

After I finished rinsing the grease and blood from my face with some clean water, we found a nice, quiet spot just outside of the police camp to sit down and speak about what was happening. The cool air was just what I needed to ease the irritation caused by my injuries – it was a lot easier than finding a bag of ice for them. Domestic refrigeration was still in its infancy.

While I was sleeping off my fatigue, the police launched their attack on the fort, though they quickly discovered that there were seldom few cultists left to kill. A combination of Veronica, me, and the Alchemist thinned their numbers to the extent that those who remained were either overwhelmed with numbers or simply surrendered at the first opportunity.

It was a coin flip for their survival. The punishment for their crimes would be harsh, and the prosecutors would push for a collective responsibility aspect to be applied to any sentencing. Many would find themselves burdened with lifetime jail terms or execution by the state.

Samantha hovered to my left before taking a seat on the upturned tree. It looked out across one of the farmer's fields and beyond. It was a picturesque view, spoiled somewhat by my inability to see out of one eye. Samantha didn't know where to start. She had too many questions and none of the grace to break them without seeming brusque.

"Out with it. I won't get offended, no matter what you ask."

She sighed, "No. It's not that. I know that you have a great tolerance for whatever idiotic questions I come up with."

"Then what is the problem?"

Samantha was careful with wording her explanation; "Well, when I started spending time away from you back at the farm – there were a lot of things in my head that I wasn't so sure about. From a distance I started to reconsider what I've seen and what I know about you."

I crossed my arms, "I see. Time and distance have a way of doing that."

“After what happened at the theatre, I tried to go with the flow and accept what happened even if it didn’t make any sense to me. I accepted that you’re the way you are and tried not to ask questions. But after they attacked my home I realized just how...”

“Odd?”

She grimaced, “Odd. Yes. It’s very odd. You defy any logical explanation. You told me the ‘secret’ as it was but I started to wonder if there was more you weren’t telling me.”

“Of course there is – but the immediacy of what I’d done was more important at the time. I did not want to overwhelm you with a full explanation of who I am and how I know how to do these things.”

Samantha hopped from the lop and paced back and forth, “It’s not necessarily that secret that upsets me. It’s not even something that you did. I keep expecting answers and honesty when I didn’t offer you the same in return.”

I held up my palm and stopped her; “It’s your right to keep secrets, Samantha. There is no need to tell me if you feel that it isn’t in your best interest. How can you even be certain that I’ll respond in kind and give you the answers you want?”

“I don’t want this to be a transaction. I want to say it as a friend.”

I retracted my outstretched palm.

“If you wish.”

Another deep breath. Samantha liked doing that. It was as if she was trying to inhale honesty from the surrounding air, even when she was already full of it.

“I lied when I said that Durandia didn’t give me an important piece of information before. She told me something else that really made me think.”

“And that is?”

“She told me that in the future – your fate would be in my hands, and that I’d have a choice whether to betray you or not.”

Now that was an unvarnished truth. I understood why she was wracked with anxiety about it, and why she kept it from me at the time.

“And you didn’t like that.”

“It’s unsettling!” Samantha said, spinning on her heel and facing me head-on, “I want to be your friend, but my own head keeps telling me that it’s a bad idea. That you’re dangerous, or that it’ll end up with me being in that situation and having to choose. I don’t want that.”

I recognized this problem. It was the same one that I was worried about. How much free will were we really enjoying under her watch, and what was the true meaning of the words she said to us during our trip across the Veil? There were two possibilities. They were either truthful and intended as a warning, or they were stated for the express purpose of conditioning us, trying to make us behave in a very specific way.

Durandia planted that seed of doubt in her mind in the full knowledge that it would consume her for the next few weeks and eventually lead to the conversation we were having.

“And that’s all the context she gave you?”

Sam nodded.

“I guess your problem is that you don’t feel well-placed to judge me. I disagree. If I ever become so far gone that I can’t even earn your forgiveness, I deserve whatever punishment comes my way at your hand.”

Samantha frowned, “No. I don’t want to do that at all. I don’t want to potentially hurt or kill you.”

“But we can’t always get what we want. That’s the harsh truth.”

She was expecting me to be more upset about the deception when she aired it to me. All of that anticipation and fear of an argument breaking out was for nothing. She deflated like a balloon and slumped over next to me.

Even hearing that I placed so much trust in her judgement didn’t feel complimentary or right. Who was she to judge me, or anyone for that matter? She was an ignorant

farm girl who didn't know the first thing about how the real world operated. That was her takeaway from the entire ordeal. She was incapable of doing what needed to be done to protect innocent people. If she was placed into a situation where she had to take a life, she wouldn't be able to.

