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On the Tip of a Cat's Tongue  
by Karen Haber  
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"Good evening," the long-haired calico said in a deep, rich voice. "Did  
you have trouble finding us?"

Willem Seaton paused at the door and took in the dark-walled entry  
hall. It was empty save for the black, orange, and mostly white cat seated  
upon a gold tapestry pillow set into a miniature banquette. The light from the  
wall globes caught its eyes for a moment, sparking them with an incandescent  
glow.

"Pardon me?" Seaton said. He was a slender, dark-skinned man of middle  
age and medium height, dressed in unremarkable clothing, accustomed to coming  
and going without the notice of others. He had done many things in his life  
but never before had he talked to a cat.

The calico yawned, showing a rough pink tongue and sharp pointed teeth.  
"Come along." It rose, gave a luxurious stretch, hopped on to the deep red  
oriental carpet which nearly covered the floor, and, tail held high, set off  
down the hall. Seaton followed obediently. The scent of roses hung in the air,  
triggering an urge to sneeze which he immediately throttled.

The hall gave onto a well-appointed office. The walls were covered in a  
glossy red fabric. Four inset red-lacquered bookcases held thick volumes in  
aged leather bindings. A mirrored shelf held a small video kit and a silver  
teapot. Recessed lighting gave the room a warm and welcoming glow.

A leather sofa and chair made a cozy grouping in one corner. Along the  
far wall was a work table heaped with neat piles of papers. And dominating the  
room was a massive wooden desk whose thick, trunk-like legs seemed rooted in  
the thick burgundy carpet. It was very rich, Seaton noted, especially for a  
space colony like Mantuchika.

A pale, white-haired woman clothed in flowing green silk sat at the  
desk. As Seaton drew closer he saw that her entire lower jaw and neck had the  
gleam of plastiflesh. She looked up and blue eyes of startling intensity met  
his. She smiled.

The cat vaulted gracefully onto the desk. "I appreciate your coming on  
short notice," it said.

Belatedly Seaton remembered the story: a cruiser docking error. Three  
passengers killed, five badly hurt. One -- Kembali Val, level two curator  
-- had survived. But her throat, her voice, was gone. The doctors had fitted  
her with prostheses and a cyber-link to the animal -- and new voice -- of  
her choice.

"My situation takes everyone by surprise at first," the cat continued.

"My voice's name is Sebastian. He does not enjoy being petted by strangers. Please sit down."

Green silk whispered as the woman gestured gracefully toward the well-padded wing chair at the side of her desk.

Seaton nodded, uncertain whether to look at Kembali Val or her surrogate voice. To gain time and a bit more composure he flashed his holocard.

"Willem Seaton," Sebastian the cat said. "Private detective. Formerly with the Department of Internal Security, IASA. So you are who you claim to be, at least at first glance."

Seaton leaned toward Ms. Val. "It's rare that I receive a call from someone in your line of work, ma'am."

"Is that so?" said Sebastian. "Well, I wouldn't have called you at all if my employer -- "

"Colonel Westphal."

" -- hadn't insisted. We prefer to handle these matters privately -- in-house -- of course. But Colonel Westphal demanded that I contact you."

"Regarding?"

"Why, the fake, of course."

Seaton's eyebrows rose swiftly as the curator nodded. The Westphal art collection was renowned throughout the Three Systems. While Seaton didn't care much for art -- he could take it or leave it -- he knew that public acknowledgement of an exhibited piece as fake would be extremely damaging. Not to mention embarrassing.

"I see you understand the gravity of the situation. Good. Mr. Seaton, what I'm about to show you must be held in complete secrecy. I am relying upon your personal as well as professional discretion."

"Of course."

"Look at this."

She pressed a panel in her desk. A door sprang open, revealing a faceted black onyx case. She opened it, and a light came on in the lid of the case, illuminating the contents.

A smooth stone oval carved to eggshell thinness at its center sat upon a plump cushion of amber velvet. Although it appeared to be crafted from rock crystal, the object began to cloud and change color as Seaton watched, until it was golden ivory, finely grained, and then a rich umber. Now it was tinged with red, with purple, with grey shading into black. And as the colors changed the oval seemed to rotate upon its cushion. Seaton blinked. The piece was clear as glass once again. It had not moved.

With a queenly and satisfied nod, Kembali Val closed the lid of the case.

"The Bettyl Egg," Sebastian said, a touch of reverence in his smooth basso profundo. "Carved as a gift for the Princess Talum Vera Kaan upon her betrothal to the Ruler of Seti V, Massim Alysia, in the third cycle, vintg deuxieme siecle, old calendar."

