

The meeting went well, all things considered.

It was very similar to the plan that Caius originally offered, with some minor changes to make things safer for us. Instead of ‘busting through the skylight’ of the meeting room itself and potentially being gunned down in a hail of bullets, we entered through another chamber that was off the beaten path. This second entryway also sported windows that could be opened using a latch rather than shattered with magic or force.

Caius had hoped to prepare an appropriately flamboyant speech and display of magical power to scare them stiff too – but I put the kibosh to that post haste. Not only were we short on time, but we also couldn’t predict how the attendees would react to the information we’d stolen.

He looked like a sad puppy when I told him that.

I resisted his quivering bottom lip and stood firm. We weren’t going to execute any plan like this unless I was absolutely certain that were we going to be safe while doing so. Samantha and Caius were not willing, or capable, of gunning down an army of private guards. Shock and awe was the phrase of the day. Get in, shock them with our blackmail, awe them with how easy it was, and then get the hell out.

There was no guarantee that they’d follow through with dismantling the plot, but then I could simply release the documents. And if that failed – I’d have to resort to my usual violent measures. I was taking a chance on Samantha’s perspective with this. It would have been so, so easy for me to kill everyone in that room and be one hundred percent certain that it was done with.

With that in mind, it was difficult to ignore the gunshot that travelled through the building after we’d already escaped and started the rest of our plan. We came to a brief stop halfway to our next destination, craning our heads back to try and see where it came from.

“What was that?” Samantha murmured, sticking close to me as we moved towards our exfiltration route.

“A gunshot, but Goddess knows who shot who.”

“Why are they shooting at each other?”

“I don’t know. We’ve put a lot of pressure on this organisation. Someone must have felt that it was time to make some major changes.”

We’d broken free from the guard’s encirclement and moved to the back of the building where a service lift was located. Normally used to transport food and objects from different floors, it was also conveniently large enough to fit a person through the metallic chute. I went first, ducking my head under the top and holding out my hands and legs to touch each side. I gently released the pressure and slid down until I reached the bottom.

“Are you okay?” Samantha asked.

“I am fine. It’s your turn.”

Samantha summoned her courage and followed me, imitating my stance and slowly, painfully sliding her way down until she hit the bottom. I kept a close eye on her, ready to act in case she fell so that I could catch her. Every detail was meticulously planned in advance, including this escape route that utilised the service lift to confuse our pursuers. It was the only feasible way to escape without having to kill someone.

Judging from the gunshot – we may have failed to avoid casualties by doing this. If I had to bet on who was responsible, it was either Cordia or Marco, who were both lurking in the manor to try and catch us. Cordia always struck me as an unstable presence, but I didn’t know enough about Marco to accuse him of taking a cheap shot at one of his employers.

Caius landed with a thud and a grunt as his knees quaked under the strain.

“I wish I was your age again,” he complained.

From the back corridor we could move freely towards the rear rooms of the building. Since they were far removed from the stairs that led to where the meeting room was, few guards were patrolling the area when we snuck inside. We entered from the ceiling before – and now we were going to leave by utilising the lovely wine cellar that was helpfully built into the manor.

It was too obvious an entry, but now that everyone was scrambling to catch up with us the guards who were meant to be watching the doors were absent. The scent of wine and spirits hung heavy in the air. It was a mercifully short walk to the steps that led into a small exterior building in the garden.

Just as planned, we were in the clear. At least I thought we were. The discord occurring upstairs was enough to pull away the interior guards, but the external ones were unlikely to have moved because of the commotion. They were given strict orders to stay in place and not move.

Unluckily for the guard we knocked out to get inside, we also came prepared with a length of rope and a towel to gag him with. He was gently thrown into the nearest bush and left to rot while we entered the building and did our thing. From there it was a simple matter of climbing onto the roof and descending through one of the glass skylights using Caius' climbing gear.

All in all – it was a hell of a lot of effort just to air their dirty laundry.

