

The first person on my 'list' was Lady Carides Franzheim. She was supposedly referred to by the nickname 'Carrie,' but only by close family members. Carides was the lynchpin holding the conspirators' northern operation together. She was the one building bridges between Duchess Rentree and the northerly noble families who didn't think too highly of that unwashed lot from the south.

With that said – the letters being sent between Thersyn and Rentree were utterly scathing. They couldn't stand the woman, and would eagerly take every opportunity to mock her intelligence, and her belief that she was somehow in control of the situation. Cordia was the one put in charge of keeping her on a short leash, but that also meant she had to follow her orders sometimes.

It was hard to describe the sheer vitriol being spewed in their written correspondence when Sam asked me about it. Even Cordia was getting in on the act and taking cheap shots behind her back. They had a strange way of showing gratitude to the woman making their idiotic plans possible in the first place.

Lance was willing to tell me a few things about her in discussions about our respective home lives. Carrie was open about her support of the Van Walser family and returning them to power, though Lance qualified it by stating that she'd never allow that desire to spiral out of control. It was a little late to be saying that given what I knew.

The impression I got from him was that she was amusing herself. She coveted the idea of being the one pulling strings behind the scenes, to be the playmaker. Cordia and Rentree gave her that opportunity and allowed her to run with it. They were right to call her a fool and worse, she was way in over her head.

She was the connective tissue of their plan, but she was also the weakest link. I didn't need to kill her to sow discord. A few hints that she was heading towards a tragic ending, just like Thersyn, would chill her to the bone and put a stop to all of that. All good nobles delivered their blackmail through letters, and the Walser postal service was always happy to deliver as long as you paid for a stamp.

Being vague was not what I wanted. I wanted to scare the pants off of this woman. The best way to do that was to lavish her with details that only someone with insider

knowledge could state to have. Thanks to Thersyn's gossip chest I had all of the pieces I needed to make it clear that she was going to regret going any further.

I did get a strange thrill out of writing a threatening message, twisting her arm and making sure to pace out each reveal for maximum impact. I never got to do that in my old life. Once I was certain that Carrie was feeling good and paranoid about me, I made the hard sell and told her to quit while she still had the chance, or she'd end up just like her good friend Thersyn.

Of course, a good assassin always came with a backup plan – so I included one of the letters we didn't need, where Cordia and Rentree spent two full, end to end pages lambasting her for everything from the way she spoke to her business interests. She might not choose to stop for the sake of the Van Walser family, but it would increase tensions in an already volatile situation.

The hardest part of this plan of mine was finding her address. Asking Lance for it would elicit no end of questions, so I had to fall back on slowly shaping our conversations at the tennis society until he spilled the beans. He must have thought that I was planning on becoming an architect by that point given that I never shut up about the design of his family's home and its location.

I mailed the sealed letter back to Franklin and told him to double-check my work. I received an affirmative response the next day. One of our current contracted servants had worked there for a spell, and was willing to share details about their time there under the mistaken belief that Franklin was networking for a mutual friend. Franklin sent my threatening mail to the posted address without a name and I crossed my fingers.

There was a small chance that Carides wouldn't even read the damn thing. Not everyone was like my Father – eagerly reading every piece of mail that came through the front door even if it was obviously junk from the outset. A servant would often take the responsibility of opening and screening them. I belaboured the point on the envelope and in the header that it was for her specifically, and that it contained private information for her eyes only.

I'd be a fool to leave all of my eggs in that particular basket. Any differences that came about as a result were a nice bonus that tilted the odds in my favour. There was no getting around the fact that not all of them were 'soft supporters.' Thersyn was already willing to kill for his beliefs, as was Cordia. Rentree was paying for all of this. She understood what was on the line when she sent Cordia to kill Clemens.

Separated from my personal opinions about the flaws in Walser's political system, I could not agree with their plan or their perspective. I really was in no place to say something like that though. I'd forsaken many of my rights and moral principles when I started killing people for cash. I was being the lesser-evil, and that was what my mysterious benefactor wanted.

One thing was for certain, I did not want to endure a civil war. The consequences would be far-reaching and would not discriminate. Those who chomped at the bit for war were the ones who took it too lightly. It was also counter productive to their goals. Galvanizing the populace and forcing them to decide between the two starkest choices, monarchy or democracy, would mean that failure could result in the Van Walser family being stripped of everything. There'd be no coming back from that.

