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# THE ~~X~~ O.T.H.E.R.S. (SECRET SOCIETY)

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The library air was thick and suffocating. A scorching sun comes through the reading room's window, burning a couple of students' heads who appear to be about to fall asleep on their books. There's no one among the bookshelves. Well, almost no one. A shadow slides in silence through an aisle lined with a grey carpet.

The shadow is eleven years old and is called Franz Kopf, but that's not important anymore. In truth, it's been a long time since anyone has called him that. A few know him as Cobra Eye, and for everyone else, he's known as Deadeye Franz. But that's not important anymore either. The main thing is that the mission had been a success. A little overdue, perhaps, but a success.

The section with the letter C takes up a dark corner in the back of the room. Deadeye is looking over

the books one by one with his good eye: *Cool Games to Play... Creepy Horror Stories... Curiosities of the Climate...* that's what he's looking for. The boy opens it to page two hundred eighteen and drops in a small piece of paper that he has in his pocket. The paper, the size of a playing card, says the following:

WE FOUND THE SECRET  
THAT WE'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR,  
YOU MUST CONVENE  
AN URGENT MEETING FOR TOMORROW

O X

The message's signature represents Franz's two eyes: the O symbolizes his open eye, and the X symbolizes the closed eye. The organization members are absolutely prohibited from using his true name while on duty.

Franz re-reads the message before closing the book and leaving it in its place again. His accomplices will understand it perfectly, but for anyone else, it will just be an insignificant piece of paper full of words without meaning. And just then he realizes that, in reality, all of that craziness that he got himself caught up in was precisely because of a stupid sign full of meaningless letters.

· CHAPTER 1 ·

# The Lazy Eye

Despite the darkness, the heart in Dr. Winkel's office was asphyxiating. Franz could feel a big drop of sweat hanging from the tip of his nose for a while. Less than twenty centimeters away from the drop, the doctor's brilliant double chin was palpitating like a gigantic toad:

“Read the second row of letters, Franz” the doctor grumbled.

**E W X**  
**R K H N**  
**L S U G T**  
**R J B Y H A**  
**M R M B D Z V**

Franz focused on the sign in front of him. His left eye burned, but his right eye was covered without any pity from the doctor's chubby, sticky hand. Franz

himself had seen a greasy packet of butter cookies on his desk. Winkel probably stuffed himself with them between patients.

“**R, K, H, and N**” Franz mumbled, praying that it would all stop there.

“The third line”, Winkel said, pressing his hand a little harder over Franz’s eye.

“The third? Uhm... **L, S... U, G**, and... maybe it’s an **F**?”

Somebody swallowed a laugh in the darkness of the office. Franz would recognize that rough laugh among millions. It was his sister Janika. And her laugh could only mean one thing: problems. He had probably said the wrong letter.

“The letters on the fourth row,” Winkel insisted, without any compassion.

Letters? What letters? From this distance and with his eye covered, whatever was on the fourth row seemed like fly poop, at most. He tried anyway.

“**R... or P?... J, B, T, M... yeah, M.** And I think the last one is an **N**.”

He heard another burst of laughter from Janika, this time followed by a loud whack on the back of the head by his mother.

“Fifth line,” the doctor mumbled, spitting a bit of saliva onto Franz’s nose, where it stayed keeping the sweat drop some company.



“I... I think... I think...” Franz stuttered. A tear flooded his left eye.

“Come on, what letters do you see?”

“Well, I see... Now I see..”

“See what?”

Franz closed his eye, giving up. It was a lost cause.

“Nothing,” he admitted. “I can’t see anything else.”

The doctor removed his hand from Franz’s eye and pressed the light switch and a blinding light illuminated the room. The boy squinted his eyes, bothered, and wiped his face to clean off the bits of swear, saliva, and tears. In a corner, his parents looked at him worried. Janika, of course, was smiling. Winkel plopped down on his chair and an enormous stomach peeked out under his white coat.

“**Amblyopia!**” he roared as if he were insulting someone. “This boy has a textbook case of amblyopia.”

The whole family was blinking, confused. They didn’t understand a single word of medicine.

