

Detective Ito

and the

ARGUMENTS

I hate galas.

Now, to be clear, I don't mean parties, shindigs, or hootenannies. Those are all fine, especially with a little hooch thrown in the mix. No, I mean galas. You can't even say the word without sounding pretentious. Try it! *Galas*. The type of gathering that the upper crust has where the best entertainment you're likely to come across is when a couple rich brats get all testy with each other trying to determine whose...skyscraper...is bigger.

(Spoiler warning: they may talk a skyscraper game, but they're usually more in the one-floor motel range with bugs to match, if you get my drift.)

Still, a paycheck is a paycheck, and that's why I found myself in a too-clingy dress ('thoughtfully' provided by my employer) that probably cost more than my month's rent. It had sequins on it too. I've never understood the purpose of sequins on clothes. They scratch you, stab you, and then fall off. At least his assistant had compromised with me and let me wear heels only a couple inches high. I still felt like I was in imminent danger of falling on my face, but at least I was steady enough that my ankles would probably last the night.

"Ah, Detective Ito," spoke Sir Charles Cartwright IV (yes, really, the fourth), as he came over towards me, a glass of what I fervently hoped was whiskey outstretched in my direction. Trailing behind him was a woman I didn't know, and who was actually showing more reluctance to be here than I felt, if that were possible. "Allow me to introduce Dr. Deborah Schultz. Deborah is the head of my antiquities collection, verification, and restoration team. Deborah, this is Detective Dinah Ito, the private detective I brought on tonight to add a little to our security."

The doctor looked me up and down, and I returned the favor. She was a couple years past 50, if I had to wager. Mouse-brown hair that was going grey, thin lips, and a somewhat dumpy figure even in a party dress. The divots on her nose spoke of normally wearing glasses (so contacts tonight, most likely), and her hazel eyes that had sized me up in an instant. Sir Charles, meanwhile, was 74 and looked healthy for his age, with nearly-white hair, blue eyes, and an ability to wear a tuxedo that spoke to decades of practice.

It made sense that he'd had practice, of course. Sir Charles was the owner of one of the finest private collections of Mediterranean antiquities in the world and was the one hosting the gala tonight. He was a widower with two grown children who would also be in attendance, and also a financial genius, if the current estimates of his net worth were accurate. (Yes, I do research on my clients. Honestly, I wish I had done it before accepting the job, since I'm pretty sure I could have asked for a lot more pay.)

"A pleasure, Detective," said the doctor, with a tone suggesting that it wasn't as she offered her hand to shake. I did so while taking the offered glass from Sir Charles. "I hope you can do something more than what the police and building security can do, but, to be frank, I doubt it."

“Stick with Deborah, Frank doesn’t suit you,” I quipped, taking a healthy sip from the glass. Another thing I hated about galas: even if they have the hard stuff, it’s always too smooth. Call me cheap, but if booze doesn’t go down my throat kicking and screaming I feel like it’s trying to lie to me. “You’re right though. Odds are good I won’t be of any help tonight. Even if she makes her move, Miss Mystery is much more likely to be taken down by them than by me. Still, if someone wants to pay me to stand around and drink, who am I to say no?” I winked at her and downed the rest of the glass as she glared at me.

“Come now, Detective,” cut in Sir Charles with an awkward chuckle. “You sell yourself short. I know for a fact that you solved the Toms River murders, recovered the Gaia’s Tear Emerald, and helped a close acquaintance of mine with a rather...delicate matter to his great satisfaction. The constables outside and security inside are all well and good, but they have such rigid thinking. You, from what I hear, are much more prone to thinking ‘outside the box’, as it were. Considering this Miss Mystery character has been making off with priceless art and antiquities for a few years now without getting caught, I feel that some of that thinking is called for.”

I waved off his praise and set my empty glass on the tray of a young female caterer that was passing by. “I do my best when I come in *after* a crime has been committed. Preventing one? Not really my forte. Still, you’re the one with the checkbook, so I will do the best I can. Can I see the note that she left, again?”

