

“I’m very sorry about the accident, Maria.”

I shook my head, “There’s no need to apologise. These things happen.”

He laughed, “I am thankful that you are so level-headed. If it was anyone else, I’d never hear the end of it.”

“I’m not going to decry you over what was a simple accident,” I insisted.

He frowned, “I’m just getting too involved with all of those rumours about you again. Even though I know you personally, it can be hard to separate yourself from the story that everyone else is trying to write about you.”

Felipe led us further down the corridor, past the bustling kitchen where dozens of chefs worked to prepare the food needed to sustain so many guests. There were several other closed doors between us and the washroom. Felipe had chosen the staff washroom over the one designated for the guests out of paranoia about being attacked again. It was a wise decision. An unassuming doorway at the end of the red carpet was our final destination. I took a quick look down the way to make sure that we hadn’t been followed out of the hall.

“Ladies first.”

Confident that I could wash my hands of the wine in only a few seconds, I opened the door and stepped inside. It was a well-presented bathroom, complete with toilets, a bathtub and a sink. Running water was something that’d only become widespread in the past few decades, with the poorest people continuing to utilise wells and groundwater to clean themselves, drink and to prepare food. I locked the door from the inside and set about the task of rinsing the wine from my arms. I was lucky that none of it landed on my dress. I shivered as the cold water ran over my bare skin. A small application of soap was enough to cover up the smell.

Thump!

I froze as something tugged on the door handle from the outside. Then a voice called out in the corridor, “Why the hell is this door locked?”

It had to be a bad joke.

I turned the tap off and straightened myself out. I unlatched the door and pulled it open, bearing witness to a scene that I did not predict. Felipe was grappling with one of the guards, it was Lanky, and he was holding a knife in one of his hands. I acted fast and leapt into the fray. While he was busy trying to keep Felipe under control, I kicked at his hand using the tip of my shoe. He cried out in pain as I struck his fingers, causing him to drop the knife. I shuffled it away before he could reach down and grab it.

“What the-“

His head snapped back as I punched him in the nose. Before he toppled over, I grabbed him by his collar and dragged him into the bathroom with me. Felipe fell to the floor and clutched his neck, coughing and hacking all the while. Lanky wasn't nearly as strong as Prier was, so I actually stood a chance of taking him on in a direct fight. Hooking my left leg behind his, I pushed him back onto the floor and slammed the door shut so that Felipe couldn't see what we were doing.

“You're that... you're the one that they warned me about!”

A small trail of blood dribbled down onto his top lip. A large bruise had already started to form where I had struck him. I was in no mood for talking things over with him. The only thing I was interested in was incapacitating him as soon as possible. I dashed across the floor and flipped over him, wrapping my arms around his neck and dragging him back up to his feet. There was a frantic struggle as I wrestled him closer and closer to the sink that I had filled just moments ago. I reached up and ragged on his hair, back and then forwards with as much strength as I could muster.

His entire body folded, smashing his forehead against the porcelain sink and leaving a red mark where it cut into his skin. I applied more pressure and slid his face into the surface of the water. As the liquid started to fill his eyes and busted nose, his arms and legs tried desperately to escape from my grasp. Once I started to feel him losing strength, I pulled him back up into the air. He gasped, chest heaving, and tried to fill his lungs before I started drowning him again.

“Who hired you?” I whispered. He shook his head and groaned in pain. I did not entertain his stalling attempts, back down into the murky red waters he went. After

another thirty seconds of feeling him twitch between my rear-choke, I pulled him back out. “I’m serious. You’re going to talk, or the last thing you’re ever going to see is that water rushing up to meet you again.”

I was getting overly aware of the noise that we were making. The scuffling was one thing, but combined with the sound of his leather shoes scraping against the floor and his desperate gasps for air, there was no doubt from the outside that something strange was going on. I waited patiently until he had the wherewithal to speak.

“I-I don’t know who the money guy is! I promise! It was some punk called Eidos, he was the one who dragged us along for this!”

“How many of you?”

“E-Every guard, all of them are working on this..”

“Armed?”

“Yes, they have pistols.”

“Four versus one, with guns – that almost sounds like a fair fight.”

He inhaled a raspy cry and shook his head, “Who are you? What the hell is this?”

“Who said you got to ask questions? Take a nap.”

I punctuated the end of our interview with another impact against the edge of the sink. He crumpled to the floor with two head injuries and a serious concussion. I reached down and searched through his pockets, locating a tiny, palm-sized pistol that he smuggled in through the doors. It looked like the organizer didn’t trust them with anything bigger. I was going to have to take care of all of them and find out who was in charge the hard way.

I winced as gunshots rang out from somewhere in the manor. Another quick dip into the sink failed to clean away the blood that had smudged onto my palms and fingers, but there was no time to worry about keeping up appearances now. Felipe was still outside and still in serious danger. I slid the dinky gun into my dress just in case I needed it. Cognizant of the unconscious body lying in a heap by the sink – I made sure to keep the door closed behind me so that Felipe didn’t notice it.

“Felipe, what’s going on?”

“W-What happened to the other guy?”

“He ran away when I showed up. Someone just fired a gun.”

