

Cordia slammed the newspaper down onto the table.

Four men and two women flinched at the sound of the paper meeting the wooden surface. They were gathered in the apartment to report back on their attempts to kill Caius Willow, an operation that had proven to be a tremendous blunder on all fronts. Not only was Caius still alive and well, but he'd also managed to elude them at some point during the chase.

“Do I even have to say anything about this? What the hell were you thinking? He was boxed in, and forced to protect his sister, yet you somehow managed to allow his escape!”

The assassins in attendance winced. They were simple criminals and agents brought together by the promise of a good day's pay. All they were asked to do was infiltrate a sanatorium and kill a singular man during his visit. Cordia was starting to regret her decision to send them instead of handling it herself.

“He was very fast,” one of the men offered.

“I don't care how bloody fast he was! Explain to me how he left that room without taking a bullet to the spine.”

The downtrodden man, Ben, turned to his compatriots, “He was an expert escape artist. He's clearly done this before.” The others nodded in affirmation of his account. Not only was he fleet of foot – but he also possessed magical abilities that allowed him to distract and obstruct their efforts.

“More excuses,” Cordia snapped, “I have no need of them. Surely, you're aware of the risks that we face if we continue to fail to follow orders. My head will not be the only one on the chopping block.”

None of them could offer a response that would satisfy her. She wanted to give them a dressing down for their failure and nothing else.

Ben frowned, “Is this about Lady Franzheim?”

Cordia laughed, "Lady Franzheim is the least of your worries. The best kind of puppet is one who believes that they're pulling the strings. You should worry about me instead. Lady Franzheim is not the one in control here."

There was an expression of doubt from her hired hands. Was that truly the case? Lady Franzheim was a member of an incredibly rich and powerful family. It begged to reason that she was the one giving out the orders. She wouldn't suffer the consequences should things not go in the right direction, that was what they all assumed.

"I don't believe for one moment that Caius is a genuine threat to the plan, but Lady Franzheim being in a good mood is key to ensuring a smooth progression. It is a small ask for us to find and kill him before he can speak with the police."

Even after Cordia repeatedly told her that Caius knew nothing of importance, she persisted in her belief that he posed a severe threat. Cordia's primary job was to convince her that she was in control. Refusing her orders would compromise that purpose - the true value of killing Caius was keeping Franzheim on their side. Her money and influence were key.

She crossed her arms disapprovingly, "It's lucky for you that I have contacts in the union. We'll get a second chance, but you should be aware that the police are looking out for you."

It was an abject humiliation to go to her spies and ask for his whereabouts. It was the first time in a very long time that Cordia hadn't executed a plan to perfection. She lived by a simple creed. That one should do things correctly the first time around, rather than allow mistakes to occur. Failure was not an isolated harm. A single cog in the machine running out of step would shift every other piece around it. To fail was to be selfish.

"Given the area where he disappeared, I suspect that he may have taken refuge on one of the nearby estates. They are extremely large and unwieldy. Unused buildings are a frequent sight. It's entirely possible for two people to hide there for some time without being spotted."

Clara, one of the women who posted as a patient, joined in on the discussion.

“Do you mean to say that he has a contact within the nobility?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Caius has worked as a small-time thief for years; his social circle extends no further than his criminal associates in the city. I have spies watching them closely and none have reported back with a sighting. Caius is smarter than I gave him credit for.”

And there was the matter of the mysterious interloper who tailed her to her previous safehouse. Cordia suspected that Caius was soliciting the help of someone else. Whatever the reason, Cordia was not going to allow it to happen again. Moving all of her belongings out of the previous apartment was a tedious affair. The only silver lining was that the letters she stole were carefully written to ensure that they did not incriminate those involved.

It was a mark against her pride that a stranger snuck up on her and held her at gunpoint. The perpetrator was talented. She didn’t hear a damn thing until the barrel was already pressed against the back of her skull. She must have picked the lock with genuine precision.

