

“Damn it all,” Caius grunted. Every second spent running for his life was another second in which Alice’s condition could potentially worsen. There were already three men waiting outside of the hostel where he was staying, which meant that they needed to find a new hiding place.

The town was lightly populated. The only things to be found for miles around were noble estates and sprawling farms. Caius could not fade away into a crowd or disappear through an alleyway.

His feet moved without his control. Getting as far away from his pursuers as humanly possible was the most important thing at that moment. He almost tipped over while sliding down into a flood ditch dug into the side of the road, but used all of his strength to keep Alice out of the mud.

He moved quickly and carefully – concealing his form behind rows of bushes and stone walls. These divisions between the fields were his lifeline. With his mind on autopilot and the extreme stress of trying to protect his sister, there was only one place he would end up.

The Walston-Carter estate.

He’d been running for nearly an hour straight without rest. His fog-addled mind finally cleared thanks to a faint sense of familiarity with the area he found himself in. The tall walls with spiked iron points, and lavish gardens which lay tantalizing out of sight. He’d been here a few days before to meet with Maria.

Caius switched his grip on Alice’s body so that he could use his other hand. The fence that allowed entry from the rear was not as secure as the one at the front. All he had to do was fill the mechanism with some energy and melt it. The thin piece of metal that held it shut soon gave way with a firm tug on the bars. Destructive methods left too much evidence to be used in calmer circumstances, but he was in a hurry.

Through the garden he went. There were very few people tending to it at this time of day, so a long route around the outside edge and past the pond kept him out of eyesight. Once he reached the back of the house – he realised that the next steps would be much riskier.

Getting Alice into a warm bed was essential. She couldn't wait this out in the garden like he could. The backdoor onto the patio was left open to let fresh air inside. He slipped through the curtains and made a mad dash for the stairs. His good fortune meant that he made it almost all the way to the upper floor's residential wing.

Almost.

"Hey! What are you doing?" a voice barked. Caius turned to face the interloper. It was Franklin, Maria's personal assistant. They'd only met briefly during the carriage ride down to the city, but they recognised one another.

"Sir Franklin," Caius panted, "May we speak in private?"

He cast a glance back and sighed. Franklin hurried Caius and Alice into the nearest vacant guest room, slamming the door shut and locking it from the inside. Happy that Franklin didn't immediately scream for help, Caius laid his unconscious sister on the bed and held out his hands to make himself appear harmless.

Franklin nodded towards him, "You're that fellow who Maria brought over, and who is this?"

"This is my sister, Alice. Maria gave me a hand with something a few days ago.

"And what are you doing in the house?"

"I... I broke in," Caius admitted haplessly, "We needed somewhere to hide – and this was the only place I could think of."

Franklin grimaced and clutched his head, "I told them to fix the gaps in the fence already. Did Maria give you permission to do this?"

"No."

"Don't you think it's rude to use her home as a hiding place without her consent?"

"I understand fully how presumptuous this is of me, if not criminal. Do as you please, but the only thing I ask of you is to let Alice stay here for a few days while she recovers. She's just had an operation and needs time to rest."

Franklin approached the bed and studied her. The thick dressing on her stomach could be seen through her gown. This was a difficult situation. Allowing a stranger onto the grounds was risky. He would be the one liable if they did something to the other staff members or made away with a valuable item. If Maria and her Father were home there would be no question that they could not remain.

“This is hardly an appropriate place for someone to recover from an operation. We have a nurse on staff just in case, but she isn’t trained to the extent that a Doctor would be. What can we do if she starts to struggle?”

Caius shook his head, “I know that! I didn’t want to take her out of there, but someone there was leaking information to some very bad people. It’s too dangerous to keep her there now.”

“Dangerous? What in the Goddess’ name have you been doing; did they see you come here?”

“No. I shook them.”

Franklin grimaced, “This is starting to sound more suspect by the second. I need some clear answers from you. What did you do to earn their ire?”

Caius closed his eyes, “I’m a thief. A criminal, whatever you’d like to say. A small group of people offered me enough money to secure Alice’s well-being. Like the fool I was – I accepted their conditions without thinking about what that may mean for me.”

“And now they’re trying to kill you.”

“That’s right. I’ve done many a thing that I am not proud of, but I’d sooner suffer a thousand damnations than let anything happen to Alice. It is your choice. You may ask me to leave and face my fate, and I will do as you ask.”

Franklin crossed his arms and thought about what Maria would do. She must have known about his history when associating with him in the city. Maria was perceptive beyond her years. It was impossible to pull the wool over her eyes. What would she need a thief for? That was the real question at the heart of this matter.

