

“I didn’t even get to do much of anything. Talia and Maria were so fast in putting together everything we needed that it almost made my head spin,” Claudius complained as he, Samantha and Maxwell sat in his room after hours. He wanted to see how the others were getting along with their respective partners.

Samantha was nervous about being put with Adrian, but he was much calmer when Maria wasn’t around to rile him up. “Things went surprisingly well, even if Adrian doesn’t pay attention in class. I think I’ll have to handle most of the work,” Samantha sighed.

Margaret hadn’t left much of an impression of Max while they were in class, and that form continued when he was alone with her. She remained silent while he picked through the books they needed and started to sketch out a rough outline of their presentation. “Margaret doesn’t talk to me. I guess I’ll be doing the speaking when it comes time to present.”

Claudius twiddled a loose pencil between his fingers, “I asked Maria a few questions about what happened at the party, and she seemed pretty firm in stating that she had nothing to do with all of the criminals who got shot.”

“As expected. Just leave it there.”

“Why?”

“You know what people are like in this academy, Claude. Even the slightest implication of impropriety is enough to whip people up into a fever. Maria won’t appreciate you accusing her of gunning them down again and again.”

“I never said anything like that. She was outside of the room that Felipe and I were hiding in, and he told me that she was the one who rescued him and brought him to a safe place. That meant that she must have moved through the lobby between the start and the end of the gunshots. Is that not suspicious to you?”

Samantha had never seen Maxwell’s mood turn for the worse so quickly. The frown on his face was enough warning that Claude was treading into territory which he found upsetting. Claude, having the social graces of a deaf-blind person, continued on

with his line of reasoning regardless. This was going to turn into an argument and she knew it.

“She’s an expert at shooting as well. She has all the skills you’d need to fight back, you shouldn’t discount her because she’s our age.”

Max slammed his hand flat onto the table, “You know how much I hate that kind of thing, Claude. Every time I tell you stop doing it you just get even worse. Stop spreading rumours about people!”

Claude was getting equally flustered, “But I saw her walking past with a gun, with my own two eyes!”

“That doesn’t mean she ran out there and killed all those people!”

“Then who do you think did it? Nobody’s come forward to claim responsibility and none of them saw anything.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Max snapped back, “That’s something for the police detectives to worry about. Why don’t you stop playing these stupid games and focus on studying for once?”

Samantha tried to stop them from shouting at each other, “Okay, okay! Let’s take a step back and calm down a little, please.”

Max shook his head, “No. I won’t. He never listens to me, and he knows better than anyone else why I hate it. You just don’t care.”

He grabbed his things from the table and stormed out of the room before Claudius could answer back. Samantha was shocked by the intensity of the argument. Claude groaned, “Oh boy – I’ve really done it now.”

Samantha chastised him, “Why do you never listen to what Max says? He was clearly uncomfortable with the discussion from the start but you kept going anyway!”

There was a brief flash of regret on his features as he calmed down, but Claude’s stubborn nature was getting the best of him. His immediate reaction was not to seek out his best friend and patch things over, but to dig his heels into the dirt and continue to claim that he wasn’t doing anything wrong.

“It’s not my fault that he’s so sensitive. I’m not spreading rumours for the sake of it. I think that something very weird is happening in this school, and if he doesn’t want to see it, I’m not going to mince my words to make it more palatable.”

Samantha’s Father always told her that a fierce argument was a sign of close friends, but she’d never had a friend with whom she was willing to go at with such venom. Max’s initial offence was rooted in something, but everything after that was the pair arguing for the sake of arguing. Neither one wanted to admit that they were wrong or overstepping each other’s comfort zones.

“Are you sure that you saw what you claim you did? I’m with Max – it doesn’t sound believable to me.”

“It won’t matter if you or him believe my theory. I’m going to get to the bottom of this on my own if I have to. We can see who the one in the right really is after the culprit is caught.”

With the group’s plans put on hold, Samantha decided to let Claude stew in his own decision-making. The mood in the room was so bad that Samantha was starting to feel like she was the one who was in the middle of their fallout. Claude didn’t say another word as she took her things and returned to her own dorm room. In the corridor, Maxwell was nowhere to be seen.

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Maxwell was in a furore. One could ordain to see the storm clouds that lingered above his head. Arguing with Claudius was nothing new – the two had been friends for as long as they could remember, but it was for that exact reason that his stubborn streak infuriated him. His reasons were very personal, and Claude knew what they were already. So why did he continue to force the matter instead of staying silent?

Occupied in his own world, he didn’t even notice that I was standing right in front of him.

“You look happy,” I commented dryly.

He snapped his head back up and met my eyes with a frustrated grunt.

