

To awaken from such an experience was surprising in itself. Was all of that just a bad dream? I was in a bed; a bed I wasn't familiar with. I understood that modern medicine was impressive, but to survive a wound such as that after bleeding for so long was improbable. I stared at the canopy above for several minutes, trying to piece together what little I knew. I remembered being shot vividly – and the chase that occurred as I tried to get away from the police. I didn't remember dreams like this, so that meant it was a memory.

I pushed myself up into a sitting position. The more the angle of my view changed, the more questions urgently squeezed themselves to the forefront of my brain. This was not a hospital room, nor was it a jail cell. I was stranded between four wooden posts, attached to a monstrously huge queen-sized bed. The great expanse of white sheets and knitted lace sent me for a loop.

Then there was the rest of the room that surrounded me. Deep crimson walls, a heavy wooden wardrobe and matching dressing table. A single electrical lamp was placed on a smaller table beside the bed. To my left was a towering window, criss-crossed with black lines that offered some scant privacy from the world outside. The room was crafted with supreme care; there were wooden cornices at the top and bottom of the walls.

I was not in my own home.

I did not recall purchasing a stately, European manor during my time as a hitman. I regrettably did not make enough money for such a flashy purchase. Lest someone had recovered my unconscious body and whisked me away to rural France, I had no idea of how I had ended up here.

Something else was strange. My body felt different in a way I couldn't place. The surrealism of the situation blunted my reaction when I looked down at myself. I had clearly gotten much shorter in the intervening time. My arms and legs were stubby and thin. I would have guessed that my 'new' age was around eight or nine, though the unfortunate reality was that this 'new' me was rather diminutive, and I was off by upwards of a year.

My clothes had been switched for a pair of pyjamas in a matching crimson. I wouldn't be caught dead wearing something like this, though the fact that I had already died was not lost on me. Now was a time for trying new things. I threw away the stupidly dense covers and hopped down onto the carpeted floor. The height of the bed caught me off guard.

My first port of call was the dresser. It was a heavy, aged thing with decorative swirls engraved into the timber. More importantly it came with a large, circular mirror that was

much too high for me to see into from the bed. I pushed the stool into position and climbed up, standing on the very tips of my toes to see what had become of me. I expected blood, scars and bandages, but what I received instead was much more shocking.

A ruby-eyed, black haired little girl stared back.

I blinked, she blinked. I opened my mouth, and she did the same. It was only when I raised my stubby arm and waved to myself that I finally accepted that this thing was me. Divine punishment had been divvied upon me harshly. I could do nothing but chuckle uncontrollably as the absurdity of it finally settled in. That was me. I was a little girl. And what a porcelain-faced angel I had been turned into.

As if the mere disadvantage of becoming a young girl was not great enough, this particular girl had big, vivid eyes and the face of a masterwork painting. The first thought on my mind was that she couldn't ordain to hurt a fly! I corrected that line of thought a moment later; I was just insulting myself. This was me. This was me. I repeated the statement again and again. I couldn't wrap my head around it.

For whatever it was worth, the cruel deity that had seen fit to reincarnate me into this strange body had not done so haphazardly. Despite the huge gulf in appearance between my old and new bodies, I felt no real shock upon seeing my face in the mirror. There was an immediate acceptance in my mind that the doe-eyed, doll-faced girl was me. A second later I realised that I had started referring to herself as a girl internally too. I was certain that I had never harboured any serious desire to become a girl, despite my strange love for media that was aimed at them.

This was all starting to sound very familiar.

I reached out with my palms and brought them back inwards, pressing against my chest. The pressure was real. I was searching for discrepancies. I wanted to be sure that this wasn't a lucid dream, or the last desperate imaginings of a dying brain locked into a bleeding, hole-filled body. I closed my eyes and opened them again, studying the hands on the clock to see if they changed between instants. I did not know whether their staunch refusal to shift was reassuring or worrying.

