

The house was in an uproar.

Not since the Civil War had there been such a brazen attack on the seat of Walser's government. Even if it was at the hands of a conservative member for the sake of a political marriage, it exposed deep, systemic flaws in the approach that the house was taking to stamping out dissent and creating stability.

At the very first session after the building was repaired, there was a near-unanimous vote to pass a new security bill, significantly increasing the presence of guards and security officers for the associated members. Nobody noticed the irony in that the arrested conspirator was one of its biggest champions.

But as they say, a broken clock is right twice a day.

There was a collective agreement from both wings of the house that things were in a dangerous state. The attack provided ample evidence and reason to dissident groups, that they too could attack the government without facing swift retaliation. Roderro didn't have a friend left – his miscalculation could have potentially caused the collapse of the republic. Braying Monarchists and extreme Republicans were chomping at the bit to let some blood, both sides convinced that the parliamentary members were nothing more than half-baked sell-outs.

The gavel came down thrice, "Order, order! Can we please have some order in the house? We have many matters to speak on. I'd like to call the committee to attention." The debate slowed to a stop, replaced with whispers and huddled discussions that allowed the speaker to have his say.

"Our first motion is on the expulsion of Cathdra Roderro, forwarded to me by the clerk of the house."

The MPs shuffled through the aisles and found their seats as the first vote was called.

"Official proceedings to remove Cathdra Roderro from the house, to vacate his seat, and hold an election within the next thirty days has been introduced under statute thirty-one, for the crimes of which he is accused, and for damaging the confidence of the house. All in favour, please say aye."

It was unanimous from those who supported the motion, “Aye!”

“And are there any objections?”

Those who abstained from within his own party kept their silence.

The gavel snapped again, “The motion is passed without division. Cathdra Roderro is hereby expelled from the house. He will forfeit his wage and pension, and will be barred from entering the building lest the ban be upturned at this house’s behest.”

The Speaker handed the order paper back down to one of the clerks so that it could be filed away and placed into the records. Cathdra’s conduct was indefensible. It was the kind of scandal that could damage the popularity of his entire parliamentary wing, never mind his family alone. Even the distant members of his own family tree refused to stand up and speak on his behalf, what was there to say or debate?

With the vote designated for the block over, the members dispersed, some choosing to leave the chamber and head for the private offices that many of them used to discuss their next moves. This was where the glad-handing and influence currying occurred. For some – it was the only reason they attended the votes in the first place. Today, there was a special meeting being held between several leaders from within the house.

The meeting room was thick with smoke as several of the men in attendance puffed happily at a set of cigars placed in the middle of the table. Even with the windows open it was enough to make one’s eyes water.

“I’d like to thank you for bringing things to a prompt conclusion,” Fernwell Clark said to the speaker, Darian Fulmar. Darian was formerly a member of the Republican party but renounced his affiliation when he was elected to the position. He was seen as a firm and impartial hand by the others, the perfect man to wrangle the often-unruly politicians into some form of order.

“I am just performing my duty. I’m surprised that it passed without division.”

Clark nodded, “It was a terrible look for the party, but that wasn’t going to stop rabble-rousers from forcing it to a formal vote. I suppose there are some things that

even they aren't willing to forgive. It's a shame that allowing criminals into the house was the breaking point, and not anything before that."

It was very rare indeed to see the leaders of every major party in the same room together. The Republicans and Monarchists were natural enemies, and they seldom found common ground on anything at all. Only the smaller parties chose to skip it, believing that taking a stand against the establishment would boost their fortunes in the next election.

Clark was not magnanimous about Roderro's downfall, "I told the chief whip that he was nothing but trouble. The Roderros have a bad smell about them, always scheming behind the scenes and going too far. It's not the first time he's dropped us into hot water."

His Republican colleague snapped his fingers, "Okay – there's no need to drag his name through the mud now, Clark. What's done is done."

"You don't mean to defend him now, Franzheim? The people back at the headquarters are already planning a publicity push to wash the stink off of us."

"But there's a difference between saying something to the public and airing it in the drawing room. We already know what's at stake. You might find those words turned against you one day. This incident threatens the legitimacy of the entire house, and the parties who sit in it."

The Republican's squabble was silenced as another man burst through the door, "The King is here!" The scattered pockets of discussion were snuffed out like candles in the wind with the loud proclamation of his arrival.

King Thersyn Van Walser was a commanding presence. Despite the removal of much of his political power, he demanded loyalty and awe from many of the nation's citizens. He had not been defanged by the compromise – he relished the chance to engage with a new political system. He was a tall man with dark hair and cold eyes. His imperious manner was meant to serve as a beacon of stability and strength to the people, and for that purpose, he continued to dress in a manner some would call

antiquated. A large purple sash, the Van Walser's royal colours, was draped over one shoulder of his decorative military uniform and gown.