The risk was not to the plan of which Cordia was privy. Great pains were taken at every step to create redundancies and cut-off points that would prevent investigators from piecing together the truth. This was a matter of personal and professional principle. Nobody got one over on her and lived to tell the tale.

“All of you need to cool off. I’ll contact you again when I have something to go on,” Cordia concluded with a snap of her fingers. The miserly lot she paid for the killing gathered their bags and left in a single-file line, leaving the stern woman to her thoughts. The attack at the sanatorium was seen as a surefire way to kill Caius, but that also came with significant heat for the killers. Now, Caius was still alive – and the people she was relying on were known quantities. It was the worst of both worlds.

It was a brief moment of temperance that prevented Cordia from dumping them and handling it herself, but that would only create more work cleaning up the mess and organizing replacements.

Another figure emerged in the open doorway with a morose frown on his face.

“Oh dear. I wouldn’t be so quick to anger. It’ll make you wrinkle.”

Cordia was already in a bad mood, but being visited by Marden Booth was the only it could get worse. She rued every day in which he continued to be her best source for the information she needed. Despite his abrasive personality, he had a way of getting secrets out of people.

“What do you want?” she asked bitterly.

“I thought some good news would bring a smile to that face. The fellow you’ve been looking for was just seen on Wayland Avenue. He’s back in the city.”

That was good news, but it would take more than that to break Cordia’s eternal tense frown. She stood from her chair and took a gun from the cabinet by the window.

“I see. Given that the rest of my cohort failed to kill him at the sanatorium, it’s down to me to eliminate him.”

Marden laughed, “We disagree on a lot of matters – but your interest in doing things right the first time is all too accurate.”

“Competent help is difficult to come by these days.”

“If you ask me, he’s probably heading to one of the nearby underworld contacts for work. He probably can’t live off of his savings or relocate somewhere else.”

“Do you know which one?”

“No. That area is stuffed with them, to the gills they are. Dozens and dozens of them. I heard that he does business with a handful of them on the Avenue. You’ll have to camp out and see if you can catch him leaving.”

Cordia was not happy to hear that. She’d already spent dozens of hours watching and waiting for her moments to strike, and that was with the benefit of unsighted colleagues taking shifts.

Marden waved, “I’ll get out of your hair and leave you to it. I know how much you hate dealing with unreasonable requests from people like Lady Franzheim.”

Cordia said nothing while he dipped back into the corridor and left her to stew in her own frustration. He was a buffoon, but at least he was skilled enough to do the job. That was the singular aspect of a person that she cared about. She was willing to deal with contrasting personalities so long as they did their part.

This was not personal. Cordia didn't care about what happened to Caius. He was just another in the long line of tools she utilised to further her objectives, and the objectives of her benefactors. They'd all put their livelihoods and freedom on the line to finally be rid of the ineffectual, incompetent and illegitimate parliament - that saw themselves as superior to Walser's chosen rulers. Caius would surely understand the significance of his death if she explained it to him, yet there was no time to afford him that privilege.

Whatever crimes she and her comrades committed would be forgiven once the population discovered the indignity in which they lived and worked for so long. They'd forgotten the pride that their ancestors felt when the Van Walser house ruled with confidence, dashing their enemies from shore to shore and breaking them into nothingness. A second golden age would come by their hand, and henceforth no other nation would doubt Walser's place as the primary superpower on the continent.

Every great victory started with a small, innocuous step. In this case, killing Caius Willow and maintaining Lady Franzheim's trust. She merely needed to find him first.

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When we assembled for breakfast in one of the sitting parlours that morning, it was quickly made evidence that Caius had absconded from the manor overnight and disappeared to do whatever he was planning to do. Alice sat nervously at the table in her gown, nibbling on a piece of bread provided to us by the servants. Franklin was keeping everything in lockdown. No information was to leave the manor until he gave the word.

