

The next several days were spent gathering information. I had slowly accumulated a variety of stolen newspapers from where my Father left them on the dining table every morning. That context was essential to understanding where I was. From my cursory investigation, it appeared that I was in some type of fantasy world – one where unusual creatures and the use of magic were common. Aside from a passing comment about ‘changing my hair,’ nobody suspected anything about my behaviour.

But my paranoia only intensified with each night that passed. I couldn’t accept that I had somehow been reincarnated into the body of another. To anyone else it would have been a great reward for a life of good deeds; but I was nothing more than a cold-blooded killer. Why would I, of all people, be rewarded with a comfortable second chance? There was a catch. I knew it. I was waiting for the second where the blade dropped onto my neck.

As a young child, it was easy to plead ignorance on many subjects. I wasn’t expected to know much of anything. The gaps could be papered over by fluttering my eyes and pretending to have forgotten. The long and short of it was that I was named Maria Walston-Carter. I was a noble girl of eleven years. I lived with my father, who ran a successful mining business. My mother was deceased. The other branches of our family had roots and interests in many other industries and political matters.

‘Noble’ was a title that had lost a certain amount of significance in the years preceding my birth. A revolutionary wave had swept through the newly formed Walser Republic, spurred by similar occurrences in neighbouring nations. Rights and equality were the language of the day. The intentions were pure but the reality was much harsher. The political and economic power was still concentrated in the hands of a select few. Old families like mine had incredible sway. Still, the foundations of a modern legal system had been instituted, and a newly formed parliament passed laws under the authority of a First Minister.

Anything more than that was purely for my own interest. I read about neighbouring nations, and continued to sneak into the library to further my integration. There was a lot to study. I ensured that the most relevant information was prioritised. I needed to know about recent history such as the disempowerment of the monarchy. Even young children would learn about these things through interactions with their relatives.

True to my father’s word, magic was also something of a big deal. It was an innate power that people were born for a capacity to use, but required lengthy and expensive tutoring to master. Magic was a status symbol amongst the elite. It was formerly used for industrial processes pre-mechanization, with applications in medicine, making and combat. Many of those

families made their fortunes that way. The arrival of machines that could spread the benefits without need of a trained mage had tipped the balance of power. Some families adapted and became even wealthier by investing early, most others drowned with the tide by refusing to move on.

It was all very... visual novel.

And I would know. It was my greatest shame that I indulged in them so much during my free time. Every genre, every developer, every target audience. I played as many of them as I could. A few were even worth the time and effort. This resembled some of them. A pastiche of clichés and ideas paved over with a heavy dosage of true to life industrial revolution.

As for adjusting to my new identity – there was little issue. I found it strange that whatever had sent me here went to the effort of ensuring my comfort within a new, female body; but did not bless me with the knowledge to navigate the world I was placed into. Looking into a mirror didn't summon a sense of deep discordance. There was an acceptance in my mind that this girl was me, and always had been me.

The only theory I had was that my existing personality was important to the reason I was here. Or perhaps some kind of freak coincidence had caused my soul to be reincarnated into a new body, or further still – this was all the incomprehensible delusion of a man bleeding to death in a hotel lobby. Only my mind could come up with something this esoteric. I kept myself quiet for the most part, fearful of stepping out of place and revealing my real background to the people around me.

Maria, if she was a 'real' person before my untimely arrival, was not the talkative type. The servants who attended to my every need did not find anything strange about my behaviour. I did find it disquieting to have people watching over me at nearly all times of day – but they at least respected my occasional requests for privacy while I was studying in my room or the library.

I was also a lonesome figure. My Father was planning to send me off to earn an education at the Royal Academy in a nearby city, but as for the matter of a social life, I did not have any to speak of. I pieced together that the most I could expect were prearranged meetings with the children of other noble families, and always under the supervision of an older individual. I had no friends and allies to rely on. That was just fine by me. I made a living as an assassin without needing help, after all.

As the days and weeks passed by, I started to grow increasingly paranoid. While most would feel secure after a long period of peace – I was different. I was a man who had spent his entire life dancing a fine line. I'd committed many heinous crimes with full awareness of what they were and the consequences of those same acts. The thought of being rewarded for them with a karmic reincarnation was not acceptable, it would not settle into my mind no matter how hard I tried to push it down.

