

Perhaps I was naïve when I thought my Mother would brim with curiosity about what I'd been doing while she was away doing intelligence service stuff. Several hours after that revelation, and offering my testimony to the police about what happened at my house, she had yet to ask me a single question.

We sat in one of the few untouched rooms with a table between us. A healthy distance, one might call it. No matter our blood relation, this woman was dangerous, but I was not yet certain if she was also bad news. Veronica happily consumed her entire body's weight in bread and jam. She was not due to leave for her next destination for a few hours, so irregular were the trains that headed south from here.

The longer I spent studying her face, the more I accepted that this woman was related to me. It may not have been a mother-daughter relationship, but it was real. There were too many similarities to simply discard the idea as a lie. The way her cheeks bunched up when she smiled, and the crease of her brow when she frowned, those were key tells that went deeper than surface-level appearances. I was good at identifying targets from my old job and those details mattered. My eyes drifted south to the pile of food she'd pilfered from the kitchen.

She started our second discussion off on a strange, almost confrontational note; "I hope you aren't expecting anything from me."

My eyes snapped back to her face, "Like what?"

She smiled, "Thirteen years of missed birthday presents. Hugs, kisses, the sorts of things that Mothers do for their daughters."

"I'm not silly enough to believe that," I contested, "You made it very clear from the beginning that you have no interest in 'connecting' with me. You needn't worry about disappointing me if that's what you're worried about. I never expected anything from you in the first place."

"Dearie me. You seem to have developed quite a sharp tongue - even without my guiding hand. It makes me wonder about those smart men at the University who speak of 'genes' that reside within us, about how those invisible codes shape who we are and what we do."

“I’m well aware of what nature and nurture can mean.”

From my perspective, I was the one who came into being first. Veronica did not know that I’d lived an entire lifetime separate from this before my rebirth. This was all by design - I assumed. This world was similar yet different from the one in the game I played, the game that Durandia and her helper planted to educate me on how it worked.

My eyes burrowed into her, “I have my reasons to doubt that our similarities are simply biological. There are limits to what one can know from genetic memory.”

“I’m not going to ask where you learned how to fight, it would be a waste of time.”

“That’s right. I’m not telling you anything unless you provide me with an equal answer in exchange.”

“But I do know that they couldn’t have snatched you from the cradle and put you through your paces. Rich little girls enjoy a life free from that sort of problem.”

It was easy to infer from her accent but that was more evidence that Veronica was no noble lady. Given that she was allegedly kidnapped by the ‘Sturmläufer’ and trained from childhood to be a talented killer slash problem solver, it was likely that she came from an impoverished background, one wherein she would not elicit a wide scale police search if found missing. Being an orphan was the explanation I settled on for the time being.

As for meeting my Father, it must have been in the line of her work after they were reformed into a civilian intelligence agency. Her handlers were probably not thrilled to discover that she was both fraternizing and sleeping with an unmarried nobleman. An unplanned pregnancy followed, so she went to ground and disappeared until the time was right to deliver me.

Once that was done – Damian took over and raised me from birth, taking every measure to ensure that nobody, not even me, could discover the real identity of my Mother in the meantime. The cat-like smile on her face unnerved me. She knew that I was deducing all of this as we spoke.

“Actually, I don’t need any concrete answers from you. I have what I want.”

“Hm. So the young lady believes she knows everything now, does she?”

“I know that I don’t like you one bit.”

She laughed, “Joy of joys. I even managed to land smack-dab in the middle of your rebellious phase, and how adorable it is!”

I remained unshaken by her mockery, which seemed to annoy her. She leaned into the table and narrowed her eyes.

“There’s a lot about me that nobody will be able to understand. You look really pleased with yourself, but you shouldn’t be. All of those theories bouncing around in that pretty skull of yours? They’re just that – theories. Don’t pretend for one second that you know what makes me tick.”

“I could say the same to you. Treat me like a fool at your own peril.”

She laughed again, “Those words coming from that face? It’s not scary. It’s cute.”

“It won’t be cute when I beat you in another fight.”

“Beat me? I wasn’t even trying.”

“A convenient excuse, if an unconvincing one.”

She stood and slammed her hands down onto the table but rather than unloading another bout of verbal abuse to perpetuate the debate, she thought twice, and sat back down without saying another word. I was trying to push her buttons just to see what would happen. This aloof act she was using was a type of behaviour I found personally irritating.

She bounced back to our previous topic like the petty bickering never happened, “Actually – you can see me however you want to. It won’t hurt.”

