

A cascade of different events occurred in the following few days.

Thersyn Bradley tried to play off the house fire as a mere accident, but the responders who arrived on the scene were quick to notice the obvious signs of arson that we'd left behind. The ethanol we'd spilled everywhere, and the empty cans and bottles discarded in the garden made it evident that no such story would hold under scrutiny.

To make things even more difficult for him – refusing to allow them to put out what was left of the manor would only arouse further suspicion. He stepped aside and allowed them to enter the premises, only for them to do exactly what I wanted them to. They found the secret entrance beneath the smouldered bookcase in the office, and a single curious officer discovered the body within.

It was on the front page of every paper around the country, even the ones that he owned. Once details about what the crime scene looked like got out from some of the firemen, it was all over. Thersyn's reputation was in tatters. Even his closest allies ravaged him to pieces in the press. The mere suggestion that he was a Scuncath was enough to doom him in the eyes of most.

The Monarchist's plans to social engineer their way into power was now in jeopardy. They would need to reassert control over the new leadership of Thersyn's newspapers, and while they may choose to tow the same editorial line, that didn't mean they were in the tank for a violent response to the upcoming election.

As for our concern about them hiring assassins – it soon became evident that Marco and his associates were given the nod. His mules were seen buzzing with activity, which meant someone was about to have a very bad day. It cost me a lot of damn money to find that out, but the answer as to who his first target would be was obvious if you applied a small amount of logical thought to it.

It was Clemens, again.

He was hosting a speech at the Henry Snow Memorial Museum. It was nothing special aside from the window it offered Marco to put a bullet in him. To my boundless frustration, it was also taking place in the middle of the school week, so I used some of my social capital to con my father into letting me go.

His love of Henry Snow was so large, and his belief that it would help my future prospects so strong, that he was more than happy to contact the academy and score me a day off to go visit. I discovered that this was a frequent fixture of the academy's front office – having to accommodate spoiled children and overambitious parents alike. A single day was less than what the others asked for, so it was granted easily enough.

I even scored an extra ticket to the speech so that Caius could come with me.

“Why the hell is he hosting a speech here?” he asked. We stood on the balcony that overlooked the main lobby, where a small wooden stage had been erected in the centre.

“Henry Snow has a lot of loyal followers. He's essentially the second largest religious figure in Walser after the Goddess.”

“Right. Uplifting the working classes, that sort of thing?”

I nodded, “He's responsible for the wealth and prosperity that a huge portion of Walser now enjoys. His machines were revolutionary, ahead of their time even. Walser wouldn't be the industrial powerhouse it is without his contributions, so he's more a unifying figure than you'll find in parliament at the moment.”

Nationalists, trade unionists, and monarchists all had an interest in appropriating the 'cult' of Henry Snow for themselves. He could be anything they wanted him to be with the right message; a prime example of Walser's superiority, a worker-orientated genius who evened the playing field, or a man who demonstrated that popular leadership was not needed for progress.

The Social Democrats were particularly skilled with this school of messaging. They aligned themselves closely with his personal politics and shaped the public perception of him as a consequence. They wanted to rapidly industrialise the rest of the nation and spread the economic goodwill to all.

If only they knew about the downsides, like pollution. That was one aspect that magical industrial processes could claim to excel in. They didn't need the use of electricity to the same extent, so they had a smaller carbon footprint and could be performed in remote locations with less infrastructure.

The museum was rather impressive from my uneducated perspective. Dozens of bronze giants dominated the floor space, while many smaller devices and exhibits were stuffed into each wing of the building. It was a wide-open space, with the only truly concealed areas being restricted from visitor access. It was likely that our man would try to sneak through a staff entrance to get a vantage point and gun Clemens down.

Caius' eyes focused on the multitude of different pipes that fed into the steam generator on the main floor; "I can't wrap my head around any of this stuff, not these machines, and not the politics."

"Unfortunately, we live in a complicated world. I was wondering – what did you do before you adopted this Caius persona?"

He shrugged, "Nothing that would capture your imagination, I'm afraid. I was holding an honest job at a local manufactory. The pay was good enough to support me and Alice, but then her condition became critical and the bills piled up. I went to my old man and begged him to teach me everything he knew."

"Caius Senior, I assume?"

"That's right. He used the name for a long time, and there are a lot of thieves who like to ride his reputation to get jobs. I took the rose calling card from a book I liked and started using it to stake my claim on the identity. He always said that Caius' name wasn't worth dirt, but I could tell he cared about preserving its honour."

"Hm. I think you're smarter than you care to admit."