“I think we might get away with this!” Samantha giggled from under her mask.

We dashed through the garden and towards the side entrance that was used by the gardeners to maintain the surrounding land. Our KO'd friend was still where we left him, but there was someone else waiting for us by the pond.

“I'm afraid that I have to stop you there, Miss Walston-Carter.”

I skidded to a halt as Marco drew his gun and held us up. Samantha and Caius were quick to step out of the way and leave only me in the firing line. I'd have to thank them for the vote of confidence later.

“Marco. Your reputation precedes you.”

His face twisted – wondering if he'd ever told us his name before. His job demanded a certain level of confidentiality, meaning that his name was only spoken between those who intended to procure his services and buy a hit.

“You're an interesting girl, but I have to fault you for getting yourself involved in this kind of business. This isn't a place for the likes of you to play around as you please.”

I glared, “Who said I was here to entertain myself? You’ve already seen first-hand what I’m capable of. I’d suggest that you go back to the house and make sure that Cordia hasn’t just shot your employer dead.”

His reaction to me changed once I started to get frustrated with him. His eyes lit up in scant recognition like he’d finally connected the dots between two differing thoughts. I decided to try my luck and pick his brain for an answer, not expecting to get anything but a bullet through the head as a response.

“A good try, but I’m afraid I cannot allow you to leave. I’ll try to give you a better challenge than last time. That was a shameful display.”

“You said I reminded you of someone.”

He humoured me, however briefly; “You do. The way you fight, the way you scheme – you remind me very much of that person. But if you’re looking for answers as to who that person is, I’m afraid I do not have them. Her true identity is a mystery to me.”

“Another assassin, then?”

“Yes, but she’s an enigma. Doesn’t have family, or even a name. Assassins keep their private lives private, but even by that standard, she’s unusual. You’d think that she would let a detail slip eventually.”

We must have looked similar at a glance too. He’d mistaken me for this woman during our first encounter. Marco cocked the hammer on his gun.

“Enough talk. I was asked to put an end to you, girl. No hard feelings – but I have to bury you if I want to get paid.”

I was already suffering under the weight of disabling Cordia’s weapon earlier, but there was a benefit to hitting the books and learning the tricks myself. The static location of the object I was targeting made the spell more efficient – as I destroyed the bullet fired at me using brute force. I blanketed the entire area with high-energy magic through reaction and got lucky enough to dismantle it in mid-air.

Now that I was in control I could cast the spell more often. Three times in total was as far as I could go. Using my second get-out-of-jail-free card here seemed like a wise

move. Marco's choice of weapon was less intricate than Cordia's, but there were still key components on the inside that would jam it up if broken or damaged. I focused in on them and summoned a small field of high-energy particles. Marco had no idea what was happening.

He got a rude awakening when he pulled the trigger. The gun clicked – but no bullet was fired. His face fell. He tried again much in the same way that Cordia did. He pulled the cylinder aside and watched the entire thing fall to pieces in his hands. The pins, the screws, and the rod that held it in were all destroyed and turned into metal dust. The still-loaded cylinder fell to the floor.

“Oh, I get it,” Marco chuckled, “You did something to my gun. That’s how you got out of there in one piece.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Cordia wouldn’t let her gun jam or break. She’s the most detail-orientated woman I’ve ever worked with. When we were talking contracts, she spent the entire time disassembling that gun and cleaning it. This gun was brand new too, fresh off the shelf.”

I crossed my arms, “Your observational skills are impressive, but I fail to see what makes you so confident in the face of this. Your men are not present and your weapon is in tatters. I say you should step aside and fold.”

“I don’t know the meaning of the word quit, girlie.”

“Really? You’ve already fled once, what’s a second time between friends?”

Marco dropped his weapon and put up his dukes for a fistfight. Despite being the one to initiate a melee contest, he was not expecting me to respond in kind by putting my fists up.

“You asked for it!”