"Exquisite," Seaton said.

"Yes, it's quite good for a fake."

Seaton couldn't resist asking, "Are you certain?"

The glare Kembali Val gave him was filled with blue ice.

"Would I have called you here, wasting both your time and mine, if I were not?" Sebastian demanded.

"When did you discover that the Egg was counterfeit?"

"Almost a full cycle ago. Naturally, I was quite careful to check it several times. But the specific gravity is off, the refraction of light -- wrong, all wrong. I've had the piece charted and recharted. It's a good copy. But it is a copy."

"Do you think the original was stolen from the collection?"

Kembali Val reared back stiffly, her nose in the air.

Sebastian fixed his yellow gaze upon Seaton as though personally insulted. "Impossible," he said. "Besides, this is a marvelous piece but

hardly the most valuable in Colonel Westphal's keeping. If a thief could gain entry, why bother with a lesser object?"

"So you think that the fake was part of the original acquisition?"

Kembali Val nodded.

Sebastian began to wash his face noisily. The curator gave him a sharp look and he desisted with a patient air.

"Of course, this all comes at the worst possible moment," the cat said. "We're expecting proofs of the definitive catalog for the Colonel's collection any moment. The orders have been given throughout the Three Systems: every museum and library wants this book. Should I allow it to be published with the error in situ? Or delay printing, costing who knows how much, and risk a lawsuit from the publisher in order to correct the error and remove the plate?"

Seaton felt a bit out of his depth. "What does Colonel Westphal say?" he asked.

"Oh, she's furious. Wants the whole thing aired, villains punished, and hang the cost. But you see..." Sebastian paused and Ms. Val looked away in obvious embarrassment. "This happened during my watch. Although the Colonel holds me blameless she nevertheless wants the issue publicized as a warning to other collectors. But my reputation is at stake here. I approved that piece. In fact, until last cycle, I would have sworn it was good." Tears glittered in her eyes.

"Surely the Colonel doesn't want to hurt you."

"Of course not. That's why you're here."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I want you to investigate Samule Baule. He's the dealer who sold it to us. His home base is on the smallest moon of Ilona, although he keeps a residence here on Mantuchika. I want you to chart the life of Bettyl's Egg from the moment it came into Baule's hands until it entered the Westphal collection nine cycles ago."

Seaton gazed frankly at the curator. "Isn't this kind of outside my area of expertise? I handle espionage, not art fraud."

"But you are a detective, yes? Accustomed to investigating situations where criminal activity is suspected?"

"Of course."

"Good. This qualifies as such. I would much prefer to have someone outside of the art world handle this. Less chance of idle gossip that way. We have a week, Mr. Seaton, before I must notify the publisher."

"Why not go directly to the dealer? If he's reputable..."

"I would prefer an independent -- and private -- investigation before I approach Mr. Baule."

"All right." Hell, Seaton thought. Why not? Might be interesting. "I require partial payment up front."

"I'm aware of your fee structure."

Ms. Val slid an envelope across the polished desktop toward him. Seaton put it in his pocket. He didn't think he should count the credit chips in front of the curator.

"A week. Sebastian will show you out."

The cat jumped down from his perch and, without a backward glance, walked jauntily toward the door.

Seaton nodded and followed. At the door he paused. What was proper etiquette here? "Good night, Ms. Val. And Sebastian."

"Good night."

Was the cat grinning at him as the door closed?

\* \* \* \*

A paper trail. Seaton stared sourly at the screen. Four days and all he had to show for his efforts was a paper trail. Seaton sighed and pressed the off switch.

It hadn't been difficult to find traces of Baule in the IASA records. Seaton still had plenty of friends in the firm and knew he could always do

some looking around on the graveyard shift.

Traces of Baule, yes. There was permit after permit: the man kept the space lanes humming with his import business. But Seaton had been looking for days and he couldn't find one thing to incriminate him. Not one. The dealer was clean or careful, or -- most likely -- both.

As far as Seaton could tell, Baule had never touched the fraudulent Bettyl Egg. There was proof here that he had sold the real thing to Colonel Westphal: the entire sale was documented up the whimwham. But nothing linked Baule to the counterfeit Egg. Nothing. Seaton had checked fingerprints, import permits, licenses, bills of sale, tax records.

And the week was almost up.

