Monday. Ina's office.

I was impressed by your interview.

We got a call from a the Evening Mirror, a national newspaper, to co-opt the article in their Wednesday issue.

Marisa's presence appears to have stirred a broader interest in the town council elections.

Are you saying my interview will be distributed nationwide?

She scowled.

It's not just your interview, they'll be publishing excerpts from mine as well—

And hey—

Considering how you seem to have a great entry with Flock 05—

Her tone had become friendlier.

—I was wondering if you'd consider covering their entire campaign.

Huh—? What do you mean?

That you'd serve as a dedicated reporter.

If you do Flock, I'll do the other parties.

I mean — your chemistry with Marisa, we can't let that go to waste.

I was taken aback. Though Ina had asked me to fill in on previous occasions — whenever she was in a pinch — I'd never been this involved in the editorial proceedings of the paper.

You want me to cover their entire campaign? We have finals coming up—

Hmpf. I'm sure you'll manage.

I think this will be a great way to take your mind of studying now and again.

Taking my mind off studying isn't exactly the problem—

She shrugged.

I wonder if there will even be much worth writing about.

Do you think Marisa's party could truly gain a foothold in our town?

I'm not sure. A.I.R. has always held an absolute majority in the council, and the people here are generally steadfast.

But times are changing. A party like Flock can build up support by challenging the status quo.

And to a certain extent we can't blame the voters. When there is nothing to choose, a political elite will become arrogant, lazy, corrupt.

Then, as soon as an alternative raises it's head, people welcome it, under the assumption that any change is good change.

But will the rise of Flock 05 truly bring about good change—? Only time can tell.

Especially now that they're under new leadership—

If only we could get to know Marisa, from really up close.

Then she grinned, as though she'd just remembered something.

Moreover, something interesting has happened. It appears Flock has attracted a new candidate.

Oh yeah, Leopold—

Her eyes widened in amazement.

You read the press release?! That's unlike you—

But you're right — it's Leopold.

I guess it figures. The marquis was a bad fit for A.I.R.

He's an unpredictable man — joining an unpredictable party.

We went outside, and while I accompanied Ina to the bike shed, I recalled something that I wanted to tell her.

Ina. Before you go—

During the interview, Marisa hinted at something.

She knows of some kind of scandal that involves the political elite of Abbotsford.

Please tell me more.

It was clear I'd caught Ina's attention.

There isn't much more. Just that it's a well hidden secret, leading up all the way to the mayor.

She promised to elaborate further, if we were fair in our coverage of her party.

Hmpf.

You will need to get to the bottom of this.

But please be careful. This could be a political game Marisa is playing, in an attempt to paint her political opponents in a bad light.

We can't go around publishing unsubstantiated rumors. Make sure you get hard facts—

A cloud of ebony hair appeared — Ina stopped speaking immediately.

Abe, Ina—

I apologize for disturbing what must have been a very important editorial meeting.

Ina eyed her up suspiciously.

But I have great news! We're very — very! — close to reaching the participation threshold for Easter break.

If the two of you could sign up now, the trip will be guaranteed to continue!

You're so close already—? I though you were struggling to find participants.

We were, but we've made great progress — two people signed up just yesterday.

A rather strange looking young man—

—and Marisa, the new girl in town. Have you met her?

I could see Ina tense up.

Such a nice girl — she's really trying to fit in.

She even attended our church service yesterday, and now she's coming on easter break—

Ina interrupted her.

Abe would like to buy a ticket!

I turned towards Ina, muttering at her under my breath — but she shot me a deathly glare.

Oh that's great Abe, thank you!

Let me hand you a ticket. Please make sure to pay me before coming Sunday.

This means I only have one more ticket left to sell. Hmm—

Rika eyed Ina pressingly.

What—

Come on, Ina. You'll have a great time.

You could write a report for the school paper.

Ina had begun shuffling uncomfortably.

I think she'll take it.

Really—? Wonderful!

Meekly, Ina accepted her ticket from an overjoyed Rika — before wandering off quietly.

It's a big step for her. Ina hates joining in with social events.

I nodded.

But I'm sure she'll have a great time. Once she feels the warm sand against her skin, all reservations will surely melt off her like ice.

Do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward—

A silence fell.

So Abe, have you been able to look into the issue of the skulls?

I was caught completely off guard.

The skulls? I—

I have, I have actually—

At Bremersberg there is a lecturer who is connected to the department of Forensic Anthropology at Leiden University.

There is—?

I think if we'd just talk to him, ask him politely, he may tell us more about the skulls.

Rika chuckled.

Ask him politely—?

Oh Abe, sometimes I feel that you receive the world like a little child.

But I'm glad you've put in the work. I'm truly grateful for that.

It's worth a try.

She browsed through her calendar.