He nodded and reached into his inside jacket pocket. Pulling out a card, he handed it to me, and Dr. Schultz leaned in closer to see what it read as well:

*Greetings Sir Charles,
I regret to inform you that I have taken a liking to your recently-acquired item, what you have termed in the press the Argos Engine. As such, I intend to take it for myself at the gala where you unveil it. I thank you for your understanding in this matter.*

-MM

I nodded. I knew it by heart at this point, of course, but I just couldn’t seem to convince myself that I’d gleaned all I could from it. The police and I had both been over it with a fine-toothed comb, obviously, but aside from the words that had been printed on it, there weren’t any additional clues to be gotten. “Alright,” I said with a sigh. “Let’s see this thing finally.” I started walking over to the central case in the room, while Sir Charles and Dr. Schultz hurried to catch up. My head start gave me time to flag down another glass of whiskey. This one I resolved to drink more slowly. After all, I didn’t want myself getting tipsy until at *least* halfway through my shift.

“The Argos Engine,” said Dr. Schultz as she came up beside me, in a tone of reverence. ‘Devout’ is a term people tend to use for the religious, but I’ve found devout followers of just about anything, from pop stars to politics. Dr. Schultz was clearly a devotee of history. “Have you heard of the Antikythera mechanism, detective?” she asked. At the shake of my head, she

sighed. "A wonderful piece of ancient Greek craftsmanship, found off of the island of Antikythera. It's thought to be an example of the world's first computational device, able to calculate the positions of stars, planets, the moon...so many things, and so precisely! This, though...this could be several orders of magnitude more groundbreaking than that! This could be a true computer! Now, in 1837 Charles Babbage proposed the Analytical Engine, which theoretically would have been the world's first programmable computer, though it was never properly built, mainly due to the costs involved at the time. The Argos Engine, from what we can see through x-ray tomography, shares many features with the Analytical Engine, but on a much smaller scale, and with even more pieces involved! This could have been the world's first Turing-complete computer, and who knows what it could calculate?!"

I took a look inside the case where the item was. It was essentially a cube, about 8 inches to a side, though it had been propped up on a clear stand so that one of the corners was facing down, and it was possible to see all sides. Most of it was covered in some kind of crusty gray-green deposit from the seabed, but here and there I could see clear indications that it was some kind of artificial...something. "I'll take your word for it, doc," I replied. "Aren't you worried it'll fall down off that stand if someone bumps this thing though? Whoops!" I faked a stumble towards the case, and the doctor let out one of the funniest squeaks of alarm I'd heard in a long while. I looked back to her and winked.

"A concession to my vanity, I fear," spoke up Sir Charles. "Deborah wanted it laid flat as well, but I want my guests to see the full grandeur of it. Seeing 5/6ths of it just doesn't have the same effect."

"If you say so," I sighed as our group was approached by two couples, one a man and a woman, and the other two women. These were Sir Charles' son and daughter and their spouses, if my research held true. The son, Archibald Cartwright, was the first to speak as he looked me over.

"Who's this, Dad? A new stepmom candidate? I can't say I disapprove of her looks, but I would prefer it if she weren't young enough to be your grandchild." At Sir Charles' awkward sputtering, the doctor's beet-red face, and my arched eyebrow he laughed. "Forgive me, detective. I know who you are. I just have too much fun pulling my dad's leg. Archibald Cartwright and my wife Camilla," he said and held out his hand, which I shook while giving a nod to his wife. Archibald had taken a different tack from his father growing up, and rather than collect antiquities for himself he had worked his way up to become curator of the best history museum in the region. As for Camilla, there wasn't much to say. She had been hired on as a museum tour guide a few decades previously, the pair had hit it off, and then gotten married. No kids, and with both of them getting towards their 50's, I was doubtful they'd be changing that.

"Still can't stay professional, eh, Archie?" smirked his sister Emma. "Wonderful to meet you, detective," she continued. "Thank you for helping with this event. I'm Emma Cartwright-Ricci, and this is my wife Lucia." I gave them both cordial greetings. Whereas Archibald had gotten the collector half of his father, Emma had gotten the love for travel. Thanks to a sizable loan

from Sir Charles, she had opened a luxury hotel in Malta, which soon became a successful chain all around the Mediterranean. Her partner of many years (and wife as soon as Malta legalized same-sex marriage) was an Italian heiress. They were both pushing 40, but looked a decade younger. It must be nice to be rich. I wondered how they managed to keep up their personal maintenance with them being on the road as much as it sounded like they were in my research. Give me four hours on a plane and I look like hell for two days.

Pleasantries completed, I looked around the room. More guests had begun to arrive (those who were too late for the doors opening and too early to be fashionably late) and I nodded. "Time to earn my pay, I suppose. Sir Charles, if you could take me on one last walk around? After that I'll leave you to it." He nodded and we started to walk around the full gallery, accompanied by Dr. Schultz, who said she wanted an excuse to not have to mingle yet.

