursday.

On Sunday morning Simon decided to return to Metis’ grave, once more in an old t-shirt and his hiking boots. It was sunny out, with a cool breeze, and he let his pale skin soak up the warmth as he cleaned up her site, dusting it and wiping the headstone, before placing his bouquet of marigolds, poppies, and white carnations next to a pot of somewhat recent, drying and decaying roses. Then he stood there for a while, his fingers touching the headstone, with words caught in his throat and thoughts screaming out at him.

Afterwards he walked back home, made himself a bowl of katsudon, and marathoned another season of the Steel Samurai. Sometime around six, just as he was thinking of making himself dinner, seeing as he really ought to be eating more, his phone chimed with a random text from Ema.

Ema [18:12 PM]: Thought you might like this.

Curious, Simon opened up the attachment.

It was a candid photo of him in the pub last week during Ema’s celebration. Taka sat perched on his shoulder whilst he spoke to a very exuberant Klavier and a cardboard cutout of the Chief Prosecutor. Ema had drunkenly suggested producing it at the print shop next door, joking that everyone had had a crush on Edgeworth at some point; a claim which Simon could unfortunately not deny on his part.

Below the image was a small caption that read ‘Sir, this is my emotional support hawk’.

Simon [18:15 PM]: Are you sure you meant to send this to me?

Ema [18:17 PM]: Yup. It's a really old meme.
Ema [18:17 PM]: Blame Kay. She came up with it.

Simon [18:19 PM]: Well...it is most appreciated.

It was true; he had thoroughly enjoyed last week’s drinks, if the barely legible notes in his journal and mood charts were anything to go by, and that was the only event he had recorded since his therapy session. Everything else was...

Ah well.

On another note, that reminded Simon he ought to speak to Athena again. He switched messaging applications to the one she favoured, and began to type hesitantly.

Simon [18:28 PM]: Apologies once again for the delay.

Simon [18:33 PM]: I have sought out psychotherapy on your recommendation.

Simon [18:35 PM]: It was fine. As to be expected.

Simon [18:38 PM]: Otherwise I remain bogged down in work.

That should do, he thought to himself, and set his phone down on the coffee table. One more episode, and he would make dinner.

Halfway through a particularly badly coordinated fight scene between the Tin Samurai and the Evil Magistrate — this is why he hated the fourth season — his phone chimed.

Athena [19:09 PM]: Hey, hey!!

Athena [19:10 PM]: Don’t worry about the delay. I figured you needed the space.

Athena [19:10 PM]: But that’s great to hear!!

Athena [19:11 PM]: I’m really happy for you, Simon.

Athena [19:12 PM]: I mean, it’s good you’re taking the initiative.

Athena [19:13 PM]: And like, talking to a third party helps.

Athena [19:14 PM]: Neutrality and all that.

Athena [19:14 PM]: Like the Swiss lol.

Athena [19:15 PM]: You ever been to Switzerland??

Athena [19:15 PM]: We should go sometime. Get lots of chocolate and cheese!!

Athena [19:16 PM]: Do a grand tour of Europe!!

Athena [19:18 PM]: Also, what do you mean your session was as to be expected??

Simon grimaced slightly; he wouldn’t bother responding just yet, and so he got up and made himself some fried rice with whatever leftovers he had — he’d have to go to shopping soon, which he was still dreading — and trudged through season four, falling asleep on the sofa.

He forwent visiting Oleander on Monday, choosing instead to update von Karma and Lang — both
seemed reasonably satisfied with his progress, and expressed the possibility of bringing in a criminologist for an interview later in the week — and to prepare for Camilo Nero’s upcoming trial.

He also met up with Ema on Tuesday morning to discuss the audio recording results, and the potential for trial in absentia for Johannes Birken and Rebekah Klaark in the event they fled, and, on a more casual note, he engaged Sebastian and Klavier in conversation at lunch. He was rather enjoying the banter until a call from Tank came through that Oleander would be discharged tomorrow, and he should come on down.

And so, here he was, back in the tiny hospital room with a bored-looking Oleander.

“You know, Blackquill, I don’t understand why you’re still here,” Simon tilted his head in puzzlement. He opened his mouth, about to ask for clarification, when Oleander continued. “because this isn’t exactly a courtesy call.”

He sat down and took out his writing materials. “It is my duty as a prosecutor to...interrogate you.”

“But you’re not exactly here as a prosecutor.”

Simon swallowed. He was about to object when Oleander waved him off dismissively.

“Anyway, I can empathise with you now, you know.”

A wry smile crept up Simon’s lips. “Can you?”

“Yeah, the food here’s shit,” he said, pulling a disgusted face. “And where you were too.”

“I wasn’t aware you possessed empathy.”

“I don’t. It was a statement.”

Simon leaned forward in his seat. “Speaking of empathy, or lack thereof...I wondered how your diagnosis came to be.”

Oleander cracked his knuckles. “How do you mean?”

“Disorders of the dissociative sort tend to arise from situations of extreme stress such as childhood abuse, or witnessing episodes of abuse or violence,” Simon explained. “Your psychiatric evaluation...is the one document I have come across in the archives with redacted information.”

“Interesting. Well, you’re not getting any answers out of me there.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t feel like talking about it.”

“Is it that you don’t feel like broaching the subject, or is it that you do not wish to broach it?”

“You decide.”

Simon leaned back in his seat, studying Oleander; his face wore that same stony glare as the other day.

“In that case, would you be able to divulge anything pertaining to your previous assignments?”
“That’s a lot to ask.”

“I suppose...my question is: are you aware of your previous assignments?”

“...Of course.”

“And yet you could not recall what you had said to your colleagues in your initial meeting with them.”

“Ah.”

“Well?”

A shrug. “I don’t know.”

Simon leaned back in his seat, tapping the page. “...Why did you join the army?”

Oleander fell back against the pillows, and stared at the ceiling. “It was either that or the navy, and I don’t like open bodies of water.”

“I wasn’t aware you were capable of liking and disliking things.”

Oleander yawned. “I can dislike things. I don’t like shitty yoghurt. Doesn’t mean there’s any emotion attached to it.”

“Why were you dishonourably discharged?”

“...I cannot remember,” Oleander grumbled, and Simon followed his gaze; he was staring at the crack in the ceiling again, and it looked like a cross between a butterfly and some malformed bunny infected with myxomatosis.

He moved on. “Who is Erikh Qvinn?”

Oleander’s face split into a smirk. “A nom de guerre. I chose it deliberately.”

“Why?”

“Schoolboy me probably thought he was cool. You know, like how all children find at least one ruler of some sort ‘cool’. Until they learn of their brutal reigns and...Well, Erikh Qvinn, Ruler of the Borgenian Plains, was still fascinating,” he said robotically.

Oleander then turned to face Simon, tucking his arm behind his head as though he were just some child on a sleepover, about to impart some gossip under the covers.

“He committed patricide, you know.”

Simon’s eyes narrowed; that might be a clue, so he quickly marked it down. He was about to follow up with another question when Oleander interrupted, somewhat apropos of nothing.

“...I do not know how to behave as myself. I have always known myself to so easily become someone else, to be a...social chameleon. To be pliable, made digestible, palatable.”

Simon studied his face; the nervous phantom he had seen in court, terrified that his identity was going to be revealed, was nowhere to be seen.

“...You are hardly what I’d call digestible.”
“No. But there we have it,” he said, turning on his back again.

Silence threatened to fall on them before Simon blurted out a question. “How long did you intend to continue as Bobby Fulbright?”

“As long as it was necessary,” Oleander said without a beat.

Simon frowned. “I comprehend that the psychological analysis conducted by M— Dr Cykes was necessary for you to obtain. But beyond that, would you...have stayed?”

“Perhaps.” Oleander said. “Robert Fulbright was...rather easy to mimic.”

“In what manner?”

“He was very...righteous, very predictable, very... empathetic,” Oleander spat out. “Great big family he had up north. All so... nice and sweet , and yet if you peeled back the layers…”

“Did all your...assignments entail you becoming family men?”

A tired smirk curled up Oleander’s lips. “Trying to psychoanalyse me, Blackquill? Hah! Go on, try.”

“No, thank you. I merely...extrapolated from what little and vague information you have provided me with.”

“Information you dug up, because you’re a nosy bastard,” he retorted.

“Silence.” Simon rubbed at his thighs. He opened his mouth and closed it again. “...‘The calm before the storm’; did I really utter that on the eve of my execution?”

“No,” Oleander said, voice flat, “and it doesn’t matter now.”

“It does matter.”

Oleander rounded on him. “Does it?”

Simon pursed his lips, and they stared at each other for a moment; there was such an emptiness in Oleander’s eyes; it was just an empty abyss, a bottomless pit.

Is this what you saw, Metis, as you drew your last breaths?

He broke their eye contact, lowering his gaze to the tiled floor and his hold on his thighs tightened. Somewhere in the distance he heard a clap of thunder.

“...Tell me.”

“Hm?”

Simon raised his head. “Was it all a lie?”

“What?”

“Don’t play me for a fool. I am referring to... everything now. Everything you uttered, and everything you did in our...prior arrangement. Was it all a bloody lie?”

Oleander’s eyes narrowed. “Ah.”
“Well, was it?”

“...You misunderstand.”

Simon frowned, and Oleander’s lips curled up into a smirk again. “You of all people, being a psychologist, would know that...people are their most honest when they’re anonymous; when they’re hiding behind a mask.

“And...just as you suggest I took on certain masks to present myself a family man for presumed family fuck-ups in my own life that I am not aware of because I can’t recall half my memories then...you should also know that...people do some very debauched things when they hide under their masks.”

Oleander snorted. “...Do you remember?”

Simon stayed silent. His thumb rubbed along the scars on his wrists.

“...I lied about many things. But not us.” Oleander said quietly, an air of finality punctuating his words.

Simon looked up, meeting his eyes. Without thinking he leaned in closer, and before Simon could register anything, Oleander had tugged him down by the tie and crashed their lips together.

Simon’s eyes widened, and his mind raced with thoughts. He knew he should pull away, should shove Oleander down into the bed, should alert the guards—

But he didn’t.

Instead, his first instinct was to stay.

It wasn’t a kiss so much as a bare essential, something necessary, something mundane and normal. Though Simon was hardly normal, he had never been normal; after all, he’d been touch-starved for years, touch-starved until that bumbling Fool Bright had appeared by his cell one night and—

This is Metis’ murderer! Stop it! You will tarnish her, and her memory! You will sully yourself!

But he didn’t stop.

He didn’t know how, to say nothing of the fact that he couldn’t help himself, couldn’t help himself giving into temptation. His right hand disappeared under the thin blanket and Oleander groaned and—

Simon’s hand fell limply at his side moments later, palm wet and sticky.

He was disgusted with himself.

The air in the room had turned musty.

“You’re a bastard,” Simon spat out, not to Oleander, but to the heart monitor, beeping away; a reminder that life went on.

In spite of everything, he was still here. He was alive, and this wasn’t some depraved dream.

Oleander adjusted the straps on his hospital gown. There was a sharpness to his cold eyes.

“Oh, I know.”
Simon made to stand; he needed to find a bathroom, he needed to rid himself of this foul filth. Two long strides, and he would be out of the room, out of this hell he had crafted for himself.

And he didn’t know why but as soon as he reached for the door handle...he looked back. Looked back at the plain-faced man in a starch hospital gown.

And it looked so normal. If Simon had the energy he would laugh. Or cry.

Normal, save for the nasty smile that had made itself known on Oleander’s face.

“...I think you should give up the ghost, Blackquill.”

Unbeknownst to Simon, as he stormed out, and as Oleander’s eyes followed his retreating figure...

That would be the last time he would see the Phantom.

Chapter End Notes

Dun, dun, dun!

This chapter turned out shorter than I expected it to, but we're nearing the end of the story so a lot of what has been brought up here will be concluded in these last few chapters, and in the next one, we're going to go back to Miles and Franziska going abroad!

Let me know what you think of how I characterise the Phantom? I find he's very difficult to portray in a meaningful way...and at times I feel like I'm not doing his character justice. It doesn't help he's also rather an unlikable and irredeemable little man.

Also, random fun fact: I headcanon Simon as bisexual, so that's cool.
April 4, 2028

Dread set in for Miles as soon as he stepped off the plane in Skande and followed the signs for passport control. He’d managed to keep it at bay all through the flight, including the layover in Zheng Fa, but now he could no longer ignore that dread, and the guilt and anxiety pooling in his stomach.

