

DEFAMED SEABORG



In the dimly lit dining hall, a resounding cheer erupted around the table, accompanied by the delicate clinking of seven fancy cocktail glasses brought together.

“To the Circle of Brainteasers!”

Sipping on her rich-tasting dark rum, Kelsie allowed herself a faint smile. Here she was, surrounded by six strangers in a mysterious mansion in the middle of a sinister island, and yet the mood had gotten surprisingly pleasant at the end of their dinner.

Unbidden, her eyes wandered around the table. It was her first time meeting the other guests, and yet she already felt some degree of genuine affection for them. They were all her fellow Circlers, after all.

And yet.

Her hand went to her pocket, where a crumpled note was hidden. That alone was enough to dampen her spirits.

After all...

Could there be a detective without a crime?

Several hours earlier...

At around noon, seven distinguished individuals were scheduled to meet in the remote Greg Hal harbor town.

The Circle of Brainteasers had started as a simple epistolary book club, where a few passionate members exchanged letters discussing mystery stories, but it had grown into much more over time: over a hundred dilettantes from all over the world routinely challenged each other with mysteries, riddles and logic puzzles. Not only that: the Circle was a place to argue over mysterious happenstances of all kinds, from trying to solve mundane crimes to investigating ancient legends and supernatural stories.

Therefore, it was no surprise that upon receiving an official invitation from the secretive owner of a mysterious island known as the Defamed Seaborg, many prominent Circlers had jumped at the opportunity to visit it.

As the inquisitive mind behind the Circle's complex communication systems, Kelsie was of course among them. Being part of a famous mystery writing duo, she was hoping to gain some groundbreaking inspiration by staying at such an intriguing location for a few days.

The first one to arrive after Kelsie had been Tōja. The eccentric teenager was the heir to a small fortune and as such, one of the main financial backers of both the Circle itself and of this extravagant venture. His fashionable and downright pretentious black and red silk outfit belied a surprisingly friendly and down-to-earth demeanor and within minutes, Kelsie found herself amiably conversing with her fellow Circler.

A short while later, another person approached them: it was a mysterious-looking fellow, wearing a long grey coat and a curiously shaped beret. With a smirk, he took his sunglasses off, revealing another pair of glasses underneath, and introduced himself as Zen Magpie, the Circle's most infamous trickster. His riddles were among everyone's favorites and hence, an invitation had been reserved for Magpie even though not much else was known about him.

The next person to arrive was a strikingly tall gentleman, clad in a dark green suit and carrying a briefcase: it was none other than Dr. Mummies, one of the staunchest defenders of science within the Circle. By leaning on his expertise, he enjoyed cornering those who sought to introduce the supernatural within

the realm of mysteries; his medical knowledge would often make the difference when it came to devising or unraveling complex murder scenarios.

“H-hello?” a hesitant voice greeted the group as another young man approached them. In contrast to the others, Kelsie thought he seemed like a fairly regular guy: he was wearing simple clothes fit for travelling and was clearly a bit nervous about being there, which was honestly quite understandable given the circumstances. Everyone else was just a bit crazy, she thought with a smile.

The newcomer introduced himself as Mr. Pointy Error. Unlike the other six eminent and wealthy guests, Pointy had been randomly selected with a lottery among all of the remaining hopeful Circlers. And so by virtue of his luck, he had been able to join their little expedition at the Circle’s expenses.

Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of...Hooves? Kelsie turned around and indeed, there it was: a woman was approaching the pier, riding on top of an imposing horse. A man was running after her, dressed like an attendant of sorts. Once she got closer, the rider dismounted from the horse with practiced ease. She was wearing an elegant but practical white uniform, her hair braided in an unusual style. “Am I the last one to arrive?” she asked with an expectant smile.

“As a matter of fact, no,” replied Dr. Mummies with a shrug. “We’re still waiting for PD.”

She sighed. “Aww, there goes my grand entrance. And I worked so hard on it...” she turned towards her companion and handed him the horse’s reins. “Take Lazer and bring him somewhere safe till my return, will you?”

He rolled his eyes and shrugged. “Alright, Ignis. Have fun on the cursed island. And if you come back haunted by nightmares, remember I told you so!” he called out, as he led the horse away.

Kelsie smiled at the new arrival. Ignis was one of the most talented artists among the Circle and Kelsie considered her a friendly rival in that regard. There were rumors that she was working on some kind of grand creative project...Was she also looking for inspiration on the island?

Shortly thereafter, the seventh and final guest finally made his appearance. It was an athletic looking man, whose appearance suggested a disregard for other people’s judgment: he was wearing a half-unbuttoned floral-themed shirt, partially exposing his chest despite the breezy chill, and sported a scruffy

stubble. Yet Kelsie wasn't fooled by the newcomer's air of careless unkemptness, suspecting it was actually a carefully cultivated look.

"Now that I, Pale Darby, have arrived, the party can finally start!" he loudly declared, spreading his arms. His outburst was met by a mixture of laughter and sighs. As the Circle's foremost legal expert, Pale Darby was among its most notorious members. He was known for his exuberance, as well as his tendency to play Devil's advocate for the losing sides in debates.

Once the seven Circlers had gathered in front of the black boat they were supposed to board, curiously named *Chitinous Lithe Wolf*, a hatch opened on the deck and a silhouette emerged to greet them. It was a serene looking man, wearing a curious uniform that almost resembled that of a police constable. He gave them a small graceful bow and pulled a lever, which caused a small bridge to connect to the pier.

"Welcome, honored guests. You may now board the ship. I am agent For Nine, here to escort you on the island."

"Agent 49?" Asked Tōja, his eyebrows raised. "That sounds pretty cool. Are you a secret agent or something?"

"It's 'For', not 'Four'," the agent corrected him with an impassive expression. "And my existence is hardly a secret. I represent the master of the Defamed Seaborg and enforce law upon the island."

"Hoh! That's quite the claim, but as a master of law itself, I should outrank you!" joked Pale Darby.

"But then I, the very embodiment of Chaos, clearly surpass both of you!" declared Zen Magpie.

"Please don't mind them," said Kelsie waving her hand. "Let's get on board!"

The cruise up to the island proceeded rather uneventfully. The youngsters Tōja and Mr. Pointy Error fraternized with each other, Pale Darby unsuccessfully tried to get a rise out of the unflappable For Nine and Dr. Mummies was engaged in an animated discussion with Zen Magpie.

As for Kelsie, her attention was directed at Ignis, who was capturing the scenery of the approaching island on her sketchbook with an inspired glint in her eyes.

As they grew closer to their destination, everyone else gathered on the prow to gaze at the Defamed Seaborg. The view was magnificent: dark grey storm clouds loomed on the horizon, enveloping the island in a perpetual and almost surreal state of intense gloom. Waves clashed against the rocky cliff sides and in the distance, they could barely catch a glimpse of the Crimson Tower, where the master of the island resided.

“It’s as beautiful as I expected it to be...” whispered Ignis. Next to her, Pointy Error nodded. “And just as ominous,” he added with a shudder.

