

“Gah!”

Sam grunted aloud as her back met the grass. The much taller girl was left sprawled out while I worked the kinks out of my arms. That was a good throw – my judo skills weren’t as rusty as I thought. It was just like riding a bike.

Judo was an easy way to give people the grappling skills they’d need to defend themselves. Wrapping someone up in a choke and incapacitating them was the ultimate goal. Teaching her the fundamentals of striking, or any of the other MMA adjacent skills I possessed would take too long to learn and apply. Fighting with a variety of strikes and holds was more effective than judo on the whole – so I rarely found use for it during my old job as an assassin.

Sam was an eager student and she always paid close attention to what I told her. We sped through the early stages with no difficulty, assisted by Sam’s larger size and already-developed musculature. Working on a farm for most of her life came with some significant benefits. She dusted off the back of her pants while I pulled her back up, “Claude is going to start thinking that you’re abusing me or something. Have you seen some of these bruises?”

“Is that not what’s happening here? I may be teaching you ways to defend yourself – but that inevitably comes with injuries and welts. I’ve been trying to find a softer surface to do this on, but I’ve had no luck thus far.”

Sam shook her head, “I’ve suffered worse than this. This ground is soft enough for practice.”

I smirked, “I think that if someone ever tries to grab you again, you’ll show them a thing or two. No more hostage situations next time.”

Sam looked weary, “Wouldn’t it be better to avoid putting myself into such a bad way entirely?”

“Yes, it would. But there are no guarantees when dealing with other people, the situation may be completely out of your control. The first step to victory is to assume control over the area of engagement, and when that fails you should be prepared for whatever initiative the enemy takes.”

“I understood some of that,” Sam chirped.

We squared up for the final time, with Samantha taking a firm hold of my clothes and hooking her foot around the back of mine.

“Go!”

Samantha used her leverage to push me off balance, before wrestling me to the ground with a hip-toss. From there she wrapped her forearm around my neck and applied firm pressure to my windpipe.

“Good.”

Samantha broke the hold, looking every bit as proud as she felt for earning that scant praise. I rubbed the grass from my ass and took a swig from my water canteen. I looked like a damn alcoholic when I did this – all because the popular proliferation of plastics hadn’t arrived yet.

There was an unusual visitor emerging from between the trees. Claude limped down the embankment and approached Samantha while she tried to clean herself off from the sweat and dirt that had accumulated.

“Sam! There you are.”

He must have gotten the all-clear to ditch the wheelchair and crutches from the Doctor. This was the first time since the shooting that I’d seen him on his own two feet.

“Is this what you’ve been doing every morning lately?” he asked, “Max told me that you walked out of the dorm with Mira. I didn’t expect to find you doing this.

Whatever this is...”

Samantha was quick to concoct a cover story, “I was impressed by Maria’s athleticism – so I asked her to show me a thing or two about how she stays in shape.”

Claude nodded, “Oh. I didn’t know.” He eyed me wearily, but I said nothing to contradict her story. “Max told me that I should come find you before you miss the first period. I have no idea how you keep getting up so early in the morning.”

Samantha laughed, “Grow up on a farm and it’ll become second nature to you. Spring, summer or winter – we always have to wake up before the sun rises.”

“What difference does it make when you go to bed earlier in return?” Claude pondered.

Sam paused, “I don’t know – actually. It’s probably to keep a regular schedule for the animals. Did you start worrying about little old me?”

“No. You’ve just been spending a lot of time with her lately. I thought it was odd given that you were at odds just a few months ago.”

“She’s nice when you break through that hardened outer shell of hers.”

Claude grimaced, “I’ll have to take your word for it. I don’t believe that she wants anything to do with me.”

“Perhaps an apology for those accusations is in order? She’s not the malicious actor you think she is.”

I was standing in earshot of this discussion, so I wasn’t sure why it was such a huge problem for Claude to get over our previous encounters and be friendlier. He’d accidentally stumbled through the hardest part of the reconciliation process. Now that I understood my situation better, I was not going to chase him away with my usual intimidation tactics.

