

It turned out that Xenia was probably real. When our discussion finished during that lucid dream, I anticipated that the exact details of what was said would elude me. The opposite was true. When I awoke in the morning I remembered it with the clarity and detail of a conversation I would have in reality.

The economics of that decision were murky. Xenia did not seek to sway me, and they claimed to not have used the Red Tree – the device that Durandia used to make all of her predictions. With that in mind it became a curious question as to why Xenia used their power in an inefficient manner to speak with me.

There were two possibilities. Either Durandia expended a lot more power than Xenia did on a regular basis, setting the pieces into place and transporting my essence from one world to the next, or Xenia had no intention of utilising their own power in any great capacity anytime soon.

I would have been happier to pretend that Xenia was a figment of my imagination intended to fill in the gaps left by Durandia during our conversation at the museum, but I could not discard the absurd so glibly in a world with magic and demons and all others kinds of oddities.

Xenia spoke of internal politics, panels of peers, and other conflicting interests that drove their decision-making. It made me wonder what Durandia was hoping for when she sent me here. Was this world one of her own making? That would be an obvious and clear-cut answer as to why she desired to protect it from potential destruction. But she was all-powerful, at least compared to the likes of me, so I was uncertain what utility I served in the face of that.

Communicating across the Veil was difficult. Durandia and Xenia implied the same problem. Perhaps, for whatever reason, they had lost touch with their ability to reach out and manipulate the worlds beneath them. The universe was always expanding outwards, further and further, filling the space between with an unassailable void. What once was trivial may have become almost impossible.

These were the thoughts bouncing around in my head while I dressed myself that morning. The same old routine was executed on autopilot. Underwear, vest, skirt, shirt, blazer, hair – in that order. Some noble girls my age would start to wear

constricting corsets to make their waists look larger. It wasn't as extreme as the examples I knew from my old world and they weren't dominant as a fashion – but you wouldn't catch me dead wasting my time squeezing my organs into shape to make myself more appealing to men.

To be frank, I did the bare minimum to pass the social standards of the era. I was lucky that Maria was naturally beautiful in so many ways because it meant much less time spent preening like a peacock in front of the mirror. Some foundation was good enough to make people believe that I was paying a lot of attention.

It was a running joke amongst the servants at our estate that at one time I would change my hair every single day. That was because I was trying to find a dignified style that was easy and fitted in with Maria's persona, and I was very bad at doing it. I ignored the uneasy feeling that blossomed in my chest now that some of those same servants were dead and stood from the vanity, ready to face the day.

It was the weekend and the teachers were attending a faculty meeting cross training session. There was nothing planned, though I was confident that something would demand my attention if I left the dorms and wandered the grounds for an hour or so.

I did not want to dedicate any more mental energy to thinking about Xenia. That was a waste of time. They were checking to see if Durandia had followed their recommendations and kept the personality tweaks to a bare minimum, along with a pointless warning about not blindly trusting her. Xenia said they knew me – so why did they feel the need to warn me about the pitfalls of trust?

I never trusted Durandia.

Trust was earned, not given freely. Samantha was trustworthy insofar as she was a fairly naïve country girl who was willing to take what I said at face value. It wasn't an equal relationship – but there was no way for me to address the balance given that I was both older than her and more willing to commit to drastic action in times of crisis. She even willingly aired a fact that might have jeopardized our 'friendship' or turned me into an enemy.

That fact, which Durandia planted into her head for a specific purpose, was not one I could assume was true. She wasn't above lying to us to get what she wanted. Part of what I said to her was genuine. Samantha was the morally upright member of the cast. She always did what was righteous even if it contravened the letter of the law.

If she felt that it was time to cut me loose, then who was I to get angry about it? That she hadn't already turned me into the nearest police officer was already beyond what I originally expected. It spoke to her developing understanding that sometimes that violence could only be answered with violence.

