

“...Unfortunately, Henry Snow was unable to see the final outcome of his hard work, as he passed away at the age of sixty-four just before the completion of his final project. The impact he left on industry around the world can still be felt today, allowing for previously unthought of methods to be utilised by a wider range of businesses and individuals.”

I closed out the last part of our presentation, summoning a polite round of applause from the other magic students. Miss Jennings inspected the final cue card with an approving nod; “What a well-considered presentation, thank you everyone. You can return to your seats.”

We cleaned up the mess and sat down in the front row. Everyone had successfully delivered their lectures on each historical figure, and surpassed her expectations at the same time. She was planning on offering further elaboration on areas that we missed, but there was no need with such thorough explorations of each persona and what they did for the field of magic.

“I’m very impressed with the hard work you all did for this task. I even had some notes of my own for areas I thought you’d miss – but I didn’t need to use them! It’s safe to say that you all get a passing mark, and I hope that you managed to get closer to your classmates in the process.”

If that was the criteria we were being tested on, it was better for me not to say anything. I only did the bare minimum to get through the process, reserving most of my discussion for matters related to the lecture. Claude was a little put off by the way that I acted around him and Talia, but she was used to it by this point.

Samantha and Adrian made an unexpectedly good team. It was the first time that I’d seen him put any effort into his school work. He was a talented public speaker with amazing voice projection. It was a shame that his short temper meant that those skills seldom found use.

“As you can see – the use of magic is very important to Walser and has been for thousands of years. There are many different paths that lay before you, and while it’s easy to predict the end of magic as a common tool, it may well be that one of you will

someday make a great discovery as they did, one which will bring it back to prominence all over again.”

There was a loud knocking on the door.

“Come in!”

It swung open and the last person I expected to see stepped on through. It was Felipe, who had a smile that threatened to split his face in two.

“Felipe? I didn’t expect you to be back so soon!” Jennings gasped. She hurried over to his side and got a closer look as if she were expecting him to be covered in grievous injuries.

“We just got back to the academy, and since it’s that time of day I decided to swing by and see how everyone is doing. Getting the boring work out of the way while I’m absent?”

“Boring is a matter of perspective,” she tutted, “But yes, I’ve been forced to change the lesson plan since you disappeared. I take it that you have good news for us?”

“I convinced my Father to readmit me to the school,” he revealed. Everyone in the room was overjoyed to hear it, none more so than Miss Jennings herself. She was extremely stressed by the uncertainty, and none of the other students in his year were available to take his spot as the teaching assistant.

I wasn’t so sure if it was a done deal. The school was faced with a lot of controversy over how they handled the attempt on his life, and there would be demands made of the staff to ensure his safety. I wouldn’t trust the guards at the front gate as far as I could throw them. Almost every time I caught a glimpse of one of them they were slacking off or not paying attention.

“That’s wonderful! I’d feel terrible if you were prevented from graduating next year because of what somebody else did.”

“I understand why my Father is so worried, but I can’t live in fear of what may or may not happen while I’m at the academy. I’m sure that they won’t allow anything like that to happen again.”

His eyes momentarily turned to me as he said it.

With Felipe's big reveal and the presentations delivered, the class was dismissed a few minutes early. I stepped out of the room as a veritable mob of people swarmed around him to offer their condolences and greetings. I didn't want any part in them. I couldn't blame Felipe for coming back to the academy when his future depended on it, but I also believed that it was the wrong decision to make. There were more people here to witness any potential attack, but that came with its own risks. Eidos didn't seem concerned about being identified when he took the party hostage. What was to say that the next person wouldn't be the same?

I sighed and moved in the direction of my room, only to be stopped by Felipe's voice calling out to me from the doorway. The others watched curiously as he hurried over to me and pulled me aside.

"We didn't get a chance to speak after what happened at the ball. I just wanted to thank you for risking yourself to keep me safe."

"I didn't do that much," I replied plainly. With so many open ears nearby, I didn't want to reveal any details of what actually happened.

"I was very disorientated when that man attacked me by the washroom. There's just one thing I don't understand. You told me that he ran away, but later they found him unconscious in the bathroom."

I almost broke out into a cold sweat. Crap – this was a detail that I hoped he was gracious enough to look over. He must have been given an account of the crime scene by his Father once everything was cleaned up. I was the one who dragged him in there and smashed his head against the sink. I kept my face from twitching and just shook it off. The best thing to do was plead ignorance or imply that I was confused about the order of events.

