

It was with a heavy heart that Cordia's name was returned to our notice board as a living conspirator. The more I sat and stewed on it, the less it made sense. I saw what I saw back then. It was unmistakably her - and that fall was fatal. There was no other explanation.

It had to be connected to Adrian's watch. They dedicated so much time to stealing it, she was carrying it when she died, and Caius revealed that the magical energy he felt originally was lessened through use. I plumbed the depths of my visual novel knowledge and settled on two different theories.

One, the watch allowed her to come back to life an indeterminate time after she passed away. This posed some more questions. The police were already investigating the scene when we left. Did they witness her sit up and gasp, her injuries magically reverted?

The second theory was more sound. It was a watch, a watch that contained immense magical power, what else could it do but send Cordia back in time? That would explain the different reactions I saw from our first and second meetings. The first time we saw each other in the flesh at the tournament, she was scared of me and seemed to know who I was.

The second in the museum was different. She was no longer fearful of me and was surprised by my appearance. Unless the fall caused short-term amnesia, the easiest explanation was that those events were out of order. The Cordia I met at the tennis tournament was from the future.

With this in mind – I reached a conclusion.

No matter what we did we couldn't actually kill Cordia. Her presence at the tournament, with the watch in her possession, was evidence that our attempts at killing her would inevitably fail. She needed to survive to use the watch, travel back in time, die by falling from the roof, and then have the watch returned to Adrian to close the loop.

If the watch were capable of creating splintered timelines, then it was beyond both my comprehension and ability to manipulate. However, there was no evidence to support that view of things.

I recalled the etching engraved onto the watch. Technically it was not possible to change the past into something more favourable. That was what it was trying to warn the user about in a roundabout way. Events were set in stone and you could only reach the same present by using its time manipulation magic.

As I spoke, there was one living Cordia from the present, one dead Cordia from the future, and two different watches. The original watch was still in present Cordia's possession as part of her plan, while the future watch was already returned to Adrian – who would not be able to tell them apart. Present Cordia would eventually be foiled somehow, and use the watch to go back and try again.

All in all, a good vote of confidence for our plans to stop them from killing the Social Democratic Party en masse, and also the kind of idiotic nonsense I expected to find in a world based on a visual novel.

Tomorrow I'd be making an early trip back to the academy. I'd regroup with Caius and Samantha on the weekend and try to come up with our next moves. It was looking increasingly likely that we would have to go on the offensive and kill off some of the monarchists identified from the letters. Just another red line for me to go skipping over without a care in the world.

Not as if any of the other killings I was guilty of were spontaneous.

The next day, Samantha was already waiting for me when I entered the dorms.

“Did it go well?”

I sighed, “Not exactly. My Uncle is fine, but the people responsible got away.”

Samantha wanted to say that it was for the best that fewer people were harmed, but she restrained herself. I wasn't going to be receptive to that kind of argument when my family was in danger because of them. She followed me into my room and watched me unpack.

“Isn’t it annoying moving back and forth like this?”

“I’ve performed more tedious tasks than this before, many times over. An hour’s journey home is nothing in comparison.”

Nobody understood the true meaning of tedious unless they’d spent days and days staking out a spot, following a target, or just waiting around for the opportunity to present itself. Bad assassins were impatient people. Cordia and Marco were lucky that the police did not yet possess the full repertoire of modern crime-fighting techniques that I was familiar with because the chaos they caused at the museum would have been a death sentence otherwise.

I stressed the importance of concealing our identity to Caius before we departed for the museum. As a man who made a career from a distinct identity, it was a type of thinking that he was not too familiar with, but he understood well enough when I told him about the consequences of being the subject of a murder manhunt.

“I have to say, I’m surprised by the extent of their willingness to put themselves in harm’s way. They did not merely try to assassinate my Uncle within the building, they chased him out onto the streets and engaged us in a gunfight before retreating.”

“Was everyone okay?”

“I’m afraid not. Cordia killed one of the guards before we could do anything.”

I sat on the edge of my bed and gave her a weary look.

“Maybe we should just submit what we found to the police and let them handle it,” she suggested, “You don’t seem too happy about all of this.”

“They will not act on whatever we submit, and an anonymous submission of stolen evidence will mean it cannot be utilised in court, should matters even progress that far.”

Walser’s police relied heavily on a chain of custody to determine the authenticity of evidence used in its cases. Seeing is believing, after all. I couldn’t decry them for sticking with what worked when so few alternatives were available to them.