Marco closed in on me and threw a trio of jabs in my direction. I could tell right away that he was no normal pugilist. This guy was a boxer – his footwork and power were too good to be a pure amateur. Given that he had a foot and a half on me, longer

reach, and much bigger muscles, it would have been foolish to take him on in a straight battle.

“Stop running away!”

Marco opened the door while getting flustered about my evasive tactics. I lifted my leg up into the air and kicked him in the lower midsection from the left side. He exhaled some of the breath from his lungs and tried to grab my stray limb before it returned, but he was too slow.

Reaching for my gun would put an end to this fast, but I couldn't do that with him rushing me down like this. He'd happily take that opportunity to pummel my head into the dirt.

Marco's hands moved faster than I could react. He reached out and took a previously unseen metal trowel from the ground, waving it like a sharpened weapon. With enough force, it could easily penetrate skin and break bones. He charged at me again with wild swings, trying to catch me on the back foot. Caius and Samantha were paralyzed in place – they couldn't decide whether to make a break for it or stay and help me.

“You know, you aren't going to get paid if Cordia iced your boss,” I snuck out between attacks.

“Why the hell would she do that? And for your information – I always get paid in advance!”

Marco stepped too deep, allowing me to press down on his forearm and trap the trowel behind my back. I thrust my head forward and cracked down against the bridge of his nose with my forehead. He wrenched the makeshift weapon free and staggered back with a fresh trail of blood leaking down onto his top lip.

“That's dirty, not ladylike at all.”

“I don't want to hear critiques from a man wielding a crude weapon like that against a beautiful young lady.”

“And so modest too.”

He understood what game I was trying to play here. I was the only one who could effectively fight him, that was why the ‘other two’ were hanging back and just watching. He turned to face Samantha, who’d accidentally backed herself up to the edge of the garden pond. I could see the gears turning in his head, but there was no time for me to close in on him and get in the way.

He brought the trowel down into a front-facing position and charged while clutching it close to his stomach. This was an all-or-nothing attack, the type that you would use to perforate an unarmed opponent with sheer force. It was extremely deadly. Even I flipped a coin when taking people on while they were doing this.

Luckily for Samantha – I’d already drilled her on this exact scenario.

Samantha’s mind reacted on instinct. All of the disparate lessons I’d given her on how to protect herself from physical attacks suddenly came together under duress. She reached out to meet him and deftly avoided the sharp edge of the trowel, grabbed the front of his suit, and twisted while tucking her body beneath his. With an almighty heave, she delivered a picture-perfect hip throw.

The second I saw his feet leave the ground, I knew he was about to go flying. Samantha released him and followed through. Marco went sailing through the air and landed directly in the middle of the pond, coming down with a loud splash. Beneath the foam and froth, I could see him struggling to see with all of the algae clinging to his face.

Samantha covered her mouth in shock as if she wasn’t the one who just dumped him into there.

“That was perfect,” I quipped.

“Goddess above, I didn’t even mean to do that!”

“Yes, you did,” I fired back, “What do you think I’ve been training you for? This is the ideal situation to defend yourself using a lovely throw like that.”

“Lovely throw?” Samantha lurched, noting my strange turn of phrase.

“Yes, yes – it was a ‘lovely’ throw. Now can we please leave before more of them show up?” Caius urged.

It was too late for that. Marco had kept us occupied for long enough that some of his men were already powdering their way down the hill at the top of the garden to try and intercept us. I pulled Samantha aside and concealed her behind a nearby stone wall as they opened fire to try and pin us down.

“We can’t get away with them chasing us,” I grunted.

“I thought you said you wanted to try this without killing anyone!”

“Try. I said try! If I have to, I’ll pull my gun.”

They were already closing in on top of us. I reached out and grabbed a spade that was leaning against the wall next to me, waiting until the ideal moment to pop out and clobber one of them around the head with the blunt end. He fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

“See? Just a concussion!”

Another goon leapt through the exit we were hoping to use with a gun in hand. I grabbed Samantha’s collar and dragged her towards a nearby hedgerow before he could gun us down.

