

Cordia was not the only ghost haunting the halls of the museum, as Marco could testify. It had been a long time since he'd seen that face and those eyes, but he would never be able to forget them so long as he lived. But this was not the same person he knew. She was far too young for that. Still, she bore all the same menace, freezing the blood in his veins and wielding a weapon in an alike manner.

This must have been the girl who Cordia warned him about.

She did describe her as young, based on the sound of her voice, but how young she really was stretched his credulity to the limits. She was no older than thirteen years old, and on the smaller side at that. She was a perfectly presented noble girl, from her dress to the tone of her voice, yet she wielded that weapon with killing intent. Marco saw a reflection of himself in the way she behaved.

There was no time to hesitate now. Cordia's actions had already sent loud noises through into the main hall where Clemens was due to speak. He burst through the employee door and hurried to the top of the steps. None of the people who were at the museum for the speech had fled, such was the short window between the first gunshots and his arrival back in the main antechamber, though there was a loud commotion from them as they pondered the source of the noise.

And there he was. Clemens Walston-Carter was standing behind the curtain with two of his colleagues in close proximity. Marco drew his gun and aimed carefully at his target. It wasn't clean like he wanted, but Cordia did bail him out by stopping the girl from executing him. He tensed his trigger finger and steadied his arm.

At the very last second – an unseen figure dived into his ribs from the side. The gun fired, with the bullet straying off course and shattering a nearby window. The air was robbed from his lungs as the full brunt of an adult man bore down on his ribcage. Meddling hands reached out and grappled with him in an attempt to steal the gun from his possession.

The crowd screamed and stampeded for the main exit, with little regard for the safety of the other attendees. Marco couldn't see Clemens and his entourage from the floor, but his attacker was extremely persistent in wrestling him down and keeping him from giving chase.

“Bastard!” he growled. He kicked and clawed at the stranger, eventually getting the upper hand and forcing his head into the floor. It was the same man who’d clobbered him in the corridor. He had run along the entire length of the building’s first floor for the sole purpose of blindsiding him and alerted the target.

He aimed his gun at the man, but he took the opportunity to reach out and take his wrists in a tight hold. Their arms pointed to the ceiling as they both staggered back to the stone bannister behind, three more shots being released into the ceiling as they both struggled to gain control of the gun.

Marco had to reassess his situation. This man was fast, strong, and knew how to fight someone holding a firearm. He must have been working with the girl, and she wouldn’t bring a civilian along who couldn’t hang in a fight.

“Let go, friend – and I won’t kill you.”

“We’re far past that point, ‘friend.’ You’re one of Cordia’s scumbags, and I’m not letting you get away after what you pulled at the sanatorium.”

Marco had nothing to do with that operation, but he was working on behalf of Cordia this time, so it was an easy mistake to make. There was no point litigating the specifics of his contract with a stranger who was holding a grudge, he just needed to get him out of the way before Clemens could escape.

“Get out of my way!”

Marco used all of his strength, tucking himself beneath his arm and hoisting him up and off of his feet. Caius gasped as his centre of gravity flipped over, his arms reached out and grabbed for whatever leverage they could find, in this case – the bannister which they were fighting against. He grunted when his stomach hit the wall on the way over. He now found himself hanging from the first floor while Marco tried to get his bearings.

This would have been a problematic position for anyone else, but Caius was agile like a cat. He’d climbed his fair share of manor facades during his career as a thief. Marco didn’t see him coming, until he felt one of his arms wrap around his neck and pull him back against the stone rail.

“Sorry, I’m here to get in your way no matter what.”

Marco tried to fight him off with a series of savage back elbows, but Caius kept his head out of the way and avoided them. Marco could feel his footing start to slip with Caius pulling back on him. He was a moment away from falling over the railing and landing on the marble floor below.

Broken bones, not ideal.

He scrambled for grip on the back of Caius’ head, before heaving him up and over the banister once more and forcing him down. Caius slid for three meters before coming to a stop, but he didn’t stop moving. He swivelled around onto his back and snapped his fingers, sending another blinding flash into the air and preventing Marco from firing. Marco hated dealing with mages, and this guy was sharper than most.

Every second that he wasted was another second in which Clemens was allowed to get further away from the museum. Every second wasted was another second in which the police would get the chance to respond to the gunfire at deploy officers to apprehend him. Every second wasted was another second in which Marco wasn’t getting paid for his honest, hard work.

But how could he get the upper hand against someone who was experienced in disarming their opponents? He had more magic tricks waiting up his sleeve to unleash at the opportune time, and if he lost hold of the gun, his chances of killing Clemens would plummet to nil. Instinct would tell him to move away and hide, but keeping close and frustrating his attempts to fire his weapon was the safer strategy, given his skills.