“Looking at the island now, even I have to admit that the supernatural stories about it suddenly feel harder to dismiss,” commented Dr. Mummies with an impressed tone. He then turned towards Zen Magpie, who seemed about to open his mouth. “And before you say anything, this changes nothing about my position. As our esteemed friend Hey Plant would say: I will not modify my beliefs unless presented with sufficient evidence to do so.”

“Magic or no magic, it’s pretty awesome!” exclaimed Tōja. “If the mysterious owner of the island shows himself, I’ll have to ask him about a selling price...”

“Even *you* wouldn’t be able to afford it,” remarked Pale Darby with a chuckle. “Hell, if we all combined our resources, I’m pretty sure we wouldn’t even come close. Assuming it has a price.”

Right when Kelsie was about to join the conversation, she felt a light tap on her shoulder. Startled, she turned around: it was For Nine, who handed her a slip of paper. “A message from my master” murmured the agent. “Keep it a secret, if you can.”

Burning with curiosity, she unfolded the note. It was a short sentence, elegantly written in a crimson red ink.

I declare Kelsie the detective.

Kelsie raised her eyebrows in surprise. “What’s the meaning of this?” she whispered to For Nine. Red ink was the ultimate signifier of truth and answers within the Circle. Why would the master of the Defamed Seaborg know of it? What sort of game was he trying to play?

The agent gave her an enigmatic smile and retreated back towards the ship’s helm. Kelsie glanced back at the others: they were still focused on the view of the approaching island, so it was safe to assume nobody had noticed the exchange. Puzzled, she put the slip of paper into her pocket.

“Detective, huh?” she murmured to herself.

The rest of the afternoon went by in a blur. Once the boat reached its destination, the seven visitors were led to an elegant mansion, partly hidden behind a rocky cliff a short walk away from the harbor. After giving them a brief tour of the premises, For Nine bid them farewell.

The mansion was much less imposing than they had expected. In fact, it featured a surprisingly simple layout: the entrance led into a central hallway, from which every other room in the building could be accessed. The East wing consisted of a spacious kitchen, dining hall and lounge, whereas the West wing contained seven private bedrooms. These rooms all had the same layout, with no windows, a small private bathroom and a keyless door that could only be locked with a simple latch from the inside. However, the three rooms on the left side were a bit more spacious and luxurious than the four on the right.

After some pointless discussion over who deserved to claim the best rooms, Kelsie sensibly suggested they draw lots to decide. The results were as follows: Zen Magpie, Mr. Pointy Error and Kelsie were assigned the fancy suites on the left, while the other four were instead relegated to the slightly less ostentatious rooms to the right.

“Luck favors the worthy!” proclaimed Magpie with a satisfied smirk.

“Let’s be real, you probably cheated somehow,” insinuated Ignis with a dirty look.

Dr. Mummies shrugged. “Unless you have a concrete theory, we should assume the results to be legitimate.”

“Damn, boy!” exclaimed Darby, lightly punching Mr. Pointy on the shoulder and making him flinch. “You sure are the ultimate lucky Circler, aren’t you.”

The teenager blushed. “I don’t think this one really counts... The odds were pretty even,” he replied.

“Well, I suppose it might be interesting to experience life as a commoner for one night,” said Tōja in a benevolently condescending manner.

Kelsie rolled her eyes. “I’m sure you’ll survive the experience.”

I hope we all do, she thought to herself, resolving to stay alert and keep watch over the group for the rest of their stay.

After taking some time to settle in, the seven guests met in the lounge to discuss their plans for the evening. It was already getting dark outside and it looked like a thunderstorm might be coming soon, so they decided to stay in until the next day.

As far as they knew, the only humans who inhabited the island were For Nine and his mysterious master. And since none of them were present, they would have to prepare dinner for themselves.

“I never cooked a single meal in my life” admitted Tōja with a shrug. “But hey, I can try if you guys want me to...”

“Hoh. What a pampered rich boy you are!” taunted Pale Darby with an amused smile.

“Aren’t you pretty well-off yourself, PD?” inquired Kelsie with a raised eyebrow.

“Sure, but I’m also an awesome chef. Let me show you!” boasted the lawyer.

“That’s good to hear, because I’m in a similar position as our dear Tōja” said Dr. Mummies with a chuckle. “My cooking expertise is limited to extremely simple recipes, but I’ll gladly be your assistant if you require one.”

“I can cook too...” hesitantly offered Mr. Pointy Error.

After some further deliberation, they decided upon the following roles: Darby would be directing the preparations for the main course, while Mr. Pointy would be in charge of the dessert. Ignis, Tōja and Dr. Mummies would be assisting the chefs in the kitchen. As for Kelsie and Magpie, they would serve as waiters and clean up after dinner.

Following a brief inspection of the well-supplied kitchen, their next topic of discussion was food. Since everyone had different dietary preferences and needs, they had to settle on a meal that could accommodate all of them.

Once a consensus was finally reached, the guests decided to take a short break before getting to work on the dinner preparations.

Kelsie was gazing out of one of the windows in the lounge. The East wing of the mansion was built along the edge of a cliffside and offered a breathtaking view of the horizon, with the sun about to vanish into the stormy sea below. Next to her, Zen Magpie offered her a cheeky grin.

“We managed to get the easiest job!” he exclaimed. “As expected of us lazy scoundrels.”

Kelsie shrugged. “You could argue that cleaning up is the worst part though, since everyone else will be resting at that point.”

“That’s actually a fair counter-argument,” replied her fellow Circler as he adjusted his glasses. “I wonder if we could get out of it somehow? Maa~ybe if someone got, let’s say, poisoned at dinnertime, everyone else would be too distracted to enforce our clean-up duty...”

Kelsie couldn’t help but laugh at the thought. “That’s gotta be the pettiest motive I’ve ever heard.” But then she remembered the red note sitting in her

pocket and her mood dropped. Should she really be keeping it a secret from the others?

Her thoughts were interrupted as Ignis, who had also been contemplating the view, joined in on their conversation. "I'm pretty sure we're all thinking about it," the artist mused. "Seven people, locked in a mansion during a stormy night on a mysterious island? That's such a perfect setting for a murder mystery, it's almost too perfect. In other words, clichéd. A killing under these circumstances would lack any artistic value."

"Unless you *really* value the classics," precised Magpie.

Kelsie sighed at the morbid turn the conversation had taken. Fortunately, someone else was approaching them: it was Mr. Pointy Error.

"Hey," he greeted them shyly. He glanced out of the window and for a moment, he seemed awestruck at view. The sound of thunder rumbled in the distance, setting an eerie atmosphere. "I've been wondering," he said in a low voice. "What do you guys think about the stories we've heard? Is this island really the secret birthplace of the legendary Uncle Bark?"

"Are you talking about those rumors?" asked Dr. Mummies as he joined them in the lounge, followed by Tōja and Pale Darby. "They're likely unfounded, as most information concerning Uncle Bark tends to be. That said, we're here to find out, right?"

"I hope the rumors are true," admitted Tōja. "Imagine how cool it would be to find one of his impossible mysteries somewhere on the island."

"Or even better, the solution to one of his riddles," said Ignis. "Although that would surely bring the attention of the entire Kebur Clan on us..."

"You mean those crazy fanatics?" asked Mr. Pointy. "I've heard they're so obsessed with Uncle Bark and his mysteries, they even murder people hoping for an epiphany or something."