To the immediate right were two doors, one of which was the emergency exit while the other led to the security room. Pulling a small keyring from his pocket, Sir Charles held up a single key on it. "Master key. Only I and Mr. Villasenor, the head of security, have one." He unlocked and opened the door, and we filed inside. "It locks every time it shuts," he finished, closing the door behind us.

This room was much more interesting to me than anything I had seen outside. Along the left walls were four rows of five screens apiece, each showing a different angle on the gallery. There were also five monitors at stations below them, with several buttons and a joystick beside each one. In the three chairs in front of these stations were three security guards. They had turned at our entry and the one in the middle seat stood. "Detective Ito. Jorge Villasenor, head of security for the Cartwright Gallery."

"Ex-cop?" I asked, shaking his hand.

"Heh, is it that obvious?"

"If you know what to look for."

"Well, at least it shows you've got good eyes, Detective. Yeah, I left the force about 5 years ago. Kept getting passed over for promotions, you know how it is. Now Sir Charles pays me better to stare at screens and make these guys walk the rounds for me. I think it was a good choice," he chuckled. "So welcome to the nerve center! We've got 25 cameras set up all throughout the gallery, kitchen, and restoration room. We skipped the bathrooms of course. Most of them are in corners or as close to corners as we could make it. These monitors down here let us take control of up to five cameras at a time, to pan and zoom as we may want. No sound on the cameras, unfortunately, but with how lively this place can get when it's open I doubt we'd be able to hear anything clearly anyways." With a gesture, he indicated a large metal box on the right wall. "Back here is our...well we call it the fuse box, but anything electrical we might need to access is here. Alarm systems, storage devices for our security footage, and yes, fuses."

“Fair. Can I look at it, Mr. Villasenor?” I asked.

“Jorge, please, and...Sir Charles?” Jorge looked to Sir Charles, who nodded. The security man shrugged and took out a smaller key. “Only myself and the other security guards have this key,” he said. “Mainly so we can let an electrician in to work on it if something shorts.” He unlocked the metal cover and pulled the two halves of it open.

“Understandable,” I muttered, looking over the equipment. I wasn’t an expert electrician, but I’d seen enough security systems to usually know when one had been tampered with. After about a minute, I was satisfied that everything was wired correctly.

“Oh no, Winters is here,” said Dr. Schultz, and everyone turned to look. The room erupted in grumbles. Gloria Winters, one of the most famous gossip journalists in the country, was sauntering over to the buffet table. She had a sharper nose for scandal than your dog does for dropped steak. Rumor had it that she had faked some of those scandals, but nothing was ever proven.

“Want me to escort her off the property, Sir Charles?” asked Jorge, closing the doors to the electronics and relocking it. “This is officially private property, after all.”

Sir Charles seemed to consider it, but shook his head. “No, she would just write about how she was manhandled by us. Maybe if we’re lucky and treat her nicely she’ll write something favorable.” He looked at the woman on the screen a while longer, then over to me. “Satisfied? Ready to look over the rest?” I nodded and we continued on, now accompanied by Jorge as well. Out the door on the other side was the next section of the gallery. To the right, judging by the caterers who were coming out of the double doors, was the kitchen I had seen on the monitors. The smells coming out of them were excellent, causing my stomach to grumble. I shut it up with a little more whiskey. I’m a pragmatist like that.

I have a rule of never entering a working kitchen if I don’t have to, ever since I almost lost a hand while chasing someone through Chinatown, so I left it alone. We walked back and turned the corner to the left, passing more displays of ancient art and artifacts before returning to the main gallery room. There were of course paintings and hung partial mosaics on the display walls, but the center of attention was clearly meant to be the Argos Engine. We passed by it, along with some truly appetizing food on buffet tables to our left, and on our right a magnificent 7-tiered cake. It had been decorated to look like the viewer was descending into the Mediterranean Sea as you went down the tiers, with the top a shimmering sky-blue, the bottom an amazingly dark sea green, and various images of sea life and even some underwater ruins on it all. It hadn’t been cut yet, but I promised myself I’d get a taste before I left.

Our little gang kept on walking through another set of double doors, into yet another room showcasing pieces of Sir Charles Cartwright IV’s personal collection. On the far wall were the bathrooms, and I took a peek into the ladies’. I have a theory that you can always tell the true

class of a place by its bathroom, and this one was pretty nice. My own in my apartment, not so much. So, theory supported.

