

It was entirely unpleasant to be awoken in the earliest hours of the morning by a belligerent captor. These noblemen and women were quick to rise and early to bed, but there were no alarms in the fort to keep them to a schedule.

“Get up! You bloody parasites, get up!”

“Looks like we’re due,” Fernando murmured from the corner of the shared cell.

Damian remained silent and composed. It was a small comfort to Adrian – who was buckling under the weight of many different stresses. There was a brief commotion as all of the cells were unlocked by armed guards, and their occupants were forced to move in a single file line.

The trio left and followed with the full expectation that their final moments may lie beyond the staircase at the end of the hall. They were ruthless when it came to capturing them. Adrian did not anticipate mercy now that they were in their grasp. At any moment they could be ordered dead, and the bloodthirsty men and women who surrounded them would follow that order without question.

What he was not expecting though, was to be led into a makeshift dining room.

He, and the other captives, stood by the door and observed the sight that lay before them. This unhospitable room was prepared to serve them a meal. A round, wooden table in the centre was surrounded on all sides by matching chairs. The table itself was covered with a white cloth and baskets filled with various food items, like bread, fruit and jam.

There was a man standing at the back side with a smile on his face. He was old, with grey hair and wrinkled skin. His most distinctive feature was the wound on the left side of his head. The indented skin and scarred tissue spoke of a grievous injury, and upon closer inspection, Adrian noted that he was also missing his eye.

“Is this everyone?” Adrian whispered to Damian.

“That seems to be the case. There are even more here than I counted when I first arrived.”

Adrian looked around the room. They were on the second floor of the fort, and there were several small windows that looked out into the grounds below. Some were boarded up to keep the wind out, while others remained empty, as they were when the fortification was originally constructed. Adrian estimated that someone Maria's size could squeeze through with enough effort.

The wounded man clapped his hands together, "Esteemed guests! There's no need to congregate by the door. I thought it right to invite you here this morning. Nothing brings together the hearts of men like a shared meal."

The captives had no choice. The herd slowly moved away from the entrance and towards the table. There were still several armed guards waiting in the outside corridor. Adrian approached one of the chairs and considered his words.

It was an odd gambit, to say the least. The whirlwind of violence that had blown through their homes, killing many innocent and good people, seemingly at his behest – was now tempered with a buffet spread that would not look out of place at a business conference. The man held his arms out wide and invited the captives to sit at the round table.

Fernando was the first man to muster his courage and speak, "What do you think this is? You kidnap us and murder our staff, and now you mean to curry our favour with a meal?"

"Sir Escobarus, you misinterpret my intentions. You are not here because I have a hatred for you or what you do. If anything – I am thankful for your presence. This meal is my present to you, my payment for your participation!"

"Our participation in what?"

The enigmatic leader shook his head, "It's a long story. Sit, sit! I will explain all to you."

The nobles did as the man commanded and took their seats. A great sense of unease rolled from end to end within the circle. Nobody reached out to take the food, fearful that it may have been poisoned.

“My good men and women of Walser! Thank you for being here today. My name is Hoffman, and I am the elected leader of this flock. I do apologise for the sudden intrusion into your lives, but I assure you that there is an important reason behind our actions.”

His words fell onto unsympathetic ears. The table remained silent in response, allowing only the sound of the wind to leak in through the windows. Hoffman smiled and continued to speak despite the cold rejoinder, “I’m sure that you all have questions for me, and I’d be glad to answer them for you.”

Fernando shook his head, “What is there to understand? You’re a clique of murderers posing to represent something greater. Don’t you feel ashamed of all the innocent people you killed to bring us here?”

Hoffman frowned, “Innocence is a matter of perspective. While the people you employed may have followed the rules, who is to say that those rules are just? Now, I’m inclined to concur with your point, Sir Escobarus. They were good, law-abiding people, but their sacrifice will pale in comparison to the lives we ultimately save.”

