

It was a lovely summer's day, the perfect kind of weather for a noble boy to relax in the back garden of his family's manor. But for Max, it was a shame that relaxation was the last thing on Claude's mind. The two friends were sitting by the lake at the rear of the property with a platter of drinks to share between them.

"Now, for the real reason I came to your house today!"

"I invited you."

"That may be the case, but I'm also here to advance my investigation into this Caius Willow fellow. Where better than to start by finding out where he's been stealing those blue roses from?"

Max pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation, "Claude – my Father doesn't keep a pile of business records in his office, especially not ones that are related to the operation of specific locations and how much stock they receive. In fact, there isn't a single stock list in this entire house."

It was a hyperbolic statement. Some of the servants used lists like those to purchase supplies for meals and the like. The point was still the same. Max's Father kept his business away from the house, and that business was so large and wide-reaching that there was no way for him to micromanage them to such an extent.

Claude laughed, "I thought as much, but can you blame me for trying?"

"Yes, very easily. You said you were going to stay away from the investigation."

"I can't help it! Not when the bloke throws a huge clue right at our feet, doesn't it make your imagination race?"

"I'm imagining all the different ways that you're going to get hurt or maimed trying to track him down."

"You're always so pessimistic."

Max slammed the table, "When have you ever given me a reason to be optimistic? You wandered off once and managed to get shot in the gut! I'd say that's a terrible rate of return for all of the effort."

“It was my pelvis, actually.”

“It doesn’t matter where it was. The fact of the matter is that us two aren’t in any position to go snooping around. Noble brats like me can get away with a lot – but getting in the way of the police is a step too far.”

Claude grumbled into his teacup, “I doubt they’ll take the theft that seriously. To them, it was just another watch. The teachers are more concerned about how he managed to break onto the campus.”

“They do right. Not that I’m saying this out of spite for Adrian, but there are more pressing concerns for the police to handle than the theft of personal possessions. It may be some time before they make any progress on the case.”

“I still think that Adrian is hiding something about that watch. He had a weird look about him when I asked what it was for.”

“Everybody reacts differently. You shouldn’t assume so much based on his expressions.”

“I don’t think he’d be so torn up about it if it was nothing more than an old watch. Adrian isn’t the sort of guy to care about tradition. The only thing he thinks about is what value a person or thing has.”

“Again, I don’t see what the point of getting so hung up on this is! We can’t do anything.”

Claude shrugged, “I do it because it’s fun.”

“Seriously? What happened to becoming a police detective?”

“I still want to do that,” Claude asserted, “But you were right – I’m just a dumb kid who doesn’t know the first thing about how to actually catch a criminal. None of the theories I come up with are going to go anywhere. If and when the police do catch them, I want to see if I was accurate or mistaken.”

“And it only took a nearly fatal brush with one of those criminals for you to realise that?”

“Maria always says that failure is the best teacher.”

“I can’t imagine her taking many hard knocks.”

“But it’s true. I sobered up after spending so much time cooped up in the hospital.”

Samantha said that there were no thanks necessary, but Claude felt differently. She saved his life by taking a chance on her healing magic. He would have bled out and died if not for her and Max swooping in and closing up his wound. Once he reached the hospital a surgeon removed the shrapnel in his body and pieced his bones back together.

The tough part was finding a way to show his appreciation. There was nothing more selfless that a person could do than saving a life. Saying ‘thank you’ in a hundred different ways didn’t have the intended effect, and there was nothing he possessed that he could give her.

Max turned his nose back down to the book he was reading, “The teachers are starting to stress me out by talking about our selections next year. We haven’t even finished the second semester yet.”

“Don’t you already have a free ride lined up?”

“Sure, if I don’t find something that I like – but I’d rather make my own choice instead of falling back on the family business. Muwah and Odeh are stuck to my Father by the hip at the moment.”

Claude couldn’t hold back his intrusive thought, “Why are your brothers named in that old style, when you’re called Max?”

“It’s simple really. It’s a family tradition for the first sons to be called Muwah and Odeh, the third son is a free-for-all. My Father always liked the name Maxwell, he worked with someone with that name for a few years, so he ended up giving it to me.”

Claude nodded, “That’s interesting. So, who were Muwah and Odeh the first?”

“They’re the two founders of the branches of the Abdah family. Muwah stayed behind in Shataran, while Odeh emigrated here to Walser.”

“But your Dad isn’t called Muwah or Odeh.”

“I said it was a tradition, not a rule. There are a lot of folks in our family who were never given those names for whatever reason. A few changed them once they reached adulthood. I think Odeh is the tenth, and Muwah is the ninth.”

“Right. I wish my family had an interesting story like that.”

“It’s not that interesting,” Max argued, “A lot of my relatives are boring. There’s a lot more to life than a name.”

