

Caius hated visiting the sanatorium.

There was nothing enjoyable about seeing so many people in such a terrible state. Their bodies pale, thin, robbed of their lustre and energy; many of them were so ill that their rib could be seen sticking through their skin. This particular sanatorium was dedicated to some of the foulest diseases known to mankind. It was a small comfort to know that they were not infectious. Because of that – Caius could visit his one family connection without worrying about quarantine.

He kept his head low out of respect as he passed by several of the wards during his journey through the main building. The sounds of people in pain, and the sobbing of their loved ones were a consistent auditory challenge that he faced when coming here. He hoped above all else that he would not be joining that chorus.

There was a pleasant breeze rolling through the ward where his young sister was hospitalised. The white curtains flowed ethereally in the wind. The nurses rarely opened the windows, as many of their patients felt an unnatural cold. The heat on this particular day was such that it was necessary to keep them comfortable.

“Brother!”

Caius removed his hat and approached the bed which had become his sister’s involuntary home for the past year. She was always happy to see him – as he rarely could find the time to visit the remote countryside location without making compromises. To keep a family member at the sanatorium was stressful enough, but there was also a great financial burden that had to be managed along with it. Most families could not handle juggling both responsibilities.

In Caius’ view, it was no good spending all of his waking hours attending to his sister. He was doing everything he could to make sure that she’d live long into the future, a future where he could make up for that lost time by living as a family again. He sat down on the chair next to her bed and reached over to take her frail hands into his own.

“Have you been well, Alice?”

She nodded eagerly, “I’ve been feeling so much better in the last week. The nurses say that I almost look good enough to leave!”

Caius wished that they wouldn’t say things like that. Until she received the treatment she needed, it was too dangerous to leave the sanatorium. If her condition were to worsen without the medics around to stabilise her, it would almost certainly result in her death.

“I’ve got some good news for you, Alice. I’ve been working very hard to get the money together for your treatment – and I finally have it! I’m going to forward it to the Doctors once we’re done for the day, and they should come back to you and arrange the operation.”

Alice’s eyes lit up, “Really? Do you mean it?”

Caius chuckled, “Would I ever lie to you?”

He did, constantly. Alice didn’t know anything about what his real job was or the crimes he committed to keep her safe. She was too young to understand how baffling the world could be, nor how callous and careless it treated the people who lived in it.

Caius was enraged about what Cordia said to him in the days prior. Making his job personal was not the want of a good employer. They were attempting to manipulate him, instead of engaging with him as a freelancer. Caius did not know who was leaking information to them, it must have been somebody within the hospital.

Moving Alice was not an option. Places in sanatoriums were rare, and there was an upfront cost associated with claiming a bed. This particular one was located in the perfect spot for the operation that Alice needed. It would be faster and safer for her to have it done as soon as possible, and then move her once the recovery period was over.

He couldn’t help the feeling of paranoia that submerged his senses. Every nurse that walked past the door elicited the same response. He found himself wondering if they were the ones responsible for finding out about Alice.

“Is something wrong?” she asked innocently.

“No. I’m very happy, truthfully. The only thing that I want to do is get you out of here.”

The sooner he could arrange the operation the better. Alice was a long-term sufferer of a rare condition that robbed her of her strength, spoiled her appetite, and left her bedridden for much of her life. It was called Coilin’s Syndrome. The exact causes of the condition weren’t known, but there were effective treatments available to combat it. It was one of the few things that the pair could be thankful for.

It was nerve-wracking to carry so much money in a pair of briefcases. Caius spent the past four days sleeping with them in his bed to make sure they weren’t stolen. They never left his sight for one moment. They went everywhere with him. He still found it difficult to believe his luck.

Maria Walston-Carter was a no-nonsense sort of girl. She promised to pay him, and she did. He’d never tell her this – but she reminded him of Alice. They were polar opposites in terms of personality, but they looked very much alike. It would be easy to confuse them for sisters if not for the radically different shades of hair they possessed. Alice was always praised for her pale blonde locks. They brought forth images of rolling fields filled with wheat.

Alice was not convinced of his sincerity, “You’re getting into trouble again, aren’t you?”

Caius chuckled, “It’s the elder brother’s job to get in trouble, so innocent girls like you can focus on the important things. There’s no need to worry yourself about me, you should focus on recovering once your operation is done.”