Let's attempt to get in contact with this lecturer of yours, and make the trip to Bremersberg.

I will call you to make further arrangements.

That evening, I sat in my room, staring at the piles of unopened textbooks.

With all the extra work Ina had heaped upon me, I reckoned there would be little time to get around to any real studying.

Especially now that she'd signed me up for a four day trip I hadn't planned for.

Yeah, why had she signed me up for that trip—?

I took out my phone.

Abe—? What's the matter.

Why did you sign us up for Easter break? I thought you hated these kinds of outings.

An awkward guffaw resounded through the telephone.

I did, sure. But I changed my mind.

Do you know what I was thinking?

I was thinking — a trip like this is a godsend.

You'll be able to observe Marisa, day and night, for four days straight.

You'll be able to get close and intimate—

—truly get into her mind.

I sighed.

At least we're in this together—

Yeah, thanks for that—

But at least I'll be able to keep an eye on things, to safeguard the bounds of journalistic integrity.

Anyway — if that's all, I have to go. I have editing to do.

She hung up the phone.

As always, ulterior motives were at play.

Ina expected me to fully mobilize my budding friendship with Marisa as a meanse to generate more headlines for her newspaper.

And though I resigned myself to the prospect of going on the easter trip, I resolved not to let things get out of hand.

Determined to spend the rest of the evening in a productive manner,

I was in the process of opening my trigonometry textbook when my phone began to buzz.

When I picked up the call, Rika's voice rang out, tinnily.

Abe — there have been developments.

I looked up that guy, Peter van Helsing. He teaches a lecture on Thursday afternoons.

So I called the university explaining that we're high school students, interested in pursuing Cultural Anthropology next year.

They told me to come to his lecture next Thursday, and that he'd talk to us afterwards. Isn't that great?

So you're going?

We're both going. We can walk to the station from school.

Also, I'm very excited that you'll be coming on easter break.

We were in a bit of pinch, as most senior students have come to regard the easter break outing as a waste of time.

But in reality, the trip is a great way to relax before finals, whilst also providing a chance to reiterate over the important parts of the curriculum.

We will be staying at the rustic village of Ryebury, which lies on the lakeside.

I could hear an uncharacteristic excitement in her voice.

My family owns an inn over there, which we're able to charter at a very good rate.

Anyway, we're leaving Monday afternoon. Please don't be late—

She terminated the call—

—the room was filled with silence.

Unopened textbooks stared at me.

Defeated, I crawled into bed.

On thursday afternoon, I found Rika sitting outside of my last class — as though to block off all escape routes.

We made our way towards the station.

Though I had been anticipating the trip with mild reluctance, I had to admit the gentle Spring breeze and the omnipresent signals of nature awakening were stirring a fancy in me.

We made it just in time to board the three o'clock train.

The city wasn't far from Abbotsford, and it was within fifteen minutes that we passed through the first suburbs.

Bremersberg. What a god-forsaken place.

Built after the reclamation of the Marshpolder — it aimed to be a hallmark of post-war architecture.

But in all it's craftmanship, it lacks character, it lacks history—

—it lacks soul.

The citizens here are all strangers to one another, unlike in our little town.

Is that really that bad—?

It is.

She sniffed.

Places like this breed evil.

When we arrived at the faculty of social sciences, professor Helsing's lecture was still in progress. We waited outside of the auditorium until he had finished and all the students had filed out.

A dark haired figure approached us.

You must be the students that mailed me.

Rika—?

She nodded.

The professor held out his hand, which she accepted gracefully.

Peter Helsing — pleased to meet you.

I'm delighted to see young people take an interest in the science of anthropology.

And so proactive too, to reach out to me like that. You don't see that often these days—

—but it's the way to go. In the social sciences, I mean. You need to get ahead, know the right people.

He let out a dry cough.

Please tell me about yourselves.

My name, as you know, is Hendrika Kuyper. And this is Abe.

We're in our last year of high school—

—and although it's still a month until finals, with out GPA's they will prove to be no more than a formality.

She shot me a cunning grin.

For me, the reason I contacted you, is that I'm seeking direction.

I'm sure I want to study Anthropology — but what type? Cultural? Linguistic? Forensic?

In a thinly veiled attempt at youthful enthusiasm, her voice was rising steadily.

—and then, the next question arises: where do I go? I mean Bremersberg is nearby, but there are much better universities. Leiden? Maybe even Oxbridge?

Peter laid a calming hand on her shoulder.

Don't worry, you're doing great.

You can only make one decision at a time.

Personally I would advise against Bremersberg, as they don't have a dedicated Anthropology department.

That's why I make the commute from Leiden once a week.

But there's no need to come to a hasty decision.

Rika let out a sigh of relief.

I'm sorry.

It's such an ambivalent time for me. I feel like all my steps are magnified.

