

Two days later and I was wearing my Sunday best for a visit to Uncle Clemens's home. He lived fairly close to our own manor – so it was a short trip in the carriage down the road and across the creek. It was a comparatively modest home versus ours, but still so large that he needed to hire helping hands to maintain the gardens.

I thought his house was nicer than ours. Given that it was only my Father and me living inside of it full-time, the extra space felt wasteful. Comfort wasn't what mattered to most nobles, it was all about how valuable the property was. It was the best way to show one's affluence and business acumen in a world yet to develop overly expensive cars.

Clemens liked his privacy. The exterior of the estate was surrounded by a dense wall of foliage designed to keep prying eyes from looking inside. It was easy to do when your house wasn't perched atop the tallest hill in the area for the sole purpose of showing off in the noble dick-measuring contest.

The sounds of the garden party could already be heard as we stepped out onto the driveway and found ourselves escorted through the building. Clemens had gone to a significant effort to make sure that everything was picture perfect for his guests, including opening the doors into the house so that people could get out of the heat if they so desired.

The gardens were teeming with dozens of luminaries from the Republican alliance, members of his own party and others, who had come together to both celebrate Clemens' new position as vice chairman and to strategize for the upcoming elections. There was a lot riding on this, the future direction of Walser would be decided in a few months.

Tables filled with expensive food and drink surrounded the back-patio area, while more seating was placed on the grass. A lively game of croquet was taking place between several partygoers. Clemens was introducing himself to a group of people near the food. His attention was snatched away when he spotted me observing from a distance. He excused himself and turned to face us.

"It's so lovely to see you, Maria! And what a wonderful young woman you're turning into as well!" Clemens cheered from behind the serving table.

He navigated around the side and approached me and my Father with a bright grin on his features. He'd already swallowed a few drinks judging from the colour of his cheeks. He studied my appearance. It had been almost a year since we had the opportunity to meet in person.

"Hah. She's growing up so fast now, isn't she? She'll be the spitting image of Gwyneth soon."

Damian laughed, "That she is. Sometimes I wonder if there's any of me in there."

There was no awkwardness to his mention of my absent Mother. Damian and Clemens had a very close relationship. Noble brothers were always at each other's throats – fighting over inheritance and fuelled by envy, but Clemens was more accepting of his place in the family hierarchy. He was the younger brother, and thus he sought to distinguish himself in another field.

"I'm glad that you could both make it. I heard that your trip was extended by a day."

Damian tipped his brimmed hat, "We could hardly afford to miss a celebration for an important moment like this. You were there for my wedding, even when circumstances attempted to keep you away."

"Well, I received the promotion a few weeks ago – but I wanted to make sure that everyone had the chance to clear the date so they could drop by and visit. I've been working my fingers to the bone making sure that we're ready for the parliamentary election."

Perhaps not the ideal time to throw a complicated party, then.

Clemens escorted us to a shaded gazebo, where we all sat down to have a chat about recent events. I should have known that the first thing to come up would be the attack on the theatre.

"I heard that Cathdra launched his scheme during your trip to the parliament building. Did everything turn out okay?" he asked.

"Thankfully, none of the students were hurt. Though it was extremely alarming to be there while it was happening," I lied.

“I was never a big believer in the fellow – but to do something as dastardly as that is beyond the pale. Dare I say that his career in politics is well and truly over. There isn’t a party mad enough to plant their banner by his side now, but some of the MPs are worried about him launching an independent bid once he leaves prison.”

Damian shook his head, “Surely not.”

“I agree. The criminal element is too much of a weight for the voters, he’d have no chance of victory, but stranger things have happened before.”

I tuned out of the conversation and observed the party from our elevated position. Clemens couldn’t pass up such a perfect opportunity to utilise his large collection of antique chairs. The less valuable pieces of his collection were positioned around the tables in the garden.

Those bloody chairs.

Clemens was obsessed with them. An entire storehouse on the property was dedicated to the presentation and assembly of as many chairs as humanly possible. They came in all shapes, sizes and colours, constructed from every type of wooden and metal that you could think of. There was no person on this planet that loved chairs quite like he did. The man could easily talk for an hour about each one while going down to the most minute details.

I did not care for the stitching of the pillows, the welding of the beams, or the curvature of the structures. Chairs were the most dreadfully boring topic to dedicate oneself to, yet here Clemens was, extolling the virtues of what was an extremely mundane subject. It didn’t matter how old you were, an eleven-year-old Maria was a target for his knowledge regardless of her interest.

