

It didn't take a clairvoyant to see that two dozen armed men and women had flowed onto the third floor behind us. This operation was the very definition of a blunt instrument. It was executed with a single-minded intent to kill Felipe no matter the cost, both physically and socially. It didn't matter how many of them were killed or caught, the ends justified the means because a lot of money was on the line. This was the kind of job that would make a hitman for life.

The two prior failures at the academy and the party demanded swift and firm retribution. They were willing to attack the seat of the nation's government to get another shot at him. Despite the high stakes, it was clear that someone smarter was pulling the strings this time. They were using tactics that made the men at the party look like a bushel of bumbling idiots. We were surrounded from the moment that the fighting kicked off and they were going to keep it that way for as long as possible.

I needed to keep them away from Felipe until the police decided to get off of their asses and do something. There was one problem with that plan – I only brought two magazines with me. The pistol had a higher capacity than a six-shot revolver, but it was still less than ideal when I was facing down such a huge gang of enemies. Each missed shot would sting and make my life even harder than it was already. Running out of cover and picking up another gun or pilfering their bodies for extra bullets was a recipe for disaster.

There was only one thing I could do. Kill as many of them as possible with the ammo I had on me. They'd already boxed me into the large room, of which several other smaller offices were connected to. My presence here would clue them in. Felipe was hiding nearby. I really hoped that he was doing his best to barricade that door, and that he was heeding my advice to stay out of the way in case they fired through it to try and hit him.

Visibility in the office was just as poor as the floor below. Rows and rows and rows of office desks, cabinets stuffed with documents and dividers filled the entire room from end to end. It was a double-edged sword. I could surprise them, but they could also surprise me. Given their numbers advantage, I'd have bet my money on them coming out on top.

But I'd somehow managed to get this far without biting it, and this didn't feel like the right place to die. It wasn't climatic enough. If I was being used to mete out some kind of justice unto these people, then there were still those who were out of my reach. Eidos and the leader of the gang were still missing. This story wasn't over until they were dead, then I'd be disposed of. For the small chance that I could keep living though, I was going to fight on. I knew better than to ask for divine intervention.

I wanted to have the first strike. Carefully creeping around the edge of the dividers, I caught a glimpse of some of the gunmen who were sweeping the area searching for me. They were better armed and a lot smarter than the folks who crashed the party. Some of them had shotguns, rifles, and even semi-automatic pistols. They broke the bank to make sure that this one kicked off with a bang.

"Did Eidos see a little girl shooting back at the party?" one of them pondered idly.

"Jay was there – and he said that he saw her with his own two eyes! Can you believe it, what the hell are they teaching those kids these days?"

"Jay? He makes crap up all the bloody time."

The other rolled his hand, "And Eidos, and Erwin..."

"Fine. So, suppose that this mysterious little girl is real – why is she posing so much of a problem to us? I thought Erwin was always boasting about how we're the baddest gang this side of the strait."

"Doubtful, considering they let morons like you join."

I silence their inane discussion with a carefully aimed shot to the dome. The one who was so doubtful about my existence got a first-hand taste of how deadly I could be. The cheap mask he was wearing did nothing to prevent the bullet from travelling through his skull and splattering his brain matter all over his friend.

"Holy shit!" he cried, aiming his rifle in my direction.

Too slow.

Another shot sent him to the ground too. The remaining assassins shouted my location and scrambled for cover before I could follow up with more for my tally. I

swivelled around to face the opposite direction, knowing that one of them was going to try and flank me from the other side. He forged ahead with a serious head of steam, only to tumble into the wall as I rocked him with a shot to the torso. He crumpled to the floor where I finished him with a follow-up to the head.

Three kills in four bullets. Sometimes I impress myself.

There was no time to sit back and admire the beauty of my handiwork. This was a game all about movement and positioning. I hurried over and grabbed the other gun. As I did, yet another goon hopped around the corner. With my off-hand I aimed my new weapon and forced him back with a sloppy shot, striking the booth to his left and sending shredded felt flying into the air. More cries as they tried to communicate my position. The mundanity of the office was ultimately their undoing. Which desk or divider was I hiding behind exactly? There were almost a hundred of them!