To the left of the bathrooms was a door labeled "Restoration Room." Sir Charles let us in to this one as well. "Myself, Dr. Schultz, and her research team have access to here, though only myself and the doctor can unlock the cabinets in the back where the pieces we're actively working on restoring are currently being kept. We always pack it all away before a gala, after all. They're not ready to show, yet, and they could still tempt people with light fingers."

I had been distracted. "Is that a 3D printer back there on the right?"

"Ah! Yes it is!" Sir Charles replied. "See, we had this wonderful idea that, using all those fancy scans we can do to artifacts, we could actually print recreations of them using this! That way, before we work on restoring the actual item that has probably gotten hundreds or thousands of years' worth of dirt, rock, calcifications, or other debris on it, we could attempt to simulate what the restoration would be like. Obviously it's not an exact science, and after a few tries we figured out it wouldn't work with the Argos Engine because it's too complex. Still, we figure that if doctors can have virtual surgeries, we can have practice restorations."

"Uh huh," I said. A simple yes would have been preferable, but I thought that telling him that would probably feel similar to me telling my nephew that I didn't really care about the lore behind the card game they were making me play. (I still felt bad about that, but come on, he was in his 20's, so he should have been able to take it.) "Well I think that about does it for the walk, right? Back out to the right and we're in the main area again, with an emergency exit on the right."

"Indeed," Sir Charles replied, locking the door behind him.

"Oh! Ceilings! Anything I should know?" I asked.

"Plaster, about 9 inches of insulation, wiring, and support, and then the roof. Some air ducts, but I doubt anything as big as a person would slip through them," replied Jorge. "And those windows on the exterior wall are fixed in the frame, they won't open."

"Excellent," I said, smiling at him and finishing the whiskey I was carrying. "You all go mingle. I'll settle in for the boring bit."

It had been a few hours, and I was, indeed, shockingly bored. Watching rich folks wander in and out, watching what amounted to a very important and old piece of junk not move, watching people watching the piece of old junk like it *might* move... stakeouts were the hardest part of being a detective. I spent most of my time leaning against the wall next to the front doors, but I admit, I did interrogate the buffet tables a few times, to my stomach's satisfaction. At one point I

spent a few productive minutes debating with myself about which of the guests was secretly the sleaziest. Some guards that were outside in the gallery switched places with those that were inside the security room, probably to give them a break, but it looked like Jorge was going to be in there for the duration. I was a bit irked by that, since he seemed like someone I could get along with. The others I had met wandered in and out of the main room, mingling I supposed. I had a little bit of excitement when I saw the young lady caterer that had taken my glass earlier closing the blinds on all the windows. When I asked her about it, she told me that the staff had been told that there was going to be a late night thunderstorm in the area, and to close the blinds so that lightning flashes wouldn't disrupt the party. Personally I'm a fan of a good thunderstorm, but who was I to say no? So I went back to my spot by the front door and resumed watching people. At a guess I'd have said the gala reached about 75 people at its height, and while I'm good, I am not able to track 75 people everywhere at once, so I kept my eyes on the prize.

"Detective Ito, isn't it?" asked Gloria Winters, sidling up next to me with a glass of champagne in her hand. "Helped out Samuel Arthur with that little bit of blackmail he was dealing with?"

"Ms. Winters, if you know who I am then you know that I believe in discretion for past clients."

"Ah, so he was a client of yours. Very interesting, very interesting," she chuckled, placing the champagne to her lips for a moment. "And now here you are, looming over a gala. Well, as much as one can loom in a dress like that," she continued, eyeing me. "So, is it true? Miss Mystery has targeted the Argos Engine?"

I hate muckrakers almost as much as I hate galas. It's not so much that I hate what they do, though. It's that I hate that they invariably seem to know more than I do, and I'm supposed to be the one getting paid to know it all! "I have no idea what you're talking about, Ms. Winters. I am simply here to work security. A girl's got to pay her bills, you know?"

"Of course, darling, of course," she said sweetly. "Well, if you ever want a little help paying those bills and have something to trade for it, do let me know, alright? Ta!" She had taken a couple steps away from me when I heard a muffled *bang* and all the lights went out.

