

One of the direct consequences of my behaviour was that things had taken a radically different path from what I remembered from the game. Without me to serve as Samantha's foil, the adversity she faced was generalised and arranged by a small group of people who did not respect me enough to take my lead in leaving her alone. In comparison to some of the things that Maria did and said in the game – it was pedestrian in comparison, it was nothing that she couldn't handle herself. I wondered if it would change the way that Samantha developed as the 'story' unfolded. Separating myself from that path did give me plenty of space to worry about finding my would-be killer.

Filip stuck very strictly to the orders that the teachers had given us, never being seen without Beatrice and another friend at his side. I had made several other attempts to lure out the shooter by wandering different parts of the campus, all of them were just as unsuccessful as the first. Completely unwilling to accept the possibility that I was being paranoid, I concluded that my methodology was faulty. Samantha was keeping a close eye on me – looking for the perfect chance to leap into the fray and befriend me. Her presence only aided the uncertainty I felt.

I did have to question the headmaster's plan. Surely someone who was killing to kill would have no issue in doing so at the expense of bystanders. Most murderers didn't have a set of rules that they liked to follow. The only thing that it would create was more witnesses or more victims; and the careful planning of their first attempt on my life meant that they weren't going to let themselves be seen so easily. They had scouted out my schedule, and specifically timed their shot to be hidden by the noise of the clocktower. They were a professional, even if they failed to recover the shell casing from the floor.

That shell casing was my main lead. I needed to find more information about what types of weapons could fire this calibre and make of bullet. As I expected the libraries within the academy did not boast an index of firearms that I could compare it against. With that, and the desire for a proper holster for my pilfered pistol, I decided it was time to make my first excursion into the nearby city of Bleufarl. It was the capital of Walser and the seat of government, though the economic core of the nation was really located further south of where we were situated. Convincing the faculty to let me off-campus so I could go visit was going to be a hard ask. I had arrived at the staff lounge and asked the teacher at the door very nicely to have a private chat with one of the managing members.

The opponent I had landed was a stern looking man named Robert Engelbart. He had big, bushy white eyebrows and a face like thunder. His voice sounded like he'd gargled a bag of

gravel every day for twenty years. The room was mostly empty aside from us. The teachers were all busy preparing for the following day's lessons. We stared each other down for a moment before he started to address me. "This is rare. I never expected to have you ask for a meeting with one of the staff."

"And why would that be, sir?"

He stroked his bushy moustache and grumbled, "You seem rather independent already. Every teacher has nothing but praise for your work ethic, behaviour and focus. What ever could be troubling you?"

I bowed my head respectfully, "I would like to ask for permission to leave the campus this coming weekend so that I can visit the city. There is some business I must attend to."

His face fell even further (if that was even possible) as he considered my request. He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, "I see. That is a rather problematic proposal. I can see why you came to speak with us before making a decision. I take it that you understand the headmaster wants you to remain on-site? We could be in serious trouble if one of our students was killed."

I made my case firmly, "While I understand your concerns, is it not strange to essentially punish is by prohibiting us from leaving as the other students do? I would like to visit the city, and my Father will surely send an attendant to make sure that I do not get into any trouble."

That made him chuckle huskily, "I highly doubt that a lady like yourself would get into trouble. No, rather - the trouble is seeking you."

"The culprit only targeted us with the knowledge that nobody else was around to witness it. Surely a well-populated area like the city will deter them from taking a similar action against me." I had purposefully avoided making the argument that people could also serve as excellent camouflage. I'd completed my share of hits simply by allowing the natural confusion and panic to spread and interfere with attempts to locate me. Engelbart was not an experienced assassin like I was, so he didn't even consider it.

He exhaled through his nose and hushed his voice; "To be truthful, we lack the full authority to confine you to the campus. While we act as your guardians, you also attend this academy with the combined consent of yourselves and your families."

I tried to walk things back a little before he felt like I was pushing things, “I don’t mean to imply some kind of nefarious blackmail scheme. If you conclude that it is a risk I am not permitted to take, I will follow your recommendation and remain here.”

Engelbart was already wavering in my favour though. He reached into his jacket and retrieved a small piece of paper, on which he jotted down his signature using a pencil. It was dated for the first day of the weekend before it would then expire. “Here. If you show this to the gatekeeper, you’ll be allowed through. But I needn’t remind you of the curfew that we still expect you to follow even when outside of the school grounds. We’ll also be checking to ensure that an appropriate escort is going with you.”

“That is reasonable. Thank you very much, sir.”

The problem with adults was that they didn’t find me intimidating like the other students did. It was easy to look down on me as a pretty little noble lady when they were twice my height and well-weathered from a lifetime of dealing with bratty kids. Still, I had successfully gotten what I wanted out of the discussion. Tactic permission to go into the city so I could investigate my lead further. I took my leave and headed back into the corridor with a spring in my step. That was a lot easier than I had anticipated. Some of the teachers were extremely strict when it came to the rules, but keeping us on campus was not an official action. There was only so much they could do before they upset our parents and lost that sweet, sweet tuition money. I pocketed the permission slip and started walking to my dorm room.

