

Max's heart was beating at a thousand miles a minute. Two factors were contributing to his elevated stress level. The first was the most obvious – with Claude still in real danger of dying right in front of him or suffering a permanent injury thanks to the bullet still embedded into his flesh. The other was the racket coming from upstairs. Max had not seen an armed guard during their tour of the building, so he wasn't sure why there was such a riotous gunfight occurring.

Who was doing it? Claude would have floated Maria's name – but he remained entirely unconvinced of that. His Father told him that his life at the academy would be exciting and filled with new experiences. How badly Max now wished that his statement was a lie.

“Ugh. Augh! What the...”

Max was not expecting Claude to awake from his state of unconsciousness, but if Claude was anything, it was stubborn. He wasn't going to go quietly without getting the last word. He peeled his eyes open and grit his teeth as the pain returned with a vengeance. It would have been better to stay sleeping. Claude's shattered pelvis was the single most painful thing he'd ever experienced.

“Goddess above that hurts,” Claude groaned. His voice was hoarse. Even speaking those words was a significant amount of effort. Max kept a firm hand on his chest so that he didn't move and aggravate the already serious injury.

Max launched directly into a tirade about his impulsive behaviour, “What the bloody hell were you thinking? If you'd just have stayed with the group, none of this would have happened. Look at you – you're in a right state!”

“Can we save the recriminations for when I get fixed up, please?”

“There isn't much else we can do while all this chaos is going on outside.”

“Why do you care anyway? You didn't want anything to do with me a few hours ago,” Claude observed.

“There’s a big difference between arguing with you and worrying about you being shot and killed, idiot. If we weren’t here you would have died. Don’t you ever think about how that’d make your family and friends feel?”

“Sure I do!” Claude objected, “But you’re just mad because of what happened with your family. I’m not trying to do anything like that.”

“I know you’re not. That’s not the only reason I don’t like it. It’s because you never consider the consequences before you go running off to do things like this. I’m worried about you, I always am. I worry myself sick thinking that something like this is going to happen. Do you have any idea what I felt like when all of this violent stuff started happening? I knew you’d be right in the middle of it somehow.”

Claude closed his eyes, “I know it sounds stupid, but I kinda’ get your point now that I got shot. I should have listened to you. But how did you find me?”

“We snuck away and heard you groaning from in here. Samantha fixed you up with healing magic to stop you from bleeding to death. Your pelvis is another matter entirely. You’re going to need surgery.”

“My Dad is going to flip his lid.”

“Maybe you should be more concerned about dying before he finds out.”

“Trust me – it’ll be a fate worse than death. I’m never going to hear the end of it.”

“Good. You’ve been trying to play the hero this whole time…”

“I’m not trying to be a hero, Max. I want to prove that I’m capable of doing this.”

“That doesn’t seem like much of a distinction to me.”

“Anyway – I did overhear something while I was hiding in here, that’s why they shot me. I saw something they didn’t want getting out.”

“Really?”

Claude nodded, “The guy directing those criminals came in here with Adrian’s father, I think he’s the one who’s trying to get Felipe killed. That way he can marry someone into the family and take over their business.”

“The Rederro family? I wish I could say that I’m surprised, but I suppose the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree.”

“He didn’t say anything about Adrian knowing about it, and even as he is, I don’t think he’d ask his father to kill Felipe just so he can marry Beatrice. He doesn’t care one bit about her.”

“That’s true,” Max concurred, “And that helps explain how they broke into the building and got around the security. Sir Roderro must have helped them get inside and told them where our group was going to be.”

Max was always one to doubt Claude’s assertions about what he believed – but if he was making such a clear claim about something he witnessed, and he’d been shot for witnessing it, that was a different story. Max never liked the Roderro’s, they had a terrible reputation for underhanded tricks. Even still, organising the murder of a teenager was beyond the pale. That was the sort of thing that saw a family’s nature and reputation stained for a very, very long time. There was a good reason to keep it under wraps even if he didn’t face legal consequences for it, which may happen given his pull in the city.

