

The balls on this man to try this again.

I had to admit the gumption was almost admirable. He'd just finished sneaking into one of the most heavily guarded locations in the country and slipped away with a valuable item, in comparison Clemens' party was a walk in the park. But he saw me immediately upon entering the sitting room, and not for one second did he elect to turn back and make a run for it.

I kicked off my shoes and squared up. He was hesitant to get into a fight with a teenage girl – which was fine by me. It would give me the chance to land the first blow and tip this fight irreparably in my direction.

The Monarchists were not popular revolutionaries, they were nobles who preferred to crystallise the power they wielded through the old system rather than the new one. There would be no public hangings or beheadings if they got their way. They were rich people who weaponised the common folk's desire for something familiar and comforting.

Caius had another reason to do this.

Money makes the world go around. It was no exception here in Walser. Healthcare, housing, and food – they were all things that every living person needed eventually. It was easy to make someone betray their 'class interest' by offering them a big payout. Most people didn't read political theory, they didn't understand the long-term consequences of their actions. Caius only understood that people in his situation were his friends to some extent. The need for cash was always more pressing than making some political point.

It wasn't selfish unless he intended to spend his payment on fast cars and a fancy house. The problem was that he was dealing with a group of untrustworthy plotters, who would not be eager to leave an obvious loose end dangling like Caius. He was risking a lot more than his freedom by being here. He was not taking my warnings seriously – not did he take my stance seriously. He rolled his eyes and scoffed at the idea of me boxing him.

He was about to learn a painful lesson about underestimating me.

Raw strength was never going to be an advantage I held in this body. After my fights with Prier I realised that a new approach would be needed for hand-to-hand combat. To compensate for my lack of strength, I had to replace it with precision. The human body was both tough and weak depending on where and how you hit it. You could fall from a great height and survive with serious injuries, or someone could knock you down with a punch and kill you instantly.

He wasn't on guard until I stepped in and jabbed him in the throat with a well-targeted blow. Caius staggered back against the desk and clutched his neck as the wind was taken from his pipes. I followed it up with another punch to his midsection, designed to expel the rest of the air from his body.

"Shit!" he cried in a horse voice. He swung wildly in my direction to make some space and regain his bearings. I erred on the side of caution and stayed out of range. I could run down the clock all I liked because he was the one who needed to escape the building without being captured.

"Nothing irritates me more than people making light of me," I quipped. It was a sharp reminder to Caius that I chased him down in the academy because I believed I could apprehend him.

"What kind of teenage girl knows how to fistfight?" he replied.

"The likes of Maria Walston-Carter."

Caius pulled the chair aside and pushed it between us to try and stop the fight cold, but I wasn't going to let him control the pace of his confrontation. He seriously pissed me off the last time we met with his magical tricks. I was going to dole out some payback for his misdeeds, and maybe get some answers about the watch he stole.

"You're a young girl – there's no need to do anything violent – agh!"

I silenced his pleas by hopping up onto the desk and pummeling him around the head with a kick. Caius finally got the message that I was not going to be persuaded by words, so he put his hands up in defence and tried to block the follow-up that I delivered with a near bone-cracking impact afterwards. He grasped his forearm and hissed at the pain.

His reluctance was not going to dissuade me from neutralising the threat he posed, and he sensed the same thing. He put up his dukes and squared out his feet. I would quickly learn that the man was not a particularly talented fighter, but the size difference between us would help even things out.

He tried to sweep me off of my feet while I was standing on the desk, but I hopped back and down onto the floor before he could reach me. He slid over the polished surface and sent papers flying everywhere in the process. His first punch went astray. I redirected it into the wall and caused his knuckles to brush against the plaster.

“Where did you learn to fight?” he bellowed.

“My Father was very concerned about self-defence.”

“That didn’t answer my question!”

He charged at me with his arms wide open, but constricting me was not going to achieve the desired outcome. I reached out with a kick aimed squarely at his stomach, forcing him back and opening another gap.

“Is now really the time to talk? You already rejected my offer to avoid this!”

“Well, I wasn’t expecting you to be good at brawling!”

It was too late to be ruining his own decision making now. I was not bluffing, all he had to do was talk things out and I would have avoided fighting him. This guy was nothing more than a petty thief. He was no murderer, and he hadn’t yet posed a direct threat to me or anyone else. I could get information out of him. I did have to laugh at the contrast between his suit-clad persona and how he acted while trying to be discrete. Even his accent was broader than before.

