

Kaleb Duchesneau

Word Count: ????

Jerimiah Ness

HONR 39100-003

11 November 2024

Title

By Kaleb Duchesneau

The faculties that govern reason are, in truth, the least graspable of all human attributes. We perceive them only through the marks they leave upon the world, and it is by their effects, rather than their nature, that we come to know them. As the artist who finds pleasure in the stroke of the brush, so does the thinker revel in the clarity of thought, each deduction a triumph over the chaos of uncertainty. Except, ignorance is *bliss* and intellect is a *burden*. Where one can only drive man to a demise that pains them only physically, the latter leads to unbearable torment by the rapid siege of thoughts running through one's mind. Each idea, a flare arced through the void, leaving a mark before disappearing into the vast expanse of cognition.

There exists a peculiar lament among mothers, a subtle yearning for their children to be endowed with a spark of genius, as though it were an inherent privilege rather than a burden. They envision their children as paragons of intellect, capable of feats beyond the ordinary, yet fail to consider the oppressive weight that such brilliance often carries—an insatiable thirst for perfection, a ceaseless barrage of questions without answers, and the isolation borne of a mind that moves too swiftly for the world to keep pace. For in truth, the 'gifted' are oftentimes shackled by their own gifts, while the common mind, though perceived as ordinary, enjoys the serene privilege of simplicity, untouched by the relentless demands of unquenchable curiosity or the paralyzing burden of endless possibility. It is the average who, in their quiet contentment, may hold the truer freedom, free from the tyrannical expectation to always exceed.

The realm of chess, often known as a field, only fit for genius, is bound to the tormented psyche of those who dare to wander into the abyss. It is a world where the game, deceptively simple to the untrained eye, becomes a deep dark forest where two plus two equals five and the winner is the first to escape. Morphy, Steinitz, Nimzowitsch, and, perhaps most infamous, Bobby Fischer, all succumb to the weight of their own brilliance. Each relentlessly pursued by the ceaseless barrage of thought, a tide leading to madness.

The following account seeks not to bind the mind in such torment, rather to free it from the same torment that those burdened with brilliance are forced to cope with. What will be presented is not the struggle of a tortured intellect, but a narrative too long suppressed, too intricate to escape, yet too burdensome to remain unspoken. The silence has taken root, slowly corroding the ability of reason, until I find myself consumed and straining against the confines of my own thoughts. The story is no longer mine to control. It demands release, lest it swallow what remains of clarity.

Chapter 1

The amber lights of New York flickered through the smudged window of Sharpe's study. Shadows of autumn leaves danced on the wall, stirred by a brisk wind outside, lending a nice rhythm to the quiet room. If not for the occasional ticking of a clock and the deliberate, almost theatrical rustle of my jacket, the room was silent. A worn chessboard rested between us on an amply crafted mahogany table, squares faintly scratched from years of play. Sharpe's hand hovered thoughtfully above his knight, his eyes fixed, unblinking, on the position. I watched with a sly grin, my fingers drumming a steady rhythm on the table's edge.

"You're taking your time, Sharpe. Not thinking of bailing the game so soon, eh?" my voice, carrying my patented unplaceable accent, cut through the silence. I sat back, studying Sharpe as if he were one of the pieces on the board. Me and Sir Jean-Baptiste Sharpe met on our journey for a new life after the war only six years ago. I remember thinking to myself, *a new life for a me, Sir Winston Clement*, as I stared into the waters cascading into a rounded horizon, my pale blue eyes soaking in the sun. I first met Sharpe in the tearoom of aboard the S.S. United States. I saw him sitting near a window studying a chess board all alone.

His appearance was unmistakable, he wore a houndstooth-patterned trench coat, slightly rumpled but fastened securely, with a clear disinterest in looking fashionable. A matching hat sat perched atop his head, with a brim that shadowed his exaggerated features. His face wore an impressive mustache, thick and meticulously groomed, which seemed to twitch with each word spoken. His eyes, sharp and unblinking, wide with the intensity of his gaze. His brows, dark and slightly arched, lent his face a look of perpetual suspicion or curiosity, as if he could never quite believe what he was seeing. I approached and asked for a game, to which he accepted with an honest grin. Ever since me and Sharpe have been acquainted quite closely.

Sharpe let out a quiet laugh as he made his move, sliding his knight forward to queen's bishop five.

"Bailing? Hardly." His tone was smooth, his confidence bordering on insufferable, yet laced with charisma. Even as he spoke, he kept his eyes locked on the board, "You know, Clement, it's strange that someone like you, a self-proclaimed purveyor of all things practical, should find such fascination in a game of mere intellect and strategy." Sharpe finally looked up,

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you had aspirations." Winston's smile didn't falter, though something hardened in his gaze.

