

The police were on the scene quickly, putting up a cordon and investigating the incident. It happened far away enough from the tournament that there was no disruption, and without any obvious evidence of foul play, no need to evacuate the attendees.

In a world without modern mass media and internet communication – it was rare for the police to be open and transparent about what they were doing. It was possible for a murder to occur in the city and for the general population to know nothing about it, unless an enterprising journalist decided that it was sensational enough to dig into.

But Cordia? She was a nobody. There wasn't going to be any public interest in a union member jumping from a building and killing herself. The police would wash their hands of it and go with the easiest answer themselves. They had bigger problems to deal with than 'suicidal' folks. It was morbid – but that was the way things worked in this era. Justice was often only levied to the people who could afford it.

Cordia was a small fry, getting her hands dirty for the sake of advancing her owner's goals. They wouldn't be shedding any tears about her death, given that she was being used to commit the actual assassinations. I hovered around the VIP area until the next match to make sure that there were no follow-up attempts.

When I returned to Lance, he and the rest of the club were getting excited.

"Right on time. You look sweaty, did you play a match with someone?"

"No, no. I just feel a little under the weather for some reason."

I took a small cloth from my pocket and wiped away the perspiration. A noble lady never left the house without one.

It was Emily's turn once again. The bracket was falling into place for her, with some upset victories that pushed lower-seeded players into the upper bracket. If their form suffered during the following games, she could make a very deep run and potentially move into the semi-finals.

Over the next four hours and gruelling series of battles played out in front of me. I was able to switch my mind off and enjoy the spectacle of two talented players putting

everything on the line to win. Emily blasted her way through three more opponents during that time. Having a tournament take place over a single day was not exactly optimal, but it did raise the stakes by putting their endurance to the test. At least four participants were forced to drop out after suffering fatigue and injuring their arms.

Lance was over the moon, “Emily is amazing. She’s already two stages ahead of where we thought she’d end up!” His exuberance was shared by the other members, who were starting to fly into a frenzy of applause, cheering with each and every point scored.

But she was flying close to the sun. Her third opponent was looking strong, and the match was close. Everyone was forced to the edge of their seats, but Emily’s endurance finally hit its limit. The ball slipped past her and against the back fence, signalling the end of her run. Despite her loss – Emily was in a better mood losing to a skilled foe than she was destroying a hobbyist.

The club left the stands and returned to the changing area to offer their condolences.

“That was a fantastic showing, Emily. You’re the first third-year to make it that deep into the bracket.”

Emily wiped herself down with a towel and flumped over onto the bench, “Thanks, Lance. You weren’t lying when you said that there’s a huge leap in skill from one round to the next.”

Lance nodded in consolation, “I had the same reaction. The senior members of the society revealed the same to me, but I didn’t understand what they meant until I saw it with my own eyes. This is where the future professionals come to show off what they can do. I’d say that you’ve caught the attention of people in the sport.”

Emily was pessimistic, “We’ll see. I’m not expecting to hear from the bigwigs after one solid showing.”

“More than solid, and you never know – they like to keep an eye out for young talent.”

With Emily eliminated the Royal Academy’s tennis society was officially out of participants for this year’s event. Some of the others slipped away to enjoy the

festivities or catch matches that they were anticipating. I didn't have any plans in mind, and now that the game was over my headspace was occupied by Cordia's untimely end. It was a bizarre way to go. In terms of the artistry of this life I lived, it was strangely anticlimactic. I was so sure that she'd become one of the leading antagonists on this new adventure. The unassuming lackey who holds all the cards – it was a classic trope.

“Did you have a good time, Maria?”

I glanced up at Lance, “Yes. The matches were rather enjoyable.”

“You know – a lot of the other students keep acting like you're an emotionally stunted doll. I could tell that you were excited about the games.”

“An emotionally stunted doll...”

Lance's eyes shot open, “Oh. I didn't mean to say it like that. I never put any stock into those claims in the first place. What I mean to say is that they'd have a better impression of you if they were willing to see you as a real person, rather than a collection of unlikely stories.”

Lance was very meek – but also brutally honest and prone to getting himself into awkward situations. This was one example of that. He stated it with good intentions but accidentally implied that he was one of those people with his own counterargument.

“I understand what you mean, but I am no zoo-bound animal who owes them a display of my personable qualities. Fools are difficult to convince, evidence is often only further proof of their pre-existing conclusions.”

Lance frowned, “That was the type of response they talked about too.”

“I take myself seriously.”

