

With the tour group corralled into one corner of the office on the first floor, the men fanned out and launched a pursuit for the girl who ran away with Felipe in tow. Even when they were acting vigilantly and with significant preparation, she was still capable of fighting back. One of their gang members was already lying in a pool of his own blood at the midway point of the stairwell. Eidos and Erwin were already on the scene.

“Bloody hell, she’s already killed one of us!” Eidos exclaimed.

He knelt down to inspect the body. The bullet had travelled clean between his pectoral muscles and undoubtedly struck the heart. If not for his own experience with the culprit he’d describe it as a fluke. A moving shot delivered with deadly accuracy. It was a testament to her reactions that she killed him in such a manner. Eidos made sure to retrieve his gun and the ammo he was carrying. Maria would happily use it against them if she got her hands on it.

The team leader who Erwin assigned to the main wing of the building looked as hapless as he was stupid, slack-jawed and paralysed by the sudden downturn in his fortunes. Erwin scowled and forced himself to dispense some discipline before things fell apart again.

“You’re telling me they fled upstairs? They could be anywhere in the building by now.”

The leader grimaced, “We’ve blocked the staircases and encircled every route they can take. There’s no way that they can get past us without fighting through.”

“Oh, so you want to find them based on the sounds of gunfire? Do you have any idea how complicated the acoustics in this place really are? You may as well poke your eyes and eardrums out now before you embarrass yourself,” Erwin fumed.

Eidos was revelling in his frustration from beneath a cloth mask, “Bossman – you did say that you wanted to be here to make sure that we did this right.”

Erwin adjusted his own disguise and surveyed the men who survived the initial fight. A lot of them looked like scolded dogs, with tails tucked between legs and all the

bravado drained from them. It was a serious hit to their confidence that the well-laid plan was already up in the air.

Erwin painstakingly did everything in his power to make killing Felipe as easy as possible. He procured the schedule and location for each stop of the tour, made certain that every member of his gang knew what the target looked like, and gave them precise orders on where to go and what to do. A leaked police operational document even stated in plain text how long they had to complete the mission before they kicked the doors down to storm the place. He'd burned almost all of the goodwill he maintained with the client in the process. This was their Hail Mary. If they didn't get results this time – there wouldn't be another chance. Tens of millions of marks would disappear into thin air.

“Shut up. I've bet everything we have on this one. If you mess it up, we're not getting paid. I don't want to hear any backtalk from the bloke who gets bested by a teenage girl in a ball dress and heels.”

“She wasn't wearing heels,” Eidos protested vainly.

“We can't afford to drag any of the other lads from hostage and door duty. We're going to have to make do with what we have now.” Erwin checked his gun and prepared to demonstrate his leadership by going in first, but there was one small problem to handle before that.

Eidos held him back, “Speaking of the client, he wanted to have a word with you.”

“Now? Is he mad?”

“You don't hire a gang of killers to go after a teenager without a few screws loose. He said he wanted to have a one-on-one chat with you about what's going on here.”

“Can't it wait?”

Eidos shook his head, “He's yammering on about withholding our pay if you don't talk with him as soon as possible. He knows that you're here.”

Communication between the gang and their client was kept low-fi and out of sight of any potential interlopers, even if it meant that they couldn't always be on top of new

developments as and when they happened. Erwin liked to do things the old-fashioned way, delivering letters through various means and insisting that the recipient burn them once they were opened and read. A detective couldn't piece together a pile of ashes. With Prier dead and lots of investigators snooping around it was more important than ever that Erwin protected their secrets.

"He's a bloody idiot, but I'm not going to let his temper tantrum stop us from getting that money. Make sure that they get Felipe, I'll go and make sure he understands what position he's in."

Eidos saluted mockingly, "Aye aye, sir."

"And stop messing around!"

Erwin stomped away and left Eidos in charge of the men. For Eidos, getting rid of the girl and killing Felipe were one in the same objective. She was the one who'd blown the coop with him once she sensed that something strange was happening. It was exciting. Eidos was furious about his previous retreat, but fighting such a capable foe made his heart pound in anticipation.

Eidos called everyone to attention, "Alright. You, and you – stay here and make sure that none of these hostages get away. The rest of us are going upstairs to help the others find this kid."

"Is two people enough?" one of the men asked.

Eidos clipped him around the ear, "You think a bunch of kids and that fat arsehole are going to do anything? You've got a gun! Just keep an eye on them. And once we see that girl, leave her for me. I owe her a little payback for what happened last time."

The gunmen formed up behind Eidos and followed him up the stairs. The two guards were happier to be left on babysitting duty than potentially ending up like their dead friend. They turned back to the huddle of children and teachers who were sat with their legs crossed in the middle of the office space. What neither of them noticed was that one of the hostages had gone missing while they were distracted with Eidos and Erwin. One amongst a large crowd could easily go unnoticed.

