

María Álvarez may have not been a good detective, but at the very least she was punctual. Probably. She arrived at the private estate of the de Vera family at sunrise, which seemed like a fair response time to a vague and urgent 2AM telegram.

Despite this, her own patience was being put to the test, considering that the good prince Jaime was nowhere to be seen.

Detective Álvarez was in no mind to sit in the foyer all day. Though the manor was architecturally tasteful, it had since been overpacked with frescos, paintings, and miniature rhino figurines. Their tiny stares irritated María's soul.

The sound of silverware and the smell of bacon led the detective to a half-prepared dining room. It seemed as if certain guests were of the perverse opinion that breakfast should occur immediately upon waking, as opposed to a pre-appointed time convenient for the house staff. Being royal guests gave them an undue sense of self-importance, perhaps. That being said, of the dozen or so crêpe-eaters, prince Jaime was nowhere to be seen. As such, she proceeded to--

"Oi!" Said the man grabbing her arm, "Detective María Álvarez! Come and sit!"

Detective María Álvarez was gently yanked into sitting at the table. Her seater was a pink egg of a man; a being heavy in years, but light of spirit. His eyes grew yet lighter at eye contact.

"Now," he said, "you *are* Detective Álvarez, correct?"

"Well, yes," she replied. "And you are...?"

"Hah! See, Danny? I told you I recognized her!"

"I suppose you did," said a woman sitting to the other side of María. She wore a set of sharp spectacles, and was very deliberately focusing on her oatmeal instead of his conversation.

"That I did!" he replied. "I am Sir Willard Humpfret, but you can call me Will, and this is Dan--"

"My name is Daniela Mendez Ramos," said the sharp woman, giving a disinterested handshake. "Charmed."

"Um, likewise," replied María.

"Now what's a famous detective doing at the prince's art expo? I didn't see you arrive yesterday! Did you enjoy the rhinos? I should tell Sir Alex about this! Wait, great Scott!" Will dropped his toast. "You wouldn't happen to be on one of your infamous criminal investigations right now, would you? What is it? Grand theft? Grand murder? GRAND ARSON???"

“Well. It certainly can’t be those last two, on account of not being real crimes,” said María.

“Excuse me,” injected Daniela Mendez Ramos, “but ‘famous’? I am afraid that, despite being a well-informed citizen, I have never once heard about you.”

“Oh, I’m not actu-”

“Pshaaw, Danny! Haven’t you ever heard of a little thing called ‘the Scarlet Knife incident’?”

“No.”

“An actress lost her corgi. I found it,” explained the famous detective María Álvarez. “No, I don’t know why people call it that.”

At this point Daniela’s expression moved away from disdain and firmly into pity. She ordered herself a coffee refill to cope.

“Hah! So modest! Don’t worry, I’ll tell Danny all about the drama and intrigue later,” replied Willard. “But truly, are you on an investigation?”

“None that I know of.” It was a *very* vague telegram. “That being said, Sir Will Humpfret, do you happen to know where the prince is? I need to speak with him.”

The sixty-year-old man had the sparkling eyes of a six-year-old. “Ah, well mayhaps I do. But if you want to know, then you will have to solve this one quick riddle that I have here, which goes a little lik--”

“And what about you, Daniela?” asked María.

“Unfortunately, I do not,” she replied while a mousy maid topped off her coffee.

“--and you see, this is a particularly sticky wicket of a brain teaser, even Sir Alex was stumped by this! Since knaves always--”

“I see,” responded María. “And you?”

As Willard continued describing his short riddle and Daniela began to drink her refill, it became increasingly apparent that María was addressing the maid.

“E-Eh?” Squeaked the maid, clearly shocked at being broken out of her mechanical rhythm. “Me?”

“Yes, you,” replied María. “Sorry, but do you happen to know where prince Jaime is at this moment?”

“-- and while the candlestick is always in the ballroom, the knife can be in the kitchen OR the--”

A flash of visible resentment was quickly subsumed by a polite, if pained smile. This was a maid who just wanted to do her job quietly. Her job was to serve scones, not shenanigans.

“A-Ah,” the maid said, “I heard that he has been in the drawing room on the third floor.”

“Thank you very much.”

“-- and then, you see, the question becomes,” Willard concluded, “who lives in the blue house? What do you think, detective?”

“Oh, well, the butler did it? Anyway, it was lovely not eating with both of you, but I really must be going.”

María Álvarez finally got up and walked out of the dining room. As she did, Sir Willard leaned over to Daniela.

“Danny, did you see how quickly she solved that riddle? Now *that’s* a true genius!”

“... That was the right answer?” Daniela responded, “Wasn’t there something about a house?”

“Oh, of course I didn’t know the right answer,” said Sir Willard Humpfret. “But an answer of such confidence coming from such expertise must be right!”

The drawing room was tucked into a corner of the third floor of the manor, beyond the numerous guest rooms. And an additional number of rhino figurines, much to María’s displeasure.

She gave the door a quick knock before it swung into her face.

“There you are,” said the belligerent door-operator “what took you?! I’ve been waiting forever!”

“Frigfrigfig ouuuch,” replied María, clutching her nose.

“There’s no time for dried fruits, this is a matter of national emergency, detective!”

As her vision returned, she realized two things. First, that she was talking to the prince, Jaime Pietro de Vera the second. Second, that he was still wearing his orange nightclothes and hadn't bathed.

It turns out the one true prince smells like dried fish.

"Oh, prince Jaime, sorry for the delay. How can I be of service?"

"How can I-- isn't it obvious?!"

María took a moment to observe the obvious. "Well, it looks like you need a maid service."

"Yes! I mean, no!" The prince grabbed the detective's lapels. "The crown jewels! They're gone!"

Drawing rooms were made to impress. Ideally, the room was a small, but posh, meeting room for important diplomatic engagements, with every article, amenity, and decoration in perfect aesthetic order. The mahogany paneling offset by an imported carpet, the lovely window overlooking the meticulous garden, and the fine silver tea case were all to contribute to an ostentatious opulence.

Anyway the carpet was folded upside down, the drapes were thrown to the ground, and tea leaves were in the rafters.

At least there were no animal figurines.

"Please, sir, calm down" said María, pulling away from the prince and producing a pen and small notebook from her coat. "Tell me as much as you can. Were the jewels stored here?"

"Yes, of course they were! All five of them were right on the display table there: the bracelet, the ring, the circlet, the necklace, and the golden eyeball. And now they're not!" Prince Jaime Pietro de Vera the second was in a bad way. "Listen to me, my royal father left me the duty of throwing the summer festival. And being an artistic exposition, of course I would need to show off great-grandma one-eyed Matilda's most valuable treasures. This was a premeditated act of treasonous robbery!!!"

"Again, *please* calm down, I will do everything I can do to-- hold on," said María. "Pardon me, did you say they were 'on' the table? Not in any protective case? Just sitting on the wood there?"

"Well not just *on* darn the thing. They were sitting on those pillows there." Prince Jaime pointed to a pile of lime green velvet cushions in the corner. In truth, they were exceptionally ugly.

María nodded along politely.

“Okay, well then. Next up, who discovered the crime scene?”

“I did! I was taking dinner next door in the library when I heard an awful crash, so I rushed over and found it like this! I’ve been up guarding this room since eight PM yesterday.”

“I- uh, well first of all, what about the guards?”

“What about them?”

“Wouldn’t they have heard something too?”

“What do you mean? All the guards are downstairs, showing off the latest in uniform fashion.”

María realized to dawning horror that she passed exactly zero guards on the way to the crime scene.

“Well. I am sure they are all very dashing. In any case, do you mind telling me why you were eating in the library instead of in the kitchen with your guests?”