"Odd. I cannot say for certain how these people behave, but I'm certain that he ran away when he saw me emerge from inside."

Felipe wasn't going to question his 'saviour' without good reason. My simple rebuff of his observation was all he needed to hear to reaffirm his trust. He laughed, "I suppose

he hid away in there once the police arrived. Still, you remained cool-headed even as everyone else was starting to panic. I would have stormed into that hall and gotten myself killed if it weren't for you."

"Being just is one thing, but you should always remember that people are motivated by specific reasoning."

He nodded, "I'll keep that in mind."

"Does Beatrice know you're back?"

"She does. Beatrice was the first person to know that I was returning."

"Hm. I'm glad that you are well, if only so we can avoid the future indignity of more group projects."

He rolled his eyes, "Dishonest as always. You just can't make your tongue admit that you're happy to see me."

"I'm nothing but honest," I responded, "It's just that people don't listen, or infer the wrong conclusions from what you say. So long as they don't interfere with me the best action is to leave them alone. Denials are merely veiled affirmations to some."

"You always send my head for a loop with this philosophical talk."

"It's not philosophy, it is merely an observation about the way that others behave."

We were interrupted by Samantha and Claude, who emerged from around the corner to see what was going on. Claude was as ever quick to ask probing questions without worrying about his manners, "What are you two talking about?"

"I was just thanking Maria for giving me a hand during the incident."

That reminded me of something. Claude took Felipe out of the room that I'd left him in and took him skipping around the manor when there were still armed gunmen everywhere! I scowled and got into his personal space, jabbing at his chest with my finger.

"I have something to say to you, Claudius. Why exactly did you think it was a good idea to start running around the manor when Felipe was in such danger?" I

demanded. Claudius was more surprised to hear my voice changing from my usual dispassionate tone to one of anger than being called out on it. I'm sure that it was a novel sight for all three of them to have Maria Walston-Carter burst her top like this.

"I-I just thought that it would be best for us to move to the upper floor, that's all."

"And what would you have done if someone found you and shot you?"

He would have died, for one thing.

"It turned out okay in the end! You can't get mad at me when..."

I cut him off, "I can get angry with you. You placed yourself and Felipe at risk for no good reason. Don't you have an ounce of self-preservation in that empty head of yours?"

Samantha allowed Claude to endure my scathing criticism because deep down she agreed with it too. Claudius was always so eager to leap into whatever interested him that he never considered the risks associated with it. He stammered out some half-formed words, unable to properly materialise an explanation.

"Why do you even care so much?" he shot back, trying to shift the target onto me.

"As cold as you think I am, I wouldn't enjoy seeing my fellow students gunned down by a group of madmen. It is not right for a noble lady to lead by example? I showed Felipe to that office because I knew that it would be the safest place to hide, but you were determined to ruin my work."

Claude steamed, "Oh yeah? Sounds to me like you're just mad that you can't take all the credit for rescuing Felipe!"

"I never took credit for that. This is the first time I've spoke of it to anyone else."

Samantha stepped between us with her hands held aloft, "Now, now – there's no need to argue with each other. You've both said your piece." Claude tried to say something more but he stopped himself. His face fell and his mood turned for the worse. He walked away without saying goodbye to Samantha or Felipe. It was a stark change from his boisterous detective persona.

“What’s wrong with him?” Felipe asked.

Samantha twiddled a lock of her hair, “He got into an argument with Maxwell about something. They’re too stubborn for their own good.”

“They argued? I always got the impression that they were best friends.”

“The better the friends, the more bitter the fallouts. It seems to me that Claude is starting to regret whatever he did to upset Max,” I offered.

“I guess you’re right. I hope they can get everything patched up before our next lesson or things are going to be very awkward.”

Samantha laughed, “Don’t worry about that. This isn’t the first time this has happened. They’ve butted heads a few times this year already, and I’m sure that there’ll be a lot more to come.”

Felipe checked the clock on the wall and hissed, “I better head over and see how the meeting is going. Hopefully, I’ll have good news for you all when the next lesson comes around. Don’t be afraid to say hello if you see me wandering the campus.”

“I look forward to it,” I replied, waving as he left me alone with Samantha. The farmgirl was staring again, as she’d been doing for hours while we worked out the specifics of our presentation. I never called her out on it, preferring to let sleeping dogs lie. I was unable to ascertain why she was so interested in looking at my face.

“Can I help you with something, Samantha?”

