1

The Incident at Wensworth Factory

Ominous clouds rolled around the sky, casting an enormous gloomy shadow over the factory, as Mr Wensworth watched his workers through an elaborately decorated window. He was in deep thought, and every crackle from the roaring fireplace seemed to unnerve him and break through into his mind. Strange and untimely events filled his week; there were too many to be called a coincidence. Only a few days ago, two of his most trusted foremen were rushed to the hospital and results came out as food poisoning, and the next day no less than fifty of his employees resigned without reason at the same time, leading Mr Wensworth wondering what he could have possibly done to make them do so.

There was a sharp noise that woke Mr Wensworth from his internal struggles quite suddenly. Loud footsteps crawled up to his door, and a loud knock bounced around the spacious room.

“Come in.”

The magnificent oak door glided open and in strode a man, tall and robust with even, neat hair and clothing that complemented his personality perfectly.

“What news do you have for me today?” asked Mr Wensworth, whose physiques could not have contrasted more greatly with his behemoth of a secretary.

“Not much, sir,” replied the secretary affably. “Most of them are still uneasy from the recent events, but things haven’t gotten out of hand yet.”
“I see.”
Mr Wensworth sank back into deep thought and then suddenly asked, “What about Elysius Blight? Does Mr Blight still want to collaborate with our company even though we are at the brink of bankruptcy?”
“Yes, sir. He believes he can help us out of this time of misfortune as well as strengthening both of our positions in the market.”
Mr Wensworth slowly rose from his cushioned armchair and began to pace up and down the room, his footsteps echoing like a metronome. Stroking his chin, he thought, “Working together with Blight means that I will get my share of profit, even if it mainly comes from his sources, as well as solving this infernal employment crisis; what do I gain by going through all this alone? I should look through his contract before deciding anything, though. There might be some important information that could prove to be a major setback—”
“Oh yes,” broke in the secretary, not realising he had disturbed his employer’s thoughts. “I have a copy of his terms and conditions, if that helps your decision.” He drew out a black briefcase and placed it lightly on the desk, treating it as if it were made of glass.
Mr Wensworth stopped pacing abruptly, walked to the briefcase in a single stride, and stared at his secretary in

disbelief with a shadow of suspicion on his face. “Where did you—”
“I went and asked Mr Blight for a copy of the contract as soon as I realised your intention of collaborating with him.”
Mr Wensworth sighed. For an instant, he imagined his secretary knowing more than he should or secretly being in Blight’s confidence but realised that he had merely planned a step ahead to help him. He reached out a lanky hand and opened the briefcase carefully. Inside was the contract that Blight had proposed to Mr Wensworth days ago. He scanned through it carefully, his eyes two black ants scurrying around.
“Is this all there is?” he asked without lifting his eyes up from the piece of paper in front of him.
“Yes, all of this was written by Elysius Blight himself and delivered to me personally.”
“I will consider this agreement. Thank you, Winslow, you may go now. Or are there any questions you have concerning this matter?”
“None, sir, as long as you are satisfied.”
“Very well, I will be seeing you later.”
Winslow nodded, stood up, and stepped out.

—

Steam hissed, fires roared, and turbines whirred around, as heaps of coal were shoved into the mouths of ravenous furnaces, which instantly devoured the coal. Above it, the

mammoth-like boiler, which was black from the belches of soot coming out from the furnace, screamed as it spewed out hot steam to power the massive turbines for many major cities.

Although work in these factories was dismal (mainly because of the miasma of putrid smoke and the smell of soot) the workers had no reason to despise their employer, Mr Wensworth. He compensated for their rough work with fair wages, adequate food and drink, and precautionary health checks. Most workers, who came from poorer districts of the country, had no access to food or medicine; they regarded the factory as their second home.

However, during the past week a number of incidents which had sown seeds of suspicion and distrust into the working community for the first time. Several workers and even the foremen were poisoned during lunch break. Naturally, since the only person allowed to handle the food was the cook, this led to many theories and suspicions to how the poison found its way into the food.

“The cook must have been the one who poisoned those men; he probably wants to remove some people outta his way and receive extra pay or something.”

“Don’t be a fool! If he did that, the boss would know. No, the boss must have ordered the cook to poison them—”

“Why would he do that? Nobody here has done anything to ‘im. Maybe it’s an outsider who snuck in while cook wasn’t lookin’...”

Nevertheless, the rumors stopped spreading after a few days, and when the people poisoned returned looking

healthier than ever, almost everybody dismissed the incident as an accident.
After the food poisoning, many workers resigned and mysteriously vanished, but nobody paid any attention to them; every man returned to their own work once more.
CLANG. CLANG. The monotonous ringing of the bell roused the busy workers' attention. In unison, every one of them finished up on their work and marched in single file towards the dining hall. Although it was not as soiled as the rest of the factory, scraps of mouldy bread and stains covered the grimy floor. Wafts of greasy air flowed around the rectangular hall, swirling the candles' fires.
Inconsistent light from the many glowing candles on the tables danced around the meagre rays of light that trickled in through the misty translucent windows.
As each of the workers received his share of food and water, they cluttered into the wooden chairs and began to start devouring their bread and meat. Soon, the hall was filled with lively conversations and laughter. Lunch time was always the most anticipated time of the day, due to the dirty mornings they had to endure every day. It was as if the human spirit refused to be tied down by their work; dirty-faced men roared with laughter at each others' stories, while younger boys raced back and forth, almost competing with each other for more food. Crumbs of bread and small chunks of canned meat fell to the ground, and even the black rats residing in the crevices around the dirty factory scurried around rapidly, foraging for small scraps of food left behind by the humans.

Clang. Clang. As the same bell echoed through the hall, bits of food were shoved into eager mouths at the last second, laughter and fragments of conversations died down gradually, and everyone left for their work stations once more.

Footsteps thundered down the hall, and the group of workers thinned until those remaining pushed open a pair of audacious iron doors and entered the boiler room. One by one, each individual snatched a wide metal shovel and resumed feeding the greedy flames of the furnaces.
One of the workers froze. “That’s odd,” he thought. “I thought I heard—”
A deep rumbling noise came from one of the boilers. Alarmed, many of the workmen dropped their shovels and pokers, and rushed to check on the boilers. Yells and confused cries shot out of the boiler room and spread around the factory like a wildfire. Soon everyone was crowded around the entrance, trying to catch a glimpse of the chaos inside.

“Move aside, move aside,” cried an impatient grimy man dressed in thick overalls exasperatedly, “I’m the mechanic, you know!”
Pushing through the crowd was no easy task; there were so many people that it was more likely to push past a herd of cattle. Eventually, he managed to get through the doors and face the problem that stirred up the entire factory. Pandemonium reached out its hand to everyone in the

boiler room. They were scuttling spiders moving around in disarray; each was trying to find the fault in the boilers, which had started to vibrate the floor with its thundering rumbles.
The mechanic scanned the entire scene like an eagle hunting for its next victim. It stood out among the other boilers significantly.
While the normal boilers gave loud shrieks and long hisses of steam, the faulty one vibrated violently and coughed out steam with every ominous rumble. There was still time. If he reached and fixed it in time, nothing catastrophic would happen. If he didn't... It would be best not to think about it.
Hurriedly but calmly, the hassled mechanic made his way to the target. He pushed past disoriented stokers and dodged the sinewy arms of a coal miner. Finally, he reached the boiler and searched for the flaw. A flickering movement caught his eyes and he saw it: the pressure gauge was vibrating dramatically and though he realised what was happening, he was too late to prevent incoming disaster.

A loud bang erupted and pierced the entire factory like a catastrophic volcano exploding. Masses of glass shattered simultaneously and fell to the ground; among the sea of glittering crystalline shards, a faint flash of gold could be seen dashing across the air. Those in and around the boiler room were blasted and blown to bits by the sheer force of the explosion. Black soot was mixed with the roasting

steam to form a deadly combination of thick, blistering dark steam, which travelled around the surrounding neighbourhood and covered it like an eternal shadow. Unfortunate people travelling past and residing nearby were engulfed in darkness, while the survivors of the explosion poured out, gasping for breath.
Among them were Mr Wensworth and his secretary, Winslow. They were not as badly hurt as their workers, save for a few cuts and bruises, but they were, nonetheless, very much shocked at the final blow their factory had suffered. Sparks of orange and yellow leaped out and made contact with the wooden beams holding the factory. In an instant, the sparks turned into twirling tongues of fire, which licked the beams and tore apart the foundations of the halls and caused red brick walls to cave in and collapse in a heap of rubble.

Thud, thud, thud. Firefighters rushed to the scene to try and wrestle with the blazing inferno and recover trapped workers still hidden among the heated debris. Their thick boots plodded on against the unrelenting heat and their coats flapped wildly as they swung their axes to clear blocked passages. Some of them brought out great tanks of water connected to long leather hoses which they used to spray jets of water in rebellion against the flames, but it was no use; every spray of water was mockingly slapped away by the engulfing flames.
Many lucky workers rescued by the brave firefighters emerged from the burning rubble and were treated on the

scene immediately by medics, who had just arrived to help. The majority of the workers were safe and alive, but the factory was beyond any human power to save. As they looked on, the dark clouds parted and rain began dripping down to the earth as the fire burned on to match the orange shade of the sunset.

2

Elysius Blight

Many miles away, a man sat lounging on a luxurious armchair, his sturdy hands holding a delicate white teacup. Sipping the tea appreciatively, his body suddenly grew stiff momentarily then relaxed, as the silhouette of a well-built bearded man advanced stealthily towards him.
“Good evening, Rook, or is it night already?”
“Night, I think,” replied Rook, glancing at a rustic grandfather clock behind him. “But how did you know that it was me?”
“Your footsteps. A man of your stature has longer strides when they walk, leading to longer intervals between each footstep. None of my servants have such long legs, so I knew it was you.”
“Well,” replied Rook amusingly, as he tossed his thick brown overcoat aside, “I see you are still sharper than ever after all these years. Yet, even after telling me to stop visiting for several years, you suddenly ask me to drop in whenever I can. The situation must be bad, or are you finally starting to feel lonely?”
Blight chuckled, placed his teacup gently on the table, and pulled himself up from the armchair. He turned around and faced Rook for the first time in their conversation, and the light shone on him, revealing his features clearly.
He was lean and lanky, though not as tall as Rook, with a warm cotton sweater wrapping him against the bitter cold.

His brown, messy hair was brushed to the sides casually, exposing a pair of penetrating eyes which lingered above a slightly crooked nose. Two grey slippers scraped along the crimson carpet, as Blight made his way around the room. Selecting another cup from a row of neatly arranged porcelain sets, he set the cup down on the table, poured aromatic tea into it, and sat back down. Motioning for Rook to do the same, he said, “Have a seat, and, I will tell you why I have requested for you.” Rook did what he was told, and so Blight began:

“Ten years ago, we started this long-term plan. I put you in charge of managing my high-risk affairs in my place. Then only years ago, I suddenly called you in to tell you to take a break from these activities.”

Rook gave a stiff nod, as he recounted this in his mind.

“It was absolutely necessary; the police were unusually sharp, and any further advancements might have ended up with us facing serious consequences. No, it would be better for you to lie down for a while and be cleared of suspicion. But now I had a problem: how could I keep orchestrating crimes in your absence to convince the Constabulary of your innocence? The answer was simple for me to think of but not so easy to carry out. Luckily, due to my vast network and connections, I was able to get my hands on an easy pawn: Mr Winslow Towns, a greedy, gullible young man, whom I gained control over after an anonymous letter with rather compromising details about his past dealings. Since then, he has been a highly efficient piece on my board with me overseeing his every move.”

“So then… The Wensworth boiler explosion was you as well?”
Blight’s lips curled into a satisfied smile. “I see the story has already made it into the evening newspaper. Young Winslow had the sense to move himself and Wensworth to a safe room; I will need them both alive for the next stage in my plan.”
“You still haven’t told me the reason for my visit,” remarked Rook, slightly impatient.
“Patience, Rook, patience. Without waiting, plans will never succeed; besides, I was about to tell you.”
Blight closed his eyes, and Rook waited, somewhat annoyed that he had just been scolded.
“I want to reinstate you as my representative in the underworld.”
A dull buzzing sensation filled the silent room. Rook recovered rapidly, then grinned and asked, “All right, when do I begin?”
“Quite soon, but there are a few things which I should tell you now. Firstly, instead of meeting together every week, we should write letters to each other; this will reduce the possibility of the police suspecting us again.”
“Letters?” repeated Rook slowly. “Won’t that confirm their suspicions if they manage to get a hold on one?”
“Not unless we replace the words with everyday speech. For example, if I write ‘business is well’, it will directly translate into ‘stay down; make no moves for now’. Is that easy to understand?”

“Right. That way it’ll just look like we are writing to each other.”
“Exactly. Now secondly, please do not use my real name; that would only draw unwanted attention to me which could prove to be a major problem.”
“Don’t worry,” said Rook in a relaxed tone, “I’ve never told a soul about your true identity.”
“Now thirdly, after Wensworth’s company falls," continued Blight monotonously, "There will be no competition in the coal market for me; everyone will come to me for coal and electricity. Winslow won’t be needed in the future. Try to dispose of him in a non-traceable way, and most importantly, do not draw attention when you do so. And those, Rook, are the only few points I have to tell you. Feel free to ask me any questions that you have concerning these matters.”
Rook thought for a moment then said, “No, I don’t think I have any questions.”
“Good. You were always excellent at understanding and adapting to my plans; I hope that stays the same after your break, now then, drink your tea before it gets cold.” He pointed to the teacup, which was no longer steaming.
The two of them sat in an eerie silence, sipping their tea quietly, until an old butler announced from behind the door, “Dinner is ready, sir.”
Blight rose from his armchair and opened the door.
“Thank you, Greaves,’ he said silkily, ‘Might I ask you to tell the cook to prepare the meal for two?” He gestured at

Rook, who had also gotten up, leaving his empty cup on the table.
“Of course, sir.” replied Greaves, bowing slightly.
As the aged butler tottered away, Blight stepped and turned his head around over his shoulder. “Do stay for dinner; I think we′re having steak and gravy tonight.”
Following Blight’s lead, they walked through the slithering corridor that led up to the dining hall. Entering the hall, echoes ricocheted around, with the butler being the main source of noise. Very soon, the table was laid with food, as Rook looked around the hall, remembering every little detail from his previous visits years ago. Bright shots of light flooded from the roof; the elegant chandelier glimmering like an array of stars. Framed paintings adorned the richly decorated walls, each one depicting famous battle scenes or brave knights leading a victorious army. The golden plates in front of him laid expectantly on a rectangular carved dining table overlaid with a vivid purple cloth. While the maids and the butler returned to their other housekeeping chores, both of the men tucked in their chairs and began to eat. The soft clattering of the forks mingled in with the occasional thunk of the gravy jug, as Rook pondered on a conversation topic suitable for the current situation. Finally, he made an attempt to engage Blight in a lighthearted conversation, after the bowls and plates were cleared away, and red vintage wine was brought out and poured into crystalline glasses by Blight’s steady hands.

“I wonder, what is the final result of all of these projects going to be?”
Blight settled down his glass of wine and replied in a dignified tone, “All will be revealed in good time, my good man, for now, just enjoy the food.”
A long drought of speech followed this question with Rook struggling to find another catalyst for conversation.
Eventually, he gave up on all hope to engage Blight in a decent talk, got up and said, “Thank you for your hospitality, I’ll be getting back now.”
He stood up and strode across the dining hall to the exit.
“Don’t forget those three points.”
Grabbing his top hat and looking back at Blight over his shoulder, he replied curtly, “I won’t. Goodnight.”
And he left the mansion, trodding along the gravel path to a horse-drawn cab waiting patiently outside the iron gates of Blight’s property.
As Blight looked at the fading shadow of the cab, he sighed and closed the curtains. With his hands behind his back, he marched on back to the living room, and opened the door back to where he had been sitting for hours during the day.
Lying on the table with the tea cups now gone and placed back in the glass cupboard was a copy of the evening newspaper.
Blight chuckled and muttered, “Rook’s parting gift.”
He flipped through the pages and stopped at a page titled ‘Factory in Flames’. On the top corner was a blurry photograph depicting a giant building engulfed by flames.

“This sure brings back a lot of memories...”

A sudden vivid flash burst into his mind. A giant building crashed to the ground; its windows shattered by the onslaught of burning flames. People were crying inside, but he didn’t care; they kept on burning until the remains of the house collapsed into a heap on the floor, a mere shadow of its former grandeur.

3

Memories

30 years ago…

A scrawny young boy was watching an elderly cautiously. Wearing a black frock coat and a silver watch, the man nervously checked his watch every few minutes. Two horses trotted up to him with the cabman tugging at their reins; the horses gradually slowed down and stopped right in front of the man. The cabman looked at him carefully.
“Are you Mr Stone?” he asked, giving him a questioning glance.
“Yes, I am.”
At this, the cabman hopped down and helped Mr Stone into the Cab before flicking the reins and taking off again. Quick as a rabbit fleeing from a predator, the boy sprinted down a deserted alley and zig-zagged his way through a labyrinth of buildings before pushing open a dusty door and entering what seemed to be an ancient antique shop. Treading past countless valuable jugs and cups sneakily, he stretched out a grimy hand at an intricate porcelain vase.
“What have I told you about touching the products, Elysius?”
Elysius Blight, who was only half the height of the man behind him, shuddered as he turned around. Elysius whipped back his hand and said innocently, “I was only just examining it, Charlie.”

Charlie narrowed his eyes and retorted sternly, “And that’s the third time you’ve said that. You know, it would be a tiny bit more convincing if you came up with another excuse.” His face suddenly lit up into a smile. “Well then, how did your errands go?”
“Not bad,” replied Elysius, focusing his attention now to a bronze statue of an elephant, “I made thirty crowns today; old Mr Grey gave me a loaf of bread too.”
Going on errands was part of an everyday routine for the young boy. Starting from the morning, he would leave the shop and look for hirers; usually small deliveries for shopkeepers or help with cleaning for busy households. He would return for a quick lunch, then continue working until the sun set behind the neglected row of buildings in the district, Fallow’s Row.
Collapsing into a rickety wooden chair, Charlie extracted a pipe from his pocket and lit it, blowing out rings of smoke with every breath. He pulled a newspaper out and browsed through the featured stories. On the cover, a familiar face stood out; Elysius gave a sharp gasp. Charlie sucked in excess smoke at this abrupt exclamation. Coughing, he wheezed, “What’s wrong?”
“Who’s that?” Elysius was pointing at a photograph in the newspaper showing a fashionable man dressed with grizzled sideburns gazing at the camera with an authoritative air.
“Oh, him? He’s part of the Custodians; the highest authority of this country. His name is Mr Stone— Hey, where are you going?”

“Upstairs.”
Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Multiple stairs sagged as the young boy stepped up to his room. Many schemes started to come to his mind; this was an opportunity too good to miss. If he could steal the nobleman’s wallet, it could be ransomed for a small fortune.
“I know the times and places he’ll be visiting,” muttered the scheming boy, “but the problem is accessing his coat; how do I reach for his pockets without him noticing? The frosty weather will make sure he keeps his coat on with him at all times… I’d better come up with a plan soon, or he might slip out of my grasp…”
Looking outside, Elysius saw the moon illuminating the neighbourhood; the sight of the moon made him unexpectedly melancholic. He had been born an orphan like many other children at the time; however, Charlie had found him not long after he was born on the streets, and so he was able to live a somewhat normal life. “It would all go to waste, if I get caught though,” whispered a voice in his head. “But if I succeed, we can live a much better life than this,” argued another craftier voice.
“Elysius! Come down for dinner!”
As he trudged down the stairs, Elysius, realising he would never be able to resist the temptation of potential instant wealth, chuckled in a low tone to himself thinking, “If I’m going to do it, I’ll just make sure that I won’t get caught…”
The sun floated up, signalling a new day. Elysius kicked back the thin blanket covering him and tip-toed out of the shop; he wanted to avoid Charlie’s interrogation; after all, it

was Saturday and very few people would be hiring his services today. The moment the sun's shining rays hit Elysius, he was licked by the warmth of comforting rays of light and was filled with the urge to accomplish something. He strode on, determined to spy on the unfortunate nobleman.

For the next few days, Elysius spent most of the time memorizing the streets and observing the nobleman. Escape routes, alibis, and disguises whirred around in his mind; a plan slowly took shape, and he was prepared to put it into action, but there was still one small problem: he had no one to rely on for help. If a constable happened to pass by while he was still carrying out the deed and caught him in the act, it would be over in mere seconds. He wasn't ready yet for ten years in a dark, damp cell with the rats, so he immediately began to think of a way to obtain a lookout.

"Should I Charlie? No, he would probably ask way too many questions. Hmm… I guess I could ask some of the street kids to help me, but I expect they'll be wanting payment… Yes, the only possible way is to hire a few kids to help; smaller than me but big enough to contribute something to my plan… Would ten crowns be enough to buy them?"

A loud crash woke Elysius from his thoughts and froze him in place. Glancing around cautiously, Elysius regained his composure and quickened his pace then heard soft pattering of tiny feet behind him; he spun around, preparing to fight off any pickpockets behind him, but to

his surprise, the two scrawny boys behind him looked just as frightened as he was.
They were dressed in dirty overalls and filthy grey shirts that must have once been white. Their messy, long hair was the exact shade of brown as Elysius', though a lot dirtier. The pair of street urchins shot each other looks, trying to get one another to speak first. Eventually, the taller out of the pair stepped forward, confident as a lion in his territory but shaking slightly said, "E–Erm, Mister Charlie wants ya ter come back home quickly. He has something important ter tell ya and, erm, yeah that's 'bout it."
Just as they turned around to leave, Elysius suddenly called out to them, "Wait!" The pair stopped and faced him curiously.
"How would you like to earn a few crowns?"
Their eyes lit up at the mention of money. "Work? For you?"
"Yeah, I'm going to try and pick a rich guy's pocket. All I need you to do is stand in a certain location and warn me of policemen if they come. I can give you..." He reached into his pocket and brought out ten silver coins, "ten crowns now, and at least a hundred crowns each after I get the guy's wallet. Are you with me?" He shook the coins in his hand temptingly.
"Wait, if we agree ter help ya, can we have that money now?"
"That's right. And don't forget the hundred crowns later."
"Alright, I'm in. What 'bout you, Tom?"

The shorter boy hesitated. “Well, I’m not so sure...”
“Come on, Tom! A hundred crowns each and ten now! And it’s not even a hard job either!”
“O–ohh, alright I guess.” Tom faltered. “W–what if we get caught?”
“Relax, I’ll put you in a safe place with plenty of escape routes and besides, I’ll find a way that makes it unlikely for you to be seen as my accomplice.”
“U–Uh, okay...” Tom still looked uneasy, so Elysius said consolingly, “If you’re still not sure, you don’t have to come.”
“N–No, I’ll come. I want the money so...”
Elysius looked at the pair, as if waiting for any questions, then seeing that they had none, handed them the ten silver coins. Both of them received their fee gladly and waited patiently for further instructions.
“Okay, so in two days, meet me back here in the morning as early as you can, got it?”
“Yessir!” They saluted him and ran off into the deplorable maze of buildings, obscured from plain sight once again.
Everything was prepared now for the upcoming robbery; he now had two watchouts ready to warn him of approaching danger. “Even if they slip up and the police question them,” thought Elysius, strolling leisurely, “they can’t give anything away, because they know nothing about my plan.”
The shop, now closed, waited patiently in front of him. As he closed the door gently behind him, Charlie popped out from behind a row of tottering shelves while carrying a

box of imported goods and cried, “Happy birthday, Elysius! You’re nine years old today!”
Elysius, who was taken aback at this unexpected welcome, stuttered, “Y–Yeah, thanks.”
“Oh, and I also have this for you,” he added, settling down the box and pulling out a small box from a nearby cupboard and opening it, revealing an even smaller white iced cake in it. I’ve been waiting for you all day, you know. Where have you been all this time?”
“Just wandering around; who were those two boys you sent to find me?” asked Elysius, while he searched for a fork.
“Them? They were also wandering around like you. I gave the two of them a sovereign each to tell you to return; looks like they succeeded too.”
“Why didn’t you come yourself?”
Charlie raised his eyebrows and said, “We had a record of twenty customers today with about two and a half thousand crowns in profit; there was no time to leave the shop. Besides, I thought you’d be home quickly, since it is Saturday after all.”
“No, I was trying to find more work, but there was no one there, so I left and walked around for a bit. Anyways, thanks for the cake but I’m feeling pretty tired, so can I go up and have a rest?”
Surprised at this unexpected request, Charlie responded, “Uh— Sure, go ahead.”

At this, Elysius marched back upstairs. It was as if there were two armies fighting in his mind; the wild, instinctive army was fighting tooth and nail against his conscience. "It wouldn't be too late to stop this," his conscience debated. "Oh, yes it is," retorted the reckless side, "you've already paid the two kids, and they're expecting even more; don't back out now you coward!" Elysius took a deep breath and relaxed his mind. "Come to think of it, this isn't something I want to do, it's something I *must* do. Sooner or later, someone's going to rebel against this awful government, so why shouldn't I help them out a bit?"

—

Clouds drifted by. Birds flew back and forth through the sky. People went on with their daily activities. Fallow Street remained monotonous. No one paid any attention to the boy standing in front of a lamppost dressed in a dusty, beggarly coat with his hands folded in front of him, keeping an eye out for his fellow accomplices. One low whistle. Two low whistles. Elysius spun around, looking for the source of noise.
"Psst! Here!" whispering the taller boy through a shattered window from an abandoned building behind the lamppost Elysius was leaning on. He waved urgently for him to come.
"In here."
A battered wooden door creaked open and admitted him into the room. It was a dark and musty room, with only

one broken window to allow slivers of sunlight into the poorly furnished den.
“So, boss, what are we going to be doing today?”
Elysius sat down on the opposite side of a table like a general commanding his soldiers in battle.
“One of you stand on the roof of that building—” he indicated an invisible old tenement building to his left. “And the other over on that rooftop.” He indicated another invisible tenement building to his right. “That way, we’ll be able to see them coming from all sides; you two take the left and right intersecting roads, and I’ll take the middle one. If you see a policeman walking down the road, make sure you wave your handkerchief—” He reached into his pocket and passed to them a handkerchief each. “And drop them. After that, just leave the rest to me and come back here; also if no one does appear, just stay where you are. Got it?”
The two of them saluted and sped off to their positions. Now, the plan had begun.
Cold wind roared and bit Elysius’ face as he made his way to his station: an abandoned multi-storey unit set up for destruction. Positioning himself near the window, Elysius took out a long scarf and tied it around his mouth and nose, hiding most of his face from sight. Next, a scruffy brown cap was pushed onto his head, which completed his disguise; everything was ready and all there was left to do was wait for the target.
Although Elysius knew the man wouldn’t arrive for quite some time, nevertheless, the animated boy couldn’t help

but feel slightly impatient. He spent most of the time waiting and drumming his fingers on a giant water bucket mindlessly. Minutes soon turned into hours, Elysius was about to leave his hiding place and search for the man himself, when he heard a familiar footstep approaching the unit he was in. Carefully, the hunter peered through the glass and saw his prey under his window. This time he wasn't alone but was accompanied by two men in suits. He was dressed in a warm woollen coat with a black top hat perched on his head. The nobleman reached into his pockets, drew out an expensive cheroot cigar and lit it. It was time.

Elysius lifted up the heavy bucket and poured the water through the open window, drenching the man in freezing water.
He heard a surprised, "What—" and rushed down the stairs to take the bounty. As he quietly stepped out and positioned himself in a hidden corner close to the nobleman, Elysius heard multiple concerned voices speak up.
"Are you alright, sir?"
"Can I help in any way, sir?
"I'm fine, I'm fine," he grumbled, "It's those damned fools; what were they thinking, pouring water down in this kind of weather?"
Mr Stone stiffly removed his top hat and coat and sat down on a bench next to him. After he checked his surroundings and made sure he was quite alone with his

attendants, he took off his soaked cotton coat, still dripping with water, and grabbed it tightly, suspecting already that this might be a set up, while he mopped his face. Crawling up from behind the bench, Elysius dared not to breathe, as he inched closer and closer to his target. There was a strange bulge in the man's pocket. Could it be a—?

"Hey! What are you doing?" shouted one of the attendants, quickly alerting the wary nobleman.

It was time to disappear. A loud clunk was heard as Elysius dropped the lit smoke bomb onto the ground. Dense smoke shot out from it, covering the vicinity in a heavy white cloud. In one swift motion, Elysius swiped the coat off out of the confused nobleman's hands and dashed off into a dark alley. A loud "Stop!" erupted from behind him but the exclamation didn't pull him to a halt; it spurred him on faster than ever. His heart beat like a drum, thumping against his ribs as if to break free. He kept sprinting until he came to the building he was looking for: the laundry house. Heavy footsteps were getting louder and louder; he had to hurry and change out of his disguise. Hastily removing the scarf and cap, Elysius rushed to a basket and dumped them in, blending them in with the other wet clothes. Next, he extracted an expensive wallet out of the coat, hid it in the pocket of another coat in a different basket, and left the empty coat with his disguise. After he saw that everything was satisfactory, he took off the rags he was wearing and pulled on a clean, neat shirt and trousers. Taking the basket with the wallet inside,

Elysius stepped back out into the street, accidentally bumping into the exhausted nobleman. Getting nothing more than an irritated glower, he sighed a breath of relief; it was time to check the bounty.

