

The crunch meeting was finally upon Welt. It was time to speak with his backers in the Capital and make it clear what the state of play was going to be moving forward. The meeting was to be held in the utmost levels of secrecy, with letters sent to a select group of individuals, who themselves would then dispense what they heard to a list of others.

Such accommodations were now necessary given that Welt was a wanted man. Smuggling himself from place to place was a bother of the highest order. WISA and the police were searching high and low for him, and there was little doubt in his mind that someone with insider information would lose their nerve and leak sensitive information to them in time.

Even his best efforts to assemble a group of people with the will and bravery to see it through weren't perfect. To wit – some of the men he assigned to manage the blood-infused problem solvers had spoken too loudly while in the presence of other low-ranking members, who then spread that information on to WISA. Suddenly his supply of ferdinol, essential to making them compliant and ready for action, was in jeopardy.

That strained his ground troops and how much they could cover. He could no longer rely on doped wrecking balls to cause the type of unrest and chaos that he was hoping for. Those who were loyal to the cause would have to pull double duty and take on some of those jobs in their place.

Huddled in the back of a three-story noble townhouse on the edge of the city, a veritable cascade of notable and important figures crammed into the sitting room and prepared to hear Welt's final pitch. Jonas Rentree, Micah Greenblatt, Jeremiah Vincent and more – there was a collective wealth worth hundreds of millions of marks between them.

"I hope you're ready to answer our questions, Sir Welt – there has been troubling news travelling around the media lately," Micah said between puffs on his cigar.

"I wouldn't have called you all here in these pressing circumstances for a custodial meeting. While it may not have been the day we planned for, I am ready to take on the challenge and see it through."

The assembled nobles, businessmen and restoration-aligned politicians were Welt's closest supporters. They were the ones willing to put their livelihoods on the line to see the monarchy restored as Walser's ultimate authority. They all had their own reasons to do so – but Welt was not in the business of prying.

“The King has long shied away from restoring the rightful powers of his station for the sake of protecting Walser. It is no longer an issue that we can ignore. We will deliver our ultimatum to him. He will shred that piece of waste paper they call the Compromise, or he will be replaced by someone who is willing to do so in his stead.”

To hear the words spoken aloud was the first indication that some of the visitors had received that Welt was earnest in his efforts.

Jonas Rentree spoke out; “So who will take his place, should it come to that? You never did tell us who the new King shall be.”

It was a significant point of contention to everyone he spoke with. Welt was keeping the name under wraps on purpose to get them all on the same page. Now was the time to lay out all of the cards. He nodded, “Ekkehard Van Walser has agreed to take on the mantle.”

“Isn't he poorly regarded by the house?”

Welt tried not to let his mask slip when that question was pointed at him. Welt was concerned about Ekkehard's role in the plot. He was close enough to the direct line of succession that he could realistically stave off any challengers once placed on the throne, but he was also weak enough that Welt could use his influence to push him around.

But that was only to benefit Walser. Welt wanted someone who would be at least capable of leading the nation through troubled times. The careful planning and preparation were all in service of shoring up his position once he was inaugurated as King. Welt could 'adjust' his level of safety depending on the circumstance.

For now, he was going to lie.

“Ekkehard is poorly regarded only because he shares our perspective on Walser’s future. The theatre and the good-for-nothing clowns within have dehorned the once proud house and rendered them gutless in the face of danger. They are too comfortable, being fed from the government’s hand and being permitted to keep their wealth and status.”

Jonas did not seem entirely convinced, but he was one of the most problematic members of the coup. His cynical view was often a helpful tool for Welt to use when around the others, allowing him to address his concerns and show the rest of the gang that everything was under control. The issue came when swaying his personal opinion was the goal.

Jeremiah took his turn to ask questions.

“I’m ready to do as you ask, Sir Welt. Are all of the pieces in place for us to begin in earnest?”

“They are. Make no mistake, this meeting is the beginning of it all. When you leave this place and return to your respective homes – I expect you to disseminate your orders in accordance with the plan. Two days from now the process will begin. We will seize the seat of power in Walser and deliver our ultimatum to the King. He will restore the natural order of this nation, or we will replace him. Do I have your loyalty in this endeavour?”

The men sitting in the room looked to each other for confirmation. Jeremiah was the first to raise his hand in affirmation, and from there the momentum carried the act throughout the room until all but one had pledged their allegiance to Welt.

“Sir Rentree, is there a problem?”

Jonas tightened his lips, “The quality of any outcome depends on the quality of the men you assign to lead. Ekkehard is not the most inspiring figure. Will the people rally around his leadership even if the Avatria part of the scheme fails to catch their imagination?”

Welt smiled, “I value your opinion, Jonas. Ekkehard will not be making any hasty decisions without consulting with us, I can assure you of that.”

The show of hands ended and everyone returned to a neutral position. Jonas was now the centre of attention. All eyes were locked onto the discontented frown he bore. Welt was losing his patience. Why did he come all this way only to show his cowardice at the last possible moment?