If Maria was associating with him, it was unlikely that she wanted him to die for whatever reason. He would simply keep a closer eye on the pair of them and confine them to the room. Maria could be informed through a letter and hand down her own judgement on the matter.

“Maria would have my head on a pike if I allowed a young girl to die in these circumstances. You can stay for now, but the door is being locked from the outside. I want you to stay in here, and don’t show yourself to the staff.”

That was more than Caius was expecting. He bowed deeply, “Thank you. I mean it. Thank you so much.”

“I’ll bring some medical supplies from the nurse, and deliver food and water when you need it.”

Caius had another thing to say before Franklin could leave, “Please do tell Maria that I’m here. There’s something we may have to speak about.”

“I will. Keep an eye on your sister.”

The door clicked shut. Caius finally rose to his feet again and exhaled the breath he was holding. This was unbelievable to him. Maria’s servant trusted him enough to let him stay? He took a chair from the seating area and placed it next to the bed. Alice was starting to wake up from the shock.

“Brother, where are we?” she groaned.

“A safe place – I hope.”

Alice stared at the wooden posts that surrounded her on all side, before scowling. If she could sit up under her own power, she would have. Now that the chaos of the chase was done, she could put the pieces together of what she knew. Caius had gotten himself into a terrible quandary again!

“Brother,” she spoke gravely, “I hope you didn’t do something silly just for me.”

Caius turned his head, “You know me. I would never do anything for the sake of entertaining myself.”

“Brother!”

“We needed the money. I couldn’t pay for that operation, you know that.”

“But I don’t want you to do anything dangerous,” Alice reiterated, “I thought we were past this!”

“One last job, that’s what I told myself. Enough money to fix you up, get a new place, and start that life we were always talking about. I’m an idiot. I’m the biggest idiot around.”

The harsh truth was that they were not ‘past this,’ not even close. Caius could not earn enough money to pay for her surgery through labour alone. The cost they demanded was extortionate – stated in the knowledge that the needy and desperate would pay any price to save a family member they cared about. People would find that money, or they would die.

Caius was intelligent, he was skilled, he could have found a job to provide for both of them with ease, but that was not enough. Alice would have been long dead had he hung up his thieving boots and walked gently into the normal life of another man. It was not a question of pride. While the previous Caius taught him everything he knew, it was always predicated in a firm belief that being a thief was not a living.

“Once something better comes along, it’s time to give it up.”

He always repeated that to him before every lesson. It was the creed which he stuck to through thick and thin, and why the previous Caius retired to live the life of a clockmaker in the city. He was always good with small mechanisms, and once he had the money to open his own shop, he earned enough to live comfortably without risking his freedom.

Even getting him to teach Caius what he knew was difficult. There was no emotional attachment to the skills, the name, or the persona. Caius Senior would have been happy to let the myth die forgotten, but after meeting Caius and his sister, he realised that it would be a waste to let them go without passing it on. What right did he have to say that Caius should tread a more noble path? The noble path was reserved for those who could afford to walk it.

“The old man would be furious with me for this,” Caius admitted, “I can see it now. The red face and strained whiskers...”

Alice sat back against the headboard, “You told me that you stopped doing this.”

“I did, for the most part, but then your condition got worse and worse, and they started demanding even more from me. I had to fall back on old habits just to keep you there. I didn’t want you to worry, with your condition and all.”

But now all of that stress was unloaded at the same time. Caius was unsure as to whether that was a preferable outcome. Anything that could jeopardize her health in the long term was to be avoided. Now things were turned on their head, there were people out there trying to quickly bury them six feet under.

“I’m really happy that you paid for the operation, but what are we going to do? Who are those people?” Alice asked.

Caius sensed it was time for honesty, “I’m not entirely sure, but an acquaintance of mine believes that they’re a group of monarchists trying to unsteady the government.”

Alice tilted her head to one side – she didn’t understand a word of it.

Caius nodded, “Okay. They really like the King. They want him to be in charge of everything like he used to.”

Alice’s mouth opened, “Ooooh. I see!”

“Is that the case?” Franklin asked, stepping through the door with a tray in hand.

Caius frowned, “I’m not sure. They’re clearly violent enough to try and kill us just for knowing about them.”

Franklin placed it beside the bed and offered Alice a glass of water; “And what does this have to do with Maria?”

“She caught me trying to get my hands on the Liberal Democrat’s party standing list.”

His eyes widened, “And that list includes Sir Clemens! Did this happen at the party?”

“Yes. She caught me in his office and warded me away.”

Leaving it up to Franklin's imagination was a bad idea. He immediately pictured the terrifying visage of his ward freezing Caius in place with her presence, and not the violent brawl that actually occurred. "I hope you didn't bring any harm to the young lady!" he gasped.