As though they could set loose an unstoppable chain-reaction.

But I apologize for wasting your precious time.

Please tell us about your renowned Anthropology department.

He coughed.

Well, what is there to say—

Anthropology is the study of humans—

—but what you encounter, at times, has little semblance of humanity.

Anthropologists delve into the dark depths of our past. The ugly, horrid process of becoming human—

—and our trauma-ridden, turbulent tearing away from our previous existence as animals.

I returned, three weeks ago, from an excursion into the rain forests of West-Papua. I hadn't seen a real toilet for months—

But I watched as a man skinned a boar with his bear hands—

—and after that I helped him remove it's entrails, clean the blood and feces of it's flesh.

The professor reveled at the sight of my disgusted face. He appeared to be enjoying the lurid details he was throwing our way.

Anthropology is great, but it isn't for the faint of heart. Especially when you take it seriously.

At our department, we do science the old fashioned way.

We try to disengage from the petty trends that have come to dominate our field over the past decades—

—the wholesome fairy tales of universal brotherhood and noble savages, that naive students are attracted to like flies.

He leered at Rika, who shrugged coolly.

How about Bram Bulwer? Was he old-fasioned?

The professor stirred at the sound of his name.

Bram Bulwer—?

You've read up on the history of our department—

Bram should be regarded a pioneer in our field. He didn't shy away from anything—

—even when he likely should have.

But why do you bring up his name?

Rika took a deep breath.

I found something in a book of his — and I was wondering if you could clarify.

She took out some paperwork from her bag, some of which she had marked with page markers.

Please look at this.

Here he writes something about three Abbot skulls — and I'm curious what he was referring to.

But I can't find anything more about them.

Peter looked at her — appearing genuinely confused.

I have no idea what that could be.

But then his eyes narrowed.

This is such a particular inquiry, it makes me wonder why you'd ask—

Are you, by any chance, from Abbotsford—?

Rika remained silent for a moment — then she nodded.

I thought so. We've received an inquiry about these skulls before — from a church.

Did they put you up to this?

Rika shook her head violently.

No— not at all. We're truly curious.

The professor sighed.

Look, I'm telling the truth when I say that I have no idea what Bram was referring to in these notebooks.

But considering the sustained interest from your community—

Rika's lips curled into a precocious smile.

—I'm willing to do a quick search in the archives.

Next week — or whenever I find a PhD student who I can delegate this task to.

He sighed.

But after this, you will really need to let the issue rest.

I understand how an aside like this can spark interest in an affected community, but most likely it's nothing.

A typographical error, or a wild idea—

Rika nodded understandingly, although I saw a glimmer of hope shining in her eyes.

I hope you kids do decide to study at my department — especially after all the trouble you've put me through.

It'll be a huge change of environment for you. After growing up in such a rural community.

I never grew up in—

He cut me off.

College is a time to expand your mind, to question the assumptions instilled in you during your upbringing.

I'll contact you as soon as I receive more information.

Well, that went well.

Rika was beaming.

You think so? He didn't seem too happy with the ruse we came up with.

Oh sure he didn't, but that was just a way to get a foot in the door.

Matters like these require a personal touch. A dull letter from an orthodox congregation is easily cast aside.

But as soon as give such an inquiry a youthful, pretty face — it becomes a lot harder for a man like Peter to say no.

She flashed me a meaningful grin.

I didn't really notice him looking at you in that way.

Oh but he was looking—

—at you.

Rika burst out in a contagious laughter that she sustained all the way to the station.

Afternoon rush hour had begun, and the city was tense with the noise and bustle of cars.

On monday morning, I lay for a second in blissful ignorance—

—until the full reality of my situation dawned on me.

Good morning Abe.

Naomi? To what do I owe this honor?

Rika and I are both out and about — gathering the late sleepers.

She herself is picking up Mei at this very moment.

You wouldn't want to miss the train, would you?

I hope you're packed and ready. Come on, let's head to the station.

I retrieved my bag and followed her through the empty streets. While we walked, I could feel an undeniable tension in the air.

After a while, Naomi broke the silence.

A—Abe. I've been meaning to ask you something.

Her voice sounded brittle, as though it were about to break.

It's about a fr—

Abe old boy. Good to see you're tagging along.

Due to the sudden interruption, Naomi swallowed her words.

Bernard? Are you coming on easter break—?

He is — he was one of the last people to sign up.

Did Rika manage to coerce you—?

There was no coercion required at all. I'm due for an outing, you see?

It's important to distract your mind every once in a while.

Water, sky, female companionship — isn't that what life is all about?

Naomi leered at him.

When we arrived at the station, a small committee stood waiting on us.

W—What is he doing here?!