"I hope he knows what he's doing. As capable as he seemed from our previous meetings, I still doubt his ability to handle a threat of this scale."

Alice cleaned her mouth with a napkin and bowed her head, "I'm sorry about my brother. He always takes such impulsive action!"

"Don't apologise for him. I'm sure that those familiar with me could say the same."

Samantha gave me a knowing look.

"He said that he'd leave for a while and try to visit his friend in the city. She knows a lot of things that other people don't. He told me that he'd sent a letter here when he found out something useful."

An informant. It had been a long time since I'd worried about one of those.

"It would have been easier to tell us that himself," Samantha muttered. I concurred. The urgency he was showcasing made communicating harder. Would it have killed him to hang back and tell us this in person?

Samantha and Alice were enjoying their glimpse into the life of a rich and powerful noble daughter, primarily through their inhalation of whatever food was placed in front of them. The cooks always stocked so much food that some of it would inevitably be thrown out once it turned rotten.

That would not be a problem if these two stayed at the house long-term. I sympathized with Alice, eating nothing but hospital food for almost a year must have driven her up the wall.

The head chef was happy to have so many people in the manor to enjoy their work. Without me around, and my Father taking regular, lengthy trips away for business, they were often left without any serious work. They didn't prepare the same luxurious types of meals when we wasn't around. He was passionate about the job. He wanted to produce world-class dishes on a regular basis.

"Anyway, aren't we heading back to the academy later?" Samantha inquired.

"There isn't much we can do from here. I was planning on setting off early to ensure we returned in good time, but we can stay for a few hours longer if there is something you would like to do."

She shrugged, “I don’t have anything in particular. I was enjoying the change of scenery, but I was also hoping that you could show me around the gardens. It would be a shame to come all this way and not appreciate them.”

“I don’t mind. There are some wonderful vistas that have been cultivated by the staff over the years. My Father spares no expense in allowing them to chase whatever mad ideas they come up with.”

It was a common adage in the landscaping world that the Walston-Carter house was the best place to demonstrate your innovation and talent. My Father would pour millions of marks into ideas that caught his fancy, and they so often did. He was fickle like that, always changing things around for the sake of novelty or to say he was the ‘first’ to do it.

The most infamous of all was the twisted iron statue that he commissioned from a famous artist named Frank Dugdale. He was considered a working-class prodigy, producing abstract and terrifying forms from common industrial materials. The end result was a towering pillar of sharp edges, pipes and metal objects.

Perfect for placing in the garden of a noble manor house, obviously.

The sculpture lasted for a few months before his common sense finally got the better of him. It was moved to somewhere more appropriate - a local plaza dedicated to the work of the nearby manufactories. I didn’t have a problem with the piece, but its placement was always questionable to me. It was like a statue you’d see in a public sculpture park, and it stood in harsh contrast to the natural surroundings.

“I’d love to come with you, but Franklin said that I should stay in bed,” Alice sighed.

I gave her a reassuring smile and tried to act the part as a big sister figure, “I’m sure that there’ll be an opportunity for you to explore the gardens once you recover from the surgery. Franklin is concerned about your stitches opening up again. Ask him to give you a tour once your bedrest period is over with, he’ll be happy to oblige.”

Alice lit up, “Oh! Is Mister Franklin kind?”

I wouldn't describe him as kind, but he did have a strong sense of duty. What I liked about Franklin was that he was flexible. A lot of servants were extremely rigid in their duties and struggled to adapt to a new environment. Franklin and I were on the same page, which meant he understood what mattered to me.

"He'll do whatever I ask of him. Tell him that I was the one who suggested it. Franklin pretends he cares little for the gardens – but I've seen the way he looks when the weather is nice. He would eagerly accept an offer to spend his entire day lounging by the pond."

"We've always lived in the big city," Alice said, "When I went to the sanatorium I couldn't believe how clean the air felt, or how pretty the horizon was."