When my ears returned to the discussion he and Damian were having, I was not pleased to discover that he was talking about antique hunting again.

“I found this lovely bed frame from Chatmar last week, but the owner of the shop was asking for an extortionate price. That kind of timber doesn’t go for that kind of money. I told him that – but he insisted that he had lots of other customers waiting

who were willing to buy it. I called his bluff and left it, and what do you know, a few days later it was being discounted due to a lack of interest.”

Just kill me now.

Damian gave me a sideways glance that was a combination of permission to wander off somewhere else and a desperate plea for help. In my endless experience of two different lives I’d never found a method to stop Clemens from talking once he got fired up. A bomb could detonate a few feet away and he wouldn’t stop speaking unless he was the one caught in the blast.

I slipped away from Clemens and Damian. There was no reason to stick around when he was already launching into a discussion about antique hunting. I was planning on finding a quiet spot to sit and enjoy the weather, but my reputation precedes me. Several of the girls who were around my age descended upon my location like a pack of vultures.

“Are you Lady Maria?” the head girl asked with a hopeful look.

“I am.”

The other girls gasped in awe at the sight of me, even though I was shorter than every single one of them. It was amazing how much mileage one could get out of having a pretty face in this world.

“I knew it. I told you that it was really her!”

A heavyset lass with ginger pigtails stewed at her, “I never said it couldn’t be Lady Maria! Of course it might have been her. This is a party hosted by her uncle.”

“Whatever – you were the one who kept saying that it wasn’t her.”

“I did not!”

The third member of the troupe smiled nervously and attempted to steer the conversation back on track, “There’s no need to argue in front of her. I’m sure that she finds it extremely distasteful.”

She would be right. It was annoying to be stopped by a group of people so that they could argue in front of me. I gave them a second chance, wherein all three girls reassembled and started to follow through with their original plan.

The leader of the gang fluffed out her golden locks of hair and declared her name for my memorisation, "I am Pricilla Wells. Surely you've heard of my family?"

"I have," I responded. Their business was waste management. Not glamorous work by any means, but it did pay very well in the urban areas of the country where capacity was always being expanded. Two members of the family were sitting MPs. Pricilla was a total stranger. Noble families liked to pump out as many potential heirs as possible to prevent a disaster from occurring. She was just another drop in the ocean.

The larger girl was next, but she kept it short and simple, "Betty Jones."

And the shy girl, "I'm... Penelope Van Seaham."

Pricilla was clearly trying to pick a fight with me for ojou-sama dominance. She had the look – with curly blonde hair and blue eyes. The only issue for her was that it was a game that demanded the participation of two players, and I couldn't care less about what she thought.

"Hmph. I have to admit that your beauty is no exaggeration, but your dress selection leaves much to be desired. I suggest firing your tailor with immediate effect."

"I do not have a tailor."

The goalposts shifted, "We can tell! Didn't you hear that yellow is in season? Who do you think you are wearing a white lace dress in this weather?"

I stared at her.

Penelope frowned, "I don't think she cares very much..."

"Shut up," Pricilla snapped back, "There isn't a noble lady in the world who doesn't care about the way that she looks. I'm starting to think that you allow your Father to choose your outfits for you. Only an out of touch man could create an ensemble this odious to the senses."

I stared at her, silently.

“She’s ignoring you,” Betty offered unhelpfully.

“I can see that! You’re not fooling me with this stupid little game, are you going to stand there and make that stupefied face this whole time? Say something!”

Well, if she didn’t want me to stand here, what else was there to do but make my exit?

With my first idea of heading into the garden to find a quiet spot scuppered, I turned around and headed back towards the house. Pricilla didn’t get the memo and continued to yell vague insults at me even as I was leaving the range of her voice. Any louder and an adult will have told her to zip it.

The house wasn’t my first choice because it made me look like an even bigger loner than I was already. There would be no shortage of tutting tongues or pointed questions about how a young socialite could get by without socialising. I ducked away from the noise and stepped into the foyer. The shade was nice. I could wave them away and say that I was looking to cool down a little.

Parties really weren’t my thing.

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Caius couldn’t believe his luck, it had taken days of hard work, observing the preparations being made at the property and sneaking around the edge of the gardens for an entryway, but he’d done it. He’d snuck into the house without anyone seeing and pilfered a spare uniform from the staff quarters. To make things even better – it seemed as if none of the temporary servants were fully aware of the others. He could blend in and explore as he pleased.

It was an appropriately risky job for the money that he was being offered. Caius was never under the illusion that this was going to be an easy task, Gertrude’s warnings were not completely wasted on him. This was a densely populated area with a lot of important people. A single wrong step could end in his arrest.