“You’ve seen the list. They’re rich and influential. Even if they were caught in broad daylight killing another – it would still be down to chance as to whether they find themselves in prison or not.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“No, I am not. The gross inequality of Walser is far beyond what most people assume. The evidence will go missing. Witnesses will change their stories. Officers will make ‘mistakes’ that compromise the case. All of these coincidences will allow the trial to fall apart naturally, with no outward evidence of foul play.”

“You’re being pessimistic again. You always do this.”

“Current events aren’t giving me much to be optimistic about. I’m merely being realistic about the chances of our letter haul resulting in prosecution. If Thersyn were not a Scuncath, I do wonder if they would have even brought him to trial for the murder he committed.”

Samantha shook her head in disagreement but did not pursue the argument further, which was probably the wise choice given how stubborn I could be. I was basing my opinions on what I’d seen during my years living as Maria – whilst she endeavoured to believe in the free and fair values upon which this new Republic was founded.

“I’m worried that this is stealing all of your attention, Maria. You do have to keep up with studying for our exams, and pick out your elective subjects.”

I scoffed, “You already know that I’m only good for destroying things. I’m only here because my Father decided it would be good for the family business.”

Samantha took a different perspective, “What about your other talents, your intelligence? Are you saying that you can’t do good things, or have you simply given up without even trying first?”

“No.”

“I don’t believe you. You’re only thirteen. You’ve got a long, long time to find what you want to do. Why are you giving up already? Who decided that you’re only good for hurting folks? The only person saying these things is you!”

“I wanted to try, I did try,” I replied, “I came to the academy and tried to keep my head down, but I didn’t get a choice. Before I knew it – I was dragged against my will right back into trouble. It’s attracted to me. The last thing I want is for anyone else to become involved. I only told you the truth because you persisted.”

“You didn’t tell me the whole truth.”

“The whole truth isn’t going to change matters. You already know the darkest secret I hold, why would you bother listening beyond the fact that I’d killed two dozen people?”

Samantha was tired of this discussion, “When we first met for real, I thought that you were just a cold person. Now I realise that you worry too much about anything and everything.”

“I’ll stop worrying when my reasons for worrying are no more. I don’t enjoy being guarded.”

We were interrupted by someone knocking on my door.

Max was here, “You two sound like you’re having a big argument in there. Is this a bad time?”

“No. We were finishing up.”

Max opened the door and peered inside with a frown, “It’s rare to hear Samantha raising her voice like that. I hope Maria hasn’t offended you too much.”

I frowned, “I object to that characterisation.”

Sam chuckled, “No. We were simply having a spirited debate about recent events.”

Max averted his eyes as I withdrew some nightwear from my trunk and moved to put it back into the cabinet, “I’m not sure if I like hearing Maria having a ‘spirited’ discussion, personally. It feels wrong.”

“Have you made any progress on choosing your electives, Max?”

He moped, “No, and I think that Claude is going to go crazy if he doesn’t settle on his choices soon. He usually only gets this hung up on choosing between which detective novel to read next.”

“At least he’s taking it seriously.”

Claude was not awake yet, usually being the last to rise from the boy’s side of the dorm. Technically we weren’t supposed to intermingle with the opposite sex, but rules without enforcement weren’t really rules. The prefects and dorm managers came by so rarely that it was a non-issue for most students.

I slammed my suitcase shut and turned to the duo, “That’s all well and good – but is my room really the most appropriate meeting place?”

They both looked sheepish and bowed in apology.

“I’ll speak with you again later, Maria.”

Samantha grabbed Max by the scruff of his neck and dragged him out of the room to continue the discussion elsewhere. Once I was sure that they were gone, I locked the door and transferred some extra magazines from my secret compartment to the other case. I was always cutting it close with ammunition lately, so I was going to correct that mistake by bringing more bullets with me.

I took a moment to close my eyes and replay my argument with Samantha. It frustrated me that she did not understand my perspective. I would have loved to kick back and sail through some easy-going school days, but clearly, fate had other plans for me, and for her.

I’d completely forgotten to tell her about our ‘appointment’ at the Henry Snow Museum.

Was the place even going to be open within a week? The police were going to be sniffing around for a while, even with the curator’s permission it was unlikely that we’d be allowed inside to potentially interfere with the crime scene. On the other hand, Henry Snow did seem to know the upcoming course of events when he penned that letter.

I'd just have to wait and see for myself.

