

There were only a handful of matters left to attend to now that we were back at the manor. The first being Caius and Alice finally bidding us goodbye and leaving the safety of our guest rooms.

“I take it that Alice has fully recovered?”

Caius smiled, “Indeed she has.”

The young girl was starting to get out of bed and stretch her legs more often. With the full threat of the conspiracy dealt with, and Cordia doomed to die during her own attempts to implement the plan – they were now safe to do what they pleased.

“Are you planning on leaving the city? You spoke about that once before.”

“Well, that all depended on how much money I was left with by the end of this. I think we should be able to buy a small house out by the coast. I can get a regular job and look after her properly now that I don’t need to worry about medical fees. I hope you don’t miss us.”

“Miss you? I barely know you. I said before that this relationship was purely business. Thank you for your assistance in this matter, and I hope that you stay out of trouble from now on.”

He laughed, “You sound like my Mother. I’ll try.”

We walked down the steps. Caius was carrying a trunk filled with what little possessions they had left and another case filled with the money I’d given him for his cooperation. It was enough to buy a cheap place in a lesser-visited township. Houses weren’t quite the expensive wealth generators that they’d become in the future. Alice was running around the gardens, enjoying her new-found freedom. It was almost enough to melt my craggy old heart.

“I really ought to be thanking you, Maria. But I realise that I can’t rely on chance or charity in the future. You’re unique, that’s for sure. Goddess knows what would have happened to us if not for you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“There’s no need for-”

My gaze turned cold, “No. Really, don’t mention it. This never happened.”

Caius’ smile turned weary, “Ah, yes. Of course. My lips are sealed.”

He’d already added enough stress to his life by crossing Cordia. He did not want to make matters worse by replacing her with me. This was the first step into living a normal life for him and his sister. It must have wounded his pride somewhat to have it come at the hands of a noble teenager, or perhaps not, he may have valued getting his fair share more than a spiteful hatred of the upper-class.

I wasn’t interested enough to ask.

Alice eventually noticed our discussion and ran over to see what was going on. We were already winding down, but Alice wanted to have her say too before we said goodbye.

“Thank you for letting us stay here, Miss Walston-Carter!”

“It was my pleasure, Alice.”

“I hope my brother didn’t cause you too much trouble!”

Caius frowned, “Hey – since when am I the one causing the trouble around here?”

Alice laughed and ran away before he could grab her in retaliation. At least someone was getting enjoyment out of these painstakingly landscaped gardens. I couldn’t remember the last time my Father actually came out here and sat at one of the tables to enjoy the atmosphere.

“I mean what I said. Thanks for taking a chance on a damn fool like me. Alice is the only family I’ve got left.”

“Then you should act with her in mind. Have you collected your belongings?”

“Yes. You don’t need to offer us your carriage for the trip back.”

“It’s a long walk, and if you intend to catch the train out to the East I may as well give the driver something to do. I’m not going back to the academy until early tomorrow morning. He’ll be done long before then.”

Caius sighed, “Alright, if you insist – we may as well enjoy one last look at what it’s like living on the other side. Is Samantha not going to say goodbye to Alice?”

“I think she already did. For whatever reason she’s locked herself up in the guest room.”

“Hm. Send her my regards when you see her again.”

“I will.”

Caius hesitated for a moment, before deciding against saying any more and heading down to catch Alice so he could take his leave. I watched them walk down the main avenue to the carriage and climb inside. The driver whipped the reins and set the horses on their way. Knowing my luck, we’d see each other again eventually anyway.

I was happy to see the end of our arrangement. Them occupying the room wasn’t a problem when most of them went unused even at the best of times, but fretting about them being found out added extra stress that I’d rather not deal with. Now that Caius had served his purpose and secured his own freedom – our arrangement was at an end. I liked it when everyone walked away happy, everyone except the target of our ire.

“I suppose that’s that.”

I returned to the house with my mind in a different place.

Cordia’s shooting of Duchess Rentree secured the victory I sought. There were no further assassination attempts in the runup to the parliamentary elections, as the police were paying very close attention to all of the people who witnessed the murder with their own eyes. They would never find Cordia in the end. She was already buried in an unmarked grave somewhere – having died at the tennis tournament and been written off as suicide or an accident.

I kept my treasure trove of letters just in case they changed their minds. I could finally focus on keeping up with my lessons at the academy. Things were starting to pick up again, and I was being asked to learn and recall topics which I’d long since forgotten from my original schooldays.