“I should write that one down for later. It’s poetic.”

Max turned the page, “I never liked poetry.”

“That’s close-minded of you, you’re usually the one berating me for not paying attention to the arts.”

“I don’t have a problem with poetry, I can appreciate the artistry. It’s just not for me.”

Max snapped his fingers right in front of Claude’s face.

“You came here to study, didn’t you? Stop distracting yourself.”

“Sorry for not getting excited about algebra,” Claude muttered.

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Caius was sceptical about the deal that Lady Maria offered him, right up until he was allowed through the front gate of her manor. She was waiting for him at an outside table, with her legs crossed and a suitcase made from brown leather. There was no messing around. She unlatched it and revealed that it was stuffed from edge to edge with Walmark bills.

Part of him was outraged at the display of affluence, but he soon learned that there was more to Lady Maria than there first seemed. She was extremely intelligent, capable of discerning his motivations at a glance. The money was everything, and she knew that - which was why she made such an ambitious gambit right from the word ‘go.’ There was no reality in which Caius turned down the money. Maria read him like

an open book, she could smell his desperation in the air, but she didn't use it to unfairly leverage against him – she merely made an attractive counter-offer.

Cash that he could use right away was more valuable than whatever hypothetical reward the Monarchists were dangling above his head. It was urgent that he collected as much cash as possible, as quickly as possible. He was working to a tight deadline.

With an agreement in place, it finally came time to meet with Maria in the city and launch the sting operation. He arrived at the manor the following evening and stood outside of the gates. A carriage trundled through and stopped to allow him inside. Maria and another man were waiting in the cabin.

“This is Franklin,” Maria said, “He's my escort for the evening.”

Caius tipped his hat to the gentleman across from him, though he was not happy about seeing a stranger dallying with his ward. What manner of excuse or cover story had she provided to earn his consent for this operation?

Maria was dressed for the occasion. A long, black coat covered her upper body and legs. A pair of shaded, round spectacles covered her eyes from view, and her hair was tied into a simple ponytail, rather than the elaborate braids that he'd seen the day previous. It was almost impossible to recognise her at a glance.

“Are you sure that you've gotten everything cleared up?”

Maria smirked and crossed her legs, “I wouldn't be here if I did not have permission, no?”

Franklin bristled in his seat but remained silent. The truth was that he was the only one who knew what was going on. Maria was insistent that she be allowed to leave the manor and visit Bleufarl on short notice. Maria rarely asked for anything at all, but now she was demanding both her allowance and the carriage to ferry a stranger into the city.

“I do hope that this isn't your way of eloping, my lady,” Franklin griped.

She grimaced at the unpleasant thought, “I wouldn't dream of it. No offence to my new friend here.”

Caius shuffled awkwardly in his seat as both of their stares turned to him.

“I’m going to be keeping a close eye on you. I don’t want to see anything funny from you!”

Caius held up his palms, “There is no need to worry about me. I’m a consummate gentleman. I wouldn’t dream of doing harm to anyone, especially not a young lady like Maria.”

“Franklin – I told you to remain calm. Do you not trust my ability to verify his claims?”

With a single question, Maria silenced Franklin’s complaints.

Caius bristled with anxiety as her personal carriage ferried them down the avenue. What kind of Father would agree to let his daughter out of the house at this hour? Everything was about to be plunged into darkness. The city was no place for a young girl at this time of evening. If Maria was afraid of it – she didn’t show any signs on her face. She remained calm and composed for the whole journey.

What she was getting out of this was still a mystery. Protecting a family member was understandable, but was it enough to outweigh the other factors involved? Maria was tangling with some tricky business. She correctly identified that the plotters were extraordinarily dangerous, yet persisted in her efforts in the full knowledge that she would be in the firing line. It would be simpler for her to go back to the manor and live the rest of her life on the money made by her family.

Caius was a firm believer that there was no such thing as a good Samaritan.

He was a man whose perspective was shaped by a life on the bottom rung. There were a few good people who would go out of their way for others, but a majority preferred to avoid such rank inconvenience. That which demanded their effort or their wealth was a hurdle too high to mantle, even when the life of another was on the line. This way of living was capable of turning the strictest moralist into a cynical sort. Caius tried to toe the line. He targeted those who could afford to lose something and avoided violence while doing so.

Maria identified that upon their first meeting. She discerned his motivations from his actions and used her pull to manipulate him to her liking. She was the definition of a silver-spoon noble, yet she seemed to bare a similar recognition of the facts as Caius understood them. Maria offered him the payment because she knew that no moral argument would sway him, only the force of capital.

Caius' hold on the armrest tightened as the meeting place approached through the small window on his left. He was trying to distract himself with these idle musings, but the job came first. He'd need to keep his wits about him. There was no guarantee that the handoff would end safely. This might be the point where they decided to cut him loose, and it was so very easy to do with a gun these days. The police wouldn't even investigate it.