He came at me again with a trio of jabs, one of which was dangerously close to hitting me in the nose. It would be hard to come up with an excuse for getting my face busted up, so I was acting with more caution than usual. It would be even worse if the guards showed up and captured him because they would make a connection between him and the injury.

I responded in kind, aiming below the neck due to the difference in reach between us. He was getting irritated by my single-minded focus of trying to tire him out with gut-punches, so he took the blow and leapt into close range to grab my shoulders. I continued to pummel him until I was no longer getting any benefit from the strikes. He pushed me back into the wall and held me there.

“Are you some kind of crazy sleeper agent?” he asked.

“Do you honestly believe that the government trained me to do any of this? I’m the real deal. I’m Maria Walston-Carter.”

His grip was tight and it was impossible for me to gain any leverage from this position. I reached up and grabbed him by the tie, before swinging up at his crotch with my left leg. He was one step ahead of me this time. He closed his legs and took the hit to prevent me from moving. With my shoulders pinned back and one of my legs trapped, there was little I could do.

“Aiming below the belt isn’t very noble!”

“Neither is getting into a fistfight,” I observed.

I refused to let go of this clothing. He couldn’t remove his hands from my shoulders without running the risk of having me attack him again. We were locked into a stalemate – which was fine by him. He took the opportunity to get a closer look at me with an inquisitive tilt of his head.

“You really do look every bit the rabid animal you fight like. It’s strange how such a picturesque appearance can change into something so menacing.”

“You don’t scare me.”

“I never said I did. If I really scared you, you would have never pursued me back at the academy, or tried to fight me in this office. You should know that there’s a very thin line between bravery and stupidity.”

I rolled my eyes, “I don’t want to hear that coming from you. You’re the one who seems so dead-set on ignoring my warnings about this. I hope you enjoy the money while it lasts because they’ll be looking to be rid of you at the first opportunity.”

He gave a surprising response, “That’s fine as long as I get the chance to spend it beforehand. I don’t think you realise just how much this money means. I’d happily give my life for it because I won’t need to be around once I hand it off.”

“What a sad excuse for a life you live,” I scowled, “The person you’re leaving it to won’t be happy with that, not lest you believe them to be a callous soul. Don’t you feel ashamed, or sorry for your parents?”

“I get to choose how to spend my life, little lady,” he said with venom. I’d struck a nerve by questioning his motives. “My parents never once cared about me. Why should I feel thankful to them for thrusting me into this mess?”

I hopped up with my other free leg and kicked him in the ribs. His grip on my other limb loosened for just long enough so that I could wrench it free and push him away, pulling the tie from around his neck while I was at it. He clutched the area I’d hit with a frown. He was starting to hesitate again.

“Aren’t you going to do something? I’m not holding back, so neither should you.”

“What variety of gentleman injures a young girl?”

“You would be surprised.”

We came to blows again, though I could sense that his heart wasn’t in it. He couldn’t bring himself to fight earnestly against me, relying on less harmful methods like trying to restrain me. It was going to be impossible for him to do that. I was using every trick in my repertoire, he was fighting with one arm behind his back and a lingering anxiety about someone finding us in the office.

Now was the time to put this affair to rest.

I charged in and ducked under his outstretched arms, popping back up behind him and wrapping the stolen tie around his neck. My fingers danced and quickly formed an intersection from which I could tighten it. I heaved him over my back with all of my strength and slammed him into the floor with a judo-style throw. Before he could get his bearings, I stood and pulled it taut, stepping back until we reached the wall again.

He tapped my arm as a sign of surrender.

“I give, I give!” he wheezed. With a tie wrapped around his neck and his airway constricted, Caius ceased resisting I slackened the noose in response to show him that compliance would be rewarded.

“The watch you stole, did the Monarchists who hired you want it too?”

He laughed, “What the hell, are you trying to play detective now?”

“I’m the one asking the questions. Unless you want me to knock you out and hand you over to the nearest guard you’ll tell me what I want to know.”

“You drive a hard bargain, little lady.”

“The watch,” I repeated with emphasis, “Do you know what it’s for?”

He shook his head, “No. I was curious, so I asked a friend of mine to look into it for me. All she could find out was that it’s handed down to each head of the Roderro house, but they wouldn’t send a thief like me to go steal it just because it’s worth a bit of spare change. I’m sure a smart girl like you already figured out that much.”

“You would be correct. A simple deduction to make, really.”

