

Samantha was furious. She had never felt such an incandescent rage in her entire life. She paced back and forth in her room like a girl possessed as Maxwell and Claudius watched on from the doorway. Samantha didn't care one bit that her anger may have spilled outwards and been overheard by the girl in question.

"She's horrible, a witch, a cruel villain!"

In her eyes, Claudius was right to judge her so. The more inflammatory insults she wished to air were not for polite company, like the ones that she had heard her Father shout after stabbing himself in the hand with a farm tool. Maxwell decided to intervene before she worked herself into an even more violent furore. He had been present for the confrontation – but even he thought that Samantha was taking it unusually hard.

"Was it really that bad? You were speaking about how nice she was just a few hours ago."

"That was before I had a chance to speak with her for real," Samantha pouted. The words she had said cut deep. It was profoundly juvenile, almost as if Maria herself was not putting any real weight into them. Samantha dreaded to think what bitter truths she would utter should she have become serious. What was the reasoning behind how she acted? Samantha could not hope to understand.

Claude was unhelpful, "I heard that she doesn't have any friends."

"But what about the girls who follow her everywhere?"

"They're just fans, not friends. They want a little bit of that noble shine to rub off on them..."

Maxwell didn't agree; "Still – even the worst people have one or two friends. The bully from my old school wasn't left wanting for company. They were like a pack of wild hounds."

Claude snapped his fingers, "Maria doesn't want them. I've heard the same story told over and over again. It doesn't matter who it is or how polite they are, she rebuffs all of them in the same way. So don't take it too personally, Sam."

Samantha kept replaying their 'conversation' in her head. Part of her had expected to meet rude people at the Academy. She was a country girl infringing on a place where the rich and powerful made connections. Her Father had made it clear that she'd face many adverse challenges by taking this path. It had not deterred her in the slightest. But to experience it first-hand was more disturbing than she had anticipated. Maria's glare had frozen her in place and made her feel like a helpless prey animal.

As she repeated their encounter again – she attempted to view it from a different perspective. Had Maria done that intentionally to scare her away? It was true that she hadn't formed any other relationships during the first day of their education. She hadn't spoken to anyone without them speaking with her first. She didn't seek to enter conflict with her, it only happened because Samantha thought they had something in common. She started politely, but became increasingly prickly and irritated the more she spoke – and finally turned when she said she wanted to be friends. Was that the red line that Samantha could not hope to cross? It was a dangerous place to tread. Samantha had only thanked her for the kind treatment, and that was enough to send her tumbling back down to the start.

Max pulled on his collar, "I don't think you should try to get close with her anyway. You don't want to earn the ire of the Maria army that's started forming. It's just more trouble than it's really worth."

"Friends are a good thing, Max."

"Sure; but do you think that Maria would have your back if something bad happened? Would she stand up for you if they started giving you trouble? If the girl says she doesn't want to deal with you, it's probably for the best."

Claudius chuckled to himself.

"What's so funny, Claude?"

"It's obvious that there's more to this girl than first meets the eye. Such a mysterious presence, a femme fatale who defies social convention and has a look that can kill! She must have some serious skeletons in her trunk. It makes my inner detective tremble with excitement."

Max covered his face, "Oh, for goodness sake."

"What is he talking about?" Samantha asked.

"Claude can't stop reading those trashy detective serials they publish in the back pages."

"They are not trashy."

"The ones with all of the murder, and drugs and sex, they're horrible. He kept sneaking them from under his Dad's nose and reading them without his permission. Now he thinks he's a qualified detective. When was the last time you solved a crime, Claude?"

Claude opened his mouth to object but fell silent as he rewound through his entire life. “W- What about that time I found out who stole the last piece of cake in elementary school?”

“That’s hardly equivalent to solving a murder.”

“And I’m very good at understanding people! I can tell from just a simple glance what someone is thinking.”

“Okay, then what am I thinking right now?” Maxwell queried.

“I can tell from the quirk of your brow and the movement of your lips that you are impressed with my abilities!”

Max clipped him around the ear, “No. I think you’re making an arse of yourself, quite frankly.”

Samantha giggled as the two old friends bickered in front of her. She could tell that both of them had spent a long time getting to know each other. This was the type of argument that you could only have with someone you were close with.

Claude was not going to be beaten down by his doubt. He continued to argue his case, “I’m the son of a police ombudsman – it’s in my blood. My nose is finely tuned to the scent of misdoings.”

“Your Father works with evidence and witnesses, he isn’t inferring anything based on the angle of their damned eyebrows.”

“Since when did you become an expert on police procedure?”

