

Red Dorm – Red Side. Set Summer 1936, Songmark Aeronautical School for Young Ladies.

With many thanks for Walter D. Reimer for the use of Wo Shin, and the assistance of E.O. Costello with Inspector Stagg and Sergeant Brush!

Liberty Morgenstern twitched an ear in irritation as she threw the sheets aside, waking to the grey light of a Saturday morning at Songmark. It was always the same.

Her paws hit the polished floorboards with a click, and her coyote ancestry showed in a half snarl as she cast an eye over to her annoying room-mate Brigit Mulvaney. “Willya keep the noise down? Some of us are still trying to sleep!”

The red-furred girl was sitting in the window, singing a lilting Irish air as she breathed in the jasmine and bougainvillea-scented air of Spontoon Eastern Island. Her tail twitched but she carried on regardless, long muzzle parted as she filled the room with the plaintive tones native to a very different island.

“Why, and to be sure,” Brigit’s eyes twinkled as she finished and cast a glance over to the grey-furred New Havenite who was buttoning up her rather unflattering first-year Songmark blazer “’Tis a lament of Auld Ireland, groanin’ beneath the claws of what ye’d call the Imperialist Powers and pining for her freedom. What bit of me song is it you’re not liking ?”

Liberty’s grey ears twitched in annoyance. Two and a half terms of sharing rooms with Mulvaney and the Starlingist Russian had been a strain. She had arrived on the islands confident in her mission and serenely sure she would triumph or die a People’s Martyr trying. She would learn everything taught by the finest non-communist academy open to her, and every day spread the many truths expounded by the great Comrade Lev Trotsky to an admiring audience keen to hear the marvels of the dialectic.

Well, she told herself as she finished dressing – fifty percent success with more than two years to go, is not far off the Three-Year Plan. But then her tail drooped as she recalled the fifty percent failures. Part of the reason she had been sent all the way across the planet by the Committee of Nine was to report on the curious non-progression of what should have become a matching People’s Republic years before she was even born. As islands, the Spontoon group was very little interest to New Haven on the far side of the world; there was little chance of much military support or trade. But to any citizen of a proper Worker’s State, it was glaringly obvious that only harsh forces of Imperialistic and capitalistic oppression could prevent the natural development of a Worker’s paradise like her own homeland.

Except in Spontoon’s case, despite the apparent withdrawal of repressive forces decades ago, this had bafflingly failed to happen. There must be a hidden paw of reactionary forces somewhere around, but she had to confess that so far she had entirely failed to find it.

Her tail twitched as Brigit started another song. She had been so sure of making progress the month before. It had been a Friday and the rest of the class was cheering their evening meal for a change; roast chicken in celebration of them all having soloed for the first time.

It had been an opportunity to take a moral stand and she had done so fearlessly, although the steaming meat was decadently fragrant in her nose she had loudly declared she would eat not a scrap while oppressed workers on the island were being ill-fed by their masters, and agriculturalist cubs going hungry while the decadent tourists dined on caviar and steak.

“I expected they’d at least notice me,” she grumbled to herself as she made the bed, recalling how she had braced herself for a clash of wits. But her class tutor Miss Cardroy had simply shared out her portion amongst the other girls, who had at most smiled pityingly and ignored her. The next day she had been introduced to Zara, a particularly reactionary third-year who must have somehow offended the Tutors shockingly (third-year girls were expected not to break the rules or at least not to get caught) and given a forty pound pack of tinned stew to carry.

Miss Cardroy had flashed that sincere-looking smile of hers and informed her she had been chosen for a mercy mission; the staff had seen the error of their ways and sent her to find starving and oppressed families all across the islands to distribute emergency relief. The tins were slightly old but perfectly edible “Maconochie” meat and vegetable stew, which was well-known on the islands as the Althing had stockpiled it for disaster relief from typhoons and the like. Zara was to go with her, she added, arrange any water-taxis required and keep count of how many needy families had been helped.

It had been an embarrassing two days for Liberty, as apart from six hours sleep neither she nor Zara were allowed to return to Songmark until the time was up or all the aid distributed. By that time she had visited every inhabited island, delved through jungles on Main Island to the remotest settlements on the map, and returned in disgust still panting under the weight of thirty-eight tins. Just to add insult to injury, the two tins handed out had gone to no hungry waifs but to a rather wealthy-looking bourgeois South Island store-owner. Herr Rassberg had explained he normally kept a very small stock on the shelves but had just sold the last of it to some nostalgic tourists, ex-soldiers who had eaten it nearly every day in the 1914 Capitalist War.

It had taken more than a month for Liberty to eat the contents of every can she had failed to hand out; Miss Cardroy had looked closely at the expiry dates on the tins and declared it would be a crime against the hungry of the world if they had to be thrown away next term. By the end of five weeks it was almost a relief to get back to three-finger Poi – and for the rest of her days she swore an undying hatred on Capitalist-War surplus Maconochie!

“’Tis said,” Brigit advised brightly, finishing her song, “If you wrinkle your snout like that too long, ‘twill stay that way. A fine day it is for sure, and us with Kilikiti practice to be done. Or will you sit there and pickle, with a face that sour?”

“Beauty is only fur-deep,” Liberty snapped, then immediately regretted it as the other canine grinned.

“Ah, an’ what else would ye be havin’? A trim liver or a lovely spleen on show?” Brigit’s green eyes sparkled in amusement. “Let’s be seeing some of that Worker’s Solidarity ye’ve told us such a hatful about – or are us poor workers beneath you?”

With a disgusted sigh, Liberty rose and followed her out of the dorm. The local traditional game was a good team sport, she consoled herself – and when she was swinging that four-foot war club, often it was not the rubber ball she imagined it hitting.

Two hours later, four exhausted young ladies flung themselves back on the beds panting, unable to argue for several minutes.

“This weather,” Tatiana complained, the Siberian ermine stirring herself to brush her tail “Is like Sauna. A sauna all the time!” She stuck her tongue out in disgust at the sight of the comb clogged with fur; she had thought she would finish shedding a month ago, but there seemed no end to it. One of the tourists on the last boat had been a freakish-looking canine, a Mixtecan Furless whose pink exposed skin was mostly clothed despite the heat to protect her from sunburn.

Tatiana shivered at the memory, and brushed more gently. She had never heard of an ermine shedding ALL the way, but neither did she want to make medical history.

“Oh? This is only the start of June. Just you wait till August! You’ll be wishing it was this cool again.” On the next bed a red panda gently smoothed her own fur. A lot of it was concentrated in her ringed tail that took three times as long as the rest of her to dry. At the moment it was raised to catch the breeze coming through the open window as she lay on her front and luxuriated in the warm glow after hard exercise. “Oh, but you won’t be here in August, probably. I will. I’ll be with my husband that month, ALL month.” Her eyes sparkled. “And you know what’s the first thing I’ll say to him when I see him?”

“No – what?” Tatiana frowned, scratching an ear.

Shin grinned. “I’ll say – take a good look at the bedroom floor, darling; because for a long time all you’re going to be seeing is the ceiling!”

Liberty tried to concentrate on her navigation textbook as Shin went into ever more extreme and improbable detail, Brigit and Tatiana seeming impressed. At least, she told herself, it seemed improbable. She would have dearly loved to denounce some of it as impossible. But she had seen Shin’s Siberian Tiger in the fur, and had a disturbing feeling that despite her roommate being a self-confessed criminal (or “unrestrained entrepreneur” which was surely the same thing) she might today be telling the literal truth.

