

The Department of Transportation was every bit as exciting as it sounded. What little energy had been generated by our arrival at the Theatre was soon sapped away by a succession of increasingly dull stops along our tour. It was worse than my most pessimistic predictions. Were the teachers at the academy taking drugs when they decided to institute this as a yearly tradition? I couldn't put myself in their shoes at the moment when this particular idea was formed.

The only entertainment to squeeze out of this was the way that everyone's faces became increasingly weary with each location we visited. For sure, that is a collection of government office spaces, but a room filled with desks and dividers was not going to capture the imagination of a group of young students. Patrick's attempts to keep spirits high with jokes and stories were falling flat. Forget being shot, this was the most painful thing I'd ever experienced.

Bless this man's soul – he was trying his hardest.

"It's almost time for us to attend the morning debate session. Let's find some good seats up on the balcony!" If he was hoping that the thought of the debate session would perk up the group, he was mistaken. To us it sounded like swallowing a bucket of sand while dying of thirst.

At least I didn't have to pay attention while making my mental map of the building for later. It wasn't a complicated labyrinth like the Booker's place. Everything was laid out to make it easier for the government employees to move from department to department as they were needed.

Patrick and the teachers ushered us through the doors and onto the first floor balcony, which gave us a great view of the entire chamber. A few dozen MPs were already sitting in their assigned places, with the speaker of the house rambling through an order list before things got underway. I made extra sure to sit next to Felipe at the front, with Samantha sitting on my other side. We were allowed to whisper to each other, so long as we didn't interrupt the proceedings in the chamber.

Samantha was looking extremely disillusioned, "I don't think that politics is for me."

“I don’t disagree. Though the people sitting down there don’t worry themselves about the fine details of how to run a government department. They show up twice a month, rubber stamp their vote, and go back to their countryside palaces with nary a thought spared.”

Samantha’s brow raised, “They get paid for that?”

“Yes.”

“But they’re already rich.”

“Yes, but if a poorer MP were to be elected – they’d need to receive a wage.”

That was a very big ‘if,’ most of the MPs were from established noble families or big businesses. Running a campaign was expensive and the urban areas didn’t have an appropriate level of representation in the house for their population. With many of those poorer, republican MPs being non-noble businessmen, even the lower end of the scale was packed with big money. But anything was an improvement over the Monarchy to some. More progress would come with time and patience.

I had to remind myself that this was a world with a chequered history involving evil overlords and prophecies of doom, not just a recreation of post-industrial-revolution politics from my universe.

“How much do they make?”

“Eighty-thousand marks a year.”

Samantha exhaled, “Never mind. I’d happily do this job for that much money.”

It was more than her farm made in profit, that was for sure. The real money was made by advancing bills to advantage yourself and your family. Every campaign expense was just an investment that led to the influence they needed.

The speaker banged his gavel and called the parliament to order.

“To begin, we will proceed with the member’s speeches on bill thirty-nine, expanding the jurisdiction of the city’s court to Farman Yard. Mister Walter-Jones, if you would please begin.”

Walter-Jones stood from his chair and approached the smaller podium that rested beneath the speaker's chair. After shuffling through his papers and clearing his throat, he started to make his argument for the bill.

“In recent years, Farman Yard has become an increasingly important part of the city's economy, but until now it remained under its local jurisdiction. With the addition of a seat to the house to represent its citizens, it is only natural that the local court be merged with the metropolitan one. Assurances have been made that the judges, clerks and lawyers will retain their existing positions, but it will allow the metropolitan court to hear appeals on decisions made there.”

My eyes nearly rolled into the back of my head. I slumped back into my seat and stared at the pattern on the wall behind the stage. It was a strange combination of green and blue, almost like the feathers of a peacock. Whatever it was – it did a much better job of catching my attention than Walter-Jones' impassioned pleas to his colleagues to approve the merging of the courts.

This bill was almost certain to pass so I wasn't sure why he was bothering with a long speech. It had cross-party support, unifying the legal structure of the area and promising more resources for the previously deprived outer areas of the city. Every bill had to be debated as a matter of constitutional law. Some of the members took that responsibility more seriously than others.