“And why didn’t Max come and find me instead?” Sam queried.

“I think he was busy grabbing a shower. He didn’t have to time to do it last night.”

I approached the pair and made my presence known to him once more, “I’m keeping a close eye on the clock. There is no need for you to trouble yourself and come into the gardens searching for Samantha, especially when you are still rehabilitating your leg.”

“It’s not that bad now,” he insisted, “The Doctors say that I’ll be back to normal in a few weeks. It’ll be like it never happened.”

“You take a very light-hearted approach to your near-death experiences.”

“Why did you pluralise that? You’re trying to jinx me!”

I laughed and walked out of range before he could swipe at me. Samantha tugged on his shoulder and prevented him from giving chase, not that he had any hope of catching me with an injured hip.

“I didn’t know that Maria had jokes now,” he whined.

Samantha grabbed her things from the floor and followed along with us as we headed towards the main building. It was so early that we were the only ones outside in the chilly weather. This was the ideal time to exercise, a flash of cold air into my acid-filled lungs. It woke me up from the drowsiness of a good night’s sleep.

With Cordia’s death – finding a thread to lead us to the people running the show was going to be harder than before. I left her alive the first time because I did not see any value in killing her. She didn’t know my face, and unsettling her was likely to threaten the execution of their plan more than anything else.

Getting in tight with Lance was going to be key, now more than ever.

I couldn’t sit back and put all of my eggs into one basket, but attending the academy restrained my movements. I needed to put out a letter in advance if I wanted to use the carriage, and I was expected to attend most lessons save for extraordinary circumstances. They took that sort of thing seriously.

Caius was a blowhard and I didn’t want to rely on him, but he was capable of some impressive escape techniques. He could potentially be helpful by gathering information about our targets. His first discovery, that Thersyn Bradley was a Scuncath, was a shocking one. I wasn’t certain of what we could make of that. It wasn’t as if we could leak it to the press and have his reputation in tatters without firm evidence.

Scuncath were folks who believed earnestly in the power of violence. They revered acts of bloodletting because they (and some other scholars) believed that it would bring about the revival of the Dark Goddess, or the Black Lady, or Dark Lady, or whatever the hell they were talking about. There were fifty different names and methods assigned to every piece of the puzzle.

It was illegal to be a Scuncath. There was no affirmative right to free speech even in this newly democratized country, but putting that aside they were more of a gang of violent lunatics than a legitimate religious sect. You had the true believers and the ones who exploited them, either way they were bound by an oath of violence. Rates of violent crime from the Scuncath were so astronomically high that they were specifically targeted and banned. It came part and parcel with the ideology.

Given that we'd lived through violent times before – their theory that the Dark Goddess could be revived through singular sacrifices was comical. The civil war resulted in tens of thousands of dead and even more horrifically injured, yet the world did not end as a result.

It did give us a hint towards his true motivations. Thersyn may have seen himself as the one person who could inflame tensions in a similar way and bring about mass death to that end. It was folly, but there was no reasoning with people like him. He'd take this as far as he could and die for it if the need arose.

Killing Thersyn would be a waste of some good information. If we could inform one of his co-conspirators about his true motivations, it could pull apart the stress fractures in their coalition. Scuncath were reviled by huge portions of the general population, fairly or not, for the acts they committed. Legends about them having squalid appearances and sharpened teeth were more misleading than instructional.

My own knowledge of Scuncath was sadly lacking, and they didn't keep records of morbid topics like those in the school library. Any research would have to come from more obscure sources. My old friend religious dogma was also here to cause trouble after my struggles with nihilist magic, which had taken a backseat to all of this fighting with thieves and monarchists. There'd be no unbiased accounts or uncensored records this time – not unless Miss Jennings was secretly a huge fan of their work.

