

A singularly distinguished gentleman waltzed between the undulating crowds of the downtown jungle.

Caius Willow was on cloud nine thanks to his most recent endeavour, a robbery most fiendish, under the most challenging circumstances. It came as a surprise that the stiffest resistance he faced came from a girl half his age! But the methodology did not matter in the end. He succeeded in taking what was demanded and delivering it safely to his client.

Caius did not like getting physical with others. He was a thief – not a brawler or a murderer. That was a line he remained unwilling to cross. He aimed to perform his robberies in pitch-perfect form. Done without witnesses, injury, or evidence left behind, aside from the blue roses he loved to leave behind as a calling card. He couldn't advertise his services openly, so having a trademark such as that was essential to cultivating new clients.

The other side of that equation was an information broker named Gertrude. She was a cranky old crone who helped the young orphans on the street earn money through ill deeds. The rapidly expanding middle class of Walser meant that there were more targets than ever to pilfer and rob. Despite that increasing prosperity and wealth, none of it was felt on the bottom layers of society. If anything, their conditions grew worse with each passing year.

Areas that were once considered safe havens for the poor were being cordoned off by a heavy police presence. Working-class neighbourhoods were being swallowed whole by office-bound professionals who wanted to be close to the heart of the city. Many of them were offered money for their homes, so much money that they couldn't possibly refuse, fracturing the communities to pieces and coercing those who remained to make the same bargain.

Gertrude inhabited one of those brick townhouses, which had been converted into a storefront and two pairs of apartments. It was discrete. The butcher's shop on the bottom floor also served as a convenient excuse for her clients to come and go without arousing too much suspicion. The owner of the shop was one of her previous friends

who decided to go straight. He repaid the favour he owed her for those early tips by opening the shop and keeping his mouth closed when the police came asking.

Caius ducked beneath the low doorway and squeezed past a line of customers who were waiting at the counter. A flight of stairs allowed access to the houses above – but exterior space was so limited that you could only enter them through the shop itself. Both other residents were given a key so they could let themselves in. Caius arrived on the upper floor and knocked thrice.

“Gertrude, it’s Caius.”

The slot on the door scraped open, revealing a pair of weary eyes. Once Gertrude was sure that it was only him – she proceeded to go through the arduous process of releasing her chains and locks. Caius had told her time and again that they wouldn’t stop the police from knocking it down with a battering ram, but she refused to listen.

The apartment served as both her office and her home, though the latter interpretation was challenging given the state of the space. What was already a small area divided from a larger, three-story home was taken to the very extreme by her obsessive note-taking. Caius held his half-cape aloft in mockery of a vampire bat. Given that he never wore his full costume to these meetings, it had less of an effect than he would have liked.

Gertrude was not amused, “Save me the bloody theatrics, Caius.”

Caius laughed and grabbed one of the chairs, squeezing between the towering pillars of paper that dominated every flat surface in the tiny apartment. Gertrude would have his head if he knocked any of them over. If there was one thing she couldn’t stand, it was someone ruining her controlled chaos.

“How did your last job go? I didn’t get the chance to ask last time you swung by.”

He shrugged, “She already wants me to do another hit.”

Gertrude sighed, “What kind of hit? I hope you didn’t accept the down payment before coming here to speak with me.”

Caius held up his hands, “I can assure you that I have made no promises to the good lady as of yet. She wants me to break into a particular house and retrieve a document that lists collaborators to the Republican alliance.”

“That seems about right. I sent out my feelers for who she was, and what I got back was a little worrying. According to some trustworthy sources – she’s the personal fixer for Claris Rentree.”

“I’m not familiar.”

“Yeah – that’s just how she likes it. She’s a baroness from the south counties, and a major figure in the underground monarchist movement. If her fixer is asking you for information like that it can only mean one thing.”

“Political plotting abounds.”

“I don’t really care how things pan out with the parliament, but I do care about what happens to you. These monarchists are bad bloody clients. They stiff the people who work for them, and try to kill them if they know too much. I’ve heard nothing but horror stories since I started looking into them. My advice? Get clear of them while you have the chance.”

Caius crossed his arms. Was the watch theft just a test to see if he could manage? It was magical in nature but how advanced could the internal mechanism really be? A test wouldn’t pay that much. She could have chosen an easier target that closely matched the conditions of her follow-up offer.

“Oh, and I asked them about the watch too – didn’t get anything back aside from the fact that each head of the Roderro family is given it on succession. Since the kid’s dad ended up in prison, he’s the one who ended up with it. It seems like a closely guarded family secret. So how did Claris find out about it? What was it that made her want the thing?”

