

Classes were suspended for the rest of the week while the headmaster attempted to settle on a course of action. The police wanted space from the leering eyes of the student body, so the cordon was extended to a large section of the gardens which we were now forbidden from passing through. I could not conceptualise a means by which they could discover my identity. I had been very careful to pick my moment where foot traffic was non-existent, it was also a sunny, dry day which meant there was no residue left on my shoes or any footprints leading up to the greenhouse door.

There was an adage that I liked to stick to; always do things right the first time around. Second chances weren't handed out willy-nilly – a single misstep could unravel an entire scheme in one go. Every morning I would go through the same routine to make sure that I left no evidence in my wake. I would clip my nails, comb my hair until the loose strands were removed, and thoroughly wash every nook and cranny of my body. My clothes were treated to the same meticulous process. Every stray fibre and piece of dirt would be removed before I could consider wearing them. Even with Prier bleeding onto the floor instead of me and my clothes, I still cleaned them until it risked making my fingers split.

In a world where DNA evidence was not yet widespread or understood, those risks were minimised to a certain extent. But breaking from the routine would lead to sloppy behaviour should that advancement be brought to bear. Two connective pieces of evidence could bring everything crashing down. You did not want the police connecting dots with your name and face in mind.

The only thing people wanted to talk about was Prier's death. The police were forced to come out and issue a statement to the press about what had happened and how they were searching for the killer. Otherwise, they ran the risk of having a rogue member leak the details. With the narrative set a sense of panic started to spread as many students wondered who was next on the hit list. Worst of all was Felipe – who had recused himself from most social activities out of fear for his life.

That served my purposes just fine. I wasn't intending to act as his guardian angel, but I got the feeling that I was going to be dragged into his orbit whether I wanted to be or not. I had originally intended to have a brief discussion with him in the yard and was almost shot for the offence. There would be more of them coming no matter what I did, and they were going to threaten me and Felipe all the same. If I were a nicer person I would have chosen to do it out of some misplaced intent to redeem myself for sins past, but I had abandoned any thoughts of a karmic redemption years ago.

Because there were no lessons I didn't know what to do with myself. I had already made all of the preparations I could. The lesson periods dominated so much of the day that I never worried about being bored or unoccupied. The lonesome figure that I had projected to others was backfiring in spectacular fashion. My old standby of consuming a bunch of visual novels was not possible in a world without computers. The fiction section of the study was light on quantity as well. I feared what would happen once I worked my way through the entire shelf.

On the third day of lockdown I had a guest in the library with me. Samantha had not veiled her intentions very well. Since the confrontation on the steps, she had been keeping a close eye on me. It hadn't crossed the boundary into active stalking just yet, but if she happened upon me while I was doing something, she would stop and stare for a while. I glanced up over the rim of the book I was reading. Samantha quickly ducked behind the dictionary that she had grabbed at random to try and conceal herself.

Samantha certainly was persistent.

Adrian was meant to be the one Samantha had to 'fix,' that was the archetype that he fit for people who found that appealing. Somehow that generous spirit had been transferred over to me. She believed wholeheartedly that there was a deeper meaning behind my self-imposed seclusion. With enough time and effort, surely, she could break down the wall of ice that surrounded me. How idealistic, how droll. The author was not plumbing the depths of the idea well when creating her.

I didn't particularly mind her staring. I was used to handling the pressure, both from my experiences before and after my rebirth. People would always stare at me no matter where I went, and you needed to project confidence when you were entering somewhere you weren't supposed to be. I was the one having the most fun in the end. I'd glance up occasionally just to make her jump and hide.

The cat-and-mouse game had to end eventually. I finished reading yet another book and stood from my seat, passing by the table that Samantha was using to return it to its proper place on the shelf behind her. When I turned back she was doing her best to resist the temptation to swivel around and follow me.

I stopped at the side of the table and peered into the open pages; "Are you enjoying that dictionary, Samantha?"

Her eyes darted in every direction, "You know me – just brushing up on my vocabulary!"

We both knew how unconvincing that line was. Samantha closed it and put on her best, prize-winning smile to try and distract me. Perhaps in her mind having me speak to her unprompted was progress in her attempts to win me over. Things went off the rails almost immediately as she opened her mouth but found herself without the words to say. The sweat starting to form on her forehead intensified when I asked my next question.

“Is there any particular reason why you keep following me? I would have thought that a busy girl like you had better things to do with her time, and I’m not the most stimulating person to observe besides.”

She shook her head in a flurry of blonde locks, “I’m not following you. We just happen to run into each other every so often.”

“I don’t find your excuses becoming, Samantha. You and I both know what is happening here. Or do you wish to experience my faint admonishment for a second time?”

