

Cromwell's invitation got me thinking. What if the shooting club had weapons on hand for practice and competition? It could have served as a good hiding place for the rifle that my would-be killer had used. Unfortunately, my theory was quickly proven incorrect after some cursory investigation. Firearms were completely banned from the campus lest they be held in the hands of law enforcement or a private guard. The shooting club's room served as a meeting place before anything else. The guns were dispensed on-site by the organisations running the contests. I had never participated in an academy competition before – so I was unaware of that detail. I also had no reason to suspect that any of the club's members were responsible. Cromwell was the first one from their number to speak with me.

With no evidence to go on and no obvious suspects, I decided that it was time to take more drastic actions. If I couldn't find the culprit normally, I merely had to make them act by drawing them out into the open. There were several remote areas on the campus which would make the perfect place to assassinate someone and get away with it. The grounds were expansive and labyrinthian. There were the buildings themselves, some of which were not utilised, and the grounds and gardens that surrounded them. There weren't enough people in the school to cover every single angle. The teachers had advised us to stay in populated areas for our own safety. I was about to do the exact opposite. It was the right time too. I felt like somebody was watching me as I moved around the campus, a burning gaze that bore down on me like a heavy weight. I had a lot of admirers, but this was a different feeling entirely.

I had constructed a makeshift holster using napkins and old clothes. It was terrible and insecure as all hell, but it would be enough to carry my gun with me for this occasion. I unbuttoned the side of my skirt and exposed my upper thigh, wrapping it around and slipping the gun between my skin and the fabric.

It was a serious piece of shit.

But that's life. Sometimes a piece of shit made of leftovers is just what you need.

Resourcefulness and adaptability were two things that I was very good at; that was how I had managed to fit in so well with this new world. I assessed, analysed and planned. Those plans could only be as good as the assumptions that led to their formation. I was taking a serious risk by doing this. I was resolved to follow through with it. It was the quiet hours between our last lesson period and dinner, which meant that foot traffic was going to be even lower than usual. I took a deep breath and headed out into the corridor. Not a soul was around just yet. I'd need to bait my hook before leading them into my trap. I took the scenic route throughout the school grounds, catching the attention of as many people as possible while I did so. It was

easily done when I was the most popular girl in the academy. I could sneeze and it would be on the front page of the school paper the next day.

Soon enough I felt that creeping paranoia again. My instincts were alight with activity as I headed out into the back garden and moved between the tall hedges. I had a specific destination in mind. It would obscure my exact location while being isolated enough to lure any enterprising assassin into overextending. The greenhouse. It was a large, iron and glass construction that was used for botany lessons. It was bigger than my old house back on Earth. While the walls were glass, a large variety of exotic plants blocked a clear view through to the other side. I skirted the left edge and headed around the back side. They were still following me. I could hear their footsteps behind me.

I smirked as I wound the line tighter and tighter. This was it, the moment when the truth finally came out. Were they going to try and kill me again? Or were they going to err on the better side of caution and back away before trying? Either way – I was going to emerge the victor. There wasn't a single person in this or any other universe who could compare to my fighting prowess when it came to using a gun. Once I was certain that my pursuer was close enough, I swivelled around with my hand prepared to draw my weapon. I had to stop myself as the person in question finally became apparent.

It was Professor Prier.

Instead of holding a gun, he was holding a still-dirty trowel in his left hand. He gave me a concerned look as he approached me around the corner, "Miss Walston-Carter, I don't mean to interfere with your walk – but I do recall that you were asked to keep to the populated areas of our campus."

That was a disappointment. He wasn't the person I was looking for.

I bowed to him, "Apologies, Mister Prier."

He wiped his brow and chuckled, "Please don't try to make me nervous! My heart almost stopped when I saw you walking past the greenhouse. We're not trying to threaten you. The principal is just very much concerned for your safety."

"I was taking a stroll, and I was so deep in thought that I forgot all about it."

He did not seem convinced by my excuse, but he had no reason to question me any further on the matter. Prier escorted me back to the front side of the greenhouse and shooed me away with his tool, "Make sure you remember to stay safe! It's for your own sake."

“I will, sir.”