Hopefully, Cordia would finish up with the girl and even the odds.

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Cordia was not trying to preserve her ammunition. I never got the chance to see how she operated while working one of her jobs, and I was under the mistaken impression that her role as a maid would translate into a precise and carefully considered style of work.

Given the sorry state of the room I'd leapt into to avoid her first salvo, that was evidently not the case.

I second-guessed my conclusion that Cordia was somehow alive, but seeing her up close dashed any doubts in my mind that she was the genuine article. It was the same woman who just a few days ago tumbled from the roof of an urban building and smashed her skull to pieces on the concrete below. I was not mistaken when I checked her body and declared her dead, not unless they somehow managed to restart her heart and bring her back from the afterlife.

But there was no arguing with the reality now. Cordia was alive, and trying to shoot me dead in the back offices of the local museum.

"I don't know what you did to unsettle Marco like that, but I'm not going to let you interfere again."

I had no idea what she was talking about. Cordia looked genuinely terrified when she saw me at the tennis tournament. Now she was acting like I was no big deal, or that she didn't know who I was. It didn't make sense.

"Big words from a small-minded woman."

"I wasn't expecting you to be Clemens' own niece! Does your Daddy know what you've been up to behind his back? Maybe I should tell him and get you grounded."

"Now why would he do that to his perfect little angel?" I taunted.

"You were the one who burnt Thersyn's house down, weren't you? It was no accident that the first responders found his little... hobby down in the basement."

"You make it sound like you knew from the start, Cordia."

"Of course I did. I know everything there is to know about every member of the plan. We wouldn't invite them to be a part if we couldn't hold them ransom with embarrassing information. Thersyn's Scuncath leanings are an open secret amongst his associates."

"Not so secret anymore," I chuckled.

“I’ll have to thank you for making our lives more difficult.”

She punctuated her threat with two gunshots, which struck nothing but the bookshelf at the back of the room. I took the opportunity and leapt up onto the desk in front of me, diving through the air and forcing her back with my own fire. I rolled down into a crouching stance and kept myself out of sight. Cordia was blocking my only exit. She only needed to delay me and let Marco handle the dirty work.

I hoped to the Goddess that Caius hadn’t made a run for it yet. I could use his help to distract Marco until Clemens could get away.

“Are you sure that attacking me was the wise decision? I’m certain that Clemens and his colleagues have already fled the building thanks to your impatient trigger finger.”

Cordia laughed bitterly, “Do you honestly believe that this event was our only window of opportunity? Ridding ourselves of a pest like you must always take priority.”

“I’m glad to hear that you think so highly of me!”

We both turned out of cover at the same time. Cordia was aiming in the wrong direction, having lost track of my position behind the cover I was using. She readjusted her aim but panicked when I shot first. She ducked back behind the wall, with me trying to hit her through it using the last rounds in my magazine. I dropped the empty mag onto the floor and replaced it with my second. I couldn’t afford to waste any more of these bullets.

I pressed the advantage and moved quickly to reach the door. I peered around the corner and found Cordia notable by her absence. Judging from the position of one of the bullet holes, and a splatter of blood that had landed on the floor, a stray shot must have hit her somewhere non-vital.

“Cordia, come out and play!”

I was just amusing myself at this point, trying to take the edge off.

I couldn’t tell her direction of travel based off of the blood stain. The wound was not actively bleeding enough. If it was heavier, I might have been able to use that

information and find her. I stopped and considered my options. It was better for me to find and help Caius with Marco rather than go on a wild goose chase.

I kept my gun aloft and headed back towards the main hall. The staff were steering well clear of where the noise was coming from, which was the right thing to do. I burst through the door to see Caius grappling with Marco by the stairs. What a beautiful son of a bitch he was.

“Caius, duck!”

Caius looked like a deer in the headlights, but he did what I asked and got the hell out of the way. There was no time to fine-tune my aim. I pulled the trigger and hoped the guiding hand of whatever God was screwing with me led it to the right place. Marco cried out in pain as it struck him in the side, sending him flying back through the air and down the first flight of steps with a painful series of thuds.

I rushed over to see if that finished the job, but Marco was one step ahead of me this time. His jumpsuit had been torn open, revealing some kind of armoured vest hidden beneath. I had never seen anything this modern in my years of inhabiting this world. It looked like Kevlar, but I knew that such an innovation was not yet widespread, or available to contract killers.

Either way – it was enough to stop my bullet from rupturing his internal organs. He returned fire and forced me back into cover. Marco wasn't done yet. He clutched his bruised ribs and hobbled down to the ground floor, using the stone railing as support.

“Where did he get that body armour?” I complained. That was just unfair.