"So how much are we getting?"
They were back together again in the small room, sitting around a table as if they were making a secret exchange. Elysius opened up the wallet and shook out the contents. Multiple gold coins and official looking papers fell out and littered the dusty table.
"Your payment was... a hundred crowns, I believe? Well, there are no crowns here but only sovereigns, so here—" he handed both of them twelve sovereigns each, leaving six for himself. The two boys beamed as they received their payment then waved goodbye and departed from the room, leaving Elysius alone once again.
It was evening and the orange sun was slowly falling back down when Elysius started for home. There were several important papers that were still in the wallet he hadn't given away; each of the papers had a date and a sum of money written on them. Three of them had ten thousand crowns written on them and four had twenty thousand crowns; whatever these papers were, they were sure to be worth a lot of money. "Hmm... This date, 1879, is most likely an expiration date, like those found on receipts, so it means I have nine years to find out how to use these papers..."

Raucous laughter burst out from a nearby pub. As he walked closer, Elysius heard a familiar voice from it. Curious, he stepped a little closer to the entrance and for the second time in the same day, crashed into Mr Stone. He was tipsy and helped into a waiting cab by two of his attendants. Elysius watched the cab drive off and was about to move on, when he suddenly heard another man's voice, "That stubborn fellow who just left, a member of the Custodians, you know, and still got robbed! Says he lost about a hundred and ten thousand sovereigns' worth of bonds… I've even heard he's out hunting for the kid who stole them and has sworn to put a bullet through his head after he's done with him…"

"Bonds… I think I've heard of bonds before…" pondered Elysius, trying to think of where he had heard of the term before, not at all concerned with the threat of immediate death. "That's right, I asked Charlie what bonds were last year; he told me they were sort of certificates that could be exchanged for money in banks… The real problem is trading in the bonds without suspicion. I don't want to rely on others for this, so I guess I'll wait and let everyone forget about it first, since I still have nine years' worth of time…"

Yells and cries ran out from the street corner in front of Elysius. A circle of people were gathering around an obscured figure.

"Must have been an accident or some—"

His thoughts were cut short. Something about the figure slumped on the wall, bloody and lifeless, seemed familiar.

Elysius' heart dropped, as he pushed past the crowd to get a closer look. The dead man had a hole straight through his head, a river of blood trickling down.
"Charlie..." No tears welled up in the boy's eyes nor did he feel any pain or grief, but he was shaking more than he ever did in his life. Bright, blazing flames in his body jumped up and lashed him painfully. He was unaware of being tired... So tired...

It was morning and the soft twittering of birds aroused Elysius from his deep slumber.
"Where am I?" he mumbled, sitting up.
His room above the shop loomed into view. There were loud voices below, discussing things Elysius neither understood nor cared about. Now that Charlie was dead, what would happen to him? How did he even die?
Someone was coming up the stairs. A knock on the door announced his arrival, and a man came in.
He was not particularly wealthy but still appeared well-looked after. His short moustache bristled with each word he spoke.
"Are you Elysius Blight, one of the residents of this building, along with the deceased?"
"Yes." replied Elyius numbly.
"Well then, Mr Blight," continued the man, "I'm the landlord of this block, and I am sorry to say that you will be required to move out of this building. The deceased, however, had already paid for the weekly rent in advance,

so you have up to seven days to make any decisions regarding this matter, is that clear?"
"Yes." repeated Elysius in the same monotonous tone.
"Very well."
As the landlord turned to leave, Elysius suddenly remembered something, and said, "Wait."
The landlord turned back.
"Does that mean I'm in charge of all that stuff down there?
"No, you are not old enough to take over this business, but—" He lowered his voice. "But if you wish to sell something to me, I would pay you well for it. There are a few articles of interest that I—"
"How do I know you haven't taken anything?" Elysius asked blandly, gazing into the man's eyes.
"Well, anyways," the landlord continued, choosing not to answer the question. "How's twenty five sovereigns for the articles in question?"
Elysius watched as the landlord pulled out a bulging sack of coins and poured out twenty five golden coins.
"Please make it fifty."
The landlord stared at him in disbelief.
"It's to make sure you pay for anything you might have taken."
The shrewd landlord stood silently, then put the coins back into the sack and slapped it onto the table next to Elysius' bed.
"There. Take it all; there are about sixty sovereigns in there."
And with that, the man departed from his room.

“The wallet,” thought Elysius instinctively, as he patted a hidden pocket on his right thigh. Feeling that it was still there, Elysius sighed in relief. “I have money and a week to make plans; that’s all I need for now...”

The week came faster than Elysius had anticipated and soon, he was on the streets by himself.
“Charlie’s dead, so I have to work for myself now,” he reminded himself, trying to force himself to calm down. A newspaper page was flying through the air; Elysius read ‘MR STONE ACQUITTED FROM HEAVY CHARGES’.
“Mr Stone again?” he thought inquisitively.
Curious, Elysius read on. “Mr Stone was arrested one week ago, in Fallow Street, Sodor. He was charged with first degree murder—”
Elysius stopped with a jolt. So it was he who shot Charlie to death. He read on, determined to get the entire story.
“After many trials, however, it has been revealed that due to lack of evidence, prosecution will not stand. Mr Stone was acquitted today at seven o’clock by the court and is expected to continue working as a member of the Custodians.”
Resentment and hot fury exploded within him; how could they say lack of evidence when no more than six people saw him shoot? Slowly, Elysius got up and threw away the paper. From now on, it was his job to execute justice...
To accomplish this, he had to first get educated and climb the ranks in society himself. With scholarships and money, he attended the finest schools, achieved the

highest national score countless times, and studied relentlessly while keeping an eye on news of the financial world. During this period of intense learning, Elysius discovered many hidden talents: chess, economics, and even music.

Years passed by, and soon the scrawny boy grew into a respectable gentleman; he was still lean (due to working late into the night) but now had wealth, knowledge, and power. After exchanging the bonds, which the banker took without suspicion, he bought land and factories, slowly building up a strong business. Creating an excellent outward appearance was essential; nobody could tell what his real intentions were, so he built several orphanages and tenement buildings for the homeless, as well as donating hundreds of thousands of sovereigns to the poor. Finally, after waiting for twelve years, the opportune moment to strike had arrived: he was invited to Mr Stone's mansion as a guest. Politicians, company directors, army leaders, and many other big names from the upper crust of society attended this magnificent party; it was a treasure chest of valuable information. Elysius used this chance to worm his way around key figures, extracting information like a skilled surgeon.

A week later, a momentous story shook the news: Mr Stone's giant mansion had collapsed from a fire, killing him and the other inhabitants. A jealous politician, who had previously been mistreated by the dead millionaire,

was arrested with charges of murder and arson, while a mysterious figure walked off in the distance, smiling to himself as he saw the photograph of the raging fire.
But his plan had changed drastically during the years; he saw the chaos and destruction that he had created... At the party, he had discovered many unspoken things... The emptiness that had once been caved in his heart was refilled with a lust for death...

A monster terrorized a town and everyday it came down to eat the villagers. Along came another fearsome beast that killed it; the villagers were ecstatic for a brief moment, until they realised that their saviour was worse than the previous monster. The new monster ravaged through the town and left it looking worse than it had ever been. One night, when the moon was brightly shining in the sky, a tongue of fire came down from the skies and licked the town and beast, destroying everything in its path. A fire... Destruction... Chaos...

—

And thus, the figure slipped off into the dark.

4

Investigation Begins

Wensworth factory lay in ruins, as the rising sun tickled the rubble with its shining fingers. The chilly air stung those who breathed it in. A couple of policemen lingered around the scene, hoping to catch some clue to this explosion.
“This is hopeless,” sighed one of them, shivering from the cold. “I’m done with this. How about you?”
“Hmm… I guess so…”
“Well, then, I’m leaving now.”
The group of police marched on to the iron-barred gates of the fallen factory, where Inspector Branch, a wide, corpulent man dressed in a blue coat and trousers stood, his straw hair sticking out from a blue bowler hat.
“So, no luck?” he asked them, as they opened the gates and trudged out, tired after a morning searching for clues in the ruins.
“No sir, we’ve found nothing to give us a lead on this explosion.”
“Oh dear, that is bad news… Yes, bad news indeed… Well, I suppose now that we have no evidence of foul play, we can put this down as an engineering accident of some sort.”
“Sir, is it true that they’ve sent a detective here to help us in this investigation?”
“Hmm? Oh, yes, that’s true. He’s a strange fellow; I’ve only met him once, and he barely talked too. I’ve heard rumors

about him; apparently, he's the best detective in the Constabulary but gives the information and credit to his superiors to avoid unnecessary attention. I'll say, I'd sure like to see him try and find something in this absurd—"

He was suddenly interrupted by the soft clip-clopping of an approaching horse and the squeaking of its trailing cab's wheels. When Inspector Branch saw who it was carrying, his face changed from confusion to incredulity.
"My word! It's the man himself! And who's that behind him? Oh, he's also brought along Mr Wensworth too."
The newcomer, striding in front of a haggard Mr Wensworth, could not be older than thirty, with his jet black hair reflecting the early sun. His sinewy arms hid beneath a thick brown coat, which was wrapped around him like a shell on a snail, protecting him against the cold. Piercing green eyes scanned the situation, then his thin mouth spoke.
"Pleased to meet you again, Inspector Branch."
He extended a calloused hand out, which the inspector shook hesitantly.
"I see you've already inspected the scene," he added, looking down at the blackened shoes of the other policemen.
"That's right, we have, and I haven't got a single clue on how the explosion happened. I think it's safe to presume that the entire incident was an accident—"
"No, I think it's still too early to assume such things."

Everyone froze. No one had ever contradicted the inspector before.
“Your name is?” asked Inspector Branch, slightly offended.
“William Sigerson, sir.”
“So then, Sigerson, do you think you can find something?”
“Possibly. In fact, if nothing had been removed from the scene, it is highly probable that there could still be incriminating evidence hidden somewhere in this rubble.”
“Incriminating evidence? Evidence of what?”
“A crime. I believe someone purposely sabotaged this factory—”
Mr Wensworth, who kept quiet throughout his arrival, burst out, “But this is impossible! Everyone was in the dining hall, and nobody suspicious entered or exited the factory on that day.”
“Are you sure everybody was in the hall, Mr Wensworth? What about your secretary?” asked Sigerson.
“If you think Winslow blew up the boiler, then you couldn’t be more wrong; he’s been with me for over a decade and has never once attempted to do anything like that,” replied Mr Wensworth impatiently.
“Has his behaviour changed at all during the previous weeks?”
“Well, yes, but I suppose I have been giving him more work than he usually has.”
“That’s interesting…”
Sigerson was looking out at the ashy rubble as though he was hypnotised. He broke the silence as suddenly as it started.

“The engineer brought in claimed the explosion was due to a faulty pressure valve; am I correct?”
“Yes, that’s what he said,” replied the inspector in a dull voice.
At this, Sigerson leapt forwards, wrenched the iron gates open, and called behind his back, “If it’s not much trouble, please excuse me.”
The onlookers watched him, amused to see him strolling around the sooty rubble with his back slightly bent, examining the ground for something they believed did not exist. All of a sudden, he bent down to the ground and began rummaging through the blackened wooden shavings like a dog keen on a scent. With a quiet exclamation, Sigerson gently pulled out a shiny, partly golden object: a bent, deformed sovereign.
“You think that is the evidence?” sneered the inspector, shaking his head in disbelief.
“I do not think; I know it is. See this mark over here?” he asked, pointing to a large scratch in the middle of the coin as the policemen and Mr Wensworth stepped closer to get a better view of the coin in his hand, “This could only have been achieved by a hard strike with another object.”
“It could have been a coincidence,” responded the inspector who was clearly still skeptical, “It could have been hit accidentally and a worker might have carried this coin around and dropped it here.”
“If someone really did carry a coin around with them, it would likely be in their pocket, which doesn’t allow for

objects to drop out so easily; there is more than one coin dropped as well, see?"
He reached into his pocket and took out nine more golden coins.
"See how they have the same mark?" he asked, showing them the disfigured coins. "It's nearly impossible for that to be a coincidence. Besides, the coins' diameters are only a slight bit larger than the pressure valve's opening, making them ideal for hammering in to block the steam, build up pressure, and eventually blowing up the boiler, setting everything up to look like an accident. And if you look even closer, you can see the edges have been badly scratched for all ten coins, indicating that they have scraped along something."
There was a long silence after Sigerson finished speaking. Since it was almost concluded that there had been no crime committed, this new development stunned everyone. The first to recover was Mr Wensworth, who stammered, "Then who could have possibly done it?"
Sigerson looked thoughtful for a moment then replied, "That's not for me to say right now. I think—" He turned to Inspector Branch unexpectedly, "With your permission, Inspector, I would like to continue this conversation somewhere preferably away from the cold."
Inspector Branch blinked rapidly and nodded; then turning to the other officers said, "You're all dismissed."
Watching the other policemen walk off into the distance, he said, "Well then, let's get going."

—

The smell of coffee and sugar wafted around the quaint cafe as the first three customers entered and took a seat. Promptly, a tidy waitress came and took their orders, leaving them again in deep silence.

"So," asked Mr Wensworth, who was eager for results, "You can figure out how someone blew up my boiler but can't tell me who did it?"

Sigerson stared at him in the eyes and replied softly, "I'm a detective, not a magician. But assuming that everything you've said so far is correct—"

"It is! I saw everyone with my own eyes and no one came in or out of the gates!"

"Then the only possible culprit would be your secretary, Mr Towns."

"Impossible!"

"I knew you would say that," sighed Sigerson, "But if you tell me everything: his background, personality, details; I can easily clear him of suspicion if he truly seems unrelated to the case."

"Ask me anything, and I'll reply the best I can."

"Thank you. Oh, and Inspector, if you have a pen and paper, it might be wise to take note of this. Please tell us, Mr Wensworth, when and how did you employ Mr Towns?"

"Well, I don't know what you mean by how I employed him; when my old secretary resigned, Winslow was recommended to me by a colleague and has been with me

ever since he took up the job. Now, the date… I can't remember the exact date… It was about ten years ago, around this time of the year."
"Thank you. Now what about his personality? Please answer honestly, Mr Wensworth; this is all extremely important and will not be revealed to the public."
"His personality? Well, I suppose I could say he's exceptionally hardworking and quite efficient with his tasks. He's sharp but patient with his colleagues, even if they are not as hardworking as him. I've only seen him at work; outside of that, I'm not so sure, but I can assure you, he would not hurt anybody if he could help it."
"Thank you. Now, for the final question," Sigerson said softly, his green eyes piercing into Mr Wensworth's black ones. "Do you know if he has any reason to be in need of money? For example, was he in debt before?"
"Now that I think about it, yes, he used to be in debt from gambling and card playing all the time, although he paid it all off during his second year in my employment. Currently, I believe he has no immediate need of money, because he told me that he had stopped playing cards in order to focus on his work."
"Interesting…" mumbled Sigerson, closing his eyes. "Ah, I almost forgot!" he said aloud, making both men jump. "I meant to ask you; what exactly is the deal you are being offered by Mr Blight?"
"H–How do you know about this?" stammered Mr Wensworth.

“He had stated in a newspaper article that he was hoping to collaborate with you in the future.”
“I can’t tell you any of the details—”
“That’s fine; just tell me this: how does he plan to split the profit from the collaboration?”
“He stated that it would be half mine and half his.”
“Has he contacted you today, regarding this matter?”
“Yes, just before breakfast, a letter was sent to me wishing me to consider his offer.”
“Thank you. That’s all I have to ask you, sir.”
The waitress returned, this time with a tray laden with sandwiches and three mugs of aromatic coffee. Mr Wensworth checked his watch and seeing that it was half past eight, got up, wished them luck on their investigation and departed, leaving his mug untouched. Inspector Branch fumbled around with his paper, then asked, “I don’t understand. What was that all about? I fail to see how any of it relates to the case.”
Sigerson picked up the mug in front of him and sipped slowly, looking at the inspector, considering whether he was able to be trusted. Finally, he returned his mug to the table and told him everything, deciding to trust him for now.
“I checked with the bank this morning; somebody had paid Mr Towns twenty thousand sovereigns by a cheque. Apparently, Mr Towns visited the bank a few days ago and used the cheque. The cheque’s drawer is a middle-aged accountant, Patrick Hartland, who so far, does not seem to have any connection with Mr Towns. Now, Mr Hartland,

whose modest salary is three thousand sovereigns a year, would not pay such a ludicrous amount of money to a stranger without a worthy cause. If this is so, is there any way that Mr Hartland could earn money without others noticing, or is he connected to anybody who could provide money for him? And most importantly, why did he pay Mr Towns that big amount; was he forced or did he do it for a hidden reason?"

The detective stopped, and sipped some coffee quietly. Inspector Branch took a sandwich and ate it, looking at Sigerson in the eyes, unsure if he should speak, when he continued, "Someone had recorded that Mr Hartland and Mr Blight had associated with each other before and are on close terms with each other. Therefore, since Mr Blight is one of the richest people in the country, there is a slim possibility that he is the provider of money."

Inspector Branch stared at Sigerson as though he was explaining some impossible physics theory in a classroom. "I don't understand. Who do you suspect?"

Sigerson reached for another sandwich and replied calmly, "I suspect everyone. But out of the people related to the case so far, I think it is most likely to be Mr Blight, since his motive—"

"But he's going to share half his profit with Mr Wensworth, and since Mr Wensworth's factories' productivity have been reduced severely after a string of accidents, Mr Blight will get nearly nothing while still dividing the profit of his business. If anything, he'll be losing money."

“But what if his motive is not money?” murmured Sigerson.
Unsettled, the inspector asked, “What else could he gain?”
“Control. If Wensworth was out of the industry, Blight would have control over the majority of coal supplies, which would grant him immense power. But—”
He bit into his sandwich and tore out a chunk.
“These are all possibilities, nothing has been made certain yet, so I could be wrong.”
The two of them sat in silence again, eating the sandwiches and sipping coffee, each of them in their own thoughts as the streets outside slowly crept to life with people hurrying to work and children riding their bicycles to school. In the distance, a bell rang, signalling a new day.

—

Loud tolls echoed past the forbidding iron fence and into Blight’s private garden. Bright pungent flowers bloomed all around and intricately shaped bushes crowded the space around a magnificent marble fountain that adorned the centre of it like a valuable gem stuck in a royal crown. Blight strolled through, absorbing the sunlight and fragrant scents of the exotic flowers. He took a deep breath and sighed; there had been so much to work on lately and so little time to rest. One of his pieces on the board had to be sacrificed; the evidence and danger it possessed made it crucial for it to be removed...

5

Diversion

Avarice Crowne, president of Ecclesia, strode up to the stand, ready to make his speech. His bushy grizzled eyebrows and moustache gave him an aggressive look, with two beady black eyes sticking out from the eyes brows. The elegant town hall stood out behind him with its sturdy marble pillars holding it up and thousands of people crowded around the city square.

Nobody knew what had happened thirty nine years ago, when the late king of Ecclesia suddenly disappeared. A month later, the king and his entire household were found half-buried in a pit dug in the middle of a forest on the other side of the country. The villages in its vicinity were brought in and questioned but it remained a mystery; how they were transported across the country still remained unsolved.
But there were more pressing matters to be settled. Who was to sit on the throne? All the heirs of the king were dead. Naturally, the lower citizens didn't want another king; after all, the previous one had led the country to poverty and discontent with the many unjust laws pressing down on the people.

Then came Avarice Crowne, twenty two at that time. His history and relations were a murky river; hard to uncover and dangerous if approached too closely. Although no one had ever heard of him before, he instantly became the crowd's favourite. Through his motivational speeches and political campaigns, he instantly won over the majority of people and gained a group of loyal supporters.
He was elected as the first president of the country and the moment he stepped into the office, everything changed. From the wealthiest city to the poorest district, every memory of the previous royal family was erased, and the people's support for Avarice Crowne made them quickly forget about their hardships. Jobs were offered, food and water was distributed to those in need, and shelters were built for the homeless. By the end of the year, Ecclesia had completely transformed and a new government ruled the country.
The Custodians, the elite of Ecclesia loyal to Crowne, ran the country like a business. They oversaw every activity the citizens participated in, took charge of distributing money and resources, and made alliances with surrounding countries, as well as setting up a nationwide security service, the Enforcers. Everyone was satisfied for the first time in decades.
Seeing that the country was finally stable again and the people were in his hands, Crowne started the next phase of his plan. Slowly, he built up more and more factories and accumulated wealth. Prices on basic needs rose higher and higher, until the lower citizens of the country couldn't

stand it; protests and actions of resistance were made, but to everyone's surprise, they worked. Blame was piled on one of the managers in the Custodians and trust was restored. Nobody asked questions. Everyone obeyed.
Four years later, one of the worst famines in Ecclesia's history hit the unsuspecting country like a bull. All eyes diverted to Avarice Crowne, the people's hero. Immediately, he restocked every storehouse the country had, secretly earning more than ten times the usual amount. Finally, after six months, the famine came to an abrupt stop, but now the people were divided more than before; the high price of food caused many of the poorer districts to collapse, while richer citizens were still quite comfortable. This sparked rebellion from some people; they wanted compensation for the hard times during the famine. However, they did not realise how powerful the Custodians and Crowne had become. During the famine, while most of the country was withering, they grew bigger on the profit from their sales. Secret international deals were made, and by the end of the famine, they had more resources in their hands than any other country. Using the Enforcers, leaders of the rebellious group were rounded up and silently executed, shown to the public as a warning. Lies spread around like a wildfire in a forest, convincing the public of the executed leaders' immorality. Avarice Crowne had done it; he was now the most powerful figure in Ecclesia.

—

Clearing his throat, Crowne began his speech.
“Citizens of Ecclesia, we have suffered much under the heavy blows of the famine, but have we fallen yet? No, we haven’t! So offer everything you have and sacrifice them for the future that is to come...”
As the speech continued, patriotic fervour crashed into the crowd. They began to cheer and chant; within minutes, the air around them turned into a sea of noise.
Suddenly, loud bangs erupted, and streams of smoke floated into the air. Several men drew revolvers and fired at President Crowne, who ducked behind his stand just in time to avoid a bullet coming at his head. Once the crowd understood what was happening, the scene turned into a stampede with screams and dust flying into the air. The Enforcers standing on guard, rushed into the mess, their crisp, military-style uniforms gleaming from the shining afternoon sun. They flooded the square and surrounded it, cutting off all possible escape routes, while some others escorted and shielded President Crowne from any possible harm.
More shots rang out, as the crowd began to thin out and revealed the rebels; a group of ten men armed with revolvers. Seeing that they had lost the cover of the crowd and were severely outnumbered, most of them fled for their lives, while some others stayed to try and finish off the job, but it was too late; the Enforcers had them in a tight circle and shot all of them down within seconds.
After the smoke had settled, there laid the rebels, dead on the ground.

—

Sigerson rushed to the scene, where the bodies were now being carried away from the scene. Some of the crowd were still lingering around, hoping to get a glimpse of their president. He was pale, but other than that, was quite unhurt. A pair of burly Enforcers marched him back towards the town hall. As Sigerson watched, he noticed a man wearing a thick coat lurking close to the doors of the grand building.

"That's odd," he thought, "It's the hottest time of the day, and yet he's still wearing such thick clothes... Could it be?"

The man inched his hand closer and closer towards his coat as President Crowne approached, and just before he pulled out a concealed revolver, another loud bang filled the air, and the assailant crumpled on the ground in front of the president, holding his leg. The Enforcers guarding the president raised their weapons at Sigerson, who in turn lifted up his arms along with his revolver. Pulling out his ID, he made his way over and handed his revolver to one of the Enforcers.

"Mr Sigerson?" asked the Enforcer in charge, reading his ID card. Sigerson nodded.

"Are you by yourself or with other police members?"

"I've only just arrived, but I don't think you'll have to wait for the rest of the police much longer—"

He gestured at a group of constables led by Inspector Branch, who were marching up frantically.

“If you’ll allow me to interrogate the assailant somewhere private, I can help find out more about this affair.”
The Enforcer stared at him doubtfully, then sighed and replied, “Very well. I will take you to our headquarters where you can question him alone.”

—

Hidden deep in Sodor was the Enforcer’s headquarters. It was an ordinary building with the exception of grim iron bars and hidden security systems dotted around its perimeter. From the outside, it had a dull look; most of it was made with orange brick. Sinister windows jumped out from each of the three storeys, revealing nothing to those lurking around outside, but provided an excellent outlook for the secretive Enforcers working inside.
Walking into the headquarters felt like entering a den of lions; danger and animosity jumped around the determined detective, who was unmoved by all the scowls and whispers around him. He was led by the captain of the Enforcers to a gloomy hall lined with interrogation rooms. Barely furnished, with the exception of two uncomfortable metal chairs and a table, these rooms gave off a chilly aura, as a plethora of hopeless souls suffered in these rooms, mentally and physically broken after the questioning. A lone guard pushed open the door and saluted his superior.
“Do not hand him anything and avoid unnecessary contact,” warned the captain. “Remember, if you need any assistance, we’ll be waiting outside.”

Sigeron nodded grimly and entered.
The room was dimly lit by a pair of gas lamps flickering feebly overhead. It was no roomier than a garden shed; its walls were completely made up of brick, allowing every word spoken to reverberate around the claustrophobic room. The assailant, Samuel Cooper, sat on a chair, his face emotionless, as he waited and fiddled with his tweed coat. His cold black eyes swept to Sigerson as soon as he entered the room.
“Just so you know,” Cooper started, watching the detective settle down in the chair opposite him, “I have no intention of answering your questions nor do I plan to give any information that could help the Enforcers.”
“I do not work for them, nor do I wish to work with them.” Sigerson replied softly, his sharp green eyes burning into the harsh black ones of the man in front of him. Cooper leaned back in his chair and asked coldly, “What do you want then?”
“What I want,” He lowered his voice to almost a whisper. “Is why you decided to even attempt an assassination.”
“Why?” repeated Cooper, moving closer to the light, his scarred face illuminated. “To destroy the corruption that has taken over our country; for the very reason soldiers go out to fight: to free this land from oppression. Let me tell you: Avarice Crowne may seem to be better than the previous king for some people, but ultimately, he’s just another crook who’s sacrificed the entire country for his profit.”
He finished this sudden burst with an angry scoff.

“And if that’s not bad enough, he also goes around arresting random people to satisfy his paranoia!”
During all this time, Sigerson had been silently listening, trying to work out if his suspicions were accurate or not.
“Have you told anyone about this?”
“Well, the lads with me had all agreed on—”
“Anyone who was not directly involved with you today?”
Copper stopped and smiled grimly at Sigerson, revealing several broken teeth.
“He was the one whom I talked to first.”
“He? Can you describe him?”
Cooper sunk back, trying to recollect his memories, then replied in a hushed voice, “He was about as tall as you and had neat brown hair parted to the sides. He had blue eyes and shabby clothes too, now that I think about it.”
“Did you notice anything in particular about him when he talked?”
“He didn’t seem to be around the village; he didn’t even know that the arms dealer was restocking on revolvers that day; but at the same time, not many people really have the need to purchase those kinds of things.”
Sigerson sat up, listening intently.
“He was the first person to ever understand me,” murmured Cooper in a dreamy voice. “Day after day, we would meet up in that pub and share our troubles together. Then one night, I came home and found a couple of revolvers on sale. I bought them, called some of my mates together, and we plotted every step of our assassination.

My plan has failed. There is no hope for this country with that devil as president; just remember that."
Seeing that he could get nothing more out of the prisoner, Sigerson stood up and said politely, "Thank you for your cooperation; it has been most enlightening to me."
He opened the door of the room and left, leaving Cooper confused.

"So how was it?" asked the captain, a little bit forcefully.
"As expected. The prisoner is clearly deluded, and judging by his speech, listening to him talk will only lead to more trouble," lied Sigerson smoothly.
It's probably wiser not to reveal anything to them, since they could interfere with my investigation.
The captain glared at him watchfully, as if waiting for a proper answer. When no reply came, he gave orders to a flaxen-haired guard nearby, then the detective was escorted out of their building.

Walking down the streets, Sigerson quietly reflected on his short interrogation with Cooper.
Judging from what he told me, it's most likely Cooper was manipulated by an outsider, rather than someone in the village; the fact that they didn't realise the firearms store was restocking shows that they had not been in the village for very long. The revolvers just happened to be on sale again a week before merchandise was planned to arrive... Looks like somebody secretly restocked them... That is very suggestive... Evidence... There's no evidence that it's him..."

He arrived back at the police station and stepped into the glum building. Throwing his jacket on a rack and making his way to his desk, he barely stopped moving before the round figure of Inspector Branch rushed up and caught him before he could even sit down.