“So why are you asking me? You were right, I’m just the guy at the bottom – they don’t tell me anything more than what I need to know to do the job.”

“That would be a rational thing to assume, but humans are not quite rational, are they? I am being thorough and covering every angle.”

“I guess not.”

I slackened the tie a little more to show him that he was heading in the right direction. He gasped down a big gulp of fresh air before I could pull it taut and suffocate him again. If he kept talking, he wouldn’t need to worry about it.

“The watch and the party list have to be related,” I asserted, “They’re pushing these tasks onto you so that it’ll be easy to control what information gets out. You’re a mage, you must have sensed something coming from the timepiece.”

Caius hesitated between telling the truth or concealing it from me to give himself leverage. He could extract concessions from me in return for that key information. I wasn't going to give him room to negotiate. I already had another plan in mind for what to do with him.

"I can buy you out if that's what it takes."

He laughed, "Pft, you're not going to do that."

"You'd be surprised at how much pull I have. My allowance is probably more than those Monarchists are willing to pay you. All you have to do is give me a hand finding out who's responsible for this. It won't be any more dangerous than completing the job for them."

"What a load of rubbish. You don't have any skin in this game, why would you want to stop them?"

"Clemens is my uncle. It would be inconvenient if he died because of that list getting out."

"Uncle or not – a normal girl would be quivering in her boots right now. That, and all the stuff you just did, tells me that there's more to this than you're willing to tell me."

"Then we're the same on that front."

Caius tilted his head to one side, "Fine. I did get a magic signature from the watch. I haven't got the foggiest idea of what it's being used for though. They didn't tell me anything."

Magic signatures were an easy way of detecting when an item was magically enhanced, but they do not convey what the device is used for. It would take someone in the know or an expert on the subject to unveil that mystery. Adrian did know what it could do, but he was not willing to share the truth with me at that moment. A part of me was hoping that Caius knew instead because getting answers out of him sounded easier and less thorny than the alternative. I unwrapped the tie and allowed Caius to rub the red mark around his neck, the hierarchy of who was in charge now firmly established.

“I believe you. But your part in this isn’t done yet. I want you to help me find out who’s responsible for this. If you do I’ll keep this encounter a secret and pay off whatever debts you’ve incurred. That sounds reasonable to me.”

“Didn’t you say that they’ll kill me if I step out of line?”

I shrugged, “They’ll kill you regardless of what you choose to do. You have a higher chance of surviving if you side with me.”

Caius’s eyes were wide in disbelief, “A few minutes ago I would have called you crazy for saying that, now I’m not so sure.”

If snuffing out this plot demanded killing people in high places that was what had to be done. If anything, that was my comfort zone, and the lack of modern policing in this world made life easier.

Caius was not going to follow along with whatever I said. He trusted me no more than he did the folks who originally contracted him to steal the list. They had paid him once for the work already completed. Money meeting mouth was the next step to flipping him onto my side. I didn’t carry a bundle of cash with me at all times though, my powers of persuasion would have to be enough.

I stepped around his prone form and approached the desk where the documents had been knocked loose during our fight. Most of them were personal drafts of letters and plans for the party in the next election, not the sensitive stuff that Caius’ employers were looking for. I took a thin strip of jagged metal from my sleeve and raked the lock on one of the drawers.

“Here it is.”

Caius perked up and hung onto the edge of the desk to see what I was talking about. It was the candidate list for the upcoming election. It contained the names, ages, and addresses of every person that was planning to stand on the Liberal Democratic ticket. I’d need to nudge Clemens into placing this sort of document in a more secure location.



“No wonder they want to get their hands on this. They could track down and kill every member of the party. We can’t let them get this document.”

“We?” Caius repeated.

“We. Because if you don’t give me a hand you aren’t getting paid, and I’ll turn you over to the guards that my Uncle hired instead.”

Caius sighed, “I guess that sounds better than being arrested.”

I took in the typesetting and formatting of the document and stored it away in my mind for later. I also grabbed a piece of parchment and started to fill in the details of their names and hometowns. The obvious solution was to forge a copy of it with the information modified.

Once I could remember it in good detail I slipped the original back into the drawer and locked it again. It was too risky to use this in my plan. A single badly timed move could lead to it falling into the wrong hands. Caius could hand the fake version to his contact and avoid arousing any immediate suspicion. The list of names was easy to get and cross-reference, but their addresses and the seats they were running for were kept secret. By the time they discovered our ruse Caius would be in the clear and I could use what I’d learned to launch a counter-attack on them.

