

Samantha was absolutely furious with me. I'd gone against what she wanted and ordered Caius to burn down Thersyn's home even after he handed us the information we were looking for. He sat mum quietly on one side of the room and picked through the huge pile of correspondence between Thersyn and the other conspirators. He had no dog in this fight.

One problem – he couldn't focus with us yelling at each other.

"I told you that I didn't want to burn his damn house down! You're crazier than a horse in rut!"

I tried to keep my voice even, "And what do you think would happen if we left him as he was? He'd go on to kill a lot more people, people who could be protected if only we took drastic action."

"Then just call the police!"

I laughed breathlessly, "The police? Sure, a thirteen-year-old girl approaches the police box and tells them that she somehow found a dead body in the basement of a complete stranger. I'm sure they'll be right around to investigate at the first opportunity."

Samantha frowned but remained silent. Caius sensed that this wasn't his argument to witness, ducking out through the door and closing it behind him until the storm blew over.

"I have some sobering news for you, Samantha. There are people in this world who know how to play the game – who know how to break the rules and get away with it. Purity in methodology will only result in them walking free to harm more victims in due course. We did what we had to. Thersyn won't be murdering any more victims because of us."

"There had to be a better way," she repeated – failing to comprehend the scope of my argument.

"You said that you thought I was a good person. Would you like to retract that statement?"

Samantha bristled at the suggestion, “However vicious you might be, I still stand by what I said. The methods are questionable but they are in service of a good end, aren’t they?”

I stared at her and delivered a frank assessment, “I’m doing this because I think it’ll help protect me. Please don’t mistake that for being selfless. That’s a description reserved for people who deserve it.”

I could see the air escaping from her lungs as she slumped over and planted her hands on the table that stood between us. We were both being stubborn idiots, refusing to back down from our position purely for the sake of having the last word. I was in too deep to realise it though.

“So what? You think you don’t deserve to be described like that? It’s my right to use whatever words I please,” Samantha shot back. She was avoiding my central point. From the first moment that we met, up until she discovered my secret, Samantha always assumed the best. Why did she have such a firm, blind belief that I was doing this for anyone but myself?

“If you knew half of the things I’ve done, you wouldn’t be saying that.”

“You never told me what you did in the first place, so I don’t see the difference. You keep acting like you don’t care about what other people think – but at the same time you refuse to tell me because you’re scared of my reaction.”

I paused. That was an unusually perceptive observation from Samantha, so much so that I hadn’t even considered it myself until she said it out loud. I was doing that. She’d diagnosed the problem. I did care too much. All of my snide comments and cold behaviour had convinced me that there was no reason to fear becoming involved with other people. But here I was, dancing around the point to try and preserve a relationship that a few weeks ago I was convinced I didn’t want or need.

The problem was twofold. The truth was too absurd for Samantha to believe, and it didn’t change the fact that she was angry at me for going over her head and burning Thersyn’s house down. The best course of action was to shut my mouth and defuse the argument.

“You wouldn’t believe it. That’s all.”

That wasn’t ‘all,’ but Samantha knew she couldn’t pry any more from me than that.

“Thersyn is a violent criminal. Do you honestly think that losing his home is too much? He has bigger things to worry about now. Either he lies and tells them that it was an accident, or he tells them it was arson and runs the risk of their investigation finding out about his sacrificial killings. I could have released the safety and killed him, then and there, but I didn’t – because I was being considerate of you.”

“And I’m meant to be happy about that?” she scoffed, “That you crossed a line I drew instead of doing something even worse.”

“It was only a house. He can afford five more to replace it.”

“I’d be rightly furious if anyone burned down our farm. That’s where I was born, and it’s where my family has been for nearly a hundred years.”

Conflating her attachment to her own home with a house owned by a man with more money than sense was foolish. I didn’t understand. Burning down the house was kinder than putting a bullet in him and being done with it. He was going to get the opportunity to present his defence to the courts, should it come to that. Such mercy was not displayed to the men and women he eviscerated to try and summon the Dark Goddess.

“Resolving this problem will require us to take action that you will find uncomfortable. I warned you. These people are willing to use whatever violence they deem necessary to achieve their goals. Attempting to engage them with reason is an easy way to find yourself on the sharp end of their blade.”

Samantha exhaled and adopted a more relaxed posture, “You did warn me, but it still makes me uncomfortable.”

Sensing that the debate was over, Caius returned to the room and proceeded with his previous thankless task of sorting through all of the documents. I approached and split the pile in two, taking my time to study the contents of each letter in finer detail.