The Monarchist-conservative men sitting at the table stood at attention and bowed their heads respectfully. The Republicans would treat him with some respect, but they would never bow to him in the same way.

"I apologise for coming here on such short notice, gentlemen. I have made a selfish request of you by asking permission to enter this house."

Darian Fulmar waved it away, "Permission is given freely, sire. This is an important matter that we must address, as it pertains to the safety of all citizens within Walser."

The King was solemn, "Aye. I have heard much of the attack here, and some of the conclusions that they reach worry me greatly. There are rumblings that it is a bad omen, a signal of the Black Lady's revival." A terse silence settled over the room as cigars were extinguished and throats cleared.

Clark was slow to pour cold water on the idea, "The Black Lady? Surely you do not believe in such rampant superstition? To assert that but a single woman could transcend the eras and return from death, never mind set in motion such dramatic events..."

"I never stated my belief in it," The King replied, "Her existence is a matter of historical record – but I myself do not foresee some kind of return on the horizon. People are externalising the fear they feel about the direction of this grand ship."

"And that means that opportunists will be waiting in the wings to start the fighting again."

The King was clear, "I have no interest in fighting old battles. The matter is supposed to be settled, for that purpose did we sign the treaty."

Darian pinched his nose, "I'm afraid that reiterating that position will have no effect, Sir Clark. The King has made his will very clear to the public multiple times before, yet they persist in their rebellious activity."

Clark was incandescent, “Bah! For what purpose do they take their seats in parliament then? For a group who claims to revile the new legislature so much, they don’t seem to mind enjoying the scenery while they’re here. I have half a mind to give them a clip around the ear!”

The King folded his hands into his lap and focused his gaze upon the flag that hung from the chamber’s roof. Clark’s boastful violence was inappropriate speech in front of a member of the royal family, not that he was a man to care about station. The rest of the Republican members were not impressed. The Monarchists had heard that kind of language a thousand times before.

“The time for guillotines and show trials is over,” Darian declared, “That was the premise by which we all agreed to form this greatest of legislatures. A machine for compromise in a rapidly changing world. I firmly believe that it has been a success. The citizens feel more represented, like their voices and votes have weight. Meanwhile, the Van Walser house remains the pride of many.”

A chorus of ‘aye’s’ responded in kind.

The King nodded, “I concur. I could not abide seeing our own people destroy each other for the sake of enshrining our family. We may have been chosen by the Goddess to lead, but we also owe our position to those whom we command.”

He knew all too well that their passion for the Van Walser house was not attached to any one member. The shifting tides of monarchist opinion were well and truly fickle. A pretender to the throne came and went like the changing of the seasons, so long as they posited a belief in an exceptional, nostalgia-tinged Walser that they all dreamt of. The figurehead did not matter to them. This was about ideology. It was a harsh lesson to learn, to see his words fall on deaf ears and for the violence to continue unabated.

They were not doing this in his name, nor did they do it for his sake.

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“So, what do you like to do in your free time?”

I peered over the edge of my book to Samantha, who was playing with a lock of her hair in the seat across from me.

“What I like to do?”

“Yeah – hobbies, favourite subjects. I know you don’t spend much time with friends, so I was curious.”

I stared at her and tried to formulate an answer that didn’t make me sound like even more of a psychopath. Unfortunately, most of my time before my revelation at the theatre was spent in a state of abject paranoia. Even though I was now taking a more relaxed stance on things, that didn’t mean I was flush with hobbies, friends and stories to tell. Samantha’s smile dropped as she inferred my real answer through the silence.

“Oh, so you don’t really do any of that stuff.”

“Unless you count shooting, no, and I’ve even stopped doing that since I got what I wanted out of it.”

“A cabinet full of trophies?”

“No. I was stealing bullets the whole time.”

“You were stealing them? I thought you were from a rich family.”

I hushed my voice to keep it from leaking to outside ears, “I am, but what do you think my Father would say if I asked him for so much ammunition? I didn’t want to make him suspicious.”

Samantha gave me a pitying look, complete with watering eyes and a quivering bottom lip, “And that’s why you were so resistant to having friends because you didn’t know the joy that came with connecting with other people.”

I grimaced, “I was more worried about them being killed if I’m being perfectly honest. I’m more than capable of understanding the appeal of knowing other people, but if you keep speaking like that I’m going to retract my conditional offer of friendship post-haste.”

She wiped that sympathy from her features really quickly after that.

“And aside from that – I find most of the people at the academy extremely tedious. I have little time or interest in engaging with them when their singular focus is on using me as a way to enhance their reputation.”

Samantha nodded, “Ah. I understand. I heard what they were talking about before the lessons started, and I realised that you wouldn’t be interested in things like that. Like how their horses or doing, or who’s going out with who.”

I scoffed, “Oh, I am certain that those relationships will last for a very long time indeed.”