“We’re going to create a fake candidate list, and you’re going to hand it to your contact. Then I’ll follow them and see where it leads. Once that is done, your part in the play is over. I will pay you and our business will be done.”

“Wait a second, are you suggesting that you’re going to bust this plot wide open alone? You’re good in a fight, but I doubt that a girl your size is going to be able to handle that many people.”

“Why do you care?”

Caius didn’t answer me directly, “It just seems a little odd, that’s all.”

“It all depends. I could turn their names and location over to the police and wash my hands of the ordeal. I agree with your assessment that dismantling their operation will

be no simple matter. They are exercising a level of discretion that will make it difficult. Your contact is likely kept in the dark as well.”

Caius ran a hand through his sweat-covered hair, “Why are you talking like you’ve done this before?” I smiled and pulled him back to his feet. He reached up and clutched his aching ribs with a grimace, “And did you have to hit me so damn hard?”

So much for all that talk about me being a ‘little lady.’

Caius was still hesitant to agree to the bargain I was offering him. He’d need proof that I was being serious about it before deciding. In my eyes, not screaming like a banshee and having him hauled away was proof enough, he did not seem to agree.

“I’m going to let you walk away from this. It’s up to you what path you wish to walk from there.”

“I don’t get you one bit. You’re not going to be able to stop this. You’re throwing yourself beneath the wheels for no good reason.”

“I would rather not see the country plunged into another civil war. It could potentially impact millions of people. I’m offering you a second option. Avoid the conflict, and I’ll pay you whatever they used to hire you.”

“You said that they’ll kill me. If they’re so dangerous, why would I go against them?”

I stared at him, “Because I’m much worse.”

The killing intent was clear. Caius couldn’t believe that he was being intimidated by this, but after that fight he knew that I was more than I first appeared. He slumped over and tried to appear non-threatening.

“If you show me the money, I’ll consider it.”

“I’d need some time to organise that.”

“The drop-off date isn’t for two days yet. That’s more than enough time for you to get the cash and arrange a forgery to hand over.”

“Come by our residence tomorrow. I’ll have one of the servants bring you through the front gate.”

“You’re going to have the money by then? The payment is two-hundred-thousand marks.” He wasn’t kidding when he said they paid him well for the work. That was four times the average yearly wage of a working-class citizen.

“Is that embellished?” I asked sceptically.

“Cross my heart – it is not. That’s the unfiltered truth.”

“Well, it’s no matter to me if you’re exaggerating. Two-hundred-thousand it is. Look on the bright side, you might live long enough to spend it this way.”

We cleaned up the mess caused by our brawl and snuck back into the sitting room at the back of the house. I expanded on some of the details that he needed to know before we continued. He held no personal loyalty to the plotters who hired him. He was going to do what was best for him and his interests. To some that sounded like he was an unreliable conspirator, but it was actually for the best. I could predict the way he was going to behave when it was disconnected from a personal ideology.

The core of the plan was simple. Caius would hand over the forged document to the contact, and I would follow them to wherever they were hiding. With that information in hand – it would be a simple matter of tipping off the authorities or causing a commotion that would attract them to the building. If the contact was being cautious it could take a long time. Patience would be a virtue.

“The contact’s name is Cordia, but I presume she is using an alias like me. She’s a willowy sort that wears a pair of glasses.”

“I’ll be there, you need not describe her appearance to me.”

Caius looked at me like I’d grown a second head.

“Are you seriously going to tail her in person?”

“It won’t hurt anybody if they don’t find out.”

He groaned, “You’re twisted in the head, I swear. I’m starting to think that you don’t know how dangerous this is.”

I waved him away with a final warning, “I am well aware of the risks, and I am perfectly capable of handling myself. Remember to visit the house tomorrow and get your payment, and don’t stay here at the party when we break. Someone is going to notice that you aren’t a member of the staff.”

“If you say so...”

Caius was keeping the meeting point close to his chest. I crossed my fingers and hoped that he would pick the most rational option by defecting to my side. I returned to the gazebo and caught the tail end of Clemens’ discussion with Damian.

“...And that’s how I ended up with that Hansen Sitting Chair. I was over the moon at the deal we struck!”

I decided to put Damian out of his misery and distract Clemens for an hour or two, “Uncle, would you like to hear some of my stories from the academy?”

His face lit up like the fourth of July, “That sounds wonderful! Please excuse us, Damian.”

It was the most genuine smile of gratitude the man had ever worn on those cragged features of his.