"Chess is more than a game," he replied, boldly marching his king's pawn up the board. "It's a test of foresight and resilience. Of learning to read the mind of your opponent. You of all people should be very aware" I said with a forceful gaze.

"Yes, I agree. The games application is endless, if one can only see it in the correct light."

"Precisely, take the Soviets. They have invested quite heavily in the game, holding the World Champion title for the better half of this century, seeing it as more than a classic board game but rather a test of intellectual superiority."

"Yes, yes, though I would be careful speaking about them in such high regard my friend. Sharpe said cautiously.

"My apologies, though the beautiful games that emerge from the Soviet players is something to marvel at. I would fashion to say that the precision on the board of a player, in the likes of Mikhail Tal, would be much like our work, wouldn't you agree?"

The clock struck ten, its chime breaking the tension, Sharpe's study was momentarily filled with its echo. He promptly took the trade in the center and retreated his knight.

"Our work," he repeated, emphasizing the words as if tasting them for the first time.

After immigrating from France, Sharpe began his consulting agency, taking his keen observational skills across the Atlantic. After meeting on our journey, he allowed me to join him, to which I accepted, though I didn't plan on staying this long, but rather wanted to embark on my own and further blend into the American lifestyle. Though over the years I've grown quite fascinated by the unique abilities he possesses. Abilities that I believed were only present in fiction, in characters like Poirot, or even Sherlock himself. Abilities that if I had not witnessed first-hand, I would not believe to be humanly possible. His methods of deduction and observation to piece together mysteries that have gone unsolved by even the most renowned detectives have continued to amaze me.

"Now that is an interesting way to put it, seems you have left your plans of moving on to the wayside?"

“That was before I found out how much of an asset being associated with you would be.” I had no real fondness for Sharpe, he was quite charismatic, but I did find his air of confidence to be, at some times, arrogant and quite difficult to put up with.

“As anyone would, I am quite fascinated aren’t I Win?” Sharpe spoke with a chuckle. Before I could respond, the ring of the telephone pierced through the room. Sharpe’s hand froze over the board, and his expression morphed from interest to a glint of suspicion. He leaned back, casting a wary glance at me before answering the call.

“Yes?” he said curtly,

“Jean-Baptiste Sharpe?” said a familiar voice on the phone,

“Speaking.”

“Good evening it’s Milo Sinclair,”

“Ah yes Milo, how good it is to hear your voice! How are you these days?”

“Ah good, good, yes. Erm listen Jean I think that there’s something that you might want to see down here, if it wouldn’t trouble you too much, I’d fashion it a good idea for you to come to Chicago. Something... peculiar has turned up, and your expertise would be more than welcome.”

Sharpe’s face remained expressionless, though a glint of joy flickered briefly in his eyes. He covered the receiver with his hand and looked at me.

“It appears we’ve been summoned. Chicago.” I raised an eyebrow.

“Chicago eh,” looking down at the ground in thought for a moment

“When shall we depart?”

“Well of course now!” Sharpe said with an air of excitement,

“Excellent, a late-night train, no doubt. . . I do suppose this means our game will remain... unfinished.” Sharpe gave me a thin smile,

“For now. Consider it a draw.” He glanced back at the board before picking up his pocket watch, adjusting the time with a flick of his wrist, and swiftly placing it in his left coat

pouch. His tall, lean figure casting a long shadow over the room, with his trench coat swung around his thin frame as he motioned toward the door.

“Pack lightly, Clement. And bring that notebook of yours.” My eyes lingered on the chessboard a moment before I rose and followed, *been quite some time since an adventure beyond the great city* I thought with the poise of a man in a mission. Outside, the world lay blanketed in fog as we hailed for a cab to the station. The streets were quiet, with an uneasy silence hovering over the city that seemed to sense a storm brewing.

#

We arrived at the train station at 10:53 P.M. and immediately bolted towards the ticket booth.

“Two tickets for 20th Century Limited Chicago!” Sharpe said with urgency.

“Ah yes, would you like tickets for coach or would you like full Pullman Accommodations?”

“Pullman Accommodations? What would be included with that?” Sharpe asked inquiringly

“Well, you see, the Pullman accommodations would be equipped with all the luxuries a discerning traveler could dream of! Take the Roomette, for instance—your own private little haven, just for one, complete with a plush seat that folds right down into a cozy bed. And, oh—”

“We’ll take the coach!” I butted in, noticing that the train would be leaving in only moments. Sharpe shot me a look of disappointment.

