

## A Mary Tradition

“Where on Earth did you come from?” Chief asked, still puzzled by what just happened.

“Your office,” Vigenère replied, picking up the device in the desk drawer.

“Well, duh. But how did you end up in that costume?”

“And why couldn’t you help us earlier?” Caesar added.

The inspector recalled the scenario as he walked toward the precinct door. He had cracked something in the Killer Kat case, but needed a disguise to get closer to her. By acting as an innocent victim while guiding Chief and Caesar through the cat mystery, Vigenère had thought he could eliminate the glass chameleon, figuring it had been altered by his former partner. As soon as the eye exploded, Vigenère had known that he was safe to remove his disguise and regain control of the situation. Cracking the desk code would have blown his cover.

“If I had done that, she would have detonated the device and killed all three of us,” the Inspector stated.

“What do you mean, she had remote access?” Caesar asked.

“In two places, actually,” Vigenère answered as he exited the room.

Caesar and Chief looked at each other. Times like these made them both love and hate to work with the Inspector. He moved three steps ahead of everybody else, which led to some confusing explanations. What he considered an assumption, the layman saw an impossible deduction.

“Two places?” Chief repeated.

“The device and the chameleon...” Caesar sighed. He realized what Vigenère had just implied.

“You mean someone was spying on us through that glass figurine?”

“I think so.”

“Unbelievable.” Chief shuffled to the second story window to watch the Inspector get in his car.

“Thanks for the save, by the way.” Caesar nodded in appreciation.

Vigenère waved toward Chief, who stood with his hands on his hips, then pulled out his phone to call someone. Caesar joined Chief at the window. He felt his pants pocket vibrate. It was the Inspector.

“I almost forgot. Happy holidays!” Vigenère said as he sat in the driver’s seat.

“Where are you going?” Caesar asked.

“Vacation with Mary. Join us if you want.”

“How would I...” Caesar’s phone beeped. Vigenère had hung up.

There was a knock at the door. A USPS man stood outside the precinct holding a package. Caesar scoured the street for a truck as Chief carefully approached the door, opening it slowly.

“Can I help you?” Chief focused on the man’s face to look for any expressions.

“I’ve got a package for Ken,” the mailman said.

“Who it is from?” Caesar asked Chief.

“I just need a signature and I’ll be on my way.”

Chief signed the slip and took the package. It read: To Chief, from I=V. He shook his head, again trying to comprehend the impeccable timing. Vigenère left, no more than 30 seconds passed, and a small package showed up from him. The equal sign seemed curious. Maybe it doubled as a cipher key? The mailman left the scene as Chief began to inspect the brown box further.

“How does he do this?” Chief mumbled to himself.

Caesar overheard and responded, “I find myself asking that question a lot. And who’s Mary?”

Chief meticulously opened the package. He extracted six square wooden pieces that appeared to fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. Only one side of each piece had markings. Caesar assembled the cube.

“This must be a new trend or something,” Caesar said, rotating the cube in his hands.

“As of an hour ago, I had never seen anything like it,” Chief declared.

“Same here, and now I’ve seen two of them,” Caesar agreed. “Hopefully nothing will explode this time.”

Agents and detectives began returning to the precinct. The security team had given everyone the all-clear. Caesar tossed the cube to Chief and greeted his friends. He explained what happened and that Vigenère was okay.

Chief walked into his office, looking at the six sides of the cube. As he sat down in his chair, he got a text from the Inspector: “You coming? Mary could use your company.”

Chief lifted his feet onto the desk, scouring over the puzzle. Is it possible that this cube could inform him of Vigenère’s next move? There were a bunch of pictorial clues. He laughed when he saw the KenKen—a math game that consisted of equation sums, differences, products, and quotients. Each row and column had to contain a unique number from one to eight.

Chief worked on KenKens while he traveled to keep his brain sharp. Vigenère must have noticed on a previous trip. Ken enjoyed a good word challenge too. The crossword, cryptoquip, and scrabblegram felt right up his alley. One side of the cube looked like a cipher. He figured the key would come from solving the different sides, which appeared interconnected.

Caesar leaned into the office. “You need any help in here, Chief?”

“I think I can solve this,” Chief replied, “but I need someone to get our divisions back on track.”

Caesar stood in the doorway, waiting for an order. Both their phones interrupted.

Another text came in from Vigenère, perhaps a strategically timed continuation from his first message: “Flight leaves in 90 minutes.”

Chief popped to his feet, went to his locker, and pulled out a day bag filled with clothes. The airport was 30 minutes away, and he might be gone for a few days. He would need to solve the cube in the car, so he ordered a Lyft. His gut told him that the Inspector was on Killer Kat’s trail, but her crimes didn’t extend beyond the region. And why would he bring Mary?

“Hey, Rodriguez. Take care of the ship while I’m gone.”

“Yes, sir.” Caesar watched Chief slip out the back door. He proudly turned to address the precinct.