There were a number of reasons for his current state but chief among them was his thought that he shouldn’t have left Simon on his own. Not just that, but that he should never have assigned Simon to this case; here he was going on about the importance of mental health and emotional well-being, and he’d probably utterly crippled Simon’s with the further trauma and stress.

Miles shuffled his feet, sidestepping into the queue for the electronic passport gates. Furthermore, Nerium Oleander’s murder and the subsequent political and diplomatic storm that ensued in the days afterwards had added to his dread and anxiety for this joint Bordinia-Cohdopia summit.

Though they had tried to keep a tight lid on that and their investigations, the newspapers had managed to uncover them, spewing all sorts of unhelpful and unnecessary rhetoric, from decrying the ‘egregious nature in which these extrajudicial killings were committed’ to blatant racism with suggestions of ‘evicting Bordinian oligarchs from their vacant London and New York properties’.

Miles pressed his passport into the provided counter and looked up at the camera. The software recognised him, and the glass doors swished open, welcoming him into Bordinia and leading him to the baggage reclaim signs. He stole a glance behind him to find Franziska was still in the queue, checking her phone.

Another thing weighed on his mind as he walked down the hallway; Johannes Birken and Rebekah Klaark had somehow managed to bypass border control at LAX last Wednesday and board separate planes to separate undisclosed locations, widening the scope of the manhunt. That being said, Miles was certain they were in Bordinia right now, supported by a very out-of-the-blue work email from Kay detailing several hacking attempts on servers here in Skande ahead of this summit.

Miles stopped at the baggage carousel that was servicing his flight, setting down his briefcase and rubbing at his temples; he felt a migraine coming on from all this stress. He took a few deep breaths and tried to calm down; this was only to be a short trip — one of those unfortunate ones where he’d be shuttled from hotel to conference centre and see nothing of the city, though he had been to Bordinia plenty of times over the years to take the time to appreciate its culture and history — and soon he’d be back home with Phoenix and Trucy.

The suitcases began to trundle down the conveyor belt and Miles kept his eye out for his and Franziska’s. A throat cleared behind him, pulling him out of any more thoughts.
“Miles.”

Miles turned around; Franziska wore a tight-lipped expression on her face, gripping her phone. “Yes?”

“I must leave you to handle the summit alone momentarily; Agent Lang has just informed me they may have located Rebekah Klaark in District Thirteen.”

*How convenient.* “...I see.”

“Would you collect my baggage and deposit it in my room?”

“Not to worry. Do let me know...if anything arises.”

Franziska nodded, and Miles watched her briskly receding figure as she headed straight for the taxi ranks. He checked his watch, and sighed; it was going to be a long day.

Thankfully for Franziska, the taxi ride was quiet and quick, roaring down the ring road that surrounded the city; Skande was rather a small and bleak capital city, still displaying remnants of Soviet-era infrastructure.

But what it lacked in style and grace, it more than made up for in its eco-friendly policies; over the years the central government had enacted several ‘green laws and practices’ which meant Skande and its outer regions were absolutely covered in swathes of countryside boasting sustainable farming methods and dotted with recycling plants and electrical car hubs.

And District Thirteen very clearly fell into this massive green belt with its rows of quaint country cottages and wheat fields that stretched out for miles against the overcast sky. As the taxi crawled through the cobbled streets and gravel paths, Franziska kept an eye out for the address.

Sure enough, it was impossible to miss the squadron of armoured vehicles parked outside one such cottage. Franziska instructed the taxi to stop here and wait, paid and marched up to a very wolfish-looking Lang speaking with a police tactical team.

She listened as Lang continued his debrief until he gave the orders for them to prepare and he addressed her.

“The local police got a call at around seven, just an hour ago, from some of the neighbours for a welfare check; they said a woman had just moved in here as of Thursday and hasn’t been out of the house since. Given its suspicious nature they alerted the national police who, given our liaison with them, informed us,” Lang explained tiredly.

Franziska nodded. She was about to say something when the radio receiver at Lang’s shoulder crackled and he responded to it.

“Go in. Copy,” he ordered.

They watched as twelve dark-uniformed, faceless shields of armour knocked down the sturdy wooden door and filed into the house. Franziska had seen plenty of SWAT teams infiltrate dwellings before in this formulaic fashion; they would enter, split into teams and take different rooms and floors, searching for their intended target.

“...Individual found. Entry permitted.”
Lang pressed the receiver, and gestured at Franziska to follow him in.

They entered, moving through the bare, whitewashed walls — no photographs or plaques or religious objects present — until they located the living room.

Slumped in the armchair, head turned to the right side, was Rebekah Klaark. Dead.

“We found her like this,” announced one of them; Franziska spotted a fireplace in the corner, the dying embers releasing feeble strings of smoke.

Lang turned. The shield of armour held up a plastic evidence bag with a vial inside.

“She ingested the cyanide found in this vial. Enough to act between two to six hours. A glass with a trace amount was found in the kitchen sink. We reckon she’s been dead for two hours now.”

“And that,” he offhandedly gestured to a sheet of paper on the oak table beside the window, “I’m guessing, is a suicide note?”

“A letter, addressed to an ‘Anne-Marie’. No stamp or address.”

Lang nodded and inhaled sharply. “Right. We’ll need to notify the next of kin, and take the body down for an autopsy just to be safe.”

“Will do. We’ll...get the local police in again.”

Lang nodded. “Call me if you need me.”

He gestured to Franziska and the two exited the cottage. Lang sighed and dug his boots into the gravel.

“That’s...seven now. Seven out of sixteen found. And the fourth...suicide.”

“Do you think this was...planned on their part?”

“The suicides?”

Franziska nodded.

“I think there’s evidence to suggest that. But...not enough yet. Killing themselves to avoid jail time…” Lang trailed off and shrugged. “Anyway, this is my last case on the field.”

Franziska cocked an eyebrow. “You hadn’t mentioned that when we…”

Lang shook his head. “I only just found out last week; Head of Criminal Investigation in Lyon said I’m due for a promotion. Transferral. Some kind of cushy job where they fly me around the world to conferences.”

“I suppose congratulations are in order then,” Franziska said.

“Heh. I can think of a few ways I’d like to celebrate.”

A knowing smirk appeared on Franziska’s face for a brief moment. “If that is all for now...I shall return to the summit and inform Miles Edgeworth.”

“Fine by me.” Lang said, before leaning in to peck Franziska on the cheek. “I’ll...come by later if I can. Otherwise, call me.”
Mieru Conference Centre was anything if not overcrowded, bursting at the seams with reporters, watchdogs and interested parties such as Miles. Conversations in various tongues — Borginian and Cohdopian unmistakably among them — flooded his ears, emphasising this summit’s international scope.

The conference itself was nothing much to comment on, it being a series of summits and negotiations held between Borginia and Cohdopia in recent months to stave off tensions and build better relations. Nonetheless, Miles did find himself intrigued by the manners of address and speech displayed on the TV screens; it wasn’t all that different to his courtroom battlefield really.

He felt something brush against his shoulder in the crowd, followed by a very familiar searing pain across the backs of his calves.

“Ngh...Franziska,” he greeted, bending down to rub at the fresh wounds. “You were quick.”

“Of course. I have information to impart.”

“Oh?”

He listened intently as Franziska explained their discovery of Rebekah Klaark’s body.

“...I see.”

“Of course, it is far less than ideal and, dare I say, cowardly for these terrorists to avoid facing their makers. But...I can only hope that they do meet divine retribution, if their faith demands that of them,” Franziska said, stroking at her whip. With a sigh, she added, “And do you have anything to report?”

Miles shook his head. “You didn’t miss anything here. The summit has been progressing tentatively; there’s a Swiss chairman, as to be expected, who is moving down the agenda rather quickly. Their negotiations are weakest on financial and military points, but strongest in areas that concern international crime and law.”

“That is promising,” Franziska said.

“And tomorrow they will be discussing international treaties and Borginia’s accession to NATO and the EU, which—”

“Which we shall attend,” she finished for him.

“Of course,” Miles conceded. “But before that, I was hoping to engage the foreign ministers in a conversation, as was our intention with this trip.”

“You can do that. In the meantime I shall make my way to the hotel for some rest.”

Miles nodded. “Yes, you rest up. I’ll relay my findings at dinner.”

He watched Franziska be swallowed up by the crowds, timed perfectly with the large double doors opening off to the side, revealing Colias Palaeno in his sharp suit and slick ponytail and a tall blonde woman of athletic build dressed just as sharply in dark suit.

Miles braced himself for impact as a sea of reporters clamouring up to them, bombarding them with questions, thrusting cameras and microphones into their faces.

“...Thank you very much,” he heard Palaeno say.
On that cue, Miles sidled past the people, moving to walk alongside Palaeno. Palaeno noticed him and stopped.

“Ah, Mr Edgeworth! It’s good of you to come!” he greeted, and Miles became acutely aware of the cameras on him.

But Palaeno paid the attention no heed, and sidestepped to reveal the woman. Her searing blue eyes peered into Miles, as though trying to read his stance.

“Allow me to introduce you to my counterpart, Andreja Amantes,” he said. Then he turned to Amantes, and added, “This is Miles Edgeworth; Chief Prosecutor of Los Angeles. His investigations into the Phantom have brought him to this part of the world.”

Miles bowed politely at that, and Amantes’ gaze softened. “Of course, you have prosecuted plenty of high-profile cases here in Borginia.”

“The Borginian courts have certainly gained my respect, Your Excellency.”

Amantes smiled at that. Palaeno cleared his throat. “Let us continue this conversation in another venue.”

Miles found himself ushered into a plain conference room behind another door, very much resembling the Cohdopian defence ministry in its lack of decor and detail. They all took their seats, with Amantes and Palaeno side by side and Miles opposite them. A jug of water and three glasses sat between them.

“I would have thought the prime minister would have accompanied you on this trip,” Miles said once he had made himself comfortable.

Palaeno chuckled, lacing his fingers together. “He’s in Brussels for an EU summit and since he cannot be in two places at once...I have filled in for him here.”

Then his features pulled into a tight frown. “But onto business...we heard the news from our intelligence sources.”

Miles nodded. “Yes. Death by poisoning.”

“How so?” Amantes asked, securing a bobby pin into her elaborate platinum-blonde plaits.

“An individual posing as a nurse entered his room late last Tuesday night and administered atroquinine through an IV drip,” Miles explained. “This individual, Rebekah Klaark, a Borginian, has just been found dead as of an hour ago.”

Amantes frowned. “This is very grave. When Mr Palaeno had informed our delegation of this copycat ‘SEIL’, we certainly hadn’t expected anything of this scope.”

“No, we hadn’t. In fact, I think we were naïve in that regard,” Palaeno commented. “But..the Cohdopian Intelligence Bureau, under Erynnis Tages’ command, has been able to establish their motives.”

“Oh?” Miles prompted. “How were you able to come across that information?”

Amantes answered. “Our servers here in Skande at the Department of State Security were hacked a couple of days ago. Instead of stealing our intelligence, we actually received several documents from individuals claiming to be part of ‘SEIL’. This, we shared with our Cohdopian counterpart.”
“...And?”

Palaeno cleared his throat. “We discovered that, commencing with that dreadful attack in Anthyllis in 2019, and progressing from there, with further assignments, they intended to play our two countries off against each other, such that tensions would escalate and a war would follow. With this conflict in place, they would profit from the power vacuum left behind and install their own leaders and policies.”

“Then it is good our summits have been taking place,” Amantes said.

Palaeno turned to her. “Yes, I was just saying to Mr Edgeworth last time, about the importance of communication.”

A polite smile traced up Miles’ lips. “So, as I understand it, Nerium Oleander’s assignments, and essentially all that organisation’s missions, intended to provoke your relationship?”

“Yes,” Amantes confirmed. “We have reason to believe — so our public prosecutors tell us — that all their missions intended, one way or another, to undermine our relationship. One of the ways they did so was through industrial espionage or by sending moles into our military intelligence units.”

“Papilio Machaon and Kallima Inachus were casualties in this regard,” Palaeno added quietly.

“Yes. Plenty of video cameras placed Nerium Oleander at various Cohdopian embassies; I suspect then that his missions entailed him playing a Borginian military official or a mole,” Miles recalled, tapping his finger on his upper arm. “We first took notice of him in 2020 at Cosmos Space Centre; in his interrogations he claimed he had been ‘hired’ by Borginia to gather information about the rockets and robotics technology.”

“Of course, we can neither confirm nor deny these testimonies,” Amantes said.

“No. My colleagues said much the same when his identity was uncovered. In fact we have found ourselves in this dilemma because he couldn’t neither confirm nor deny his previous statements as he seemed unsure of his persona and his persona’s actions.”