Samantha was a naïve girl, but her having that information was one of the few ways I could redress the imbalance between us. It was her choice whether to associate with me or not. Now that I was assured that my presence wasn't specifically endangering people, that I was here to get in the way, I could leave that in her hands.

Speak of the devil – she was waiting outside of my dorm room.

“Good morning Maria, have you performed your morning run?”

“No. I'm taking a day to rest. Is there something wrong?”

“Nobody's shot at me yet - so I think we're okay.”

“Where are the terrible twosome?”

“Oh, they're busy. I don't know why. I was hoping you could accompany me to get breakfast.”

“Very well.”

If she was going downstairs, there was no reason to refuse. I always awoke bright and early before most of the other students. Samantha was the same, having lived on a farm for her entire life. I kept a strict schedule because it helped me get stuff done. It gave the added benefit of being able to choose from the full selection at the morning buffet. This was a high-class school for spoiled kids, but they could never predict which foods would be in short supply. It was amusing to see them adjust the ratios of what was on offer to try and get ahead of the herd.

That wasn't a problem I ever had to deal with. Samantha followed me silently down the stairs and through the corridor that led to the dining hall. A few other early risers mulled around the building, but this early you would often only see the teachers hurrying to get their lessons ready for later.

I grabbed my usual and waited for Samantha. She took her sweet time piling on as much as she could. I didn't comment on it, but she still felt the need to pre-emptively defend her appetite.

"What? I'm a growing girl."

"I didn't say anything, though I do have to doubt your assertion that you're still growing. Hopefully, some of that growth emanates from your body and is passed on to me."

"I thought you liked being... cute."

The glare I sent in her direction said more than words ever could.

We sat at one of the smaller tables in the back corner of the hall and dug in. Students slowly started to filter through over the next ten minutes, taking their pick from the still-full selection. I wanted nothing more than to get out of there before everyone started crowding around us and pelting me with questions.

"Breakfast with friends is better than doing it alone," Samantha declared, "Don't you agree?"

"Friends?"

Samantha pouted, "You're always straight-talking, but for whatever reason you seem incapable of admitting that we're friends. What else would you call a pair of girls the same age who spend a lot of time together?"

"Acquaintances."

"Acquaintances don't eat lunch and dinner together almost every day. They don't teach the other to fight and defend themselves either. Does being someone's friend really upset you that much? I don't get it."

My 'problem' was that Samantha shouldn't have been relying on me to fill her friend circle. Not only was I technically an old ass man from another world, but I was also a trained killer. Samantha had a lot of better options than me – but no matter what I did or said she didn't seem to catch on to why I was trying to push her towards more traditional options.

"Do you see me as a novelty?" I inquired.

"A novelty. Because of your wealth, or... the other thing?"

"Both."

"Being rich doesn't make you a novelty at this academy. If anything, I'm the novelty here."

"I don't need pity," I insisted, "If you think I'm in over my head and need help, then I'm afraid that you are mistaken. There is nothing more to be done about it."

"I'm well aware that between the two of us, you're the one who gets into the fights. If you say that you don't need emotional support or a shoulder to cry on, I'll listen to your request and keep my distance. I think you're an interesting person – and nobody else at the academy seemed to understand what you were looking for in a friend."

"I wasn't looking for friends at all. You know, because of the 'other thing.'"

Samantha nodded, "Yes, yes. The other thing, but you changed your mind. So why not cut loose and make some friends?"

"Even if I wanted to, I find most of the people at this academy impossible to get along with. I understand that it sounds silly but I do not enjoy the company of people who are in a similar situation to me. I already have a lot of money. I do not need relationships predicated on the idea of making more of it."

That marked me firmly as an outlier though. All of the kids in the academy considered themselves extremely talented at playing 'the game.' That being the art of making backroom deals, cosying up to people in influential places, and making their huge amounts of wealth turn into even more money.

They weren't. The high-pressure environment did demand that they grow up fast, but they were still ignorant in a lot of ways. They could fall victim to all sorts of popular myth-making and misconception. Relationships that they felt were set in stone were nothing more than a passing fancy. Power couples, lauded and celebrated, came and went like the sun rose in the morning and set in the evening.