“We’ve got you surrounded girl! Why don’t you just put those guns down and come quietly back to the other hostages?” one of them yelled from across the way. I remained silent.

“Why the bugger are you trying to negotiate with her, you twit? There are two dozen of us here. Chase her down and kill her already!”

Not exactly an inspired piece of leadership from the person responsible. Still, some of them decided to move their feet and try to surround me again. I ducked away as a wild shot from one of the rifles struck the ceiling and caused plaster to fall on my head. As I tried to cross one of the aisles, another enemy jumped out at me. I stumbled down onto my stomach, slid across the polished floor and unloaded into him with both pistols, forcing his body up and over into a backflip.

Another opportunist was hot on his heels, trying to get one over on me now that his friend was already dead. I rolled through and barely avoided being shot in the ribcage. My sense of balance was thrown for a loop. I spun around and shot back using my off-hand weapon, forcing them to retreat. I was starting to run low on ammo, and they’d love to take that chance and take me out while I was reloading. I needed to open up some space.

The holster around my thigh didn't just hold my extra magazines and the gun. It was also where I'd hidden the conductive spike I had stolen from the practice range. We were in a room filled with some extremely flammable materials, and Eidos' methodology had pushed me to learn a thing or two about how lightning magic worked. I stabbed the spike into one of the supporting pillars and clambered over the divider, before turning and pointing my finger through an invisible path in front of me and focusing on ionising the air. My hair stood on end as a thrum of energy passed around my nervous system.

A deafening crack rang out through the office as a bolt of electricity shot from my finger and hit the spike, burning a clear hole through the felt wall and sending burning pages scattering across the room. Acting quickly, I reached down and swapped the magazine in my main pistol before they could get their bearings. Getting the spike back could wait for now.

I hopped up onto one of the desks and took a pot-shot at one of the men who were still cowering from the lightning bolt I'd shot a short distance. The papers were already starting to fill the room with smoke, and they'd also lit several other things on fire too. Disrupting their teamwork with lights and noise was a perfectly valid strategy. I needed to even the odds somehow. A lot of people underestimated the impact of psychological warfare in a fight like this. The gang was already hesitating thanks to their current losses and the braying leadership of those who wouldn't risk themselves was not helping matters.

At least, not until the doors swung open and another pair of men stepped through. I immediately recognised the body language of the man on the left. His hunched back and broad shoulders told me loud and clear that it was Eidos, wearing a stupid mask to try and hide his identity this time. His eyes met mine from across the room. Of all the times to perch on one of the desks like an eagle.

The person on the right was firm, "She's right there. Kill her already!"

I was forced to leap down before they used my signposting to put a round through my chest. A hail of bullets followed, whizzing over my head and tearing through the upholstery as they blindly fired in my general direction. It was absolute chaos. There

was no way to keep track of what was going on. I was running on nothing but pure instinct. By some miracle, I was able to get down onto the floor and avoid being hit by chance.

The orchestra of bangs and pops slowed to a crawl as they tried to preserve some of their ammo, instead of wasting it all on the vague hope that one would kill me. Aside from the sound of burning pages, silence settled in the room. Not even the sounds of their boots against the tiled floor could be heard.

“I know you’re there, Maria,” Eidos taunted, “We’ve got you outnumbered and outgunned. So why don’t you quit this stupid game and come out so we can kill you the fast and painless way?”

“Why would I quit now, knowing that none of you bumbling fools are capable of beating me?” I quipped back.

“If you think that we’re going to make the same mistakes again, you’ve got another bloody thing coming. I don’t care how good you are with a gun – there are two dozen of us. We’re watching all the exits! There’s no way for you to get out of here! You better hope to the Goddess that I’m not the one who gets his hands on you because you’re in for a world of hurt if I do.”

“Isn’t your mother ashamed that you use the Goddess’ name in vain so often?”

“The Goddess can kiss my arse for all I care! You don’t have the ammo or the backup. So just quit while you’re ahead and tell us where Felipe is. The Bossman might even decide to let you go if you do.”