For Max – it was sending him into an intense spiral of paranoia and worry. He turned to Samantha and hissed under his breath, “What the hell is Claude thinking? He nearly got killed the last time he tried this stunt!”

Samantha felt the same. Claude was pushing his luck again, delving headfirst into a tremendously dangerous situation for no good reason. They weren’t in a position to stop him as he slipped away from the back of the group and hid behind one of the dividing walls. The last they saw of him was the back of his shoes disappearing around the stairwell in pursuit of the ringleader. The heavily armed, extremely dangerous ringleader, who wouldn’t hesitate to put a bullet in him if he found him.

Samantha whispered back, “We can’t chase him now. Those two are watching us, and I don’t imagine they’ll be well pleased seeing us run away to find our friend.”

Max stared at the two intimidating presences. They were doing nothing but standing there, with one facing the group and the other turned to face the entryways into the office. The others were pulled away to chase after Felipe, which meant they didn’t consider them a threat – they were simply leverage to keep the police at bay. Before he knew it, he’d already concocted a plan.

“Excuse me, may I please go to the bathroom?”

The goon furrowed his brow, “The bathroom? Where do you get off on making demands in a situation like this?”

“I’m not demanding anything,” Max said with a crack in his voice, “We were sitting out there on the balcony for a long time and my bladder is... full to bursting.” He ended his statement with his glossiest, showman-like smile to try and win him over.

“Why should I care?”

“I’m sure that you’re a reasonable gentleman. Ask yourself what I would be capable of doing during the short walk from here to the washroom. It would be extremely uncomfortable for everyone involved if I were to wet myself.”

It was a deeply embarrassing lie to weave, but Maxwell’s acting left a lot to be desired and everyone in the class caught on to what he was doing. The two men left to stand

guard did not have such discerning eyes. To them, this was a legitimate request from a terrified young man. Eidos' bloodthirsty nature was not shared by every member of the gang he belonged to. The room fell silent as both parties awaited the outcome of his bluff.

The other man was conclusive, "I don't want to smell some kid's piss for an hour while we're stuck here. Just take him."

His friend was not happy about being left on toilet duty, so he issued a final warning to the assembled hostages; "This is the only time I'm going to do this. Do any of you need to go as well?"

Samantha sheepishly raised her hand. Nobody else dared take the chance.

"Fine. You two, come with me – and don't try anything stupid."

Samantha and Max navigated their way through their sitting peers and followed the gunman as he led them down one of the side corridors to where the washroom was located. Max had not planned this far ahead, and the look of sheer panic on his face was starting to make Samantha worry about his intentions. Getting away from the group was no good if they couldn't shake the guard. Samantha put herself into the shoes of a rugged survivalist and tried to find something that would help. Staplers, rulers and stacks of unsorted paper were not going to win out against a gun.

Samantha was a rough-and-tumble country girl at heart – but that didn't mean she was ready to take on a dangerous criminal in a fight. All of the options she was considering would pose a risk to her and Max's lives. It needed to be fast, easy to use, and capable of surprising the guard so that they could knock him out without worrying about his weapon.

Something red, round and bright captured Samantha's attention. It was a fire extinguisher – though she was completely unaware as to its true purpose and function. All she knew was that it looked heavy enough to send someone for a loop but light enough for her to lift it into the air. The only problem was how conspicuous it was. Unless there was some kind of distraction, there was no way she could grab it without being spotted first.

“Max, I need you to keep his attention while you’re in the bathroom.”

“For how long?”

“Just a few seconds, but make sure it’s loud.”

Max nodded, his nerves were completely frayed. This was going to be dangerous. The man opened the washroom door and swivelled to face them with a grumpy demeanour.

“You go first, lad.”

Max ducked his head and stared at the floor with the intent of not angering him any further. He pulled the door shut again and locked it from the inside. His mind was racing as he tried to come up with an appropriately flamboyant distraction. His first thought was a humiliating one, and he found himself questioning why he was willing to go so far for someone who he was presently at odds with.

That intrusive flash of spite disappeared as quickly as it arrived. What the hell was he thinking? Claude was his best friend going on eight years now. Even if they were arguing, Max would be upset if he got hurt or worse, killed. He could give him an earful for sneaking away later. For the time being he had a guard to distract.

Making certain that every movement and noise he made could be heard through the door, Max played the part as best he could, groaning and complaining as if he were passing a particularly problematic stool. The guard’s face twisted into one of disgust, but he steadfastly remained by the door with his gun facing Samantha.

