

It was a first for Adrian to humiliate himself, repeatedly, for the sake of his Father.

Normally he was happy to let his Father fool himself into believing that he cared about his plans or opinions, if only to keep the man quiet and away from his life at the academy. That was his first mistake. His meddling had gone far beyond his worst expectations, transforming into a greedy play for power that besmirched the reputation of the family and forced all of the responsibility onto his head.

What really upset him was the pitiful appearance that his Father took when he visited him in custody. He did it to himself, so the downtrodden persona he put on only outraged him further.

“Arsehole...”

Adrian stared at the golden pocket watch on the desk in his dorm room. It may as well have been a pair of handcuffs for all that it represented. Adrian was now the head of the family. It was bestowed to the head so that they could protect themselves and the house from danger. A one-time use ticket to a point in the past of their choosing.

There were some complications though.

Using it did not revert the body. He would remain the same age as he was when he activated the recall spell. It was seldom used – but every house head was given the same advice, refresh the recall point regularly just in case. Repeating years of your life over again was not worth the advantage it offered in potentially avoiding disaster. Simple actions could make the difference between life and death. No grand plans were needed.

Adrian wasn't aware of the true nature of the timepiece until his Father handed it over. It was a closely kept secret by the family, and with the branches struggling to have sons and daughters, the number of people who knew that truth was dwindling by the year. Cathdra drove himself mad with worry about a future where the Roderro clan died out not by intent, but through bad luck. His brother, Adrian's uncle, had passed away of an illness a few years before. Adrian's cousin died in an accident a few months later and terminated the branch. That was the catalyst for Cathdra's desperate and illegal actions.

But Adrian couldn't care less for the future of his family. Everyone around him were obsessed with securing a legacy which they would never live to see or benefit from. What good was living a life paralysed through that kind of paranoia? Life was life. You could live in a space of self-torment, or you could accept it for what it was and try to enjoy it. Lying back on the bed, Adrian wanted to forget about his troubles and enjoy a restful sleep before the drama started again the following morning.

The biggest surprise to him was Maria's reaction to his Father's arrest. She was always sharp tongued, and that venom was not reserved for him alone. Maria was sensitive and quick to anger. She had a very particular set of likes and dislikes that would earn her praise or scorn respectively, and she was not above cheap shots if it upset the person she was in a spat with. For her to hold back on making any comments about the situation was unusual in his eyes. Her discretion told her that it wasn't an appropriate subject to make light of.

The rest of the student body were not so restrained. It was impossible for him to close his eyes and ears to the whispers that swirled around him like a hurricane. That was to be expected. Even the mundane was warped into a big deal. A real, genuine piece of subterfuge designed to murder one of the other students was the most exciting thing to ever happen on the academy's grounds. The only measure of protection was his fearsome reputation as the year's shortest-tempered delinquent, but when they thought he wasn't close enough to hear they really let loose with the barbs.

It took all of Adrian's patience not to march over there and make his opinion on them known. He was working hard to make sure that his reputation could recover somewhat, and picking fights would only set him back. It was harder than he first believed to show contrition. Contrition for a crime that he had no part in, contrition for a crime that came about because his Father always had to know best.

He wasn't looking so smart now – unshaven and shackled in a prison cell.

A complicated cocktail of feelings was present. Part of him wanted to laugh at the state he was in, another was angry at the abdication of responsibility he'd unknowingly walked into, and the final was that of Adrian as a younger boy, a boy that was now without parental guidance in a complicated world. There was no getting

around it. There would be people trying to take advantage of his family's situation now that Cathdra was imprisoned.

It was playing hell on his sleep schedule. Adrian couldn't will himself to rest no matter how tightly he shut his eyes and tried to ward away the intrusive thoughts. He slipped under the covers and stared at the ceiling above his bed. It was easy to lose track of time when you were incapable of sleeping. How much time was being wasted by his restless mind? Minutes felt like hours, but a state of half-awareness could mean that hours passed in seconds.

Adrian marked each noise that came from the outside. Feet slamming against the wooden floors, people talking after curfew, and the shuffling of furniture from the rooms on either side of his own. But one noise made him jolt. It was the sound of his outside door being unlocked.

Adrian was one of the lucky few whose room came with a balcony that looked out into one of the gardens. The rooms were allocated by random lots, but accommodating the students with a luxurious dorm was always a priority. Adrian hoped he was simply hearing things, but the rattling intensified. Someone was there, silhouetted through the curtains that covered his balcony.

