

The time had come for Rentree's meeting to take place at the Franzheim estate.

Beside Duchess Rentree and Carides Franzheim, a laundry list of notable people from above the middle counties were in attendance for what was supposedly a meet and greet slash business planning session. The truth was that every person in attendance was a participant in a criminal scheme to undermine Walser's parliament and reinstate King van Walser to the throne.

Of course, this meeting of minds was not publicized anywhere. Not only were many of them conscious about being discovered, but the security considerations that would be needed for so many influential people were already complex enough. Cordia and Marco had brought two dozen guards into the estate to watch every angle of entry.

"Are you certain that they won't be able to get into the building?" Rentree asked.

Cordia nodded, "I've personally seen to it that there is not a single gap in the exterior screen. I have four men positioned on each side of the property in an unconventional location, and men posted on each entryway into the bottom floor. Finally – I and the rest will be personally patrolling the corridors outside of the meeting room."

"And the assassin?"

"He's been a profound disappointment, but he is present and accounted for. At worst, he can serve as a good meat shield to protect the rest of us."

"I hope that you're right. What does Franzheim think now that she knows you've been working for me since the start?"

"She claims that she suspected as much already – though I believe that she's attempting to appear savvier than she really is. She doesn't want to show a weak hand before the meeting begins."

"And the others? What's the temperature?"

Cordia shook her head, "They are not feeling optimistic about our plan. The Thersyn situation has caused many of them to think again about supporting us."

Rentree scowled, “I should have never invited that moron. Not only was he a Scuncath, but he didn’t burn his letters! The one thing I expect everyone to do without question.”

Cordia withheld her true opinion about Thersyn and his selection. Rentree should have known better than to trust a gossip merchant like him. Cordia was convinced that once the plan was executed he’d use those letters to blackmail them or to publish embarrassing information into his newspapers. He was a shock jockey first and a monarchist second.

But Cordia was not the one making the decisions, and she had to admit that controlling the media landscape would be essential to cementing support for their restoration efforts. The newspapers had increasingly emerged as kingmakers for politicians across the nation, who were now catching on to the power they wielded in shaping public opinion.

“My Lady – it may be troublesome to convince them now.”

“I know!” Rentree snapped, “But we can hardly afford to sit here twiddling our thumbs with such an existential threat to our efforts. I will put forth my best and most well-meaning intentions to them, and we shall see where the dice fall.”

They powdered out of the guest room and into the main artery that ran through the house's third floor. Carides Franzheim was a second-rate member of the family, but there was nothing second-rate about her personal residence. It would be easy to mistake it for the main family home.

Aside from the extra security, there were many attendants and servants who came with the other guests. All of them were carefully vetted, with a specific restriction for staff who’d been on the payroll for longer than three years. Erecting such barriers was an easy and effective way to prevent bad actors from sneaking into the premises. Every guest room was now occupied, though many of them would not be staying overnight.

This was all about business.

They were expecting to go home convinced, or disillusioned with Rentree's plan, with little in the way of ambiguity. Rentree was one of the first to enter the chamber in which the meeting was due to occur, not wanting them to have the chance to discuss their positions before she got the first word. Allowing uncertainty to ferment between them would make her job harder.

Franzheim shot her a glare that bordered on malicious as she entered. She hadn't directly spoken of some of the insulting language which Rentree used in her letters to the others, but it was obvious to Cordia that she was rightly upset about it. For all of the Duchess' gesticulating about being equal partners, she treated many of them with open disdain.

But Franzheim was not the sort of person to air that kind of grievance in a public setting. She decided that discretion was the best approach. Nothing productive would come from challenging Rentree directly on her statements, Rentree already knew full well that Franzheim was angry with her.

The tension in the room increased progressively with the arrival of each reformist; businessman Mark Wolfe, socialite Jane Gladys, nobleman Frank Durmarch, and industrialist Mer Cobb. They were the key targets that Rentree was trying to sway, who were both essential to the plan and the closest to splitting from the group. They silently drifted through to their seats like family members attending the gravest of wakes.

Cordia stood at the door and waited for Franzheim to make her opening statement.