Him—? Oh, he seemed interested in joining us. And we were still short of people—

Madeleine, as soon as I heard you were going, I knew I couldn't be left out.

I looked at Marisa without saying anything.

Rika — you really shouldn't have done that. Bernard is trouble.

You're so annoying, Bernard.

And it looks like you've been harassing poor Abe again.

Well, I'm not associating with you during any part of this trip—

She shrugged haughtily.

—please keep your distance from me.

Mei and Naomi showed up, and after fifteen minutes even Ina appeared, carrying two cases.

She appeared as sullen as ever.

I've brought my laptop — and books.

That inn better have good security.

Rika stifled a laugh.

Oh Ina, I am glad you agreed to come.

We need someone to make sure we get around to studying.

Collectively, we made our way to the platform.

The train shot past miles and miles of farmland. Here and there, the acres of green were interspersed with brightly colored tulip fields.

The flowers are pretty, aren't they?

They always cheer me up, when spring comes.

Are you looking forward to the trip?

I love visiting new places.

The people, the culture—

Ryebury is only a thirty minute trainride away, you know—

Incredible, isn't it?

After exiting the train at Ryebury station, we made our way through the narrow alleyways that led to the inn — a townhouse style building that counted three floors.

After entering, Rika addressed us in a sheperdly fashion.

Dear travel companions.

My family is gracious enough to make this property available to us students, year after year.

Let us ensure that they continue this tradition, by acting as responsible stewards and leaving this place cleaner than we encountered it.

But most importantly, please make yourselves at home and enjoy the fellowship together. You're free to share in all of the amenities this inn has to offer, even though they may be sparse.

Thank you for attending Abbotsford High's seventh annual Easter break. Let's study hard and be joyful!

I carried my luggage up the stairs before helping Ina, who was clearly struggling.

And then I swung open the door to the master bedroom — just in time to witness a spectacle unfold.

Get out, Bernard! I'm not sharing my room with you — let alone a double bed!

Madeleine— You're so cold.

I may as well just sleep in the cellar—

Attracted by the noise, Rika stuck her head around the corner.

Oh you two—

Marisa, come with me. We can share the penthouse suite.

Abe, maybe you should room here with Bernard.

Then Ina can take the family room, together with—

I—

What?

I was thinking Abe and I could share a room, in case we'd need to work on newspaper business.

Ina was blushing visibly, and I noticed Rika's lips arch into a mischievous smile.

Oh Ina — there will be more than enough opportunity for that.

It's just that we can't allow mixed dormitories—

—my family wouldn't like that.

Hmpf.

We carried Ina's luggage to the family room, where she immediately began unpacking.

Now Abe, you may think we're here on vacation, but I do not want this trip to go to waste.

We kicked off the campaign season with some light interviews, to bring out the human factor.

Now, however, I want to start digging deeper.

If you get the chance, please ask Marisa about her political strategy.

I will do the same for Rika, to find out what she knows about her father's campaign plans.

Politics are like a game of chess — each player has a battle plan. We must—

Naomi came in — Ina became deathly silent.

When I returned to the master bedroom, which I would be sharing with Bernard, I found him him combing his hair in the mirror.

Well Abe — it seems like the morality police has condemned us to one another.

And personally — I don't mind. This may even provide an opportunity for us to grow closer.

I reckon this is your first time—

He grinned.

—sharing the bed with another man?

I shot backward.

Ho—ho. I can see a parochial fear growing in your eyes, but I can assure you there's nothing to be timid about.

Once you go to college, you'll realize how much joy there is in fraternizing with your fellow brethren.

Life is a symposium, my friend. Love is all around.

Let's go out and be bohemian!

After lunch we headed up to the beach.

Rybury lies on a tideless lake, large enough to hide the opposite banks from view.

I figure this is what it all comes down to.

The beach — if that is what you can call it.

Anyway, I brought my books.

You can go ahead and splash around in the water—

—I'm getting cold just looking at it.

Ina rolled out her bath towel.

I think I'm going for a swim.

I need to stay in shape, for the championships this summer.

Carefully she removed her glasses, passing them to Ina for safekeeping.

Not wearing her school uniform, Naomi appeared unnaturally pale under the clouded spring sky.

P-Please don't stare at me—

I should have brought my sports swimsuit — this is very uncomfortable.

I continued down to the waterline, where Rika stood, looking out into the distance.

Can you see how dark the waters here are?

At some points, the lake gets very deep.

When this used to be a sea, tidal currents would tear long rifts along the former shorelines.

Rika really loves the sea. Maybe a little too much at times.

But I don't mind them turning it into a lake.

The water is much calmer that way.

Rika, are you going to try to swim to the humming stone?

I looked into the distance, where small black spot shimmered at the horizon.

The humming stone was an underwater rock feature, that reached up right to the water level, so that it was visible whenever a wave opened up the water's surface.