“T-That’s beside the point! This robbery is a clear attempt to assassinate my character, to make me look incompetent in front of the world and my father! Actually...That is exactly the sort of thing that would benefit good old V, isn’t it?!”

“Vee?”

“My cousin, Valeria Vargas de Vera! Ever since we were nine, she always had it out for me. I *know* she thinks I’m not worthy of the throne. That idiot thinks I’m an idiot!”

María clicked her pen a few times. While uniquely posed, it was a plausible motive. She jotted it down, just to be safe.

“Interesting. Being part of your family, it’s reasonable to assume she could get the key to this room.”

“Oh, this room doesn’t get locked, I tossed the key out.”

...

...

“...Pardon?”

“Listen I have a LOT of things going on in my life right now, I can’t be expected to keep track of so many dumb keys.”

“I...”

“Being future king is stressful, you know? So a few months ago I has all the keys for my rooms tossed out. Now I don’t need to waste any more time with lost keys and locked doors.”

María would have responded, or maybe jotted down a note, but she was busy cupping her face in her hands.

In short, the country’s five most valuable treasures -- the bracelet, the ring, the circlet, the necklace, and even the golden eyeball -- were sitting in on a table in the middle of an unguarded, unlocked room.

Because *apparently* that’s just how Jaime Pietro de Vera II lives his life.

María took a deep inhale. “Well. I suppose, I should get started in earnest. I’ll send word to HQ and get--”

“NO!” Bursting Jaime. “You are not to tell anyone! My royal inheritance is on the line with this case, do you understand? The fate of an entire nation is on the line here!”

María rubbed her temple. “Yes, I do suppose that every member of parliament would be grief-stricken at this development...”

“Besides, you are a legendary detective, right? You don’t need any backup. You cracked the case of the Scarlet Knife, didn’t you?”

“...While technically true, I would rather much prefer to have some sort of assistance with this.” Partially because this case won’t involve rescuing a lapdog from a tree, she added internally. “You know. Help conducting interviews, gathering evidence, taking notes, and so on. The fundamentals of investigation?”

Prince Jaime rolled his eyes and let out a long “Fiiine” as he walked over to the door. He poked his head out and immediately started yell-commanding someone, yes, you, don’t be shy, to come over.

In walked a familiar mousy maid. Apparently breakfast service had stopped by now.

“Uh, Um,” she stuttered out, as her fully dilated pupils took in the scene. “A-Are you asking me to clean this up?”

“Do I have your loyalty and secrecy?!” barked out Jaime.

“W-What?!”

“I said, do I have your loyalty and secrecy? Do I?!”

“Yes yes of course!”

“Good!” exclaimed a self-satisfied Jaime. “Detective María Álvarez, this maid will act as your assistant for the course of this investigation.”

“H-Hold on! I’m on rotation for housekeeping and food service today, I don’t--”

“There are more important things at stake than dusters and dumplings! Miss, uh,”

“A-A-Amelie Stewardson. Uh, sir.”

“Right! Miss Stewardson, the fate of the nation is on the line here! Besides, I outrank Ms. Dolores, I run this place! Or, well, my father does, ANYWAY this will just be for today so it won’t even be that big of a deal.”

“Today?” María asked.

“Oh yes, my father arrives this evening,” replied Jaime. “At around midnight, to be exact. If we don’t find the jewels and the culprit before then not only is my life ruined forever but, and believe me on this, I will be taking the both of you down with me.”

Jaime took a moment to check his pocket-watch. “Considering I have been awake for approximately twenty-six hours, I believe I am now going to retire for the day. I hope by the time I wake you will have a complete report for me. Best of luck, and ta-ta!”

María didn’t get a chance to give a farewell -- she was bereft of words. Amelie couldn’t contribute either. So, hearing no objections, prince Jaime left to his quarters with a flourish, a spin, and the walk that only comes from the confidence that all his problems would be solved when he woke.

“... But how did the corgi even get up a pine tree?” asked the maid Amelie Stewardson.

“That’s beside the point,” responded Detective María Álvarez. “It’s because of that dog that I am here now, and why the two of us have been press-ganged into investigating the disappearance of the royal jewels, Ms. Stewardson.”

Amelie wasn’t particularly happy about this. All things considered, the mousy woman had the spirit of a lion. A lion that heavily cussed under her breath.

“Please don’t give me any of that, I’ll need your all the assistance you can provide.”

“Oh, but I thought a *legendary detective* like yourself wouldn’t need any help cracking this case.”

“I’m not, and I do. Have you worked this room before?”

“I-uh, yes? I was on c-cleaning duty yesterday, with --”

“Good,” said María. “That means we have a chance at an investigation.”

Quizzing Amelie, María attempted to construct a “before” to the abundantly clear “after.” Every item she could recall remained in the room, excepting the bracelet, the ring, the circlet, the necklace, and the golden eyeball. However, many things were now in several pieces: the display table’s drawers were pulled out and dropped to the ground, the curtains were pulled off, every available cushion (chair and jewelry alike) was tossed into a corner. Also, the tea set had undergone ballistic adventure.

“At the very least, this should be easy to clean up? Well, excepting the tea.”

“Y-Yeah. If it weren’t for all the leaves, I’d just take ten minutes to put all the cushions and drawers back in place. So they *almost* didn’t make my job insufferable.”

True, María thought, but what’s the point? The five treasures were right there on the table. So why bother turning the room upside down? Mayhaps the culprit was trying to send a message? Then why--

crunch

The train of thought was suspended on account of dirt clod on the tracks. Underfoot, to be more exact, and scattered haphazardly across the entire floor to be more general.

“Okay, so, obviously you cleaned this room yesterday.”

“W-Well, yeah!”

“Then I’m just going to assume that all this ex-mud showed up after you cleaned up, and before the noises at 8 PM.”

“I-I was the last cleaner, and finished at 1 PM. Um, So. The muddy jerk had seven hours to ruin everything.”

The carpet was folded in half, underside up. And yet, María noted that both under- and upside were caked with drying dirt.

“Wha-What kind of idiot could be so messy that they tracked mud onto *both* sides of a carpet???”

“Well, at least they only left hair on its upside.” María took a moment to tease out the reddish-copper clump from the weave of the carpet. “Have you worked here long? And if so, do you know every ginger in house?”

“I-I’ve been here for half a year, but there are so many guests with their own servants right now I don’t think I could, er, classify them all? The cleaning staff here yesterday were all brown or black haired, in any case.”

María pressed the hair between notebook pages. Considering how she had no actual forensic tools or talent, this was a reasonable haul. The next step was to leave and wait hold on has that pin been there the entire time.

Indeed, a pin laid atop the pile of lime green velvet pillows. It carried an insignia of a crossed sword and handsaw.

Well then.

“Tha-That’s a um, very clue-like clue, isn’t it?” asked Amelie. “I don’t remember if I’ve seen this before, but, uh, it really just sort of sticks out here, doesn’t it?”

“Agreed on all counts,” responded María. “One can’t really ask for something to more clearly be called a clue than an ominously decorated pin. Shame that neither of us know what it means. It probably would have been really informative.”

“Sh-Shut up.”

Five lithe men doing flips in orange spandex could perhaps be art, María considered. At the very least she tried keeping an open mind about it, watching the open air flying trapeze. Amelie, on the other hand, was having none of it. But now that the mansion's day had begun in earnest, this sort of nonsense was inevitable.

The acrobatics were taking place in the bottom of a semicircular grassy hill, landscaped to look like a natural amphitheater. It was mostly empty, with the flippy men rehearsing for a performance during the rapidly approaching noon. It was also flanked by a pair of very politely arguing women. One wore her hair short and red, dressed as the sort of woman constantly on the move, holding a small box in hand; the other wore a pair of sharp spectacles and oh hey its Danny.

