

It was time to make a quick detour before we departed for our next destination, though ironically in the process we would learn an important piece of information that made the whole trip rather redundant.

Veronica had a significant level of access to the telegraph network that was only recently built to connect various institutions around Walsler. Private use had not yet propagated to the point wherein a regular person could afford to use it. They charged by word, and certain areas were controlled by private companies that got a kickback from the government for contributing.

In exchange for tax relief and whatever profits were derived from the infrastructure, they allowed law enforcement and government agencies to use it free of charge. The fact that Veronica did have access meant that she was being truthful about that much at least.

Despite the convenience of the technology, you still had to physically visit one of the locations and do the dance of sending a coded signal to the agency building, where an operator would then speak with the person in charge before relaying the reply back. It was very slow but faster than visiting the building and speaking with them face-to-face.

What that meant was that I had to stand out front like a lost child while she did her business inside. Genta ran off somewhere to purchase supplies for the rest of our trip, sparing me an awkward discussion but also leaving me in the lurch. I was starting to feel extremely uncomfortable with how many people kept staring or whispering about me to each other.

I hadn't erased that train encounter from my mind. They had eyes and ears in government agencies too. It was a revealing level of access to what should have been secure organisations. How widespread were their views, really? Did they honestly have the pull to implant their people into places like those?

After a disconcerting amount of time, Veronica emerged from the office with a calm smile and several pieces of paper in her hand. She was going to have to burn those later to keep the information on them from being leaked. We walked out of the public

square and into a nearby park that was left empty during working hours. Genta was going to reunite with us here.

“Anything of note? You have a lot of papers there.”

Veronica shuffled through them, “One of the local constables from Channery sent a letter to the dispatch officer, and it was forwarded urgently to the Chief. He claimed that a surplus of suspicious and aggressive strangers had entered the town, and several of them had already been apprehended for violent behaviour.”

“Not much point in us coming out here then,” I grumbled.

It was going to take time for the police to redeploy their men to the area. Veronica, Genta and I could be there within hours – though with less force of arms to bear against an enemy that saw no issue in responding to any threat with violence.

“Not necessarily, the presence of the black stone in the soles of the discarded shoes tell us that they’re hiding in a location outside of the town itself - and Genta inferred some important details from the runes they drew.”

“Make all the excuses you please. We should have guessed that they’d make themselves obvious in time.”

“We haven’t lost that much time. It’s a few hours from here on the train.”

“Did you tell them about the leak?”

“I did.”

I couldn’t trust anyone with any information, it seemed. Adrian already ran afoul of that when an unknown actor sold the secret of his family’s watch to Cordia and her goons. Opportunists were everywhere.

“I hope you weren’t the one who told them,” Veronica joked.

“Obviously not. We’ve been together for the past three days.”

Veronica deflated, “You really don’t play along, do you?”

“Apologies for not being in an oafish mood while my Father remains under threat of imminent execution for the sake of summoning a world ending demon. I don’t

imagine that you'll step up and take his place as my sole parental figure should we fail to rescue him."

I hadn't prodded her about our relation for some time. I wanted to keep her off-balance, so I would randomly bring it up whenever I could. It rattled her very easily and I could tell that she desperately wanted to dispel whatever illusions I held, but couldn't because of her obligations to the WISD. She was getting frustrated about it. She wished that we didn't look so alike so she could play it all off as a coincidence.

But she must have also caught on to what I was trying to do. I was prying her open, trying to find a sensitive subject to exploit and attack her with. She came prepared with that kind of psychological training. Our first meeting was not an out-of-control leak of privileged information. She assessed how much I could determine and offered a little extra to make me shut up.

It was better to offer some vague details than getting trick into revealing something truly damaging.

"So little trust, even after our bonding experience on that train."

"Our relationship thus far has been entirely transactional. I don't trust you because you helped me fight off those Scuncath. If I weren't there – you would have died, and you know that well. You'll keep me around for as long as you find me useful."

"Are you displeased?"

"I don't care either way. I wasn't expecting any more from you. I have nothing left to share in return for those secrets of yours. The only one of value is far in excess of whatever else you're holding close to your chest."

Veronica scoffed, "Surely not."

"If you don't believe me, it isn't a problem. I was never going to tell. Why would one spend far more than the price of what they receive in return?"

"I do wish you'd stop trying to make me curious. It's safer for you to not know about me or what I do."

“I already know what you do. You’re an officer for the WISD – and you take care of the messy business that they don’t trust the police to handle. It’s elementary when you think about it. The gate is open and the horse has bolted, as they say.”

Veronica shook her head, “There’s a lot more to it than that.”

“But you won’t tell me – so what good is that to me? I understand the fundamentals. I highly doubt that the details will alter our relationship, my opinion of you, or endanger me in the way you describe.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve told your academy friends about your skill with a gun? Or that you’ve taken another’s life on multiple occasions? It’s fine to bleat about being honest and open, but you’re hardly a sterling example of that in practice.”