A lot of the contents could be safely discarded as irrelevant to our goals. There were a lot of pleasantries exchanged with the singular purpose of fulfilling the 'social contract' between Thersyn and his co-conspirators. They expected him to bend over backwards and kiss the ring at every opportunity because he didn't come from an established noble family.

Once he was done giving them a loving spit shine, the real meat of the letters started. The disconnected pieces were difficult to understand at first, but Caius' organisation system did wonders to make everything fit. Each person was sorted into two piles. One which contained nothing pertinent, and another which contained letters which directly discussed some of the criminal actions they were taking.

It took us two hours (and some tea delivered by Franklin,) for the work to be completed. The floor was covered in a dozen piles of paper – carefully categorized to give us a clear image of the plot as a whole.

"This is bigger than I expected," Caius commented, "And some of the names that are involved are surprising."

All of our previous suspects were represented. Thersyn, Duchess Rentree, Lady Franzheim, and Cordia, who was seemingly responsible for a lot of the ground work.

"They were very pleased about getting their hands on that party list," I noted.

Caius gritted his teeth; "Sorry!"

"I'm not fishing for an apology. It's interesting – they were considering targeting some of the other Republican parties, but the Social Democrat's strength in the pre-election polls has scared them. They want to dent their numbers as much as possible before the vote."

Samantha scratched her chin, "Why are the Social Democrats so popular, anyway?"

Caius explained, "They're the lynchpin holding the Republican coalition together, and they have a lot of charismatic faces who are ingratiating themselves with voters. There's a popular perception that they're the most competent party in the house. They're sucking the air from the room and consolidating the democratic vote, but

even a small adjustment in their direction will have an outsized effect in terms of seats won.”

The wonders of first-past-the-post. It wasn't about being the most popular, it was about exploiting the electoral boundaries and fighting off your competitors. The Monarchists were more united than the Republicans – but they also had a smaller proportion of the popular vote. Consolidation of the Republican vote behind the Social Democrats would be disastrous for them, a raft of legislation they'd rather be without would surely follow.

Beyond that, success begets further success. Once people realised that the Social Democrats were the most viable option they would be able to consistently vie for the top dog spot in each subsequent election that followed. It would be a gradual erosion of everything they stood for.

That was the urgency that drove them. People would not be so happy to give up additional rights granted to them by a democratic movement. It would bind their hands even if they did return to power in the future, and they didn't like the word 'compromise' one bit.

“There's still a risk that they could target members from the other parties,” Caius said.

“You're right. We'll need to disable their ability to launch attacks against the MPs. Running from place to place and dousing plans will allow them to act with impunity. There are more of them than us.”

Samantha got down onto her knees and took a closer look at the letters, “And how do you propose that we do that?”

Caius saved the day with some of his street-wise experience.

“When you get down to it the number of folks willing to kill for cash is really small. In the 'criminal underworld,' everyone knows everyone. Word gets around about that kind of job. For a lot of folks, it's too much trouble to consider.”

“So, who would agree to an assassination job?” she asked.

“There were three gangs who get their fingers into business like that, but Tee’s Gang fell apart after Roderro got busted for hiring them. The other two are more choosy with their clients, and generally go about it in a subtler way. They’re the Church Walk Family, and a group of loosely affiliated killers led by a guy called Marco Fisichella.”

Caius explained in detail who both of these groups were.

The Church Walk Family, or gang, depending on who you asked – were one of the original big street gangs in Walser. They came from the eponymous religious district in the city and were originally founded as a protection racket for persecuted believers. Once that period of religious unrest came to an end, they morphed into something less noble.

Caius wouldn’t touch the area with a ten-foot pole unless he really had to. They were extremely territorial and prone to random acts of violence. They happily accepted hits on various individuals so long as the pay was good enough. Even if there was no clean way to do it – they’d still follow through and let one of their members earn their stripes in prison.

Marco Fisichella leaned towards the more professional side of the scale. He was a bona fide hitman with a lengthy list of clients. He eventually sprouted roots and formed his own network of like-minded assassins who helped him with his jobs. He was more troublesome to locate because of his reclusive nature.

“If you want to get solid information on either of them, it’s going to come at a high price. My informants risk their skin by handing out anything on either of them. There’s a danger fee associated with that.”

“Would my allowance cover it?” I asked.

“Allowance,” Caius muttered with envy, “Sure. I think that should let us get what we’re looking for. The Church Street lot is visible enough without relying on that though. I’d suggest saving the lion’s share for eyes on Marco.”