Another part of her could not ascribe my actions as being virtuous. She knew where I stood on the use of violence to resolve disputes. I would have been happy to sit down and talk it out, but the Scuncath were far beyond the reach of reason or common sense. They wanted to hurt people, and in the face of that what other response was available?

The proper course of action would have been to prevent the violence from happening in the first place. Violence, as I said to her before, was ultimately a mark of failure. It was a sign that the righteous path was not followed, and that as an outcome there would be bloodshed.

Samantha couldn't wrap her head around it. If the Goddess was real, why did she allow these terrible crimes to be committed against her children? She and I were now the avatars of her will - the outstretched hand of divinity trying to right the ship and prevent disaster.

"You trust me that much?"

"It's not about trust. I think you're the most upright girl in the country. That's why Durandia chose you to be my other half, I suppose."

Samantha leapt on my choice of words as quick as she could; "Like a bride?"

I snapped back, "No. Not like a bride. She said that you and I have a destiny awaiting us, or something along those lines."

Samantha laughed, "That doesn't make a single bit of sense to me. If we're meant to be saving the world or what have you, why would we be put into a situation where we're fighting against one another?"

“She likes that uncertainty. I feel that it’s best for us to keep our eyes on the present and try not to think about it too much. All of her words were chosen carefully and for a reason, they might not necessarily be true.”

“The Goddess wouldn’t lie to us – surely.”

“While I understand your faith, the fact that she was in some way attempting to manipulate us makes me believe that she is not above using untruths to get the outcome she desires.”

Samantha wasn’t going to spend any time arguing with me about that. It was a difference of opinion based on the sum total of zero evidence. It would have been comforting to know that Durandia was earnest and incapable of embodying humanity’s worst traits, but I’d seen nothing to suggest that was the case. She was like me in many ways. She was trying to come to the best outcome and if that meant breaking a few eggs, then she was going to do just that.

It was dangerous to act under the presumption that Durandia was uniquely unbiased and trustworthy. She wanted to see a particular outcome from all of this. She was directed by her own desires.

“I was scared.”

“Understandable.”

“I was standing there and watching you fight, but I didn’t try to step in and help or even to break it up.”

“Did you want to?”

“I don’t know. I feel like I let you down. I managed to stop them back at the farm, but this time I was too scared to move.”

“When people lose their fear - they start making stupid decisions. Keeping calm under pressure and being afraid are two very different issues. I’d rather have you paralyzed in shock than confidently charge into disaster. I taught you how to stay calm, not to discard your fear.”

Samantha twiddled her thumbs, “Well – it worked.”

“At that moment, if and when it arrives, all I can say is for you to do what you think is best. You have to decide for yourself what the best path is without worrying about my feelings. Any less than that would make me the worst kind of hypocrite.”

“That’s a typically complicated answer.”

“Life is anything but simple at the best of times.”

The discussion ended there, though I was left with the impression that there was more to her dilemma that she wasn’t ready to share with me yet. Our talk went some way to relieving that pressure. Samantha was visibly happier now that the secret wasn’t weighing on her shoulders.

After some minutes of silence, she launched into a detailed explanation of what happened once I blacked out. All of the hostages had been rescued from the fort, partly thanks to my Father, and placed in the medical tent under armed guard. They didn’t want the cultists getting their hands on them again.

The fort was cleared out within the hour. I was sure that the rank-and-file officers were breathing a collective sigh of relief at not having to besiege the place like they expected originally. There was a new threat to worry about instead. They had no idea what kind of monster had caused the huge amount of damage to the fortress, ripping away half of the buildings and leaving dozens dead with molten gold leaking from their eyes, ears and mouths. That was going to be a delicate discussion behind the scenes between the WISA, police and military.

Claude was brought to one of the tents and given time to sleep off his sudden bout of ‘fatigue.’ None of the others knew why he collapsed once the book was burned. I saw fit to explain it to Samantha so that we were clear on the events.

“It was cursed?”

“That’s right. Whatever is written into the book is wiped from the author’s memory if the page is destroyed. I noticed Cade writing something into it at the time, but I was in a hurry to get to the throne room and couldn’t warn him about it. It slipped my mind entirely.”

Samantha sighed, “So that’s why he was acting so confused earlier.”

“What did he forget?”

“Everything involving you, from the moment you rescued us from the dungeon to the when the book was thrown into the fire. It’s incredible. He remembers most of what happened except the precise moments where you were present. Naturally, it’s very strange to have large chunks of your recollection missing. He knows that he’s forgotten something but can’t figure out what it is.”

“Thank goodness he didn’t write his life story into that damn thing.”