“I was hoping that you’d answer those questions for me.”

“I’m an information broker, not a miracle worker. The Roderros like to run a tight ship and there are less and less of them to leak intel these days. All I’m saying is that

they're keeping you in the dark and at arm's length. If things go wrong – you're going to be the one they burn first."

Gertrude turned down to the paper she was writing onto, dipping her quill into a fresh dosage of black ink. She was always ferrying away at something or other, always busy, never able or willing to keep her hands still for one moment. She was a woman who believed the adage 'time is money' as if it were religious dogma. If she issued a stern warning about how a job wasn't worth the money, he tended to listen.

But this time was different.

"They offered me fifty thousand marks."

The quill stopped.

"Fifty thousand?" she repeated for clarification.

"Aye, offered to give me the first half upfront on acceptance."

"Too good to be true. That's more money than most people make in a year."

"I thought the first one was too good to be true, but they still paid out in the end."

"And what do you want me to say? That I won't blame you for going through with it? Because I will. I'll think you're a right bloody idiot if you jump into that without knowing who you're dealing with."

"Money is money."

"Don't turn that canard around on me," Gertrude groaned, "This is sounding more sensitive with every detail you give me. So, it's a political job to get a party list from the Republicans, issued by a prominent monarchist and her fixer, and they're offering to pay your bills for a whole year? You may as well hang yourself now and save the police the effort."

Caius wasn't interested in her reason, "They're not going to catch me. I'm not those two-bit petty thieves who try to ride on the reputation of Caius Sr. I'm the real deal. I'll be in and out so fast that they won't know who hit them."

Gertrude scoffed, “Pah. Every criminal who ever got caught thought the exact same thing. I read an interesting journal about criminal psychology recently - it said that the punishment wasn’t what deterred people from committing crimes. It’s all about the odds of getting arrested.”

“I’m no fool. He didn’t teach me everything he knew just to watch me waste away the prime years of my career picking pockets.”

“There’s nothing more valuable to a human being than their life! Everybody makes compromises between their health and their financial security – but this is going too far. You can’t enjoy a single penny of that money if you die in the process of earning it. How many hot-headed lads do you think come through those doors saying the exact same bloody thing? Their names and faces turn up in the obituaries a few days later.”

Caius closed his eyes and exhaled. He knew she was going to react badly to hearing the news, but it was no less distressing for her to launch into a desperate tirade to try and stop him. His reasons were deeper than just financial security. It was a literal matter of life and death.

“I have to take the money. I’m sorry.”

Gertrude leapt out of her chair and pursued him through the room, “Wait a damn second Caius! I’m seriously warning you about this! Why are you choosing now of all times to be a stubborn pig about it?”

“There are some things that even you don’t know, Gertrude.”

“I don’t care what your reasoning is. This is way too deep for you, you’re going to drown down there. Is that money really worth taking a gamble on your life?”

Caius wouldn’t heed a word she said. He continued to ignore her cries of protest even as they descended the steps and moved through the butcher’s shop. The staff and customers were befuddled by the argument that was simmering between the pair. She hovered by the front door of the shop, not wanting to leave her door open and unattended.

“Because if the monarchists don’t kill you, the Republicans will! You’re the little guy on the bottom! Those gears are going to keep turning, and you’re going to be the one caught between the cogs!” Gertrude roared, her voice cracking and fraying.

Caius didn’t need to hear it. He understood perfectly well that he was taking an immense risk. What Gertrude revealed was not enough to deter him from this course of action. Those who refused to gamble would continue to wallow in their squalor. One did not ascend to the heights of upper society without putting everything on the line. To him there was no difference between staying away and failure. They would both mean the same undesirable outcome.

Jobs that paid this much only came around once in a blue moon, and they always went to other people instead of him. Caius was not going to pass up the opportunity when it finally arrived.

Gertrude slammed her hand against the doorframe and clenched her teeth, “Bloody idiot!” She turned to the bewildered customers and stormed back through the shop to her apartment. Had everyone lost their minds? Nobody was willing to listen to her advice anymore! She turned on her kettle and stewed in the kitchen, looking out of the window and onto the alleyway behind the building.

“Idiot. Idiot. Idiot,” she chanted. She paced back and forth but found no comfort in doing so. She briefly considered breaking one of her golden rules and stepping in, but that would bring greater consequences than she could predict. Confidentiality was the creed by which she earned trust and spread her roots into boardrooms and manors across the nation.

Caius would regret his hastiness.