“One of them does know, actually.”

“And how did that turn out for you?”

I wanted to say that Samantha was just fine and that our relationship hadn’t changed all that much as a result – but recent events gave me a reason for pause. Were things really okay? Samantha had been avoiding me ever since we wrapped up the business with Cordia and Caius. She was at the end of her rope. She couldn’t ignore who I really was anymore.

At the same time, I’d yet to hear her final word on the matter. I needed to speak with her again and clear the air to be certain. It might have been a different problem.

Veronica took my silence as evidence of her catching me in an unescapable bind.

“See? Honesty is not always the best policy. I envy people who are permitted to live in ignorance of how the gears turn. I’d be happier not knowing what I do.”

“Would you really? You’re only saying that to try and oppose me. I don’t believe that you’d prefer that at all. If I promised to wipe your memory of all of those uncomfortable truths, you wouldn’t be comfortable with letting me do so.”

Bluster was easy – but backing it up with action was hard.

The only reason to fear knowing the truth is a strong sense of helplessness. Victoria did not believe that she could create a more just world with that knowledge, that it

was impossible and meaningless to possess it at all. I disagreed. The march of progress would continue, and it would be driven by the wider public realizing that which scientists and psychologists discussed and wrote about every day. A just society demanded it.

I was starting to get where Veronica was coming from. In a similar way, I did not believe that my ability to end lives would prove ultimately beneficial to anyone. Still – I refused to blind myself to the reality I lived in. It was odd, but nobody would give up their modern comforts for the sake of living in pleased ignorance. They instinctually understood that wisdom would lead to a better life.

“This is all way off course. The simple fact is that knowing this particular information is dangerous. I don’t need to explain why that is.”

“You were the one who tried to turn it into a discussion about society-wide transparency,” I droned, “If there are people who harm you under the presumption that you know too much, then obviously there’s a direct link – but that speaks more to a deficiency of their morals than anything else.”

This argument was pointless. We’d ended in the same place we started, though Veronica seemed to take my shelving of the discussion as a clear sign of her victory. I sat down on a bench and looked up into the branches of the tree that towered over my head.

Genta returned some time later with a bag filled with what could only be described succinctly as ‘stuff.’ He was under the impression that our excursion to Channery would last for a month, given the sheer quantity of different items he’d procured during his shopping trip.

“You look tooled up and ready to go,” Veronica observed.

“You can never be too prepared. I wanted to ensure that I had all of the necessities before we departed for Channery. I’m afraid I didn’t bring enough spare clothes and food to last the whole trip!”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, “Channery isn’t in the damned wilderness, Doctor Cambry. It’s a large town with thousands of residents. We can easily find food while we’re there.”

“Thousands?” Genta repeated, “Only thousands? I don’t like taking chances. You never know how the day will turn once you’re there!”

I was surrounded by morons. I could only hope that Samantha was having a better time than I was.

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“Roderro, on your feet.”

It was an unwelcome surprise when two of the cultists arrived at the cell that morning. Adrian peered through his arms at the twin escorts with scorn in his gaze. He feared that he was the first person to be killed. Nothing good could come of being singled out and moved away from his fellow prisoners.

There was nothing he could do to resist though. He followed along like a good boy until they reached the first floor of the fort. Rather than heading into the dining room from before, they took another left and headed down a long corridor filled with doors. Adrian was brought to one of them and left to knock on his own.

“Come in.”

Rather than a set of gallows or a mass grave – he found himself face-to-face with the man who brought them here. Hoffman sat behind a wooden desk. The office he was using was not in good shape, having been abandoned by the original military users some two decades ago. He had no time for bringing in home comforts. Adrian remained silent. There was nothing to say to Hoffman that he hadn’t already tried the day before during breakfast.

It was he who finally broke the ice, “Adrian Roderro. What a curious life you lead.”

“As in?”

“A young man forced to reckon with the misdeeds of his Father, forced into a position of immense responsibility. There are very few men your age who are tasked with holding the lives of so many in your hands.”

“I don’t hold anyone’s life for bargaining, Hoffman.”

“But you do,” he replied gruffly, “You do hold a lot over them. All of the men and women who rely on your good sense to provide them with jobs and security. You could snap your fingers and see the back of all of them. All it takes is a moment of madness to send thousands of people into a life changing crisis. Their debtors will not wait, nor will they lend them a sympathetic ear.”

Adrian had little patience for these games. Hoffman was trying to shake his confidence, or make him think in a manner which benefitted him. There was no common ground upon which they could stand. Adrian abhorred everything that Hoffman stood for. He saw him as nothing but a mad criminal who justified his misdeeds with emotionally complex, but ultimately meaningless, pretext.