Caius laughed out loud, "You couldn't be further from the mark on that one. I doubt I could even bruise her if things came to that." She'd thoroughly outplayed him at every point of their encounter, exploiting her personal strengths and the possibility of capture to wrap him around her little finger. Where she learned to fight was a profound mystery.

"So, what did the young master do then?"

"She let me off the hook in exchange for some information. That's why we went into the city on that evening."

"She didn't turn you in?"

"She said that she'd rather handle the matter herself. I don't believe there would be much for the police to investigate. At this stage, she knows more about the scheme than I ever did."

Franklin stroked his chin and considered what the odd stranger was telling him. Maria found him in the middle of a criminal act and refused to hand him over to the guards? He would need to confirm this tale with the lady herself before reaching any conclusions.

"But why would she decide to handle this matter herself? I know Lady Maria better than anyone – and she much prefers to maintain her solitude."

"Perhaps she sought to protect Sir Clemens from harm?" Caius offered.

"Hm. Yes. That would make sense."

Caius, as a thief, did not present an active threat to Clemens during the party. The potential of a future attack by these monarchists was of much greater concern. Lady Maria's famous forward-thinking was in play once again. She rarely gave him a reason to doubt her logical thinking. Franklin was starting to get a clearer picture.

“I do appreciate your honesty in this matter. I will contact Lady Maria and ask her for confirmation. Until then, please remain here and keep a low profile. We can hardly afford to have those ruffians follow you onto the estate.”

“Of course. Thank you very much.”

Franklin left to pen his letter to Maria.

Caius exhaled, “I’m surprised that he’s being so reasonable about finding two complete strangers in one of the bedrooms.”

Alice smiled, “He must feel sorry for me. What kind of boorish man would throw a poor, innocent girl to the wolves?”

“There’s nothing innocent about the way you say that.”

Caius reached out and took the second glass of water for his own consumption. Everything would hinge on Maria’s response, but at least for the moment, they could relax in the knowledge that the assassins would not so easily be able to find them nestled away on such a huge estate.

It was just as well; his legs weren’t able to handle any more running.

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Samantha must have been mightily confused about why I was shoving a bunch of things into my suitcase and preparing to leave for the weekend. Returning to the manor took a few hours, hours which could have been spent studying or relaxing instead of commuting.

I wish I had that luxury – but the last thing I expected to receive in the mail the morning before was a letter from Franklin revealing that a beleaguered Caius Willow and his younger sister had snuck onto the estate, claiming to have been chased there by a gang of killers. This was far faster than I was anticipating from my mental math of the situation.

“Did something urgent come up?” Samantha asked from the doorway.



“Yes. I have to return to the manor for a day or two and address an issue that has arisen. I wasn’t planning on returning to the manor until our next holiday.”

Samantha turned pensive, “A shame. I was hoping that I could visit and see your home for myself.”

“Is it really that interesting? If you’ve seen one noble manor – you’ve seen all of them. Ours is no exception.”

“The layout may be similar, but every home is shaped by the people who live in it. You must have your own traditions and preferences that make it special. Furthermore, I didn’t get much of a chance to explore the Bookers’ manor before the attack started.”

I did not have a specific objection to Samantha seeing the mansion. Just as I said, there was nothing particularly interesting about it, and nothing that I wanted to cover up from outsiders. The problem was that I was not going back to spend the weekend in comfort. Caius was there, which meant that the situation could take a very sudden turn for the dangerous. He was being pursued by the monarchists.

“I have a feeling that this visit will be dangerous,” I said honestly, “I would not like to put you into the line of fire if there is no need for it.”

“Could a visit to your own home really be so deadly?”

“Under normal circumstances, no. But you and I both know from experience that there is no such thing as a simple matter when I become involved. A spell of dour luck is due.”

Samantha frowned, “It’s not like a bloody weather pattern.”

I slammed the lid of my trunk shut and stood up, “If you really, really want to come and spend the day at my home, I can bring you, but we won’t be staying for any longer than necessary. You’ll need to pack some clothes for an overnight stay. I won’t be held responsible for what happens while we’re there.”

Samantha’s eyes lit up like the fourth of July, “A sleepover?”

Before I could correct her, she was already running back to her own room to grab some clean clothes and underwear. I should have known that she'd leap headfirst into this even with my warnings. She was desperate to spend time with me and I'd handed her the perfect opportunity to do so.

I put the finishing touches on my preparations, and Samantha soon returned with a giddy smile on her face. I failed to see what was so exciting about dropping by my house for a single night. Was it the prospect of experiencing the noble lifestyle for real?

"I love sleepovers," Samantha declared with authority, "We used to have them all the time back in my hometown. It's a great way to make friends!"

"It isn't much of a sleepover with two people."

