

I found Beatrice in one of the studies that evening and took the opportunity to pry into Felipe's readmittance to the academy. She was keeping herself busy with her studies and prefect work, but it was clear that recent events were weighing heavily on her shoulders. It was her party that gathered everyone into one place.

"Oh yes, he said that the meeting went very well and that the academy has agreed to tighten security even more. Felipe's Father even offered to pay the cost himself."

"I am glad to hear it. I hope that the incident hasn't affected him too negatively."

"He is still rather paranoid about it happening again. I don't believe that it is possible for one to forgive and forget such a difficult experience. Felipe is putting a brave face on the matter for now, but I feel that he will divulge his true emotions to me in due time."

"I understand. He will speak with you and his friends when he is prepared to."

Beatrice giggled, "Why do you speak as if you are not a friend as well?"

I almost forgot that I was trying to be friendlier with him for a moment there. It was a force of habit. The excuses came quickly, "I was speaking generally, I'm certain that Felipe has many friends in his year beyond me."

"Unfortunately, Felipe is learning who his real friends are at the moment. Some of them have been speaking ill of him behind his back, others are afraid to be around him with the threat to his life. I'm willing to forgive the latter, but not the former."

"They didn't get that culprit to speak about their motives?" I asked. Beatrice shook her head and sighed wearily.

"The police said that he was willing to speak on some matters, but otherwise plead ignorance on others. They still aren't sure as to why Felipe is being targeted, but it doesn't take an expert to draw a conclusion. They want to kill him and annul our betrothal."

I crossed my arms, "That makes sense. Do you have any idea of who might be behind it?"

“If we were speaking exclusively of the families who made a formal offer to my Father, it would still create a list composed of almost every single noble clan from here to the borders. Even those who were not initially interested may have changed their minds. The Abdah family, Rederros, even a young noble from a Van Walser cadet branch.”

That made it impossible for us to determine a culprit from the list alone. It was safe to say that almost every noble family worth paying attention to had put forth their pitch to marry Beatrice and take over the Booker’s business empire in the process.

“Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better to be born a boy,” she mused, “It seems that being a lady has brought nothing but ill fortune to the people I care for.”

“You shouldn’t have to change your life because of someone else’s immoral actions,” I chided her, “You’re a victim in all of this, just like Felipe.”

“I don’t know what I’m saying these days. Thank you for always being so concerned about us, it means a lot to have a good friend like you.”

I smiled. I was doing all of this for the sake of my own salvation.

Was that the wrong thing to do? Perhaps. Eidos was right about one thing, people didn’t get handed second chances every day, though he was speaking about it in more literal ‘shot-in-the-chest and dying’ kind of terms. This new life must have come with a catch, and the sudden proliferation of dangerous situations was cementing my position with each passing day.

If I wasn’t here, nobody would be in danger.

I couldn’t stop myself from thinking that way. All of these actions were performed by others, but it felt like I was partly responsible. I sincerely doubted that this kind of thing happened in a normal school year. All of those visual novels I used to clog my brain space and distract my conscience from the terrible things that I did had given me a sense for when I was being subjected to dramatic irony.

There were only two possible answers. The first was that I was being punished for my previous misdeeds, lulled into a false sense of security and then stabbed in the back by fate or coincidence. The second, that the reason I was here was not intended to be a

punishment at all. How many of those same stories hinged on the protagonist using their skills to help a troubled Deity? I was a good assassin, that was for certain, but I failed to see why any God or Deity would want the likes of me helping them. An unrepentant murderer wasn't good for building trust. What was stopping me from flying off the handle and causing trouble myself?

For that matter – beyond the abolition of a potential identity crisis, I remained completely unaffected mentally. I was still capable of making my own decisions, unless the changes were so minute and insidious that I couldn't recognise them. They were still aligned with how I would operate in my previous life. That was the only measure I could count on. If this theoretical patron Deity was capable of banishing body dysphoria with a snap of their fingers, why couldn't they make my life easier instead?

Beatrice shifted topics, "He came back at the right time. The first years are almost due for a trip to the parliament building, and he was one of the seniors who were penned in to take on the job of supervising it. Will you be going?"

Wherever he went, I'd follow.

"I'm interested. My Uncle is a sitting member."

"Is he? I didn't know."

"He says there's little exciting about it, not unless one of the floor's rowdier members starts a fist fight in the pit..."

The newspapers loved that kind of story – but in truth it was extremely rare, and only triggered between MPs who already shared some bad blood. Seeing a huge huddle of people pushing and shoving gave a false impression that the place was more of a fight club than the seat of Walser's government law-making. Tensions were high at the moment and ideological divisions were starting to form about the future of the Republic.

