

Even though we were only gone from the academy for two weeks – it felt almost foreign to fall back into the old routine of attending lectures and lessons. There was no obvious threat on the horizon to worry about for the time being, even though I knew deep down that Durandia always had another nasty surprise in store for me.

I was already sick and tired of hearing people talk about the kidnapping incident. As if risking my life to fight off all of these evil schemes wasn't testing enough, I then had to endure several weeks of uninformed teenagers running their mouths about it and airing wild theories that bore no connection to fact.

And Goddess above - those theories were something special.

The cultists summoning a demon from beyond the Veil using a stolen book was already crazy enough, and the police who witnessed the Alchemist appearing were not speaking about it to the press. The gaps were quickly filled with less absurd ideas that generated just as much incredulity from me and other sceptics. One girl in our class was one hundred percent convinced that the entire incident came about because a lady from the Escobarus family had fallen in love with the cult leader. Beatrice was furious when she found out about it.

Stories about aliens, demons and foreign saboteurs were one thing, but dragging other people's personal motivations into their mythmaking was where the truly absurd was formed. A lot of people couldn't accept the straightforward answers when they were provided to them. They had to be one step ahead of everyone else.

I was speaking from a biased perspective though. I was there when all of this happened, so all of this talk seemed absurd to me. Even separated from my own experiences, it was rude of the students to tar and feather other people like that. But I'd rather hear the students talking about the kidnapping crisis than my part in it.

Max and Adrian kept quiet, which was a shock. Max was upright to a fault, always trying to follow the rules and keep on the straight and narrow. Adrian was a hot-headed loudmouth who was always trying to get one over on me. If anyone was going to spill the beans and blow my cover, it would be one of them.

I was going to get a taste of what Adrian was thinking, because he was waiting for me at the end of our magic period on the Friday that week. He hung back while the rest of the class left to go get food from the cafeteria. If he was afraid of being alone with me, he didn't show it on his face.

"I wanted to speak with you in private."

"This is about as private as the campus gets," I replied, sitting on one of the tree stumps around the edge of the shooting range. "Whatever you want to know, I can tell you. There is no point in avoiding it now."

Adrian grimaced, "The party and theatre, and the fort – those are all incidents I can understand, but what possessed you to kill Professor Prier?"

"He was one of the people trying to kill Felipe."

His voice cracked and rose sharply in pitch, "What? My Father hired him?"

"Yes. He was the first one to launch an attempt on his life. I was disturbed to find that one of the members of that gang had infiltrated the academy. His credentials were real, but his intentions were dark."

"Unbelievable. He would be willing to kill a student for money..."

I pointed to the main building to demonstrate, "He was hiding in the clock tower after our magic lesson because he knew that Felipe would be there to teach us. When the bell rang after the lesson was adjourned, he timed his shot and tried to kill him.

Luckily – I noticed him in the window and pulled Felipe aside just in time."

My eyes turned to the damaged tree on the other edge of the clearing. His gaze followed my line of sight and caught on to the implication of where the shredded bark came from.

"And that's what the teachers were covering up."

"Yes. We told them what happened and their only answer was to hide the incident from the parents and launch an ineffectual investigation. They did not want to run the risk of losing their tuition fees or blemishing the academy's reputation."

Adrian was pensive; “And how did you figure out it was him?”

“I retrieved the empty shell casing from the clocktower, cross-referenced it with a selection of rifles from a hunting store catalogue, and then investigated the greenhouse to try and find one of them. He’d buried it in the soil using a wooden box. He arrived on the scene and caught me red-handed, where he then admitted to his part in the plot.”

“So you just shot him, on the spot, without even thinking about it? You never spoke with him, or considered turning him in to the police?”

“He was being paid to kill Felipe. He’d tried to kill me twice by that point. No amount of reason was going to work on him. It was either let him go and let someone be harmed, or handle it myself, then and there. I was not going to have Felipe’s blood on my hands through rank cowardice.”

In reality, my reasons were less noble than that. This was back when I was operating under the idea that karma was at play. I should have known with how the Prier situation played out that I wasn’t here to be nice and make friends. Durandia always wanted me to intervene in my typical manner.

“I’m not here to impugn your reasons for doing it. What I mean is, how did you find the resolve to bloody your hands?”

I blew air through my nose and shook my head.

“Resolve has nothing to do with it. Violence is the final and most devastating kind of failure. To live without having to subject oneself to it is a privilege that should not be abandoned so readily.”

Adrian didn’t get the answer he wanted.