“He's some kind of monster for surviving that!” Caius commented. He didn't understand what I was talking about. It was not going to end well if I tried to rush down the stairs with Marco still training his gun on me from below. If I crested myself against them, he'd have an easy shot.

“What happened to Cordia?”

I shook my head, “Disappeared. I hit her, so she's injured.”

“Where did she even come from? We both saw the same thing! She was dead!”

“I don’t know, and she’s not going to tell us if we ask!”

Caius followed me down the stairs now that Marco was out of sight. He was running towards the back of the building to try and find Clemens. I didn’t know what he was doing, but Cordia wouldn’t launch this kind of attack unless she knew what their plans were. On the bright side, one of the party officials being involved in an incident like this would put them on high alert for any future attempts.

“I’m not happy about this!”

“Then put your bloody mask on.”

In fact, that was a good idea. The last thing I needed was for Clemens or other civilians to see my face right now. It was a pain in the ass to grab the cloth from inside my coat and slip it on over my face while still trying to pay attention to where we were running. Marco’s injury slowed him down enough that we caught a glimpse of him escaping through the rear exit.

“There he is!” Caius yelled.

There was already a crowd of onlookers gathering on the street beyond. The only information they had was the sound of gunfire and the sudden evacuation of the building. Marco was forced to hide his gun again, as was I. We forced our way through the throng and pursued him down the road. I was losing sight of where Clemens and the other speakers had escaped to.

Perhaps the masks were a bad idea in terms of making us less suspect.

It was too late for recriminations now. One of the men hovering on the street corner ahead of us struck me as familiar. He was with Clemens when they walked through the doors and approached the stage. Marco knew that too. He made a direct move to intercept him.

“There’s no way he tries that out here in public,” Caius grunted.

“Never underestimate others’ stupidity.”

He was going to stake his reputation of completing this job, I could tell from the desperate look in his eyes while he was tussling with Caius. He barrelled through a

group of people as they watched the commotion, knocking two of them into the gutter and earned no end of scorn for doing so. I leapt over one of the prone victims and tackled him from behind. The strength left his legs and he collapsed without my assistance, though that had the knock-on effect of causing me to trip over him and fall onto the pavement in front of him.

I groaned in agony as a lash of thunder ran up my arm. That didn't feel good. That was what happened when you screwed up your landing and fractured a bone or two in the process. This was my worst injury yet and he wasn't even doing it on purpose! Our fight was attracting a lot of unwanted attention, including from the men who were guarding the VIP assembly area.

Caius grabbed him by the scruff of his overalls and dragged him back to his feet, while I rushed in from the other side and grabbed the arm which was holding the gun. The guards noticed and called it out to their comrades. They hurried away, presumably to usher Clemens and the others from danger. One of the men stayed behind and tried to join the fray, but Marco kicked him away using his free leg.

Despite being trapped in a sandwich, Marco was not going to give up so easily. He tried to toss me away by shifting his centre of gravity, before pushing Caius back into the brick wall of the nearest building and pummelling his stomach with painful elbows.

I grabbed his wrist and forced his gun hand into the wall again and again until finally the shock caused him to drop it to the floor. I leaned back as he tried to headbutt me and escape, but that did afford him the leeway he needed to finally push free from Caius' hold. I kicked the gun away before he could take it again.

But then Cordia showed up to crash the party. Two gunshots were fired into the air. The bystanders watching our fight scattered in every direction. The chaos was so loud and overwhelming that it took me several seconds to locate her, on the other side of the road, still clutching her bloody side.

"Bugger me!" Caius grunted. I concurred. This was a bad spot to be left standing when she had the gun. The guard pulled his own weapon and tried to stop her, but his



brain matter ended up splattered across the stones below as Cordia blew his head off with a well-placed shot.

“Crazy broad!” I seethed. Subtlety was out of the window now, “Push him into me!”

Caius did as I asked and released Marco from his grip, forcing him forward with a powerful shove to the back. Marco lifted his arms up to his face to prevent me from striking him, but that was not my intention. I swivelled around his left side and hopped up, wrapping one of my arms around his neck and pulling him down so that his centre of balance was tipped in my direction. He now found himself in an unenviable position of being my human shield.

Cordia frowned and turned her gun away from us. Marco wasn't expendable enough to shoot through. That expression did not last long, as it was soon replaced with a cocky grin. I didn't know why she was so pleased with herself until another, unseen gunshot echoed across the city block.

She wasn't the only one here with Marco.

My heart skipped a beat. I hoped that it wasn't the sound of my Uncle getting his early due. Cordia had us in a bind and she knew it. We couldn't move without letting her shoot us, but one of her associates was already trying to kill their target. Letting Marco go would make our odds worse too.

“Grab my gun.”