“Here you are sirs,” the salesman said while placing the tickets on the counter, “that will be sixty dollars” he motioned for the payment.

“Now hold on,” Sharpe said quite aimlessly. “I wasn’t done hearing about the Pullman accommodations.”

“Sharpe we really haven’t any time for—” Sharpe cut me off,

“Continue your pitch fine sir.” The ticket man hesitated for a moment before continuing

“Of course, along with the plush seat there is also a washbasin, all within arm’s—” Suddenly, the loud whistle of the train began to echo throughout the station. I threw the money at the ticket booth and began to race towards the boarding area. Sharpe, noticing the urgency, quickly followed suit.

We made our way through the isles and found our seats; I placed my stuff in the overhead compartment and took the window seat. Sharpe sat next to me.

“You know our very own wash bin would be quite nice right now” Sharpe remarked snarkily. I ignored him and laid my head against the window slowly drifting asleep.

Chapter 2

We exited the train the next morning, the clock at the station read 7:00 AM. The cool fall breeze was drifting through the streets, Milo Sinclair was there to meet us. He wore a charcoal-gray suit, the fabric well-worn in the elbows, but its sharp cut suggesting a man who cared more about function than fashion.

“Good morning, sirs” Milo grunted with his old accent.

“Milo how good to see you,” Sharpe and Milo shared a solid handshake, as they began catching up.

“How’s the man himself?” Milo turned towards me with a welcoming smile, shaking my hand with a very memorable grip.

“Good, good.” I replied

“Say there’s a diner round the corner that’s open, why don’t we go and find a seat.” Milo led the way to the diner where we found a seat near the window. We ordered some coffee and began sharing the stories filling the gaps from our past meetings.

“Oh Milo, you know New York has grown a tone drearier ever since you left.” Sharpe voiced with a falling tone.

“Ah, yes, my apologies, but family calls.”

“And how is your mother, Milo?”

“Well, she’s seen better days for sure, watching her slowly decay has been eating me up.” Milo was a detective for the NYPD a few years ago and worked very closely with me and Sharpe on multiple cases, but he has since moved to Chicago to better care for his mother.

“She’s a strong woman, and I’m sure she’ll power through.”

“Milo, if there is ever anything we can do, don’t hesitate to call on us. We would be more than thrilled to help an old friend.” Sharpe consoled.

“Why thank you Jean, I can always count on you. Anyway, let’s get on to the reason for your visit. . .” Milo took us to the Binga bank on 3633 South State Street. The building's height seemed almost to defy gravity, with its narrow, elongated windows standing along its upper stories. Its corners were chiseled with intricate lines, carved by the hands of experts, Inside the marble-floored lobby glistened with an ornate chandelier sparkling above. Men in neatly pressed suits and women in tailored dresses walked the floors as if to seem more important that they were.

“There have been some threats cast against the bank, and there seems to be some peculiarities about these threats that tie into your agency.” Milo continued to lead through the bank and to the front desk.

“I’d like to speak to Jesse Binga, tell him its Milo Sinclair.”

“Yes sir,” said the man behind the counter, “and please help yourself to some water.” He pointed to the glass water jug by the counter as he headed to the back office, to which I helped myself. He returned with a tall black man who had an air of quiet authority, the sort cultivated through years of determined labor and unshakable resolve. His expression was composed, with a gaze that was direct, yet kind. A neatly groomed mustache rested above firm, unsmiling lips.

“Milo! Welcome back, and who might these gentleman be --?” The man paused for a moment as he looked at Sharpe “Jean-Baptiste Sharpe?!” He said with a sudden shock in his voice. “What a pleasure! Jesse Binga, at your service.” The man took Sharpe’s hand and shook it very emphatically.

“The pleasures all mine.” Sharpe said with bold charisma. “I hear that there have been some threats against this fine establishment here?”

“Ahh yes right this way” Binga led us down a passage and into his office. “Please sit.” We each took a seat in the fine leather chairs in his office as he began to ruffle through a drawer. “Here it is.” He said as he took a notecard and placed it on his desk. Sharpe picked it up and began to inspect. “We found this hanging on a drawer of one of our safety deposit boxes.”

“I see...” Sharpe looked deeply distressed. He set the card onto the desk as he continued what seemed like searching his mind. I picked it up and to have a look myself. On the front of which was a large ornate ‘M’ stamped into it with gold leaf.



“Mistletoe.” Sharpe said with eminence.

“Mistletoe?” inquired Binga.

“It can’t be...” Sharpe continued to wrap his brain as he paced the room. “I watched the place erupt in flames... how can he be...”

