

Sometimes I wondered why my Father afforded me such an insane amount of money as a monthly allowance. The manor we lived in was not exactly surrounded by prime real estate for commercial premises. The countryside was sparsely populated and almost impossible to operate that kind of consumer-goods business in. The folks in these parts of the Republic had enough money to have their food and clothes delivered, if not grown and created on their property with dedicated staff members.

It was an hour ride down to the coast where most of the shops could be found. As a direct consequence of this – I seldom spent a single penny of the Walmarks that he threw at me. There were few items of interest to buy, and getting there was too inconvenient for me to bother doing so regularly.

Despite the fact that I never spent any of it, my Father continued to keep track of what he owed me, tallying up the total and leaving it on the financial books as a separate account for me to access at my leisure. He was not anticipating me taking out a large portion of that cash to pay a thief-for-hire, but what he didn't know couldn't hurt him. It was only gathering dust otherwise.

And so, with more money than most people would see in their lifetimes shoved into a discarded suitcase – I wandered down the path into the front garden. Caius was already waiting at the front gate for me, trying his best to not look suspicious. I opened the gate with my key and waved him through.

He immediately took issue with the size of the garden, “Goddess above. Do you really need this much space?”

“No. We don't.”

“I wasn't expecting you to agree with me.”

“Call me a cynic. The only thing these gardens are good for is employing local people to take care of them.”

Caius chuckled. I led him through the trees and towards a private sitting area that rested beside one of the property's many ponds. It was a picturesque landscape for a dirty deal. It was also the most secretive spot on the whole estate, unmarked, unpathed, and rarely visited by anyone else. Nobody would see us making our

handshake agreement out here. I took a seat at the table and placed the suitcase down in front of him. Caius joined me and crossed his arms impatiently.

“Did you bring me here just to show off?” he quipped.

I frowned, “Show off? I wasn’t the one who built this place, I just live here. What do I have to be proud of?”

“Seeing how the other side lives is something I thought I’d gotten used to. I break into places like this all the time – but this manor is a cut above. I guess that’s what all the money in the Republic can buy, as expected of the Walston-Carter family.”

“I am more than aware of the great inequalities that divided Walser – so allow me to do my part in redistributing some of our ill-gotten gains.”

I flipped the latches on the case and pulled it open, revealing the frankly absurd number of notes that I’d withdrawn for this specific purpose. The look on Caius’ face told me everything. He was expecting me to stiff him on the payment and push it back until he did what I asked. I was not going to do that. I needed to show him that the offer was genuine.

“Bloody hell.”

I held out my palms, “This is the down payment. The other half will be yours if you follow through with the plan. All you need to do is hand this fake over to your contact.”

I pushed a stack of papers across to him. They contained an almost perfect replica of the real party registry, with falsified addresses attached to protect the candidates’ confidentiality. The cash was right there for him to take and do with as he pleased, while his other employers only offered promises upon a successful delivery. Now that he knew I was being deathly serious - he’d be stupid not to take it.

“Where on Earth did you get all of this cash? Is your Father involved in this?”

“No. This is what I’ve saved from my allowance over the past three years.”

Caius twitched as I casually revealed that this money, which would be enough for a working-class man to live on for well over a decade, was the spare change which my Father found down the back of the couch and gave to me.

“You’re screwing with me.”

“I do not make jokes, Mister Willow. The money is right there.”

“But if you doubled this, it’s more than what they’re paying me.”

“Then they clearly aren’t paying you enough for the job at hand. I’m a firm believer in the power of the free market. You’re a talented man with information that I want. It’s only natural that I use the power I hold to gain an advantage over them.”

I’d been in his shoes before. There were a lot of employers who weren’t willing to pay the market rate for what was an expensive process. If you wanted someone dead, you would have to demonstrate just how badly you wanted it to happen through your contract price. Hagglng was one-half of my job as an assassin.

“You... I’m starting to think that there’s something wrong about all of this. Nobody offers this much cash without an ulterior motive, and you’re too young to be playing these sorts of games.”

“I grew up fast.”

A leaf fell from the canopy above and landed on the water, sending ripples through the still surface.

“But there’s a limit. Who are you working for?”

“Nobody. This isn’t a threat, Mister Willow. You are free to make your own decision, but the fact that you neglected to steal the real thing during our last encounter shows me that you are leaning towards accepting my deal. If you choose to walk away here and now, that will be the end of it. I will seek alternative ways to prevent their plot from coming to fruition.”