"We're going to need you, Sigerson," he said brusquely, putting on a coat. "We have a new case on our hands."

"Another case?"

"Yes, yes, you heard me!" snapped the inspector impatiently. "Winslow Towns was shot dead in his own home!"

Winslow Towns... The main suspect in the exploding boiler incident is dead? His death is certainly not random; he still contained much information about the accident. There's a high chance that something's been removed or hidden with his death... Two incidents in a day... If I'm not mistaken, the assassination attempt was just a diversion to draw our attention away from a seemingly smaller murder... The problem is who did it? There's not much evidence, but based on what I know, Blight would certainly benefit from the removal of the Wensworth Company... He also had the wealth to bribe Winslow Towns, who had received a large sum of money not long before... All I need now is evidence to support my theory..."

Throwing on his jacket, Sigerson departed with Inspector Branch; the two of them jumped into a cab, as it dissolved away into the cover of the approaching night.

6

Missing Links

Rook waited patiently, his finger on the trigger.
The signal... Wait for the signal...
He sighed. It would be a lot faster if he shot now...
His target, no more than a speck to the hunter, shifted around in his chair, clearly discomforted but unaware of the immediate danger he was in.
Do it now...
Realising he could stand it no longer, the man twisted around in his chair and opened the window behind him. In a flash, he slumped forwards, his head falling onto the desk in front of him. Rook rapidly put away his air rifle into his bag and slinked away into the crowd below.

—

The dim lights lit the foggy streets, as the cab made its way to the scene of the crime. By the time they arrived, the moon had risen from its slumber and cast an eerie light among the drizzle of ominous fog.
“In here, sir,” prompted a haggard constable standing at the entrance of a quaint terraced house. The two men had gotten off, paid their fare, and were now staring at the gloomy door.
“I’ve kept the scene untouched and the onlookers away,” he informed them, while they walked up the stairs. “Here, through this door.”

It was a total mess inside the roomy study room. Blood was sprayed all over the wall; a puddle of it was on the desk, slowly dripping onto the wooden floor beneath it. Towns' giant body was still slumped on his chair with his arms dangling down.
"What can you make out from this, Sigerson?" asked Inspector Branch, turning around but finding that the detective was missing.
"Sorry, inspector," panted Sigerson, running up the stairs to join his superior. "I was checking the footprints below."
"What did you find?" the inspector asked, entering the room with the detective.
"There was another set of footprints that led in through the door. Someone other than the constable and the victim entered the house before us."
The two of them walked around the room; the inspector with a solemn air and the detective with great interest, gliding around quickly to every spot in the room, studying everything intently. It was not a particularly large room; Sigerson could walk from one end of the room to the other in only a few steps, so much of the room was splattered with blood; the investigators had trouble making sure not to step in it. A window directly behind the desk on which the victim was slumped on was one of the two sources of light that shone in the room, the other being a lamp that they had brought along, which cast a strong light on the entire room. The constable, seeing that they needed nothing else, sunk back to the door, standing there like a statue.

“Was the door unlocked?” asked Sigerson to the constable.
“Yes it was. It was locked from the inside.”
Locked from the inside? There was also an extra set of footprints...
Sigerson walked around, inspecting the blood splatters carefully. He abruptly stopped and stared at a few individual drops attentively.
Strange... These drops of blood were not created by the bullet wound; they are not the usual oblong shape but circular instead, meaning they fell from somewhere directly above. Something or somebody must have been in this very room during the murder...
He got up and walked over to the desk, inspecting the area around.
The angle that he had been shot at suggests that the shooter was considerably elevated above the victim. There are two possibilities: either someone stood behind him and fired or someone fired from a tall building. The latter seems to be the most likely; after all, there’s no more than a foot’s length of space between the victim and the wall. A hidden gunman...
Squinting out of the window, Sigerson could make out a tall multi-storey building in the ominous misty night. The door was hanging slightly open, which the detective hurried over to inspect. Miniscule tufts of fibre stuck to the doorpost, catching his eye; he plucked them off and held it up to the light.
Interesting... It is possible that the lock was slid shut by a piece of string tied to it, since the gap between the door and the

frame is wide enough to let a piece of string through... I don't have much evidence, but I'm sure of it...
"So have you found anything yet?" asked Inspector Branch, waiting for him to make a mistake.
"Nothing definite so far," replied Sigerson, who clearly saw the inspector's satisfied grin. "As in, nothing that will help catch the culprits easily."
The inspector's smile dropped a bit.
"Meaning you still have found something connected to the crime?"
"Yes. I can confidently say that the crime was carried out by two people, one of them knew or was expected by the victim, and the murder was carried out by an exceptionally skilled shooter with an airgun."
"W–What?" stuttered the inspector, dumbfounded.
"There was only one set of unknown footprints around the house. They show that the person, most likely a man judging from the size of the shoeprints, was let in by Towns, as there doesn't seem to be any suggestion of a break-in. As you can see here—"
He pointed at a few drops of blood.
"The trajectory of the blood flying through the air was disturbed by something; namely, the mysterious person. The window was opened, Towns was shot, and then the person closed the window again, making it seem like the work of a single culprit."
"How do you know Towns wasn't shot by someone in the room?"

“The lack of gunpowder and also the position he was shot at; it would be impossible to squeeze in between the victim and the wall like that.”
“What about the skilled shooter and the airgun?”
“Well, you have to be excellent at shooting to be able to hit a target at about nine hundred metres away. As for the airgun, I asked the constable standing on guard, and he told me that the neighbours never heard a sound. Since the airguns use compact air to shoot, they barely make a sound when they’re used. Airguns are quite rare, but are nonetheless acquireable.”
“I give up,” admitted the inspector, “You really have thought of everything properly. Well, if everything you’ve said is true, then we should be able to find clues on our hidden assassin in that building.”
The two of them descended back down the stairs and into the living room, where a fireplace and several other furniture were scattered around.
“Just a minute, inspector.”
Kneeling down, Sigerson picked up a fragment of charred paper in the fireplace, fluttering gently while held down by a burnt log.
This is... A message?
“What is it?”
“Inspector, have a look at this.”
He placed it softly into his palm and held it up; the fragment was no larger than an eraser. It was blackened around the edges with miniscule, cramped writing on it.

The murderer had enough time to completely destroy, yet they didn't; they must have left it here on purpose. But what can this mean? An eight and a thirty? P127/250... A10... A fragment of the sentence has been saved... Bomb is the only word I can make out from here...
He peeked to the side. A drawer was closed but had a clean patch inside of it. Something rectangular in shape had been taken out of it. What could it be?
"You should save this, Inspector," said Sigerson, handing over the charred piece of paper. When Inspector Branch tucked the piece of evidence away safely in a brown envelope, the detective prompted him, "That building is the only one left to inspect now, I think."

A pale illuminating light radiated from the moon and cast shadows over the quiet street. Footsteps from the two men were loud and distinctive in the silent night, as the only other sounds to be heard were the gentle wind blowing and the soft flickering of the flames in the street lampposts. Staring uncomfortably at them was the door of their destination.
It was an old tenement building set up for destruction and reconstruction; the inside was dusty and dirty with cobwebs hanging around like decorations. Rays of moonlight shined on the stairs leading up, eerily guiding them towards the tallest floor. Up the stairs they went with the light from their lamp illuminating the way and the stairs creaking with every step. Finally, the air brimming with ominous anticipation and fingers on the triggers of

their revolvers, they reached the highest floor and pushed open the door.

There was nothing much; the room was nearly empty, except for a table and a chair lying on its back.
"Well, it looks like the bird has flown from its nest," sighed Sigerson. Seeing the crestfallen expression on Branch's face, he hastily added, "Don't worry, inspector; I suspect we will gain much from this little scene. A criminal may come and go silently, but never without leaving traces."
Immediately, Sigerson scoured the dusty room for marks and odd patterns and almost instantly gave a sharp exclamation and asked for the inspector's attention.
"These footprints are different and much bigger than the ones in front of Mr Towns' residence. And can you see here—" He added, adjusting the lamp's light to focus on a spot on the ground.
"Somebody has been kneeling here; much of the dust has been displaced."
Beyond the spot Sigerson was indicating, on the window ledge, was a slight mark.
So he knelt down, used the window ledge to steady his gun, and shot from here. And as expected, there are no signs of gunpowder, strengthening the theory for an airgun. The footprint is much larger than mine; the culprit must be at least five inches taller than me... Could it possibly be him?

—

“So, what did you find from that?” asked the inspector eagerly, bumping up and down the cab as it drove along an uneven road. They were heading back to the station after a night’s investigation.
“Not much more aside from what I previously said. The shooter in the building is approximately six foot six judging from the marks on the ground and on the wall, where he leaned on. That’s all I can find out for now.”
Inspector Branch nodded and sank back into his own thoughts.
“Actually, there is someone I suspect.”
“Who is it?” asked Inspector Branch with great interest.
“I have no evidence to link him to the crime, but I believe that Captain Rook of the second division of the army is the killer.”
“August Rook? The one who shot down thirty soldiers from an enemy outpost without being detected? He’s a national hero, you know.”
“I know, but the evidence we do have fits him almost perfectly. He’s excellent at shooting, he’s six foot seven, and the last time I checked—”
Sigerson drew out a cloth wrapped with a cigar in it.
“He smoked these. I found this thrown away in a corner.”
“How do you know he smoked those specific cigars?”
“I met him briefly in a meeting before; as to how I know that our assailant smoked this individual cigar, look closely and you will see that there are smudges of blood around it. Now, in the empty room we had investigated, there were small specks of blood splattered around the

windowsill. I think it is safe to assume that the two small amounts of blood came from the same source; after all, nobody should have a reason to enter the building."
The soft clip-clopping of the horses' hooves came to a stop; they had arrived back at the station. Bading each other goodnight, the two of them left to their separate paths. Tolling ominously through the night was the giant bell, alerting everyone of the imminent midnight.
Sigerson, hearing the midnight toll, quickened his steps. Something was troubling him from the crime scene; what was it?
The motive... There was no clear motive for the crime... Something was removed from the drawer... What could it have been? And that fragment of paper left; what do the numbers on it mean? Eight and thirty... Was it a date or a time? The only word that I can understand is bomb... Is this part of their plan? No... Something doesn't feel right; it seems like they want me to believe they're going to perform another crime... The accomplice had more than enough time to burn the evidence; why was the fragment still there? I'll have to think about this later, but there's no doubt now; an entire organisation is behind these crimes...
Greeting him warmly was an ornate oak door with a brass knob. He placed his coat aside on a rack, marched down the carpeted hall, and flopped into a cosy cushioned chair, exhausted from the work, he had missed lunch and dinner due to all the excitement of the day.
"Evie's still not back?" he muttered, his sharp green eyes glittering as a hand reached out for a piece of paper and a

pen and scribbled down everything he remembered from the fragment of paper.
“Now, let me see… The only clues so far are the numbers eight and thirty, P127/250 and A10, and the word bomb. No… I also have another clue; the person behind all of this wants me to know this. It’s unlikely that this set of letters and numbers is a code; there is no pattern to them at all. There has to be something that can be commonly found to turn these digits into a message. There is a high possibility that this is a message pointing to another crime; is it another diversion? If it is a message, then it should contain where and when the crime is to be carried out. Eight and thirty… Most likely a date, since there are no indications of it being day or night… That leaves where the crime is going to take place… A10 seems like a coordinate; it should match up with a map. The question is which one? It has to be in general use and easily obtainable… There is only one official street directory in Sodor… It also contains two hundred and fifty pages so page 127 now…”
Sigerson dropped his pen and moved sluggishly to a nearby shelf, which was stacked with books, and took down a bulky hardback edition of the city’s street directory.
“Page 127, A10… Here it is. The theatre? Why would anyone target the theatre? Could there be something there that links the puppets and the strings? No… I’d better get some rest before anything now…”

With his mind still in shambles, the yawning detective returned the book back into its place and crept up in bed, closing the bedroom door behind him.

—

Chaos reigned over the city. Burning fireballs rained from the sky, reducing everything on the ground into ashes. Then, the balls of fire twisted themselves into humanoid figures, oddly distorted and horribly strong; they marched up against the country, threatening to destroy all. The smoke filled the air; screams and the sound of crashing buildings dominated the scene; he was powerless to help anybody. All of a sudden, before the destruction reached the country's most respected building, the House of the Custodians, everything disappeared in a blink, and Sigerson woke with a jolt.

The mahogany curtains covering his bedside window were drawn, letting the joyful sunshine jump and fill his room. His mind was still focused on the troubling night's dream. It had been too realistic… But there was no time to focus on imagination…

He limped out, half asleep, to the dining table, where his cousin, dressed in a plain white gown, was waiting for him. Her rosy red hair, neatly brushed and straightened out, seemed to glow in the morning sun, as her round green eyes looked up from the book she was reading.

"Your coffee is getting cold."

“Right. Thanks a lot, Evie,” he said, sitting down in his chair and picking up a mug. Noticing a few additional new marks on the piece of paper he used yesterday, Sigerson asked quietly, “Did you understand the message on that slip of paper?”
“This?”
Evelyn indicated the paper.
“Yes, I solved it before I went to sleep. Clearly, these few numbers and letters point to the theatre, where I suppose a bombing is going to take place.”
Sigerson fell silent, then seeing that the street directory was put in a different place on the shelf from the previous night, he lowered his voice and said, “You wouldn’t have gotten it if I didn’t leave the book out like that.”
“Maybe not,” replied Evelyn with a smile, putting down her book and bringing two dishes with toast.
“Aren’t you worried? You work in the theatre, don’t you?”
“If there really will be a bomb in the theatre, it’ll most likely be carried out by an insider; if I suddenly change my usual routine, somebody’s bound to notice. Besides, everyone will panic if I tell them, which could make catching the culprit much harder.”
“I suppose so.”
He quickly devoured the toast on his plate, and hurriedly dressed himself.
“Well, I’m going now, and I doubt I’ll be back before nine, so don’t bother waiting for me to come home for dinner.”
Waving behind him, Sigerson left for work with a heavy feeling; why did he always feel like something was

missing? He tried to shake off the feeling and walk on; after all, nothing was going to be achieved if all he was going to do was worry.

The work that day was extremely tedious. Seeing that the only clues on the murderers were the shoeprints, Inspector Branch sent out a team to track down the shoes and the owner, causing Sigerson to feel a slight bit annoyed at the inspector's decision.
"It's nearly useless, sending people out to match the shoes and wearer," the detective pointed out, while they were eating lunch. "The culprit had more than enough time to throw away his shoes along with some of the other evidence on that day; the chances of finding them are practically impossible."
Hold on... I understand what I was missing the entire time... If they are planning to bomb the theatre, then they won't be killing just a single person; they kill hundreds... This is not like the other more secretive murders carried out before; it's far too loud and they've never warned the police beforehand either until yesterday... Could this be a direct challenge to me?

Later that day, when Sigerson returned back, he asked Evie in his calmest manner, "Is everyone acting normally at work?"
"Hmm?"
The two of them were playing a game of whist, a favourite pastime for the pair, which usually led to intense disagreements and covert muttering. Evelyn slapped down

the ace of spades triumphantly and replied, still fully focused on the card game, “Yes, everything’s fine.”
“Has anyone been acting strangely during the past weeks?”
“What do you mean by that? Do you really think someone working in the theatre is really plotting to blow it up?”
“As you said before, it is most likely that a crime was plotted or aided by an insider. And as for the message, I do think that they are going to bomb the theatre; the hand behind the crimes specifically wanted the police to see the message they left behind. If it is a diversion or a fake message, then I don’t see any harm in taking precautions.”
“Well… If you say it like that then, everybody is acting normally in my opinion; I trust my coworkers and believe none of them would ever participate in any crime.”
“You trust too easily,” muttered Sigerson in an undertone.
“What was that?”
“Nothing. Anyways, when you go back to work tomorrow, can you check the building and any places that might contain concealed bombs because—”
“There are places that are restricted to me—”
“Then put on a disguise. I’ve seen you in your disguise before; nobody can do it better than you. I know you can do it.”
When Evelyn continued to frown at him behind her cards, he said exasperatedly, “Look, if I could do it myself, I would have already, but I have too much paperwork back at the station. Besides—”
His voice became gentler.

“This is for you and everyone else’s safety, so you would really just be helping yourself.”
Evelyn sighed then said, “Fine. I’ll do it tomorrow.”
Unable to contain her happiness any longer, she left her cards, turned away, and disappeared into her room, leaving her cousin the pleasant duty of cleaning up.

—

During the following weeks, although nothing had been found in any of the theatre’s rooms, which Evelyn had stated was obvious, a number of curious incidents popped up in the newspapers and instantly caught Sigerson’s attention. One of the highest ranking generals in the army was shot in the heart by an unseen hand; the owner of a famous newspaper company was run over by a speeding cab; and the Foreign Affairs minister was nowhere to be found in Revalty, where he had been visiting on that day.
“There’s a pattern in these murders, Inspector,” stated Sigerson, kneeling down to get a better view of the tracks left by the cab wheels, horses, and victim.
“Do you think this was a murder?” asked Inspector Branch, joining him on the ground.
“Yes. The wheels of the cab didn’t swerve until hitting the man,” he replied, pointing at the messy lines imprinted on the ground in front of him.
“Notice that the hoof and wheel prints don’t turn away from these footprints until they’ve run them over. This was a murder… A premeditated murder… Oh, I would arrest

the cabbie if I were you, Inspector; it might provide us with a clue on this invisible hand."

I know what you're doing... Who you're targeting... Now I just have to figure out how to expose you... They were both seen together for a number of times during the past few years, but lately have been sending messages to each other through letters... I can't take the letters, but that proves that they are still communicating with each other... A few years ago, when Rook was suspected, he suddenly stopped communicating with Blight; the crimes were then shifted to target Wenworth's company through Towns. Then, just a few weeks ago, an assassination was carried out on Towns, cutting off much important evidence. The prime suspect is now August Rook... What are you going to do now, Blight?

7

Contact

Soft tinkling noises of delicate teacups sparkled out into the magnificent hall. While the butler, Greaves, strode up the crimson carpet and knocked clearly on the door, which was slightly ajar. Blight, dressed in a modest suit and tie, came over and admitted his butler into the room.
“Mr Davis is here to see you.”
“Please guide him in.”
Greaves nodded and left Blight alone in his thoughts.
Most of the key figures have been removed... When the time comes, he will be next to go...
A loud knock announced the arrival of the visitor.
“Mr Davis,” introduced the butler.
A man, who was so short and twitchy, one might have thought he was an overgrown rodent in clothes, entered the room, scanned Blight beadily and shook his hand stiffly.
“May I offer you a cup?” asked Blight politely, holding out a fine teacup. “You can leave us, Greaves,” he added, turning to his butler. Greaves nodded again and left, shutting the door firmly behind him.
“So, Mr Davis,” began Blight, “Is there anything you require from me?”
“Well, sir, I’m a journalist you see, and I’m trying to collect information on the case of the exploding boiler from Wensworth’s factory. Seeing how you are one of the closest

to the man himself, I've decided to come and ask a few questions."
"I see..." Blight's face remained expressionless as he listened.
"Well then, may I proceed with the questions?"
"Please do, Mr Davis."
"Right then," started Mr Davis, taking out a small notebook and holding it in front of him, "May I ask, for the sake of accuracy in my article, where were you and how did you feel when you received the news of the factory explosion?"
"Where was I? Why, I was strolling through my garden when the news came to me."
"What about your thoughts on the incident?" asked Mr Davis forcefully, peering over his notebook like a professor giving a dull lecture.
"My thoughts..."
This man is clearly not a journalist as he claims. His boots are military-grade, his notebook is one commonly associated with police work, and his authoritative tone suggests he's used to ordering people around. Moreover, he still hasn't mentioned his publisher nor the company he works for; this man is no journalist but a representative of the police in disguise.

Aware of the visitor's true profession, Blight exhaled slowly and drank calmly, treating the man sitting opposite him as if he was a friend chatting lightly with him.
"What is your relationship with Mr Wensworth, and how close would you say you were with him?"

“We’ve been friends from the start of the year, always talking about business, our lives, and our interests... I would say that I was as close to him as any other person could be.”
“Thank you, now moving on to the next question...”

As the interview dragged on, Blight patiently waited for a crack in the questioning, an opportunity he could use to reverse the roles and gain the upper hand against the detective in front of him.
“Do you mind if I ask a question, sir?”
Mr Davis stared at him, surprised at this sudden request.
“My knowledge doesn’t extend to anything unconcerning the incident, so if you don’t mind then do ask.”
“That’s fine. I wanted to ask you what the deadline was for your scoop.”
“Oh, that’s next week.”
“What about your lede? I generally find the lede to be the most important aspect of the article.”
Mr Davis froze.
Lead? It can’t be... Has he already figured out who I am?
A strand of long brown hair dropped to the ground and a pink ribbon fluttered onto the table as the detective flipped through his notes slowly and as naturally as he could, his composure breaking for the first time. Blight noticed a small fingerprint smudged on the book’s cover, barely visible in the soft light. Gently breaking the long silence, Blight remarked, “I notice you have a young child. A daughter, perhaps?”

“Y–Yes,” stammered Mr Davis, who was grateful that the topic had been changed.
“And, apologies for my rudeness, but are you recently divorced?”
“How do you know?”
“There is a band of skin on your finger that is much lighter than the rest of your hand; your wedding ring used to be there. Seeing how you had reacted to the word ‘relationship’ and how you frequently avoided mentioning your family when you were questioning me, it became apparent to me that your home affairs are not as stable as they once were.”
“If that is all you have to say,” said Mr Davis curtly, “Then please excuse me; I’ll be going now.”
“Please remain seated, Mr Davis; I had no intention of offending you. I want to help.”
The detective hesitated, then sat back down.
“Your daughter, she prefers her mother doesn’t she?”
“I don’t know how you do it, but yes.”
“As a caring father, you must be confused? Or angry that you cannot achieve anything?”
There was absolute silence in the room, save for Davis’ quickened breathing and the quiet rustling of the notebook’s pages as he fidgeted around with it.
“But among all these emotions, it’s your daughter’s happiness you want most, isn’t it?”
Another long pause followed. Blight patiently waited for his words to sink in and observed the man in front of him, who was thinking hard on his words.

“If your daughter’s wish is to be with her mother, what can you do?”
Blight lowered his voice even further until it became no more than a whisper.
“And you know, emotions can be the hardest things in the world to control… What if suddenly they get out of hand? Things could be catastrophic for your daughter… Imagine her… Blaming you… Disowning you… The easiest way to protect your daughter is to simply disappear…”

—

“What?” cried Sigerson, making the troubled inspector jump. “You sent another detective to interrogate Blight?”
“Well, yes, but he was supposed to be disguised as a journalist to avoid suspicion.”
“And you said he was found dead this morning?”
“He was run over by a cab at about five this morning. We’ve questioned the cabman and could find nothing against him.”
“Can I see the place of the accident?”
“I’ll bring you there myself.”

Within a couple of minutes, they had arrived; the body had been taken away, but the damage was still clearly visible. Large splashes of blood were splattered on the ground and hoof prints danced around the dirty cobblestone road. Many constables were in the vicinity, keeping onlookers away.

“Do you see,” observed Sigerson, “That the footprints of the man were facing towards the cab when it approached? The cab swerved—” He pointed at a group of hoofprints arranged messily on the ground. “But the footprints show that the man did not move at all. It’s most likely that he committed suicide.”
“What if he was drunk?” asked the inspector. Sigerson shook his head and said, “That’s highly unlikely. The footprints leading up to here are perfectly stable; a drunk man’s footprints would never look like these.”
“But why would he commit suicide?” asked Inspector Branch, as they hailed a nearby cab, after Sigerson was satisfied with the crime scene.
“I lack information, so I have no idea,” remarked the detective dully.
“Do you still suspect Blight?”
“Suspect him?”
Sigerson thought for a while.
“My suspicions against him may need some confirming, but I am sure he’s in this criminal business. But please keep this between ourselves, inspector; I don’t want anyone to know that I suspect him.”
While the cab was still rattling around the busy streets, inside of it, the detective was still deciding on the path to take next. His mind ceaselessly processed theories and predictions; each thought became more and more complicated as new questions arose for every obstacle he encountered in his mind. At last, seeing as he needed many more answers, Sigerson concluded that seeking a

private conversation with Blight and trying to get some insight on his behaviour and personality would be his next approach to the case.
After they had arrived back at the station, Sigerson rushed back out, explaining that he had a crucial step he might have overlooked, and sprinted to the train station, barely making it in time for the departing train. On the train, he laid out his facts and attempted to rearrange them again.

I know that the person organising the crimes must have a wide network available to them; the general was assassinated with no evidence left behind, the newspaper company owner run over by a cab was killed on purpose, and the disappearance of the Foreign Affairs minister was done right in the middle of a large crowd if I remember correctly... None of these crimes were random, nor could a single person carry it out; no, they were targeted for a reason... Each one of the victims were close to Avarice Crowne and held a high position for him, providing him with support when he needed it most. Although they were replaced afterwards, without them, the government's power diminished by a large degree... The fall of Wensworth's factory led to Blight monopolising the coal industry, which allows him to now control cities to a certain degree through coal supplies and electricity. The main suspect of the crime then gets assassinated, wiping away much of the needed evidence...

Looking outside the compartment window, the cluttered city scenery gradually changed into grassy hills, large herds of cattle, and tilled farmland. The dainty town of

Eden peeked up from behind a tall hill, which many flocks and herds could be seen roaming around on, grazing peacefully without a care in the world. Warm, pleasant rays of sunlight reflected off the cool pristine lake next to the town, which gave it the appearance of a giant mirror. Steadily, the train slowed down and came to a stop. The conductor announced the station, prompting Sigerson to leave.

"This stop: Eden."

Stepping out of the train, he looked around for a map to help him locate his final destination.

"Excuse me," he asked politely to a blonde girl, who was dressed in a neat brown apron, carrying a large paper bag filled with vegetables. "Do you know how I can get to Mr Blight's mansion from here?"

The girl turned to him with surprise, then recovered and replied, smiling slightly, "I can help take you there, sir."

Sigerson, a bit taken aback at her readiness to help, replied hesitantly, "Thank you very much, miss."

She led him out of the train station and out into the streets. Eden had no high-rising buildings in contrast with Sodor, which gave it a much warmer tone than the industrial city that gave off clouds of polluted air that Sigerson was accustomed to. Bakeries opened their doors, allowing the scent of freshly baked bread to waft into the air, small children spent their time running and frollicking around on the grass, and elderly shopkeepers came out to greet them genially.

“You’re not from around here, are you, sir?” asked the girl cheerfully, looking around her shoulder.
“No, I’m not,” the detective replied wearily.
Sigerson took a moment to observe and consider the girl walking in front of him, treating her as if she was an interesting specimen in a lab.
Judging from her familiarity with these streets, as well as her apron and the amount and variety of shopping materials she has, it’s clear she’s a maid, possibly employed by Blight. It would be wise to be cautious around her, just in case...
“Well, here we are, sir!” she called, as they reached a pair of iron gates. Located on the outskirts of the city, Blight’s impressive estate was a giant expanse of land enclosed in a fence of iron bars. A languid guard was sitting in a booth behind the fence. When he saw the pair walking up, he said, “Welcome back, Elena. Who’s this?”
He leaned over and peered at Sigerson curiously through his spectacles.
“I am with the police,” Sigerson replied, quietly, showing him his card. “There are a few questions I have to ask Mr Blight.”
The gates opened, the guard nodded, and they continued walking. A string attached to a bell was stuck next to the door, which the maid pulled. As soon as the bell was rung, an elderly butler opened the door and immediately admitted the maid, who looked back and said, “He’s a policeman who’s here to ask questions, Greaves.”
The butler stared at him with mild surprise, then said, “Come in, sir, and I’ll call Mr Blight down to meet you.”

He turned to tell his master, but a gentle voice behind him said, “It’s alright, Greaves. Into this room if you please, detective.”
Blight held open a door and waited for him to enter.
It was not as Sigerson expected. The room, while it did have rich crimson curtains tied with gold string in bundles at the sides of the arched windows and a proud piano standing in the middle of the room, was barely furnished, containing only two armchairs and an ivory table.
“Please have a seat,” said Blight, gesturing at one of the armchairs. “Oh, and if you take out your revolver and place it on the table, I’ll be much obliged to you.”
A soft clunk notified him of the displaced weapon.
“Now, detective,” asked Blight, staring at Sigerson’s blank face impassively, “What does the police require from me?”
“I’m afraid you are a suspect for no less than five crimes committed this week.”
“That is… Some interesting news indeed…” murmured Blight with concern.
“If you have any information concerning these cases that could lead us to the culprit, please tell me.”
He won’t tell me any information that would be helpful; instead, anything he says will mostly be false or designed to lead me away from—
“I’m sorry, but I have nothing to say. There is nothing I have that could help you.”
“Nothing, sir?”
Blight shook his head sadly and replied, “I’ve got nothing to say.”

