

Of all the people who could have gotten close to discovering my real identity, Claudius was the last person I expected to do it. That was the risk I ran walking around the building with a gun in hand, but my quick thinking saved me from having to deal with any damage control. Claude thought that I was just being stupid and walking around with a gun I wasn't planning on using. He was wrong. I was going to thin the herd before things got any worse.

People would always walk the path that fulfilled them the most, or the one that made them feel the smartest. The biggest secret to getting your way is to make other people think that what you want was originally their idea in the first place. This was true of many things. When trying to gain access to a restricted area or get away after doing the deed – I'd often use slight misdirections to confuse my pursuers. I didn't have many options. I needed a good place to launch the opening strike against the assassins that were after Felipe, but I couldn't move past the point where he was hiding lest I risk them finding him without my knowledge.

I settled on a small library room. It provided me with enough concealment to move around and confuse them, though solid cover was in short supply. There were seven rows in total that ran from front to back, along with a small seating area by the door. The books were the leftovers from what I presumed was the main library in one of the other wings of the building. There was little reason to place a room like this below in the staff corridors.

My plan was simple. I was going to tilt the odds in my favour as soon as possible by taking a pot shot at one of them as they walked through the door. How did I know that they were going to follow me? I'd intentionally left a trail of bloody handprints that led to where I was hiding. Given that I had just brutalized their friend and sent him tumbling into the hall covered in blood, they were going to be out for a bit of revenge. I'd even left the door slightly ajar to sell the story that I was hiding. I braced my shooting arm against one of the bookshelves and steadied my aim. These revolvers could have some pretty serious kick, and I wasn't wasting one of my six shots just to test it out first.

I could already hear them kicking up a fuss.

"Are you sure that they're here?" a voice complained, "Shouldn't we be focusing on taking care of that Felipe kid first?"

"I'm not running around like an asshole looking for him when there's somebody here who wants to do us in!" another barked back, "I thought that Prier was full of shit when he said that there was somebody at that academy on his tail – but I guess he really is just that incompetent after all."

“The blood stops here,” a third informed them.

“Yeah, real bloody convenient. Put a few through the door first.”

I remained still even as a trio of shots tore the shin wooden door to pieces right in front of my eyes. I was one step ahead of that ploy. I’d positioned myself in the next row over at an angle that was almost impossible to hit. If they were also using revolvers or non-magazine-fed weapons, they couldn’t afford to spend a bunch of ammunition shooting blindly into the room. Reloading these things took a very long time, time in which the likes of myself could sweep up from their flank and gun them down uncontested. I felt a swell of anticipation building in my chest as they finally chose to enter the room to find me. I counted each and every second as the door was pushed open from the outside.

The first man charged through with a head of steam, only to be crueller cut down as I pulled the trigger. The hammer cocked itself and fired in one smooth motion. The man on the other end cried out in pain as a fountain of blood and gun smoke pirouetted from his chest and splattered against the wallpaper behind him. He fell to the ground in a heap and clutched the wound, kicking his legs in agony.

“Holy shit, they just shot him!”

“I can see that, moron – get in there and shoot them back!”

But I was already relocating, falling back between the aisles of books and hiding from the entryway. Keeping on the move would prevent them from triangulating my location or using their numbers advantage. Two to one still weren’t favourable odds but they were much better than three to one. Having more bodies gave a multiplicative impact on the outcome of a fight. They’d need to be careful if they wanted to surround me now.

“He’s hit real bad, Eidos.”

“Agh! Son of a whore!” the injured thug yelled.

“I’m giving you one last chance to come out here quietly and surrender,” ‘Eidos’ shouted,

“We won’t hurt you too bad if you do.”

I held my tongue. What kind of idiot would accept an offer like that?

“They’re not going to fall for that, they just shot one of us for the Goddess’ sake!”

“Then stop lollygagging and find them!”

Leading from the front was not his specialty. Tentative footsteps delved deeper into the library, an abundance of caution carried from seeing his friend shot down right in front of him. There was no sympathy coming from me – these people were trying to kill a young boy just to get their hands on the Booker’s business empire. The injured man still hadn’t stopped screaming and shouting. It would have been wiser to preserve his strength and try to get away. I was keeping quiet and using his big mouth to cover my tracks.

I was already located at the back of the aisle. I could jump between them and keep away. My first pursuer had other ideas as his steps gathered pace. He wasn’t going to let me manipulate his movements that easily, so he was charging down the way to try and catch me with a quick shot from the side. My fast reactions were too much though. I stepped to the left and slipped down the aisle next to his, before thumping the bookshelf with a heavy kick. The unsteady wooden shelf gave way and fell down into the corridor, almost crushing him in the process.

“What the hell-”

Bang!

I pulled the trigger and fired at him, but the delay between the pull and the hammer coming down was just enough to save him from a direct hit to the chest. I hated double-action revolvers. They were nice to look at and romantic to the layman, but they always threw off my aim. When every millisecond counted, it was infuriating to miss because of that slight delay. The shot went wild and struck the books behind him, causing them to explode outwards into a flurry of torn pages. He ducked out of the way before I could fire a follow-up, which meant that his friend, Eidos, could run down and get me. I backed away and tucked myself behind one of the shelves again.

“Eidos, it’s a little girl!”

“So what? She has a gun!” he responded, “Don’t tell me that you’re going to flake out now!”

