

Tennis was tough. I didn't join the club under any illusions about my prowess in other things coming to my rescue, but even with that in mind, I was getting completely dismantled by the more experienced members. My hand-eye coordination and fitness were both excellent – but sending the ball where you wanted it was not something one could intuit. The points that my opponents scored came almost entirely via my returns landing outside of the lines.

Not that my lack of tennis skill mattered to the girls surrounding the court. Maria Walston-Carter could make an amateur tennis match a must-see event. Every time I sent the ball astray, the girls cried out in protest, or gasped at the sight of a bead of sweat leaving my body. Lance, who was acting as our umpire, was not going to be swayed by their protests.

The match came to an anti-climatic end as my opponent won on another misplaced swing. The girls continued to act as if I was the victor, even when I crossed over the net and shook their hand. Lance shooed away the audience in his usual soft tone of voice.

“Everyone, please don't spend the whole period watching Maria. We have to practice for the regionals!” There were some groans of discontent, but they complied and scattered to the four ends of the courts so that they could start their own matches.

I walked over to the bleachers and grabbed a towel to dry the sweat from my face. Lance was in hot pursuit to speak with me about my first day as a member of the society. While he would never say to my face that he was happy about all the attention I brought, the expression he was making told me all I needed to know. The tennis society was the hottest ticket around now that my membership was well-known.

“You're a fast learner, Maria.”

“I pride myself on listening closely. Thank you for your assistance. It is very gracious of you.”

“I do the same for every new member of the society. During my first year, the society's president took me under his wing and showed me everything there was to

know. I try to lead by example and extend the same experience to all of our members.”

Lance was notable as the youngest president in the academy. Usually that position was handed down to the second-most senior member upon the president’s graduation, though there were no specific rules holding them to that standard. All you needed was a nomination from the president and enough votes of confidence from the others. Lance must have ingratiated himself to the rest of the club during his first year. The direction he was taking the society was popular, and the idea of having a continuation of the previous leadership regime was appealing.

There was a small pang of guilt inside me about misleading Lance to get close to Carides Franzheim. Lance was a good kid, as far as I knew. But how many people came and went from the society on a regular basis? He’d probably forget all about me if I chose to leave in a few weeks. Ultimately – it was better for everyone if this issue was nipped in the bud. The benefits outweighed stringing Lance along for a while.

As for how joining the society would allow me to find Carides, that was a matter that required flexibility. A normal person would imagine that simply knowing someone or being in the same social circle as them wasn’t good enough to get close to their family. The reality was that the world could be a small place if you tried hard enough. An invite to a party hosted by the family was what I had in mind.

Nobles *loved* throwing parties for everything and anything; Marriage, quarterly profit reports, the birth of a child, them coming of age, new windows being installed into their manor. These were just a small handful of the motivations I’d heard over the years. Spend enough time in the proximity of a noble and the invitation would come in due course. What else would they use their gigantic homes for if not for hosting parties every two minutes?

With that said, the Escobarus affair meant that the proliferation of pesky parties had been slowed significantly. A lot of the students were worried about being targeted in a similar plot, a stunning display of false empathy for Felipe. They wished they were important enough to have their lives threatened. Calling off an engagement made them feel big.

I sighed dramatically, “I must improve my control. I can hardly hope to compete while sending the ball outside of the line in every rally.”

“That is always the area where the new members struggle the most. It’s also the point where we see whether they have the patience to continue. I’ve seen no less than ten applicants quit after becoming frustrated with it, and my senior claimed to have had a hundred come and go for the same reason.”

He was aiming to end his tenure as president with less quitters on his record, but if he stuck with the job, he was going to be in charge for four or five years. The odds were stacked against him. I returned my racquet to the bag and left it on the cart they used to move equipment to and from the courts.

“Are you interested in coming with us for the regional tournament? We still have a few free spaces for people who are interested. I think it will be a good experience, even for someone new to the sport.”

“The regionals? That’s very impressive.”

“There’s still a huge gap between the best student players and the professionals, but the academy has been a consistent presence in these tournaments for years. We have four members who’ve successfully qualified.”

“Including you?”

He chuckled, “I’m afraid not. I’m rather ashamed to say – but I was falling behind in my studies, so I focused my efforts on catching up. Tennis is fun, but I can’t neglect the more tedious parts of attending the academy. I’ll leave it to the others this time.”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of. There is only so much time in the day. I would have thought that an outing to the tournament would be booked out already.”

“We have a large number of seats available. There are no other events booked for that weekend, so all of the academy’s carriages are open to transport us there and back.”

Lance escorted me back to the centre court. A fierce practice match was underway between two of those male tournament contenders. I was unfamiliar with their names and faces, as they were from the fourth year.