“Will they?”

“No, that was sarcasm.”

“I’ve never heard you be sarcastic before.”

“There are a lot of things I don’t do around other people. What do you do with your free time, since you’re so invested in drilling me for answers?”

Samantha hummed, “Back home, I liked looking after our animals. I was hoping that some of those noble girls and I could find some common ground over it – but they all turned their noses up at me because we don’t use them for dressage.”

“Heavens forbid that a horse be used for work.”

“I know! I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. So what if they pull some of our rigs around? We probably treat those boys better than they do, and we don’t have any fancy-pants heated stables either! It’s like they don’t know where all the food they eat comes from.”

“They don’t,” I observed, “It’s all news to them.”

When you combined the stupidity of a child with the confident ignorance of a noble, you were bound to find those who lacked concrete knowledge on anything you could think of. To them learning something new was not a valuable activity, nor was the information worthy of occupying any space within the brain. After all, they’d never find themselves in a position where they needed to know how farming worked, or any

other common job that formed the bedrock of modern society. They didn't think that the work was easy, they thought it was utterly beneath them and worthy of contempt.

Samantha sighed and rested atop her palms, "I still don't know why you're so well-studied, considering that the other girls our age don't seem to know much at all."

"Is that really the part that strikes you as the most unusual? Not the way that I mercilessly killed two dozen people?"

"I wouldn't say it was mercilessly," she argued, "But aside from that – I'm curious as to how you have such a broad range of knowledge."

"I like to read," I responded simply.

Samantha didn't buy it, "You're doing that thing you do when you lie."

"What thing?"

Samantha held up her hand and made a strange motion with her fingers, "You always tense the tips of your fingers like this. I noticed it a few weeks ago, and since then I can't not see it when you tell one of those lies by omission."

"What good is the truth if you aren't willing to believe it?"

"You don't know whether I'll believe it or not, you won't even tell me."

"I know you will not believe it, because I'm unsure if I believe it myself. It is a preposterous, silly thing to say out loud in my own company, never mind with you. Am I not allowed to have a few secrets of my own? You already know the most important one."

Samantha stopped imitating my tic and conceded, "Alright. I have a bunch of stuff I don't want people cowing about either, none of it as... life-changing as yours though."

"Do those secrets involve the animals you claim to be so fond of?"

"No comment."

I closed the book I was reading, "Why is it so hard to find any information on Nihilist Magic? I've scoured every damned book in this study, and yet there's nary a mention of it at all."

“When I asked Miss Jennings, she told me that a lot of people consider it the domain of the Black Lady, which brings ill luck upon those who learn of it. I don’t believe any of that rubbish – but they try to keep it out of the textbooks to avoid offending people.”

“Why did you ask Miss Jennings?” I inquired.

“Oh, I was learning about Regenerative techniques and saw it mentioned as a cyclical opposite.”

Samantha’s regeneration magic saved Claude’s life, so it was a good thing that she found herself so interested in it.

Think of the devil and he shall appear, because Claude soon made his arrival to the study in the most bombastic way possible. The doors swung so hard that they smashed against the wall. He limped his way into the study and shouted so loud that everyone on the damn campus could hear him in the process. “Did you hear? Adrian Roderro just turned up at the front gate!” he panted.

“He’s back already?” Samantha gasped.

I returned my book and resigned myself to the fact that I wasn’t going to get much studying done on Nihilist Magic for the time being, not with Claude shredding his vocal chords to pieces to share what would soon be common knowledge.

“He was never suspended from the school,” I added, “I believe that Felipe and Beatrice may have a thing or two to say to him though.”

Even to the end, Adrian’s Father had insisted that his son was not involved in his plot. Given that Adrian was still a minor and there was no evidence connecting him to the crime, there was never a real risk of him being convicted on the same offences. It was purely for the sake of salvaging his reputation amongst the noble class.

Whether it worked or not would largely depend on the families pre-existing opinions on the Roderro house. They didn’t win many fans when the truth came out, but there were a few dedicated defenders of their position, some who believed that matrilineal marriage shouldn’t be permitted when it came to inheriting the family business.

Compromise was such a dirty word.

I followed them both out of the study and to the front yard, where a small group of spectators had gathered to see the world's most evil man step through the front gates. His carriage pulled to a stop, and Adrian stepped out looking every bit as miserable as he must have felt. I did not envy the amount of work it took to manage a noble house, even one with few members like his. A few jeers were thrown his way by troublemakers. He ignored them, and that was how I knew that his mood wasn't improved by anything happening in his life.

I held back and observed from a distance. Adrian did not stick around to meet and greet his legions of loyal fans. He stormed through the huddle and marched towards the head office to re-enrol without sparing a word.

"Bloody hell, he has a face like thunder," Claude chuckled.

"I'd be upset in his position as well," I said, "Now he's going to have to deal with a negative reputation that he had no part in creating."