“That isn’t what I mean. Back there at the fort, I was telling myself that I could be the one to save the day, but in the end, it was all just posturing. Meanwhile, you were doing the right thing. You stood up to them when I couldn’t.”

“Everyone was already evacuated by then. The best course of action was to leave. There was no purpose in picking up a gun and trying to fight.”

“So why didn’t you? It was that woman, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“She was your Mother.”

“I believe so.”

“What do you mean you ‘believe so?’ It’s a yes or no question.”

“I’ve never met my Mother before. For years my Father has pretended that she died in childbirth. Not to belabour the point – but I do not know for certain. He only confided with me later that she was my Mother, and given this life’s propensity for bizarre occurrences, I am not willing to accept that claim without question.”

Adrian grumbled, “You always were a cynic. Not even believing your own Father.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you!” I snapped back, “Have you already forgotten what your own Father did a few months ago?”

He couldn’t argue with that. He, of all people, should have understood not trusting family more than anyone else. The memory of that fateful day caught up with him, and all of the bombast drained out of him.

“Regardless, my point remains the same. You should not envy me for having to do that. There is not a single speck of glory to be cultivated from debasing oneself in such a way. Do you truly desire to burden thyself with the memory of taking a life?”

“Is it worth losing sleep over the deaths of men who relished in the suffering of others?”

“You act like it is a choice to be made and not the natural consequence of killing another. Righteous or not - one cannot simply close their eyes and ears to it. The memory will haunt you regardless. You should celebrate every day in which we’re allowed to live without experiencing a fresh disaster.”

“I don’t get you, not one bit.”

“It is not something that can be understood without experiencing it first. I already know that you are not one to take my word as a matter of fact. There is little reason to continue this debate further.”

“Do you remember them?” he asked, “Do you mean it?”

I sighed; “Yes. I do. In the same way that you might recount the most important moments of your life up to this point, I recall the exact circumstances of each and every person killed as a result of my actions.”

It wasn't just the Scuncath or Cathdra's killers. The men and women I crossed out in my past life were there too. All of that planning and anxiety, and the heart-pounding adrenaline that came with executing it. These were the feelings that made memories. It was impossible to forget any of those assassinations, nor did I want to. I was a ghastly man doing ghastly things. I always had to keep that in my mind's eye.

Though, Maria Walston-Carter was no assassin. She was only spurred into action when circumstances demanded it, and Durandia didn't seem to have any issue with unleashing my destructive abilities unto the world she guarded. She was expecting me to use those skills for a more noble purpose.

While I did accept that I was worthy of some form of punishment – I still would have liked a shorter time period between potentially deadly crises happening in the vicinity of the academy. If it didn't slow down soon then every student was going to hightail it and never come back. What kind of visual novel would this be without any characters to woo?

There wasn't much romance going on in the first place. Samantha, as far as I knew, hadn't launched into any of the 'routes' that I remembered from the game. She spent far more time with me than any of the boys she had to pick between. Thankfully, Love Revolution was the type of game where the neutral ending didn't end with everyone dying from miscellaneous circumstances. If there was a secret Maria route – perhaps she could be going down that.

But that was silly. Despite all of the similarities to Love Revolution, I couldn't shake the reality that this was a real place filled with millions of real people. There were no

'routes' here, just a complex web of interwoven relationships that made up the real world. Routes were too comforting of an idea, that if you walked a certain path and said the right magic words, people would get along with you no matter what. That wasn't reality. A certain sort of person enjoyed being confrontational.

Adrian had changed a lot in the past few months, most notably since his Father was sentenced for trying to kill Felipe. It wasn't healthy. This was a guy who loved to compete with me and others, he was a total hot-head, but now that explosive energy was nowhere to be seen. He looked like he was enduring a serious depressive slump. I knew how demanding running a noble enterprise could be.

Even if he outsourced the direct management work to experienced administrators, there would still be a constant flood of documents coming through his door demanding his opinion on every little detail. Three of the rooms in our estate were dedicated entirely to storing pieces of paper and various folders. They were filled wall to wall with cabinets, shelves and boxes.

"How are you dealing with being in charge?"

"Hm? Why are you asking that?"

"I'm curious. After all, you did have the entire daily running of your family's business empire dumped into your lap with zero warning."

"It's child's play. I leave all of the hard work to the people at the farms and factories. My Father ensured that they were capable of running them without his direct supervision."

He didn't sound convincing even when trying to live up to that old competitive persona. It was the way his eyes shifted, and the slight quiver of uncertainty in his voice. He was asking himself if it was even worth lying to me about.