Caius understood that I meant keeping the list away from him, or anyone else they sent to try and steal it. I did not foresee them hiring another flunky to do that. Caius

was being contracted multiple times to keep information locked down. They could kill him later and cease worrying about any outsiders leaking intel to the police.

There was one problem – Caius could just as easily think that I was lying to him.

“You already understand that I need this money, correct?”

“I do.”

“And you’re willing to hand over this much cash to a thief like me?”

“I am.”

“And you trust me enough to lead you to the contact?”

“It’s rather simple. If you do that, the second half of this payment won’t be given to you. There’s nothing in this world that can be truly relied on aside from a man’s capability to act in his own interest. They are offering you a theoretical reward in exchange for the documents you do not have. I am offering you a physical reward in exchange for nothing but your cooperation”

Caius reached up and swept back his hair, “Goodness. You’re a little devil. I feel like I’m selling my soul to you.”

“Apologies for my cold demeanour.”

The tension snapped. He reached out and grabbed the case, double-checking that the bills were real before closing the top. It was the most cash Caius had seen in one place. Even the sorts of folk who stashed their money beneath their mattresses didn’t keep this much on hand.

“Fine. I’ll play your game. I just hope it doesn’t come back to bite me in the arse.”

Caius studied the fake listing. It was an eerily accurate recreation of the original, complete with the same font and spacing between the letters. Clemens and my Father utilised the same typewriters – so it was an elementary problem to solve. The addresses were real and located within the respective constituencies, but they were not residential buildings. When the plotters launched their attack they’d quickly

discover that the people on the list were not living there. I was hoping that everything would be wrapped up neatly by that time.

“All of the names on that list are real, but the addresses are fake. Hopefully, they won’t notice the deception.”

“And if they figure it out?”

“That’s for you to decide. They don’t have any leverage over you, do they?”

“No. Thankfully not.”

“You’re a master of escape – I’m sure you can get away from one person if things turn south.”

“I guess I’d better do some preparations of my own just to make sure. We’re meeting tomorrow at seven sharp, so I’ll swing by here at six and ride with you into the city.”

I nodded, “Once you hand the fake over to the contact, I’ll tail them and decide what to do next. As far as your part in this goes, that’s all I want. A simple tip to the police about Monarchist dissidents should put the freeze on whatever they’re trying to do.”

He laughed, “Jeez. You’re ruthless. Is this what all noble ladies are like at your age?”

“No,” I stated simply. I leaned across the table and extended my hand, “Do we have a deal?” Caius took a moment to confirm his decision, before standing and joining me in a firm handshake to secure our contract.

“Alright. I’ll switch sides and give you a helping hand.”

“Pleasure doing business with you, Mister Willow. That money is yours. Do with it as you please.”

Caius stared blankly as if he was anticipating a catch or additional condition. When I said nothing more, he hesitantly took the briefcase into his arms and tipped his hat.

“I’d save the pleasantries until this is done with.”

“Oh, of course. I never assume anything until all of my matters are settled.”

I walked him back to the front entrance.

“You remind me of my sister,” he said.

“I do?”

“She’s a little devil. Always causing me trouble, you do your hair in the same way as well.”

He was sharing something very personal with me, though I wasn’t certain of why he elected to do so. Was my young age so disarming that he was willing to offer details about his personal life? I held up my hand and stopped him from speaking.

“Stop right there. You shouldn’t tell me anything about yourself. This is a strictly professional arrangement, and I doubt that you do the same with your other clients.”

He looked sheepish, “Ah. You’re right.”

I checked the time. My Father would be back at the manor soon.

“Tomorrow. Six. We’re riding into the city and finding your contact.”

He nodded, “It will be done.”

Caius stepped through the gate and out of sight. I locked it behind him and breathed a sigh of relief. Things turned out better than I expected. He was just short-sighted enough to take my offer of physical cash. The money was irrelevant to me, so even if he decided to stiff me I wouldn’t be left in a tough spot. The family made so much that they didn’t know what to do with it, besides reinvesting it into expanding the business. That in turn made the problem even worse, the wealth accumulated snowballing more and more until there was nothing left to do but hoard it.

A charity or two would appreciate some of that splendour, though donating to charity was never a matter of how much money you collected. It was about the personality of the person who held the cash. I doubted that Damian would change his ways and become a donor any time soon.

There were preparations to be made. Franklin would be my chaperone for this trip, and he was going to have questions. I was opening myself up to exposure by doing this, but needs must. There were no good excuses I could conjure to assuage his concerns about leaving the manor so late, and my Father was only agreeable by his

absence from the house on that day. On the other hand – Franklin was my personal attendant, he would never contravene a direct order given by me.