Mistletoe, was Sharpe most formidable opponent. A physicist and veteran of The Great War, equal parts genius and madman. Having only met the man once, his face is still crystal clear in my head. His bald head always shaved meticulously, with the smoothness interrupted by faint scars crisscrossing his scalp. His eyes were unnervingly dark, like the polished black sapphire, reflecting no light and betraying no emotion. His gaunt face was accentuated by sharp

cheekbones and a jaw that seemed perpetually clenched, giving the impression he was always calculating something.

To the community he was a virtuous figure, earning awards in his field of physics and getting his name 'Mistletoe' from the toe he supposedly lost in the war. No one would ever suspect such an upright man. Yet behind the act, he was a mastermind controlling crime figures as pieces on the board. His schemes always spinning just beyond Sharpe's grasp.

Until late one night, an experiment went wrong engulfing the lab in flames in mere seconds. The flames destroyed everything inside, and with Mistletoe being the only one in the building at the time, him as well. Sharpe had been keeping track of his whereabouts and was watching from afar as the building was swallowed by the flames.

"You don't think he's back?" I asked Sharpe with a prodding tone.

"It's not impossible, improbable, but... If Mistletoe lives," Sharpe said, his voice heavy with dread, "then he's more dangerous now than ever." Sharpe paused to collect his thoughts for a moment, "Mr. Binga, would you be able to give us a tour of the vault?"

"Absolutely, right this way." He led us through an elaborate door where there were walls of safety deposit boxes, and at the end of the walls pointing to the large vault door. The vault door was a hulking disc of solid steel, ringed with thick locking bolts and a heavy central hinge. "Here are our basic boxes, where personal valuables are held for our clients. The door there is either guarded or locked tight, with the code being held safe with me." Binga remarked with pride. "And of course we have out top of the line vault door, designed in Belarus and perfected here in America, its top of the line."

"Excellent, what a grand room you keep here Mr. Binga."

"Why thank you Sharpe. Now on top of the most secure vault doors and state of the art locking mechanism, we also have a new Closed Circuit Television, or CCTV, system installed on the inside of the vault. Vericon, the company that's developing these has been using my bank as a testing ground for their new electronics."

"Wow, very nice Mr. Binga. Now humor me for a moment, say I were a thief inside of your state-of-the-art vault. What would I be attempting to erm, confiscate per say?"

"Well Mr. Sharpe I'm not supposed to disclose that information for business reasons. But for you I will say that for a thief in this hypothetical scenario, they would take large monetary leaps. Along with miscellaneous items in our premium safety deposit boxes for clients who have extra care for personal privacy. Though someone getting inside the vault would be almost impossible. With the new time lock mechanism, the code to open the vault will only work during business hours, and the only person who knows the code is me."

“I see, very nice, very nice. Thank you, Mr. Binga, for your time, but since there has been no crime committed, I’m afraid there isn’t much we can do. Though if our suspicions are true, and we are dealing with Mistletoe, then situations can unravel at alarming speeds.”

“Understandably so.” Said Mr. Binga

“I will take what you have given us to work with and try my best to anticipate what may be to come, though in the meantime I would suggest you tighten up security as much as possible.”

“Of course, Mr. Sharpe, though the odds are heavily in my favor.”

We all waved Mr. Binga a farewell as we left the bank

#

Sharpe and I entered our hotel room after the day, and began settling in for the night,

“If Mistletoe has made a return from the grave supposedly it would be quite the development. Eh Jean?”

“I would say, though I do find one thing particularly puzzling.” Sharpe said with a pause.

“And what would that be?”

“Ahh never mind for now, good night, Clem.” I continued to watch Sharpe as he slowly drifted asleep, continuing to work my mind at the possibilities the future holds.

Chapter 3

The sun was barely peeking through the curtains when I woke to the muted rustling of paper and the ticking of the wall clock which read 7:00 A.M. Sharpe, as always, was an early riser, already sitting at the room's modest desk with a cup of black coffee and the morning edition of The Chicago Tribune spread before him. He skimmed the headlines with meticulous attention, his brow furrowing as he read.

"Good morning, Jean," I muttered groggily, rubbing my eyes as I stumbled to the basin to splash water on my face.

"Good morning, Win. You should read this," he said, folding the paper to expose the lead story.

I leaned over, scanning the headline: RUSSIAN SPY NETWORK UNEARTHED IN THE HEART OF AMERICA.

"The man was a client at the none other than Bing Bank, what a crazy world." Sharpe said under his breath. Beneath it, a subhead detailed the capture of a Russian operative right here in Chicago, their list of contacts allegedly leaked from a high-level intelligence breach.