This was an event from the game, as far as I recalled. Claudius will have said something stupid to Maxwell and forced him to walk away in a huff. As Samantha, you could chase after him and score some brownie points for the effort. The exact reasoning behind the argument couldn't be guessed, but it was inevitably going to be motivated by something from Max's backstory.

Max hated rumours.

"Is Claudius driving you mad again?"

He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, "How did you know?"

"You two do nothing but bicker whenever I see you. If you are in a foul mood, it is easy to assume that he's the one responsible."

Max shook his head, "It's not entirely his fault. I worked myself up and blew up in his face again. I should have turned the other cheek and ignored it as I normally do. He's willing to put up with it when I do something that he doesn't like."

I furrowed my brow, "To be friends means to compromise and accept things about the other that you otherwise would not. However, if Claudius refuses to respect a heartfelt request from you – you have the right to be upset with him."

He chuckled, "Since when did you become an expert in having friends, Ice-Queen? Talia and Felipe are the only people who're even allowed to get close to you."

"Most others are trying to get something from me," I responded, "I have no need of people who see me as a resource to be exploited. There are many people out there who are better company than they could hope to be."

"Claude keeps going on and on and on about how you're connected with all of the dreadful things happening at the academy lately. He goes through these cycles where he gets caught up in trying to accuse someone of being a criminal, and it always turns out to be dead wrong."

"I am familiar with his pet theory. So long as it doesn't transform into anything more damaging than him playing games, I will not concern myself with it."

"You're surprisingly forgiving."

“Claude is the only one who gives those allegations space in his mind. It’s simply too absurd for anyone else to accept.”

I couldn’t tell him that I was familiar with the reason behind his objections to Claude’s behaviour. We were strangers. I knew that his Mother was divorced by his Father, and that an out-of-control plague of rumours started to swirl around him and his family. It affected him so greatly because he loved her dearly. To him that was the end of his family as a harmonious place to be as he liked. His Father was not a suitable replacement for the care and attention that his Mother once gave him.

Claude was witness to all of that as it happened, yet even though he understood Max and why he hated that sort of behaviour, he persisted in doing so. From the perspective of someone playing a visual novel, it seemed nothing more than an excuse for petty drama and the regurgitation of exposition to fill in their characters. Having spent time with Claude as a real person instead of a portrait on a screen, it felt more real than contrived. People argued about stupid crap all the time. In the grand scheme of things, this was a comparatively serious debate between the two.

“There are already so many stories about me that I doubt Claude’s even registers to most. A lot of them are patently false, and a rare few are even more absurd than accusing me of being a murderous gunslinger. I’ve heard one girl who claimed that I was the reincarnation of the dark goddess.”

“It’s pretty easy to conclude that based on...”

I shot him a stare that stopped him in his tracks.

“Sorry, bad joke.”

“I can speak with him the next time our group assembles. An outside perspective is helpful in resolving these sorts of arguments.”

He waved his hands, “No, no. That’s fine. It’s something that I need to do on my own. I can’t rely on your kindness when it’s between me and him.”

“Very well. Please remember to pay attention to where you’re walking in the future.”

“I will.”

We parted ways without him doling out his life story in the process. That was fine – I already knew most of it. This sort of problem would get papered over and resolved with a flourish by Samantha soon enough. She was the protagonist after all, the glue that held this tangled web of relationships and rivalries together. Though in that capacity I had rarely seen her executing some of the events and flags that the player normally would. Perhaps without the guiding hand of somebody else, she didn't have an interest in romancing any of them.

I wracked my brain for the potential consequences of such a decision on her part. None of the 'bad' endings were particularly disastrous for her. It was possible to complete the game and resolve the core plot without picking any of the boys, though that took more effort than settling on one of them quickly. It was a careful dance between different conversation options and event outcomes to keep everyone balanced. The game could be ruthless in forcing you down a particular path towards the midway point.

I was the one who stood to be worried about the outcome. Maria did not get a fair shake of things in most endings. Arrested, disgraced, or even killed – she was inevitably disempowered and embittered for her next appearance somewhere deeper into the franchise. The saving grace was that I'd specifically avoided doing the things that the real Maria did. I evaded ingratiating myself with the Prince, I defended Samantha from some of the bullies, and I wasn't locked in a battle for the affections of any of the male cast members.

But the real Maria didn't have to worry about a violent criminal conspiracy working to kill another member of the school. As far as I could tell, it had nothing to do with me or my actions. This wasn't some sort of crazy butterfly effect kicked into gear by my arrival. Felipe and Beatrice were betrothed before I arrived at the academy. If I wanted to put an end to things, I would have to find evidence pointing towards the people responsible. The men I fought at the ball were tight-lipped about who was signing off on these attacks, or they simply didn't know that much.