There was no doubt in my mind that they were petty enough to take these school experiences forward, shaping the future image of the Walserian nobility for decades to come, but the practical impact of their independent actions at the academy was close to nil.

Samantha shrugged, "I should be proud to have scored such a highly desired place, then."

"You should."

Samantha sighed as I undercut her sarcasm. It was a favourite strategy of mine, because it irritated her and tied into my persona. She was starting to catch on to the fact that I was doing it on purpose after hearing it so many times. The hall was starting to fill up, and who would walk through the door but Claude, sans Max on this occasion. He ignored the skirmish at the buffet and approached our table with narrowed eyes.

"Claude? I thought you were busy."

"I didn't need to stay behind as long as Max did. I decided to come and grab some food before it's too late. But what do we have here? The most sought-after girl at the academy, eating a meal with public enemy number one."

Samantha frowned, "I'm public enemy number one?"

"You are when they see you with Maria," Claude observed. He was right. I'd never seen so many glowers of jealousy in one place.

Claude pointed to his eyes with two of his fingers and then turned them in my direction.

“I’m watching you. What’s your little game in getting all buddy-buddy with Samantha?”

“My game?” I echoed mockingly, “It turns out that Samantha is the heiress to an incredible fortune, and I’m positioning myself to steal it from her once the will is due to be read.”

“Really?”

I laughed in his face, “No. I made that up.”

“I’m already onto you, Maria. Behind every smile is a bared dagger.”

“Cute – did you steal that from one of your detective novels?”

“So what if I did?” he replied defensively.

Claude was already kind of annoying, but this new schtick of having suspicions about me and eyewitness testimony that he was completely unwilling to believe was an entirely new level of irritating. If only he hadn’t written that stuff into the book at the fort. When I told him about what happened and he refused to accept it, I knew he was a lost cause. If I were playing the visual novel – I’d be very upset about a plot development like this.

It was bad comedy.

And as if the peaceful morning atmosphere wasn’t already spoiled enough by Claude – Wendy and Dalia walked through the two doors on the left side of the hall at the same time. Without delay, they began to argue and attract an awful lot of attention from the surrounding students. I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Let’s leave. I’m starting to get a headache.”

Samantha followed me in a hurry, leaving Claude to get his food and ruminate on his new pet theories about what evil I was cooking up this time.

“I can’t believe that they started fighting as soon as they saw each other.”

“I can. Once the niceties are done with – it’s all about having the last word.”

“You do that too.”

“I know. I have to meet people’s expectations or they’ll start to wonder who I really am.”

We emerged onto the back patio of the main building – which faced down towards the gardens and the greenhouse. It was a nice day that we could do whatever we pleased with. Getting off-site was a lot harder now ever since they tightened up their security protocols, so we would have to amuse ourselves within the campus grounds.

“You know – back there when you were fighting your Mother, that was the first time I’d ever seen you make a face like that. Were you angry? Scared? Or... were you enjoying yourself?”

I laughed, “Enjoying myself? I’m not so foolish so as to find any enjoyment in risking my life. I suppose it would be most accurate to call it stress. I make a lot of odd expressions when subjected to pressing circumstances.”

“Even though you don’t like it – you still get yourself involved.”

“I could hardly stand back and let my Father be killed by those lunatics. On the other occasions, it was merely a coincidence that I was there and ready to fight back.”

“Was it a coincidence? The Goddess does seem to have a goal in mind for us.”

“Then I would very much like to forward a formal complaint to her. It’s inappropriate for a powerful being beyond our comprehension to rely on a pair of teenage girls to solve all of the world’s problems.”

Samantha wasn’t going to speak badly of the Goddess. She was not the most religious person I’d met during my time in this world, but I imagined that she still held a certain level of belief in her values and teachings. That dedication would be strengthened by having met her for real.