"Yeah, they're basically an evil cult," added Pale Darby. "But I've heard one of their rituals involves slathering yourself with crank lube while naked. I wouldn't mind trying that one..."

“I’m sure you wouldn’t,” remarked Kelsie wryly. “Well...According to the Kebur Clan’s doctrine, solving Uncle Bark’s mysteries is the only path to attain divinity. I can see why they would go to such lengths, even though I despise them.”

“Ascending to godhood...that doesn’t sound too bad!” reflected Zen Magpie. “But am I not a god already?” he asked theatrically, raising his arms in a triumphant gesture.

“They almost sound like a warped version of our Circle, driven mad by their obsession,” reflected Dr. Mummies, ignoring Zen’s antics.

Tōja nodded thoughtfully. “I’m glad we all listened to the warnings and stayed away from Uncle Bark’s mysteries. Who knows what sort of crazy stuff we’d be doing if we got trapped in that spiral of madness...”

“In any case, I hope we find some clue about Uncle Bark himself on the island,” said Ignis with a smirk. “Now *that* would inspire some legendary art.”

Kelsie shrugged. “This is all fascinating, but to be honest, I’d rather find out more about the mysterious master of the Defamed Seaborg. At least we can be pretty sure *he* exists, hidden in his Crimson Tower.”

“Why limit your ambitions? Let’s investigate both of them!” exclaimed Pale Darby. “Still, I wonder why we were invited here. Do you really believe that someone in the Circle managed to persuade the master of the island?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Kelsie. “I have a theory, but I’d like to confirm it before sharing it.”

“You’re such a tease!” protested Tōja. “If I manage to buy this mansion, I’ll name it ‘Stingy Kelsie’.”

“You still haven’t given up on that?” asked Ignis with a puzzled look.

“Well, acquiring just the mansion sounds more reasonable than the entire island,” conceded Dr. Mummies.

“Putting talks of gods, cults and masters aside. I’m actually starting to get pretty hungry here...” announced Zen Magpie with an expectant voice. A few people nodded in agreement.

“Alright everyone, break’s over!” declared Pale Darby. “Let’s get this dinner rolling.”

And so it was that the seven Circlers found themselves celebrating with a round of drinks after a surprisingly delicious dinner, thanks to the efforts of everyone involved. The bottle of rum, courtesy of Ignis, featured a curious drawing of a lion-like figure plastered on its wrapping and displayed a likewise peculiar name: *Evilest Rum*. Yet despite its ominous branding, Kelsie found the taste to be much more pleasant than she had expected.

After emptying her glass, she turned her attention to the nervous-looking young man sitting next to her. “Are you enjoying yourself, Pointy?” she asked him with an encouraging smile.

“Y-yes, of course!” he blurted out as he sipped on his drink. “Just a bit nervous, I guess.”

“Try to stay focused,” said Pale Darby with a smirk. “You’re still in charge of our dessert! It would be such a shame to have those delicious-looking cupcakes burn in the oven...”

Kelsie turned towards the scantily clad man with a raised finger, playfully admonishing him. “Stop teasing the poor guy, PD!”

“He’s right,” stated Mr. Pointy Error with a determined gaze. “I can’t fail at my task. Not after everyone else did their part so well.”

“Relaaax,” intoned Zen Magpie, dragging his words out with a lazy drawl. “I’m sure it’ll be fiiiine.”

“Zen’s got a point,” conceded Ignis. “Too much effort is detrimental to one’s spirit.”

“Hold it! Aren’t you the one who draws super seriously all the time!” objected Tōja, pointing his finger at her.

“That’s just part of the beautiful contradiction of art,” replied Ignis with a wistful sigh. “Not that I’d expect an artless clown such as you to understand.”

“Alright, that’s enough!” interjected Kelsie. “No name-calling, please.” She then turned towards Mr. Pointy Error. “Just ignore them and do what you want to do.”

The nervous teenager nodded thankfully and rose from his seat. “I’ll do just that, thanks.”

A few minutes later, he came back from the kitchen, carrying a tray with six beautiful, steaming pumpkin cupcakes.

“Look at that! Not bad from my chef apprentice!” exclaimed Pale Darby with a boisterous laugh.

“I have to admit, they look quite enticing,” remarked Dr. Mummies with an impressed tone.

“Still, it’s a bit sad that you won’t get to enjoy the fruit of your efforts. Are you sure you don’t want any?” asked Kelsie.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Pointy replied with a smile, as he distributed the cupcakes around the table. “I already told you I’m allergic. But since it’s my specialty, I wanted you all to try it. No need to hesitate!”

“Well, no need to tell me twice. Let’s dig in!” said Tōja. The young heir then proceeded to swallow his entire cupcake in one bite.

“I won’t let myself be defeated by the likes of you!” shouted Zen Magpie, following Tōja’s gluttonous example.

“What an unsightly display!” protested Pale Darby in a mildly outraged manner. “You have to savor your food!”

“Speaking of which...There is definitely something wrong with the taste. It’s not supposed to be this bitter, right?” complained Ignis, putting her half-eaten cupcake back on her plate.

“Are you sure? Seems alright to me,” replied Dr. Mummies. “Then again, I don’t exactly have a discerning palate. As long as it’s edible, I’ll eat it.” He then proved his claim by munching down the rest of his dessert.

“It *does* have a weird aftertaste, now that you mention it,” admitted Tōja.

Zen Magpie shrugged. “It’s hard to tell for me, since I basically swallowed it whole.”

Mr. Pointy Error looked mortified upon witnessing the negative reception of his culinary prowess. “I-I’m so sorry, guys! I did my best and the ingredients looked fine though, I swear!”

“Perhaps you’ve made...an *error*?” joked Pale Darby. He then took a sniff at his own cupcake. “I think I’ll pass. I can tell from my finely tuned chef’s nose that the aroma’s a bit fishy here.”

Kelsie was about to reject her own cupcake too, but upon seeing the dejected expression on Mr. Pointy’s face, she decided to give it a shot for the young chef’s sake. Of course, she would only take a small bite, to be safe...That probably wouldn’t hurt, right?

Unsurprisingly, although the texture was nice and crispy, the taste turned out to be decidedly unpleasant. With a grimace, Kelsie put the almost intact cupcake back on her plate.

“Could they be poisoned?” asked Tōja anxiously.

“That would be troublesome,” admitted Dr. Mummies, looking a bit worried. “Wouldn’t it be way too indiscriminate and sloppy for a poisoning attempt, though?”

“Considering how everyone but Pointy was supposed to eat one, it seems almost too easy to indict him,” remarked Ignis with a frown. “Unless he was

counting on getting away with it by being the only survivor? But even then, he would surely be caught by that agent For Nine guy.”

Mr. Pointy Error was getting paler by the minute. “H-hold on! Sorry, but I had no intention of the sort. There must have been some kind of mistake!” He looked around, but immediately cast his gaze down. He probably couldn’t handle being the target of such negative attention and suspicion.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, looking rather dejected. “I should probably take my leave. I’ll go lie down and try to forget about this whole business...”

Nobody protested, and so the young man scurried away.

“I think we were too harsh on him,” said Kelsie once Pointy had left the room.