The rock had always been a hazard for passing ships, as it could easily rupture their hull on it's unseen edges.

And Rika had told me that many tales existed about the humming stone, featuring hideously deformed creatures that lived there and feasted upon the flesh of drowned sailors.

Not much later, Marisa approached me.

Hey Abe, I hadn't had a chance to thank you yet.

For what?

For your feature piece on Flock, last week. The interview came out beautifully.

Oh it's nothing, thank you for your cooperation.

I'm serious, I was such a beautiful piece. And so honest.

I must admit, I was having second thoughts before it came out.

Our movement is so used to being treated unfairly by the media, due to prejudices that people have—

—but I wanted to trust you, Abe, because you were so kind to me.

You kept your promise, and treated us fairly.

A fierce determinism had formed in her eyes.

That's all we ask for, to be treated fairly.

If only the press would report the facts—

Did you hear our piece was picked up by the Evening Mirror?

Yes! It's fabulous!

I've been receiving phonecalls from across the nation.

Who would ever think the concerns of our little town would gain national interest.

Then she sighed.

I have to be careful though.

Lecherous journalists have been making comments on my appearance.

The fact is, I did some modeling work while I was in university.

And now the press has dug up photographs.

I need to tread carefully.

Although this kind of coverage can spark interest in our movement — it distracts from our core message.

As I said, we are seldom treated fairly.

I want to be a serious politician.

Rika, who was standing nearby, turned her head.

Oh but you are a serious politician, Marisa. I read your interview, it was great.

My father is very excited about you — he's looking forward to working as your colleague.

Your father — councilman Kuyper — said that?!

He did. He thinks you'll be a serious competitor in the race. That A.I.R. will have a heavy task maintaining it's majority.

But he agrees with many of the ideas you expressed in your interview. About creeping corruption and the gradual erosion of moral values in our town.

Maybe this year we'll see a transformation, in which things change for the better.

Where our community wins, in the long run. And not just one political party.

As overseers of His creation we must be above reproach.

That's right, isn't it?

Oh Rika, you put things to words so nicely.

Have you ever considered a career in politics—?

We will have our first study session at eight. Feel free to get refreshed before then!

There we are, Abe.

This must be the life the gods had envisioned for us. Lounging in the sun during the day — contemplating the classics at night.

Does that mean you'll be joining our study session?

Oh not at all, that's for you highschoolers. Personally, I've done enough studying for a lifetime.

He staggered like a weary soldier.

So what are you going to do, now that you're out of university? Are you going to look for a job?

Hm. I'm not sure—

I want to live an easy life — filled with art and beauty.

I've always aspired to be a playwright, you see?

Although I'm afraid there aren't many openings in that field.

I've done some amateur productions in college. I loved that.

Especially the auditions for the female parts—

He was drifting away.

You have some of your father in you—

He snapped back fiercely.

Hold your mouth! Don't say these things!

That man wouldn't recognize true beauty if it spat him in the face. He corrupts all that he touches.

Poor Madeleine—

I heard she used to be a model—

His eyes lit up.

She was—!

I tried to get her to play the lead part in a production of Salome, but naturally she turned up her nose.

But I've collected her entire catalog. I even went out to buy an issue of Lighthouse when she was featured in there—

I'll show you when we get home.

I nodded affirmatively.

Oh Abe, if I were ever to give something to this world — it would be a grand beauty contest.

Where the greatest fountainhead of female aesthetics would be selected from a pool of thousands — to reign over this blessed earth as a princess of the purest silver.

I chuckled.

A miss-universe pageant? A vulgar miss-universe pageant? Would that be your gift to humanity?

Oh not at all—

—for in a miss election both the interior and the exterior of women are judged.

But in my contest — it's only about exterior!

Because that's what it's all about! The origin of man!

Do you remember the Judgment of Paris?

When the young prince gifted his golden apple to Aphrodite — crowning her most beautiful — which eventually led to the destruction of Troy and the birth of the modern world?

That was a beauty pageant.

If we have no beauty, then what do we have—

He had become overly sentimental, reveling in his ridiculous words—

Rika called us, and we all gathered in the common room downstairs.

This evening we will be dedicated to study.

Senior students, let's look over the examination syllabus together—

If we're not in our finals year, can we go out to the beach to explore—

Of course not! That would defy the spirit of the trip. Mei — you can go over your regular homework now. I can't imagine you aren't behind somewhere.

Mei pouted self-consciously.

And Marisa, Bernard. Please think of something to do. Marisa, you probably have some council matters to do.

Marisa held up her laptop.

I definitely do!

And Bernard— You do whatever it is you do—

I'll just shut up and read Nabokov.

Grumbling, he sat himself down in a corner.