Was I mistaken? I swore that I could feel someone watching me as I moved. I pondered the problem while walking back to the rear entrance. It was rare for my instincts to lead me astray like this. I'd need to try it again later, this time while Prier wasn't keeping a watchful eye on the greenhouse. I couldn't expect to see results right away. Persistence would lead me to the right answer. I needed to keep trying and doing everything I could. Given that my life was on the line, it only made sense. Prier's presence was not evidence of his killing intent. It was nothing more than a bit of bad luck. I turned my eyes upwards and noticed someone else watching me. Samantha was waiting on the steps. I intended to ignore her, but she stood and called out to me as I tried to pass her.

“Uh. I was hoping that we could talk about something!”

I paused, “I highly doubt that we have anything worth discussing.”

Samantha was trying not to get flustered by the brisk reaction. She took a deep breath and approached me, “I just wanted to ask why you stay away from everyone but Talia. I still remember what you said to me when we first met.”

“What I mean is that there's no worth to us being friends, none at all. It's something that would benefit neither of us. It's just as much for your sake as it is my own.”

“There's nothing bad about having friends. Is there a reason you're trying to distance yourself this much?” she asked. Samantha was going to be stubborn this time. She wasn't leaving me alone until she had some kind of answer from the horse's mouth. I couldn't tell her that I was paranoid about people close to me being killed, and Talia had already wormed her way into my social circle without me being able to do anything about it. I was in damage mitigation mode, trying to prevent it from becoming precedent before it was too late.

“Do I need a reason to prefer solitude?” I offered vaguely, “I enjoy the company of myself more than anything. It helps knowing that most of the people who approach me only do so to try and enhance their reputation and image.”

Samantha pouted, “I'm not trying to get popular by speaking with you!”

“You already have trustworthy friends at your side. There is no need to invite me – I'm quite satisfied as things are.”

I was confident that my refusal would result in Samantha giving up, but that was yet another miscalculation. Rather than being outraged or despondent, she only grew more determined to

prove me wrong. I had forgotten something important. Samantha was the protagonist and one of her key personality traits was trying to see the best in other people no matter what. She was an earnest and friendly farm girl who was facing down a cold and uncaring societal class system. She'd grow beyond it and form a bond with one of the boys at the academy, potentially even the Ice Prince that everyone was so afraid of.

"I can't accept an answer like that, Maria. I can see it in your eyes when you say it – you don't believe that at all."

I crossed my arms, "And who are you to understand how I feel?"

"There's no such thing as a person who prefers being alone. I've seen the way you act when Talia or Filip speak with you. You might not realise it yourself; but you want them to reach out to you and be your friend."

My tightly clamped lips wavered as I struggled to maintain my cold character in front of her. Her face lit up as she believed that I was about to cry, or break into an uncontrollable smile that betrayed my true feelings. It was neither of those things. Ever since I had been reincarnated into this body it was almost impossible for me to constrain the extremely irritating laugh that defined Maria's character. It was too much. I could feel the pressure building and threatening to bubble over like a burst dam!

"Hehe... ha. Ohohohoho! Ohohohoho!"

Samantha stepped back as the explosive outburst of laughter rang through the gardens. It kept going and going and going to the point where I could feel myself running out of breath. When the contractions ended, I slapped a hand over my mouth and glared at her as hard as I could. Samantha was unsure as to the reasoning behind my uproarious mirth. I cleared my throat and returned to normal in due course.

"A touching sentiment, Samantha, but I'm afraid that you underestimate the diversity of human thought. There are many millions of people in this world. For every firm belief you may hold, there is an exception that exists beyond your field of view."

"B-But still!"

I wagged my finger at her, "Please, Samantha. Respect my wishes."

Samantha was stumped, but she needed to have the last word.

“I still don’t believe you. I’m going to do everything in my power to make you admit that I’m right and that you do care about the people around you! I’m going to be your friend.”

I ascended the next step, “And what a grave thing that would be...”

I left Samantha with that thought in mind. My reasoning could not be understood from her perspective. This was the one good deed that a person such as I could do for others. To refrain from violence, and to spare them the indignity of becoming pawns in my punishment. If only she was so willing to believe in my story as she was the existence of a heart long since withered. Samantha was too kind to be dragged into my orbit. Talia and Filip were already playing with fire by associating with me. I absolutely wanted to avoid doing so with another person. I crossed my fingers and hoped that fate would not conspire to keep me from tracking down the assassin. Becoming the victim of dramatic irony would not make for an exciting tale.

If not for learning from my past mistakes, why had I been reincarnated here?