"Book smarts? No way. I don't have a formal education. I guess I do have a gift for understanding people though."

"The human mind is more complex than any machine that Henry Snow could build."

"Sure – but you don't make half the money for seeing through it."

A slow trickle of observers was starting to come through the doors. Even though we'd been given some tickets, we were initially under the impression that we would join them in the queue at the front – but we were intercepted by the museum's curator

and told to come inside early. I wrote it off as Clemens meddling again, but Caius seemed to believe that there was an ulterior motive.

“That curator was very enthused to see us. I don’t like it,” he said.

I doubted that the Curator was one of Marco’s collaborators, not when it was easy to get a ticket to the speech and schmoozing party that came afterwards. Or he could sneak in through the back. The doors weren’t the most secure. In order to find Marco, I had to think like Marco. If I was him – how would I approach this job?

To be blunt, it looked easy. Not much security, a lot of open space in the building to manoeuvre and get into a good spot, and a target who was about to stand on a stage and give a long, winding speech about something or other. I was starting to silently regret not being there to let Cordia expose herself during the tennis tournament, at least then they’d tighten security around the candidates.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty. The mark of a good professional was their ability to adapt to shifting circumstances. Marco was likely to stand on this first floor and shoot down at Clemens so I couldn’t leave it to chance. It only took one well-placed bullet to put a man in the grave.

“Are you sure you’re ready to handle this guy? Marco has a fairly fearsome reputation.”

I remained impassive, “I’ve long since learnt that someone’s reputation is easily enhanced for the better. What is it that Marco can do that I cannot?”

“He’s a hardened killer, for one.”

I did not correct his misconception. I was exactly that.

“If there’s a high profile killing of a public figure, he was probably involved in some way. Politicians, nobles, industrialists – there’s a reason he’s the go-to man for any and all of their illegal needs.”

And now Caius was making him sound like the local Supermarket. This man had a bright future in radio if he got in on the ground floor.

“It’s too late to worry about that now, and no matter his reputation – I will not allow him to bring harm to my Uncle.”

Caius sucked in a deep breath and nodded, “I’ll keep an eye out for him, but I’m not sure how you plan to take care of him.”

I was going to shoot the bastard.

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle it.”

Caius peeled away and into one of the museum’s exhibition wings to scout the building for Marco’s location, while I kept my eyes peeled from above. It was a shame that Samantha wasn’t here to give us an extra pair of eyes. It was difficult to watch the staff entrances and the crowd below at the same time.

What a crowd it was. Even when the Social Democrats tried to appeal to a broad coalition of labourers and middle-class workers, they still played the game with the old nobility. They were the ones who brought in the big money, they were the ones funding the expensive political campaign that they were embarking on to win outright power in the parliament.

You could always spot a noble from a mile away – buried under piles of frills or head hidden beneath a heavy top-hat. They liked eccentric fabric patterns and bright colours that served to demonstrate their affluence. One man was dressed entirely in green and blue plaid, like he’d tumbled through a kilt shop and came out the other side.

My overwatch was disrupted by the arrival of the Curator. He was ageing man with a big, bushy beard and receding hairline, both stained snow white by the ravages of time.

“Hello, Lady Walston-Carter.”

“Do you need something?” I asked.

The Curator shook his head, “I was just dropping by to make sure that everything is okay. Wouldn’t it be better to observe from the ground floor with the rest of the audience?”

I shook my head, “No. I’m fine standing here.”

That was enough to push him away from the topic. He must have thought that I was being a moody teenager and acting rebellious. You’d be hard pressed to find any girl my age chomping at the bit to attend a political rally in the local museum.

He approached and leaned up against the banister with me, “This is my favourite spot in the whole museum, actually. You can get a perfect view of the etherscope from here.”

“The etherscope?”

He pointed to the bulbous machine in the middle of the showroom, “That machine there. It’s the most beautiful piece of engineering in this building, in my humble opinion, and also the most interesting. This was constructed during a period when Sir Snow was developing a growing interest in magic.”

“Ah, say no more. My Father has already regaled that story to me three dozen times.”

The etherscope was an odd form even amongst the other experimental machines that filled the museum. It was bulbous and round, with dozens of pipes spewing forth from every available orifice. A heavy airlock allowed entry into the main chamber, while a large control panel carved from wood and steel was placed clumsily at the front. I had to wonder how they hauled such a heavy lump of metal into this room.

The Curator chuckled, “It was one of his finest if most impractical creations. He claimed that it was capable of allowing one to speak with the Goddess herself by amplifying a person’s magical perception. You can perform incredibly powerful spells within its confines.”

“Does it work?”