Palaeno furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. “How do you mean?”

“As Erikh Qvinn, he could very clearly explain the motives and the background behind some of his work. But as Nerium Oleander he fluctuated; he could remember certain obscure things, but not major things like previous missions. We do not know if he was deliberately holding back or he, as Nerium Oleander, genuinely did not remember.”

“Hm...That is, unfortunately, not unusual,” Amantes said.

“No...But seeing as he fluctuated between such extremes, and our time with him was so short, we regrettably couldn’t get information from him that pertained to his identity,” Miles leaned forward in his seat. “The archives were an excellent asset, Mr Palaeno, but...my colleagues were wondering if you had any more information on that.”

“Of course, Mr Edgeworth. What do you want to know?”

“His history. One of my colleagues wanted to know what brought on his dishonourable discharge from the army.”

Palaeno’s face turned grave. “I am afraid...that it is not a pleasant tale.”
Miles tilted his head, curious.

Palaeno began. “His parents were young and unmarried, in an inter-ethnic relationship, and he was the only child. He was...subjected to horrific abuse as a child from his father, such that social services had to step in and rehome him. He was raised partly by foster parents, partly by his mother, until he was sixteen and joined the call to arms on the Allebahstian side of the civil war.”

He paused to take a deep breath. “And...during the war, he deserted. He fled the battlefield and made for a tiny Babahlese village called Hesperiidae — not far from my hometown, actually — where he located his father, and his new wife and baby, and...he murdered them all.”

The room was silent for a moment as Palaeno allowed those words to sink in. Amantes shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“...Regrettably, he and the other soldiers who had been given a dishonourable discharge...they were welcomed back in for testing after the divide, to see if they were eligible to join the new intelligence bureau; SEIL. He was given a psychiatric evaluation which diagnosed him with depersonalisation disorder as a result of the abuse he experienced as a child.

“That abuse, and his hatred for his father, translated into a wider hatred for the Babahlese people, which, back then, made him an excellent candidate for SEIL. And in the those missions he adopted plenty of identities, acting as a mole and undermining Babahl’s security, until the reunification. And then rest, as they say, is history.”

Palaeno paused again, this time pouring himself a glass of water and sipping at it.

“I do not deny that Cohdopia’s actions in allowing these men into SEIL then were unforgivable and condemnnable. It certainly was a dark era, and we cannot sweep it under the carpet. It is a frank discussion that needs to be had, so that the victims can be heard, and so...we can move on as a collective body.”

“I fully support the delegation’s statements,” Amantes said quietly.

Palaeno nodded at her in acknowledgement, before turning back to Edgeworth. “Despite the injustice done unto him, and perhaps to his comrades, the state of Cohdopia widely condemns his actions. And I’m sure the state of Borginia will join me when I say this.”

Amantes nodded. “Borginia does.”

Palaeno glanced at his watch and smiled at Miles. “I’m afraid that’s all I have time for. Duty calls, you understand.”

Miles rose from his seat. “Of course.”

“Thank you for coming to Borginia,” Amantes said, shaking his hand.

“Not at all,” he said, moving to shake Palaeno’s hand. “In fact, I shall join you on your way outside.”

He was back on a rooftop.

Back on a rooftop with the night still young and traffic crawling along the streets around him at a snail’s pace. Rush hour.
He didn’t know how he felt about all this. numb, tired, disoriented.

If anything, in fact, he was happy to be back home, with his trusty hot chocolate stashed away in his small flat, and his trusty Steyr Scout rifle his father had brought back from abroad and modified to suit the Borgenian Army snipers.

He was back where he belonged; home ground, home territory. Klaark didn’t like that he did his missions against that familiar backdrop, hidden away atop buildings, weaselled into small canopies. But what did she know? She was dead now.

Well...as happy as he was to back on home turf, he knew he needed to savour it. It wasn’t going to last very long, that was for sure.

He exhaled, and set up his rifle, mounting it, and then pointing it downward to capture the sleek black cars parked outside the large complex. It was a cool night. No breeze, which meant conditions were excellent. He was only equipped with five rounds, but that should do.

His muscles tensed slightly as he lay on his stomach to take his position. There was something comforting about the way his heart fluttered and his toes and fingers twitched excitedly; a confirmation of sorts.

A confirmation that he knew what he was doing; this certainly wasn’t the first time he’d targeted someone, shot to kill, or to render injured. He didn’t like doing it, just like he didn’t like fighting in the war, but it was in his ‘job description’.

He had to — no, needed to — do this. It was in their manifesto. He had signed up for this, hadn’t he?

At least...this was to be the last time. And he would savour it.

The clock was ticking. He tapped his fingers together; one-two-three, one-two-three. No one could tell him to stop fidgeting anymore.

Fidgeting meant he was stalling for time, meant he was ready.

He positioned his hands, and made to aim for the entrance to the complex. He hoped he wouldn’t have to wait very long.

It was a nice night anyway; he liked overcast skies, and traffic that muffled his suppressed shots. Much more than windy December evenings perched atop bombed-out courtrooms.

And...despite his dissatisfaction with this part of his job, he couldn’t deny it was in the interests of humanity; his fellow humans, his comrades in arms, deserved quick deaths. No drawn-out goodbyes, no sickly bodies with terrified eyes staring death in the face.

His muscles tensed again, prompting him to pay extra close attention.

“Hello,” he whispered, recognising three familiar figures emerge from the complex through his aperture sights.

This was it. He needed to get them before they began to move in different directions to different places.

And so, he took a deep breath and...
He pulled the trigger.
Where I End and You Begin

Chapter Summary

X'll mark the place// Like the parting of the waves// Like a house falling in the sea// In the sea

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 4, 2028

“Breaking News: gunshots have been reported in Borgia’s capital city, Skande. Inhabitants have been ordered to stay put or to seek refuge as the city is currently on lockdown while police search for an armed fugitive. More details to follow shortly.”

Simon Blackquill [10:17 AM]: All alright?

Miles Edgeworth [22:37 PM]: Fine. Fortunately no deaths. Ten reported injured in fair condition. Assailant has been found dead.

Miles Edgeworth [22:40 PM]: May return to LA later than intended. Gavin in charge in the meantime.

“Hello Simon,” Munira greeted soothingly in her typical tunic and trousers on Friday afternoon. She shook his hand before welcoming him back into her humble office, with the sunlight spilling in through the blinds, casting shadows on the furniture.

He took his seat on the same leather sofa and watched as she moved to sit opposite him, clipboard and pen at the ready.

“So I noticed you cancelled our last scheduled appointment. How are you?”

Simon dragged a hand down his face. “I feel like utter shite.”

Concern etched into Munira’s features. “Oh, what happened?”

Simon took a deep breath. “My— That is, the man I’d been interrogating, is dead. Killed by his colleagues. Furthermore, my superior was caught up in a terrorist attack three days ago.”

“Is he alright?”

“Thankfully, yes. I’m afraid I cannot elaborate further as the details are sealed to those outside the investigation.”

“I understand.” Munira said, relaxing slightly. “But let’s focus on the first part of your statement: remind me again, this man you’ve been interrogating, he had murdered your mentor and posed as your colleague for a year?”
Simon looked away. “Yes.”

“...That is unfortunate.”

“Most,” Simon emphasised. He swallowed down the lump in his throat. “And I...I do not know how to comprehend the situation. I do not know...how I feel with regards to it all. His last moments, you see, they were...horrible. I…”

Simon shuddered, and buried his face in his hands.

Why is this so bloody hard?!

“...It’s okay. Take all the time you need.”

Simon took a few moments to compose himself. “I...Before my exoneration, when we were under such false pretences...I had...been engaged with him. Sexually.”

“I see,” Munira said, and Simon dared not look up. Noting this, she assured him, “Don’t worry, I’m not judging you. If I did, I would be out of a job.”

He snorted derisively; he supposed that statement was intended to be comforting but…

Ah well.

From what he could tell, Munira didn't react to that. Instead he heard her shift slightly in her seat.

“Do you mind if we explore that a bit further?”

“Do as you please,” he muttered, eyes still trained on the oriental carpet.

Munira nodded and jotted something down. “So was it just sex?”

“Yes,” Simon said, rubbing at his wrists. A rue smile crept up his lips. “The clink, as I’m sure you can imagine, is rather a lonely place. I was...in need of sexual release, and he...well, he provided that for me.”

“What was sex like with him? Did you use protection?”

“It was...sadomasochistic,” Simon said, looking up to meet her hazel eyes. “Do not misunderstand me: I fully consented, and I had been the one to initiate such activities. After our first encounter, I...I had suggested we take it further, using his electroshock weapons to provide me with...”

Munira raised her brows. “He shocked you?”

“Yes,” he said. “And I...derived erotic pleasure from it.”

She set down her pen and leaned forward. “But Simon...Regardless of how consenting you were, that could have been very dangerous.”

“I was well aware of that, and — once more, I must reiterate — I consented fully,” Simon answered, tone snippy. He looked back down at his feet again. “But, of course, I was perfectly aware our...relationship — if it could ever be called one — was certainly compromised through its power imbalance; I had been an inmate, and he, supposedly, a member of the law enforcement in a far greater position of authority.”

“So you were aware of these risks, and yet you continued to have sex with him?”
“...Yes.”

“Why?”

Simon’s gaze moved to the potted snake plant beside him. “I suppose...I wanted to push him to the edge. At the time I felt very frustrated and angry with myself and the situation I was in; I was more than prepared to die, and so I felt that prolonging it with this absurd notion of rehabilitation was...pointless. Delaying the inevitable.”

A sardonic smile. “So imagine my disbelief and uncertainty when I find myself free, with the prospect of interrogating the man who had come to know me in the most intimate of ways...”

Simon drew in a sharp breath, meeting her eyes again. “...I never suspected him. Not once. I’m sure he’d behaved oddly at times, but I suppose I chose to ignore such behaviour as I was, for lack of a better term, infatuated with him.”

Munira frowned. “Infatuated?”

“Perhaps infatuated isn’t the right word...But I turned a blind eye where convenient.”

“So you turning a blind eye, did that mean you felt you had feelings for him — whoever he was?”

“I’m— I can’t say for certain,” he said, frowning. “I suppose I did.”

Simon opened his mouth and closed it again, before he leaned back in his seat to ponder the question for moment.

“You see, I had found myself, at times, attracted to his stubborn and incorrigible nature, his hot-blooded pursuit for justice, and his kindness and generosity. But...as I’ve now learnt, I never knew...Robert. Thus, I’m left to question my attraction to him because I never knew if he was behaving as Robert would have done, or as himself. So I am uncertain as to...”

“As to what or who you were attracted to?” Munira finished for him.

“Precisely.”

“Did you ever bring this up with him? Your feelings or your relationship to him?” Munira flipped a few pages on her clipboard. “I ask because you said last time that you felt you were ‘vacillating between extremes’; you didn’t know whether to ask him personal or professional questions during your interviews.”

“That is an excellent point to bring up and...” he trailed off, the sardonic smile creeping up his lips again. “Well, such discussions were never held until death came knocking on his door.”

“What did you talk about?”

“I...asked him if our arrangement had been a lie; a way for him to extract information out of me. And...he said it hadn’t been a lie. Then he— he kissed me, and before I knew it, I had brought him to sexual climax.”

“How did you feel then?”

“Disgusted. Ashamed. I felt as though I were tarnishing my mentor’s memory.”

Munira frowned. “Why her memory?”
“...For I was fraternising with her murderer! And...I never uncovered the full truth behind her death, for one could never be sure if anything he had uttered was the truth, especially not when he was uncertain of himself!”

He faltered, looking away again. “...I will never know that truth.”

Munira crossed her legs. “And because you don’t know the truth, you feel you don’t get closure, correct?”

“Indeed. I am left with far more questions than answers, and so I feel my work was all for naught.”

She tilted her head, tapping her pen on her clipboard. “But is that really true?”

“What do you mean?”

“You say your work was all for naught, but let me reframe this for you: what have you been able to achieve, both personally and professionally?”

Simon leaned back in his seat again. “Well, my investigation permitted us to uncover his identity. And Interpol’s subsequently managed to arrest several more individuals associated with him.”

Munira nodded, prompting him to continue.

“I’ve also, as I said last time, managed to strike up new acquaintances and rekindle old ones.”

“Right. And have you been recording this in your journal and charts?”

“Given my recent set of circumstances, I have recorded naught but one entry. But I thoroughly enjoyed that outing.”

