

“...So, I was thinking of choosing biology, social science and politics.”

I stared a hole through the wall behind Samantha’s head as we awaited the arrival of Caius. It was time for us to make our move and put the kibosh on whatever plans the monarchists were cooking up in the background. Caius summoned both of us to the manor, claiming that he had all of the information we’d need to launch an attack.

Sam begged to come along for the ride. She was capable – but I doubted her ability to help given the violent context in which we were going to act. Those judo throws couldn’t stop a bullet. My eyes drifted to the books lent to me by Miss Jennings, once again left neglected and unread. Finding time to practice what was inside them was tough.

“Do you have anything planned?” she asked.

“No. I already told you – the only thing I’m good at is killing. I can coast through my years at the academy and live off of my family’s wealth for the rest of my days.”

“Do you really want to do that?” Samantha replied pointedly. She knew me too well to fall for that bold-faced lie.

“Sometimes it isn’t about what I want. I wanted to solve the situation involving Felipe without turning it into such a damn bloodbath, but they were not open to negotiation or reason.”

“You’ll regret it if you pass on the opportunity. Just pick subjects that you like. They don’t have to lead you to a job, since you’re already so affluent.”

The problem was that I couldn’t pick any subjects from the pack. Magic was a given, but it was also not an elective subject. It was added to the top of what else we selected. I got good grades in all of them, but picking three or four topics I enjoyed delving into was impossible. My head wasn’t in the right place.

“We didn’t come here to chatter about our elective subjects, Samantha.”

She shrugged, “What else can we do? Caius isn’t here yet.”

She said the magic words though. The door swung open and shut again, with Caius quickly slipping in and approaching us at the table.

“Sorry for the wait. Alice was being troublesome.”

I waved him off, “We haven’t been waiting for long. I do hope that you have something good for us. With Cordia’s last attempt to kill the council members, we can no longer sit back idly and allow them to make the first move.”

He responded by slamming a heavy stack of papers down in front of us. They spilt out in all directions, his hands scrambling to arrange them into some sort of organized chart. Dozens of names and faces were recorded for our viewing convenience.

He spoke while working, “This is every last drop of information that I’ve been able to squeeze from every last informant working from here to the dockyard district. You have no idea how much effort it was to get all of this. I couldn’t exactly pay them for it, so I had to do a lot of favours.”

This was starting to remind me of Claude’s conspiracy wall – now sadly removed from the dorm room. Caius was a talented sketch artist. He drew all of the portraits himself. The resemblances were striking in their accuracy, the exaggerated forms and key details serving to make them immediately recognizable on both sides of the divide.

“But we still never learned what the watch was for.”

Caius sighed, “Not that it matters now. Cordia is gone, and the police have returned it to Adrian Roderro. It’s safe to say that it no longer plays into our calculations.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. It felt like we were missing a piece of the puzzle. Cordia did use that watch during her attack at the tennis tournament, but she never got close to injuring anybody before Caius rumbled her and chased her away. Was it meant to be used pre-emptively? It didn’t help her escape, and it wasn’t capable of closing a gap.

Caius’ words did have a certain appealing logic. The long and short of it was that Cordia was dead, and the monarchists no longer possessed the watch as a result. Answers as to what it actually did would only come from the mouth of Adrian. That would require that stars align.

“What I learnt from my expedition is that, first and foremost, nobody has the foggiest darn idea about Thersyn and his Scuncath connections. I didn’t ask them directly – but nobody keeps a track of what those people are doing. They see it as a random pattern of violence, not actions motivated by a reason.”

“He must know a few of his fellow cultists.”

“That’s a certainty, but it’s unlikely that we can use them to get to Thersyn. The easiest way to tackle him would be to get the police to search his house and lead them to the torture chamber.”

“Torture chamber?” Samantha murmured. She was already getting rattled by it.

“I have a lot of pull, but the police aren’t going to raid someone that important based on the word of a thirteen-year-old girl.”

“You’re right. The next best plan would be to lure them there with an unrelated offense. Knocking him out of the structure would cripple their media messaging in the aftermath of the assassinations.”

“And Claris Rentree?”

Her connection to the rest was severed with the death of Cordia.

“Cordia was loyal to a fault. The only reason she ever left her contract was to get in close with another person they needed to manipulate. She had eyes and ears everywhere and knew where to hire killers for whatever jobs needed doing. Claris was the one who gave her that opportunity. She’s still a high-level member of the plot.”

I nodded, “She’s too rich to cut loose.”

“Those fellows in the south are obsessed with the monarchy. It’s the perfect place to ferment obedient little extremists like Claris. She has tendrils in every noble family you can think of, and she’ll call in some favours of her own when the time is right. She’s the political firepower.”

