

Security Is Compromised by Shortbread

It was on account of a biscuit that I came to find myself in the middle of the road in the pouring rain.

But let me go back to the beginning.

My human, Sir Archibald, was the Director of MI9, Britain's most secret counterspy agency. His was a shadowy group, far behind the scenes, vastly more secret than MI5, 6, 7, or 8. So secret, in fact, that "MI9" is not even the organization's real name. A vow of absolute silence, to which Sir Archibald was required to swear each year, prevents me from revealing even that. What I can tell you, however, is that the organization we shall call MI9 maintains a constant vigil against spies, thieves, assassins, and other generally bad guys.

On the day that changed my life forever, the British Security Service (the comparatively un-secret MI5) intercepted intelligence that a group of master spies was planning to kidnap the Queen during the Masked New Year's Eve Ball at Buckingham Palace.

Sir Archibald was informed immediately. He mobilized all available personnel to establish a secure perimeter. Meanwhile, he himself would serve personally as a last line of defense, blending in among the Queen's guests with two of his best agents at his side. The trio departed for the palace dressed, appropriately enough, as the Three Musketeers.

Sir Archibald and I were very close, and most days I could be found prowling around MI9 headquarters, a kind of office mascot. A spy's life is a lonely one, and quite often Sir Archibald would bring me along for company in the field as well. But that night, he left me behind in his quarters, a very nice townhouse on a quiet Westminster mews, only a few blocks away from the palace.

"Stay here tonight, cat, and keep an eye on things," Sir Archibald said on his way out the door. He winked. "After all, we don't have a costume for you."

And with a flourish of his musketeer's cape, he was gone.

Now, I am a cat of breeding, and honor demanded that I stay put. Not all cats are honorable, to be sure, but educated cats are schooled to value the Feline Code of Honor above all else.

As the evening wore on, however, I grew more and more agitated. Something was not right.

Sir Archibald had always valued my instincts, and I had never disappointed him. For example, when I jumped on his pillow to wake him in the middle of the night, he knew I was not begging to be let out like a common cat: experience had taught him to be instantly alert, listening for any intruders I had detected. Those same instincts were now telling me that Sir Archibald needed me. I slipped through an open window and into the chill evening air.

The streets of southwest London were nearly deserted, with everyone indoors preparing for the stroke of midnight. In moments, I found myself standing in front of Buckingham Palace.

Having been with Sir Archibald since kittenhood, I had acquired many useful skills, such as the ability to silently infiltrate a gathering of humans. When I slipped through the bars of the palace gates, the four sentries posted there — tall humans in fancy red tunics and ridiculous bearskin hats — did not even glance in my direction.

Obtaining access to the ballroom itself was a simple matter, as I had long ago developed a good rapport with the palace rats. Don't be surprised: even a palace has rats. Rodents of all kinds are easy to intimidate and make valuable informants, and the palace rats were familiar with the back ways and secret passages.

I circulated silently among the costumed guests, looking for suspicious behavior. Nothing seemed to be amiss until I spotted the sleek Siamese and knew mischief was a-paw.

She was curled innocently by the roaring fireplace on a leopard-skin rug. As I drew closer, she yawned and looked at me drowsily through half-lidded eyes of startling blue. Siamese cats are as beautiful as they are intelligent, and their facility with language makes them very popular as companions for master spies.

I followed the lady as she stretched and then headed toward the pastry tables. Even if she was innocent, she was quite captivating and certainly worth a closer look, I reasoned. A most delicious perfume wafted from her well-groomed fur.

When I reached the pastry table, I paused to lick a small dollop of whipped cream that had fallen to the floor, and I lost her in the press of human legs and feet. I sank low to the ground and peered into the

corners just in time to see a slender, black-tipped tail disappear through a door leading to a darkened side chamber. I prowled closer to investigate.

The chamber was temporarily serving as the ballroom's coat closet and was full of elegant overcoats and hats and intriguing-smelling furs. I slipped inside and sniffed the air.

A voice behind me drawled, "And vat's your name, handsome?"

She may have been a Siamese, but the accent was Russian. That tipped me off immediately. But danger and perfumed cats are an intoxicating combination, so I played along. She was half my size, I told myself. I could handle her with both paws stuck to a tree.

I spun around. She was leaning lightly against the door frame, haloed from behind by the ballroom lights.

"The name is Bristlefur. James Edward Bristlefur." I bowed gallantly. "Are you with one of our guests?"

"How very puuurceptive."

She nosed closer, her breath smelling enticingly of salmon. I closed my eyes and felt her whiskers brush against mine.

"Oh, James," she murmured. "It's a pity you have to go, just as things are getting so interesting."

"Go?" I said. "Where am I going?"

And with that, the door to the coatroom smacked me in the nose, and I found myself alone, locked in darkness.

It was not the first time a lady had complicated my life.

Leaping quickly to a low table by the door, I put one eye to the antique keyhole just in time to see the minx saunter into the crowd of humans, twitching her tail back and forth proudly.