“You two need to get out of here. I’ll try to distract them.”

“What about Cordia?” Samantha asked, “She’s not going to let you go.”

“I don’t even need to kill her. She’s going to use Roderro’s watch and slip away. She wouldn’t do that without a good reason. She wanted to have a second chance.”

I was talking about a future event in the past tense...

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“There’s no time to explain that now! Get out of here while you still have the chance.”

Caius flashed the interceptor using his magic, allowing me to run over and knock him out too. I grabbed his gun and unloaded the magazine before someone else could use it against me. Caius tugged on Samantha’s shoulder. With great hesitation she finally

turned and made a break for the open gateway, disappearing behind the wall and onwards to our exfiltration.

Cordia was making a mad dash down the hill to join the party. Without Samantha or Caius around to protect, I could let loose and cause as much trouble as possible. Marco was only just struggling his way out of the pond when she finally arrived on the scene. She was so loud that even I could hear her from my hiding spot.

“Marco! Where the hell is that girl now?”

Marco was in no mood to have her barking orders into his ear after that humiliation. He was cold, drenched to the bone, and got a mouth full of boggy pond water for trying to take Samantha on with the now-lost trowel. He slicked his hair back out of his eyes and grunted.

“She’s hiding in the hedge maze over there. I don’t think she has a gun.”

“You’d be a damn fool to assume that. Get everyone to surround her.”

Marco sighed and took a deep breath, “Pull it in! She’s over here!”

Those who were not guarding the guests in the house responded in kind, regrouping around the bottom of the garden and trying to cordon me in. There were gaps I could exploit, but they didn’t know that yet.

“What about the other two?” Cordia demanded.

“They made a run for it.”

“And you let them go?”

“Let them go? It was one against three!”

“You’re the most reputed assassin in the county!”

Marco couldn’t make himself look or sound intimidating after getting dumped into a pond, but he wasn’t going to let himself get pushed around by Cordia.

“I don’t like your attitude. Remember, I’m working for the Duchess – not you.”

Cordia smirked, “Really? She’s lying dead with a bullet through her heart as we speak. You’ll be joining her soon enough if you keep forgetting who’s in charge here.”

Marco was furious; “What do you mean you killed the Duchess? You stupid broad!”

She was dismissive, “You already got paid. What does it matter to you?”

“There was still some cash left to be paid out. She didn’t give me all of it in one go!”

“Whatever. I’ll pay off the rest.”

Marco’s misgivings were deeper than the cash, “Do you know how much heat is going to come down on us now? You just killed one of the most important women in Southern politics! Every damn police officer from here to the Talltrees are going to be investigating! And you don’t have the first idea of how damaging it is to my reputation to have my employer die under mysterious circumstances!”

It was quite a sight, given that the man was still wearing half of the pond flora on his shoulders like a shawl. He looked like a swamp creature, now passionately chewing out one of his co-workers for making life harder.

Cordia did not appreciate his tone. She grabbed his drenched shirt and wrenched him in close, “I don’t appreciate your tone, Marco. You’re going to help me kill that girl, and I don’t want to hear any more complaints from you!”

Marco slapped her hands away, “I don’t think so. My contract was with the Duchess, not you. Me and my guys? We’re going to stand back and let you handle all of the work.”

“She already paid!”

“It’s the principle of the matter, not the money.”

None of Marco’s men moved to argue. They were all on the same page. No contractor, no work. There was no love lost between those two. Marco wouldn’t trust Cordia for a second when it came to paying his completion bonus. It was probably more than she could afford.

“Don’t you dare.”

Marco was already walking away, “Pack it up! Leave Miss Perfect here to clean up her own mess.”

And just like that – they did as he commanded. Almost all of the guns that were coming for me seconds ago turned tail and wandered away to go back to the house. Cordia was so stunned by this development that she didn’t notice me slipping out and incapacitating one of her own people with a chokehold. She held up her hand and considered trying to shoot him in the back, but she knew that it would lead to her being gunned down in a blaze of not-so-glory.

