

Exactly as I predicted, Felipe was somehow given permission to go on the trip with the first years. It defied logical explanation, but none of the teachers filled me with a sense of confidence when it came to things like this. They were educators first and guardians second. It was doubtful that they'd ever dealt with something this serious before. Since Felipe was going, so was I. I thanked my good fortune to have prepared the stuff I needed before the announcement was made.

The trip would last for one day at the start of the week. The academy was relatively close to the parliament building, at least in comparison to the extremely dense industrial and urban areas that were located along the city's coast. The congestion from people moving back and forth made that particular route significantly more arduous and time-consuming. For us, it was an hour's trip using a horse and carriage. It was almost hard to believe that this beautiful rural location was so close to a major city.

As for the composition of our party – there was another surprise in store. A lot of the kids from my year were being forced to go by their ambitious parents. Getting in early was considered a good strategy for forming political connections even if those kids were far too young to understand what they were doing.

The mere appearance of being interested in politics and leadership was seen as important. What I expected to be a group of nine or ten quickly swelled to three dozen. That explained why students like Felipe were being brought along as guides. They couldn't spare the adult supervisors to come with when classes were still in session for everybody else.

The last piece of the puzzle that eluded me was a book covering the layout of the building. The Walser parliament building was more popularly known as Vander's Hall. Originally constructed as a theatre three-hundred years ago, it eventually went out of business and fell into the hands of the city. The architecture was considered cutting edge at the time and various noble investors poured millions and millions of marks into making it look that way. Nowadays it was showing its age as an example of classical design. That afforded it a sense of grandeur and it became the perfect place

to seat the newly established house of representatives. It was sitting empty otherwise, so why not use it?

While those facts were easy to establish and collect, an actual floor plan of the building was another matter. It made sense that the government didn't want fully detailed maps of the building being out in public. It posed a serious security risk to the people whom many revolutionaries and reactionaries would rather see dead than sitting. The best I could find was a map from before it was turned into a government building, but years after it ceased operating as a business.

Things will have changed since then. Not just for the sake of confusing any potential revolutionaries, but because the building was also where many government offices held space for their paper pushers. While the atrium of the building was transformed into a rotunda of seats, desks and a speaking podium, everything else was dedicated to all the boring minutia of running a country. It was the single biggest office space in the nation. Walls will have been knocked through, new ones erected, and extra routes through the building installed to make travel easier.

At any other time, those tiny details won't have mattered so much, but if I was pulled into a gunfight knowing the layout would be a significant advantage. If they attacked in numbers again those advantages would be necessary for success. It never hurt to be too prepared for something. In an era where governmental transparency was the last thing on people's minds and the establishment of scholarly and historical record was a recent concept, it was perhaps too much to ask to see a detailed map of the parliament building.

The tour were we getting from the building's caretaker had to be a good one.

Expending every book in the academy's libraries wasn't going to get the results I was looking for, and I couldn't justify spending any more time on that element of my plan with others yet to be fully cemented. I put my collection of tomes back into their places and decided to take a break from it. Smashing my head against a brick wall was not going to help. That knowledge was important but I could compensate for it in other areas.

I sought out and needled Felipe for the details about the day's itinerary. In the morning we would be given an hour-long tour, walking through the different departments, seeing some of the tourist attractions, before finally being led to the balconies that overlooked the house chamber. The session was scheduled to begin a few minutes before we arrived. We would watch the first reading of the bill and some of the debate, breaking up for lunch and for the individual sections of the proceedings. This was where we'd be alone with our assigned groups, and where Felipe would be the most isolated.

Each prefect was given a department to visit, where a more in-depth talk would be given about the function and day-to-day of the wing. That would be followed by a personal discussion with one of the MPs who were attending the session, usually selected from among the kid's parents because of their pre-existing connections with the school. Even as an adult in a teenager's body I didn't know what exactly that discussion would be about, given that most of the students were more invested in gossip and interpersonal drama rather than international politics.

Once that was done with, we would return to the balcony and see the end of the reading session plus some of the ensuing debate. The reading would go on for some time after we left - potentially late into the night. That was true even if the vote on it was considered a formality. It would be interesting to see if the debate was on anything of substance since there were no cameras to play to and it was unlikely to be front-page news. Exposure served as a perverse incentive for some politicians.

