

The very first words Samantha's Father spoke to her once she passed through the front door of their house were 'why the long face?' He had an uncanny ability to see straight through whatever she and her brothers were struggling with. Normally Samantha would find his counsel helpful, but in this case, there was nothing he could say to her that would quell the conflict in her heart.

She knew that not saying anything would keep worrying him – so she passed him by with a claim that some friend trouble at the academy was responsible. A little lie by omission wouldn't hurt him, and it was partly true on top of that. The full truth was too insane for him or anyone else to believe. She'd spoken with the Goddess, and that Goddess revealed that she would betray a friend sometime soon.

The real pain point for Samantha was that it went against her values. Her family had always stressed the importance of doing the just thing, and always striving to act with honesty and integrity. Her Father's answer for a troubled mind was hard work – so he quickly handed her a set of responsibilities and errands to complete during her two weeks away from the academy.

Mucking out the stables, preparing food for the animals, and performing general maintenance on the fences and farmhouse. Today he was using her as an extra pair of hands, dropping off some of their unsold produce at the local market for a discount price. The two workhorses pulled the cart along the dirt roads into the outskirts of Channery.

Things rarely moved quickly in a semi-populous rural town like Channery, but both Easton's noted the unusual level of activity going on in the market square. There was a large quantity of food and alcohol being purchased and hauled away. It was like harvest season had arrived early.

Eugene tipped his hat and whistled, "The town's really bustling today. It looks like they're getting ready for some kind of party."

"But the harvest festival isn't for two months yet," Samantha commented.

Eugene studied the faces of the customers, but he failed to recognise any of them.

“Hm. Must be some new residents, or visitors. I read in the paper that Channery is one of the most popular places for people looking to escape the city. Would you agree, Samantha?”

Samantha disagreed, “The Academy isn’t in the city proper. I don’t really spend much time there unless we have an excursion planned for us.”

Eugene carefully manoeuvred their own cart into the unloading area, where the store’s owner, Adam, was waiting for them. Steering two braying horses through stacks of crates and shelves was something that took time and practice. Eugene was blessed enough to have both in spades.

“Eugene! I didn’t know that Samantha was back in town.”

“Yeah. Two-week holiday for the students. Sometimes I wonder how much they’re making those kids work.”

Samantha hopped down and started the arduous task of unloading the goods.

Eugene nodded towards the commotion out front, “Busy day, Adam?”

The older man chuckled and stroked his beard, “Aye. It’s a rare sight to see so many folks coming down to the store and buying everything on the shelves. That’s only reserved for the harvest season usually. You’re a lifesaver, Eugene.”

“Well, we didn’t plan it this way – did we?”

Adam cut Eugene off before he could start haggling; “Let me pay you a little more for this lot. I thought I was going to have to throw most of it away when it rots, but now I need all of it!”

Eugene was a friendly man but he could be ruthless when it came to getting a fair deal. It was commonly understood by members of the community that everyone was trying to provide for their families. Depressing prices too much was bad for everyone because it made city buyers think they could push the farmers around when peak export season arrived.

“They tell you what they’re buying so much for?”

Adam pursed his lips, “They’re buying it for some kinda’ party that’s happening. They’re not willing to share the details with an old man like me. I just hope they don’t go causing too much trouble. A lot of the strangers coming into town have been nothing but trouble lately.”

Eugene sighed, “Like that thief?”

“The thievery wasn’t even the biggest problem! The damn fool was getting hammered in the bar every night and picking fights with some of the other drunkards. It’s the last thing you want to see when you’re relaxing after a hard day’s work.”

“I think that’s all a matter of perspective, Adam. I imagine the victims of his sticky fingers were more concerned about getting their belongings back.”

Samantha returned empty-handed to pick up another bag of unsold grain, “For goodness sake! Are you going to give me some help here?”

Adam pulled an odd face, “Woah. That’s the first time I’ve heard your little girl get so testy with you.”

Eugene snorted, “She’s in her rebellious phase I think. Ben and Tobias were much worse - I can handle a bit of sass. I better give her a hand before she turns me in to her Mother and has me thrown in the dog house.”

Adam barked out a laugh at the imagery. The dog house in this case was more metaphorical than literal, but there was no doubt in Adam’s mind that old Meriden would gladly throw him in the stables with a blanket to spend the night if he crossed her.

The pair dispensed of the non-exported food and grain in short order, placing them down onto a palette by the back door so that Adam and his employee could move them inside and restock the shelves later. The men out front still hadn’t finished moving their carts yet, and one more had just arrived to pick up the last of their purchase – blocking them in as a result.