Fernando stood and slammed the table, “Sacrifice? They weren’t sacrificed for the sake of anything, you one-eyed bastard! You spilt their blood for the sake of it! You enjoy the thought of their friends and families grieving their loss!”

Hoffman remained unaffected, “Every death is a tragedy – which is why we are here. I assume some of you already know us. We are Scuncath. The dedicated followers of his teachings, and the ones who seek to maintain a long-eschewed balance.”

There was finally a reaction from the table, as several of the nobles discovered that the situation was more dangerous than they initially thought. News of Thersyn’s arrest had reverberated around the nation and reminded everyone of how ruthless the Scuncath could be.

Adrian joined with Fernando in taking Hoffman to task, “What is this? Payback for Bradley’s arrest?”

Hoffman laughed at the question, “Thersyn Bradley? He was one of us, supposedly. If you’re asking if he was involved in our plan, then the answer is no. I’ve never met the

man, nor do I feel any particular outrage for his arrest. We are all well aware that what we do is considered in bad taste.”

“Bad taste?” Adrian scoffed, “You murder people and skin them, and use their blood for those vigils of yours. That’s a step beyond bad taste. You lot are mad, all of you.”

Hoffman’s eye turned to him, “Hm? You speak so confidently of our savagery, yet your Father was the one who sought to kill a teenager to enrich himself, and by extension, you.”

Adrian glanced at Fernando, but he wasn’t budging.

“I’m not going to receive any lectures from the likes of you. What a ridiculous comparison to make, and I’ve been clear that I never agreed to what my Father was planning.”

“A convenient excuse if there ever was one,” Hoffman dismissed.

“Adrian’s Father is being punished for his crimes, not celebrated. By what measure do you mean to draw comparison between Walserian law and your directionless violence?” Fernando responded, “Violence is all you Scuncath are good for. It’s the driving force behind everything you do, yet you now try to admonish Sir Roderro for something less.”

Hoffman waved his hands to try and calm the flaring tempers, “Directionless? I think you’ll have a different opinion should the time come to explain our motives.”

Adrian and Fernando doubted that any explanation could sway them onto his side now. Adrian’s rage was fractional compared to Fernando, who was personally present with his staff when the attack started. He saw the callous way in which the Scuncath tormented and murdered them. He had half a mind to round the table and punch Hoffman’s teeth in. He’d be shot for the act, but it would be satisfying.

“I’d like to ask you all a question. Have you ever stopped and considered the unfettered prosperity that Walser now enjoys? It stands head and shoulders above our neighbours. Our military, industry, and technology are the envy of the world. Does it

not strike you that just a few decades ago, there were many who believed that Walser would cease to exist as our people tore themselves into two?”

Silence.

“I suppose you deserve some of the credit,” Hoffman chuckled, “Your influence and financial resources allowed these things to happen. Industrious, intelligent and forethinking people are the blood flowing through our nation’s veins. But I’m no nationalist, my experiences in the civil war moulded me into a decidedly less proud man. I have seen the depths at which otherwise upright men and women can sink.

“To which I propose a simple conclusion. We are beings of two halves. The side we demonstrate to others is determined by our circumstances, much like the twin Goddesses who created the land we stand upon. But as we speak, what suffering is levied unto the people of this nation in exchange? What price do we pay for the peace we enjoy? Before the civil war, conflict was a natural part of our lives.”

Damian was even-handed in his response, “Because the Van Walser family demanded it. War has given way to diplomacy with our neighbours, as it has across the world.”

Hoffman shook his head gravely, “We are all servants of the Twin Goddesses. Our hands are guided by a force beyond our understanding. It is clear to us now that the balance has been upset, the natural order overturned. We enjoy peace, and prosperity, and the unending march of progress – but the Dark Goddess’ influence wanes. We will pay a terrible price if no action is taken.”

“And how can you be so sure of that?”

“We have heard the voice of Cath. We have studied his teachings closely. One Goddess cannot be allowed unfettered dominion over the other.”