It was tough being proactive when you didn't know where to start. I'd have to cross my fingers and see if Caius could dig something up soon, if not, drastic action would be in order.

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“There you are, Sam.”

Samantha rolled her eyes and sat down next to Maxwell – who was flicking through the pages in his textbook.

“Can I not do what I want without you releasing the bloodhound to find me?” Sam complained.

“Bloodhound? Claude’s hardly a vicious hunter. He managed to get lost in our house once, and it isn’t even that complex of a building.” Easy to say when he’d lived in it for his entire life, of course.

“I was doing some morning exercises with Maria, and my timekeeping skills are second to none. There’s no reason to send Claude out to find me – we were just about to wrap it up and come back.”

Samantha’s blossoming friendship with the coldest shoulder around had attracted a lot of attention and a lot of ire. Claude and Maxwell were uncertain about their own feelings on the topic. Samantha was the girl whom Maria confounded the most at first, but now they were getting along like a barn on fire. It was an inexplicable turn of events, with no indication as to how or why Samantha managed it beyond sheer persistence.

“I don’t get it. I really don’t,” Max grumbled.

“There’s nothing strange about her when you get down to it,” Samantha argued, “There are hundreds of equally unsociable folks in this academy, you only care about Maria because she has a stellar reputation while she’s at it. She was already friends with Felipe before I wormed my way into her heart.”

“Actually - Felipe seems a little put off by her now,” Claude replied. It was so quick that it could only have come from instinct.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. The atmosphere around them seems more awkward than it used to be. Every time we have a magic lesson with him, he can’t seem to look her in the eye.”

Claude winced as the truth came out. He was waiting for Max to yell at him over making up theories again, yet the condemnation never came. Max folded his hands into his lap and nodded.

“I noticed that too. It’s like he’s walking on thin ice around her for some reason.”

Claude exhaled and slumped down again, “Really? That’s the observation you don’t have an issue with?”

“If I’m sensing the same thing that you are – it means that it’s really noticeable. Maria doesn’t seem to care, or even notice that he’s behaving differently.”

“Maria doesn’t much concern herself with how other people feel. She just charges on ahead and if that upsets someone, tough luck.”

Samantha opened her mouth to ask a simple question; “What could the reason behind that be?”

But she never delivered it. She paused and considered her own words. There was one big, significant secret connecting Maria and Felipe. Did Felipe know the truth about who Maria really was? Did he know that she was the one who killed his attackers at the party and the theatre?

Samantha was forced to put everything into perspective. Maria was utterly bewildered by her reaction at first. Despite the truth being as it was – she couldn’t see Maria as anyone but the girl she’d come to know over the preceding months. Everyone had a secret or two, ones that they kept hidden from their closest friends and allies. It was not normal for anybody to react as if it was no big deal. Maria had killed a few dozen people right in front of her.

She was expecting fear or rejection.

Felipe primed her to think that way. Maria used her talents to do what could be considered a good deed, but the means by which she achieved it were questionable and aroused no end of questions. Training with Maria to learn some of her tricks only made Samantha’s curiosity burn brighter. She clearly knew a lot more than what she was willing to share.

Hand-to-hand combat, firearms, magic – she was a walking arsenal of odd quirks that no other girl her age could claim to possess. Seeing her keep such a cool head under pressure, and the way she directed Samantha to do the same, gave off the impression of someone several years her elder. Where did she find the time and space to teach herself all of this? And if she didn't teach herself, who did?

The enigma of Maria Walston-Carter was one that she wanted to decode for herself.

Speaking of whom, Maria waltzed through the door into the lecture hall and quietly took her seat near the front of the crowd. The room immediately descended into a chorus of hushed whispers between the other students, who aired new and existing rumours about Maria and her achievements. These stories had been laundered back and forth so many times that they no longer bore any resemblance to the truth.

“I could ask her about what's going on with Felipe,” Samantha suggested as some deep thought.