So the police haven't caught up yet, then? You, Sigerson, came here to determine if I was the culprit, didn't you? This proves it; you have no evidence against me...
"However," Blight continued, "if you can give me details of the crimes, I may be of some assistance; I have studied law and crime before, so it would be improper to say that I have little experience in these things."
Sigerson nodded and started off with a description of Wensworth Factory's boiler explosion.
There's no harm in giving him these facts' after all, they are going to become public, and I might be able to catch him in a trap if I leave out some details for him to fill in...
With his head slightly tilted to one side, Blight listened intently with his blue eyes down, barely open. When Sigerson finally finished his lengthy monologue, Blight slowly raised his head, thoughtfully rearranged a decorative vase and answered in a quiet, resolute voice, "According to your facts, I can conclude that the culprit behind the crimes has a vast variety of resources, well-connected to the government, and likely has an eye for high positions in the government, which could benefit them either directly or indirectly."
"How did you come to that conclusion, sir?"
"Well, firstly, judging by the crimes committed, the wide scope of them, and how they were carried out, I would say that the possibility of an individual performing these crimes is close to zero. Secondly, since the army general had quite a number of bodyguards and rarely appears in public, the culprit must know exactly where he will go and

when he is most vulnerable to attack: something only a government official would know, since they provide the protection for him. As for the last point, the deceased were all in high positions in the government; if they were removed, replacements would be needed, and they could be replaced by puppets and the person over them would gain much power."
Sigerson nodded again in response, thinking deeply.
The description he provided is nearly identical as mine. Is he trying to imply that the mastermind is someone other than himself? Is he really the one behind the crimes?
"I'm afraid I might have confused you with my explanation," smiled Blight.
"No, not at all."
"You seem to be a little tired. Is everything alright?" asked Blight, after a short pause, his face expressing gentle concern.
"Yes, I'm quite well, sir."
Blight leaned in, his eyes fixed on the desk in front of him.
"I have often heard stories of the dangers from working in the Constabulary," he said softly, "But I never believed much of what they said."
The air around them seemed to grow tenser with every second that passed.
"I don't understand you, sir."
"I mean, it's a dirty world, isn't it? Kill or be killed? Have you ever been in a situation where killing the criminal was the right thing to do?"

For a split second, Sigerson froze on the seat, then narrowed his eyes and answered hesitantly, “Yes, but only in self defence.”
“I have often found myself questioning morality; if the law exists to maintain justice, why then is depravity and suffering still prominent in our society?”
“I think,” murmured Sigerson, “you may have mistakened the law for a set of commandments. It only exists to guide the people and correct them but it isn't perfect.”
“You’re most right, and I have to agree with you. But this leads to humans being the source of wrong. What is morality but a facade that we all hide behind? When humans are faced with disaster, their true natures are exposed; barbaric and evil, each competing with another for survival. After all, who can say ‘I am clean and without sin’? No, a righteous person has never existed nor will there ever be one; everyone has a hidden vice inside of them, waiting to be exposed on the surface.”

It was starting to get dark outside. Noticing this, Sigerson got up and took his revolver, excused himself, and reached for the doorknob, when Blight’s silky voice carried itself across the room.
“Please contact me again, if you are able to clear me of suspicion, Mr Sigerson.”
Assuring him half-heartedly, Sigerson left, wondering if he had just met the most dangerous mind in the country.

8

For the Greater Good

“Are you sure it is wise for us to meet here, even though the police already suspect you?” asked Rook, raising his eyebrows.
“Relax yourself, Rook,” assured Blight, raising his mug and taking another sip of the strong alcohol, “When Mr Sigerson came by to visit, he was the one asking questions, meaning that they lack evidence to convict me of any crime. He came looking for answers, and I sent him away empty-handed, so don’t look so worried; they can suspect, but they will never be able to prove anything at the moment.”
“At the moment?”
“In the highly unlikely event that our classified information leaks out, then yes, the police would certainly have sufficient evidence to prosecute us. All we have to do at the present is cut off the weak links and focus our efforts into isolating *that* man.”
Rook seemed to understand, so he lowered his voice and, staring into his empty mug, muttered, “Understood.”
There was something else he seemed to want to ask but hesitated.
“The detective’s suicide… Was that you as well?”
Blight replied calmly, “Yes, that was my doing.”
“What happened?”

“He was merely in my way. I removed him as if he were a piece on the board. No one can understand what truly happened except for himself; I just allowed him to do what was hidden in his heart the entire time.”
Not entirely satisfied with this, Rook said nothing but remained uncomfortably unconscious of Blight’s motives. “He is certainly secretive,” he thought, taking another long draught from his mug.

—

The card pyramid was nearly complete; only a pair of aces remained missing from the top. His hand trembling slightly, Sigerson slowly brought the two cards down to the vertex. With a crash, the door flew open, which sent a gust of wind at the card at the card pyramid. Cards littered the table and floor, as the pyramid tumbled down, leaving Sigerson sitting in front of a mess of scattered cards. A freckled young boy strode into the room, leaving the door ajar. After rubbing her face forcefully and making sure the makeup was completely removed, Evelyn slid the wig off and blinked at the scattered cards.
“Sorry about that,” she said apologetically, glancing at the cards.
“It’s alright,” returned Sigerson, walking over to the door and shutting it firmly. “Anyways, have you gotten any information today?”
“Nothing that can help,” Evelyn replied sadly, pulling out a small bundle of papers. “There’s not much public

information about him; the only thing I could find was this old newspaper article."
"You mean this?" asked Sigerson, flipping through the papers. The papers were yellow and musty, with the print almost completely faded.
"The date of this... It was published fifteen years ago..." muttered Sigerson. "That means Blight is now thirty nine years old? He certainly doesn't look his age... By the way, did you find this in the newspaper archives?"
"Yes, hence the disguise. They would be awfully suspicious if I wanted to have a look around. I found this paper among thousands of others."
There was a hint of pride in her voice, as if she expected her cousin to praise her for this achievement. Sigerson, understanding her motive said, "I will admit that you've done well in showing me this, but as you said, this doesn't really help me in my investigation. Was this the only one?"
"This is the only one I've found mentioning Blight," said Evelyn a little irritably.
"Yes, yes, of course," replied Sigerson hastily.

A sharp knock on the door cut them both off. Sigerson strode over and wrenched the door open, revealing a distraught Inspector Branch behind it.
"We need you to come immediately," he explained breathlessly, "We've just uncovered a small crate of explosives in the theatre."
"Explosives in the theatre?"

“That’s right. Since you warned us that the theatre might be targeted today, I went with a couple of other officers and checked the surrounding area and found the crate stashed away in a storage room.”
For a brief moment, the detective sunk into deep thought, then closed his eyes and asked, “I suppose there were no traces left behind?”
“None that we could find.”
What could the reason be, that the mastermind would need to destroy it?
“We’d better leave as soon as we can.”
“I’ll go and get a cab then,” said the inspector before hurriedly leaving.
Picking up his grey travelling cloak, Sigerson glanced back and said, “Don’t worry about me; if I’m not back before seven, do save some of that pie for me later.”

—

As they were travelling in the cab, the inspector suddenly said, “I forgot to tell you, but did you bring your revolver? It could get messy.”
“I have it here,” answered Sigerson, patting his pocket.
The cab turned a corner and in front of it stood an enormous building, the National Theatre of Performing Arts.
It was in the shape of a dome, with Corinthian pillars stuck in place, holding the roof up. Dazzling lightbulbs shone and illuminated the giant letters of the theatre’s name.

Polished marble and wood covered the theatre, giving it an elegant, rich appearance, pleasing to the eyes and a marvel to behold.
“Ah, we’re here,” observed Branch.
Normally filled with lively chatter and much smoke, the atmosphere was clearly more drab and gloomier than usual, with dozens of policemen patrolling the area like busy ants. As the two of them walked past the lobby and into the auditorium, Sigerson removed his cloak and glanced around him. There were two floors, each one containing rows and rows of seats. The stage was hidden behind a pair of purple curtains, shielding everything behind it from sight.
“It certainly wouldn’t be difficult to conceal explosives among all these seats,” thought Sigerson.
“May I see the crate of explosives, Inspector? There may be some small clues which you might have missed.”
“Of course. Right this way, Sigerson.”

“We left everything untouched,” explained Branch, while they hurried down a deserted corridor fitted with crimson carpet. “I had a feeling you would want to investigate the scene yourself.”
A constable standing next to the door pulled it open for them as they approached.
“In here.”
Musty air rushed up to Sigerson’s face, smothering him uneasily. Nevertheless, without hesitation, he marched up to the open crate, eyeing it with great interest and showed

a keen expression on his face, not unlike a wolf on its prey's trail. Many sticks of dynamite were tucked neatly inside the crate. Picking one of them up, he examined it carefully, turning it over and observing it from every angle. "This is a standard explosive used in the mining industry," he remarked curiously. "What—"

A sudden change swept over him; his jaw clenched slightly as he removed the sticks one by one, revealing a message on the inside of the crate. Although he had expected this, it nonetheless filled him with slight agitation.

STOP ME IF YOU CAN

"I'm almost certain that the real attempt has not been made yet," said Sigerson, striding back to the auditorium, Branch jogging to keep up with his fast strides. "The dust around the crate had settled with only our footprints and the constable's; that proves no one had gone near it after it was planted there. If the crate had no missing sticks of dynamite and no one had gone near it, this proves that the crate is merely a decoy."

I still can't understand; was the warning from the fragment of paper trying to taunt me or divert my attention from something else?

"Inspector," he said, halting to a stop. "Can you position your men around on the upper and lower floors? Tell them to be watching for suspicious packages or bulges in people's clothes; the explosive, which will most likely be

the same dynamite we've seen, will be concealed somewhere."
Inspector Branch nodded and turned back to the constables, ordering them where to go, while Sigerson continued his way to the upper floor.
Countless seats lined up symmetrically across the overhead platform with many of them occupied with people. Strolling around the seats casually, he found an excellent vantage point of the entire auditorium and settled down. Peering at the crowd below, he could see everything clearly like an eagle in its nest.
The crate was placed in the storage room; only staff could access that room, so the culprit or accomplice must be among one of them. If I were the culprit, putting the decoy in the storage room would lead others there, but I would set off the bomb in a different position, far enough from the storage room to avoid attention from the police... Where could that be? In this building, the only places that match the description would be the auditorium and the dressing rooms... The dressing rooms would be filled with people by now, making it much harder to smuggle anything in unless it were small enough or concealed in an innocent object, but police have guarded those rooms as well as searched everything that was brought in... After seeing that, the culprit would pick the auditorium, where it would be a lot easier blending in with the crowd... The question is where and who the culprit is among us... Wait...
Sigerson shut his eyes to help him picture the crate in his mind as clearly as he could.

There were a number of cracks around the edges of the crate, not from impact but by mishandling. Since the culprit knew what was inside and used the crate as a decoy, it's highly unlikely that they would treat the crate in such an offhand manner... It must have been by accident, but the crate isn't particularly heavy; whoever handled it must have less strength than the average adult...

Realising at last who the culprit may be, he jumped to his feet, upsetting the smartly dressed audience sitting in front of him. Running all the way to the staff room, he asked the manager, who was busily directing actors and actresses to their allotted roles, "Has a young child come here with a crate, by any chance?"
The manager turned to him in surprise and replied, "Let me think... I suppose there might have been... Yes, there was a child who came to me today with a small crate— a young boy, I think. His appearance? Well, if I remember correctly, he had dark black hair, not unlike yours, and a dusty tweed jacket."
Without listening to the rest of the manager's words, Sigerson sprinted back out, now with his mind focused on finding the young boy described.
There was a smudge of gunpowder on that crate... If the boy hasn't taken off his jacket, which is quite likely, then it should show marks of the dark powder...

Not far off was a tiny boy dressed plainly; his black hair and jacket matching the description perfectly. He fiddled

around with his jacket then checking that no one was watching, slowly drew out a red stick of dynamite, exposing only the fuse. From the moment Sigerson had a glimpse of the wire, he jumped down the stairs; none of the police on the lower floor had caught on yet, so he drew his revolver and pointed it carefully at his target while sneaking closer.

"Drop it."

Everyone in the vicinity scrambled to get away, and Inspector Branch, who heard the commotion from inside the corridor, also rushed out, his revolver ready in his hand.

"I said leave it," repeated Sigerson. "Or I'll be forced to shoot."

With the explosive halfway out from his jacket and a match in his hand, fear shot through the child like a bullet. His quick eyes darted up briefly, then came back down to the armed men in front of him.

Although his hand wielding the revolver was quite steady, sweat began to pour out and his heartbeat quickened like a drum.

Drop it... Just drop it...

In a blur, the matchstick swung around, ignited and aimed for the fuse, which openly embraced the presence of the flame. There was nothing to do if the two met now...

The inspector's revolver fired a shot, hitting the boy squarely in the chest; then as if in slow motion, his eyes grew big with shock, and his arms and legs, knowing that his life was now over, collapsed in a limp mess. The stick

of dynamite dropped and rolled away, while the matchstick was extinguished by the blood of the young boy, pooling up in a puddle.

Among the shrieks and cries of the spectators around them, who the rest of the police present were working to keep under control, stood Sigerson staring down at the body. His shoes were soaked crimson by the river of gore flowing out of the body as he stood paralysed on the spot. The child… Still. Lifeless. Inspector Branch shook his head sadly, muttering to himself.

"Who would have guessed this boy was carrying an explosive strong enough to kill hundreds of people?"

Sigerson snapped back to reality.

"Someone must have supplied him with it."

And they were still in here. The moment the boy looked up, a person in the stands of the upper floors nodded. The boy was unsure of what to do next, so he sought instructions— and received them.

"I'm going to have to write a report on this later, Sigerson; I'm returning to the station."

After they had calmed the crowd and carried off the body, the two of them made their way back out of the theatre with Inspector Branch leading the way. Countless questions sprang into the detective's mind; there were too many theories to be tested.

I'll start by searching for any background information on that boy... There may be some connection I can find and use to my advantage...

However, nothing could be found on the elusive boy, who was portrayed in the newspaper as a 'dangerous criminal'. No records, no witnesses, no photos; it was dead end after dead end. The strangest part to it was the lack of information on Blight himself as well. In every archive and library he searched in, no mention of the name Blight had ever been noted down. Finally, accepting the fact grudgingly that the culprit had covered their tracks exceptionally well, Sigerson gave up on trying to find the boy's history and instead, turned to a more direct approach: arresting key figures of the organisation.

After a full day of unsuccessful searching. He arrived back home, sighed dejectedly, and began to devour his cold pie half-heartedly.
"No luck finding anything?'
"Absolutely not. They've erased all records of the boy's existence, but now I've got my priorities set on Blight; I'm sure he's the one."
"How can you be sure with no proof?"
"That's the thing: it's too clean. There are no records of his history at all in the city town hall, even though he's a prominent citizen in the country with a large business. All the documents of his past business dealings are also far too innocent; he wouldn't be able to amass the amount of wealth he has now if the documents are true."
Evelyn peered out of the open window, frowning at something below.

“Are you aware of that man standing outside of our home?”
“Who?” asked Sigerson, jumping up and rushing over to the window. As soon as the stranger saw Sigerson’s face, he dashed away instantly.
“Go to the back door, Evie. I might have been followed.”
Evelyn left puzzled, but without delay. There was a soft clattering sound as Sigerson picked up his revolver and stole stealthily to the door, pushing it wide enough to see the staircase winding down. A harsh scratching noise floated up to his ears.
“Somebody’s trying to pick the lock… Should I wait around or not? They could be Blight’s henchmen after all…” muttered Sigerson to himself.
BANG! Several armed men stormed into the building with knives and pistols, as the door flew open. Sigerson fired a shot through the small gap, hitting one of the attackers in the leg. The assailant yelled in pain and collapsed on the ground, while his comrades swiftly closed in. Quickly realising he was heavily outnumbered, he cut out all the sources of light in the building, leaving it in complete darkness and rushed to the back door, which led to an emergency staircase to the streets. Evelyn was standing there in the dark, unsure of what to do, when Sigerson raced down the stairs, making her jump in surprise at his sudden appearance.
“This way,” he gestured to her, and together, they secretly left the building and made it out onto the streets.

9

The Accountant and his Tricks

With only the moon to guide them, Sigerson and Evelyn reached the Crown Hotel without a scratch. Although his sides were aching and his heart was pounding ceaselessly, as if it were trying to break out, Sigerson had never felt more exhilarated; every sense in his body was alert from their sudden escape. Evelyn, however, was far less amused. “Where are we meant to stay now?” she asked haughtily. Sigerson lifted his head, looked at the shining building in front of him, and said simply, “The Crown Hotel.”

Being the most modern building in the country, the grand hotel consisted of many large glass panes and metal frame, giving the building the appearance of a massive glass container, which contrasted starkly with the rest of the buildings around it. As they entered, dazzling bright lights shone from above into their eyes. Few people were in the luxuriantly carpeted lobby, but the ones that were present paid no attention to the newcomers.
Once they had settled down in one of the last rooms left, Sigerson, turning around to Evelyn, who was sitting on the bed thinking silently, said, “First thing you should do tomorrow is write a letter of resignation to your manager; it’s far too dangerous for you to return back to the theatre.” “Yes, that’s what I was thinking as well, but what about our financial problems–”

“You don’t have to worry about money for the time being; I knew it was only a matter of time before something like this would happen, so I prepared beforehand.”
He reached into one of his coat pockets and drew out a bundle of notes, his loaded revolver, and a box of matches.
“So you have a plan then?” asked Evelyn with raised eyebrows.
“Many. Most of them are backup plans in case the current one fails.”
“And what is your current plan?” she yawned.
“Get some sleep first; there’ll be time to explain tomorrow.”
“Where are you going to sleep? There’s only one bed in here.”
“I’ll stay up and keep watch, so don’t worry and go to sleep.”’
Curling up into a ball and pulling the warm covers over herself, gentle breaths soon fluttered out from beneath the covers, as Sigerson flicked the light switch off, dousing them in a flood of darkness.
Since Blight has complete control over coal and electricity now, the entire hotel would be in his grasp as well; most of the things here operate on electricity. I’ve seen the layout of the entire building, so if the worst comes, there are at least four viable escape routes available to use. But how can I catch Blight? Since he never commits the crimes himself, it would be impossible to directly link him to one of the crimes. I’ve had it wrong this entire time; I have to start by targeting his pawns

first and gradually connect them to him. There are several threads I could target first: Rook, Hartland, or the cab driver...

Wind was howling through the window with rain falling lightly as well in the background, creating a symphonic haunting noise which carried itself around the room, chilling the detective's heart inadvertently. As Sigerson stared out into the black sky, he wondered, "Will everything return to normal again?"

—

Evelyn woke up groggily with a start; it was a moment before she remembered the previous night's events. Seeing Sigerson sitting comfortably on the armchair in front of her eating a pastry, she hastily got out of bed and went over to her cousin.
"Did room service pass by?" she asked, snatching the last pastry on the dish.
"Just a minute ago. Are you hungry?"
"Not particularly. By the way, whose are those?"
She indicated a pile of white clothes lying on the ornamented table.
"Yours. I went out and got a change of clothes for us both this morning. Anyways, I've written down everything I"ve uncovered so far on this case, so here, you'll understand if you read."
He waved the piece of paper in the air like a flag, then placed it onto the table next to the clothes. Walking over to

the table, Evelyn scooped up the paper and clothes, when Sigerson suddenly stood up again and picked up his coat.
“I’m going out for today, so here—”
He held out his revolver, waiting for Evelyn to take it. She took it and examined it curiously, turning it over in her hands.
“Only use it in emergencies,” warned Sigerson sternly, “If you don’t have to use it, keep it out of sight; averting attention away from ourselves, is one of the most important things to remember now.”
Warning Evelyn adamantly for the last time, he stepped out and left her alone in the room, still inquisitively studying the weapon in her hand. Then, after taking several mental notes on the many features and mechanisms of the revolver, Evelyn placed it beside her on the bed and was about to change into the new clothes, when she heard two muffled voices in the corridor outside of the room. She paused and listened intently. There was a knock on the door. Slipping the revolver into her gown, she cautiously walked over to the door and opened it.

A staff member and a smartly dressed man were standing behind the door. As soon as the door was opened, the concierge dismissed himself and returned to his work. The man smiled warmly and said, “Miss Evelyn Whitlock?”
“Is there anything I can help you with, sir?” asked Evelyn naturally, hiding all signs of suspicion perfectly.
“Can I come in? I amy have some information that might pique your interest.”

Evelyn opened the door wider and allowed the man to enter the room. He was dressed tidily with a red tie to match his crisp suit.
"Please have a seat, sir."
As the man sat, Evelyn observed him keenly, noticing the smallest details in the man's clothing and behaviour. A small faded ink stain was splattered on his sleeve; a few scratches were dotted around the watch he was wearing.
This man should be an upperclass citizen; his clothes and shoes alone are worth an average citizen's year of working. His shoes are rather clean even though it was raining quite heavily last night; he probably came in a cab. The watch on his wrist is expensive but badly scratched in multiple places. He keeps it because of its efficiency, not because of its value, since a valued possession would rarely have that many scratches. This can only mean that this man sitting here in front of me must be Elysius Blight; who else would have a reason and be able to track down our location so quickly?
During all these thoughts, which hardly took over a few seconds, the stranger continued to smile at Evelyn, looking as though he already knew the thoughts in her mind.
"I'm sorry, but I still don't understand why you're here, sir."
"That's right, I still haven't introduced myself, have I? My name is Elysius Blight."
A brief pause lingered in the room, as if these words stopped time itself, halting everything in the world from thought and action. Evelyn's hand twitched and moved towards the revolver involuntarily by a fraction of an inch.

“Dangerous things, aren’t they, Miss Whitlock? You may want to leave your revolver on that table next to you. No? You prefer to keep it with you? That’s fine.”
He continued to beam in a friendly manner, although his eyes shone with hidden menace.
“I believe, sir, you said you had information for me.”
“Yes, I did. You know, there’s a sleeper train departing from Sodor in a couple of days.”
She froze uncertainly. What was this about?
“I’m not quite sure what you mean, sir.”
“Oh no, I was just telling you that the sleeper train is available in a few days and can take you out of the country.”
“I–I see. Thank you for telling me, sir.”
“You’re stuck in a small problem now, aren’t you? You and your cousin?”
“Yes. May I ask how you are aware of this, sir?”
“I have many connections, some of which are with the Constabulary. More importantly, your predicament right now, is it not your detective companion leading you through the hardship?”
“I suppose you could say that, sir.” she replied carefully.
“Can you understand him? He never reveals everything to you, does he? There might be some… hidden detail he’s never mentioned before. Can an intelligent lady such as yourself bear to work with a man like that?”
When Blight saw that his words were beginning to have a small effect on her, he continued in a honeyed voice, masking all malicious intent, “We both know that neither

you nor your charming cousin trust me, don't we, Miss Whitlock. It would be wiser to separate yourself with everything if you want to surpass *him*, I am right? Use your talent for yourself, and you'll reap the reward that you've been wanting for so long."

He got up and walked over to the window, gazing peacefully outside at the row of decorative trees lined up parallel to the sidewalk. A soft breeze was blowing on the trees, making them sway side to side in perfect sync.

"See the trees outside, Miss Whitlock? They hold themselves firmly in the ground without support; their roots alone are strong enough. One tree is hard to fell; a forest is almost impossible. But a spark—a single spark—is deadly to the forest. It spreads, destroying everything in its path. Tell Mr Sigerson this—"

He strode to the door, his hand tightening around the knob.

"Meet me at the train station on platform three, at noon, ten days from today. I hope to see him there."

Nodding to Evelyn, he left the room, filling her with repulsive dread.

"He knows where we're staying now… He also knows exactly what I want, but how?" muttered Evelyn to herself, "Never mind that now… He was just trying to make me work against Will; every word he spoke was luring me to try and separate myself from him and let my pride overtake me… What should I do? I'll wait for him… Then we'd better leave as soon as possible…"

—

Blight was resting on a cushioned seat, helping himself to a glass of wine and a slice of cake. Before him, on the laced cloth covering the table, lay a letter he was writing to Rook *Shifting suspicion now would be the optimal time to do it. Their case on me is merely based on suspicion, and judging from what I've seen and heard from my sources in the Constabulary, Rook is not far from danger. Those two... I'm sure Sigerson has his attention turned to Rook; he knew there was a hidden shooter in a separate building that day... It would not be difficult to link Rook to the crime due to his size and shooting skill, but that is hardly going to build a strong enough case against him... The only piece of evidence that could incriminate him would be his possession of the airgun; after all, the shoes that created the footprints are destroyed and the bullets are all that remain. If the airgun remains hidden, nothing will be made certain; only suspicion will linger. Should I sacrifice Rook for a better advantage? The threat, however, still remains... How do I deal with those two? If I can isolate them, it will become much easier to eliminate them... To eliminate them one at a time would be the safest option. If one gets away, it could take some time to track them down again, though... Miss Evelyn was certainly cleverer than I had anticipated; she didn't seem to fall for my trap... Still.. It is untrue to say that I have achieved nothing; that conversation reflected the young lady's mind perfectly. Her personality is rather... dauntless. Her trust and loyalty to her cousin is*

admirable, but even so, the biggest strength can be a double-edged weapon...
He stared out of the train window. The scenery was slowly changing. Soon, he'd be back in his study, filing paperwork and showing the kind side of him to his household.
"I'd better finish this letter quickly," he told himself, scribbling away on the paper. "Wait... Maybe just one last thing..."
Jotting down a few additional lines, he sighed with satisfaction and slid it into a brown envelope, sealing it securely.

—

When Sigerson returned at last, the sky had darkened and the lamp-posts were lit up. His slightly dishevelled appearance and muddy shoes only made him look worse; as he removed his coat, an angry, blistering welt across his arm came into view.
"Hunting crop," he explained briskly, after seeing Evelyn's concerned reaction, "One of the ruffians in the streets snuck up to me as I was returning from running my errands. There was a small scuffle, which I didn't entirely manage to avoid, but in the end, I flattened him with a right hook to his jaw, and now the inspector's got his hands on him."
"I'm sorry I took your revolver—"
"It's fine; I gave it to you myself. I could tell you needed it more than I did."

“That’s right—there’s something important I have to tell you, William,” said Evelyn. Sigerson listened silently as Evelyn recounted her morning and the conversation with Blight. At last, when she had finished talking, he paced around the room, head down and considered all the facts that were in his grasp.
“Although you didn’t know,” he said, not meeting his cousin’s eyes, “I actually set up security arrangements before you woke up; that’s why Blight didn’t just kill you there.”
“If that’s true,” Evelyn began slowly, “Then Blight might have spies in the Constabulary. How else could he have known there about the additional security around the place? If he didn’t know, which isn’t likely, he could have just sent people to break into the room or maybe slip a poison into a meal. After all, he is intent on removing us out of his way; I could tell from our conversation that he meant business…”
Deeply perplexed, Sigerson continued to pace with forceful steps.
What did he mean by telling me to meet him at the station? Is this a trap or does he want me to solve something and find a false clue?
“Evie,” he said, suddenly stopping with his back to her. “Can you get ready in ten minutes? I want to leave as soon as possible.”
“Everything’s packed into a small trunk.”
“Excellent. Now, I’ll explain everything I’ve planned so far; I have already written to the inspector, informing him of

our situation. He's helped prepare a cab to meet us at the emergency exit. From there, we will take the cab to Eden's train station."
"Why not take a train from Sodor?"
"Too many of Blight's spies are positioned there and he probably already predicted my plan, since he mentioned the train to you. No—it's far safer to take a train from Eden instead, where he doesn't expect us to be. Besides, I have an informant in Eden, who's told me that the station there is usually quiet and empty during the night; that way, it'll be far easier to notice any stalkers coming at us. The only problem with this is, although we can spot the enemy easily, we'll be out in the open for them to attack."
He pulled out another revolver from his pocket and placed it onto the table, along with a small leather pouch filled with tiny lead balls.
"From now on, this will be yours."
Tucking the weapon away safely into her cloak, Evelyn asked, "When are we leaving?"
"Soon. I believe the designated time was four in the evening. We still have an hour before departure; if you need to do anything else, do it now. There won't be much rest during the journey."