“It does, though nobody has tried using it in decades, and none of those who tested it claimed to have heard the Goddess’ voice. At the time it was popularly theorized that Sir Snow was becoming infirm in both body and mind, in truth, he was as sharp as ever. It was eight years later that he passed away, after all.”

“Nobody can appreciate a genius in their time.”

He smiled, “Sir Snow faced many adversities early in his career from those who sought to pile scepticism upon his work. Even when he was established as one of the brightest minds of our age, he continued to endure the same treatment from a select few in the political and scientific establishment.”

I was very eager to see the back of the Curator. He was getting in the way of my job.

“Oh, and while I’m here – I have something for you.”

“What?”

He reached into his pocket and handed me a sealed letter. The yellowed paper made it clear that both the envelope and the contents within were extremely old. I flipped it over and looked at who it was addressed to. According to the envelope – this was sent by Henry Snow to me.

“What is this?”

The Curator gave me a pained frown, “Sir Snow was known for his many eccentricities, but one of the most curious things he did was leave behind dozens and dozens of letters addressed to different people, all with extremely specific instructions on when and where to deliver them.”

I turned to face him with an open mouth, “You’re telling me that a man who died before I was born sent me a letter?”

“This is the first time I’ve seen the opportunity to hand one over,” he admitted, “My predecessor stressed that it was his duty to personally ensure that every single one found its intended destination. And his predecessor was a personal friend of Sir Snow, he instilled the importance of doing so in him when he opened this museum. In fact – the museum was also something requested by Sir Snow himself.”

Three generations of curators all following the request of a long-dead inventor. There was no mistaking my name on the back side, but how could I be certain that this was the real deal?

“Oh, and the red mark on the top corner means I should make myself disappear before you open it. Good day, Lady Walston-Carter.”

He bowed and hustled away from my position. The curiosity was too much for me to resist. I pulled the wax seal away from the lip of the envelope and opened it. The smell of aged paper flooded outwards. I jostled the letter free and folded the envelope into my pocket for later. I spoke out the words under my breath.

“Dear Lady Walston-Carter, I have composed many of these letters over the past year, and I must admit that yours has been the most difficult for me to approach. Your matter is the most pressing of all. The voice was economical with details, but she assured me that you had a key role to play in protecting the future of not just Walser – but the world as a whole.”

Okay, that was odd. He knew something, not just my name and location – but the very nature of my arrival in Walser and the world of Love Revolution.

“She provided me with a cryptic statement to verify this letter’s authenticity. A girl of thirteen years who has yet only lived two. Fear not for your future as it is in safe hands. Your will and action will deliver salvation to many and penance for your past misdeeds.”

This was the real thing. Henry Snow, of all people, knew who I was. It was a shame he was dead too quick to do anything with that knowledge. A voice telling him to leave letters, one of which was addressed to me, containing information that only one being could possess.

He’d been in contact with the Goddess.

‘Goddess’ in this context being the non-visible entity who brought me to this world. Given that she was now dispensing a letter to me through a mortal proxy, it begged to reason that she possessed some level of omnipotence. Perhaps the reason she selected me was because she could see the future that would come about as a result.

This was the last thing I expected to find when I came to the museum.

“By the next weekend, bring your destined partner to the etherscope and speak with the Curator. He will know what to do next.”

A quick aside from Henry was included.



“PS. I had to build that damnable thing because of you – so you better get some good use out of it!”

Charming.

That was essentially the end of the letter for my purposes. Henry signed off with a quick word of thanks to me for ‘the hard work.’ Whether he knew that the hard work in question was killing a lot of people was left unsaid. I folded the letter back into the envelope and considered what was happening.

What an odd turn of events. If this Goddess was powerful enough to see the future, to summon the dead to another world, and to plan this elaborate scheme to send a single letter, why did she need to go to this much effort to communicate with me? They wanted me and Samantha (who I assumed was the destined partner) to utilise the etherscope for an unspoken purpose.

My best guess was that the etherscope would bring about more answers to my questions. If it was capable of amplifying magical power within a localised area then it must have been the way that Henry received his instructions in the first place. He did claim to have heard the voice of the Goddess using it, a claim that none would entertain given the absurdity of it.

I was long past worrying about what was absurd or not.

I wanted to have a nice, friendly chat with the Goddess responsible for bringing me here. She had a lot to answer for. I was sceptical of the suggestion that I’d get to speak with her via the etherscope, but there was little harm in trying as the letter suggested.