“What about Lady Franzheim?”

“As far as I can tell – she’s one of the toadies that Claris hooked early on. She’s one of their northern collaborators, leaning on MPs to turn in the direction of the Van Walser family. She’s expendable, and that’s why Cordia was assigned to her as a leash handler.”

There was one thing missing from the map.

“Who is in charge?”

Caius laughed, “I have no idea. I’ve heard talk that there is somebody on top, running the show, but I don’t believe it. I think they’ve all come together with their different motives with the same aim, and that all the rumours about someone upstairs are just designed to scare the pawns back into line. You don’t get much bigger than Thersyn Bradley or Duchess Rentree.”

I shuffled through some of the pages and took in the information contained on them, “Not that it matters. If we eliminate the middle of this conspiracy, the top level won’t be left with any pieces to play. It’ll crumble like a house of cards.”

“Eliminate?” Caius repeated.

“I don’t mean that literally. I’d much rather handle this without risking my life in a gunfight or anything of the sort. We have to take the initiative and strike before they can respond or adapt.”

Samantha was utterly bewildered by all of this. Caius and I were talking over her head as she tried to comprehend the veritable explosion of documents, names, faces and plans. She tensed up in her seat and didn’t relax until I told her to chill out.

“Breathe, Samantha. What’s wrong?”

She grimaced, “Seeing all of this is putting it into perspective. These folks are really dangerous, that’s what you were trying to warn me about before I came here.”

“I’m not going to pretend that they’re harmless, no. You can back out if you want – there’s nothing forcing you to come with us.”

Samantha found that objectionable, she rose from her chair and wagged her finger at me, “I have a good reason to be here. You’re my friend, and I’m not going to let you risk your life without standing by your side.”

I turned that sentiment back on her; “I don’t feel like endangering you either. Look at this practically for a moment, do you believe that you can do what is necessary to protect me if I were to end up in a bad situation?”

“That’s not the point,” she argued, “It’s the thought of it that matters to me. I have an opportunity to help you, what kind of friend would I be if I turned my back now and ran for the hills? Dad would be furious with me if he found out.”

Me thinks that he’d be even angrier if he found out that his daughter was diving headfirst into dangerous situations where she had no right to be. How far could standing up for your friends really go?

“You don’t need to do this to prove your earnestness. I understand completely if you chose to step back and protect yourself. It would be immensely selfish of me to condition our relationship on something this unreasonable. If we were smart, we’d try to find a safer way of resolving this situation, but that also runs the risk of them launching their scheme and killing my Uncle.”

The problem was that Samantha was as stubborn as a mule. She’d been raised in a particular way that gave her a strong sense of what was right and wrong. Not the ideal companion to someone like me – who relished in blurring the lines to do terrible deeds. She believed that helping me here was the right course of action regardless of the act itself.

Caius stepped in to break up our argument, “Now, now – Ladies. We haven’t settled on a plan yet! As Maria says, we are intending to settle this without violence. Let’s wait until we have a firm grasp of the situation before coming to a judgement.”

I slumped back on my chair, “And what do you suppose the best course of action is?”

“Well, Thersyn has a bloody dead body in his basement, and he isn’t exactly acting in the interest of the other schemers with his Scuncath creed. Driving a wedge between them using that information seems like the easiest way of picking apart the plan.”

Samantha nodded, “That sounds doable.”

“It’s not going to be easy to lead the police into his office. I imagine that he’ll be very cautious about inviting anyone inside or reporting crimes that occur on his property,” Caius mused.

I chuckled, “Then we have to leave him with no choice in the matter. Find a way to keep the secret door open, and make a very good reason for the authorities to visit his home when he least expects it.”

Like...

“A fire?” Samantha offered.

“Exactly. Light a small fire in his home, one that he won’t be capable of putting out, and he’ll be forced to call for the fire brigade to visit. Caius can sneak into his office while he’s distracted and open the door.”

Samantha leapt out of her chair, “Wait a second – we’re not burning down someone’s house because I suggested it! That’s crazy!”

“It is crazy, but how else can we get a set of eyes on that building without doing so? He won’t call the police for a break-in. It has to be a problem that he can’t ignore or solve for himself. He can choose between his liberty or his property.”

“And what if there’s someone else in that house when we do it?”

Caius already scouted that out, “He doesn’t hire regular assistants, just a pair of guards who stand on the perimeter. If we set a blaze in a location that they can see – they’ll run to the nearest fire post and sound the alarm.”