The sitting member from Burdick River, Clemens Walston-Carter, was a strange fellow. He didn't seem all that interested in being a politician but he won his seat handily and ended up there anyway. He was an independent aligned with the

conservative coalition, the right-leaning republicans who helped push the monarchy out of power and supplanted the traditional monarchist right in the process. Uncle Clemens, as he liked to be called, was a gregarious and jovial man, completely unlike his brother. Every time he swung by the house to visit – he'd shower me with gifts and excitedly listen to whatever domestic exploits caught his interest. His primary hobbies were collecting antiques (specifically chairs,) and boating.

“Wouldn't it be wonderful if he was giving us the tour? They haven't settled on a group leader just yet.”

“He has the flair for it – but I'm afraid that he might be busy at the time the trip is due to occur.”

“I suppose that is true. They schedule the tour to occur during the midterm session.”

The midterm session being a period where the government dumped the more mundane laws and debates onto the docket, ones which were expected to pass mostly unopposed. It was popular etiquette for major new bills to only be introduced during the main session when most of the MPs were in the city. Nobody wanted a tit-for-tat scheduling war where the ruling party tried to slip things through without having time cleared for a vote. It would happen one day, there was no constitutional rule saying things had to be like that.

For our purposes the first-year trip would attend one of those midterm sessions and revive a speech from a sitting member. We'd be in the spectator gallery above the main chamber. It was a deathly boring prospect, but things would be spiced up if Felipe was going along. It sounded like the perfect place for a twice-bitten gang of hitmen to make another try on his life. In return for our sacrifice in boredom we would receive extra marks for our Civics and History class.

“I get the impression that the Headmaster will be hesitant to allow Felipe on the tour, even if he did agree to do it before his suspension.”

“The Parliament building is one of the most secure locations for a person to be,” she replied, “To try and kill someone within the property would be tantamount to madness. It would bring every police officer down on the city like a swarm of locusts.”

They didn't have a problem doing it to the Booker's house. She picked up on my hesitancy.

"Maria – I'm worried about Felipe too, but he made it clear to me that he does not wish for this dilemma to prevent him from doing what he wants to do. There is no good in him living a life of fear."

"The 'good' you speak of is remaining among the living," I noted. There was nothing more important than that. It was something that would make even the most composed individual take drastic and anomalous action. While I seemingly stood as an exception, it was easy to guess that you didn't get a second life if you lost your first. What good was holding onto a principle if the only thing it did was get you killed?

Felipe was trading his safety for seeing through the last days of his schooling at the academy. It was an outsized risk for something that didn't matter so much in the grand scheme of things. He was a rich noble's son, he could do anything he wanted once he graduated from here experience or knowledge be damned. Every problem he ever faced could be paved over with some cash. And when you spend several years at an academy, the last dregs weren't going to make or break what you learnt.

At the least, he could wait until the culprits were dealt with and come back once the coast was clear. These nostalgia-drenched schoolboy memories weren't worth the space they took in the human grey matter. He'd look back on this and wonder what the hell he was thinking. Mortality comes into sharp focus once the years start slipping past.

"Felipe's father is going to do everything he can to make sure the academy, and elsewhere, is safe for him to go. I understand that recent events have shaken confidence in their ability to protect Felipe, but they won't be making the same mistakes again. They're going to be highly visible."

Deterrence was the better half of conflict. It put me at ease somewhat that they were heading in the right direction with this. Putting a lot of scary-looking guys with guns in view would ward away the fickle and challenge the foolhardy. Aside from Eidos – none of the men who attacked the party were special. They didn't use magic and

seemed to be totally lost once the bullets started firing. I could trust someone else to shoot back at them.

“We’ll see. I am not the one making that decision, after all. I find myself sceptical of their wisdom in part because of what happened at the ball. The assassins are resourceful, placing themselves into the best possible position by manipulating the people your father believed he could trust.”

She tensed up as I pointed the finger firmly in their direction. She hadn’t said a word about her own experiences or feelings while being held at gunpoint. Was she trying to avoid a sticky subject? Or was she not ready to reopen that emotional wound just yet?

“Are you implying that we had something to do with it? We were the ones who agreed to the betrothal in the first place.”

“I never accused you or your father of anything.”

She snapped her lips shut and covered her eyes as she realised what she’d just revealed to me.

“Is that the rumour that’s been going around? A severe case of cold feet?”

She nodded wordlessly.