Fresh air. Seaton wanted a walk and, maybe, a sandwich. It was 0300. The grey cubicles of the records room were empty, the screens blank. He turned off the lights and shut the door.

Outside, the streets were quiet, the streetlamps haloed by green mist. Even the street mechs had finished sweeping and shut down for the night. But the Red Demon was still open. The place stank of sour beer and old grease, and Mara was fixing drinks. Seaton nodded at her and took a wobbly stool at the bar.

"Seaton," Mara said. "It's been a while. How's the private sector treating you?"

"Can't complain."

"Especially with a government pension." She gave him a crooked smile and brushed her dark red hair out of her eyes. "What'll you have?"

"A beer. What's on tap?"

"This late? Nothing."

"A bottle of Blue Jack, then. And a choba roll."

"You haven't changed."

"Why should I? Perfection is good enough for me."

Mara rolled her eyes and went to fetch his order.

The bar was empty save for one drunk drowsing in a booth near the door, and two antennaed Socorrans muttering together at a small table.

The door slid open and in walked a bald man with a trim grey beard and large bulbous nose. His face lit up when he saw Seaton.

"Sergeant! How are you?"

"Retired, Lempir. You know that."

Mara returned with a full plate, a frosty blue bottle, and a glass. "It must be old home week tonight," she said. "Lempir, I thought you were in jail."

"Got out," he said proudly. "And now I've got a permit, an actual resale license. Totally legit."

Mara gave him a fishy look. "I'll bet."

"They're licensing fences now?" Seaton paused, his sandwich halfway to his mouth. "I see I got out of the business at just the right time."

"No, seriously, serg -- uh -- Seaton. I'm a trader. Antiques and jewelry, mostly." Lempir sidled up and took the seat next to the detective. "Hey, get a look at some of my stuff."

"I'm not in the market."

"C'mon. You'll love 'em. It won't take but a minute. You can spare a minute."

"As long as I can eat while I look."

Lempir pulled a bolt of fabric out of his pocket, unfolded it, and began unrolling it down the bar. Its underside was covered with transparent pouches and pockets from which peeped coins, gems, and pieces of jewelry. "I love this," Lempir said, shaking his head. "So much easier. I should have done this years ago."

"You may be the only man who went straight in the Mantuchika jail," Seaton said, between bites.

"Anything catch your eye? I've got some very nice pieces, very affordable. Maybe you've got a lady you'd like to impress? No? How about

something for yourself? I like you, Seaton. I'll give you a good price. Go on, try this ring."

"I don't want -- "

"Perfect fit. How about that?"

Mouth full, Seaton stared at the ring. It was made of thick gold, encrusted with stones cut so that they glimmered like a crystalline mosaic. He swallowed. "I don't wear jewelry."

"A man of your age and stature wants to make a statement -- "

"Not this one." Seaton unscrewed the ring and handed it back.

"Hey, it's from a very prominent dealer who let it go for a pittance. Take a look at the inscription." Lempir shoved it in front of Seaton's nose.

Inside the ring in spidery letters were the words, "Sam from Luba. With love. 33829."

Seaton froze.

Luba was Colonel Westphal's first name. And the inscription was recent. His hand closed over the ring. "How much do you want?"

Lempir beamed. "For you? One hundred and fifty credits."

"I'll give you seventy-five. Take it or leave it."

"Sold."

"Now tell me who you got it from."

"I can't reveal sources, Seaton."

The detective shook a handful of credits as though they were dice.

"What if I throw in a tip?"

"How much?"

"Twenty-five credits."

Lempir held out his hand and Seaton gave him the money. "I told you, a big dealer. He just got married, again. Sam Baule."

Something gnawed at Seaton's intuition with sharp little teeth. He patted Lempir on the shoulder and tossed a couple of credits on the bar. "Lots of luck with your new business, Lempir. Mara, keep the change."

He was out the door, retracing his steps to the records room, rattling the ring around in his hand. So Westphal and Baule had had an affair. What else could this ring mean? And why not? It happened. More than one rich woman had been seduced by an unscrupulous dealer seeking bigger sales.

But Baule had just gotten married again. And unloaded the ring. End of that love story. And the beginning of a hunch.

On the third scroll through the import permits, Seaton noticed something odd about one of Baule's import permits, something he hadn't picked up on before. The first name on the permit wasn't Samule. It was Elisheva.

A quick search of the population database for the Three Systems revealed that Elisheva Baule, b. 3257. d.3340, had been Samule Baule's mother. But the date of the entry permit bearing her name was almost nine cycles ago, long after her death.