This plan was brutish but effective. If Thersyn refused to allow the fire volunteers onto his property and let the house burn to the ground, it would launch a police investigation into what happened. The only way out would be to claim that he accidentally burned his own house down.

If not – they’d pick through the wreckage and inevitably come upon the secret passageway that Caius described to me. It was a long underground tunnel built from stone, so it wouldn’t go down with the rest of the building. I could see the scene in my

mind. A group of investigators picking through the wreckage of his office, only to find the entrance revealed by the fire burning away the bookcase that once concealed it. They'd venture inside out of curiosity and find his ritual sacrifice, before hurrying away to report it to the police.

A dead body on his property? It was an open and shut case, and someone as high profile as Thersyn Bradley being arrested would be front page news across the nation, even in the papers that he owned. They couldn't pass up on the opportunity to sell volumes with the hottest story around.

Samantha was regretting her suggestion already.

"Ugh – you two are unbelievable. I should have kept quiet."

"I'm sure he'll get out just fine," Caius snickered, "And we're dealing with a full-blown cultist murderer here. It's hard for me to feel sorry for the bloke considering what I saw down there."

And the immense quantities of falsehood and slander he pushed into the public square via his newspapers. He was a parasite of the worst sort, dancing to the tune of whatever leader offered him the best return on investment. I doubted that Thersyn legitimately believed in restoring the full powers of the monarchy – it was just a convenient line to take when selling papers to rural towns and villages.

Spilling blood for the Dark Goddess showed where his true loyalties lay. He was here to spread as much chaos and destruction as possible. He wasn't going to put his neck on the line for the monarchists if he didn't have to.

I rose from my chair and headed to the wardrobe, pulling out one of the suitcases that I'd left behind from the bottom well. I scrolled through the digits on the lock and opened it, revealing absolutely nothing. The untrained eye wouldn't suspect that there was a secret compartment inside. Samantha hovered over my shoulder, gasping out loud when I pulled away the felt base and revealed what was hiding beneath.

"Where did you get all of these?" Samantha asked.

The trunk was filled with 'spares,' guns I'd found and taken over the past few months, just in case an incident like the one at the theatre occurred again. There were four additional handguns stored in there, hidden from sight and chained behind a lock.

I took one of the guns and offered it to Caius.

"Just in case."

"I've never killed anyone before and I have no intent of starting now," Caius clarified, rejecting the outstretched firearm with his palm.

I pulled the gun away and placed it back into the trunk, "If that's the case we'll need to be extra cautious, although to be honest that's my preferred way of doing things. Making a lot of noise will only make life harder."

Caius seemed to snap back to reality for a moment, "Hold on. Why do you have all of these guns?"

I responded with an observation, "Why was I capable of fighting you in hand-to-hand combat and winning?"

Caius frowned. Had he compartmentalized that incident away since the panic of protecting Alice arose? I'd beaten the seven hells out of him at Clemens' house and extorted him to turn on his allies. Those weren't actions that a normal girl would take.

"Are you seriously implying that you're a Sturmläufer?"

The confusion on my features was clear to see; "A what?"

"Sturmläufer. It's an urban legend that the provisional government kidnapped and trained a bunch of secret policewomen from a young age, they were mostly girls because they could get into places that most men couldn't without arousing suspicion. My grandfather used to tell me that they'd come and grab me in the night if I kept being a naughty boy."

Why on earth were the secret police being used as a metaphorical monster under the bed? I was genuinely confused.



“Uh, no. I’m no Sturmläufer. I was born and raised in this house, and I don’t recall ever being kidnapped by the government for secret assassin training.”

“Heh. You do fit the bill to a tee though. Pretty young girl, hiding a vicious secret, running around and getting herself involved in the fate of the nation at large. We could use that and really put the fear into him...”

I snapped my fingers, “You know what? That’s a fantastic idea. He must know that a stranger tailed Cordia to her apartment if they’re communicating with each other. We could use that to intimidate him, instead of burning his house down and leaving it to chance.”

Caius was waiting for a moment like this. He hustled over to the bed and pulled his own case of goodies from beneath. Unlike mine – his were significantly less suspect. They were a set of three masks, normally used during Walser’s harvest season festivals to ward away ill weathers.

Each one was carved into the figure of a Walserian Half-Hawk, a chimera like creature with the head of a hawk and the body of an equine. No, not a lion, we weren’t in a hot enough climate for that sort of thing. The masks themselves consisted of two separate wooden pieces. The top half was the hawk’s head, ears and upper-beak, while the lower half was mainly intended to keep the mask clamped around your head and secured into place.