"Not surprising," I said, settling into the chair across from him. "A country that understands the importance of the intellectual high ground would prioritize reconnaissance. It's tactically sound, wouldn't you agree?" Sharpe nodded but offered no comment, his eyes already drifting to another headline.

"Here's something of note, a physics convention at the University of Chicago starts today, distinguished guests from across the globe. Interesting timing?" Sharpe raised an eyebrow. Before I could respond, the telephone rang, its shrill tone cutting through the quiet morning. Sharpe answered it swiftly, his expression darkening as he listened.

"We'll be there immediately," he said before hanging up. Turning to me, he continued, "There's been a break-in at the bank. Guards tranquilized, the vault breached, and not a single alarm triggered. I should've expected this." He grabbed his coat and hat and dashed through the door, I quickly got dressed and followed suit.

#

We arrived at the bank to find a scene of controlled chaos. Uniformed officers were stationed at every entrance, keeping a crowd of onlookers at bay. Inside, Milo was already waiting for us, his face set in a grim expression.

"Morning, gentlemen," Milo greeted us, his tone heavy. "It's bad. All the money is gone. And the guards—" He gestured toward two men slumped in chairs, their pallid faces glistening from the light of the chandelier, "They were found unconscious with tranquilizer darts in their necks."

“Where’s Binga?” Sharpe asked briskly.

“In his office. He’s rattled, as you might imagine.”

We made our way through the bank, past the ornate marble lobby, to the vault room. The massive steel door stood open, its imposing bulk seeming powerless in the face of whatever genius had orchestrated this heist. Sharpe immediately spotted a card lying on the floor near the entrance. He picked it up and examined it. The ornate golden ‘M’ glinted in the overhead lights.

“Mistletoe,” he murmured, with a foreboding tone.

“What’s the play, Jean?” Milo asked.

“Everyone out,” Sharpe commanded, his voice firm. “Except for you, Milo, Clem, and Mr. Binga. I need quiet to think.”

Once the room was cleared, Sharpe addressed us. “A crime scene, gentlemen, is an archive of exhaustive details. Every element here is telling a story, you just have to know how to listen.”

He began his examination, starting with the perimeter. Giving it a walk he began inspecting and testing all the windows and doors.

“Mr. Binga, what was the state of the bank when you arrived this morning?”

“Everything was locked just as I had left it the night before sir.” Sharpe continued the inspection into Mr. Binga’s office

“Your windows as well?”

“Why of course, its been locked for months.” Binga said adequately.

“Did you check it last night?”

“Well , erm... No sir I did not.” Binga replied drearily. Sharpe rattled on the window in Binga’s office, to find it still locked tight. “Interesting,” he muttered. “I was almost certain...” Sharpe moved passed the window and continued his work.

“Other than the three main doors, are there other entrances into the building that I should be aware of?”

“No sir-- Well there is a hatch on the roof, but I’ve had it welded and sealed from the inside because of some leakage problems. The winters can be ”

“I see. What time did you leave the bank last night Mr. Binga?”

“Why 11:00 P.M. sir.”

“Do you normally leave around that time?”

“Well, yes, some nights I leave a bit later but I’m always out by midnight.”

Sharpe paused for a moment as though to think, “I see,” he said in likely fashion. “Mr. Binga you mentioned you had a new CCTV system installed.

“Yes of course! Right this way.” Mr. Binga led us further down the hall into a dark closet where there were bulky computer set up against the back wall. He pressed some buttons and pulled up the footage from last night.

“Incredible.” I said quietly. We all gathered closely to the screen watching intently. The screen showed the inside of the vault door, the array of golden boxes lining the back wall, and the centerpiece of a table filled with bills acting as a focal point. The top corner of the screen was a time stamp reading 1:59. As soon as the clock struck 2:00 the money in the center of the vault suddenly disappeared. We all gasped in unison, and Mr. Binga slammed his pace into the desk.

“This can’t be!” He said filled with distress.

“Calm yourself, Mr. Binga, as long as I’m on the case you haven’t anything to worry about.” Sharpe spoke with a voice of control.

As we continued closer to the vault, Sharpe began a lecture on its complexities.

“A vault door like this isn’t cracked by amateurs. It’s precision work. To bypass the time-lock without breaking anything in the locking mechanism is very puzzling indeed. Let alone crackng the actual vault code would either take someone who already knows the vault and the code, or a mad genius.” Sharpe’s pacing slowed as he stood before the safety deposit boxes. “Somone like Mistletoe would fit this requirement in a sense, though there are two problems,” he said, half to himself. “Mistletoe has no need for anything monetary. If it was him he would be after something technical, such as an invention or some type of intel -something specific.” Sharpe thought for a couple moments before shouting

“Mr. Binga, open the premium boxes. Let’s see what’s missing.” Binga hesitated for a moment but nodded, retrieving the necessary keys. He opened box after box, checking the catalogs to note their contents. Then, he paused, his hand trembling as he held up one particular box. It was empty, except for a for a neat pile of ashes.