If she was trying to speak with me, then that came as a surprise. She never demonstrated an interest in directing me before, or even handing me simple explanations about my reason for being here. I was mistaking a practical reason for one more spiteful. I wasn’t a toy brought here for the thrill of it, only to be discarded once she got her kicks. She needed me for something.

I refocused on the task at hand. I could worry about that closer to the date given in the letter. Right now, Marco was trying to kill my Uncle and help the monarchists sow some chaos amongst his party. I wasn’t going to let that happen.

But as far as I could tell – there was no sign of him. Caius gave me a detailed physical description of the guy before we arrived at the museum. He had tanned skin, a black moustache, and a scar on his left cheek. It would be hard to miss him with such distinct features.

If he was planning on using the balcony to launch his attack, my presence would ward him away. He'd want to keep the number of witnesses to an absolute minimum and avoid any chance that Clemens' speech could be cancelled. I caught a glimpse of Caius moving between the rooms on the opposite side of me. He hadn't found anything either.

But a flash of a dark figure from behind the staff door certainly increased my heart rate by a few points. I pressed my index finger against the cold metal of the gun in my pocket and kept an eye on it. The man on the other side could see us moving through the frosted glass, a pair of coloured blobs that told him that there were witnesses present on the balcony.

He took the dive and unlocked the door, shutting it behind him in the meekest manner he could manage. Given his medium-length black hair and easily identifiable moustache dominating his top lip, it was obvious that this was the man we were waiting for.

To give him credit, he'd gone to the effort of even obtaining some coveralls and a mop to give the impression that he was here as some sort of custodial staff. What was less convincing was the hard shape resting against his hip, which was exposed whenever he tensed his back. That was a gun alright.

In my mind, there were several different outcomes to this meeting. Either he'd hover around and wait for us to get bored and leave, or he'd try to take a more proactive approach to making us move by using his fake staff credentials. Caius was already hiding behind something, so I was the only person on the balcony that he could see.

The latter plan was what he wanted to go with, but for whatever reason that is not what happened. He marched in my direction, got one good look at my face, stopped with an expression of what could only be described as 'pants-pissing fear,' and turned on his heel to get the hell out of there so fast that my head spun.

What the hell was going on?

I wasn't going to let him get away that easily. He clearly had a reason to be scared of me, and I wanted to nip this in the bud. I took off in pursuit, through the staff door and down a long corridor filled with offices. I was already tired of chasing these damn people down after they screwed up.

Or that would be the case if Caius didn't swing out from around the corner and absolutely pancake the guy with a clothesline. Marco flew head over heels as his own momentum clocked him with a strong blow to the neck. It wasn't enough to knock him out, but his attempts to draw his gun and fire at Caius failed miserably as he used his magic to flashbang his eyes.

By the time his vision cleared again, I was already behind him with my own gun pointed at his back.

"Drop it, Marco."

Sensing that his goose was thoroughly cooked, he did as I asked and placed it on the ground.

"Of all people, why did I have to run into you?" he lamented.

"I don't think we've ever met."

He shook his head, "No – I recognise those eyes of yours, that black hair. We've met before. You're the girl they told me to stay away from."

"Who?"

"My friends in the business. I'm not giving you names."

"I don't care about names. I've never seen you before, yet here you are – trying to murder my Uncle."

"Uncle?"

He tilted his head in my direction and took a closer look at me. The punchline was here.

"Tch. You aren't her, are you?"

“I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about,” I repeated, “Is that why you decided to turn tail and run down here once you saw me?”

He refused to answer that question. Caius stepped back and out of range of any danger, “Easy. Got our man, nothing to worry about.”

“You really think that I’m the only one here? Cordia warned me about you two – said that you’d find a way to meddle in our business.”

“Cordia’s dead,” I snapped.

Another voice joined the debate; “Well, that would be news to me.”

I leapt through the door as a trio of gunshots chased me. Caius made himself sparse, while Marco grabbed his gun and posted himself near the entrance. That voice – it was Cordia’s. I couldn’t see her from my hiding spot, but it was definitely her.

“I watched you smash your head against the pavement, how the hell did you survive?” I hollered.

“What is this girl talking about?” Marco complained, “She’s making no sense!”

“Leave her to me and get Clemens before they evacuate the building, you dullard!”

Cordia had taken a chance on shooting me in the back but fluffed it. They would have heard those bangs from downstairs for certain, and they’d be working fast to evacuate everyone from the building. Even so, Clemens was in immediate danger with these two around. There was no time to worry about how Cordia survived now. I had to get rid of them before they could reach him.

“Once I kill you that traitor and his parasite sister are next!” Cordia yelled.

If she wanted to die twice so badly, then I was happy to oblige.