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The week break was finally upon us. Samantha and I were both heading home for that period, with Sam being more than a little homesick after spending so long at the academy. I didn’t care so much – but it was an opportunity to clear my head and catch up with what was happening at the estate. Sam left me with a declarative statement that she’d find something ‘fun’ for both of us to do.

Doubtful.

My Father wasn't home for the first day, having been held back on a business trip, but he returned early the following morning. The carriage rode into the driveway and he eagerly entered the main reception with a tired groan and a crack of his spine. The servants soon followed with his luggage in hand, shuffling past us and taking them upstairs to be unpacked.

"Goddess above. I thought those meetings would never end."

"Welcome home, Father."

Damian smiled, "It's lovely to see you again, dear. Just the thing I need after such a frustrating experience."

"Was it that bad?" I inquired.

He chuckled, "You don't have the faintest idea. At this point, I feel as if they are doing it to spite me. I hoped that my new managers would be able to handle it, but it seems that my faith was misplaced. Hopefully they get up to speed, and soon."

The very first thing he decided to do, aside from getting his fill of seeing his beloved daughter, was to check the pile of mail that had grown on the table by the door. He took the bundle of letters into his arms and followed me into the sitting room. I observed him cracking each one open and quickly scanning their contents in turn.

"Hm. Nothing interesting."

That was until he reached the bottom of the pile. His brow raised as he read out the name on the letter, "Clemens..."

"Uncle Clemens?"

My Father nodded and read some of the text, "He's been promoted to a senior position in the party, and he's invited us over to join a celebration at his house."

"I haven't seen Uncle Clemens in some time."

"Ah, he's very eager to catch up with his favourite niece."

"I'm his only niece," I responded dryly.

"If there was competition, I'm sure you'd still hold the position."

Clemens was the younger brother, and at thirty-four he'd yet to settle on a partner or have any children. It was a rare sight for a man of distinction to be single for so long. There was no doubt that he received plenty of offers for marriage from other families - and he was under no pressure to land a significant tie with them. It was only for his benefit, as I was the heir to the main branch. Perhaps he was awaiting the arrival of a woman who loved wooden furniture with the same zeal that he did.

"It would be rude to reject his invitation now."

This sounded like another 'flag.'

Clemens was not a character from the visual novels, he was exclusive to this reality I was living. I couldn't expect every single person to appear in a game primarily focused on romance - but these circumstances made my hair stand on end. The robbery at the academy and this event were coming one after the other. Was karma teeing up another crisis for me to solve?

He was heavily involved in the Walser Liberal-Democratic Party, one of the key lynchpins that held the ruling Republican coalition together. Versus some of their partners, they were considered to be a conservative force, though it was hard to appear far-left when you were standing with the Worker's Party.

Politics in Walser was strange. Some of the Monarchist factions were more liberal than the Republicans. With Republicanism the defining issue of the era, many unlikely alliances were being formed to cement what political institution would win control for the foreseeable future. The specifics didn't matter. What did matter was that this question of monarchism versus democracy was one with a lot of bad blood behind it. The country nearly collapsed into total civil war a few years before my 'birth.'

It was the perfect environment for an unfortunate incident. On the upside, I personally knew the layout of his home, so I didn't need to submit myself to any special preparations on that front.

"What position was he promoted to?"



“It says here that he’s now the vice-chair of the party’s leadership council. Why do I get the feeling that they’re making these positions up just to keep the members happy?”

Damian was only interested in politics insofar as he could complain about them during breakfast and ignore them for the rest of the day. He never went any further than reading the headlines and reaching fast conclusions on whether he hated them or not.

“It will be nice to see Uncle Clemens again.”

He looked uncertain about that. The parties for adult occasions had a poor tendency to get rowdy as the alcohol started to flow. Clemens loved drinking almost as much as he loved a good antique chair. One of my most vivid memories of him was a previous engagement where he drank so much that Damian had to drag him upstairs into the bathroom so that he could empty his stomach.

“Well, as I said – it would be rude to refuse to visit on such an important occasion. I’ll send a reply and tell him that we will attend. It’s happening soon. Luckily I wasn’t held back for any longer than one day!” Damian wandered off to find a blank piece of paper and a quill with which to pen his reply. I heard his voice calling out for his personal attendant to assist him.

The head maid stepped in to speak with me, “The Master has been worried sick about you since he heard the news. It was the only thing he wanted to talk about for days after it happened.”

“There is no need to tell me, Margaret – I am well aware of the ways in which he conceals his real feelings from me. He must project an ever-vigilant image of strength for the sake of the family.”