“Jonas – don’t your son and daughter both attend the Royal Academy?”

The atmosphere in the room took a sudden and harsh turn. The attendees all silenced themselves and paid close attention to the argument developing between Welt and Rentree.

“I hardly see how that’s relevant,” Rentree said sternly. He was not intent on giving up ground.

“You already understand full well that we’re to assume control of all of the important institutions in Walser. The Royal Academy was the first to be captured. My men are there as we speak.”

Rentree stood from his seat and glared, “You forget your place, Welt! We’re not tools for you to use as you please, and now you’re making threats?”

“It is no threat. The truth of the matter is that the process has already begun. Nothing will happen to anyone at the academy. I’ve given strict orders to the men there not to so much as touch a hair on their precious little heads. Do you want to submit to your fear now and sit in the gallery, a silent witness to history in the making?”

The silence was deafening. Welt and Rentree were locking horns, with no resolution in sight.

“You’re ignoring my concerns. If Ekkehard can’t win hearts and minds then this entire scheme is doomed to failure. The Civil War showed the average citizen that they have the means to change the course of this country, and that is not a lesson that will soon be forgotten. ‘The gate is open and the horse has bolted,’ as those rural folk like to say.”

This was a fundamental difference of opinion between Welt and Rentree. Welt was an elitist, he did not understand the multivalent factors that led to the outbreak of the

war. He believed that the controls of the great ship of state were reserved for him and his ilk and no one else. He could simply strike against the common man with his hammer and forge them into whatever shape he pleased.

Rentree was similar in goals and intent, and he did feel that there was still a place for the nobility and political dynasty, but to ignore the war and how it impacted Walser was a folly of the worst variety. Appointing an unpopular figurehead to the throne would see them summarily removed and hung from the palace gate.

What the Civil War demonstrated to Rentree was that no amount of force could resist an organized resistance made up of the majority of the nation's population. Where Welt hoped to use a blunt instrument to correct that deformed metal, Rentree hoped to embed their authority within those institutions with the precision of a scalpel. The people couldn't become angry if they didn't know what was happening behind the scenes.

Micah was the one who interjected to break the impasse.

"Gentlemen, there's no need to argue this now. Sir Welt has been extremely clear that we'll keep Ekkehard on a short leash, and throw our collective weight behind him to stay the civil society and institutions that surround the King. Is that not why you've been gathering collaborators in and out of government?"

Rentree backed down and a weary sigh, "As long as you keep my concern in mind. You will have to pay a close eye to what happens when his ascension is announced."

Welt silently thanked his lucky stars that Micah jumped in to break up the argument. Rentree was digging his heels in – and that would only lead to his protests becoming more stringent and removing any room for compromise.

"Are we all in agreement? I would like to declare the official initiation of our revolution."

The assembled plotters cheered in agreement.

“Excellent. Gentlemen – they will remember our names for thousands of years should we succeed, and we will be regarded as the ones who saved this nation from a tawdry and sad end.”

Welt took a glass of whiskey from the table and held it aloft in a toast.

“To the future, my friends.”

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There was an unusual silence in the old schoolhouse.

The death of a man from a sudden and unexpected heart attack quickly sobered the jovial attitude that some of the team members attempted to curry by drinking alcohol and playing card games in the lounge. The games continued – but they were played in respectful silence.

Koch quickly submitted to his baser instincts and started to spread as much doom as he could conjure from his disturbed mind. Having one of their comrades die suddenly of an undiagnosed heart condition was unsettling enough without his undesired commentary on the situation. It grated even more for those who were not of a religious inclination as he was.

“We should be on our hands and knees beggin’ the Goddess almighty for mercy!”

Darin was far too occupied with the declaration of ‘consequences’ from Maria Walston-Carter to pay any mind to what he was saying. Normally he would have laughed it off and gone about his business, but this was a delicate situation and kids her age could make a hell of a mess without even trying.

What would happen if a girl like her tried to cause trouble? It would likely come in the form of a police blockade around the campus, and at that stage, he had no confidence in their ability to hold them off or negotiate their way out. They would be at the mercy of Welt’s part of the plan succeeding so they could be pardoned by his new appointees in the justice system.

Even if he attained total control and restored the Van Walser family to their rightful place, it would still take time for that change to occur. He checked and double-

checked all of the information they gathered about the campus and made his men walk the length of the exterior walls to check for any gaps that they could escape through.

Dedicating that type of mind real estate to a teenage girl was equal parts humiliating and embarrassing. He was already on edge before Koch burst into the sitting room and started extolling his virtues to everyone with a working pair of ears.

“-Like I said – that death was an ill omen! It won’t be long before more start to occur all around us. Tragedy always brought about more tragedy, that’s what always happened back in my village! I hope you’re paying attention, Darin!”

Darin stood up from his chair and almost bit his head off.

“Shut up. You’re driving everyone mental with this bullshit!”

Everyone watching the exchange visibly winced at Darin’s reaction.

“You’re not taking me seriously and it’s going to cost you.”