“Lady Maria is so beautiful in her tennis clothes!” one of the girls gushed from behind us.

“Do they always do that?” Lance inquired under his breath.

“Yes. Every day.”

“And you told them to stop it?”

“Yes. Every day.”

“I don’t know if I could handle getting that much attention...”

A shame. The Walston-Carter fanclub was always looking for applicants.

We wrapped up the morning session and transported the equipment back to the sheds for storage. Samantha was waiting for me by the doors, having woken up and dropped by to see how things were going.

“Did you have fun?”

“It was entertaining enough. Lance invited me to the regional tournament that’s being hosted in the city.”

“A date!”

“Hardly. I don’t see much of a reason to go at the moment besides ingratiating myself with him and the other members. How is your society hunt going?”

“Hm. I dropped by the theatre society’s rehearsal and spoke with some of them, and they’d be happy to have a bigger girl to play certain roles. Am I really that big?”

“For a girl our age – yes.”

This was the second time Samantha had expressed incredulity about the topic. What the hell were they feeding the kids in her hometown so that she believed that her height was the norm? Mystical creatures were a real thing in this world, but a town filled with giants was still an unlikely discovery.

“Well, I hardly went to spend my halcyon years playing monsters. I’d rather have a spot as the leading lady.”

“I never took you for a romantic.”

Samantha clasped her hands together and spun on the ball of her foot, “Every girl dreams of being whisked away by a handsome, wealthy prince.”

“I don’t.”

“Don’t be a party pooper. You don’t have to worry about that sort of thing anyway. You must have the pick of the lot. Plain girls like me have to work hard!”

“Plain,” I repeated sardonically, “Plain. Plain.”

Samantha became increasingly embarrassed each time I repeated the word. She finally had enough on my fifth repetition, holding out her hands and attempting to silence me.

“Okay! I get it. I’m being too hard on myself. Please stop saying that.”

Samantha didn’t line up with the societal expectations about what a beautiful girl looked like, but makeup would allow her to fool even the pickiest noble. Aside from her sun-kissed complexion, everything else about her was perfectly suited to fit her spot as the protagonist. Pretty - but not in a way that precluded her from being bullied about the way she looked.

Her reaction tickled my funny bone, so her exasperation only grew when I broke out into my characteristic laughter in response. Hopefully it would make her think twice about being so pessimistic about herself in the future.

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Cordia was worried about what Lady Franzheim would say about proceedings. If there was one thing she liked, it was for her private affairs to be kept private. She stringently kept a lock and key on all essential information entering and leaving the estate. Servants and aides who trafficked rumours were summarily dismissed and blacklisted from the industry. Not even the servant’s union could stop her from doing so. Hopefully the presentation of the beige folder she sought would pave over those cracks.

“You were cutting it dreadfully close, Cordia. The deadline is not there for the sake of pressuring you. Our timeline will be forced to shift if we delay any further.”

“I share in your concerns, Lady Franzheim. I made every effort to secure these documents in a timely manner - but Caius presented me with a falsified list. I used our leverage to ‘encourage’ him to return to the house and do it again.”

“He’s compromised,” Carides snapped, “Where did he get that fake list?”

“The names on it were accurate. I can only assume that the Social Democrats were trying to prevent leaks by placing decoys in important places.”

“What did you say to him once he gave you these?” she asked, holding the real articles in one hand.

“I did not see him.”

“I told you to get rid of him once the delivery was made.”

Cordia bowed her head apologetically, “He successfully retrieved the documents on his second try. I’m afraid that he placed them beneath my apartment door while I was away.”

She was unsure of how to describe it. It was both a pleasant and unpleasant surprise. Caius struck her as the unreliable type, and his attempts to deceive her during their last meeting were plain as day. A simple threat towards his critically-ill sister was enough to grease the wheels. His decision not to meet her face-to-face was a wise one, though it did not prevent it from being a source of frustration. Were those threats a step too far?

It was no good ruminating over what may have been. There was no way for her to go back and approach things differently now.

“Cordia, I trust your opinion on these matters – do you believe that he will be an issue for us in the future?”

“He is too craven to stand against us directly. A thief like him was perfect for our purposes. Skilled enough to do what we ask, but too cowardly to take any unneeded action.”

Cordia did not report to her employer about the mysterious woman who held her at gunpoint after that meeting. Her loyalty only went so far as to do what was demanded and nothing more. She knew what the reaction would be from the other plotters if they believed her to be compromised. A great many faces came and went without a word as to why.

“I want to know if we must sever him.”