How could I finagle a list of past marriage candidates from Beatrice without appearing suspect? My best idea was to engage in some 'girl talk' and ask her about

the other families who were vying for her hand. She wasn't at the school for the time being, so it would have to wait until she returned from her sabbatical. Since marrying her was the goal, I didn't dedicate myself to protecting her in the same way as I did with Felipe. If they killed her on accident there'd be serious trouble on the horizon for them, and none of the promised payday when the son married into the Booker family. Having to deal with this and a group project was going to make my hair turn grey.

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Eidos returned to the dockside building where he worked with tail tucked firmly between his legs. For many of the young men and women who were a part of the gang, it was a first. Eidos never showed any sign of weakness. He got results – no matter what it took or how much heat he generated in the process. Instead of boastfully declaring his victory and promising a round of drinks for everyone on his tab, he skulked through the back door with several fewer men than he set out with.

The recrimination from Erwin was no secret. The moment he stepped past the threshold and entered the office the sound of their voices shouting drowned out everything else.

“What do you mean you didn't get him? You were out there with twenty bloody men, and you were the only security on the property! If the buyer finds out about this there's going to be hell to pay.”

“He already knows, for the Goddess' sake, Erwin. It's in every damn newspaper from here to the coast.” Eidos flumped down into one of the chairs and covered his face in shame, “Everything was going just fine. We had the entire place locked down tight, and we were looking for where he'd run off to. But then one of the girls at the party got her hands on one of our guns and started running riot.”

Erwin scowled, “The Walston-Carter girl? I thought that was nothing to worry about.”

Eidos laughed, “No. Prier was right. There's something seriously odd going on in that academy. I've never seen anything like it. She didn't break a sweat, running through the place and gunning people down left and right. I almost got hit a few times as well.”

“She’s just a teenager.”

Eidos threw his gun onto the desk, “That may be the case, but you know the truth already, you can put one of these things into the hands of a kid and they can kill someone with it. I’m starting to think that they put her into that school to keep folks like us on notice. I wouldn’t put it above those scumbags in parliament to train kids to be killers.”

“So what actually happened?” Erwin asked again – uncertain of the events that led to their failure.

“Like I said, we took control of the hall, got everything locked down tight on the inside and the outside. We were combing the place for him since it was so bloody big, but then Maria Walston-Carter shows up and starts blowing people away one after another. She managed to waste so much of our time that the police showed up and nearly caught us.”

Erwin pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“All that time and effort, and the most public bash we’ve ever thrown, and you didn’t get the job done. Maybe you should stop flapping your gums and accusing everyone else of being full of it before you see the facts, Eidos.”

Eidos averted his eyes and he bore down on him from behind his desk like a king. Erwin was every bit as sadistic as he was, and he was the one man who he wouldn’t dare cross no matter what he said or did. He’d formed this gang for a reason. He was the undisputed boss of the operation because he brought in the money. Part of it was his pragmatism. He could be cold and calculating when needed.

“I’m going to kill her,” Eidos growled, “She’s dead. The next time I see her there’s going to be no messing about.”

“We can kill him without her being around. You’re already a wanted man because of what they saw, getting rid of her isn’t going to plug the leak. We need to figure out where they took the Escobarus kid and make a new plan.”

Erwin's mistake was presuming that Eidos was thinking rationally, but he was petty, vindictive and cruel first and foremost. The only thing he could focus on was the way that he was humiliated by a girl who was young enough to be his daughter. A girl who for all intents and purposes lived a sheltered life on a wealthy estate somewhere in the country. It wasn't just a shock that she had beaten him, it was an upset to the natural order. Eidos was streetwise and toughened by a hard life – he should have been the winner with no questions asked.

Eidos pushed his chair away and stood with a start, "This isn't about the job, Erwin. It's personal. I'm not letting some little scrote put one over on me and get away it. You give the next job to someone else, I don't care – but I want to be there so I can put one right between her eyes."

Erwin cracked his knuckles and looked down to a piece of paper that he'd been writing notes onto. There were several different plans of action in the works, but he only expected to have the time to do one of them. The man who was paying for all of this was getting impatient. He needed to see results, not just a pile of dead bodies.

Prier leaked a lot of information to the gang about what the academy was planning for the near future. Some of them were long-standing traditions for the students, like a trip to the house of Parliament for a tour and a speech from a sitting member. They'd be remiss to cancel such an occasion even under such duress.

But an attack there would be a cut above any of their previous attempts.

He chuckled to himself as Eidos marched out of the office and headed off to cool down. It was a good thing that the man on the other side was offering enough money for every single one of them to start a new life of comfort somewhere else. When he put it like that – it didn't sound like such a bad idea.