

A few hours later, the rest of the students had settled into their respective cliques and Samantha was left feeling out in the cold. She was unfamiliar with everyone in the building, and her country upbringing was bound to cause some to reject her out of hand without even speaking a word to her. Her prayers were answered in part as she entered the magic classroom and saw Maxwell waving to her. He was sitting with another male student, who was much taller than any of the others. Samantha made her way over and sat next to him.

“Samantha, glad to see you decided to take a chance on this.”

“My Father worked hard to send me here, so I intended to make the most of it.”

Maxwell tapped the shoulder of his companion; “This is Claudius. He’s a bit of a dummy, but I’m sure you’ll get along just fine.”

“Hey! No need to insult me when introducing me to a pretty girl, Max!”

He rolled his eyes and leaned closer, “He’s a terrible flirt too.”

Samantha wasn’t sure how to respond to his compliment, “Uh, it’s very nice to meet you.”

“I hope the school is treating you well. Some of these people can be really judgemental if you don’t fit in the right way,” Maxwell sighed. “My older brother used to come here and it doesn’t look like things have gotten any better.”

Claudius shrugged, “My Pa said the same thing. It comes with the territory. Everyone here thinks they’re competing against one another.”

“That’s because they are, Claude. If you want to claw your way up the social standings and land a nice, comfortable job in the capital – you need to stand out and tear down the other people around you. Thank goodness I already have something lined up on the opposite side if things don’t go well...”

“Like Maria Walston-Carter?”

“Ugh, not you too.”

Claude waved his arms in an attempt to ward away Maxwell’s scorn, “No, no. I don’t mean that I’m obsessed with her like everyone else is. I just mean, she’s the kind of girl who’d do something like that.”

“Now who’s being judgemental? You don’t know anything about her.”

“Hm. She seemed a little scary earlier,” Samantha admitted, recalling the incident in the front garden.

Claudius clutched his heart theatrically, “A scoundrel, a menace, a villainess - even! Where others see a classical beauty, I see the eyes of a cold-hearted killer.”

“You’ve been reading too many detective novels, Claude,” Maxwell grumbled. He was always awash with wild theories about other people. He’d already aired his ‘well-reasoned’ suspicions about one of the janitorial staff because of a limp affecting his left leg. Claude was convinced that he’d injured it on a piece of broken glass.

Claude was insistent, “Surely, they include those kinds of characters for a reason, Max!”

“They’re not real!”

“They’re based on true stories.”

“They just say that to sell more copies! You dullard.”

Another voice cut through the lively argument; “I was not aware that I made such a negative impression.”

Claudius squealed and leapt halfway to the rafters like a startled cat. Standing in the doorway to the classroom was the very subject of their discussion – Maria Walston-Carter. She cut a striking figure, but that was quickly undercut by the way her face twisted after seeing Claude’s reaction. Her boundless mirth at striking such fear into the boy was enough to elicit an uncharacteristic round of uproarious laughter. Maria tried in vain to cover her mouth and contain it – but it was hopeless; “Ohohohoho!”

Claudius flushed a bright, rose-red colour as a girl almost half his height mocked him so openly. Samantha and Maxwell did not judge Maria for finding the sight amusing. The hopeful detective had presented himself as nothing more than a circus sideshow on this occasion. Maria snapped back to her usual, serious persona with an awkward cough and wagged an irritated finger at him.

“It’s very unbecoming to gossip about someone behind their back, you know!”

“Augh. Apologies, Lady Carter.”

“Maria will do just fine, thank you.”

Up close and personal, Samantha drank in the small details that she hadn't had the chance to see back in the courtyard. Maria was stunning – with wide, ruby eyes and perfectly curled locks that were black like pitch coal. She wore one of the school mandated uniforms with a natural confidence that made her feel green with envy. The white frilled jacket was more intended for the male students, but they came in sizes small enough for a girl – and there was no real rule against using them should she wish. Combined with the black skirt, tied around her stomach with a matching leather belt, and she looked ready to take on anything that the academy could throw at her.

The other physical aspect of note was her height. Samantha was a very tall girl by most standards, which just served to make the pint-sized Maria seem even more diminutive by comparison. How Maria commanded such attention from the people around her could be credited entirely to the way she presented herself. There wasn't an ounce of hesitation or wasted movement. Samantha likened her to a rock or tree stump, ones which frequently confounded her father and his new moving machines.

"I-I'm Samantha, it's nice to meet you."

Maria smiled pleasantly and shook her hand, "The pleasure is all mine."

A simple act such as that would have gone unnoticed had any other girl done it. But this was the Lady Maria, shaking hands with a lower-class farm girl. The whispers started circulating from the top row of the seating arrangement that dominated the back half of the chamber.

"Did you see that? Maria shook hands with her..."

"She's so polite!"

"My sister would never do something like that."

Samantha felt pins and needles running down her back. It was shameful. Once again, the differences between her upbringing and theirs was thrown around with little regard for her own feelings. Did coming from a hard-working agricultural family really make her such a pariah? Maria sensed that something was wrong.

"Pay them no mind. Good manners are not something afforded exclusively to those of wealth."

Samantha shook her head, "Ah! We're actually very well off, for a farming family. My father was able to pay for my tuition after all."

“I see. Then I believe that your work ethic will surely silence them in time.”