“To be fair, all of us who were working in the kitchen probably had the chance to tamper with the dessert at some point,” observed Darby. “Plus, we all left to use the bathroom at some point during dinner, while the cupcakes were baking in the oven...”

“This is all assuming they *were* tampered with,” replied Zen Magpie. “Which is a hell of an assumption to make. I’m still feeling perfectly fine.” He paused. “Actually, ignore that. I suddenly feel terribly sick! I’m gonna have to retire to my room!” To everyone’s surprise, the trickster then stood up and slipped away.

“What’s up with him now?” asked Tōja.

Kelsie sighed. “I wouldn’t worry too much about Zen. I’m pretty sure he’s just trying to evade his clean-up duty.”

An awkward stillness loomed over the dining hall for a few moments.

“Well, what a way to kill the mood!” remarked Pale Darby.

An hour later, everyone else had gone back to their room with the exception of Kelsie, who was keeping a lookout from the lounge’s entrance. Tōja had been

the first one to leave, lamenting that he felt bored by the sullen atmosphere. Next ones to go had been Darby, Ignis and Dr. Mummies, who all claimed to be feeling tired despite the night still being relatively young.

As her fellow Circlers headed out one by one, Kelsie observed each of them heading into their respective rooms. As soon as she was the only one left, she walked down the West Wing's hallway to check on every door: thanks to the indicator on each lock, Kelsie could ascertain that every one of them was engaged, with her own room being the sole exception. Satisfied, she went back to the lounge. Nothing was going to escape her surveillance!

And yet after some time had passed, she realized there was no way she was gonna be able to stay up and alert for much longer, let alone until morning. She was feeling so tired... In her dazed state, Kelsie didn't even realize she had leaned against the wall and dozed off, until she was brought back to her senses by hearing some noise close by, coming from the hallway. Had someone left their room?

The reluctant detective rubbed her eyes and blinked a few times to collect herself, then carefully stepped into the hallway...

Empty. Nobody in sight.

After a moment of hesitation, she decided to check on everyone's door again and walked a few steps forward.

Suddenly, Kelsie heard a click and all the lights went off, plunging her into darkness. As she hesitated and stumbled forward, she heard footsteps approaching her from behind. An ambush?

Just as she was about to let out a scream, a gloved hand covered her mouth, muffling her voice. As she struggled to break free from the aggressor's grip, she felt a sharp pain at the base of her neck, like a needle piercing her skin, followed by a cold sensation. An injection! She had always hated those, even when they didn't come from mysterious attackers in dark hallways!

With a desperate surge of adrenaline, Kelsie managed to push her mysterious assailant away, feeling another stab of sharp pain as the syringe was detached from her neck. Out of breath and in a weakened state, she managed to stumble

forward until her hand grasped the handle of the second door on the left. After slipping into her room, she just barely managed to close the door and slide the lock into place before collapsing on the fluffy bed.

As she lay there, fading into unconsciousness, her last thought was a weird guilt for having neglected her assigned clean-up duty.

“Hnnghh...”

Kelsie stirred and groaned as she heard people knocking loudly on her door.

“Kelsie! Are you okay?”

“Heeey! Wake up you lazy pants!”

The voices were slightly muffled, but clearly distinguishable as belonging to Dr. Mummies and Tōja.

“One moment, guys!” Kelsie called out as she groggily stood up. How much time had passed since the ambush? Judging from her personal stopwatch, it had been barely half an hour. Since she was feeling remarkably well given the situation, she had likely managed to push her assailant away before they finished injecting whatever nefarious substance they had tried to drug her with.

Before heading for the door, Kelsie stepped into the small ensuite bathroom to quickly wash her face and make herself presentable. As she did so, she noticed a tiny red pinprick at the base of her neck while looking in the mirror. Yeah, it definitely looked like the typical mark of a syringe.

“You took your sweet time!” protested Tōja as soon as she undid the lock and opened the door. “Are you alright? Did you hear anything?”

“Tōja came knocking on my door upon hearing a scream and some commotion,” explained Dr. Mummies. “I must have been sleeping pretty deeply because I didn’t hear anything, until he started knocking so hard I thought the

door was about to fall down. So I got up and joined him to check on the situation. Did you notice anything strange?”

“If by strange you mean extremely scary, well...” Kelsie quickly summarized the events.

“Did you call for help when you were attacked?” Dr. Mummies asked. “If so, it could have been your screams that alerted Tōja.”

“I actually didn’t manage to do so, I was out of breath and then I sort of passed out,” admitted Kelsie.

“Woah, that sounds pretty intense!” commented Tōja. “We better check on the others.”

Next, they tried knocking on Pale Darby’s door.

“PD, are you alright?”

“Wake up man, there’s a shirtless party outside!”

A few moments later, they heard the lock being undone and the door opened.

“Did someone say *shirtless*?” asked a disheveled looking Pale Darby.

“It was just a ploy to get your attention, sorry...” admitted Tōja.

“Oh, well. At least I seem to be still alive,” replied Darby with a sigh. “Believe it or not, someone managed to get into my room despite me locking it. I was lying in bed, half-asleep and too weak to move, so I couldn’t resist or even see who it was when they approached me and gave me an injection.” He pointed to the base of his neck, where a puncture wound identical to Kelsie’s could be seen. “Still, at least I managed to let out a scream before passing out. I think that may have saved my life. I’m sure that my booming voice caused my aggressor to panic and flee before finishing the job, leaving the door to my room unlocked.”

“So it was your voice!” exclaimed Tōja. “Then it must have happened only a short while ago. I changed out of my clown pajamas and hurried out as soon as I heard that.”

“What a bizarre situation,” remarked Kelsie. “Alright, let’s call the others and hear their testimonies.”

They split up and knocked on the three remaining rooms. The first one to respond was Zen Magpie, who unlocked the door and popped out his head to glare at the noise makers.

“Let me sleep, you insufferable fools!” he groaned. “Sleep is sacred for cats and magpies alike, as you should know.”

“It’s urgent! Some of us have been attacked by a mad culprit wielding a syringe,” explained Darby.

“Oh, so that’s what the scream was about. Alright, I’ll solve this pitiful mystery for you. It was Dr. Mummies, because doctors and syringes, duh!”

Dr. Mummies looked decidedly unimpressed at Zen’s deduction. “Brilliant. Who needs detectives when you have Zen Magpie,” he remarked in a sarcastic voice.

“Aaand here’s the confession! Bow down to my genius. Can I go back to sleep now?”

“Denied,” flatly replied Kelsie, who was still knocking on Ignis’s door. “Now get serious for once and help us out.”

At that moment, they heard a weak voice coming from the artist’s room.

“Kelsie...Is that you? I’m not feeling too well right now...”

“Ignis! Can you open the door?”

“Hold on a second, I’ll try to get up...”

A few moments later, they heard the latch being undone and Ignis appeared before them, still wearing her usual attire but looking significantly paler.

“Worst dinner ever,” she complained, leaning on the door frame. “Am I the only one who’s feeling quite under the weather here?”

“Allow me have a look,” said Dr. Mummies. He approached her and after a quick examination, offered her a relieved smile. “Seems like you’ll be just fine, Ignis. Your complexion is already regaining some color.”