"I have to thank all of you for coming here today under these less-than-ideal circumstances. We are rapidly approaching an important juncture for the restoration of the monarchy, with the legislative elections on the horizon and a strong republican coalition forming – it is now more important than ever for us to take action."

There was polite applause to signal the beginning of the meeting, but the looks of concern being sent her way were not going to be banished so easily with a few reaffirming words. Rentree was forced to do something she very rarely did, show repentance to others.

“There is one major topic that we cannot ignore now that we are here in person. Thersyn Bradley has been credibly accused of murder after firemen discovered a body in the ruins of his home. I do not know if the rumours of his Scuncath affiliation are true – but he is no longer a part of our number regardless.”

She turned to Franzheim.

“Unfortunately, he did not heed the instructions given to him when he volunteered. Thersyn Bradley, aside from the offences making headlines right now, was also incorrectly retaining the correspondence he received from I, Lady Franzheim, and several more of you.”

There was a murmur of discontent from the table.

“I can only offer my apologies for this oversight. Despite my attempts to stress the importance of cooperation with our security policy, he saw fit to defy those standards and collect them for an unknown purpose.”

Franzheim gave her a glare that made it clear that it wasn't enough.

“And... additionally, we believe that someone, perhaps responsible for the arson attack on his house, got their hands on those very same letters.”

That murmur of discontent exploded into a torrent of disbelieving outrage. Rentree kept her silence as the other members roared in protest about the potential of someone being able to expose them to the police. It took five minutes for the rancour to quiet down and allow her to speak once more.

“Lady Franzheim has received an anonymous letter outlining their demands. They intend to stop our scheme before it can see its resolution by peeling away individual members.”

Mark Wolfe raised his hand.

“Yes, Mister Wolfe?”

He spoke gruffly and curtly, “What sort of threat does this pose? Are we in significant danger of being investigated?”

Rentree tried to talk around it, “Given that the culprit sent an anonymous letter to Lady Franzheim – I have reason to believe that they presently have no intention of turning over the letters to the authorities. I’ve made extra preparations within the investigative division just in case. If we can maintain our present posture and complete our task, they will have bigger matters to attend to than sniffing around our affairs.”

He was not convinced, “You say that – yet we’ve no guarantee that you’ll succeed in restoring the Van Walser family to their rightful place. What say you to the idea we back away and bide our time?”

He wasn’t speaking literally, he was hoping for an effective pitch from Rentree about their future prospects. Rentree was worried about this. She couldn’t see the future. If they weren’t willing to risk their own liberty for the sake of saving Walser, then why did they join the movement in the first place? It was a craven type of politics.

Jane Gladys arrived to save her bacon, “We do not have time to bide, Mister Wolfe. The upcoming election will determine the course of the nation. If the Republicans win an outright majority, further roadblocks will be placed to prevent us from making the needed changes. It may be the last gasp of the restorative dream.”

Wolfe crossed his arms, “Yet if we are all arrested and thrown into a cell, they’ll throw away the key and then it’ll really be all over. We’re the vanguard. Without us – there is no realistic prospect of a return to tradition happening. They bribe the workers with promises of a fairer nation while weakening us on every front. We cannot permit them to fracture us in this manner.”

“That is precisely why we must band together now,” Rentree declared, leaping on the chance to exploit his own words, “This interloper intends to do just that. You are all essential participants, without you, there will be no restoration.”

It was a bold gambit. Rentree was giving them a destructive level of leverage over her. They could squeeze her for all of the concessions they desired, knowing that even one stepping back could spell doom for the whole operation. The room fell into silence as each attendee considered their own position. How much were they willing to risk to make the dream come alive?

Wolfe spoke and broke the silence, “I want to believe in what you’re offering us, I really do – but this leak needs to be plugged immediately. I don’t trust the police as far as I can throw them. Parliament can lean on them to make sure we never see the sun again.”

Jane was next, “And we must collectively agree to revise our communication policy. We cannot afford to have another Bradley situation in a few months’ time.”

Sensing that she was starting to win, Rentree pushed the issue further, “I agree with both of you. Cordia and her contractors already have a good idea of who is responsible. I trust you appreciate my keeping their identity a secret, given the sensitivity of this meeting.”