She closed her eyes, unwisely allowing herself to follow Shin’s story. A minute later she heard a jeering remark from Brigit, and her ears flushed as she realised her tail had locked sideways. There was no way to pull it back without pain except in its own good time; the reflex was as involuntary as a sneeze and as impossible to fake.

Shin’s three-tone face was a study in glee as she spotted the mongrel coyote girl’s discomfort. “Why, Liberty,” she smiled across the room, though her eyes were hard. “So glad you approve – at least the smarter end of you does. But you’ll never know, will you? You wouldn’t survive a night with him – and if you did, when I found out you wouldn’t survive ME.”

Liberty snarled, and reached under the bed for the Kilikiti bat. Shin was just as fast on the draw, and two seconds later the pair faced each other in the middle of the room while Brigit and Tatiana scrambled out of the way and cheerfully started calling out the odds and tossing over cowries as they placed bets.

Just then the door to the corridor opened, and it became a matter of reflexes to see how fast the bats could vanish. But it was not one of the Tutors who stood there with notebook in paw ready to knock off valuable points from their dorm – it was the second-year mouse Beryl, looking smooth and elegant in her privately tailored uniform.

Beryl’s big ears twitched in amusement as she surveyed the scene. “I don’t suppose I could make it worth your while to put off the duel to the death – say for two whole days? I have a little proposition for you.”

“A folk museum,” Tatiana mused as the four of them looked around the Main Island Museum of Anthropomorphy that afternoon. “Is fine, da. Celebration of worker’s achievements, all so good. In Russia

even, still tell stories like Baba Yaga's hut, pre-Revolutionary beliefs of the People." She beamed, looking at the gallery showing the fictitious "Natives of No Island" explaining the technical details of how the legends of water-dwelling furs had been brought to life for the film studios.

Brigit's green eyes were sparkling as she looked around the museum. "And isn't it fine of Beryl to persuade the Tutors to let us come, and pay our tickets besides? To be sure, anyone might think she's turning over a new leaf. But you catch me believing that, you can call me a West Briton to me face."

Shin wrinkled her snout. "You get nothing for nothing, Brigit." She fished in her pocket for a folded mimeographed sheet, and handed it to Brigit. "She collared me after lunch and told me what we're doing for her. She's got a project on public buildings to do; it's not the strangest thing I've heard the Tutors handing out. We give her the exact plans of this floor, we get ten shells to split between us, and four bottles Nootnops Blue. Sounds fair to me."

Brigit and Tatiana agreed, grabbing the fabric measuring tapes Shin tossed them from her pocket. Liberty hesitated, her radical conscience in a slight turmoil. It would, she decided, be a matter of contributing honest proletarian labour and removing capital from the paws of a corrupt and criminal bourgeois to be redistributed amongst the deserving.

"Count me in," she grunted, looking at the next gallery where the Fire Crystal glittered, a pretty condensation of so much labour. "I'll do it – and unlike you I'll get my measurements exact."

"Fire Crystal Stolen!" Was the cry of the newshounds selling the Daily Elele and other local papers two days later.

The voices echoed up to the first-year Songmark dorms, waking Liberty five minutes before the alarm clock. For a minute she thought about it and went back to sleep again. Spontoon was full of criminals, capitalists and crypto-capitalists, much the same thing. If a token of capital had changed from one corrupt set of paws to another, it hardly mattered.

Unfortunately, the others in the dorm were less inclined to let her sleep.

"What it is that I am hearing, 'tis terrible bad luck to lay paws on that stone," was the first thing she heard Brigit saying.

Shin nodded vigorously. "I've heard the stories. They're true. We had a hard-boiled journalist working on the story the last time, four years ago and even he had to confess it always happens just as the legends say. If you find it in your pocket, head straight back to the museum and hand it in, there could be a reward if you're lucky. But don't keep it." She paused. "Don't get me wrong. I love jewels. The Fire Crystal's worth a fortune – but that's no use if you don't get to spend it."

Tatiana's voice dripped with scorn. "Is only big red rock! World is full of baubles, and collectors. Bad luck is peasant superstition." As she often did, she took her cap out of her drawer, the Komonsol Youth Movement red star as clean and polished as Brigit's crucifix. Her finger rubbed it hard for reassurance.

Shin's gaze was thoughtful. "If there was an aircraft that'd just had ten fatal crashes with no survivors and no explanations, you wouldn't want to fly that model. Even if nobody had any idea what'd happened, you'd steer well clear." She paused. "The Fire Crystal's like that. If you don't believe the things that happen to folk who steal it are on account of some ancient God's wrath ... fine, I won't try and persuade you. But believe me, they DO happen. And you really don't want to be around when they do."

From the window of the first-year dorms one could look down on the compound gate; often one of the students could be seen longingly gazing at the way to freedom, when denied passes. Since being somehow caught smuggling the Nootnops Blue into their dorm the previous day, Brigit Mulvaney fitted that description painfully well. Just how they had been "fingered" she could not explain, as only Beryl had known about it.

She was perched in her usual window seat, the one she had laid claim to the hour she had arrived at Songmark by virtue of getting there first. Suddenly her ears perked up. "Mother o'saints! 'Tis himself, the Inspector of Polis, and a polis officer alongside of him. They're havin' words with the third-year on the gate." Her snout wrinkled as she surveyed her room-mates. "Is there something ye've been up to, and didn't give me a share of? For to be sure I'll get my share of the licking if you have."

"Not me." Shin had practiced her virtuous look in the mirror, and put it to good use. "I'm keeping my nose clean; I only just scraped in here, and I'm not planning to get thrown out." She looked out of the window following Brigit's gaze, and snickered. "Oooh, I like that. Without a warrant not even the police get into this place – they're kept waiting outside, even the famous Inspector Stagg himself."

"Inspector Stagg? Here?" The effect on Liberty was much the same as if Shin had casually announced that Chancellor Hitler had dropped by. Her fur bristled and her lips drew back in a snarl, exposing sharp and well brushed teeth. After a moment's hesitation she lunged for the Kilikiti bat under her bed.

Shin jumped over and stood on it, pinning the bat to the floor. “Naughty girl,” she wagged a finger at the New Havenite “Now, that’d definitely get us bad marks. I’m allergic to police myself, but we don’t even know it’s us they’re here to see.”

“To be sure!” Brigit’s green eyes sparkled. “T’would be a fine thing to see that second-year dorm frog-marched away – the one with that so-English milady and her fine friends.”

“Da! And that cow, the Italian tyrant’s niece. That would be a day, a day to write to the Embassy about!” Tatiana’s black-tipped ermine tail waved in enthusiasm as she demonstrated the ideologies of Starlingism did not fundamentally clash with wishful thinking.

Two minutes later, all four tails drooped as they heard Miss Cardroy calling them down to the front gate right away. Liberty’s fur bristled anew. When Miss Cardroy called “Right away” it meant that if you were soaped up in the shower you came out at a run in your dripping bare fur. This was not looking like a good day to write to the Embassy after all.

“Ah. Songmark.” The deer looked up through the wire, surveying keenly the complex of two-storey buildings. “A famous institution. One wonders if infamous would be a better word.” Inspector Stagg gazed thoughtfully at a loose strand of wire as his vulpine Sergeant flicked through the notebook listing the most recent visitors to the Museum.