She jerked back to life and stood up straight as if to emphasise the size difference between us. “Ah, no. Not exactly. I was just studying your... expression.”

“That’s rather rude,” I warned her, “I’ll forgive you, but be wary of doing anything like this to the other girls here. They may not take it so lightly.”

“You’re the only one I’m interested in,” she said confidently, completely and blissfully unaware of how that sounded from my perspective.

“Wouldn’t you rather flirt with one of the boys?” I inquired. She was always surrounded by them, and she was meant to settle on one as her partner for the ongoing story. Samantha blushed and furiously wriggled in place.

“F-Flirt? I’m not flirting!” she protested, “It’s not that I’m trying to do it or anything. You just had a look on your face that I haven’t seen before, it’s like you’re more at ease than usual.”

“That was a joke.”

She flopped down and sighed.

“How can I be at ease when we’re surrounded by such chaotic times, anyway?”

“Perhaps you prefer high-pressure situations? My Father is the same – he always cuts things so close to the deadline, but he never breaks a sweat about it.”

“I’d rather not live my life under the threat of a hail of gunfire, thank you very much. Completing our assignments is more than enough stress for me.”

“It’s not a bad thing. I think you look pretty cool when you get serious,” Samantha chirped.

I barked out a laugh, “Cool? That’s a first.”

For someone who looked like a child’s doll brought to life through profane means, Maria never had the benefit of being described like that. Her character in the game was much less mature. She was a mischievous and manipulative girl who hid her true motives beneath a sickeningly sweet mask. I always thought that I looked like an angry chipmunk. It was part of the reason why I had to work so hard to intimidate people.

“But you have really angular eyes and a cold gaze, and you always carry yourself like you’re in total control of what’s going on around you. I kinda’ look up to you. That argument with Claude was the first time I’ve ever seen you get angry with someone.”

I laughed even harder, my voice picking up into that characteristic ‘ojou’ laugh that Maria and every other antagonistic character liked to use. Samantha’s uncertainty was clear as day, she didn’t know whether it was a laugh of mirth or mockery. I took a

deep breath and tried to stop the loud, echoing laugh before someone overheard us and came to investigate.

“I’ve never heard anyone describe me like that before. You are something special, Samantha.”

She smiled – happy that she’d managed to amuse me in some small part. She would need to do a lot more if she wanted us to be friends like she so boldly declared weeks ago in the back garden.

“I hope you mean that in a good way.”

“The suspense is half of the fun,” I tittered, “I have things to attend to. I’ll see you in the next period.” I took my leave. There was nothing specific that I had planned, but I wanted to see if Felipe really was being readmitted to the academy. I’d have to camp outside of the staff office and try to catch what was going on.

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Samantha was awash with different thoughts and feelings about her talk with Maria. For a brief moment, she was allowed to look at the girl who lived beneath all those protective layers. She may have described her as a cool presence, but when she cracked a genuine smile it was easy to understand why so many people preferred to define her image as ‘doll-like.’ Maria was unfathomably beautiful. Samantha held a particular admiration for her ruby-red eyes, which could be heart-stopping or inviting depending on her mood.

Samantha’s cheeks turned red as she recalled the moment when she finally broke. That was what she was aiming for the entire time. Samantha knew that a few more positive meetings like that would result in them becoming fast friends. It was a technique she used to get along with people back in her home town. There were no permanent enemies, just people who wanted to protect themselves by putting up fronts.

Maria was an exceptionally tricky case. Samantha learned the hard way that many people at the academy were trying to put on their best performance for the sake of their peers. This was a cauldron where future businesses, political alliances and personal relationships were formed. It was designed that way, it was the reason for the

frequent excursions to notable locations for civic lessons. The children were expected to be the next generation of leaders and affluent job creators.

That would be enough pressure for a young man or woman on its own, but some also dealt with parents who wanted to use them as extensions of their own ambitions. They saw their own children as a second chance to succeed in the places where they had failed, not content with what successes they already enjoyed. It was an unrealistic way to live and think. Samantha saw many bad harvests during her time living on the family farm, but there was no way to go back and do things over again. The seasons came and went. It was a harsh business to compete in.

But Samantha's family enjoyed privileges that she could have never imagined a few years ago. She was the first girl from her family to attend any school at all, and to go even further and attend the Royal Academy was no small feat. From a young age she was instilled with a philosophy that proposed a single truth, mistakes and missed opportunities were inevitable, but there was no need to linger on them. The next season would always come.