I could only continue with the assumption that this was real. How or why, I didn't know. I hoped that answers would be around the corner. I climbed back down and considered investigating the rest of the room for clues, but I was interrupted by a knocking on the door.

“My Lady, it’s time to wake up!”

The voice that burst forth caught me off guard as well, “I’m already awake.” That was what I wanted to say. But the intonation of it was so much different to what I expected. I had a voice like sharpened glass. A mature tenor topped with a pointed end. It was naturally rebellious and rude.

I breathed a sigh of relief as the apparent servant responded positively, “Punctual as always!”

The door unlocked and opened, revealing a woman wearing a traditional maid uniform. She clutched several pieces of newly pressed clothes between her arms. She waddled over to the bed and lay them out one piece at a time. I observed her work and marvelled at the difference in height between us. I really had been de-aged by a few decades.

“The Master wishes for you to wear this ensemble today. Would you like some assistance?”

Conscious of the way I spoke, I shook my head; “No. I will manage.”

“Very well. I will escort you to the dining room once you are ready.”

With that, she turned and left the room again, closing the door behind her. I was thankful for her consideration. I didn’t have any knowledge about the layout of the manor I was now a resident of, and having someone dress me was too humiliating to consider. I hovered over my new clothes with a sceptical gaze.

Included in the package was a set of plain underwear, top and bottom. The main thing that caught my eye was the red dress – long, slender, and rather dense to keep out the cold. A matching silk jacket would cover my arms. A large leather belt and a black skirt that reached below my knees were the final pieces. Given the anachronistic surroundings, the clothes, and the traditional maid and her deference to me as a lady, I could only conclude that I had been transported sometime into the past.

I swallowed my pride and changed into the new clothes. It was a struggle figuring out how to wear them properly, but I was not burdened with other out-of-style inconveniences that required a college degree in history to operate correctly. When all was said and done I was the spitting image of a young noble lady. I needed to blend in and figure things out. Rocking the boat by complaining about my clothes was a bad way to start.

I stepped out into the hallway where the maid was waiting, “Ah. You look simply wonderful today, my Lady.”

I ignored the flattery and followed dutifully behind as she led me through a series of long, straight corridors. The windows offered a glimpse into a large garden, complete with fountains, ornaments and neatly trimmed hedges. Two other servants in overalls were busying themselves by making sure that everything was perfectly in place. It was a terrible location in terms of security. Huge windows, long sightlines, and far too many rooms to hide in. My paranoid self was already starting to worry about the implications of living in such a place; even though there was no threat at the time.

We finally arrived at a pair of already opened doors. Inside was another long chamber, dominated by an equally long dining table. At the head of the table sat a man with finely combed and heavily greased black hair. A thick handlebar moustache sat upon his upper lip. He was dressed in a combination of three different suit pieces, of different colours and textures.

The maid spoke to him from across the way, “Maria is present and accounted for, Sir.”

“Thank you!”

The maid bowed and made her exit, leaving me alone with the stranger. Given our comparative ages and similarity in appearances, I could only assume that he was meant to be my father. He was a significant upgrade over my last one, for one thing, he didn’t seem like a piece of crap deadbeat. There were only two sets of cutleries prepared, the other to his left. I walked over and took my seat.

He was holding a newspaper. Once he had confirmed that I had successfully walked to my spot without combusting spontaneously, he picked it up again and continued to bury his face into the pages. That was just fine by me. The newspaper was just the thing I needed to see. The title, emblazoned in bold stylized font declared, “WALSER DAILY.” The date was the 5th January, 1898. The front-page story was about an upcoming parliamentary election.

It was a good thing that I had a lot of experience in pretending I knew what I was doing. I was completely lost. I didn’t know where I was, who I was, or when I was in comparison to the ‘real’ world. Half of my brain was still acting under the belief that this was all a bad dream, one last kick in the nuts before I got sent straight to hell.