For the rest of the time remaining, Sigerson sat back in the armchair, his chin on his chest, breathing slowly. Rhythmic ticking coming from the clock put a drowsy spell on everything in the room, making time seem slower

than usual. Then, glancing sideways at the clock, he jumped up and said, “It’s ten till four. We’re leaving now.”
“There’s only one trunk containing both our things,” explained Evelyn, as Sigerson strode over to her. “It should be light to carry around. How is it? Is it too heavy?”
He lifted it up, tested the weight, and nodded in approval. “A bit, but I’ll manage.”
The two of them made their way downstairs and around the winding corridors, careful to avoid other people as much as possible. Waiting for them in a back alley was the cab with black curtains, drawn to veil the inside of it, and its driver, looking grimmer than the detective. The journey to the station was far from cheerful; it was no lighter than the mood of a funeral. They all sat in silence, with Sigerson resuming his thinking from a few minutes ago, Evelyn peering out of a gap between the drawn blinds on the window, and the cabman clenching his teeth, eager to finish the job quickly and perhaps get a drink later before heading home. About half an hour passed, and Sigerson, who opened his eyes but seemed to be troubled, started muttering the names of the streets and roads as they drove past, while staring at the black curtains with a concentrated face.
“Shaftsbury Road… King Street… A left turn, then a right? Earlfort Road… Now, Miriam Avenue—”
“Actually, I think we’re on Harper Street now,” chimed Evelyn softly, sitting back with her arms crossed. “Mrs Pherson, the shopkeeper a few streets away from our

place, warned me a few days ago of the construction site that was working there."
Loud hammers and strong voices rang outside of the cab; they couldn't see it, but it was clear that they were passing a construction site.
"Harper Street? Hold on… You're right; we should be on Twinings Road then… Prepare yourself; we'll be getting off soon."
"But it'll take at least another half hour until we reach the station."
"I know, but it's highly likely Blight has spies in the police force, as you mentioned before. Therefore, he'll be expecting us to arrive at the station in a cab. If we walk the last few kilometres, we'll be able to hide our trail for a while, since everyone will be waiting for us to arrive at the station."
What a wait it was! Ears straining, every muscle in his body tensing, and mind whirring chaotically, Sigerson listened for the right moment to depart from their cab as it continued to rumble onwards. When the cab drove over a particularly bumpy road, Sigerson slid open the trapdoor above him and told the cab driver, "Stop here cabman."
The cab driver, evidently confused, halted the cab. When Sigerson and Evelyn stepped out of the cab, the cabman looked down and asked, "Is there anything wrong, sir?"
"Not at all; we would like to walk the rest of the way, that is all."
Then, seeing the cabman's bewildered expression, he added, "A sovereign for your troubles. Please keep this a

secret; if anyone asks you where you left us, including the police, tell them that you dropped us off at the inn."
Watching the cab fade into the setting sun, Evelyn turned to Sigerson and asked, "Where do we go from here? We're already close to Eden aren't we?"
"That's right," answered Sigerson, taking the trunk. "I've familiarized myself with Eden and its surroundings during the past week, so we won't get lost. The station arrival was only a red herring; I had no intention of boarding a train today."
They walked into town, gazing at the different shops and inhaling the fresh air. Spending such an extended amount of time in the cab did not dull the energetic detective's senses; on the contrary, he was filled with a kind of purposeful fervour. Every building was marked, every signpost remembered, and every person observed.
"Now," started Sigerson, "I probably should have mentioned this earlier, but I'll just tell you now: I'm engaged to someone."
"What? Who is it?"
Evelyn knew her cousin too well; most people avoided him because of his apparent coldness to people inferior to him in intelligence. He was usually the type of person who would rather hide their emotions than show them.
"Elena Keller. She's one of the maids in Blight's employment."
"Surely this is taking it a bit too far, don't you think, Will?", asked Evelyn, hesitantly. "I mean, you'll need to spend

time with her and investigate at the same time, don't you? Are you sure it was necessary?"
"Not necessary, but highly rewarding; the information I have gained through her was much more than anything the Constabulary could have offered me."
Although Evelyn still remained conflicted about the idea, she stayed silent. What use was it now, to try and reason with him? Once her cousin was determined to achieve something, he would never stop until he reached his goal.
"This is the inn where we'll be staying tonight," said Sigerson, as the two of them approached the brick building.
Even though it wasn't as large or flashy as the Crown Hotel, the inn, which provided for many travellers passing by, was well received by all the people, leading to massive crowds lingering inside, eating, drinking, and singing merry tunes. When they entered, a blast of noise shot out at them like a cannonball. Hearty laughter erupted from several tables, sweet scents oozed out from the kitchen, and, most unsurprisingly, mugs of foaming beer floated around to each table. It was as if the inn had blocked out suffering, gloominess, and despair from within its walls.
Sigerson glanced around, making sure they weren't being followed or overheard, and told Evelyn in an undertone, "Stay here for now; I'll go up to our room, where we'll be staying, and discuss some things with my fiancée. Although she already knows who you are, it's best if she doesn't see your face; after all, she's in constant contact with Blight, so..."

“You really don’t trust people easily, do you?”
“Not at all,” he replied unsmilingly.
Sigerson ascended up the stairs, and soon vanished among the corridors on the upper floor.
Evelyn sighed and sat down in a chair, feeling rather dejected. While it was true Sigerson had written everything she needed to know on the slip of paper back at the hotel, she always felt like something was intentionally missing, a small detail or clue that was withheld from her. Blight’s words constantly came back to haunt her.
Can you understand him? Never reveals everything...

“Hey there, young missy!” called one of the men playing cards at a table. “Care to join us for a game?”
“Maybe if you’re lucky, you’ll win a few coins too!” jeered another.
The men exploded with laughter, slapping the table loudly. Finally, ignoring their ridicule and deciding that a bit of extra money would help them greatly on their journey, she made her way around the maze of tables and marched up to their table, which surprised all four of them for a brief moment.
“If I play and win, then I’ll take twenty sovereigns; but if I lose, I’ll give you twenty. Deal?”
They had stopped laughing; her curt manner of speech caught them off guard, causing them to stay silent. The man that seemed to be the most experienced player stood up and said to Eveln, “We’ll play but if you win—” He

slammed a box of coins onto the table. “—I’ll pay you double the amount you named.”
Being a head taller, he bent down until his eyes, brimming with confidence, were level with Evelyn’s.
“Let’s start, then.”
She sat down. The men turned to each other, unsure of what to do, then one of them shuffled the deck and dealt the cards to each player. As the cards were coming around, the man asked with mock politeness, his round spectacles shining in the light, “I’m assuming you know how to play whist?”
“Yes, if we’re playing by standard rules.”
Every card was dealt; all that was left was to decide on the teams.
“Josiah, you’re with the newcomer. Amberton, you’re with me. Let’s begin. Win two games out of three, and I’ll pay you both accordingly.”
The game had begun. During the first few minutes, the man had made for himself a strong lead. Having already won the first few tricks rather easily, he grinned widely at Evelyn and taunted, “You might as well give up now, if all you’re going to do is sit there.”
Ignoring this, Evelyn continued to play calmly, and, for the first time in the game, noticed something strange. Whenever she played a card, it felt like the man knew what she was going to play. She glanced casually at the man, waiting to see his actions. There was a slight pause, then his eyes darted sideways subtly and returned to his cards.

That level of confidence and those glances... He could be cheating, but how? A reflection or a signal? That watch could work...

Tilting her cards by a small degree, Evelyn watched Amberton, who was next to her, intentionally but secretly. As she had expected, the man tapped his fingers lightly on the table, his partner shifted his watch, which nobody paid attention to except Evelyn, and the man played a perfect counter to their cards.

That was neither luck nor skill; this man and Amberton are both cheating, but what can I do to stop them? I think the only thing I can do now is to quickly win and leave; otherwise, it may cause us to lose money...

The game continued on, all four players concentrating intensely on their cards. The first game had gone to Amberton and his partner fairly easily, the second game to Evelyn and Josiah, outscoring the opposition by a fairly small margin. Now, the final game had started, and dominated by Amberton and the spectacled man once again. Remaining calm, Evelyn evaluated the cards played and the remaining tricks to be played.

Let's see... Thirty two cards have been played... three have been aces, so I'm the only one with an ace... The trump suit is spades, which makes my ace less valuable, since there are still eight cards of spades... Two are in my hand... That means the chances of the man having the same number or more trumps than me is about seventy percent... There are thousands of possible combinations and even more possible outcomes of this game; at least thirty two with us winning...

She looked down at her cards, still unsure of what to do.
I know my opponents are cheating and overconfident; if I can force them to play differently to their plans, it might be able to unsettle them and force them to make a mistake...
She placed her ace down. Amberton sneaked a peek at his partner, who looked even more confused than he was. He places his king of spades, which was exactly what Evelyn was waiting for.
Excellent. Now the chances of him having an equal or higher number of trumps than me is reduced to fifty seven percent. I have the highest card now, the queen of spades. The last four games are ours if Josiah plays his hand properly...

During the last few minutes of the game, Amberton, now anguished, turned to his partner and after receiving no answer, played the last few tricks terribly, resulting in Evelyn and Josiah's win. Absolutely stumped, the man got up sulkily, snatched up his box, and took out twenty golden coins, handing them out to Josiah. To Evelyn, he also gave twenty.
"I thought you wagered forty," she reminded him.
"But you asked for twenty," said the man pragmatically. "Take it or leave it."
Evelyn smiled and walked around the table to the man. She whispered into his ear, "You were cheating, weren't you?"
The man's face turned a pallid white, his glasses quivering. "You and Amberton were working together; you could see my cards through his watch's reflection. It wouldn't be a

pretty sight if I told the people you cheated against the truth, would it?"
"What do you want?" he whispered back hoarsely.
"Just give me the forty sovereigns, and I'll leave you alone."
"Take it."
He pulled out twenty more coins and left them on the table, then left the inn hastily, causing Amberton to get up and follow him. Evelyn scooped up the coins eagerly, brought them to another table, and started to count the money, when a voice behind her said, "Nicely played."
She whirled around, seeing the face of her cousin grinning at her.
"Those men that just left, they were cheating, weren't they? The one with the glasses was using his partner's watch to cheat and see your cards, correct?"
"That's right. You saw him stare at the watch, didn't you?"
"No," replied Sigerson, his hands behind his back. He straightened up and turned to the table where they had been playing cards.
"See that lamp? It shined right above Amberton, his partner. Whenever the flame flickered and dimmed, Mr Patrick Hartland's precision fell significantly. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that he was seeing something that would greatly help him, most likely a reflection or signal. When I looked closer, I saw Amberton's watch reflect a glimpse of your cards and knew he was cheating."
"Hold on—did you say Patrick Hartland? Isn't he working with Blight?"

“Yes, he is, but I highly doubt he knew who you were, judging from his lack of reaction. He’s a heavy gambler who’s famous here for hardly losing a game, so it’s not a surprise that we bumped into him here. Besides, Elena told me he had just visited Blight this afternoon, so I could predict he would be here.”
While they walked up to their room upstairs, Evelyn suddenly remembered Sigerson’s predicament.
“What about your fiancée, Will? Is it safe to leave her here?”
“She’s fine. I’ve given her instructions on what to do in my absence.”
Still feeling uncertain, Evelyn entered the room after Sigerson had already drawn the curtains, blocking the moon’s light from shining in.
“Sleep as much as you can, because tomorrow, we’ll be taking the sleeper train straight to Alms.”
With that said, Sigerson crawled into his bed and instantly fell asleep. Evelyn, however, decided to take a bath to relax her mind. She still had no idea what Sigerson was planning to do. Was it right to trust him with something as important as her life?
“There’s no point in worrying,” she told herself countless times.

After getting out and drying her hair, she too lay under the soft covers, the warm glow of the oil lamp easing her to sleep.

—

Sigerson woke with a jolt. Hurriedly snatching up his watch from his coat, he checked the time and breathed a sigh of relief; it was only three o'clock. He climbed out of bed, fully refreshed after a few hours of sleep, and took a shower quickly before his cousin woke up. By the time Evelyn did wake, Sigerson was comfortably sitting on his bed, fully dressed and enjoying a mug of coffee quietly. When he realised that Evelyn was awake, he told her to take a shower first, then eat a light breakfast, before they were to leave for the train, while he fixed some things around their room. Bacon and muffins were laid out onto the table for them, which were taken gladly, then after they had eaten their fill, Sigerson lifted the trunk up, and they left. While they were strolling to the train station, Sigerson explained as much as time would permit.

"I booked a spot in that inn weeks before we arrived, so we had somewhere to stay. I was aware of the fact that we might be forced out of our home, so I prepared everything we needed to travel beforehand and waited for it to happen; if we weren't attacked two nights ago, I would still come here anyways, away from Sodor where Blight would expect us to escape. Since he played the first move and sent those ruffians to our home, he'll think that we have little to no preparations beforehand and still believe he has the upperhand. We can then travel to Alms via the sleeper train before he realises our plans, understand?"

“Yes, yes,” Evelyn replied huffily, as she tried to keep up with Sigerson’s long strides in her dress. “But he mentioned to me, if I remember correctly, the option of escaping by the trains you’ve just mentioned. Doesn’t that mean he could easily still track us down if we take the train?”

“No—I’ve thought about that as well. I’ve set everything up so that it looks as if we were still staying at the inn. I’ve put an identical suitcase inside, filled with both of our belongings inside as well as a large amount of money, which no one would expect us travellers to leave behind. Along with that, there are two other pieces of evidence that will lead the hunters astray. I’ve left a piece of cloth thickly folded that has a moderate amount of ice in it that is left on a rack in the bathroom; if anyone goes to investigate, they’ll assume that one of us recently applied water to the cloth due to the dampness of the ice melting. A delayed fuse was also attached to the candle I was handling earlier today; by the time the maid comes in to clean the room during the evening, it would just have started to burn, making the maid believe that we had only lit it a few minutes ago. When they open the door, any ashes left behind by the fuse should blow away, leaving the illusion completely intact. Since everything is set to make it look like we had stayed in the room all this time, everyone would expect us to leave by tonight, but instead–”

He checked his watch.

“—we’ll be gone before the sun rises. This way, Evie.”

Leading the way, Sigerson chose the most deserted and unnoticed alleys he could recall from emory, preventing people from seeing them. At last, the sound of trains emerged through the brick buildings and the station, already buzzing with activity, even with the sun unrisen.

A speeding train came rushing to the platform, creating a gust of wind which swept over the passengers standing there. The doors were opened. Everyone entered. The door shut again, and soon, the train left the station to continue on its journey.

10

Misdirection

Two days later, The Royal Constabulary

"D-Director!"
A middle-aged man seated comfortably on his plush but rather neglected armchair, turned around in his chair to see what the intrusion was. Although he was barely fifty, his greying hair, droopy eyes, and slow movement made him look a lot older than he really was. He stared at the man, who was wheezing from sprinting up two floors, shut his eyes wearily and asked, "What is it?"
"We've intercepted a letter, sir. It came from the flat you gave us orders to watch over."
He pulled out a crumpled letter from the brown envelope he was holding and handed it over to his superior, who took it and examined it carefully.
"Interesting..." he murmured, turning the paper around in his hands. "This letter is obviously coded... The dots and lines have a pattern. I must admit; I've never seen this code used before... Did you say it was delivered to the flat or being delivered from it?"
"Delivered to it, sir."
"I see... This cluster of dots has been used ten times in this short letter; it must be a common word, then. An individual dash? Either an 'a' or 'I'. If that's so. Then this word might be 'it'."

He continued staring at the paper, as if in a trance. Nearly falling asleep, the messenger was about to ask for permission to leave, when his superior said in a low voice, "Stay."
Bringing the paper so close to his face that his hooked nose almost touched it, the director scanned through it, his eyes moving faster the more he read. Slowly, his face lost colour, and as he finished scanning through the entire letter, which he had also decoded during those few minutes, he became as white as a sheet. He hurriedly pulled open his drawer, drew out another piece of paper and an envelope, and scribbled a letter to Avarice Crowne, before giving it to the officer standing in front of his table.
"Deliver this directly to Mr Crowne; if anyone stops or hinders you, tell them this letter is a message from the director of the Constabulary. Understand?"
"Yessir!"
Watching the young policeman run off into the distance, the director asked himself how this could have happened. A lone sunbeam shone into the messy office, highlighting a name on a certificate pinned to the wall: Mr Grock. This man was a living machine, adapted to be able to solve the most difficult problems and keep the people in control. From his youth, he showed a natural aptitude for solving puzzles and codes; this skill was only matched by his loyalty to the head of the country, Avarice Crowne. After a single encounter, he was hired by Crowne to be the director of the Royal Constabulary, and, although unknown to the public, the head of the Enforcers, granting

him almost equal power over the entire country. From hunting down and arresting rebels to exterminating the country's most vile criminal organisations, Mr Grock was the final opponent to all those that dared to resist the government.
Checking the coded letter again, he reread it, trying to get a grasp of any details he might have missed. Exposure of him, Crowne, and all of the Custodians was laid bare on the paper; every little fact, every name, and every detail was mentioned, as well as a full explanation. It was the perfect weapon to overthrow the oppressive government's rule over the country, something that Grock would be helpless to defend against.
"Whoever wrote this," thought Grock, "was well connected to the government, since none of these facts have ever left the House of the Custodians. The sender is William Sigerson. I'll have a team to check on the location of the post office this came from..."
He flipped through a drawer filled with files and stopped at S. Sigerson.... The name was familiar... There it was. A dusty folder was taken out, and the papers it contained captured the attention of his eyes. Mr Grock stared at it, half of his brain reading and the other half thinking. If Sigerson sent the letter intending to hand over this lethal weapon over to the rebels, he must have a strong reason to do so... Could it be that they were collaborating together?
He shook his head impatiently, trying to clear his mind. Even though the handwriting matched Sigerson's exactly, Grock decided to wait, gather more information, and ask

for Crowne's response before acting. Immediately, he placed everything back as it was minutes ago; a team of police were summoned and dispatched to investigate the letter's origin. All that was left to do now was wait for the results.

—

After an entire day of waiting, while Grock, still sitting where he had been hours ago, was smoking with his pipe profusely, thinking furiously about the plethora of crimes committed during the past month, messengers returned to him, informing him of all the pieces of the puzzle he was missing. The letter had been traced back to Eden. Sigerson was indeed staying in Eden, which was all that Grock needed to know. Additionally, further news reached him that Sigerson was staying at the inn and had only left recently, leaving all his possessions behind. If he did want to leave now, the latest he could would be eleven at night, since all transportation services were closed until the next day.

"He could also have a companion with him, since he booked a room with two beds..." considered Grock. "Right now, he would be on the run after sending that letter, so it only makes sense that he uses his resources sparingly... But at the same time, he could be using this as a trick to deceive us into thinking he's travelling with another person... The trunk he's left behind still has everything he needs and the Enforcers have notified me that a candle

had only been recently lit in the room, meaning that he had left the room only minutes before... I'll prepare the Enforcers to arrest him when he tries to leave later..."

Grock stood up, his entire body and mind ready and devoted to catching the detective. Crowne had given him the order, so with his face resolute and set in stone, he marched out of his office, laying his plans down and organising the teams to capture the fugitive.

—

A grandfather clock, ancient as a fossil, rang out somewhere in the mansion. Its deep echoing tolls bounced around the corridor, alerting the entire household of the time. Blight glanced up from the music sheet he was composing but paid no attention to the time. There was still plenty of time until the meeting... Finishing up on the last note in his composition, he blew out the candle that was glowing warmly next to the sheet, shrouding the room in black, put on his travelling clothes and left his home, heading to the town. A stocky pistol was hidden in his cloak; Blight knew it would rarely be used but kept it anyway as a precaution. Lights could be seen, shimmering dimly in the dark, calm night. Even though it was a few minutes past midnight, many of the townsfolk were staying up, partying and drinking, as was their custom every weekend night. Blight strolled on leisurely, peering at the happy faces through the windows with a curious

expression, which he often had while studying people's behaviour. The revelers in the house appeared to be bright and cheerful, excessively noisely, and half drunk. He looked at them impassively for a while, then turned away, continuing on his way with a face devoid of emotion and expression. How foolish they were, drinking and enjoying themselves as they pleased... They were all sorely deceived that tomorrow would be just another regular day... Easily placated by the Custodians, who wore the mask of civility daily but were cruel monsters hidden behind it... Everyone saw the mask; none questioned it. All masks had to be removed; it was only a matter of time...

Beyond the cluster of buildings lay his destination and the town's most prized establishment: the inn. When he entered, it was just as he had anticipated. Most of the people present had no idea what restraint and quiet meant; it was a chaotic mess of noise inside. After receiving a warm greeting and a mug of beer from the barman, Blight settled down on a chair, silently waiting for someone to come. His associate: a Revaltian politician. This was the third conversation he had with him; during their talks, Blight had been silently profiling him, finding every strength to turn into a weakness to exploit: loyalty, moral uprightness, and a strong sense of justice.
"He's three minutes late," he thought, checking the time.
A hooded figure came gliding through the entrance; Blight, seeing the man, motioned for him to take a seat with him.
"So, Knightley, what brings you here?"

“I–I’m here—”
“Take this. I haven’t touched it yet. Take your time.”
Blight handed him his mug, and waited for Knightley to finish drinking. With occasional glances at the inn’s door, Knightley drank slowly and seemed to be a little more at ease. Blight smiled back at him encouragingly after noticing the change in his composure.
“Now that you’re feeling a bit better, Mr Knightley, what are you here for?”
“I want help. No… I *need* help. Ever since, you’ve shown me the truth, I’ve been thinking and I need guidance.”
“Very well. Tell me everything.”
Knightley took a deep breath and closed his eyes, contemplating on what information to give and what to withhold.
“It’s fine if you’re unsure, Mr Knightley. Just tell me when you’re ready.”
Knightley gradually opened his eyes again, but this time, instead of uncertainty, his face shone with determination.
“I’ve come to the conclusion that the problem between our countries lies within the Custodians.”
Blight looked at him with raised eyebrows and asked, “What makes you think our government is the cause of dissension between our nations?”
“According to the data you’ve pointed out, Revalty’s economy has crippled ever since Avarice Crowne and the Custodians took over Ecclesia. Although our president signed treaties with Crowne, the Custodians have

continued to take advantage of our businesses and use them for their own selfish benefits."
Knightley's carefully controlled voice started to crack; anger seeped out and crawled into his calm words. Blight continued to watch the man in front of him struggle with his thoughts.
"You are right, of course," he murmured, "but can you do anything to stop them? That remains the most important question we have to answer."
Knightley stopped. His eyes, which were lit by a flame of anger, flickered and darted down, facing the table.
"I'm not— I don't know," he faltered.
"You're a politician, aren't you, Mr Knightley?" You'll be meeting with the Custodians on Monday, am I right?"
"That's right, on the train."
Those men... They're the ones you've been talking about, aren't they? The people responsible for your country's downfall?"
Silence fell among them; the noises around seemed insignificant and buzzed dully in the background, as Knightley continued to sit noiselessly, his mind uncomfortably ringing with the multitude of information subtly fed to him during his conversations with Blight.
The tense stillness in between them was gently broken by Blight's light voice.
"Will you try to reason with them during your meeting? Have the Custodians ever dealt honestly? You said it yourself, haven't you? They've never treated your people fair before..."

“Y–You’re right… What can I do then?”
Picking up another mug, Blight drank serenely from it, his eyes piercing into the politician struggling in front of him.
“I cannot tell you what to do,” said Blight, shaking his head slowly. “But let me ask you this: do you think such men should be permitted to roam about freely? After your thoughtful negotiation fails, what will happen next? When the Custodians take over Revalty, what will become of the country? Starvation, poverty, and death will arise; freedom will be stripped away. Your government will fall, leaving everyone living in the country under Crowne’s control. Families will be torn apart, property forcibly stolen from their owners, and life turned into daily suffering. Can you carry the weight of all these lives?”
“So you’re suggesting… That I should kill the Custodians in the train?” asked Knightley hesitantly, cautiously choosing his words.
“I do not suggest. I am merely warning you what could happen in the near future. If you deal with the situation wisely, your country will be restored. Fail, and the consequences will be disastrous.”
There was a tone in his voice that made Knightley understand that this was his final word. With his mind resolute, he got up, thanked Blight for the drink, and hurried out of the inn, covering himself with the hood once again. Blight, now one of the last few stragglers left in the bar, finished his drink and paid the barman. Very soon, he was back on the road, this time, walking back to his home. He chuckled to himself.

He was evidently not telling me everything. The way he kept glancing at the door, the mud on his cloak from a deserted alley; those were the signs that he was avoiding attention. He's afraid of the government. If he doesn't do it, I'll still have another plan, just in case...
The board was set. The pieces were in place. Now all that was left to do was wait for the attack to begin.

—

Night passed by without a trace of the events of the previous day being noticed. After Blight, who was always the earliest riser in the household, saw that the sun had risen enough to cast a meagre light upon the town, he went to his downstairs study and picked up his work from the day before. An unfinished sheet of music lay before him. He grabbed his pen and by the light of an oil lamp next to the sheet, continued to fill in the empty staves.

With the Enforcers hunting them down, they will be forced to leave Sodor and into the open with less resources at hand in exchange for more freedom of movement... The problem is where they are now... Even the Enforcers have caught onto their little ruse... Those two were last seen three days ago in the inn; no less than ten eyewitnesses saw them, so it is near certain that they had been in the inn. If that is true, they must have stayed for the night and left at the break of dawn. Sigerson knew they didn't have much time to leave... That leaves the transportation method... If he knew they had a short

amount of time to get away, he would pick the fastest way of travelling; this eliminates walking and cabs, since the latter is unavailable so early in the morning... There are only two options left: trains and local support. Now, local support wouldn't be able to get them far from Eden due to the rocky terrain, not to mention the high chance of being seen if they travelled by cart or anything else; therefore, it's most likely they took a train. After all, when before the police realised the absence of those two, there had been no guards at the station until today, providing them with an excellent opportunity to escape. The time they could have departed was between midnight and six in the morning... There weren't too many trains on that day; the only one that could take them far enough from Sodor was the morning sleeper train... That's the one... They'll be travelling on that train to Alms... I'll wait until they reach there then...

Blight wrote and planned at the same time, muttering to himself every few minutes, sometimes about which notes to add, sometimes which key resource to target next. With each plan he formulated in his mind, several more branched out from them, predicting and countering every move that could be used against him. Soon, with his mind filled with many trees of plans, each one layered with several backup ones, he decided to rest for a while, relaxing his brain into a state of tranquil unconsciousness.

Greaves, on the other side of the door, whispered, "Mr Hartland is here to see you, sir."

"Ask him to come in, Greaves."

Not a moment passed, as the butler tottered away and returned with Patrick Hartland, a bespectacled, pudgy man of fifty.
“I hope you are doing well after all the work you have been doing?”
“Yes, sir, very much so,” Hartland replied, taking off his top hat and seating himself into a plush armchair next to the fireplace.
“I meant to ask you, Blight, what in the world did you write in that letter? The city and the towns are all filled with constables roaming around.”
“The letter? Why, all I did was show Crowne that his scandals have been discovered. This alone was able to trigger the reaction you’ve witnessed.”
“But how and what did you find?”
“Do you remember back when the previous monarchy fell and an investigation was carried out to catch the culprit of the murders?”
“Yes, that was around… Forty years ago? I remember the investigation lasted for nearly a decade with no results.”
“Quite right. That was enough to make me suspect Crowne. How could the entire Constabulary, led by Crowne at that time, fail to catch the culprit with so much information in their hands? No— the more I thought about it, the more suspicious I got. Even though I was about twenty years too late, I managed to find and expose a minor incident. I used it to test my hypothesis, and judging from their reaction, I was correct in thinking that they had covered up their regicide. I have kept that

knowledge up until a few days ago when I sent the letter to Mr Grock of the Enforcers."
"Won't they come after you if you wrote that letter to them?
"I sent the letter to one of the rebels's hideouts in Mr Sigerson's handwriting; they won't be able to distinguish the difference between the real detective's hand and mine."
Blight rose, stretching out his arm to grab the poker.
"Besides," he said, giving the wooden logs in the fireplace a hard thrust, making the flames roar and flicker. "Very soon, there'll be no reason to fear the government or the Enforcers anymore."

11

Interception

It was erroneous to say that Mr Grock, director of the Royal Constabulary, felt irritated after he realised the head start he had given the fugitive. He was furious. Although he didn't express it, everybody in the building was aware of the fact and stayed far away from his office, where he shut himself in, smoking as if his life depended on it. A rather bold police inspector went up to the office door and knocked on it. Within a second, the door opened wide, he was ushered into the seat opposite the director, and now had to endure not just the dense smoke swirling around in the room, but also Grock's hard stare, which made the inspector feel like he was being examined for faults.
Finally, Mr Grock spoke, puffing out wisps of smoke from his lips as his deep voice echoed words.
"Where do you suppose they are now?"
"S–Sir? I'm not quite sure what you mean, sir."
"Where do you think Sigerson has fled to?" he asked again, fixing his eyes on the inspector, which, in the dimly lit room, unsettled the poor man slightly.
"I'm not sure, sir. Maybe he's already left the country? He seems to be in touch with the rebels."
"Impossible… Even the fastest train route needs about a week to reach the border. No— I think it is safe to say that he has not left the country yet."

The next few minutes passed with grock murmuring to himself with more puffs of smoke coming profusely from his mouth. Then jumping to his feet as if he had been shocked by a current of electricity, he ordered the inspector, who also jumped at this sudden movement, “Send a telegraph to the sleeper train that departed from Sodor Station that left three days ago; it’s a ninety percent chance he’ll be on there. Tell them to stop the train and search for Sigerson. I’ll make further inquiries elsewhere.”
While the harassed inspector ran off to send the message, Grock rose from his seat and left his office, determined to attain favourable results.
“We were searching the places at the wrong time before,” he muttered angrily. “That mistake was enough to give Sigerson a day’s worth of time ahead of us.”
The first thought that came into his mind was to contact the station and confirm Sigerson’s presence at the station on that day. Moreover, satisfying his suspicions at last, the messages relayed back to him mentioned him travelling with a lady, most likely his cousin.
“Finally,” he said softly, “I know where they are; the only thing left to do is catch them...”