“Gun,” I muttered to myself, “Definitely bring the gun...”

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Samantha was shocked by how similar everything was to when she left her hometown and farm for the academy. It was unrealistic to expect drastic changes in just a few months, but it felt like much longer from her perspective. It took her some time to readjust to how friendly everyone was. This was a quiet, rural community where everybody knew each other by name. Nobody would go to that effort in the city.

She descended the stairs of her farmhouse home into the kitchen and living area, where her Mother and two older brothers were already preparing for the first meal of the day.

“Oh, you’re awake already, Samantha?” her Mother, Meriden, chirped in a broad accent.

“We only wake up an hour later at the academy,” Sam griped.

Her entire family started acting as if she’d forgotten how to live on the farm. She didn’t need them to pamper her after a few months away from the house. She took her usual seat at the table and grabbed three pieces of bread from the basket.

“They didn’t make you change your accent then?” Ben asked.

“They hardly have time to teach us everything we need to know; do you honestly believe that they’re finding time to give me language lessons?”

Ben and Tobias were the spitting image of one another. Before they started to grow out into their own personalities and tastes, the only real way to tell them apart was by which side the beauty mark on their cheek was located. In recent years – Ben had taken a liking to letting his hair grow long, down to his shoulders. Tobias preferred to keep it trimmed and out of the way for when he was working.

The real oddity was that both young men were considered the most eligible bachelors in the town, girls were always approaching Samantha and asking her to make

introductions. They clearly weren't as familiar with them as she was. Good looks could only get you so far.

Tobias leaned over, "Can you show off some of that fancy magic you learned for us?"

"Sure. An open space is all it takes."

The family settled in for their meal. Samantha mused that Maria was likely enjoying a long morning in bed, instead of waking up at the crack of dawn and heading out into the fields to work. It was no slight against Maria. Sam knew first-hand just how strong her work ethic really was. Even so, farm life was an acquired taste. The effort required was immense and the nitty-gritty of caring for animals made most feel queasy.

Meriden addressed her three children, "Eugene is already mucking out the stables. Remember to go give him a hand before pestering Samantha to show you her magic."

The siblings wolfed down what food was available and headed into the front yard. The farm was surrounded on all sides by picturesque rolling hills, though the dense morning fog made it impossible to appreciate them. Fields stretched out in every direction, surrounded by low stone walls to keep some semblance of order. To the right of the farmhouse was the main stable, where the larger animals were kept when they weren't in the fields grazing.

Eugene was already half done dispensing of the faecal matter when his children arrived on the scene. Tobias grabbed a bag of feed and got a head start on filling the troughs with fresh food. Ben tapped his Father on the shoulder after he threw another shovel full of dung onto the pile by the entrance.

"You're almost done already!"

Eugene laughed, "Only because you lads have been spending too long eating your bloody breakfast. I didn't know you were so excited about shovelling the dung."

"I'm not. I could have spent a few more minutes in the warm before coming out here."

Samantha approached one of the cows and stroked her cheeks. They were receptive to physical affection. Samantha loved spending time with the animals on the farm, even

when some of them were destined to be sold off and slaughtered for meat. The cows were a regular fixture though, kept until the day when they could no longer produce milk for the family. Bell was the oldest animal on the farm by some margin.

“Bell is holding up well, isn’t she?” Samantha said.

Eugene grunted between shovelling loads of waste, “Aye. She’s a hardy old girl – a bit like your mother.”

Samantha left Bell alone and set about giving her brothers a helping hand with the morning chore. There were stables to clear, vegetables to fertilise, livestock to feed and weeds to clear. Running a farm like this was a big job for a small family, but Eugene’s new pride and joy expedited some of the most tedious work.

It was a harvesting machine. Similar to the horse-drawn cutters that were used before, but more efficient and less prone to jamming. What once took several days now only demanded two or three. Meriden worried about how they’d be able to recoup the high cost of purchasing the device, but now she was a dyed-in-the-wool believer too. Time is money, and the harvester was very good at saving time.

The amount of crops the farm generated increased with the new efficiency savings, while allowing some overhead which Eugene and his sons could use to rest after working hard. Those scant hours felt like weeks from their perspective. There was a time when they’d work from dawn to dusk every day regardless of the condition of their bodies.

Another benefit was for the horses. The new machine generated less resistance by digging into the ground. They could work for longer, or simply work less. One of their stallions was already rehomed to another farm – they couldn’t justify keeping him around without anything to do! The last two were more than capable of handling the load.