Rika, Naomi, Ina and I began working through our biology-reader — and it wasn't long before I realized that I was so dramatically behind that there was no point in asking questions.

Ina sat staring into empty space, similarly lost — even though I'd always imagined her as a decent student.

Soon Mei came down to our table.

Ina, please help me with this. I cannot find the hypotenuse—

Mei, I've shown you this before—

Everyone appeared to welcome the distraction.

Rika, I was wondering. If the land around Abbotsford forms an artificial island — then how come some of the houses in Ryebury look so old?

Rika glanced up from her syllabus.

The Marshpolder was reclaimed in 1942. Back then a large stretch of sea around the isle of Abbot was dammed off — before being pumped dry and connected to the mainland.

Ryebury is one of the oldest communities on the new-formed land — the houses here were built in the forties, thus containing salient traits of prewar architecture.

Soon after it's founding, some of the fishing families from Abbot settled here, in an attempt to revive their old trade.

While the lake was filled with brackish water, they were still able to fish for herring and haddock — but once the water grew sweet, they had to venture out through the giant floodgates up north to fish on the northern sea.

They still make excellent fish balls though.

You should understand that the reclamation of the Marshpolder left a huge impression on the inhabitants of the isle of Abbot.

Gradually, they saw the waters surrounding their island sink, until only a vast wasteland of mud remained.

Their idyllic island life was brutally torn away from them — these scars run deep in our community.

But beside all the sorrow, the reclamation had some interesting side effects.

Although the newly drained seabed was untraversable at first, soon archaeologists descended upon Abbotsford to see what they could dig up from the mud.

And though the island community — still traumatized from their dramatic change in lifestyle — was uncharacteristically unwelcoming of their sudden arrival, the archaeologists proceeded to erect barracks and set to work.

By now, all those present had put down their books and sat listening intently to Rika's story.

So— What did the archaeologists find?

Rika stood up.

All this talking has made me thirsty. Let's see if they've left us anything to drink—

She walked behind the bar, where a refrigerator stood.

We have tonic, and ginger ale—

Ch-chocolate milk!

After Rika had returned with refreshments, she resumed talking.

Anyway, Naomi, to answer your question.

The archaeologists mostly found bones.

The first place they started to dig was around the old graveyard.

And as I told you — Abe — they unearthed a number of old gravestones that had eroded off from the island and lodged themselves in the former seabed.

And along with their gravestones, naturally, they found the remains of the deceased.

Which they immediately returned to the community, to be buried underneath the crypt of the new church.

Then, after the graveyard was done, they expanded their search.

On the exposed seabed, the archaeologists found remains of concentric embankments around the island that had been swept away in the past by rising waters.

Abbot used to be quite large. But ever since the late middle ages, the island slowly lost land to the encroaching sea.

The archaeologists even found remains of stone huts, that had once been submerged completely.

Rika took a sip from her glass, which contained a clear liquid.

But that wasn't the only thing they found.

As I said, they found bones — countless bones. Not just human ones near the graveyard, but many of charred animal carcasses.

From food preparation?

Likely—

Her tone had become dismissive.

But you must all be getting very tired. I suggest we beak up this meeting, in order for us to get some well-deserved sleep.

Suddenly, Bernard stirred.

What about the Aelian implement?

What—?

It was a curious artifact that they found closeby, they have it in a display case a the university.

No— It's a well known hoax.

It was a hammer of sorts—

And it wasn't real. The Aelian implement has been conclusively proven to be planted by one of the researchers.

What a hoax, if it was one—

As I said, one downcast afternoon, an archaeologist dug up an asymmetrical double faced hammer, no more than twelve inches long.

It was completely unique to the region, and forged from a heavy, dark steel.

One of it's faces was blunt, like an ordinary hammer, but the other narrowed into a sharp point that had been reinforced.

As though it were used to kill animals, with one single blow to the head.

And the implement was crafted in a way, that was wholly unknown to these regions.

At first glance, it's surface appeared adorned with a scaling of miniature steel shields, overlapping eachother in a way that formed a thin steel plating.

But upon further inspection, this steel plating went beyond the surface of the artifact, forming layers that decended into the core of the hammer.

And the scales interlocked in such a meticulous fashion, that they contracted upon touch — forming an almost fleshlike grip, without sacrificing any of the tensile strenght of the tool.

And the most remarkable part about this item, was that it appeard impervous to oxidation. All those centuries that is must have laid on the ocean floor, and it was without even a speck of rust.

Isn't it great to share lurid horror tales with friends?

But please don't overdo it, Bernard. We wouldn't want to give Mei nightmares.

Bernard smirked.

Bernard loves telling tall tales. But the thing is, he never knows when to stop—

Come everyone, let's go to bed. We still have three more days before us.