“I’m worried about the operation,” Alice admitted hesitantly, “Because you won’t be here to watch over me.”

“The doctors and nurses are better suited for that. They’ve been training for a long time to look after sick people. There’s nobody better suited to trust you with.”

Alice nodded, “Okay. I’ll be brave.”

Caius ruffled her hair with a smile, “You’re always brave – Alice. Dealing with all of this, your illness, the money problems, it’s not something that a kid your age should worry about.”

“I’m not a kid anymore!”

“You’re only eleven. There’s a long, long way to go before you get to be called an adult. Enjoy it while it lasts. You’ve got the time to do anything you like, even more so when we get out of here.”

A nurse dipped her head into the room, “Mister Willow? The Doctor is available now.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back in a moment, Alice. I need to have a chat with the good doctor about your operation.”

“Okay!”

Caius grabbed his cases and headed through the door towards the head office. He knocked thrice on the door to be polite, before stepping through and bowing his head to the senior surgeon. Doctor Kern was Walser’s foremost expert in combatting Coilin’s Syndrome. He’d performed hundreds of live-saving operations using a combination of science and magic - with a success rate that was the envy of the field.

“Mister Willow, it’s nice to see you again. I don’t suppose you’re here for pleasantries.”

Caius shook his head, “I said I’d be back when I got the money together, so here I am as promised. It took me an awful lot of work to get this.” He placed the cases down on the table and opened them, revealing the astonishing amount of cash that rested inside. The Doctor was expecting something more sophisticated than two briefcases stuffed to bursting with physical bills...

“Well I never,” The Doctor murmured, “This will be more than enough to cover the expenses involved. You’ll be glad to learn that we already possess the reagents and equipment needed to move forward. I can schedule her for an operation at your earliest convenience.”

Caius tipped his hat, “Please do. I’d like Alice to begin her recovery as soon as possible.”

Indeed, there was more urgency to this matter than ever. The Monarchists knew who he was and about his sister. They were going to threaten her as leverage. His only recourse was to see the task through and flee the area before any harm could come to her. There was enough money left over for that. A new life in a new city sounded like just the ticket to ease their woes.

“Very well. The theatre will be available in two days. Alice will have to refrain from eating or drinking for twelve hours before the operation begins, and afterwards, she’ll remain unconscious for some time. Do you have any concerns that you’d like me to clarify before we proceed?”

Caius had heard it all before. It was an agonizing decision to make, so he researched the operation in question before giving the okay. There were always risks associated with invasive surgeries like this. Alice couldn’t survive long enough to hit her teens without it. This was Caius’ last chance to secure her future and see her grow into a young woman.

“No. I’m very familiar with the process. I leave her in your capable hands.”

Kern rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder, “We will do our utmost to cure Miss Alice of her condition. A bright girl like her shouldn’t have to spend so much time bedridden, the nurses have become smitten with her charms – dare I say!”

“Then I suppose we have some common ground,” Caius replied. Alice could worm her way into the coldest, most callous hearts with no effort on her part. She was charming and kind in equal measure, so the thought of anyone choosing to hurt her to get at him was almost too much to believe.

Confident that Alice was going to receive the best possible care, Caius left the Doctor to his preparations. There was only one thing left for him to do. He couldn’t risk having Alice sit beneath their thumb. It was time to go back to Clemens’ home and steal the documents for real.

“Sorry Maria,” he murmured, but first – there was still an hour left to his visitation.

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Samantha and I did everything we could to wear each other down. My strength and stamina were greater, but she wanted to win through persistence alone. It was a messy brawl of a tennis match, with both of us trying to impress our audience by landing our shots inside of the lines. The only thing we succeeded in doing was drenching ourselves from head to toe in sweat. Nobody was keeping a serious run of the scores.

Lance clapped his hands and brought us back in, “Okay! That’s enough. I don’t want you to ruin your uniforms. I didn’t expect the both of you to be so competitive...”

We collapsed down onto one of the stands and tried to catch our breath. Samantha was almost delirious with laughter about the whole ordeal.

“You bring out the worst in me, Maria.”

“This was meant to be a friendly match – you were the one who started taking it seriously.”

Lance brought us a drink so we could cool off, before splitting away to deliver the second half of his lesson to the new students. Samantha watched him commanding their attention with envy. She wished she could earn half the respect that he did.

“Claude and Max spent their entire break fretting about what subjects they’ll pick when selections arrive.”