“I can tell. Now that all of our club members have been knocked out of the contest, the others will be too busy stuffing their faces to see the rest of the bracket. Emily and I are going to centre court to see the finals.”

“I'll come with you. It would feel like a waste of a trip not to see the best of the best.”

Emily, Lance and I did just that. We moved to the centre court and observed the last rounds of the tournament until the winner was finally crowned. The level of play on display was far over what Emily could do as a student. They moved with speed and struck the ball with superhuman accuracy. They were on a different level. I was fit, but my smaller pubescent body would not be capable of keeping up with the likes of them, it was physically impossible.

The match was close, whipping the crowd into an uproarious frenzy as the scores switched back and forth. The noise was deafening as the final serve skirted the line and was called fair by the umpire. Almost everyone in the stands leapt to their feet and applauded the young woman's victory over her foe.

This was her goal. She was enraptured by the sight of these future professionals playing on one of the biggest stages, she imagined herself in their place. I envied her. She was already so assured in the path that she was taking. I was not. I was a stubborn asshole who masked my indecisiveness with a confrontational attitude. There was never a moment where I set my mind to a goal and worked towards it.

That was what I found the most frustrating. At some point along the way, I started to accept that my wants needed to take a backseat to whatever unseen plan was being formed on my behalf. Would my reward at the end of this be the freedom to make my own choices, or would this second chance be snuffed out before I could cause any harm to innocent people?

I wanted answers about how much control I had. Everything lined up to conveniently place me into situations where my skills as an assassin were needed. They brought me here for that exact purpose, so how much did they know about what was going to happen?

I sat in silence and contemplated that question during the journey back to the Academy.

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Thersyn Bradley was furious, but he kept it hidden beneath an impassive mask – like he always did. It was not unusual for a competitor to send a journalist to his home to

try and dig for secrets, but none of them got so far as the front gate before being caught by the guard on duty.

He had a sneaking suspicion that the state his office was left in came about as a result of one individual getting through. They were careful not to disturb anything, but he could tell. The biggest problem was the passageway door, that had been opened before he could descend the stairs and confront the intruder.

If what was in there got out, his life was over.

There was no time to ruminate on that subject though. The next phase of their plan was due to begin, and Claris Rentree was visiting the city to get an in-person update about what was going on. What he wouldn't give to knock her down a peg. The Duchess always acted like she was too good to appear in his presence.

Thersyn knew what the problem was. Every man and woman involved in the plot believed themselves to be the ones giving orders. They wanted to be the ones who claimed all the glory at the other end, asserting a position of even greater influence over events in the country.

Thersyn did his best to hide the sheer, venomous disdain he felt for Claris as her carriage rolled through his open front gate. He got down onto one knee, as was proper, and kissed the back of her hand in greeting.

"Duchess Rentree, I hope you are doing well."

"I hope you understand how much of a hassle it is to come north for these meetings," Claris griped from the offset. "Cordia has been keeping me abreast of any new developments with the Franzheim girl. She's very meticulous."

"I understand perfectly well, it is a time-consuming process, even when we benefit from waterborne transportation."

"I mustn't waste any time. There's a ball I must attend the day after the next – I will never recover my social standing if I'm forced to miss it."

"Wouldn't you say that this grand mission of ours is more important than a ball? We are speaking of the future of this nation."

“It is important, but if you want the money and political support to keep flowing, I have to shake hands and put on that fake smile. Now, chop chop – let’s get to it.”

Thersyn resisted the urge to turn her into a new shrine to his Goddess and escorted her through to the meeting room. She sat down on the sofa, refusing to remove her overcoat and hat. She was far too eager to leave again, she was forgetting her manners.

Thersyn calmed himself with a cigar; “Franzheim is tangling Cordia up in busywork at the moment, but she’s not at risk of turning on us yet. She’s more concerned about her own safety than the success of our plan. We can pressure her in a different way if Cordia can’t deliver the results she demands.”

“It’s unusual for Cordia to struggle like this.”

“It appears she hired an elusive customer. He doesn’t know anything. If she can’t kill him we’ll lie to Franzheim and say that it’s taken care of. It’s unlikely for a blind fledgling like her to discover the truth. Her network is your network, after all.”

“If needs must. I would prefer loose ends to be tied firmly, though.”

“Still – the gentleman she hired did what we asked eventually. A complete, accurate list of the candidates standing in the next election. We’re already putting our people into their places so that we can cripple the Social Democrats at the right moment. Without their leaders, the voters will split apart and seek other avenues.”