With annoying predictability, the first thing that happened was there were plenty of shouts and screams of surprise. My eyes don't adjust the fastest, so for a few seconds that was all I knew. When my initial surprise wore off, I shouted as loud as I could, "*NOBODY MOVE!* If anyone so much as *thinks* of leaving I will personally make it my sole aim in life to see how far I can fit my shoe into you, and I am *very* inventive!" There are times, I have found, where changing the focus of fear and confusion is the only way to actually take control of a situation. Luckily, this was one of those times. I kicked off the damnable heels and blindly started heading towards where I thought the Argos Engine display was. I got a few bumps, threw a few elbows, and said some words in combinations that I doubted some of the people present had ever heard before, but after about half a minute of pressing myself through I thought I was near where the pedestal was. By that time some of the folks near the windows had shown enough personal initiative to

get the blinds lifted, so even though there was indeed a storm happening outside there was some very faint light coming in through them. Some of the others had gotten their cellphones out and were starting to use them as flashlights, and judging by the flashes of beams I could see in other rooms, the guards that were working the outside had some lights on them as well.

I heard a door open and was about to go off on a tirade, but then I heard Jorge's voice call out, "Detective Ito! What's it like in here?"

"I'll let you know for sure as soon as I can see, but I think we're all mostly calm. What happened?"

"The fuse box blew."

"So reset them already!"

"No, I mean, it *blew*. There were sparks and flames and stuff. We managed to put it out, but I don't think we're getting these lights back until we can get an electrician up here."

"Ugh, fantastic. Well, I suggest you have your people guard the doors."

"Why? Shouldn't we be getting out?"

"Shine a light over here," I said, and after blinking away the effects of having a beam of light on my face for a moment, I looked at the case where the Argos Engine should have been.

Instead, laying there flat in the case was an elegant black card that simply showed:



The nice thing about having the police staking out the building as well, I reflected, was that getting a professional electrician on short notice was considerably easier. It had taken a couple hours of work, but the lights were back on. The backup drives for the security cameras and the alarm wiring were all shot, though, according to the guy.

The cause was a device about as long as a hot dog, made of batteries and coils of wire. It was, he claimed, a crude but effective electromagnetic pulse generator, and it had been in close enough proximity to blow the fuses and fry the more sensitive electronics completely, which led to the fire and further damage.

While we'd been waiting for him to give us his diagnosis, I had gone out the front door (escorted by one of the boys in blue, of course) and to the coat check area so that I could get my supplies bag. I'd really wanted to have it with me from the start, but I knew I'd look out of place enough without a tattered messenger bag slung over my shoulder. In it was a magnifying glass, some rudimentary fingerprinting equipment, a flashlight, handcuffs, a notepad, a pencil, and other items I thought I'd need tonight if the crime did actually happen. Oh, and a toy gun. I wasn't licensed to carry, and wasn't really looking to be, but have a toy that's realistic enough at twenty paces and you'd be amazed how effective it can be, especially when pulled out of my normal underarm holster.

Coming back in, I nodded to the ranking officer here. "Alright Captain Weston, what have we got?"

"A theft, Dinah. One that happened right under your nose," he replied, rubbing his eyes.

"Hey, you and your boys were all watching the building too, and you had the advantage of always being able to see. You can't pin this on me completely."

"Yeah, yeah. This one's going to be a PR nightmare though. The upper crust is here, Gloria Winters is here, and we were warned about it in advance. That damned Miss Mystery is going to lead me to an early retirement. Or an aneurysm."

"Let's not go digging our graves yet, Weston. I was next to the door when the lights went out, and I didn't hear them open. Every other way out of here is an emergency exit, which make a lot more noise opening and shutting. It's probably safe to say that whoever took the Engine is either still here, or escaped in such a way that there will be plenty of evidence left behind. You and yours haven't let anyone out, right?"

"Right. I've got everyone taking statements."

"Good. I'm going to do a little poking around myself. Did you get the keys off of the guards, Sir Charles, and Dr. Schultz?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I borrow them?"

The Captain looked at me, unamused.

I gave him my most sultry smile and wrapped an arm around him. "Hey Cap..." I began, softly.

"Mmhmm?" he responded, unimpressed.

"Let me have the keys, and I'll..." I whispered, walking my fingers up his chest. "...forget the fact that you still owe me a hundred dollars from the last poker game..." I smirked and pushed myself away from him.

His eyebrows rose a little at that, and then he sighed. Fishing in his pockets for a couple moments, he held out the keys I wanted. "Oh. Oh no. Looks like Detective Ito has used her incredible pickpocketing skills on me again. I should arrest her next time." He slapped the keys into my hand. "Make it quick, Dinah. I need them back before the questioning is done."