“I’m not! But you should know better than I do!”

This argument was going nowhere fast. There was just one problem, Samantha had already seen Maria dragging her trunk into her new dorm room and it wasn’t large enough to contain a human skeleton. Samantha tuned the boys out and opened her magical theory textbook, intent on getting a head start before their first real lesson.

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I sighed and settled down into the armchair within my chambers. The room was the same as everyone else’s, more than enough to hold everything that a teenage student would need. It was odd for me to consider that parents were willing to send their children away to live at an academy at such a young age, but then I remembered that they didn’t usually spend much time looking after them in the first place. The status quo was the same whether they were at home or not.

I still couldn't get Samantha out of my mind. A misfortune as profound as mine would surely be shared. Karma was inevitable. I was a person who had committed innumerable sins in my past life, and now I had proof that some supernatural force had brought me here. What kind of punishment was this to sally me forth into a new, healthy body and a life of immense privilege? An all-encompassing paranoia had started to grip me two years after my arrival; one that kept me awake at night and sent me spiralling at the creeping shadows of our large country home.

I leaned down and unlatched the brass locks from my trunk. Inside were a collection of several personal items and some spare clothes. The velvet interior was luxurious to the extreme, and presumably cost more than the average home. I had insisted on purchasing it during a shopping trip in the city. It was one of the few presents I had ever requested. Not only was it aesthetically pleasing, but it also contained an important feature that the shop owner had neglected to mention to my guardians. The only other thing I wanted was not within reach, so alternative measures had to be taken.

After removing all of my clothes and fiddling with another set of hidden latches, the bottom of the trunk lifted away to reveal a second, secret compartment. The inlay was divided into several smaller sections that allowed me to store different objects. Inside was something that would surely get me expelled, and perhaps worse, should anyone learn of it.

A Burs semi-automatic pistol; chambered for nine-millimetre bullets that bore a striking resemblance to parabellum rounds. The rough metal construction harkened back to the earliest days of firearm design. Guns had become an increasingly important industrial product in the preceding decades. Their development was accelerating every day thanks to genius designers and people like my Father. I had expected to find some strange and wild designs once I learned of them, though for my money, it most closely copied an M1911.

Revolvers were still popular for people who couldn't afford the newly released semi-autos. How I had come into possession of the gun was a long and winding tale. Father had purchased it for self-defence and competition and stored it in his study, in a location that was all too insecure and easy to access. The opportunity to use the thing had never arisen, leaving it as yet another forgotten trinket amongst a collection of other impulse purchases. It was almost certain that he'd forgotten all about it. The M1911 was one of my favourite guns, if only for the way it looked and sounded. When I was an assassin there were much better contemporary options that offered more features and modern materials.

I snuck into the study while no one was around and made away with it, tucking it atop my bedframe and out of sight where the maids wouldn't find it. The misplaced pistol was not noted for several months, upon which Father had momentarily believed that he had simply lost it. A more scrupulous investigation of the house staff turned up no leads, and he was never going to imagine his own daughter stealing a gun. The investigation went cold, but he got over it soon enough. He wasn't attached to something he had never used.

Sometimes looking like this had its advantages; that was a rare thought.

The only problem was that my Father had only purchased a trio of eight round magazines. That was all the ammunition you'd need for a self-defence weapon. I did not anticipate needing a measly twenty-four bullets. Even I could miss a shot occasionally. A solution for that problem soon presented itself. Shooting competitions. Both using targets, clay pigeons and ones that still used live animals for practice. There were a lot of guns and ammo at the meetings held in unsecure crates. It had taken a monumental effort to convince my Father to even consider taking me to one. Once I was there, demonstrating a 'natural' talent for firearms had overridden his good senses. Everyone found it more than a little strange to see a young girl there, but they weren't checking the pockets of my dress for all of the pilfered ammunition I had stolen when they were looking the other way. They weren't going to notice a dozen rounds missing in a box of hundreds.

Through this methodology I had stolen a hell of a lot of ammunition. Not as much as I would feel comfortable with – the rounds that the Burs used were rare, but it was enough to satisfy me for the time being. Those loose bullets were stored in a pouch inside of the case so I could refill the magazines later. I would have liked to have brought the gun with me but that risked it being discovered. I was torn between taking that chance or making sure I wouldn't lose it to my own idiocy.

I made sure that everything was in order and closed the secret compartment again. I needed to resist the temptation. There were very few regulations on who could own a firearm, but it would still be confiscated if discovered on campus grounds. It would have to remain hidden away under my bed until a rainy day arrived.

Much to my frustration, that day would not come for some time yet.