Maria pierced the silence as the carriage rolled to a stop; "I'll be watching."

He couldn't parse whether it was an attempt at reassurance or a threat. He ensured that the papers were secure in his pocket and dismounted the carriage, slipping down the alleyway with Maria peeling away to find a good hiding place. Franklin remained with the carriage in case they needed to make a quick escape.

Cordia was already waiting.

She never looked happy to see him, even more so with a half-used cigar held between her bony fingers. Caius bemoaned his current state of affairs – always surrounded on all sides by women with such cold glares. Though between Cordia and Maria, the latter was more personable.

She adjusted her glasses and exhaled a cloud of smoke into the air, "You kept me waiting, Caius. I almost believed that you fled the city."

"Flee? For what purpose would I flee? I promised to see this task through to the end. A few minutes delay is hardly cause for concern."

There was a flash of black hair around the corner behind them, Maria was in position and ready to follow her wherever she went. Caius pulled the package from his coat and handed it to Cordia.

“I hope this is everything you need. Infiltrating the estate was a tedious affair.”

Cordia said nothing. She unlatched the binder and flipped through the pages with an impassive expression. Each second that passed felt like its own small eternity. Was Maria’s gambit going to pay off?

“Impressive work.”

Caius exhaled.

“Everything appears to be in order. But I do have one question...”

“What?”

“Did you honestly think that we’d fall for a cheap forgery like this?”

His heart leapt into his mouth.

“A forgery? I went into his office and grabbed those from his desk!” Caius exclaimed in a desperate bid to keep the charade going, “Are you telling me that they were fake the whole time?”

Cordia dropped the cigar to the ground and crushed it beneath her heel.

“Let me make this clear, I don’t care one bit as to whether you were aware of this or not. The only thing we want to see is results. If you are incapable of providing those results, we can replace you with someone who is more suitable for the task. You can’t trick us. One of our people has been infiltrating the party for years, and they’ve already revealed their address and constituency to us. The list here is incorrect.”

She waved the papers in the air, before summarily dumping them into the nearest rubbish bin. Caius’ pulse quickened. They’d planned for this from the start. A mole was present in the party list, for the precise purpose of differentiating between the real thing and a fake.

“Then I’ll go back and do it again. I’ll take every damn document in that office if I have to,” he croaked.



Cordia's words were sharp like knives, "See to it that you do. My employers do not reward failure. And it would be a terrible shame if something were to happen to your sister. Such a cute face doesn't deserve to be involved in messy business like this."

His sister?

"What the hell are you talking about?" Caius barked, desperately trying to give the impression that she was off-mark.

She approached with footsteps that cracked like gunfire, "It's a funny thing, actually. I don't know how they do it – but the people upstairs noticed that there was a particular girl on the sanatorium's registry, and she was regularly receiving visits from you."

Caius gripped his knuckles tight until his nails cut into the skin.

"It must be very expensive to keep a girl in a place like that, and there's no guarantee that she'll survive her battle with the illness she suffers. It must be worrying to work your hands to the bone for her sake, unsure of what fate lies in store."

He couldn't keep it quiet. Caius stepped up to her and lowered his voice, "If you so much as touch a single damn hair on her head – I'll do whatever it takes to bring all of you down with me."

Cordia was not impressed, "And what do you suppose that one man can do? There's no purpose in threatening me. I am merely one rung above you on the ladder. I'm a messenger. I handle the dirty work that my superiors are unable to."

"Don't give me that crock of shit. It's so easy for you to wash your hands of responsibility, isn't it?"

"Is that not the same thing that you do? You invade people's homes, steal their treasured possessions, and assure yourself that there is no harm done. You never once imagine the paranoia or anguish your victims suffer as a result."

"You made this personal!" he roared, "There's one rule that I always stick to in this business, and it's to never get friends and family involved. You'll get your bloody documents. I'll go back and get them."

Cordia allowed his response to hang for a painfully long time before relenting, “Fine. It’ll be faster if you succeed anyway. The deadline is coming up. Make sure that this is not the last time that we speak on such friendly terms.”

Caius desperately wanted to have the last word – but she was already moving away towards Maria’s position through the other exit. He gritted his teeth and stepped back before his emotions got the better of him. As she slipped around the corner and out of his sight, Maria peeled away and started her pursuit.

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It was too quiet for me to hear the exact context of the meeting, but it was evident from Caius’ tone of voice that it hadn’t gone well. She’d dumped my fake documents into the nearest bin and put pressure on him to do it again. There was uncertainty in the air. Would she return to a safehouse, or move close to the employers that I was seeking?