The curvature of the beak was such that it covered the wearer’s brow and nose, while leaving their eyes clear for visibility purposes. It was tradition for the wearer to don a black mask to simulate the opened maw and enhance the illusion. All three were decorated in different shades of brown and black, with pastel accents like cyan, yellow and pink added for the sake of celebration.

“I picked these up because Alice always loves the harvest festivals, but perhaps we can use them to put a different coat of paint on our efforts to stop them.”

“I thought you were too attached to that Caius Willow persona of yours,” Samantha quipped.

“I don’t believe that the gentleman thief act will have the intended effect, unfortunately. How about this? I set up the kindling downstairs and keep watch, while you two make Thersyn believe that he’s received a visit from those legendary killers.”

I nodded, “That sounds acceptable. I can be very convincing.”

Though with Samantha present, I couldn’t rely on some of my usual techniques. Beating and maiming someone was not an effective way to gather information, but you still needed to lean on them hard to get useful titbits. We were looking for the names of everyone in the organisation and what they were planning to do with the list.

Samantha took one of the harvest masks and tried it on while Caius and I hashed out the last details of our plan. He’d prime the place for a fire while keeping an eye out for the guards that Thersyn contracted. Confining him to the interior space of the house would prevent him from crying for help once we showed ourselves.

It was time to go on the attack.

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Thersyn was worried about us.

Caius’ previous visit to the house did not go unnoticed. Two additional guards now watched the perimeter of the property, but he still refused to allow them inside. The ultimate flaw with his plan was that he needed to keep curious eyes away from his home office. He couldn’t risk letting them patrol inside, lest they discover the grisly secret beneath.

That suited us just fine. Two extra guards weren’t going to pose a difficulty to our plan. We donned our half-hawk masks and descended onto the grounds through a small gate at the rear, which Caius deftly picked through using a pair of metal tools.

“This is exciting,” Samantha whispered, “Breaking the rules – sneaking into someone’s house...”

“Really? It makes me nervous,” Caius responded.

We crept through the back garden and towards the rear patio doors. Caius worked his magic again and we were in. He hoisted the can of ethanol into his arms and nodded in our direction. That was our cue to find Thersyn and make him piss his pants. Samantha followed me up the stairs, while Caius found some kindling to use with his alcoholic starter fluid.

I drew my gun and approached the bedroom door.

“The safety’s on,” I stated to Samantha. I was about to do something that would make her panic otherwise. I wound up and kicked the door through, breaking the metal hinges and causing it to slump down. The flailing form of Thersyn Bradley wrestled with his bedsheets, eventually tumbling down onto the floor with a pained grunt.

His disorientation was exactly what we needed. I charged at him and wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing the cold steel of the gun barrel against his skull. His movements came to a sudden end.

“Who are you?” he barked.

Samantha hurried over and bound his arms together so that he couldn’t fight back. I dragged him away from the bed and forced him down onto one of the armchairs located near the fireplace. With that done – I finally removed the comforter that had somehow become entangled around his head.

It must have been a terrifying sight, two strangers looming over you in strange masks, illuminated by the moonlight coming from your window. He could only see the whites out of our eyes peeking out through the black veils. There was a moment of recognition when he finally noticed how short I was.

“You’ve got to be shitting me!”

“No, I am not ‘shitting you.’ Mister Bradley – I take it that you understand why we’re here?”

He shook his head with clenched teeth. Playing ignorant. Samantha pulled out her own bottle of ethanol and made a theatrical performance of dousing the floor with it.

“I want names and plans – and I don’t want to hear your objections. If not, we’re going to make your life extremely difficult.”

“Kill me if you please. I’m not saying a word!” he spat. The panic in his voice was the only evidence I needed to confirm that he believed we were the Sturmläufer. A pair of young girls breaking into his house in the dead of night and holding him at gunpoint, that was the narrative we were trying to piece together.

“I’m not going to kill you, Thersyn. Killing you would mean missing out on the information that we’re looking for, and that wouldn’t be constructive for any of us.”

I started to pace around him, intentionally planting my hand on his shoulder. He flinched, and I leaned in closer to let him know what the score was.

“I have a lot of ways to end your life that don’t require the pull of a trigger, like that wonderful art display you’ve constructed in the basement. What do you think the police will do if they find out about that?”

He grimaced, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, come on now. There’s no need to be shy! I thought you Scuncath were all too eager to share your beliefs with the unwashed masses! Or do you imagine that they’ll take a much dimmer view of the violent murder than you’d prefer? I thought about reporting the matter to them directly, but then I realised that it would be a terrible waste of some very good blackmail.”

Samantha finished setting up the firebomb against one of the bookshelves in the room. Those pages would go up real nice with a single spark, quickly spreading to the wooden floors and through the rest of the building.