Her attention returned to the big problem once she heard the sound of her friend’s unconscious body dropping on the floor. Cordia aimed at me and tried to fire, but for the last time, I snapped my fingers and broke her new weapon from the inside. A loud click was the only response from her trigger pull. I could feel the fatigue pulling down on me like a pair of weights tied to my shoulders.

“You... you damn brat!”

“Did you know that the last thing a contractor wants is uncertainty? Your little games have cost you dearly. I hope that brief moment of elation was worth it.”

Cordia tried to put on a confident front, “It was, and it’ll be even better when I wring that scrawny neck of yours. I like the idea of killing you and the Duchess twice over. It’s a rare opportunity that no other person can experience.”

“With Roderro’s watch?”

She reached into her pocket and showcased it to me. This was the present-day version of the watch. Adrian already had another in his possession because the time loop had been closed with her death.

“Say, did you happen to overhear any interesting reports about an accidental death a few weeks ago? A woman your age – fell from a rooftop and broke her own neck. A shame, really.”

She scoffed, “As if I have time to listen to the woes of every harlot and parasite who dies on the streets of this city. If I didn’t hear about it – they weren’t important.”

Indeed, she was right about that. Cordia was not important. She was arrogant, power-hungry, controlling and obsessive. She liked to think of herself as the lynchpin holding everyone together when in reality they'd be better off without her. A woman like her dying in an accident would barely be cause for notice from the spies she'd embedded into Walser society. An obituary in a paper with no name or relatives was all she could muster.

The police didn't investigate her death, so her eyes and ears didn't even know that she'd died at the tennis tournament. All of that insecurity and she didn't even generate a mention, just an unmarked grave in a local charity yard – where many others were also buried after failing to be claimed.

Living life with the expectation of being remembered was idiotic. To mould your actions and personality around trying to make that happen was a dark path to tread. The watch was exposing all of her worst avarice. She now believed that her decisions had no impact on the future. She could just go back and do it all again.

“That cute display in the meeting room only confirmed my belief that these people never had any intention of restoring our rightful leaders. I have the party list right here. All I need to do is use the watch and pick them off one by one. I planted an anchor point months ago, and I've been carefully tracking their movements ever since. There'll be nowhere for them to run, and you won't be able to stop me.”

I crossed my arms, “I see. Go ahead then.”

That smile dropped ever so slightly.

“Really? All of this, and you're going to stand there and do nothing?”

“I already did something. You don't know about it yet.”

“I tire of these word games - Maria. If you think that such vague assertions are enough to deter me, then you clearly underestimate my dedication. But I'm not going to leave until I get the better of you.”

I was pretty sick and tired of this too. I unzipped the side of my skirt and drew the gun I'd been hiding. Cordia's tune changed quickly. A few moments ago, she warned

Marco about this – but she'd gotten so invested in taunting me that I was now within firing range.

She stumbled back and landed in the grass, "Wait, no! Don't shoot!"

I advanced on her with intent. In that single second, she had to make a choice. She could use the watch and slip back in time, or she could risk dying before she got the chance to see her dream fulfilled. There was no hesitation. She pressed down on the second button and disappeared into thin air.

There was no grand flash of light, no magic circle, she was cut from reality like an editor would cut the frames of a movie. One millisecond she was there – the second she was not. I continued to aim at the empty spot where she was in disbelief at how sudden it was. She must have been getting an equally sudden rude awakening on the other side.

"You should have heeded that warning, Cordia."

Not that she could hear me in the past.

Her madness, her belief in the power of the watch – those were the things that would eventually doom her, having not succeeded in even a single of her planned killings. The watch would be recovered from her body and returned to Adrian. I secured the gun back into my holster and headed for the exit before the gunmen woke up. The police would be here eventually to see what happened with the Duchess.

As for the consequences, I had no earthly idea.