I gave him a mock salute and went on my way. First I went to the security room. I took a brief moment to look at the lock on the door with my magnifying glass. *Scratches!* ...that didn't help me. Honestly, most locks have scratches around the keyhole. People slip, it happens. The handle had at least not been unscrewed or forced though. I had no idea how someone would have done that in the middle of a gala with me a few feet away most of the time, but hey, it was good to be sure.

The inside still smelled a little acrid. The electrician the police had brought in was working at the wiring, seeing what could be salvaged. I was more interested in the lock of the fuse box door, though. It, too, hadn't been forced. Nodding, I walked over to where Jorge was leaning against a wall. "Rough day to be a guard," I said by way of greeting.

"You're telling me," he replied, rubbing his face. "An EMP? No way I saw *that* coming."

"Any idea how it got there?"

He looked at me and grinned. "Going right for the jugular, aren't you? No, I don't have any idea. I was in that room all night, except when I was helping give you the tour. I left two of my guys here when we left for that, and they were there when I got back. Sure, the doors on the fuse box don't exactly screech when they're getting opened, but I'd hear metal on metal behind me without any problem."

"You have some of your guys with you in the room all night?"

"Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Well sure. Had to give the guys breaks now and again, and it's more important to have guys on the floor than in the room. So yeah, I was alone in the room a few times. It wasn't for long, but it would have been plenty of time to plant an EMP."

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked, eyes narrowed.

“I’m an ex-cop, remember? I know how this’ll work. They’ll check alibis and timetables, and it’ll get found out then anyways. Remember, though, I’m head of security. There’s probably at least a few different ways I could have swiped the thing without having to try to wrap my head around how to build an EMP.”

“Like looping the footage once everyone has gone for the night and taking it then.”

‘Yeah, there you go.’

I shrugged. It wasn’t the best reasoning I’d ever heard, but it was something at least. “Alright, thanks. Don’t suppose you saw anything interesting on the monitors?” He shook his head. “Ok, let me know if you think of anything.” At his nod, I left. I proceeded to search everywhere I could think of for where the Argos Engine could have been hidden. It was obviously large and bulky enough that no one was hiding it in their pocket or in a handbag. First stop was the kitchen, but the police seemed to be handling that pretty thoroughly. Next I started checking around the bases of the other displays. None of them had any convenient openings, and while I supposed it was possible that they may have hollow bases, that would mean the culprit removed whatever was on it, lifted the display up, slid the Engine into place, lowered the display, and put the item back on it in a manner close enough to how it had been to not arouse suspicion. Of course, they would have had to do all this while in near-darkness, with everyone in a mild state of panic and light beams flashing everywhere. Possible, but unlikely. Moving on, the bathrooms were next. Aside from a smell that told me that someone’s stomach had not been happy with the catering, I didn’t find anything of note in them either. Lastly there was the Restoration Room. When I entered, it looked about the same as it had earlier. Clean desks, with various archeological tools ready to be used on whatever was placed before them. This time, though, I had the key to the cabinets.

I made a beeline for them, unlocking them all and throwing them open. On the second from the bottom shelf, I hit pay dirt! Then I saw what was next to the object of my search, and my smile rolled over and died.

When I came walking back into the main gallery idly tossing the Argos Engine back and forth between my hands, both Sir Charles and Dr. Schultz let out cries that sounded like a mix between joy and alarm. They ran towards me, gesturing frantically to stop. Meanwhile, I looked around at the rest of the room. Both Archibald’s and Camilla’s eyes were worriedly tracking the Engine back and forth in my hands, whereas Emma looked relieved and Lucia looked confused. Captain Weston came over quickly.

“You found it!” he exclaimed.

“Your boys would have too, eventually. It wasn’t hidden.” Without much care, I tossed the device over to Dr. Schultz.

She managed to catch it, to her credit. “Be careful with thi...oh. That was in rather poor form, I must say.” She handed it Sir Charles, who, after taking it, became equally crestfallen.

“Now you know how I felt,” I replied. At the Captain’s confused look, I explained to him. “For a while they were trying to print 3D replicas of the Argos Engine as it now is, so they could practice restoring it. I found that one in a cabinet next to some half-broken ones. The replicas have a little number printed on a corner, which I found once I had the idea to look for it.”