—

Billows of steam came erupting out of the black funnel of the mighty locomotive roaring on the tracks. Sitting with his arms folded, Sigerson gently dozed off while Evelyn kept a careful vigil of the surroundings around them. They

had already been travelling for several days without rest. Moonlight streamed in from the curtained window and shone on the polished mahogany wooden beams holding up the bunk bed in their compartment. Evelyn herself tried to stay awake; during the past days, their routine was tediously repetitive. Each day, all they had to do was eat and rest, repeated again and again in a monotonous cycle.
“Is it midnight yet?” asked Sigerson tiredly, opening an eye.
“Nearly— about five minutes until midnight,” Evelyn replied, checking the watch.
“Good,” yawned Sigerson, closing his eyes once more. “We’ll be approaching the outskirts of Huntersberg then.”
“You’ve been on this train before, haven’t you, Will?”
“That’s right. I’ve travelled here many times already, so I can confidently say these surroundings are familiar to me as if they were on the back of my hand.”
“You seem to know everything, don’t you?” asked Evelyn sardonically.
“Not everything,” Sigerson replied humbly, smiling for the first time in months. “Besides, you’re very intelligent as well; you just need confidence, that’s all.”
Evelyn blushed at this unexpected compliment and turned her face away quickly. Sigerson watched her, slightly amused at this reaction then said, “I’m heading to the dining car for a light drink.”
He rose and left their compartment, remembering to shut the door firmly behind him. Walking past the many compartments and into the dining car, Sigerson picked a

seat close to the windows where he kept a careful eye over the changing backgrounds outside. It turned out he wasn't the only one roaming around at night. Two men, one young with neat wavy hair and the other old with a beard like candy floss were whispering covertly with each other. One of them called for a drink from a nearby steward, while the older man took out a newspaper and flipped through the pages while sipping from a bottle of brandy. He came to a halt and leaned forwards to get closer to his companion. Abruptly closing the newspaper, he whispered across the table, "Revaltian politicians are meeting up with the Custodians, aren't they?"
"No," Ford sighed, "there will only be one politician meeting them in the train at noon."
"It was... No... Do they plan to meet at the station and get on together, or do they only meet up on the train?"
"They'll be entering the train at different stations but come together in a specially designed carriage where their discussion won't be overheard."
The man nodded in understanding, while Ford took his first gulp of cold brandy from his bottle.
"Then when will it happen?" he asked.
"The fourteenth of September. That's tomorrow, if I'm not mistaken."

During their short conversation, even though they were whispering, Sigerson could catch on to every word they were saying.

Tomorrow... Blight said he would meet me at the station tomorrow as well... Is he going to interfere? He knows the tension between the two countries is escalating rapidly... If he wants war, this would be a crucial step to take...

Out of the blue, a great jolt shook the entire train, as it suddenly halted to a stop. In the other carriages, passengers, some confused, some annoyed at the abrupt stop, came flooding out of their compartments, demanding the driver for answers to their never-ending stream of questions. Clearly standing out among the crowd, Ford was still seated in the chair, drinking calmly, while his companion also got up in a confused mess.

"Relax," said Ford in an undertone, "This delay won't take long; once the Enforcers catch up and search the train for the man they're looking for, it will be smooth travelling again. Apparently, the one they're finding fled from Eden a couple of days ago and boarded this train from there. They didn't give me a name but warned me to suspect people who associate themselves with the Constabulary outside of Sodor."

Sneaking away as silently as the wind, Sigerson backed away from the carriage, thinking everything out calmly as the crowd around him showed no signs of settling down. The man who he had just overheard was an official in the government. Sigerson could still clearly picture him in his head, from the polished leather shoes to the bridge of his nose, where a pair of glasses had previously sat on and left a faded mark.

Ford... I've seen him lurking around before at the Royal Constabulary; he must have overheard some of the Enforcers' plans during their meeting... So they're searching for someone who's connected with the police and escaped from Eden on this train? That doesn't sound good... Blight could have easily orchestrated this, since his influence over the government is far greater than anyone realises...

Reaching into his pocket for a matchstick, he lit it and gently swiping it across an expensive silk curtain adorning the carriage window, set the cloth on fire. The match was extinguished before anybody could notice, but the small spark had done its job; it gradually grew and when everybody realised the burning curtain, it was a wild stampede all over again. As the mass of passengers shoved each other to avoid the flames, which were burning steadily, Sigerson slinked through the crowd unnoticed and reached his compartment with relative ease. Inside, Evelyn, perplexed but alert, sat waiting for him expectantly with everything prepared and ready for travel. As soon as Sigerson entered, she jumped up from the bottom bunk, asking if they were going to escape off the train.

"Just follow me," said Sigerson, swinging the trunk around and reopening the door to allow Evelyn to step out first. "I'll explain as we go."

The corridor, although empty, was not entirely devoid of life; eerie echoes resounded from the other carriages into it, making the corridor seem like it was whispering to

them. Sigerson guided them through each carriage, finally reaching the emergency exit where, luckily, nobody was around to witness their undercover departure. Into the darkness they went, or rather, jumped. The hostile terrain combined with the pitch black sky created a maze that thoroughly tested Sigerson, for in almost every problem he had faced, the use of his eyes was always available to him. Now, with only a sliver of moonlight to assist them, only his nose and ears remained to guide them through the dark. Thickets of trees, clusters of bushes, and endless barrages of branches persistently tangled their clothes, forcing them to eventually stop moving. As they untangled themselves from the thorns, Sigerson heard a faint trickling noise from somewhere not too far from them. Using the dim moonlight, he could just see the reflection off a body of water. A river?

"Wait— Evie, stop moving for a while."

He froze in place, straining his ears to listen.

"The sound of water is coming from there," he said, tugging Evelyn's sleeve in the direction. "If I remember correctly, Huntersberg produces the most fish in Ecclesia, don't they?"

"Yes, I think so. They're also the biggest producers of freshwater crabs in the country."

"Precisely. Since freshwater crabs can only be found in lakes and rivers, such as the one in front of us, there's a high possibility that we'll be able to reach Huntersberg by following the river."

The clouds hiding the moon were starting to part; soon, the shining bright orb was fully revealed, spreading its pale light across the entire forest. This, however, sent a strong draught of cool air, prompting the two fugitives to keep moving on.

"There's an overhang on that cliff over there," said Sigerson, pointing at a rocky roof covering a bed of moss and lichen in the distance. We'll be staying there for the night."

As they hiked towards the cliff at a painfully sluggish speed, another distinct train whistle could be heard, not too far from where they had escaped from.

"Must be the Enforcers," he muttered, giving Evelyn a reassuring tap on the back, because she turned back in alarm at the sound.

"Do you still have those matches?" she asked, flicking a crooked tree branch out of her way.

"I've got a few more in my pocket and another unused box in the trunk," replied Sigerson in a cheerful tone, trying to lift their spirits. "The only thing we're missing now is food."

"Oh, I packed some bread rolls earlier on the train, but I doubt it'll last us for more than a day."

"A day is enough. We'll sleep for the rest of the night and find the town tomorrow."

They had arrived at their destination at last. Although it looked quite tight and tiny from a distance, the space available was actually roomier and more comfortable than they had initially expected. The rocky roof was able to

partially shield them from the bitter wind, which was now roaring mercilessly, as well as block the view of the Enforcers if they decided to enter the forest from the train tracks. Sigerson dug out a small pit in the damp soil, dumped dry vegetation into it, and lit it on fire. Warmth and light instantly shot out to every corner of their hideout, while the little smoke that was produced got trapped from rising above the cliff. The two of them sat on the ground next to each other around the fire, warming themselves until they were as snug as they could be in the present weather. Evelyn was the first to fall asleep, falling sideways and resting her head on Sigerson's shoulder. He tenderly swiped a strand of red hair from his face and, making sure he didn't disturb Evelyn, reached for a twig to stoke the fire. Its flames were dancing around happily like a boisterous dog, leaping at its master joyfully. The cloudless sky, filled with twinkling jewel-like stars, combined with the intermittent chirps coming from the bushes to create a soothing atmosphere, perfect for inducing drowsiness. Staring into the flaming pit and deciding to put it out, the detective gradually gave in to the inevitable tempter, sleep. The flames flickered, then rose no more.

—

The moon sank down, only to be replaced by the rising sun, while the crisp morning air hit Sigerson like a wave of icy water. He woke, shivered, and covered himself with his

coat, which he had briefly taken off when they still had the fire. Beside him was empty space. There were no footprints leading in or out of the opening; the rocks made it impossible to leave traces on, for many other creatures also shared the forest with them, crawling and slithering all over the place. Sigerson climbed to the top of the cliff and looked out into the vast wilderness, scanning the dense vegetation for his missing companion.

"She couldn't have gotten far," he thought reasonably, "The ground she was sleeping on was still slightly warm."

Great towering pine trees stood proudly, swaying lightly in the wind; the serpentine river curved and looped its way around the way around the forest, its aquamarine body connected to a distant lake. As he squinted to see better, Sigerson finally spotted Evelyn, her rosy red head blending in with the vividly coloured flowers. Now that he knew where she was, Sigerson leaped back down, checked that nothing was left behind, and hurried to meet up with her. The pungent scents oozed out of the exotic flowers and leaked into Sigerson's nose as he ran through the trees, hoping dearly that Evelyn hadn't moved from the spot. When he pushed past a bush of fiery red flowers, a quiet rustling noise made Evelyn spin around, face-to-face with her concerned cousin.

"Why," panted Sigerson, "did you leave by yourself?"

"I was prepared to return when you suddenly showed up."

Sigerson sighed and sat down, resting from his sprint.

"I know which direction we need to travel in."

She pointed at the sun, barely above the horizon.

“The river flows in that direction and the source of the river—” A finger pointed at the lake to the right. “—is there, so we’ll—”
“Since the fishermen of Huntersberg use fish traps that utilise the river currents, we’ll need to travel in the direction left of the lake,” finished Sigerson, peering thoughtfully at the fast flowing river shrouded behind a cluster of flower bushes. Evelyn, looking mildly chagrined, sniffed and said, “Let’s get moving; the Enforcers should be aware of our absence by now.”
They marched on, over hills, under shady oak trees, and across streams on slippery stepping stones. Sunlight flooded into the forest now, and judging from the sun’s position in the sky, Sigerson knew it was roughly about noon. By resting and eating small portions of the bread rolls periodically, both of them were able to keep a good amount of energy to carry on hiking endlessly. A welcoming sight came into view after hours of tiring walking. Many tree stumps stuck into the ground; a clear sign of human activity in the forest.
“These trees have been cut for some time now,” remarked Sigerson quietly, eyeing a stump with some interest.
“Have a look at this, Will.”
Evelyn called him to another stump, which she was staring at. He hastily shuffled over and joined her. When he was close enough to view the entire stump clearly, he gave a sharp exclamation and bent down to see every detail the odd piece of wood presented.

“This was cut quite recently; I’d wager about a day or two ago,” he stated, running his fingers across the rough woody surface, free from mould and lichen.
“We should be close to Huntersberg.”
On they went, and within the hour, saw their first house on their journey. Consisting mainly of stone cottages fitted with wooden roofs, the small village had the appearance of a fairy tale setting. Like Eden, it was located near a body of water and had a hospitable atmosphere to it, but that was all they had in common. Huntersberg, the quieter and calmer of the two towns, was surrounded by scenic mountains and lush green forests. Columns of smoke rose out from the many chimneys, hardly seen in the bright afternoon sun. The townsfolk, all dressed plainly, wandered around the village, each to their own tasks, whether it was hauling buckets of fish onto an ox-driven cart, or delivering cardboard boxes filled with eggs to their customers. It seemed that everyone in the village had a purpose in their activities. Unsure of what to do, Sigerson said to Evelyn, who was watching a group of chickens running around wildly with a grin on her face, “We should probably find somewhere to stay before sunset, but not at the local inn, or we’ll risk being trapped by the Enforcers. It has to be somewhere private, where the Enforcers would never keep their attention on.”
“If the worst comes, leave it to me. I’ll find a place for us to stay easily,” sighed Evelyn, throwing seeds to the chickens, which were instantly devoured by them.

12

An Enforcer in their Midst

After taking out and finishing the last of the bread they had left, Sigerson rose from the rickety bench they were sitting on, told Evelyn that he was going to scout the surrounding area, and strolled away leisurely. He muttered to himself as he walked along the river, fixing his eyes on various markers to help him remember the layout and borders of the village.

A shrill cry rang out somewhere beyond Sigerson's range of sight. Another shriek, equally loud, shot out, seconds after the first. Recognising the tone of distress in the voice, he hurried over to the source of the sound. A desperate scene loomed before his eyes; a small boy, no older than eight was waving his hands frantically, the lower half of his body completely engulfed by the raging river. Next to the river, his mother, who had the same fair hair as the child, kept running to keep up with the boy, shrieking at him to grab a hold on something, while she desperately looked around for help. Sigerson, having spotted the boy being carried away, threw off his coat and dashed to the river, thinking furiously how to help rescue the drowning child. There was no rope nor anything for him to hold on to, but if he didn't act quickly, the boy would soon be smashed by the jagged rocks up ahead. The rocks... They were the only footholds available to use, slippery but less

harmful if used properly. He reached the rocks just before the boy did and, cramming his foot slightly in between two of them, he managed to stay firmly secure on the dry grey platforms, inches above the foaming water. With his trousers soaking wet, Sigerson caught and pulled the boy up, whose head narrowly missed a particularly aggressive looking rock. The weight and momentum of the boy, however, could not be supported by Sigerson alone; he staggered backwards, his foot slipped, and into the icy river they both went. Freezing water gushed into their lungs as they struggled to keep afloat. A low-hanging branch hovered above in front of them. If he could only reach out and pull them both out of the water... Highly risky but worth a try. Preparing every muscle in his body and clutching the gasping boy firmly, when the branch was within an arm's length above the surface of the water, he pushed up with every ounce of strength he had left. Up they rose, out of the water, high enough for Sigerson to get a strong grip on the knobbly branch. Pulling himself up a little higher while still clutching the boy, he coughed, "Hold on to me tightly before you fall back in."

This made the boy wrap his arms around Sigerson's neck excruciatingly tight then, with his two arms free to move, he used the branch to pull them to the bank, carrying the combined weight of them both along with their sodden clothes. The mother, after seeing her child safe on the muddy bank, uttered a relieved cry and rushed over to him.

“Towel,” croaked Sigerson to her, who was hugging and crying over the boy, repeating to him over and over not to play near the river before thanking the detective for his help.
“He needs a towel, otherwise he’ll catch a cold in this weather.”
She obeyed at once and left for their cottage to bring back a pair of towels. By now, Evelyn had also caught up with them, after hearing the distressed mother’s calls from a distance. She retrieved Sigerson’s coat, brought it over to him and asked several times whether he was hurt.
“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he said, waving her away. “If you need to worry, check on the kid, not me.”
Bringing two fluffy towels, the mother came back, slightly surprised to see Evelyn standing over Sigerson; nevertheless, she handed a towel to Sigerson, and began to rub her son dry, until he wriggled out of her grip. This was the first time Sigerson had a clear view of the boy he rescued from the river. He had flaxen wavy hair, partially covering his ears and forehead, bright blue eyes, and a stubby nose, set above a set of white teeth. Familiarity washed over the detective, a sensation as unpleasing as a blast of water from the river. Where did he see this face before?
“Excuse me, sir,” said the fair-haired mother, putting her hands on her son’s shoulders. “Would you like to come to our place to warm up?”
“My cousin and I are trying to find somewhere to stay—”
“Oh, I’m sure that could be easily arranged.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”
She beckoned to them to follow and together, they were led by her to their cottage. It was separated from the rest of the village by a short painted fence and sat on the edge of the forest, its windows reflecting the green vegetation. Along the fences were rows of garden beds, each one planted with colourful flowers or luscious vegetable plants. As they walked up the stone pathway, they were greeted by buzzing bees and sweet, aromatic scents, which eased their spirits instantly. A key was produced from the lady’s pocket, the oak door thrown open, and in they went. The inside of the cottage had two roomy bedrooms, a messy kitchen, and a cozy living room, its fireplace no longer ablaze. Moving over to the window, Sigerson saw a smaller shed, protruding out from among the flowers.
“That’s the bath-house,” the lady said, noticing his curious gaze. “I’ll be back in a few minutes with food.”
Nodding and thanking her politely, Sigerson plopped onto the rug in front of the empty fireplace, keeping the trunk close to him. Turning to find his cousin missing from behind him, he turned and saw the two of them, Evelyn and the little boy, playing around in the homely garden outside. They were on a grassy patch of space, soaking in the soothing sunlight. Laughing merrily, Evelyn sat on the ground, watching the boy chase and attempt to catch a white butterfly like a playful cat enjoying the attention of others.
“So what’s your name, sir?”

Sigerson hesitated for a fraction of a second, his back to her, then replied in a soft voice, “William Sigerson. My cousin’s name is Evelyn Whitlock.”
A mug filled with hot herbal tea was handed to him as he spoke.
“I’m Helen Hale. My son over there’s named Thomas,” she said, throwing a look at the boy, who had finally captured the butterfly and was now showing it to Evelyn enthusiastically through his cupped hands.
“Would you like to take a bath before dinner? You still seem awfully cold.”
“Thank you, but I don’t have a change of clothes—”
“I’ll give you one,” she said at once, disappearing into a room and returning with a bundle of clothing and a fresh towel.
“Here.”
She held it out to Sigerson. Which he accepted appreciatively, then hastened away to start the fire for the bath. Sigerson, now standing alone at the window, stared down at the bundle of clothes in his hands. If he wasn’t mistaken, another man was living under the same roof they were staying at.
“And that face,” thought he. “I’m sure I’ve seen it before, but where?”
Mrs Hale called for him from the garden.
“Mulling things over a hot bath might work,” mumbled the detective absent-mindedly, looking forward to his first relaxing bath in weeks.

Welcoming him graciously was the wooden bath-house, its earthy doors opening to reveal a world of swirling steam inside. Although the outside of the shed gave it a rough claustrophobic appearance, the interior contrasted far too greatly with the ulterior. As he stepped in, the smooth polished planks beneath his calloused feet made a refreshing change with the rocky ground they had been travelling on. Solid oak beams made up the foundation of the shed and held up its ceiling. A huge tub of water lay in the left corner along with a boiler and bucket on the right, radiating warmth and steam around to the four corners of the bath-house. The moment he stepped into the water, every sense he possessed seemed to relax and loosen; the heavy weight that was laid on him vanished into thin air, as he melted away into a dream-like dimension, only accessible by calming his deepest thoughts.

—

When Sigerson suddenly remembered that the other members of the household were waiting for him, he slowly rose from the tub, which had stopped emitting steam, dried himself, and dressed quickly. The sky outside darkened and the forest air began to grow chillier; pulling on the new coat he had been given tighter around himself, Sigerson trudged over to the cottage, shivering slightly and trying not to sneeze. Light streamed out while Mrs Hale, seeing that he was finished with his bath, held out

the door for him to come in. He sneezed softly, covering his mouth with the thin sleeve of the coat.
“Are you alright, sir? The clothes I gave you might be unsuitable for this weather…”
“No— it’s fine,” he reassured her. “I’ve always been particularly sensitive to the cold, that’s all.”
They both walked in, where a table, laden with all sorts of food, was set up. There were many varieties of cheese, several sausages with peas, and plenty of bread rolls— similar to the ones they had eaten on their hike to the village but fluffier and lighter in texture.
“What do you do for a living?” asked their hostess curiously, switching her gaze from Sigerson to Evelyn, who had come in earlier with Thomas as soon as they saw the sky darkening.
“I work for the government to reinforce the law,” replied Sigerson, trying to be as vague as he could while still answering the question.
“Not as an Enforcer?” asked Mrs Hale, slightly more suspiciously.
“No, as a detective,” he returned, throwing Evelyn an assuring look, communicating with her wordlessly that everything he said was intentional.
“My eldest son also works in the government,” she said, the suspicion gone and replaced with a hint of pride in her voice.
“Which department does he work in?” asked the detective, hiding his keen tone underneath a politely controlled voice.

“Let me think… Ah yes— he told me he was working in the Crime and Law Department the last time I asked him, if I remember correctly, but I’m not sure which office… He’s always kept silent every time I’ve asked him.”
Sigerson saw a flash of green from the corner of his eye; a man’s military coat was hung on a hook just beyond the kitchen.
“Does he travel often or have any past careers? I am curious as to whether all government workers were required to travel long trips for their jobs.”
“Come to think of it, he does travel frequently and sometimes, he also returns home with minor injuries.”
“Is he alright?” asked Evelyn, her face shining with genuine concern.
“He’s fine,” smiled Mrs Hale. “But thank you for worrying about him; I myself questioned if he had been mixing in with bad company lately as well… The truth is, he’s been acting a lot more distant since he started work in the government; it feels like he is getting further and further away from us…”
Her voice trailed away. Then, with a mortified expression, she said, “I–I’m sorry for talking about this; I know I shouldn’t be troubling you with this, but…”
“It’s fine, Mrs Hale,” said Evelyn kindly, giving her a sympathetic smile from across the table.
Their embarrassed hostess, now feeling more at ease after listening to Evelyn’s comforting words, rose in a hurry and told them that if they were finished with their food, to

make themselves at home, while she heated more water for Evelyn's bath.
"I hope you don't find sleeping on the couches inconvenient, sir?"
"Not at all."
She beamed at the two of them before promptly leaving to clean up the dishes, a chore that the two guests volunteered to help with at once. After turning down their offers to help, she dragged an unwilling Thomas to assist her in cleaning up, leaving Sigerson and Evelyn alone in the dining room. Checking that they weren't being overheard, Evelyn hissed, "Why did you tell her our names? We'll easily be caught if we're not careful enough."
"I've got it under control," replied Sigerson calmly, "I was hoping to see her reaction; if the news of us was already released to the public, then she would've acted differently. Besides, if it comes down to force, well… We've got two revolvers on our side so…"
Evelyn frowned at this remark.
"Do you think there's a possibility that the eldest son is an Enforcer?"
"Ah, you figured it out too?"
Sigerson was grinning widely now, urging her without words to keep going on with this interesting claim.
"Well," continued Evelyn, "among the unused shoes at the front of the house was a distinct impression of a pair of boots. Since office workers never wear boots to work, it's safe to assume that the son never had an office job. If not, what other jobs in the Crime and Law Department could

he have? Policemen hardly travel around and are usually assigned to specific towns and districts, so the only answer I could think of were the Enforcers."
"Right. When Mrs Hale claimed that her son had been avoiding telling her of his job, I was suspicious; why would he not be willing to tell her? Judging from his mother's tone, it's clear to see that she approves of a position in the department."
"My guess is that he made it into the Crime and Law Department, told his mother, was assigned to the Enforcers, which is technically part of the department since they work the Royal Constabulary frequently, and now cannot confess his true occupation because his mother, like most others, disapproved of the Enforcers. Did I miss anything?"
"Quite a bit. Right now, it's only a matter of conjecture. There's no physical evidence to support your theory, is there?" questioned Sigerson with a playful twinkle in his eye, as if he already knew the answers.
"Evidence? Why, there's his military coat that was hanging in the corridor back over there which strengthens the possibility of him being recruited into the Enforcers, since all of them require military training. Also many of these articles come from Sodor and are quite expensive," said Evelyn, pointing to the numerous vases and marble statuettes on the dusty shelves. "No one in this village would be able to afford so many of these unless they had a high income, so a second high income in this household was extremely likely. The wages of an Enforcer are

significantly higher than the average labourer's— about five thousand sovereigns more per year— meaning an Enforcer could easily earn this amount of money while living in this household. Therefore, the eldest son is an Enforcer."
"Exactly what I thought as well," said Sigerson in approval, leaning back on the couch with his arms stretched out in a carefree way.
"Aren't you worried? An Enforcer, the ones trying to arrest us this very instant, lives under the same roof where we are staying."
"What is there to be afraid of? If we can gain the sympathy of the mother, who evidently distrusts the Enforcers, we can also gain the sympathy of the son. She's already extremely grateful that I was able to rescue Thomas from the river, so with a little bit of subtle persuasion, it shouldn't be hard to make her trust us."
"I suppose so," said Evelyn, staring placidly into the roaring fireplace. "Although... It would involve much more luck than we've ever risked..."
After cleaning up the kitchen, Mrs Hale brought over to them a pair of plush grey cushions and took away their dirty change of clothes to the laundry. She then reminded Evelyn to take a bath and by the time she came back out, the twinkling bright stars were out, mixed in with the mass of dark sky above. There was a patter of gentle feet approaching them.
"Can you read me a story?" asked Thomas to a surprised Evelyn, twisting a golden curl of hair with his finger.

“Don’t bother our guests, Thomas,” scolded his mother from the table, giving him a stern look that could only mean the one thing he didn’t want to do.
“It’s alright. What do you want me to read?” asked Evelyn gently.
“Here,” said he, handing her a storybook. She took it from him, flipped to the first page and began reading. Listening to the story inattentively, Sigerson was arguing with himself why the Enforcers and the Constabulary were trying to arrest him. Blight had something to do with it; that was certain… But how he did it was still shrouded with mystery…

—

“So they’ve released the news now?” muttered Sigerson quietly.
It was morning and with a newspaper in his hands, the sombre detective ate his breakfast solemnly while scanning for information. During the early hours of daybreak, Sigerson snuck out of the cottage, making sure not to disturb the slumbering household. The air was refreshingly cool with just enough breeze to make the giant pine trees sway lightly. There was barely any sign of life in the village yet. Going straight to the newspaper agency, he purchased a paper and headed back, cautiously watching out for any early risers that might notice him. When he returned, Evelyn and Thomas, conversing in a lively way that somehow reminded him of two chirping

pigeons, looked at him as he was admitted into the cottage again by Mrs Hale.
"I wish you'd stop disappearing like that, Will," said Evelyn ruefully, forgetting that she had done so only two days ago. Sigerson chose to ignore this to avoid an argument, accepted a plate of bacon and toast from their busy hostess gratefully, and sat down to eat.

After seeing the headlines in the paper, he whispered urgently to Evelyn, who was teaching Thomas how to read properly, "Quickly, have a look at this."
She patted Thomas on the back encouragingly and hastily went over to her cousin, joining him to read the newspaper in his hands. Although she didn't show it, Evelyn felt an irresistible sense of dread wash over her when she read the heading of the news article.

TWO SUSPECTS LINKED TO BOLD ROBBERY OF GOVERNMENT PAPERS

Police are searching for Mr William Sigerson who allegedly carried out a swift but secretive robbery at the Enforcer's headquarters last night at 11 o'clock. The papers stolen were of great importance, and it is believed that they were an important key in maintaining peace with our neighbouring country, Revalty. Authorities warn that there may be an accomplice working with him who is none other than the elusive actress, Miss Evelyn Whitlock. Anyone with information is urged to step forward and report to the Enforcers.

"What does this mean?" asked Evelyn with a puzzled look on her face.

“It means they must have something they don’t want the public to know about… There is no information here giving details about the actual contents taken from their headquarters. Meanwhile, it would be easier to lie and make something up, but they didn’t and instead chose to blame us for something we did not steal…”
Sigerson sank back into his usual silence.
“What do they have that could’ve been stolen then?”
He paused and thought for a while, but nothing came to mind.
“I’ve worked with the Enforcers before and if there’s one thing I’ve learnt, it’s that they rarely fail to match the evidence with the suspect. We were both here last night, and as they clearly knew, I was also on the train two days ago. How could I get from the train to their headquarters in only a day? If they had doubts as to whether I really was on the train or not, the fire I started as a diversion should be more than enough to raise their suspicions. No— they knew I didn’t commit a robbery, yet wrote an intentional lie. I’m guessing something really was stolen from them, then Blight shifted their suspicions to me, so they would focus their efforts on arresting us while giving himself free reign.”
“So then, what are you going to do?”
“For now—” He rose from the couch, his emerald green eyes locked on to Evelyn’s. “—I’ll negotiate with our gracious hostess. You can sit back and relax; I’ve got this.”
As Evelyn returned to teaching Thomas, not without a foreboding sense of unease lingering around her, Sigerson

took the newspaper and stepped into the kitchen where Mrs Hale was working, busily cutting up potatoes for their dinner. When she heard his footsteps behind her, she turned around and asked kindly, “Would you like coffee, sir?”
He hesitated then replied, “Yes, please.”
Watching her pour the brown liquid into a mug, the detective spoke up again.
“You might find us inconvenient guests to have, Mrs Hale.”
“No, no, not at all. This is the least I can do to thank you for helping me save Thomas from the river.”
“I mean, there’s something else—”
He handed the newspaper over to her. She took it with a bewildered expression, which rapidly turned into shock. Staring at him as if he were a ghost, she stammered, “Th–This can’t be true, can it? Last night, you were sleeping in the living room!”
“Exactly. Now, I know it’s probably just a mistake, but having us here will nevertheless put you and Thomas into considerable danger.”
He paused to watch her reaction. Mrs Hale thought hard of the consequences that might follow, as well as ways to help her two guests escape. Being a rather friendly, good–natured kind of person, she would never allow her guests or her family to be put into danger. Finally, although she seemed quite unsatisfied with the decision, she said quietly, “My eldest son, Percy, will arrive here in the afternoon. Why don’t you two wait here until he

arrives? Maybe I can ask him to help you find a solution to this problem."
"Thank you, but would he be willing to assist us?"
After being reassured countless times, Sigerson was ushered back to the living room where Evelyn, bored from reading, was asking questions about Percy, Thomas' older brother.
"If Percy Hale turns out to be disagreeable, which is not unlikely," thought Sigerson gazing out of the window casually to hide his face from them, "there's still the hidden fact of him being an Enforcer; I can use this to my advantage if things get messy..."
From the heavy oak door, a sharp knock aroused everybody's attention. Mrs Hale hastened to open the door while Sigerson and Evelyn waited beside it with bated breath. In came a young man, his appearance nearly identical to his younger sibling. He strode in, hugged his mother briefly then, laying his eyes on the two fugitives, he went white and uttered, "W–What? T–This can't be..."
Quickly taking note of her son's dramatic reaction, Mrs Hale led him to a separate room and said, "In here, Percy. There are some things I have to tell you."
Behind the shut door, they could hear low murmuring voices speaking rapidly but never rising. Minutes flew by and what seemed to be an eternity later, the door was opened again. Percy Hale marched straight up to Sigerson, extended his hand to him and said stiffly, "Thank you for saving my little brother. I'm Percy Hale."