Samantha tried to encourage him to go one step further, “Are you alright, Max?” She picked up her voice so that it was clear to him that she wasn’t able to get away yet.

Max covered his face with his hands in shame. This was the most humiliating thing he’d ever done. He pressed his ear to the door, but there was no sign that either person on the other side had moved.

“There’s no toilet paper...”

“You didn’t check before you sat down?” Samantha exclaimed as theatrically as she could manage.

“It was too urgent!”

The plan was not effective, a point proven only seconds later as a loud cacophony of gunfire rained from upstairs – vibrating through the walls and floors and sending Samantha running for cover. The man on watch was more concerned with the chaos than Samantha potentially getting away, which was exactly the window of opportunity she was hoping for.

He pounded on the washroom door impatiently, “Hurry up! I don’t want to be standing here all day. Do you hear the damn racket going on up there?”

With his back turned, he was completely ignorant to the fact that Samantha had rounded the corner, retrieved the red metal canister, and was now hoisting it over her head like a blunt weapon. A loud clang echoed through the corridor as she brought it down on his head with as much force as he could deliver. His body slumped to the floor in a heap. Samantha gasped and stepped back with the weapon still in hand.

The washroom door clicked and Max peered through the crack.

“Bloody hell!”

Samantha composed herself and grabbed his dropped gun, fiddling with the latch and dumping the unspent bullets onto the floor so that they couldn’t be used. Max stepped over the unconscious body of their guardian with a grimace.

“That was rather uncouth.”

“Don’t start talking like that now, of all times,” Samantha groaned, “This is the worst situation to be doing the rich-boy act!”

“I was just joking – trying to bring some levity, you know?”

Samantha was in no mood for jokes. She placed the extinguisher back down and pocketed the gun just to be safe, even when she had no intention of pointing and shooting it at another person. Hitting someone with a blunt object was already going outside of her boundaries.

“We’d better go before he wakes up. Did you see where Claude went?”

Max nodded, “Yeah – he went this way. Hopefully he hasn’t jumped in front of a gun yet.”

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From the first shot to the ensuing chaos that broke out in the parliament building, Claude was hyper-focused on one thing and one thing alone. This was the perfect chance for him to finally figure out what was going on with Maria. Not only was she the one who defended Felipe from a knife-wielding maniac, but she was conspicuous by her absence from the hostage situation that he found himself in. He’d connected the dots as the sounds of gunfire. Yet he, nor had anyone else, seen the man falling down the stairs after Maria shot him.

Claude took the first window of opportunity to scramble away as the evil henchmen discussed their dastardly scheme. It all sounded so easy in his head – get away from the pack, find out what Maria was up to, and escape the building to heroically inform the police as to where his class was being held so that they could be rescued. Reality swooped down to slap him in the face soon enough as he discovered that the building was much too large for him to navigate, and even if he could there were armed guards everywhere he looked.

Several close calls had him spiralling into a nauseating state of paranoia. It was infrequent for Claude to admit that he made any mistakes, but in this case, he couldn’t help it. There was no rationalising how stupid he’d been by running away from the group. The only purpose it seemed to serve was to get him shot and killed. Salvation came in the form of an empty office space, which Claude relished like the last few drops of water in a vast desert. The calamitous noise from the floor above showed no signs of slowing down. It had to be Maria, or the guards who were stationed inside the building who were caught flat-footed by the incursion.

Tucked into one of the booths, once occupied by a paper-pushing government worker, Claude felt a seed of doubt being planted into his mind. All that big talk about being some kind of ace detective, cracking cases that nobody else could; but he’d totally failed on one aspect that his father always made sure to emphasise to him. Understanding. Not the understanding of the technical details, that was something



anyone with time and a few books could manage. To be an effective police inspector demanded an understanding of people and an understanding of compromise.

‘The biggest puzzle isn’t the crime itself – it’s navigating your way around the different people who are involved with it. The victims, the preparators, and the witnesses. What separates a good detective from a bad one is their ability to figure out what makes them tick, and then using that insight to get the information you need.’

Claude loved it when his Father entertained his aspirations and told him things like that, but he was never much good at implementing them. How could he hope to understand or work with a hostile witness when he couldn’t even stop himself from offending his best friend?

Some detective he was.

The pity parade was not to last. Claude heard one of the doors in the room opening, which meant that he was in danger again. He thought fast and headed to the nearest office room that split off from the main area. It was a small space intended for a higher-ranking manager to work in peace, but now it was the only place he had left to hide. Luckily, there was also a large cabinet that was intended to be used to store papers. Claude hurried inside and pulled the doors shut behind him. He silenced his breathing and peeked through the small crack.