Weren't the reincarnated meant to be good people? Ones with qualities that were desired within their new world? Heroism, kindness, selflessness – they were things I was never given a chance to practise. If I was meant to have a grand purpose, I hoped that it wasn't something that relied on me making the right decisions. I was no good at that. If anything, I could see myself fitting firmly into the role of the villainess.

I looked the part, with menacing red eyes, sharp brows and a high birth that gave me wealth and influence. But it was hard to imagine myself falling into that role. It required a sense of malice that I just couldn't muster towards a group of strangers. A villainess was always there to antagonise the innocent protagonist for initially flimsy reasons. I may be a killer, but that wasn't indicative of how I behaved in my everyday life.

It was a popular misconception that someone who killed for a living was touched in the head. That may have been true for a serial killer, but I was a professional. Soldiers and assassins are similar in some ways – and the most important aspect is their mental fortitude. A psychopath isn't a good soldier. They could ignore all of the things they saw and did easily, but when it came time for empathy or rational decision making, they were ultimately left compromised.

For an assassin like me it was even more essential that I kept a hold of my faculties. A lot of my work involved careful social engineering, working my way into places I wasn't meant to be. Someone with no empathy, understanding or restraint would expose themselves very quickly, and that was before they came to the act of killing someone and trying to get away with it.

Making things personal was a no-go. Even when the people I was taking out were the worst scum in the world, I stopped myself from getting angry as I looked over their respective offences. It was essential that I gave myself a way out if things weren't looking good. It was a job. Nobody ever enjoys working a job where they run the risk of dying every day. Getting too invested in delivering some perverse sense of 'justice' was a one-way ticket to hell.

That sense of perspective was important to me. It made sure that I never fell too deep down a rabbit hole from which I could not escape afterwards. I was a bad person at the end of it all, a man who killed for money. Even my self-imposed rules about who I killed and how weren't enough to fill me with a sense of righteousness. Remember the names and the faces. Always remember names and faces. I was proud to say that I had never once killed someone on accident. I was extremely thorough in my preparation and casework.

But when I put it like that, it sounded pretty crazy.

Some people moved boxes, other people enforced the law, some used their bodies to please others – and I killed people. Nobody would ever be able to reach an understanding with me. A lot of folks didn't want to believe that genuine, real life assassins could exist in the first place. It sounded like something out of an action movie. The reality was a little different to what they imagined. Ninety percent of my jobs were done without using firearms, and the ones that did rarely led to me being caught and forced into a firefight.

If that were to happen, I'd come out the winner anyway. Until I didn't. The police had always tried to keep a bead on me. I used a lot of different tricks to hide my identity and create plausible deniability. I never expected them to host a sting the way they did. They didn't try to protect the man I was sent after at all. They let him die and gunned me down once I tried to run.

There was no point in ruminating about it. It was exactly what I expected to happen. Someone couldn't continue to flout the laws of the land so openly without anticipating punishment. The only real surprise was how long I had managed to do it. Maybe my final lapse in concentration came about as a result of complacency. I slammed my book shut and stood up, stretching out my body and yawning loudly.

I had been reading for almost the entire day again. My Father believed I was being studious for the sake of passing the entry exam, which was only partly true. I was completely ignorant as to the history, traditions and culture of the nation I had been teleported to. My new body came with some other caveats that I had learned about in detail over the weeks since my arrival. For one thing; it was nowhere near as strong as my old one. That sounded obvious considering the transition between a fully-grown man who worked out and a girl below the age of thirteen, but living through it was another matter.

My mind was still stuck in the old ways. I'd try to lift something heavy and find myself stumped. I'd run down the halls of the grand mansion we lived in and tire myself out within

moments. My paranoia demanded action. If the worst were to happen, my body would not be ready to defend itself. In my eyes it was practically an inevitability that karma would demand payment from me for my sins. After a long day of reading up on what I needed to know, I would head away from prying eyes and train my body as well. Actual gym equipment was too much to ask for, but makeshift methods could be just as effective if you know what you're doing.

In particular, a shaded grove near the east side of the gardens. A set of chopped logs for burning had been placed there in storage. They were compact and heavy enough to provide my arms with a good lifting workout. After that was done, I'd run until my legs couldn't move anymore. Returning to the house – some of the staff would give me a strange look as they noticed my haggard breathing and sweat drenched face. They wrote it off as me playing like any child would.

All of that hard work on plausible deniability; turning back the clock and becoming a child would have been easier.