Sharpe leaned in, his eyes narrowing. “Well,” he said quietly, “it seems our thief left us another riddle to solve.”

Chapter 4

After the unsettling events at the bank, our minds were preoccupied with theories and unanswered questions. Despite the state of the bank there was still a flicker of excitement as we headed to the physics convention. As we approached the entrance, a large banner reading **"Chicago Annual Physics Symposium: Pioneers of Innovation"** hung proudly over the double doors. Inside, the atmosphere was buzzing with scientists and enthusiasts alike all swarming around the different exhibits and showings.

Booths lined the aisles, each boasting an array of gadgets or demonstrations that put the laws of physics on full display. One station showcased a levitating globe, suspended mid-air through the marvel of magnetic repulsion. Another featured an intricate Rube Goldberg machine, its movements a dance of cause and effect.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Sharpe remarked, his hands resting in his coat pockets as he observed the displays with a casual interest.

"Remarkable," I agreed, my eyes drawn to a pendulum that moved in perfect synchronicity with the vibrations of a tuning fork. "It's a playground for the scientifically inclined." We wove through the sea of people until we reached the main auditorium. Inside, rows of chairs were arranged before a grand stage, where a series of presentations by some of the world's leading physicists was set to begin. Sharpe and I found our seats near the middle of the room, granting us an unobstructed view of the stage.

The presentations commenced with a flourish, even Sharpe, who rarely displayed enthusiasm for public events, appeared somewhat engaged. As the next speaker was announced, a peculiar figure stepped onto the stage whom I immediately recognized. The man was tall and thin, his head fashioning a fresh cut g, though the faint scars were still distinguishable across his forehead, and though he wore a neutral expression, his piercing black eyes seemed to survey the audience with unsettling precision.

I grabbed Sharpe's arm. "Sharpe, look at him! It's him, isn't it? Mistletoe!" Sharpe, however, remained composed, his gaze fixed on the stage.

"Calm yourself, Clem. We've yet to hear him speak, let alone confirm anything."

The figure didn't approach the podium. Instead, he stood silently at the edge of the stage, his presence looming like a shadow. The event's host briefly gestured to him before resuming the introductions, as if the man's role was needless. He remained on the stage for the duration of the segment, never uttering a word, and left just as quietly when the next speaker was called.

My excitement refused to wane. "You saw him, didn't you? Those scars, that look—it *must* be him!" Sharpe leaned back in his chair, seemingly unimpressed.

"Coincidences happen, Clem. Though I can see the resemblance, men with scars aren't as rare as you might think." The convention concluded with thunderous applause as the final speaker left the stage. The crowd began to filter out of the auditorium, but I couldn't shake the nagging suspicion. As we walked back to our lodgings, I continued my attempts to engage Sharpe on the subject.

"It's too much to be a coincidence," I insisted. "The timing, the appearance, and his connection to physics—it all lines up!" Sharpe dismissed my theory with a wave of his hand.

"The mind is a notorious fabricator, Clem. It strings together unrelated events to form a narrative that feels true. Focus on the facts, not conjecture." His nonchalance only stoked my frustration. "You're telling me you're not the least bit curious? That man looked like he stepped straight out of your memories."

Sharpe paused for a moment, then offered a cryptic smile. "Curiosity has its place, my friend, but it's far too early to draw conclusions. For now, rest. Tomorrow may bring clarity."

Back at the hotel, the evening air was thick with unspoken thoughts. As Sharpe settled into bed, I continued to replay the day's events in my mind. His calm wasn't helping.

"Good night, Win," he muttered, his voice low and even.

"Good night, Sharpe," I replied, though sleep felt impossible. As Sharpe's breathing slowed, I stared out the window at the city lights, my thoughts consumed by the figure on the stage and the lingering question of why Sharpe took no interest in it at all?

Chapter 5

We continued our investigation, through the week, Sharpe began a board of all the facts in our hotel room, noting the important facts of the case,

“Winston, have you been keeping everything in that logbook of yours?”

“Yes, very neatly.” I pulled out the notebook and gave it a glance before handing it to him.

