

It turned out that spreading false rumours around the academy was extremely easy with my downright undeserved levels of clout. I spoke with a handful of my fanclub and Talia – telling her the truth, and the fangirls that someone on the campus was coming up with a way to get the word out to the police.

Since every single student at the academy couldn't be trusted to keep the most basic of secrets to themselves, it was soon spread from wing to wing under hushed voices. Even better for me, the story mutated as they tweaked the details to make it seem more exciting or digestible.

It was only a matter of time until the stories reached their ears. It was intended to put the group on edge and make sure that they couldn't get comfortable while keeping an eye on us. The dead body they were keeping hidden in the basement probably didn't help matters either.

The act of scaring a group of fully grown and heavily armed men was not a simple one by any means, but it was technically possible in a world where many still held a strong sense of faith. It was a person's innate hypocrisy that allowed them to conduct themselves in this way, only to fear the wrath of their respective God or Goddess when it went wrong.

I wasn't a believer myself. I didn't need to believe, because I knew that the Goddess was the real deal. She clearly had extensive influence over this world as some type of greater power. To look at it that way, you could conclude that I was the consequence that she had in mind when they decided to resort to violent means.

I overheard a few discussions while skulking around the gardens and near the old schoolhouse that implied at least one devout member of their group was losing his damn mind already, and it was causing tension between them. That was the type of weakness that I could exploit.

He would be putting all of the others on edge and making them uncomfortable with the situation, and the looming threat of a message getting out and the police surrounding the campus would further inflame tensions in their camp. My intent was for them to make a run for it before that could happen.

If I succeeded – I could make a mad dash to the city and try to insert myself into what absurd plot Welt was cooking up with his magically enhanced super soldiers. I could throw my body into the fray knowing that Durandia had her little script that all of the following events would occur to the tune of.

It was odd to recall that technically, everything that had happened since I first arrived here was planned by her. The video game I played in my past life, my revival here, and the minute details that led me to be in this exact position were all accounted for. Still, it wasn't an infallible machine. The implication was that the 'Red Tree' they used could only peer so far into the distance.

So, if she wanted to cook up a plot that took several years and included multiple prerequisite pieces, that would be much more difficult. There were six years between my finishing Love Revolution and my death in the hotel. All she needed me to do was to have a passing familiarity with it.

Then she used the Red Tree again when the time came to see if it predicted the outcome she wanted. That was the biggest risk. If my presence didn't alter events to her liking – then there would be no time to prepare a second person to take my place. The only answer to that would be to travel through time and try again.

Could she even do that? There were a lot of unknowns about how this metaphysical society operated and what laws they followed. Adrian was permitted to have a time-travelling timepiece insofar as it didn't cause major ripples through the fabric of reality. The paradox would naturally close itself.

It was radically different when adding a near-omnipotent Goddess with incredible powers to the mix. That may have been a bridge too far beyond the Veil where they resided. It sounded like a good way to cause a hell of a lot of trouble to me, so I concluded that it was forbidden in some manner. A rule was only as good as the ability to enforce it. Getting a re-do on past events or backing yourself up during them was a powerful tool in the wrong hands.

However – I could not discard my self-preservation instincts and rely on Durandia's guiding hand to save my bacon. She brought me into this world because I possessed the skills to beat back whatever dark forces threatened to tear a hole in the fabric of

reality. I needed to use all of my guile to see it through to the end. Trusting the process was always at the forefront of my mind.

Even if 'the process' was looking a little beat up these days...

For example; normally I wouldn't let any witnesses see me or catch on to what I was doing. That was already out of the window, with Samantha, Max, Claude and Adrian all being clued into my secret identity. Nor would I intentionally involve an outside force in any of my jobs. Adding more moving parts to a plan created more points of failure. Humans were very good at screwing shit up.

I screwed shit up too – but at least I knew it was my fault when it happened.

Lessons were suspended again. The teachers tried in vain to keep the regular schedule going, but it proved too difficult to keep the students in the right state of mind to absorb anything that was being said. Some of the students were terrified and flatly refused to leave their rooms for any period that wasn't mealtime.

The real shock came from Darin's men, who followed the terms of their agreement with the principal down to the letter. They rarely encroached into the main building and they were always unarmed when they did so. He was keeping them on a tight leash, further cementing my opinion that they weren't told to cause real harm to the students.