A thousand different culprits ran through his mind. An assassin spurned by the actions of his father and out for revenge, or one hired by the parents to issue payback for the danger that their children were placed in. He ducked under his covers and pretended to be asleep as the door swung open and a strong breeze rolled through. Peering from under the blanket, he spied an unusually dressed man in a three-piece suit, domino mask and top hat.

He looked at the bed and smiled to himself. Adrian kept quiet as the trespasser quickly moved towards his desk and wardrobe. It looked like revenge wasn't on the menu. He started by investigating the drawers, and then the wardrobe itself – though Adrian found his eyes rolling when the man gasped in realisation once he spotted the golden watch laying on the desk. Thievery it was. Adrian was going to be damned before he let some two-bit thief steal a family heirloom.

He kicked the covers away and leapt out of bed, with a finger outstretched and a scowl on his face.

“Thief! Get your hands off of my watch, this instant!”

The besuited man slipped the timepiece into his pocket and smirked cockily. His other hand reached under the hem of his cap and held it outwards in a dramatic, bat-like pose.

“I am no mere thief, young man! Remember this evening well, for you have been visited by the world’s most famous gentleman criminal! I am Caius Willow, the rose-bearing phantom!”

“I don’t give a damn who you are,” Adrian spat, “You’re going to put that back where you found it or you’re going to be in for a world of hurt!”

This was a targeted attack, of that Adrian was certain. Someone talked about the true nature of the timepiece – someone who was close enough to the family to know what it was capable of. Why else would he break into his room and go straight for it? Any normal thief would assume that there was little of value in a school dorm room, even if it was dedicated to educating the rich and powerful.

“A young gentleman like you isn’t going to harm me.”

“You wanna’ bet?”

“Those who know me have learned to never put money against me!”

Adrian ran towards the balcony door and slammed it shut, standing guard to prevent him from getting out. Rather than confront him or come to blows the flamboyant thief merely wagged his index finger and moved to the other exit. With a snap of his finger and a jostle of the door-knob, it was opened from the inside. Adrian even went to the effort to lock it with his key before trying to sleep. The stranger somehow circumvented the mechanism without touching it.

“These dorm rooms are so low tech,” he lamented to a steaming Adrian, “To think that the bright future of our nation is living and learning here. Any old criminal can break in and do whatever they please!”

“Are you stupid? The entire student body is out there. You’re going to get caught.”

The man laughed, “And how do you think I got onto this campus? Your armed guards aren’t worth the money spent – and I can slip through this academy building with nary a peep from the uninitiated. It’s time for me to take my leave.”

He tipped his hat and turned around, only to come face-to-face with a girl small in stature but intimidating in malicious presence. It was Maria.

“Who are you?” she asked - completely oblivious to the scenario that was playing out behind formerly closed doors. Caius was not in the mood to answer any more questions. He turned on his heel and tried to make a break for it down the hallway, only to be stopped dead and dragged back as an unusually forceful hand tugged on the back of his cape.

“Alright, I can tell that you are bad news,” she concluded. Caius couldn’t believe what he was seeing. A young girl almost half his height was demonstrating an ungodly feat of strength.

“He stole my bloody watch!” Adrian yelled. Several other students poked out from their rooms to see what the fuss was about.

“Ah! A pervert! A pervert broke into the dorms!” one of the girls cried.

“I am not a pervert!” Caius replied, trying in vain to wrench his cape free from the stubborn girl pulling back against him. Sensing that she was merely delaying his escape as a means of capturing him – drastic action had to be taken. He snapped his fingers again and a bout of flame ignited the cloth that connected them. The silken fabric quickly caught alight and tore into two pieces. He staggered forward and made a break for it once again.

“You son of a…” Maria growled.

Adrian nearly toppled over as Maria broke out into a sprint and started chasing the man down the hallway like a predator. She was not holding back. The rest of the students watched in awe. The gap closed rapidly and Caius was starting to sweat. What on Earth were they feeding these kids?

Caius wasn't going to let himself get rattled by one random girl! He was the thief extraordinaire, the dirty secret that every noble family relied on to pilfer important items and collect valuable information. This was a job that he couldn't afford to mess up. The pay being offered for the watch was simply too much for him to refuse, and spoke to the profound importance that it held in the process. He'd carefully planned out every step of his entry and exit, learning the layout of the academy before even attempting to enter one of the dorms.

The young man was onto something by stopping him from leaving via the balcony, but he also had several backup plans in place just in case. All he needed to do was reach his secondary exit and slip away over the fence, leaving the guards none-the-wiser as to the crime committed right beneath their noses. That was the intention anyway, but the girl who confronted him outside of the bedroom door was still following him, and she showed no signs of slowing down or getting tired.