The wait was agonising, but that was nothing compared to the sense of pure, undistilled dread he felt when the footsteps got closer and closer before two figures entered the very same room to join him. Of all the places they could have chosen to go!

Worst of all – it was the guy who barked orders at the other criminals earlier. He was holding someone at gunpoint. Claude angled himself to try and get a clearer view of who it was.

*Mister Roderro?*

Claude had only seemed him a few hours ago, greeting his son and the rest of the group as they experienced the tour. Roderro sighed and positioned himself against the desk.

“Was there any need to point the gun at me?”

The masked man shook his head, “The safety was on. With everything else that’s happening right now, I think me shooting you in the back is the least of your worries. What would you do if someone saw us walking through this building like best buddies?”

Roderro frowned, “Very well. I’ll leave it at that.”

Claude had a bad feeling about this. He was witness to something he wasn’t supposed to be. They were talking like they knew each other, and the implication in their words was clear. Roderro was a party to the scheme.

Roderro wagged his finger, “I understand perfectly well that this is your best chance to kill the Escobarus boy, but I hope that you’re taking great care not to cause too much trouble. Money can pave over many a crack – but the police will be very motivated to find you and your friends after this is over with.”

Erwin was tense, “We’ve been doing this for long enough to know. Once this job is done, we’ll be gone. You won’t ever hear our names or see our faces again.”

“And about the thing we discussed before…”

“There’s no need to worry. We’ve got him locked up tight on the second floor, and I’ve given them explicit orders to leave them alone just in case. If any of those bums fires a single shot in their vicinity, I’ll personally strangle them and toss them into the waiting arms of the nearest police officer.”

“Good. I needn’t say that I’m feeling antsy about this entire ordeal. I mean it when I say that this is our very last chance. If this much is not enough, then there is nothing more to be said.”

Claude couldn’t believe what he was hearing. There was a gunfight happening upstairs during all of this, yet here they were talking casually in one of the building’s offices like it was nothing unusual. It was the Roderro’s who were trying to kill Felipe. They were the scorned suitors who attempted to annul the marriage through murder!

“You’re ice cold. Killing a young lad for something like this.”

“When you saw the money at stake you understood perfectly well. There are limits to everything, even the value of a human life. If Adrian gets to marry Beatrice – it’ll be the biggest business merger to happen in this city since its founding. I can give you anything you want. Age doesn’t have to be a factor with so much on the line.”

Erwin hung his head and chuckled throatily, “I’m not criticising you for it. I’ve killed a lot of folks both directly and indirectly. If we can’t get this job done now then getting arrested is just about what we deserve. I’d rather die than live with that sort of humiliation.”

“Is that your way of saying that you’ll do whatever it takes?”

“We already are. What else would you call launching an assassination attempt in the parliament building?”

Roderro concurred, “Whatever it takes, indeed. On the other hand – it’ll help advance a bill some of our party has been working on to tighten security around here. Happy coincidences are my favourite sort.”

Claude’s ears burned. He never would have suspected that Roderro was responsible. Adrian was ill-mannered and hot-headed, but not murderous. It was entirely possible that he had no idea about what his Father was planning to do. As the silence settled over the room, Erwin looked up to the ceiling.

“Hm. The shooting’s stopped.”

“Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?”

“Depends on who won. I’d better go check things out. I came here to give this one a personal touch, after all.”

Claude breathed a sigh of relief.

“By the way. Did you hear something?” Erwin posited.

“No. Why?”

Erwin turned on his heel and faced the cabinet – his eyes almost meeting with Claude’s. In his scramble to push himself deeper into the concealing dark, he only made his presence more evident.

“I suppose it’s just a rat in the walls.”

Claude couldn’t move, even as he saw his gun toting arm lift up into the air and take aim. A deafening blast filled the air. He was forced back as a terrible impact struck him in abdomen. The shock of the attack precluded the intense pain that followed. Claude clenched his teeth and resisted the urge to fall through the doors and tumble out onto the office floor.

“Good heavens! What are you doing?” Roderro wailed.

“Get out of here before someone comes running,” Erwin barked. Roderro hurried out of the office and left Erwin to stand in a cloud of his own gun smoke.

Erwin approached the cabinet and pulled it open, revealing the slumped over form of the boy who he’d just shot blindly through the wooden casket. A hiding place and a grave, all in one. Claude was already drenched in blood that poured from the open wound, but he was still breathing somehow. Erwin didn’t know how young he was before he fired.

“Don’t worry mate. You’re only worth one bullet.”

Erwin didn’t have time to waste worrying about him. The men upstairs were still fighting to find Felipe. In truth, he didn’t care one bit about what happened to Roderro so long as he got his payout. But for as long as he was contracted to work under him, he was going to do things right.

His pride wouldn’t allow any less.