I helped him back to his feet and scanned both directions of the hallway we were in. Some of the staff members were rushing out of the kitchen to see what was going on in the hall. Not the brightest idea to insert themselves into that situation. Another pair of gunshots could be heard, as well as screams to go along with them. This was bold. Some of them weren’t expecting to show their faces around here again any time soon, or perhaps the money at play was enough to go and start a new life somewhere else.

Felipe was clearly in shock from the attack, it was just like when we were shot at by Professor Prier. He was unsteady on his feet and his eyes were unfocused. I leaned him up against the wall and slapped his cheek a few times to clear away the fog.

“Felipe, are you still with us?”

He nodded, “I am. Sorry.”

“We need to get you someplace safe, now.”

“But what about the others? They’re in danger.”

I dragged him further down the corridor and into an alcove before someone spotted us; “We both know that they’re only here for you, and what good would you charging into that hall do now? They’re trying to kill you. There is no trade to be made here.”

“We can’t just leave them there.”

“And do you think you can handle it yourself? Be realistic, Felipe!”

He was frustrated with the logic that I was offering him. He wanted nothing more than to charge into that room and play the conquering hero. The only thing he would receive was a swift bullet to the head. Letting him enter that hall now was essentially suicide, and I wasn’t going to let him do it. His teeth clenched as he knocked his head back against the wall behind him.

“Why do you even care?”

I frowned, “What are you talking about?”

“You’ve never once concerned yourself with other people, why now?”

“I do care – we just have different ways of expressing it. You’re my friend, are you not? What kind of lady would stand by and watch you die for no good reason?”

My own words were less effective on myself than him. Whether we were friends did not matter in the end; I wanted him to listen to what I had to say, and that meant pushing him in a certain direction by appealing to his emotions. A sober perspective was what he needed. His breathing calmed slightly as he started thinking normally.

“I’m... I shouldn’t have said that. Of course. You’re right. They’re trying to kill us.”

“I’m glad we’re in agreement. Hopefully they don’t hurt anyone. Is there a safe place we can go?”

Felipe nodded and led me through the bowels of the manor. We arrived at an unassuming door tucked away between three intersections. He opened it to reveal an unused office space with a small window that looked out to the back garden. “This place is very hard to find, Beatrice comes here when she wants to be alone. You can lock the door, and even fit through the window if you want to escape.”

“Good. Now wait here until the coast is clear.”

He turned on me with a fearful expression, “What?” I pulled the door shut and held onto the handle as he tried to get out again. I had no intention of letting him run around the manor with so many armed assassins chasing him. He banged on the door, “Maria! What are you doing? You need to hide too!”

“I might have omitted a few important details. The only person they’re after is you.”

“How do you know that?” he protested, “You told me that there is nothing to be done! Don’t tell me that you’re planning something!”

“Lock the door and stay here,” I insisted. With my point made, I let go of the handle and kicked off my shoes. Those heels were just going to get me killed. I sprinted back the way we came before Felipe had a chance to escape the room and hold me back.

My disappearance would give him enough reason to stay put. I'd fed him multiple lies to get him here, and the most important one was the fact that these men were entirely capable of harming the hostages with or without us. I wasn't going to let this ball turn into a bloodbath. It'd be a sad display to return to the academy with members of my class missing because of this bullshit.

The problems were numerous. I only had a novelty pistol that could potentially penetrate the body at point-blank range. There were five or six armed men who now sported full control of the main hall, where two hundred or so innocent people were trying to socialise. It was safe to assume that at least one of the staff members went running for the nearest phone or police outpost when the trouble started. There was a time limit to think about before they arrived. I didn't trust the police to handle this situation without turning it into a violent gunfight, and that would mean people getting caught up in the crossfire.

My priority was finding a way to attract their attention and pull them away from the hall. The best way to do that would be for them to realise that Felipe wasn't there at all, though I predicted that one or two of them would remain to ensure that the hostages didn't make a run for it while the others searched the manor. Before I reached the double doors that led into the dance hall, I took a detour into the kitchen, which was now deserted. The single-fire pistol that I'd stolen was not going to be much help. The bullet calibre was so small that the target could easily survive the shot and fire back. That was a chance that I was unwilling to take, victory in combat was all about stacking advantages on top of each other; like initiative, momentum and resilience.

I took a kitchen knife but discovered that there was no good place to hide it. A bright idea soon came to resolve my dilemma. I withdrew the pistol from beside my chest and made sure that it was cocked and loaded. If it was no good for killing someone, it could at least serve as a noisemaker to get their attention. The plan was simply terrible – but there were no more pieces for me to manipulate. I needed a real weapon and I had to hope that one of the gunmen was carrying something more usable.

I aimed towards the ceiling and pulled the trigger. It may have been small, but it still made an almighty racket. With my bait set, I ducked behind the kitchen counter and waited. "Come on, let me stab you already," I muttered to myself. I heard the doors open and voices speaking, but it was impossible to discern what the discussion was about. They must have been questioning the guests about where Felipe was. The footsteps grew closer, converting from carpet to tile as the biggest loser peered inside to see what was causing the trouble.

It was now or never.