“Looks like we can’t move until those folk clear off,” Eugene grumbled.

“I can tell them to go move it,” Adam offered.

“It’s fine. We have a few errands to run, if you don’t mind me hitching the horses here for a spell.”

“I don’t have any other deliveries planned, so feel free. I’ll keep an eye on ‘em for you.”

Eugene thanked him and led Samantha away from the unloading yard to complete the rest of their errands. As they passed the convoy of customers, Samantha couldn’t help but notice the dirty glare being sent in their direction by some of the travellers. The way they were dressed, the way they spoke - she could only feel unease when around them. Samantha didn’t like the way that one of them was staring at her Father, not one bit.

Their manner was disturbing the other residents. They were taking up a large part of the interior road with their carts, and were making an awful lot of noise. Many of them were marked with tattoos on every piece of exposed skin, though Samantha was not usually one to judge based on that factor alone.

“I don’t like those people at all,” Samantha murmured as they walked away, “They look like trouble.”

“What’s with the judgemental attitude all of a sudden? Is this because of what happened at the academy? I can’t offer you any advice if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s personal,” Samantha responded, “I don’t feel comfortable explaining the whole deal to you.”

“Ben and Tobias used to say the exact same stuff when they were your age. There’s nothing wrong with asking me or your mother for help if you don’t feel alright.”

Ben and Tobias never had to deal with a question this complicated, Samantha thought ruefully. Neither one of them was contacted by the Goddess, and neither one of them was told plainly that they were going to potentially betray one of their friends. If that was the type of problem they dealt with during their teens – then perhaps they could find some common ground.

Even a brief explanation of what was eating at her would take hours of fine detail, including a full contextualized history of her relationship with Maria, revealing several of her closely guarded secrets in the process, all to reach a point wherein he would immediately laugh the whole tale off as her overactive imagination. Samantha wasn't even certain that the story was true – and she was the one experiencing it!

“Ben and Tobias probably haven't dealt with anything like this.”

Eugene laughed, “Really? Do you have any idea what sort of trouble teenage boys get into? It was almost every darn week with those two!”

“I'm not fighting with my friends, I'm not being bullied, and nobody has done anything to me otherwise. It's just me.”

“Okay, so what have you done?”

“Nothing.”

Eugene adjusted his hat, “Nothing? Is this about picking what subjects you want to study?”

Samantha shook her head, “No, I was confident when it came to choosing what I wanted to focus on. Everyone else was struggling – but I think I've discovered a job that I really want to try and do.”

“We're all really proud of you, me, your Mother, Tobias and Ben. Meriden always gets so excited imagining you out there doing your best and taking in everything you can, she wants to see where you end up as a young woman in a few years. Your Mother and I want to support you as much as we can.”

“But I don't think you can help, Dad. This is me arguing with myself over something odd. It has nothing to do with my studies or being the only farmer on the campus. I just need some time and space to work it all out in my head.”

“If you need peace and quiet, there isn't a better place than here. Channery is Channery. Nothing much exciting ever happens around here. Troublemakers get told to pound sand, and there's always a friendly face keeping an eye out should someone try to meddle with your property. So don't pay those rowdy tourists any mind.”

“You shouldn’t assume that things will always stay the same. I thought that the Academy would be a peaceful place, but I ended up in a hostage situation within the first term...”

Eugene snickered, “But you set them straight, didn’t you?”

“Shut up. I’m not bulletproof.”

“You don’t need to be. You stared them down like a raging half-hawk and made them get a taste of the Easton family’s toughness!”

Eugene was always happy to make jokes out of serious situations, as was his Goddess-given right as a Father of three. What was the point of having children if not to annoy them by undercutting serious matters like this? He’d quickly come up with his own embellished version of events that credited Samantha with saving the day, standing resolute against the gunmen despite the danger.

But that wasn’t her – it was Maria.

Samantha couldn’t believe she blew up at Maria over what happened at Thersyn’s house. Samantha wasn’t the one putting herself in grave danger for the sake of other people, yet she thought she had the right to tell her how to do things. She humoured her at the Franzheim house, but only because she wanted to.

She was no heroine at all. She loved to talk big about her own values, about doing the right thing, yet Maria was right in her decision to lead the firemen to Thersyn’s home. How many innocent people had he murdered and stored in that basement of his? How many more would have fallen victim in the same way if not for her unethical actions?

Burning down his home was dangerous. It was not the correct way to dispense justice to a man who committed grave crimes. Yet the outcome made those missteps acceptable in retrospect. Thersyn was too influential to be investigated seriously based on nothing but allegations.

