

“The Goddess spoke to me. I can’t believe it!”

I hushed her from across the carriage, cognizant of the man holding the reins on the outside. This cabin was soundproofed to some extent – but yelling something that crazy was bound to leak through a gap and get us in serious trouble.

“That she did. I can’t say I expected that when the Curator gave me the letter…”

A letter which supposedly didn’t tell him a thing about what the etherscope was for. It was almost enough to make me feel bad for the old fellow considering he’d dedicated his entire life to studying Sir Snow’s work.

“Did she tell you to keep your discussion a secret?”

“No,” Samantha replied, “But I’m not sure if you’ll find most of what we discussed very interesting. I spent three of my five minutes freaking out. I still think that someone is trying to play a trick on us. There’s no way that was real, right?”

“Who else but a Goddess could have the ability to see the future? I was uncertain myself, but the contents of the letter have me believing in her legitimacy. She knew things about me that no other person should.”

Samantha cupped her cheeks and kicked her legs giddily, “I can’t believe it. I’ve been touched by the Goddess’ grace! Maybe that’s why I’m so good with light magic!”

Destined partner. The pieces fell into place. She and I were meant to be opposites. Samantha was given the ability to wield light magic, while I was talented with dark magic. They did say that opposites attracted. Durandia must have wanted us to work together to avert this vague disaster she described.

“But to think that Henry Snow was in contact with the Goddess for so long,” I mused, “I would have thought that a man of science would avoid becoming entangled with the unexplainable.”

“Unexplainable?”

“You know, irrational.”

She nodded, “Oh, I see. What she said to me was that we should use our abilities to save the world. Is she trying to say that everything we know will be under threat one day?”

“I believe so.”

Samantha scowled, “Would it have killed her to give us the details? How can we be expected to do that without any information to work off of!”

“She’s confident that we have all of the information we need as is,” I explained, “We’re just going to have to trust her judgement and keep doing what we’re doing.”

Samantha remained silent for five minutes after that, trying to work up the nerve to ask me a question that was burning a hole in her pocket. She was afraid of offending me by talking about my method of operating under danger.

“Did she say anything about you... killing those gang members?”

I sighed, “She appears to be well beyond caring for matters such as those. Her responsibility is to protect the entire planet – and that means making decisions that may be morally questionable. Were you expecting her to chastise me?”

Why would she criticise me for killing? She was the one who brought me here to do just that in the first place.

“I’m not trying to insult you, Maria. I was curious. The Goddess is meant to stand for everything good in this world. Making such a difficult decision is surprising. She’s entrusting the second half of this destiny to you.”

“I’ve received better gifts before,” I joked.

Samantha never spoke of any particular dedication to a religious creed. There were many spread across this world of varying shapes and sizes, though worshipping the ‘Goddess’ was the most widespread by far. In a world where there were physical examples of places and people gifted incredible powers by her, it was easy for it to become the dominant creed.

Each church had its own way of doing things – although some of the rules and pathos were codified between them by collective agreement. There were your garden variety

moral standards like avoiding murder, lying and theft, and some more esoteric rules intended to commemorate important dates and people.

For example, it was considered rude to eat seafood on Gerwent because on that day Chosen Saint Ethel famously resolved a dispute between fishermen by using the Goddess' teachings. Legend held that they were in danger of overexploiting the rivers and starving their village in the process. It was a good story to tell greedy kids. There were a lot of permutations that changed elements but retained the core message.

God fearing country folk were a stereotype from my old life and sometimes it was easy to merge the two worlds together without considering the numerous factors that drove people to religious dedication. I'd found that countryside citizens tended to lean onto the more cynical side of the scale. There was a strong undercurrent of affirmation in common sense, only spreading what they knew and sticking to what was simple.

Whether Durandia was the Goddess that the common folk talked her up to be was ultimately irrelevant. She could only influence us through careful planning and preparation, and she implied that the beings beyond the Veil utilised the same magic that we did.

Samantha frowned and reassessed what she thought, "I suppose that bearing such a heavy responsibility means compromising from time to time, right?"