Max shook his head, “Seems a little too direct to me. If she hasn't noticed it yet – you might cause a problem by telling her.”

“Yeah, Max is right. You've got to use some subtlety.”

Claude scowled, “What the heck do you know about doing something subtly? You spent the past few months shoving your finger into Maria's face about any wild theory you could come up with.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

Samantha reached out and pinched both of their arms, “Stop arguing like a pair of children. Why are you being stubborn about this? Max is right. Being detested by Maria never stopped you before.”

“Am I not allowed to change my tune? Don't make me spell this out for both of you.”

Max scoffed, “You're definitely just trying to come off as more mature for the girls.”



Claude blushed, “No. I’m not. I already told you – it was because of what you said to me after I got shot. Why are you trying to minimize my maturity here? I thought we had a serious heart-to-heart back there!”

Max laughed at him, “I’m joking. I’m messing with you. You’ve turned as red as a tomato. Are you really that worried about people seeing you that way?”

“Sure I am! I’m not some crazy womanizer who thinks he’s the Goddess’ gift to women everywhere, even if I did try to lift a few lines from those novels before.”

Samantha sighed and covered her face in embarrassment. Even if Claude was interested in landing himself a lady, it was going to be a difficult task with the negative reputation he’d built through his prior behaviour. And not to be mean – but a boy of his station was already facing an uphill battle. He wasn’t from a big-name family and they weren’t as affluent as the other families at the academy. Samantha was in an even worse spot on the social stepladder, being the daughter of a lower-middle-class farmer instead of a police captain.

Nobody dared bully Samantha in person. Such an action demanded a certain level of reckless disregard for their own safety. She towered over all of them and sported a robust body built through years of hard labour on the family farm. It was allegorical to walk into a lion’s enclosure unsighted.

The teacher entered the hall and the voices came to an abrupt stop.

“Good morning everyone. I hope you’ve all been giving some serious thought to which subjects you’d like to specialise in once the time arrives. Six months seems like a long time, but it’ll be here before you know it.”

There was a collective groan from the students, none of whom had yet decided on what subjects to select. The paralysis of indecision was lurking around every corner. Even if a large proportion of the students had their future careers already set in stone, they still wanted to select subjects they enjoyed to focus on.

What surprised Samantha most was the pensive expression on Maria’s face. From her side-on view, she could see the way she fiddled with her pencil with the tips of her fingers. She was always so confident and assured – she thought that Maria’s

uncertainty was only a temporary issue. Since Maria was having such a problem deciding, Samantha felt reassured about her own failure to settle on one subject.

It was more accurate to say that she couldn't take the plunge. Samantha's interests developed rapidly once she left her homestead, branching off into politics, social sciences and medicine. It was entirely possible for her to do all three with her allocation of lesson time. But it was a huge departure from her comfort zone of bailing hay and feeding animals.

Samantha was being her own worst enemy. She was already inventing scenarios and reasons as to why she couldn't do what she really wanted to. She fell into a gloomy mood as the lesson started in earnest. This self-imposed impasse was not going to resolve itself.

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Franklin unlocked the door to Alice's room and stepped through, finding his other guest sitting on the edge of her bed with a notepad in hand.

"Mister Willow, I didn't know you were back."

"Sorry for showing up unannounced. I forget my manners sometimes, but I was in such a hurry to put this down to paper that I.."

Franklin paused. There were several dozen pieces of half-scribbled-on paper scattered around the room. Some of them were on the table, others were taped to the wall, and some were left underfoot for an unfortunate guest to slip on and injure themselves with.

"What in the Goddess's name is this unholy mess you've created? I've only been gone for two hours!"

Franklin bent over and rounded up the stray pages with a furious scowl on his face. Caius and Alice were the good lady's guests, but he was taking her generosity for granted with this sort of behaviour. When he stood back up again – Caius snatched the bundle from his arms and brought them to the table, quickly arranging them and the others into a rough form.