It was eye-opening. This was the truth of Walser and the society that it cultivated. Egalitarian values were aspirational, not reality. Rich nobles and influential

industrialists could do whatever they wanted. In the face of that, was it really so wrongheaded of Maria to take a direct approach? She was taking down bad guys, dismantling conspiracies, and protecting her friends and classmates in the process. Samantha was getting hung up on the methodology because she wasn't used to violence.

Samantha's brow furrowed. In an ideal world she needn't get familiar with violence at all. If she was ever in a position to feel comfortable with it, then she must have gone astray somewhere along the line. She wondered to herself about Maria, and how she became so willing to use violent means to achieve her ends.

"Having a pastry from Mary's shop will do you wonders," Eugene concluded, "My treat for all the hard work."

"Are you trying to bribe me with food already? You don't usually run out of ideas for at least three days normally."

"Bribe! You make it sound so sinister."

He knew Samantha wasn't going to say no to a free pastry.

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Adrian hated coming back to the empty house. It was crazy to recall that just a few months ago this was the preferable option versus being at the Academy. Suddenly being surrounded by others who he didn't have much patience for sounded like a holiday compared to this.

He always felt that the house was too big for them. He and his Father were the only regular residents. There wasn't even a staff house on the property, not that there were any maids or butlers working for him anymore. Adrian, in a fit of paranoid rage, fired all of them after the watch was stolen.

They were never good company anyway. They haunted the halls and corridors like spectres, coming to and fro, cleaning and completing tasks, and occasionally bringing a meal to his door during long evenings of working through piles of paper. It was a harsh lesson in the realities of running a business. His Father handled almost all of it

without assistance. With him gone, there were no contingencies to fall back on. Adrian was slotted into his place and expected to do the same amount of work to keep the company afloat.

Easier said than done though. His Father's scheme had shredded their reputation to pieces. Suppliers and buyers were dropping out at an equally alarming pace, putting a serious cash squeeze on every arm of the company. Nobody wanted to be associated with a man who gladly aimed gangs of violent killers at teenage nobles. Adrian didn't want to either – but he didn't have a choice in the matter.

“I should have hired someone to do this,” he griped. Where would he even start looking for an accountant skilled enough to handle it?

Each movement of his quill stood alone as the only sources of noise in the manor. There were no birds or animals to speak of. It was almost as if they could sense the foul air that hung around the property. Adrian looked out of the window and into the garden below. The plants and grass were starting to grow out of control without a gardener to look after them.

But all of these niceties, the comforts he took for granted, were not things he needed. The garden would sit unused, he was capable of making his own meals, and the dusty rooms would simply remain untouched until the time arose for them to be occupied again. Adrian wanted to stay focused on what really mattered.

Yet he couldn't. His brain was melting from each ear just looking at the long list of negative numbers staining the balance sheets. With a frustrated roar, he grabbed the pile and tossed them into the air. They fluttered down around his hunched body and landed on the floor.

“What am I even doing this for?” he complained.

He laid his head against the desk and stared at the wall. His contemplation was meant to be a momentary break before he stood and gathered the scattered papers. It wasn't only him who made money from the businesses he now bore responsibility for. His Father employed hundreds of other people to make the machine run smoothly. It



wouldn't be right for him to leave the on the lurch with a sudden closure announcement.

Something else conspired to attract his attention. A loud noise caused him to sit up again. He twisted around in his seat and looked towards the door, which lay slightly ajar. The darkness of the outside corridor was not an inviting sight, and he was the only person on the estate, or rather – he was supposed to be.

Adrian walked to the door and considered locking himself inside to be safe. Was it really worth risking his own safety to stop some petty thief from stealing an old vase? The watch was out of charge, seemingly used by the thief before it was retrieved from their body. It would take a decade to recharge again. He didn't have a backup plan, nor did he have a point to restore himself to should the worst occur.

Adrian's combative side won out. He could spook them by making some noise, and if that failed, he could slip out of the back door and run over to the police checkpoint that was located nearby. There were a lot more officers on duty ever since the attack at the Escobarus estate. The nobles wanted to feel safe.

He stepped out into the corridor and took a candle from the wall.

The house was huge and mostly empty, with high ceilings and big windows. It was terrible at trapping heat from the fireplaces. He could feel the chill settling in immediately. Locating the source of the noise was going to be a tedious process. Items could be moved and misplaced and Adrian would completely forget about them.

The faint light being emitted by the candle was not enough to illuminate the opposite end of the corridor. The darkness encroached, meaning every step was a matter of anticipation as more and more of the interior was revealed. Adrian took one step and stopped – the bottom of his shoe releasing a loud clicking noise.