“We also call it ‘lazy eye’, have you heard of it?” the doctor continued. “In other words, one of his two eyes rests calmly while the other does all the work, to describe it plainly. Like a carriage being pulled by one hardworking horse and another lazy one. The more the first one pulls, the less of an effort the other one makes. So, this boy’s left eye is lazy. Very lazy. A

real slacker,” he laughed and his double-chin shook like crazy.

Franz didn't like at all how he talked about his eye as if he weren't there.

“Is there a cure?” Franz's father asked, anguished.

“We've been lucky to have discovered it quickly. Franz will get better with a little bit of patience, as long as he's disciplined and uses this in the meantime.”

The doctor stuck his hand into one of his desk drawers and searched around underneath a mountain of crumpled prescriptions. Franz couldn't imagine what he was going to pull out of there and a bunch of ideas came to mind, each one more extraordinary than the last. Gamma radiation glasses? A mechanical eye? A laser? The boy was disappointed when the doctor finally found what he was looking for. In the palm of his pudgy hands, there was nothing more than a skin-colored piece of plastic, more or less the size of a normal card.

“What... what is this?” he asked, distrustingly.

“Come on,” the doctor smiled. “Don't tell me you've never wanted to be a pirate.”

Franz didn't understand. His mother swallowed saliva, she grabbed his hand and she pressed it into hers.

“It's an eyepatch, dear. An adhesive eyepatch to cover your healthy eye. This way your lazy eye won't have any other option than to start working. Isn't that right, doctor?”



“Exactly, exactly! But don’t worry, child. You won’t even notice that you’re wearing it.”

An hour later, locked in front of the bathroom mirror, Franz would have loved to see Doctor Winkel eat his damn eyepatch. And see his enormous bag of greasy cookies turn into an enormous packet of greasy eyepatches. To say that he wouldn’t feel this giant sticker on his face! It didn’t even look like a pirate’s eyepatch at all, which would have at least been the good part. Pirate ones are black and don’t stick to your skin, everybody knows that. This eyepatch was a color that incredibly looked just like Franz’s skin. That’s why when he first looked at his face, his first impression was that in reality, there had never been an eye. It truly looked strange.

“Franz!” his father yelled, pounding on the door. “Are you planning on ever coming out of the bathroom?”

“No!” Franz screamed, furious.

“What exactly are you doing in there?”

“I’m trying to find my eye!”

“Don’t be a baby! Doctor Winkel said that you won’t have to wear it forever.”

“There was no convincing him. Franz stayed locked in the bathroom well into the night. Only much later, when his parents were tired of yelling and threw in the towel and went to their bedroom, he slid on his tiptoes to the kitchen and started devouring a

cold chicken leg and what was left of a withered salad that floated in oil.

Maybe Franz took the whole eyepatch situation so badly because, up until that moment, his life had been completely, undeniably, absolutely normal. He wasn't very tall or very short, not very smart or very dumb, not very talkative or very quiet. Maybe Franz was even the most normal boy I've ever met. He had a normal group of normal friends who played normal games and got normal grades, who fought over normal things and lived in normal houses surrounded by normal families that scolded them for normal things like jumping on the bed with dirty shoes or opening a new jar of jam when they hadn't finished the old one yet. In that way, that eyepatch was the first exceptional event of his life. Better said, it was the second.

In truth, the first extraordinary event of Franz's life was hidden in the darkness of his room at that moment, waiting for the boy to return from his secret banquet in the kitchen.

It was smiling sinisterly and had its hand placed on the light switch. When Franz entered his room and, expecting to find the light switch, found that frozen hand, his heart almost stopped. After, he understood.

"You're an idiot, Janika!" Franz screamed as quietly as he could, throwing himself towards his sister. "I'll get you for playing pranks!"

Janika was small and crafty and, like she always did, she managed to flee out of his room like a rat before her brother could catch her. Franz could still hear her choked breathing past the bedroom door, but the girl had already turned the bolt lock. That bedroom, whose door was always closed, was wild territory for Franz, unexplored and dangerous.

In any case, if I say that Janika was extraordinary in Franz's normal, average life, I don't only mean her cruel, perverse jokes. She was absolutely a special girl.

To start, Janika had a disease called asthma since she was young, which had been getting worse with time. It was difficult for her lungs to catch air, which is why her breathing sounded hoarse and fatigued. Often and without knowing why, when she breathed in through her nose, she let out an unpleasant whistle, like a young serpent. Most people didn't like that whistle.