Friday:

- Leave from New York at 11:00p

Saturday:

- Arrive in Chicago 8:00a
- Eat Breakfast with Milo 8:30a – 11:00a
- Tour the bank with Milo 11:30a – 2:00p
- Lunch and dinner in the city 3:00p – 7:30p
- Settle in for the night 8:00p

Sunday:

- Breakfast 9:00a
- Call from the bank, rush to scene, investigation 10:00a – 4:00p
- Facts: robbery, seemingly no entrance point, all doors still locked, no alarms triggered, men tranquilized, money taken from vault so motive must be money, calling card with an ornate ‘M’ stamped on it found once again, crime happened through the night
- Physics convention 4:30p – 8:00p
- Back to hotel 9:00p

He gave the notes a puzzled look. “Winston, can you help me to formulate a timeline of the crime?”

“Yes, absolutely” I replied eagerly

“Let’s begin on the night of the crime. We know that Mr. Binga locked everything in the bank up as promised, and left the bank at around 11:00 P.M.”

“Yes.”

“Though he did admit that he didn’t check the window in his office before leaving that night.” Sharpe lingered on the thought for a moment. “So the thief would have entered some time around 2:00 A.M.” Sharpe said with that old certainty of his.

“2:00 A.M.?” I questioned “But the footage showed the Money disappearing at precisely 2:00 A.M. Wouldn’t they need to enter much earlier than that?”

“Yes one could only assume, but take a look at you’re watch and read me the time.” I looked down at my wrist watch, the tiny hands slowly ticking. “12:32.” I murmured

“Yes exactly!”

“Exactly what?”

“It’s not 12:32 but 10:32! Your watch is two hours off.” I sat there staring at him waiting for an explanation. “The night of the robbery was the first Sunday of November, which is daylight savings time. So the clocks get set back one hour. On top of that the travel from New York has put us in the Central Time zone, losing us another hour.”

“I see so what could this have to do with the robbery?.”

“Come on Win, your usually much sharper than this. Think about it.” I sat puzzled for a moment

“Ahhhh, I see. The clocks being set back must have triggered something in the CCTV system, leaving around an hour window at 2:00 A.M.”

“Yes! Precisely.”

“So the man responsible for the crime must have either had prior experience with these systems or, they would have to be smart enough to figure it out.”

“Now you’re getting it Clem,”

“Who would fit those categories?” I said prodigiously

“There are a few people, though it’s usually best to leave suspects out until everything is sorted.” Sharpe retorted. “So here’s what we know, the thief must have entered at 2:00 A.M. perhaps a little earlier to deal with the guards, and cracked the vault within an hour. He then left everything neatly for us to find in the morning.”

“Yes, it makes sense, though how did they get into the bank? Everything was locked the night before and was still locked when we found it.”

“Yes, it continues to puzzle me though my instincts, which are never wrong, continue to lead me to the window. Although it was locked the next morning, there hasn’t been any guarantee that it was locked the night prior. For it to be an entrance point someone would just have to have been at the bank sometime before the heist to unlock it, and find some way to lock it afterwards.”

“Yes, but why not the front or back doors? There’s no way of unlocking or relocking the window from the outside, that is without breaking it of course. Wouldn’t it be much easier to pick one of the door locks and just re-lock it after completing the heist?”

“It would make, yes. But with a heist this clean, no destruction of any kind and just pure meticulous use of vulnerabilities. Our thief, who is so meticulous, would’nt want his heist being fooled by a mouthbreathing hobo.” Sharpe stated with some emotion. “So the window would be the only viable entrance option for our thief.”

“So is now the time where theories are acceptable.” I asked,

“I believe it is Clem, why don’t you start.”

Chapter 6

There was an uneasy air in the room as I began,

“Well, I believe that there are only two viable people to commit this crime,” I began, “The first of which is of course, Mistletoe. Being such an accomplished physicist and having such a high intellect, I don’t think that it is too large a leap to assume he could understand and get around the security system and the, although getting through the vault would be quite difficult, I believe he would have the capabilities. Not to mention the calling cards with the golden ‘M’ stamped into them.”

“And who would the second be?” Sharpe asked with the raise of an eyebrow.

“Well, of course with Mistletoe as a suspect, there arises some problems. As we’ve established the likely entrance would have been the office window. So, it would be probable for Mistletoe to have been able to get into the office and unlocked the window beforehand, but the problem arises with the window being found locked the morning after the heist. So whoever setup the heist would have to have been in the office the next morning to lock it again.”

“Correct.” Sharpe emphasized.

“So the only other person who knows how to open the vault, has the ability to bypass the CCTV system, and was at the crime scene to lock the window once again, would be Mr. Binga himself...” There was a pause in the room as Sharpe sank his head to think.