Samantha finally got a little serious; “I never said I enjoyed the way you treated me back then. You’re rather rude for a girl that everyone loves to fawn over.”

I shrugged, “I never asked them to do so. If they were to know me better, they would learn to feel the same way. I wouldn’t be so popular then, would I?”

“Why would you...”

Samantha paused as she considered what I said. A lightbulb turned on in her brain as she remembered that she was projecting her own thoughts and experiences onto me. She had been acting under the presumption that I was just like every over egotist in the academy, the ones who preened so happily like peacocks. I didn’t care about my reputation as long as it continued serving me as camouflage.

“...Did you say those things to me on purpose?” she asked.

“Maybe I did. But the intent was the same. I think you’ll be much happier keeping your distance from me.”

Samantha crossed her arms, “There’s nothing I can do about that if you keep acting so coldly.”

“I meant physical distance,” I quipped, “You’ve been trailing me for two weeks now. As I said, you would find yourself in much healthier company if you spent more time with your friends.”

“I don’t want to be your enemy.”

“That’s good, because you’re not.”

Samantha was thrown off for a different set of reasons to before. From afar she saw me as an idealised noble girl, a delicate doll that would fall apart under pressure. But when I spoke to her directly like this she could sense an overpowering presence and confidence hidden beneath the surface, this was the real Maria Walston-Carter - the one that did not bow to expectation. Samantha was unsure as to what the best approach to speaking with me was.

“Are you going to Beatrice’s ball?” she asked.

I nodded, “Yes. I will be attending.”

“That’s surprising. I would have thought that you have little time or patience for something like that.”

“It would be rude to turn down an invitation. I have been to many balls before.”

“This will be my first.”

“Then do not expect too much. They are a rather mundane affair once you look past the expensive dresses and food. There will be many shaken hands and scant pleasantries shared between men who cannot stand the sight of each other.”

Samantha’s mind was elsewhere, “I’d love to see you in a dress, Maria.”

“Why?”

She blushed as she attempted to elaborate, “I think that you’re beautiful. If there’s anything that everyone can agree on appreciating, it’s something beautiful. It’s like when I wake up in the morning and see the sun rising over the farm and all the hills that surround it.”

She loved using that line in the game too.

It was a flag that launched her into one of the big romance subplots. Something rather profound coming from the lips of a country girl who people treated with disdain. How that kind of talk worked on winning over Adrian of all people was another mystery altogether. That boy wouldn’t know beauty if it hit him with a brick.

“I will do my best not to disappoint, then.”

Samantha had turned bright red in the pause between her explanation and my response. It was embarrassing to say out loud, even more so when faced with Maria Walston-Carter. I put

her out of her misery by curtseying and taking my leave from the room so that she could regret it in peace.

“Samantha, what am I going to do with you?” I muttered to myself.

---

“I do hope that you’re taking our security arrangements very seriously,” Geoffrey Booker barked at several of his house servants. The heavy-set man had called the organisers of his upcoming ball into a sudden meeting to make sure that everything was going as planned. The news coming from the campus was serious and grave in equal measure. The last thing he wanted was for a rascal to kill someone on his property as well!

“Yes Sir. We’ve decided to tighten security further on the evening of the event. We’ve put forward several different names to guard the premises at that time,” the head servant, Michael, explained. Several applications had slipped through the chain until it reached his ears.

“Have you selected from them yet?” Geoffrey inquired.

“Nay. We were hoping to receive your affirmation for our choices.”

Michael placed several of the pages down in front of his employer. On them were the names, profiles, backgrounds and pictures of the men and women who had applied to take on the job. Geoffrey was a liberal boss. He usually entrusted the fine details to his staff members, though for a matter this important he always wanted to have the final say. He perused the applications with a firm brow.

He read some of their names; “Wesley Franklin, Ode Freeman, Kirk Grantpark.” They were all experienced in both combat and security, defending businesses from thieves and protecting the rich and powerful. One of the men caught his eye in particular thanks to his extensive work history, “Eidos Bolte? What a curious gentleman.”

“His resume is very impressive.”

“It is! And you’ve ensured that his background is spotless?”

“He is listed in the mage registry as a grade three, and his other references refer to him as a consummate professional. I do not foresee any problems with picking him.”

Geoffrey was a quick decision maker. He separated four documents from the pile, including Eidos’, and pointed to them with a decisive harrumph.

“These four will do. They can complement the other guards that we’re bringing in.”

Michael offered no debate for his choices. Once his mind was set on something, there was no changing it. The four successful applicants would be invited onto the estate, given a tour of the grounds and their assigned posts, and then fitted for appropriate uniforms to make them blend in with the rest of the waiting hands who would be working at the ball. Now that the matter was settled – they could finish their preparations.

Geoffrey moved right along to the next (and his favourite) subject; “Now! About the buffet...”