"... not to mention that – oh. Hello again, detective Álvarez," went Daniela Mendez Ramos, cutting herself off.

"Sorry for interrupting your conversation, Daniela. And you must be—"

"Yes, I am Valeria Vargas de Vera," replied the woman in red. "Third in line to the throne, consummate patron of the arts, part-time flower arranger, et cetera, et cetera," she recited with a practiced and tired gesture. "Now then, what sort of occasion brought such an accomplished detective to our mansion? Or more to the point, what sort of zany crime is dear cousin Jaime accusing me of today?"

María blinked twice. "Pardon?"

"Yes, yes, out with it now. Is it treason? Murder? Dognapping? What sort of elaborate excuse is he making to hassle me?"

"Well. I have nothing to say about any of those topics," replied María. "But are you telling me that the prince has a habit of frivolous accusations against you? That this is a reoccurring feature of your lives?"

"Absolutely. The fool has had this ridiculous rivalry with me ever since we were nine. Perhaps it's a matter of pride, revenge, or merely boredom, but he has heckled me in every way since."

Under her breath, Amelie made a comment about how rich people need some goddamn real hobbies. María just politely coughed.

"I entirely figured that something like this would happen today. What with this..." Valeria held up a small package and gave it an experimental wave. "My cousin isn't terribly subtle."

"Did he give you this, uh, package, yesterday?"

“He ‘gifted’ me this box of chocolates during yesterday’s teatime. What a farce, as if any of his gifts would be anything but a transparent passive-aggressive slight. Besides, I hate chocolate. I just brought it here to try and sweeten up Danny here.”

“I already told you, Val,” responded Daniela, “I can’t make the paperwork go any—”

“Yeah, yeah, what about you detective?”

“I believe I will pass. Amelie?”

“Mine.”

Valeria tossed it over to the maid, who caught it in a hug.

“What sort of paperwork are you discussing, if you don’t mind me asking?” asked María anyway.

“...Insurance,” replied Daniela, perhaps a little bitter over the chocolate. “My company has covered a number of items at this exhibition, and unfortunately, Val has decided that she qualifies for compensation at this very moment.”

“Hmph,” intoned Valeria, “I had recruited this band of orange spandex gentlemen to perform a set of acrobatic feats for our guests. They are the art I have brought, so compensation is in order if one can’t perform on account of a twisted ankle.”

“And I already told you that I need—”

“IN ANY CASE, detective, you have yet to tell me what business you have with me.”

“Oh,” responded María, taking a moment to observe the acrobats soar and climb high in the air. “Nothing important. You know, we’re just on the lookout for any suspicious behavior. Something from the last day in particular, perhaps.”

Valeria regarded María. Suspiciously.

“Welllll, if you really want to know who I think is suspicious, I would suggest Sir Alejandro Ortega. That fellow’s Suspicious with a capital S.”

María didn’t know who that was, but nodded anyway. Valeria continued.

“He doesn’t talk much, but he’s somehow always at these family gatherings. Once I caught him giving Jaime the stinkeye. So I invited him to a good-old Jaime-mocking-session but then he just gave *me* the stinkeye. What a self-righteous ponce.”

“That reminds me...” added Daniela, “Yesterday, I saw Sir Ortega sulking off into the kitchen right before dinner. It was odd. I’m not sure why anyone would go there.”

Amelie, the maid, gave a quick grumble.

“See, that’s the exact sort of behavior that *actually* demands investigation. *Please* try to take anything my idiot cousin says with a pinch of salt.“

María thanked the two ladies for their time (after promising to investigate the good Sir Ortega) and walked back around the garden with her assistant.

“So,” said Amelie, sliding her precious box of chocolate into an apron pocket, “Valeria is, er, still the main suspect, right?”

“Pardon?”

“She, uh, she has the motive, means, and opportunity, doesn’t she? She really hates Prince Jaime. And did you see how high her acrobats can climb? One of them could have easily made it to the, er, third floor window, and break in that way. Someone coming in from outside like that would explain why there’s so much dirt everywhere. Oh! It was raining yesterday too, so that means that it would have been slippery, so maybe that’s why one of them have a twisted ankle? S-So, um, I think the evidence is against her.

Y-You were thinking about all that, right?”

“Absolutely. Yes. 100%. Completely and totally obvious. Let’s move on.”

“...R-Right.”

María supposed there was a name for the kind of brunch-like activity that happened in the early afternoon. Perhaps tea time would fit the bill, but the smell of coffee was too strong in the air. And while tea was meant for a time of serenity, some kind of interpretative song and dance was taking place. The dancers were wearing rhino costumes. Despite (or because of) that, the guests weren’t focused on the artistic expression taking place, having far more important topics to discuss.

For example, dogs.

“...And now, Spot was a misnomer for the sort of activity this boy got into,” sprawled Sir Willard Humfret, the egg of a man. “Not to mention it’s fur coloration. His name was meant more aspirationally, see. There was some measure of premeditation going into this pup’s heritage, and—”

“Hold,” said his conversational partner. His cheekbones were the kind exclusive to those who were substantially older or younger than they looked. His eyes constantly pierced and evaluated all they saw. His preferred pairing was cinnamon honey tea with thumbprint marmalade cookies.

“Detective María Álvarez,” stated Sir Alejandro Ortega, “I was expecting you.”

Before María could respond Willard gave an excited gasp and exclaimed how he *knew* good ol’ Mary would come by for tea.

“How’ve you been Mary? I’m sure you’ve appreciated such a *vacation* from investigation, eh?” asked Sir Willard, punctuating his question with drawn out winks.

Sir Ortega took a moment to stare at Sir Humfret. “Willard, would you kindly run and grab *The Complete Architecture Handbook* from my room?”

“Oh, of course Alex!”

As the good Sir Will sped off, Alejandro gave a sideways glance to the small, giftbox bearing maid.

“Ms. Stewardson is with me,” said María. “And the package is for us later. But it looks like you also have something for us.”

Sir Alejandro Ortega gave a long stare. “You are here because the ring was stolen.”

Amelie and María gave one another other side-glances.

“Yes. The ring being missing is absolutely one of my priorities.”

Ortega gave a humorless chuckle. “Figures. I tried to broach the topic to him this morning, and offered the use of my military connections to help with the investigation. I even proposed additional security personnel at the beginning at this endeavor. But he turned me down nonetheless. I do not know if the young man is too trusting of his guests, or too paranoid of his allies.”

“For whatever reason, he seems to trust me,” replied María. “And I’m sorry, but, from who did you hear about the, erm, ring? The prince was the first to find the crime scene, and guarded it all night.”

“Th-That’s true,” added Amelie. “Um, sir. But even the staff didn’t know there was a robbery. I-I mean we knew that idio--I mean the prince was staying in the drawing room. B-But that’s not out of character for him.”

“My assistant is right. So how did you learn about the missing ring?”

“I,” said Sir Alejandro Ortega, taking a sip of his cinnamon honey tea, “shall not say.”

“... Didn’t know you could opt out of an investigation,” muttered Amelie.

“There is no reason for you to involve me in your investigation. The prince has chosen me to not be a part of this process, and so I have nothing to say.”

“Really?” replied María, “You have no anecdotes to provide? No fingers to point? No herrings to paint red?”

“None,” replied Sir Ortega. “Unless, of course, you had cause to arrest me. But you won’t.”

The loud bang of a thousand page handbook upon tabletop interrupted whatever cool retort María was planning.

“Hah! *wheeze* I still got those ol’ Humpfret legs going for me!” Sir Willard Humpfret was drinking in as much air as he could.

“That you do, Sir Will,” responded Sir Alejandro. He was giving a pencil-thin smile in María’s direction.