What kept him going was something that none of the guards could account for.

Unlike them, he had a strong reason to keep going. His strength of will would win the day.

Most of the guests were occupied in the back garden, enjoying the party that Clemens Walston-Carter was hosting due to his recent promotion within the Liberal Democratic party. That promotion was the same reason that he found himself infiltrating the grounds. Word had leaked that he possessed several sensitive party documents in his study. The client was tight-lipped on how they obtained that information, but it was likely that a monarchist who worked for Clemens was the one responsible.

It didn't make a lick of difference to Caius who won the spat. Despite all of the big promises made by the Republicans, things were still the same as they were before the fighting started. The compromise wasn't much of a compromise when it existed to cement the existing power blocs that ruled the country, people like Clemens and his glad-handing politician partners. They were Republicans because it was convenient for them and nothing more.

Caius restrained his feelings. There was no good reason for him to let his blood simmer with rage because they were having a good time. He couldn't blame them for enjoying the high life. If he had the same kind of money that they did, he'd be in their place – standing with a glass of wine in one hand and a bland sandwich in the other.

All he wanted to do was to scout out the party and see how many people were around. Most of the guests were from the party, but there were also wives and children in a large number. His eyes drifted across the sea of heads until they landed on the gazebo at the back of the garden.

“Bloody hell.”

Caius dived behind the nearest pillar, his breath hitching. Why, of all people, was that girl here? He peered around the edge of his hiding place and observed the trio of people standing under the gazebo. That was Clemens Walston-Carter and his brother. With all of them together like this, it was easy for him to conclude that the three were related.

Caius was not overly familiar with the Walston-Carter family. All he knew was that the larger man was the owner of the house, and the vice chairman of the Liberal

Democratic party. That new job of his was why Caius was sent to the party. There was an important document that his employers wanted taken from his office.

There was no need to get any closer to them. Caius walked away from the main party and slipped into the house to begin his search for the target. The client didn't give him much information to go on, so it was a manual search through every room in the house until he found what he was looking for.

Or it would have been, had he not have been intercepted on the way to the private area by a meddling manager. She appeared out of the blue and forced a silver tray covered with wine glasses into his hand.

“Can you please take these out to the garden?”

The woman was in such a hurry to attend to her duties that she didn't stop to take a second glance. All she needed to see was that Caius was wearing one of the staff uniforms, her mind was on autopilot from there.

“Uh, sure.”

Caius remained still as she disappeared down the corridor. To his frustration, it was the path that he wanted to follow. He couldn't chase after her without arousing unneeded suspicion. Blending in was his first priority. He swallowed his pride and turned back to the garden party, intending to offload the tray at his earliest convenience and return to the search.

Caius put on his most confident façade and waltzed out onto the patio. There were empty glasses galore, the perfect cover to make himself look busy. He dashed from group to group, swapping dry drinks for fresh ones and receiving plenty of thanks in return. Caius wondered why he was even worried about it. The platter was emptying faster than expected.

Once the wine was doled out to the boozing revellers he returned to the drawing room and placed the tray down on one of the tables. That would keep the manager from asking too many questions for a while. Caius smirked and headed back to the hallway where he was planning on starting his search.



The problem was that another servant was already waiting to ambush him with a platter of sandwiches. There was no time to dodge out of the way before it was forced into his hands.

“Perfect timing. I need someone to take these out to the catering table.”

Caius had to stop himself from screaming in frustration. He nodded and moved as quickly as he could without spilling them all over the floor. All he had to do was leave them on one of the tables and go back to what he was doing. There was just one problem, between entering the house and heading back to the sitting room at the rear, the red-eyed girl had moved locations and was now sitting on one of the couches.

A bead of cold sweat ran down the back of his neck. Her head locked onto him, and those damnable eyes scrutinised every detail of his form and appearance. He ignored the girl for the time being and powered on in the hopes that looking busy would prevent her from becoming suspicious.

The sandwiches landed on the table with a clatter. He carefully timed his emergence from the house to avoid the majority of the party-goers, who would undoubtedly ask him to perform more menial tasks like bringing more booze, wiping their arse or clipping their overgrown toenails. There was no bottom with these nobles, if they could pay someone else to do something, they would.

Caius returned to the sitting room and felt every muscle in his body pull taut. The girl was staring right at him with an impassive expression. Her indifference lulled him into a sense of security. Surely there was no way that she could recognise him now that he wasn't wearing his mask and costume.