Lady Rentree crossed her legs, “All of that work to protect that information, and that blubbering idiot Walston-Carter leaves it in a scarcely defended drawer.”

“Obscurity is the best kind of security,” Thersyn explained, “Though his office is not the best place to keep sensitive documents like those. He had to hold a party to celebrate his promotion too...”

“They’ll be back at his home soon enough, to attend his funeral rites.”

Thersyn handed a piece of parchment over, “This is the list.”

Claris studied the document with a discerning eye. Several notable members of the Social Democratic party were included, the ones who had the biggest pull and

capability to attract voters from across the spectrum. It would be a devastating blow to their election prospects to lose them. It would collapse the Republican faction's power in parliament and tip the scales in the monarchist's favour.

From there they could make deals and promises to secure rollbacks on troublesome reforms. Even the monarchists in parliament were nothing more than convenient pawns for Claris Rentree and her ilk.

"We'll need to pick our targets and find out where they're going to be, and then launch a simultaneous attack to kill as many of them as possible. Cordia should be able to take care of the fine details."

Thersyn nodded, "When that happens, we'll publish stories to sway public opinion away from the parliament and republican parties. If we put our backing behind one of the monarchist fronts – we should be able to steal seats and prevent the Republicans from forming a coalition."

"Good. The public's trust is already waning after the shootings in the theatre building. One more nudge in the right direction should have them clamouring for the return of the royal family."

Thersyn snorted and snubbed his cigar into the ashtray, "I heard some interesting stories from some of the folks who took part in that plot. They told me that a young girl rolled through and gunned them down without remorse, no older than thirteen."

"Thirteen? Don't tell me that you buy into that Sturmläufer nonsense?"

Thersyn tugged on his collar and tried to chuckle his way out of it, "We may have published a few articles about the subject before. I can't say that I'm the kind of man who dismisses the absurd out of hand. When you work in this business – the strange is mundane."

Sturmläufer; it was perhaps the single most loaded term in the Walser language. Not because it held any particular meaning outside of being a portmanteau of 'storm' and 'walker.' To express a belief in the Sturmläufer was often a mark of intense ridicule, as sensationalist actors repeatedly claimed to have the proof needed to show that the

government had been quietly training secret police officers from a young age to infiltrate places where they normally could not.

The theories would run the gamut from them acting as nothing more than government snitches, to trained killers who showcased enhanced strength, speed, agility and awareness. Even further afield than that were theories that intertwined with concepts and conspiracies about magically enhanced humans who were essentially living weapons.

Thersyn's journalists scoured every corner of the nation for evidence to support this story, but couldn't find anything. Some cursory mentions about the hypothetical application of magic in human enhancement provided enough fuel for some hysterical articles about them, but even that well ran dry after a few weeks.

It was a personal curiosity – but Thersyn was not a 'believer.' Belief implied that it was some sort of religious devotion, or that it was unfounded to look into the matter. Thersyn would not argue that they were real unless he could find proof. Anything less would be to waste his breath.

"Call it a hobby of mine. I only entertain it these days because some of the young men and women who come through my doors are curious in the same way. But if we separate the claim from the stigma of *Sturmläufer*, it does beg many questions. The other survivors testified along similar lines. To put it simply – a girl who was there somehow procured a weapon and killed two dozen of them, yet the police have no idea who did it or why."

Clariss had no time for absurd claims like these.

"Do you honestly believe that an unruly rabble like them are trustworthy sources?"

"Not usually, but they all told the same story independently. I heard it from multiple police sources that they swore on their lives that it was true, they even asked them if they coordinated the claim ahead of time – but none of them agreed."

Clariss sighed and intended to discard the discussion from her mind as soon as possible, but then an intrusive thought occurred to her. Cordia's reports had mentioned a 'young lady' breaking into her apartment and asking for information

about who she was working for. As was protocol, she refused to offer anything more than a single morsel to throw her off of the trail. Just how young was that lady specifically?

She chastised herself. She was falling for Thersyn's propaganda techniques again, casting doubt where there was otherwise nothing to see. Cordia didn't specify because it wasn't worth noting. All she knew was that a young girl was chasing them down for some reason. It was a task better left to the likes of the police.

Not that they'd ever lift a finger against her or Thersyn. They were bought and paid for, and she had eyes and ears inside the organisation too. At the higher levels of Walser's police – they couldn't so much as breathe without her hearing about it. Not that she did. Her operatives were picked because of their ability to separate prescient information from worthless noise.