Samantha remained at an arm's length for the rest of the day, and did not speak much during the ride back to the academy the following morning. It was odd. She was usually very talkative, and I'd relented in executing a plan that involved no bloodshed on my part.

She had little to say about it.

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Oddly – the first person I spoke with upon my return was Adrian.

“Back from your family emergency?”

I peered up from over the cover of the book I was reading, “I never said it was a family emergency. To what do I owe the pleasure of hearing you speak unprompted?”

He reached into his pocket and held out the watch, “I wanted to let you know that I got it back since you were seemingly so invested in learning about what happened to it before. You can rest easy now.”

“I didn't know you could tell jokes. Just so you know, my curiosity has already been sated. I know what the watch does,” I commented snidely.

He was taken aback, “You did?”

“Let's keep it between you and me. How did you get it back in the end?”

Adrian looked uneasy, “The police found it at the tennis tournament. Didn't you go?”

“I did. I do recall seeing some police officers inspecting a certain area and cordoning it off. I assume nothing pleasant occurred.”

“That's what happens to criminals. Petty theft soon takes a dark turn with so many competing interests. The strange part was that it wasn't the same person who stole it from here. And for that matter – who even told them about the watch in the first place?”

I shrugged, “Who would have intimate knowledge of what it is?”

“Only people from my family, supposedly. It’s not impossible that an expert could have come into contact with it before and spread the information beyond us. It needs to be kept working.”

“You should ask Claude to investigate. I’m sure he could figure it out.”

Adrian shook his head, “Not likely.”

“Regardless, it’ll take a long time to charge it again, assuming it’s a magical item.”

Adrian sighed, “Alright. So, you do know what it is. How did you figure it out?”

“The exact mechanics are still a mystery to me, but the magical signature that emanates from it is distinct. You won’t have to worry about that for some time now that it is empty. I did a little research of my own and discovered the man who created such devices. Dalton Fink.”

“Wait – there are books in here that say that?” Adrian worried.

“No. It’s only something that you can deduce having seen the watch already and knowing where to look for the relevant books. It is safer to guess that someone who also knows the watch’s purpose leaked the information in exchange for money. It’s a failsafe, to protect the life of the house head, is it not?”

“Okay! Okay! Stop trying to lord that over me. You’re very smart.”

“I didn’t intend to lord anything over anyone. You were the one who came here to taunt me with it’s retrieval, to tease my prior curiosity, if you will. No matter how much changes – your instinctual need to compete with me in every matter big or small remains.”

“I’ll get one over on you eventually.”

“I don’t do shooting anymore. Didn’t you hear the news? I’m the new belle of the tennis society. Poor Lance has been buried under dozens of applications to join, even when they have no intention of learning the sport.”

Though in an ironic twist of fate, I didn’t need to join the club in the end anyway. Me joining it only served to see me present at Cordia’s death at the tennis tournament.

When I stepped back and strung together events like that – it became obvious how choreographed they seemed, but I couldn't assign responsibility to Durandia alone. It apparently took her a great effort to even speak with us for a few minutes.

Strangely, I found the sport amusing enough to continue with even after its usefulness was outlived. It was a good way to practice some of my athletic skills and hand-eye coordination without having to run laps around the campus or come up with my own exercises.

Felipe was the next to arrive in the study with Beatrice in hot pursuit. Her face lit up like the fourth of July when she spied me sitting on one of the couches. She grabbed him by the arm and dragged him over to us.

“Maria! We haven't had a chance to talk in ages!”

“Hello Beatrice, Felipe.”

“I read about what happened to your Uncle. I hope he's okay.”

“Ah, he was a little shaken up – but he was unharmed. I believe the police have assured my Father and him that no further attacks are on the horizon.”

Felipe nodded, “Something to be thankful for. It's incredible how many violent people are out there, waiting for an opportunity to cause chaos.”

“I wish I could say it was unexpected, but there is a lot of tension about the upcoming election. It could decide the future of Walser as a whole for decades to come.”

“Still, we have a vote for a good reason,” Felipe declared, “It was a right handed down to the people by the royal family. Is it not absurdity to try and deprive them of that same right in the family's name?”

The monarchists convinced themselves that the Van Walser family were chomping at the bit to be large and in charge again. It didn't really matter what they thought at all, it was just an easy justification for installing some lunatic from a minor branch house who'd clamp down on all the people they didn't like.

“If they are susceptible to bouts of unjustified violence, they are also susceptible to a certain line of thought wherein the true meaning of their actions is not considered.

