

From then on, my schedule changed dramatically from what I was used to. Aside from my regular visits to the tennis club during the morning or evenings, I also dedicated my time to teaching Samantha the basics on self-defence. I resolved not to show her anything she could use to kill someone on accident, focusing mainly on grappling and how to handle stressful situations where your attacker was using a weapon.

Mainly – the finer points of running away.

Samantha was incredulous about that one, but I made sure she knew the real dangers that came with someone using a sharp object to try and stab you. There was no winning, not without a serious helping of good luck, so it was in your best interest to put as much distance between you and the attacker as possible. Even an effective defence could end with them sinking it into your ribcage and killing you.

The only reason I stepped in back at the theatre was because I was too hyper focused on protecting Felipe. It was lucky for me that the assassin was too busy looking at Felipe to notice me moving to intercept him. It was a bad example to set for Samantha.

Besides putting her into the right headspace to handle crisis situations, we also picked up on the amount of joint exercise we did. Samantha was tall and strong for her age, but her conditioning left a little to be desired. I gave her a simple training regimen of morning jogs to improve her stamina and round out that strength with some speed.

I was juggling teaching her and my tennis lessons with Lance. My arrival did bring a lot of eyes to the club, but none of my adoring fans saw fit to put the effort into joining and learning how to play. The few that did soon decided that watching me from afar was preferable to drenching themselves in sweat every other day.

I wish I had as much free time as they did.

The purpose of my association with Lance was simple. I needed to find out any information I could about the Franzheim who was involved with the monarchists. Asking him about her unprompted wasn't an option, so I attempted to steer our conversations in that direction over the course of the next week.

Eventually, I found some success. We were talking about our personal lives and matters turned to that of the family business.

“What does your family do?” I inquired while we cleaned up the equipment from the day’s session.

“We’re best known for our construction company. You’ve probably seen a lot of our buildings in the city while passing through. The cadet branches have their own interests, but they tend to revolve around the core business. My great-aunt Carides owns a furniture manufactory.”

Carides was just the woman I was hoping to hear about.

“Furniture, I do believe that she’d get along well with my Uncle Clemens. The man is obsessed with it. He collects antique items from every auction house he can find. There’s a storehouse on his property that is filled from wall to wall with chairs; just chairs.”

“I don’t believe that she’s an antique lover, she’s more interested in managing the factory than the specifics of their design.”

“Would you describe her as a workaholic?”

Lance chuckled, “No, she has her own hobbies besides. She’s also a lover of tennis, as it happens. She’s coming to the tournament to see me play some exhibition matches.”

Yes – very convenient. It was almost as if things were aligning specifically to help me in finding her.

“Then I must remember to give her my regards.”

“There’s no need for that,” he insisted.

“No, no. My Father always says that manners come first. And not to worry you but she sounds like fine company to have. A practical mind like hers is rare and to be cherished.”

Lance wasn't sure what I was angling for, "Well – I suppose there's no harm in dropping by and saying hello. Does that mean I should reserve a place for you? We still have some left."

"Of course. I wouldn't be a good member of the club if I did not attend my seniors' competitive matches."

"Fantastic. We have a lot more people coming with us this year versus the last. I must be doing something right," he chuckled.

We finished cleaning up the rest of the mess and stored it in the shed by the courts. The tidying duty was rotated between junior members of the club, though it was considered good manners to take your own equipment back without relying on Lance or a first-year. Still, with so many balls, bags and racquets lying around – it was inevitable that some of them would be forgotten and left behind.

"I'll see you at the next session, Maria."

"As will I."

We said our goodbyes and parted ways. I was covered in sweat, so a visit to the washroom was in order. I was the last one to use the showers, so I enjoyed the solitude of a quiet moment beneath the head while lukewarm water poured over me. It was rare to see all of the other booths empty after a session, we took longer than usual to find the last few balls that had escaped the court during play.

The changing room showers were a rather depressing place – so it wasn't a location where I liked to spend a lot of time contemplating recent events. They were covered in dull white tiles, and while above your usual public restroom, it was clear that the staff spent less time cleaning the showers versus the washrooms inside the main building.

I got my fill of showering in solitude and put on some fresh clothes. While I was walking back towards the academy building, Adrian caught my attention. He was moping on the steps in front of the doors.

"Good morning, Maria."

“Adrian,” I replied curtly, “I do hope they aren’t giving you too much trouble.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No. I’m being genuine.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed, “You know, it’d help people discern your motives if you put a little emotion into your voice instead of this even tone you always use.”