That was going to cause some friction, though none of the attendees had time to think about it.

“You won’t have to worry about that.”

All eyes turned to the double doors at the other end of the chamber, which swung open to reveal a teenage girl flanked by mask-wearing strangers. The doors were quickly forced shut, with both of her companions dragging bookshelves and furniture to block the exit.

“Maria Walston-Carter?” Wolfe gasped.

“Oh please, spare me. It’s hardly much of a surprise given that you lot tried to kill my Uncle a few days ago.”

Cordia reached down to grab her gun but Rentree’s hand lashed out to stop her. She shook her head. No shooting the girl, not yet. Cordia silently broiled at her decision to stay in the room for a few moments before leaving to patrol. Silence reigned as Maria made certain that nobody would be able to get into the room from behind them. Once she was happy, she held out her hands as if to greet her captive audience.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It’s a pleasure to see all of you gathered here. It makes life much easier. I assume that most of you already know who I am, and why I’m here.”

Jane Gladys played ignorant, “Lady Walston-Carter, what a surprise to see you here, but I’m afraid that we simply have no idea of what you speak of.”

Maria’s face fell, “Is that so? I do seem to recall the good lady standing behind Duchess Rentree was responsible for the attempt on my Uncle’s life. And are you not the group who contacted Thersyn Bradley before his unfortunate accident? Cease your foolish games – Miss Gladys, it unbecoming to spread such wanton lies.”

Gladys sputtered in outrage but was cut off as Maria raised her voice.

“I’m here to see you all make an important decision. This scheme of yours ends here and now.”

Rentree stood up, “And how do you suppose you’ll do that? You’re nothing more than a meddlesome teenager! Not only that, but you’ve walked blindly into the lion’s den in the process. This estate is surrounded on all sides by armed guards, do you honestly believe that you’ll be able to escape.”

“Is that a threat?” Maria said gravely.

“Take it as you will.”

“If you mean to compete with me in the field of making threats, you will lose. Allow me to demonstrate.”

Cordia reached for her holster and drew her pistol in response, but Maria didn’t even flinch as she pointed it in her direction. She tutted and wagged her finger, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. If I don’t return from this outing, a friend of mine will ensure that all of these incriminating letters find their way into the appropriate hands.”

As if to labour her point, she retrieved a stack of them from inside her coat and tossed them onto the table - scattering them in several directions. Even a momentary glance made it obvious that these were the real deal. By chance, some of the original senders were confronted with their very own writing.

“A stranger making such accusations would be faced with incredulity from the police, but what if Maria Walston-Carter were to do it? Combine that with my supposed disappearance, and you have a recipe for disaster. My Father won’t stand for it.”

Wolfe harrumphed, "If your Father is so concerned, then why is he not here?"

"I implore you to focus on what's in front of you," Maria quipped back, "Does it matter whose mouth this ultimatum comes from? You are now presented with a simple choice. You can follow this pied-piper down a path of madness and have your secrets exposed, or you can quit while you're ahead and live a life of freedom."

"We can't trust you to keep your word," Wolfe argued.

"That's right," Rentree echoed, "If we cease, as you demand, then what is preventing you from simply releasing these letters anyway? It's a poisoned chalice. Surely none of us would be foolish enough to fall for a gambit like that."

"Who is to say that your plan will result in legal immunity?" Maria laughed, "Should you succeed and reinstate the royal family to their prior status, it will cause significant instability. They might just decide to make an example out of you. There's no benefit to keeping troublemakers around after all."

"Nonsense!"

"I can concoct imaginary scenarios just as easily as you can," Maria stated, "There are no more matters to debate. You must all make your choice. Will you protect yourselves, or will you risk everything to restore the Van Walser family?"

The reformists were not expecting this to happen. It defied rational thought that such a young girl was the one responsible for causing Rentree so many sleepless nights. She even had the gall to make demands of them.

Rentree slammed her hands onto the table, "You cretinous cur. Were you the one who took the letters from Thersyn's home?"