“That’s great to hear. Would it be something you’d do again?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

Munira set her pen down and clasped her hands together. “Great. Because having friends around — people you know and trust — will really help you get through this difficult time. You’ll have that support to fall back on, which is essential, and as you said last time, it’ll help you in other ways.”

“I suppose.”

“...Do you feel you could be in a relationship someday?” Munira asked, quickly following up with, “I’m not saying this in the sense of you being in a relationship is the end game — the be all and end all — but given your recent experiences and your outlook, do you feel that could be possible someday?”

A sharp inhale. “Perhaps. But I’d wager it’s a very low priority now, for I feel I must focus my attentions and energy within. Furthermore...I’d prefer to feel more comfortable with myself before I enter another relationship, and in one that is preferably safe, sane and consensual in a sexual context.”

“So you would prefer to work on yourself and on cultivating friendships?”

Simon nodded. “Yes.”

“That’s absolutely fine,” Munira said with a smile. “I was thinking, to complement that, you should also learn to enjoy your own company outside.”
Simon frowned, and Munira elaborated.

“There’s a real value, I say, to being in public. You don’t have to be social, just be in public. Even walking the aisles of a big mall, or around your local park. It allows you to adjust to your new surroundings, as well as to reclaim that environment on your own accord.” Reclaiming that environment, adjusting to those new surroundings.

“Hm, I suppose it would aid me in reducing my anxiety,” Simon conceded. Then, with a smirk, he added, “This city certainly has no shortage of eccentric characters.”

“That’s a great start already!” Munira said, chuckling. Then she picked up her pen again. “So let’s talk about something right now that would you get you out around other people. What do you like to do?”

“I’ve always been a fan of the arts. My parents would frequently take me to the theatre.”

“Well we have some great rakugo theatres these days; those have really grown in popularity in the last five years, and you can always catch a performance on the weekend. There’s also lots of museums and galleries you can visit. Botanical gardens too,” Munira suggested. “How do you feel about that?”

“I suppose I’d be open to such solo outings,” he said. “I’ve also been intending to get back into an exercise regimen.”

“That’s a great idea — would you want to do that at a gym or by yourself?”

“For now, my lodging provide me with enough space to practise my aikido and iaido.”

“Good.” Munira said. Then, eyeing the small clock on the table, she added, “Well, that’s all we can manage for today.”

Simon rose, picking up his satchel. Munira moved to grab her organiser from the desk. “I won’t set you any extra homework, but I do suggest you continue with the journals and the charts. Just take the initiative with friendships really.”

“Very well then,” Simon nodded, swinging his satchel over his shoulder.

“So, when do you want to come in next time?”

“In a fortnight?”

Munira flicked through her organiser. “I’ll put you down for the twenty-first, then? At five?”

Simon nodded.

“Alright then. Oh, and,” she started, rising from her seat to retrieve a small plastic wallet from her desk. “Here’s that goodie bag. Please do take the time to look through it.”

Simon scanned it briefly before tucking it into his satchel. “Thank you.”

Munira smiled, and walked him to the door.

“Well, thank you for coming today. And...have a good weekend, Simon.”

He shook her hand. “Likewise.”
Good weekend meant Simon finally felt inspired to make a start on his redecorating process, watching season five of the Steel Samurai as he was perched on ladders, painting the living room and hallway in dark pewter grey.

It also meant Taka came by sometime in the mid-afternoon, prompting him out of the flat for a long walk around People Park. Simon also took the time to bask in the sunlight, reading his book, and watching the world go by; the little old ladies with their little old dogs; the hyperactive children tearing down the footpaths with balls and frisbees; and the angsty teenagers with awful music blaring out of their loudspeakers.

When he and Taka parted ways a few hours later, and Simon had just begun to formulate a mental shopping list, just trying to figure out what he was going to have for dinner, a text chimed on his phone.

Ema [15:13 PM]: Hey, you wanna come out for drinks tonight? It’ll be our group again.

Well, that would solve the matter of dinner. He fired back a response.

Simon [15:18 PM]: Certainly not opposed to the idea. Where and when?

And that was how Simon found himself at the Wonder Bar on the other side of town, swapping stories and telling jokes over pints of lager and baskets of fried chicken until the early hours of Sunday morning.

He even slept over at Klavier’s, too tired to get home with a spotty bus connection and Klavier more than willing to shelter him. There wasn’t much sleep to be had, but plenty of insomniac talks were held, drawing out old memories and unspeakable nightmares, heavy words punching the cool night air.

Despite such talk, Simon didn’t feel as though he regretted opening up and by the time Klavier had dropped him off at the prison later, in a too-small Gavinner’s t-shirt and jeans, Simon could safely say he had enjoyed himself.

“So, Simon...I’ll see you around then,” Klavier said. The smile that had slid onto his face reached his eyes.

And it was a contagious smile, as Simon’s own lips quirked up. “Indeed...Klavier.”

Klavier waved. “Bis dann!”

Simon watched as the sleek car sped off, back onto LA’s bustling roads, back into a city that never slept, before stepping inside.

“Oh hello,” Aura greeted with a smirk, eyes following him as he moved to sit. “I was begin to wonder if you were ever going to show up again.”

“Hello to you too,” he said hoarsely.

“Wow...you look worse than shit today,” Aura remarked teasingly. “Not to mention your interesting choice of clothing.”

“Perhaps I do,” he said, stifling a yawn. “Didn’t sleep much.”

“Huh,” Aura offered, crossing her arms.
“So…” she began, tapping her nails on the table; the ring glinted in the thin streams of sunlight.

“I have commenced psychotherapy,” Simon blurted out without thinking. “On...Athena’s recommendation.”

Aura tilted her head. “Have you now?”

“Yes,” he said.

“And...how’s that been for you?”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” Aura repeated.

“I spoke about her,” he said, lowering his head.

He knew he didn’t have to elaborate. Never had to elaborate about her, and Aura’s fidgeting, twisting the ring on her finger, was proof enough.

“I...must admit, I wasn’t entirely honest with you,” he said quietly, thumbing at his wrists.

He looked up to meet Aura’s narrowed eyes. She was grinding her jaw, much like their father had when he was...attempting to diffuse an emotional situation, trying to reel back in that stoic, stiff upper-lip nature that was so characteristic of the Blackquill upbringing.

“I don’t need to know, Simon,” Aura said quickly. “Really.”

“But I feel it is my duty to inform you,” he said. Then with a faltering sigh, he added. “In due course.”

*Duty is what condemned you to the gallows.*

“Okay,” Aura said. Then with a tired smirk appearing on her features, she added. “Just don’t take another seven years to tell me.”

That got a humourless, hollow laugh out of them. Aura shook her head exasperatedly. “...I have ceased to try to understand our family.”

“Family?”

“You, me, and...your niece.”

“Your daughter,” Simon corrected for her.

“...In due course.”

Aura propped her leg up on the chair. A flicker of a smile appeared on her lips.

"Well, we're a right pair, aren't we?"

Simon mirrored the smile. "We bloody are."

She inhaled sharply through her nostrils. "So there we are. An estranged mother and semi-present uncle. The perfect family."

"Not that we had superb parents ourselves."
Aura raised her eyebrows. “That’s the first I’ve heard that from you.”

“Hm.”

A beat. “...I suppose it’s a case of righting the wrong.”

Simon tilted his head. “I take it then...you are willing?”

Aura shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s a sign I should see the shrink myself.”

Simon snorted. “Perhaps I should ensure that you do find yourself in a lunatic asylum.”

Aura eyed him for a moment before breaking out into a grin, the likes of which he hadn’t seen in years.

They spoke for longer than expected, the uneasiness dissipating slightly, fumbling through seven years of silence and miscommunication, until that familiar tannoy announcement sounded out and they said their goodbyes, with Simon promising to come by again next weekend.

His phone pinged with a text on the bus to the mall.

Kay [14:55 PM]: Hey here’s the pics from last night!! You look great with Seb and Ema!

Simon scrolled through all the photos. They were mostly just comic relief, with him wearing Ema’s rose-coloured glasses and Sebastian getting his hair braided. But there was one series of photos that caught his eye; all of them sitting at the bar in an excellent display of camaraderie that caused warmth to bubble up in his chest.

Simon thumbed the screen for a moment before he looked out the window, head pressing against the glass as he took in the palm trees zipping past him and the cloudless skies. A rare small smile crept up his lips.

Perhaps things were looking up.

Miles Edgeworth [00:23 AM]: On flight back to LA. Will email you further details. See you later.

Despite things looking up, Simon still had to adjust to the concept of change. Not just in being thrust into the real world after so long, or in certain developments in his case, but...also in the little things like this being his last work meeting with Ema as his detective.

At the very least routine was normal — with Ema bringing in case files and beverages — which perhaps lessened the pain slightly.

You’re a melodramatic little shit, Simon thought as he thanked her for the Darjeeling tea. Something old, something new, he supposed.

Ema frowned, opened and closed her mouth, and then asked, “Is Edgeworth okay?”

Simon nodded. “He returned this morning. The terrorist plot in Borginia was foiled.”

Ema began arranging the case files on the sofa, prompting him to join her. “Yeah, how did it happen anyway?”

Simon moved to sit beside her, setting his cup down. “...It appears to have been a last-ditch effort
by our copycats to disrupt relations between Borginia and Cohdopia. They intended to set off several bombs around the country, most notably around Skande. And...they also intended to assassinate the foreign ministers.”

He sipped at his tea before continuing. “Thankfully our sniper was an utter fool, and had only fired a warning shot, when he was immediately spotted atop a roof. A manhunt was set up and...his body was discovered mere hours later; he had committed suicide.”

“The sniper being...?”

“Johannes Birken. The other terrorists were either rounded up or found dead as well. Those discovered deceased were reported to have died by suicide.”

Ema leaned back in her seat, fidgeting with her coffee cup. “So we’re looking at some kind of suicide pact?”

“von Karma-dono has indicated as much. The methods were the same, involving ingestions of large quantities of medicaments or easily-procured poisons.”

Ema grimaced, hiding it with a swig of coffee. “So, we’ll only be able to bring Camilo Nero to trial as an accessory to murder.”

“Indeed. However I do believe, as we’ve discussed previously, we may be able to try him in absentia,” he said. “We’ve certainly gathered enough evidence to put forth a strong case.”

Ema nodded. “Hm. Dr Nøhr has been able to confirm the evidence’s authenticity, so we won’t have issues on that end. All that’s left there really is to see if we can get Birken’s autopsy results — DNA samples and all — sent over from Borginia, as well as some general information about that switchblade knife — though, given what we know, I suppose that’s Borginian issue too — and...”

She paused, taking another swig. “Also I spoke with Agent Lang on Friday.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, it was the end of the day. I just had some questions for him,” she said, before elaborating, “He said the other jurisdictions will be doing the same thing; they’ll see about holding trials in absentia if the killers were found dead depending on different laws. But of course, if they’re alive, they’ll be put on trial in those countries and then deported back to Borginia and Cohdopia for further sentencing.”

Simon nodded, processing this new information. “That all sounds reasonable. I shall meet with Edgeworth-dono later today to discuss when I shall stand in court.”

“Okay. I mean, I think we’ll be set to go to court by the end of the week. This case, on the whole, is pretty open-and-shut.”

Simon snorted. “...I beg to differ.”

Ema glanced at him, the features on her face pulled down into a sympathetic gaze. “I’m sorry.”

“Ah, no need,” Simon fumbled.

She sighed. “But yeah, no, I get what you mean. It’ll be quick though; we’ve got our motive, our evidence, our defendant.”
“Hm.”

There was a momentary pause as Ema grabbed her bag and rummaged around for something. She eventually produced a large bag and thrust it into his face.

“Lucky snackoo?” she offered.

Simon could feel the slight melancholy dissipate as a smile slid onto his face. “I thought you were going to stop with that.”

“After our case is done. Then I’m saying bye-bye officially. Unless, of course—”

“Something rouses your ire?” he finished for her.

“Yup,” Ema giggled. “Hey, they’re great stress relievers.”

“I can imagine,” Simon said. “I admit...I used to have a sweet tooth myself.”

“Really?” An incredulous grin.

Simon grabbed a handful of snackoos, casting his eyes on the decorative katana on the windowsill. Ema followed his gaze.

“...My mentor, Dr Cykes, always ensured I was rewarded with daifuku after my cases, regardless of my performance. And every Friday...we would take our suppers at the canteen and for dessert, she would provide us with wagashi.”

“...She sounds really nice,” Ema said quietly.

“She...was. Words do not do her justice, I’m afraid.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need to be. I...I fear I’m a sentimental fool at times.”