“All we need to know is if these people have hired them. There might even be a clue in these writings that we haven’t seen yet.”

Caius grimaced as he looked down at the pile, “Well, I’m not exactly looking forward to going through all of these with a fine comb.”

“I’ll get Franklin to help. With him, you, Samantha and myself – we should be able to do it within the day.”

Having to work these meetings around our school week was driving me up the damn wall. It was ‘Saturday,’ so we did have a day spare to walk through all of the documents we’d stolen. I was hoping that it wouldn’t use up our entire day off. There were also some hours left in the evening, but Caius would rather claw his own eyes out than spend another moment looking through them after the first go around.

“Let’s take a break and get something to eat,” I concluded, “Will Alice be joining us?”

“Oh, yes. She woke up an hour ago, and she’s looking much healthier at that. We should be able to get out of your hair as soon as this matter is dealt with.”

Samantha smiled, “I’m glad to hear that. It must have been extremely stressful coping with her illness.”

Caius blew it off, “I won’t say that it was easy – but for the sake of keeping Alice healthy it wasn’t much of a challenge at all, at least not until they started trying to kill us...”

“Is it just you and her?”

“Yes. Our parents unfortunately passed away some years ago now, so I have to take on the responsibility of looking after her.”

Samantha shot me a quick glance, “Now that I think about it, you’ve never mentioned your own Mother before, Maria. For that matter – there isn’t a single portrait of her in this entire manor.”

I was being entirely genuine when I replied with, “I don’t remember her, and my Father doesn’t speak of her.”

Not once, either in the memories I was given to further my character as Maria, nor from my time living her everyday life, had he ever so much as mentioned that I even had a mother. I didn’t know her name, her face, or even when and where they met. It

was a total mystery. It was almost like she never existed in the first place. How could a man go about raising a daughter without ever mentioning his partner?

Samantha was shaken by the revelation, “That’s... unusual.”

“I hope it isn’t for a bad reason,” Caius murmured.

Motherless nobles were not a rarity. There were political marriages and the like, but the subtleties of the caste system meant that those same marriages could dissolve if they couldn’t get along. Max’s Father was divorced, for example, and he wasn’t happy about the way that his Mother was removed from his life as a consequence.

“Oh, trust me – if my Father was angry with her he’d have already complained about it over breakfast. He isn’t one to keep secrets, for better or worse. It may be that he doesn’t wish to speak on the matter since she isn’t here with us.”

We headed to the sitting room with Alice and asked Franklin to bring us some food. The discussion turned to memories of family, with Samantha and Caius sharing stories from their respective clans. I did not have many stories of my own that would interest them. My Father was usually too busy to spend a lot of time with me, and that suited me just fine.

With that said, he was always the first person to become all too enthused with my achievements. A collection of shooting trophies and rewards dominated one side of the manor’s lobby. I was his pride and joy and he wanted every guest who swung by the manor to know it from the moment they walked through the door.

Franklin agreed to help us with reading Thersyn’s letter collection, and I also asked him to organize a spot to dispose of them. A barrel in the backyard and a match was all we really needed. I wasn’t going to keep the evidence of our vigilantism on the property once we were done with it, not unless I could slip it into the hands of the police as evidence.

A lot of the letters would not be helpful to that effort, so they’d be the first on the disposal list. Franklin already handled that kind of sensitive job. There was no difference between burning business accounts and sensitive order sheets and disposing of paper-trail evidence aside from the potential consequences.



“I’ve been sneaking out of Alice’s room and exploring the place while nobody was around. I couldn’t help but notice how many trophies you earned,” Caius sniped, “Do you try to show everyone up, or does it just come naturally?”

I placed my cup of tea down and shook my head, “I think you’ll find competitive shooting is the one sport I have a gift for. And it is a gift, before you ask. I wouldn’t have won so many competitions if it wasn’t.”

Franklin sighed, “I do hope that you’ve been staying quiet during your little excursions. I’m already running a risk by allowing you to have free roam of the manor after hours.”

Caius bowed, “You have my word. I won’t make so much as a peep, and I’ve made certain that none have seen me during those adventures.”

It would be fairly easy to escape notice later at night when most of the staff were headed home. Franklin was doing an amazing job at keeping the other servants away from Alice’s room. They had no idea that we were housing a pair of fugitives. Franklin handled all of the work himself to keep information from leaking, just as I’d asked.