“Yessir. Very well connected, if you know whadda mean. Famous if ya got the scratch to send your gal here. Infamous if you’re the one sent here. Lots of the rich and powerful send the gals they can’t handle out here, whether the gals like it or not. By the time they’re through at Songmark they’re a mite less rich but a whole lot more talented.”

The Inspector nodded, leaning on his cane. “Discretion then, definitely discretion. If you could make the arrangements, Sergeant Brush? There is one dorm of theirs where we should introduce ourselves socially.”

As his Sergeant admiringly told his friends, you didn’t just have to get up early to catch out Inspector Stagg – it probably wouldn’t help even if you stayed up all night. A few minute’s discussion with the senior girl on the gate and then with a mottle-patterned feline Tutor put their request over, and he turned back to see Stagg already finishing a review of the background material.

“Yes, I see what you mean,” the tall deer closed the slim file with a snap as he heard the sound of approaching paw steps. “It must be quite a pawfull for the Tutors to look after. And yet they do; we have rather few serious complaints on record against Songmark, especially considering some of the recruits they take. Quite a collection they have. The admissions office has either an odd sense of humour or a devoted sense of mission” The files he carried were mimeographs from the Interior Ministry, obtained after persuading two of the clerks to work late the previous night. Though nobody had yet been refused permission to study on Spontoon after the Tutors had chosen them, the Government insisted on a copy of every successful application form.

“That’s one red dorm for sure, sir,” the fox shook his head. “None of them exactly respecters of property, you’d think. Gotta devout Starlingist, a third-generation Fenian from the Emerald Isle, an honest-to-goodness criminal heiress from Krupmark – hard to top that little collection! Unless...” his tail twitched, as he looked up at the deer.

“You can say it, Sergeant, you needn’t spare my feelings. You left out one of my own, from New Haven. You can be sure that my ... former neighbours won’t have sent any moderates out all this way unsupervised. Ah well, here are the young ladies in question. Innocent until proven guilty, like anyone else.” He tapped his cane on the ground, and raised an eyebrow.

Sergeant Brush wisely made no comment. But if this was one of the places where the first reaction was “arrest the usual suspects”, well, he’d have brought four sets of pawcuffs along that morning.

“Now you see why my family live on Krupmark”

It was three hours later when a very bad-tempered Wo Shin threw herself down on her bed again, after being quizzed relentlessly “It may have its worries sometimes, but – no police!”

“Is a very soft sort of police,” Tatiana said wonderingly, doing a mental check that all her finger-and-toe-claws were still there. “In Russia, we are never seeing daylight again until we are signing full confessions.” Her ears jerked as she realised what she had just said. “But of course we would not be asked, is only criminals put to the question. Not good citizens and Party members.”

Shin smiled mirthlessly. “I’ll take your word on that, for what it’s worth. But he’s got this on us; we had the motive and the opportunity. You Reds love a chance to “redistribute wealth” – and Brigit? What’s this fund-raising he was asking you about? ‘A dhrink for the Bhoys’ or something, wasn’t it?”

The Irish Setter’s ears went right back. “And wouldn’t I love to know the name of the one who opened his snout to the Polis about that! ‘Tis getting so a good girl can’t even send a shilling home to her poor auld mother in County Kerry.”

Liberty fixed her with a stare. “My Embassy’s told me ALL about that,” she wrinkled her snout “your poor old mother was caught running guns to anyone who’d buy them, and a neutral court gave her five years, the stiffest penalty they could find in the book.”

Brigit sniffed, and muttered something about not having managed to raise a cowry for the struggle anyway.

“Well, we DID have motive,” Shin insisted. “Except for me. You don’t live in a Casino without learning about luck. That Fire Crystal is something I wouldn’t try stealing with a thirty foot lasso and asbestos gloves to carry it home in.”

“So you say,” Liberty sniffed. “Someone sure stole it. You’ve got the local contacts to fence it, we haven’t. That’s a strike against you; even the dumbest cop can’t miss it.”

The four looked hard at each other. The Fire Crystal had been stolen sometime on Saturday morning, and as it happened they had been on Casino Island at the time. Worse still, against Songmark rules they had all been separated at some time before meeting up at the water taxi. Liberty had stopped to look for acceptable books at the bookshop, Tatiana had reported in to her embassy, Brigit had tried again to get served at the Marleybone Hotel bar in the crowd, and Shin had met up with some “family friends.” Considering what her family did for a living, the red panda could have chosen a better alibi.

“You’re a fine climber, that you are,” Brigit twitched a long ear, looking at Shin speculatively. “The gem was on the second floor, and the window would be easier than the door. Just last week, wasn’t it yourself who went up that wee cliff by the North coast in about nothing flat?”

Shin studied her finger-claws. “We’re all trained at that, Brigit. Those rocks are the place you got your name in the book the week before, remember? That new route of yours was quite a frightener, “*Pogue Mhudrhoy*” or whatever you called it. Quite a height that last traverse was, twenty feet above the rocks. About second-storey level, I’d say. Just about the height of the Museum room that had the Fire Gem.”

“’Tis so, and there’s no denying it. And then we’ve Tatiana, isn’t she just the girl who squeezed under that chock-stone even Beryl stuck on, to put “*Heroic Progress*” in the book right next to me own little route. Couldn’t she just squeeze through a tight window that nobody’d believe?” Brigit continued, remembering the almost unbelievable contortions the ermine had made to complete the route up the narrow rock chimney. “Suppose she did visit her Embassy afterwards with the Fire Crystal in her pocket? Diplomatic pouches, they could swallow a dozen o’ them. ‘Tis the perfect way of getting a hot item out o’ the country under the noses of the polis.”

“I did not!” Tatiana spat angrily. “Reporting academic progress was all I did.” Her tail twitched dangerously; “Is only bourgeois who steal.”

“All property is theft, and all of that?” Brigit asked innocently “So if ‘tis stolen anyway, it might as well go to a good home.”

Shin could see another fight and another round of kitchen-work in the sweltering heat looming on the horizon; she jumped between the two and held out her paws placatingly. “Now then, everybody. I know I didn’t do it – but you won’t believe me. And that’s exactly what you all say.” There was a brief silence. She picked up her (now well-thumbed) copy of the Songmark rules and held it to her breast with the devoted embrace she had seen a public preacher on Casino Island use on his Bible. “I’m responsible for you. You’re responsible for me. It says so, in writing.” Seeing Liberty about to object, she took a deep breath and continued “and this book says unless we take it seriously we’re all liable to get thrown out. Believe me, I’ve wanted to come here since Songmark opened when I was twelve – I won’t be happy with the one responsible for ruining that for me. I’d take it very personally, in fact.” Her tail swished slowly from side to side, and her eyes narrowed. “And apart from that, do you really want to go home in disgrace and try and explain it to the ones who sent you?”

Tatiana looked sick. Liberty stopped in mid-stride, her mouth half open. Brigit’s ears and tail drooped. “T’was only the good Lord’s own luck that Aunt Maureen found out I was on me way to the Magdalene, I thought it was a plain reformatory.” She licked her muzzle with a nervous tongue. “She wouldn’t manage that twice, if I was sent back.”

“God save holy Ireland, as you keep saying.” Liberty said dryly. She took a deep breath, and looked around at the other three. “I’ll believe you, for now. But if I find out you’re lying, there’ll be hell to pay whether they boot us or not.”