Sigerson shook the hand but was very careful when he did so. Both men eyed one another with suspicion, although Sigerson was not so obvious and hid it with a friendly smile. Percy, on the other hand, did not attempt to conceal his mistrust; he narrowed his eyes slightly and said, “Mr Sigerson, I presume?”

The detective replied with a quick nod. Percy, disliking this wordless reply, huffed and sat down next to Thomas, his hand on his brother’s shoulder. Mrs Hale could sense the unfriendliness from her eldest son’s actions; she walked past him to the kitchen, whispered something in his ear, then announced that lunch would be ready in ten minutes. Seeing that there was no immediate catalyst for conversation with Percy, Sigerson excused himself and went to help Mrs Hale prepare the food. It was only five minutes later, when he came back out to the living room and saw, to his great surprise, Evelyn and Percy chatting normally like two school friends. The expression of doubt had been replaced with friendliness; his eyes no longer narrowed with suspicion but instead, a relaxed expression hung upon his brow.

“Sorry about earlier,” he apologised to Sigerson, embarrassed at himself. “I admit that I was taken aback at the sight of you being here.”

A flash suddenly flooded into the detective’s memory; the man in front of him was the same one that guarded the cell of the assailant he had visited several months ago. It was confirmed: the man was indeed an Enforcer.

“Anyways,” Percy continued, completely oblivious to his satisfied smirk, “your cousin was telling me how you jumped into the river to save Thomas.”
“Oh, I didn’t jump into the river…”

Lunch was served, to the relief of the several hungry inhabitants of the house. Percy, who was now sure that the government had clearly made some sort of mistake, started to talk freely, asking Sigerson and Evelyn about their work, where they came from, and whether or not they thought living in Huntersberg was better than Sodor. After a hefty meal, Percy proposed that they should take a stroll outside to enjoy the beautiful weather. Pulling Evelyn to the side, Sigerson whispered covertly to her, “What did you do? He seems like a completely different person.”
“You think so?” she replied, glancing over at Percy curiously. “I guess you’re just overthinking everything…”
At this, Sigerson turned away exasperatedly. There was no point in trying to coax anything out of Evelyn if she decided to keep it a secret; years of experience had taught him that. Instead, he returned to Percy and stated, “The Enforcers would easily find us if we step out into the open.”
“You won’t have to worry about that,” said Percy, checking behind his shoulder to make sure his mother wasn’t listening. “You see, I’m actually an—”
“An Enforcer,” Sigerson finished for him.
“H–How did you know?” stuttered the pale-faced Percy, sweat dripping from his forehead. “You didn’t tell my mother did you?”

He shrank back in astonishment and fear, dreading the answer.
“No, I didn’t. Your mother still has no idea.”
Percy, relieved that his secret was still hidden, continued explaining, “As you know, I am an Enforcer. I was assigned here in search of you with five others, so you could say I have a considerable amount of power to hide you, since I can control the information on your status. If you buy a train ticket and reveal yourself to the ticket clerk on purpose, I can create the illusion of you leaving this town. I’ll set your current location elsewhere and tell them you’ve already left.”
Sigerson accepted this proposal without much thought.

Later that day, the data on Sigerson’s profile was changed to travelling, and the Enforcers instantly left the town alone. Security loosened, allowing the two of them to move around freely. Now that everything had been settled, Sigerson’s mind flew straight back to Blight. How could he arrest Blight’s men without attracting attention to himself and exposing his location? There was now a very limited number of methods he could use to gain information… Newspapers… Local gossip… Elena, who was still employed in Blight’s household…
Hold on... I have everything I need already...
There was a way he could arrest *him*… It would be risky, but if he could calculate everything perfectly, he’d be able to topple over one of the strongest pillars in Blight’s network. The rest would follow suit shortly after…

As he was lounging on the couch, Sigerson began crafting ideas for the arrest, sharing his ideas to Evelyn. Suddenly, the door crashed open, shaking the cottage. Mrs Hale poked her head around the corner; when she saw that it was her eldest son that had slammed the door open, she strode over to him to scold him, but he raised a hand to stop her. Percy's face was white and he panted as he said, "There's been a murder. On the farm."
At this, he collapsed into a nearby seat, while Mrs Hale hurried over to him with a bottle of brandy in her hand.

13

The Vanished Object

“Did you say it was a murder?” asked Sigerson, curious to hear what had happened in such an isolated village.
“Murders,” corrected Percy, wiping his face with a towel. “Four people are dead. They were found at three o’clock just then.”
“You mentioned a farm. Where is this farm?”
“Just on the edge of the village. It’s on the opposite side to us.”
Sigerson looked thoughtful for a moment. Could this crime have anything to do with Blight? The moment he stepped into this village in the middle of nowhere, a murder, which was rarer than being struck by lightning, occurred right where he was staying. It would be wiser for him to check, just in case…
“Is there a chance of me being seen by the Enforcers if I help with the investigation?”
“You want to investigate this crime?”
“Yes, if it is possible for me to stay hidden.”
“I–I suppose I could let you into the crime scene… I can’t guarantee you won’t be seen though…”
“I’ll be fine as long as they can’t identify me on sight.”
“That should be possible, although…”
He hesitated for a moment, then ran off to ask his mother a quick question. When he hastily returned, he

said, “If you’re fine with bleaching your hair, I can easily disguise you well enough to avoid too much attention.”
“I think you should do it,” piped Evelyn enthusiastically. “At least your hair won’t look like strands of—”
“I’ll do it,” said Sigerson, cutting off his cousin’s excited jabbering. “When do we start?”
“Come to the bath-house and I’ll help you now.”
After several minutes of painful bleaching and a few extra details, the disguise was complete. Sigerson, now with dull blonde hair like straw and a stooping posture, emerged from the bath-house. His overcoat was replaced by a shabby trench coat picked out from among Percy’s old clothes, giving him an air of untidiness. A pair of rusty glasses was handed to him and placed carefully on his face, completing the illusion.
“That’s excellent!” exclaimed Evelyn in amazement. “Here, let me fix your hair a little bit—”
She tucked his hair behind his ears.
“There. Now that your hair is a lot neater, you look like a completely different person.”
“Are you ready to go?” asked Percy, putting on his shoes.
“Let’s leave now.”

Together, they navigated around the village to the farm. The usually quiet streets were bustling with activity and rumors flew around at every corner of the cobblestoned streets. People shared whispered conversations about their own theories on the murders; nothing like this had ever been heard of in the village. As they approached the farm, many constables came out to block them, telling them to turn around and leave. At this, Percy slowly drew out his Enforcer badge, holding it up to the policemen in a solemn, impressive way. The constable barricading the path trembled at the sight of the badge and asked, "Is there anything you need, sir?"
"I wish to see the progress of the investigation," he replied coldly.
"I–I'm afraid that might not be possible, sir."
"If you refuse to let me pass, rest assured, this will have to be reported to my superiors," said Percy menacingly, raising his voice subtly for the cowering policeman to understand the situation he was in.

"What is going on over here?" A shrewd voice called from behind.
"Inspector! These men wish to enter the crime scene!"
"And who might you be?" challenged the shrew-like inspector rudely.
Percy held out his badge again, which caused the same shocked expression to appear on the inspector's face.

“Of course, of course, sir,” said the inspector, whose tone had completely changed after seeing the badge. “Would you like to proceed to the scene?”
“Lead the way, inspector.”
The farm in front of them was a large piece of land, with plenty of green pasture and fences, another similar cottage, and a wooden red barn. On the outside, it seemed to be a regular farm; on the inside, it held the key to the sudden deaths of four people. When they reached the door, Sigerson, already scanning the ground for footprints but finding a jumbled mess all over the place, said in a low voice to Percy behind the inspector’s back, “There’s not much to be found if all these bungling policemen have already messed with the evidence.”
Percy nodded silently to show that he understood, then clearing his voice to attract the attention of the inspector, he commanded in a clear voice, “Inspector. Tell your men to stop working on the investigation while we’re here. I want the evidence as preserved to its original state as possible.”
The inspector obeyed at once and barked orders to his men, telling them to leave the scene untouched until two newcomers left. Entering the cottage, Sigerson saw at once a vase toppled over on the ground half intact but with its flowers scattered on the ground. He bent down and gently touched the thin rug that had partially cushioned its fall. It was still very wet. He

asked over his shoulder, “Did you or any of your men knock this vase over or was it already positioned like this when you came?”
“We found it lying there when we were called here, sir.”
“Someone else must have knocked it over,” said Percy.
“Yes…” muttered Sigerson. Then, straightening up, he said, “The bodies are in the barn?”
“Yes, sir. The plumber who came to fix a pipe of theirs discovered the four bodies stashed away in the barn. He came and contacted the police right after the discovery, so nothing should be removed from the scene of the crime.”

They went out of the cottage through the back door, but not before Sigerson checked the kitchen and found a curious sight of scurrying mice avoiding a certain dish on the metal drying rack, and arrived at the barn, which was located a short distance away. Hay bales stacked up neatly to the sides filled most of the space. Lying on the muddy ground were the four corpses, lined up in a row. Sigerson bent down and examined the bodies carefully, prodding and shifting things around without disturbing them too much.
“The four victims are the Wycloff family,” explained the inspector anxiously, pointing at each one as he spoke. “Jonah and Sarah Wycloff, the aged parents of Jeremiah and Penny Wycloff, were both poisoned, as

well as Miss Wycloff over here. Jeremiah's murder was a little more… brutal. See here, sir?"
He turned the dashing young man over carefully, revealing the back of his head. Evidently, he had been struck to death by some object; his entire skull had been smashed in, leaving the head grotesquely shaped. It was, to say the least, a rather gruesome sight. Not too far off, a puddle of blood was violently splattered and mixed among the mud on the floor, leaving drops everywhere around it. Turning to a bucket of bloody water, Sigerson collected his thoughts silently.
More information… There wasn't enough data to support his theory yet…
"Are the times of death different?" asked Sigerson.
"They are, sir. The doctor who was summoned here not long before you two arrived claimed that Mr Wycloff's death was around three hours earlier than the deaths of his wife and children, which puts the estimated time of death at twelve o'clock."
"Inspector!"
A constable came running up to the barn, holding a muddy jacket.
"We found this bloodied jacket along with some other clothes down near the river bank."
"Excellent! Now if you two gentlemen—" said the inspector warily, peering at them from the corner of his eyes, as if expecting them to stop him.

“You can leave; we’ll be fine,” said Percy, who was also looking at the dead bodies with great interest. Waiting until the inspector was out of earshot, Percy rapidly turned to Sigerson and asked, “Do you have an idea on who the culprit is?”
“I can infer how the scene was played out, but as for the culprit’s identity… I need more information to be certain.”
Shifting his gaze to the bloody mess on the ground next to the victims, he noticed a mark that instantly caught his attention. A faint imprint of an object was stamped into the muddy ground.
What’s this? Something fell and left a mark here, most likely a curved object. Judging from the distance of the miniscule mud splatters that were displaced when this missing object fell, the unknown object must have fallen from at least a metre up. Then, one of the people in the barn, picked up the object and left behind the mark of their finger tips when they scooped up this object. What could they have taken?
“Did you find anything on the dead bodies?” questioned Sigerson, facing an alarmed constable waiting patiently for them to finish their examination.
“Sorry, sir, I don’t quite understand your question.”
“Were there any possessions or small objects in the victims’ hands or pockets?”

“No, sir, there weren’t. I can be sure of this, because I was the one that handled the bodies, sir, and could find nothing on them.”

That leaves the culprit... The culprit took the missing object and either hid it, destroyed it or kept it. Unless... No— why would any of the victims pick up the object and throw it away? Besides, the mark was made not too long ago... Yes, I think it’s safe to assume the culprit was the one with this object; I just need to find out what it was...

When the inspector returned, face red and sweat dripping down his face from searching under the scorching sun for further evidence near the river bank, Sigerson immediately pelted him with a question.

“Yes, that was already like that when we started our investigation, sir.”

Everything fits now... The missing object... The broken vase and the wet rug... This boiling hot weather... But if that’s true, the chances of someone seeing him stumble around are quite high... There must be some other way out of here for him to be able to leave so unnoticed...

While the inspector and Percy were discussing the potential suspects to arrest, Sigerson passed them and stared down at the corpses once more. The key to this case was the massive difference in the four murders... Mr and Mrs Wycloff, their frail bodies contrasting greatly with the youthful figures of their children, had grey hair, mixed in with the mud unpleasantly. Their

children, presumably in their twenties, had rich hazel hair, a similar shade to Blight's.

Moving on, the detective left the barn and into the glaring heat outside. An opening in the fences, barely visible with several branches and clusters of leaves covering it, peeked at the detective as if drawing him in to uncover its secret hidden behind the foliage. Inspecting it closely, he realised that a hidden path through the pine trees was cleared; visible signs of recent human activity were left on the ground and nearby fences.

A faint handprint in this position can only mean one thing: they were using the fence as a handrail to guide them between these two posts and onto this secret pathway. The footprints are also very unclear, but— Hold on... That's the river! That means this should lead to...

Light burst out, as the detective stepped out from the wild vegetation and onto a deserted rocky lane. This lane, which led straight up to the cottage, was dotted with prominent rocks, which jutted out from the ground like lethal teeth. There were scrapes on the rocks and signs of scraping around some of the larger rocks. The last clue was here. Now, all he had to do was arrest the culprit and see if they had any connections with the one he was up against, Blight.

—

“Where were you?” interrogated Percy, ten minutes after Sigerson had found his way back. “We were just discussing about the suspects—”
“I can help narrow down your list of suspects; I know how the murders were carried out. The only problem now is not who to catch but how to catch them…”
“We’re still unsure of what you’re talking about,” replied Percy, who was just as confused as the inspector.
“Yes, let me explain. The culprit is a man about my height, who wears glasses and is quite familiar with this farm.”
“How can you be sure of that?”
Percy looked stunned, while the inspector was clearly sceptical, not believing a single word spoken.
“First,” explained Sigerson, “the height. See over here? The lengths between the footprints match mine, and they never grow larger or smaller, I can conclude that these strides were made without difficulty. Since the height of a man can be measured somewhat accurately from the length of his stride, we can assume that our culprit is around my height.”
“What about the glasses? How can you be certain of those?”
“Let me tell you how the crime took place; everything will fit into place afterwards. The culprit came to the cottage to kill one person only, elderly Mr Wycloff. After he poisons him, the culprit stashes the body away

neatly behind the bales of hay. Then, after a certain amount of time passes, an unexpected event occurs: the other three inhabitants of the cottage arrive. Jeremiah Wycloff, who stumbles upon this scene in the barn, is swiftly killed, since he became a witness and most likely saw the culprit's identity. This explains why the times of death were different, as well as the drastic change in the method of murder.

While this murder was being carried out, the women in the cottage were poisoned by accident. If you run a test on the wet dish on the drying rack in the cottage, it'll come back as positive with arsenic or some other poison. The culprit left some of the poisoned food on the table when he went to hide the body, then accidentally killed the rest of the family. If you need to know how I found out, the rats scurrying around the cottage avoided the dish although they had no problems with approaching the others."

"How do you know they weren't killed before Jeremiah Wycloff was?"

"If he were still alive, he would have ran for help. Anyways, it's certain that Jermiah was unable to notice that they were being poisoned, so there's your answer."

"None of this explains how you know the culprit wore glasses," said Percy, throwing a casual questioning glance at the detective.

"The glasses..." continued Sigerson, "When you arrived at this barn and took out the bodies, was anything

strange about them, inspector? Wasn't Jonah Wycloff's body neatly arranged and hidden, while the others messily stashed in?"
"Yes, it was. How did you even know, sir?"
"Mr Wycloff was killed just as the culprit had planned— that was when he still had his glasses. During his struggle with Jeremiah Wycloff—" Sigerson gestured at the displaced mud and bloody puddles.
"—something was picked up. I believe that the missing object is a pair of glasses. If you come with me, I can show you more evidence."

He led them to the hidden path he had found earlier. Bringing their attention to a dirty but vague handprint on the fence, he said, "There are handprints on this fence, indicating that somebody, namely the culprit, used it as a handrail. Since the gap between the fences is rather large, why would anyone need support to help them? They evidently couldn't see very well and had to hold onto something. If you have doubts as to whether or not this handprint belonged to the culprit, look at the footprint down here. It matches the ones near the barn."
"Couldn't the culprit have been old or injured?"
"Highly unlikely. No elderly person could have strided like that or emerge from a struggle without injury. As to the possibility of an injury after the struggle, the

footprints along this path also disprove that. They are equally spaced apart, showing that the one that created the footprints had no difficulty in walking."
Percy fell silent again, unable to find any faults in Sigerson's reasoning.
"If we keep going, you will be able to see the river along this path."
Soft trickling noises came out from behind some bushes not too far from them. The river, much calmer than Sigerson had seen it, was now visible to them all.
"As you can see, the river current flows in that direction—"
The detective pointed in the direction the frothing river was flowing.
"—which is exactly why you were able to find the jacket. In other words, the culprit ran along this path, threw away his soiled clothes, and departed."

They had reached the end of the path. All three of them pushed past the bushes and stepped out onto the rocky lane. The sun had remained in its highest position in the sky for some time now, so Sigerson knew that evening would come soon. He hurried over to some of the rocks and pointed out the strange dents on and around them.
"After losing his glasses, the culprit travelled along that path and made it here. The rocks here frequently made him stumble, hence the marks. Why would he stumble

so many times? He has severe myopia, which makes smaller objects, like these rocks, seem blurry and unclear."
"There's no doubt you must have hit the nail on the head, sir," praised the inspector, relieved that the amount of work he had to do was greatly reduced.
Walking back up to the cottage with the inspector and Percy, Sigerson wondered whether the crime really was connected to Blight in any way. There didn't seem to be any reason for Blight to kill him; Mr Wycloff had lived a very quiet life with his family and rarely left the town. The murders also seemed too... messy. Poisoning seemed careful enough, but the other three were too impulsive, unlike his other crimes.
"Still, we don't know who to arrest," sighed Percy, giving Sigerson a look as if expecting him to reveal the culprit's location.
"We know enough to be able to trap him," said Sigerson. "There hasn't been much time for the culprit to get away. Besides—"
He went into one of the bedrooms, pulled out a pair of similar shoes, and presented them to the inspector.
"—he left behind a valuable clue for us. I noticed that the pair of footprints leading away from here didn't match exactly. Before he fled from the scene, the culprit switched his own bloodied pair of shoes for these ones, and since he couldn't see very well, confused these two very similar shoes as a pair. If you look at the soles of

the shoes, you can tell that they don't match up exactly."
"And how are we meant to use this to help us catch the culprit, sir?" asked the inspector, unable to think of anything. "The footprints won't get us very far; in fact, he might have already switched out of them."
"First," said Sigerson, talking to them like a general preparing his troops for battle, "we have to consider the two possibilities and plan for both. Can we return to the station?"
"Is there anything wrong, sir?" asked the inspector nervously.
"In order to catch the culprit, I'll need you and your men to cooperate with me."
"And the crime scene, sir?"
"It is no longer needed. We should now focus our efforts on arresting the culprit."

When the inspector turned away from them, Percy pulled Sigerson to the side and said quietly, "There was something else you forgot to mention. How did you know the culprit was familiar with this farm?"
"If he could not even see the rocks at his feet, how else could he have spotted that hidden path? The footprints showed that the culprit walked straight to the fence and moved sideways along it until he came to the opening. Why would the culprit go to the fence instead

of seeking an exit? He already knew it was there and probably visited the farm several times before."
The inspector jogged back up to them and said, "A cart is ready, sir."
As the horses trotted away, pulling the cart, the cottage in the distance grew smaller and smaller until it disappeared completely from their view.

—

Back at the tiny police station, a dull brick building with a faded wooden sign over the entrance, everyone was restless; after all, nothing like this had ever happened before in their little town. When the inspector returned with Sigerson and Percy, everyone gathered around him, waiting to be instructed. The inspector turned to Sigerson and allowed him to give the orders.
We know that the culprit has severe near-sightedness and previously wore a pair of mismatched shoes. Before planning a trap, I need to know whether he's still in the area; two hours would have been more than enough time for the culprit to escape. I could ask Evie to help me gain data at the same time, which would significantly speed up the process...
Snapping back to reality, he immediately sent out constables to prevent people from leaving the village, watching both the train station and the roads.

Sigerson, remembering the layout of the town and its position in the forest, knew that it would be near impossible for anyone to escape on foot with such hostile terrain in the town's vicinity. Soon, information flowed back to him through the police. No one fitting Sigerson's description had departed on the few trains during the entire day nor was anyone seen passing on the roads leading away from the village. Moreover, Evelyn's report sent him vital information: a man named Brook Erwin was known to have visited the Wycloffs for many years and coincidentally matched Sigerson's description of height and glasses.

If he lost his only way of seeing clearly and hobbled back here, where would he go? The inn, of course, since he has no friends or family to stay here with. The inn would be much easier for him to locate without attracting much attention because of its loud noise and prominent position in the town. I guess I'll check there next then...

14

Confronting the Messenger

Preparations were set, and the pieces on the board moved into position. After the detective had checked the inn and found that Mr Brook Erwin was currently staying there, he went out with the setting sun behind him and met up with the remainder of the police waiting for his last instructions.

His hunch was spot on; Mr Erwin was the culprit. The innkeeper had mentioned that he was extremely clumsy and frequently knocked into chairs.

"Did he come back down and leave the inn wearing a pair of glasses?"

"I'm not sure, sir," replied the innkeeper, "I didn't pay much attention to him after he left, although he did mention he would be coming back later."

That settles things. Knowing the culprit's tendency to plan ahead is a vital piece of information; unless pressured into a corner, he is unlikely to make any desperate moves. As long as I lure him into a false sense of security, it shouldn't be too hard to catch him off guard and arrest him before he prepares anything...

"We're ready when you are, sir," said one of the constables waiting patiently.

"Arrest the mayor, then spread the news quickly," said Sigerson suddenly.

"Excuse me, sir?"

All the policemen stood there, bewildered at this command.
“The mayor doesn’t have an alibi during the time of the murder does he? Not to mention he’s an old friend of the Wycloffs; arrest him now and we may get a chance to catch the real culprit.

Mayor Frank was usually a bluff, cheerful man, whom everyone in his town knew and liked, due to his positive personality.
“He must have been quite a player,” thought Sigerson, gazing at the countless ball-shaped trophies in the house, while the policemen moved in to take the mayor into custody. Within the minute, Sigerson could hear the mayor’s voice roaring through the house; when he stepped into the room to assist them, he saw two dumbfounded constables trying to negotiate with the furious mayor, whose head had turned into the colour of an overgrown tomato, while several others, including the inspector, were huddled in a corner, questioning themselves whether this was really the most appropriate action to take. Seeing that the scene might escalate quickly, the detective rushed forwards and placed himself between the mayor and the constables, saying, “Calm down, Mr Frank and come with us quietly for a moment.”
“You’ve all been making a mistake! True— I was gone during the time of the murder but that was because I had some very urgent business to attend to—”

“Can anyone verify your location during the time of the crimes?”
“No, but I’m telling you, you’ve got the wrong person—”
“You say we have the wrong person? If that’s so, you have nothing to fear, Mr Frank; just follow us and we’ll have you released in no time if you really are telling the truth.”
“But—”
When Mr Frank continued to protest, Sigerson quickly cut him off from talking.
“Think about your reputation, Mr Frank.”
He paused, waiting for a reaction. The mayor’s eyes twitched for a second; he remained silent, his face betraying a hint of nervousness. Sigerson, understanding that Mayor Frank would try to protect his reputation as well as he could, continued, “We can make sure the news of your arrest becomes harmless to your public image, if only you come quietly.”
Mr Frank’s shoulders sank in defeat, then he said in a small voice, “I’ll come.”
He allowed himself to be escorted away by the inspector with his head hung low. Watching the mayor disappear among the rows of brick buildings, the detective stood watching the orange sun, with his hands behind his back and his eyes twinkling. Not long after, the inspector reappeared at his side, ready to carry out the next steps of the plan.
“The mayor is safely residing in the police station, currently being thoroughly interrogated,” announced the inspector to show that his job was finished.

“Good,” replied Sigerson, still gazing into the sky in an oddly nonchalant mood. “Keep him there for as long as you can, but don’t push him too hard; he’s done nothing wrong to be punished.”
“Why did we arrest him then, sir?” questioned the inspector.
“The culprit will let their guard down, making it easier for us to find and trap him,” said Percy, striding to them so unexpectedly, it seemed like he appeared out of thin air. He turned to Sigerson. “Am I right?”
“That is correct,” the detective replied, turning to face them. “If we force the culprit into a corner early on without a definite way of trapping him, he’s more likely to make desperate moves and thus becomes more unpredictable and dangerous to the residents living here.”
“The next move is to spread the news, isn’t it? We need to make sure the culprit actually hears of the arrest first.”
“I’ve already done that. The newspapers should all be spreading the news of his arrest by now. I notified them as he was being taken away. Although it is most likely that the culprit would never risk buying a newspaper, he will still hear of the news, since the mayor is a prominent figure in this town and rumors will inevitably arise.”
He hesitated for a second before asking, “Do you know a man named Brook Erwin by any chance?”
He was now speaking directly to the two of them, expecting a response. The inspector shook his head.
“Brook Erwin? He isn’t a resident here, is he?”

Percy scratched his smooth chin, his mind scrambling for names.
“Yes— I’m pretty sure he does not reside here; no one has moved in or out of this town for the past few years, though we do get visitors occasionally.”
“In any case, if you happen to meet him, approach carefully and arrest him; I have identified him as the culprit.”
“Understood.”
They both nodded solemnly.
“And now,” said the detective, checking his watch again. “I’ll tell you the rest of the plan. First of all, did you position your men in the exact locations I instructed you, inspector?”
“Yes, sir, I did. Everyone is ready and waiting for further orders.”
“Good. Tell them that their job is to stay where they are; they’re positioned in every exit of the village and their fields of view should cover up for each other’s blind spots. Right now, they are acting as barricades to prevent the culprit from leaving. Since the culprit is now trapped, village, all that’s left to do is determine his whereabouts. We know that the culprit has a broken pair of glasses, therefore this is a piece of information we can use to our advantage.”
A light of understanding was dawning on Percy; gradually, he began to understand what Sigerson was planning. He asked excitedly but in a restrained voice, “Are you going to lure him into replacing his lenses at the pharmacy?”

“Yes— in fact, I’ve already sent out the advertisements for discounted replacements. I managed to persuade the owner, not without difficulty though, so we’d better get this done as soon as possible.”
While the three of them made their way down to the pharmacy, where a large variety of drugs, medicines, and equipment were sold, Sigerson resumed his monologue.
“Because there are no other places to purchase lenses in this village, I’m sure the culprit will attempt to try and fix his glasses here,” said the detective, jabbing his finger at the dull shop.
He took them both aside to an elusive corner where several crates hid them so they wouldn’t be seen while checking the entrance and exit for their target.
“How can you be so sure that he will come?” questioned Percy.
“Just think about it. When a person, whose eyesight cannot allow them to see even a considerably sized rock in their path, loses their glasses, it’s reasonable to say that they will do everything in their power to obtain new ones. In our case, it is even more likely, since we blocked the exits of this village, forcing him to stay in this cage and try to put on the appearance of a regular visitor. Besides, with this crowd coming to buy things, the culprit will think they have a much better chance of blending in with other people.”
“What if he already has an extra pair and doesn’t enter the pharmacy?”