Samantha grimaced at the grisly thought of Claude accidentally wiping even more of his own memories in the process. It could have been really bad if he hadn’t simply used it to write his furious allegations of my involvement.

“You’re right. That would be terrible.”

“Did you tell him what happened?”

Samantha hesitated.

“Well, no, not really.”

“Why not?”

“On one hand, there’s no way he’d believe us without seeing it for himself, and on the other, I didn’t want to start spreading your secret without your permission.”

I laughed. Some secret that was supposed to be. The worst outcome of this ordeal was that my Father had seen me getting into a bloody fistfight with my Mother. I wasn’t certain if he also watched me shoot and kill the rifleman during the last moments of our fight. Not only that – but Adrian and Max had seen the whole fight play out too. It was going to be almost impossible to keep a lid on this now.

“And what about Max and Adrian?”

“Adrian didn’t want to talk. Max was quiet as well. Are you worried?”

“Yes. I doubt that anyone will be willing to believe them right away, but...”

“If they all start saying the same thing – their words start being more credible.”

One eyewitness was a story, multiple eyewitnesses became a pattern. If they were desperate enough to field their theories, it may develop into a serious problem. I did not want the police snooping into my business and asking questions about where I’d been and what I was doing.

I should have been glad that Claude lost his memories thanks to the book, but I was starting to believe that his lack of knowledge about me was part of what attracted him to these dangerous places. He was always following his instincts and trying to find clues about whatever theory was occupying his mind.

On the other side of the fence, he was a horrendous blabbermouth who didn’t know the first thing about the value of discretion. It was easier to list the names of the nobles at the academy who he hadn’t offended, rather than the ones he had. If Max and Adrian backed him up on what happened, then his lack of credibility would be less prescient to them.

What a headache.

I was not looking forward to the conversation with my Father either. It was going to be hell on earth when I got back to the manor and we had a chat about what was going on while he was away on his business trips. The discord I felt was written plainly on my face. Samantha was staring at me.

I was being foolish. I couldn’t expect to live my life in relative comfort when my hand was being forced time and time again. I hoped that these revelations would eventually prove liberating. Adrian, Claude and Max were all members of the ‘main cast’ after all. It was inevitable that I would have to deal with them.

“Is there something else on your mind, Maria?”

I nodded; “You know, for a long time I felt that keeping everyone in the dark was the best way to protect them. I didn’t want anyone to know about my true nature because I feared that through knowing, you and other bystanders would be drawn into the chaos. That was me being self-serving, acting in the interest of my own comfort. I had no right to deny you a choice.”

“I feel a ‘but’ on the horizon.”

“But I also know that information is only as dangerous as the circumstances that surround it and the context that precludes it. In a more just Walser, perhaps Genta Cambry would not have had to destroy his family’s life work, and we would never have run into the Scuncath.”

Samantha stared across the rolling hills and nodded along with me.

“Genta was right. The truth; the sciences, history and politics – they will always march onwards regardless of what people wish. In that moment he chose what he felt was right to do, and I must applaud him for it. It was an unsung deed of heroism to destroy the book, but at the same time it was only a temporary setback. When Walser no longer suffers from the same malaise that it does now – men and women like him will reconstruct what was lost without the fear of their discoveries being misused.”

“Kinda’ like a fight.”

“Indeed. This back and forth will continue into the future long after we’ve departed this world. The question I find myself asking now is whether it’s time to be forthright with the rest.”

Samantha replied in a way I did not anticipate.

“You said it yourself. Do you believe that it’s the right time to do that?”

My lips thinned, “Maybe not. I doubt anyone would be willing to believe it. A girl like me shooting a man dead. It’s sheer absurdity. Satire. Parody.”

Samantha laughed under her breath, “Getting into a bloody fistfight with her own mother.”

“Aye. It’s a shame that I was not presented the opportunity to get some clear answers out of her. Not that I’m willing to sacrifice the safety of the entire nation for that.”

“So, when you said you’ve never seen or met her before...”

“That was true. I can tell you the whole story if you’d prefer.”

Samantha shrugged, “Sure. Why not?”

I cast my mind back to the carriage ride and started to speak.

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“How was Channery, Gladwell?”

Being forced to sit in that big leather chair, with the low bottom that made her feel like she was sinking into the floor, was one of the few parts of the job that still rattled Veronica. On this occasion – she looked like a school child who was sulking after being caught getting up to mischief, not helped by the bruises and lumps that covered her normally beautiful features.

“Miserable.”

The handler sighed, “And what happened to your face?”

Veronica shrugged, “There were a few complications.”