“Agreed!” Shin clapped her paws together. “And the same goes for you, Brigit, Tatiana?” The other two nodded their assent, and she gave a feral grin. “So – that’s settled. We didn’t do it. And what’s the best way of proving that to everyone else?”

“Obviously. We find out who did, and make them confess.” Liberty’s ears were raised, as she nodded. “That’ll be the fun bit - maybe we can take turns, and compare notes on our techniques.”

The red panda smiled, as Red Dorm gathered round and began to put together a plan.

Inspector Stagg sat contemplating a thought-provoking wall at Police Headquarters on Casino Island. The peeling paint and the cracks on the wall were neatly covered by two dozen diagrams and photographs of the Museum and surrounding streets. Some were general plans copied from Museum files; others were very specific close-ups of doors and windows that Sergeant Brush had taken with a close-up lens. On his desk was a thick dossier; every interview and report was indexed and cross-indexed a dozen directions in small, precise writing sprinkled with cabalistic abbreviations.

“The Fire Crystal,” he mused, tapping the dossier with a precisely sharpened pencil. “Very interesting.” He had committed to memory the various tales surrounding that enigmatic gem, including the very earliest reports which had it in local possession well before such a perfectly faceted gemstone could have been produced even in Europe. Whether it had been pirate loot as some stories claimed, was merely conjecture – and his preference was for dealing in facts. It was a fact that the Chief of Police had been very eager to see a high-visibility recovery of the gem and hopefully not by having Interpol recover it from some Amsterdam jewellers. This was a point repeated often in a rambling set of orders. True, that Saturday morning when it had been stolen there had been four commercial and six private flights leaving the island, and it was possible it had left on one of them while the Museum was still ringing its alarm bells.

But on the whole, he mused, probably not. Of course, there were a few ways of testing this theory ... His reverie was interrupted by the Sergeant quietly padding in. “Superior just gave us a ring. Their backroom boys just finished up that little job you wanted.”

“Splendid. I think a visit is in order, especially if we’re to move this along, like our lords and masters want us to.

Sergeant Brush nodded. “Yessir. It’s a bit out’o their usual thing, y’know, the gizmo, but they’re a real smart bunch down there – and what they don’t know about materials, ain’t known.”

An hour later, the two policemen left the Eastern Island workshops carrying two items – a closely typed report held discreetly by the fox and a large red gem held rather openly by the deer. The gem was rectangular, wonderfully faceted and shone in the bright June sunshine. A passer-by took a look at Inspector Stagg carrying it, did a double-take and gasped, before running off in the direction of a public telephone.

“Sir? Ain’tcha going to tell him?” Sergeant Brush looked wryly and cynically amused as the eager Junior Reporter began to phone in a highly misleading story.

“Mmm? Well, well, we might. But I’ve made it a rule never to interfere with the free Press. He’s free to report anything he believes to be true. Likewise, his editor is free to impress upon him the importance of double-checking one’s sources. Soon after, the reporter will be free to seek other employment. Hence, the importance of getting one’s facts right the first time”. The tall deer sat on a shaded bench near the seaplane terminal, gently massaging his aching hoof.

He held the glittering gem up to the sunshine; from that angle it was obvious that the gem was not red at all, but clear. In fact, although it looked quite convincing as close as ten feet away, what lay in the Inspector’s paw was not a real gem. Its colour came from a thin layer of dye on the flat back, backed with mirror surfacing to give it a convincing lustre. “It’s not glass. I could tell that when I picked it up at the Museum. I thought it might be Perspex, as they’re using for aircraft windscreens – but not quite.”

“Methyl polyacetate, sez the report.” Sergeant Brush looked over at the closely typed lines. “Takes a better shine than Perspex, harder to scratch besides. Very new, very pricey – the McCraddens say they’ve only seen half a dozen canopies made of that stuff in their workshop so far. Should cut down the suspects a bit. If it wuz glass, we’d best be checking the costume jewellers over on Casino Island, I’ve seen them make glass diamonds size of hen’s eggs for the films. But this stuff...”

“Yes. Aircraft material, put together with a good deal of talent and access to precision machinery. Apart from the weight, the dimensions are exact. Put together, in fact, with the skill and patience of a jeweller. Had the curator not taken it off its cushion that morning to dust it – well, someone might have rather more of a head start. Let’s see.” Inspector Stagg tapped the bulky dossier that now held the engineer’s report as well as the lists of names. “Songmark has a good deal of talent, keeps up with the latest technology, and I’ve seen the workshops they lease. They could build an aircraft from stock materials, let alone a simple windscreen.” He looked down at the five names on a crisply typed list, standing out in bold, black letters.

“Two of’ em, sir, we’ve had our eye on since they got here. Miss Procyk, old man’s a major league mobster back in the States – or he was, Hooper’s guys ran him out of there. Anyone’s guess the way she was brought up, the crooks she knows by their first names! But she’s kept her nose clean here.” Sergeant Brush wrinkled his own snout as he looked at the next name. “Miss Parkesson. Oh, you can ask the Casino folk about her. Same charming sort o’ family, her pa’s “*The man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo*” like in the song. It was his bank’s reserve money he wuz usin’ – and Lady Luck didn’t partner him that night. Little Miss Parkesson’s known associates, well, sorta fill half our dossiers back at the station. Never been charged, but she’s a smart one. She’s the one told them first-years to case the joint for her.”

“Quite. Covered her tracks well, it seems. We have her movements rather well vouched-for that day, though. The Tutors tell us there is no active tunnel out of Songmark this term” the Inspector’s eyebrow rose slightly at the word choice “and she was counted into their compound the night before, and only left after breakfast the next day, when the robbery occurred. Headed straight to Casino Island ... water-taxi folk confirm it ... straight over with her friends to their usual dance lessons, and was there the whole morning.” He scanned a few one page affidavits. “The dance class teachers say she was there the whole time. Being quite ... annoying, by their accounts, but that’s no crime on Spontoon. Given the nature of the student body at Songmark, one is even surprised they noted it.” The deer paused, and made a note on a slip of paper. “Yes, quite surprised.”

Sergeant Brush pondered the meaning of this last thought as they both watched a brilliantly-shirted tourist waddle towards the ferry, loudly complaining to a similarly costumed friend that they’d arrived on Eastern Island nearly an hour ago, and “*every dame in sight had a dress on.*” As the two boarded the water-taxi and sunk it two inches deeper in the water, the Sergeant cleared his throat. “She’s off-island right now till Friday. We can lay paws on her iff’n we have to, she’s moored in a lagoon in the Kanim Islands, playing lifeboat survivors. Shall we pick her up?”

“Hmm ? No, Sergeant, I think we can leave that till Friday. She wasn’t at the Museum at the time – in fact, there’s no record of her being there that month. As you say – by all accounts, she IS a smart one.” He stared across the waters speculatively, in the general direction of Casino Island. “Besides – by Friday some of my other enquiries should have borne fruit. And then we will have some more thought-provoking questions to ask.”

“’Tis a surprise to me, our Tutors lettin’ us come here – after what the likes of those polis were asking us.” For the second time that week Brigit Mulvaney stood on the second floor of the Spontoon Museum of Anthropomorphology, which had re-opened its doors to the public only the day before.