“Isn’t that at the end of the year?” I asked.

“Yeah – but they expect you to start considering your options a long time before the final deadline. They got nowhere. Claude wants to do something that will help him become a detective, but Max is completely lost.”

“Then he should pick something that he enjoys. He has the luxury of doing that.”

“And you?”

“I don’t have a first choice in mind.”

Samantha gawped at me, “I can’t believe that you don’t already have a clear idea of what you want to do when you graduate.”

I chuckled morosely, “The only thing I know how to do is, well, you’ve already seen that.”

Samantha’s brow furrowed, “I don’t want to hear that from the girl who tops every quiz and exam we do. It’s almost like these lessons are totally wasted on you.”

“There’s a difference between being capable of something and being passionate about it. I have no prospects for the future at this time. I’m likely to end up in my Father’s position – pointing fingers and barking orders for the sake of building even more wealth.”

“You could change a lot from there, do some good.”

“That is an optimistic way of viewing things. There are shareholders to account for. They won’t like it if the Boss starts giving away what could be dispensed to them as dividends.”

“Oh, I see...”

“And it simply isn’t true that they need me in charge. These businesses could easily run without our intervention for years to come. I would like to say that there is an area that captures my interest, but that isn’t the case.”

Samantha smiled, “Which is why we should try out all kinds of different things! You looked like you were having fun while we were playing. I haven’t seen you smile like that since we started here.”

Surely that wasn’t true. I laughed in her face at least once before that.

“Is that so?”

Samantha clarified, “I’ve seen your laugh, and your ‘polite’ smile when someone is annoying you, but never a smile like that. Apologies if this seems rude – but it was more real than those other times.”

I’d let a genuine smile slip. Samantha distracted me from my problems such that there was a brief moment out there where I forgot what was going on. I said nothing in response, but Samantha was not intent on letting me wriggle away from acknowledging it.

“You already have looks that make all of the other girls jealous, but you look even better with a real smile on your face,” she mused.

“Okay. I get it.”

I was straight back to being a grumpy bastard again. It was very annoying when another person started picking apart your behaviour like this. She had the good sense to back away from questioning it further, seemingly for fear of having some of her fingers bitten off in a violent outburst.

“I did have fun,” I admitted, “Yet I remain uncertain about your proposal of joining one of these societies.”

“They only want a few hours of our time every week. You could easily cut some of the studying you do to come down here every now and then.”

That wasn't the part I was concerned with. The only reason I spent so long studying was because I was trying to stay away from everyone. With that idea out of the window now, I was left to sit and consider what I could spend my spare time doing. Did I enjoy tennis enough to turn that into my big thing? I wasn't certain.

“What other societies were you interested in?” I asked.

“Music, art, theatre, athletics, and politics were the main ones.”

“Politics?” I echoed.

“Sure. The talk about current events, hold mock debates-”

I cut her off, “I know what they do. It was surprising to hear that you're interested in something so dry.”

Samantha shrugged, “I can't explain it, but our citizenship lessons with Mister Camry really captured my imagination. I've been reading up on everything there is to know about parliament and the monarchy.”

“A lot of the students here plan of finding themselves a comfortable position, soaking up the taxpayer's money by standing for parliament. Most of them will win. It's easy



to find a spot when your parents help run one of the major parties. I'm afraid to say that it will be much harder for you to become involved."

She grimaced, "I'm well aware. Even the man who stands in our constituency as the farmer's favourite is well off in comparison to us. I won't say that I'm planning on becoming an MP. I just find it interesting."

Lance returned a few minutes later with a pair of white towels. We dried down our faces and arms while he considered our qualifications to join the society. Any postulating on the society I did want to join could wait. Getting close to Lance and finding out whether his family ordered Cordia to organise the theft came first. There would be no time for tennis if they plunged the nation into an ugly civil war again.

"You two must have had fun," he cracked.

"I suppose we did. I am interested in exploring the sport further if you'd accept me as a member."

"Of course! As I said, we're always looking to introduce new members to the society. It doesn't matter what year they're in, or if they have previous experience. First and foremost, our society values athleticism, good sportsmanship, and sharing a love of the game."

Samantha took a different stance, "I was going to visit a lot of the other societies before deciding on one to join. Would you mind if I deferred my answer for a few days?"

"That's perfectly reasonable. There's no deadline to join. Swing by any time you like and say hello, you don't have to be a member to use the courts or racquets. All of the equipment belongs to the academy."