"I do not believe that killing is inherently evil. If the death of one saves the lives of a thousand others, you are protecting them in the process."

"But what if that one person hasn't done anything wrong?" Samantha countered.

"That would be complicated," I admitted, "But trust me when I say – it would take a truly tremendous stroke of bad luck to harm that many people by complete accident. It takes malice to cause that much damage."

"Hm. What if they're carrying a dangerous disease with them?"

I shook my head, "We can hardly keep track of something like that. How could we discern who was infected as the first victim? And if they are here to be killed it is

likely too late to stop the spread anyway. I honestly cannot imagine a situation where someone would unknowingly cause death on that scale in a manner by which a preventative action would stop them.”

“Meaning?”

“The premise of the question is flawed. We can add as many qualifiers as we want but it does not change the meaning of the original statement. To kill another in the knowledge that they may accidentally kill many others is to imply the ability to see into the future, or predict their actions so accurately so as to appear as such.”

“Hm.”

“On the other hand, malicious actors like Lady Franzheim and Duchess Rentree are plain in their intentions. They mean to directly end the lives of several innocent people and plunge Walser into a violent civil war which may kill hundreds of thousands more. When someone declares intent as foul as this – what else is there to do but believe them?”

Or to put it simply...

“It is a difficult subject to address. As I said before, there are far too many factors to consider before making a judgement on the merits of killing another. It can only be done at that moment, knowing the full measure of what they intend.”

Samantha settled back down in her seat and returned to a contemplative silence. She wasn't going to tell me exactly what Durandia said. There were two possibilities. Either she was given a boring hero's journey speech about mastering her powers and saving the world, or there was something more complex brewing. If Samantha was lying to me or hiding it by omission, it would be the first time.

“Did she say anything to you?”

“Actually – she was very light on details when it came to me. She must have guessed that I didn't need the same kind of motivation that you did. The only takeaway I have is that we're going to get involved in some troublesome battles in the future. I think it is a good idea to intensify our training schedule.”

Samantha grimaced, “I wish I knew where you found all this darn energy. Not only do you exercise every morning, but you also spend an hour playing tennis on top of it. How do you even focus during our lessons?”

“It’s all endurance. You could do the same if you dedicated yourself to training regularly.”

“I don’t believe that for one second. I’ve been breaking my back working on the family farm since I knew how to walk.”

“Conditioning and physical strength are two separate issues.”

Samantha groaned. I reminded myself that titbits of knowledge like that weren’t widespread just yet. There were a lot of folks who didn’t understand the distinction between building muscle and building stamina. This applied to a lot of fields, like physics, chemistry and political theory.

I got comfortable and explained the rest of my divine meeting to Samantha during the trip, excluding the messy details about how and why I was brought into this world. There was one reassuring fact about all of this – that Maria Walston-Carter wasn’t pushed out of her own body for the sake of giving me a means of entry.

It might also go some way to explain the immense success of the Walston-Carter family. From what I could find in the records, we were relatively small time until a few decades ago when our businesses exploded in profitability. Was that Durandia’s doing as well?

As for the subject of who my Mother was, it was now theoretically possible that no such person existed. Maria was an ‘empty shell’ until I was pulled through to occupy her body. How was this body of mine created? If she struggled to speak to us without the use of a catalyser – how could she expend so much energy to create a new physical form for me? Was the reason for that struggle my creation?

I shook my head and availed myself of such questions. There was no easy way to answer any of them. I was just going to frustrate myself by lingering on the small print. It would have taken a significant effort from my Father to conceal the identity of my Mother. There were no paintings or records, and none of the staff had ever

seen her either. I'd broken into his office and searched for my birth certificate once before, only to find nothing for the effort.

Either he was hiding something big – or there was nothing to hide in the first place.

By the time we returned to the house, it was already past midday. Caius was waiting for us in the planning room, as I'd coined it, with a pile of documents with names and faces attached. They were all of the conspirators whom Rentree was inviting to the party at Franzheim's home. This was our best shot at hitting all of them at once.