There was no good in backing off now and missing my window of opportunity. Caius might have burned a very large bridge for this. I tucked my hands into my pockets and made myself look inconspicuous as I started tailing the woman from a safe distance. She was the unaware type – not considering for one moment that Caius was working with someone else.

Still, she tried to slip away from any pursuers by taking a roundabout path through the city. The problem for her was that I could easily guess where she would come out again after disappearing into the alleyways. I parked myself at the nearest junction and waited for her to emerge again, this process repeated three times. It wasn’t so late that we were the only people out and about. It was easy to blend into the crowds and keep myself out of sight.

It didn’t take long for me to guess where she was headed. There was a dense residential area closer to the dockyards where many of the working men and women liked to live. It was a good place to hide. I studied the layout of the city a few years ago in case I ever needed to make an escape. There were a lot of apartments and homes available, and the owners never asked questions about their tenants. It was easy to

bluff and claim you were one of the thousands who came to work at the shipyards. Attrition was high, so it wasn't unusual for someone to come and go within weeks.

True to form – she forced her way between two men who were arguing on the front porch and disappeared behind one of the side doors. It was a tall building, consisting of four stories. Judging from the number of doors, each floor was its own apartment. I snuck over and peered through to check if there was a flight of stairs once she was gone.

It was time to make a hard choice. I could chase after her into the complex and try to squeeze her for information, but if the Monarchists had any good sense, she wouldn't know anything of importance. But good sense was always in short supply. There was a chance that she was savvy to more than they wanted her to be. I could follow her back to her employers, but that rested on the assumption that she was even in physical contact with them.

I loosened the edge of my skirt and ascended the steps. There was only one door with a number emblazoned on it. She wasn't going to open it if I knocked politely. It was a good thing that I boasted a world-beating plethora of lockpicking experience. I pulled out my makeshift tools and started to fiddle with the locking mechanism. The landlord was being cheap, it only took me a minute to figure it out.

The door clicked and I paused. There was no sound coming from inside.

The main room was upfront. It was a relatively small space, in which a kitchen, washroom and seating area were all squeezed. My attention was drawn to the back window, which was open. She was sitting there with a drink in one hand and a cigar in the other. The noise coming from outside was such that she never heard me tinkering with the door.

I drew my pistol and approached with steady steps. Video games convinced people that getting down onto your knees was the best way to sneak, but that only served to knock you off balance and make a sound. The true way to sneak up on someone was to keep your back straight, your legs limber, and your nerves calm.

She tensed up as the cold metal of the gun barrel pressed up against her bare neck.

“Talk,” I demanded, “Who’s paying you?”

She placed her drink onto the small table to her right before answering.

“That’s a rather vague question. There are a lot of people who play a part in paying my wage.”

“I already know that the Monarchists are digging for information. Who put you up to this?” She tried to move, so I pushed the gun harder. “And if you turn around to face me – I’ll leave a brand-new hole in that face for you to breathe through.”

She chuckled, “Terrifying. Do you use that one of all of the people you hold at gunpoint?”

“Stop wasting my time. It makes no difference to me whether you live or die. Tell me what you know.”

“If you’re hoping for a detailed list of every person involved, I’m afraid that you’re sticking that gun in the wrong place. They don’t talk to me face-to-face; all of my marching orders are sent via letter.”

She nodded in the direction of one such envelope on the counter next to me. I reached out and scanned through the text. It was nothing explosive. It was a request to find and hire a thief, and to steal two things of importance. One of them was Adrian’s watch, and the other was the Social Democrat’s party membership list.

“Do you know what the watch is for?”

“No.”

“Do you know what they want to do with the membership list?”

She sneered, “Kill them most likely. What other reason would they need something like that?”

“And where did they want you to drop it off?”

“The old mailbox on the fifth avenue. They have the key to open it.”

I pulled away to show her that she was on the right track.

“And when is the pickup time?”

She hesitated before relenting to save her own skin, “In a week. I was hoping that Caius was going to get what we needed before then.”

“Who’s Caius?” I asked. Obviously, he was already working for me, but she didn’t know that.

“The thief I hired, but he knows even less than I do.”

“Thank you very much.”

She wasn’t done yet, “You sound like a young girl. What the hell are you doing holding a gun up to my head?”

“A voice can be deceiving.”

She remained completely still while I ransacked her cupboard for the rest of the letters that she was sent by the conspirators. I tucked them into my coat pocket and started to back away towards the door. Killing her would maintain the status quo, and that was a bad idea when trying to find out the facts.

“We never met, and this never happened.”

She returned to her drink and remained silent as I stepped back through the door and slammed it shut. I speeded down the stairs and out into the street, keeping myself out of sight from the window which she was watching from. This was a productive operation. I’d need to study the letters in brighter conditions and plan for my next move. But first – it was time for a debrief with Caius, and to hand him his payment for the information.