“Could it be another botched poisoning attempt? Were you also attacked by the, uh...*Syringe Sinner*?” asked Pale Darby with a proud look, likely having just thought of that name.

“Uh, nope? I just went back to my room and kinda collapsed on the bed. Couldn’t even finish my sketch,” she regretfully added.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” said Kelsie, before quickly updating her on the situation. “What about you, Tōja? Still no reply from Mr. Pointy Error?”

Tōja stopped knocking and shook his head. “Nah. Dude must be sleeping like a rock.”

“Let’s be real, he’s totally dead,” predicted Zen Magpie. “In a perfect closed room, with the only key inside, blah blah. I mean, what else would you expect?”

“Technically incorrect. These doors have no keys, remember?” precised Dr. Mummies.

“Well, this Syringe Sinner hasn’t displayed much competence so far,” remarked Darby with a shrug. “So I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t even manage a single murder. Anyways, let’s stop with the theorizing and break this door down.”

“Maybe try opening it first?” suggested Ignis with a raised eyebrow.

“...Oh, good point.”

Before anyone else could act, Kelsie stepped forward and tried turning the handle: unsurprisingly, the door was indeed locked. “I’ve got this. Stay back,

everyone!” she declared with a steely voice, channeling her frustration into a perfect kick. And another. And a third, even more powerful one.

With a crashing sound, the door gave way to the detective. After giving a small bow, she stepped inside the dark room.

After a moment of hesitation, the others followed her inside, just as she turned the light on.

Mr. Pointy Error was lying on the bed, still tucked under the blanket with a peaceful expression, but unmoving.

“Pointy!” called out Tōja, rushing to his side and shaking his hand to no avail. Dr. Mummies checked his pulse and shook his head with a grim expression. “He’s gone.”

Zen Magpie sighed. “Why must I always be correct?” he lamented.

“That wicked Syringe Sinner!” exclaimed Pale Darby. “They’ve finally done it!”

“You’re really trying to force that nickname on us, aren’t you?” asked Ignis with a frown. “Anyways, this goes without saying, but it really looks like we have a locked room murder on our hands.”

“Indeed. The lock was properly set when I broke the door down. Look, the mechanism is still intact,” stated Kelsie, who had secretly made sure nobody took advantage of the initial commotion to tamper with it. “Furthermore, it seems as if nobody tampered with the door itself, either.”

“These rooms have no windows, no keyhole, not even a gap under the door,” added Dr. Mummies. “When a room is locked, it’s properly sealed from the outside.”

“Yep, I guess we don’t have to worry about cheap tricks with strings and whatnot at the very least,” said Tōja with a shrug.

“Look at us, coldly dissecting the situation like real detectives!” exclaimed Zen Magpie. “Now the question is, will too many detectives spoil the mystery?”

“Obviously, we’re all suspects to some extent,” said Kelsie. “But I think working together is actually a good idea here, because we can all keep an eye on each other as we investigate. No way we can count on the police, considering the circumstances. The most we can do is send someone to contact the master of the island once morning comes. Any objections?”

None were raised.

“Alright. Let’s figure this out. It’s what we do after all, isn’t it?”

“About the crime scene...There are no signs of a struggle,” observed Tōja.

“The victim could have been drugged or poisoned, I suppose. In fact, poison would easily explain the locked room. Poor Pointy locked himself in before the poison finally took effect,” theorized Pale Darby.

“At this point it seems clear to me that our dinner was tampered with in some way,” stated Ignis. “Those cupcakes were suspicious as hell. So yeah, poison wouldn’t surprise me.”

“You may be correct, but I wouldn’t be so hasty to discount the locked room yet. Look here,” said Kelsie, who had approached the body to examine it more closely. “There’s a mark on his neck. And it should be a familiar sight by now: it looks similar to mine and Darby’s.”

“The Mark of the Sinner!” exclaimed Darby theatrically.

“No doubt about it,” confirmed Dr. Mummies upon closer examination. “It’s the mark of a syringe. Most likely of the same kind that was used to attack Kelsie and PD...” he sighed. “Also, most likely one of my own instruments.”

“What?!” blurted out Tōja in a shocked tone. “Are you confessing?”

“Told you guys,” said Zen Magpie with a smug expression.

“I wouldn’t jump to conclusions so quickly,” said Dr. Mummies with a frown. “When I went back to my room after dinner, I noticed my suitcase was slightly out of place. I went to check and noticed that the toolbox containing my medical supplies was missing a syringe. However, before I could tell anyone, I

was overpowered by a sense of weariness and passed out on the bed. It wasn't until Tōja knocked on my door that I returned to my senses.”

“So you were likely drugged too.” Kelsie sighed. “What a mess of a situation to untangle. In any case, the victim must have died at least ten minutes ago based on his body temperature.”

“Right before Tōja was allegedly woken by the scream, then...” insinuated Zen Magpie.

“And yet...Mr. Pointy was the first one to leave the dining hall. Which means, he could only have been attacked after he locked himself in his room and went to sleep,” reflected Ignis.

“Couldn't the culprit simply have knocked on his door and given him a surprise injection as soon as he opened?” asked Tōja. “Then Pointy locked himself in and went to sleep.”

“That would neatly explain things, but it seems highly unlikely.” Pale Darby shook his head. “Do you really believe the victim of a sudden night-time ambush would meekly lock himself in, go back to bed and tuck himself under the covers, without even trying to alert anyone? Without thinking twice about having been attacked and injected with some nefarious poison?”

“Plus, I don't think that plan could have worked,” added Dr. Mummies. “We all left the dining hall one after the other in fairly short succession and I'm sure at least some of us would have been alerted by the sound of knocking. It would have been a huge risk for the culprit.”

“I was the first one to leave after Mr. Pointy Error and his room was already locked when I walked by,” testified Zen Magpie. “I'm pretty sure the first knocking sound I heard happened shortly after being woken by the scream, which supposedly belonged to our brave PD here.”

“Nothing manlier than a good shout,” proudly declared the screamer in question. “Scared that incompetent Syringe Sinner away, didn't it?”

“Are they really that incompetent if they managed to get one of us in the end?” asked Tōja with a pensive expression.

“This ridiculous mess certainly isn’t the result of a sane or competent plan,” declared Ignis. She directed a suspicious glare at Tōja. “I can easily think of one person that could be responsible for such a clown show.”

“Hey!”

“Then again, you could also say this whole thing is pure chaos...” thoughtfully mused Pale Darby. “And here, we have a self-proclaimed master of chaos.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Zen Magpie sardonically bowed to an imaginary audience. “But please, this pitiful amount of chaos is beneath me.”

“Enough!” called out Kelsie. “Accusing each other is not gonna help. Instead, here’s what we can do in order to get to the bottom of this...”

The detective explained her plan, and thus the investigation began in earnest.

First, the six Circlers split up into three pairs: Tōja and Zen Magpie, Dr. Mummies and Pale Darby and Kelsie and Ignis. The idea was to conduct a body search on one another before the culprit had a chance to get rid of any potential evidence. Of course, the search had to be thorough, which led to a certain awkwardness for everyone involved...With one notable exception.

A devious grin was plastered on Pale Darby’s face. “Should you go first, or should I go first? This is gonna be fun!”