Liberty gave a harsh laugh. “Well, what’s left here for us to steal? The ceremonial masks, or maybe the film prop displays? Anyway, all the books say the suspects always return to the scene of the crime. They’d love to give us enough rope to hang ourselves.”

Shin was silent, looking around the empty gallery. There had been rather less security around the Fire Crystal than one might expect; some of it was provided by the newspaper clippings reporting previous thefts and what had happened to the criminals. A rather chilling police photograph showed the gem being recovered from a burned-out building which seemed to have two charred wooden dummies in it. She remembered seeing that one in the news some years ago, having just started at the Meeting Island High School and all the class had talked of little else. Still, the world was full of desperate people willing to risk their lives for a thousandth of the prize the Fire Crystal might fetch – if anyone could hang onto it long enough to sell it or indeed find a buyer.

“The police haven’t talked about how it happened – no surprises there, they’re still investigating. But thank the gods for nosy journalists – sometimes at least.” Shin spread the morning edition of the Daily Elele over one of the display cabinets. “Looks like whoever got in used the window like we thought – but they didn’t step inside the room. It’s four yards from the window to the display case, just like we measured it.” Her banded tail twitched in annoyance. “There’s a lot of tools available that could do the trick, folding wire and bamboo grapples, if you know the distances.”

“Upset you didn’t think of it first?” Liberty asked slyly.

Shin sniffed. “If I had thought of it, I’d have the sense to leave it severely alone - whoever took it is either ignorant or stupid. They’d never fence that, even to a private buyer. Oh, most other world-famous gems you might have some Rajah buying for his personal collection, but ... folk who can afford that sort of stone know all about this one.”

“Smart enough to get away with the rock,” the coyote jeered “and not to get caught yet. They’re probably living it up in Rio right now, whatever you say.”

“I wonder.” The red panda looked at the neatly cut five-inch circular hole in the window, through which someone had dextrously manoeuvred a grapple through while clinging to the second-floor ledge. “They might not have gone that far – but they could have come from that sort of distance, and not believed in the gem’s reputation.” She tapped a sharp canine tooth. This sounded like the work of a specialist, brought in from outside for the job. Some were available for general hire, others were more major players who travelled on their own account and hired other folk as support. She smiled.

“There are some advantages in a family background like mine,” she twitched an ear, looking around at the room, now with a good idea what had been done and how. “I don’t know who did this – but I do know who to ask.”

Half an hour and half a mile away, Brigit Mulvaney looked on mildly impressed at Liberty’s frustration as Shin sat at a dockside tea-house table in animated conversation with a large black and white Panda in oriental garb. “And you did insist we follow her, did ye not? Besides, Songmark rules for us poor first-years don’t allow us to go around Casino Island on our own.”

"I should have known she'd have something up her sleeve besides her grubby paws." Liberty grumbled as the two at the table looked her way and laughed.

"They might be saying what a fine girl and a grand Citizen you are, who knows?" Brigit's tail swished as she looked on. "Tis hardly their fault if you don't speak Chinese."

Shin took her time finishing her fragrant cup, catching up with the local gossip from Lin Chung. He was the head of one of the merchants' "Protective associations" that provided private security on Casino Island, and had been an honoured guest at her wedding. After half an hour, she had stepped through the courtesies and asked if there were any new arrivals on the island that she could approach for some "Roof work."

Chung laughed, the round panda's plump frame shaking. "Roof work, as in repairing a few tiles and gutters? Well, I have heard of one fellow who has been known to work on a few second storeys." He winked. "We've had our eyes on him since he arrived two weeks ago. If one of our merchants developed a hole in the roof, we wanted to be able to lay our paws on him to ask him about it. But he's done nothing to our customers."

Shin's tail waved as she digested the information and motioned the waiter for more tea, the sound of grinding coyote teeth from outside music to her ears. Lin Chung's operation was one of a few that had branches both on Spoutoon and Krupmark, although the merchandise it guarded was not always the same. Even on Casino Island, she was sure some warehouses carried valuable merchandise whose owners would not want to talk to the police about if it was stolen. A private Protective Association, on the other paw, was loyal only to its paying clients. The Krupmark end of the operation was much the same and equally profitable, as although it employed more bodyguards it needed fewer lawyers.

"And if I wanted to contact him ... say, if I knew a building had a few leaks?" Shin swirled the tea in her bowl, watching the floating green leaves. "I'm sure he won't be around for long – working on roofs is such a tiring job in this weather. It can get quite very warm."

"Oh, I agree. In that job, things can get very hot for him, at such short notice." Chung scribbled a description and a contact address on a paper and handed it to her. "With my compliments to you and your husband. Tell Fang if he ever gets tired of playing house detective, we've always got a job for the right sort of people."

Shin bowed respectfully and tipped the avian waiter before she made her way out to where the rest of her dorm awaited her in the scorching sunshine. He was new in the tea-house; from his accent he came from the mainland, a genuine Peking Duck. Brigit at least seemed quite content to pass the time watching two huge bears of Samoan ancestry working hard, the muscles playing under their short fur as they threw huge cloth bales into the back of a lorry.

"I've got us an appointment," she waved the paper nonchalantly "now let's see if there's anybody home."

Sitting at a café table some hundred yards around the corner, Inspector Stagg looked outwardly at ease as he sipped a strong black coffee and made cryptic notes in his pocket-book, his eyes occasionally flashing a glance at the passing traffic. It was mostly on foot, with hand carts and bicycles, but there were several official cars slowly negotiating the crowded streets. He recognised the long black limousine of the Soviet Embassy, chugging along at three miles an hour behind a native cart loaded high with watermelons. A fairly pointless exercise, having an official car on Spoutoon, he mused – only Main Island was much more than half an hour's walk across, and Main Island was barred to "euro" vehicles anyway. Still, if the official list of an Embassy states it will have its own transport, then common sense took second place to following protocols.

He gazed down at the notebook. One piece of paper he did not carry with him was the urgent memo from the Chief of Police that had been on his desk that morning, asking him to hold a press conference to "raise public confidence in our force." It was not just Embassies that had more protocols than common sense.

Suddenly his ears and nose twitched. "Ah, Sergeant. What news?" He turned round to see Sergeant Brush approaching dressed in an inconspicuous tan suit.

"We've got some action, sorta," the vulpine handed over a notepad. "Just heard from two of the boys shadowing that Red Dorm, here's their schedule. Tutors were happy to let them go for a stroll after we asked, looks like it paid off." His tail twitched. "Sir, how'd ya know it was me? The waiter here's a cousin o'mine, must scent about the same. Don't see no mirrors or reflections handy, neither."

"New shoes, Sergeant. I see you've left them unpolished to match the suit – but they still squeak. A thing to consider." Stagg cast an eye over the notebook. "Well, well. A visit to the newspaper stand, another visit to the Museum, and now Miss Wo drags her class across to see an Oriental friend who is involved with "private" security. They certainly are taking an intelligent interest in the investigation."

"Could be seein' how close we've got?" Sergeant Brush hazarded a guess. "Naw, they wouldn't. They'd sit tight iff'n they had the Gem, wouldn't attract more attention that they's got already."

"Yes. I concur. We could warn them off the case, and explain they won't help their chances by muddying the waters trying to solve it themselves. Two points against that; without locking them up we can hardly stop them, and of course – they may know things we do not. I doubt they would hand any information

over to us, at least voluntarily.” Stagg slipped the notebooks in his pocket and stood, his ear dipping wryly. “The game’s afoot, as they say – and let’s keep track of where our Songmark team are leading us.”