She smiled, “I was worried that you’d think of him as a cold Father since he did not possess the time to personally visit the academy and see if the arrangements were to his liking. There were vigorous letters of complaint exchanged between him and the headmaster.”

It was easy to know the true nature of a person after spending years living with them. Damian Walston-Carter was the archetypal noble family man, steering the great ship he called home with a fixation on tradition and attainment. There were a lot of things that were expected of him, but being caring was not one of them. Noble men showing any signs of weakness was considered poor form, partly due to a history of those weaknesses being exploited and partly because many of them were extremely conservative.

Adrian's Father was what most people expected. A conniving, insecure man who projected his failed ambitions onto his child without asking for his opinion. Most never went to the extremes that he did, but in the decades before the formation of the republic, it was more common to see that kind of behaviour.

In the grand scheme of Father figures among the noble class – Damian was one of the best, though perhaps he gave me too much room to do as I pleased. If I were a normal girl my age I'd question the wisdom of him caving to my every demand. He simply could not refuse a request when it came from me. How else would I have gotten permission to participate in those shooting competitions?

Damian returned to the sitting room with his quill and parchment. I did not understand the need to send a reply given how soon the party was supposed to be occurring, but etiquette was always on his mind. He sat down by the table and started to compose the letter.

"Is there anything you wish to speak to me about, Maria?" he asked, "You were involved in both incidents with the Roderro family."

I decided to tow a fine line between expressing fear and assuring him that he did not have to worry about me. 'Maria' was composed and mature, but even mature people would be placed under significant stress in those scenarios. I was a teenage girl and sometimes I had to remind myself of that fact.

"It was rather terrifying – luckily I managed to escape to a safe room on both occasions. The sound of the fighting was calamitous."

That was good enough for him, “If you ever want to speak with me, I’m always here for you, and don’t be afraid to send me a letter if I’m not available in person either.”

“I will keep that in mind in future.”

It only took him a few minutes to finish his writing. The letter was folded, placed into an envelope and stamped with a wax seal that bore the family crest. Margaret was already waiting by the desk to accept it from him.

“I’ll mail this for you, sir.”

“Thank you, Margaret.”

She tottered off to find another servant to delegate the task to. My Father, now happy that the important business was taken care of, turned his full attention to me. There was a moment of silence as he studied the way I was standing in front of him. I doubled-checked my posture to make sure that I wasn’t missing something important. Relief flooded my system when he smiled.

“You are looking like a fine adult lady already, Maria. Have your lessons been going well?”

“They have. I’ve been dedicating myself to my studies.”

“I heard that you were assessed as a grade five mage during the opening exam. I always knew that you had a knack for magic! You’ll do the family proud, I’m sure.”

“Unfortunately, our lessons were disrupted by the incidents at the party and theatre, Felipe Escobarus was our senior tutor.”

“Is that so? I was not aware that his son was a firm hand with the field.”

“He is. He’s a very talented teacher as well.”

The pleasantries went on for the next hour and he drilled down into the events at both the assassination attempts and the individual classes that I was taking. I got the distinct sense that he was feeling out how things were going at the academy and how I’d adjusted to them. It came to a surprising conclusion, stated out of the blue.

“This Samantha girl sounds like a good friend. I was wondering why you gave off such a different air to what you usually do, but now I know.”

“Hm?”

He chuckled, “You’ve never been interested in having friends. It was always the aspect of your personality that worried me the most. The nobles can be a heartless lot, and a good friend only comes around so often.”

“I wouldn’t say that we’re friends, not yet.”

“To me it sounds as if you’re friends in everything but name. Choose them well. There are many who see a relationship with a noble as nothing more than a transactional one.”

He had a strange idea in his head now about me and Samantha. There was no hope in trying to deny his allegations now. His mind was firmly set on her and me being best friends. It made sense. He wanted what was best for his darling little girl, and becoming more social was a sign that I was ‘growing up’ and breaking out of my shell.

“And you say she comes from a farming family further north? Interesting. I did not realise that the academy was admitting people from rural backgrounds.”

“She receives no end of backhanded comments for it, but the way she ignores their pointed words tends to frustrate them greatly. That anger grows fiercer when she outscores them in our mock tests.”

Damian laughed boisterously, “They would do well to learn a lesson in humility then. The Academy may have a reputation for housing the spoiled children of careless nobles, but it is one of the few places where your ability is measured against your peers in a forthright manner.”

With that said – it was entirely possible to butter up or bribe one of the teachers, I just hadn’t seen anyone try it yet.

“Whatever you say, Father.”