"That's where you're mistaken, Maria. There is no minimum, and no limit, to the number of people who can participate. All it demands is that we share the same room and spend the night."

"I hope you aren't expecting me to arrange entertainment for us. This is a family business matter. We will swing by, solve the problem, and then return here to the campus."

Samantha crossed her arms and glowered at me, "You're always such a party pooper. Would it hurt to lighten up a little?"

"Yes."

Our discussion attracted the attention of Claude, who was passing by. He poked his head over Samantha's shoulder and spied on what we were up to.

"What's going on?"

Samantha moved further into the room to give him space, "Maria has invited me to a sleepover at her house."

"She invited herself," I clarified, "I'm hardly going back for recreational purposes. Some urgent business has arisen that I must attend to."

Claude was undoubtedly inferring the worst possible outcome based on that statement. What devious schemes could I be hatching, or what great crimes had need of being covered up by a personal visit from yours truly?

“Oh, will you be back for the start of the week?”

Samantha nodded, “Yes. Maria only intends to stay for a single night.”

“I don’t know how you got so friendly with one another. She was telling you to shove it when you talked for the first time. Is she blackmailing you?” he asked.

Samantha pushed him out of the room, “I am not blackmailing her. Stop sticking your nose into other people’s business.” That was rich coming from her. Claude was banished from the room with a slam of the door. Samantha turned to me with a giddy smile, “Oh. I can’t wait to see your house!”

I packed away the other leftover items into their hiding places to save myself the work when I returned to the campus. Samantha got comfortable on the edge of my bed and swung her legs idly back and forth.

“You do understand that this is the kind of business that I can’t speak of with him around? It’s potentially dangerous.”

“I thought you said that you were trying to avoid situations like that.”

“I am, I tried to get ahead of this problem before it got worse – but it seems that I was mistaken in believing that matters were tidied away. The fellows responsible are more reckless than I imagined. They started shooting inside of a sanatorium. The police are already investigating.”

It hadn’t hit the national papers yet, but the local newsagents were sure to propagate the story far and wide. Shootings happened regularly, but this one was special; it was much more odious to start a gunfight around sick and injured patients. It would rub people the wrong way and inflame their sense of righteous outrage.

It was catnip for publishers because angry people would keep buying papers. The public would soon come to feel that matters were getting out of hand. A spate of major violent incidents was damaging the government’s authority and popularity.

“What is this about, exactly?”

Samantha kept my secrets well enough, so I explained some of the context to her.

“I believe it’s connected to the theft of Adrian’s watch. The same thief was at a garden party hosted by my uncle a week ago, trying to make away with a list of the candidates standing for election on the Social Democratic ticket. It seems that they have violent intent. I needn’t say how troublesome it would be for all if they launched a series of attacks on them.”

“Hm. But what do they need Adrian’s watch for?”

“That is what I would like to know. Adrian is remaining tight-lipped about what the watch can do. I suspect that it possesses a magical power that the monarchists want.”

“So what happened to the thief?”

“He didn’t know anything, so I let him go and follow the person who hired him. She plead ignorance – but I made sure to take as many of her documents with me as I could.”

The documents primarily consisted of correspondence between Cordia, her boss, and Caius. The boss was smart enough to keep their name and seal off of the incriminating letters, but comparing their handwriting to another example would unmask them in an instant. Samantha knew better than to ask how I took those documents, moving on promptly to the next topic.

“The thief in question was at the sanatorium when the attack occurred, and he claimed to Franklin that they were trying to kill him. He’s hiding in one of our guest rooms. I hope he’s willing to part with more information now that the stakes have been raised.”

Samantha had another observation, “Is it really okay for you to be handling this kind of stuff? Reporting it to the police would be better than putting yourself at risk trying to crack the case.”

“I hand those letters to the police and they will bury them so deep that they’ll never see the light of day again. This is a noble conspiracy. There is no circumstance in which they will investigate if the only victims are lower-class civilians.”

“But they’re bound to-”

I cut her off, “They’re bound to whatever their bosses tell them. The police will not risk stepping on any toes if they can help it. I would much rather have them deal with matters, but they will not. Ergo – I am the only one positioned to solve this problem. I am not going to allow them to kill my uncle in pursuit of power.”

Samantha wanted so desperately to argue, but she thought twice. This was the first time she’d ever heard me so passionate about something. I saw this as nothing more than inevitability, but she misinterpreted it as familial affection. I was going to be dragged into this no matter what, so I’d rather do it on my own terms this time around.

“Well, I’ll help you in any way I can,” Samantha declared, hand on heart.

Girls shouldn’t make promises they can’t keep. Once the bullets started flying I’d see just how truthful she was being.