"If you say so. We should go and eat dinner before there's nothing left to claim."

The relief on his face said more than words ever could. He was hoping that I wouldn't press him further on that subject. Depressed or not, Adrian didn't want to show any

signs of weakness to me or anyone else. His pride was on the line – and thanks to his Father it had been tarnished to a significant degree already.

I walked away, leaving Adrian to trail behind and stew on that thought.

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In a hidden nook in the main building, a small table could be found in the back corner. This was the space that Max, Claude and Samantha liked to claim as their own when space did not permit them to sit in the main hall. Claude and Max were already present with trays of food between them.

“Remember my theory about Maria blackmailing Felipe?”

“The one that wasn’t true?”

“What if it was true though?”

“It wasn’t!” Max retorted, “It was never true. That whole thing was because she and him were the only two students who knew about what was going on with Adrian’s Father.”

“All I’m saying is that there are too many coincidences.”

“Sure there are, and Maria admitted to her involvement in all of those things, which for some reason you can’t seem to accept now that it’s out in the open.”

“Don’t wee up my leg and call it rain. You’ve been arguing against my theories this entire time – and now suddenly you unquestioningly believe what she tells you?”

“We saw it happen!” Max seethed, intentionally keeping the discussion vague for fear of unwanted ears listening to them.

“I’d remember if something that crazy happened in front of me.”

Max covered his face and tried ever so hard not to scream out of frustration. He wasn’t particularly invested in the outcome of the debate in itself – he was only angry at Claude for suddenly expressing scepticism when before he would have immediately jumped to foolish conclusions based on no evidence.

Samantha rounded the corner and shook her head, “You shouldn’t bother arguing with him about it. That book completely wiped his memories.”

“Why didn’t it erase anything else?” Max asked.

She sat at the table and started to eat a piece of bread, “It only erased what he wrote onto the page. According to Maria, the book was cursed a hundred years ago by the original author to protect the information inside. So, if the book got destroyed or something – they couldn’t torture the author to learn what was inside of it.”

“And Claude jumped the gun by writing his last will and freaking testament into it.”

“I don’t remember doing any of that,” Claude asserted.

“Yeah – that’s the point, idiot. You’ve got no less than four different people telling you the same story about what happened and why, and you still can’t accept it.”

When Max got annoyed with Claude – he’d quickly descend into throwing insults his way and trying to brute force a conclusion to the argument. It was futile. Claude was too set in his ways to accept an alternate perspective that relied on common sense or the weight of collective testimony.

The book wiping his memories was too ‘convenient,’ which oddly, Samantha also heard Maria say in the aftermath of the kidnapping plot. She wasn’t sure what she meant by that, given that she openly admitted to her involvement afterwards. Was she really so worried about Claude not keeping it a secret?

“Max, let’s give up for now. I’m getting sick of hearing this same argument over and over.”

Max grumbled under his breath and returned to eating the meal he’d collected from the dining hall. Getting back into the swing of lessons after a stressful experience was frustrating him just as much as Claude’s new attitude. He and Samantha did not seem to be suffering the same problem. He would always find his concentration lapsing during lessons, and loud noises would startle him even when he could see them coming visually. The main offender was the academy’s bell tower.



The trio ate in silence – at least until a pair of girls stumbled through the door with a fistful of dress shirt in each other’s grip. Samantha leaned around Max and observed. It was Dalia and Wendy, the two girls who were giving her grief the other day about being friends with Maria.

“I know you talked to Clara and started filling her head with lies!” Wendy grunted.

“Where do you get the nerve to accuse me of doing that?” Dalia squawked indignantly.

“There was nothing wrong before you spoke with her!”

Max sighed and put his fork down, “What in the Goddess’ name are those two doing? I’m trying to eat here!”

The two troublemakers didn’t listen to Max’s complaint. Whatever they were arguing about, it had escalated quickly to the point where they were both tussling with one another, pushing, shoving and pulling on whatever fabric they could reach.

“You are a two-faced scoundrel,” Wendy retorted, “I should have known that it was all an act. You see me as nothing more than a convenient toady!”

“Don’t blame me because you thought we were closer than your delusions suggested. You’re always using that stupid shy doormat act – but as soon as someone speaks ill of you it turns into this kind of violent outrage.”

“And you think you’re any better? I remember when you ruined Agatha’s ball gown because you thought that Louis Germain was interested in her! You made the entire thing up, whole cloth, and then called her stupid for being upset about it!”