“I’m giving you a simple choice, Thersyn. You can tell me what you know about Lady Rentree and her plan - and keep your freedom, or you can lie and obfuscate, and I’ll simply destroy your property and see you housed in the finest jail cell around. Can you picture it? Those brave volunteers coming across that mysterious passageway in the smouldering rubble of your manor, and what lies beyond.”

My ratcheting of the tension was working as intended. He was picturing it clearly, the exact moment in which his carefully crafted façade fell to pieces, and the dashing of any chance to use Rentree as a wedge to ferment fresh violence. He could turn away the police within reason; they'd need warrants and procedure, but he could not turn away the fire service without arousing rightful suspicion about his motives.

He cracked.

“Under the bed, the red chest – the code is 39678.”

Samantha followed his directions and lugged the heavy container from its hiding place. She dialled in the numbers and released the padlock. Whatever I was expecting from the inside, it was not what we actually found. The entire chest was stuffed from base to lid with thousands of documents.

“What is it?”

“Every bloody letter I've sent and received about it for the past year.”

It seemed that their lack of trust in each other was a shared phenomenon. Cordia did the exact same thing, she kept her correspondence even when the letters explicitly asked her to burn them after reading.

“He's right,” Samantha confirmed, “There's one here addressed to Duchess Rentree.”

“Well, isn't that convenient,” I pulled Thersyn back to his feet and directed him with the gun, “Pick it up.” Thersyn scowled but did as we asked, leaning down and hooking his bound hands around one of the handles, while Samantha took the other.

I let him lead us down the stairs and into the back sitting room. Caius was waiting for us there, relieving him of the burden by pushing him out of the way and taking the front side for himself. We weren't going to let him go outside with the guards around.

“You're Sturmläufer, aren't you? A bunch of brainwashed government mutts!”

I couldn't help but laugh, “Ohohohoho! I don't recall saying that we belonged to the Sturmläufer, Mister Bradley! Is your overactive imagination getting the better of you again?”

He looked like a sad puppy having now realised that he'd been had. I was happy to play along with his delusions so long as they helped us get to what we needed.

"This is your last chance to share any other pertinent information with us," I concluded, "I would suggest making it good because your fellow conspirators are not going to be well-pleased about this. We'll take care of them for you."

"Bullshit."

I stared at him for almost a minute straight to give him time to stew on my generous offer. He did not elect to take it and divulge any more than what we could discern from the documents. I shuffled through some of them in front of him and made sure that it was enough for us to go on. These were much more revealing than the ones sent to Cordia, with a lot of unfamiliar names cropping up in the body of the text. I put them back and sighed.

"Happy to do business with you, Thersyn. Hopefully, this will be the last time we speak."

"Charmed, you bitch. I'm not going to rest until I have your damn head on that pedestal. I'll use your blood to bring the Dark Goddess back!"

"Big words from a man with his hands tied behind his back."

I snapped my fingers and Caius lit up a spark using his magic.

"Wait, wait! Wait – what the hell are you doing?!"

"Goodbye, Thersyn."

Caius underarm tossed the sparks into the reading room and stepped back as a violent flash of flame engulfed the area. The ethanol took light and started to spread between the various wooden fittings in the house. We took the chest and walked out onto the patio, with Thersyn in hot pursuit. Samantha lagged behind in shock. She wasn't expecting us to go ahead and do it anyway.

"You damned cur! I'll have your head for this! You better sleep with one eye open from now on!"

There was nothing he could do about it. We marched down into the garden and through the back gate as he tried desperately to summon help from the guards. We were already making egress through the woods before they could find us. The orange light of the fire framed the tall wooden trees that surrounded us.

Samantha was quick to take us to task.

“What in the Goddess’ holy name are you two doing? I thought we weren’t going to burn the damn house down!”

I inhaled and kept the chest held aloft, “And let him kill more innocent people for his sick games? Not a chance. Additionally - if word of him being a Scuncath gets out to the press, it’ll cause chaos for the conspirators.”

Caius cut in, “Can you save the debate for later? We need to toss this thing onto the cart before the firemen come knocking.”

Samantha struggled to conceal her dissatisfaction with how I ignored her objections to burning the manor down, but at the time I was not in the mood to argue about it. I could have put a bullet through him and had the same outcome, but I compromised for her sake. A house could be rebuilt, after all.

Once we were far enough down the road we removed our disguises and threw the chest into the back of a rented cart. Caius took the reins and we departed from the sight of the fire. The next challenge would be to dig through the documents and find what we were looking for. I sat opposite Samantha as the cart trundled down the road, but her eyes were looking anywhere else but me.