Now that the gregarious Willard was back, María knew that this particular conversation was over. However, she noticed that Amelie was staring pointedly. María followed her gaze down to the hardcover of *The Complete Architecture Handbook*.

On it, was a sigil of a crossed sword and handsaw.

“Say, Will,” said María, “I don’t believe I’ve seen this book before.”

Sir Alejandro Ortega was visibly bracing himself. And Sir Willard Humpfret’s eyes began to sparkle in anticipation of that most treasured sentence.

“Could you explain it to me?” asked María.

The outpouring was inevitable, irrevocable, and unstoppable.

“Oh, oh! This is a brilliant compendium on the aesthetic and engineering principles of modern architectural study – incredible that they managed to compress it all down into a single easy pocketbook like this, eh? Course, this is only a primer to those eggheads in the Royal Engineering Corps, I wager that Alex here has it all up in his noggin! Those folks do all the public works, you know. All the bridges, dams, aqueducts, and lavatories! All of them! Well, except the private ones of course. Alex-boy, I count you as one of my closest friends, but I’d rather you not be in charge of my water-closet situation, haha!”

María could barely scrap in a single “Oh, really?” before the man’s explanation train ran her words over.

“Oh, yes! Why, the Royal Engineers made blueprints for everything government and royal family-wise. Why, I wager even this manor was put together by them. There’s a lot of artistry that goes into making an abode, you know. The ‘geometry of living’ they call it, but there’s also the whole, whatchamacallit, ‘structural integrity’ angle to consider, whatever high math that is. But that’s the sort of talent that got this boy Alex into this artistic expo, you know! As for me, I’m more into the, whatsit, ‘kinetic arts’ I think they’re called. Y’know, a good old bout of rugby, some skeet shooting, wrasslin a capybara, that sort of art! At least, I think that *should* be art. Y’know, I was hoping to get some falconry done this stay – I even saw good ol’ prince Jaime the other day galivanting around wearing a falconer’s glove, as we waited for teatime to start. Not sure what business he was up to with it, it was already pouring cats and dogs at that time and no bird worth their plumes would fly in that! Oh! Did you ever find the man himself?”

María took the opening. “Oh, I did, he is doing well enough right now. This was very pleasant and informative, but in any case, we really have to leave. Immediately.”

María and Amelie peeled off before Sir Ortega’s famous stinkeye punched a hole in their head.

“...Why was Jaime wearing a falconer’s glove?” asked María.

“R-Really? We found O-Ortega’s pin in the drawing room and *that’s* what’s important? Not to mention that he only thought the ring was gone, and not the other four jewels too.”

María got briefly distracted at spotting the rhino dancer again. “Ah, sorry. Yes, both of those facts are rather strange. Ortega’s pin being at the scene is, as we have established, very much a clue. But it’s also odd of him to focus on the ring, and not the bracelet, the circlet, the necklace, or the golden eyeball.” María consulted her notebook. “But on the other hand, between the chocolate, the glove, and taking dinner in the library, Jaime seems to have some atypical habits for a prince.”

“Don’t,” replied Amelie, “even get me STARTED. He went off to s-sulk in the library halfway through dinner yesterday, he doesn’t know the names of half the permanent staff, and he always sort of smells like fish.”

Good to know she wasn’t the only one who smelt that, María thought.

The kitchens, and by extension the entire servant’s quarters, smelt of everything. There was no point getting any more specific than that, the entire lower level of the manor was an olfactory punch in the nose. Pheasant may have been involved. This righteous bedlam would soon produce the highest class of dinner, but at the moment it was little more than a cloud of misted grease and diced shallots.

The eye of this chaos was a sprightly yet very, very frazzled grey-haired lady of the name Ms. Francis Dolores. She was using half a leek to direct as much of it as she could, maids, butlers, and chefs going this and that way with silver covered trays, exotic fish, and raw oranges.

“I-I *said* that the kitchen would be a mess,” Amelie said.

“And you weren’t wrong,” replied María.

The detective waved over the leek-wielder. She jumped at the eye contact and hurriedly pattered over to the detective.

“Excuse me! Pardon!” went Ms. Dolores, pushing past various chefs. “Uhhh, ma’am? Sorry, but the dinner will be served soon! In, uh, the main dining room. We kindly ask for all guests to remain *outside* the kitchen,” she flagged to the door with her leek. “Now. Please. Ma’am.”

“Ms. Francis Dolores, I am terribly sorry to interrupt your work. I am detective María Álvarez. May I have a moment and get a statement from you?”

She deflated, leek becoming limp in hand. “Oh dear,” Francis said, in a resigned mutter, “what did Jaime say this time...”

“I am unfortunately aware of many of the things the prince says, but that is not why we are here today,” lied María. “I was wondering if you saw the whereabouts of Sir Alejandro Ortega yesterday.”

She bit her lip. “Sir Ortega, Sir Ortega, uh,”

“Stern face, dead voice, drinks cinnamon honey tea with thumbprint marmalade cookies.”

“Oh yes, Mister Cinnamon! Well, uh...”

“Did you see him?”

Dolores looked lost at sea. “C-Could I get a hint? Sorry, these last few days have been beyond the pale, Ma’am.”

Amelie muttered a silent “Tell me about it” as María checked her notebook.

“Well, just by chance, did you happen to see Sir Cinnamon sometime right before dinner?”

“Um, well, maybe? I was too busy being conversed with to say one way or another.”

“Conversed?”

“Well, I was being thoroughly educated about the best way to prepare and eat jerky, the architectural purpose and history of the flying buttress, as well as being quizzed on a riddle involving knights, knaves, and blue houses,” recited the defeated woman. “A-And I think there was flirting in there somewhere? It was hard to tell two hours in.”

“Willard?”

“Sir Willard, yes... I think perhaps Sir Cinnamon came by later to pull him off? I couldn’t quite tell at that point. I was just so exhausted from listening...”

Well, María thought, that wraps it together. Willard came down to the kitchen to catch the ear of the lovely matron. Sir Ortega came by later to pull his hopeless romantic senior back into respectability, and was witnessed by the insurance agent Danny Mendez Ramos.

“Sorry for complaining so much detective. It’s just that between all the guests and the days full of events and catering it’s been nonstop, not to mention that our own skeleton staff is spread to the marrow and can’t help me and every guest brought their own staff and I have to memorize who they are and they need to be taught how to cook and serve Jaime and clean the rhinos and and and oh no I’m complaining again.”

Francis Dolores looked to be on the cusp of tears, nausea, or both.

“Are you alright? Ma’am? Francis?”

“Sorry, I’m fine, I’m fine, I just need some air and – oh, Amelie, I’m sorry for implying you weren’t doing enough, I just – Henry! Those shallots need to be moved to low heat! – I just am in so many places at once right now.”

A cook shouted back a quick apology to Ms. Dolores as he clanged around a skillet.

“Amelie,” said María, “*is she okay?*”

Amelie gave a noncommittal shrug. “S-She just gets like this, I think.”

Francis took a few breaths to recompose herself. “Sorry about that. In any case, I didn’t see any other Sirs pass through here. Well, excepting Sir Adonis, but he doesn’t count.”

“Why not?”

“B-Because cats can’t be knights,” said Amelie.

“He’s our resident mouser,” added Ms. Dolores. “Sometimes I wonder if he’s the most dependable man of the estate – no wait Henry, sorry! I didn’t mean that!”

Henry just shouted back that no, he agrees, as he stirred up some Bolognese, and inadvertently elbowed a plate to the ground with a thundering crash.

At this noise, a copper colored lump bounded underfoot the myriad chefs and detectives, out of the kitchen and into a side hall.

María, in a fit of dog-chaser instinct, gave pursuit, following the furball into a sack-ridden supply closet.