---

Gertrude had mixed feelings about seeing Caius show up at her door again, though this time with the foresight to properly cover his face from sight. She was glad that the man had not yet punched his ticket to the underworld, but she couldn't agree with the reckless approach he was taking to his attempted murder. She almost burst a blood vessel when he came asking for information about Marco and the Church Street Gang.

"Oh, you didn't die – Caius."

"Why do you sound so disappointed?"

"I'm not disappointed that you lived, I'm disappointed that you won't listen to my sage advice against getting tangled up with the likes of Marco. Why have you become so reckless all of a sudden? It's because of Alice - isn't it? You won't get anywhere chasing revenge from these people."

Caius took his usual spot by the coven window and waited for the lecture to blow over again. Gertrude was always trying to act like her contact's Mother – when the only real power she held was to withhold information from them. It was something that became more apparent with age.

"This isn't about revenge, Gertrude. I want to make sure that Alice can be safe now and in the future."

"And moving across the country won't do that for you?"

"You've seen how influential these people are. I wouldn't put it past them to try and kill us again if the opportunity presented itself. There's no language that transcends borders quite like money. In fact, I brought a few letters for you."

Caius reached into his pocket and handed over a bundle of several copied letters from what he'd stolen at Thersyn's manor. These particular pieces were not important to Maria's efforts, they were standalone pieces of gossip that would bring a high price for thieves and criminals looking to exploit them.

Gertrude ceased her lecture and quickly read through them.

“Are these real?”

“Cross my heart, they are real as the day is long. They were stolen from Thersyn Bradley’s private war chest, stuff he thought was valuable enough to keep around and risk implicating himself with. I can bring the originals if you want.”

“No, no. I’ll give you this one. I can give you a good price for these. I have a feeling they’ll be in demand.”

Gertrude wandered off to try and find her own chest – this one filled with cash earned from years of illicit transactions. Given the immense chaos within the small apartment, it would be some time yet before she recalled where it was last seen.

Caius leaned forward in his chair and spoke over the rain, “Cordia broke cover. I’ve seen sketches of her face outside of police booths around the city.”

Though it was unlikely that she’d be caught even with those sketches being produced. People’s memories could be fuzzy, and a verbal description did not always translate well into another’s art. Cordia could walk around the city without worrying.

“And not Marco?”

“They didn’t know he was involved, it seems. We got in his way so much that he couldn’t even take a shot at the guy.”

“I wouldn’t push your luck with getting in his way again. He won’t make the same mistakes twice.”

Caius laughed, “From my perspective, it looked like he’d never been in a fistfight before.”

“That’s a confirmation of his skill as an assassin,” Gertrude argued, “Nobody has ever gotten close enough to do that to him.”

Caius was not going to tell Gertrude about how his heart was racing during that scuffle. At first he was planning on walking away and leaving him to it - but recalling



that Alice was in Maria's care, and that she was risking the safety of both herself and her servants in doing so, convinced him to jump in and take a chance.

Now they were even. One-for-one on protecting close family members.

"My... collaborator has started talking about taking an offensive approach. The people on the list are clearly spooked by what happened at the museum, so we can focus on dismantling their little operation and preventing them from launching more attacks."

Gertrude returned with a handful of bills, "I'd be more worried about Marco. He's not the type to forget a face. He'll be out to get revenge on you."

"Really?" Caius echoed sceptically.

"Okay, well maybe not if he isn't getting paid for it. Just be careful. You never know with those crazy folk. One day they're your best friend, the next they want nothing to do with you."

Why did Caius think of Maria when she said that?

Sure, she was crazy. It was mad that a young girl like her was running around and gunning down assassins for a morning warmup exercise, but she was also extremely transparent with him and understood that he was motivated by factors beyond his personal loyalty or desire to repay favours. She never asked him to suffer under a task he did not desire, only doing so when she knew he had a reason to agree.

She was, in a word, rational. It was easy to mistake that for cynicism, but Caius understood it well. Money made the world go around. Everyone was clawing for every bit of it they could get, to pay for food, clothes, and a bed to sleep in. There were many who did not have the luxury of doling out their efforts to personal vengeance or ideological struggles.

It was as if Maria was older than her outward appearance suggested. Her sharp gaze and cool head spoke of years of experience. She always knew what she wanted and how she was going to get it. The longer he worked with her, the more premature his comparisons to Alice really felt. Alice was a child through and through. Did Maria ever have the freedom to be the same?

Though in his eyes, total economic security was a fair trade for some early responsibility, so long as the person shouldering it could handle it without ill effects on their health. After all, some conditions could not be cured with an envelope filled with money and a scalpel.