Cordia shook her head, “I’m afraid that that may not be possible. Caius delivered the documents on the final day before our deadline, but didn’t remain here to receive his payment. I suspect that he is already seeking to relocate himself outside of the city. Chasing him would be a great effort for little benefit.”

Carides sighed, “You understand that if that information leaks to the authorities – we will all suffer the consequences? We have made it this far by preventing traitors from revealing such intelligence to the police.”

“I apologise, my Lady. It was my decision which led to this situation.”

Carides shuffled through the pages of the party list, “I suppose that having these documents is preferable to not possessing them at all, but I would like to see him dealt with. I do not expect to request your services for another matter in the near future, and it is better to be safe than sorry.”

Cordia hid her frustration behind an impassive mask, “If that is what you desire. I will make arrangements to locate and eliminate Caius. Is there anything else?”

“That is all. Thank you for your efforts, Cordia. We’re one step closer to realising our dream.”

Cordia bowed and left the study with a turnabout scowl. She would not forgive Caius for making a fool of her. Him neglecting to get his payment for the work was an unplanned variable. She would not make the same mistake again. Luckily – all of the pieces were already in place.

She just had to give them the word.

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Caius understood the risks that came with being close to Alice while her operation was underway. He was of two minds about what to do. He couldn't leave her side in the first few days after her operation with confidence. It was possible that her status would take a sudden turn for the worse.

But *they* knew that she was his sister.

The Doctor recommended that she spend a week on the ward to recovery fully. There were deep cuts into her chest where the invasive procedure was performed. They could become infested and rotten with blight if proper care wasn't taken. Caius had no intention of spending any more time on the ward than he had to. He was calculating the risks. Alice would be in danger if he kept her there.

Caius was renting a room in the nearby village to occupy while he waited. He stayed there for three days before the operation while keeping a low profile, and only emerged once the procedure was complete. He tucked a knife into his jacket for safety, and tried to conceal his face using a pair of fake spectacles and a trilby.

The walk to the sanatorium was foreboding for a variety of reasons. Alice's operation did come with a small chance of complication, or in the worst case, death. That was the natural risk that accompanied invasive surgery. Alice would not live for very long without it, so the choice was made easier for both of them.

The other big issue on his mind were the other visitors. Families of the afflicted were allowed to visit during specific hours, or at any time if they were given permission from the nurses. They were very strict about handing out permissive notices. The easiest way to get one was for a family member to have completed their treatment.

If the plotters knew his true identity, and the location of his sister, it was possible that the people within the building were part of their scheme. With the papers delivered at the last possible moment so as to extend the clock – there was now an ever-present threat that they would attempt to silence him.

He couldn't trust any of them. Not the regulars, not the nurses; even after speaking with them at length about their own families. There was no measure of how deep the

deception truly went. How long had they been waiting in the wings to see his part in the ploy stricken from the history books?

He tucked his head and ascended the stone-laid driveway. The tall windows and artistically carved façade felt more oppressive than ever. It was going to be difficult to convince them to release Alice early. They did not have the legal right to keep her if they did not feel she was in imminent danger, but litigating the exchange took time that he didn't have.

Caius worked his brain into whipping up a backup plan. He was a master of escape, and his sister was not going to be the heaviest thing he'd absconded with. It was a nice day. The windows were left wide open to clear out the air.

All of the eyes in the reception turned to him without exception.

A shiver ran down his spine. Malice hid beneath one of those friendly nods. His cynicism expected that the man he'd bonded with over his terminally-ill wife recently would reveal himself as the spy. He ignored them and approached the desk.

"I'm here to see Alice."

She smiled, "Ah. Alice is doing well. In fact – she just woke up from the anaesthetic."

Caius kept his cool and signed his name into the visitor's log. The false name was intended to protect him from the police, but there was no concealing his connection to Alice from the medical staff. She was proud of him, always talking to complete strangers about how amazing her big brother was.

When he entered the ward, he counted six brand-new faces. Two of them were confined to rest, and only one looked healthy enough to stand under their own strength. The other four were seated around the beds in silence.

"Brother!" Alice rasped.

"Hello Alice. Did the doctors do a good job?"

Alice pulled the folds of her garment aside and revealed a hint of the scar that now ran down her stomach. It was covered in white gauze and tightly wrapped to keep it from opening again.

“It feels funny.”

“It will for a few days. They had to make you sleep using a special gas,” Caius explained.

Alice nodded, “I tried to use the bathroom, but couldn’t. The nurse said that it was because of the anaesthetic.”

Caius was impressed that she’d learnt a long word like that. He reached out and cleaned up some stray strands of her hair. Alice had spent several days without being allowed to clean herself up in the washroom. Her hair was greasy and wild, her skin was covered in oil and sweat, and her mouth presumably felt the sting of going a week without being cleaned.