Max was under no illusions about how unequal justice was in Walser. Things were improving, but it was no exaggeration to say that most nobles operated on a different set of rules to everyone else. They could get away with things that would see commoners locked up for decades. Claude’s claims would be essential, as would the backing of the Booker and Escobarus families. With their weight behind him – perhaps he’d face a jail sentence after all.

Claude was getting used to the pain. He was uncertain whether that was a good or bad thing. His breathing remained heavy, but the pace of each inhalation slowed considerably. He recalled the moment that he understood what happened and the panic he felt. All of Max’s warnings about charging into things and putting himself in needless danger bounced back to him in the most humiliating manner possible. Max did care, he cared a lot – but that didn’t make the taste any less bitter.

There were more gunshots from above.

“They’re still fighting up there?” Max muttered.

“Maria, it’s definitely Maria. Did you see the way that she threw that guy over the balcony? And she grabbed Felipe and got out of there so fast, it was like she knew what was going to happen.”

“That might be the case, but are you seriously proposing that she’s enough to kill all of those people on her own? I don’t care how many shooting trophies she’s won – that doesn’t mean she’s invincible.”

“I never said my theory was perfect, it might be a guard for all I know. But they did a pretty crappy job of keeping them out of the building in the first place. I wanted to catch a glimpse of what was going on, just so I could be sure.”

“And all you got in return was a shattered pelvis.”

“H-Hey, I found out who’s responsible for starting all of this in the first place. That has to count for something!” Claude winced as he felt himself moving on instinct.

“You came in here to hide, not because you had a sudden flash of detective-like genius.”

“Putting yourself in the right place at the right time is also an essential detective skill.”

Max studied the tortured expression on his face and the blood that had somehow stained above the waist too and reached a simple conclusion; “I don’t see what was right about this.”

Before they could continue arguing back and forth over whether Claude did the right thing, they were interrupted by the sound of someone screaming.

Max leapt to his feet and hurried to the door, “Samantha!”

But when he reached the barricade, he hesitated. Samantha had volunteered to keep watch – which meant she was knowingly placing herself into danger for Claude’s sake. It wouldn’t do them any good for him to go running out and revealing Claude’s position to anyone who wanted to come and finish the job. He stepped back and tried

to ignore the ball of lead building in his chest. By the time he'd have removed the desk, she'd already be gone.

“Damn it!”

His only solace was that the commotion was not punctuated with another gunshot.

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The unlucky fellow who ran across me next was almost completely liquidated as I blasted him in the chest with the first round from the shotgun. The recoil pulled back on my shoulder, but all of the strength training I'd been doing over the past few months paid dividends and allowed me to stay on target for the follow up on his friend. Blood flew and stained the floor red, both men falling backwards from the force of the impact.

What a mess.

I tossed the shotgun to the floor and drew my pistol again. I might have killed a few of them, but the odds were still poor. They had the measure of the building, and were working as a more unified front than before. I could barely find the time to think through my next actions, being forced to rely on instinct and luck to get me through.

The first recourse I could think of was getting out of there by breaking through their lines. Felipe was hidden via obscurity for the time being – but me dying in this fight would worsen his chances of survival. It would be safer for both of us to move away and give myself some room to breathe. I could always come back and guard the door again if the need arose. It would be difficult to get through the door if Felipe had barricaded it like I asked, and the angles of the room meant he could hide out of sight even if they smashed the door through.

The problem was that Eidos and his boss had brought every spare hand they could find to try and kill me. There were still two dozen of them left to worry about, and each kill didn't feel like it was getting me any closer to being free of their net. I didn't have the ammo or magical energy to get all of them.

Eidos fired a bolt of his own lightning through the office, annihilating one of the desks near my position and sending dangerous wooden splinters through the air like a makeshift grenade. That reminded me that I needed to go back and grab my

conductive spike too. I dove over the desk, knocking over the divider as I did so, and ran over to the pillar where I'd embedded it into the plaster. It was still hot to the touch.

"Come out and play, Maria! I've got more where that came from!"

I tried to chart a clear path through the office before they really did corner me. There were gaps in the patrol pattern, but if I killed one of them they'd readjust their positions. That was a variable that was out of my control, it was risky, but I didn't have many other options. It was even worse now that the fatigue from my magical accident was setting in. I wasn't going to complain too much about a get-out-of-jail-free card regardless.