“But that’s good. Sometimes it’s good to...I don’t know, remember the good things in the midst of all the shit.”

“Hm.”

Ema shifted in her seat.

“My mentor — one of my professors in France, she was a forensic pathologist — she also really meant a lot to me.”

Simon glanced at her, noting the reminiscent smile playing up her lips. “She...really encouraged me to follow my dreams. She said we needed more women in STEM fields too...And sure, it took me longer than expected, but I’m here now.”

She let out a sigh. The sun crept out from behind the clouds, brightening up the office a bit.

“I guess there are people that come in at certain times of our lives, and they just...teach us about much more than their professions. They teach us about the intangible things, about life and the universe and all...”

Ema trailed off, handing him the snackoos bag. He took another handful. “The fop said you said
something interesting last year, when you were prosecuting; that you should proudly serve your mentor’s memory. Not let their deaths be in vain.”

The Woods trial. Simon allowed himself a small smile; funny how things came full circle.

“I wouldn’t have thought you the gossiping sort…” he teased, before adding, “but yes, I did say that. Nonetheless, one must learn to move forward, and there is no harm in having more than one mentor.”

“Edgeworth?”

Simon nodded, passing her the bag back, and Ema leaned back, shoving three snackoos in her mouth. “That’s a fair point. I mean, Dr Nøhr is also someone I’d consider my mentor; she’s really helped me get through the last few years.”

She popped another two in her mouth before adding, “Funny how we meet our mentors sometimes; I met her while working on my first big investigation; a serial killer case — very long story, I’ll tell you over drinks another time.”

They exchanged glances. “I shall look forward to it.”

A comfortable silence followed, each munching on their biscuits and examining their surroundings.

“...You know how we were speaking about Radiohead the other week?” Ema eventually asked.

Simon frowned. “Yes?”

“I think you should listen to Street Spirit. It...really helped me out in the last few years.”

Simon tilted his head. “I shall endeavour to do so.”

“Do, please,” she insisted. Then checking her watch, she said, “Well, we’d better get a move on then.”

He watched as she bustled around, placing the files on his desk, and packing up her bag. This would be routine no more.

He spoke again once her hand was on the doorknob. “Ah, thank you for—”

Ema dismissed him a wave. “No need. If anything, I should be thanking you. It’s...been good. Working with you.”

Simon bowed his head at that.

He didn’t know what to say in return, and Ema, noting that, simply followed up with a smile.

“...See you later then.”

“And you,” he returned.

He kept his eyes glued on the door long after she left.

Chapter End Notes
If you looking for a work that explores the whole erotic electrostimulation thing I brought up here, I recommend Rosage’s work 'Bright like Lightning'. Discretion is, of course, advised.

And...we're very near the end!
April 14, 2028

The gavel slammed once, twice, three times, before the hushed conversations came to a halt and attention was drawn back to the Honourable Justine Courtney presiding.

“Now that closing statements have been made, and with the presence of the Goddess of the Law, I shall now render judgement,” she said, her eyes darting between Simon who was focusing his gaze on his bench and the defence counsel Raymond Shields of Edgeworth Law Offices, who had taken off his fedora.

Courtney cleared her throat. “Given the extraordinary nature of this case, I have had to really question the meaning of a fair and just trial, and to deliberate the parameters within which the law works.

“As much as Mr Blackquill’s arguments compelled this court, it would be unjust under the eyes of the law here — by that I mean our interpretation of the law with regards to passing judgements on the deceased and conducting trials in absentia — to pass verdicts on Johannes Birken on two counts of first-degree murder, one count of evidence concealment, one count of terrorism and another count of desertion, and Rebekah Klaark for the latter three charges.

“That said, these charges against Johannes Birken and Rebekah Klaark can and will be added to an ever-growing charge sheet accompanying the case on SEIL that is being prepared by the combined judicial authorities of Borginia and Cohdopia. The victim Jacob Hawthorn’s family is also well within their rights to sue Mr Birken’s and Ms Klaark’s estates for compensation; if they wish to lodge such a request, I invite them to my chambers after sentencing.

“We can, however, pass judgement on the living. Hence, this court finds Camilo Nero guilty on the charge of accessory to murder.

“But since Mr Shields provided the court with valid exculpatory evidence and several rebuttals which take into account the defendant’s extenuating circumstances, these matters will be closely examined at a higher court a month from now where sentencing will be awarded.”

The gavel slammed down with a sense of finality, acting as a cue for the ticker tape to rain down on the courtroom.

“That is all. Court is adjourned!”

Simon breathed a sigh of relief as the gallery began to file out, conversations buzzing once more about the place.
Took us bloody long enough, he thought to himself as he watched Nero be embraced by Shields before he was led away in shackles by two guards.

“...Like I said before, poor guy,” Ema said, moving to stand next to him.

Simon furrowed his brow. “Indeed. His sentence shan’t be too harsh, I imagine; His Baldness is a just and understanding man.”

Ema turned to face him, a teasing smile playing up her lips. “Are you saying that just because Taka likes to sit on his head?”

Simon chuckled. “Not at all, though I found Her Ladyship rather admirable today and I fully support the judgement she passed.”

“You’re just saying that because she overruled you one too many times,” Ema joked. Then she frowned. “But yeah…about that, there’s just one thing I don’t get.”

Simon ushered them into the lobby, providing them with a slightly more private venue. “What’s that?”

Ema moved to one of the vending machines. She beckoned him closer, dropping her voice down to a whisper. “Johannes Birken. You see, when Dr Nøhr and I were doing our comparative DNA analysis, something very interesting came up; he had XX chromosomes which meant he, scientifically speaking… female.”

“...I see,” he said, nodding slowly. That certainly wasn’t information he expected.

And Ema, noting this as she slotted in some coins, was quick to reassure him with, “Of course, we didn’t make note of that because it was completely irrelevant and everything else had checked out.”

She pressed a couple of buttons. “But...I did some digging around in the archives, just to see if it wasn’t a mistake, and it apparently all checked out; he’d been diagnosed with a sex disorder at 17 and received hormone therapy shortly after, with him routinely taking testosterone injections and doing blood work every three months right through to a couple of days before his death at age 36.”

“And...?” Simon prompted.

A clunk sounded out, and Ema moved to retrieve a bottle of orange juice and a pack of Swiss rolls.

“His autopsy reports also detailed he’d had several past surgeries consistent with the scarring on and in his body, which the archives further supported with old bank statements saying his treatment had been entirely funded by the army and later SEIL’s health insurance plan…”

She looked up at him, offering him one of the rolls. Simon politely declined.

“And...?” Simon prompted.

“Of course, one must bear in mind that such delicate private matters are to be handled with great care,” he said, watching with slight amusement as Ema tore into her roll. “And in any case, him being afflicted with such a condition had no bearing on his criminal intent.”

Ema nodded, swallowing her bite. “Yeah, which is why we didn’t put any of this in the report we complied but, just, it was interesting from a scientific standpoint — Dr Nøhr said we rarely get cases like that.”

She shrugged, popping in the last piece into her mouth. “Anyway, it’s done with now.”
“Indeed.”

She gulped down some orange juice before turning back to him with a tired smile. “So...I was thinking we could get a group of us together for tonight to celebrate your victory?”

Simon felt a smile tug at the corners of his lips; he’d almost forgotten that victory dinners weren’t just consigned to bluffing attorneys pulling turnabouts out of nowhere.

“Our victory,” Simon corrected for her.

“Our victory,” Ema repeated with a grin.

Simon tilted his head. “And I certainly wouldn’t be opposed to that. Do you mind if I select the establishment for tonight? They have a wide selection suitable for our motley crew.”

“I love that you call our group a motley crew,” Ema said, giggling.

“Well what else am I supposed to call it?” Simon teased.

“I mean...we are a fairly rag-tag bunch; Edgeworth’s waifs and strays.”

Simon snorted at the description; she was rather on the mark there.

“But yeah...go ahead with the selection! Surprise us all!” Ema said, downing the rest of the juice. “You text us all and we meet for 7 PM?”

Simon nodded. “I’m perfectly fine with that arrangement. It’ll allow everyone plenty of time to finish up their work. So yes, let us reunite then.”

Ema grinned and hoisted her bag — bursting at the seams from all the medical reports she’d stuffed in their for the trial — on her shoulders properly. “Alright then!”

Kay [13:21 PM]: Lol which one of you started this group?

Sebastian [13:21 PM]: And why is it called Motley Crew??

Kay [13:22 PM]: I am confusion!!!

Sebastian [13:22 PM]: Yaaaaas me too!!

Ema [13:23 PM]: Calm down you two. I made this group chat for our hangouts.

Ema [13:23 PM]: Simon’s suggested taking us all out to dinner at 7 PM. You down for that?

Kay [13:24 PM]: I’m always down for food lol. I’m in!

Sebastian [13:24 PM]: Me too!!

Ema [13:25 PM]: You too, fop. I know you’re reading this over Sebastian’s shoulder.

Klavier [13:25 PM]: Ach you caught me out. I’m joining!

Simon [13:44 PM]: Bloody hell you lot.

Simon [13:48 PM]: Very well then, we shall meet at The Whet Noodle. I trust you’ll all be prompt.
“Ah, impeccable timing as always, Simon,” Edgeworth greeted, welcoming Simon into his office; Lang and von Karma had already arrived, seated on the sofas. A bottle of Dom Pérignon and four champagne flutes stood on a silver tray on the table.

“I see you’ve wasted no time in procuring the bubbly,” Simon said around a smile.

Edgeworth chuckled at that, and with that, he quickly moved to easing the cork off the bottle — it came off with a gentle but resounding hiss — and pouring out the glasses, passing them around.

“Cheers!” he said, and they all clinked their glasses together before taking their sips. It tasted absolutely exquisite, light and bubbly, and Simon felt the alcohol pooling in his chest, warming him from inside.

“But yes, I do believe congratulations are in order; this affair was certainly no easy feat and you have certainly persevered through this to reach the truth at the end,” Edgeworth said gently. “And...that’s not at all, is it, Agent Lang?”

Lang set down his glass, a toothy grin emerging on his features. “You’re officially off the case now; we’ve found all sixteen members of the copycat organisation.”

Simon’s eyes widened; that was fast. “Have you now?”

Lang nodded. “Of them, eight were found alive and they are now facing sentences in various jurisdictions. All the other police forces — London, Frankfurt, Montreal, and Tokyo — are wrapping up their cases too.”

“That is… indeed excellent news.”

Edgeworth added, “And as a result of these arrests, which have prompted a collaborative effort between the Borginian and Cohdopian judicial authorities, there is now talk of peace between the two states.”

He then gestured to von Karma who produced a Cohdopian-language newspaper with a picture of well-dressed, cheery-looking blonde man emblazoned on the front. Simon recognised him to be the same man in that copy of The Morning Times some weeks ago now.

Taking a sip, von Karma said, “In an interview in the Nápiszék, a local paper, the Cohdopian foreign minister Colias Palaeno said he was open to such talks and most notably of opening the country’s borders to Borginia again, which would facilitate trade agreements and subsequently foster private and professional relationships between the two countries.”

Edgeworth lightly cleared his throat. “And I believe the cabinet has also said that if such actions were to take place, then further talks would be held on allowing Borginia’s memberships to the EU and NATO, both accessions which Cohdopia has sought to block for decades now.”

von Karma nodded in confirmation and took another sip. “Furthermore, Borginia’s own government has decided it is in the country’s best interests to submit to the ICC in The Hague; the Borginia Tribunal shall resume its work.”

“Though under a decidedly less biased team,” Simon surmised.

“Exactly,” Edgeworth confirmed. “Having Cohdopia head the tribunal was certainly...dare I say, naïve on their part considering their tumultuous shared past. But...”

Lang was quick to comment, “I’m surprised Borginia agreed so easily to having their war crimes
investigated.”

“I’d argue it’s a positive thing, however; as Franziska said in a similar previous meeting, it enables people to feel their governments are being honest and transparent with them, which helps rebuild trust with those institutions.”

“Whether the governments are being honest or not is another matter entirely, and I myself would be interested to see if both states follow through with their talks,” von Karma commented around another sip.


“If I might ask, Lang-dono…” Simon began, setting down his champagne flute. “The other eight individuals you recovered, what were their causes of death?”

“All suicides,” Lang confirmed without a beat, “and the autopsies all confirm them to be of the same methods and motives; either cyanide poisonings or shootings. We also found manifestos on all of them, which essentially permitted them to take their own lives in the name of ‘the greater cause’.”

