

“What are we going to do?” Claude wondered.

A heavy atmosphere had settled over the office once the initial panic died down. I was counting down the minutes in my head. I was the one starting to feel the stress. It would have been too convenient for the police to launch their attack before the summoning ceremony was completed. Because they were still going to try – that much was obvious.

Hoffman and the Scuncath creed were replete with people willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of this plan. The circle would still be effective without the nobles to sacrifice, just to a lesser extent. Even the prospect of them succeeding without those sacrifices was enough to worry Genta, more so than usual.

“And are we seriously ignoring that the woman with the gun looks exactly like Maria?” he continued.

“Who says we’re ignoring it?” I replied, “I’m well aware of that fact but I have nothing else to share on the matter. I don’t know who she is, and I’ve never once seen so much as a picture of my Mother, so I can hardly confirm your suspicions.”

“Maybe you two have been changing places while at the academy for the first term.”

“Are you stupid?” I snapped, “She’s at least three decades older than me! Even given the resemblance, you would have to be a damn fool to conclude that we’re the same person.”

Claude wilted away from my scornful retort and hid behind the desk with Max.

Samantha stepped in to mediate the dispute, “Maria doesn’t lie about things like this. You should take her word for it.”

“Oh please, why are you always taking her side?”

“I do not!” Samantha said indignantly, “You’re just casting doubt on her for no good reason!”

“No good reason! Why in the Goddess’ bloody name is she even here in the first place? Are you trying to say that it isn’t odd?”

Samantha did know why I was here, but to reveal that side of my personality would be a breach of trust that she would not be a part of. I was here to solve the problem in my usual violent way. The two guards who were standing outside of the dungeon were shot dead by my hand and she knew that. It was too late to chastise me for it.

“I came here to get my Father back. No more and no less. Mission accomplished.”

Claude shook his head, “You chose not to leave that to the police? I know that you have a unique way of approaching problems, but this is a step too far. Any normal person would be... doing what Adrian is doing right now!”

Our eyes turned to the person in question, who was presently cradling his head between his knees and trying to ignore what was going on.

“You seem to have a hard time accepting that people will react differently to the same issue.”

“And you always do this, where you dance around the question and never commit to a proper answer! It just makes you seem even guiltier!”

“Guilty of what?”

Claude stopped dead. I was challenging him to air his pet theories to everyone in the room, to commit to a position that he didn't feel comfortable in. All he had was a collection of hunches. I was already well aware of what Claude thought of me, it was hard not to given the Academy's penchant for spreading gossip. Nobody took his claims seriously because there was no evidence for them, and my social persona of a high-class noble lady generated an immense level of scepticism towards the wilder stories.

The funny part was that he was correct.

All of the offences he accused me of were right on the money. His intuition was well-tuned, but his overeager personality and inability to gather evidence slammed the brakes on any potential progress in convincing the other students. Even if he did have that evidence, would they honestly believe him? He was a boy eternally cursed to cry wolf.

I didn't feel much sympathy for his plight. He irritated me, bringing about a sense of callous disregard that was rare for me to express. It was rare for me to have strong feelings about anyone beyond the targets I used to eliminate on the regular.

He shook his head and backed away before the argument escalated.

Samantha was not happy with either of us, "Why can't you two give it a rest? They're going to find us if you keep making so much noise."

The gunfire had stopped exactly ten minutes before. It wasn't the police, because it was coming from inside of the building. It was Veronica doing her best to stem the tide of cultists chasing her down – but that was a battle that even she could not win. It was likely that she'd either been killed or captured. I was leaning towards the latter. There was still a mystery to be uncovered with her, and Durandia wouldn't let a good plot thread go to waste.

The point was that there was no longer a riotous amount of noise being generated by a dozen guns being fired in our vicinity. It would be easy enough for any passing cultists to hear our voices through the poorly fitted wooden door. These chambers were not exactly finished to a high standard.

"We really ought to leave this fort before the real fighting starts. It'll be even more dangerous once the police arrive," I reasoned.

"Wouldn't it be safer to stay put?" Samantha countered, recalling what happened at the theatre and party.

"Normally I would concur – but the scale of the fighting that is bound to occur will endanger us far more than any prior incident. Hundreds of people are about to play out a battle that this fort was long since constructed for. Bullets will be flying everywhere and these walls won't guarantee our safety."