I broke out into a sprint and took my chances. There was a flurry of movement from the gunmen as they realised that I was trying to break their blockade. Several stray shots hit where I'd just been as they tried to pin me down again. I kept my eyes focused on the goal, one of the staircases at the closest wall which was being guarded by two of them. Eidos placed them there to stop me from doing something like this, though it didn't mean much when they could get shot like everybody else.

My legs burned and my centre of balance was struggling to keep me aloft. The speed I demonstrated to the class during the physical exam was no fluke. Speed and versatility were more important than ever because Maria's naturally small stature made building muscles difficult. When one area is left lacking, it's up to another to make up the slack. Fine-tuning my strategies was one thing – but it was no substitute for experience using them in the real world.

"She's running for it, watch the bloody stairs!" Eidos roared, but he was a moment too late to save the lackeys posted there.

I snapped my aim from one to the other, cutting them down with a pair of accurate shots to the chest that robbed them of the ability to stand up and aim at me. The barrage of fire from behind was withering, ripping plaster and stone to pieces as I ascended up the steps and out of sight. I dived behind the nearest pillar and took a second to catch my breath. If I moved too fast too quickly I'd burn out my muscles and make things harder.

But what struck me as odd was that there were no footsteps following me up, from that staircase or the other one. They were holding back from pursuing me. At first, I thought it was because they'd decided to look for Felipe instead, but the voices coming from down there made me think twice. There was something going on that I wasn't privy to.

I took my chances and moved back over to the stairs with my gun prepped in case one of them ignored orders and followed me. Tuning my ears into the discussion, I got the gist of what was happening.

"This girl ran away from the group. I found her hiding in one of the offices. What should we do with her?"

Not good. They'd brought one of my classmates with them.

Eidos was initially disinterested, "What do you think? Take her back and throw her with the others. We don't have time to waste on this."

The leader stopped him, "Hold on a second. I wouldn't be so hasty. You told me that this girl seems interested in keeping her friends safe, so why don't we take the opportunity and use her as leverage?"

That was the last thing I wanted to hear. Hostage situations were extremely messy and difficult to get out of, and there was no guarantee that they'd honour their own conditions for their release. As callous as it was of me to say, but if things came to that I would choose to protect myself over them. That was my line of thinking until I heard the familiar countryside twang of Samantha's accent.

"What the heck are you talking about? Let me go!"

Her captor barked back, "Fat chance, lass. Unless you think I'm stupid enough to think that thing hit me around the head on accident."

Of all the people, why did it have to be the heroine of the story? Having her die here would probably doom the world to destruction or something equally idiotic. I resisted the urge to punch the nearest solid wall and started putting together a plan in my head. This wasn't personal like they thought – I was legitimately fearful of what

changes would occur to the timeline if Samantha died here. All those hints about her destiny as the world's saviour weren't there to mislead. That would imply a certain level of sophistication with the writing that was in direct contradiction to the target audience.

"Give her to me. I'll make sure that she knows what's going on." Eidos took Samantha from the guard as she continued to struggle and object verbally to what they were planning.

"He must be on this floor. Search the rooms," the leader commanded, "Three or four will be enough. The rest of you make sure that she doesn't interfere."

Having disengaged from the fight, I'd regained some control over the terms of our next engagement. They didn't know where I was or if I was listening to their conversation. Eidos would have to come to me first if he wanted to use Sam as a hostage. I took the spike from my holster and cut the palm of my off-hand with it, I then carefully started to apply the blood that leaked from the wound to various places along my route.

Leaving breadcrumbs for them would do two things. It would allow them to follow me and trick themselves into thinking I was seriously wounded from their shots, and it would fill them with some false confidence. There was nothing deadlier than thinking that you had the situation under control when you didn't. A handprint here, a smear of blood there – and the narrative I wanted to tell them was complete in seconds.

