

The Bargain

The exhibition hall was packed with people jostling for space in the poorly-ventilated gallery. Tourists and curious visitors surrounded the displays and worked themselves into an organized queue from start to finish. The Museum of Art's touring exhibit was a sell-out, with the museum bringing their most famous sculptures, including replicas of larger-than-life statues from Athens. The statues were portraits of royalty, of gods to be honored and worshipped, that deserved the adoration people lavished on them. The models gave off an air of pride, almost aloofness. It was as if they could stare down their chiseled noses with their colourless eyes, and sniff, with disdain, at the commoners that stood in awe at them. The white of their skins seemed iridescent, glowing under the bright lights, vanquishing any guesses that they might be only mortals. The Grecian figures basked in the light of camera flashes, as the public sought to preserve the image of a god, as if trying to take some of their aura home with them.

"Showcasing their work instead of mine? The audacity!" Arthur Brown thought and cursed under his breath. It was a privilege, no, a right that he and his associates should be there to put the museum authorities in their places. It was he who had worked to submit application after application for his works to be showcased to the world, and now the museum would not let him have even the crust off the pie, only to give it to other artisans whose work paled in comparison to his. He deserved the credit, or at least given an opportunity for one of his pieces to see the world, not a thank-you note that meant nothing, nothing at all to the hours that he put in. Loyalty did not mean anything to the young directors these days. They thought they knew everything, what with all their certificates and qualifications, but experience was priceless, but the yuppies assumed that anything could be obtained with enough cash. They would not see it coming, not expecting Arthur to trail them all the way to Spain, or that his revenge would run so deep. He planned to go on vacation for a while, after seeking revenge, with his money in offshore banks, of course. The English authorities had no jurisdiction there, and exposure of his work with his competitors far away would not hurt.

Arthur was wedged between two bickering families in what he thought to be a giant Congo line. Hordes of people swarmed the exhibition, making it difficult for one to admire the art pieces at a leisurely pace. It was a huge contrast to the calm, peaceful galleries in London, where no more than three or four people were in the room at a time. One could hear one's footsteps while strolling through the halls, and the few voices there were echoing off the walls. The families that risked a visit, in an attempt to expose their offspring to the wonders of art, were gone fairly soon, overestimating their children's ability to keep their mouths shut. Bringing art to the masses was a huge mistake, Arthur had decided, making art seem crude and just objects to be ogled at, with the inexperienced public staring at statues like they had never seen anything like them before. The majority appreciated the sculptures only at face value, proceeding afterwards into the gift shop, where they bought key rings and glossy postcards to show off to acquaintances that they were citizens of high society who

knew, and understood the culture of ancient and modern art. There were only a select few from the crowd who could properly appreciate the art, read into its depths and see what the artisans saw and feel what they felt when it was being made. Experienced eyes and minds could share their thoughts and opinions in the quiet galleries, and gain new perspectives, or fresh insights from each other.

That was one of the most critical stands Arthur made on the board- while he was still on it. David Pole had the title of principal sculptor instead, snatching it rudely from him when it was obviously his. Arthur had more credentials than David did, and his pieces were more than worthy to be shown to the world. David had probably rigged the discussion, knowing how passionate Arthur could get on who was to see the art, once it was put together.

Nicking David's statuettes was an easy choice. His miniature art looked more like play dough than priceless figurines and slipping them into his pocket undetected would be a cinch. Arthur closed in for the steal, motioning for his appropriately placed assistants to be on their guards. The assistants blocked the security cameras and distracted anyone who seemed to be interested in what Arthur was doing. The highlights of the exhibition were the Greek statues, with visitors favorably focusing their attention onto large, detailed models instead of insignificant modern art. Security was centered on the ancient figures, and David's statuettes did not even have a glass case, but merely a cordoned-off area.

With damp palms, he joined the queue nearing the glass case, and had second thoughts about continuing with the heist. Was it worthwhile to get what he wanted in this underhanded manner? What about the stain on his career, and if the police managed to find him, his criminal record? But there was no time for hesitation now. He was too close to getting back at them, and if he missed this chance, it was not likely there would be another. It was not difficult to get close to the display with many bodies pressing against the exhibits, everyone craning their heads to take a look. As Arthur tried to steady his trembling fingers, he slipped a copy of the figurine out of his pocket and switched it with David's. He had practiced too many times at home to make a mistake, and at this critical moment, nothing could be worse than someone finding out it ever happened. He tried to look confidently around, mimicking the visitors, and he was sure of himself inside, now that it was over and he didn't have to do it again. Arthur reminded himself of the holiday he had planned in Waikiki, lounging at the beach and sipping a margarita in the shade of a palm tree. This had its intended effect of making him less conspicuous and more relaxed, blending in with the crowd. The deal was done, the bargain sealed, and Arthur was free, with his passport in his pocket and a briefcase of cash waiting in the car.

However, Arthur had found himself frozen and almost nailed to the ground and unable to walk free. It was probably the nerves and pins and needles, he guessed, earnestly attempting to wiggle his toes. There was also something wrong: he was at least a hundred meters away from David's display case, and was looking over the sea of people, not among them. Maybe all the excitement had put him into a temporary daze, but his fingers could not move an inch. Arthur was mute, unblinking, standing in the midst of camera flashes, with his two thousand year old face set permanently in

stone.