“I can’t help the way that I speak. I was asking out of curiosity. The other students are quick to pass judgement and very slow to forget.”

“Why do you care? You’re trying to make me do something, aren’t you?”

“And what do you mean by that?” I responded defensively.

Adrian laughed, “You don’t do anything unless you get something out of it. I’ve learnt that recently.”

“Like?”

“Cosying up with Felipe. You didn’t give other people the time of day before we started attending this academy, and you still didn’t even when the term started, but I’m meant to believe that you turned into a social butterfly out of the kindness of your heart. Your Father told you to do it, didn’t he?”

Adrian was very plainly projecting his own insecurities onto me. The arrest of his Father humbled him somewhat, but that was not enough to overcome the deeply seated emotional issues that he had thanks to his actions.

“Interesting, and what do you suppose the purpose of me joining the tennis society is then?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have all of the answers. All I do know is that you’re like that.”

“I’m allowed to have my secrets, as are you. You should never presume that someone is doing something for purely selfish reasons, you’ll be surprised when they act in ways you do not anticipate.”

Adrian shook his head disparagingly.

I placed the racquet down and sighed, “I’d be willing to part for a secret or two in exchange for one of yours. That seems like a fair trade to me. I still want to know what’s so important about that watch the thief stole.”

Caius wasn’t told what it was for. It served some magical purpose beyond our understanding – and the monarchists wanted it to execute their plan.

“You don’t have any secrets worth knowing,” he responded with immense false confidence, “I can read you like an open book. I’m not telling you, or anyone else, what the watch does.”

“So, it does do something?”

Adrian was sharp enough to catch me out on that one, “You already figured that out weeks ago. Why else would you be asking? I highly doubt you’d be needling me with these pointless questions if not for your assumptions about its value.”

He stood from his spot and wagged his finger in my face, “I’m not telling you anything. My Dad told me to keep it a secret and for a good reason.”

I couldn’t tell him that knowing the watch’s function would help me find it for him, that would be giving away too much of my hand for no return. Adrian was imagining me pilfering it and using whatever magic power it held.

“Suit yourself. I was trying to make friendly conversation.”

“I suppose that the tennis club taught you about that. I’ve never once known you to be friendly, there’s always an ulterior motive.”

He was mostly right – but I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of agreeing with him. Adrian was a major character in the game. I wanted to keep a leash on him for as long as I could so that nothing strange happened. The problem was that Adrian hated my guts for showing him up so much.

“I’m the only one willing to stand up for you at the moment. I wouldn’t be so hasty in casting dubious assertions about my motives. If you recall, I stated clearly that I don’t hate you. This rivalry is entirely one-sided.”

“Easy to say when you’re on the winning end of it more often than not.”

“Do those trophies and accolades really mean so much to you? In a few years, they won’t be worth the space they take on my room’s mantelpiece. The only language that works in this world is money and success.”

Adrian shook his head, “And you think it’s a good thing.”

“I never said that. I think it’s laughable. You and I have more money than we could ever willingly spend. Why waste our days worrying about accumulating even more of it?”

“Your family’s richer than ours.”

“What difference does that make? At a certain point the number is immaterial. I have no intention of dedicating my time and energy to making it go any higher. There are better things to focus on.”

“What would that be?”

I paused, “I don’t know.”

Adrian guffawed, “You gave me that big speech and you don’t even know the answer? I thought you had it all figured out since you were so cocksure about lambasting me over it.”

“I’m being honest with myself. I don’t know what I want to do, or where I’ll end up. You should give that some thought, and maybe those shooting trophies won’t seem like such a missed opportunity anymore.”

I left him on that note, having grown tired of the layers of emotional defence he loved to erect between himself and others. That was why he didn’t have a single friend left to varnish his reputation or vouch for him. Everything was a competition, and to have allies would be to show weakness. He only had himself to blame, and he didn’t have an excuse of believing that his friends would all die like I did.

I really wanted to know what the watch did – but he wasn’t budging.

I’d have to find out through other means. Cordia was unlikely to know the real value of the watch herself. That sort of key information would be kept amongst the heads of the conspiracy, normally. Even if she did I couldn’t rely on finding and getting the

drop on her again to ask. For better or worse, it seemed that my only path forward was through Caius.