"Guilty as charged," she shrugged, "The buffoon had an entire chest stuffed to the brim with them. The selection you see now is merely a handful to demonstrate. There are so, so many more."

The attendees were turned into statues as the threat became clear. Thersyn had screwed them over in more ways than they initially expected, and Rentree already



admitted to the letters being legitimate, one of them being used to blackmail Franzheim.

Cordia stepped in to try and scare her away, "I'd rather kill you and see the end of it, here and now."

"Kill me? You'll do nothing of the sort. A third-rate amateur like you is no challenge at all. You failed to stop me from getting into the manor, and you'll fail to stop me from leaving in much the same way."

"Where did your confidence go? Are you implying that you'll flee should your plan fail?"

Maria remained impassive, "There's no point in killing the likes of you."

A loud clattering rang out through the barricaded door as the men on the other side attempted to break through. They'd figured that something odd was going on, presumably at the point where they found the unconscious body of one of the watchmen.

"This discussion is pointless. Die."

Before Cordia could pull the trigger - Maria snapped her fingers. She pulled on the trigger, but a loud click replaced the sound of the bullet firing. It happened so quickly and subtly that Cordia never would have perceived it, but several of the delicate components in her weapon turned to dust in an instant. It was useless.

Maria burst into unsettling laughter, "Ohohohoho! Oh my, you haven't been taking very good care of that weapon, have you? That's the problem with Erwin-Canon guns - they have very poor reliability."

Infuriated, Cordia desperately pulled on the slide and pulled the trigger, but she wasn't even able to release the magazine using the designated switch anymore. Every essential component was ruined, incapable of operating normally now that key elements were removed from the equation by Maria's nihility magic.

"You're trying to make a fool of me?" she roared, "I was polishing my craft while you were still an unborn child!"

Cordia tossed the broken gun aside and charged across the room as the other plotters ducked out of the way. She was so dead-set on tackling Maria and throttling the life out of her that she failed to recall the two others who'd broken into the meeting with her. The taller of the two twisted around her mid-charge and hooked one of her arms around his own.

Maria smirked with a devilish grin and stepped forth as her momentum continued, throwing a jab that crashed across the bridge of her nose like a ball hammer. Cordia flipped end over end and crumpled to the floor while blood gushed from the blunt-force injury.

The victors did not have any time to gloat.

“All of you – make a choice. The moment that door is opened, you’ll have missed your opportunity.”

Perhaps it was the shock of seeing a thirteen-year-old girl clock an experienced fixer like a pro boxer, or perhaps they'd given enough thought to the letters that now threatened their freedom and status, but this was the final straw - the one that broke the camel's back.

Wolfe shook his head, “Bloody hell. Rentree – you’ve completely lost control of this!”

Jane Gladys was the second to back away, “You may call her nothing more than a young girl, but it speaks to your immense incompetence that she is in this position in the first place!”

With two of the biggest backers disavowing their involvement, the rest of the dominoes were quick to fall. One by one they stepped away from the table and averted their eyes from Rentree's increasingly desperate pleas for rationality. Not one of the eleven people who entered the chamber was now willing to back her.

Maria wiped off her bloodied knuckle with a handkerchief, “A wise choice.”

Rentree's voice cracked with strain, “You... You're all going to abandon me because of this idiotic bluff? From a girl young enough to be your daughter? She's nothing! We're fighting for the future of this nation – and this is all it takes for you to bury

your heads in the sand and withdraw your support? You said you were willing to do anything, sacrifice everything!”

Wolfe disagreed, “I never made any promises like that, Duchess. This has turned into a damned circus. Do you honestly expect to see this plan through with things as they are?”

Wolfe’s words were echoed in the minds of every collaborator present. Rentree had lost control of the situation from the moment that Thersyn was arrested, and now they were being given more evidence to support their hesitation. A singular girl, no older than fourteen, was responsible for thwarting her present plans? How could they hope to deal with a more pressing situation or capable foe?

The Duchess was not going to give in so easily.

“I can still do what is needed, even if the rest of you have lost your good senses! All you are doing is writing a dark page into the history books, a display of craven self-interest beyond any other! The royal family will return to their rightful place, but we will be worse off for your choices!”