Eidos was a terrible negotiator. He’d already threatened to burn me alive. Why would I believe any promises he made about my safety? And if we were talking about the karmic balance of things – selling Felipe out to save my skin would probably lead to something equally dangerous happening to me in short order. There was no reason for me to agree to those terms. Eidos was not a man to be trusted.

“I think I’ll pass. Thank you.”

“Stop wasting your breath Eidos,” the ‘Boss’ chided him, “We don’t need to be making any concessions to a little girl. Get in there and have your fun. We’re on the clock here.”

Eidos cheered, “Alright. Let’s get to it. Don’t say I didn’t warn you, lass!”

They started moving again.

There were too many of them, I’d need to find another gun and some ammo if I wanted to have the ability to clear them out. The lightning bolt trick was one thing, but using it repeatedly would sap my stamina and make me unable to fight effectively. It was a last resort if the worst case were to occur.

Juggling all of these different resources, positions and threats was difficult – so difficult that I failed to notice one of the gunmen getting ahead of himself and leaping out around the corner at me. I used both pistols, shooting once with the one in my left hand and again with the other. The borrowed pistol was now empty. But to my horror, he wasn’t the only one sneaking up on me. There was another man behind me who used his friend as a convenient distraction. Unlike the previous time, this one was much more effective. I had nowhere to run.

It was too late for me to do anything now. I was out of position and completely exposed. The goon even took his time to make sure that his killing shot wouldn’t miss. I dropped the empty gun and briefly considered trying to shock him with lightning magic, but it would take too long. By the time my eyes were closed and my senses expanded he’d already be pulling the trigger. My only hope was that he was about to miss.

I closed my eyes and spread out, with my palm held flat and my teeth clenched. I put everything I had into making something, anything that resembled a spell that might prevent him from killing me. I heard the gun crack and waited to once again experience the feeling of having a piece of metal violently projected through my chest cavity.

Seconds passed. The pain never arrived.

I opened my eyes – greeted by the equally confused expression of the person on the other end. Both they and I saw the exact same thing. That bullet was going to hit me. There was no uncertainty in my mind about that, yet it didn't. It disappeared into thin air as if it were never fired in the first place. I snapped back to reality and decided to worry about it later. I shot them back while they were busy wondering why their killing blow had gone awry.

Whatever it was, it saved my skin at a pivotal moment.

The downside was obvious. The way that the strength left my legs was the first clue as to what happened. I'd used magic. Not a sort of magic that I was familiar with, but one that defied the rules I was taught to respect. Had I somehow managed to snatch that bullet from the air before it hit me? It was improbable. It was too fast for the human eye to recognise, never mind react to it.

I grabbed hold of the desk and tried to collect myself before the next enemy found me. If I had a choice I would have avoided doing this. Overusing your magical energy was like a severe form of fatigue. Every muscle in my body was crying out for relief. There was no aching or pain, but I couldn't move them properly. It was as if I was drained of my energy and left as an empty shell.

"Shit!" I swore.

What the hell was that spell I cast? I'd not read about anything like that in the books in the library. There was no evidence or residue to clue me in. It was something extraordinarily powerful but equally subtle in execution. The kind of spell that they wouldn't teach to schoolchildren for fear of them losing fingers or limbs trying to use it without guidance.

There was no time to worry about it now. They were closing in on me, and I had to get smart about how I was moving around the office. The smell of smoke was already suffocating. It stung the corners of my eyes and made it feel like a bag of dirt was being poured down my throat. I hurried over and looted one of the bodies for another (mostly full) gun. The other guy was carrying a double-barrelled shotgun; good stopping power, but lacked the capacity and was much heavier than a handgun. I still had a moment to pick it up though. Those two shots were enough for two more kills.

I hoped that the noise we were making was enough to attract their attention.

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Samantha and Max were happy to find that most of the people who invaded the building were now rushing to the third floor to participate in a ferocious gunfight. As long as Claude wasn't chasing after them, it meant they could avoid most of the dangerous areas in the building. They had free reign of the place, which they used to meticulously search each and every room they came across for any signs of Claude's presence.

"Why did he decide to run away like that?" Max protested, "I swear – there's not a single thing rattling around in that thick skull of his."