One of the few records that I could find about the building showed me the exterior areas in more detail than anywhere else, including the roof. Roof access was something of a modern innovation for urban buildings in Walser, but the theatre was always designed to be adaptable. There was even a retractable cover that could block sunlight from coming in through the glass dome ceiling. The people working here needed the ability to get up and down into the rafters.

That was where I would make my stand.

I hurried up the stairs, and then again, reaching the top floor with a malicious plan in mind. The tallest building in the area was about to become the scene of a rooftop



shootout. If that didn't make the police leap into action, nothing would. I forced my way through a metal doorway and ran out into the chilly midday air. The roof was huge and somewhat open, but with good solid cover that I could exploit. Giant wrought-iron structures were drilled into the ground to hold up the lighting rig and walkways inside.

Ammunition was getting dangerously low. I took the time to transfer my remaining shots into one magazine of eight. It wasn't enough to kill all of them, not unless I could hit three of them with the same shot multiple times over. I was good but not that good. I also planted the spike in a spot where I thought that Eidos would try to use his magic on. The area was surrounded by more metal pieces that would make it significantly less precise than inside.

The last piece of the puzzle was my own positioning for when they came out onto the roof, presuming they followed the convenient trail of blood I'd left behind. There was an elevated walkway that allowed the engineering staff to maintain the glass windows that looked down into the atrium, but it didn't provide much cover for me to hide behind once the element of surprise was spent. I wanted a patch that let me strike first while also being easy to retreat from.

I settled on a spot at the bottom of one of the walkway's access stairs. There was a large suspension mechanism to my left that would block bullets coming my way, and it gave me a clear view of the doorways on both sides of the roof. No matter where Eidos came from - I'd see him.

My patience was soon rewarded as one of his goons emerged from the small hut and took a brief look at what was awaiting him on the roof. As he didn't spot me during his preliminary scan, he felt safe enough to step through with two other men in tow. There was still no sign of Eidos behind them. I kept quiet and bided my time. I had to steal one of their guns to stand a chance. They fanned out and started searching in more detail, grumbling and complaining about the grunt work as they did.

One of them made the grave mistake I was waiting for.

He was using a rifle, but he also sported a pistol in an unsecured holster wrapped around his left leg. He wandered over in my direction and complained loudly, "Why

doesn't Eidos come up here and clear the roof himself if he wants to find this girl so bad? He just thinks we're a bunch of bloody meat shields!"

His friend snorted, "He doesn't want to get jumped. When you're the boss' right-hand man you can do the same thing if you want."

"Pft. As if I'd do something as cruel as-

Before he could finish I was behind him, snatching the pistol from his holster and blowing a hole through his skull at point-blank range. His head snapped forward and his statement ended abruptly with a spurt of blood decorating the concrete.

"Thanks for the gun, asshole."

I promptly put it to good use and shot his friend too. I was long past the point of feeling any sympathy for them. The fact that he considered himself kind at all was enough to make me scoff. He didn't have a problem with trying to kill a teenager, so he wasn't above using other people to protect himself. I took the rifle for myself and skittered away into cover like a ravenous raccoon.

The last scout was left to cry for assistance, "Damn it! She's out here, come help me out!"

A stampede of reinforcements made themselves known by pouring through both exits, including Eidos himself, still holding a struggling Samantha in his arms. He was too strong for her to break free, not to mention the gun he was pointing at her head. I ducked behind a new hiding spot and waited to see what his play was.

"This is your last chance to come out here and make things easy on yourself Maria. Since my other offers didn't seem to do it for you, I decided to bring your little friend along with me to make my case."

"Let me go, you cow-pie-eating bastard!"

"When I saw you at the mansion I understood right away. You've got the eyes of a killer. I thought that you didn't care one bit about anybody else – but it seems that I was mistaken. Why would you be putting your neck on the line if not for them? You don't get anything outta' this."

Samantha screamed as I ignored his demands and took an easy kill on another of his men using the rifle. Eidos sighed and shook his head, seemingly not afraid of me shooting at him while he held a hostage in his arms.

“Looks like you don’t have a problem with doing this kind of thing in front of her, but I guess that’s how it is when your life’s on the line. You know that she and all of your other friends are going to reject you when the time comes – people like us, we don’t get second chances. You should quit this hero gig while you’re ahead, you won’t get anything out of it.”