The King could personally descend from the palace and tell them that they are mistaken, and they would believe in turn that he is being insincere, or attempting to communicate with them through a secret code. There is no reasoning with them.”

Beatrice looked lost, “Uh-huh. That’s very interesting.”

She didn’t get it at all.

I laughed, “Let’s hope that nobody else gets any funny ideas about interfering with the election. It’s been very stressful for our family to have this occurrence lingering in the back of our minds. I wouldn’t wish it upon anybody else.”

“Make sure you find time to think about your electives, Maria. It’ll be what you dedicate a lot of your effort to for the next five years.”

I already had a good idea in mind. I decided to settle with what interested me the most. I was keeping up appearances, and my family’s immense wealth meant that I would never be left wanting for money or comforts. My preliminary selections were the sciences, magic, and history – which served as an amalgamation of philosophy and politics as well.

Part of me felt it was a waste. Maria could be more of a humanitarian, helping people or striving to improve the nation as a whole, but what a pathetic about-face that would be. The only thing I was good for was killing people for cash. The only reason I even involved myself with Felipe in the first place was because I thought it would earn me some brownie points with Durandia.

They didn’t need folks like me.

Adrian pulled a face that communicated his complete lack of affirmation in choosing some subjects for himself. It was hard to blame him given that he was now running around putting out fires and running one of the largest business collectives in the nation. He’d do well to put someone else in charge so he could focus on attending the academy. It was a small wonder he hadn’t dropped out.

“I know that look. Do you have any idea how many of our classmates did the same thing?” Felipe grumbled.

“Don’t get mad at me! I’ve been swamped with taking care of the family after my Dad got arrested. It’s a lot of responsibility.”

Felipe cooled the rhetoric and patted his shoulder, “Well, I can tell that you’ve been forced to ‘grow up’ very quickly.”

“Should I be happy about that?” he huffed.

Beatrice, Felipe and Adrian took their leave soon after that – each with their own errands to run before the evening was through. There was still a sense of unease in the air when Felipe spoke with me, but it was less obvious now than the last time he brought up what happened at the theatre and party. I sighed wistfully and pondered how convenient it would be if everyone forgot about me after their respective problems went away.

Alas, I couldn’t hide what was already revealed. Killing a teenager for what I chose to do was beyond my ruthlessness. I needed to learn to live with my mistakes. It was getting hard to keep track of who knew what about me. Felipe and Samantha were fully informed. Franklin was halfway there. Caius also knew my true identity.

Obscurity through absurdity was my main tool to protect against exposure. Nobody in their right mind was going to believe that a thirteen-year-old noble girl was the one responsible for the shootings. The average noble would faint at the very idea of getting dirt under their nails, never mind coating themselves in another person’s blood.

Still, consensus between multiple witnesses would strip that protection away eventually. I had to keep a lid on how many people held that information, lest I run the risk of people taking the allegations seriously. I slammed my book shut and exhaled through my nose.

What a cluster this turned out to be. The first two-week break was coming up, which didn’t mean much to me given that I was pulled away from the academy every weekend to put out fires set by other people. It made me appreciate the more common problems of dealing with essays and presentations, and even group projects.



Samantha wasn't going to be around so I'd need to find ways to keep myself busy. If only there was reading material about Nihilism for me to read. Perhaps a trip to a speciality bookstore was in order to see if I could dig up some gems like the ones in Miss Jennings' collection. To be honest, it was very amusing to see someone's gun fall to pieces when they pulled the trigger. I wanted to learn more techniques along those lines.

But first, we still had more lessons to handle.

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Samantha was in a state of discord. It was an odd occurrence for a girl who was always so self-assured and confident in her own thinking. It was a rare sight to see her conflicted about anything. She always dived in and followed her values, no matter if people liked them or not. Her Father always said that a well-meaning act was the first step to the right solution.

Samantha tried to apply that to her everyday life – but what was she to do when events were so wildly out of the ordinary that she couldn't even describe them in sequence? The Lady, whom the entire academy admired, was truthfully a violent killer who didn't flinch at the thought of taking a life or three. Not only that but both she and her were entangled in some kind of God-given mission to save the world.

Samantha didn't understand all that fancy talk about 'destiny' and 'fate,' nor did she comprehend what made her so special as to stand opposite of Maria. She was far more talented in so many ways and a lady of high birth. From her own perspective, the only exceptional thing about Samantha was her ability to land a place at the Royal Academy.