Adrian kicked his shoes away and left them by the door. It wasn't paranoia, it was just going to get in the way of finding the noise, he reasoned with himself. He continued walking until he reached the top of the main stairwell. Everything remained as it was before the sun set.

Just when Adrian started to think that he was inventing the sounds – another one came from the kitchen. Adrian felt a thrum of anxiety run through his chest. He really didn't like this. Even when it was his Father's plan, the incident at the theatre still lived large in his mind. There was a real chance that he or someone from his class could have died as a result.

Adrian thought about what to do next. The noise was not his imagination playing tricks on him. He was meant to be the only person in the manor. That meant that a stranger was inside the building with him. He needed to leave. He needed to run to the police box and get help before something terrible happened.

What happened next was so sudden and violent that Adrian was left standing at the apex with a bewildered expression. No less than three men poured outwards from one of the doors and looked up to see him standing with his candle flickering. One of the men pointed at him from below and yelled at the top of his lungs.

“There he is, he's upstairs!”

It was a scene more terrifying than any of the horror novellas had read in the library. It took their sudden dash for the stairs for him to realise that they were trying to chase him down. Adrian spun on his heel and ran as fast as his legs could carry him. There was only one way out of the house with them watching the main stairs – the staff access on the other side of the building.

They were unbelievably fast. A pack of bloodhounds was on his tail, gnashing teeth and frenzied eyes gleaming through the dark. Adrian's heart pounded like a hammer in his chest. His legs burned – his energy being expended at a frightening pace. They were gaining on him!

“Stay away!”

He pulled furniture, chairs, bookshelves, anything he could get his hands on – and tipped them over onto the floor behind him. They continued regardless, not so much as hesitating at the makeshift obstacles he was trying to erect. He could hear them ranting and raving, taunting him from the darkness.

He wasn't going to make it to the stairs.

Adrian ditched the candle and slipped into the darkness. A door, a door – he needed to find a door. It didn't matter where it led or what room he'd be trapped in, he needed to get out of their way and buy himself some time. He dived through one of the doorways and slammed it shut. He scrambled towards the nearest sofa and grabbed it, slipping on the floor as he tried to find purchase and pull it across the entryway as a barricade.

It was too heavy.

Adrian moved on to the next idea. He was left with no choice but to fight using the magic he'd learned at the academy. He rued his past self for not paying good enough attention when Felipe was tutoring him. All he could manage was a low-voltage bolt by ionising the air. It was going to be useless against anything more than a skittish animal.

He held out his hands and prepared. The doors swung open with such force that they crashed against the wall and left indents in the plaster. All of Adrian's hopes were dispelled within seconds as a horde of masked men descended upon him like a swarm of hornets. His arms and legs were soon restrained and held down to the floor.

“Get off of me! Do you have any idea who I am?”

“We do! That we do!”

A lone figure loomed over him. The frayed beige sack he wore over his head contained nothing but two eyeholes, allowing Adrian a glimpse into the manic gaze that resided in the shade.

“Mister Adrian Roderro, your reputation really does precede you.”

“What is this?” Adrian protested, “Why are you in my house?”

The men were bedraggled. They wore dirty clothes and stunk of something foul. The ones holding his arms and legs leered down at him with crooked smiles and rotten teeth. They were enjoying his distress greatly.

The leader held a hand to his chest and bowed, “Rejoice, young man! You've been selected as a guest of honour for an important party that we're throwing. We have

many esteemed men and women coming to join us, and it wouldn't be right to leave the head of the famous Roderro family out in the cold!"

Adrian struggled to try and break free, "I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Pull him up."

The men forced Adrian back to his feet, where the difference in stature between him and them was made clear. He couldn't wrestle himself free. There were five men surrounding him on all sides. He ceased resisting and stared at the man posing in front of him.

"There's no need to look so glum, friend. I promise you – when I say that we're going to enjoy a party together, I really mean it. We've got so many wonderful people coming to share in the celebration. So smile!"

Adrian was not in the mood to smile.

The captor's arms dropped down to his sides in disappointment. One hand slipped into the pocket of his workman's coveralls. Adrian's heart skipped a beat as the man pulled a dagger from inside and held it up to his neck with a furious growl. The cold steel made his entire body shiver.

His voice rose into a shrill scream, "You think you're too good for us, don't you? We're doing all of this for your sake – but you have to be an entitled shitbag about it! Smile! Before I gut you like a bloody fish! Smile!"

Adrian did his best to put on a fake grin.

His tone switched to something more soothing like the flip of a switch, "That's better. Isn't it nice to share a smile with friends?"

The knife receded.

"Bag him and take him to the cart."

Everything went black.