I didn’t think I was being a hero. Not in a traditional sense. If whatever sent me here needed or wanted a hero, they could have made a better choice than the likes of me. I only knew how to hurt people, how to kill them, and how to get away with it. That was the total summation of my existence. A cornered animal that lived for the sake of living.

I was in too deep to take a different path now. Samantha was going to figure out what was going on with me. The only alternative was to give myself over and die like a dog. That would be no good for either of us. Her rejection was not something to concern myself with. She could complain about the methods after I saved her from Eidos, not before.

Eidos understood that I wasn’t going to give myself up that easily without turning the screws a tad tighter. Waving a gun in Samantha’s face was not enough reason for me to turn myself in. He needed to guarantee to me that she’d be safe if I gave up first, but trust was in very short supply since we were trying to murder each other. He flinched as another of his men dropped dead right in front of him. He pulled Sam closer and tried to protect himself using her as a shield.

“Hurry up and surround her! She’s going to keep shooting if you don’t!” he demanded. Having ceded the ground he gained by trying to extort me using Samantha, he fell back on what he knew best – violence. In that sense we were both of the same mind.

A pair of shots rang out like the crack of a whip, and another two of them were dead. The rifle was empty, so I tossed it away and drew my backup pistol again. The

momentum built into a violent crescendo as several of them, the full number that he brought onto the roof, descended on my position in an attempt to rush me. Two men lined themselves up perfectly for a single bullet to rip through both of them, though the man in the back was lucky to suffer a less serious injury thanks to the first slowing the bullet down. I rolled out of the way as a shotgun blast pinged off the metallic structure we were fighting around. He was already on top of me before I could climb up from the floor. I snapped my aim at his body and fired two shots to stop him from getting a chance to kill me.

The rest hesitated as the bodies piled up in front of them. I dived out of cover and slid across the floor, striking one in the head before he could react. The pistol clicked as the last shot left the chamber, so I switched to my other leg and fired with the other. The assault was so overwhelming that all of them fell before me one after another.

It was quick, brutal, and lasted the sum total of one minute.

I threw the empty gun and grabbed another from one of the bodies. Eidos was the only one left, and he was hiding on the other side of the domed window to conceal his position. I took a moment to catch my breath and wipe the blood on my cut hand onto one of their jackets so my fingers wouldn't slip. My breathing was laboured. I struggled around the outside of the dome and kept my aim high.

"Did you get her?" Eidos called out after a long silence. Their lack of response must have made his blood run cold.

When I found him, he was halfway up the stairs on the walkway that ran around it, with Samantha still trying to wrestle herself free. That struggle came to an end when she witnessed my blood-soaked visage, armed to the teeth, for the first time.

"I'm afraid that your friends won't be coming."

Samantha saw the raw madness that lay beneath my gaze. I was in a blood frenzy, a state of heightened awareness and suppressed emotions. All of my careful consideration and planning was pushed aside so that I could focus on what I did best. I must have looked a terrifying sight. I could tell by the way that she tensed up and stopped moving.

Eidos laughed nervously, “Don’t come any closer, lass. I’ve got your friend here and I won’t hesitate to kill ‘er.”

“The moment you try, I’ll just shoot you dead,” I noted, “You’re too craven to do something like that. Why don’t we dispense with the pleasantries and get this over with?”

He pressed the muzzle of his gun even closer to her skull, forcing her to feel the cold steel of its construction and be aware of how close she was to death. “You don’t care one bit about her, do you?”

“I thought I made that clear already.”

“So why don’t you just risk it and shoot me anyway?”

“I don’t want to kill her if I don’t have to.”

To Eidos, it was a distinction without a difference. If either of those positions would cause me to hesitate and for him to get the upper hand, he’d exploit it until he no longer could. He was further put on edge by the sound of movement coming from below. My gambit worked. The police heard the gunshots and decided that they were waiting too long to get inside. It was only a matter of time before he and everyone else were apprehended or killed.