The next morning, I was awoken up by an oppressive sensation—

Bernard — who had initially agreed to observe a broad patch of no-mans-land between our sides of the bed — had somehow managed to shift so far diagonally that he was now taking up a full three quarters of the bed.

A stale odor hung throughout the entire room. Without a second thought I shot into my clothes and made my way out onto the landing—

—only to catch a shadow disappearing down the stairway.

I followed it—

—through the streets of Ryebury—

—out onto the shore, where I observed it for a while, as it stared into the distance of the lake.

And it wasn't long before the shadow disrobed and slid into the lake — because the shadow belonged to Rika.

Rika was a practiced swimmer, and I watched as she performed her workout routine.

And while I rested in the chalky sand, the sun rose behind me, casting long shadows into the lake.

After a forty minute work-out, she swam up to me.

Good morning Abe. Have you been spying on me all this time—?

I—I just went for a morning walk.

That's funny Abe, I never pictured you as an early riser—

But it's okay, I'm not the type to tense up before an audience.

She smiled.

I received an email from Peter Helsing this morning.

Apparently he has urgent news he wants to discuss with us.

She let out an inconvenienced moan.

He'll be in town tomorrow, but I really don't want to go to the city. Not while we're on spring break.

I'll try to get him to meet us here at the shore. It would only be a fifteen minute drive for him—

I nodded.

Rika changed out of her swimming clothes.

Hey Bernard, good to see you're awake. Did you find our amenities up to standards?

Sure did. I was out cold tonight, that sea air really helps a man wind down.

I wouldn't call it sea air, but I know what you mean.

Hey Abe — there you are.

I've been looking for you all morning.

Have you even eaten breakfast—?

Good morning Ina — how kind of you to worry about me.

Come on, let's look for a quiet place.

Even though we're on break — the Sunday Abbot never skips an issue. Let's hold an editorial meeting, before the beach gets too crowded.

A meeting—? But Ina, I thought we could take it easy for a few days—

She had already grabbed me by the arm.

So, have you noticed anything?

That Marisa girl, she seems like such a clutz.

So childish and inexperienced. I wonder if Flock will even be able to retain it's current position.

She's getting on with Rika alright—

Hm—

Ina pondered for a second.

She is, isn't she—?

I wonder what will come of that.

As you know, Rika's father is a member of A.I.R.

He leads the Kuyper faction — an autonomous wing within the party.

If Marisa manages to sway John Kuyper, it could lead to division within A.I.R.

Although I'm not sure if she would be capable of that—

You know what, maybe they're just becoming friends.

Although she is dependable, Rika can come off as lonely at times. And Marisa hardly knows anyone in town.

Not everything is a political game, you know—?

Ina grumbled.

That's where you're wrong, Abe.

Very wrong—

Suddely we were caught in a vortex of excitement—

Abe, Ina — what are you discussing?

I welcomed the distraction from Ina's paranoid ramblings.

Hi Mei, you're late for the editorial meeting. Please tell us what you will be contributing to the next issue—

You're holding an editorial meeting?! On the beach?!

Why didn't you wait for me—?!

You need to listen to what I've discovered!

While the two of you have been vacationing — I have been running a covert investigation!

Ina stifled a laugh.

And you must hear — I have discovered a mystery!

Wow Mei, what's that?

Those basalt blocks there—

She pointed towards the breakwater that stretched out behind us.

—that stone isn't from around here!

I can tell by the quartz layers and some of the markings.

She lowered her voice, to the point where is was no more than a whisper.

Illegal smuggling of rare stone is an international crime. I believe we may be on to—

—a conspiracy!

Wow Mei, we may have to put out an extra edition to cover this.

Ina reprimanded me from under her breath.

Don't encourage her—

Come on, Rika. Open up the liquor cabinet. It's time to pour some cocktails.

Rika pouted doubtfully—

I'm not sure, Marisa. The school has entrusted us to act responsibly at all times.

A little alcohol won't hurt, will it? You must have started taking communion on sundays by now—

We've all worked so hard — you can't hold an excursion without some leisurely moments.

Marisa, we've spent the entire day at the beach—

But Rika had already yielded.

Well okay, since we're all of drinking age I see no issue in indulging a little.

But all those that are still enrolled in Abbotsford High will be limited to one glass.

Please don't make me regret this.

With a squeal of delight, Marisa got up and bounded towards the bar, where she began stirring up a batch of Tom Collinses.

I'll have a glass of the Glenfarclas 15 year old—

But Bernard's words were lost in the ambient murmur.

Wow, this is good.

Better than wine.

It makes you sleepy, though.

Carefully we carried Mei to her bed.

As the night progressed, the common room grew quieter.

Marisa, Ina and I sat studying at a large oak table. While Bernard sat in a corner, working on one of his plays.

At times we heard him break out, reciting one of his lines with pathos. But for the rest he was quiet.