"Please tell me you have a good plan ready to go."

Caius was brimming with falsely earned confidence when we met him in the drawing room of my home. The chart on the table was starting to be thinned out as conspirators were pressured to drop from the plot by vaguely threatening letters from yours truly. They may have wanted the full reinstatement of the monarchy, but only if it didn't compromise their personal comfort. Some of them had a lot more skin in the game than others.

"Franklin is a beautiful, beautiful man," Caius opined, "I asked him for a detailed floorplan of the Franzheim estate – and he managed to get one for me."

"Caius..."

He held out his palms to stop me from attacking him, "Hey, hey! Cool it a little. I promise that I've been thinking about what you told me. I agree. It'll be a nice change of pace if we can do this without having to resort to violence or arson."

"I hope so," Samantha piped up.

"When it comes to matters such as these – the best way to go is to utilise our old friend shock-and-awe."

"Maria said that you wanted to do things 'theatrically,' but I don't understand what that means," Samantha worried. She wasn't alone in not knowing what the hell he was talking about.

"What I mean is that we can't give these folks time to think about their decisions. Rentree and her muscle are going to be trying to sway them back onto their side after

what happened with Carides and Thersyn. If they waver now, the structure they've set up to take over the government will fall to pieces."

I nodded, "Some will be easier to convince than others. We merely need to dissuade enough of them to make the plan untenable."

"I believe that we have all of the pieces we need to make that happen. We have evidence against them, we have an ominous reputation to threaten them with, and we know the time and place of their next major gathering. I can't imagine a better window of opportunity than this."

"What do you want to do?" I asked again.

"Firstly, you're right in assuming that the letters we have now would not be enough to kickstart a police intervention. Old money doesn't go down for mild misdemeanours like scheming to topple the government. Which is why your identity as a Walston-Carter will pay dividends. You'll be there to make the consequences of their attempt on your uncle's life very clear."

I frowned, "I'm not going to be wearing a mask, then?"

"I'm afraid not. Otherwise, how would they come to believe that an investigation could occur in the future? Having the daughter of an influential family such as yours making those threats will be more effective than the likes of us."

"Us?" Samantha echoed. She was starting to get ahead of herself with that one.

"We're going to use your identity and the knowledge we've gathered to craft a fine show for our gathered audience. None of them will see it coming, and when it comes to making explosive entrances - there is not a singular soul in this country who can do it better than me."

Caius moved towards one of the tables, where a black cloth had been placed over a bundle of unseen items. He whipped the cloth away, revealing what lay beneath with a flourish. A series of buckles, straps and ropes - along with a pulley system. It was everything one would need to come crashing through the ceiling of a particular drawing room at a particular manor house.

“I’ve used this setup a few times before. It’s lightweight and easy enough for one person to utilise without help. Just remember to burst the glass first using a concussive spell. I learned that the hard way.”

“And what if Cordia decides to put a bullet in me and call it a day?” I asked.

“You’re not going to let her do that.”

“Oh, you make it sound so simple.”

Killing a girl my age in front of a group of nobles would be in poor taste – but Cordia was just crazy enough to try it. However, a second thought did occur to me. When she spoke at the tennis tournament, she seemed to imply that I was the one responsible for her trip back into the past. She must have decided that taking me on directly was not worth the effort, so she used the watch to try and get a second bite of the apple.

But was that because Caius’ plan would work as is, or because I would step in and make a few changes to keep everyone safe? I groaned and clutched the sides of my head. This must have been what Durandia was complaining about when it came to knowing the future. I was second-guessing myself to try and align my actions with what I knew.

I took a step back and restated what Caius was proposing. He wanted me to rappel through the glass ceiling of the sitting room they were using for the meeting and convince the wavering members of the coalition that I had evidence that could lead to their arrest. It wasn’t going to work. There were too many uncontrollable variables involved in exposing myself without insurance.

I wandered over to the document pile and skimmed some of the most scandalous letters from the top. These were the ones that directly implicated them in planning to commit a series of different criminal offences. If I showed them a few of these, my claims would have a lot more weight, and if I claimed to have someone on the outside ready to release them should any harm come to me...

