

It was inevitable that the events at the party would cause a lot of trouble for the school. To have another incident happen in such close proximity to the one they were covering up blew apart whatever carefully laid plans they had in place to keep things calm. Suddenly, it was front-page news in every major paper in the district. Two attacks on a prestigious institution were kept out of the public eye to protect the faculty. Heads rolled – the Headmaster resigned two days later and was replaced by Robert Engelbart, the senior teacher who gave me permission to leave the grounds a few weeks before.

But the real problem was how they decided to treat Felipe. He was established as the leading cause of the problem and was suspended from school. It was seen as the easiest way to prevent another attack from happening, though it made it almost impossible for me to protect him during his day-to-day life. Beatrice assured me that his Father went above and beyond to hire the best-armed protection that money could buy, it seemed like they'd learned a thing or two from the party and actually vetted them first.

Extra security was also added to the academy. The single guard by the gate was assisted with the arrival of five active private security contractors. I made sure to check them out before going about my normal business, the last thing I wanted was for them to turn out to be members of the same gang as Eidos and the others. There was nothing amiss about them for the time being, but I was going to be vigilante from now on about anyone armed with a gun.

The other, more pressing problem for the teachers and suits was that several families elected to pull their kids from the academy altogether. Our own class was not spared the culling as several of the students disappeared seemingly overnight and returned to their homes. Much to my chagrin, none of them were the people who caused me issues by trying to socialise with me. That would hit them where it really hurt, the wallet. On the other hand, some parents were dead set on making sure that their children graduated from the academy no matter what happened. The risk was seen as a worthy one.

“I heard that the teacher-parent meeting was acrimonious,” Max sighed from the row in front of me, “They were worried that someone was about to throw a punch or two.”

“It makes sense considering that they covered up the whole thing. I would have been furious too. I can’t believe they covered up another attack! I told you they were acting weird!”

“Alright, Claude – I’ll give you that one. You were right.”

Claude pumped his fist into the air and cheered, “Alright! You finally said it!”

Max pulled him back to his seat, “Calm down, the teacher’s going to get mad.”

“It’s fine. They’re not even here yet.”

It was nice to see the main trio remaining mostly unaffected by all of the deadly drama going on around them. I could only guess that they were important people in the future, that was the benefit of being a protagonist in one of these games.

Samantha kept turning around and glancing at me, seemingly under the assumption that I couldn’t see her doing it before I was buried nose-deep into a book. My peripheral vision was a lot better than that.

“Anyway, they’ve banned organising big group events after what happened at the ball. The senior’s graduation dance might be on the chopping block too,” Max grumbled, “They’re not going to be happy about that.”

Miss Jennings burst through the door and put an end to the whispering.

“Apologies for being late everyone! I’m sure that you’ve all heard the bad news, Felipe won’t be joining us for the time being – so I’ve had to make some adjustments to the lesson plans.”

She poured a collection of miscellaneous papers and notes onto the table for later before turning to the chalkboard and scribbling down the itinerary for the day. There was a sharp intake of breath from the magic class as she stepped aside and revealed the dreadful truth. Not only were we starting the magical history module early, but we were also going to be doing so as a group project.

“I was hoping that we could continue our practical lessons with Felipe’s assistance, but now that he is taking a leave of absence from the academy, I decided that it will be more effective for us to delve into a topic that won’t require his help. Magical history is an important contextualization module where we’ll learn about the development of the art and key figures in the world of magic.”

This wasn’t what Adrian wanted to hear. He didn’t even have patience for the practical lessons as they were, being forced to endure a group scholarship project about history was liable to make the brain melt out from his ears. His frustration was made apparent very quickly and he huffed and crossed his arms in frustration. The rest of the class was decidedly more understanding about the problem she faced.

“But I think that this will be a lovely opportunity for everyone to get to know each other a little better. I’d like you to work with those who you usually wouldn’t. Adrian, I’d like you to work with Samantha. Maxwell is with Margaret, and Talia, Maria and Claudius can be a trio.”

Could be worse, I was thankful that I didn’t have to deal with Adrian yelling into my ear for a week while we worked on the project. The seats were shuffled and I was soon joined by Talia and Claudius. Contrary to her intentions, I was already familiar with both of them on some level. Jennings approached each group and handed us a small piece of paper outlining what she expected from us. Our group was given Henry Snow, a pioneer in the field of industrial magic. My Father loved this guy. He had every book and study on his work you could physically buy, and some you couldn’t.

“Henry Snow?” Claude muttered, “I’m not familiar with him.”

“He was an industrialist who came up with a lot of the magical processes that factories used before machines became widespread. He has a rather intriguing life story.”

He turned to me, “Oh, so you know a lot about him.”

“Not everything. Don’t rely on me to do all of the research for our group – I tended to ignore my Father when he started extolling his virtues at the dinner table.”

Talia laughed, “Your Father talks about industrialists at the dinner table?”

“He’s a verifiable workaholic. When he isn’t micromanaging all of our businesses he’s reading about how to be better at doing it.”

Talia was strangely calm considering that her brother had almost been killed by armed gunmen a few days ago, but she was putting on a brave face for the sake of her family’s reputation. The boys and girls at the academy were expected to behave in a way ‘becoming’ of their station regardless of how they felt. It could be tough to pry apart the defensive layers of a person’s obligations to get to the heart of what was wrong.

Claudius was happy with the hand he drew, “You two are smart, this shouldn’t be a hard project at all. All we have to do is put together a short presentation for the others.”