My Father and the others were likely stressing to the police that there were still hostages inside, but they couldn't act any more cautiously than they already were. The police would not come armed with explosives and other weapons that caused significant collateral damage.

The issue was that leaving would not be easy. I didn't know if the rest of the prisoners had escaped from the fort, but at the least Hoffman no longer had time to recapture them for his ritual. The police were going to make their move sooner rather than later.

On second thought – perhaps Samantha was right. There was too much foot traffic moving through the fort now that their urgency was increasing. We were going to get caught out again just like Veronica was, and the lack of cover within the hallways meant that it would be almost certain death.

I nodded, “Hm. On second thought, I agree. It will be safer here.”

Samantha seemed relieved by my acquiescence to her idea. It was an odd reaction, since before she seemed happy to follow whatever order I gave her. There was nothing wrong with her taking a more independent approach to these matters, I didn't enjoy having to hold other people's leashes in times of crisis anyway. It was easier to work alone.

“Thank goodness for that,” Claude exhaled.

“But I still wish we had something more to barricade the door with. It doesn't look like that will hold them back if they try to get in.”

Samantha tugged on my shoulder, “Then let's keep quiet and make sure they don't try.” She dragged me towards the only free corner in the room and sat down with her legs crossed, but I was too paranoid to sit down and relax.

I did not want to sit in this room with them and let Hoffman summon his demon, especially if it meant having Veronica die on me without answering a few more questions about who she was working for. It would be difficult to concoct an acceptable reason to leave the room and go chasing after her.

Before I could start laying the groundwork for that escape – Samantha whispered to me.

“I can't stop thinking about what the Goddess said to us.”

“I try not to focus on it. It makes me second guess everything I do.”

Samantha toyed with the tips of her fingers and remained contemplative. She wanted to say her piece about it, but was not certain if it was a good idea.

“I suppose she said different words to the both of us,” she mused.

“She did. She wanted to motivate us – and that required exploiting what she knew about our personalities. She played up her divine nature when speaking with you, but took a more honest and cynical approach to me. I don’t know what to think of her. I feel as if neither of those personas were her true face.”

It made me wonder how having knowledge of the future would impact her thinking and behaviour. It was impossible to appear as anything but overly manipulative given that ability – but from her perspective it was a necessary move to keep the world turning the way it was supposed to. She could have just as easily left us in the dark the entire time, but she chose to expose her involvement to us to see her desired outcome.

This was a being that existed in a realm different to ours, with different standards and practices and precedents. While it was easy to guess that we, as humans, were derived from what they were most familiar with – there was still a gulf that separated us. Did Durandia exist within the Veil, or beyond it? She also seemed to speak of others who had oversight over her actions.

For example, when she spoke of altering aspects of a living being’s personality it was as if she had to carefully weigh the needs of the situation and the rules they followed against one another. She only changed that element of my existence because they agreed that it was appropriate. It was a terrifying implication. There was someone powerful enough to control even Durandia.

“Are you hiding something from me?” she asked, directly enough to imply so much more.

“You already know my worst secret. The other one is less than relevant to the situation at hand. It’s more of a personal issue than one you should worry about. To be honest – Durandia did not speak of any events I feel like keeping from you.”

“That’s... hard to believe.”

Now this was unusual. Samantha was expressing doubt in me? I'd never seen that before. It was a good turn. I wanted to train her to be more sceptical of people like me but could never come up with a good way. It meant that she was ruminating on a matter she wasn't willing to share. Given the topic of the conversation, she must have thought that I was hiding another key fact from her.

To the extent that it would help her, I was not. There was little reason for her to know that I was reborn into this body after living a prior life. There was nothing she could do with that information, and it would only lead to more questions that would eat at her until I sat down and answered all of them in detail.

"Would you like to ask me a question?" I replied, cutting to the heart of the matter.

Samantha opened her mouth but stopped herself and reconsidered. It took her a few seconds to come up with a question that encapsulated the full scope of her worries.

"Do you enjoy this?"

"Enjoy it?"

"Yes. All of the action, the gunfire – that kind of thing."

I shook my head, "I don't enjoy it. I'm just good at it."

There was a brief period of time when I felt some kind of fulfilment over my life as a hired killer, but it did not last for long. For every moment where my righteous fury took the life of a monster, there were three more where disproportionate violence was levied against people because of personal rivalries. When a lot of money was on the line people were willing to go to extreme lengths, and I was the one who enabled them.