“Ancient history!”

“She didn’t bloody well forget!”

Samantha leaned back into her chair and shook her head, “That’s the loudest I’ve ever heard Wendy speak.”

Claude nodded, “Isn’t she usually... quiet? Shy, even.”

“She came by our table yesterday and she looked at the ground the entire time.”

That meek girl was presently getting into a physical confrontation with one of the academy's most infamous queen bees. Dalia had a bad reputation. She was one of the worst gossipers and loved using her social clout to levy unkind rumours onto other people. She also demanded a huge amount of respect simply for being present. Maria was one of her big targets at the moment. If she could get some of that elusive and solitary magic to rub off onto her – then she could cement her position as the unquestioned queen of the school.

Everyone wanted to be 'the girl who befriended Maria.'

The fight continued. Dalia pushed Wendy back towards the closest bookshelf and tried to pin her against it, but Wendy thrashed and squirmed, making it impossible for her to keep her down and assume control. Wendy was red in the face. It was to this absurd scene that Maria and Adrian wandered through on their way to the dining hall.

Almost immediately – both girls separated from each other and attempted to cover up the fact that they were at each other's throats just moments ago. Maria stared at them. Samantha thought they were both idiots, but she felt a little sorry for them having experienced that particular form of withering glare before. It was made even worse by the striking ruby eyes that she possessed, when the light reflected from them in the right way it made them look like they were glowing.

There were no lies that could conceal themselves from her insight.

She needn't speak a word to make both girls rot where they stood. They offered half-spoken excuses, but Maria was in no mood to hear them. She didn't care. She wanted nothing to do with them in the first place. This was theatre, Samantha realized, this was Maria playing her character to a flawless degree.

"You're in my way."

Samantha felt her heart skip a beat – and she wasn't even the subject of that statement! Dalia and Wendy stood aside and snapped to attention like a pair of trained soldiers. They were a pair of mad dogs a second ago, and Maria made them stop with a glare and a firm hand.

“M-Maria! What a surprise to see you here at this time of the evening!” Dalia stuttered.

“It is time for dinner. It is not a surprise that I am here.”

Dalia laughed painfully, “Oh! Of course. Naturally. Dinner time. Of course, you’d be here moving through this room, to reach the dining hall – because it’s dinner time.”

“Yes. You can go back to tearing each other to shreds, though I suggest you choose to do so in private in the future.”

Maria moved past them and disappeared through the door. Dalia and Wendy were humiliated. Red faced and with ruffled collars, they tidied up their clothes and parted ways without saying another word.

“Jeeze. I haven’t seen her do that to someone in a while,” Max observed.

“She has no patience for that kind of thing. That hasn’t changed,” Sam said.

The rest of the meal was awkward thanks to their display, and Maria did not emerge with Adrian again to provide a distraction. Sam parted ways with her friends and headed back upstairs to find some solitude in her dorm room. There was also some work to catch up on and that sounded like the cure for what ailed her, she wanted to keep her mind busy. What she found instead was a very flustered Dalia standing, arms crossed, by her door.

“Can I help you, Dalia?”

The girl sneered and turned her nose up into the air, “I hope that you won’t speak about what happened earlier. The consequences could be severe.”

Samantha approached, “That would be a shame, but I don’t seem to recall you having much of a problem airing other people’s dirty laundry when it suits you. Muck flingers shouldn’t demand to keep their clothes clean – you know.”

“I can end your association with Maria at any time. Your horrid reputation will only get worse.”

“That’s your damn problem. You think the only reason I spend time with her is because I get some kinda’ respect from the other students. I hate to break it to you, but lasses like you still treat me like crap anyway. If you’re here to figure out the secret to my success, maybe start there.”

“Maria only spends time with you as a charity. There’s no conceivable reason for her to waste her breath on... a loud-mouthed, boorish, lumbering, bespeckled, country-girl crap collector!”

“And yet she still prefers my company over yours. For anyone else that would be a cause to stop and think a little, but I don’t think you’ve got two brain cells to rub together.”

“What the heck is a brain cell?”

Samantha navigated around her, “Maybe you should start paying attention in biology class too.”

The door clicked shut. Dalia was left to rue not having the last word in their argument, so she tried to make up for it by turning to face the locked door and shouting through the crack.

“I don’t need to know what a brain cell is! I’m an heiress!”

One of the teachers poked her head around the corner and scowled, “No shouting in the dorms, Miss Dalia.”

Dalia wasn’t listening. She was already planning her revenge.