It was then that I spotted the two waiters carrying large trays of tasty-looking canapés. *Salmon* canapés. The same flavor I had smelled on the lady's breath. I moved closer, the fur on my back rising.

Peeping out from beneath the waiters' aprons were Uzi compact submachine guns — a favorite among enemy spies!

I had no time to lose.

Extending a long, well-sharpened claw between the door and the doorjamb, I flicked the bolt and pushed hard with my head — a trick I had picked up from watching Sir Archibald in action. The blackguards with the machine guns were inconspicuously working their way around the refreshments toward Her Royal Highness, who was deep in conversation with the boring Prince of Draakenstein.

My low-pitched yowl of warning instantly alerted Sir Archibald and his agents, who drew their swords and tackled the villains as they tried to hide behind a pudding. The Siamese, however, had vanished without a trace.

Needless to say, I had saved the day. Or rather, the evening.

Hours later, after the champagne had been drunk and the guests had gone, Sir Archibald and I retired to his townhouse to enjoy a well-deserved saucer of cream for me and a cup of tea and some of his favorite Scottish biscuits for him.

"Job well done, cat," Sir Archibald said with a tired smile.

Then my first human companion, my dear Sir Archibald, took one bite of a shortbread biscuit, gripped his throat, and pitched over onto the floor.

Dead.

What Happens to Lost Luggage

Now you must understand, our tale has just begun, but I had known Sir Archibald from kittenhood.

I had been raised on the farm of an exclusive cat breeder in the south of France, surrounded by other cats of exceptional promise. Although my mien and markings were unmistakably those of a Bengal, the noblest of cats, I had been found in the woods nearby, a blind newborn, and no one knew my true parentage for certain. I had worked particularly hard to compensate for this, but even so I never quite fit in with the other kittens.

One day, a British spy named Archibald Ash visited the farm, pulling up the long gravel driveway in his bright-red Jaguar C-Type. I knew from the moment I saw the man — and the car — that we were made for each other. Fortunately, he felt the same way, and I was packed off to England.

Training for my first assignment lasted well over a year, for it transpired that Archibald had scouted the entire continent for the perfect cat to provide his cover story for a mission. He was on assignment to track a nefarious international arms dealer known for his stockpile of stolen nukes — and for his hobby of breeding showcats. (And let me note here that although we eventually captured the man and his prize-winning cat collection, his favorite — a six-toed white Persian named Macavity — somehow vanished from his yacht off the coast of Monte Carlo.) The operation exceeded all expectations for success, earning Archibald his knighthood and me an enduring place by his side.

In the years that followed, as Sir Archibald rose quickly through the ranks of MI9, we spent many happy hours together. He took me anywhere a well-behaved, well-bred cat would not be unwelcome — attending formal events, listening in on espionage training sessions, or sitting by his side during tedious all-night stakeouts. Summer evenings would often find us driving through the streets of London or Paris in his open Jag, the wind ruffling my fur as I sat in the passenger seat. In short, I knew Sir Archibald better than any man or cat on Earth, and I was crushed when he died.

In the days following the tragic event, I could not get off the bed in his old townhouse, not even to eat. For you see, I blamed myself. Someone had infiltrated our home while I was out, and the biscuits had been poisoned.

I stared at the biscuit tin, with its cheery painting of a Norwegian fjord, still sitting on Sir Archibald's favorite table in the tea nook at the window. The tin was now empty (the contents having been sent for lab analysis) and was covered with black residue from fingerprint dust. I stared and stared until my eyes could no longer focus, as if by staring I could see through time and space to find Sir Archibald's killer. At last, delirious from grief and hunger (and cross-eyed from staring), I allowed myself to be bundled into a traveling cage by Miss Astrid, Sir Archibald's lovely young secretary.

Sir Archibald had been a bachelor, and a spy has few friends: there was really no other place for me to go. In the days that followed, Miss Astrid nursed me back to health in her small flat near Regent's Park, occasionally dragging me, blinking, into the park for fresh air and exercise.

"The lab rats in Scotland Yard say no fingerprints were found in the townhouse, Master Bristlefur," one of my informants, a local field mouse, told me during one of these outings. "They was professionals, all right."

One evening at home as Miss Astrid was sadly sorting through a box of things from Sir Archibald's office, she gave a loud sneeze. She had been doing a lot of this lately — sneezing, that is. She looked at me, her eyes watering, her nose red.

"Listen, cat" — and here she sneezed again — "I know you can't understand me, but I want you to know that you've made it a lot easier for me to cope with losing Sir Archibald."

If only humans knew just how much we do understand.

"You're such a dear, but — *achoo*." Sneezes always come in threes. "But I'm allergic to you, and I just can't keep you any longer. My sister-in-law in Norway wrote me that she'd love to have a big, beautiful cat like you. I think a little country air would do you good, don't you?"