“I have a fairly good idea of who you are already. You said you were going to explain more about this case to me, so stop shovelling food into your mouth for a second and give me the details.”

“I still haven’t decided whether to bring you alone.”

“That’s too bad – because it’s not your choice to make.”

“You can’t force me.”

“Just like you can’t force me to stay away. I don’t imagine that you’re bold enough to cause any real harm to your own daughter.”

“Would you like to test that theory?”

“Go ahead,” I goaded her.

Her hand shot out and grabbed one of the dinner knives from the table. She twisted it around with a flick of her wrist and threw it with all of her strength in my direction. I didn’t even flinch as it embedded itself into the wood beside my head, barely missing the cartilage of my ear. She stared at me.

“Very impressive,” I smirked, “But there was no chance of that hitting me. You held back.”

Veronica remained stiff like a statue, glaring at me with elevated shoulders and tense legs. I picked up my fork and continued eating. Sensing that this showdown was over, she sunk back down into her seat and adjusted the collar of her dress. Eating was the method by which she calmed her nerves in the face of her own daughter.

What a curious character.

“You mentioned an expert on demons earlier.”

“Very astute. While it is my responsibility to end the Scuncath’s criminal operation, that does not mean I’m an expert on the esoteric methods they use to achieve their goals. I was hoping that by speaking to a resident historian at the Walser National University their motivations would be made clear.”

“Who is this expert?”

“Genta Cambry. An unassuming fellow from a family with a long and eventful history. His Grandfather and Father were both extremely knowledgeable about demonology and the occultic history of Walser, and he continues that legacy to this day by taking tenure at the University. Academics are one of the few groups who dare to venture

into the subject, given the government's long-standing position of censoring any mention of it."

I'd never heard of him or his family, from either my present life or my playthroughs of the game. This was someone who existed outside the scope of that original story.

"I hope he does know what's going on. The scale of these attacks are rather alarming for someone in my line of work," she tutted dismissively.

"Why? Were there more of them?"

"Yes, there were. Every noble family from here to the coast were graced with their own visitors who acted in the same way. They've kidnapped several other important people along with your Father."

"For ransom."

"No, not ransom. You don't bring together a group like this only on the promise of getting money out of it. Scuncath only care about causing as much damage as they can. I've been following these groups for two years, and they have all kinds of strange beliefs that motivate their actions. My guess is that they want to summon a Horrcath, and they believe the blood of the rich and noble will summon a particular type of Horrcath."

"Why do you need an expert if you already know this much?"

"I don't. I'm making assumptions based on previous cases involving them. I may eat crow in a few days when they send a random notice to the police, I cannot predict the future."

"Wouldn't that be convenient?"

"I'll make my position clear. I don't want you to come with me. It would be foolish to bring any civilian with me, never mind one your age. The handlers won't like it. They'll try to kill you if they find out."

"They are more than welcome to try their luck."

"I don't think you fully understand just how dangerous they are."

“You won’t tell me who they are - so I’ll use my imagination. I’m afraid that I cannot ascertain a threat that I lack information on. The scales are not tipped in your favour. That’s too bad.”

“You really are a churlish sort,” Veronica complained, “You already understand perfectly well why I can’t do that, yet you persist regardless. If you come with me I’ll see you abandoned at the earliest opportunity.”

“Well, I suppose you do have prior experience doing that.”

Perhaps that was more mean-spirited than I intended, but I was getting pulled into a mindset that Veronica did not care about what I said to her. I couldn’t miss the opportunity to hit her with that low blow when it was so easy. She opened her mouth to reply but paused and reconsidered her response.

“No, no. I’m not doing this. This needs to end, here and now. Do you understand what I’m trying to say here? This is no business for a girl your age! You should stay here and worry about the usual things that a girl your age worries about.”

I motioned to the destruction that had been wrought on the garden outside, “This is the kind of matter that I worry about! A group of rampaging murderers have just stormed through my home and massacred dozens of people! If you don’t want me – fine, but you should know full well that I’m not going to take this lying down. You can have me on your leash or you can leave me to potentially get in your way later. Those are the two options.”

“You are not going to leash yourself to me. You haven’t listened to a word I’ve said.”

“I did listen, but it’s obvious that I’ll only comply if you give me a good reason.”

“I did give you a good reason.”

“Not good enough for me. If you fight as well as you throw knives, there’s no chance that you’ll be able to solve this mess.”