Why had Baule secured an import permit in his dead mother's name? But something else was screwy here. The address. That wasn't Baule's keep on Ilona. Not at all. In fact, it was the location of the Westphal collection on Mantuchika.

Seaton scrolled down through the permit. Whatever Baule had brought in, it was much more than one small fake crystal ovoid. The weight was for several tons. Sculpture.

The date of the permit was twelve cycles past, right around the time that a bunch of military-grade weaponry and hardware had flooded the market in this sector. Seaton stared at the permit suspiciously. Substitute guns for sculpture and the weight would be about right.

He made a copy of the permit. At least it was one lead to follow up.

The next permit, for seven carved mursani skulls, looked legitimate. So did the one after that, for half a pound of uncut Gower gems. But the one that followed set Seaton's heart to peculiar hammering. There was something odd about the signature again: the slant of the L, the case of the E.

Seaton split the screen and brought up one of Colonel Westphal's import

permits. He was no expert on handwriting but it sure looked as though the good Colonel had forged her former lover's signature here. And look, the weight of the object, a few ounces, small enough to be the fake Bettyl Egg. Port of Origin: Colfax. A colony known for its ability to reproduce almost anything from credit chips to space cruisers. Their carvers were famous throughout the Three Systems.

Had the Colonel ordered a copy of the Bettyl Egg and brought it in herself? But why? And why substitute it for the real thing? Seaton had heard of rich people copying their jewelry, wearing the fakes, and keeping the real thing in the vault. But this was different. And disturbing.

Seaton copied the permit and shut down for the night. He had found the villain. Now all he needed were some motives.

\* \* \* \*

He slept for a few hours and awoke feeling curiously clear -- headed. As early as he dared he put in a call to Sebastian and Kembali Val.

"Mr. Seaton, I'm so glad you called." Sebastian's voice sounded almost gleeful.

"Has something happened?" he asked quickly.

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, I won't require your services any longer."

"What?"

"You see, I've found the Bettyl Egg. The real one."

"You have?"

"Yes, it turned up while I was inventorying the rest of the collection. It had been misplaced. In fact, it was completely hidden beneath two other artifacts. I can't imagine how it got there. It's just luck that I found it."

Seaton couldn't quite process all she was telling him. "I don't understand. What about the fake?"

"Oh. That's no longer a problem."

"Have you told talked to the Colonel yet?"

"I just left a message for her. She'll be thrilled."

"But you haven't spoken to her since you found the real Egg?"

"No. She usually calls me at ten."

"Good, we've got fifteen minutes. I'll be right over."

"But -- "

Seaton cut the line. He wanted to be standing next to Kembali Val when Colonel Westphal called. He was sure it would be an interesting conversation.

Sebastian was waiting for him at the door. His tail made lazy question marks, left to right, right to left.

"There was really no need for you to come -- "

"You might change your mind about that," Seaton said. "Once you've talked to the Colonel."

Ten o'clock came and passed.

Seaton, Sebastian, and Kembali Val stared at one another.

"She's usually as punctual as a clock," Sebastian said. "I don't understand it. She must have received my message by now. She always checks her e-mail, first thing."

"I'm sure she'll get in touch," Seaton said. He settled into the chair by the desk.

Neither Seaton nor Kembali Val heard the door open or someone come in. But Sebastian pricked up his ears and Seaton, noting the cat's fixed gaze, turned quickly.

Colonel Westphal stood in the doorway, slender and trim in her green and gold uniform. Her brown hair was pulled back off her face and her dark eyes glittered with some violent emotion.

"So you found the real egg, Kembali." Her voice was low, almost a whisper, and ragged with anger. "Congratulations. Now lose it."

"Colonel ... I don't understand."

"What's difficult about it? I'm telling you I don't want the real Bettyl Egg to see the light of day. Why were you snooping around, anyway? Couldn't you leave it alone? Why didn't you do as you were told?"

"I beg your pardon?" Both Sebastian and Kembali Val seemed flabbergasted.

"Excuse me," Seaton said. "Colonel, I'd like to talk to you."

"Who are you?" The Colonel's gaze flickered over Seaton and back to the curator. "What's he doing here?"

"Willem Seaton. I hired him to investigate Samuel Baule. As you instructed."

"Oh." Colonel Westphal regarded him with a guarded expression. Obviously, she was regrouping. "Well," she said. "As you can see, Mr. Seaton, we no longer need you. Kembali, pay him for his time and let him go."