As they exited the dorm hallway and came into the first study, Caius smirked. There was no way that she knew what he was planning to do next. He tucked his head and hurried his pace to open a gap between him and his young pursuer. Nobody was able to stop him now. He was moving too quickly for any bystanders to step in and restrain him, and it seemed that even the mystery girl had given up and peeled away.

Caius smiled to himself – another job well done. All he needed to do now was reach his other exit and sneak back over the fence before the armed guards heard about what was going on. Caius impressed himself sometimes. There was a reason his name was spoken of with such hushed tones, and tales of his daring do featured in newspapers and pulp novels across the nation. He was a fantasy brought to life, a master thief who could evade any justice and steal any item he pleased.

His smirk did not last for long.

From the left she reappeared like a cannonball in flight, hooking her arms around his waist and forcing him up and down onto his back. The breath left his lungs in one great gasp as her head pressed against his gut. They both hit the ground with a worrying thud, though Caius was on the worst end of things, almost smashing the back of his head against the marble floor.

“Show’s over,” she quipped, scrambling around his back and pulling his arm into a lock. Adrian and the others arrived on the scene to see Maria Walston-Carter wrestling a fully-grown man to the floor and holding him captive.

“How did you catch up with him?” Adrian asked.

“I knew he was going to come this way. It’s the closest exit.”

Caius froze up. She’d read him like an open book the entire time! But what good would he be as a thief if he didn’t have a backup plan for his backup plan? Surely a girl her age wouldn’t be able to beat him in a test of strength. Caius had fought his fair share of police officers and detectives in his time. Getting out of holds like this was a cinch. He rocked back and forth and started to get up onto his feet. Maria kept a firm hold of his arm, refusing to let go even as he did so.

“Just give it up. You can’t get out of this.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure, little lady. I’ve been in bigger pinches than this!”

Adrian was filled with scorn, “Give my back the watch, you bastard! How do you live a life where you debase yourself with this idiotic circus act?”

“Circus act? I’m afraid that you don’t understand the art which I am so well versed in, young man. My crimes are each pieces worthy of a place in the most prestigious of galleries!”

Manipulating his fingers into the correct position, he cast yet another spell. A blinding flash was projected into the air in front of the crowd. Maria recoiled as her vision was stolen in an instant. He used every second of the opportunity he created and wrested control from her, using a flair of his burnt cape to cover his movements. He waited no longer to espouse his qualities to his adoring fans – instead choosing to run to the window and leap through onto the balcony.

“Farewell, and remember to tell your friends about me!” From his pocket he retrieved a blue rose and tossed it onto the ground, before jumping from the first floor and disappearing from sight.

When Maria’s vision returned, there was no sign of him.

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“What the bloody hell was that?” Adrian yelled, “He stole my watch!”

Once everybody had calmed down and the prefects were informed about the break in, I tried to piece together what ‘that’ was exactly. He made no secret about his motivations – but that only spurred forth another set of questions that were no less baffling.

“Of course, I want it back, it’s a family heirloom!” Adrian argued. Claude made himself known, if only to posit like the detective he thought he was. He immediately launched into a fierce debate with Adrian about how important the watch really was.

“You could easily buy another watch that looks exactly like that one. I don’t care how much sentimental value it has – you’re acting weird!”

Though on this occasion he was onto something. Adrian’s reaction was unusual in the extreme. He was flustered and angry like always, but also defensive about the details as to why the watch held so much significance to him. The thief targeted it for a reason, why else would he risk breaking into such a heavily guarded campus just for one item? Nobody else reported anything of theirs being taken.

“Why can’t you just accept that I want it back? He broke in here and stole something that belongs to me, you’d be doing the same thing if it happened to you! Every head of the Roderro house carries that watch with them, and now it’s in the hands of some damnable clown!”

I shifted between joining in and keeping silent several times while the spat continued.

“He targeted you for a reason, Adrian. There’s something about that watch that you aren’t telling us, something that he knows that we don’t.”

Adrian rolled his eyes, “And you want me to spill all of our family secrets? I don’t see how that changes anything. It’s not like you lot are going to be tracking him down.”

“It might give us an idea as to why they stole it,” Claude reasoned.

“I’m not telling you anything, Claude.”

Max walked into the study, “What in the Goddess’s name is all this noise? I’m trying to sleep.”

“Someone broke into Adrian’s room and stole his watch,” Samantha explained.

“What, another student?”

“No, he was too old to be a student.”