“You could say the same for a lot of people who run businesses. I fail to see why my position is so unique. You propose hypothetical scenarios that have no bearing on what we’re doing here.”

Hoffman grinned with his crooked teeth, “I was merely complimenting your composure. I am certain that I would not be able to handle it, yet here you are, fifty years my junior, handling it with a stiff upper lip.”

“Get to the point, you bloviating fool. I’d rather spend another week chilled to my bone in the cells than listen to one more second of your inane philosophy.”

Hoffman was insulted by his dismissive attitude, “It’s actually rather simple, Mister Roderro. Based on principles that have long been accepted by the faithful in Walser.”

“Really?”

“Aye. A simple study of our history shows a pattern of great import. Times of affluence are inevitably contrasted with those filled with struggle. These represent the shifting balance of power between our twin Goddesses.”

“What a tedious waste of my time,” Adrian complained, “Do you honestly mean to try and win us over with reasoning as vacuous as that? That which you speak of without evidence can just as easily be dismissed. Kill us and be done with it, if that’s what you intend.”

“We have all heard the voice of the Goddess at least once in our lives. I was hoping that you and your compatriots would be able to appreciate what we mean to do. We will prevent Walser’s destruction, nay, perhaps even the world at large, and your blood is the key that allows us to do so.”

Adrian stared at Hoffman and manipulated the different facts he knew about the man in his mind, rearranging them and trying to put them into a new light. He clearly held delusions of grandeur. He earnestly believed that his schemes would be seen in retrospect as being for a noble cause. What was the point? Was this all for his own self-satisfaction?

Adrian probed his motivations with a simple statement, “Nobody is going to understand you, Hoffman. They’ve already reached their conclusions, and I don’t feel that they’re mistaken when they speak poorly of the Scuncath.”

“I don’t beg for their understanding.”

“Then why did you bring me here to try and coddle my feelings? Did you want me to blankly nod along with whatever you say and agree to be murdered? What a sad man you are. I won’t play along with this idiocy, dressing up this viciousness with a kind word and well-meaning metaphor.”

“This is not viciousness. It is a kindness. They can damn my name to hell and back, and I’ll still do what I feel is needed. Everyone feels that they are above making righteous sacrifices, but deep down in their hearts, they acknowledge that it need must be done.”

“What is the purpose of this? To start more wars on our continent? Killing us isn’t going to do that.”

Hoffman shook his head, “This is a blameless crisis. I do not mean to say that our leaders should throw us into the restless tides of war once again. Conflict is inevitable,



yet we have experienced years of peace. Something is terribly wrong. The balance between the twin Goddesses is faltering. If we allow it to continue, the event that will occur to 'balance' it again may well end this world. I am not willing to take that chance."

Adrian was on the fence before, but now he was certain that Hoffman was a man robbed of his good senses by the civil war. No right-minded individual would take an absurd chance like this even for a perceived righteous end. There was no evidence to support his claim, just the unseen, the irrational, the emotional. What a convenient way to live.

None of this made sense. They'd reached a conclusion about a great disaster befalling Walser and used that conclusion as proof that they needed to murder and pillage their way to an unknown solution. Adrian had his doubts about their deaths destabilizing the nation to that extent. The common labourers wouldn't shed a tear for the loss. The person in charge would rotate to the next and life would go on.

Adrian did not understand the Scuncath, nor did he have any desire to. It was contradiction piled on top of contradiction, a messy scramble of social and political ideas enhanced by devotion to their faith. Hoffman was special alright. It took a special kind of lunatic to get them to work together as a singular unit. He must have convinced the rest of them that his prophecy was true. There was no greater motivator than a fear of death but even that was no guarantee.

"To me, it sounds like you can't accept that a better life is possible."

Hoffman opened his mouth to respond but no words emerged. He was not expecting such an abridged response to the story he was sharing.

"I don't know if it's envy, or rage, or a desire for revenge – but it's sad all the same. You can't bring yourself to celebrate what should be a good thing. You attach all kinds of conditions and hypotheticals and justify them using your faith, and you never reassess that belief when your predictions don't come to pass."

Hoffman latched on to Adrian's last statement, "We have not yet reached the anointed time. When it comes, I will be glad to see my fears unrealized."

“Don’t lie to me. That means that you’ll still kill us based on nothing. If nothing does happen, then you’ll credit yourself for a job well done.”

Hoffman chuckled, “I’m not risking the existence of this world, you’re right. When you live through the civil war – such a cost paid in blood seems minuscule. The scars will heal with time, and people will move on happy in the knowledge that their futures are secured.”

“From where I’m sitting it doesn’t seem like those scars are healed at all. The fact that you so willingly bloody your hands for a vague reason is all the proof I need. You no longer understand the value of the lives you claim to be saving.”

“And what value did your Father place on the life of the Escobarus boy?”