Damian, hearing this response, realised that no amount of reason was going to cut through the ideological armour he’d erected around himself. Whether they succeeded or failed in their mission – that outcome would validate their actions regardless. The scales needed to be balanced.

Adrian was not so gentle with his words, “Did you lose a piece of your brain along with that eye? Damnable fool.”

“This scar was once a burden to me, but now it is more. It is the price I paid for my future role. A pound of lost flesh to serve the Dark Goddess, and the Black Lady, in the truest sense of the word. I can imagine no greater privilege.”

Adrian stood from his seat and pointed at him, “Just because you do not believe that a better Walser is possible, does not give you the right to inflict such violence upon other people.”

“We must rebalance the scales, lest we all be destroyed.”

“And how are you so confident that the Dark Goddess demands war?”

“The words and works of Cath guide our methods.”

“And how do you know that Cath isn’t just lying to you?”

Hoffman paused before chuckling, “I see that you’re the stubborn sort, Sir Roderro. To walk a path of endless questions is to simplify the beauty of life. There are powers in this world beyond our collective understanding and the sciences will always fail to explain how and why they interfere.”

“I’m wasting my breath,” Adrian concluded. He sat back down and stared at the bread basket that was placed in front of him.

“Do you think we did something untoward with this food?” Hoffman motioned to Adrian, “Hand me something, anything from the table.”

Adrian considered what to pick very carefully. He was trying to prove to everyone present that the food was not poisoned. Adrian understood that he wouldn’t go to so much effort imprisoning all of them if only to murder them en masse just a day later. Still, he had a hunch that there was a trick to it, so playing it safe and trying to catch him out was the best option. He didn’t lose anything by trying.

What would be poisoned, if anything? Not the bread, but perhaps the jam and butter. Adrian grabbed a knife and started to prepare his offering. He used both on a piece of

bread and also took an apple from the bottom of the basket. He never said to restrain himself to one item.

Hoffman accepted both and laid them on his plate. Without hesitation, he took a bite from the loaf and swallowed a mouthful of the apple to follow it up. Adrian was disappointed that he didn't theatrically clutch his chest or neck as the poison surged through his veins.

"Your paranoia is well-placed but meaningless. Your lives will not be wasted on childish folly. Now eat. I won't have you starving on me before that time arrives."

Their collective discontent was plain to see – but none of the captives would choose to take a pointless stand. Allowing themselves to go hungry would only make a potential escape more difficult, and their imprisonment less comfortable than it already was. Adrian remained still while the rest of the herd charged ahead and started to partake in the meal.

Adrian almost laughed at the absurdity of it. Dinners with his Father were always silent and profoundly awkward. He earnestly believed that there'd never be a less hospitable dinnertime than that. Hoffman was out to prove him wrong. There were no words shared, and no connections forged. Was Hoffman joking when he spoke of bridging the gap between him and them?

Hoffman was pleased with himself, that was for certain. He looked the part of a jovial family man happy to be surrounded by his loved ones. It was a type of satisfaction that a monster like him did not deserve. This scene he beheld was brought about under duress. The atmosphere was not friendly or celebratory. Adrian could only compare it to a wake, like the one once held for his Mother.

The more Adrian thought about – the more similar the feeling was. His Father wanted that event to be a celebration of who she was, but there was an unquestionable air of misery about it. Adrian kept his head down and remained quiet, too young to fully comprehend what was happening.

He wasn't alone in that experience. It was surprisingly common for young noble men to find themselves without Mothers. In his eyes it was the most dangerous role one

could take. Death from illness, childbirth, murder or expulsion from the house via divorce. Many house heads took their partners for granted or treated them like passing fancies. Even in the immediate circle of people who knew at the academy there were many examples.

This was a funeral. Everyone understood what this meant and were playing along appropriately. What good would it do to dignify this sham by putting on a fake smile and sucking up to the manic at the top of the table?