It was just as well the Chief of Police was not spending the day shadowing his Inspector, as to outward appearances there had been very little in common with the hectic and violent schedule that any reader of the Detective pulps would expect. He had crossed from one side of Casino Island to the other and back, drunk two black coffees and ordered, but did not drink a Nootnops Red with ice which he had left, and read the reports from some of Spontoon’s finest who were spending their afternoon following four pretty young ladies around.

“Charlie, he sez they went to three cafes and the Temperance Hotel, enquiring after a “friend” they wuz planning’ to meet.” Sergeant Brush scratched his ears. “We gotta description they gave, skinny sorta ape guy, foreign accent. They drew a blank, though one of the cafes and the Temperance place know the guy, he’s been in last week. We’re checking with Customs at the Air Terminal, he prolly’ didn’t come in on a tour boat, someone might remember him. But this time of year ...” his tail waved in frustration at the hordes of tourists, some of whom were various ape species and most had foreign accents. “Needle inna haystack, Chief.”

“Indeed. A clever needle would wait till harvest-time to hide away. What next?” The Inspector appeared absent-minded as he brushed dust from his trouser leg, though his mind was weighing up pieces like a jigsaw puzzle – or rather, like a box of mixed and half-missing jigsaws only one of which he wanted.

“Heh. They bounced outa the last place Miss Wo took them to, went round inna alley and had a real old ruckus. Pulled a lot o’ real fancy moves, good thing they were matched pretty even or fer sure there’d a been some customers fer the hospital. Thought we’d manage to get ’em for disturbing the peace, if’n you’d wanted us to bring ’em in.” The fox’s eyes sparkled. “Wish I’d a seen it. Charlie was up onna fire exit across the street, sez they calmed down inna coupla minutes, turned round and tried summat new. Damnest thing. They drew a blank at cafes and that, went callin’ on every chemist store that side o’ the island. Same “friend” they’re lookin’ for, different story. He’s wanting his usual prescription. Sedatives, nerve tonics, that sorta thing. They drew a blank again, turned round and headed home, their time’s up an they don’t want the older gals to have to come lookin’. They’re waitin’ for a water-taxi right now.”

“Interesting change of plan, would you not agree?” Inspector Stagg stood up, consulting his notebook. “Chemist shops. Tell me, is there one in the area that was open last week, but happens to be closed this afternoon?”

Sergeant Brush paused. “Dunno fer sure, Sir. I’ll ask the boys, give us twenny minutes, we’ll tell you.” He dashed off, leaving his Inspector pondering deeply. An ear twitched as he consulted one of his notebooks – the one that held the reports of earlier thefts of the Fire Gem.

Half an hour later, the two policemen were standing in the small back kitchen of Penworth’s Pharmacy talking with the owner. On Casino Island the chemists had agreed a rota to maintain cover and Thursday was his day off. Fortunately, one of the Constables was his second cousin and knew just where to find him.

“Yes, yes, I remember the fellow very well.” The pharmacist was a rather dusty-looking terrier, who had been summoned from work in his garden. “Columbus Monkey, Central or South American accent, could be Mixtecan or Cuban, I really couldn’t say. Said his nerves were in a terrible state, couldn’t sleep for days, first time it’d ever happened to him.”

“And this was when, exactly?” Inspector Stagg looked around the room with interest.

“Wednesday, it would have been just before closing time.” The pharmacist worked in a profession where precision and a good memory were everything. “He wanted laudanum, that’s raw opium and alcohol mix.” He shook his head. “I wasn’t going to send him off with a bottle of that without a doctor’s prescription, whatever they may do in his home town. Still, it shows how desperate he must have been. I prescribed chloral hydrate and a local soothing herb mix, told him to see a doctor and return in two days if it didn’t clear up. He’s not been back though.”

Inspector Stagg nodded and thanked him, leaving his sergeant to finish the note-taking and arrange a time to sign a typed-up affidavit. A few minutes later the two were heading back towards Police headquarters.

“It’s getting late, Sergeant – we have enough to be going on with. Our Songmark students are back in class, no doubt explaining their bruises away after their lively discussion in the alleyway. I think we can eliminate them as suspects, although they were unwitting accomplices. Our worthy Chief wants the Press conference tomorrow, but I believe we can put it off another day. For tomorrow is Friday.”

Sergeant Brush looked confused. “Yessir. But what’s Friday got for us? There’s that second-year Songmark bunch due back tomorrow – they’ve been keeping out of the way in the Kanims.” His ears rose. “Li’l Miss Parkesson couldn’t ha’ taken the gem with her own paws, but someone could’a passed it to her – and while we’ve been tearin’ round lookin’ for it she could’a bin sittin’ on it all week!”

“Yes, that was one possibility I considered. But that was before I knew about the chemist shop, and refreshed my memory on the more ... traditional tales about the missing item. Regardless – we shall have a word

with our mouse maid about some family traditions of her own. As to the Fire Crystal” he looked up at the evening skies, where the full moon was rising, and shook his head sadly. “Well, well. I may be quite wrong about this – but I fear there will be a more severe punishment handed out to the thief than anything the Spontoon Criminal Code has to offer, a punishment from which there is no appeal. Oh, and sergeant? I recommend getting to bed as early as convenient, tonight.” And with that, the Inspector tipped his hat and left Sergeant Brush looking up somewhat mystified at the full, red-tinged moon that stared back down over the islands.

The Casino Island fire brigade was luckier than most such organisations in that they never had far to go – and the frantic alarm reached them at a few minutes past midnight, when the streets were almost free of traffic except a few revellers who whooped and cheered at the bonus entertainment as the red wagon shot past with all bells ringing.

“One of the go-downs near the old China Dock – what’s in that place, a tonne of magnesium?” the Fire-chief could see the light reflected off the clouds for a few seconds, and a plume of flame sprang skywards as if to meet the judgemental moon. But before the fire engine could even see it directly the flame died away, as if someone had turned off a gas pipe. The engine screeched to a halt and the crew jumped out with hoses ready to quell any spreading flames. One of the part-time firemen was already there, having been awakened by the light shining through his window a few hundred yards away. He ran up to the engine, his eyes wild.

“Chief – I’ve seen what’s left of the place” he panted, and turned night-wide eyes towards the faint red glow that was all that remained of the fire. “And you just aren’t going to believe it.”

News travelled fast on the Spontoon chain, and at breakfast-time the Songmark first-years were buzzing with excited talk about the mysterious fire. Wo Shin listened intently, and kept her snout firmly shut. It was one of the habits learned on Krupmark that often proved useful elsewhere.

“And they’re saying that the place was just a stone shell like a crucible, nothing left but half-melted rock,” Brigit Mulvaney relayed the tale told by one of the cooks whose brother was a fireman. “They’re looking hard to be sure but they don’t know what caused it – it’s thick with polis as fleas on a hedgehog’s back.”

“Place wasn’t just scorched, it melted,” Florence Farmington added. “Cook says it was abandoned, due to be pulled down – an old bonded store, basalt-built and very solid, not the usual timber frames. If it hadn’t been built from volcanic rock it wouldn’t have held the heat – most of that went straight up like it was a burning zeppelin. Otherwise it’d have taken half the neighbourhood with it.” Her tail swished. “I wonder what was in it, to make it go up like that?”