“It does sound a bit strange when you put it like that.”

“We should keep in mind that there is no such thing as a truly infallible individual. For as long as intelligent life, here in Walser or beyond our reality, have desires and goals of their own – they are capable of making decisions that are not to everyone’s benefit.”

“Do you have a particular reason to feel that way?” she asked.

I always felt that way, but it wasn't because of Xenia that I was bringing it up now with Samantha. Xenia was the same. If anything, they were even less reliable than Durandia because they insisted on not using the Red Tree to see if they would get their desired outcome.

Samantha answered her own question before I could; “I keep forgetting that you're slow to trust anyone. Disregard what I said.”

“It is not that I am slow to trust. I simply feel that there is no good reason for me to believe everything I hear. These are matters of great importance, it would not be a surprise to learn that the Goddess would lie or mislead to ensure that the proper outcome is achieved.”

Samantha recalled my training sessions – where I stressed the importance of identifying people's motivations and self-preservation instincts. Words were cheap and easy to throw at someone's feet, but the stuff that really mattered was more tangible than that.

“If it's to save the world then I wouldn't be angry with her.”

“And if it gets us killed?”

Samantha's face dropped, “That's bloody morbid.”

“But it is the first thing of value that most people imagine. Without your life, nothing else matters.”

“I'd be... quite upset if that happened.”

Not that we could avert that outcome if their claims about the Red Tree were true. In a sense, the die had been cast a long time before we were aware of the game that was being played. That was frustrating.

A new voice called out to us, “Maria! May I speak with you for a moment?”

I swivelled around and came face to face with one Louis Germain. He was a narrow, gaunt-faced boy who came from a pharmaceutical family. His most distinctive feature

was a pair of round brass spectacles that rested atop his nose. He was in some of my elective classes, but Samantha mentioned that she saw more of him thanks to her focus on biology.

“Can I help you?”

“I hope it isn’t a bother, but I was wondering if you knew why Dalia and Wendy are at odds all of a sudden.”

I shook my head, “I rarely if ever speak with them.”

“Dalia spoke with Clara about a personal issue – and the next hour those two were at each other’s throats about what was said,” Louis explained, “I believe it was about you, Maria.”

“I’m afraid I can’t illuminate this manner in the slightest. Dalia swung by the gardens yesterday to boast about something or other.”

Samantha added her own testimony to mine, “I saw them arguing and scuffling in the downstairs study afterwards. Whatever happened – it was on that day.”

This petty school infighting wasn’t my bag. Who cared what Dalia and Wendy were arguing about? They should have just kept my name out of it. Louis adjusted his glasses nervously.

“Ah. I don’t want to be a bother. I’ll leave it at that.”

“I take no offence,” I said, “But Dalia mystifies me. Her primary method of trying to win my favour appears to be popping up at random and insulting me.”

“She does do that. She’s good company if you get to know her.”

“I will have to take your word for it.”

Louis bowed his head respectfully and left the way he came. I sighed and leaned against the stone bannister that ran across the patio. Whether I liked it or not – my name was being invoked in this feud for whatever reason. Louis wouldn’t have a reason to approach me if it wasn’t. I could feel it in my bones, even though I kept my

distance from Dalia and her crew, I was going to end up tangled in this schoolyard bullcrap regardless.

Killing someone was easy – understanding the mind of a teenager was not.

---

“All of that fuss and he got away without a scratch, unbelievable!”

In the smoking room at the Walserian Parliament – it was not an uncommon sight to find the industrious, influential and powerful speaking with the politicians who resided there. The ‘smoking room’ was often used as a euphemism to describe deals made behind the backs of the parties they represented.

The house was not in session, and so Cedric Roderro made himself known to one of his oldest and most important allies, a dyed-in-the-wool monarchist and member of the Restoration Party – Frederick Chaplain. Both men enjoyed sharing a cigar, and both had extremely expensive tastes.