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Caius was used to being patient, but the threat to Alice's life pushed him to hurry. It was not a comfortable position to find himself. He didn't know if he could trust Maria and her servants to keep Alice safe, but what other options did he have? The monarchists had eyes and ears everywhere, and they were willing to use extreme methods to be rid of him.

It was a calculated risk. He couldn't bring Alice along with him on a dangerous endeavour. She still had to recover from her operation. Between his anxiety about leaving her at the manor and the potential anxiety he would feel from bringing her with him, the manor was the better choice.

Thersyn Bradley was the most important person that the general population didn't know about. That was by design. The man was famously reclusive and concealed his business dealings through a variety of quasi-legal means. He was most well known for his ownership of three different newspapers that were pushed out to different parts of the Republic.

These rags were popular amongst conservatives – featuring content that was tailored to their interest and biases. Thersyn kept a close eye on the editorial content of these publications, and they frequently laundered stories between one another to give them credence where there would otherwise be none. The publishing industry was a wild place. Regulations were only just catching up to how influential they could be.

It was not unusual to see the enemy of the day plastered across all three. It was a well-oiled machine that allowed them to shape public opinion as they pleased. Thersyn was an innovator, and he did not shy away from using his papers to push the monarchist line on every issue. Stories of parliamentary impotence and waste were their favourites.

Parliament was perfect – but nobody expected it to be an answer to all of their problems. It was a damn sight better to have them in charge than a group of

unchanging royals; if they were incompetent you had to live with it until they died. But Caius wasn't doing this to make a political statement. His only motivation was to protect Alice, if that meant collapsing a political conspiracy to topple the government, then so be it.

He bided his time until the sunset and infiltrated the estate. It was a comparatively modest home compared to the Walston-Carter family's, but it was likely that Thersyn didn't want to pay out of pocket for a large contingent of staff to look after the place.

One thing was for certain – the man was his own biggest fan. The lobby area's walls were covered from end to end in framed copies of his own newspapers. Whether the headlines were true or false was of little concern, so long as they sold enough and shaped public conversation.

One of them was recent, from just a month ago.

*“Parliamentarians cower in fear as gang of thugs humiliate security force!”*

The article made the argument that parliament was not stable enough to resist attacks of this nature while ignoring the counterargument that a closely guarded collection of royals was irreplaceable. His monarchist leanings were easy to discern, but did it mean he had a hand to play in the plot? Caius scoffed under his breath and moved on before his brain rotted from reading the low-quality swill.

Caius was here to look for hard evidence of his involvement. It would be silly to pass judgement without finding any supporting documentation first. There were many out there who held the same position out of an earnest belief in the old ways being superior. It was a messy subject. People were being born every day who lived without ever knowing about the monarchy or the war that removed them from power.

Caius was estranged from that generation. He was just old enough to recall the immediate aftermath of the Compromise. The thought of going back to debate the issue all over again chilled him to the core. No reasonable fellow who lived through the war would espouse such an opinion unless they were getting something out of it.

They weren't looking for war. They were looking for revolution.



Caius slinked down the corridors of the house and checked each room in turn. Thersyn did not lock his doors for the sake of convenience, and it was the right choice. Most mass-produced locks weren't worth the metal they were cast out of. Caius could have easily breached any of them within seconds. There was an irony to that. A man who preyed on others' ignorance, himself being fooled by unscrupulous lock makers who assumed their customers would do little to no research about their purchases.

Sadly, that was often the case.

The common man imagined themselves as security-minded, but they would not dedicate the time and energy to delving into the complicated world of lock security. Like all disciplines, there were good and bad manufacturers, but the bad often rose to the top through cheap production costs and expansive marketing campaigns.

Caius smiled as he finally found what appeared to be a study or office.

"Don't mind me, just admiring the furniture..."

Caius stepped through and closed it behind him. He could take his time and find what he was looking for. It was early in the morning. The master of the house would not awaken for some time yet. There were even more framed newspapers in his office – though these seemed to take on a more personal form than the ones in the lobby.

Primary placement was given to the very first copy of the Walser Tribunal, which was posted proudly on the diving wall behind the desk. Caius' petulant side had half a mind to vandalize it as revenge for what happened to Alice, but ideally, he'd never even know he was here.

"Documents, documents," he murmured, trying to refocus on the task at hand.

If it was documents he was looking for, he got them in surplus. Thersyn was a hoarder. He never threw away anything that he believed could serve some obscure purpose to him in the future. Ironically, this immense paper trail made Caius' life much harder. Where would he even start?