“You’re already tweaking my plan, aren’t you?”

I laughed, “Was it that obvious?”



“I never said it was going to be perfect, but it does bruise my ego a little bit. You’re going to be the one in the firing line though.”

“Hey – don’t forget that I’m here to help too,” Samantha yelled.

I struggled to see where Samantha was going to come into the equation, but that was for the best. If our plan went flawlessly, she wouldn’t need to do anything and we could go home smelling like roses. Caius and Alice would be safe from future reprisals and could leave their self-imposed imprisonment in the guest rooms at the estate. Sure, the food was nice and the rooms were luxurious, but even I would start to go a little stir-crazy if I were forced to stay in one of them for weeks on end.

“Show me the floor plan. I want to start from the beginning.”

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“When I gave you that information about Maria Walston-Carter, I expected you to track her down – not sit back and kick your feet up,” Cordia said with scorn. Marco placed his newspaper down and sighed.

“For what purpose? Given what you’ve told me, and her behaviour during your previous attempts, it’s clear that she both possesses the knowledge and the means to launch her own counterattacks. And what do you know, Duchess Rentree is gathering everyone together to meet at this very house.”

“You could have killed her before she had the chance.”

Marco shook his head, “No, no. You don’t get it. That girl is smart. She already knows what we’re trying to do. And why go to the effort when we can be there when she tries her little plan? It only takes one bullet to put an end to her.”

Cordia was furious, “You’ve cracked. Did that meeting at the museum really test your nerves so? If I knew that you’d become such an abject coward after one fight, I never would have hired you!”

“Don’t get mad before you see the results.”

Marco’s dismissive attitude only served to anger her further. A huge amount of effort went into giving him and his men suits they could wear to attend the meeting and act

as security, under the presumption that Maria would attempt to interfere or deploy hired guns of her own in retaliation. She didn't have time to argue with him now. Rentree and Franzheim were going to meet – and she was expected to be there when it happened.

She straightened out her dress and marched down the corridor towards the drawing room. A pair of Marco's men were already positioned on both sides of the door. Inside was the woman of the hour. Carides "Carrie" Franzheim, a key supporter of the plot who was now beginning to waver. From any perspective, it looked as if her home was being occupied by an invading force. There were guns on every angle of approach.

With that said, Cordia was not anticipating any violence being used to leverage her back on side. That would only serve to further alienate her from the cause and potentially result in police scrutiny that they didn't need. Duchess Rentree was being genuine when she said her visit was for a friendly talk.

Franzheim tensed up when Cordia entered and stood by the opposite chair. She certainly wasn't on the same page. She believed that things could take a sour turn at any moment. It was a rational response to a series of prolific failures. This meeting with their northern collaborators was key to enforcing a calmer status quo. Franzheim was not the only one spooked by Maria's actions.

Soon after, Duchess Rentree made her entrance. Carides Franzheim stood from her chair and curtsied out of respect, before retaking her seat. Rentree was not interested in the pleasantries. She wasn't planning on making this trip to the north at all, but reports of Franzheim waning in her support demanded a show of dedication to try and right matters.

"It is good to see that you've emerged from your hiding place to speak with us, Duchess."

It was already off to a tough start. The Duchess restrained her disdain for such petty comments and nodded, "I understand that there is a great deal of frustration amongst you and our northern partners about recent developments. I am here to reassure you that there will be no further incidents on my account."

“And what about Thersyn? You invited a Scuncath to linger amongst our ranks! He’s on the front page of every newspaper from here to the plains!”

“Thersyn went behind our backs.”

“It doesn’t matter if he went against your orders, Duchess. The fact of the matter is that thanks to him, someone has evidence of our involvement, and what I assume is a clear picture of our network.”

Franzheim motioned to an open letter that was on the table between them. Rentree reached over and took it into her hands, discovering that it was a veiled threat sent specifically to her address. The person penning it claimed to have a complete picture of their organization, and the means to dismantle it.