If they did, the nobles in question would have more reasons to stab Welt in the back to get their revenge. He wanted them to be compliant, not rebellious. They were here to give off the impression of danger. He would be lording his control of the academy over their heads as I spoke, whipping them into shape and asserting control over the wider high society.

There was an exception though. It was inevitable that one of them would break the rules and go on a rampage. I was walking back to my room after another spy mission and found him harassing a trio of girls in the interior garden. He was a tall, burly man with sunken eyes and black hair.

The girls were visibly petrified by the strange man who had stormed into the building and was now giving them a hard time over something they weren't connected to.

“You three are being funny. I asked you a simple bloody question, so I expect a bloody response! Don’t they teach you any damn manners in this school?”

If I was going to play the part of the hero – it made sense to step in from time to time. I hopped down the stone steps and approached the scene of the crime with a stern frown.

“Excuse me, is there a problem here?”

He paused his spittle-spewing tirade and craned his head around to face me. The three girls were equal parts happy and concerned about my presence in the situation.

“There is. There’s a big bloody problem. I know what you lot have been up to. You think you’re real smart, real funny, but one of you’s got a lot to answer for.”

Durandia above his accent was thick. It was like he’d descended from the Scottish Highlands to grace my ears with the gruff tones of a man who gargled a handful of gravel every night before he slept. I nodded my head in their direction as a silent warning that they should get away while he was distracted. The girls scattered and fled.

I returned my attention to my new friend.

“And what would your name be, sir?”

“I’m the one asking questions here,” he barked with teeth bared.

“It’s good manners to address your opposite with their name,” I insisted, “My name is Maria.”

He didn’t return the favour. He glared at me with venom in his eyes.

“I’m not causing any trouble, girl. I’m asking questions – but it seems that your parents never taught you lot right. It’s not good to keep secrets, especially when it involves the death of a good man!”

I tried my best to look surprised; “Death? I haven’t heard about a death on campus unless you’re talking about what happened to Professor Prier some months back.”

He was clearly in the throes of an irrational rage, caused in part by this incident involving his friend.

“This is a faithless country now,” he seethed, “There’s no consideration for others these days! We’ve lost our way. Even kids, teenagers, taught from the moment that they’re born that they’re meant to serve nothing but themselves.”

“What does that have to do with me, exactly? You’re hardly in a position to complain about being ‘considerate’ while keeping us as hostages. What would the Goddess think of this kind of behaviour?”

My response threw him for a loop, but I could see the process that was playing out in his mind as he took in what I was saying. No amount of rhetoric could convince him his position was on a foundation of sand. He was already working to minimize the damage, excuse his hypocrisy, and reframe the argument in a way that benefitted him so he didn’t have to eat crow.

“This is for the greater good, and we don’t have any plans of angering the Goddess, that’s for sure! You won’t find a more devout follower than me.”

So this was the one who was causing all of the trouble for Darin. He was out here getting the faces of the students to try and find who was ‘responsible’ for the death of the man in the basement. The purpose was to calm his anxieties and prove that it wasn’t divine retribution for his actions. That very same ‘retribution’ was standing right in front of him as he spoke...

“What would you do if I claimed to be the one responsible for his death?” I queried.

That gave him pause all over again. What would he do? That was the big question. Murder was, as expected, an extremely grave offence in the eyes of the modern worshippers of Durandia. Was it justifiable in their holy scripture to kill someone in retaliation, even if they were also a child?

“Is that your confession?”

“No. I’m trying to measure you. What would you do?”

“I’d... well, I’d lock you up somewhere safe for a start,” he said unsteadily.

“But that would be a profoundly dishonest answer. You’re obviously upset about what happened, so I find your assertions of punishment via confinement to be farcical in nature. Let me put it another way. Would you be willing to point that gun in my direction and kill me?”

I could hear a pin drop. All of that righteous anger drained out of his features like air from a punctured balloon.

“You’d... you’d deserve it, I think.”

My brow rose, “Deserve it? The Goddess never spoke of those who ‘deserved’ and did ‘not deserve’ violence. To cross that line, to take the life of another, is divorced from the context surrounding it. For what reason would you bloody your hands and stain your soul so?”

“This is about restoring Walser-”

“-Yet restoring Walser does not demand that you distribute violence. Ask yourself, who stands to gain the most from making you besmirch the Goddess’ teachings? The man who leads you, surely. His hands will remain clean – and common men will be forced to bear the burden of her judgement.”

This was becoming too philosophical for his liking, as it was for me. I wanted to steer him away from going crazy and blowing one of the students away, not invite him to the academy’s debate society.