"Thank you."

Lance scratched the back of his head sheepishly, "I have to say, having Maria here will result in a flood of applications to join. It's going to be a lot of work to find out who's taking the society seriously or not."

"I thought you said this was for fun?" I said.

“It is. But we also join inter-school competitions, and some of our seniors have even travelled to national junior tournaments before. At the least – we expect club members to attend some of our sessions and put forth an earnest effort. The teachers will be quite upset if our roster list consists of students trying to catch a peek at Maria.”

The other club members were already doing that. I recognised a couple of them as my groupies. I turned to face the gap in the fence and three pairs of eyes scarpered away like startled mice. Maria was decisive in all things, so I turned to him and reached out for a handshake.

“Consider me interested.”

He took my hand and shook on it, “Glad to have you with us.”

Lance was a curious character. He boasted a voice like a soft breeze, always breathless and airy no matter the circumstance. He loved animals and he really loved tennis. Of course, he held a dark secret or two. I was spoiling things for myself having played the game, but it was hard to forget the truth about him.

Though ‘dark secret’ may be overselling it a little. Lance is the singular love interest who was implied to be bisexual. The fans loved that. There was more art of him with the other guys than there was of him with Samantha. This ex-boyfriend wasn’t a named character in the game – but judging from past precedent I was probably about to walk right into him.

As for his family, the Franzheim lot was old money. They had their fingers in every pie you could find from the east coast to the west. Business, politics, and the media. They were the first family to take advantage of vertical integration – using every part of their empire to enhance the others. Lance’s hand in marriage was the hot ticket for a lot of the girls.

Since Adrian’s life had changed versus the timeline from the game, I could no longer assume that the characters would remain static. Given his gentle nature it was not likely that he was personally involved with the scheme. What kind of schoolkid would help organize a civil war?

The girl who was hissing like a snake through the fence, perhaps.

I tried to ignore her, but it was impossible. That was a purer display of envy than I'd ever seen. She was clenching her knuckles so tight that they were turning white from the pressure. All this because I shook Lance's hand. Was she the sort who thought that babies were delivered by storks?

"The next session is in two days, before the first period. I hope you're an early riser."

Samantha nodded, "You have no idea."

"I do," Lance chuckled, "I've seen her running laps around the campus. That's the sort of work ethic that we're looking for."

"You're still visiting the other societies with me, right?" Samantha asked with puppy-dog eyes.

I shrugged, "I don't see why not."

"Slip into some comfortable exercise clothes and come down in the morning," Lance explained, "I have to go and relieve the rest of the club. Have a nice day!" Lance jogged away, passing where the girl was spying on us through the metal fence that separated this court from the one next door. She was nowhere to be seen now.

"I can't even shake someone's hand without something finding it grossly offensive," I griped. Lance would never hear the end of it.

Samantha cast a suspicious glance at where she was hiding, "Seeing this makes me happy that I'm not a celebrity like you."

"Do you honestly believe that? You're so tall that the other girls use you like a landmark."

That was clearly news to her. She gasped and covered her mouth, "R-Really?"

"And besides that – you are a unique existence within these walls. The daughter of a farmer, tall, strong, and Goddess forbid, with blemishes on your skin. It's enough to give a sheltered lady the vapours."

She finally picked up on my dry sarcasm. There was an element of truth to it. Samantha had a particular reputation as being fiercely opinionated and headstrong. None of the bullying attempts seemed to faze her. Those who couldn't get their kicks from her lack of reaction moved on to easier targets. Now there were only a handful of extremely dedicated hecklers, who'd invested too much time to back down without seeing her reaction.

She tilted her head, "Are blemishes that rare?"

I led her off of the court and towards the main building, "Not particularly, but you will seldom see them buried beneath a thick layer of foundation."

Pubescent teenagers got spots, that was a fact of life. In my past existence, I was one of those unlucky kids with a face like pizza. Mercifully they cleared up by the time I hit twenty. It would have been very easy to recognise me as a hitman if not. Maria did not suffer so. She was perfect in every way, untethered from the harsh realities of growing up.

"What's the next club on your list?"

Samantha snapped out of staring a hole through my head and stopped in place to check where we'd wandered.

"Music. The music society should be meeting in a few minutes, and they keep the doors open so that people can observe their practice. We have to go to the theatre."

"Lead the way, then."