So far, they hadn't found anything to worry about. The police were too busy dealing with the fallout from the Roderro case, tracking down the last pieces to finalize the case and shut down the Tee's Gang. Heads would roll at the higher ranks if any of them got away by having not been at the building during the shootout.

Cathdra Roderro was a blessing in disguise. Any initial suspicions about the monarchists being involved were quickly brushed aside by his confession to doing it for purely personal reasons. He'd galvanized both sides of the debate without meaning to, and tensions were rising fast.

Thersyn rubbed his eyes, "I still don't understand how you found a woman in the servant's union with this kind of background in discrete matters."

"Information is everything. Pulling up a criminal record or two is easy enough for someone like me. I offered her a network of willing subordinates and almost complete protection from prosecution for her loyalty. She's an excellent handmaiden – and an even better fixer. Many others have crossed that line before, but it's become more of a rarity these days with the police sniffing around our business."

Clariss had noted that Thersyn did not hire any permanent hands himself. There were one or two contracted guards around the exterior of the property depending on the

day, placed in locations which deterred potential thieves from entering the premises. The staff who cleaned the house were also temporary. He was paranoid to a fault.

“Don’t give me that look,” he groaned, “I prefer to keep my house to myself, as much as possible. I don’t like the idea of having others occupy my private space every hour of the day.”

“I don’t mean to offend. I was just thinking, you seem curious about Cordia.”

“Curious is all it is. I’m not asking to hire her or one of her extra arms.”

Claris snickered, “I see. You prefer to shout your intent loudly and proudly from the nearest soapbox.”

“It’s more sophisticated than that,” he said defensively, “It takes a lot of work and experimentation to shape people’s opinions on the subject we care about. They have to be prepared, and we have to carefully build our desired narrative to play into their beliefs.”

“From where I’m standing, it appears to be nothing more than a constant outlet of bile.”

She turned her derisive comments in the direction of the front pages that hung from every wall that surrounded them. Sensationalist, bombastic, testing the limits of what people would accept as truthful. The advent of mass media gave shock merchants like Thersyn an immense amount of power.

“I’d be careful with your words – Duchess, or you may come to find just how damaging they can be.”

She laughed, “Is that supposed to be a threat? I could snap my fingers and ruin you, and these tawdry pieces of wastepaper you take such pride in. Don’t forget your place, Thersyn. Me and you? We are merely cogs in a larger machine still. There are men and women you have yet to meet who far outsize my influence.”

Thersyn responded with a tense smile, “Is that so? Well, I can hardly be expected to make plans without knowing who they are. You should consider giving more respect to the ‘wastepaper’ in future. Power over the national discourse will only become

more important as time passes. You can disagree with the presentation, but the results are not up for debate.”

“I will have to disagree, Thersyn. An elegant manner is not merely for the sake of appearances. It is to ensure that you walk the right path in all things.”

She stood from her chair and moved to leave with the list now in her possession. Thersyn pursued her through the main lobby and towards the front door. She always had to try and get the last word during their spats. He hated it. She was always preening, always looking down the side of her nose.

She’d look good in a crimson mask.

“And tell Cordia to get in contact with me again. She’s been missing deadlines for weeks now.”

Claris ignored him and kept walking, through the gate and into the waiting arms of her carriage to be taken away. The driver cracked the reins and the horses bolted off down the road. Thersyn slammed his door shut and grabbed the nearest vase from a table, throwing it to the ground and scattering porcelain shards all over the floor.

“Oh. I can’t wait to gut you like a fish!” he growled.

Patience. He needed to be patient. She was key to his personal plan, the one that sought to seed anarchy and bloodshed across Walser. Only when her use was expended would he do what he dreamed of and replace the old corpse in his basement. She would be a worthy sacrifice to the Dark Goddess - a woman of status and wealth. Her blood would nourish the withered roots and bring her one step to the destined revival.

But all good things came in time. He felt his anger dissipating now that he’d smashed that vase. It was a cathartic sensation, much the same as how it was when he cut open one of his sacrifices. To destroy something, to take an object or life that was valued, and turn it into worthless refuse was the perfect outlet for his rage. The vase was only valuable for the price tag that was attached to it, a replacement could easily be found.

He bristled with anticipation. The final outcome of his scheme was just beyond the horizon now. Staying the course and making sure the pieces played their role was all he had to do. Idiots like Duchess Claris or Lady Franzheim couldn't possibly suspect themselves as being the pawns.