She wasn't alone. The advent of industrialisation and urban population centres meant that there were working-class citizens who'd never witnessed Walser's natural beauty with their own two eyes. It was easy to take clean air and low-density development for granted. For many, it became a luxury they could not afford.

Alice finished the last of her meal and left to return to the guest room. Franklin was going to personally keep an eye on her and make sure that no complications arose from her operation. Caius was curt on the details about what exactly they'd done. All he stated was that she was suffering from a fatal bout of a common syndrome and that the surgery was intended to correct it. With that said – it was difficult to ignore the large vertical scar that ran from the top of her chest.

Samantha was curious, "It must have been very intensive surgery to leave a scar like that. That's the sort of wound that stays behind for the rest of your life."

"Indeed. I can understand Caius' desperation to protect her from harm, regardless of how ethical his actions were in the pursuit of that goal."

Samantha was taken aback by my expression of sympathy, "I didn't expect you to forgive him like that. The other nobles at the academy would lose their heads if they were forced to reckon with a thief."

"I'm full of surprises."



Her brow furrowed, “Was that a joke?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know, was it?”

Samantha grumbled, “Ugh. I suppose you are. Every time I assume something about you, it’s proven wrong in short order.”

“It’s true of people from all walks of life that desperation can make them do strange acts. If you were to ask me the value of Caius’ behaviour, I would respond by posting that the loss of private property from the wealthy is a small sacrifice for a young girl’s life; though the victims are liable to disagree.”

Samantha nodded, “I can’t say that my family are big fans of thieves and the like, but there’s a big difference between rustling some of our animals and stealing jewellery. And now that Alice has gotten the surgery she needed, he doesn’t have a reason to keep doing it.”

That was an optimistic assessment. Criminals were creatures of habit, I knew because I was one myself. It was hard to break old habits and patterns when you were riding high on the sweet smell of success. Caius could take one of two paths. He could enjoy his freedom and start a new, honest life somewhere else, or he could feel emboldened by the control he felt and become reckless.

There wasn’t much I could do about it. He was not beholden to my whims, so I decided to focus on what was possible. Samantha would need to be given some points about how to protect herself in a dangerous situation before I’d feel safe bringing her along with me on one of my adventures.

I hoped for Alice’s sake that Caius didn’t do something stupid.

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Caius was growing paranoid ever since he returned to the city. He put on a brave face for Alice’s sake, but the truth was that their near-death experience shook him to the core. If he made the wrong choice back at the hospital – she would have died along with him. Stepping out of the Walston-Carter manor and taking them on himself

served two purposes. It kept her safe, and it promised a potential future wherein they could start a new life together.

The first step was gathering information on Cordia. Maria was kind enough to share the letters she stole from her apartment, allowing him to take examples of their handwriting with him. Gertrude could analyse them and see if she knew who was penning the orders.

Easier said than done now that a cabal of monarchist revolutionaries was tracking his every movement. It was rare to see him without his trademark suit and top hat, but they were too recognizable. This was not a situation where he needed to build his brand as a gentleman thief.

It seemed that Gertrude was expecting him given the speed at which she opened the door and scowled at him. Her hand snapped out like a coiled viper, strong fingers gripping one of his earlobes and dragging him through the threshold into the apartment.

“What the hell are you doing coming here after what happened at the sanatorium?”

Caius wrestled his way free and held out his hands to prevent her from attacking him again. She really did a number of his ear there. It felt like she was about to rip the damn thing off!

“I need your help with something,” he pleaded.

“How about you start with a bloody good apology?” she sneered, “Do you honestly think it’s okay to come here with how much heat is on your back?”

“I promise, I’ll be gone before you know it. I just need you to take a look at these and tell me if you recognise the handwriting.”

Gertrude didn’t get the chance to say no. Caius quickly pulled the notes from his pocket and placed them onto the singular blank space that he could find on the nearest table. She sighed and leaned over to inspect each in turn.