“They also feel differently, when you’ve held the real one for long enough,” sighed Sir Charles. “The 3D print looks the same, but when you’re printing with modern materials, you’re going to end up with differences in density. If it weren’t for that, we would have ruined the real thing after the first one we printed. Luckily we noticed, and started programming in the numbers for future batches. Here, Captain, care for a souvenir?” he asked with a dry chuckle, offering the police officer the replica. Meanwhile, I’d gone over to the table near the windows. The caterers had still never gotten around to cutting the cake. I was in a funk, so I helped myself to a fingertip’s worth of frosting. Cream cheese. I’d probably sampled the red velvet layer. I wasn’t a fan of red velvet. This was not my night.

While I’d been wrapped up in my confectionary contemplation, I hadn’t noticed Ms. Winters come up beside me. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“More like a quarter for the swear jar.”

“Oh dear. Well, darling, I’ve been conveniently near some conversations that have been going on that might interest you. Plus, of course, I do make it my business to know *everything* about *everyone*. Perhaps we can engage in a little tit-for-tat.”

“I don’t have anything to give you, Gloria, even if I would.” Then a thought struck me. “But...if you help me solve this case, it’ll get you out of here and back to your keyboard quicker, and you’d know everything before the official police announcement. You’d have one hell of a scoop for your editor.”

Gloria considered this for a moment. “Alright, I suppose it’s a deal. What do you want to know?”

“Everything you do about possible motives.”

“Motives? Darling, who knows why Miss Mystery does these things?”

I shook my head vehemently. “It wasn’t Miss Mystery.”

“But the card-”

“I know, it’s her symbol. The declaration note sounded like her too, but she wasn’t the one who took the Argos Engine.”

“Well, if you say so, darling. I suppose if you discount a random theft, there are indeed plenty of motives to go around. Take Sir Charles Cartwright IV, for instance. Now, he is actually in a legal battle, and it’s become something of a toss-up on whether he’ll get to keep the Engine. He’s been burning up considerable funds trying to win it. And what is the name of this person he’s doing battle with, you ask? Why none other than Archibald Cartwright, his son! Apparently the expedition that found the Engine was a joint venture between Sir Charles and Archibald’s museum, the first real father/son team-up on something like this. The museum got a lot of good artifacts out of it, but obviously the Argos Engine outshines any of them, and so Archibald was suing to force his father to give it to the museum. That’s Archibald’s motive too, in case you missed it, darling. No one knew where the Engine was going to land. Camilla, well, she’s a bit of a wallflower, but I imagine she would love to help out her husband. Rumor has it they’ve been on the outs lately, and if she loses him she’ll lose her gravy train. Maybe she took it to get back in his good graces, or maybe they planned it together.”

“Stealing a priceless artifact to save the marriage? ...I suppose it’s cheaper than counseling.”

“Please stop trying your humor on me, darling. You’re not as droll as you think you are. Now, where was I? Ah yes. Now Emma, poor dear Emma. Well, hotel businesses haven’t been doing too well, have they? Travel and hospitality incomes have gone right down the tubes lately, and apparently all of her wealth was tied up in the business. I can’t imagine the price something like the Engine would fetch on the black market, but it could be a simple need for cash driving this theft.”

“Anything special for Lucia?”

“Oh I suppose. She’s always been something of a crusader for getting artifacts sent back to their native museums. I could see her trying to get the Engine donated back to an overseas museum, but stealing it? I don’t know, but she just doesn’t seem the type to me. I’d have her pegged as Miss Mystery, though. They do travel a lot, those two, and Miss Mystery has been known to globe-hop.”

“Alright, what else do you have?”

“Well, Mr. Villasenor? The security head? I heard some of the policemen talking, and apparently he was forced into retirement. Something about him having gotten caught skimming from department funds to pay off a gambling debt. Apparently he is a real gambling addict, but the poor dear doesn’t have a lick of skill or a decent poker face. That was a few years ago, obviously, but a leopard can’t change his spots.”

“Addicts get help all the time.”

She shot me a skeptical look, but shrugged. “If you say so, darling. That’s all I have, though.”

“What about Dr. Deborah Schultz? Sir Charles’ head of sciencey things?”