Lang shrugged. “I don’t like to disrespect the dead but...Lang Zi says, ‘Inevitably, all who have evil in their hearts find themselves in Hell’. And — well, you heard Judge Courtney — they will face an overall sentencing in Cohdopia’s Royal Courts of Justice and Borgenia’s High Court.”

“I suppose now it’s a mere matter of handling the formalities,” Edgeworth said.

Lang nodded. “Lang Zi says, ‘The end of the kill is not the end of the hunt’. And with that…”

He moved to Simon, clapping a hand on his shoulder, and vigorously shaking Simon’s hand with the other. “It was great working with you. I know it was tough sometimes especially with that whole Qvinn/Oleander business, but you stayed on the scent all throughout and provided some great insights. You and Skye both; give her my best wishes when you see her.”

Simon bowed his head. “I will. And, ah, thank you too for your contributions; I can’t imagine the jet lag provided much of a reward.”

Lang barked out a laugh, emphasising it with another clap on the shoulder. Then he let go, and von Karma came up to Simon and he bowed one more.

“As both Miles Edgeworth and Shi-Long Lang have already said, your steadfastness and persevering nature were both admirable qualities I recognised throughout the course of this investigation,” she said.

“Glad to hear I wasn’t to be subjected to your whip’s wrath,” Simon said, a teasing smile playing up his lips.

von Karma smirked at that. “And in that, you have proven yourself to be a worthy comrade. I look forward to working with you in the future, Simon Blackquill, be it when I return here or overseas. Though I’d imagine the English courts would suit you.”

“We shall see,” Simon said, bowing again.

And with that, Lang and von Karma said their goodbyes, promising to drop by again as soon as possible, leaving Edgeworth and Simon alone.
The sunlight shone through the room, catching the glinting golden stamps on Edgeworth’s academic certificates, hung neatly in a column down the wall next to the bookcases; his undergraduate degree in Law, his licenses to prosecute, his Masters in European and International Law and finally his doctorate in European Legal Studies.

“...I wasn’t aware you possessed a doctorate, sir,” Simon found himself remarking as they both moved to the sofa.

“What?” Edgeworth then followed Simon’s line of sight, and recognition set into his features as he sat down. “Oh, yes. I obtained my PhD in 2025.”

“I can’t imagine it to have been an easy task.”

“No, no, it certainly wasn’t; I had to do it part-time from Berlin whilst juggling both a heavy caseload on the continent and some...rather personal matters,” Edgeworth elaborated, a reminiscent smile curving up his lips. “I focused my thesis on matters regarding corruption and legal grey areas, hence the so-called ‘Dark Age of the Law’, a term I coined back in 2023 in one of my papers.”

His gaze then moved to Simon, eyeing him over the rims of his glasses. “...And speaking of the Dark Age of the Law, how are you faring, truly?”

Simon swallowed and looked away. “I...must admit, this affair had quite the impact on me.”

“Yes...I wanted to discuss that,” Edgeworth said, and Simon turned to face him again. “As I said before in one of our previous meetings, I felt as though I had thrust this matter entirely on you with no regard for you or your mental well-being. So I don’t feel as though I’ve performed adequately there as your superior.”

Simon inhaled sharply; perhaps now was the right time to be candid.

“Fear not. I...actually took the initiative and sought out psychotherapy to help...address certain underlying issues.”

A flicker of a smile crept up Edgeworth’s lips. “I’m very glad to hear that; therapy was immensely helpful for me earlier in the decade, and I do actively try and encourage my staff to obtain it if it’s in their means to do so.”

He shifted in his seat. “I’d much rather have a workforce that’s healthy and in tune with themselves than one that is unhealthily and illegally pursuing truth and justice. And with these reforms, many individuals who fell into the latter category have been ejected from the office in the last few months.”

Simon nodded; that explained what Sebastian had been going on about last week at the Winder Bar. “Does that mean you shall be recruiting new talent soon?”

“I’m hoping to entice fresh graduates from Themis and other law academies up and down the state, as well as veteran international prosecutors looking for new courts to call home,” Edgeworth said, crossing his legs. “In fact, I’ve contacted a promising young man from Khura’in — a small nation in the Himalayas — who, so far, seems willing to offer his services.”

A smirk pulled up Simon’s lips. “I do hope these new faces won’t chase our dear investigative partners out the country.”

“Yes, well, even the detectives — from what Chief Gumshoe has told me — are understaffed at
“the moment.” Edgeworth said, tapping his finger on his upper arm. “But change is good at times; it forces us to rethink our positions.”

“Indeed it does,” Simon concurred, before rising from his seat. “Well, I’d best get on with finalising the formalities of this whole affair.”

Edgeworth also rose from his seat, following Simon to the door. “I’ll look forward to seeing the paperwork on my desk later then. If I’m not in — my daughter has been pushing me to attend her newest magic show which is this evening — then just hand it in to Ms Fright and I’ll read it on Monday.”

Simon smiled as his hand closed around the door knob. “Enjoy the show then.”

“I shall,” Edgeworth said, and Simon swore he saw something warm and parental flash across his eyes.

*Metis held that very same gaze in her eyes.*

“...Till Monday then, Simon.”

“Sir,” he said, bowed his head, and exited. Back to his office, back to his papers, and back to his quill and Babahlese ink that glided so smoothly across the pages.

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*Athena [16:39 PM]: I heard you wrapped up your case!! Good job!!*

*Athena [16:40 PM]: Also holy hell it’s your bday tmw!!*

*Athena [16:42 PM]: We need to celebrate you being an old fart!!*

*Athena [16:42 PM]: Junie and I are gonna bake you a cake and you’re gonna eat it!!*

*Simon [17:00 PM]: Hope said cake isn’t poisoned.*

*Athena [17:01 PM]: HEY!! RUDE!!*

*Simon [17:04 PM]: But yes, of course, let us meet then tomorrow.*

*Simon [17:06 PM]: Shall we say noon at your lodgings?*

*Athena [17:09 PM]: Okey dokey!! See you then!!*

“Hey Simey!” Bucky said as Simon stepped through the blue curtain, followed by his motley crew. “And — hic! — Simey’s friends too! Come in, come in!”

“You’re inebriated, Bucky,” Simon stated matter-of-factly, and the hiccups that emerged from Bucky’s mouth confirmed as much.

Klavier flashed a winning smile, clapping a hand on Simon’s back.

“Ach, Simon, I think it’s just a way for the good man to inform us how good the food and drink here is, ja?”

“Hic! Y-yeah, whatever he said!” Bucky said, ushering them in and producing a stack of menus. “Now, what do y’all wanna eat?”
After they’d sat down in a row — Klavier and Sebastian sat on either end with Kay and Ema next to Simon who found himself seated in the middle — and made their food and drinks orders, Ema leaned in, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“So...a little birdie—”

“Kay! It was Kay; she went through the office directory and pulled out your profile!” Sebastian was quick to clarify from his spot.

“—told us that it’s your birthday tomorrow.”

Simon smiled. “Did they now?”

“So, we all chipped in to get you something!” Kay announced as a large grey box was then slammed down on the table by Sebastian.

Simon picked it up gingerly, his arms slightly tensing from the weight.

“Open it!” Klavier ordered.

Simon tore off the wrapping paper to reveal what lay underneath; two large hefty books with one titled *Forging the Blade: A Comprehensive History of Japanese Weaponry* and...the Steel Samurai manga series in its entirety.

“Given what Ema told us about your office, we thought you might like these books!” Kay explained.

“I…” Simon was at an absolute loss for words. He turned to Ema. “Well, you certainly do have a keen eye for detail. Thank you, all of you. I— This is most appreciated.”

But before Simon could set the gifts down by his satchel, Klavier was quick to add, “And that’s not all!”

“...Oh?”

“Sebastian’s got something else for you, richtig?”

Simon turned to Sebastian, who was leaning out of Bucky’s way as he began setting down their beer bottles and several plates of pork and cabbage gyoza and vegetable tempura.

“Oh! Yeah! You know how you were telling us last week about going to see some permanences—sorry, performances?”

“Yes…” Simon began; he had a vague idea where this was heading...

“So I have a season pass to all the arts stuff in town and I got you tickets to the Toneido Theatre in Kurukuru Tei; they’re putting on a show on Sunday!”

“I— Toneido, you say?” Simon helped himself to a couple gyoza. “I...used to frequent their theatre during my university days.”

“Oh I remember you talking ’bout that, Simey; when you used to tutor me!” Bucky commented from his post as he ladled soup into bowls. “That reminds me, Master Toneido actually wants to come over sometime next month for a naming ceremony to help teach him ‘bout all them wonders of udon making!”
“Is that so? Then I must pay him a visit before then,” Simon noted before turning back to Sebastian. “Well, I find myself indebted to you. Thank you very kindly.”

“Oh! It’s no problem!”

And with that, the group fell into easy conversation plied by the good food and the alcohol sloshing around them. With the gyoza and tempura quickly polished off, Bucky took the plates away and informed them that the soba would be coming up shortly.

“So,” Ema began, with an arm around Simon’s shoulders, “how’re you feeling about all this? Got that dopamine surge running rampant all day?”

“I must say, I do feel a bit overwhelmed,” he said, nursing his beer as he overheard Sebastian and Klavier yammer on about time signatures in music theory. “But...in a good way.”

Ema grinned. “I’m glad to hear it. I mean, I felt the same when I first got in with this crowd, but you quickly get used to it.”

Her arm left Simon, and she began to drum her fingers on the table as raucous laughter sounded out from Kay and Sebastian. A small smile traced up her lips.

“You know, Kay and I, we...used to be a couple way back.”

“...I see. Are you—”

Ema shrugged “Eh, it wasn’t a bad breakup. It was, in hindsight, what we needed at the time and we got through it with a lot of Radiohead; we live together so obviously something worked.”

Simon took a swig.

“But point being, it used to just be the two of us would go out on Friday nights to these bars and talk about our cases and bitch about how fucked up our legal system was what with Wright all disbarred and Edgeworth out the country somewhere...” she trailed off, the smile now turning reminiscent.

“And then at some point, Kay started including Sebastian who we’d both known from our Dadworth squad days—”

“Dadworth?” Simon echoed.

“Edgeworth. We call him that sometimes because he’s basically a second dad to Kay and Sebastian what with all they’ve been through. And like I said this morning; we’re basically his waifs and strays, and of course he’s Trucy’s Papa too...”

Simon nodded; the nickname made perfect sense, if not for all the concern Edgeworth had shown around him and the advice he’d imparted, then...for that look in his eyes.

Ema carried on as steaming bowls were set before them.

“So yeah, we became this weird trio and then a few years later, Sebastian came along with the fop — who, yeah, I’m not the biggest fan of but I dealt with it — and we were like that. It was very hectic all the time, and quite negative actually because of all the so-called ‘contradictions in the law’ that we had to work with—”

At that moment, Klavier burst into giggles at some music video Kay was showing him. The
reminiscent gaze on Ema’s face disappeared, making way for a contented grin.

“But it also gave us all a space to breathe, and we could always reconvene when one of us was back in town — like with Kay right now; she’s going back to Lyon with Lang in a few days...”

“You say that and yet I encounter far more nonsensical shenanigans in these meetings than I would in a courtroom battle against Wright-dono and his little tribe.”

Ema snorted, picking up her chopsticks. “I mean, that’s what it’s evolved to be. Which I honestly prefer now, and hey, I’m glad you’re in our group now.”

“Oh?”

“Because now you can add to it with your own nonsensical shenanigans!”

“Which I already did when I cut your cake for your celebrations the other week,” Simon commented. “And Taka last weekend was more than happy to contribute some squawks to our riveting discussion about napkins!”

“Yeah, by tearing them up and—”

“Hey, Simon, look at this!” Kay interrupted, thrusting her phone in Simon’s face. “It’s you!”

Simon tensed up for a moment. He hoped it wasn’t some awful news report or—

It was a video, and a rather old one at that, titled in all lowercase as *history of japan*. Kay pressed play, subjecting Simon to a ludicrous show of bright colours and absurdly catchy jingles.

“How are you supposed to protect your shit from criminals? Hire a samurai!”

“See what I mean!?” Kay commented, barely stifling her giggles.

“Well done, you little jackdaw,” Simon teased, “but I won’t be protecting whatever you choose to steal as the Great Thief Yatagarasu.”

“Awww…” Kay whined, making a show of slinking off back to her seat.

“Alright, fine, I will! But you’d best be discreet about it!” Simon called out after her, met with applause and cheers as they raised their beer bottles in a show of support.

Once they’d quietened down, the group returned to their bowls — praising Bucky for his soba with just as much enthusiasm as Simon had done on his first visit — slurping their noodles as they continued their conversations.