It was easy to forget that Theodore Van Walser was attending the academy with us. The higher years were an elusive species, and his security was extra tight ever since the attempt on Felipe's life. He went nowhere without two armed guards following along and standing outside of whatever room he was in.

I wasn't trying to woo him, so I was content to let him live his life without my interference. He was probably sick and tired of hearing the other students crack jokes about his Father being a Scuncath, they really were fonts of originality.

While I was worrying about tracking down and killing Cordia and Rentree, the other students were more concerned about what subjects they were going to take when their elective forms arrived in the coming months. There were two distinct camps. Those who were here for the sake of it and already had roles lined up by their parents, and those who cared about getting into a field they were passionate about.

Obviously, Claude was in the latter.

“I asked the teachers what subjects would be best for trying to become a police detective, and they said they’d get back to me later. I can’t wait that long!” he complained.

“Why not? We still have months before the final deadline,” Samantha replied.

“I don’t know what I need to be studying up on. It’s not a very efficient use of my time to guess which subjects are most important.”

“So why do you spend so much time reading those crime novels?”

Claude clammed up, “W-Well, it isn’t good for the brain if you spend too much time working hard! You need to give it a rest from time to time.”

Max snickered, “Yeah, but you and I have very different standards when it comes to hard work.”

“Oh, shut up Max. Since you’re so self-assured about it, I presume you’ve already selected your subjects?”

He was much quieter about that, “No, not yet.”

All their eyes turned to me, as if they were expecting a contribution. I was only half paying attention to what they were saying. I was so deep in thought that I was covering my mouth and tapping my foot.

“Hell must have frozen over. What’s on her mind?” Claude whispered, “Because I’d bet good money that it’s not our electives.”

“You don’t know that,” Max said in refutation, “Everyone handles difficult decisions in different ways. Just because Maria remains unflappable doesn’t mean she has no nerves to speak of.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Based on what, exactly?”

“Based on everything I’ve seen from her! She’s as cold as ice, that girl.”

“And she’s standing right in front of you while you insult her.”

I finally looked up to my adoring fans and frowned, “I’m used to Claude’s careless words by now. It’s no mystery as to why he has such a bad reputation with the other girls.”

Claude turned red, “Hey! It’s not that bad. I think I’m in with a good shot of landing a date for the prom.”

“Anything is possible if you give yourself a six-year lead-in to the deadline.”

Max found that response hilarious. He always thought that my dry cynicism was amusing. He covered his mouth and tried not to disrupt the others, who were warming up with some magic exercises before Miss Jennings arrived. There was another issue. Felipe was weary of me given past events, though he had not yet told the truth to anyone else.

I couldn’t pin down why but it was as if his anxieties about me were getting worse with time. Was it because I didn’t show any outward signs of being affected by killing another person? That might explain why he started off trying to make it business as usual but eventually gave up. Or he could have simply changed his mind about the worth of my violence.

A weaker sort would grow upset about their well-intentioned deeds going unappreciated, but I was not that sort of person. A majority of people would not separate the means and outcomes that way. A normal person would not eagerly go along with whatever a mass killer told them. A normal person would only see the blood spilt to pave the way.

Felipe was a normal person. He was a rich son of a noble family who’d never engaged with violence like this. His disquiet was seeded from the moment that he learned of my involvement and only grew more prominent with time. It must have been a complex mixture of different emotions. Was it safe for him to be here with me, knowing what he did? Was it even worth killing all of those men for the sake of protecting one life? He was certainly not imagining all of the other potential victims who were now spared their threat.

I'd be worried if I had a kid thinking that way. I was happy that he hadn't fallen into my own type of craven rationalisation, but his cold shoulder was making me uncomfortable. I was waiting for him to finally crack and try to tell someone about what I did at the party.

When Felipe and Jennings stepped through the rear doors of the main building, he avoided making eye contact with me and put on a smile that was filled with hidden tension. It was going to be another painful hour of tutoring. While everyone else got acclimated to the day's subject matter, Miss Jennings pulled Samantha and I aside to have a word with us about our loaned books.

"So, have you two fully explored the books I gave you?"

Samantha nodded, "I finished the last one this week. I would have liked to have completed them all sooner – but we were too busy to spend all of our time reading."

I bowed my head, "Apologies. It was my fault."

I was too occupied running around like a damned idiot, putting out fires and starting one or two of my own. Eventually, I managed to power through some of the tomes and pass them off to Samantha so she could get started on them as well.