“I don't get what they're talking about,” Samantha murmured with a befuddled expression.

“Don't you have property disputes in your home town?” I queried, “Courts deal with that kind of thing or criminal cases like murder and robbery.”

“Oh! I get it now, but we don't have a court back home. Property disputes are usually resolved by both families getting into a big fight.”

Maria and I were aligned in our response; “That does not sound very proper to me.”

Her shamefaced response told the tale, “Our town is a little... behind the times.”

I turned around in my chair and spied Claude sitting in the back row on his lonesome. Max was also isolated, sitting on the far left next to one of the teachers. Adrian was also at the back doing his best to keep his eyes open and his head tilted upwards. Even though the two friends weren't speaking or even in eyesight of one another, they were still sporting bitter faces, unwilling to let the masks crack for one second. There was at least an hour of this to go. I was almost wishing for someone to burst through the door and fire a gun in the air.

"I wish this place was still a theatre," Samantha lamented.

I was counting the seconds that dragged on with each sequential speaker. It wasn't much of a debate. Though some did have objections to the urban council taking legal responsibility for a formerly independent area, they didn't have the votes to effect any real change in the bill. It was highly unlikely that any minds were going to be changed through their impassioned words.

I was waiting for the penny to drop – the moment where everything went to hell. It was coming, I could feel pimples breaking out on the surface of my skin. I started to sweat and my heart pounded with freshly bled adrenaline. Time started to speed up as my anticipation grew. This wasn't paranoia. It was the result of a life spent killing and avoiding being killed in return.

I heard the click of the door opening.

There was no time to worry about being found out. I turned around in my seat and glanced at the shady-looking man who was trying to sneak onto the balcony without permission. The doors had been left unlocked, though that would prove to be a boon in an emergency situation. I recognised him. He was one of the assholes who fled through the front door during our last shootout at the party. His hand was already reaching into the folds of his jacket to withdraw some type of weapon. A flash of chrome and a straight handle screamed 'knife' to me. He was planning on running to the front row and stabbing Felipe to death.

Not if I had anything to say about it.

I leapt from my chair and into the aisle. He drew his blade and charged towards the front, seemingly ignorant to the fact that I was standing right in front of him and obscuring his path. Going one on one with a knife-wielding maniac was a bad idea. I had no window to draw and fire my gun with him moving so quickly. I tilted my upper body forward and looked down to the floor. He collided with me, trying to push me aside with brute force instead of getting caught up in using it on me. That was his biggest mistake.

With a mighty heave and a roar, I flipped him over the railing by pushing myself up from under his stomach. His weight pulled me off balance, and we staggered back towards the railing that separated us from the main hall. When the weight left my back and shoulders, the fight was punctuated with a loud yell of shock as he fell from the first story, which was several feet above the ground, and crashed into one of the empty desks with an almighty clatter. He was out cold and possibly sporting a couple of fractured bones for the effort.

It all happened so swiftly that none of the spectators were capable of understanding it. A complete stranger had charged down the middle of the aisle wielding a knife, and I'd tossed him over the edge and into the main atrium in retaliation. Felipe gripped the armrests of his seat and stared at me.

“What the heck was that?”

I stood up straight and cracked my aching shoulders, “Self-defence.”

They caught on after that. Some of the guards in the theatre rushed over and dragged him away before he could harm one of the MPs. Meanwhile, Patrick and the teachers decided that now was a good time to make ourselves sparse before someone else came to try and finish the job. The speaker banged his gavel and the session was adjourned in short order.

Felipe peered over at the carnage, “You just threw him over the balcony.”

“He was trying to stab you.”

“S-Sure, but I didn't know you were strong enough to do something like that!”

Samantha joined the chorus, “I saw you in the changing room, but I didn’t realise that you were robust enough to do that to someone.”

I crossed my arms, “And why, pray tell, were you staring at me in the changing room?”

Samantha deflected my inquiry, “Everyone else was doing the same thing. They were just curious about some of the rumours that they’d heard.”