He took his share of the food and filled his stomach. The discomfort of the cell was already profound. He did not want to add starvation to the list of challenges that he was facing.

If they couldn't find a way out of the fort – then it would be the end of all of them. Adrian kept his eyes peeled for opportunities throughout the meal, and tried to memorise as much of the layout of the building as he could once they were silently led back down to the prison.

Fernando was less enthused about a potential escape, “They're armed. There is no way we can get out of this prison without the police finding us.”

Adrian sighed, “Can you blame me for thinking? I was hoping to see a critical vulnerability we could use to slip away.”

“I don't see it. This lot might be violent and belligerent, but that Hoffman fellow has scared them stiff. They're following his orders. What kind of menace must he be to command that level of loyalty? Scuncath are not team players and never have been. They must have something terrible planned, and they need us to do it.”

Adrian slumped against his wall and clutched his head, “This is it. We're done for.”

Damian snorted, “I wouldn't be so sure, Sir Roderro. There have been times when I felt the same. I believed that there would be no salvation forthcoming and that I'd be walking into the Goddess' embrace, but there is value in believing that someone will be here to help us.”

“Really?”



Damian nodded and smiled wistfully, "It was actually how I met my wife!"

"Your wife?" Fernando echoed, "I cannot say I recall you ever mentioning her."

He laughed, "Aye. My wife. Her name was Gwyneth. Adrian will already be familiar with her appearance. Maria is the spitting image of her, if not shorter by virtue of her young age."

"And what happened to her?"

Damian clammed up suddenly, "A-Ah. Well, I'm afraid that I have to keep a few secrets close to my chest. Apologies. Sometimes I forget myself and start reminiscing about her."

Fernando rolled his eyes, "Let me guess, Maria was born out of wedlock?"

Damian refused to confirm or deny his guess. He tugged on the edge of his shirt and shook his head, "No. No. I'm not saying any more than that! She'll come back from the grave and strike me down. I'm sure of it."

As Adrian studied Damian's reaction to the question – he was struck with a gut feeling. Damian was lying. He couldn't place why, nor could he claim to have any evidence in support of his theory, but it was the way he said it. She wasn't dead, or if she was, the reason behind that death was extremely sensitive and troublesome.

He was curious. Really curious.

Getting the truth was going to be a difficult task. Adrian's imagination ran rampant for the next hour as he tried to piece together a puzzle without seeing any of the pieces. It wasn't as if they had anything better to do while locked in a cell. He really hoped that Damian was right about their saviours arriving soon.

Hoffman made it obvious that there wasn't much time left.

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Samantha did not sleep well after the confrontation between her Father and the strangers outside their home. It was a consistent source of anxiety, given how much

she cared for every member of her family. They chose their words with the specific intent of upsetting her Father. She happened to be caught in the crossfire.

It was her day off. There were no chores to be run that her Brothers couldn't handle themselves, so she chose to go into town and busy herself with whatever the day brought. A small town like Channery was a friendly place. Everyone knew everyone and there were always current events to talk about.

Samantha was only gone from the town for a few months, but to her, it felt much longer. How much had she missed during her time at the academy? The local paper didn't ship out to the city, so all of the goings-on would have to be recanted by word-of-mouth.

Of all the sights to be found within the town centre, Samantha was not expecting to stumble upon a pair of familiar faces. Claude and Maxwell were standing outside of the bakery with a pair of rolls between them. It was surreal to say the least. Samantha pinched her own arm to make sure it wasn't an elaborate dream that she'd sunken into. Judging from their reactions when they spotted her staring, they were thinking along the same lines.

Samantha hurried over to them to get the details about their mysterious visit.

"What are you two doing here?" she asked.

Claude was glum, "To make a long story short. My Dad was investigating one of those attacks that are in all of the papers at the moment, and one of the mad buggers who did it leapt out of a room and stabbed him in the stomach."

Samantha gasped, "Is he okay?"