“There’s an adage I like to keep in mind at times like these. The simplest explanation is the likeliest one. It’s a shame that those particular rumour-mongers can’t accept your continued relationship as a sign of that story’s falsity.”

Beatrice’s voice cracked, “I almost flipped my lid when they said that when I was in the room. It was outrageous! How could they accuse me of doing something so horrible? If I wanted this betrothal to be done with I’d have said as much!”

Beatrice was greatly overestimating how much sway she possessed when hundreds of millions were on the line. As kind as she believed her father to be, he wouldn’t budge so easily when the future of his business was on the line. That only mattered if she wanted to annul the marriage, of course – something which she was already distressed about. From an outsider’s view it made her potential involvement in the scheme more believable.

“I made it clear how distasteful I found their comments,” she revealed, “It may not make me any allies, but I have no need of ‘friends’ who act in such a way.”

“I cannot argue with that. Hopefully they will grow bored of it in time and cease their incessant speculation.”

“I’m not so sure about that. This is so much more explosive than any of the other stories that normally circulate the campus,” she sighed. It was made all the worse by the fact that there was some truth to it. Most of the campus’ favourite tall tales were so evidently false that they soon sputtered out and died with the fuel to remain alight.

“I can speak with them if you’d like.”

Beatrice laughed, “I don’t think they’re willing to listen to a girl in the first year, even if she sports a reputation like yours. It is my problem to solve. You should focus on your studies and stop worrying about me.”

I said nothing on that point. It didn’t matter to me what Beatrice thought about things really. I was going to worry no matter what she demanded from me. Unless I saw evidence to the contrary that I was attracting all of this danger like a gravitational mass, I was going to remain vigilant and keep an eye out for more assassins.

“And I think you should spend more time with the other students from your year. You will regret not making friends while you have the chance. I saw you speaking with that Samantha girl earlier – have you been getting closer with her recently?”

I turned on my heel and started walking, “Okay. I’m leaving.”

“Humour me a little!” she cried.

I did not.

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Felipe returned to school the following week, and was present for a practical lesson with Miss Jennings. Max and Claude’s feud was nowhere close to being done with, much to Samantha’s chagrin. It was extremely awkward for her to be around two boys who were doing their best to avoid apologising or making up over a petty argument. Max’s anger came from a genuine place, but as a cranky thirty-year-old man in a

teenager's body, I didn't have time for it. The only reason it continued was that neither wanted to eat humble pie and make the first move.

"So why are you sitting with me?" I asked as Samantha slid into the seat across from me with a tray of food in hand.

"I'm going to lose my head if I have to spend a second watching those two stare at each other for an hour again," she complained, "I don't know what group I'm going to pick when we go for our trip to the parliament building. Max and Claude don't want to be together."

"You're all coming?"

Samantha nodded, "I've always wanted to see it for myself, and it'll be interesting to see a session in person." I wasn't brave enough to break the bad news to her – there was absolutely nothing interesting about watching an off-season parliamentary session.

"I find myself surprised that the staff are willing to let Felipe come with us as a prefect. Beatrice told me that she believes nobody would be foolish enough to attempt a crime in the parliament house, but the men who held you hostage at the party did not seem so concerned with images of civility. I have no doubt that they will be willing to take the risk."

"I trust that the place will be well-guarded. I mean – it's the seat of government and all. Would you mind if I tagged along with you?" she pleaded, fluttering her eyes and trying to give off the impression of a begging puppy.

"If you want. Felipe already said that he wants to invite me to his group," I revealed.

"Thank you. Do you have any ideas on how I can get them to be friends again?" I gave her an unimpressed glare as she implied that I was some type of social butterfly. Samantha smiled tersely and shook her head, "Or not."

"Lock them in a room together and throw away the key."

Samantha considered doing just that for a split second, "No. They'll refuse to speak with each other even if we force them to."



“Have you never argued with a close friend before?” I inquired.

“A few times, but that was when I was younger. Those kinds of arguments aren’t as personal as this one. It was over stupid stuff like who got to use the rope swing or which river we wanted to go swimming in.”

“They will forget about it in time. You shouldn’t worry so much about them.”

I was saying that from a perspective of a girl wracked with paranoia about everyone being shot and killed. Now that I knew the trip was likely to go ahead, and Felipe was also trying to retain his place, I’d been making some of my own preparations just in case. I wasn’t going to get caught on the backfoot this time. I was going to bring my gun, try to learn the building layout in advance using architectural writings and bring some specific countermeasures to keep magic attacks from being effective.