“I am knowing who would have liked to see it,” Tatiana commented, idly stirring her breakfast bowl of mashed breadfruit. “Molly will be cursing, to have missed such a fire! When the fire people arrived it was all over, but three hours later still too hot to go into even with hoses. Molly, she will be back today.”

“And the rest.” Shin’s ears flattened against her skull. “I’ve got a few questions to ask Beryl – it looks all a bit too “convenient”. We didn’t even get properly paid for the job after someone leaked it to our Tutors about that Nootnops Blue.”

“Ye should watch yourself, messin’ with such a lass,” Brigit warned. “A second-year and all, she’s one o’ them can drop us in it up to our pretty ear-tips should she take a mind to.”

“Second-years don’t scare me” Shin said bluntly. Looking around to check nobody else was listening, she dropped her voice to whisper in Brigit’s long ear. “One of her dorm-mates, Adele – she spent Easter at my family’s Casino, and I don’t mean gambling. She was a popular girl, if you understand me.”

Brigit’s tail went rigid in shock. And then a slow smile crept over her features. “Is it so? She’s the one they say has the bad luck, until she gets in the air and gets all of it back.”

The red panda’s snout wrinkled. “You’re telling me! Mother started her off on the gambling tables, but too many customers got lucky. It’s fine to have some hit the jackpot now and again, but we’d have lost a fortune if we’d kept her on that. It took some doing but we found another job for her; you’d be surprised how Mother can talk people into things and make them think it was their idea all along.” She snickered. “I expect all those years married to Father honed her talents that way. Anyway, despite our best efforts looking after Adele, the same thing happened as on the tables – as we found out later. Folk with bad luck just don’t fit some jobs. Putting things right cost me a weekend flying back to Krupmark with her.”

Brigit’s ears went flat on her head. “Our Tutors ever find out about that and it’s the both of ye they’ll be giving the push to,” she warned. “Anyway, it’s no help to us.”

“True ... except that Beryl IS in her dorm and would take some of the damage from it. Ack, what am I saying? I’d be cutting my own ears off to fit the hat, doing that.” Shin closed her eyes.

“Anyway, we’ll be having the rest of the second-years stepping on our tails again, ‘tis a sorry truth.” Brigit reflected, finishing her steaming bowl of stewed breadfruit. Nobody at Songmark ever left the table without cleaning their plate however unappetising its contents; where kitchen duty was one of the common demerits, whichever dorm had worked on the meal was grimly determined their efforts would not be wasted.

“Oh, yes.” Shin’s eyes were open, and sparkling now. “I expect I’m not the only one who wants a quiet word with Beryl. She’s got a lot coming to her, that girl.” She had lost ten shells trying the month before to prove the mouse out in what looked like her most blatant lie yet, when Beryl claimed the Head Girl at her old school in England was Miss Manchu, youngest scion of a famous family Shin’s own venerated beyond all other. Beryl had put the wager money in their Tutor’s keeping and written off; two weeks later Shin had received a postcard in exquisitely elegant Chinese that had left absolutely no room for doubting the identity of its writer.

Although working at the family Casino she had often wished for the gift of precognition, just then she regretted it as her words came true. Miss Cardroy appeared behind Tatiana and pointed to her and the other Red Dorm members then pointed at the door and the compound entrance. One minute later they were hurrying across the courtyard in the dawn light, tails drooping at the sight of a familiar horned silhouette in the gateway.

“Him.” Liberty’s voice was a quiet hiss of fury as they approached. “Well, I shouldn’t be surprised if he’s found a way of pinning it on us after all. But he can do his worst – throw me in jail, give me the third degree – if he had me killed I’d be a People’s Martyr, the Proletariat would sing my name.”

Inspector Stagg was on his own, and for a second Liberty considered her opportunities for an attack – New Haven would forgive her any consequences of that, and even being thrown out of Songmark might be worth it. But she heard Shin and Brigit snicker behind her as they saw her fur bristling out – and realised she would probably not get close enough before they pulled her down and still worse were praised for it.

It seemed that not even the Police set hoof on the hallowed ground of Songmark, as their Tutor led them into the small guard-room that was technically outside the wire. For a second there was silence, Miss Cardroy seeming amused, Red Dorm a mix of fury and puzzlement, and the Inspector’s expression one of mild interest.

“You may be pleased to know, ma’am that I have noted prominently the assistance given by these first-years in the police investigation. I have copied their respective embassies in on the final report. I’m sure they will find the report enlightening reading.”

With this, Inspector Stagg bestowed a wintry smile on Liberty, raised his hat, and slowly hobbled out of the room.

“What?” Tatiana blinked, looking around while the coyote’s jaw hung open in speechless shock. “What did we do?”

Their Tutor smiled benignly. “You’re officially cleared. Aren’t you pleased? The nice Inspector mentioned there might even be a public reward if his Department chief approved the money, which he wasn’t sure of. Wouldn’t that look good in your scrap-book, girls? All the newspaper folk would love it, I’m sure – and wouldn’t it look fine on the front page with him shaking hands with you, Liberty, and handing you over a generous cheque in a spirit of International good-will?”

Miss Cardroy might have looked shocked and puzzled at the reaction of Liberty Morgenstern, the coyote girl suddenly throwing herself to the ground in a fit, howling in a turbulent mix of rage and horror. But as Shin was starting to realise, Miss Cardroy was in fact a very convincing actress.

When Sergeant Brush reported for duty that morning, he had heard all about the fire on the way. But losing one condemned building was nothing he expected to be dealing with, unless of course the folk sifting the ashes came up with evidence of arson, or a stiff. He knocked on the Inspector’s office door and walked in – and his fox brush bottled out like a chimney-sweep’s as he was what was in there.

“Ah, Sergeant,” Inspector Stagg put down his morning reading, an incongruous thing to see in a police station, a tourist holiday guide advertising “*New for this season! Package holidays – just bring yourself and we’ll provide everything you need!*” He gestured to what was lying in the middle of his desk. “I would have had you called, but the building took so long to cool, it was early morning by the time a search could start. So I went ahead without you, Sergeant. And I believe we can start arranging that Press conference, the one our Chief has been pining for, say tomorrow morning.”

On the desk sat the Fire Crystal, its scarlet facets gleaming hard and sharp like a blood-dripping blade in the bright morning sunlight streaming through the open window. It was perfectly intact, with not a scorch-mark or speck of soot clinging to its impossible perfection, a hundred and thirty-four carats of flawless ruby which was currently acting as a paperweight for a few days’ worth of newspapers.

“What the’ hell? Ya found it!” The Sergeant sat down in the chair with a heavy thump, hardly noticing the pain as his tail folded heedlessly under him.

“An ironic choice of words, Sergeant. Oh, yes. It wasn’t hard to find once the place had cooled enough to sift through. One way of finding a needle in a haystack involves a lighted match; there was little else but fine ash in the place.” Stagg’s ear dipped. “And I fear the thief paid a high price. The hospital has what I found of him, although there was scarcely enough to fill a cigar-box. A lightly-built ape seems to fit the bill as far as can be judged.”

Just then one of the constables knocked on the door. “There’s that Songmark girl you wanted to see, sir! Just pulled her off the boat – her Tutor says we can keep her if we want to, sale or return.”

“Ah. Send her in. And Sergeant, here is a telegram I received this morning, from the Records Office in London. I think we have everything here we need.” He gestured to what was on the table.