She grabbed her workbooks after the final period and used them to hide her face as she quickly escaped the room before Max or Claude could ask her questions. They were going to speculate about why, but land on the same answer they always did, that Maria was responsible. For once they'd be correct.

It wasn't Maria's fault – not directly. Maria, despite her cold and often curt manner, never insulted anyone unless she had a good reason. Samantha had come to realise

that her initial insults were intended to erect barriers between her and others. Once that strategy failed, she moved on from it and opened up about why. The weight of the secret that hid beneath satisfied Samantha's initial questions and then some. She didn't argue, unless it was with Adrian and he often brought that on himself by being obnoxious around her.

Even so, this was the type of distance that would form between two friends who'd fallen out. Samantha was angry with herself because she knew that it wasn't fair. Maria did what she asked even when it risked the life of her Uncle – yet here she was treating her like a total stranger. The shoe was now on the other foot. She tossed her belongings down onto the desk and collapsed face-first onto her bed. She was the one putting up that barrier.

Now that she'd heard her words - Samantha wished that she'd never spoken with the Goddess.

Her statements were spoken with unflinching certainty, bearing the full weight of destiny. Yet despite the undeniable truth that lay beneath them, they only served to further the cloud of uncertainty that circled her mind. How could meeting the Goddess leave her in such a state? It was a meeting that many men would kill for!

Samantha wanted to power through. She wanted to keep her usual upbeat smile and friendly demeanour, but the more time she spent with Maria the less she found herself capable of doing so. She couldn't hate Maria. Despite their differing personalities and background, there was a chemistry between them that she could not deny.

But what was this intense sense of unease that she felt when they were together? The initial shock of her ability to kill with no remorse was enough to distract her from the sad reality of it. What sort of person was Maria? What had occurred to turn her into such a cynical and cold character? It certainly couldn't be anything good. She replayed the scene time and time again but remained unable to settle for a satisfactory answer.

Her voice echoed, “You are conflicted. Your heart demands justice, but your mind recognises her rationality. You know that this world cannot be saved with pure intentions alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“There will come a time when you must make a difficult choice. I will speak of it now. You do not know whether to betray her or not.”

Samantha’s breath hitched.

“I’d never betray Maria. She’s my friend.”

She hoped she was.

“You and I both know how unconvincing that is. You do not believe your own words. You fear that a time may come where she turns her malice unto you.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Maria has many reasons to do as she does. Even knowing her true identity is reason enough.”

Samantha clenched her fists, “Why are you being so vague? I don’t know! I don’t know who she really is, but you must. Why do you refuse to tell me?”

“The future is already written, Samantha. I speak now with the intent of seeing that future through to the present. There are many questions that I cannot answer, questions that must instead linger in your mind until the right time. Only you can assess Maria, only you can judge her for what she is.”

“But you’re the Goddess.”

“I am not as virtuous as you imagine. What value does my judgement offer to the people who live in your world? The laws, the morals, the values you speak of – they are all creations of those who live there. Those who claim to speak on my behalf seek to only control the faithful. You must judge Maria as she is, from your own perspective, and choose your own answer.”

“I won’t betray her,” Samantha insisted. Her mind could not even dream up a situation wherein she even held that power over her. Maria was always the one in control, and she never let anyone put her in a bind wherein her fate depended on the actions of others. She noticed this when she remade Caius’ plan to infiltrate the Franzheim manor. She did not allow a single variable to escape her notice.

“We shall see.”

And that was the end of it.

Samantha’s answer was one that was imperfect in form and function. If she were to ‘betray’ Maria in the future for whatever reason, it would be easier for the both of them to stay apart again. Stabbing a friend in the back went against everything Samantha stood for. Her Father would be furious if he found out.

Durandia did not claim that it would be a conflict delivered on equal terms. It was to be a true, full-bodied betrayal that could be found within the pages of the forlorn tragedies that Claude loved to read. Samantha couldn’t imagine it. How would she ever be in a situation to do that to Maria? And for what possible reason would she elect to follow through with it?

Durandia left some room for doubt. She said that Samantha would need to make her own choice, but Durandia already knew what was going to happen. That ambiguity served a specific purpose. The conflict she felt in her heart was intentional. It was a subtle piece of manipulation designed to push her into a specific place.

Samantha could intuit that based on what Maria said in the aftermath, yet she found herself falling down the rabbit hole regardless. This was what Durandia wanted, but Durandia, the Goddess, would never do something so cruel, would she? What Samantha did not want to accept or conclude without more evidence was her true nature.

She had a feeling that Maria and Durandia were more alike than dissimilar.