“I’m only attempting to offer you a suggestion. Harassing the students will not get you any closer to the answers you seek. Was there any evidence that he died as a result of someone else?”

That was the key conflict here. He wanted to believe that people only died for a reason, or at the hands of others, to find otherwise would be to submit to his fear of divine punishment from the Goddess.

“Your nurse said it was a cardiac arrest, or something.”

“If that’s the case, then I’m afraid that your friend suffered from a bout of the most ill luck. It can happen to anyone with little to no warning, you know.”

My intent was to nudge him towards the conclusion that it was an accident, and not connected to the whims of the Goddess who was punishing them for invading the campus. Instead, the look of panic on his face intensified all over again. He clutched the sides of his head and knelt down, curling up into a ball.

“Shit! I told Darin we should have started praying for mercy! He didn’t listen to me!”

“What are you babbling about?”

He leapt back up to his feet, teeth bared, and sprinted out of the courtyard like a man possessed. I briefly followed him to ensure that he didn’t go on a rampage through the campus as a result of his internal crisis, but he passed through the main lobby without incident and charged down towards where the old schoolhouse was to find the man in charge and give him a piece of his mind.

There was no good reason for him to accept my explanation as true, but there was also no reason for him to believe that his friend’s death was anyone’s fault. It didn’t work to approach his thought process rationally. He was bouncing between two different extremes with no regard for how far apart they were.

To be frank – I had never personally witnessed a man suffer a mental breakdown before. That was all new to me. I sighed and adjusted my wind-swept hair back into position. I was anticipating some kind of fight or conflict, but for all of his anger, he couldn’t bring himself to legitimately harm someone old enough to be his son or daughter.

This was what people like Welt did. They pushed and pushed and pushed until they were trapped and forced to make impossible decisions. Welt was not the one who bore the full horror of what he intended to do, that was reserved for the suckers and workers who followed along with him, lured in by the promise of a perfect yesterday.

Adrian emerged from the corridor to my left – attracted by the noise.

“What the heck was all of that shouting about?” he asked, “It sounded like they were going to throw punches a few seconds ago.”

“One of those goons forced their way in and started harassing the other students. I succeeded in making him leave with a stern talking-to.”

“Stern is a light way of describing one of your verbal rampages...”

“I’m rather impressed that he has managed to keep them in line for two days straight. I was expecting trouble to start much earlier than it did.”

“You’d better hope that he doesn’t come back and do it again.”

“He won’t, and if he does, I’ll break his fingers.”

Adrian’s face turned sour.

“That’s... morbid.”

“These are morbid times we live in. Have you heard about the rumours going around?”

“Yeah, why?” he shrugged.

“Because you never pay any attention to what other people are speaking about. If you’ve also heard of those rumours, then it means it’s only a matter of time before they reach the ears of the men occupying the schoolhouse.”

He didn’t appreciate me using him as a barometer, but he refrained from starting a long-winded argument over it for the time being.

“I should have known you were responsible for those. What are you going to do if they decide that they have to keep us under close watch because of them? That’d make your goal even harder.”

“It would be unfortunate, but there will be no harm done so long as they don’t try to extract answers from us through torture or threats. This is the gambit. They come to believe the stories and flee before the police supposedly arrive, or they become paranoid and tighten the noose.”

“Tightening the noose sounds more problematic than you let on.”

I laughed, “Does it? With this untrained lot? I could sneak out of here with my eyes covered and my arms tied behind my back! The only reason I’m still here is because I believe that Samantha will have to come with me.”

Of course, I was also hiding the big problem with getting out of here the ‘easy’ way. It would potentially compromise my identity to the entire school, and make my position as a lady of noble birth much harder to maintain. Things were complicated enough without creating a cover story for gunning down several men and running through the forest like a chicken with its head cut off.

“What are you going to do now?”

“There are a few pieces left to put in place. We’ll let this current rumour gather momentum for the day, and then I will push the second into the conversation alleging that someone is already seeking the police so they can come and siege the academy. They’ll be forced to decide on the spot if it’s worth the risk to stay.”

“And if it goes wrong?”

“Then I improvise.”

I was also coming up with a way to melt my candelabra down into something I could use. There were a lot of tools on the academy grounds that I was not familiar with until I started looking into things. It was technically possible for me to do it myself without the assistance of a blacksmith.

What I needed was some time and space to work in peace...