“I’ll keep my head down. Did you hear anything interesting from the people on the list I gave you?”

“I’m afraid not. I gave you everything prescient the first time you asked.”

“Gave me? I had to pay for it.”

Gertrude grinned, “Aye, and if you die I won’t be able to do business with you again. Try not to die out there.”

---

“Maria Walston-Carter.”

Marco jolted back to life, having been forced to sit at the same table and wait for hours without any activity. Cordia stood before him with her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face, though that was nothing unusual at this point.

“Who?”

“The girl who interfered with us at the museum, and the same one who questioned me after breaking into my apartment. She probably had something to do with Thersyn’s arrest too.”

Cordia had used all of her contacts and all of her wile to figure out who was responsible. It was a painfully slow process of bringing up the museum shooting, inquiring about the ruby-eyed girl she spied on the upper balcony, and then wondering aloud as to her true identity, usually in the context of being falsely concerned about her safety.

The breakthrough came swiftly and suddenly through a singular maid who’d worked at the Walston-Carter house before her contract expired. The dark hair and red eyes were immediately attributed to the only daughter of the family, Maria. Their ages lined up too.

Marco exhaled through his nose and nodded.

“Why do you look so relieved?” she inquired.

“I mistook her for someone else.”

“Someone else, that being?”

Marco refused to answer, “I’m not talking about it. That’s ancient history, and Goddess knows she might still be keeping an eye on me.”

If Marco had his way – all of his memories relating to this person would be permanently suppressed from his mind. It was a bad time. They were the one who showed him the boundless cruelty by which men could act. They also taught him the most important lessons about being an assassin. He was ashamed to say that by working with Cordia, he’d broken one of those golden rules.

“Cordia, that last attempt was a failure. Why did you shoot at her before we could find Clemens?”

“She was about to execute you.”

“Even so, it would have been better to take that risk and find him first before worrying about me.”

Cordia was reflexively willing to defend her decision making, even when she knew that her choices led to the failure of her plan. Marco was sugar-coating how he felt about her rescuing him, he thought it was a stupid decision that compromised the objective they were there to complete.

“You got paid regardless. You can thank Lady Franzheim for that.”

“Sure – I’ll keep fighting so long as the money rolls in, but I have my pride too. I want to do the job right. I want to handle the next one. Security is going to be much tougher now that we’ve been exposed.”

Cordia considered his demands for some time before reaching a conclusion. The museum plan was one mainly of her own making. She was the one who picked the spot and gathered the information. Marco played along – but it was obvious that he

chafed under conditions set by other people. He had to base his entire approach around something outside of his control.

It was rare for Cordia to cede responsibility entirely to her hires, but the previous approach was clearly limiting Marco's ability to deliver the desired outcomes. Cordia was all about results. If one element of the operation was compromising the others, it was time to make changes.

"She's only a teenager, but Walston-Carter is going to be problematic moving forward. She must be removed from the board before she can utilise the information she's gathered from the extremities of our organization."

Marco grumbled, "It's going to be difficult to find a girl who has no public engagements planned, even ignoring the difficulty she may pose as an opponent. Killing a politician is much easier – they want to be seen by as many people as possible."

"You don't have a problem with doing it?"

"She killed one of my men. I've always held a belief that those who are prepared to kill, are prepared to die by the same standard. I do not imagine that she expects no retaliation from us in exchange. She is the priority. The politicians can wait."

"I agree," Cordia harrumphed, "There are still two months until the elections, but my Mistress would like to see results a month before and no later. That will give the populace time to consider their choices carefully and select candidates that are more appropriate."

Marco paused, "Are you a true believer, Cordia?"

"Would I be willing to do this if I did not believe it to be the best course of action?"

"I thought it was curious. I don't run into people who care so strongly about the monarchy often."

"There is universal support for the Van Walser family in the south, both upper and lower classes believe they are the rightful leaders of this nation."

Marco shrugged, "It doesn't make any difference to me. My buddy is always running his mouth calling the parliamentarians parasites and what have you, but he doesn't seem to assign the same level of blame to the Van Walsers and their immense wealth."

"They have the Divine Right, Marco."

Marco laughed, "Divine Right? It didn't do them much good when people were braying for their heads. All I'm saying is that you should be careful what you wish for. Not everyone is going to agree with a sudden change in direction now."

"You would do well not to poke and prod at the people paying your wage."

"I didn't say it to them, did I?"

Cordia glared at Marco before leaving the room, she didn't have time for an elongated argument about it. The populace would see that the old ways were superior, they merely needed an example to follow.