"Yeah, but my Mum is really distraught about it. She decided that we're staying out of the village for a week while it all blows over. She grabbed a spare room from my Aunt and we're living with her."

"I didn't realise you had family in Channery," Samantha mused.

"I didn't know either," Claude admitted, "This is the first time I've been to my Aunt's house."

“And you?”

Max frowned, “I’m here for the same reason. Our house is a crime scene at the moment. I don’t feel safe staying there.”

“They took your Father?”

Samantha knew the answer, but she was hoping that her gut instinct was mistaken.

“They did. Snatched him away that evening and killed a lot of our servants while they were at it. It was horrible. Even worse than the attack on the theatre and the party.”

Samantha felt bad about opening with such a dreary subject, but there was no getting around it. Max was still worried about the whereabouts of his Father.

Claude explained further, “We’ve only been in town for a few hours. My Aunt was driving us both crazy with questions and chatter about what we’ve been up to at the academy, so we slipped out to explore.”

“This fresh air is good for my nerves,” Max added.

Samantha sat next to them, “What an odd coincidence this is.”

“It is,” Claude concurred, “I take it that nothing interesting is going on around here?”

“I wouldn’t say that. Some troublemakers have arrived lately and have been starting spats around town. Two of them got drunk and got into an argument with my Father last night.”

“Seriously? Mum isn’t going to be happy about that.”

Claude could remember the panic he felt so clearly, even hours removed from the news being delivered to them by one of his Father’s officers. He was quick to assure everyone present that the injury was non-fatal, and that a medical expert was already on scene to patch him up and close the wound. A short amount of bedrest would be all it needed to heal.

But the fact that the danger was present at all was what worried his Mother the most. She hurried to come up with a plan to get them out of the area until the investigations were done. She was going to stay behind and look after Vincent while he recovered.

Max was tacked on to the scheme suddenly, forcing him to go racing for some spare clothes of his own too.

“Seriously, how did I end up being dragged along with you?” Max murmured.

“You didn’t want to stay in your house, and I wouldn’t either. It’s going to take a while for them to finish gathering evidence and clean the place up. They have to leave it as they found it until the detectives are happy they’ve gathered everything.”

Max already understood that. He was simply lamenting the sudden shift in surroundings to a town he’d never visited before. Any hope of normalcy returning was getting fainter by the second. The police would have a hard task in finding the kidnapped victims before they could be harmed. He sunk his teeth into the bagel he was holding and tried to distract his frantic mind.

Walking across the plaza was a singular figure. A man with a shaved head and sharp eyes. The blood in Max’s veins froze as a terrible sense of revulsion rose up from his stomach.

“No, you’re kidding me...”

Claude turned to his friend, “What’s wrong?”

Max pulled on his sleeve, “That man – I’ve seen him somewhere before. I think he was one of the people who attacked our estate!”

All eyes turned to the man, who continued walking whilst unaware of his identity being discerned by a witness. Max was not mistaken. The longer he stared, the more he was convinced of it. He was there. He was one of the men who kidnapped his Father.

“We need to do something, now.”

Claude tried to keep him from running away, “Hold your horses there, Max! What do you expect us to do? We should go talk to the constable about it.”

Samantha stood in front of the pair, “That’s right. The constabulary are the ones who solve all of the problems in Channery. If you tell them about what you saw, they’ll have it sorted in the blink of an eye.”

Max flumped back down onto his seat and shook his head, “If you say so. I want to do it now. Where can we find them?”

“I’ll lead you there. It’s not a long walk.”

Max really was in a hurry. Samantha wasn’t sure how to react once she stepped back, because he leapt from his place and started pacing in anxiety-ridden circles in front of her. If he wasn’t careful – he’d dig a trench down to the local aquifer.

“I guess we’re going to the constabulary’s office.”

Claude nodded, “It’ll calm him down. Alright, come on Max – let’s report him to the bobbies.”

The trio departed, not knowing just how close to the issue they now flew.