But look: nobody could imagine a sweet, frail girl would be covered under a mountain of blankets and coats. Nobody. Janika was a sickly, but strong girl who didn't let anyone mess with her. Those who tried almost always earned a formidable scar with the outline of her sharpened teeth. Her father called her "my sweet wild child" and then she would smile, pleased.

Janika played some strange games that only she understood and she would often spend recess alone,

mumbling things to herself under her breath. In class, everyone knew she was a little weird and behind her back, they called her Crazy Janika or Infected Janika or both things at the same time.

Definitely, Franz and Janika seemed so different that it was hard to believe that they were siblings. It was even hard for them to believe it. The most normal boy in the world and the weirdest girl at school had landed in the same place. Franz was sure that his sister was nuts.



Whatever it may be that she thought about Franz, I don't have the slightest idea.

In any case, Franz didn't think about his sister anymore that night. He laid face up on his bed, closed his eyes, and very slowly peeled off the eyepatch on his face. It was like taking off some shoes that are still tied. A cold current of air came through the crack in the window and announced the first Fall storm, but it felt good on his warmed eye. That calmed him down a little. "Maybe," he said, "it's just a matter of getting used to it. This eyepatch doesn't have to change anything."

That thought helped him to fall asleep. On the other hand, he couldn't imagine exactly how wrong he was.

# The formidable Trio of Dweebs

Although nobody sensed the storm, the truth is that the next morning, the city woke up completely flooded by the rain. Traffic flowed at a snail's pace and the bus that took Franz to school skated over the puddles, splashing pedestrians that were galloping to get to their office in time. Franz's mood was as gloomy as the sky. During breakfast, underneath his cup of hot chocolate, he found a little handwritten note that said: WE'VE LOCATED YOUR EYE. COME TO LOST AND FOUND TO RETRIEVE IT. Franz crunched up the note in his fist, furious. He was so upset with Janika because of her practical joke that he had refused to take the same bus as her. And now he's late for class.

Franz pretended to look out the mirror, but he was inconspicuously watching the other passengers. Nobody seemed to be paying attention to his eyepatch. Many of them were half asleep with their heads rocking

and they were trying hard to hold on to the bus' rail to not lose their balance. A schoolboy with an eyepatch? What a little thing. They've already seen that before. An old lady who seemed to be more awake than the rest winked an eye at him and smiled. Was she being nice, was it pity, or some kind of joke? It was hard to be sure. Franz timidly returned a smile.

Finally, the bus stopped in front of the school gates. It was late and the entrance was empty. The cloying Ms. Kruegel's class had probably already started. Franz galloped through the halls up until the classroom and the echo of his steps bounced through the floors of the old, immense building. He dried off his sweat and touched his eyepatch to make sure that everything was in the right place, and he opened the door.

"Franz Kopf! Do you think this is the time for ...Oh!" Ms. Kruegel got closer and opened her eyes so much that a thick layer of makeup started to crack. "I'm sorry, dear. Come on, from now on you'll sit in the front row, next to Jakob. Berta, move to the back."

Berta started to put away all of her things to move to the fourth row. She did it without taking her eyes off of Franz. In reality, the whole class was watching him, intrigued. The boy's skin started to sweat around his eyepatch.

"I don't need to go to the front row, Miss," he mumbled. "I think I'm fine in my normal seat. Plus, my eye needs to get used to ..."

“No, no, Franz! There’s no trouble at all in having a broken-down eye. That doesn’t mean you’re completely helpless. History is full of distinguished cripples. Look at Toulouse-Latrec. He was a dwarf. Look at Miguel de Cervantes, with just one arm...”

“Yeah, but I’m not...”

“Homer was blind and Beethoven went deaf. Truly wrecked humans that fought against the calamity and made the best of the very little that life offered them, despite the mockery of normal people.”

“Thanks, but my eye just...”

“Of course. In my class, you’ll sit in the front row.” She placed her hand over her heart in a theatrical gesture. “I don’t want anybody to ever say that I look down on the handicapped.”