I love what you are doing with the Sunday Abbot.

It has such a broad appeal, I had never expected that from a school paper.

Ina's eyes narrowed.

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that we are not a school paper—

Oh it's great what you've done, Ina. I'm sure you have a brilliant future ahead of you.

I know people who could—

She let out a hiccup.

—I know people, I mean, who could really open doors for you.

That's kind, Marisa, but I ask you to maintain the integrity of our relationship.

Our only current concern is to cover the town council elections in a fair and objective manner—

Oh Ina, you're so good. It's no fun—

—and that's so much fun.

But to be a good journalist, you should be able to spin your web a little.

—like the incy wincy spider.

Marisa broke out giggling, before suddenly becoming overly serious.

I want to tell you something, for your paper—

—have you ever heard the story of Anna Sanders?

I shook my head.

On 56 Oystercatcher Lane there is an apartment of the second floor — so small and unassuming that you'd hardly notice it.

There is something I know about this apartment, that I've been wanting to share—

Even though Marisa was slurring her words, Ina had become all ears.

Things are going on in Abbotsford — Ina — hidden, terrible things.

Things that are impossible to gain insight in without the right entrances.

So what's the deal with 56 Oystercatcher Lane?

I saw Ina make a quick note of the address in her notebook.

Dark things have happened in Oystercatcher Lane — dark, disgusting things. If I tell you, you probably wouldn't believe me.

But please—

Marisa moved to take another sip of her glass, but Ina stopped her.

In the registry there are ways to look up the, um— provenance of all of Abbotsford's real estate—

—and the, eh— tax status. The tax exempt status, I mean. And I'm sure you will figure for yourself what's going on.

That this leads up all the way to the Mayor.

Ina frowned.

Mayor Van Linden? Your main political rival, you mean?

Marisa brushed aside Ina's snide remark.

Don't believe me. Look it up for yourselves, do your duty—

Before Ina could stop her, she took a large sip from her glass.

Marisa — who was Anna Sanders?

Anna—?

A look of utter sadness appeared in her eyes.

Oh proud saint Margaret—

For a second, she covered her face in her hands, before she broke out singing.

Oh I forbid you maidens, all

that wear gold in you hair,

to come or go by Carterhaugh,

for young Tam Lin is there!

From the corner of the room, I could hear Bernard humming along with the melody.

Ina sighed—

She's had too much.

A little wine can loosen tongues, but too much and it detaches them.

It won't be long before she passes out. Come on, Abe — let's go to bed.

The next day, I hung around at the inn until noon, when Rika and I distanced ourselves from the rest of the crowd.

She'd arranged to meet up with Peter near the north point of Ryebury, where a natural sandbar ran out far into the lake.

Frequented only by incidental birdwatchers, this secluded place would offer us enough privacy to discuss our matters.

Thank you for taking the time to speak to us.

It's nothing — you know, I wish my own students would take this much interest in my profession.

Students can be so calculating, these days.

'Will this be on the exam?' is what they'll ask me, whenever I delve too deep into a subject.

As if grades are all that matter.

You can't become an Anthropologist just through taking tests.

You need to get your hands dirty — take a good long look into the eyes of humanity.

Let me guess—

Sometimes you even need to get on your knees and dig up graves—

Peter swallowed.

I—It's not like that.

Look—

The thing you should understand — in the days of Abraham Bulwer, there were many academic misconceptions about isolated communities.

People speculated that the inhabitants of Abbot suffered from physical and mental degeneration, due to inbreeding that would occur on the island.

Rika's eyes shot fire.

How about that—

But I think even Bulwer had to reconsider this hypothesis. Because in his notes, he states that the genetic makeup of the Abbot skulls appeared far more genetically diverse than expected.

Rika murmured approvingly.

Far more diverse—

But look at the time, I have a class to teach at two. I really should get going.

Wait, Peter, did you manage to find the skulls?

Would there be any way to return them to our community? To their rightful resting place—

Yes, um— No. I mean, I'm doing my best.

I mean, the department is looking into it — but I still have to clear some matters.

Even if we do find them, I will need explicit permission to release them to you.

You have no idea how many old bones the anthropology department owns. That's all they are, in the end.

Maybe we shouldn't even go through the bother—

We should, Peter. Please contact me as soon as you hear more about the skulls.

Theft of human remains isn't a trivial matter — maybe informing the press about this whole idea would help you expediate the process with your department.

She nodded at me, meaningfully — as I felt a shudder of realization pass through me.

Oh please wait, I assure you they are working as hard as they can.

I mean — maybe now isn't the right moment to inform the press.

We could invite them once we hand over the skulls to you, though.

Then we'll both be featured in a positive light.

He smirked.

As you seem to realize all too well, academics is all about public relations.

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