Sir Adonis was a scraggly, scrappy old man of a cat, though his orange-brown fur and charming personality gave him a kittenish air. He was presently pawing about several lumpy burlap sacks, and dedicatedly mewed and swatted at some invisible thing as knightly cats are wont to do.

Francis and Amelie caught up with the detective, Dolores meekly asking María to please stop intruding into the kitchen if she wouldn’t mind please.

“Sorry,” responded María, “got a little carried away there, but could you tell me what this is?”

“A, um, cat? Are you more of a dog person?”

“She meant the bags,” interrupted Amelie with an eyeroll. “T-They’re just orange rinds. Aristocrats don’t like eating them, so we send them back to town for resale. D-Don’t open them. O-Old rinds smell worse than you think.”

“Both are fascinating answers, but neither were what I was referring to.”

Two pairs of eyes followed María’s finger to the spot where good Sir Adonis was pawing. He was presently swatting a seam in the wall. And at the base of the seam, a small corner of burlap snagged right under the wall.

A moment of careful pushing, a panel in the wall swung open into an unlit stairwell. Sir Adonis mewed in thanks and trotted in.

María took a moment to process incredulity of the situation, as both Francis Dolores and Amelie Stewardson stood mouth agape.

“Well, thank you for your time, Ms. Dolores. But as you said, it *does* appear to be time we left the kitchen,” said María, ascending the secret passage.

“So, are there any other hidden doors I should know of?” María asked, carefully maneuvering the unsafe dark steps.

“N-No! I didn’t even know about this one.” Replied an Amelie, quite worried about stepping on an elderly cat. “S-Say, do you want to put money on where this goes?”

“No.” María came up to the end of the stairs, with a hairline seam of light illuminating the stairs.

She gave it a dedicated push, rotating the panel of mahogany.

“See? Of bloody course.”

“I-It could have been to, erm,” said Amelie, “someone’s private chambers?”

“Nope. We both know what kind of day this has been,” replied María, walking out from the hidden stairs and into the still trashed, still sans-jewels, still tea-ridden, drawing room.

Because of bloody course.

Sir Adonis trotted into the room, rubbed against the leg of a table, stared into space for ten seconds, and trotted right back down the stairs.

Cats.

María took out her notebook and tried to get to work in the sunset-lit room. The pages of the overtaxed pad were rife with interview notes, timetables, and an attempted map that now needed substantial revision. Why did crime have to be so complicated?

“Okay, so we have secret stairs as another entry point,” said María. “But it seems as if nobody knew about them?”

“Ortega.”

“RIGHT Ortega comes from a background which would give him blueprints to this manor. So any forgotten secret passages would be accessible to him. Also tying him here is the fact that his crest was found on the pile of ugly green pillows. His shady personality isn’t doing him any favors, but the exact motive isn’t clear.”

“... Do you need a reason to think Jaime is an idiot?”

“Well, no, but, Valeria has a more clear history of rivalry with Jaime. Moreover, we determined that her team of athletic gentlemen was a plausible means to complement her motive. The fact that they would have come in from outside would explain the dirt in a way that Ortega alone wouldn’t.”

“S-So is V the primary suspect.”

“That would make sense, but the evidence for both is mostly based on happenstance – the secret passage predated the crime, and acrobats are not inherently tools of evil. In principle, any one of the hundred-some guests and help could have done it,” María clicked her pen twice. “That being said, I don’t want to imagine there are more than two people as shady or vindictive as Sir Alex or Ms. V.”

Amelie fidgeted with her hair for a moment. “S-So, what do we do now?”

“...”

“...”

“... Do you still have that chocolate? I could do with something sweet right now.”

“... Same.”

“But that doesn’t make sense!”

“He absolutely would!” That means that the culprit is – ”

“Jaime!” exclaimed Jaime Pietro de Vera the second, bursting into the room. He was still wearing his orange nightclothes.

Amelie immediately stopped her point and shoved the jewelry and box back into her apron.

“What did you think of that self-introduction, detective? I get terribly annoyed whenever people don’t notice my entrance, and heralds are a `waste of money` according to my father, so I’m trying this out.”

María coughed a bit from the whiplash. “It was very effective, your highness.”

“And so was my day’s sleep!” he replied. “I feel vital enough to take on any of this night’s challenges. By which I mean arresting treasonous thieves of the state. Or crown. I’m still unclear of the difference.”

Amelie muttered something about how its technically both, on account of his lifestyle being funded by parliament.

“ANYWAY,” he continued, “You do have the culprit, right?”

María exchanged a glance with Amelie.

“...Yes?”

“Prefect! That must mean it is time for the parlor scene!”

“Parlor scene?” asked Amelie.

“It means he wants to gather everyone into a single room before we reveal the results of our investigation. It’s quite popular with the rich.”

“Dramatic timing is everything!” said Jaime. “It’s all very intellectual, not something I expect the help to understand.”

Amelie was visibly doing the mental arithmetic vis-à-vis prince murder.

María scribbled out a quick list and tore the page out of her notebook.

“Ms. Stewardson, could you find the people on this list, and tell them that they are immediately needed in the third floor drawing room?” she asked, passing the note over. Amelie looked it over with a conspiratorial nod before leaving the room.

“And prince Jaime, um,” she continued, “could you tell Ms. Valeria Vargas de Vera to also come?”

The royal heir’s eyes sparkled like a corgi gifted a rawhide before he bounded off to be an absolute nuisance to his cousin.

And now María was alone.

And something very important was still not adding up.

She flipped back and forth through her notes, the noisy paper cacophonous in the silent room. To make her way out of this needed to make an airtight case, but all her material amounted to moth-eaten bloomers. And yet...

She made her way back to the drawing room’s door. She opened it, and took a good look at the turn-knob handle. The knob was a weathered sort of bronze, surprisingly scratched with age. The lock mechanism was not usual – even royalty still had a two bolt system. One rectangular deadbolt for proper locking, and one angled bolt for securing the door in place.

Interestingly, the angled latchbolt was stuck inside the door. María twisted the knob, but it remained stuck in place. Even if she wanted the door to be closed, it would still be free-swinging.

She looked closely at the bolts. In the seams of the lock, she saw scuff marks of various wires and imperceptible wads of cotton shoved into the mechanism.

“Of *bloody* course,” said María, ice in her veins.

Soon enough, detective María Álvarez was standing in front of her chosen crowd. The library chairs she brought from next door clashed with the drawing room’s intended aesthetic, but in its present state it seemed fine.

The architect Sir Alejandro Ortega sat calmly in his chair, aromatic tea nowhere to be found. His pointed silence didn’t stop the outdoorsman Sir Willard Humpfret from spilling about how the rug somehow reminded him of salmon fishing. Cousin to the heir, Valeria Vargas de Vera,

waited as poised and elegant as a lion. This lasted for fifteen seconds, until the royal heir Jaime Pietro de Vera the Second started his taunting regimen. At present, the slapfight was favoring Jaime, though V has had more creative insults.

And standing in the back was the maid Amelie Stewardson, barely tolerating her various superiors in the room. Nonetheless she gave a silent look to María, perhaps of encouragement, but also of impatience.

María decided to start before things got out of hand.

“Could I have your attention? Right then, as you all are aware, I am a detective,” she began, tapping pen with notebook. “And as you may guess this is a crime scene. This drawing room contained the royal treasures of the de Vera family: the bracelet, the ring, the circlet, the necklace, and the golden eyeball. But as of eight pm yesterday, all five treasures were missing, and the room ransacked. Here, we are to find the culprit of this theft, before the king finds out, and I lose my job.”

“It was V,” said Jaime.

Valeria rolled her eyes. “Please, cousin, must you really waste *everyone’s* time with this prattle? I was at events all day yesterday, and even you saw me at dinner yesterday. Well, before you spirited away halfway through.”

Jaime was pointedly not paying attention to his cousin.