Franz sat down, annoyed. If Ms. Kruegel had tried to do him a favor, she wasn’t very skilled at it. Although he wouldn’t dare turn around, he could feel a ton of gazes brazing the back of his neck. He sneakily looked to the right. Jakob, the loser, was staring at him with curiosity, crossing his eyes horribly behind his colossal glasses. Franz avoided eye contact and focused on the board. It would half to wait.

The last class before recess was Math. Franz was already dizzy from deciphering numbers with his lazy eye when the recess bell went off. In a minute, he found himself surrounded by a ton of classmates as if



he were a rockstar attacked by the tabloids. That made him feel important.

“What is that patch?” “What’s it for?” “How long do you have to wear it for?” “Does it hurt?” “Are they going to do surgery on your eye?” “Is there a bloody, ugly scar underneath?”. Franz smiled. Nothing appears to have changed. He responded patiently to everyone’s questions and they all seemed satisfied. Later he headed towards the stairs and he grabbed the rail out of precaution, while everyone else leaped down. Without noticing, Jakob, the loser, followed him closely and continued eyeing him with curiosity.

The playground was wet and slippery, but not so much that it stopped the kids from playing their usual game of basketball. As always, Linda and Oliver, the sports aces, were named captains. Everybody else waited patiently in line to be chosen.

“I pick Giselle!” Oliver screamed.

“Matthias, with me!” Linda said.

“Kurt!”

“Moritz!”



“Uhm... Herbert.”

Franz got impatient. Normally, he was always one of the first ones to get out of the line because he was quick and was a good shot.

“Norman.”

“Minna!”

Olaf, Mathilda, Berta, Patrick... Franz looked to his right and left, more surprised than upset. There were only three left. On his right, Emily was swaying. She was a large, clumsy girl like a giraffe that appeared to have grown suddenly one day. On his left, Holger, the fattest boy in the class. He was certainly an enormous boy, and was chewing on the tip of his thumb. Franz, confused, tried making eye contact with Linda, but she wouldn't look at him.

“Emily” Linda said, and the giraffe girl stomped over to her.

“Uhm... Franz” Oliver mumbled, after thinking it over for a second.

“Well, Holger” Linda blew out in resignation.

Holger trotted over like an old hippopotamus to the far end of the court and the kids dispersed. Franz didn't. Franz stayed still. He was the second-to-last, he ended up second-to-last! He was so astonished that he had completely forgotten that he had to run towards the ball. And he stayed like that for a while until Oliver, seeing that someone from the rival team pass calmly by, screamed: “Franz, move it, damn it!”

Franz came down from the clouds, looked at Oliver, then looked for the ball. Full of rage, he ran to steal it from Linda, who was dribbling it masterfully in the middle of the court. He was going to show that he was still in shape. He took aim and launched like a panther towards the girl, shot out his hand, and... slipped on the wet floor, making him fall flat on his stomach against the concrete. Linda laughed at him, but Oliver ran to help him up.

“Thanks,” mumbled Franz.” “It was because of the puddle.”

“Right,” the other answered simply.



What Franz didn't suspect was that, while he reached out his hand to help, his captain had just decided that even chubby Holger would be a better choice than him for the next game. "As I thought, the eyepatch turned him useless," Oliver thought.

Franz's team was losing by twenty-two points when the bell rang, announcing the end of recess. The boy's right arm and knees hurt. He headed towards the porch behind the rest of the team. No one waited for him and no one saved a spot for him. That was when he realized that giant Emily and plump Holger were walking alongside him. He started to snifle.

"Good game, right?" Holger smiled.

"Yeah... yeah, of course. Good game," Franz answered, distracted.

"I love basketball!" Emily screamed suddenly with her screeching voice.

The three kids got in line together to go inside. Holger had begun to tell a strange story about Ms. Kruegel and Emily shook with raucous laughter. Franz wasn't paying attention. In the next grade's line, two older girls were watching him and giggling over their shoulders. But at who? At Holger? At Emily? Or at him? At all three of them? The truth is they probably looked strange: The Formidable Trio of Dweebs. One of the girls started having a real laugh attack. Franz sneakily stepped away from his "new friends". Emily

and Holger didn't seem to be worried. Maybe they were used to it.