Not that Franklin would ever knowingly place innocent people at risk. He was a certified ‘good person,’ the type you’d see in feel-good news stories or fictionalised accounts. He understood the immense dangers faced by Alice and Caius, so much so that he was willing to overlook their criminal background.

I finished the last of my meal and sighed, “Back to work. Those letters won’t read themselves.”

Caius and Samantha couldn’t have looked less enthused if they tried.

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“Marco – there’s a new job for you.”

Marco groaned and pulled the newspaper away from his face. The ‘shithouse,’ as his colleagues liked to call it, was always left in a tremendously chaotic state. Contrary to his professional image as a killer-for-hire Marco did not pay the same level of

attention to his domestic tasks. Problems would pile high to the ceiling, both literally and figuratively, before he lifted a finger to rectify them.

“Bloody hell. When was the last time you cleaned up in here?”

The curtains were thrown open, allowing sunlight to flood into the cramped room.

Marco waved his arm, “Ah, leave me be. This is my house!”

“I’ll leave you be when you stop sending your rubbish to my mailbox.”

Marco snatched the letter from Tully’s hand and peeled open the wax seal. Hiring him and his co-operators was no small feat. They did not advertise their services to just anybody. The interested employers would send their requests through a series of proxies until they ended up at his door, all for the sake of protecting their identities.

The only way to know Marco was to know someone else who did – and that was a vanishingly small number of residents within the city. He could already guess that they came from wealth and power, and were probably hoping to use him as a pawn in one of their idiotic games.

Marco scanned the contents of the message, seeking out the details that meant the most to him. The targets, the requestee, and how much they were willing to pay to see the job done. This was a big one. There were a dozen targets whom he was free to select from, with more payment in exchange for more heads taken.

It was the names that raised an alarm in his head.

He recognised some of them, they were members of the Social Democrat party.

“Ugh. A bunch of fake kingmakers trying to sit on the throne again?”

Tully shrugged, “But is the pay good?”

“It is good – but you know how troublesome people with delusions of grandeur can be. They will try to evade paying us at some point.”

Fools who reneged on an agreement normally expected the consequences to play out in court. As Marco was an assassin he had no grounds by which to hire a lawyer and defend himself. No, failure to pay for your part of the deal was rectified in blood.

Marco hated doing hits for free, but he needed to keep them scared so that they'd pay up on time. And sometimes, if they were important enough, it was good advertising for his services.

Tully wasn't listening – the money was already going to his head, "I've been begging for another big payout lately. Don't tell me you're going to turn it down."

Marco groaned. It had been a while since his last hit, and his skills were going to get rusty if he let himself atrophy like this. He grabbed a clean shirt from the wardrobe and dressed himself in a workman's jacket. The client's request came with some key deadlines that he'd have to abide by.

"Is that a yes?" Tully inquired.

"Yes. Send them a reply, we'll remove as many of these obstacles as possible."

Tully smiled and headed back down the stairs to organize a response. Marco took a small pistol from his drawer and slid it into his beltline. The first name on the list was Clemens Walston-Carter. Marco didn't like screwing with the Walston-Carter family, they were big and affluent, and he'd heard bad rumours about other guns for hire who found themselves in a shallow grave after tangling with them. It looked as if he was going to test those rumours for their veracity.

He was hosting a campaign speech at the Henry Snow Museum. That kind of interior space suited him just fine. There were lots of corridors, nooks and crannies to hide away in until the big moment. Security was going to be light with no previous attacks on record to get their attention. He could disguise himself, get in, and get out without any trouble. An easy job for a big pile of cash.

The rest would have to come from his own intuition and groundwork. Even having details about one target was more than most would offer to him in the initial letter, they were very confident about securing his loyalty. Marco appreciated it. He hated it when they screwed around instead of getting to the point, sending boring letters back and forth to try and secure the information he needed.

When he finally reached the front sitting room of his home, Tully was already halfway out of the door to complete his assigned task. He paused in the entryway and turned back to him, “When’s the first one?”

“Three days. Clemens Walston-Carter is hosting an event at the Snow Museum.”

Tully smiled, “The museum? I love that place, it’s very interesting.”

“I hope you have gotten your fill,” Marco chuckled darkly, “I have a feeling that it will remain closed for some time after our upcoming visit.”

Tully rolled his eyes at Marco’s joke, stepping off the front porch and slipping away into the crowd. Marco pulled the door shut behind him and exhaled through his nose. He’d need to prepare for a messy series of jobs, and an even messier billing process with the clients.

“Monarchists,” he muttered.

But first things first – the food he’d left on the kitchen counter was starting to stink up the ground floor.

