

Claudius was not having a good time.

He thought that attending a noble ball was the worst thing that was going to happen this evening. Even a cursory look at what most of the other students were doing was enough to bore Claudius out of his mind, and he was a boy who found amusement in things other people considered mundane. He did not understand the appeal in the slightest. Who would want to go to a party with boring music, and where nobody seemed interested in having fun? Most of the attendees were just standing around and chatting with each other, if that.

His complaints about the party were superseded fairly quickly, with a patter of gunfire from the main hall and the panicked movements of the staff members in the main lobby. Claudius found himself standing in the middle of the tempest – a witness to the kind of crime that his Father specialised in cracking down on. Claudius ducked for cover behind the nearest piece of furniture as four gunmen emerged into the front garden and prevented anyone from leaving. The people trying to escape the manor were contained and forced back into the building under threat of execution.

This was it; the moment that Claudius had been waiting for his whole life. There was a real, honest to goodness crime happening right in front of him! Hundreds of stories of heroism ran through his mind. Tales from the brave and the bold, the bystanders who stepped in to prevent injustice even at great personal risk. Claude idolised those men and women, it was part of the reason why he was so intent on following in his Father's footsteps. Being a police officer wasn't glamorous – he knew that, and it didn't command the same attention that a civilian hero did...

So why couldn't he will himself to move?

This was it. The type of occurrence that he dreamed about every single day was happening right before his eyes! But he couldn't move. His legs were locked into place like they were connected to the floor. His breathing felt uneven as adrenaline surged through his body, but rather than summoning bravery – it only made his panic worse. He didn't have a gun, and he didn't know the first thing about fighting someone in hand-to-hand combat. The moment he tried anything, he'd be gunned down in a hail of bullets. There was a sudden, sobering moment as Claude observed from his hiding place. He was no hero at all.

There was a nascent understanding within him. His obsession with detective novels and true crime stories was all fun and games, even his wild theories about people like Maria were just to amuse himself more than anything. It made his life feel more exciting with danger and

menace lurking around every corner. He would declare someone like her to be a murderer, and then turn around to accept her personal tutoring a few days later. He'd have to be a tremendous fool to not see the failings in his own behaviour. Claudius would not be attending such a prestigious academy if he weren't highly intelligent already. But his desire to be helpful was earnest. What could a boy his age do to help people like his Father did?

They had guns, Claudius didn't. If those crime serials had taught him anything, it was that getting into a fight with them was going to be a terrible idea. Claude didn't want to get caught and held by them either, so he scuttled away on his hands and knees to a nearby storeroom to get out of sight before they found him. The room was not replete with things that could help him fight his way out of the manor, not unless he turned the broom in the corner into some kind of pointed weapon. Cleaning supplies versus firearms was not a favourable equation.

Claudius chastised himself. There really was nothing for him to do, unless he could find a way off of the property to go and find some help. Surely a barrage of police officers moving up on the building would scare them away before they could bring the people to harm. It was a safer bet than letting them do whatever they pleased. Taking the broom in hand for self-defence, he peered out of the doorway and tried to get a view on the situation. The gunmen had posted two to watch the front door, but their backs were turned to the lobby. The rest of the staff had been ushered back towards the hall so that they could keep an eye on them.

Perfect. Claudius kept his head low and scuttled away from the commotion before he could be caught up in it. He needed to find a window or exit that would allow him to leave without anyone seeing him. His best hope was to head to one wing of the house that wasn't being watched and make a break for it through the gardens – then it would be a simple matter of reaching a nearby police outpost and informing them of the trouble. A quick telephone call to the nearest dispatch operator would have things cleared up in a jiffy! Of course, Claudius was assuming that everything would go perfectly smoothly, unimpeded by others or faced with adversity.

There was one immediate problem. Claudius had no idea where he was going, aside from that he needed to keep heading in one direction to find an exit. Easier said than done when he wandered into the twisting, velveteen corridors of the staff area. There wasn't a single window to be seen or orient himself with, and every area rapidly started to blend together as he walked in circles time and time again. It was safe to say that he was getting incredibly frustrated. As far as he knew he was the only one in a position to get out of there and bring help back.

“Come on Claude, what happened to those amazing powers of deduction?” he despaired, “They’re going to find your skeleton in here in a few years...”

How hard was it to pick a direction and keep walking? Very; given that the building wasn’t designed with such a task in mind. There was no rhyme or reason to the layout from what he could see, whenever he thought he was headed in the right direction he’d end up facing a blank wall or a locked door in short order. Claude thanked his lucky stars that the criminals rampaging through the building hadn’t seen him yet. Though he did nearly jump out of his skin when a white blur leapt around one of the corners and stared at him. It took him a moment to realise that it was Beatrice’s pet cat, and not a man out to kill him.

Bloody cat!