“I’ve prepared for that as well. If he already has a pair with him, he’ll try to escape from here. We’ll have to rely on the police in Alms to help us arrest him; I alerted them to assist us by searching the trains as soon as they arrive in the station. By controlling which trains leave at which times, we can make sure he is sent to them, as long as they search every train before any passengers get out. The constables guarding the station should leave first, though. That will provide the only escape route for the culprit.”

Not long after he had finished explaining, clusters of customers started to arrive at the pharmacy, filling the claustrophobic building in no time.
“The advertisement,” started Percy, “wouldn′t it be suspicious if you applied the discount to glasses only?”
“Oh, that. No, I’ve told the owner to reduce prices for everything in the store; that way, more people will come and purchase things, allowing the culprit to blend in more easily among them.”
Sigerson put a finger to his lips, indicating that they were to remain silent and unseen. Minutes passed by and no signs of the mysterious killer appeared, while they watched people enter and exit attentively in their hiding spot. Bright orange reflected off the glass panes and lit up the dirt road in front of the pharmacy, causing it to glow as if it were red hot. Fading away in the distance, the sun slowly sunk, stretching their shadows and robbing them of the pleasant warmth. They were now huddled together in

the dim corner, still unsure if the person they were looking for would come.

There are only ten more minutes until the store closes for the next two days... Did he really have an extra pair on him or was I wrong? All the circumstantial evidence points to him— it can't be wrong...

A loud crack shook the three of them from their inner thoughts. Grasping a nearby bench to support himself, a man emerged from the shadows, which were slowly creeping around the town. The man, whose long black hair was matted but quite clean, hobbled up to the pharmacy, completely oblivious to the three hidden men, stalking him silently. He stooped slightly, his back bent like a chimpanzee, keeping his eyes glued to the ground as his two dark nervous eyes scanned the pathway for further obstacles in vain. As soon as Sigerson spotted him, hope rekindled instantaneously, shooting through his body like a stimulant. There was no mistake now.

Dressed in the most absurd way he had ever seen, Sigerson observed the man's unusual attire rapidly, from the oversized coat, to the mismatched pair of shoes on his feet. Percy and the inspector, who had both noticed the shoes as well, faced the detective, their unspoken words telling him that they were both ready to jump at him. When the inspector shifted from his position in an attempt to rush out, Sigerson gently placed a hand on his shoulder and held him down, preventing him from moving forwards.

"Not now," hissed Sigerson, his attention focused on Mr Brook Erwin. "If we move out now, there's a small

possibility that he might have taken a weapon from the farm. There are still quite a few customers inside the shop that would be in danger if he were to get desperate. Follow my advice and take some of your men and wait at the inn. Go to his room— that's number thirty if you didn't know— and arrest him there."

The inspector's face expressed such disappointment that a passing observer might have thought Sigerson had just denied him a very special treat. With a resentful glance at the detective, he limped away to obey the orders at once.

When the inspector had left and the culprit entered the pharmacy, Percy asked in a confused voice, "Why do you expect him to stay at the inn?"

"I made inquiries earlier; the innkeeper told me that Mr Erwin, the culprit, was staying there for the past few days. Usually, replacing the lenses of a pair of glasses takes more than a day, so Mr Erwin will need somewhere to stay for the time being. Where else but the inn would he stay for at least another night? He has no relations to anyone here in the town, and if he attempts to try and lodge with one the residents here, suspicions will be raised after the murders. Here he comes. You continue to follow him; let me check something first."

Sigerson waited until the man hobbled out of sight with Percy on his tail, who was pretending to be on a leisurely evening stroll, then he hurried to the pharmacy, eager to make his prediction into a certainty. The owner of the shop stared at him, his bushy eyebrows raised and his white beard bristling with annoyance, then remembering

Sigerson's face, he immediately started a light conversation with him, his initial annoyance melting as he talked with his newly made acquaintance.
"You were right, sir. I sold twice as much than I usually would in a week and with new stock arriving tomorrow—"
"I hate to interrupt you," said the detective urgently, "but can I see the list of customers who had paid for a lens replacement?"
"Of course, sir. There aren't many who came for a replacement today, though," the owner replied gruffly, handing over to the detective a sheet of paper.
Erwin... There he is. It'll take three more days for the lens to arrive, so that means he's probably headed to the inn now, as I thought...
Dropping the sheet back onto the counter, Sigerson thanked the owner and ran out, taking a route that would lead him to all the potential stops Brook Erwin might make before heading back to the inn. However, when he saw that none of the other establishments contained his target, nor was there a sign of Percy anywhere near them, he marched straight on to his final location without hesitation.
Up ahead in front of him, a beacon shining in the dim evening that was being engulfed in darkness was his final destination and perhaps, even contained a key connected to the man pulling the strings from afar, Elysius Blight.
As the detective reached the entrance of the inn, a commotion from within the walls of the building had caused a large crowd to gather, stopping Sigerson from

entering. Pushing past the inquisitive spectators and accidentally trodding on at least a dozen feet, he made it into the inn and continued to shove his way to the thirtieth room. A horrible sinking feeling clawed at his conscience. All these people around must have meant that something significant had happened while he was away... A death? No... It was inconceivable that one of them had died, after taking so much time to isolate the culprit...

The final flight of stairs materialised before his eyes. A sigh of relief escaped from his mouth. Percy and the inspector were both standing at the entrance to the room, trying to shoo the crowd away as if they were a flock of bothersome pigeons. What was wrong? When Percy noticed Sigerson pushing the people out of his way, he marched up to him, dragged Sigerson into the room, and shut the door into their faces.
"We've found Brook Erwin," he said breathlessly, the moment the door was shut. "The problem is... Well, you can see for yourself."
The man they had seen earlier in front of the pharmacy was slouched on the bed, stone dead. An empty brown bottle laid next to him, opened and the contents used. Sigerson walked over to it and took it using a handkerchief in his hand. There were still specks of white powder inside of the bottle.
"Arsenic," remarked the detective, picking up the bottle and examining the insides of it. "Can you run a test on this later, inspector?"

He passed the bottle over to the inspector, who received it cautiously.
"This was also found in the dead man's pockets," said Percy, pulling out a clean envelope and handing it to the detective. "We've seen the contents, but it seems to be some random words scribbled by some lunatic."

Sigerson opened the envelope and pulled out a piece of paper. On it, and unusual string of words were scribbled neatly across:

Get, **F**irst, **Y**ear, **TWICE**, **C**ut, **UP**, **Y**ellow, **P**ear, **L**et, **C**art, **B**est, **W**et, **MOVE**, **S**ee

Flipping the paper, Sigerson found another message scrawled behind it.

FOUND YOU

Sweat dripped down his forehead and his hand trembled slightly as he read this. The message was written by an unknown hand.
These letters... They must be the real message directed to me... Or maybe he wants to bring my attention away from something? I'll see if this has any meaning behind it before coming up with a theory... Let's see... The first letter of every word is bolded; they are one of the two key parts to solving this code. Next, the second part are these three words in capital letters: twice, up, and move. If read this way, it leads to nothing, but read backwards... Move up twice... An instruction for what?

Read every two words above the capitalised words? No... That also leads to nothing. What else could this possibly mean?

Grumbling to himself and shaking his head occasionally as he tried to decipher the code, Sigerson sat down on a stool in the corner for a few seconds, a disturbed expression set on his face. However, a sudden change came over him in an instant; he thanked the inspector for his help, leaving the rest to him, bade him goodnight, and left the inn, bringing Percy with him.
"I knew it," muttered the detective under his breath as they walked past the rows of dull stone buildings. "He is involved with this murder, but as usual, I still lack evidence against him..."

15

The Approaching Storm

Everything was restored to its original state in Huntersberg later that night; apologies were made to the mayor, the murder case was closed and released to the public, and all the credit of the dramatic arrest and downfall of the murderer was given to the inspector.
"Why," asked Percy, leaning back into an armchair by the fireplace, "didn't you take any credit for that case? You practically solved it yourself without any of the police helping you, didn't you?"
They were now back at the cottage, resting after a day of hard work. Red and orange flames jumped up from the fireplace, desperate to lead out of the grate and spread its arms to the beautifully embroidered rug that laid in front of it. Mrs Hale strode forwards, poked the firewood around to prevent the flames from getting out of control, and returned to the kitchen to prepare dinner, where Evelyn was also lending a hand. Sigerson sat onto the blue couch, clutching the coded message from the scene an hour ago. He stared at it blankly for a while, then turned to Percy and answered, "I don't want to attract any attention to myself. By the way, will you have a look at this?"
He folded the paper in half and passed it to Percy, who received it with some confusion.
"Why, this is the paper we found today, isn't it? I don't think there's any meaning behind these words."

“How come it says ‘found you’ then?”
“Perhaps the writer was really a lunatic.”
“Hmm… I wish that was really the situation here…”
Percy was even more bewildered than ever.
“You mean, it’s not written by the culprit?”
“Let’s decode this first. There are fourteen words; all of their first letters are capitalised and heavily emphasized. We can then assume that they are of great importance to this puzzle. Next, the words twice, up, and move are fully capitalised, bringing our attention to these three words. If we read it backwards, it says: ‘move up twice’. What can ‘move up twice’ mean? I tested every probability I had in my mind and found if every letter of each word was replaced by a letter two places in front in the alphabet, a clear message would appear. So the ‘G’ in ‘get’ turns into ‘I’, the ‘F’ in ‘first’ turns to ‘H’ and on it goes.”
“That makes…” Percy pulled out a pencil from a nearby drawer and jotted down the letters. “I–H–A–V–E… I have? It does seem to be making sense now…”

A minute later, the entire message was written down, but Percy, although he could see the entire sentence and its threatening intention, did not understand the purpose of it.
“I have warned you… To whom was this written, I wonder?”
“I know who wrote this, but—” Sigerson eyed Mrs Hale and Thomas warily. “—I’ll have to tell you somewhere where we’ll not be overheard by your family.”

Percy dragged himself off the cushioned armchair somewhat reluctantly, led the detective to his bedroom, and pushed open the squeaking door for him.

It was furnished quite plainly; in contrast to the earthy brown of the magnificent oak walls in the other parts of the cottage, Percy's room was painted with a tint of rich emerald green, mimicking the colour palette of the scenery outside. A simple bed, which was a lighter shade of lime, sat at the left side of the room, while a uniquely carved desk and wardrobe adorned the right with a precious alabaster jar laid on top of it like a golden egg among chickens. Everything was spotless; his mother frequently cleaned after him while he was away on journeys.

"Anyways," said Percy, shutting the door firmly behind him to make sure no one could eavesdrop on them during their private conversation. "Who wrote this?"

"Have you ever heard of Elysius Blight?"

"Blight? No, I don't think I can. Is he well known?"

"He himself is not to the public, but some of his subordinates are. You've definitely heard of August Rook, haven't you?"

"Everybody's heard of him. Most of my pals back at the training camp revered Rook. In fact, I don't think there's a single person in the country who has never heard of his name."

“Right. Well, this is most likely his handwriting,” stated Sigerson, bringing out the sheet of paper again. “I’ve seen it too many times in my life, even in Blight’s household.”
“Who is this Elysius Blight? He sounds like trouble from what I’ve heard from you so far.”
“Half of the wealth in this country belongs to him, as well as half of the crimes committed. He’s not so much of a predator but more of a wildfire; he sparks conflicts between people and lets them commit crimes for him. It’s almost impossible to trace murders or thefts back to him; either the culprits of his crimes are assassinated and the evidence swiftly destroyed, or their motive and evidence used against them is so undeniably strong that nobody questions the existence of an outside party.”
“How did you know it was Blight then?”
“There was one crime he failed to cover up completely; that was in July, I think.”
He breathed in and out calmly before continuing.
“The crime in question was the boiler explosion at Wensworth Factory. Before the explosion even took place, Blight had suggested a contract with Mr Wensworth that would pass the ownership of both of their companies into both of their hands, sharing the profit between themselves. This, although it cost Blight quite a fortune since Wensworth Factories could no longer produce resources effectively, made sure that Blight had total control over the coal industry, as all the companies before him had either collapsed or collaborated with him in secret. When I realised Blight’s coal monopoly, I suspected

him of planning the explosion to force Wensworth into accepting the conditions he had presented to him earlier that week.
After the incident, Wensworth's secretary, Towns, was found dead, shot to death by an invisible shooter in a multi-storey building. At the scene of the crime, I found much evidence against Rook, one of Blight's subordinates as I said before. However, when the police used the footprints to track down the killer, it led them to a completely different suspect, whom they arrested and put on trial. All the circumstantial evidence at the crime scene was cleverly manipulated to point to him; moreover, the suspect himself confessed to the crimes and was therefore charged and sent to the scaffold where he was hanged a few days ago. But... I've always felt something was wrong..."
The detective paused for a bit, thinking what the best way to explain his complicated story was. Percy lounged on his bed, expecting him to resume at any moment, while Sigerson struggled for the correct words to use.
"It just doesn't seem right, does it? The executed suspect, although he had a criminal record before, had no experience with firearms and yet, the shot was made from hundreds of metres away... That just can't be possible... The cigar I found... He never smoked those either..."
His voice gradually dropped. Suddenly, Percy sat up with a loud clap and exclaimed, "Now I remember! Mr Blight, the one you were talking about, is a piano virtuoso and an

excellent composer as well. I had a memory of me and my friends going to the theatres he was performing in."
"Theatres? Do you mean the one in Sodor?"
"No, not that one. I remember it clearly; it was a smaller shabbier one in Alms. District 4, I think. Hypnotic and soothingly calm would be the words to describe the atmosphere back then…"
Gazing out of the window dreamily, Percy seemed to be incapable of speech for a minute, silently reflecting on his memory. He stared off into the night sky as if recalling the pleasant memory.
So he has appeared in public before. Why then was I incapable of finding any information at all? Surely his activities were all passed off as charity, just like the orphanages he built and sponsored.
"If you want, I can search for the theatre's records; there might be something there I can show you."
"Thanks. Could I ask you to find the date as well?"
"No problem."

Two knocks on the door alerted the two of them and prompted them to suddenly fall silent. Mrs Hale's voice on the other side told them to come out for dinner, while Thomas' whiny cries could also be heard, begging his older brother to hurry up.
"I'll be back with information tomorrow. For now, let's just enjoy dinner and talk about other things at the table; my mother would faint if she had a clue on what we were talking about."

—

After dinner was finished, the table cleared, and the dishes washed, they all retired to the living room, while Mrs Hale once again rushed off to tidy up the other parts of the house. The night air seeped in through small openings from the windows, providing a cool contrast with the roaring fireplace in front of them. Soft chirps rang out from the garden bushes below the sash of a tinted window. As they all sat around, Percy and Thomas withdrew to their usual activities, reading reports and scribbling pictures. The guests, having nothing to do, requested permission to turn in for the night.

"Just a minute, Sigerson," said Percy, rising from his seat and making his way over to his younger sibling, who was so preoccupied with his drawing, he never noticed Percy sneaking up behind him until it was too late. He was picked up and, struggling as hard as he could by flailing his arms around like a bird trapped in a net, was carried into his bedroom by his brother. They exchanged a few hushed words at the entrance of the room, then Thomas retreated back in, closing the door half-heartedly in Percy's presence. Once he had made sure that nobody was around the living room to listen to their conversation—including his mother, whom he had asked to leave them for some time, Percy returned and brought a platter of chocolate chip cookies Mrs Hale had prepared earlier for the guests.

“Do you mind if I have a smoke?” he asked, taking out a cigar from a cardboard box. His eyes darted between Sigerson and Evelyn, waiting for one of them to object. When none of them did and told him they were fine with it, he lit the cigar and placed it between his calm lips with steady fingers.
“Anyways, now that we have this room to ourselves, I think it is time to decide on our next course of action, if you understand what I mean.”
They both nodded, prompting him to go on and elaborate further.
“Although the Enforcers are currently chasing a fake trail right now, it won’t take long for them to figure out you’re here, so the question is this: how are we going to safely transport you away from Huntersberg?”
All of them sat in reverie, pondering about the different methods they could use to escape.
“I don’t suppose there are any other towns around here?” asked Evelyn, staring straight at Percy with her flashing emerald eyes so intently, he turned pink and dropped his gaze.
“We can’t travel anywhere by foot, if that’s what you’re thinking,” stated Sigerson flatly. “The forest stretches across this land for about fifty kilometres. But…”
“The train stations are also being watched,” said Percy usefully. “Only the stations that go beyond Huntersberg are. I suspect the director must think you would try to escape as far as possible away from them, so he never ordered the men to watch the stations close to Sodor,

although I suppose it still would be advisable to be as inconspicuous as possible…"
"Does he think those stations are close enough to headquarters or does he want to lure us there?" Sigerson wondered aloud. "If the stations are close to headquarters, it would mean the time needed to travel between the two places is significantly shorter, making arrests more effective."
"Wait— that can't be," piped Evelyn suddenly, drawing all attention to herself. "It took us a few days to get here by train, so the Enforcers would also need at least two days to get here with the fastest train in the country. Why would they leave this town out of surveillance?"
Percy shrugged his shoulders.
"Beats me," said he, blowing out a cloud of smoke, which was blown away and dispersed quickly by a soft breeze flowing through the miniscule crack from the open window. "They must have thought my presence here in this little town was enough."
Still aware of an unsettling feeling in his chest, the troubled detective sank back in thought, his eyebrows furrowed and his lean hands clasped together tightly. First, he had Blight to worry about and now the Enforcers were after them too. There had to be some way he could clear his name or at least turn their eyes away temporarily… What was the appropriate move now? Suppose he did manage to clear his name. That would take time and leave many more people vulnerable, perhaps even causing casualties to mount unpredictably.

Think... Something must be able to converge these two paths together...

Memories ran through his mind like a film; everything he had experienced during the past few months spun in and out, weaving through the crevices of his thoughts. Out of nowhere, the smug face of Patrick Hartland, Blight's henchman, flew in and materialised subconsciously, triggering a flash that caused him to realise the importance of their encounter with him in Eden. At the same moment, a plan formulated like a peculiar concoction brimming with uncertain variables and undecided conditions. The risk was immense; the consequences would be disastrous if anything strayed from the calculated path, but since he had an abundance of intel, it was definitely worthwhile to attempt his plan. But first...

"I'm going to have a mountain of work when I return to give the report to Grock," groaned Percy, flipping away from a newspaper article.

Hold on... It's been ten days since that meeting... This reminder must be linked to it. Something must have happened in that train, most likely a provocative attack to enrage the government of Revalty...

"Do you want to have a look at it?" offered Percy, holding up the newspaper for him. Sigerson accepted it gladly, rifled through messily and quickly found what he was searching for. A brief article stood out to him, claiming that a murderous shooting took place on the train carrying

the Custodians and a Revaltian politician, who had met them in a specially guarded carriage.
“According to the passage,” read Sigerson softly, “the shooter was the politician from Revalty coming to negotiate terms with them. Is that true?”
“Yes. At headquarters, we were all told of this meeting, thus preparations were made. There’s going to be so much to do though… An investigation’s probably going to be made to uncover the weapon’s origin and other trivial details…”
As Percy continued grumbling about his piling work, Sigerson quickly cut in.
“It says here that the assailant was shot down by Rook.”
“I noticed that as well. I suppose you suspect him of something, don’t you?”
“Hmm… It certainly is suspicious, as the article claims all nine of the Custodians were shot down… What do you think, Evie?”
Evelyn, who at the time was silently listening to their conversation without much thought, blinked rapidly, surprised to be asked for her opinion. Her face was slightly pinker and her expression aloof as she requested for the newspaper, which she buried her face behind the instant she received it.
Some time elapsed before she was ready to share her thoughts, shyly peeking at them from over the top of the page like a timid kitten. She cleared her throat, gaining more confidence, before she spoke in a more serious tone.

“There are many points of suspicion regarding Rook’s involvement with this shooting. Why did he not enter and protect the Custodians before all nine were shot to death, though he was seated in an adjoining carriage?”
“Maybe he wanted to make sure it was safe before doing so?” suggested Percy.
“The maximum number of bullets any revolver can hold in the world is six. Since we know that the assailant possessed a revolver containing six bullets, we therefore know that he could only fire six shots before reloading. What was Rook doing when the shooting temporarily stopped? He could have easily used this opportunity to overpower the assailant and yet, he did not. Don’t you find this strange?”
“Now that I think about it, you may be right, but it’s still undeniable that Rook might have been a tad bit too slow in responding—”
“He was a soldier— a rather bold one too,” said Evelyn. “That doesn’t fit in with his personality in the war.”
Evie is right. It’s odd that Rook would cower before an enemy, then shoot them... Besides, being an ex-soldier, he would know that the revolver had a maximum of six shots, so he could have easily waited for them to be fired before taking action, but instead waited for all nine Custodians to fall dead. Blight must have used him to remove the politician in case he was questioned later. Why did he have this crime committed in broad daylight?
He needed witnesses... Put the blame on Revalty, and war will swiftly follow... Everything he has prepared leads to this: an

uncontrollable war between Revalty and Ecclesia... His entire mindset is built around proving moral ambiguity in the world around him; this would certainly be a chance he would never miss...

"Will? William!"
Sigerson forcefully shook himself back to reality again. Evelyn was standing over him, pouting at him petulantly as though she were a school teacher scolding a student for daydreaming. Her attire had changed while he had been swimming around in his thoughts; she wore a beige lacy night gown, her long rosy hair flowing behind her back, and a pair of clean socks wrapped warmly around her feet. She tossed a similar set of clothing to him, telling him to hurry and change.
"Percy has kindly offered his room to us," she said, "so hurry up and stop dreaming."

When Sigerson finished changing into a fresh set of night clothes identical in colour to Evelyn's, he trudged into Percy's room, where his cousin was already sleeping soundly. Sighing but unable to keep back a feeling of melancholy, he crouched down and laid on the spare mattress brought out for him. Tomorrow, he decided, would be the optimal time to get his plan started and score his first victory over Blight.

—

Light lazily trickled into the dark room, providing an unclear view of the cluttered mess within it. No birds were chirping outside yet; all was calm. Silently passing Evelyn, Sigerson opened the door wide enough to squeeze through, then slipped out to the living room. It turned out that he was not the only early riser. Percy, with another cigar lit up between his lips, was staring out of the window nonchalantly, admiring the tranquil peacefulness of the forest. The couch he had been sleeping in was tidied to perfection, as expected from a former soldier.

"Morning," said Sigerson as a greeting, then he added, "I observe you have been out today. I presume you've already handed in your report to headquarters this morning?"

"Yep," replied Percy, nodding. "I left on the earliest train I could board."

"By the way..."

Sigerson moved closer to communicate his plan to Percy, dearly hoping that his mother and brother were still fast asleep. Taking out the cigar and placing it gingerly on a glass ashtray to focus his attention on Sigerson, who was half whispering instructions, Percy leaned in with his hands grasped together, his eyes deadly serious.

"We'll leave before noon; Evelyn will take the train to District 1 in Alms and I'll travel back to Sodor, acting as a distraction for Evelyn. I'll expose my location temporarily for the Enforcers to focus their attention on me, then when they're after me, I'll lay low for a while before travelling to Alms myself. Is that alright with you?"

Percy nearly dropped off his seat in surprise.

“Absolutely not. You’ll be in too much danger and this plan seems to rely on them taking the bait, which I believe is far too risky.”
Sigerson felt no annoyance at his flat refusal; on the contrary, he beamed at Percy and said, “I appreciate your concern, but I really must insist. I have some other business in Sodor to attend to, so this really is the only option we have.”
Percy sat silently, contemplating whether or not he should comply with Sigerson’s dangerous plan. He looked up desperately at him and found him smiling serenely as if the threat of capture and possible execution was little more than a trivial matter. The smouldering end of the cigar was glowing dimly, telling both of them how much time they had spent talking. Finally, with a deep sigh, Percy gave in.
“When do we start?” he asked.
Sigerson checked his watch. It was a little past six.
“Maybe get some breakfast first, then when you’re ready, give us a call and we’ll begin. I think Evelyn should be awake by now. I’ll go and tell her.”
He got up, patted Percy on the back, who was somewhat struggling with himself, and returned to the bedroom.

Evelyn, it turned out, had already been awake for some time and, by listening to broken fragments of their conversation, could easily comprehend what they had in mind. Returning back into the bedroom as stealthily as he

could, he found Evelyn standing in front of a mirror, fully dressed in a strange fashion.
A frayed dull overcoat, which was slightly too big for her, wrapped around her slim figure loosely. Providing much needed warmth, a gloomy grey turtleneck sweater, similarly large and roomy, lay comfortably hidden behind the coat. Overall, her attire gave the impression of a messy, blundering man, who, if it were not for her head, would never be detected as an imposter among the crowds in the streets. Tugging at her slightly baggy trousers, Evelyn twirled around to face Sigerson entering the bedroom as silent as the night.
"This doesn't really suit me, does it?" asked Evelyn, frowning at the oversized clothes. "Still, it was the best fit I could find."
"Are you going to put on a disguise? I hate to break it to you, but if you don't find something to cover that bright head of yours—"
"I've got this," interjected Evelyn briskly, pulling out what seemed to be a large ball of drab brown hair. "Mrs Hale gave this wig to me; she said she was going to throw it away but decided I could keep it if I wanted it."
She ran her fingers through the wig, feeling each individual smooth strand.
"Just wait," she said, pushing her cousin out of the room. "Give me two minutes and I'll be ready."
By this time, Percy wandered towards his bedroom, curious to see what was taking them so long. When he did reach the door, he staggered back in surprise; what he saw

was nothing close to what he had anticipated. Before his eyes stood a man with pale skin, clumsy movements, and weak eyes. He was dressed shabbily and appeared inept but not unkind. Sigerson, finding Percy standing in the doorway with his mouth gaped wide open, walked over to him and declared that they were ready to go. The dumbstruck Enforcer, still staring at the unkempt brown hair, turned to Sigerson and asked breathlessly, “Is that really your cousin beneath the disguise?”
“I’m right here,” she replied, making the scene even more bizarre than it originally was.
“Impressive…” murmured Percy, nodding his head and scratching his clean shaven chin. “Even the Enforcers would have a hard time seeing through this… Although… Your eyes might give you away.”
“Don’t worry,” said Evelyn, altering her voice to a hesitant weak male voice. “I have a pair of tinted glasses. If I’m stuck in a noticeable position, I’ll just put them on and nobody would notice. Besides, I’m planning to travel around in enormous crowds and blend in with them, so I doubt anyone would notice me in the first place.”
Percy continued to nod, then lowered his head.
“How about we have some food first before we head off?”

After Percy served a platter of assorted biscuits along with bacon and cold porridge, they left the cottage silently, only stopping to bid Mrs Hale farewell. The sun had only begun to rise, so the cobblestoned streets were fairly quiet, with the exception of the occasional cluck from a chicken.

While they were strolling to the train station, which would be the destination that split them up in their separate directions, Sigerson couldn't help but notice how restless Percy was getting. He was constantly shifting his gaze away whenever Evelyn or Sigerson's eyes met his own. Sensing something was wrong, Evelyn sped up and caught up with him, asking him quietly if anything was wrong.
"I'm fine," he answered meekly. "I'm only wondering if you two will be alright by yourselves with the Enforcers chasing you and all that..."
Evelyn looked back at Sigerson, who was still strolling at his own leisurely pace.
"I think... We'll try our best to stay safe. Who knows? Everybody lives happy one day then suddenly dies the next. Life is certainly unpredictable most of the time. You watch out for yourself; I'm sure we'll be able to meet up at least one more time in this lifetime."
Percy seemed uncomfortable that he was sending two friends into immediate danger and possible death.
Sigerson had now caught up with the two of them. Placing his hand gently on Percy's shoulder, he said consolingly, "Don't worry about us; you have a family to take care of first. Anyways, I hope— and I expect Evelyn does as well —we'll be able to see you again if future events allow us to."
They had reached a peaceful narrow lane with thin, green rushes growing on the sides, softly tickling their legs as they walked by. Up ahead in front of them was their final destination, the Huntersberg train station. Evelyn looked

back wistfully at the town behind them and took in the scenery one final time. Every pine tree, the bubbling river, the smooth pebbles that were scattered around on the bank, and the swirling smoke curling up above the chimneys flooded into their eyes, and even Sigerson, who was by no means man easily swayed by emotions, felt a sense of regretful guilt for leaving this small town behind. But it had to be done. If their plan was delayed or failed, all of the lush landscape in their view would fall, along with the rest of the country. So when the three of them spent what seemed like an eternity walking up to the brick building to pay for their tickets, they suddenly stopped in their tracks, frozen in place.

"So listen," began Sigerson before any of them could speak. "What you two need to do is focus on your separate goals. Evelyn, you make sure that you reach Alms safely and undetected; remember the plan we discussed earlier and follow it as tightly as you can. Percy, look after your family and if you sense danger, don't hesitate to flee with them. Here, take this."

The detective tore a piece of paper out from a pocket-sized notebook and gave it to him, listing names of trusted strongholds they could escape to. No further words were said and after a brief hug from Evelyn, which he brushed off awkwardly, they split up, each to their own path. Sigerson smiled to himself as he sat down on the seat and since he had the compartment to himself, spread out a wad of newspapers, scanning through them with renewed keenness.