I had secretly pilfered three of the conductive spikes from the training area. Eidos was delighted with his lightning magic, and it was dangerous unless you were ready for it. There were enough of them that their absence wouldn’t be noticed – and if it came to that the staff would assume they’d been misplaced. I could stab them into a surface and protect myself from his magic. I had to question the utility of that particular spell when he was still using a gun, but the cruelty seemed to be the point. Being burned alive hurt a lot more than getting shot, not that I sported experience in the former.

I would have given an arm and a leg for a proper bulletproof vest too. There were a few problems with that. In addition to hiding it beneath the thin uniform shirt we were forced to wear, most modern militaries still used brightly coloured and decorated uniforms for their conscripted troops. The doctrine and technology required for personal investment in them weren’t widespread. The best you could find was something made from metal, and you didn’t need to be an experienced assassin to see that using that was an invitation to have it fragment into your chest cavity. Mobility, subtlety and speed were more important to me than a metal chest plate that wouldn’t even work.

It would be a relief if Felipe was rejected from taking on one of the groups. I’d still have to go, but it would mean that he’d remain on campus instead of going to the building. I was confident that the assassins had blown their one chance of getting to

him while at the school with Prier's death. None of the other teachers aroused any suspicion from me, and I was being extremely vigilant around them.

How did he even land a job like that? The tutors were paid fairly well, and they often came from backgrounds wherein they had the chance to attend colleges and universities. They were always in high demand and could play hardball with their employers to secure good wages. Sure – there was a lot of money riding on marrying Beatrice Booker, but people in more economically secure positions were less likely to commit a crime. In the face of evidence to the contrary I could only adjust my expectations. This was still technically a fictional world, and it was possible that the pieces had been put in place before my arrival to pose a specific sort of challenge.

The parliament trip felt like the next step. It would be utterly absurd to let Felipe go there with recent events still in mind, but I could tell that it was going to happen anyway. Reality would warp and bend to make things as difficult as humanly possible. I always found myself right in the middle of proceedings. Twice could be considered a coincidence, but three times was a pattern.

Samantha caught my attention by swallowing a huge piece of bread and chugging half of her drink in one go to wash it down, before she could clear her throat of it she was trying to talk to me again.

“You’ve started to open up a lot lately.”

“I have?”

“Ah, I don’t mean it’s a bad thing. You’re friends with Felipe, aren’t you?”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“And you’ve been more willing to speak with me, Claude and Max. Not to mention you’ve been sitting with Talia for two months. Were you nervous about being around so many new people? I won’t judge if you were.”

I laughed, “People don’t make me nervous. I’d rather not deal with them, but you can’t avoid them when you’re attending an academy like this. Even the most isolated

individuals make connections with others. Is it not enough to say that I'm becoming more comfortable? I'm sure that you underwent a similar process."

Samantha toyed with a piece of her food, "I was really worried when I first came here. I thought that I was going to get bullied a lot by all of the other girls because of my accent and appearance, but you and the boys scared them all away."

"I don't recall scaring anyone."

"That's because it comes naturally to you! When you said to the girls in class that you thought insulting me was a waste of time, they all stopped doing it to try and get into your good books. They're like a herd of sheep."

"That they are. If only there was a way to show them that I'm a profound bore as well."

Samantha wanted so badly to contest that claim, but she knew better than to try. Self-imposed ideas were too tough to break down in a simple discussion. I was not a boring person. There was nothing dull about an assassin reincarnated into the body of a noble teenage girl from a visual novel. That part was one-hundred-percent pure, undistilled crazy. It was so crazy that even I was having a hard time buying into it. The sensations felt real, and the consistency of the world around me was solid, but it was far beyond my rational mind to accept with no questions. The moral element assisted in heightening that incredulity; why would a person like myself be offered a second chance?

"What's wrong with being my friend too?" Samantha asked.

"I see no need for us to be friends."

She leaned in and dug deeper; "Why?"

"Talia and Felipe serve a specific purpose to me – what do you offer that I can't get from them?"

Samantha's expression morphed from offended to pensive. It was the same line that I'd been trotting out to try and get her off my back for some time, but she was no

longer willing to accept that as an answer. Samantha had caught on to the fact that I was just being defensive and didn't really think of them in such a utilitarian way.

"I think you need to work on your honesty, Maria. There's no way you believe any of that. I can tell that you're having more fun when you're around them. You have another reason."

I finished off the last bite of my meal and started to pack up my utensils, "Then allow me to flip the premise on its head. There is nothing for you to gain from being my friend. You should stick with Claudius and Maxwell." I left her to think on that, silently hoping that it was enough to push her away. I caught the end of her question just as I left earshot.

"Why the heck do we need a reason to be friends?"