“I know. It’s unusual to see you on the receiving end of any kind of injury.”

“You did send me on a one-woman suicide mission. It’s perfectly natural that when faced with so many zealous opponents I’d take a hit or two. Your worries about their level of organization were not unfounded, luckily, the man that glued those desperate mobs together has been killed.”

“I can see that - and all of the hostages escaped unscathed. Characteristically perfectionist work, as I expect from you.”

“Perfect? I failed to recover the book.”

Frankfort just smiled and turned over the page, “We can overlook a small mistake like that.”

What Frankfort, the handler, meant was entirely different - and Veronica picked up on it. The only reason she gave her the order was because the bigwigs at the defence ministry next door were breathing down her neck about it. Frankfort was as dedicated a public servant as one could find in Walser – yet she was not immune to pride. Being meddled with by the military drove her up the wall. They didn’t understand the work

they did behind the scenes. They were not errand boys and girls for generals who didn't know which way to hold a rifle.

Their job was to defend the nation against internal threats.

And sometimes those internal threats came from the very men and women who swore to defend it. Frankfort thought they were all buffoons, and the thought of giving them even a portion of the destructive power that Veronica testified about made her shiver in her boots. So much so that her testimony was kept off the record. Frankfort and her boss were the only ones who heard it.

This second meeting was more candid. Veronica would only reveal the finer points in a one-on-one discussion. Ms. Frankfort was known for her stern manner and analytical eye. She already had all of Veronica's reports typed out and left in a pile on the desk so that she could check through the timeline of events in detail.

"We've interviewed Doctor Genta about his work, yet he appears to be suffering from some form of memory loss. I take it that you were witness to why that might be?"

Veronica kept her nerve and stated the facts, "According to him – the book that contained his family's work was bound with a powerful curse. The book's destruction wiped his memory of what was written inside."

"I took your testimony into consideration and gave him a nice, friendly interview, and he was very candid about what happened."

Veronica felt her heart skip a beat. She hoped he didn't say anything about Maria to them.

"Do you feel that this is the right approach?"

"Whether his memory is lost or not, we will need him to take the time to recreate the book at the very least. We should endeavour to stay on his good side and allow him to return to the University, under watch, of course."

"A bleeding heart, that one?"

"Very much so. It seems that he found his morality at a pivotal moment when I was too occupied to stop him from burning it."

“Let’s categorize that as a ‘happy accident,’ shall we?”

“If you say so.”

“Do you have any other issues you’d like to raise?”

When Veronica entered the inconspicuous office building when she returned to the capital, she noticed that at least two of the offices were emptied, with their brass nameplates removed and their contents left out in the hallway. Veronica needn’t ask Frankfort what happened to them. Nobody suddenly disappeared from the WISA building unless they were being dealt with. Given the incredible sensitivity of what happened in the office, they weren’t in a cell awaiting trial either.

“No. I’ve said my piece.”

Frankfort nodded.

“Very well. Thank you for your service as always. Take a few weeks and heal.”

Veronica stiffly pushed herself back out of the chair and bowed politely, before turning and making an urgent move for the door. She was under no illusions about what was going on. Being dismissed did not mean that Frankfort had nothing she was concerned about.

“Oh, and one more thing...”

Veronica froze with her hand reaching out for the handle.

“...Did you see anyone else at the fort? The police found bodies that were penetrated with a calibre of round that none of the weapons on site were chambered for.”

“I may have heard gunshots – but I assumed that it was simply the cult tearing itself to pieces.”

“I see. Enjoy your holiday, Miss Gladwell.”

Veronica stepped out of the office and stared across the way. Facing her was another clouded glass wall. From end to end, the entire floor of the building was dominated by screens designed to obfuscate. She hooked a left and started the walk down the steps until she passed through the lobby.

Even hearing Frankfort give her a pass for failing to retrieve the book wasn't enough to make her feel any better about the situation. From an outsider's perspective, she didn't have many reasons to be upset. The nobles were safe, the cult was dismantled, and the collateral damage was kept to a minimum.

What really upset Veronica was how Maria toyed with her. She'd clearly learnt that keeping her enemies close was a good strategy. Maria didn't lose that fight, even with her injuries. She won handily. She put on the perfect show to sway Genta into destroying his family's book, exposing the violence that boiled underneath her calm and mature exterior. Every detail, from her attacks to the way she moved Veronica through the courtyard was made with intent.

There was never a chance of him giving the book to her having seen that. There was no sugar-coating it. Maria outplayed her. From the very moment that she conceded and allowed her to come along, the outcome was determined. She was always calculating her next move – and never once did she let her out of her sight.

Too many questions stood without answers.