"Forgive me, Colonel," Seaton said quickly. "I couldn't help gathering the impression that you want it thought that the Bettyl Egg in your collection is nothing but a clever fake. Why?"

"None of this concerns you."

"Perhaps. But I've come across some peculiar information concerning you and Mr. Baule..."

"I have nothing to do with Mr. Baule and nothing about his interests me."

Her protest merely confirmed Seaton's suspicions.

"No? Then why did you forge his signature on the entry permit for the fake egg?"

Westphal stared at him. "Aren't you making some dangerous accusations here?"

Seaton decided to crawl out even further out on the limb. "I'm not accusing you, Colonel. I'm stating fact and you know it."

"Baule sold me the fake Egg. His license should be revoked!"

"There's no proof of that. Especially now."

Westphal's mouth shifted convulsively. Her hand came up and there was a sonic disruptor in her hand. "Especially now," she repeated. "I didn't think you would find anything, Seaton. But you were better than I'd suspected. Still, it would all have gone as planned if Kembali hadn't found the real Egg. I should have taken more precautions."

"\_You\_ hid it?" Sebastian said. "You bought the fake and substituted it for the real thing? Why?"

The curator's eyes had gone wide, almost glassy.

"How else could I ruin Samule Baule?" Westphal demanded. "That miserable bastard. Eloping with a student after all I'd done for him! I planned this so carefully. Everything was nearly in place. But I can still do it, as long as you both keep quiet."

"I'm sorry," Seaton said.

"I'll pay you well."

Even Sebastian was staring at Westphal, fascinated. "I'd be committing professional suicide," he said.

"If you don't take my offer it will amount to the same thing, more or less."

"Colonel Westphal, you're obviously not yourself. Let me call a doctor..."

Westphal held up the disruptor and aimed it at Kembali Val. Her fingers tightened on the trigger.

"No!" Seaton made a desperate grab, but he was too late. Sebastian had gotten there ahead of him.

Yowling, hissing, and biting for all he was worth, Sebastian jumped on Colonel Westphal.

The disruptor went off, blowing a hole in the fine red wall above the sofa.

The Colonel and Sebastian went down, rolling over and over on the deep burgundy rug.

Colonel Westphal tried to club the cat with her weapon. Kembali Val got in her way, grabbing hold of the disruptor and wrestling it away from her employer.

Seaton forced his way into the tangle of cat, curator, and Colonel, getting bitten and kicked as he tried to separate them.

Sebastian hissed and slinked away under the couch. Kembali Val stood up, patted her hair back into place, and put the disruptor down on her desk. Colonel Westphal sat quietly, a vacant look in her eyes.

"Colonel?" Seaton said.

There was no answer.

He snapped his fingers. The Colonel blinked slowly.

"Kembali," he said. "Call the police. I think she's gone catatonic on us."

The curator stepped in front of him and pointed helplessly at her throat.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot. I guess Sebastian doesn't feel like talking either. Hell, dial the number and give me the phone."

\* \* \* \*

The police had come and gone, taking Colonel Westphal with them. The Bettyl Egg -- the real one -- was back in place. Seaton, Sebastian, and Kembali Val were saying their farewells.

"Thank you, Mr. Seaton," said Sebastian. "This may not have been in your line but you did a fine job nonetheless."

"I'm not finished," Seaton said. "I've still got a hunch about Samule Baule and some peculiar shipments of his. It may be that Mr. Baule and the Colonel were involved in importing more than fine art objects."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Weapons smuggling, for a start."

"What?" Kembali Val looked as though she might laugh, or cry. Sebastian looked puzzled.

"The Colonel had access to the munitions sources. Baule had the transport connections."

"But why would they do such a thing?"

"I don't know. For the money, maybe." Seaton shrugged. "We'll see."

"I still can't quite believe that Colonel Westphal forged Baule's signature on the import license for the fake Egg, infiltrated it into her collection, removed the real piece, and pointed the finger at Baule. All of this just to ruin him."

"Love," Seaton said, as though it were an explanation. "I'm sorry, Ms. Val. I guess you're out of a job. The Colonel will probably sell her collection to pay for her lawyers' fees."

"Not necessarily," said the cat. "But if so, I'll try to follow the collection. I've put in too much time with it now to abandon it to some callow new collector."

Seaton chuckled. "Good luck. And good luck to you, too, Sebastian."

Sebastian looked as though he might answer personally. He blinked. He sniffed. Then he sat down and began a thorough cleaning of his hindquarters.

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