

Detective Soup

"One chance to try to save me, or you will pay the greatest fee."

The recording issued from the cat threatened Chief's wife, who looked at him terrified. Daria wasn't sure that she wanted her husband nearby. What if it detonated? She knew what this cat could do.

"Stay calm," Chief said slowly as he approached the cat. The hotel staff instructed everyone in the vicinity to give them space.

"What are you doing?" Daria asked, nervously.

"There's likely a puzzle attached. It's the key to getting us out of this mess."

"That's sick."

"Yes, I know. We had one in our precinct earlier."

Daria felt comforted by her husband's confidence in the scenario. Clearly he had solved a cat puzzle before, so he could solve this one too. Other than perhaps Inspector Vigenère, Daria knew nobody better at puzzles. Ken usually spent an hour before bed doing number and word puzzles.

"I wish Vigenère was here," Chief declared as he reached for the cat's collar. He didn't find a tiny cube dangling like the last time. Concern crossed his face.

"Why? What's wrong?" Daria asked.

"We would probably be sipping drinks by the pool already."

"Not funny. Stay focused!"

"I'm just trying to help lighten the mood."

Chief's phone buzzed in his pocket. It was Vigenère. He answered, expecting assistance from his colleague. Instead he got silence.

"Hello... Inspector? You there?"

Nothing. Chief checked to see if the phone was still connected.

"Did he hang up? I don't understand him," Daria said. She threw her hands up in the air. Inspector Vigenère may have been smart, but his communication style frustrated so many people.

Chief scratched his head, playing around with the cat's collar. That's when Daria noticed a blue light the size of a pinhead emanating from the strap. She knelt down and felt around the light. There was a small indentation on the back side of the strap.

"I think I found something. Should I press it?" Daria asked.

Chief hesitated, but eventually nodded. What other options did they have? He held her hand and hoped for the best. She felt a click and the blue light began blinking.

The blink rate increased until it turned solid blue again. Moments later, a hologram projection appeared in front of them. Daria had clicked what seemed to be the startup button for this micro device. She and her husband stared at the picture, which materialized into the shape of a cube.

"Now we're in business," Chief said.

"I see the puzzle. How does it work?" Daria inquired. She wanted to help. Maybe her 11th grade English teaching skills could be put to the test. Wordplay and poetry were her strengths.

"Each side helps solve a different side. We have to link the common threads and find the code."

Before Daria could ask about the code, a new monotonous recording started.

"Cat identification 411891."

Chief's phone, which was still connected, accepted this message like an audio password. His phone responded by prompting him to solve the puzzle.

"You have 60 minutes or your first incorrect entry until detonation. Goodbye."

The phone disconnected without further instruction. Chief sat there confused. How would he enter the final code? Meanwhile, Daria scoured the cube for details that looked solvable.

"Look at this," she announced, pointing at a list of short descriptions on one side of the cube.

"Do they make any sense to you?" Chief asked.

Daria shared her theory with him. She was absolutely right, and the rest of the puzzle fell right into place. They now had an answer but no way to enter it into the system. Time ticked away as they searched for an entry pad. Only minutes remained, and Chief's mind went into overdrive.

He had overlooked the obvious. Chief picked up his phone and called back Vigenère. It rang through. The Inspector never setup his voicemail message. He expected an automated operator followed by a message beep. This time, the line stayed silent. Daria looked at Ken, gesturing in confusion.

"I'm not getting the answering machine. Maybe someone picked up?" he responded.

Daria thought about when her computer froze recently. She reached behind the cat's collar strap and pressed the button. The blue light blinked six times and the hologram disappeared. Another recording emerged from the cat, which again served as a verbal command for the phone call.

"Enter Cat 411891 security code..."

The phone screen shifted to the keypad. This was it--one chance. Six digits separated them from freedom. Daria repeated the security code to Chief, who carefully entered the combination.