“The police won’t lift a finger against us, you already know that.”

“But that letter was sent by no policeman, was it?”

Cordia remained silent – even though she already identified the person who was likely responsible. That was information given on a need-to-know basis, and Franzheim had not yet realised that she did not have the pull she believed she did.

“I am confident that despite their possession of these incriminating documents, nothing will come of these threats.”

“I was the only one targeted. I cannot guarantee that the others will maintain their nerve if they are to receive a similar ultimatum. Do you intend to conceal this situation from them?”

“Yes,” Rentree replied.

“Then they will consider it a breach of trust. We are the only ones who know the full truth of what is happening, despite your prior claims that everyone is an equal partner in this plot.”

Rentree tried to put on an empathetic approach; “Surely you understand that a position like that is impossible to execute in practice. You are the key figure in our northern push. Without your assistance, we would have none of the infrastructure in place to reinstate the royal family when the time comes.”

Franzheim was not moved, “If you believe that this matter will end with a quiet acceptance, then I’m afraid you are sorely mistaken. If we were to be exposed, it could set the restoration movement back decades and secure a republican majority in the next election. Between risking that and whatever threats of violence you can offer, there is only one clear answer.”

“I am not threatening you, or anyone else, with violence,” Rentree grumbled, “This is simply for our own security. These meddlers have no restraint or manners. They invade our homes and do as they please.”

Coming from her it was entirely unconvincing. So much time, money and effort had been spent on the violent wing of the restoration plan that everything else seemed secondary by comparison. Rentree was not above using violent means to get her way, and every member of their circle understood that already.

The problem was that they were being pushed on from two sides. They could risk offending Rentree and her army of hired guns, or risk their livelihoods and reputation should the evidence be released to the public. The one who wrote the letter was being careful about what they did with it – they weren’t here merely to cause chaos, they wanted to see the plot fall apart from the inside out.

“If it comes to that, all of our crimes will be forgiven by the new parliament,” Rentree insisted desperately, “Is it not better for us to forge ahead in the face of those risks? You and I could end up behind bars having achieved nothing!”

Rentree had taken a step too far, and Franzheim pounced on her for it.

“This is not a suicide charge, Duchess Rentree. Our cohort is being shaken to the foundation. These incidents show that those achievements may never come to be without extreme caution. Do not assuage their fears in the meeting by making such confident declarations of imminent success, because confidence is in increasingly short supply these days.”

Cordia bit her lip and tried not to let her worry shine through. Franzheim was feistier than usual, and she was right in her assessment that promises of success were not

worth the breath used to speak them. The language they wanted to hear was the language of practicalities and apology.

Franzheim pushed on with her own ultimatum, “I want to know here and now – do you intend to inform them of the leak Thersyn caused?”

“Do you mean to take action if I do not?”

“No, this is merely a way to measure your intent. I will keep my silence if you do not mean to share the news.”

It was not much of a question to Rentree. If Maria was willing to leak these damaging letters to the other members, then there was no benefit in passing it off as a one-off event. Thersyn was responsible – so she had to take the chance while it was pertinent and point the finger at him before they started to worry.

“I want this meeting to be a ‘reset’ for our working relationship. I will tell them of what Thersyn did, and we will decide on how to proceed from there.”

“Very well.”

With that, their one-on-one chat was over. Rentree kept her cool but quickly turned into a furious bluster once she was out of the room. Cordia remained silent and watched from a safe distance.

“Who does that bitch think she is? These damnable Northerners, always looking down on us from their high horses!”

It was this kind of talk that put their relationship on thin ice in the first place, but such a clear lesson was not going to be internalised within the month. These prejudiced opinions were formed over four decades, and they would not be deprogrammed after getting caught with her hand in the cookie jar. That would require Duchess Rentree to accept that her prior position was mistaken.

“Lady Rentree, would you like for me to prepare an alternative plan should the group not come to an agreement?”

“It doesn’t matter. Without their assistance, our hopes of restoring the royal family will be dead in the water. There is no alternative left for us.”