Even the normally unflappable Dr. Mummies facepalmed and sighed at this excessive display of enthusiasm.

“Can you please behave, PD?” asked Kelsie in an exasperated tone. She was starting to get tired of playing the role of the responsible adult among them.

Luckily, the search proceeded without incident afterwards. However, nothing of note was found, let alone the incriminating syringe. Which meant the culprit had already gotten rid of it somehow.

Ignis raised an eyebrow as she read the crumpled note she had found in Kelsie's pocket, but elected not to comment on it for the time being, for which the detective was grateful. "I'll explain later," she whispered.

Naturally, the next step was to search the whole mansion. The tempest was still raging outside, which meant the outside could be safely excluded.

This extensive investigation yielded mixed results.

First, their individual rooms were devoid of any suspicious belongings. Dr. Mummies's medical toolbox was indeed missing a syringe, but otherwise contained just a first-aid kit along with some medicines. According to its owner, nothing else was missing.

Since the doors were meant to only be locked when occupied, they concluded that anyone could have slipped into his room to pilfer the missing syringe during a bathroom break at dinnertime.

Next, they proceeded to examine the rest of the mansion.

The small storage room next to the kitchen contained a panel from which every light in the house could be controlled. Kelsie was certain this 'Syringe Sinner' had been hiding in there before ambushing her. A cursory examination of the various closets and drawers revealed an assortment of tools, one of which in particular stood out from the rest: it was a smooth metallic object that was quickly determined to be a fairly strong magnet.

The kitchen held nothing of note, but they were at least able to determine that nothing was off among the ingredients that had been employed to prepare dinner. In other words, the incident most likely wasn't the result of an accidental food poisoning.

The lounge was likewise undisturbed, if not for one detail: the floor under one of the panoramic windows was found slightly wet. Somebody had tried to hastily wipe it off, but some traces still remained. Considering the raging tempest outside, this likely meant the window had been opened some point in the night. A window that directly faced over a cliffside and a stormy sea below it...

“No wonder we can’t find the syringe anywhere,” said Kelsie with a sigh.

Lastly, they searched the dining hall. Since nobody had cleaned up after dinner, it was the room that was most likely to contain important evidence... Or so Kelsie had hoped.

What they ended up finding instead was...Just a big, empty dining table.

Everything that had been on top of it was gone. From the huge tablecloth to the fancy glasses, all the plates and leftovers, even the cutlery and the empty pitcher and bottle...All had vanished, without a trace.

“This is insane,” murmured Kelsie. “How did the culprit even manage to get rid of everything in such a short timeframe?”

After all, it had been barely half an hour between her being ambushed and regaining consciousness in her room. And yet, cleaning up the whole table on your own would ordinarily take at least forty minutes.

Once their inspection was done, they all gathered in the lounge to discuss their findings.

“Well, no way around it,” declared Pale Darby. “Some part of our dinner was definitely drugged or poisoned. It was already pretty obvious, but the culprit getting rid of the evidence proves it beyond a doubt.”

“Unless it’s all a misdirection of some kind,” pointed out Zen Magpie. “Make us focus on the missing stuff, so that we’d overlook the real clues.”

“Why not both?” suggested Dr. Mummies. “The culprit could have gotten rid of just one piece of damning evidence, while also obfuscating what it was by throwing everything else away.”

“Let’s narrow it down then,” said Ignis. “What did the culprit tamper with? I think we can safely exclude the main course. We all took portions at random from the central platter and I’m pretty sure we all ate more or less the same amount.”

“Indeed,” confirmed Darby. “I was keeping a *very* careful watch during the preparation of the main course. Nobody could have added even a pinch of salt without me noticing.”

“Well, I doubt the culprit could have taken action at the dining table,” added Tōja. “We were all sitting together and watching each other with our sharp mystery-loving eyes. Someone would have instantly noticed if the culprit had tried anything funny there.”

Zen Magpie nodded. “That’s right. As for the drinks, I was the one who regularly refilled the pitcher with tap water. No tricks there. I definitely didn’t spit in the pitcher or anything perverse like that...”

“I was keeping an eye on him, so I can vouch for him,” confirmed Kelsie, who had also been on waiting duty. “As for me, I prepared some glasses at random and placed them in the middle of the table. Everyone then picked their own glass at random. Therefore, I don’t think any specific glass could have been targeted.”

“What about the rum?” asked Tōja. “Could it have been tampered with?”

“I got it from a trusted friend’s personal distillery and brought it as a gift,” explained Ignis. “It was safe in my custody for the whole trip here. Even if someone had managed to steal it in my sleep, the bottle had a pretty elaborate seal: *Evilest Rum* is kind of a fancy brand, you know. After all, it was me who designed its captivating logo,” she bragged.

“I’m the one who retrieved the bottle from Ignis’s room at dinnertime. When I opened it, I’m sure the seal was still intact,” testified Kelsie.

“Too bad we can’t examine it to make sure, huh?” remarked Zen Magpie. “What a shame.”

“Even if the rum had somehow been tampered with, all seven of us split the bottle among ourselves,” reasoned Darby. “So we would either all have experienced the same symptoms, or none of them.”

“C’mon guys. We all know what the fishiest part about our dinner was,” said Tōja. “Those awful-tasting pumpkin cupcakes were suspicious as hell.”

Zen Magpie smiled wryly. “I don’t think anyone would deny that. In fact, I’d argue they’re almost *too* suspicious.”

“I’d be inclined to agree, but then again, this Syringe Sinner doesn’t seem like the most competent of culprits, based on their supposed track record,” replied Dr. Mummies with a shrug. “That said, the cupcake theory has got some issues too.”

Kelsie sighed. “Such as the victim being the one in charge of preparing and serving them, as well as the only person who conveniently wasn’t supposed to eat any.”

“Well, Darby didn’t eat his one either. And you barely touched yours, Kelsie... Hold on!” Tōja stood up with an excited grin. “I think I’m having a galaxy brain moment here. Isn’t it interesting that the people who ate the least cupcakes ended up becoming the main targets tonight? So what if the culprit is none other than...” he paused dramatically. “The victim himself?”

“Attempted murder-suicide, huh?” asked Zen Magpie thoughtfully. “It’s ridiculous enough it may just work, I suppose. But what makes you think so?”

“Well, Pointy was pretty sad when we disliked his cupcakes. So of course he’d go after the people who snubbed them the most. And when that failed, he locked himself in his room and *blam!* Injection.”

“That sounds like a bit of an overreaction,” opined Pale Darby. “Plus, wouldn’t we have found the syringe in his room if that were the case?”

“Maybe he threw it out of the lounge window before scrambling back into his room?” proposed Tōja.

“I find it hard to imagine that the victim would go through all that trouble just to set up a fairly lackluster locked room mystery...” said Ignis doubtfully. “And that still wouldn’t explain how he got into PD’s locked room to attack him.”

“Actually, I don’t think Pointy can be the Syringe Sinner,” said Kelsie. “He was the shortest one among us, and while I didn’t get a single glance at whoever

ambushed me, I would exclude it being the victim based on my impression.” She looked around. “Everyone else is fair game, though.”

“Why should we trust you on that? What if you’re lying?” protested Tōja.