“Is everything else okay?”

Alice nodded, “The nurse said that I’d feel better in a week or two, so I have to wait and see how it turns out. I’m just happy that there’s a chance I might leave soon.”

“As am I. It feels like you’ve been in here for years. We can get a fresh start together. Do you have anywhere that you’d like to go?”

Alice pondered the question, “One of the nurses showed me a postcard she got from her son! He lives in a town called Mannberg. It looked really pretty.”

Mannberg was a popular tourist destination on the coast. It was famous for its beautiful sea cliffs and affordable prices. Caius visited once or twice for work. He’d never considered making it their new home, but the more he thought about it the more it appealed to him. It was the perfect place for a fresh start.

“You know what? That sounds like a great idea. The fresh air will be good for your health too.”

Alice smiled cheekily, having twisted her older brother’s arm once again.

The jovial discussion about future plans was almost enough to distract Caius from the anxiety that gnawed at him. The nurses would recommend several days of bed rest and observation before she could leave, but they needed to make themselves disappear as soon as possible.

A flash of white from the doorway caught his eye.

“I’m going to have a word with the Doctor. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Caius felt more than one set of eyes tracing his route back out of the room. The Doctor was in a hurry, because by the time Caius reached the corridor – he was already moving around the next corner and out of sight. Caius pursued him, calling out his name, but he never reached him before being halted.

The cold touch of a blade being held against his neck.

He tensed up and stopped before he walked himself into the sharp edge. Cordia must have sent someone to kill him. She worked fast. It’d only been two days since he delivered the documents to her.

“Miss Cordia is wondering why you never came to receive your payment,” the stranger whispered into his ear.

“Because I knew that this was going to happen,” he shot back. It was impossible to turn his head and get a view of who was holding him hostage. The killer tugged on the back of his suit jacket and dragged him towards the nearest unoccupied area.

“She was hurt by your lack of trust. Was this not a purely professional relationship?”

“Cut the crap. They sent you here to shut me up. That isn’t professional – it’s zealotry.”

The man scoffed, “It’s professional because I’m getting paid. They promised me a bit of your cut for finishing you off. So I suppose you gave me something to be thankful about.”

Caius snapped his fingers. A bright flash engulfed the room and blinded his assailant. He grabbed his forearm and forced him away, slamming his hand against a nearby cabinet and forcing the knife out of his grasp. The man lashed out with a kick that sent Caius tumbling back towards the door, too far to stop him from grabbing it again.

She shook the black spots from his eyes and motioned threateningly with it, “We can do this in front of your sister, or where nobody can see. It’s up to you.”

“You’re one sick son of a bitch,” Caius growled.

“Hoh? What happened to that gentleman thief persona you were so attached to? The mask comes off – and with it a cavalcade of profanity from a man too naïve to know when he is drowning.”

“Naïve? You’re the one who’s doing the dirty work here. They’ll be rid of you soon enough.”

“I’ll take that chance, thank you very much.”

Caius leapt into action, grabbing a piece of gauze from the table to his left and tossing it through the air at his attacker. A single spark of magic was enough to make it catch light in a somewhat explosive fashion, startling the assassin and forcing him to cover his face. In truth – it was completely harmless, but it gave Caius the perfect opportunity to turn tail and run for it.

He knew how to get out of a sticky situation, and bar brawls were nothing foreign to him, but he was no fighter. All he had were party tricks, self-taught and limited in application. They were enough to break into a house or escape pursuit, and nothing more.

He darted down the corridor to try and reach the ward, but another man billowed through the doors and skidded to a halt in front of him, intent of tangling him up and dragging him down to the floor. Caius refused to stop. He charged at him and slid between his legs, knocking him down in the process. They were going to have to try harder than that.

The commotion had already caught the attention of bystanders and medical staff alike. They froze in place and observed the sight of the guests launching into a brawl outside of the wards.

“Alice! I think it’s about time we left!” he cried.

The young girl sat up in shock, “What’s going on?”

“Some bad men are trying to hurt us. Let’s go!”

Caius didn't wait to listen to any protestations from the nurses or Alice. He bundled her up into the sheets, grabbed her bag of belongings, and immediately broke for the window. A deafening bang rang out, a bullet whizzing past the pair and striking a bag of fluids.

"He's getting away, you bloody idiot!"

The gunman attempted to mantle the window and make chase, but his lack of diligence cost him dearly. The spilt IV fluid caused him to lose his footing. He slipped backwards and cracked his head against the tiled floor, knocking him out briefly. His partner ignored his distress and used him as a stepping stone to avoid a similar situation. Caius and his sister were already fading into the distance.

He clenched his teeth and gave chase.