"Would you stop insulting him for one second and help me look?" Samantha responded, "I understand that you're frustrated at him, but we're in a serious situation right now."

Max jumped as another spout of gunshots filled the air. He was on edge for a good reason. There was nothing wrong about venting some frustration in his eyes. He wandered between the aisles and poked his head through unlocked doors, each empty room adding to his stress levels. Where had Claude gotten to? They'd only left him alone for a few minutes!

But then a new layer was added to the chorus – one which made their blood run cold.

The dry croak of someone in distress.

They followed the noise to another door. It was conspicuous by its presence as the only one that had been left open. Max and Samantha crept up to the office and peered inside, only for the air to leave their lungs as the distressing sight that lay in wait sprung its terrible surprise. Claude was there, on the floor, lying in a pool of his own blood. His hands clutched an area near his pelvis, which was bleeding profusely onto the floor below.

"C-Claud!" Max cried, rushing through and coming to a halt a foot away from him. The words left his mind and he found himself unable to speak or act.

"I studied some of the healing magic in the library..."



“A wound this severe cannot be healed by the magic of an amateur,” Max fretted.

“I understand perfectly well that I can’t fix this!” Samantha retorted, “I won’t be able to heal this completely, but I should at least be able to stabilise the wound and stop him from bleeding. Hopefully, that will give us enough time to get him some proper help.”

Even that was beyond what Max expected from Samantha. Healing magic was so difficult, temperamental and focus-orientated that it had been almost completely replaced by scientific methods brought about by modern biology. It was seen as impractical and outdated – not fit to serve the needs of a rapidly expanding population, many of whom did not have access to magical healers.

“If we don’t do something, Claude is going to die. I’m not going to sit here and do nothing while we still have a chance.”

Max clenched his fists, “I know.”

Samantha meant to do right by Claude. He knew that – but placing something as important as another person’s life into her hands was never going to sit well with him. What if she did something that only made the problem worse later, and what if it didn’t work at all? Was she going to blame herself for not doing better?

Samantha shuffled over to Claude’s prone body and pulled aside the bloodied shirt he was wearing, revealing the full extent of the grisly injury that he’d suffered at the hands of one of the gunmen. A display of nothing but callous cruelty, shooting down a young man without remorse and leaving him to die. Samantha was furious but she didn’t let it show. She needed all of her cool and calm to successfully apply what she’d read in the academy’s libraries.

Even though she found herself delving so deep into the art, now that she was faced with a situation that demanded remembrance she found the knowledge slipping through her fingers. She took a deep breath and tried to organise her thought process into something more understandable. To do so, she spoke aloud with Max about what she was doing.

First, she needed to assess the wound.

Samantha was not a squeamish girl – but that was generally reserved for things like animal manure, cuts and nicks, and the occasional bout of illness. The still bleeding-hole that was punched through Claude’s body caused her to grit her teeth. It had hit him just below the belt, penetrating above his pubis. It was incredibly difficult to spot the afflicted area beneath all of the blood.

“It looks like the bullet didn’t enter any of his internal organs, at least I hope that’s the case. Still, he’s bleeding a lot. He might die if we don’t act fast.”

“It’s all on you, Sam. I don’t know anything about healing.”

“That’s fine. I just need someone to speak to.”

Samantha pulled away the clothes that were getting in her way and considered her approach carefully. Removing the bullet without the proper tools was impossible. Healers could knit the flesh and blood vessels back together, but manipulation like removing a foreign body demanded the application of forces that would cause more harm than good. The broken skin was not the biggest risk to Claude’s life. It was the ruptured veins inside. They were less demanding to put together, but asked for a level of precision that a student couldn’t hope to offer.

Like any spell, it started with focus.

Samantha closed her eyes and attempted to feel out the area inside. There was no wind entering the room to use as a sixth sense, so she fell back on a technique that one of the books suggested in the margins. She exhaled from her mouth, pursing her lips and forcing breath outwards to form a tiny, faint current that she could use to establish what was happening inside of his body.

Samantha wasn’t certain of how effective it would be, and the limitations soon became clear. Every time she stopped to take a breath, she was cut off from the image she was building and blinded again. She waved over to Max and spoke quickly.