“I don’t doubt your alibi, Ms. Vargas de Vera, nor do I believe you committed this theft. You are rich. You have people to commit your crimes for you,” María replied. “Specifically, you have a troupe of acrobats. From what I’ve seen, these spandex gentlemen would have no trouble scaling a wall and entering through this window. It would also explain how the culprit could enter and leave the room unseen, even though prince Jaime was next door. Coming in from outside would also explain the dirt tracks found throughout the room, considering yesterday’s rainy condition.”

V raised an eyebrow. “Really, detective? Dirt? Dirt is your ‘decisive evidence’ after this entire time? That’s it?”

“Maybe to you, but it seems to me that you have a means, an opportunity, and a motive. That is, spandex gentlemen, a dinner which consumes everyone’s attention, and your rivalry with Jaime.”

“So it’s agreed,” inserted Jaime. “V stole the jewels, all to undermine my credibility!”

“...Not quite,” she continued, “The dirt also seems to acquit you. See, we found mud caked on both sides of this carpet. So our muddy gentleman walked on both sides of this carpet, meaning it is reasonable to conclude he was the same man who turned this room upside-down.”

“Do you think,” added Willard, “that he was so full of vim from this daring escapade that the man in question was filled to the brim with a good ‘ol berserker rage and just tore the place down in an animalistic fury?”

“Um. Doubtful on the berserker hypothesis. Working over a room like this would take several minutes, and Jaime was right next door and reported hearing ‘a’ crash. Whoever did this was doing it quietly. Judging by the state of the room, said crash seems to be from the tea set, and was likely accidental. Look at the rest of the room: pillows removed and piled into a corner, windows meticulously undraped, and drawers systematically removed? Excepting the teat set, this room is less in a state of destruction, and moreso a state of disassembly.”

María clicked her pen for emphasis. “In my estimation, the last person in this room was *searching* for the treasures, not stealing them.”

Jaime leaned back in skepticism. “Well, I don’t see why you think he was unsuccessful. Maybe he had trouble finding the treasures.”

“Jaime, you told me yourself they were sitting on bright green pillows in the middle of the room.”

“Typical,” said Valeria, with a shake of the head.

“Well, flaunt it if you’ve got it, like my grandson says!” Willard added helpfully.

María coughed, changing topic as fast as possible. “Well. Flaunting or otherwise, it seems like there isn’t yet much to concretely tie V to the crime of stealing the treasures. Which leads us to suspect number two.”

“Let me guess,” said Valeria, “Sir Ortega?”

Sir Alejandro Ortega’s face betrayed no surprise. Jaime, however, was surprised to learn that more than one suspect was possible, and kept glancing at Sir Alex.

María pulled a pin from her pocket, and showed the crossed sword/handsaw insignia to the room. “This pin was found at the scene of the crime. And here, is the emblem of the Royal Engineering Corps, of which Sir Ortega is a part. And this evidence ... was probably faked. I think we agree on that. Right, Amelie?”

“I-I-It’s totally fake.”

“See? Fake. We found this pin sitting atop the pile of pillows, which suggests to me that it was left after the room disassembly. Not to mention it is so transparently a ‘clue,’ it’s hard for me to believe that it wasn’t planted. Valeria mentioned Sir Ortega to me twice by name today, so it seems likely that her acrobat had a pin handy in case of an emergency to throw off the trail.”

Valeria kept her cool. “Absolutely nothing you have said so far has been supported by evidence.”

“Oh!” Interjected Sir Will, “I’ll have you know that it is! Good Sir Alex never wears pins, the man’s more into, whatsit, whale-back cufflinks for the whole insignia business.”

Sir Alejandro Ortega wordlessly removed one of his links to reveal the engineering corps insignia, but no actual pin.

María had no idea Sir Alex kept such a habit, but was terribly glad because V’s comment really hurt her feelings.

“Pins and links notwithstanding, there is still reason to suspect Sir Alejandro. Amelie?”

One cue, the small maid pushed an indistinct part of the wall, swinging open the secret passage, to much sputtering of everyone who wasn’t Alejandro.

“*Seriously?*” asked Valeria. “Jaime, you left the jewels in a room with a backdoor?”

“W-Well,” replied Jaime, “I obviously didn’t know it was there!”

“You didn’t—this is your father’s manor!”

“S-Shut up!”

“Yes,” said María, “but someone with the blueprints to the manor *would* know. Such as someone in the royal engineering corps. Sir Alejandro, any comments?”

“None,” he replied. “It is just a door.”

María gave him a moment to elaborate. He didn’t.

“No ... Not really. We already know it was used on the day of the crime. Amelie and the other cleaners ensured the room was spotless, yet we found this clump of hair.” She showed the copper-colored clump to the room, who found it suitably gross. “This appears to be a clump of hair from the brave Sir Adonis, feline guardian of the kitchens. Which, by the by, are connected to this room by those stairs.”

Jaime did a quick check, and disappointed himself when he saw the copper lump didn't match Valeria's bright red hair.

"Moreover, we know when this door was used. Sir Willard, you met with Ms. Francis Dolores yesterday, correct?"

"Oh, quite yes! We conversed extensively on the finer points of the architectural wonder known as-- "

"Fantastic, when did this conversation begin?"

"Well, I wanted to get a chat in before the big ol' dinner rush, so I swung by for a chat at about five and --"

"Perfect. Now, and I want a short and clear answer to this, *why* were you in the kitchen instead of waiting for dinner upstairs?"

"Oh, that's perfectly easy, I had heard that the lovely Francis was a smidge troubled by her workload (and perhaps a little lonely), so being a fine gentleman I—"

"Who told you?"

"Oh that'd be Sir Alex, anyway, I—"

"Excellent, thank you, that will be all," replied María. She was glad to have learned that he was responsive to cutoffs. "In any case, what happened was that Sir Alex had sent his friend to distract the head maid. Then, he snuck into the kitchen, as witnessed by a certain insurance agent, Daniela Mendez Ramos. Once there, he used the secret passage to make his way into the drawing room, and inadvertently tracked some cat hair along the way. Then, he backtracked through the stairs and kitchen, picking up Willard on the way out. Any comments?"

Sir Alejandro Ortega ... was still calmly sitting. "None."

Jaime was befuddled. "So, Alex did it? I don't think he would -- that can't be right..."

"Please, it's obvious," added Valeria. "There is none more suspicious than him."

María considered her notes again. She didn't like them.

"It *is* possible for Sir Ortega to have stolen the jewels, and I *am* certain he entered this room the day of the crime before the discovery of the crime scene. But, I am not convinced."

Valeria joined her cousin's confusion. "Really? A means, an opportunity, and a motive, yet you are unconvinced?"

María clicked her pen in thought. "Something Sir Ortega said stuck out to me... which leads us to our third suspect: Prince Jaime."

Despite her earlier worries, this was an exceptionally good crowd to work with. Solid reactions all around. Willard nearly fell backwards on his chair, Valeria gave an accusatory point, and even Sir Ortega gave a disappointed shake of the head. Amelia gave a smarmy thumbs up to María, who returned it with a conspiratorial nod.

Jaime, naturally, was beside himself.

"What, I mean WHAT?" he sputtered, "T-This is nonsense! I am the victim, no, I am the prince! I could get you jailed for saying things like that!"

"L-Legally speaking, no, you can't."

"Shut up, maid! I'll have your job!"

"W-Whatever."

María recollected everyone's attention, and grabbed the chocolate box from Amelie.

"Ms. Vargas de Vera, what is this box?"

Valeria was confused. "It's a box of chocolates? Jaime gave it to me over tea yesterday."

María nodded. "Sir Humpfret, how and when did you meet Jaime yesterday?"