Norway! Suddenly an image flashed into my head: the biscuits Sir Archibald had eaten that night had *not* been his usual Scottish favorite! The tin I had stared at for so long had been marked "Product of Norway." Someone had switched the biscuits! *Only I, who knew Sir Archibald so well, could possibly have noticed this detail.* And by perfect coincidence, I was being sent to Norway! I would spend a few days at

Miss Astrid's sister-in-law's, getting my bearings, and then I would strike out on my own and bring Sir Archibald's killer to justice.

That night, I slept well for the first time in weeks, dreaming dark dreams of revenge. In the morning, Miss Astrid bundled me into a carrier, and we drove off to Heathrow Airport. My last image of Miss Astrid was of her peering sadly at me, wiping her red eyes, as a cargo handler snapped a baggage tag onto the cage. I looked around just in time to see the needle looming large.

And then everything went dark.

The next thing I knew, I heard a distinctly American voice drawl, "I think this one's dead."

I opened my eyes a squint, and the world swam in and out of focus.

Dimly, I remembered banging around in the carrier for a long, long time and hearing two cats talking in hushed voices. One had a thick Norwegian accent, and the other spoke in low, ominous tones. Vaguely familiar ominous tones.

With a few blinks, my vision grew clearer. I was still in the carrier, only now enormous piles of luggage surrounded me in a cavernous room.

Perhaps I was dead — although this was hardly my idea of cat heaven.

"You dead, cat?" the deep voice asked, and someone gave me a firm poke.

I bit the finger hard, testing my fangs. The man promptly let out a roar.

It seemed I was not dead after all.

However, I soon wished I were. For you see, instead of arriving in Norway, I had somehow been misdirected to Newark Airport.

In New Jersey.

In the United States of America.

Imprisoned without Trial

I was taken to the Humane Society.

Even now, I shudder when I recall my long, horrible weeks of confinement. What had possessed them to call this place humane? First I was tortured: pinned to a stainless-steel table and subjected to innumerable pokes, prods, needles, and tests. Then I was shoved into a tiny paper-lined cage.

I nearly lost my breakfast when a tremendous stench hit my nostrils, but as my stomach was empty, all I could do was retch. More than half the cage was taken up by an enormous lump of mottled, grayish fur that seemed to be the source of the horrible smell. And then as I watched, it opened a pair of eyes! Or not it, *he*. The pile of fur was actually an enormous, overweight, long-haired cat of uncertain pedigree. He must have weighed close to forty pounds.

My cell mate and I stared at each other for what seemed a long time.

Finally, I remembered my manners and extended a paw. "The name is Bristlefur, James Edward Bristlefur," I said.

"Bugsy," he said, scratching at a patch of matted fur he could barely reach because of his bulk. "But everybody calls me Bugsy."

On second thought, I withdrew my paw.

Our cell block contained row upon row of cramped steel cages stacked to the ceiling, full of wretched animals meowing, growling, and hissing at the humans who occasionally walked through. Most cages were shared by two cats, but a good many contained three, and the kittens were crammed together by the dozen.

And I, a well-bred cat of unquestionable taste, packed among them like a peasant.

I may not have known my parentage, but I knew I was a Bengal. Of all the small cats, we Bengal are most closely related to the great barbarian kings of the African plains. The legend is even told among kittens that somewhere in the mountains is a secret kingdom of cats — Catlandia — where the Bengal rule undisputed over all other breeds. Of course this is just a fairy tale, but a well-educated Bengal like myself is traditionally accorded the respect of nobility.

My cell mate, however, did not care one bit about my royal connections. Nor did he care to let me sleep in the nicer part of the cage, closer to the door, where the air was freshest. And so I was obliged to sleep at the back, right up against the cage of Ralph, a pathetic street cat who meowed every five seconds without surcease.

Ruffian.

By the end of my fifth week in captivity, I had fallen into a mindless routine, shuffling from my cage to the exercise yard and back each day. I was growing gaunt and malnourished, and my fur was beginning to fall out from lack of sleep. Worse, every moment I spent stuck in this place allowed Sir Archibald's killer more time to cover his tracks.

"Why the long face, Jimmy?" Bugs asked me one day. "It ain't so bad in here." Seeing my skeptical look, he added, "Hey, you should see some of the families I been with."

One of Bugs's more annoying habits, apart from his personal hygiene, was his refusal to use my proper given name, alternately calling me "Jim," "Jimmy," and "Jimbo."

"Ahh, don't worry, Jimbo. You'll get adopted one of these days. And if you don't like 'em, just lie down by the side of the road and pretend you been hit by a car. I do it all the time."

Nevertheless, try as I might, none of the visiting humans seemed to notice either of us. Perhaps they were driven away by the smell. Finally, late one afternoon, an adult female human came in accompanied by a slender, freckled boy with curly brown hair and an even smaller girl, who was holding a doll and picking her nose.

"Can't we go look at the dogs?" the boy was saying to the larger human, presumably his mother. "I don't want a cat. I want a dog! Cats are stupid."

I blinked. He didn't look like a rocket scientist himself.

"Then we can go home right now," his mother retorted. "I've told you a thousand times, no dogs!"