Tales of my athletic prowess, hard earned through years of training, were not news to me - but being the subject of intense scrutiny in the changing room was. I foolishly thought for a moment that their unrestrained gawping would be preceded by their politeness. There was no getting around it. I couldn’t demand to be let out and change elsewhere without raising more questions.

“I like to train my body as well as my mind. Is there a problem with that?”

Samantha and Felipe frantically shook their heads, “Not at all!”

Patrick was herding the rest of the students to the door, “Everyone – please stay calm and follow me to the emergency exit! Security is going to make sure that the building is safe before the session can resume!”

He was the one panicking the most. Very few of the kids on the trip were present at Beatrice’s party, so they thought that this whole thing was exciting. That wouldn’t last for long as we stepped out into one of the offices behind the balcony. Two armed men were cresting the stairwell now that their primary plan had been scuttled by my presence. Naturally, the group headed the other way to try and shake them. This was bad. I could tell that there were more of them moving in to try and pincer us. Where the hell were the guards?

I grabbed Felipe by his arm and dragged him across the floor, between the dividers. I couldn’t hope to keep him hidden even in a large office space like this. One of the others wouldn’t be able to keep their mouth shut under duress. I wanted space to manoeuvre.

“Aren’t we going to follow Patrick?” Felipe yelled, unable to fight back against my grip. My point was proven moments later as a collection of screams echoed from the other side of the room. Three more armed goons had ascended from the other side to try and trap us. Felipe’s eyes met mine and he implicitly understood that I was the person to follow if he wanted to leave the building in one piece. I stretched down and unzipped the side of my skirt just in case I needed to pull my gun.

The office wasn’t left lacking in hiding spots thanks to the cubicles, but the only way out was to use the stairs. Hoping that they wouldn’t search this area was not a sound strategy with so many of them entering the room.

“What are you people doing?” Patrick bellowed, “This is a government building! Put those guns away immediately!”

“Stay the hell out of our way, asshole.”

I could hear them scuffling. To give credit to Patrick, he was doing what he could to keep the tour group safe.

“Stay right there!” the man commanded, “I don’t want any funny business from you lot. You play along and we won’t hurt any of you.”

Another voice cut in with a complaint, “Why are you doing this with one hand tied behind our backs? I don’t want to babysit a bunch of kids.”

“Because the boss is here, idiot. He wants this done proper. The last try was a total bloody mess! So, don’t embarrass yourself in front of him or you might get left here for the police to catch.”

“That didn’t stop him from bringing Eidos along..”

Loose lips sink ships, and so too do they provide a font of helpful information about what was going on. They were so confident in their control of the building that they were willing to talk openly about their plan. Even better – the man partly responsible for this mess was here with them to direct things personally.

“They’re here for me again,” Felipe whispered.

“I figured as much.”

“But they have everyone else as hostages, what are we going to do?”

“Keep our heads down and try to slip past them, what else? They can’t use leverage if we refuse to play by their rules.”

It was risky, but given that one of them just commented about keeping things under control and presumably limiting civilian involvement, it was no riskier than what I did at the Bookers’ party. I put my hand on Felipe’s back and pushed him along in a crouched stance to keep our heads from poking over the top. This was all about timing. I found a good place to stop on the penultimate row before the stairs.

“We’re looking for Felipe Escobarus, and don’t give us a pack of lies before we ask where he is. We know he’s here in the building, and he’s meant to be with you. Where is he?” A nervous silence covered the group in response. Most of them didn’t even know, I’d grabbed him and moved away before they had a chance to understand what was happening.

The other man butted in, “Hold on a second. There’s somebody else missing.”

The ruffling of paper was followed by a horrified gasp. Not wanting to show their hand, they remained silent on what exactly had elicited the reaction. They had a register of everyone who was coming on this trip. The only people missing were me and Felipe. They must have figured out that I was the one responsible for the collapse of their last plan. There were several living witnesses who got away to tell the tale.

“They can’t have gone far!” he barked, “Spread out and search the room. You two, watch the stairs.”