The desk always came first. He rattled the locked on each drawer and investigated what was inside, finding an unloaded pistol in one and a stack of balance sheets in the other. A quick read through revealed no details that looked amiss. Perhaps that was too obvious a place to keep the incriminating stuff.

The filing cabinets also proved fruitless. Caius frowned and stood by the door with his hands on his hips. Where the hell was he hiding the good stuff? He paced back and forth, rechecking the same spots again. His dedication to a close investigation soon paid off, as he noticed a strange switch on the back of a small stone bust by the back corner.

“Hello, what do we have here?”

Caius flipped it upwards and jumped back as a loud rumbling shook the room. One of the bookshelves against the left-side wall was moving out of the way, revealing a passage that led down into the basement. That was new. The man had a flair for the dramatic. Caius reminded himself to step up his game once he got out of here.

The passage was rustic, with stone walls and wooden beams supporting the construction. Modern electrical lights ran down one side of the tunnel, offering faint light to whoever traverse it. If the incriminating stuff was anywhere, it was going to be in a convoluted hiding place like this.

Caius set his resolve and descended the stone steps with urgency. It was possible that the loud noise alerted someone in the house to his presence. He discovered that the tunnel was deceptively long and deep, heading further and further down until he doubted that it actually led into the basement. In truth, there was a chamber beneath the basement that came with the house, one that had been specially built by Thersyn for a specific purpose.

Caius could have never have guessed as to what that purpose really was.

“Goddess above!”

The foul smell of rotten meat filled his senses as he stepped down into the large chamber. Malice filled the air, a dark and dingy dungeon illuminated by a set of poorly fitted lights. It took him a moment to recognise what he was looking at. This

was no secret archive, nor was it being used to store wine or cheese. A large red symbol was slathered across the far wall, the twisted forms and sharp edges combined into a shape that resembled an A.

He was a dark Goddess cultist, a Scuncath.

Caius had believed them to be nothing more than an urban legend used to terrify naughty children, but the truth was now staring him dead in the same. A corpse lay across a heavy stone slab, with its ribcage and chest torn open like a grotesque butterfly's wings. The shrivelled skin was evidence that it had been here for some time, slowly rotting into nothing. The smell was terrible.

Caius resisted the urge to retch, but he wasn't going to stick around for any longer than he needed to. This was a sacrificial chamber intended for secret worship – not a place where one would hide their spare documents. He turned on his heel and moved back up the stairs, attempting to banish the sobering sight of the dead body from the front of his mind.

He retracted his earlier statement. Cordia and the others may not have wanted a war, but Thersyn certainly did. That must have been why he was getting involved in their plan to destabilize the government and bring back the monarchy. Turmoil on that scale would please the Scuncath and their obscene beliefs, that the bloodshed played a key role in reviving the Black Lady – and by extension the Dark Goddess who served as her patron.

Caius was not sticking around and becoming his next sacrifice. He couldn't find what he was looking for, but the presence of the profane chamber was just as enlightening as any document or plan. This conspiracy was more complex than he first imagined. There were dozens of people involved, some of whom sported motivations that conflicted with their fellow men and women.

When he returned to the office, his ears perked up to the sound of someone moving in the corridor outside. Caius did not have time to think about it. He ran to the window and jostled the lock open, slipping out and down into the garden with a flourish of his cape.

It was a good thing that he did. At that exact moment the man of the house opened the door and stepped inside.

“Why is this open?” he wondered in panic. He hurried over to the desk and retrieved his gun, clumsily loading it with a concealed magazine. It was too late for him to catch Caius now. He was long gone and already running down the main road.

Caius breathed a sigh of relief once he reached his escape point. This was meant to be a simple smash-and-grab, he didn't expect to find evidence of a cultist murder while he was at it!

“Scuncath, I thought it was just an urban legend...”

He should have known better. Urban legends often turned into something real at the behest of those unable to separate fiction and reality. Who was to say that the cultists weren't influenced by a pervasive atmosphere of misinformation? Despite their efforts – the Dark Goddess had not yet descended from the sky and brought nihilism to the world at large. That such a hodgepodge of rumours led Thersyn to commit a crime so obscene was beyond Caius' understanding.

Maria was going to want to know about this, though he was uncertain as to whether she'd find the information useful at all. First, he needed to distract himself from the sights he saw with a warm meal and some beer.

He groaned, “What a day.”

