



Mallo *stared*.

Goldie just posed, the lights of the shop glittering off her shining body and her red, sequined dress.

After a few seconds, one of the hostages in the back began to clap. He was soon joined by a smattering of nervous applause in the back.

Goldie offered a winning smile, turning to her literal captive audience. "Thank you, thank you, you're too kind!"

That, if anything, broke Mallo out of her spell. They'd made a *reasonable* plan in the time it took them to travel there. Getting derailed in the first few seconds was not part of it.

She nudged the still-stunned Allison with her elbow, and grabbed a handful of seeds from her pouch. "Sorry lady, we're cutting your debut *short!*"

Goldie turned as Mallo threw the seeds into the air, and pointed with her wand. The golden woman let a startled yelp as the seeds burst into grasping vines and fell over her.

Allison burst towards Goldie, just as planned. Mallo ran deeper into the store.

She wasn't as powerful as Allison. She didn't expect her vines to hold the villain for more than a few seconds. But they should keep her distracted for long enough for Allison to engage, and drawing Goldie's attention from the hostages.

McClane had provided them with blueprints of the building. The store had a secondary entrance through the alley. Mallo stopped to throw more seeds into the ground. Vines snapped from floor to ceiling, creating a barrier between the civilians and the fight.

A quick look revealed that none of the half-dozen hostages were bound. They sat on the ground, next to a wall, worry in their faces. Three wore the store's uniforms.

Mallo knelt next to them, glancing towards the fight. "Head to the rear, out the alley. We'll keep her distracted!"

A woman shook her head, her voice a hoarse whisper. "I tried already! She locked the door!"

Mallo turned to the door with a frown. Elegant, almost camouflaged with the rest of the decoration... and made of wood. She took a deep breath, then pointed at the door with her wand. It wasn't like working with live plants. The material felt unusual, almost alien to her senses.

*It's still wood.*

Her awareness of the entirety of the door spread. She felt the location of the doorknob and the hinges. She couldn't affect the metallic parts, but another idea came to her.

Mallo focused on the wood surrounding those areas, holding her wand like a conductor's baton, focusing her power with each breath she took.

First flick, nothing occurred.

Second, followed quickly by a third, and the door rippled.

Fourth and fifth, the door pulsed, once from the left, twice from the right. A groan resounded when the waves met in the middle.

Mallo took another deep breath, and *pushed*.

The door cracked inwards, yanked free off the wall, a smattering of splinters all that remained around the doorknob and hinges.

Her wand sparkled and creaked. She winced, her concentration broken. The door unceremoniously collapsed.

*Worry about it later!*

She turned to the hostages, motioning to the now open passage. "Go! Go!"

"Bless you, miss!" The clerk wasted no time, keeping her head low and motioning the others to follow after her. None of them has to be asked twice.

Mallo watched them go, pride swelling in her chest. She'd done it! Now she only—

Allison crashed into her, and both girls collapsed with a cry.

"Ladies, please." Goldie admonished them, dusting her hands. She looked none the worse for wear. "If you wanted Goldie's full, undivided attention, why, you only needed to ask."

Allison was on her feet in an instant, teeth grit in a fierce expression. Mallo scrambled to stand. "We—"

"And *you!*" Goldie pointed at her. "You need to work on your banter, dear! 'Cutting it short' was a weak rebuttal to my introduction and you know it!"

... *What*.

Goldie gave an over-dramatic sigh, strutting in front of them and fanning herself with a hand.

"Aah, but it's to be expected, isn't it? Was Goldie too greedy in hoping for a big name A-lister to come knocking for her debut? At the very least, a hero of *some* renown would have been nice! How is Goldie supposed to shine against a couple of wet behind the ears rookies?"

Mallo's eyebrow twitched in annoyance.

"I'm going to kick her ass now." Allison snarled.

Mallo pointed her wand at the villain. "Right beside you."