"Oh, this is a fantastic story! See teatime wasn't for a minute, so I went for a stroll about the premises on a lark (indoor, sadly, considering the rain) and met Jaime-boy over here, and I saw he was wearing a falconer's glove of all things! Now, I made a great gutbuster about how raptors are no waterfowl, so why would he—"

"Precisely," interrupted María. "Why would someone wear a falconry glove when it was raining? However, it makes sense when you consider the following..." María opened the box, revealing the royal de Vera ring, citrine and all.

Valeria started a train of particularly imaginative insults in Jaime's direction. A certain permutation of "rat dastard" stuck out to María.

“S-See?” Amelie said. “Y-You took the r-ring from the room and hid it under a-a glove a-a-and...”

“And then,” María continued, “you placed the ring in a chocolate box, and gifted it to Valeria. Either as a part of your ongoing rivalry with her, or as a preemptive strike against a possible sabotage, you planted the de Vera ring on her to frame her for theft. You understood that she hated chocolate, so she wouldn’t bother opening it. But as the night went on, you started to wonder: what if she tried to sneak the ring back in? Perhaps you even noticed some of her acrobats acting suspiciously. Either way, that would ruin your forgery. So you left dinner and waited in secret next to the drawing room, hoping to catch someone in the act, and pin your false theft on them. That’s the most complete explanation for this orange chocolate. Am I right, Jaime?”

The man was not alright. “No, no, no, no! I mean, that’s not, no! And when you get down to it, it’s still Valeria’s fault, and, I, no!”

“This is collaborated by Sir Alejandro Ortega,” she continued. “The ring moved from the room just before teatime. Meanwhile, Sir Alex used the secret doorway just before dinner. And when talking to him, he revealed something quite interesting: he said the ring, specifically and only the ring, was missing. This knowledge both confirms he used the secret door, and that Jaime removed the ring. It all fits together.”

“S-So *prince*,” added Amelie, “you c-can’t deny it! Y-You are the real culprit!”

“You can’t be sure of that!” Jaime sputtered. “I mean, because I didn’t do it, because, I deny all parts of what you are saying!”

“You really have gone too far this time, cousin,” added Valeria, trying hard to not betray her smug happiness.

Sir Ortega, however, just quietly repeated, “You have gone too far this time...”

“Well, / think it was quite the daring scheme, Jaime my boy!” Added Willard, “And it made for quite the thrilling turnabout, eh, wot? Truly, a case worthy of a legend!”

María quickly checked her notes again. She checked her timetables. She checked her hypothesis.

There were many possible histories. There were so many ways the jewels could have been stolen. So many truths fighting truths.

But only one truth made sense.

María spoke up. “There is one more thing... Sir Willard, you read the riddles column, right?”

The egg of a man puffed up. “Every day, detective!”

“Right, do you remember the one about the path, and the knight and knave? Not the new one, the one from two months ago.”

“Every word! Whatsit, there’s a path, one guarded by a knight (who is, of course, always truthful) and the other a knave (an obligate liar). But you know not whom is whom! So the trick is to figure out the best path by just employing a single question!”

“Right. Do you remember the answer?”

“Of course! it was along the lines of, ‘if I were to ask you, ‘is this the best path,’ would you say yes?’ Mind like a steel trap!”

Valeria rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, you are very intelligent and philosophical, but can we please just arrest my cousin already? Riddles have nothing to do with this case.”

“Actually, V, it does,” María replied. “Our thief had to solve a riddle of their own: how to enter the drawing room. Over the course of this investigation, I have seen a number of answers to this question, and those answers betray character. We know who took the ring, true. But not who took the other four items: the bracelet, the circlet, the necklace, and the golden eyeball.”

María pointed her pen. “This is why I mark you as the main culprit, Ms. Amelie Stewardson.”

...

...

...

It was a long silence, with the four seated members glancing back and forth, a soft “who?” punctuating the air until they finally noticed the small, silent woman in the back.

María had known Amelie long enough to know she wasn’t a quiet woman, merely that she wasn’t heard. But María was listening, and she was silent, boiling over with tears of hate and frustration.

“Y-Y-” she finally began, “You! Where d-do you even get this from! I-It makes n-no sense! Jaime did it!”

“Amelie...”

“No, Sh-Sh-Shut up! Shut up! You w-were r-right there, and then, riddles? Really?! And somehow I st-st-stole the jewels? How!?”

“It’s just as I said, it’s all about the method,” said María, staying even. “Throughout the day, we speculated on how Valeria, Sir Alejandro, and Jaime all could have stolen the jewels. You were the one to suggest that Valeria enter the room using an acrobat via window. You were the one to suggest that Ortega would use the secret passage to steal the treasures. You were the one to suggest that Jaime would just use his key and enter through the front.”

“A-A-And? Wh-What?” Amelie started a toxic smile. “Are you just b-biter that I’m better at being a detective than y-you? Is that it?”

María closed her eyes with a sigh. “And there it is. You still don’t understand.”

“Eh?”

“The drawing room doesn’t have a key.”

“Wh-What?”

“Jaime threw it out months ago. The room has no key, it’s never locked.”

Amelie’s pupils fully dilated.

“Wh-Wha-“

“It’s true. Not for months.”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh— But that’s just stupid! What kind of idiot leaves the door to his treasure unlocked???”

The prince puffed up. “Detective, are you STILL on about that? I had, like, half a dozen keys to manage. This makes it much easier to get around you know? It--”

His remarks were cut off by Valeria punching his shoulder and calling him a dunce.

“B-B-But that doesn’t mean anything! I-I just didn’t know, that’s all!” shouted Amelie.

“Not possible, I’m afraid. You have already proven to be quite the insightful and intelligent woman. And you told me that you worked here for...” María consulted her notes, “... six months? If that were true, you would have complained about this key nonsense all day. And yet, you didn’t know?”

María snapped her notebook shut. “No. Simply put, you are not a maid. You just pretended to work for Jaime or a guest, whichever seemed more convenient at the time. Unless, you think Ms. Dolores would testify in your favor?”

Sir Alejandro spoke up. “Why not ask Jaime? He is here.”

“Just look at him,” responded Valeria, “He can’t even remember to get dressed, much less name every servant on staff.”

Jaime just shot back with a huff, defending his choice of sleepwear.

“The comment on keys was what clued me in, but what confirmed it was the door itself,” María said, gesturing to the entrance. “I’m not a locksmith, but the door’s handle and lock show signs of tampering. Obviously, there’s no reason to sabotage an open door, but our culprit didn’t know this. And according to your own account, you were the last one cleaning the room yesterday. And that, is all it takes.”

Amelie was shaking. But even through tears, her eyes were fierce.

“N-No, it isn’t! A-All you’ve done is say ‘oh little miss maid broke in, blah blah blah.’ E-Even if, so what?! Th-These i-idiots did too! Why me, and not Jaime?”

“Jaime’s master plan to steal a ring was to wear a large, noticeable glove. Going by that logic, he would have needed to wear an oversized hat, sweater, and eyepatch to get the rest out. I don’t think he managed that.”

Jaime was about to protest, but Valeria interrupted, saying “Sorry cousin, the good detective has you pegged: you are too dumb to steal your father’s jewels.”

“If it’s any consolation, Amelie,” added María, “know that Jaime will absolutely be in dire straits when his father shows up.”

“B-Both of the royals are! Valeria t-tried to steal the other j-jewels! M-Maybe she d-did get the rest, but the acrobat w-was just trying to find the missing ring? We don’t have a p-proof she’s innocent.”

“Okay this has gone far enough,” said a now standing Valeria Vargas de Vera. “It seems everyone thinks I badly wanted to steal the royal jewels to humiliate Jaime. This is false: Jaime

needs no help in ruining his reputation.” She turned to make direct eye contact with the man in question. “Really Jaime? LIME display pillows?”