“I’m not taking you seriously because you have nothing of worth to say, you bloody great fool! Go pray somewhere quiet so I don’t have to hear you prattling on for hours while I’m trying to keep this thing from going wrong!”

Koch was furious. He turned red in the face like a blooming rose. He stormed out of the room and to elsewhere in the building to try and find someone who would listen to his pleas. Darin stood with his shoulders squared and a nervous twitch on his brow.

“I’m getting some fresh air,” he declared.

He stepped out of the still-open doorway and into the corridor that ran along the side of the building. A set of tall, arched windows looked out from the third floor and across the back yard at the manor house that was used as the main area. It was a good place to keep an eye on what was going on.

The lights were still burning across the way. Darin placed his hands against the window sill and leaned closer to fill his lungs with cool air from a small crack in the window. There was a shadowy figure watching from the manor.

Darin focused his gaze and tried to adjust to the darkness. Upon closer inspection, he deduced their identity. It was Maria again. She was watching the building like a hawk, and did not flinch away from letting him know even when he was staring back at her. She was a brave one – he had to admit that. Even knowing that he was looking back didn't make her run away.

“Boss!”

He turned to his left. One of the night watchmen had ran all the way back into the building from one of the gardens.

“What is it?”

“Me and George were running the route on the East side – and we spotted a channel someone started digging under a spot in the wall. They didn't get very far, so we kicked dirt back into it.”

“They're trying to get out?”

“It wasn't a very good effort. I think they used trowels taken from the greenhouse, based on how deep and wide the cuts were. I bet it was the kids. Some of 'em must be in a panic about what's going on.”

Not another problem to worry about! Darin could feel the crow's feet around his eyes encroaching even more onto his features as the stress piled on without rest.

“You and George make sure that they didn't stash them somewhere nearby, and I'll get the others to go around and clear out any tools they can use to dig out of here.”

Escaping from the academy was a difficult task with all of the exits kept under watch. It was surrounded on three sides by a tall brick and stone wall which was carefully maintained, complete with iron spikes to keep the riff-raff from climbing over. It had deep foundations that made digging underneath it a long and arduous process.

The back end of the property was dominated by a wide river which acted as a natural barrier. There was no boat to transport people across, and crossing that treacherous stretch was a dangerous task even for experienced swimmers. There was no telling what lurked beneath the canal's dark, churning waters.



Darin has assumed that the kids would be too timid, and too self-preserving, to risk crossing him and his group when they were armed. They didn't know that there was no real threat behind what they were doing. He turned back to where Maria was standing a moment before – but she was already gone.

“Do they teach them about showmanship too?”

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“Nothing. Go grab Frank and search the place, he needs the exercise on that bum leg.”

Darin was left alone again. He continued to spy on the main building for some time, but there was no sign of the girl who issued that ominous warning. She was staying away, happy to plant that seed of doubt in his mind. What could she do, realistically? He predicted that she would try to contact the police somehow, but the campus was miles away from the nearest dispatch box.

Welt had timed it all to perfection. They'd taken the campus at the start of the month after the deliveries were made. No visitors were permitted because of the prior incidents – so there would be next to no risk of anyone coming across the scene and discovering the hostage situation. Maria couldn't pass a note to a delivery person and have them smuggle it out. They would be long gone by then.

Nor was there a telegram line leading out. No matter how he looked at it, he could not come up with an effective way of getting a message over the walls and into the hands of anyone who could stop them. She would need to clamber the walls or dig a tunnel beneath while also avoiding their patrols.

The last thing that Darin was conceptualizing was her grabbing a matchbox and burning down the old schoolhouse with them still inside of it, or her sneaking through the gardens at night and picking them off one by one like a jungle predator. He was fundamentally blinded by the outward perception of Maria Walston-Carter. She was a bratty noble born with a silver spoon in her mouth.

That was the way she liked it.

Going two levels down to figure out that type of layered social manipulation was not the path Darin thought to tread. He closed the window to keep the hallway warm and walked back into the sitting room, where some of the gang had started to sleep on whatever furniture they could find with an open space.

Theo was still up and about.

“Darin, I think that Koch is going to be a problem. He was talking some crazy stuff when you weren’t in the room before.”

“About praying to the goddess? Let him vent. No point picking an argument with him over it, even if he tries to make a shrine in one of these empty rooms.”

“No, not that. He keeps flipping between thinking it was a bad omen and accusing someone at the academy of being responsible for it, or maybe he’s combined the two in his head somehow. Said he wanted to take ‘em to task for it.”

“For goodness’ sake! Welt’s going to have our arses if we actually hurt one of those bloody kids! He doesn’t want their parents to have a reason to stick it to him!”

Trying to find him in the middle of the night would be impossible. There were too many places to hide on the campus, made worse by the darkness that enveloped almost all of the garden areas.

He hushed his tone to avoid waking the others; “You hear from him or see him, you come tell me right away. I’m going to have to slap some bloody sense into him. Tell the other lads as well.”

“Aye. I’ll do that.”

Darin had enough problems, why was Koch so intent on piling on more?