

A new year beckoned within the Republic of Walser. The cold winter snows had finally given way to the onset of a fresh spring. A new year meant new arrivals at the Walser Royal Institute and College; the most prestigious and sought-after learning establishment in the nation. The affluent halls of the College were where the future leaders, businesspeople and elucidated thinkers were groomed into fine, upstanding adults.

Nearly every sitting member of the government's cabinet had attended this very school. If one wished to ordain the future direction of the nation at large, they need only study the names and faces of those who arrived in the large, front-facing garden. Hundreds of teenagers who had left home for the first time gathered in the square, chatting animatedly about what they would do now that they had arrived.

Amongst the throng of rich kids and vestigial nobles was an odd character. A tall girl with mousy brown hair, freckled cheeks and wide, excited eyes. Samantha Easton had never seen such an exquisite manor before! The momentary anxiety she had felt dismounting one of the carriages was swept away in a fairy tale delusion. Without knowing the sordid history of the family that once held it, the manor truly was a sight to behold.

It reached out and embraced the front garden with two large arms, each one lined with delicate marble lining and supporting pillars. Hundreds and hundreds of smooth glass windows allowed a tantalising peak of the inside. The building was four stories tall and extremely large in footprint, containing enough dormitories to house hundreds of students and staff members. The central building was the College itself. A comparatively constrained selection of teaching rooms packed into what was once an exclusively residential zone.

Samantha couldn't believe that she, of all people, was being permitted to attend an academy such as this! Her father had worked his fingers to the bone saving up for her tuition, assisted by a sudden and sharp rise in demand for his farm products. Things had moved so quickly in the past few years. Motorised tools and modern techniques caused entire fields of crop to grow from nothing in a matter of weeks.

There was a time where her father feared that these advancements would leave him behind; but many of those old farming families moved on to new businesses. No longer reliant on subsistence work to feed themselves, a new class of industrial worker had been born. Those who remained were reaping the benefits. Her father wished for Samantha to be one of those people – forging a new path in a rapidly changing world. A strong score on the entrance exam had secured her a place as part of a new equality initiative.

As out of place as she felt with such good-mannered peers, Samantha was determined from the start not to be left behind. One day she wanted to speak proudly of her rural origins and thank her father for everything he had done. To do so, she would need to become successful enough to elicit that type of curiosity.

Some were born with a natural magnetism.

The chatter ceased as a particular private carriage trundled its way up the long stone drive.

The family crest engraved into the maroon wood was unmistakable. Twin eagles perched atop a jagged mount of stone, contained within the interior of a flourishing shield. Branches of Ivy reached out and entangled the edges. The Walston-Carter family. Once a relatively obscure leftover from the days of the monarchy, now one of the wealthiest and most well regarded. It would not have been a surprise to find one of them soon standing for Prime Minister.

The true scope of their wealth was a mystery. A fortune built on mining raw materials for the city's burgeoning industrial sector was a good one indeed. The head of the family had gone on a buying spree, snapping up promising businesses from coast to coast. They would then be pumped full of money and some of the best equipment available – resulting in explosive growth of production and employee numbers.

All of this in isolation would have explained some small part of the respect and awe that the carriage was gathering, yet there was another, more interesting element to the story. It had been the world's worst kept secret, hinted at in the pages of local newspapers for months. The carriage was transporting none other than Damian Walston-Carter's first and most beloved daughter, Maria.

People loved to talk about her. They said she was wise beyond her years, beautiful, ice cold, and with a glare that could cut flesh. The girl had sprouted just as many inane rumours and legends as the family as a whole. Some said that she had won a clay-pigeon trophy at the age of eight. Others that she had the strength of a fully-grown man. If Samantha knew of those stories as Maria stepped outwards from the carriage door, she would have expressed an immense scepticism.

'She's just like a doll...'

That was the first thing that came to mind. Maria Walston-Carter was alike to the expensive toys that she had seen sitting in the shop windows. The greatest minds in the newly emerging art of film could not have hoped to organise an image so perfect in a thousand years of trying.

She landed on the cobbled ground without flinching or hesitating. Her perfectly permed, curly black hair bristled in the light breeze. Her pale skin glistened in the morning sunlight. Crimson eyes addressed the audience with an unspoken demand. Move or be moved.

In an instant, the lead servant rounded the back of the carriage and unlatched a large trunk containing her belongings. Rather than allow the elder man to carry it for her as the crowd expected, Maria extended her hand and wordlessly took it from him. The way that she commanded respect and refused to be coddled by her own servants; suddenly those rumours didn't sound so outlandish after all.

She marched down the central avenue of the garden without struggling with its weight. Her back remained unbent. As she passed by, the noise started again – though this time everyone was speaking of her and her alone. She was one of the most sought-after brides in the Federation. Anyone who successfully courted her was sure to enjoy a life of comfort or ambition. Girls wondered how they could emulate her style and grace, boys wondered what they could do to get into her good books.

All of this from nothing. Samantha was in awe. Such was the power of a real noble girl.

Maria did not spare any of the onlookers a second glance. Her only interest was reaching the front of the line – where the entrance speech would soon be held by the headteacher. She parked herself beside one of the plaza's gazebos and placed her trunk down onto the ground, hands folded over her lap.