Magic wasn’t necessary to get their locations this time. The floor of the room was tiled, and the fine art of subtlety was lost on them as they pounded against it in heavy boots. I honed in on their movements and tried to map out where they were in relation to us. There was some commotion coming from the floor below us as well.

“Now!”

Felipe almost fell to the ground as I pulled him along with me to the next hiding spot. We ducked into another cubicle and kept watch as one of the assassins passed us by



without sparing a second glance. The pressure of the holster against my leg was an ever-present reminder that I had to pick a moment to reveal that I was armed. We wouldn't get to the stairs with someone watching them. I needed to act quickly and take them out before they could stop us.

Claudius decided that now was the best time to speak after hours of complete silence, "You do know that the police are going to be here any minute? All we have to do is stand here and wait."

The team leader was not amused; "You've got a big mouth, lad. We already know exactly how long we can stay here before things get too hot – so I wouldn't go counting those chickens before they hatch. With such an important group of hostages, we can make 'em stall for however long we like."

Max was firm, "Stop trying to be a hero, Claude. Just shut your mouth and sit here."

"Don't tell me that you're okay with this!"

"I never said that did I? Of course I'm not okay with it!"

Their little argument worked to my benefit. That level of background noise was enough for us to move without worrying about catching their attention. From booth to booth, we moved, occasionally packing ourselves into the small workspaces and making ourselves look as small as possible. Once I was sure that we were at the right distance from the stairs and out of range of their reaction time, I pulled the gun from my leg and unlatched the safety.

"Where did you get that?" Felipe hissed, "Don't tell me that you're going to shoot at them!"

"Now isn't the time to complain," I replied.

"You shouldn't turn yourself into a murderer for my sake!"

"You don't need to worry about that."

Not wanting to waste any more time, I pulled him along with me and burst out from our hiding spot. My free hand took aim at the man standing at the top of the stairs and pulled the trigger. A deafening bang brought about another bout of screams from

the tour group. The man's head whipped back with a spray of crimson, and his flaccid body tumbled down the steps and disappeared out of sight.

"I crossed that line a long time ago."

Felipe was left stunned and silenced. There was already another man coming up from below to try and find out what was going on. We made a break for it, running up the stairs to the second floor and leaving the rest of the group behind. Felipe's legs were like jelly thanks to the stress. He wasn't used to this sort of thing. I had to keep that in mind before I tried to do anything.

We tore down the corridor as fast as our legs could carry us. Felipe finally found his voice, "You killed him, you really killed him!"

"They're trying to kill you!" I snapped back. I took a sudden left as one of the men crested the stairs and fired at us. One hapless office worker was almost struck as the bullet ripped through a pile of nearby papers, kicking them up into the air. That second gunshot was enough to confirm their worst fears – they were caught up in the middle of a shootout. Those who remained behind started to panic and rushed towards the stairs to try and get away.

To our benefit, that meant that the assassins were pushed back by a swarm of civilian bodies, and considering that they'd been instructed to keep things clean for now – they would struggle to follow us. I took full advantage of this and used what knowledge I had gathered about the building to plan our next move. We needed to get somewhere safe so I could drop Felipe off and stand guard. It was highly unlikely that the police were going to sit idly by and let a gang of criminals run wild in the nation's parliament building with some of the sitting members still inside.

My target was a nearby side room which we could hide in for the time being. I threw Felipe inside and slammed the door shut behind us, quickly dragging a chair over and jamming it beneath the handle to prevent them from getting inside. Felipe slumped down against the wall and caught his breath. I hadn't broken a sweat yet.

"Did you really need to do that?"

I turned to him with a glower, “Would you have preferred for him to shoot us dead instead? Because that was what was going to happen if I didn’t attack first.”

Felipe was scrambling for purchase and his questions weren’t getting the answers he wanted. He rephrased it to be more direct, “You don’t seem to mind at all. You just killed a man and you’re treating it like this happens every day!”

“Is that the impression I give?”

“You knew right away what was about to happen. You threw that man from the balcony when he had a knife, you grabbed me and snuck around them, and now you’ve barricaded us in here. There’s no imaginable way that your parents taught you any of this!”