Sergeant Brush read the telegram and stared intently at the odd collection in front of him. The Fire Crystal, the tourist brochure, and a famous slightly fictionalised account of one of the greatest of detectives and his arch-adversary. One passage was bookmarked; in a few seconds the fox noted which it was. There was also the guide to local folklore, produced by the Museum staff and printed on Casino Island; a chapter of that was similarly bookmarked, but he was already familiar with the story within having heard it hundreds of times since he was a cub.

The door opened and a young mouse stepped through, dressed in a slightly militaristic “adventuring” suit with a dozen bulging pockets, the musical note with two bars stitched to the collar denoting her as a Songmark second-year. She smiled charmingly, looking around the room without the slightest hint of worry.

*Anybody’d think we’d pulled her in to give her a job redecoratin’ the place – an’ sure enough we could use it here.* Sergeant Brush thought sourly as he looked the mischievous mouse up and down; mostly down, as Beryl had a rather small supply of “up.”

“Miss Parkesson? I’ve heard so much about you.” Inspector Stagg stood up and offered the mouse a chair, the only good one in the place. “Yes indeed. While you’ve been away in the Kanim Islands learning what may be useful in a future career ... well, we have been looking at your current one. I can hardly say I approve.” Stagg fixed her with a stern gaze.

“Oh, Officer.” The mouse turned an innocent gaze up at him. “Are you accusing me of doing something that’s in the Spontoon criminal code? Eleven chapters, two appendices and three amendments’ worth of it?” She flashed a smile as she looked down at the desk. “Oh, the Fire Gem! I had to copy that for a class practice.” A fine white-furred tail waved.

“I wonder how many people feel they need to know the local laws to that extent? Particularly since our lawmakers have seen fit not to criminalize things like conspiracy...specifically, conspiracy to commit burglary. A subject, perhaps, for the next election campaign.” Stagg mused, his gaze fixed on the mouse as if memorising a fascinating painting. “And tell me, exactly which project involved copying the crystal? I do have a list, you know. In your case, your Tutors were more ... cooperative than their reputation generally has it.”

“One month ago, machine-shop exercise eleven.” Beryl looked slightly bored. “I had to, and I quote, *“produce a precision finished component in aircraft material to an exact specification.”* My friends were all doing crankshafts and pistons, but they’re so dull.” She looked at the Fire Crystal critically. “Of course, once you’ve made a piston you can go down to the airport and find a buyer – unlike some things.”

Stagg’s eyebrow raised. “I see your school deserves its reputation for turning out very well-informed students. I wonder if you can quote me anything from this book, about the legends of what happens to those unwise enough to make off with the gem.”

“Oh, Officer! I’d be delighted to! My dorm-mate Missy Kahaloa, she’s a Spontoonie, I’ve read all her books and that’s one of them. You never know when it might come in useful.” She took a deep breath, folded her paws demurely in her lap and began to recite:

*“And in the year of the great Typhoon came to the islands Numu-sala, a fisherman he said though he said nothing of his kin. Tawny was he of fur and black of heart it proved, for he came to the great shrine in darkest night and laid paws upon the Fire Crystal, heart of the island and dear to the vengeful god Keyho-Ra-Ra, and tore it from its setting and made to carry it off in his boat when next there came a favourable wind. But the Crystal played on his mind like a burning ember, never leaving his thoughts, never letting him sleep. Though he yearned to escape he could not, as if it stood ever in his path when he turned towards where his boat awaited. And ever louder in his mind he heard footsteps approaching, heavy as stone and hissing like unto hot iron where they pressed the wet earth. All this he wrote in a bark-cloth scroll, as was afterwards discovered.”*

*“And upon the night of the full moon the rains ceased, leaving the trees a-drip and the fire-pits flooded. Yet far in the night the villagers saw a great flame rising to the skies and the red moon and marvelled at how any thing could burn so bright in the rain. That morning they found the ashes of a secret hut that Numu-sala had made in the forest, and from the ashes they took the Fire Crystal, unhurt from the flames that had cracked the very hearth-stones asunder. And some in the village said that the Crystal was a little larger as if it had fed, yet others denied it.”* Beryl finished, and gave a small bow to her audience.

“Bravo. Ten marks out of ten. Quite a talented young lady, indeed.” Stagg clapped his paws lightly as he opened the book and confirmed the mouse had the ancient tale word perfect. His expression hardened.

“Intelligent enough I am sure, to know what happens to those who steal this gem, and never touch it yourself nor even enter the building within a month of it being stolen. Intelligent enough to know it is completely impossible to dispose of even if you did. And – Miss Parkesson, may I ask you what you think of this idea?” He tapped the tourist brochure.

A set of whiskers twitched eagerly. “Oh, Officer, I do believe it’s the next big thing. The travel companies have just been selling tickets and the hotels selling rooms – folk just mill around when they get here, take half their holiday time just finding out what there is to do, and waste half their chances. Supposing someone

provided everything for them – all the services and information they needed, in one bundle they paid for before they started. It'd be much better value all round."

"I can quite believe it. And when your Tutors ask you to put together a career plan for next year, as I am informed they will, I heartily recommend it to you." Mouse and deer locked gazes, neither of them quailing in the slightest. "You might find other kinds of... package deals turning rather sour when the customers discover there are hidden extras they have to pay." Stagg relaxed. "And now, young lady, you have your Tutors awaiting you on Eastern Island. I suggest you not keep them waiting any longer than necessary."

The mouse bowed, flashed a fearless smile and bounced out of the room, her fine tail swinging.

Sergeant Brush looked at the perky rodent's departure, closed the door and looked at the Inspector, who was leafing through the old detective stories with a wistful smile. "Sir? You coulda thrown her in the cells for a week on suspicion, thrown a scare into her if nuthin' else! A good lawyer'd spring her, but mebbe not."

"I rather doubt that young lady scares easily, Sergeant. I have hopes an appeal to her self-interest can do more, as can diverting her undoubted talents into a worthier cause. We have the Fire Crystal back – and the thief has rather decisively paid for his crime. As to the mysterious fire, well, I very much doubt if we shall find any of the usual evidence of arson. Which means it will go in the books as," he cast the Sergeant an inscrutable gaze, "Natural Causes."

"Yessir. Ain't sayin' if there's anythin' in them old legends, but if so, there's one guy I can't imagine slappin' the cuffs on. S'pose it'll be awhile before anyone else has the bright idea of stealing this beauty again." The fox looked down at the glittering thing on the desk, but was very careful not to touch it. He, for one, thought the gem was a little larger than previously advertised. "I'll go rustle up some reporters for that press conference, an' look fer a priestess to carry this thing back to where it oughta go." He strode out, tail high and looking cheerful.

"Very good, Sergeant, very good." Inspector Stagg heard the door close, and for a minute leafed through volume of old detective stories with a wistful smile, before putting it aside. Tidying his desk, the Inspector read the telegram from London one last time, before consigning it to his ashtray, and applying a lit match. It had told him what he needed to know. He closed his eyes, and began to quote from memory, as if in benediction for a cremation:

*"He was the first among thieves and criminals: if knowledge or services for any crime were needed, he could provide them at a price, without getting his paws dirty. Just as I am the first Consulting Detective, he is the first Consulting Criminal."*

And as she boarded the water taxi heading back towards Songmark, a certain mouse gave a secret smile. Her Great-Uncle Moriarty would have been proud of her.