That was perhaps the only thing that united them. Frederick was no industrialist, and his primary source of income came from making promises to various people in exchange for funding. He was also a man lacking in the raw ambition that Cedric displayed so openly. Frederick was more than pleased with what he had.

They were squared away in the corner by the window, pulled open slightly to allow fresh air into the chamber while they smoked.

“It defies belief. I’m telling you that he was vulnerable. He fired every person who worked on the estate. He didn’t want to see or hear from them.”

Frederick laughed at his friend’s misfortune, “Aye. Aye. I can’t imagine you saying something so heartless to anyone but me.”

Cedric cleared his throat and spoke in a tone that dripped with sarcasm; “Of course – as his uncle, I’m overjoyed that the leader of our fine house evaded harm in that most terrible of incidents!”

Cedric was (in his eyes) rightly furious about how the plan had played out. It seemed to be going so smoothly! His idiot brother had gotten himself banged up in prison for

the next decade and a half, Adrian was losing his wig trying to keep control of their business empire, and at one time he no longer possessed the life-saving watch which was passed down to each leader of their family line. Just when he thought that Adrian was about to see his luck run out, some absurd coincidence arrived from the heavens above to save him from misfortune.

He'd dreamed of this scenario for years. Cathdra and his insistence on not having any more children after Adrian was going to bite him. If Adrian died – then all of the family's assets would go to him. He would be free to do with their fortune and their destiny as he pleased, as was his right.

Frederick was the one who positioned him to leak the information about the watch in the first place. They stole it, and were planning on using it to cement a plan to replace the government and restore the monarchy. One of the conspiracy's members lost her marbles at the last moment, killed one of the ringleaders, and allegedly used it to travel back in time. That was according to the stories that Frederick heard from his contacts with them.

They were oddly stingy about giving him the full story. The key points were well-known to the public. It was all over the news, and the amount of heat placed onto the other conspirators by the police in the aftermath broke their group apart before they could reform and try again.

“Did Cathdra's failed plan give you cold feet?” Frederick asked.

“You already know the answer. It would have been perfect. Perfect! It would have been perfect if those cultists had killed him. I wouldn't have had to lift a damn finger, and nobody would suspect anything. It would be an unfortunate turn of events, a young man cut down in his prime. I have half a mind to take more direct measures.”

“And spoil your reputation?”

Cedric blew smoke through his nose; “Reputation is something that can be repaired.”

“And money is something that can be earned. If you trade in your family's good name for the sake of money, I feel that you will grow to regret such a transaction in due

time. For your part – the real problem is what might happen if the police start investigating why your nephew turned up dead.”

“I never said I was considering it. I’m already too close to the incident for my liking.”

“Your brother’s actions and the Scuncath kidnappings have sent the security state into a furore. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s even worse than the Civil War. I have no doubt that they’ll be quick to prosecute anyone who dares break the law at this moment in time.”

“You act as if they care about what we do.”

“I never said they did, but it will be exceedingly problematic for the government if the people start to question how nobody above their station is ever held to account for so many curious accidents. They do not fear us, they fear the masses. Violence has become a language many understand.”

Cedric changed his tune.

“I never said I wanted to kill him,” he insisted, “I merely wish to show him that the role of family head is fraught with dangers. The stress is clearly getting to him! I may just offer him a frank suggestion about him stepping aside and allowing me to assume those responsibilities.”

“The businesses are still legally his.”

“Then I will make him an offer on their purchase. Adrian is desperate to be rid of them, he’ll see it as me doing him a favour.”

“If he hasn’t already figured out that you were involved.”

“You’re kidding me. Cathdra never taught that boy a single thing of use. If not me, he’ll get chewed up and spat out by someone else, and they won’t be half as kind to him as I’ll be. He’s got no idea how the world works. Not one bit.”

Frederick offered no further opinions on the matter. With his cigar burnt to a small stub, he extinguished it in the nearest ashtray by his chair and leaned back to relax.

“Well, let’s discuss another matter since you’re so resolute on your nephew.”