It wasn't the girl who was the problem. She was fast and unusually strong, but his evasive strategies were more than enough to cover that eventuality. The real issue was that she could scream at the top of her lungs about a thief being in the house. His showy magic wouldn't help if he was dogpiled by a dozen plus people and pinned to the floor.

She made no motion to alert the other guests. Caius breathed a sigh of relief and turned his back to her, intent on reaching the promised land beyond the hallway of meddling middle managers. Nobody else was there, so he ploughed on with confidence. Hopefully, it wouldn't take too long to find the owner's office and abscond with the documents.

What he didn't see was that young lady trailing him from behind.

Caius, in blissful ignorance, danced from door to door and peered through the keyholes in search of the office. His due diligence was not enough to keep Maria off of his tail, who unbeknownst to him had identified him as the thief upon first glance, and remained at her place in the lounge so that she could intercept him.

"Jackpot," Caius whispered. He pulled out a pair of small metal tools and fiddled with the lock until it clicked open.

"Argh!"

He then squealed like a girl when he felt a firm hand push his back from behind, forcing him through the door and onto his hands and knees. The door slammed shut, and a firm grip was placed on the back of his neck, along with a sharp knee into his spine.

"Do you take me for some kind of fool? That mask of yours barely hid the bottom of your face. I knew it was you from the moment our eyes met back there."

"Rubbish. I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Is that so? It would take me very little effort to retrieve those illegal entry devices of yours and turn you over to the nearest security guard. Who do you think they're going to believe?" Caius was pulled back to his feet and pushed towards the wooden desk. He finally came face-to-face with his nemesis. A girl who was half his age and half his size.

He put on his smarmiest smile and tried to bluff his way out of it, "I think you've got the wrong lad, my good lady. I'm just an honest servant, checking on the Master's private quarters to make sure nothing untoward is going on."

“Who are you trying to convince with this? I know it’s you, Caius.”

His body slumped down, “Shit.”

“If you’re here at the party, and trying to break into Clemens’ office, that can only mean that you’re here for one thing. You’re after the documentation for the Liberal Democrats’ election campaign.”

“A very lucid observation,” Caius admitted, “You must have a keen mind to know that at your age.”

“I can’t allow you to do that.”

“I didn’t know kids were into politics these days.”

“Only when they have a chance of causing a lot of trouble. Do you really think that the apolitical will be spared the consequences of what you’re about to do? Letting anyone get their hands on that list is bad news, for you, for my family, for the Republic as a whole.”

Caius shrugged, “Says who?”

“Says me. They’re not going to use those names and addresses to put together a calling list, I hope you’re aware of that.”

Caius was shocked at the depths of her knowledge. She didn’t speak like a coddled little girl, she was fully aware of the intricacies of what was happening. She was trying to protect her personal interests in a roundabout way.

“I don’t care what happens to that lot. It doesn't make a lick of difference to people like me.”

“Does it not? If they achieve that goal and plunge this country into anarchy, who do you think will be the first ones given a gun and told to fight on the front lines? It certainly won’t be the nobles. ‘People like you’ are expendable resources – you know that already. You’ll be killed en masse to protect the class interests of the rich and powerful.”

Caius was torn. There was some truth to what she was saying. Caius' Grandfather was killed in the fighting before the Compromise was signed. It was an event that greatly impacted his family for three generations running. But he couldn't accept it coming from the mouth of one of the people responsible. This girl was a noble – the very class of parasites that were responsible for using them as pawns. Why was she the one making such a reflexive argument?

His gut told him to ignore what she was saying.

“What difference does it make? These lot are probably going to fumble it anyway – and I'll get paid for something that doesn't affect anyone.”

“You can't guarantee that.”

“You can't guarantee anything in this life. You can only do what seems right to you in the moment. I have a good reason to follow through with this plan. I'll get my money, just like you do, and move on with my life. I'll never hear from them again.”

The girl laughed right in his face, it was an obnoxious cackle that rose and fell in an undulating crescendo.

“Oh dear. If that's the way you think, perhaps it would be better to expedite the outcome by killing yourself first. You're nothing more than a loose end. This is just as dangerous for you as it is for them.”

“Just stay out of my way, lass. I won't touch a hair on your head if you do.”

“I'm afraid that isn't going to happen.”

Caius grimaced. She was getting ready for a fight. He didn't want to do anything to a young girl, but if she was insistent on getting in his way, there wasn't a choice to be made. There was too much on the line to give up now.

“Fine, but don't cry when you lose. I hate to see a pretty face covered in tears.”