The rest of the class was a true hell for Franz. He kept thinking that if the girls from recess found him ridiculous, maybe everyone else would, too. He spent the rest of the day watching his classmates in anguish. As soon as he heard a mumble or a little giggle behind his back, he would turn around with any excuse to check if they were making fun of him. On one occasion, he surprised Olaf who was rubbing his eye hard. Was he making fun of the eyepatch? After, Moritz whispered something in Minna's ear. Minna answered something that from Franz's desk sounded like "his eye". But maybe she had said "his lie" or "this guy", or ... how could he be sure? Little notes were being passed from one side of the class to the other, as was typical. Franz worriedly followed the messages' trace, imagining that they would contain shocking jokes about his eye... or drawings? Or horrible nicknames like Weak Eye or Halfeyed? In his old seat in the fourth row, dumb Berta babbled with everyone around her.

That day Franz went home alone on the bus, trying to hide his eyepatch by burying his head between the Science textbook's pages.

"Hi, Franz" his father greeted him. "How was your day? Any problem with the eyepatch?"

"None," Franz responded bitterly. "A great day. Awesome."

“We told you so,” his father answered, distracted.

“Who’s going to care?”

“Exactly,” Franz brooded. Nobody cared about me.

# Secret Meeting in the Third Floor Bathroom

In just a few weeks, Franz's life changed completely. The boy quickly got tired of being the last person picked when they were making teams for a game. And got tired of getting left behind on the stairs for not being able to run up the steps without tripping. And got tired of not having anyone save him a seat in the cafeteria. And got tired of people looking at his eyepatch over their shoulders when they talked about him. He became bashful and distrusting. He walked with his head drooping down as if he were looking for something he lost. And then in class, he focused on the board without paying attention to anything else.

The worse part, of course, was recess. Franz had never been so bored in his life. A boring recess is more spine-chilling than three Language Arts classes in a row. Worse than listening to a harmonica concert from

beginning to end and worse than an entire afternoon playing Parcheesi.

It's boredom in its purest state, a lethal boredom. An audacious assassin could bore his victims to death with any of these methods (yes, including the Parcheesi one) and no one would ever suspect a thing.

To survive the boredom, Franz brought his notebook with him to recess and, sitting in a corner, set to mark up pages with drawings of monsters and racecars. All around him, hundreds of kids were running, chasing each other, kicking each other, screaming, and rolling around on the playground. But not everyone. Little by little, from his corner, Franz started noticing that there were other kids occupying the other corners. Far away, behind the groups that were playing football or tag, several students spent recess sitting and making drawings in the sand or reviewing the history lesson, or simply watching the clouds above the playground. Franz didn't know all of them, but he realized that one way or another, they all had something special about them.

Under one of the porch corners, there was usually a boy with monstrous braces that seemed like they were about to jump out of his mouth. He played with a leather bag full of marbles. The girl in the pink tracksuit also played there, but with bottlecaps. She had dried, stringy hair like an old mop and wore horribly colored socks underneath her sandals. Behind the gardener's shed, a big-headed little boy from third grade



hid away and was always pounding away on the keys of a calculator, multiplying who knows what. Jakob, the loser, would sit with a book against the back gate. There was also the girl that played with the bald Barbie and the sickly kid with marks on his leg and that other girl that croaked when she talked... If there were extra players for the basketball game, even Holger and Emily spent recess sitting down, chewing on their sandwiches in silence.

Franz left the monsters and racecars to one page and started to draw a giant and detailed map of the recess playground, marking exactly where the weirdest people in the school were with colored dots. Suddenly he realized that every corner belonged only to one tenant and that none of them shared it with anyone else. If any of the kids missed school, their corner would remain deserted and silent that day like an abandoned nest. Mysteriously, the weird kids never seemed to talk to each other. If you didn't have anything better to do after finishing his homework, Franz would sometimes stretch out his map on his bed and lay down to reflect on these things.

One Thursday, when there were only five minutes left before the end of recess, Franz finished his work of art. In the end, the map had more colored dots than he had imagined. The boy felt quite proud of his work. A hoarse voice leapt over him:

“It's missing something.”



It was Jakob, the loser. But he wasn't looking at it. He was leaning against the wall, pretending to clean the thick lenses on his glasses.

"Are you talking to me?" Franz asked.

"Yes, but don't look at me. I said that your map is missing something."

"What's that?"