Samantha could not contain her curiosity. She slowly drifted after her, making sure to avoid getting in anyone's way. Not a single soul dared approach Maria. It was like an exclusion field had been erected around her person. She had cleared an area of the already packed garden without even saying a word. Step by step, Samantha got closer and closer. In her single-minded drive to speak with the girl of the moment, Samantha was completely ignorant as to the machinations of a huddle of boys behind her.

Even an academy as prestigious as the Royal Institute attracted bad apples.

Rotten parents formed the bedrock for equally rotten children. Samantha's sun-kissed complexion had immediately marked her as a target of ill-doers of all stripes and creeds. The head of the gang reached down and retrieved a small rock, anxiously palming it until the perfect chance presented itself. When it finally did – he whipped it at Samantha with as much strength as he could muster.

The stone flew through the air like a bullet, threatening to strike the young girl and leave her with a bloody welt – yet at the precise moment when the rock was thrown, Samantha had already erred from the straight path she was taking. For a single terrifying second, the boy came to the realisation that the stone would not hit its intended target.

A million and one thoughts went through his mind. This was it. The end of his life at the academy. His dumb rock was heading straight for the prettiest, wealthiest girl in the school. And when it hit, he would become its biggest pariah until the end of his days. Of all the damnable things he could have done, why did he choose to throw something with her in such close proximity?

Without turning her head, Maria reached out with the speed of a coiled snake and snatched the spinning projectile from mid-air. A collective gasp rang out from the student body. It was a superhuman display of reactions and hand-eye coordination.

Relief turned to panic. He let out a pained squeak and whispered to himself; “She caught it?” Her outstretched arm slowly turned around, palm open, presenting the makeshift weapon to the culprit. Then she turned to face him with predatory crimson eyes glowing in her sockets. He clutched his chest like a bolt had been shot through his heart. Never once in his life had he felt fear so raw and visceral.

Maria passed the stone between her hands, feeling the weight and texture of the exterior surface. After repeating this several times, she turned her entire body to face the boy and sneered haughtily. With a flick of her wrist it was sent back the way it came, curving in mid-air and glancing off the boy’s forehead.

Hit like a gunshot, he fell to the ground. A long red mark was left behind where the skin had been rubbed away. He blinked helplessly and tried to comprehend what had just happened to him. And then, without another word, she turned back to her original position. A chill passed through those who witnessed the incident, and at that moment an unspoken agreement to never mention it to the teachers was forged.

This was just the first of many incidents that would soon cement Maria’s reputation as the most fearsome of all the students. Wisely, Samantha thought twice about speaking with her. It was just as well that she decided to stay away. The dorm mistress was already walking down the steps and approaching the female students. She clapped her hands and demanded the attention of the chattering girls.

“Good morning everyone. I am Miss Marside, I’ll be the one looking after you during your first year at the academy.”

Her voice was shrill, high-pitched, but the tone of her statements did not match with her character. She had a long, narrow face and sunken eyes. A messy bun of white hair was tangled atop her head. She reminded Samantha of her dear Grandmother. Though her perception of her Grandmother was warped due to her absence going on five years by that time.

She held out a small wooden board and a pencil; “Firstly, I will take a register of all those who will be occupying the dorms. If you are staying within the Academy’s grounds – please step forward so you may be counted.”

There was a rippling from within the crowd as the dorm residents separated themselves from those who lived close enough to travel. Samantha found herself standing beside Maria, even though moments ago she had decided to try and stay out of her way. If Maria found her presence unbecoming, she did not make a fuss of it.

Samantha was very excited. This was the furthest she had ever been from her home on the farm. A new world was opening before her eyes, filled with interesting people from many different places. What wonders would she behold in the future, and what amazing things would she learn from the experienced faculty of the Royal Academy?

“Lady Walston-Carter.”

Samantha observed as the shorter girl stepped outwards and faced the teacher. She was completely unreadable. Her stance was confident but her expression unmoved. She was the enigma that had entranced hundreds of potential suitors from noble families across the globe.

“Here.”

Samantha shivered, but not from the cool breeze that had blown through the yard. What should have been a regular response to what was asked of her appeared as more of a statement. Maria Walston-Carter was ‘here,’ and everyone would take notice. A single word immediately sparked another flurry of conversation from the crowd who had gathered to observe.

“Her voice is incredible. What an authoritative tone!”

“It doesn’t suit her cute face at all...”

The teacher snapped her fingers and cleared her throat, “If you are not here to respond to the register, please mind your own business!”

Her warning did little to clear the air. Some of the rule-abiding students backed away but remained within earshot in the hopes of listening in on Maria speaking again. Maria was not going to offer her fans any more fuel for discussion. She remained silent.

“Lady Walston-Carter, you will occupy room one-hundred-five.”

Samantha relaxed again until her own name was called.

“Miss Samantha Easton – you will occupy room one-hundred-fifteen.”

She nodded to show her comprehension, “Yes Ma’am.”

That meant that she was going to be living rather close to Maria. Samantha was starting to understand why she captivated the others so much. She could barely take her mind off of her. Everything had to be framed in its relation to Maria Walston-Carter. What would she think, or say, how close would she be to the topic of discussion? Her display of marksmanship had elicited an intense curiosity in her. Seldom seen was a girl so well-bred that would respond in such a way.

Samantha wanted to know more.