

The Game Maker

Inspector Vigenère walked into the dimly lit basement apartment in Washington, D.C. It looked exactly the way an abandoned base of operations should look: bare walls, splotchy concrete floor, and one wire-encased lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

He turned on the box-shaped TV. This wasn't your modern flat screen. Its picture quality was severely compromised by interference. Behind the electric crackles and constant hum, people were cheering and singing gleefully. The sound appeared to be looping, perhaps a recording of some sort – like the beginning of a song.

"Boss, come over here," his assistant, Caesar, said. The inspector shook his head and refocused on the task at hand. Two people had gone missing, and this was his first case since moving from Québec City.

"What did you find?" the inspector asked while investigating the apartment's features: two tables evenly spaced around a worn-in brown leather couch and a minimalist desk setup. The computer had been knocked off the table, screen partly shattered upon contacting the ground.

"This book has a note addressed to someone," said the assistant, pulling a note from the book that was lying on the couch.

"No, don't..." the inspector started. It was too late. The bookmarked page was lost. It came from a copy of Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*. In its mostly black background, two white figures cast bright red shadows on the cover. These details didn't feel coincidental. But the inspector couldn't place why just yet.

"Sorry! It was somewhere near the beginning?" Caesar apologetically handed him the note.

The index card from the book had text on both sides, but neither was easily decipherable. Just as the assistant claimed, the front was clearly a note. The formatting distinguished itself so. The back side seemed more mysterious. There were a bunch of 5-letter groups, but everything was jumbled. Some groups didn't even have vowels. Nothing he needed to solve now, but he needed to stay alert for any clues.

The inspector placed the card in his pocket and wandered toward the first of two tables, which was holding a chess set. Two kings, a queen, a rook, a knight, and five pawns remained on the board. White was in eventual checkmate at B2. It was a strange board position. Maybe the two people played by different rules. He took a picture of the setup just in case his assistant moved the pieces.

The assistant stared blankly at the second table, which carried a cork board with a world map attached. Someone had drawn 5 vertical lines – 4 red and 1 blue – across the map. They appeared to be along certain longitudes. The post-it note stuck to the side of the table confirmed this theory. It read in order: 144.977574, 2.246798, -0.209417, -43.395010, -73.846856.

They both met at the desk to discuss evidence. The computer looked pretty bad. It wouldn't turn on. Their tech department should be able to identify relevant data on the hard drive. The assistant opened the lone drawer. He pulled out the notepad inside. It looked like a story someone was working on, something about two individuals battling for a queen's affection to a familiar tune.

There were three distinct sections outlining bizarre challenges – defeat Princess Pawn at Frogger to show your finesse, outfox the Horse Trainer by your 5th word to show your mental fortitude, and

outrun the elite soldiers in the Castle race to show your physical strength. There was a minus sign denoting that certain times were run downwind.

The inspector continued to investigate the desk, finding small indentations on the underside of the table.

“Give me that flashlight,” he said, pointing at the assistant’s tool belt.

The inspector held the light between his teeth as he brushed his fingers along the surface. Some indentations felt slightly bigger than others, and better yet, they were all organized in two columns of five dot patterns. Except for one indentation, which floated near the edge of the surface. When his hand made contact with it, a strong static shock hit him unexpectedly.

“Whoa,” he exclaimed, “that metal lining packs quite the punch.”

“Boss,” the assistant responded, watching a small cylindrical tube emerge from the top of the desk. There was a hint of desperation in his voice.

“What happened?” The inspector looked closer at the rogue indent.

“There’s a countdown timer set for one hour,” the assistant said, eyes fixed on the green, rapidly changing milliseconds.

Alarmed, the inspector popped up from under the desk. He too was mesmerized by the timer. Were their own lives in danger? Then he saw the yellow button atop the raised tube and nudged the assistant to snap out of his gaze.

They discussed the consequences of pushing this button, contemplating the possibility of an explosion. Unless one left the apartment now, neither of them could get to an exit fast enough. But they also realized that solving the case may require more than one person.

“Can’t have any blood on my hands,” the inspector concluded. He had made up his mind, gesturing up the concrete stair to the street. The assistant obliged with a firm handshake and nod. As he left the apartment, the inspector sent a recording to his precinct email account to protect pictures of the collected evidence.

Then he pressed the button. Nothing happened. He pressed it again. And again. The time kept ticking away. He moved swiftly around the room, searching for clues. That’s when he saw the light sitting on the desk. Its purplish aura didn’t mean anything when he entered the room, but now he had a different thought: why would this room need a UV light?

The inspector picked up the light and shined it at the desk, then the ground, then the nearby wall. Bingo. A block of numbers showed themselves like magic. These bland walls had a secret. Limited by the cord and lack of outlets, he pulled the plug from the wall.

A beeping began. He followed the noise, light in hand, to the opposite wall. Another two lines of indents were circled by a newly illuminated circle. Upon touching it, he got another static shock, and an object emerged from the fake wall socket a couple feet away. It was a cube. On each side, it had references to various clues in the apartment. Underneath the cube, he caught a short message before the outlet retracted into the wall: *The game begins now –GM.*

The beeping stopped, the lightbulb went dark, and the apartment door locked. The inspector, amused, walked over to the timer and pushed the yellow button again. An entry prompt appeared on the computer screen. He got on his hands and knees, typed the username and password in eight keystrokes, and then walked out of the building...