Maria was a girl who commanded a lot of praise and influence. Her Father seemingly bent over backwards to allow her to participate in what would otherwise be segregated shooting competitions. What hopes did he hold for her, she wondered? Maria never buckled under the pressure. She knew the answers to every question thrown her way, and she carefully danced around committing herself to any one thing or interpersonal connection.

Adrian expressed those pressures in a visible, explosive way. Samantha came to understand why he acted like that during their project - with his Father demanding that he do everything perfectly no matter the cost. Adrian couldn't keep up. He was never much good at studying and he reflected that most of the lessons were completely lost on him for some reason.

Samantha wanted the answers to her questions, she wanted to finally solve the biggest puzzle she'd come across during her short life. Who was Maria Walston-Carter really? What did she care about and cherish, and what was she like when nobody was around to observe her like an animal in a zoo?

What a sad way to live!

Samantha was being earnest when she said that she wanted to be Maria's friend. While all of the other students would scoff and mock her for such a lofty goal, to her it felt entirely within her ability. Making Maria laugh proved it. She just had to keep working at it until she found the results she was looking for. If Samantha was good at anything, it was being extremely persistent.

While wandering the exterior corridor next to one of the campus' courtyards, she finally located Claude – who stormed off partway through their conversation. He didn't notice her until she sat down on the bench next to him.

“Are you okay, Claude?”

He sighed, “Yeah – I'm fine. It's just frustrating, you know? I finally see something for myself and everyone starts pretending that I'm making it all up.” ‘Everyone’ being Max, in this case. Having Maria respond to him in that way was what set him off again.

“So you're absolutely certain that you saw Maria holding a gun?”

“One hundred percent, in fact...” Claudius reached into his jacket pocket and pulled a small piece of folded paper out for both of them to study, “I clipped this from the latest issue of the Walser Herald. The police did a big conference on what happened at the Booker's house, and there are some interesting details in there.”

“And how does it connect to Maria?”

“According to the police, everyone who the Bookers hired to guard the ball was actually a part of the plot. The one that was found unconscious told them that they bribed one of the staff members to get their names put to the top of the list. That means that none of them were responsible for the shootings.”

“Okay,” Samantha nodded, following along.

“But the police say that they only arrived at the property thirty minutes after the hostages were taken. They were alerted to the crime by one of the neighbouring estates who heard the gunshots, that means that the police didn't do it either.”

“What about one of the staff members then?”

“They all testified that they didn’t have a gun on hand, and none of them claimed credit for putting a stop to the plan, even when they were told that they wouldn’t be prosecuted for it. So, if the police, the guards, and the staff are all ruled out – the only person left with a gun to fight back was Maria.”

Samantha connected the dots, “I see.”

He folded the newspaper clipped back into his pocket and groaned, “Not that I’m accusing her of doing it with certainty, but it lines up. I need more evidence before I can be sure.”

“Did you tell Max about this?”

“Yeah, that was partly why he was so angry with me. He’s had a thing against people who spread rumours for a long time, once some of the other kids found out that his mother wasn’t with the family anymore. They said a lot of terrible stuff speculating about why. It’s a good thing nobody brought it to the academy with them.”

Samantha frowned, “If you know that it annoys him, why do you keep doing it?”

“It annoys him because he thinks I’m joking around,” Claude contested, “When I evolve my theories based on what I see – he still gets mad at me because he thinks I’m being fickle. A close-minded detective is a bad detective. It’s impossible to know everything right away!”

Samantha still didn’t buy the theory that Claude was trying to sell. She was biased, she could see that, but the image of Maria Walston-Carter flying through the manor’s lobby and shooting down several gunmen like the main character in a pulp action novel was too absurd to accept. She also had the benefit of not suffering a negative reaction to it. Max was getting upset for Maria’s sake. If she could convince Maria to have a word with him about it, perhaps they could patch up their wounded friendship.

Assuming Maria would agree to such a plan, anyway.

“I’m not going to say that you’re wrong for being suspicious, Claude. But you should keep Max’s feelings in mind before you start talking so excitedly about this sort of thing. I think you really upset him.”

Claude exhaled, “I know. It’s hard to own up to it, and it’ll be a few days before he’s willing to hear an apology in the first place.”

“He’s blaming himself in a different way too,” Samantha added, “I’m certain that you’ll be back to how you usually are with each other soon enough!”

“How so?”

“Like an old married couple.”

“H-Hey, we are not like that at all!”