I abruptly stood from the table and left the room with Veronica in hot pursuit behind me. The house was a crime scene now, so we stayed well away from the officers and their work while Franklin handled all of the stuff they needed from us. Up the staff

stairwell, down the corridor, and into my bedroom where a half-prepared trunk of spare clothes and ammunition was waiting. I was so frustrated with her that I didn't even try to hide the fact that I was arming myself to the teeth.

Firstly, I needed to hide my pistol. I slipped the gun into my trunk's hidden compartment with her hovering over my shoulder like a looming spectre. She was quick to start needling me about why I had any of this on hand.

"Where in Walser did you find a Burs Semi-Automatic?"

"A mystical, lesser-known place called my Father's home office."

"You stole it."

"Steal is such a loaded term. I prefer to use the word 'borrowed.' It's not as if he was getting any use out of it locked up in that drawer. It was already buried under a pile of papers when I took it – the final stage in the life cycle of all of his forgotten purchases."

She crossed her arms and whistled, "That's Damian alright."

"I don't need to hear your admonishments for possessing this gun. It's saved my life no less than two times already, and I assume it will continue to save my skin for some time yet."

"I wasn't admonishing you, though you should consider how Damian feels before you so eagerly place yourself into these situations."

She wasn't admonishing me – but she was telling me what to do anyway. Did this woman ever listen to herself talk?

"Those occasions were not through choice. If we lived in a perfectly peaceful world where everyone obeyed the law and acted in good-faith, none of this would have happened."

I could tell that she was desperate to know where I learned to do all of this. As an alumnus of the 'Sturmläufer,' she'd have inside information on how, who and why they trained people to work as government agents. I was outside of their usual strike zone when it came to recruits. Too rich, too influential, too much of a paper trail. It

was extremely unethical, but was the reborn guy who killed people for money in any place to criticise?

I was nothing if not a shameless hypocrite though. I was on the mend, trying to do things differently to that past life, even if Durandia was going hell for leather trying to stop me. That was why she wanted me in this world in the first place. I was here to get myself into trouble and somehow save the world along the way.

“Is your butler okay with this?” Veronica mused.

“Franklin is a consummate professional. If his Lady asks, so it shall be. Getting out of his hair will be less stressful for him now that he has to deal with the police investigating the estate.”

I slammed the trunk shut and hoisted it up.

“Money, gun, spare clothes – anything else?”

Veronica scowled, “Why are you asking me?”

“You’re the one who knows what we’re going to be doing.”

I left her in a stupor once again. Shock and awe were proving to be the most effective strategy when it came to dealing with her. It was time to go and catch her train and visit the University of Walser. Hopefully, her expert had some answers about what was going on, and where we could find my Father.

---

Adrian was not having a good time. It felt silly to think that given the circumstances, but sometimes the plainest language was the best way to communicate what he felt. He was tied up, blinded, gagged, and thrown into the back of what seemed to be nothing more than a cart normally used to transport hay - with the hay left on the planks to enhance the discomfort he felt.

The men who kidnapped him were all smiles, congratulating each other on a job well done, cracking jokes and insulting each other like good friends. It was cold, dark – and the journey they were making took hours. It was a small wonder that nobody spotted them on the way and alerted the police.



Mercifully, the cart came to a stop. Adrian had no bearings for where he was or how long they'd been moving. A pair of rough hands grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt and dragged him down onto the dirt. Then they walked him down into a stone staircase. The cold was even worse when they descended below ground level.

The journey came to an end. Adrian heard the sound of a metal door being unlocked and pulled open. His restraints were released, and a firm hand shoved him through into what he guessed was a cell. With his hands free – he could remove the bag and gag himself. What waited for him was worse than his wildest and most vivid nightmares.

Fernando Escobarus was here.

There were others too, but Adrian's eyes couldn't divert from the impatient scowl that he bore like a weapon. The bruises on his face spoke of a violent confrontation with their captors. The more worrying development was that Fernando knew that his Father was the one responsible for trying to kill his son.

A different voice broke the ice, "Sir Roderro! What an unfortunate way for us to meet."

It was Maria's Father, Damian Walston-Carter. Having him and Fernando in one place was an unbelievable score for them. These were two of the most valuable men in the entire nation of Walser, with a combined personal wealth that eclipsed several small countries.

"Mister Carter? What are you doing here?"

Damian laughed morbidly, "It appears that we're all in the same boat now. Did they come to your home too?"