A sneaky way of getting the students to practice their public speaking. A lot of them were anticipated to find jobs in commerce and politics after all; the curriculum was carefully constructed to ensure that they took in all of the essentials before they were let out into the wider world. It was a modern set of ideals for a school to utilise, so I couldn’t complain about the intent. Many others still persisted in rote repetition of facts and didn’t consider tertiary skills like that.

Adrian wasn’t going to be happy no matter who he landed with because he was an anti-social dick at the best of times. Unlike me, who chose to keep people away, he was an easily angered bomb waiting to go off at any moment. Samantha was patient and well-meaning. However, being nice was liable to anger him just as much as insulting him directly. He had a lot to learn and an equal amount of maturing to do in the coming years. There were reasons behind his behaviour that I could understand but that didn’t mean I wanted to be around him. He was unpleasant and far too loud for my taste.

Nobody else in the academy knew what I did either. They weren’t going to cut him some slack because their only perspective of him was where he was behaving at his worst. For now, he remained mostly silent while Samantha read through the assignment and tried to keep herself cool under his aura of pressure. He looked like an angry rottweiler staring at a pack of birds.

“Next week we’re all going to come together and present a short speech on each of our subjects. Please make them ten to twenty minutes long. A list of suggested topics is included in the assignment sheet. A short history of the individual, their contributions to the magic sciences and a description of some of the spells that they discovered are great starting points.”

Jennings told us a few other key details before moving into a normal lecture about some of the theory we needed to cover. Practical lessons were going to be much harder without a second pair of hands to assist. She’d need some time to readjust her plans accordingly. When the lecture was done, Talia and Claude stuck with me as I stepped out of the room.

“We should get an early start on the project,” Talia said. I had to agree. Claude would completely forget to do it if we let him off his leash now.

“Yes. Shall we go to the study and begin our reading?”

Claude groaned, but Talia wasn’t playing around. She grabbed the back of his shirt collar and dragged him along with us.

“Why do we have to work with other people, wouldn’t it be easier to study ourselves?” he griped – echoing the thoughts of schoolchildren across every universe.

“It’s about working as a team,” Talia replied, “When you get a job, you’re going to have to deal with a lot of different folks. You might not like some of them very much.”

“Are you speaking from experience?”

“My Mother is always complaining about the people at her company. I don’t have a problem with you two if that’s what you mean.”

We reached the study and easily found an open table to stake our claim on. Even the students who were still at the academy were more isolated now. They were afraid that another attack would happen and that they’d be the victims. It was an open secret that Felipe was the one being targeted, but that didn’t stop the superstition from spreading like wildfire. Claudius immediately started staring at me as we gathered around and picked out our spots.

“Is something wrong, Claudius?”

He stammered and clammed up, “Ah. Nothing.”

Talia was straight to the point; “There’s no need to walk on eggshells with me because of what happened to my brother. I know that both of you were there as well.”

“I didn’t want to bring it up while we were busy,” Claude replied, “It would be rude for me to start barraging you with questions or talking about it when he was the one in serious trouble.”

“It’s a little late to worry about that sort of thing now. Every single person in the academy knows about it.”

Claude turned his gaze back to me, “I was hoping to ask Maria about what she was doing during that whole incident.”

Talia got in the way of his plan, that much was clear to me. I was only going to tell him what I told the police. I was hiding in a different room away from the chaos and didn’t know who was responsible. I checked on Felipe and Claudius, and once the shooting stopped, I left and returned to the hall. It’d be a cold day in hell when I let slip details about what I was really doing without being under duress. Claude saw me with the gun but it was easy for me to bat away any accusations of being the one responsible for the massacre in the lobby and library.

There were more than a few benefits to being Maria. People didn’t like questioning me, I looked pretty so they’d be biased in favour of whatever I told them, and I was an influential noblewoman who could probably get away with genuine murder if I made the right implications to some important people. Claudius was such a dunce that most of that didn’t register in his mind. He’d already constructed a narrative about what happened that evening. Considering he was closer to the facts than anyone else, his methodology had some merit.

“Where did you even find that gun in the first place?” he posited.

“I know a thing or two about finding where people hide their weapons. Everybody does the same thing. Bedrooms, offices, and some people are negligent enough to leave them in the open.”

“You had a gun?” Talia gasped.

“Yes. I didn’t use it. It was merely for self-defence.”

“A likely story,” Claudius smirked.

“Claudius – you should know that there is a large difference between shooting a clay plate, an animal, and a human. To rob another of their life is the greatest scar that one can inflict unto themselves. It is never a decision to be taken lightly. I would only kill if it meant protecting myself or a large number of others.”

That was a lie.

“And even if things came to that – I would surely hesitate in the moment. The simplest answer I can offer is that I endeavour to avoid those situations so I need not make that decision.”

And so was that. I threw myself into the path of that oncoming bus.

My harsh words cut Claudius’ questioning short. There was nowhere else for the discussion to go after that point, so I left the table and gathered every book I could find that mentioned Henry Snow. I recognized a few of them from my Father’s personal collection. I brought the pile to the table and placed them in front of Talia and Claudius.

“This should be a good place to start. I can work on a rough outline of what we’ll discuss, and then we can find more specific information in these books.”

Talia smiled, “Looks like Maria has it under control, as always.”

“Someone has to pull their weight, because Claudius won’t...”

“Hey!” he snapped back,

I took a blank piece of paper and started to pencil down the bullet points that Jennings asked us to cover, “I’ll retract my statement if you can complete the day’s work without opening one of those detective novels.”

Claudius crossed his arms and harrumphed, “Easy. You’ll be eating those words soon enough.”