I shrugged, “Any other explanation I can give you is just as unpalatable as the one you suggest. If you are concerned for my mortal soul, then you needn’t worry over something which has already been blackened with the blood of another man. I do not feel a shred of guilt for a cold-blooded killer meeting his end while attempting to commit a crime.”

“Aren’t you the same?”

“Cold-blooded, perhaps, but I only fight back when someone else begins this conflict. It shouldn’t have to be said that I’d prefer to be anywhere else but here right now.”

Felipe looked down at my gun hand, “And where did you get that?”

“I brought it with me.”

“You smuggled a gun onto the academy grounds?” he exclaimed. I ignored his question, not wanting to reveal too much information without a good reason.

“The bottom line is that there are a group of people out there who want to murder you. They have access to the building and knowledge of our schedule. That means they have a way of gathering that information from an inside source.”

“Don’t shift the topic on me, Maria. Don’t pretend that killing someone doesn’t have an effect on you! Why would you do something like that for my sake?”

Walking him through the psychological compulsions I suffered was a waste of effort. That would mean wading into the weeds of my reincarnation and existing understanding of this world. I scratched the back of my head and exhaled, “Because you haven’t done anything wrong, of course. Is it not the most ordinary position to oppose sinners and protect the innocent?”

“But...”

“How many people do you suppose that man had killed, or how many do you think he had a hand in killing before he came here? Dozens? A hundred? More? He was free to do as he pleased despite having committed those crimes, yet he chose to come to this building to try and kill you. At every stop along the way he made the incorrect assessment. He didn’t die because I shot him, he died because he placed himself into a position to be shot.”

“That’s too callous.”

“It is, but I don’t feel guilty about doing it. I’m sure that he would have gone on to inflict suffering on other families without a moment of remorse.”

At the heart of my hypocrisy was an acknowledgement of how the outcome was more important than the means. Everyone placed different values on different things. Human life was something that many universally agreed was the most precious of all. It was the complete encapsulation of your existence and experience. Without life, there was no meaning to anything you did. In the face of that, did it matter if what you did was morally reprehensible or not? In an ideal world nobody would need to commit crimes, nor would they feel the desire to hurt others. We did not live in an ideal world. For as long as people were incentivised to do wrong, wrong would continue to exist.

My ambition was limited to what I could reach. I was no hero. I was an individual making those small judgements for myself. This penance was one paid back in the only way that I knew how, it was the one thing that I excelled in above all else, violence. If by chance that violence protected thousands of other future victims from the same situation, then so be it.

“We’re going to stay here until the fighting is over.”

“But what about the rest of the class? They’re being held at gunpoint as we speak.”

“They’re here for you.”

“I’m not going to let my personal well-being be the reason for others getting hurt,” he said resolutely, “There has to be something we can do.”

I turned away from the door for a second and made my case, “There’s nothing you can do.”

“But!”

“I don’t care what you think, Felipe. There are dozens of heavily armed killers running around this building as of this moment. I’m going to offer you a choice. I can stay here and watch the door until the police arrive, or you can send me out there to try and find out where they’re being held.”

Felipe bit his lip and considered my deal. He understood that I was right on the first point – he didn’t have any training in firearms, nor was he a trained assassin like me. The best he could do was stumble blindly around the offices before being shot in the back and executed. Asking me to leave split the difference. He was sacrificing his safety for the sake of the class, but without flutily throwing his life away in the process.

“Fine. Do that. I don’t think I could live with myself if one of the first-years got killed because of this. But are you sure you can handle this?”

“I will give you a hint – who do you think fought back during the attack on Beatrice’s house, exactly?”

Recognition. His eyes widened as he finally connected the dots. Perhaps he knew from the start that this was the case, given the evidence on hand, but was unwilling to accept it as fact. It was an utterly ridiculous turn of events. There was no way to blame him for second-guessing himself.

“That was you?”

I said nothing more and unblocked the door, “You need to close this behind me after I leave, and don’t open it for Claude again if he comes knocking.”

He spoke with resignation; “Okay.”

The door clicked shut and I raised my gun into a firing position.

It was time to go hunting.