"They kidnapped you and Sir Escobarus? How is that even possible?"

"Not just us," Fernando grumbled, "They attacked every estate they could reach. Ours, yours, Carter's. On the way here, I saw Sir Abdah in one of the other cells."

Damian leaned against one of the stone walls that surrounded them. He was keeping cool despite the circumstances. "Dare I say that the police were caught flat-footed by

a highly coordinated effort to take us and bring us here,” he posited, “I doubt that these gentlemen are interested in trading us for random.”

“Why not?” Adrian scoffed, “They have the lynchpins of Walser’s upper class and industrial interests here. They could ask for all of the money they’d ever want or need and we wouldn’t be in a position to stay no.”

“I’ve already tried that,” Fernando revealed, “Damian is correct. They don’t want our money. Try talking to one of the guards when they visit and you’ll receive naught but mockery in return.”

While Adrian was glad to be on speaking terms with Fernando – he would have preferred to have learned this somewhere else. The cell was cramped, with barely enough space for the three of them to lay side-by-side. There was no window. The floors and walls were made from the same dark stone and sealed with mortar.

The iron bars that contained them had seen better days, but they were enough to stop a handful of prisoners. Adrian walked to the bars and tugged on them. They were firm. Across the way was another cell, but it was empty. Adrian could hear others speaking further down the corridor.

“Where are we? This must be some type of fortification.”

Damian stroked his beard and considered the situation, “Aye, that would seem to be the case. These cells are made from Churn Blackrock. We must have been taken West from the coast.”

“You can identify this stuff by eye?”

“I’ve worked with stone foundries for decades. Blackrock has a distinctive purple iridescence when light hits it. Forts in the West were built en masse using it during the civil war.”

Adrian looked to the corridor outside. The stone on the floor there was in the direct path of the torches that illuminated the chamber. True to his word, there was a slight purple tinge that moved and flickered with the flames.

“That does pose a new problem. There are hundreds of forts just like this one, dotted around the countryside and left abandoned by the local authorities. If they don’t know where to start looking for us – it may take them too long.”

Adrian was starting to see the similarities between Maria and her Father. They were both insightful, stern, and never afraid to mince their words. Adrian and Fernando were thinking the same. If not for money, then surely these monsters had another, more deadly reason for bringing them here. None of them wished to stay and find out what that was.

Adrian was not optimistic about their chances of escape. The police were going to spend a few days getting the officers in order before working in earnest to find them. The fort was presumably in a remote location where nobody would think to wander. And if they were acting with urgency they would be done with their foul deeds and scatter to the four corners of Walser before they could be stopped.

Adrian found his own patch in the tiny cell and claimed it, hugging his knees close to try and stay warm. At least the floor was dry. Matters would be truly dire should the cold seep in through water leaking between the stones.

“Is Maria okay?” he asked.

Damian nodded, “She was not due to arrive at the estate for some time. While I shudder to imagine the sight she must have seen on her arrival, I take comfort in knowing that she avoided being captured or murdered by them. Our staff were not so lucky.”

Fernando rubbed his hands together to try and warm them, “They could have at least let me bring a damned coat! We’re going to die a death of cold down here before those lunatics get to us.”

“They don’t want us dead yet. We’ll have to sit tight and wait for the police,” Damian stated.

Adrian peered through his fingers and studied Fernando’s face as the discussion quieted down. He’d seen him only once since the incident at the Theatre building. Adrian attended several of his Father’s court dates where the full story was told to a

jury. At the time, Fernando was flustered by the events. He gave a fiery impact statement to the court about how much the crime rattled the family, about how paranoid they'd become, and the emotional toll that the news took. That was where his anger poured forth freely and unrestrained.

Adrian was not given a chance to discover if that animosity extended to him. His Father was very firm in his defence. Cathdra was the one who planned it, he was the one who paid out to have Felipe killed, Adrian was not aware of his own Father's actions. It was the truth - but that didn't mean it would convince anyone.

What he saw in the now was not the face of a man brimming with fury. Now that there was time to think and recall what happened, those emotions were subdued. There was a tinge of despair. Adrian was not gifted with the social talents of others his age but even he was capable of seeing that an apology was not what he wanted from him.

So he remained silent.

Voices continued to echo from atop the stairs. There were other captives in these cells, but they could not be seen. Sir Abdah was here somewhere, as were many others of note. The only thing he could do now was close his eyes and try to rest. His hope lay on the outside, but would they find them in time and stop this fiendish plan?