Kelsie sighed. “Why would I lie about it? Assuming I’m the culprit, it would be in my best interest to have someone else take the blame, especially if they can’t defend themselves.”

“Alright, alright. I give up on my awesome theory!” exclaimed the remaining teenager with a dejected expression.

The discussion on the cupcakes resumed, but the group wasn’t able to glean any further insight from it. Tampering with the cupcakes would have been relatively easy while they were in the oven, but there didn’t seem to be any consistent pattern to everyone’s reported symptoms in relation to them.

After a while, Kelsie stood up and started pacing back and forth. “We are definitely missing something here.”

Zen Magpie smirked. “Well, you know what they say about assumptions... They’re totally trustworthy, yes.”

“Is there any element we aren’t considering?” wondered Dr. Mummies with a thoughtful expression. “There must be some clue we’re overlooking.”

“Heh, perhaps the culprit simply figured out a way to lock the door from the outside and we’re all overthinking this like a bunch of fools,” said Pale Darby with a chuckle.

“How would that be possible, though? It’s true that the locking mechanism is just a simple latch, but you still need to manually activate it...” mused Tōja.

After a moment of silence, Kelsie facepalmed. “Oof. PD’s right, we are indeed fools... Overlooking the simplest explanation in our detective craze. Come on, I want to test something.”

Followed by her fellow Circlers, Kelsie went to fetch something they had retrieved during their search. Then she pointed to the closest room, which happened to be Tōja's, and asked its owner to lock himself in.

Once they heard the sound of the lock being set, Kelsie approached the door. She extended her hand holding the tool and...

click

She tried the handle and the door opened.

“Are you kidding me!” groaned Ignis. “A freaking magnet trick of all things! Just when I thought this mystery couldn't get more underwhelming.”

Dr. Mummies gave her a philosophical look. “Reality tends to be disappointing.”

“Way to go, Syringe Sinner,” commented Zen Magpie. “Very clever. I hope you're proud of yourself.”

Pale Darby sadly shook his head. “Mr. Pointy died for *this*? I know we're being awfully callous about this whole ordeal, but damn if this solution isn't a letdown.”

Tōja nodded in agreement. “Also wow, this means that literally anyone of us could have done it. We thought it was an impossible crime, but it was actually a super-possible crime.”

Kelsie was feeling similarly frustrated, but it was too soon to jump to conclusions. “Let's try it on Pointy's door, just to be sure.”

However, the group was in for another surprise. When they went to try the same trick on the still-functioning lock to the victim's room...

The magnet had no effect on the latch.

“What is going on here?” asked Dr. Mummies with a perplexed face, voicing everyone’s thoughts.

“I have to take my previous statement back,” conceded Zen Magpie in a begrudgingly admiring tone. “This is actually a remarkable display of chaos. Almost on my level, even.”

“We are certainly reaching farcical levels of clownery tonight, murder aside,” commented Ignis.

“How about we just try the magnet on every door?” suggested Tōja.

As it turned out, all three left-side rooms were immune to the magnet trick, whereas the four right-side doors could be locked and unlocked from the outside with it. In other words, the fancier rooms on the left also happened to be magnet-proof. This discrepancy had a simple reason: the latches of the regular rooms were made of steel, which had strong magnetic properties, unlike the silver latches that decorated the fancy rooms.

“Why even bother making them any different? They pretty much look the same, although silver might be a bit shinier,” complained Ignis. “I despise this kind of tasteless ostentation of wealth.”

Tōja rolled his eyes. “Of course, after all you’re such an aesthetic genius in every field,” he muttered.

She smirked at his jab. “Now that’s the first sensible thing I’ve heard from you in a while.”

“We have more pressing issues to worry about,” interjected Dr. Mummies. “As you may have noticed, this new discovery brings our theories back to square one.”

“Indeed,” confirmed Kelsie. “It would seem that Mr. Pointy Error was, after all, found in a perfectly locked room. We are back to dealing with an impossible crime.”

“Well then,” said Pale Darby with a faint smile. “I think we all know how this goes...It was clearly an evil lep-”

The six Circlers spent the next hour in the lounge, arguing about the case while keeping an eye on each other. Fingers were occasionally pointed, but nobody really had a solid case. The incident at dinner, the bizarre nighttime ambushes and Mr. Pointy's death... They all agreed the Syringe Sinner must be the culprit behind everything and that they were most likely working alone, but everything else seemed uncertain.

Realizing that the discussion wasn't going anywhere, Kelsie decided it was time to come clean and tell everyone about the note she had gotten during the boat ride. Naturally, the revelation that she had kept such a message hidden from the others wasn't taken well by everyone.

"What the hell, Kelsie?" complained Zen Magpie. "I'd never have expected this sort of thing from you."

"Indeed," concurred Dr. Mummies. "This is the level of deceitfulness I'd expect from someone like Zen Magpie."

Ignis shrugged. "I knew about it since we searched each other earlier, but it doesn't really seem too relevant."

"Are you sure?" protested Tōja. "Why else hide it from us if she's not in league with the culprit? Maybe she had other incriminating notes but she ate them or something?"

Kelsie rolled her eyes. "If I really wanted to get rid of suspicious evidence, why wouldn't I get rid of this note, too? As I said, this was given to me by For Nine on behalf of the owner of the island. Just ask him if you don't believe me. And I seriously doubt this mysterious master is the one prancing about the mansion with a syringe."

Before they could move on to discuss the contents of the message, they heard some sounds coming from the hallway. Surprised, Kelsie glanced at the window: the storm had finally abated. Had a new visitor arrived?

"Who's there?" shouted Pale Darby.

The door to the lounge opened, revealing the familiar figure of agent For Nine. He gave a small salute. “My apologies for intruding upon this gathering so late in the night. The door to one of your chambers being forced open triggered an alarm, which is why I came to check on the situation as soon as the downpour receded. But first, allow me to introduce my esteemed employer. Upon hearing my report, he insisted on coming personally to handle the situation. It is my honor to present you... The Master of the Defamed Seaborg, Ax Beakbang!”

A shocked gasp rose from the six Circlers as another figure stepped into the lounge.

It was a remarkably extravagant man, who strode into the room with a commanding presence. He was wearing crimson leather pants and a simple white shirt, with the words ‘**Go Aces!**’ printed on it. His hair was cropped short, balanced by a carefully cultivated beard and moustache. A pair of silver-rimmed glasses and a simple iron necklace completed the picture.

“Good night, ladies and gentlemen!” he declared as he looked upon the group. “Of course, I already know you all, pieces of trash that you are. Just as you know me.” He smirked. “Welcome to my island, fellow Circlers.”

“Ax Beakbang?!”

“So it was you all along!”

“Wow, I can’t believe you’re the one who brought us here.”

“You old scumbag!”

As one of the Circle’s most prominent members, everyone had been surprised when Beakbang had refused to join their little expedition. As it turned out, he hadn’t really needed an invitation in the first place.

Kelsie raised her voice to be heard over the excited chatter of her peers. “Finally, everything falls into place. I knew this mysterious master had to be connected to the Circle somehow, but I didn’t expect you of all people.” She paused and glared at him. “So was this all a game to you, from the very beginning?”