The cat was not of much assistance in this case. Claude walked over to it, but was nearly bowled over in the process as a familiar girl bolted down the corridor. Everything came to a halt as the culprit stopped in place and tucked one arm behind her back.

“Maria?” Claude gasped from the floor, “What are you doing out here?”

“Didn’t you hear the commotion?” she responded nervously, “There are armed men in the building. I was helping Felipe hide before they could find him.”

Hide Felipe?

“That doesn’t explain why you were running down here.”

“I thought that would be rather obvious, given the circumstances.”

Maria’s behaviour struck Claude as strange. It was the first time he’d ever seen her acting like she wasn’t in total control of the situation. That would make sense if she were any other girl, but Claude just couldn’t imagine Maria losing her cool over something as banal as a dangerous hostage situation. His eyes were drawn to the arm that now rested against her back. Her other hand was covered in a mysterious red liquid.

“And what happened to your arm?”

Maria sighed, “I didn’t get the opportunity to clean the wine from my hands before we were rudely interrupted.” Claude was too flustered to make the obvious observation that the consistency and colouration of the ‘wine’ on Maria’s palm was too dark and thick to be an alcoholic beverage. In reality, it was blood from a pair of troublesome encounters.

“Do you know how to get out of here?” he asked.

“Not exactly.”

“You’ve got to help me get out of here! We need to go and get the police!”

Maria was unperturbed, “I’m sure that one of the staff is already on their way to do just that. You should find somewhere safe and try to keep out of trouble.”

Claude tried to move around her and catch sight of what she was hiding, but she deftly turned to face him, before positioning herself against the wall. It only served to heighten his curiosity. She was even trying to separate herself from him. Something foul was afoot – and he was going to find out what.

Claude pointed behind her, “Look, a cat!”

Maria remained completely still, “Yes. I met her earlier. Beatrice has spoken to me before about them. Are we going to stand here and talk all day, or get somewhere safe before they come looking for us?”

Claude had to admit that it was a poor effort. He sighed and turned around to keep going where he was originally moving with Maria hot in pursuit. Claude kept replaying the discussion in his head. He needed answers and he needed them fast. Once he was happy that Maria was moving at a decent pace, he stopped suddenly and allowed her to overtake him. That was all he needed to see what she’d been hiding from him. It was unmistakably a revolver, clutched between wine-drenched hands. Maria’s fingers were so dainty that he wondered if she could even pull the trigger without an almighty effort.

Maria was not happy about his duplicity. She reached out and grabbed his jacket, pulling him into a nearby alcove and pushing him up against the wall. Claude had messed up – he didn’t expect her to act like that just because he saw it.

“W-Why do you have that gun, Maria?”

Maria blinked, “I stole it.”

“Why?”

“So that I could defend myself, why else would you use a gun?”

Claude was filled with even more questions than he held already. Where did she get it from? Why was she trying to hide it? And was she really willing to go that far and shoot someone dead using it? The last one stuck out to him; his detective persona wanted to say yes, but his

rational mind thought otherwise. Maria was cold-blooded but that didn't necessarily make her a killer. There was a world of difference between harsh words and actual harm done.

"Listen, Claude – those men are here to try and kill Felipe, I heard them demanding to know where he is. I've hidden him somewhere in the manor where they probably won't find him, you should go and do the same."

"But what are you going to do?" Claude fired back, "Don't tell me that you're going to try and shoot some of them." Maria was visibly conflicted, though Claude was not aware that she was acting. Maria had killed hundreds of people in her past life, it was no problem to add a few more to the list.

"If it comes to that..."

"No, no. You can't do that. That's one thing that you can never take back once you do it. My Father's done it before, and he said it was the worst thing he ever did! He's a fully-grown man! And he was ready to because it was his job. He still got shaken up by it!"

The pair stared each other down. Claude could feel his pulse quickening as her predatory red eyes took a deep measure of his character. In any other circumstance,, he'd consider it almost intimate to be so close to her, but Maria's behaviour made it plain that she was extremely angry with him. Was it because she didn't want to be told what to do? Or something else entirely?

"I can choose to do what I want, Claude. Call it desperate, or silly, but I'm going to keep myself safe by using this thing. Saving your soul doesn't mean much when you give up the one life you get. There are no second chances here."

Before the debate could go any further, a cacophony of voices and footsteps could be heard from further down the corridor. They'd already started moving to try and find Felipe and the culprit behind their friend's new look. Maria was out of time, she pulled Claude along with her until she found an unlocked door – throwing him inside and slamming it shut to keep him away from trouble.

"Stay in there until this is over. There's something that I need to do."

Claude hurried to his feet and opened it again, but she was already gone. He pulled it shut as a group of armed men maundered their way past. Was Maria really going to try and get one over on a gang of armed thugs? She may have been good at sports, but this was a whole different ball game!