“The person who got these said that they belong to someone named Cordia, who works for one Lady Franzheim.”

“I can’t say that I’m familiar with her, but Lady Franzheim has a rather infamous reputation. She considers herself a mastermind, reaching out to mercenaries and guns-for-hire on a fairly regular basis. Most know well enough to leave her alone, it’s not worth the risk.”

“The risk?”

“Rule of thumb – stay away from people shopping for extra hands the way that she does. They’ll either stiff you, force you into a job that isn’t worth the effort, or burn you once it’s done.”

Caius snorted, “That didn’t stop a group of them from shooting up the sanatorium.”

“She may be stupid, but that’s also why she’s dangerous. She doesn’t respect the usual rules and unspoken expectations about doing illegal work.”

“And the other letters?”

Gertrude scratched the side of her head and powered up her mental library of every piece of scum from this coast to the next. The letters were distinctive. Whoever wrote them had neglected to use a typewriter to cover their personal stylings.

“These rounded A’s and flat D’s – I think they belong to a nobleman called Thersyn Bradley.”

“Just like that?” Caius asked. Gertrude was good at what she did, but recognising someone’s handwriting from a single glance? She proved her point by digging through one of the nearby piles of documents and placing them next to each other.

“This is a copy of a letter he sent to the speaker of the house from the man himself. One of my blokes was working on an unrelated job and needed it traced, so this is what we came up with.”

True to her claim they both sported those distinct round A’s and flat D’s. When they were placed next to each other the similarities were loud and clear.

“Thersyn Bradley, is he a monarchist?”

“Aye. A well-known lobbyist for them, donates a lot of money and pushes stories into the press about how toothless parliament is. Do you think he’s the one pulling the strings?”

“Goddess knows,” Caius replied, “The fact that Cordia was holding not these and not burning them makes me believe that everyone is scrapping and fighting for themselves. Look – there’s a note at the bottom.”

“Burn after reading,’ how classical of them.”

“Lady Franzheim thinks she’s in control, Cordia is resentful and gathering material to blackmail them with, and Thersyn Bradley doesn’t have them kept on a tight enough leash. It’s going to be difficult to bring their conspiracy down with so many competing interests.”

Gertrude rolled her eyes, “Why the hell are you trying to play the hero now? Grab your stuff and get out of here.”

“They’re not going to let me. I need to make sure that they don’t come for Alice again. I met an interesting person who gave us somewhere to hide out.”

“It’d be safer to make a run for it. You don’t get anything out of confronting them.”

“If they’re mad enough to shoot up a sanitorium to get at me, moving towns isn’t going to help. Do you know where Thersyn lives?”

“I know where everyone lives,” Gertrude sighed. She grabbed a small piece of paper and scribbled down the address. The man never made a secret of his living conditions.

“I’m going to snoop around and see if I can gather some evidence. Getting the police to bust the ring is going to be tough.”

Gertrude was withering, “Impossible would be more accurate. Nobles live in a different world than the rest of us. They don’t have to follow the laws, and they’re free to use that money to steer this country in a way that benefits them. That’s why the monarchists are so obsessed with bringing back the old system. It’ll make them even more powerful.”

“Don’t worry. I have an idea about how to launder it to the authorities. I made an interesting friend recently.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Caius grinned and moved to leave, but stopped as he heard the metal door at the bottom of the stairs clatter shut, followed by the sound of footsteps moving up the creaky wooden steps.

“Bugger. That must be one of them now.”

Gertrude was already opening one of the windows, “Then get out of here before they find me.”

Caius pulled the door shut and locked it using the bar, before following her orders and clambering out of the front window. The building was built to squeeze as many people into the small space as possible, so the first floor was extremely close to the road below. Caius dropped down, remembering to bend his knees and blunt the impact when he landed.

“Thank you, Gertrude. Love you!”

“Piss off you bastard!”

Caius was already off and running before they figured out their trick.