“You’re not going to throw everything away, lass. You’re a silver-spoon sucking noble at the core. All that comfort will go away if you shoot me now. This little girlie is going to see the whole bloody thing.”

I refused to sway my aim away from his head.

“This hero gig isn’t really you. I can tell that you’re a killer, just like me. Do you think that these folks are going to give you a pat on the back? Praise you for the good deed? They’re all too good for that, too comfortable to admit that this kind of violence is why they live in comfort. None of us are innocent.”

He was right. I could never be a hero. A hero was someone with a righteous heart and a sense of justice. A hero was someone who could console people in their darkest hours. A hero was someone who was selfless and well-meaning in everything they did.

I couldn't be those things for other people. I was a merciless killer. But as I stared up at him from below I came to a sudden realisation.

They didn't need a hero – they needed me.

Everything clicked into place. My background, the role I took in this story, my reincarnated body, and the flurry of strange occurrences that had started the moment I stepped foot onto the Royal campus. I was the right girl in the right place at the right time. Whoever sent me here didn't expect me to be a hero. A hero couldn't do what needed to be done, they couldn't do what I could. When approaching any situation – one would need to bring the appropriate tool to achieve success.

When the world is a complex place mired in endless facets and perspectives, when the lines between good and bad are blurred by their method and outcome; you can't hold on to your righteousness. Your worst biases are exposed, your darkest instincts take over. I was brought here to be myself with all of my previous memories intact. The Goddess hadn't ordered a prophesised saviour, they'd ordered a killer.

If that was what they wanted...

Eidos was trying to run out the clock. He was exploring every possible angle to try and convince me to let him go or to drop my gun. He didn't realise that I knew he wasn't going to kill Samantha. Actually following through on the threat wouldn't get him anywhere, and it would allow me to shoot and kill him without any worry.

I was one step ahead of him.

Eidos pointed his other hand in my direction and fired another bolt of lightning. The electrical attack went awry from the moment it left the tip of his finger, getting caught on the surrounding railings and more notably, the spike I'd planted nearby before he came out onto the roof. Samantha grabbed his other arm and wrenched it free, causing him to stumble down two of the steps as she kicked and struggled with him. He looked like a deer in the headlights as his attention turned to me.

"I'm no hero."

I pulled the trigger three times, aiming for centre mass to keep Samantha out of the firing line. Each shot sent him spinning dramatically up against the railing until it was too much for him to handle. He cried out one last time and fell over the edge, crashing through one of the glass panels below and tumbling down into the parliamentary chamber with a sickening thud. Samantha winced and shied away, even after it was done with.

I lowered my gun and sighed.

“Idiot.”

Samantha peered at me through her fingers, “Maria? Is that you?”

“Who else do you think it is?” I snarked.

She cast a brief glance at the shattered window where Eidos fell, before resolving to preserve her innocence by not taking another look at his twisted body. She stumbled down the steps and met me at the bottom. I couldn't help but wonder what she thought of me now that I was standing in front of her, drenched from head to toe in both my own blood and everyone else's.

“You killed them,” she stated unevenly.

There was no hiding the bodies I'd left in my wake, “Yes. I did.”

“You killed them.”

She already said that...

“Any other illuminating insights to share with me?”

She shook her head so quickly that she was liable to break her own neck.

“How did he end up catching you?” I asked.

“M-Max and I crept away from the group by knocking out one of the guards, we found Claude, but then he came back and caught me.”

I escorted her towards the rooftop hut and allowed myself to cool down a tad. The immediate threat was dealt with. I reengaged 'disinterested noble' mode and attempted to keep her from losing her mind over what she witnessed. It was very hard

to do. I was covered in blood and still holding my gun. I slid it back into the holster and zipped up the side of my skirt, stopping her at the corner of the stairwell so that we could stay out of sight. The police were inside of the building. I could hear them yelling orders and even firing shots at the criminals.

“Is this why you told me to stay away from you?” she asked.

“I do appear to have a habit of attracting trouble. Do you mean to tell me that being honest about myself would have served me better than shooing you away at the academy?”

“I... hah. I can't believe it. Claude was right, the whole time!”

Well, that was better for her than getting distressed about seeing the bodies.