"There's no rush," Miss Jennings insisted, "I was curious, that's all. I've read all of them a dozen times over myself."

"Are you interested in learning nihilism or regeneration magic?" I asked.

"Hm. No. I don't have a natural affinity for it like you two do. It was mainly to advance my own understanding of the art as a whole rather than to pick up a few tricks I could use. A well-rounded understanding of every field is what separates a good teacher from an excellent one."

"I'll return them to you as soon as possible," Samantha promised.

"Thank you. Don't be afraid to come by and ask for advice if you need it."

With that sorted, we returned to the main group and started the day's drills. Felipe put on his brave face and stood at the head of our cohort to deliver some nuggets of wisdom. We'd moved on from manipulating wind currents to ionisation, the

fundamentals of shooting lightning from your fingers and triggering more advanced reactions.

I was already familiar with what Jennings chose to cover, so I breezed through most of the lesson without paying it any mind. I wonder how frustrated Jennings felt knowing that there were two extremely talented mages in her class, both of whom were being asked to work at the same pace as everyone else.

I hung back as the rest of the class returned to the building. I was overheating from all of the magical energy that I was expending. I wanted to stay out in the fresh air and have a moment of quiet. Samantha hurried away to return to the books.

My eyes were inevitably drawn to the tree at the back of the practice area.

It was still there in the same condition as it was after Prier shot at us. There was some brief conversation between the teachers about cutting it down before it became a sort of morbid memorial to him, but there was no reason to do so in the end. The tree was perfectly innocent and it was still alive. It was better for it to be wounded than to be nothing more than a stump.

Dealing with Felipe's situation felt quaint in comparison to what was going on now. That gunshot marked the moment when everything started to go wrong for me. It was the starting pistol on a marathon of bullshit – getting dragged against my will into dangerous business.

How could I have ever interpreted this as a punishment? If this was meant to be a moral lesson, letting me loose to do the same as I always did was hardly an effective methodology. I was their hand grenade, tossed into a chaotic place and time to see if making matters more unstable would change the tide.

I had a guest, and it was easy to guess who it was.

“Hello, Felipe. It's been a while since we've talked one-on-one.”

“It has.”

He walked past me and approached the tree, placing his palm over the shredded bark. He had more reasons to be contemplative about this place than me. He nearly died

here – his young life snatched away by circumstance. It struck me that Felipe was the empathetic type. He didn't like it when people got hurt, even if they were acting maliciously. He was similar to Lance in that respect.

"I've been thinking a lot about the last time we spoke."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'm not trying to make a joke, Maria. I'm concerned about you."

"Am I not the last person you need to concern yourself with? I am more than capable of handling myself."

"This isn't about using a gun. It's everything else. Are you putting on a strong front, or are you genuinely just fine with the way things are? It is not healthy for the mind to burden yourself with these dark thoughts."

"I do not think dark thoughts. I understand that it can be difficult to discern the difference between cynicism and pessimism, I'm merely adjusting my expectations accordingly, given past events."

"Is this what you want to be?" Felipe asked.

It was an unexpectedly hostile question, which was shown by his following attempt to soften it into something more reasonable.

"I'm not trying to say that you relish this sort of situation, but to me, it seems that you've already accepted it. That's no way for a young lady to live."

"Who's to say how a lady can and cannot live?"

"And you always try to divert attention away from the issue when someone asks. Have you ever given it some honest thought? Do you feel bad about what you did?"

I sighed, "I don't derive any enjoyment from it. I would rather live my days without having to worry about armed men bursting through the doors and gunning down my friends and family. Did we not have this conversation once before?"

Felipe hesitated, "I know it's not fair to say this – but the longer I let it linger, the worse it felt."



My gaze hardened, “What you don’t seem to get is that I don’t have any control over what other people elect to do. None of us do. When someone is here with the intent of doing naught but harm, what other choice do we have than to deal with it in a way of our choosing? I would not stand to let you or anyone else die as a result of their actions.”

“That’s the problem. What you did was selfless, but I can’t stop myself from thinking that it wasn’t good either. That’s not fair to you, you risked your life for mine after all.”

I shrugged, “It isn’t fair – indeed, but I cannot chastise you for an errant thought like that. The situation we’re in is complicated, and there are no easy answers that can satisfy both sides of our internal conflict. I second-guess myself often along similar lines.”

“I don’t get your meaning,” he said frankly.

“What I mean is that you don’t have to like it. You’re right in saying that what I did was extreme on both occasions. You should not feel guilty for being shocked by what happened.”