“I see, I see.” Sharpe muttered “I think your conclusions are sound, but they are lacking in motive. So allow me to add some key details. Mr. Binga would fit a lot of the requirements, but what I couldn’t get around is his motive. Yes you could peg it down to greed, but I don’t find that to be a very reasonable. You see Mr. Binga isn’t a greedy man, he is someone who came out of poverty through hard work, so without further evidence, there is no reasonable motive for him.” Sharpe stood up suddenly and began pacing the room. “Also there would still be a problem with the calling cards that have appeared periodically, you see our thief would either have to be Mistletoe himself, or someone who was aware of his ties to crime. To the public Mistletoe would only appear as a brilliant scientist, so it wouldn’t make any sense for Mr. Binga to attempt to frame someone who we believed to be dead.” I began tapping my foot against the floor.

“Interesting...” I murmured. “What might you be suggesting here?”

“Patience Winston, I do however agree with your conclusion about the window, I think the only possible explanation for the window remaining locked is that our thief must have been at the scene of the crime to lock the window once again.”

“I see, so Mistletoe and Mr. Binga must have been working in cahoots. Perhaps Mistletoe was threatened by whatever was found burnt in the safety deposit box, and used some sort of leverage against Mr. Binga?”

“That theory works if it wasn’t for one problem...” Sharpe raised his hand to his chin and began scratching. “Mistletoe couldn’t have any involvement in this crime whatsoever.” The silence cut through the room like a knife, as an autumn breeze drifted through the window.

“How can you say that with such certainty?”

“I watched him burn with my very eyes.” The tension in the room continued to build. “You see the fire at the laboratory was lit by Mistletoe in an experiment gone bad. I watched the explosion through one of the windows, and I witnessed as he was burned alive at the scene.”

“Erm, well... Who would that leave our thief to be, you don’t mean...?” I said shakily.

“Well unfortunately Win that leaves our dear friend Milo,” Sharpe said with a sigh “I assure you I only follow the facts and this is where they have lead me continually. Milo, was at the scene before and after the heist, giving him the ability to lock the window. Also he would have had the knowledge of our feud with Mistletoe in the past. Perhaps the ornate ‘M’ would be signifying Milo rather than Mistletoe, but this wouldn’t fit Milos character of a caring man, take someone who sees them self as a superior to leave a calling card such as this one.”

I sat in silence of the notion, finding it incredible.

“Never to worry though Clem, I assure you that I’ve solved the case in its entirety.”

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Sharpe walked over and answered it, revealing Milo Sinclair at the door.

“Ahh yes, please come in Milo.” Milo entered the room and found a seat on the couch, inspecting the evidence board that we had put together. The room still silent with an uneasy air filling with his presence.

“Winston, would you happen to recall the position we left unfinished back in New York?”

“With precision.” I replied lightly.

“Well then, bishop captured bishop.” Sharpe torted

“Ah, yes, queen captures bishop.” I replied in point.

“With our current working theory there are still some issues,” Sharpe stated, “The one most prominent problem I have is with the ashes in the safety deposit box,” Milo and I watched him intimately. “The problem lies within the contents of that box, bishop captures kings rook seven.”

“A bold move,” I noted quietly, “how could we know the contents of the safety deposit box Sharpe, Mr. Binga swore an oath” I said grittily before stating my move “King captures bishop.”

“Ah yes, but with some simple slight of hand the logbook was ripe for the taking, telling us that the box belong to an Ivan Antonov, the very spy who was captured right here in the heart of the grand city.” Sharpe’s words lingering in the air “Rook to king’s rook three, check.”

I paused feeling a sense of shock at hearing the name. “King back to king’s knight one.” I muttered shakily.

“I find that coincidence to only be explained with a second thief, along side our primary suspect. Knight to king’s bishop five.”

“And who might that be?” I torted, preparing myself for the worst before belting out my move. “Queen to king’s knight three!”

“Queen to king’s rook five.” Sharpe said calmly,

“Queen takes queen!”

“Knight to king seven, check.”

“King to kings rook two...”

“The name of this conspiracist is Alexei Rybakov (Алексей Рыбаков),” Sharpe turned his back, “Somone who I know intimately, though under the name Sir Winston Clement.” The breeze from the window morphing into a shrieking wind. “Rook takes queen checkmate.”

“Sharpe... I...” The silence lingered, as Sharpe took out one of the calling cards with the golden ‘M’ centered, and slowly rotated it until it morphed into a ‘W’

“double-u for... Winsto-- ” Sharpe let out a gasp of air as I plunged a steel blade into his side.

“Sharpe, it’s been a pleasure” I whispered into his ear.

Milo ends up turning Winston in, and the story ends with a monologue of Milo explaining everything.