He spoke abruptly, “Ms. Barnslay tells me that you’ve been studying very hard recently.”

“Yes?” I hazarded.

My 'Father' sighed, "To think, when I was a young boy, women didn't have to worry about things like that. I suppose that's the cost of progress."

I held my tongue and remained silent.

"And us old magic users – they don't respect us half as much as they used to! Not now that they've built all of those fancy machines to replace us."

Thanks for the exposition, Dad. I got the sense that this was a regular line of complaint from him. An old man whittling away the days in comfort, afraid of the changing times. I had already grasped that I was somewhere different, but his casual mention of magic sent me for a loop. What's a little defying the laws of physics and reality between friends?

He snapped the paper shut and placed it down on the table, "Well – the Royal Academy has an excellent elective magic course. I hope that you'll strongly consider continuing the family tradition; it's going to be a rare talent in the near future."

I played along with him, "I will."

It was the answer he wanted to hear, he smiled and nodded back, "You've always been a smart girl. There's nothing to worry about."

Getting good grades was the least of my worries. I needed to learn everything there was to learn about this world and fast. I was two seconds away from exposing myself as a total moron. Even basic questions about where I was or who I was would have invited doom. If I could snatch that newspaper or find a library to pilfer, I'd be able to stuff my brain with knowledge and avoid such a scenario. Asking one of the staff members would be rather suspicious. I could only hope for an opportunity to wander the house unsupervised so I could locate it for myself.

Old habits die hard – I was already entering 'work' mode. My brain scurried from point to point, coming up with a variety of contingency plans, excuses and escape routes that could prove advantageous. The chairs weren't nailed down, but they were too heavy for me to throw through one of the windows. Escape would have to be done the old-fashioned way, should things come to that. The selection of silverware in front of me included some sharp instruments that could remove an eye or cut an artery with ease.

The paranoia was entirely misplaced. A second later the door opened and another young man in a white shirt placed an ornate silver platter in front of me. My father smiled, "Ah, thank you." The servant bowed politely and left the way he came. I lifted the lid from the platter and

beheld the lavish breakfast that had been prepared for me. Meat, vegetables and bread were given in excess. He observed me as I picked up the correct knife and fork. I was thankful that at least once in my life, I researched the proper way to eat with etiquette so I could fit in at a fancy party.

“I’m heading out for some shooting later. I trust that you will be okay without me?”

I swallowed, the food was surprisingly good; “Yes. But shooting?”

He chuckled, “Ah. I do suppose I cursed the invention of the firearm more than a few times. Sir Leondt insisted that I try it for myself before I pass judgement. I’m rather ashamed to say that I was misguided in my reaction. It is an admirable way to socialise, and a rather exciting sport at that.”

Shooting. That meant guns. If there was one thing I could earnestly say I enjoyed as a hobby, it was firearms. I disconnected it from my work and preserved the joy of exploring them. A handgun usually sufficed for most tasks, but the more specialised weapons were reserved for private time at the local ranges. I wondered what type of firearms were available. Were they breech loaded or muzzle loaded?

Survival demanded that I know. I refrained from asking too many questions about the specifics. A gun was the great equaliser; the most terrifying weapon ever developed. Something which could be held in the hand and be used by most-anyone. They were a sign of changing times, and if my new Father was old enough to remember their creation – things would be tumultuous.

My full delve into the world of guns could wait for the time being. I polished off the rest of my meal and considered my options. I was expecting my father to stand and reveal I had something planned already, but he did not. The day was mine to do with as I pleased.

“Don’t get yourself into trouble while I’m gone, young lady.”

He powered out of the room and left me on my own. I quickly hopped down from my chair and hurried over to where the newspaper lay. I folded it up and slipped it into my clothes for later. It would provide essential context for where I was and what was happening. With that done, I decided to seek out privacy and a collection of books so that I could study properly. It was time to explore the manor fully.