“What is this?” he asked again. The pages were covered with names, and sketches of faces, and connected with long pencil lines intended to direct the eye to relevant information. Of note was a page seemingly dedicated to Cordia, whose face was now crossed out with a bold X mark.

“I got in touch with a contact of mine and scrounged up every piece of information I could about the people trying to murder us and Mister Clemens. It’s a sort of organized chaos at the moment.”

Franklin tapped his finger against Cordia’s, “What is amiss with Cordia?”

Caius grit his teeth and spoke under his breath, “She fell off a building and died.”

“What?” Franklin snapped harshly, “How on earth did that happen?”

“She was at the tennis tournament in the city trying to kill a few of the Social Democratic council members with a knife. When I caught her and gave chase, she made her escape across the rooftops until she lost her footing, and then... Well – I needn’t speak of the grisly scene that unfolded after that.”

“Unbelievable.”

“That’s thrown my little organization tree here into disarray. Cordia was the one coordinating the more violent elements of their plan, and I don’t suppose it’ll be easy to replace her.”

Cordia was connected with Lady Franzheim and Claris Rentree, though a note attached to Franzheim made it clear that she was not the one who commanded her loyalty. Rentree dispatched Cordia to keep an eye on her.

The second big branch belonged to Thersyn Bradley – the news tycoon and business magnate who came from comparatively humble beginnings. Several unfamiliar names were connected to him.

“This looks like an almighty mess,” Franklin sighed.

“These schemes are never simple. They’re designed to protect the people at the top here from the consequences should matters turn against them. That means they

utilise dozens of lower-level pawns, who give orders on their behalf to independent mercenaries and criminals.”

“And these folks really want to kill Sir Clemens?”

“Him, and anybody else running on the Social Democratic ticket. This is all about politics, getting the best possible result in the upcoming election. They don’t care who they hurt in the process.”

Franklin clenched his fist, “I cannot say I approve of your past behaviour, but attacking any one of the Walston-Carter family is abhorrent. I made an oath to protect not just Lady Maria – but every member of the family with the same zeal and determination.”

Caius chuckled and looked down to the floor, “It’s all well and good to say that, but do you think you’re capable of dealing with a group of violent people? I’m no fighter either, but they will hold no reservations about doing harm should it come to that.”

Franklin stood firm, “I may not be capable of fighting but the power of a single man is still enough to make a difference.”

“A noble sentiment if I’ve ever heard one. But it will take more than the likes of me and you to untangle this particular web. Mister Clemens isn’t the only one under threat, and if they succeed it could plunge this nation into a brutal civil war once again.”

Franklin’s gaze hardened, “My Father died in the fighting. They mean to unleash that agony onto others?”

“My Uncle and Grandfather were also killed,” Caius revealed, “The stress of the whole thing led to our parents passing away. Now it’s just me and Alice. I owe it to her, and everyone who lost in that war, to stop it from happening again.”

“Hm. Those don’t sound like the words of a thief to me.”

Caius smiled, “Because I speak to you not as a thief, but as a man, and a brother.”

Franklin watched Alice, happily kicking her legs beneath the covers of the grand bed with a book in-hand. What great pains he must have taken for her sake. Though his actions were immoral, his intentions were as pure as the winter snow.

“You know – Caius was a pseudonym that my old man invented. He swore down on his life that he was never going to show me how to do what he did. That changed really quickly once the other side of our family ran into trouble. He knew that things were going to be tough, so he wanted to give me and Alice a fighting chance. A lot of people tried to steal it from him, but they didn’t work the way he did, or I do. When someone investigates a break-in, they know from the outset who did it.”

Caius removed his hat and laid it out on the table.

“Now I’m thinking that this might be Caius’ last ride.”

Franklin remained silent and mulled over his words. Were they a demonstration of his suicidal dedication to the goal, or merely an expression of his hope for a brighter, less criminally orientated future?

He could only reply with a single warning; “Don’t go making that poor girl sad, Caius.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