The first phase of my plan was complete, the second was to have a letter delivered to our estate so that Father could dispatch the attendant. Commercial road vehicles were still a decade or so away, so we’d be traveling to the city using a good-old fashioned horse and carriage. I didn’t know how to steer one of those, so the attendant was a convenient way to kill two birds with one stone. Given that the headmaster had seen fit to conceal the recent happenings from him a simple excuse about buying him a lovely gift would be enough to buy my way off campus. That was the same excuse I was going to use to enter one of the hunting shops and find what I was seeking. A catalogue that could show me what gun the bullet was fired from, a holster, and some other knick-knacks that would make my Father very happy. It didn’t need to be anything special. He loved his daughter too much to complain. I had to stop myself from buying him a leather holster too lest I remind him of the pistol that I had stolen.

Guns were readily available if you knew where to look – but there were still basic rules in place to prevent people my age from walking in and purchasing one. Buying everything else that was associated with them came down to the shop keeper’s discretion. Most would not

turn down good money for no reason. While I was walking I spotted several of the ‘main cast’ spending some time catching up in the library. Samantha waved at me but I refused to humour her. I kept on walking without saying a word. Between this day and the trip, there was still another magic lesson with Miss Jennings to worry about. I had a feeling that we wouldn’t be out in the yard until questions of security were resolved.

I locked the door behind me and relaxed a little.

“Quill, quill, quill,” I murmured to myself. I had been writing a lot of notes recently – so there was a gigantic mess starting to accumulate on my desk. I needed to take some time and clean it up before it grew even more chaotic. I eventually found it, having fallen between two piles of documents that I had been using to copy down some of the more important facts I had learned in and outside of class. I started my letter with some pleasantries. Father would like to hear from me for more than asking for a simple favour. I ran through some of the things that had happened since I arrived, how I was doing in class, and some more information about my magical education that I had mentioned briefly once before. He was very proud to hear that I was assessed as a grade five mage. Magic was something that he believed would come back around to relevance once everyone ‘grew tired of their machines.’ I didn’t have the heart to break the bad news that it was highly unlikely.

Once the mundane retelling of my school life was done with, I inquired if it was at all possible to have an attendant and carriage dispatched to the academy on the weekend. There was little doubt in my mind that he would agree to it without asking questions. It would take a few days for the letter to make its way through to the house. I’d find out about his reply when it came time to leave the campus. If not, I’d be left standing there like a fool for a carriage that would never arrive.

I could always try again if I failed but failure was not something I experienced often.

---

“Max, I totally just saw Maria walking out of the teacher’s lounge.”

Samantha and Maxwell had remained behind to study even as their classmates retired for the evening. They were making sound progress, but Claudius has been notably absent for the majority of the day. It soon became apparent that he had spent it screwing around and trying to dig up clues to support his pet theory about Maria being some kind of villainous mastermind.

“You know, there are a hundred perfectly innocent reasons to speak with one of the teachers,” Max contended, “You’re just making up stories again.”

Claudius sat down beside his oldest friend and shook his head gravely, “If these were normal circumstances, perhaps. But the teachers have been hiding something from us for nearly a week now. I’m certain that it has to do with Maria.”

“She doesn’t seem any different to usual,” Samantha replied.

Claudius gave her a knowing smirk, “Ah. But that’s the most telling clue of all. The fact that she feels so at ease despite the clear anxiety of the teachers and guardians around her. Does it not make you think that she’s the one holding all of the cards? She’s pulling their strings, and they’re all dancing along to her tune.”

“And what do you think she’s doing with such immense power?” Max added.

“If she’s manipulating the teachers – it must be something to do with our grades. I was always suspicious about the way that she scores near perfectly in every mock exam and piece of self-study we do. Having dirt on the staff members would serve to secure her top spot.”

Max was not going to entertain such a wild claim.

“And when she answers all of the questions correctly in the lectures?”

Sam joined in, “And I’ve seen her intelligence first-hand. I have no reason to believe that she needs to rely on such a cheap trick.”

Claudius huffed, “I’m not saying that it’s guaranteed to be the case! I’m working through some theories right now. You’ll come up with one-hundred incorrect answers before finding the right one.”

“More like a million,” Max said, “You’ve already decided that she’s guilty of something and are just working back to justifying it.”

Samantha returned to her book, “Yeah – the only thing she’s guilty of is being mean.”

Claudius knew it was a lost cause. Neither of his friends understood criminal psychology like he did. Neither of them had seen or heard the tales from people around the academy about what was unfolding. Something was up and he was going to be the one to crack the case wide open. He could imagine all of the accolades and applause he’d receive for protecting the innocent from Maria’s fiendish ways. Maxwell had implored him to focus more on his studies before he fell behind Roderro as the class clown. Claude has other ideas. Why worry about studying when the lives of other people were on the line?

But Max was correct about one thing. He needed a lot more evidence first.