“Quite a lot, actually. He wanted him to die because ‘we’ stood to gain hundreds of millions of marks from the endeavour. There’s no better representation of value, in my opinion, than money.”

“Money is a fickle thing.”

“Yet we rely on it for our livelihoods, and everyone agrees to play by the rules and use it to pay for goods and services. I don’t believe that my Father is decent, or was in his right mind when he chose to launch his plan, but some choose to kill for no reason at all. You could say that he’s more decent than any of you.”

Adrian smirked at Hoffman’s reaction to the punchline he was waiting to deliver. He knew that it was a terrible idea to antagonize the man who was holding them hostage for some kind of murderous plot, but Adrian was a naturally confrontational person. He could not resist the urge to outrage and upset in the face of adversity.

Hoffman bristled at the mere suggestion that he was anywhere near to his imprisoned Father. He was too high on the rush of executing his will to accept that Adrian’s perspective was different to his. His face was turning red, but he calmed himself with a deep breath and an accusatory wag of his finger.

“This is the problem. The new generation doesn’t understand what it means to struggle, that suffering builds the resilience we need to keep marching on, come what

may. I hope that in some small ways, our efforts here will ensure that this lesson is made clear.”

Adrian scowled, “Malice it is, then.”

The pair stared each other down from across the table. The wailing wind brushed against the stone fortifications, a lingering high-pitched whistle that boiled over like a steaming kettle. Adrian felt his hair stand on end as the lumbering veteran tried to get a better measure of who he was through sight alone.

The confrontation ended abruptly, with Hoffman leaning back in his chair and nodding his head in self-understanding. His answer was likely far from the truth. One couldn’t appreciate others without speaking with them, that was a lesson that Adrian’s Father instilled into him early during his tutorship for taking over the family.

“I was not anticipating that you would be so fierce, Mister Roderro. You have taken what small hardiness exists in trying circumstances and claimed it as your own.”

Adrian did not need to hear any compliments from Hoffman.

“I was hoping to induct you into our cause, but I see that my hopes are misplaced.”

That was the craziest damn thing he’d said so far. Adrian stood from his seat and shook his head gravely, “I’ve had enough of this. I’ve had enough scheming and conspiracy for one lifetime. It almost ruined me. I’m not going to willingly submit myself to more of the same. Take me back to the cells.”

Adrian got what he wanted. Hoffman spared him no more discussion. The guards were waiting for him outside the door, and they escorted him back down the way he came. Fernando and Damian were anxiously waiting by the metal bars for him when he returned.

“Goddess above. I thought they were going to kill you,” Damian worried.

“Not dead yet,” Adrian murmured. He spied on the guards while they moved to the next cell and pulled away another prisoner for a one-on-one talk with the boss. A thought occurred to him. Were they trying to sow the seeds of doubt between the prisoners before the date of their execution?

“What did they do?” Fernando asked.

“I think Hoffman is going through all of us and trying to find a weak link to recruit to his cult. Part of me feels that someone is going to crack and join him.”

“Likely, given the threat that is looming over us. But they would be wise to remember that there is no loyalty from those who see their lives as disposable. To join them now would be to merely delay your end.”

Damian smiled, “I’m sure you gave him a piece of your mind, Sir Roderro.”

“Adrian is fine,” he responded, “That Hoffman fellow is touched in the head. I asked him about why he was doing this and he sold me a tale about Walser becoming complacent after the civil war. He wants everyone to suffer like he did.”

“That is a dark path to tread. Destructive behaviour like that is not uncommon amongst us older folk. I count my blessings every day that I wasn’t one of them.”

Adrian turned to the elder Walston-Carter, “You were involved in the civil war?”

“You’d be hard-pressed to find anyone our age who wasn’t. Although, I was unique amongst my present peers in that I found myself in the thick of it. This was before our businesses were doing quite so well. Making clothes and weapons for the military and dodging the militias, it was a chaotic time indeed.”

“So, you supported the monarchy.”

“Landowners didn’t have a choice. It was use what resources we had for their sake or rot in the stockades, or worse. The only thing I could see were the civilians they made suffer. Never let them tell you that some of those men were heroes, in a righteous nation they’d be hanging by the neck.”

The sober tone of the discussion shocked Adrian back to reality. He was opening old wounds by asking about this. Fernando was silently stewing on the opposite wall. Adrian momentarily feared the start of a vicious fight between them, having been on opposite sides of the civil war at the time.

“You’re right, Damian. They say forgive and forget, but there’s no forgetting for the families of the victims. It was a happy end for those who did the worst. What a waste.”

Or not. Perhaps the Escobarus' revolutionary reputation was overblown.

"I'm sure that both sides of the aisle can agree that nothing good will come of reigniting that old feud," Damian said, "If their intention is to bring conflict back to Walser, then we must do all we can to vigorously oppose them."

But from within a locked cell, what could they possibly do?