Max sat at one of the tables, “Can’t we go a week without something happening at this school? How do they keep letting these people in?”

With Adrian being unwilling to divulge any further details and everyone else left in a state of shock and worry about yet another crime being committed in the building, Claude stroked his chin and seemed to catch on to something important. He held up his finger, before dropping it again as he thought twice. After some hesitancy, he decided to air his theory.

“You know, this reminds me of something.”

Max leaned back and swung on the chair, “It does?”

Claude followed his instincts and strolled over to the fiction section of the study’s bookshelves. The tip of his finger travelled down the spines of each book, assisted by his legendary familiarity with the subject matter of his interest. He pulled one of the books out and flipped through the pages until he found what he was looking for.

“I have a vague recollection of a robbery just like this one, and it came from this book. In fact – I think he’s stealing his act from the criminal in this novel. That blue rose he threw onto the balcony was a Sankiss Cordon, they only grow those overseas so he’d have to import them.”

Max stopped swinging and caught on to what Claude was implying, “The only organisation that does is the Abdah Trading Company.”

“Really? I suppose that makes sense, given the size of it. It isn’t just the rose, but the costume, and the way he speaks and operates. They’re lifted directly from the character in here, his name is Sabbath, a self-declared gentleman thief and former circus mage.”

Adrian looked over his shoulder, “He’s a fan of this book, then.”

“He must be. The references are too specific to ignore. He’s a very influential character in these detective novels.” For once, Claude was actually offering some decent insight through his real-world knowledge.

Max offered some of his own titbits, “But if I’m remembering correctly – those roses are very expensive. The reason our company imports them is because some nobles view them as a status symbol, especially if they have roots in Charcene where they’re grown. To use them as some sort of calling card he must be confident in his financial security.”

Adrian backed away, “So what? It’s not like we can go around every florist in the country and ask them if they saw some idiot in a mask and top-hat. He might have stolen them too.”

Claude chuckled, “You underestimate the power of inference. Things like this can help build a criminal’s profile, and from that you can guess as to where they’ll strike next. Whether he’s capable of recognising it or not, he still has preferences and biases that shape the way he behaves.”

Adrian was not convinced.

Claude had that sparkle in his eyes again, the one that came about whenever he started acting like a detective. It looked as if the gunshot wasn’t quite the humbling moment I believed it to be. At least he wasn’t making wild accusations before parsing through the evidence first. But I concurred with Adrian. Knowing the type of flower he was leaving behind wasn’t going to help us.

“Now that he’s taken Adrian’s watch, I doubt that he will return to the campus.”

“But I read that criminals always return to the scene of the crime.”

“Do you honestly think that he’s going to come back to the academy after getting away? He already knew what he was looking for when he came here. Someone gave him that information and paid him for the robbery.”

Adrian snapped back, “There’s no way that anyone but me knows about the real value of that watch.”

“That’s for sure, you won’t even tell us why you want it back so bad,” Claude sighed.

I understood his frustration, but Adrian reserved the right to keep that kind of information private if he wanted to. We weren’t the people being assigned to investigate this crime. The long and short of it was that the watch was now missing, potentially in the hands of a person who wanted it badly enough to hire an ostentatious thief to get it. There was a secret to the watch that he was not willing to extoll.

I stepped between Adrian and Claude, “There’s no need to worry ourselves over it. We are students first and detectives last. You should leave it to the professionals. We hardly have the legal authority to start investigating for ourselves.”

“That didn’t stop you from chasing him down like a bloodhound,” Claude laughed.

Adrian nodded, “That’s true. I thought she was fast during the physical exam, but she was nothing more than a blur when she realised what he was trying to do. Why did you go to so much effort to stop him?”

“Thievery is uncouth,” I offered simply. In all honesty I’d gotten swept up in proceedings and broke character. Maria didn’t have a reason to chase him down with such bloodlust. I reminded myself to keep things more believable in the future.

“She totally got swept up in it…” Samantha prodded.

“I’m not complaining. I just found it odd,” Adrian concluded, “There’s no point in standing around here and complaining now. He’s gotten away and the police have been informed by the teachers. We should go back to sleep. I don’t imagine that they will suspend lessons again just because of this.”

It was getting late, and Claude would not be able to operate on any less than seven hours of sleep. I pushed away from the wall and headed back into the main hallway without saying another word. This whole situation stunk of the dramatic convention. Adrian insisting that none of us were going to get involved was the loudest invitation to the contrary that I could imagine.

Another important event was on the horizon, and none of us would be able to escape its gravity.