Claude winced, "Ah, sorry."

What a worthless apology. I didn't accept that he'd changed his ways just because he got a gunshot to the waist. Once his timidness faded into nothing, it would be back to business as usual. He was only staying out of my way because Samantha was endeavouring to befriend me. It was easy to see the ways he separated himself from the group if he already knew that I was going to be around.

"But how can you be so sure that he didn't have a say in things?" he asked.

"It would be highly unusual if this entire plot was launched at his behest. I understand that some parents are willing to do anything for their children, but conspiracy to commit murder may be a step too far for most."

Claude accepted my reasoning and left the argument there. There was no evidence for either side of the argument anyway. I was the person who supposedly disliked him the most of all, though in reality, I understood him better than anyone else too. His route was never my favourite, and the arrest of his father was a sudden turn in a story

that I thought I already knew, but none of that meant he was a fundamentally different person to the Adrian from the original game. There were some redeeming qualities hidden under that abrasive outer shell.

“All of the other students have spun up the rumour mill,” Claude observed.

“It’s hard not to hear what they’re saying, but I doubt any of them have the nerve to say it to him directly.”

The Teacher’s attempts to keep people from talking were always doomed to fail. The campus was too large and held too many private spaces for them to effectively wage information warfare against us. Nothing short of gagging the main offenders was going to put a stop to it. One of the nattering girls at the head of the peanut gallery turned her attention to me and Samantha. Loud enough for us to hear, she bemoaned the state of things.

“Hmph. I suppose those stories about Maria being with that commoner were true after all.”

I didn’t want to listen to this inane rubbish. I took my leave with Samantha and Claude in pursuit. Samantha wasn’t that affected by it, but she seemed to think that I was upset.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing I haven’t heard before. I have thicker skin than they do. If I were to unleash my scorn upon them it would only look bad for me.”

“Are you telling me that the way you kept putting Adrian down was a half-measure?” Claude gasped. “I shudder to think what it’s like when you’re really mad.”

As we approached the main thoroughfare of the campus’ largest building, Adrian rounded the corner and ran right into me, too distracted with a pocket watch that he was holding in one hand to notice us approaching. He clung onto it for dear life as he lost his footing and nearly fell over.

“Hey, watch where you’re going, Adrian,” Claude said on my behalf.

“Sorry,” he replied plainly. That was odd. He wouldn’t turn down an opportunity to get into an explosive argument for anything. His brain spooled up again a moment later when he noticed that he’d walked into me. “Actually, this is perfect. Can I have a word with you, Maria?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Claude and Samantha didn’t agree, but it wasn’t their choice to make. We split apart and Adrian led me towards the dorms so that we could find a quiet spot to chat. Adrian sneered at me from the fore, “I’m sure that you’re overjoyed with the news of my Father’s arrest.”

“I have no idea why you have this vindictive impression of me. A bit of verbal sparring does not mean I’m wishing for horrible things for you and your family. I don’t care one bit about your father, or that is to say; I’m happy that his idiotic scheme was stopped before it killed someone, I’m not ‘happy’ that you’re miserable because of it.”

Adrian came out with a surprising conclusion, “I’m not miserable. He only has himself to blame. He’s always trying to meddle in my business, even when I tell him not to. What kind of idiot would arrange an assassination as obvious as that? He deserves every bit of that sentence in my opinion.”

“I see.”

“But that doesn’t mean I’m going to enjoy dealing with everyone’s questions about what I know, or how I feel about it. I’m starting to understand why you have such scant patience for them.”

“Is that all you want to say? It’s rare for you to ask me for anything.”

Adrian paused beneath one of the archways that led into the courtyard, “I’d like to apologise for my Father’s actions. As the head of the Roderro family, it is my responsibility to extend my condolences to those affected.” He angled his face away so I couldn’t see what emotion was tinging his words.

“Am I the first person you’ve apologised to?”

“I decided to get the hardest one out of the way first.”

He considered me a more difficult apology than the person that his Father was actually trying to kill? He really didn't feel anything for Felipe and Beatrice. His pride was more important than going to the source and confronting the real victims.

"I needn't hear an apology from you. Felipe and Beatrice do, and your family's penance will be paid in jail time. What judgement do you expect from me?"

He sighed, "I expected you to needle me, as you always do. Did you know that some of the people I called friends have already turned their backs on me? I'm beginning to learn where their true loyalties lie."

"I'm no friend. And as I said, I'm not so petty as to mock something as serious as this. You should find Felipe and speak with him before you worry about me." I was no social butterfly – but Adrian was starting to make me question whether he understood the value of an apology.

"Fine. I'll do that."

He cut a lonesome figure as he meandered his way across the yard and through into the opposite building. I leaned back against the wall and shook my head. He was going to have a tough time of it now, and it was all thanks to his Father...