Caius hustled over behind me, rummaged through my jacket pocket and handed me the weapon. It was hard with Marco struggling the entire time but we managed. Those struggles came to a sudden halt once I pressed the barrel against his head for the second time.

“How many people did you bring?”

“I'm not telling you,” Marco replied. I rewarded his loyalty by smacking him in the head with the butt of my gun and sending his eyes spinning in two different directions. We'd have to find out for ourselves.

Cordia was enjoying the bind we were in, “Do you really have time to stand here and ask him questions, you meddlesome insect?”

“No. That’s why we’re leaving.”

Caius grabbed the back of my collar and escorted me down the alleyway towards the sight of the ongoing fight. Cordia was forced to follow us, keeping a close eye on her angle of attack. She wanted desperately to shoot one of us down while the chance was available. Neither of us were going to give her a clear shot, not with Marco still in my hold.

The noise was coming from the street across the block. Clemens and his guards were hiding behind an abandoned carriage which had gotten overturned at some point during the chaos. That wooden construction wasn’t going to protect them from the three figures approaching, all wearing coveralls that matched Marco’s.

“I really wish you’d taken that gun,” I grumbled.

Caius shook his head, “I’m no good with them!”

He had a point there, I couldn’t rely on him to win a fight versus three other people even if he did have one. The guards with Clemens weren’t prepared for this sort of armed attack. They were cowering with him behind the wheels.

“Do something!”

“I am!”

Caius summoned all of his magical energy and charged at the men. With a snap of his fingers, all three were set alight – their overalls serving as perfect kindling for his magical trickery. The effect was immediate, with each one attempting to douse the flames using their hands, and failing that, trying to remove the overalls before they were burnt by the heat.

My arm jolted with each shot, but Marco’s interference prevented me from landing finish blows on all of them. One man was hit three times, but the other two managed to slip away and force their way into an open door. Now occupying the building across the street, they fired back through the windows and threatened to hit Marco.

Cordia's smug face didn't last for long. One of the guards peered around the corner to get a clear view of what was going on. There was no understanding to be gleaned from this. Two groups of strangers were fighting seemingly over nothing.

Marco seized up, "She killed them? She killed them!"

I turned my aim back onto Cordia, who quickly realised that she didn't have a piece of leverage left to hold me back from killing her too. She ducked around the corner as I fired several more rounds in her direction. Matters had spiralled out of her control. The only thing to be thankful for was that the police hadn't arrived yet to make matters even worse.

Cordia had a hard choice to make. She was bleeding badly from the wound I'd given her earlier, and it was affecting her ability to fight and direct her men. Every second that ticked by sapped a little more of her strength and handed us a bigger advantage. Marco and the other two were going to try and follow through with the plan no matter the outcome. She didn't need to be here.

So, Lady Cordia bravely ran away. I caught a glimpse of her heel twisting and then heard the sound of her boots slamming into the pavement.

That outraged Marco so much that he finally managed to wrestle himself free of my chokehold, slamming back into my head and forcing me away. Caius wasn't in a position to grab at him again, nor did he want to be in one given the overlook offered by his two criminal friends in the house. Even more gunshots were exchanged with no realistic prospect of them hitting anything.

The problem for me was more apparent. I only had a handful of bullets left in my magazine and no spares. Moving to grab the dead man's gun now would be suicide, and I didn't have the firepower or ammunition to suppress them. Marco staggered away while we were frozen into position.

Several moments of tense silence passed without any movement from our side. I peeked out from my hiding place towards the house, but it was evident that both surviving gunmen decided to cut their losses and follow Marco out of our line of sight.

"They got away," I groaned.

Caius took a contrary view, “Thank goodness. I thought we were going to die there!”

“Time to make ourselves disappear too. The police will show up soon.”

Caius led me away from the scene before Clemens’ guards could pull us aside and speak with us. We’d already risked a lot by coming out here. I’d need to change my clothes and come up with a good alibi as to why I wasn’t tangled up in the mess happening at the museum. Caius knew all of the best escape routes in the city, so getting away from prying eyes and removing the masks was a simple matter.

I exhaled, happy to finally be free of the stuffy garment.

There was a lot for us to consider, about the way we were approaching the assassination plot, and about how to best move forward and dismantle it. The response to this incident would be more pronounced than the others. A member of the leading party was almost killed by a gang of infiltrators.

Caius was staring at me, “You don’t seem very... shaken by killing that man.”

“Why would I be?” I commented dismissively.

Caius didn’t have a snide response to that. It was a piece of brutal honesty from a girl he believed to be nothing but talk and fancy parties.

“If he didn’t want to die, he should have stayed out of my way.”

Caius shivered. He was almost standing in his position a few weeks ago. Was it luck or mercy that he was on my side, and for how long could he rely on that being the case?

“Noted.”