“Actually, I need you down here. I need a current. Blow onto the wound, wave your hands, do anything.”

Max had a better idea. He rounded the pair and grabbed one of the empty binders from the office desk. A large, leather bound surface like this was much more efficient and reliable than using the human lung. He got into position and started to wave it back and forth above Claude's pelvis.

"That's perfect. Keep a steady pace."

Max's clever thinking was what Samantha was looking for. The ebb and flow of the makeshift breeze still restricted her sight, but it was like having an extra set of eyes versus what she was dealing with before. A swell of confidence rose in her chest. Things were looking up suddenly. Now it was down to her ability to recall what else the books said.

"I need to fix the bleeding without closing the wound. They'll have to remove the bullet later."

Healing was broadly grouped as 'light magic,' though light tended to elicit images of holiness, a stark contrast to the gory reality. The Goddess was said to be the bringer of light magic to humanity. Hundreds of years ago, those with an affinity for light magic were revered as those touched by the Goddess' grace. Such superstition was no longer in fashion with rationality coming to the fore, but there was some truth to the idea of one's affinity with a particular branch of the magical tree.

Samantha was one of those people.

The very reason she found herself so invested in what the books said was because of that affinity. It was something extremely advanced that she found herself enthralled with. It made her feel smart for understanding what the books said and how their teachings could be applied to the real world.

She could see it – the ruptured vein that was causing him to lose so much of his essence. There were other pieces embedded into the flesh and pieces of cracked bone from his pelvis. Discordant elements that didn't belong in the human body. If only she could drag them out and save the medics some time.

"I'm going to knit the vein closed. Hold him still, please."

Max kept waving the binder over the wound, using his other hand to keep Claude from rolling over and disrupting Samantha's healing. Claude sensed that they were trying to do something and tried to stop himself from moving, but it was pure agony shooting up and down his spine. It was extremely difficult to keep himself still.

"Okay, here we go."

Samantha extended her reach down into the cavity and quickly locked on to the blood vessel in question. 'Knitting' was a technique considered the most basic of all healing magic. Regenerating lost tissue was expensive and time-consuming, so moving the separated fibres back together before doing so was considered more economical. Samantha carefully and calmly reiterated the instructions in her head, going slowly to ensure that she didn't cause more damage in the process. With the separated ends of the vessel brought close together – she started the energy-intensive process of regenerating what was lost between them.

"Are you okay, Sam?"

"It's fine. I'm almost there."

Samantha could feel the energy being sapped from her. It was enough to make her worry about whether she had the stamina to see the job through. That anxiety was misplaced. As a level five mage, Samantha had more than enough. Her face lit up in a bright smile as the vessel closed itself neatly and firmly. While she was at it, Samantha fixed up some of the other bleeding vessels until she felt her grip on things starting to slip. The bleeding was minimised and Claude could survive for much longer now.

"There. I did it."

Max was stunned, "That's amazing! Where did you learn to do that?"

Samantha shrugged, "I just copied what I read in the books. The problem is we can't move him with a shattered pelvis and we don't have a surface to carry him with."

"Alright. I'll stay here with him. You go tell the others what happened."

Samantha shook her head, "I can't go back now. We knocked out the guard, remember?"

“Oh, I forgot.”

Max was too occupied with staring at his unconscious friend to recall every little detail. Samantha sensed that he wanted to stay behind and look after him.

“I’ll keep watch outside and you stay here with him. You should barricade the door so they can’t get in. Whoever shot him knows that he’s here.”

Max nodded, “Okay. Be careful.”

Samantha grabbed some of the blank papers from the desk and tried to clean away the blood that was soaking into the palms of her hands. It was a fool’s errand. She needed some water and a towel to make any progress on that front. With everything taken care of for the moment, she headed through the door and pulled it shut behind her. Max locked it from the inside using the latch and started to push the desk in front of it so that they were safe.

“Please be okay,” she whispered. Not just regarding Claude, but Maria – who was the one other person who was absent from the hostage group. Unbeknownst to her, Maria was already locked in a mortal struggle to survive in her own right.