“I like green! What other color was I supposed to use?”

“White for a neutral background! Blue to contrast the citrines! Black to make the golden eyeball pop! *Any* other color! These are one-of-a-kind historic and national treasures, and I will not stand idly while you mindlessly curate them, you utter dot! That’s why I had to have a man break in to redecorate and render their display presentable to human beings with actual taste. It’s also not my fault that your gormless security rendered the room empty before he got there,” V looked around. “He told me that he was going to fix the room when he left, but *someone* had to run in like a mad dog and scared poor Tino out of life and limb.”

“I won’t stand for this, this taste-based libel!” said a now standing Jaime. “Why, I –”

While the cousins continued their fight, María looked over to Amelie. “I mean, I suppose it’s a confession. But her aesthetic vigilantism doesn’t acquit your theft.”

Amelie was busy biting her thumb, face maximally flushed. “F-From what you’re saying, I must have come in before Jaime and, uh, T-Tino, but after Ortega?”

María nodded. “That’s right at the start of dinner. Everyone was distracted with eating and serving, so you had free reign. I imagine you could have used a covered serving tray, and easily walked in and out of the room with the remaining treasures.”

“I-If they were still there,” hissed Amelia. “E-Even IF I broke in, O-Ortega still did it first. Jewelry is f-first come first serve. So. He-he-”

María considered what she said, gave it a thought while checking her notes, and realized that she was absolutely correct.

“Um. Well. His comment about *just* the ring being gone doesn’t really line up. Moreover, his motive is still unclear – he has no proven grudge against Jaime or his father. And--”

“M-Motive? MOTIVE?” interrupted the small Amelie. “He doesn’t need a grudge! Jewelry is valuable! It’s worth a lot of money! Do, do rich people not know that? What is wrong with you people?!”

The fight between Valeria and Jaime had progressed to the point of headlocks and noogies, with appropriate commentary from Will.

“Different priorities, I suppose,” said María. “Do you want to be involved in this discussion, Sir Alejandro?”

Sir Alejandro's attention was divided between María and Jaime's antics at the moment, but he moved to engage the detective.

"You had the right of it, detective," began Sir Alejandro, a touch bashful but remaining dignified. "Though they were within my reach, the thought of stealing the jewels did not occur to me. I merely noticed Jaime was behaving oddly, and went to investigate the jewels covertly. My actions only came from a place of curiosity and concern, not greed or malice. I give you my word."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Jaime pulled his head out from Valeria's grip. "Did you say 'concern?' Did you?"

"Oh, well, yes your majesty," responded Sir Alex, a smidge more bashful than before. "Isn't it natural for a servant of the realm to be concerned for the welfare of their prince? I apologize for overstepping my—"

"Hold it, hold it right there!" Jaime was working through some mental math "You found me last evening, and gave vague hints as to how you could help me 'resolve my present difficulties.' But if what you were saying is true, then you already tooled to understanding my, uh, special ring maneuver? So *what* were you planning to do?"

Valeria, now free from the melee, was pretending to not pay attention to her cousin.

"Well, your majesty, it --"

"Jaime"

"Pardon?"

"My name is Jaime. Call me that."

"Well, your maj -- er -- Jaime," said Alejandro, unused to being tongue-tied. "It is not as if I *fully* understood what you were doing or why. But you seemed to be in clear distress, so it was only right that I ask to possibly learn. And, um, assist you, if need be."

Jaime's eyes sparkled. "You ... you were willing to conspire with me? You like me that much?"

"Well. I mean, my loyalty is to the crown, which includes you, but that is not to say I do *not* like you as a person, despite your seeming mistrust of me, which I do not blame you for. But."

María couldn't look away.

Was...

Was he blushing?

Jaime suddenly grabbed Alejandro's hands in his own. "Oh this is FANTASTIC! I never had a co-conspirator before! Well, none willing, in any case. But this is great! Oh! We should sneak away on an adventure and scheme have madcap adventures and become closer as friends! Come with me, please?"

Oh god he was actually blushing.

Meanwhile, Sir Willard was rooting for Alex "to go an get "em."

"Your ma—I mean, Jaime, I did um, bring something for the expo, and you."

Sir Alejandro Ortega pulled out a small object from his pocket, and showed it to Prince Jaime.

It was a lime-colored rhino figurine.

María facepalmed.

King Pietro de Vera arrived at midnight, punctual as ever. María explained the situation vis-a-vis the royal jewels to the best of her ability. The king took it all quite well, all things considered. Of course, the drawing room was still disheveled. The denouement ran quite long, but everything could be cleaned within an hour or two, she explained.

She also made sure to explain that the jewelry is perfectly safe now. They were hidden in a bag of orange peels in the kitchen, you see. The true culprit was planning on smuggling them out with the resellable food waste, and probably had an elaborate fencing strategy operation that got stopped dead. Don't worry, all the items were wrapped, so there's no citric acid damage on the circlet, though there *is* a bit of a fragrance still, but that should go away in a day or so. Probably.

She also explained that everything was kept quite secret, so there's no need to worry about damage control. The extent of the affair was only revealed to six people, including herself and the culprit, but then again, one in the know *was* Sir Willard Humpfret, so perhaps some rumor-squashing will become necessary. Jaime himself wanted the entire affair to be quite confidential, but he was hard to keep track of at the moment. He and Sir Alejandro Ortega had arranged an impromptu trip to the mountains to become better acquainted with one another. No,

she explained, elopement definitely was *not* the right word. Well, a sufficiently charming figurine *could* hypothetically replace a ring, but the rhino in question didn't pass muster. Don't worry about it.

Incidentally, María clarified that Jaime's departure meant the estate was technically under the ownership of Valeria Vargas de Vera for an hour or so. María wasn't quite sure if that meant anything. The woman herself was too busy trying to track her cousin to field any questions on the topic.

King Pietro de Vera calmly thanked María for her service, pinched the bridge of his nose, and explained he would settle matters. In the morning. After he slept.

The morning came and went for María, and much to her delight and surprise, she was neither fired or arrested.

Especially surprising, since the main culprit was never captured.

The supposed maid, going by the name Amelie Stewardson, was supposed to be detained in the drawing room. María had included Sir Will in part for his testimony, but mostly to act as an impromptu bailiff and sheriff, keeping suspect and witness alike from fleeing the scene. But he, as well as the rest of the room, was understandably distracted re: prince Jaime. So, the woman called Amelie bailed. She had no time to take any treasures with her, beside her freedom. But between her patchwork identity, careful intellect, and unassuming appearance, the trail went colder than a winter sleet for María.

But for the police, the king, and the public at large, they had greater priorities at the time.

"Now then, Detective Álvarez," went the reporter, cozy in María's office, "you owe me a statement on the Orange Rose incident."

María wasn't sure why they called it that.

"I am sorry," she replied, "but there's decorum and confidentiality to consider. I cannot say much."

"Come on, ma'am! The beloved prince, disappearing in the middle of the night with a mysterious gentleman, during his own party? It has everything! Romance, drama, action – the public loves this stuff, and word is that you were in on it!"

"Really," she replied, "I wasn't particularly responsible for any of those doings. My involvement with the happenings of that night was nothing really special."

“Throw us a bone, ma’am!” the reporter’s excitement only built, despite the refusal. “Outside looking in, it looks like there was some orchestrated matchmaking happening. I don’t got the ‘deets on how or why, but you, a genius detective, were there on the one night it happened? Talk true to me, ma’am. If you didn’t do it, then who did?”

María Álvarez took a pointed sip of her tea, and considered the question before speaking.

“Well, taking all things into account...” she began.

“Yes?” asked the reporter, “Yes? Yes?”

“The maid did it,” she replied.

~Fin~