“Prattle, you just said that none of your plans will happen without us!”

Maria smiled, choosing to remain quiet at the foot of the table instead of intervening. Now that they were in an argumentative mood, the content of their statements was no longer the number one concern. They would not stand by and allow Rentree to insult them openly.

“You clearly think so little of us that you think we’ll accept anything you say,” Carides objected, “I was kind enough to forgive the insults you included in your letters to Bradley, but now I see that this is more than simple theatre. You demand our fealty and insist that our contributions are essential, yet your lack of respect means that all of us are now in danger of being arrested!”

Maria had won.

Carides was trying to keep her cool, but Rentree’s outburst spelt doom for the plot. It was an illustrative moment, one that showed her as an impulsive and domineering

presence who didn't care for what happened to her underlings and tools. She didn't care what happened to them, and that meant they were at a persistent risk of being thrown under the wheels to get the outcome she wanted.

Rentree only had one card left to play. She reached into the sleeve of her dress and drew a miniature pistol that was hidden inside. Such brutish methods were normally beyond her – reserved for the poorer folks she employed, but Maria left her with no choice.

“If you won't work with us, then you are merely a collection of loose threads, weeds to be plucked!”

Maria scoffed, “Do you expect us to be scared of that thing? A sling and a rock are more likely to kill you than that.”

“You meddlesome brat. We only want to do what's best for Walser! Why do you care? I expected better from the Walston-Carter family!”

Maria's eyes sharpened like daggers, and Rentree briefly saw the malice that hid beneath the cover. She suddenly felt very small, and very much out of her depth. At that moment she felt that her previous claim was true. The gun she held between quaking fingers would do no damage at all.

“You tried to murder my Uncle. That is the long and short of my interest in this issue. I care not for what happens to you or the royal family. It is merely a coincidence that I find myself vouching for the republic. Now that the landscape is made clear to you, I beg my leave.”

“Leave? They're going to get through that door at any second.”

“Yes, they are.”

The doors finally gave way, pushing the bookshelf and drawer over to allow entry. Maria and her masked assistants stepped out of the way before they could land on top of them. The taller of the two summoned a ball of light using his magic, throwing it up into the air and causing it to explode. Ears and eyes were blinded – with only the dull sounds of bodies hitting the floor to ground them in reality.

When Rentree and the reformists regained their senses, a pile of unconscious guards were left in their wake, with their weapons stolen or unloaded.

“Cordia, Cordia!”

Rentree hurried over and tried to shake the unconscious fixer awake.

“They’re getting away!”

Cordia’s eyes opened once more. She clenched her teeth and pinched her bleeding nose with a groan.

“I hear you. I’m awake.”

Her hand reached out and took the miniature pistol from her possession. A pathetic weapon that would lose its effectiveness at medium range. Why was the Duchess keeping this on her person?

“I need you to kill that girl. Our entire plan depends on it!”

Cordia was not in a hurry to follow her orders. There was a second where she stared at the floor and followed Rentree back towards the head of the table. The Duchess spun on her heel and screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Why aren’t you doing anything?”

“I always hated you.”

The pop of the gun left the spectators confused about the course of events. Rentree staggered back and clutched the bleeding wound that rested above her heart. Cordia had held it up to her chest and fired, so quickly that it was almost instinctual.

“Y-You... why?”

“If you want something done properly, do it yourself, and besides – I still have this.”

Cordia pulled out the watch and held it in the air.

“I press the button and this entire farce never happened, and it won’t happen again. Call it a waste, but I couldn’t pass on the opportunity to see that dumbfounded look on your face before I leave. Call it stress relief if you must.”

Rentree gasped out panicked breaths in an attempt to have the last word, but she was already suffering from shock. The Duchess collapsed back against the wall and fell unconscious as the flow of blood around her body was compromised by the damage done to her heart.

“The rest of you, stay here and shut your mouths. We’ll have a friendly talk later about what just happened.” Before travelling back, Cordia was going to see how things developed. This attempt may ultimately end in failure, but there was always her secret second chance waiting in the wings.

Killing Rentree was already a cathartic feeling – killing Maria twice was going to be even better.