Being an assassin was not a job to be enjoyed. It was a prison of my own making. I was good for nothing but that and that alone. To stop would be to crush myself beneath the myriad economic pressures that all regular adults dealt with. I couldn't stop. I turned it into a routine. I'd wake up and think about killing someone, and then I would go and do it.

No amount of compartmentalisation could make that fun, and I didn't want it to be in the end. That would be an even darker path to tread. Lives could never be taken for granted. I was not willing to turn myself into someone like Hoffman or his friends.

"Is that all you wanted to ask?"

Samantha frowned. No, she had a lot more questions.

"No. That's all I wanted to hear."

I could see the unease on her face – but she did not press the subject further.

It was just as well that she did because there was someone trying to get through the door. The combination of the interior lock and the furniture in the way kept them from bursting through and catching us out. There was a moment of panic amongst the party. Max leapt to his feet and quickly came up with a way to negotiate a solution.

"Who is it?"

The rattling stopped, "It's Feldstein. Are you hiding in there, Max?"

"Yes. Everyone started shooting so I ducked into here. What's going on?"

He waved us over to the blind spot of the door. The cabinet was pulled aside and the door unlocked so that Feldstein could peer through the gap. The only person he saw was Max.

"Is the fighting over?" Max asked again.

"It is on the inside of the fort," he explained, "But Hoffman is worried about the police launching their attack within the next hour. I heard you rummaging around in there and thought it was a spy or something."

"Like that woman."

"Yeah. Hoffman's got control of the situation again now. It should be safe to come out."

"Okay. Let me grab my jacket."

Max pushed the door closed and ran over to the desk, taking his coat from the back of the chair and moving back before Feldstein got curious and poked his head inside. It was a ballsy gambit to say the least – but Max had successfully socially engineered his way out of the dilemma by appearing confident and giving him a good excuse.

At least, that was what I thought before he reached out and grabbed Max by the front of his shirt – dragging him into the hallway and accidentally pushing the door open more as a consequence. The tone of the discussion took a sudden turn that chilled him to the bone.

“I’m disappointed in you, Max. Our brothers and sisters are fighting and dying in these halls, yet you hide and protect only yourself!”

“I’m no good at fighting!” Max pleaded.

“That is irrelevant. We must all do our bit to help the cause, and that includes risking our lives and taking on responsibilities we may not be comfortable with. This is your opportunity to demonstrate your value to Hoffman. Do not waste it!”

“Hoffman only wants me for our family’s money! I bet he’d tell you the same thing!”

“You have too little faith in him. He is the singular man who sees the value in all of us.”

Their value as meat shields, perhaps.

This was bad. They were making a lot of noise and potentially attracting more attention. I did not want one of our number to become separated from the group and held under duress, or even worse, forced into fighting against the police and potentially being killed in the process. I didn’t want to show my hand so soon. There was no getting around it now.

Samantha tried to stop me but her hands met nothing but open air. I leapt through the door and approached Feldstein from behind as he interrogated Max about his loyalty to the Scuncath cause. I quickly wrapped one arm around his neck and kicked at the back of his knee.



He was too busy threatening Max to put up an effective defence. He buckled under the pressure and he stumbled down onto the floor in a kneeling position. With control over his range of movement, I pulled back even harder and forced his torso back onto the floor in a painful contortion. The last thing he saw was the sole of my boot coming down across his forehead, and a follow up kick striking him in the nose with such force that his body swivelled on the floor like a turnstile.

The muddied footprint on his head and the broken nose made him look like he'd been in a drunken brawl. It wasn't far from the truth. Everyone was staring at me. Max was pressed up against the wall, more fearful now of me than the man who was assaulting him mere seconds ago.

"Maria, what the..."

The sound of footsteps were approaching from the other end of the hallway. I reached out and pulled on Max's arm until we fell back into the room. Gunshots followed, nipping at our heels.

"They must have heard your argument."

"Hold on a second, what was that all about?" Max replied.

I had no time to offer him answers; "If you found that distasteful - I strongly suggest that you avert your gaze."

I unbuttoned my coat and drew my pistol before they reached the location of the fight. Using the doorway as cover was my best bet. They would easily take me out if I tried to move to the junction behind us, but having an escape route would make me a much happier girl.