“Who, that plain old thing? Barely know a thing about her. She doesn’t travel in my circles. Out of the trifecta of rich, beautiful, and famous, she is none of them, even being an employee of Sir Charles. I did talk to her briefly, though, and I’ve met a dozen like her. I doubt she’s your girl, darling. She really loves all this old junk. I bet she’d willingly break her back protecting all this if she took a tumble down the stairs with it. She doesn’t seem the type who would snatch away the Engine in the dark and try to secret it away somewhere, because it might be...” she gasped dramatically, “...*slightly damaged!* Oh, the horror!” She smirked. “Now that really is all I have. Go on then! Chop chop! Solve this thing so I can have a happy editor.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not there yet, but thanks.” With that, I pushed off from the table and started walking towards the case where the Argos Engine had been just a few hours ago. The police forensics team had been swarming it earlier, but now they were off looking for other evidence. That gave me a chance to try my hand at it. Looking over the glass, I could see at least a dozen different fingerprints of all styles and sizes on it thanks to the fingerprinting powder. Apparently the sign on the display saying ‘DO NOT TOUCH GLASS’ was just a suggestion to a lot of these folks. I doubted that either the police or I were going to get anything from them, so I moved on to the display itself. I tried to push the glass, pull the glass, and lift the glass, but whatever was sticking it to the base, it was solid.

“It’s been chemically bonded,” said Sir Charles, as he came over to watch me work. “Nothing short of breaking it will let you get inside.”

“Really? Why would you do that?”

“With Miss Mystery on the loose? It’s easier to make a new glass cover than try to find another Argos Engine,” he replied, then sighed. “Seems we’ll have to try anyways, though.”

“Oh I’m not done searching yet, Sir Charles. That glass wasn’t broken, but the Engine is gone and there’s a card inside that wasn’t there before. That means someone got in there and got back out without breaking the glass.”

“Impossible.”

“Alright, so then explain what your eyes are seeing.”

“I can’t.”

“Then stop telling me it’s impossible and start telling me how it’s possible.”

“I...I honestly don’t know, Detective. Perhaps there is some compound that could loosen the chemical bond for a time? If there is, I don’t know about it, though.”

“Me neither.” I stood up and looked down into the glass box. I hated when there was a problem I couldn’t solve. What was more, something was nagging me as I was looking down at the card the thief had left, staring up at me with flat impassivity like it was mocking me. I relaxed and let my eyes roam along the black base that was surrounded by the impenetrable glass box. “Hey, what are these little holes here at the corners?”

“Hmm?” Sir Charles asked hopefully. He came over and gave a close look, then shook his head. “Oh, those are just ventilation holes. You see, for artifacts like these, there are ideal temperatures, humidities, and air pressures to prevent degradation. In the base of this display there are dozens of wires, tanks and tubes all designed to monitor that mix and adjust as need be. Some of it even runs out into the floor, for things like power and a connection to the air ducts. So you see, this base, out of all the bases in the gallery, won’t be getting moved. It’s fixed to the floor. I designed it that way.”

“So the thief couldn’t have somehow switched out the whole case and base together then. Damn.” It would have been difficult, I admit, but it would have been easier than phasing their hand through glass without leaving a trace. Just to be sure, I gave the base itself a light shove. It didn’t move at all.

The Captain came over to me after I’d once more walked away to collect my thoughts, offering me a glass of whiskey. At my look, he shrugged. “I’m on duty. You’re not.” I accepted the logic and the glass. “Well, we’re almost done with interviews,” he said, “and I’ve got bupkis, aside that we seem to be missing one caterer. The staff list says there should be 10, we’ve only seen nine, and theoretically no one has left. I’m going to check on that next. What about you, Dinah? Got anything for me?”

I shook my head and took a sip. “Sorry, Weston, I’m stumped.”

Dinah turned and faced the audience, walking away from the scene a bit and sitting herself down in a chair that had appeared. She placed her glass on the end table next to it, where a half-full bottle of whiskey was waiting.

“Now, I didn’t know it at the time, but I had everything I needed to solve this case at this point. I blame the fact that it was around 3 in the morning and all I’d had were hors d’oeuvres and whiskey for dinner. Not long after this I got two more pieces of information that really made it all fit together in my head.”

She took the toy gun out of her bag and leaned against the wall, spinning the cylinder idly. “You all though? You can come at this fresh as a daisy. So let’s see what you got. Tell me your theories, and let’s see if you can give me one I can’t shoot down, hmm?”

RULES

- 1. A blue is only valid if it gives the culprit and explains in reasonable detail how the theft was carried out. For example, ‘they shot it through a window with a cannon and then patched the hole’ would not be sufficient explanation, as how they got it out of the case, where the cannon came from, how the sound was not heard, and how they patched the window glass is not covered.**
 - 2. There are two hint scenes that can be requested via Discord. If they are requested by a somewhat large percentage of the group working it together, they will be posted in the thread and spoiler’d.**
 - 3. The theft was not carried out by magic.**
 - 4. No leprechauns figure into this tale.**
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MAP







