

At that moment, one of the other officers came up to Weston and I. “Captain, one of the witnesses we just finished taking a statement from has something I think you’ll want to hear.”

“Well bring them over,” the Captain replied.

We were shortly presented with a young girl, probably about ten years of age, elegantly dressed and wearing coke-bottle glasses. “Nice to meet you, I’m Priscilla Davenport,” she said without any prompting. The girl was no shrinking violet. I approved immediately.

“Hello, Ms. Davenport,” Weston replied. “My subordinate claims that you have some testimony that could prove helpful to us?”

“Oh yes! At least, I think it will. See, I absolutely love marine archaeology. I want to make it my job when I grow up. So I was really wanting to see the Argos Engine up close. With my eyes, well, that really does need to be up close. So I was right next to the display when the lights went out. There was all this shouting and yelling, and my parents were over at the buffet table at the time so I knew I wasn’t going to be able to make it to them. Instead I just tried to crouch down next to the case. Someone bumped me, though, and made me fall into it. I banged my knee against it pretty badly too.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” replied Weston. I rolled my eyes and waited for what I hoped would be something more useful.

“Thank you. But that wasn’t the good part. While I was down there, I heard something. It was like a ‘whirr’ sound. You know, like a remote-controlled car? Or maybe a power drill? I don’t know, but it wasn’t a sound I was expecting. Then right before the ‘whirr’ sound stopped, there was a ‘tink’.”

“And you don’t think it was just the climate control stuff in the base you were hearing?” It was my turn to cut in.

She shook her head. “Nope. I’ve seen enough of these displays to know what all that sounds like. It’s all electronic. At most you get a soft and constant hiss from air moving, nothing that goes ‘whirr’ or ‘tink’.”

“Thank you, Ms. Davenport. That was very helpful,” said the Captain. “You can go back to your parents. I’ll make sure to let you know if I have any follow-up questions.” After she was gone, the Captain rubbed his face. “Was it helpful? I mean, sounds happened by the display. Of course there would be sounds there, the Engine was taken.”

“It might be, it might be,” I murmured, as I took a dime out of my bag and tapped it against the base of the display, eliciting a satisfying equivalent of ‘tink’. Looking up, I waved over Sir Charles. “Sir Charles, I have a wild theory. What are the odds that the Engine could have been swallowed up by this base?”

He let out a slight bark of laughter. “Not good odds at all, I’m afraid, detective. The metal walls of that base are a solid three inches thick on a side. I wanted that base sturdy! There’s enough room for the mechanisms, but even if the top of the base were to mysteriously vanish somehow, the Engine would have just gotten stuck on the sides.”

“Ah, right,” I replied. “You designed this yourself. Do you happen to have the blueprints somewhere handy?”

“I already got them from him,” cut in Weston. “He’s right, they’re that thick. There’s no way the Engine would fit inside the base.”

“Hmm. And you trust the company that fabricated the base for you?”

“Of course! Listen, this base has nothing to do with why the Argos Engine is gone. Myself and Dr. Schultz drew up the plans together and she hand-delivered them to the engineering team. She even supervised the installation to make sure that all the climate control was properly set up, for God’s sakes.” Sir Charles was clearly getting annoyed.

“Alright, alright,” I said, backing off the line of questioning. If the hollow base idea was a dud, I didn’t know what else to do. I wandered back over to the rear table, where the cake sat, waiting to fulfill its purpose. If I got this solved, I was going to bribe whoever it took to get that cake all to myself.

“I wonder why they haven’t cut it yet,” said Priscilla Davenport, causing me to start. The kid was a four-eyed ninja.

“Rule of life, kid. Nobody cuts the cake until someone tells them to cut the cake.” I sighed.

“So, you’re a detective, right? Do you think you’re going to find the Argos Engine? I can’t wait to get my hands on it.”

That got my attention, sure enough. “Get your hands on it? What do you mean?”

She looked guilty, tried to stammer out an explanation, then sighed. “I mean that Sir Charles was auctioning off the chance for people to do some research on it themselves. Something about needing to cover court costs, I think is what he said to Dad. Ooooh, what I would give to get a chance to get really hands-on with that thing! It’s like the Mona Lisa of marine archaeology, a real masterpiece!”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “And now what price would people give to have it be theirs completely?”