His frustration diffused slightly as I gave it to him straight. That was what he wanted to hear, assurances that his worries weren’t selfish or misplaced. Felipe was still young, younger than me, there was a lot of life left to live and a lot of lessons to learn along the way. This was probably the first time he’d felt this way about a situation he found himself in.

“You believe that too?”

“It’s not a matter of believing it. I won’t be upset if that’s what you mean.”

There was a moment of silence between us as he internalized my response. I didn’t know if it was what he was looking for exactly, but I was no mind reader. My social graces mainly extended to making people feel assured by my presence. I was a great ass-kisser and yes-man because that was a good way to make targets trust me.

“I heard that your Uncle was attacked too.”

I was not anticipating this coming up.

“Luckily he escaped unscathed. The proliferation of political violence in Walsler is starting to worry me. Are those the principles the monarchists wish to extoll to the populace?”

Felipe did not know that I was there at the museum, so he was more focused on the emotional impact the attack had on me. I reset my focus and tried to show outward concern about it so that he wouldn't become needlessly suspicious about my response.

“Why do you think the monarchists did it?” Felipe asked curiously.

“Seems fairly obvious from where I'm standing. The Social Democrat party is predicted to be the biggest Republican force in the next sitting term. They're trying to pick off people like my Uncle so that their campaign is thrown into disarray.”

He nodded, “Oh. I wasn't aware of that. I don't pay much attention to politics.”

“It's hard not to in my household, given my Uncle's involvement.”

“But won't the voters notice that transparent effort and vote for the Social Democrats regardless?”

I laughed, “As I said – the average mind is a complex being. People may never react to something in the way you expect. Their loyalty may only be commanded or swayed by the charisma of a singular speaker.”

With that said, I agreed with Felipe. Killing any of the Social Democratic leaders would potentially have a disastrous impact on the Monarchists' election efforts. It would motivate voters to boot them from the house by a much larger effect than killing any one of their popular speakers. It was an irrational risk to take – one that depended on the populace's hunger for violence during this time of uncertainty.

With Thersyn behind bars and their media fronts bleeding credibility though, stoking the flames of division was now much harder for them. Being a Scuncath was such a strong black mark against an individual that it easily blew past whatever pre-held biases the readership possessed. They were moving onto other monarchist-leaning

sources and newspapers to fill the void, ones which were more than happy to kick Thersyn's struggling papers while they were down.

Convincing one of them to sell out and join up with the plot was a hard task. Why settle for being a puppet when you could grow to become the master? With the elections looming, they didn't have time to fatten them up into having the platform that Thersyn once did either.

If Carides Franzheim backed out thanks to her involvement being known – then they'd really struggle to do anything more than killing some politicians with Cordia and Marco. At that point, they may as well give up on the whole plan.

“Well, I'll have to take your word for it. Just don't go running in guns blazing trying to take them all down. I don't see it ending well.”

“I won't,” I lied, “I think I used a lifetime's worth of luck surviving the incident at the theatre. I won't soon be placing my body into similar circumstances if I can help it.”

“Honestly, it makes me despair to think that so many people believe that violence will solve their problems.”

I led Felipe back to the main school building while he muttered more words of disparagement under his breath. The issue was not that violence would solve their problems, so much as they were invested in returning to a version of Walser where their own power and influence held significant sway over public life and politics. The mere potential for the wider public to take control from them via democratic elections chilled them to the core.

It was not a 'problem,' per se. They could easily live their lives without ever worrying about their financial security. What they wanted was more. They wanted control over the laws that were made and passed. They wanted no restrictions on how where or when they could do business. They were a group of people who were not used to being told no. They couldn't cope with the idea of it.

Through that lens, their violence became both existential to the survival of their Walser, while also being ultimately frivolous in nature. There was not even a brief consideration of the impact that their choices had on others. If innocent bystanders

died – then it was only justified to restore Walser to its former glory. A weaker, centralised nation that was being rapidly outpaced by its neighbours, and strangled with a weak governmental system driven by the whims of a select few, many of whom possessed no interest in leading in the first place.

The march of progress continued no matter what they tried.

I could have chosen to leave them to their devices with that knowledge, but it was personal this time. Maria Walston-Carter wasn't going to let some ruffians kill her dearest Uncle now, was she? The last pieces to knock over were in clear view. Cordia, Marco and Duchess Rentree. They'd learn to regret ever crossing paths with me.