“I hope those nobles haven’t been too awful to you,” Tobias said while hefting up another sack of food.

“Haven’t you been reading my letters? I’ve made some good friends, and the mean ones are too scared to say anything to my face.”

He laughed, “That isn’t a surprise. I’m scared of saying things to you too.”

Tobias and Ben weren’t interested in the details of her letters. They were too busy working the farm. Eugene gave them the cliff notes when they reconvened for dinner later in the day, but he was an unreliable source and neglected the small parts like what kind of friends she was making.

Eugene placed his shovel down and leaned against the wooden post, “Didn’t you say you met Maxwell Abdah?”

“Do you know his family?”

“Course I do! The Abdah family has one of the biggest import-export companies in Walser. You don’t run your own business or farm in this country without dealing with them. Try and become his girlfriend or something, he’s well off.”

Samantha sighed, “I’m not his girlfriend, and I’m not interested, even if he does have his admirers.”

“Shame.”

Samantha was getting annoyed at how flippant her Father was being about his daughter’s romantic endeavours. The other girls at the academy may have been happy to settle with a boy based on their wealth and influence, but Samantha wasn’t. What was the point of spending the rest of your life with someone you hated?

Maria was the same. She already had all of the money she could ever want, and she was first in line to inherit the family’s leadership position. She was going to be a tough woman to crack. She was very particular, and she knew exactly what she liked and what she hated. Samantha couldn’t fathom what sort of person would become romantically involved with her.

Samantha put herself into a suitor’s shoes and tried to come up with a plan of attack, combining what she had learnt about Maria and their previous experience together. For one thing, attempting to be pushy with her was a no-go; Maria valued her privacy and didn’t like it when strangers tried to get friendly. She wasn’t materialistic – so a gift wasn’t going to do any good. She was very serious, meaning she gelled well with

others who were responsible and restrained, but Samantha was a naturally sunny and outgoing personality.

This was starting to make her head hurt. Being Maria's lover was more complex than some of what they taught at the academy. Samantha knew things were going too far when she inserted herself into the process and internally practiced confessing to her. She shook the cobwebs clear and returned to what she was doing.

Ben was dismissive, "At least they didn't train the 'country girl' out of you. I was worried that you'd show up in a dress and speaking with a new accent."

"Do you honestly believe that they could do that much in a few months?"

He shrugged, "I dunno' – those city folks are a crazy bunch. They might have strapped you into a machine and brainwashed you."

"You're being silly."

Eugene agreed, "Ben, stop being an ass and help me haul this stuff to the field."

Tobias chuckled as his brother was dragged away by his collar.

"It's nice to have you back on the farm for a little while, Sam. I think Mum and Dad have been lonely without you around to cause trouble."

Samantha frowned, "I have to grow up and find my own place eventually. That's what Dad wanted when he sent me to the academy, wasn't it?"

"Sure, but he might not have realised how big of a change it really was to not have a young 'un on the property. I bet that Mum is going to be pushing to have another baby eventually."

Samantha wasn't so sure, "Raising a baby is a lot of work. I don't know if Dad wants to do that and run the farm at his age."

"Have you settled on what kind of path you want to take?"

"No. We still have the rest of this year before we have to choose a specialist subject."

"Any thoughts?"

Samantha wasn't giving it any consideration at the moment. She'd gotten so involved in trying to be Maria's friend that it totally slipped her mind. There were subjects that she enjoyed more than other, though she'd developed an odd fondness for the political theory classes that they were given in citizenship. She also found herself looking forward to her science lessons, but all three branches of the subject were equally enthralling.

"There are too many choices for me to be certain at the moment. It's like a whole new world has opened up in front of me. I'm learning so much about things I didn't even know existed before now."

Tobias reached out and ruffled her hair, "Well – I'm sure that Mum and Dad will be happy with whatever you choose. You've always been much brighter than me and Ben, so go out there and do the family proud – yeah?"

Samantha slapped his meddling hands away from her two-tone locks, "I told you to stop doing that!" It was too late. Her hair was already turned into a tangled mess, with pieces sticking in every direction with no rhyme or reason. Tobias laughed and ran away before she could punish him with a punch to the arm.

Samantha stopped by the doors and looked out across the farm. For so long this was the only place she knew. It was her home and the source of her family's well-being. It felt strange to consider a future where she was no longer a part of the picture.

She matted down some of her hair, "What I want to do in the future, huh?"