Simon turned back to Ema. “Now that we’re being plied with food and drink, and I seem to possess a newfound curiosity about me…I wondered if now would be a good time to recount that serial killer investigation you headed when you returned from France...?”

Ema grinned. “It’s a long story.”

Simon mirrored her expression. “We’ve all night.”

Ema leaned back in her seat, inhaling sharply. The laughter around them died down as the other three members of their group moved in to listen to the tale.

“Well, here we go then,” she said, the dim lights accentuating the sharp angles in her face,
bringing out the green in her intense eyes.

“It was October 2024, and we’d just come across our fifth murder victim…”

As Ema began to recount the case, Simon’s mind drifted off, no longer chugging along at full speed and worrying about obnoxious small details of casework and human interaction. Here he was, surrounded by good food, good drink, and very good friends.

A small smile traced up his lips as Ema launched into an animated description of her first encounter with Dr Nøhr.

Yes, this was it…

This was what victory meant for Simon.

Chapter End Notes

So, some interesting tidbits with this chapter, huh? Johannes Birken's a transgender man, Miles Edgeworth has a doctorate and Simon Blackquill's birthday's in April!

I placed Simon's birthday on April 15, reason being it matches with canon's timeline; he's 28 as of April 17, 2027 when we're introduced to him in The Monstrous Turnabout, and then 29 as of May 13, 2028 in Turnabout Storyteller, meaning, to me, his birthday falls anywhere between January-mid April I just thought it would be a nice way to round off his victory really!

Also you need to watch the history of japan video I had Kay reference! You might have noticed I'm introducing all these memes with Kay; she just seems the perfect character for them, especially considering she was a teenager back when they emerged so there's that element of nostalgia!

Just the epilogue to go now!
Epilogue: Exit Music (For A Film)

Chapter Summary

Breathe// Keep breathing

Chapter Notes

We’re finally here at the end! Now, I’ve left a very long end note so I thought I’d leave a few references I made in this epilogue here:

Simon’s haircut and necklace.

The idea for Simon’s ex boyfriend came from this excellent fic; be aware of heavy AAI2 spoilers though.

Not a reference, but this piece of art really captures the essence of this story; I think it’s great for foreshadowing and there’s so much symbolism and emotion behind it! I neglected to place it in the prologue as I thought it might give the plot away, but seeing as you’ve got this far, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June 24, 2028

“Well, well, if it isn’t you two nerds,” Aura greeted, leaning back in her seat, nodding at Simon and Athena as they sat down opposite her on another typical Sunday afternoon visit. The blinding sunlight streamed in through the windows, breathing a little life into these sad concrete confines.

“And I see you’ve finally done something about that bird’s nest of yours.” Aura remarked with amusement, nodding her head at Simon. “Did you put him up to this, Princess?”

Athena giggled, tugging on her t-shirt. “Nah, it’s all on him! Right, Simon?”

“Indeed,” Simon said, carding a hand through his short hair; he’d essentially hacked off his ponytail the other evening after an enlightening conversation with Klavier and Sebastian at the office.

He let his hand fall to his side again. “I felt I needed…a new beginning.”

“Yeah you did, you bloody nerd,” Aura teased, leaning forward to ruffle his hair. Then she tilted her head, and said, “...I see you got that old necklace repurposed.”

Simon looked down to his neck where a gold moon necklace sat.
“Ah yes,” he said, hand reaching up to touch the smooth gold. “Athena recovered it yesterday and suggested it suited me better now that she had the earring to wear.”

“Huh. Well now you two look even nerdier; two peas in a pod.”

Simon smiled easily and leaned forward. “I suppose that makes you the one with the bird’s nest, dear sister.”

Aura snorted, tugging at her hair; it had grown quite long, with the black roots now past her ears. “Yeah, well, blame that pepto-bismol bitch April May; she refuses to share her hair dye. I’m sure she gets it from The Supplier somehow.”

Simon raised his eyebrows; he wasn’t aware Sirhan Dogen had contacts in the women’s penitentiary. “The Supplier? That relic from the Taisho era?”

Aura brought her leg up on the chair, and rested her chin on her knee. “Well...not him, I think he’s retired now. Word’s going around that it’s your crazy redhead ex who’s taken over.”

“Your...ex?” Athena prompted.

Aura turned to her with a grin. “Might surprise you to know my brother isn’t a total virgin.”

“A dork like him got laid?!” Widget exclaimed, and Athena’s hands shot up to cover the AI.

“Oh, sod off,” Simon said, shaking his head.

Aura snorted and turned to Athena. “Well, you know how it goes in prison — very lonely, very—”

“And you’d know all about that, would you?” Simon said, quick to interrupt.

Aura shrugged, unable to contain a smirk.

Simon turned his head towards Athena. “I don’t think this one is much interested in our...escapades.”

“I’m not a kid!”

“Shut it, Widget!” Athena said, much to the siblings’ amusement.

“Alright. Fine.” Aura said.

She let her foot drop to the floor, and propped her elbows up on the table. With a mischievous grin, she added, “But, I’ll let you in on one thing; you know that Skye woman you were talking about that time? The whole prison wife spiel?”

Simon smirked. “Go on…”

Athena shrugged. “Just saying; I took you up on your offer.”

“Skye?” Athena prompted, playing with her earring.

“Skye-dono’s elder sister; Edgeworth-dono’s predecessor,” Simon answered. Then he turned to Aura again with furrowed brows. “Though last I heard from the good scientist, she said her sister’s due out soon.”

“Yup. In two weeks actually,” Aura confirmed, tapping her nails on the table. “Anyway, aside
from your haircut, how’ve you two been since last time?”

They went about explaining all they had done in the last week, with Athena doing most of the talking and Simon interjecting here and there with little quips and comments. The awkwardness that had formed the basis of most of Aura and Athena’s interactions in recent weeks had essentially dissipated by now, giving way to seven years of lost discussions between them.

Although Simon had prodded them into reuniting and reconciling, they’d done it of their own accord. Athena had first broached the subject on one of their Saturday afternoon pizza talks whereas Aura had brought it up on a regular Sunday visit when she’d been more inclined to discuss such things, with Metis’ ghost still lingering like mist yet to be lifted.

Of course, what with the typical Wright Anything Agency shenanigans and various fiascos at the Prosecutor’s Office regarding Sahdmadhi’s arrival, Bucky’s trial, revolution in Khura’in and Justice’s subsequent departure — though Simon had very easily managed to make a new friend in Maya Fey and she had invited him and a very red-faced Edgeworth to the next Samurai Con in August — their meetings had kept getting delayed, only commencing last month.

“Oh, it’s you,” Aura had remarked, raising her eyebrows as Athena had emerged from behind Simon’s back.

“Hey…” Athena had said, moving to sit down, smoothing out her flowery skirt. “Guess you didn’t expect me today.”

Aura looked her up and down and crossed her arms. “You’re right. I didn’t.”

Athena kept her gaze focused on the edge of the table. “And listen…I don’t expect this meeting to be all sunshine and rainbows.”

“Glad we’re on the same page here then.” Aura said snippily. “Are you going to contribute anything here, Simon?”

He had shaken his head. “No. I’m merely acting as an observer.”

Aura had nodded before turning back to Athena with a weary look. “Alright then. What do you want, Princess?”

Athena let out a loud sigh, fidgeting slightly with her hands. “I came because….I want to know about my mother.”

Aura’s lips twitched for a moment. “You’ve got Simon for that.”

Athena shook her head. “I mean you. I want to get to know you better.”

“I’m your mother? Don’t make me laugh.”

“I’m serious! You were the robot’s mama. You...were my mama. Don’t you remember?”

“I remember. Though I don’t see how you can call me your mother after— after everything.”

Athena took another breath. “I get that. And look, it was actually… a blessing in disguise that you let me go live with mom’s...relatives over in Spain.”

“If you hadn’t done that, I’m sure we would’ve grown to resent each other,” she added quietly.
“You’re telling me,” Aura scoffed, “But I didn’t do it out of the kindness of my heart.”

“No but...we can work through that.” Athena said, practically wring her hands together by that point. “I guess I’m just trying to say...that I’m open to us going back to the start. Starting again. Like I said, I want to get to know you and...my mom.”

They exchanged glances; Aura’s passive face meeting Athena’s shaky smile. Aura let out a tired sigh and ran a hand through her knotted hair.

“...Alright. I’ll think about it,” she had said. “But I won’t make any promises.”

“...Of course.”

No promises had been made, but...so far, so good, as Aura was currently smirking at one of Athena’s bizarre anecdotes. This, Simon thought to himself, this was as good a start as any.

The tannoy eventually sounded off, bringing an end to their visit.

“So where’re you off to now?” Aura asked as a guard slapped on the handcuffs, ready to lead her away.

Simon swallowed. “To see her.”

Aura nodded. “Right. Give her my love then.”

Simon smiled as Athena linked arms with him. “Will do.”

On their way there, they picked up a bouquet of Zhengfainese lion lilies, poppies and white carnations, and stocked up on incense sticks.

These visits had also recently become part of their routine, starting just after Simon’s birthday. Oftentimes they were quiet, with them cleaning up the grave, and Simon placing his hand on the headstone, silently imparting all his thoughts to her with Athena looking off into the distance, Widget turning a deep purple.


After all, Lang — or rather, Lang Zi — had said that things took their time to come to an end; that case — far more than that bizarre pork bun bludgeoning affair and Master Toneido’s untimely death by dough — still weighed heavy on Simon’s conscience despite countless counselling sessions with Munira.

The terrorist trials had wrapped up three weeks ago. They had resulted in guilty verdicts for all, which for those in Cohdopia meant life imprisonment while those in Borginia faced the death penalty.

That matter had actually catalysed political developments in Skande; snap elections had apparently been called in Borginia last month, ushering in a young and fresh government to replace the decrepit, decades-old autocratic establishment. Diplomatic gains had also been made what with the border now reopened just in time for summer holidays.

Furthermore, according to a recent email exchange with von Karma, it had seemed that these peace negotiations meant Cohdopia’s current government would be expected to perform very well in the
next parliamentary elections, to be held later this year in October.

Shortly after that interlude, state funerals had been held in Primidux and Skande to honour those who had lost their lives in January. Memorial services had also been conducted across the region in honour of the victims of the attacks over the years.

Simon, finally having obtained his new passport, had managed to make the trip to Cohdopia with Edgeworth. They’d observed the funeral processions in the capital before travelling on the trains southwest to the memorial service in Anthyllis and then northeast to Hesperiidae where Oleander had reportedly fled to and murdered his family. It had been an overall sombre experience. Yet, at the same time, it had been enlightening and it had helped Simon put some things in perspective.

He had yet to visit Oleander’s grave. Not that Simon wanted to make that journey down to the unmarked graves in Sunshine Cemetery.

He had, however, visited Bobby Fulbright’s grave at the precinct cemetery one breezy Thursday evening after work. Even though he’d paid his respects, he still didn’t know how to feel about the whole thing. But Munira said he didn’t need to know how he felt, and so that was what he was going with for now.

That said, being here, right by Metis, it made that lack of closure all the more manageable. Especially as sometimes these visits were...reflective.

He felt arms snake around his waist as Athena silently pulled him into a side hug, pressing her head against his broad shoulder. Simon instinctively made to put an arm around her, tightening his hold on her.

It was strange to think she had once been small enough for him to carry in his arms. Cradle in his arms, and carry her out of that lab that awful, awful afternoon…

“…I never know how to feel when I come here,” she said quietly, quivery voice betraying her nerves. “I just… I don’t know how to feel about my mother. I feel like I didn’t really know her at all.”

Simon furrowed his brow, loosening his grip slightly.

“...In what way?” he asked, equally as quietly.

One of the arms around his midsection moved as Athena made to dab at her eyes. He then heard her inhale sharply, and exhale a shaky breath.

He wouldn’t be surprised if the floodgates were to open right now.

Still, Athena soldiered on, just as stubbornly and persistently as Metis had been with her assignments.

“I mean, my mom loved me, right? That’s what she told you and Aura, and I remember — once I finally got out of my headspace after our trial — that I heard that love inside her. It was always there, like this— this underlying current.”

Athena let go of him, her hands trailing down to tug at her t-shirt. “It was a different kind of love to the one she had for you, or for Aura, and vice versa. And yet...I still can’t believe it. I can’t believe that love was there.”

Simon frowned, burying his hands in his jacket pockets. “Why?”
“I guess...I guess because it felt like she never showed it? Like, I never recognised the love she had for me.” Athena answered.