I only had four bullets left.

“That’s not the problem. I was just asking why a teenager has a gun!”

Eidos shouted back, “She stole it from him!”

What the hell were they doing? We were in the middle of an active shootout and they were having an argument over nothing. That was just fine by me, it meant that they weren’t working on the same page. That numbers advantage was looking less advantageous by the second. I peered around the edge to try and catch a glimpse of where they had gotten to, but

both men had made themselves sparse. I could hear them moving somewhere across from me. I got my answer soon after. Several more bookcases came tumbling down as they started to push them over, trying to flush me out of my hiding place by starting a chain reaction.

“This must be the girl that Prier mentioned,” Eidos scoffed, “She’s the only one who knows what we’re trying to do.”

“That’s right, and you fell for my trap without even thinking about it!” I shouted back. Normally I’d keep quiet and use the window to move again, but I wanted them to come to me. I ducked behind one of the upturned shelves and braced my aim. I didn’t want to miss a second shot. When his bumbling friend leapt out from his hiding place to try and cut me down, I responded in kind as his bullet whizzed past my head and kicked up another cloud of book pages. Two shots were fired but only one struck its target. He flew back and tripped over one of the tipped shelves, the shock of the bullet hitting him knocked him out cold.

“Damn it!” Eidos yelled. Flustered and rapidly losing control of the situation, he started firing wildly in my direction. It was a better strategy than any of the others they’d employed thus far, random chance had better odds of hitting me than walking into my sights and making it easy. The problem was ammunition, as always. He only had six shots in the cylinder, and it would take a deaf man not to hear the sound of his hammer striking nothing but metal. I was counting the entire time.

I leapt out of my hiding place and held him up. Sensing that he’d made a major mistake by firing blindly, he put his hands up but refused to release his now empty revolver. It didn’t matter – he couldn’t reload it in time to stop me. His eyes widened in recognition as he finally beheld the red-dress adorned ‘little girl’ who just gunned down two of his men in ruthless fashion. It was a categorical dismantling that displayed the immense gap in skill between me and them.

“I thought Prier was full of crap – but it looks like he was right to worry about you.”

I shook my head, “We’re not here for a pleasant discussion. I want to know how many men you’ve brought and where they’re positioned right now.”

Eidos balked in the face of my reasonable demands, “You really think I’m going to sell out the rest of my crew? What’s stopping you from shooting me once I do? I’m not falling for a basic bloody trick like that. No way, no how.”

Now that I could get a closer look at him, it was no wonder that I had my suspicions about Eidos when I first saw him in the hall. He was the very definition of the word shifty, with a shaved head, long mutton chops, and a scowl that that only a mother would love. Now that his sleeves were rolled up I could also see several decorative tattoos that ran up his arms. He seemed unaffected by the outcome of the fight, even as both of his friends bled out by the door and next to him.

“I’ve got a lot of questions for you, but I don’t think you’ll be well fussed answering them,” he joked.

“The only thing you need to know is that I’m well versed in using a gun.”

“That much was obvious. Maybe Prier wasn’t quite the incompetent blagger I took him for. I’m guessing that you were the one who put those rounds into his leg and chest, and even using his own gun! That’s a personal touch. You’re stone cold – girlie.”

“Hm?”

“Don’t give me that look! Prier was sending the boss man reports on what was going on the whole time, and he singled you out for being an obstacle. He had a sixth sense for that kind of thing, the way you reacted when he shot at the Escobarus kid tipped him off that something wasn’t right. He thought that the feds were inserting child soldiers into the schools to keep an eye on the kids.”

“I think you’ll find that I’m a normal noble girl, actually.”

He laughed, “Don’t piss up my leg and call it rain, love. I know a thing or two about keeping secrets, even somebody like you has a few. Prier didn’t take you seriously enough – that’s why he’s dead and you’re not. There are no second chances in this line of work. One second you’re riding high, the next you’re six feet under.”

“Alright. I’ve heard enough out of you, are you going to tell me how many more men I need to shoot or are we done here?”

Eidos smirked – which put me on guard.

“Oh yeah, we’re done here.”

He reached out with his other empty hand and turned it into a facile of a gun. I could already sense something in the air around me, so I ditched my position and rolled out of the way. Just as I did a bolt of lightning shot from his hand and struck the wall behind me, setting some of

the shelves and discarded papers on fire in the process. It was such a powerful spell that my ears were left ringing. He took the chance to flee out of the door before I could catch him. I should have known that something was up – the guy was a mage. I escaped the room before the fire intensified, but knowing that Felipe wasn't with me my target was already gone searching for him.

"I should have just shot him when I had the chance," I murmured. I released the cylinder and double-checked that I hadn't fired more bullets than I counted. Three left. I thought twice about running off after him blindly. The building was too maze-like for me to find him without a method of tracking where he was. I turned back and ducked my head beneath the smoke gathering at the ceiling. The fire was getting worse, but I still had time to search through their pockets and grab their weapons before it was too dangerous.

Stiff number one came with another double-action gun and an extra six rounds. Stiff two came with a gun of his own, but it was chambered for another type of bullet entirely. I didn't have anywhere to keep it safe but I took it anyway just in case I needed some extra shots. With all of the loose ammunition gathered and one man on the run – it was time to adjust my strategy.

Eidos saw my face, and for that, he wouldn't leave the mansion alive.