"*You still have to draw yourself on it.*" Jakob continued, looking towards the playground. "You're just as different as them. In any case, it's a good map. Better than mine."

"You also draw maps?"

The recess bell went off at that moment and all the activities were suddenly interrupted. The loser seemed to become impatient.

"I can't stay here. Listen... No, don't look at me. I'm searching for some people like you to organize something... Don't look at me!"

"It's so hard to talk like this! Organize what?"

"A place where you don't need to be embarrassed about your eyepatch."

"Honestly I don't get you."

"You'll see, but I think that it'll be interesting for the both of us. If you want, wait for me a ten to five at the third-floor bathrooms, the ones at the end of the hall.

"But the school closes at five..."

"Not for everyone. I'm taking off. Don't look at me!" Jakob started walking towards the porch, but

when he was next to Franz, he bent over like he was fixing the tongue of his shoes. “I know you don’t understand anything, but trust me. Trust us. You don’t have to spend any more recesses drawing little monsters. See you later, Franz.”



“You’re just as different as they are,” Jakob had said. What the hell was he talking about? How was he going to be different? The loser had implied that it had to do with his eyepatch. But a person doesn’t just become different because of a small eyepatch that fits in the palm of their hand... Or do they? Is it possible that a minuscule sticker has the power to transform

somebody? Was there a “Franz with an eyepatch” and a “Franz without an eyepatch”?

His parents couldn't help but notice that Franz was lost in thought during snacktime. When the boy distractedly went to put jam on his ham and olive sandwich, his father said:

“I get the feeling that you're somewhere else, Franz.”

“Do you guys think I'm normal?”

“You ask such strange things!” his mother said. “Of course you're normal.”

“So you guys think that I'm like everyone else?”

“You're just as good as anyone else. Has someone been messing with you, son?”

“No,” Franz looked down. “So, I'm exactly the same as everyone else?”

“Exactly the same,” his mother reaffirmed him.

“So anybody could substitute me. Anybody could be Franz Kopf.”

His parents forgot about eating and opened their eyes wide. Franz had arrived at a very odd conclusion. Janika, rummaging through an assortment of cookies in the pantry for something she liked, didn't miss a single word of the conversation.

The next day, Franz kept himself as busy as possible after history class so he would be the last one to leave. He grabbed his notebooks one by one, each book and each mechanical pencil, placing them all nearly in his backpack. When he was finally alone, he

left the class and, instead of heading down the stairs towards the exit, he stealthily went up towards the third floor. A solitary and silent hallway directed him to the bathrooms. Jakob had been wise to choose a place so isolated.

Franz stood in front of the boys' bathroom, slowly pushed the door, and headed inside. There were three sinks, three toilets with green doors, and the smell of plumbing, just like in all the bathrooms in the school. This one seemed especially abandoned. However, once Franz had entered and closed the door, he had a sinister feeling that a muffled murmur was coming from somewhere, like a person breathing faintly.

"Hello?" he whispered.

No answer. Franz went up to the first stall and opened the latch. In horror movies, you normally have to open two or three doors before finding something that makes you scream. Franz didn't need to wait so long.

"Ahhhhh!" The boy breathed in harshly to fill up his lungs which had suddenly gone dry. "But... but what are you all doing here?"

Balancing on top of the toilet bowl, three boys looked at him with their faces pale as ghosts. They were just as scared as he was. Franz recognized them immediately because they were all on his map of weird kids. They were no less than the sickly boy with the marked-up legs, the boy with twisting iron in his teeth,

and the stuttering boy from the next grade, who apologized while lowering himself onto the ground.

“We-we-we-we thought you were th-th-the janitor.”

Seven other boys came out of the other stalls at that moment (three from one, and four from the other). They were all old acquaintances from Franz’s map, although he only personally knew Holger, who gave him a friendly smile.

“Hi, Franz!” he said in a low voice. “I didn’t know someone from our class was coming.”

“Hi, Holger,” Franz answered. “Look, do you know what’s going on here?”

Someone answered in a serious voice from the bathroom door.

“We’re about to make history.”

Franz turned around with an annoyed look on his face. If, in the end, he decided to continue forward with all this, he was going to need to explain to Jakob that he didn’t like people sneaking up on him from behind. And even less so with tacky phrases like that.