She turned to face him; Widget flickered between blue and purple. “I think it’s because for me I need those positive affirmations day in day out, that I’m loved, you know? I tell myself in the mirror every morning when I’m meditating that I’m loved, and I love myself, and I can believe that. But…”

“But because your mother was never one to voice such love, you do not feel she loved you?” Simon finished for her.

“Yeah. All that, despite what you said in court about her having loved me with all her heart, and her not wanting to see me suffer because of the whole hearing emotions thing…” she said, meeting his eyes again. “Your heart was screaming out that love; that love that so closely resembled hers for mine.”

Simon swallowed the lump in his throat. “And how did it sound?”

Athena tilted her head, trying to piece the memories back together as she chewed her bottom lip. The leaves rustled as a breeze swept through the trees.

“It sounded...very raw,” she said eventually. “Her love for me was unconditional. Parental. Yours and Aura’s…it’s familial. Equally unconditional — though Aura is kinda more complicated, which I get — but…that day when you were on the witness stand, you almost went over the edge, crossed the boundary into the deep parental love, that urge went beyond showing me, but telling me.”

Athena let out another sigh, running her hands through her loose hair. “I just...I feel so conflicted about all this. My rational brain tells me my mother loved me; she made the jewellery, she made Widget for me, she made those headphones — which apparently weren’t so awful — and she made me.”

Simon looked down, as she continued. “And then my old emotions keep coming back up to the surface telling me she didn’t love me; that she always pushed me away; she was always too busy working with you and Aura.”

“I mean, when I was about ten or eleven, I actually started to kind of resent you and Aura, because I felt you were both stealing my mom away from me. When in fact…”

“It ended up being the other way around?” Simon answered, a humourless smile tugging at his lips.

“Yeah, that.”

He looked up to face her again. “…Would you believe me then if I told you what she said to us?”

Athena nodded slowly, and with that, Simon brought her back into an embrace. He enveloped her in his strong arms, stroking her hair as he had done when she was a little girl, soothing her.

“...You were the twinkle in her eye. You were the sun, the moon, the stars,” he murmured, pressing his cheek against the crown of her head. “There wasn’t a moment where she didn’t speak of you, or allude to you. You were our binding force.”

Simon pulled back so he could get a better look at Athena. It wasn’t until then that he felt wetness on his cheek; his tears. He sniffed a little before composing himself again.
“...Do you remember those Friday evenings in the canteen?”

Athena cracked a smile. “Yeah, I used to colour all over your textbooks while you were busy blabbing away.”

“You did, my little spring chick,” Simon said with a chuckle, bringing his hands down to rest on her shoulders. “Well, Metis instigated those Friday evenings for us; to foster a united feeling amongst us. Of belonging. Of family.”

He tilted his head slightly. “...Can you recall how those feelings sounded?”

Athena bit her lip again. “I think— I remember everyone felt very...happy. But also...there was a profound sadness that sounded out from you and Aura. I remember it made me upset.”

Simon nodded, tucking a strand of hair behind Athena’s ear. “Precisely, and do you know why we felt that sadness?”

Athena shook her head.

“You see...Aura and I, we weren’t provided that same kind of love in our household growing up,” he said, looking away. “And though we saw elements of our parents in Metis — somewhat negative elements, which you had previously described, of emotional detachment and awkwardness — it only served to amplify our love for her.”

“But... how?”

Simon met her gaze again. “I suppose the point I’m trying to make here is that your mother...was human. She was flawed, in so many ways, but we loved her nonetheless.”

Athena swallowed.

“Of course, what I’ve told you won’t immediately shift your perspective with regards to your mother’s love, and it certainly isn’t my place to do so, but...” he trailed off, letting his hands fall to his sides. “Though it’s cliché, I must admit that time heals all wounds. I am only learning such myself.”

They exchanged glances before sharing another tight hug.

“...Thank you,” Athena whispered into his chest.

“Not at all,” he responded.

They let go, with Simon’s thumbs brushing away the tears that had formed at the corners of her eyes.

Right there and then, as bizarre as it seemed in such a barren cemetery, the faint chime of an ice cream truck sounded out. Athena broke into grin and made a mad dash, pulling him with her, leaving any and all protests to die in his throat.

They purchased two cones from a very well-dressed man with a monocle and a long thin stitch line running down the middle of his face. They then moved out of the grounds into the wider Gourd Lake Park, finding a bench to sit on.

“Speaking of wounds; those marks on your face, they’re beginning to fade,” Athena said, licking at her fudge and chocolate ice cream. “And your scars too; they seem to have healed.”
Simon looked down to his free wrist. “Ah, I hadn’t noticed.”

“So, therapy’s going well, huh?” she said, taking a large chunk out of the fudge.

“One might say that,” Simon said, lapping at a rogue drop of black sesame ice cream trying to snake its way down the cone.

Athena leaned back in her seat, now working her way past the fudge and into the chocolate. “I think it is; you’re a lot more open to new experiences, new restaurants and stuff that we take you to.”

“Hm…” he hummed, pondering the statement. She did have a point there, admittedly.

“Your outlook just seems a lot more positive, really,” Athena concluded.

“Funny; Edgeworth-dono indicated as much during my performance review.”

“Well if he’s also saying that, then there must be plenty of truth in that,” she said, now getting at the crunchy cone. “Guess he didn’t taken into account your little stunt at Bucky’s trial?”

Simon smirked around a bite of the cone. “I believe he did. He said, and I quote, ‘There’s no need to be consorting with the defence, but on this occasion I’ll allow it as Ms Cykes benefitted from your unorthodox methods in revealing the truth and I admit, Prosecutor Sahdmadhi was certainly in need of a good talking down’.”

Athena giggled. “Hoo boy, Prosecutor Sahdmadhi definitely needed your lectures that day. I’m still not forgiving you for your comments about my being an amateur.”

“I must admit, I do still regard you to be a fledgling. Not just on the courtroom battlefield but… beyond.” Simon said. “And I’ve no doubt that you’ll attempt to parry my assumptions.”

“You can bet on that!” Widget contributed.

Simon snorted, and returned to his ice cream. “Edgeworth-dono also indicated that my investigative partners were all satisfied with my cooperative efforts.”

“Really?”

Simon nodded; he hadn’t had to cut anyone down yet, and that included Detective Mike Meekins.

“You say that and yet…I detect a slight note of sadness in your words,” Athena commented as she worked her way down the ice cream cone.

Simon frowned. “Do you?”

A sly grin made itself known on Athena’s features. “Maybe it’s because you miss a certain forensics investigator?”

“Hardly! She and I speak regularly and although her colleagues are more than competent…I just so happen to value her set of investigative skills and her scientific observations.”

“Oh, I can think of a few more things you like about her,” Athena teased. “What is it with you and your detectives?”

Simon tensed up for a moment, ready with a rebuttal. But he had nothing to worry about as Athena skipped right over the matter of Bobby Fulbright, delving deep into Simon’s past.
“...Like that French detective you kept rambling on about when you first started out—”

“Guillaume?” Simon answered tentatively as he reached the bottom of the cone. He was surprised he could still put a name to the face that had sometimes appeared in his dreams over the years.

“Yeah, him!” Athena exclaimed, jumping out of her seat. “You kept going on about his accent, and his deductive skills, and how you would get lost in his bright blue eyes and—”

“Yes, yes, I believe we’ve heard quite enough of that,” Simon teased as he finished off his ice cream. He turned to fully face Athena, and added with a joking smile, “So you fail to recall your mother’s love and yet you remember my fleeting infatuation with him?”

“Yup!” Athena said, popping the last of her ice cream cone in her mouth. “But...I never quite got why you were working with him...”

*The blasted Phantom affair.*

“That’s a story for another day,” he said, looking away. Then he wiped his hands with a napkin and rose from his seat. “And we have more pressing matters to attend to like your incessant rumbling stomach.”

Athena’s eyes widened. “You could hear that?!?”

“One doesn’t need sensitive hearing for that,” Simon said, helping her up. “Now then, you little duckling—”

“Hey, I’m not a duckling!”

“Alright then, you great big pelican, let’s see about passing through Bucky for soba and going home.”

Athena punched the air. “Ooh, can we watch the Jamming Ninja when we get back?”

“If you insist,” he said as they started down the path. “Though I must admit, I’ve recently been debating the show’s historical and technical accuracy with...”

As they continued their discussion with the sun beating down on them, Simon felt a sense of warmth bubble in his chest.

With his friends, his family, his work and his therapy propelling him along this new path that he was forging for himself...he was going to be alright.

...Wasn’t he?

Chapter End Notes

And there we have it! This has been four years in the making, with so much changed and rewritten since I began, and it’s finally done! I’m really glad I wrote this. I explored so much with my ideas and my writing style, and I hope you enjoyed it too. As a parting gift, I’ll leave you with some trivia!

Transit umbra, lux permanet is Latin phrase for ‘shadow passes, light remains’. Light
can symbolise hope for the future as well as the pursuit of truth, both being key elements in the series.

Name meanings in order of appearance:

Corrie Nøhr: a wordplay on ‘coroner’. The ‘ø’ was added to emphasise her Danish roots.

Jacob Hawthorn: Jacob meaning ‘to supplant/to be behind’, referring to him being on the Borginia Tribunal and his work on war crimes. Hawthorn from the large genus of shrubs and trees in the Rosaceae family, referring to him being a naturalised Cohdopian.

Johannes Birken: John meaning ‘to be gracious’ and Birken is from the German for ‘birch tree’. Perhaps he has Allebahstian roots, which ties his role in the civil war quite neatly. That said, this name has no real underlying meaning to it.

Erikh Qvinn: a Borginianised form of Eric Quinn; Eric means ‘ruler’ and Quinn is derived from the Irish Ó’Cuinn meaning ‘wisdom’ or ‘chief’. Fitting for someone described as a Borginian war hero or, in our case, a great nom de guerre.

Rebekah Klaark: a Borginianised form of Rebecca Clark; Rebecca means “noose”/ ‘to bind/to tie’, and Clark can mean ‘scribe/secretary’, both names which relate to how she managed to bring all the characters together what with that extradition request all the way to playing a role in releasing the archives.

Andreja Amantes: alternative spelling for Andrea, which is the feminine form of Andreas, meaning ‘courageous’ and ‘bold’; traits diplomats should possess. Amantes is a Baltic surname, referencing Borginia as a Baltic state linguistically.

Erynnis Tages: the scientific term for the dingy skipper butterfly. I wanted to keep in line with the game’s use of scientific terms for butterflies and flowers to denote Babahlese and Allebahstian people respectively. Here, as it’s a butterfly, it indicates she’s of Babahlese origin.

Senecio Scopolii: I happened to think this name screamed grandeur and glory when I was browsing lists of scientific names for flowers. I suppose it could be take ironically as he was anything but splendid and glorious, and the region he resided in was also withering away, what with its war games and population decline.

All place names I created for Cohdopia and other subsequent character names such as Papilio Machaon or Pieris Mannii were based around these same flower and butterfly motifs. For Skande in Borginia, I actually came up with this name on a whim, thinking along the lines of the Swedish county Skåne.

Also to note while we’re on the subject: I took the liberty midway through writing of establishing the region our characters live in as Japanifornia. I chose to interpret it as being an autonomous state within the game’s loose definition of America, with Los Angeles as the capital. This would justify the continuous usage of ‘Americans’ by characters in-game (Franziska in 3-5 comes to mind and various points in SoJ) to mean Japanifornia and the surrounding federated states, as well as the presence of embassies (i.e. there are countries like Cohdopia that recognise Japanifornia, whereas others like Zheng Fa have just placed consulates there).
Munira Alim: Munira means ‘luminous/bright’ in Arabic; the root of the name, ‘noor’, means ‘light’ which happens to fit in with the story’s title. Alim is Arabic for ‘knowing/wise/learned’, which suits a qualified psychotherapist who is well-versed in mood and anxiety disorders.

Camilo Nero: wordplay, inspired by the Spanish for truck driver. ‘camionero’. Camilo is a boy’s name.

Lastly, Nerium Oleander: the scientific term for a toxic and poisonous plant, and referencing his Allebahstian origins. Very fitting for the Phantom who has killed and manipulated many.

If you’re interested in hearing more about trivia, about ideas and concepts I abandoned in the planning stages, feel free to leave a comment!

I will, however, leave you with some prompts. Do you know where the chapter titles came from? What do you think were the key themes and metaphors in this work?

Of course, I’d also be very happy to hear your thoughts and feelings about this whole story, and constructive criticism is very much welcomed.

Thank you for reading and take care!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!