With that, Maria moved past the small group of acquaintances and took a seat on the third row. A textbook was retrieved from her bag and placed down onto the desk. The entire class watched in abject adoration. Maxwell spoke under his breath, “Heaven’s above. She lives on a completely different planet to the rest of us.”

Samantha was confused, “You said your family was very wealthy too.”

“They are – but the Walston-Carter family is leagues above us even. They provide a majority of the raw materials for every business and factory from here to the East Coast. I overheard my Father talking about them. They could buy our entire trading empire three times over and have money left to spare.”

“Then she must have a large amount of responsibility on her shoulders,” Samantha concluded.

“It’s not just that. She was the top entrant in every exam, every subject. Her looks are evident, and I heard that she won a pheasant shooting contest last year against a full roster of experienced adult competitors.”

“Shooting?” Samantha echoed, “Why would she enjoy shooting?” It was a sport primarily dominated by men. Her Father had recently become fascinated with the concept himself. It was a much easier way of warding away pests than scarecrows and harsh words. He purchased his own gun and took much joy in deafening her while she was trying to study. She did not enjoy it anywhere near as much as he did.

“I don’t know. But anything she does, she does with the single-minded intent of winning. There’s no way her parents will say no to her. She can pick up a shotgun and blow a bird out of the sky if she wants to, because she’s Maria Walston-Carter.”

It was the kind of rank exceptionalism that a group of gossip-filled teenagers would inevitably subscribe to. Maria’s legend had grown out of her own control. The reputation and wealth of her family, combined with her gifts in every art she studied were a heady combination that tale weavers simply could not resist. Not a single one of those people would dare put those theories to the test and ask her if they were true, and thus they continued to snowball to larger and more absurd forms without control or remorse.

Samantha just couldn’t imagine such a tiny, doll-like persona holding a gun. To think that her Father would even permit her to participate in something so dangerous in the first place!

Samantha's Father had damn nearly broken his nose the first time he pulled the trigger. It took him weeks to learn how to control the recoil. She shook her head. She couldn't believe such a claim without firm evidence. It could have been created and passed around by any one of the students without her knowledge. Still – it was an amusing thing to theorise about. The poor girl would be launched backwards for several yards just from the force of the shot.

The class was really starting to become rowdy as more and more people came through the door. Maria's attendance had elicited the interest of her newly formed fanclub, meaning there was nary a seat left to be taken. One of those new attendees sought to make as much of an impact as possible, as an aggressive looking boy with red hair and a permanent scowl on his face stormed through the door and immediately locked onto where Maria was seated. While Maria was quietly reading through a book she had taken from the library, he yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Maria Walston-Carter, I knew I'd find you here!"

Maria made no motion to look up and observe. She flipped to another page and continued to read. Unable to comprehend anyone in the room not hearing him, he repeated himself in much the same fashion.

"Maria Walston-Carter, I knew I'd find you here!"

Maxwell shouted back, "She heard you the first time, you damnable blowhard!"

His name was Adrian Roderro – and he was Maria's (self-declared) rival. He swaggered up to the stands and marched up the steps until he was face to face with her. Despite her best efforts to ignore him, she could no longer do so with him in such close proximity. With a grimace she slammed her tome shut and glared at him with daggers for eyes.

"So, the prodigal daughter of the Walston family sees fit to try her hand at the magic arts? Surely, it'd be a better use of your time to surrender, as I will confound you with my skill and power. Better salvage your reputation while you have the chance; nobody will think worse of you for giving up now."

Maria remained silent, as did the rest of the chamber. Tension was starting to build. The rest of the attendees were starting to understand that Maria was unflappable. She didn't even flinch as he tried to get into her personal space with bombast and flying spittle.

"You may have bested me at shooting, but I assure you that this particular contest will end in my favour."

Maria tilted her head slightly, “Apologies, have I offended you in some way – Adam?”

“Adrian, it’s Adrian Roderro!” Adrian’s face was bright red from a mixture of embarrassment and anger. How could she not remember him? He was the person standing beside her when she won that trophy! The trophy that was rightfully his! There was simply no possible way by which a mere girl could outperform him in the art of pheasant shooting.

Maria laughed, “Ohoho, Adrian! That was your name! Apologies – you were so unremarkable that I expunged you from my memory. There’s so much for me to remember these days after all.”

Samantha winced as Maria went for the throat with an insult custom designed to make the hot-headed boy as furious as humanly possible. She clearly remembered him and was trying to wind him up. He sputtered and stammered, finger wobbling impotently as he tried to come up with an appropriate response.

Maria delivered the coup de grace in short order; “If your magic abilities are as good as your shooting, I don’t have anything to worry about.” She reopened the book and turned away, having said her piece with such a firm resolve that it had short-circuited Adrian’s brain. She could see the steam coming from his ears. He walked back down to the second row and collapsed into one of the remaining seats with glazed eyes and a catatonic mumbling.

Vicious. A complete contrast to the politeness Samantha had experienced just moments before. Max laughed and jeered, “I’ve seen no less than five people walk up and ask for her hand in marriage in the last hour, and they all received a warmer response than whatever that was.”

“See, I was right!” Claude declared.

“Perhaps she wouldn’t have to be so mean if he hadn’t been so rude,” Samantha responded, eliciting positive concurrences from the spectators. Her head was starting to hurt just from the racket of him busting into the room. She leaned back in her seat and tried to calm down.

“I’m not going to be getting into any arguments with her,” Maxwell said.

It was almost time for the test to start.