Ax Beakbang raised an eyebrow, but otherwise maintained an impassive expression. “While I can’t deny that my eternal war against boredom played a

part in setting up this whole situation, I have my reasons for it, which I will explain later. But first, care to enlighten us as to what the fuck is going on here?”

Kelsie sighed and started summarizing the events that had transpired at the mansion since their arrival, aided by the others when it was time to give their testimonies.

“How unfortunate for young Mr. Pointy End,” said For Nine with a somber nod at the end of the briefing.

After a moment of consideration, Ax Beakbang started giving instructions. “For Nine, I leave it to you to keep an eye on the guests. Kelsie, come with me. As someone whose innocence is guaranteed, you will be your group’s representative. The others will wait here in the lounge until we are finished.” Before anyone had time to protest, he turned around.

“And now... Let the final act begin,” declared Ax Beakbang as he left the room.

“Final act? I didn’t expect you to have such a flair for the dramatic, Ax,” commented Kelsie as she followed him into the kitchen. “So I take it you’re confident in your chances of solving this case?”

He turned around and gave her an insufferable smirk. “Well, who knows.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve *already* solved it?”

“We are in my domain here, Kelsie. That gives me a considerable advantage.”

She sighed. “And rather than sharing your theory, you’ll offer me cryptic hints and amuse yourself with my attempts to make sense of this mess.”

“Would I ever do that to you?”

“Yes, of course you would. By the way, what was that note about? And what makes you so sure I’m trustworthy?”

Ax Beakbang walked towards the counter. “You see,” he explained as he poured himself a drink, “I couldn’t have organized this visit without the support of the Circle’s very own secretive founder, Mad W. He vouched for your good intentions.”

“Oh,” said Kelsie with a faint blush. “That makes sense.”

“As for the message, I had For Nine pass it on to you because I suspected something like this might occur and I needed a reliable witness. Such a vague message would likely keep you on your toes while hinting at my connection to the Circle.”

“Fair enough, but hold on... Why did you think someone might get killed? And why did you allow this to happen? Did you grow so bored of fictional mysteries that you hoped to experience a real one here on your cozy island?”

“That would be pretty fucking callous, wouldn’t it? Then again, I’ve grown quite jaded after spending so many years on this forsaken place. But even so, I wouldn’t just do that on a whim. I’m sure you have at least an idea of my real motive here.”

“Let me think...” said Kelsie thoughtfully. “Does this have anything to do with the Kebur Clan and the cult of Uncle Bark? Did you spread those rumors about this island to lure them here?”

Ax Beakbang grinned at her. “You’re a clever one. Yeah, that’s the gist of it. We found out that the upper echelons of the Circle had been infiltrated by a member of the Kebur Clan. We couldn’t allow them to take over, so me and Mad W concocted this plan: lure all the damn suspects on my island and create the perfect conditions for a murder. And by catching the culprit, we’d root out the infiltrator. Sacrifice one Circler to save them all, basically.”

Kelsie shook her head. “What a batshit crazy scheme. So what was the culprit’s goal here, exactly?”

“Committing a perfect murder. That’s their thing. Members of the cult believe that sacrificing a victim with an unsolvable murder will summon the spirit of the Uncle Bark and reveal the hidden truth behind his mysteries, or some such bullshit.”

“A perfect and unsolvable crime? What does that even mean? Mr. Pointy’s death certainly seems to be unsolvable at first glance, but I’d hardly call it perfect.”

“Kelsie, what do you think is the best way to create an unsolvable mystery?”

“Hmm. Is this a trick question? So-called impossible crimes *appear* to be unsolvable, but usually end up leading to a single possible answer.”

“Precisely. The more constraints you have, the less possibilities you are left with.”

“So if we follow this line of reasoning... A crime will be truly unsolvable when anyone could have done it and there’s no real way to determine who?”

Ax Beakbang nodded. “Indeed. That’s how the Kebur Clan toys with detectives: even if you solve the howdunnit, the whodunnit will remain unknowable.”

“And yet, Mr. Pointy’s death *was* an impossible murder. The kind where nobody could have done it, or so it seems. Which means... If I figure out how it was done, I’ll be able to guess who did it?”

The master of the island smirked. “That’s damn right. In other words, the culprit fucked up big time. And in trying to cover up their tracks and make up for their blunders, we ended up with this bizarre and unexpectedly impossible crime.”

“Is that why they went mad and tried to kill multiple people, including me?”

“Heh. I wouldn’t be too sure about that, Kelsie.”

Kelsie raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you know what they say...” Ax Beakbang laughed. “Assumptions are a terrible trap-”

“Oh, shut up already!” Kelsie interrupted him with a groan. “I’ve heard that a thousand times before. Isn’t it one of Uncle Bark’s quotes, by the way?”

“Well, even an evil cult is right twice a day.”

“Don’t you mean a stopped clock?”

“Yeah, whatever.” Ax Beakbang leaned against the wall and gave her a smug look. “Well now, isn’t it about time to put those deductive skills of yours to the test? Let’s hear your solution, Kelsie.”

“Don’t you mean my *abductive* skills?”

He glared at her. “Whatever skills you use, you better get it right, because I’m tempted to let the culprit get away with it otherwise.”

“Oh, don’t get all snarky on me now. I’ll solve the case, I promise. I owe it to poor Pointy. However,” she raised three fingers, “I demand three more hints, as payback for manipulating us. And none of that cryptic misleading bullcrap, I want three solid and helpful ones or it doesn’t count!”

“A bold request,” muttered Ax Beakbang stroking his chin. “But reasonable enough, considering how much of a mess the culprit made of things. Very well! I will grant you three more hints.”

[REDACTED]

Kelsie nodded. “That makes sense, yeah. A bit vague, but still a surprisingly decent hint.”

Ax Beakbang smirked. “Well, it wouldn’t be a proper hint if it weren’t at least somewhat vague and enigmatic. Speaking of which...” He took a deep breath.

[REDACTED]

Ax Beakbang sighed. “You make it sound much less interesting that way. Let’s see now...What would be a proper final hint? Oh, I’ve got the perfect one.”

“Out with it!”

[REDACTED]

“And there you have it, Kelsie. Now is the moment of truth. Whodunnit and how?”

Welcome to a new fragment, dear reader! I hope your visit has been a pleasant one. You probably know the drill by now, so I won't bother you with anything but the most essential rules.

RULES

There is only one culprit.

The culprit is the one who planned and carried out the murder.

Everyone else is completely innocent.

Only the culprit is allowed to lie and hide information concerning the murder from the detective.

The story is told from Kelsie's point of view, which is reliable. Kelsie is indeed the detective and not the culprit, but she's not infallible.

Bonus Challenge:

Scattered throughout this gameboard are 20 anagrams. Some appear often, some only once. Some are easy, some are tough. Can you find and decode them all? Great rewards await those who uncover them all.

After all... That which is redacted, can be unredacted.

Optional Achievement: *Solo Mode*

They say the great detective Kelsie was able to elegantly destroy this mystery on her own. Will you try to match her wits, and attempt this undertaking alone? Or will you band up with the other detectives to deliver the coup-de-grace on the newly revived witch's courtroom? It's up to you, dear reader!