The sudden onset of violence froze their feet in place. They stood and watched while I peeked around the corner of the doorway and got a grasp on how many interlopers were trying to murder us. Three armed men had followed the sound of the scuffle and located us. I stepped out and took aim, firing two shots. The first man, who was charging blindly down the hallway with a shotgun in his arms, fell to the floor dead.

I focused on the task at hand and cast the issue of my identity to the back of the queue for later. My biggest worry at that moment was how many other cultists heard the gunfire. If they were worried about the police launching their assault, most of them should have been outside manning the walls. Veronica's bombs made that a risky proposition.

The other two gunmen demonstrated their lack of formal training, charging down the corridor and attempting to overwhelm me with suppressing fire. Samantha and the others squealed as shrapnel ripped one side of the doorframe to pieces and threatened to send small pieces of metal flying through the air. I simply stepped back and narrowed the angle from which they could see me and shoot.

As soon as the first body came into view I fired again. He went flying back onto the ground, the bullet hitting him square in the chest. The other attacker swung around and tried to catch me before I could adjust for the recoil of the shot, but that was an amateur hour strategy that wouldn't take an experienced fighter off-guard. I was already prepared for him as he stepped around the corner.

I pulled the trigger twice, sending the cultist back and onto the floor with a pair of smoking, bleeding holes in the thick coat he wore. My gallery of observers jumped into the air at the sound of the gun's crack, but then the reality of what they had just witnessed started to settle in. That cold, creeping dread when one witnessed a killing right in front of them.

I moved closer to the bodies and made extra sure that they were both dead. The one in the hallway was still alive, groaning and gurgling as his own blood started to choke the life out of him. He didn't have the power to move his prone body any closer, so I did not waste another bullet on mercy killing him.

When I finally dedicated my energy to observing the gallery of reactions from the others, it was about what I expected. Wide-eyed, mouths held open by invisible hands. Samantha was the only one who had prepared herself for what just happened, but it was also the first time that she enjoyed a clear-headed view of what this violence looked like.

"Y-You killed them!" Max squawked, "You really killed them!"

“You’ve gotta’ be kidding me! I was right the entire time?” Claude added.

I sighed but added nothing. For them, it must have seemed like an earth-shattering discovery. Adrian and Claude, who were much more aware than Max, had recontextualized everything they knew about me and the events that I was involved with.

“A real-life Sturmläufer, right in front of my eyes!”

That got my ire, “No. They aren’t real, for Goodness sake.”

Claude scoffed, “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Adrian stepped in, “She was always talented with a gun. She won every competition she decided to enter. I never imagined that you’d use those skills to take the life of another.”

“It is not a choice I make lightly. We can ruminate over this later. I fear that our spat will attract more cultists to this room.”

They were caught between their perception of me and the reality of what they had witnessed. I was cold, confident and had a glare that could kill – but that did not mean that I was easily swayed into violence. How much credulity would they apply to this situation?

Adrian stared at one of the bodies, and the gun still held between his fingers. He slipped around my side and knelt next to him, reaching out to take it for himself. I stopped him with a firm word.

“No.”

He persisted, “I can’t stand here and let you do this on your own! They kidnapped me, and now they’re trying to kill us! Let me take one of those guns and help!”

I turned on my heel and grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him back up to his feet and backing him towards the wall.

“I’m only going to say this once.”

A chill ran through the room and all of their eyes locked to me.

“Living without having to kill is a privilege. Do not be so eager to give that up.”

They had seen me irritated, bored, dismissive and mean-spirited – but what really got their attention was the simple fact that this was the first time they’d ever seen me become angry with another person. It was more revealing that I intended it to be. Adrian knew that he touched a nerve.

“So, what do you want us to do?”

“We’re going to go back to my escape route. You are going to keep a tight hold of that book and make sure that the cultists don’t get it back. I’ll make a stop by the throne room to see what that mysterious stranger is doing.”

Samantha frowned, “Mysterious?”

“I was being sarcastic.”

Claude grabbed the book and clutched it close to his chest. There was no further room for debate. We had to move before they came searching for us. The bodies would obviously alert anyone who stumbled across them, and I wasn’t going to waste time dragging them into the room when they’d already bled across the floor.

The others were very careful not to stare, or to touch, dancing around them and keeping their eyes forward. My problem was now finding a path through the building that didn’t run is into another group of guards. Easier said than done.

I could have done with a little of that blind faith of theirs.