The day before we were due to leave, a notice was pinned to the dorm's board revealing who we were assigned to. I was grouped with Samantha, Claudius, Maxwell, Adrian, and someone called Hershel. I was totally unfamiliar with them, I couldn't even put a face to the name. Felipe had some say over who he wanted to take, which explained why most of us came from the magic class. Adrian was definitely one of the kids who didn't really want to come along. His Father was a sitting MP and an influential member of the Conservative party.

Adrian had no patience for most things, even if they only demanded an hour of his attention – so the thought of him enduring hours of legislative debate and trying to

rub shoulders with donors and voters was an absurd one. He was always two seconds away from blowing up and flying into a blind rage. Perhaps it was an unfair perception, but to me, he'd been nothing but unpleasant since the first time we met. Successive defeats in shooting competitions made the issue worse. I could only hope that he'd keep his mouth shut instead of griping about it over and over again.

Thus, with all of that information in hand and the gun neatly tucked beneath my skirt, I headed out into the courtyard and tried to locate our carriage through a sea of people. Felipe was standing on the bottom step to get some elevation and was waving to me. As I approached, I could already hear Adrian airing his thoughts about the trip we were about to depart on.

"I'm not even interested in politics. Why the hell do I have to come along?"

Felipe blinked, "Why are you coming with us?"

"My Dad said that I'd be in serious trouble if I didn't. I'd prefer to sit in the lecture theatre and listen to Jennings rattle on for two hours than do this."

Felipe found the dismissive comments on his favourite teacher irritating, but he kept his contempt restrained to a frustrated twitch on his brow. Any admonishments he could dispense would bounce right off him. Adrian could not spare any space in his mind for other people's criticism. To acknowledge them would be to admit that not everyone was in love with his attitude. His mood soured a touch further as he spotted me emerging through the crowd.

"Ugh, and we have to deal with you as well?"

"I could say the same to you," I shot back, "Save us the pain of listening to your inane complaints for the time being. This is going to be a full day of dull observation – we needn't hear your gripes to know."

He looked to Felipe for help, "Can I change groups? Come on, there has to be someone here who would be fine with swapping places."

Felipe sighed, "I'm afraid not. The teachers are being very strict about knowing where everyone is at all times. They won't be entertaining any requests to switch groups now that we're about to depart."

The troublesome trio were next to show up on the scene. Claude and Max were still having their lover's spat, strategically placing Samantha in the middle so that they didn't have to stand next to each other. Samantha looked so tired with this that I could see ghostly bags lingering under her eyes. The divorce is always the hardest on the children. Her dread was enhanced when she realised that Adrian was here and wasn't trying to dodge going.

"Goddess help me," she moaned.

Felipe stepped aside and allowed me to enter the carriage. It was less plush than the one that my Father liked to send for me, with a retractable roof and open sides instead of windows. There was more than enough space for all of us to sit inside. Adrian, Samantha and Max took that as their cue to join me in the cabin. To say that the atmosphere inside was awkward would be a profound understatement. Sam, Claude and Adrian didn't want to speak with anyone, and I felt like the odd one out for being okay with saying something to Samantha. The issue worsened when Hershel arrived and took the last spot.

Despite the space we had, it was still a comparatively small space for six people. Felipe stepped inside and pulled the door closed, sealing our fate and sentencing all of us to a one-hour trip in which barely a word would be spared. I stared straight ahead to where Claude was sitting for most of it, just to unnerve him a little. Even my coldest glare wasn't good enough to make him speak with Max. For the second half of the journey I took advantage of my window seat and look out to the countryside as it rolled by. It was early in the morning, a necessity to give us enough time to complete the day's planned activities. The orange morning sky was only just fading away into a light blue.

The open fields and dense woodlands soon gave way to suburban sprawl and increasingly dense commercial areas. The location of the theatre was considered optimal because it avoided the industrial areas while also being easy to access. It

helped balance the importance of both sides of the city, with the economic and political grunt being separated into two areas. The area around the theatre saw a significant increase in property value in the years following the move. The only reason was that the politicians didn't want to see the poor and downtrodden on their way to work, but it was hard to dispute the outcomes. Those formerly poor residents were given a serious boon, most selling up and moving away to a larger home while prices were high.

Samantha was leaning across to try and get a look at the city.

"Is this your first time in the city?"

"I don't want to sound like a country bumpkin," she waned.

"That is not unusual. Most people who don't live and work here have never seen any need to visit. If we were going by the standard of who has and has not been here, many of our peers at the academy could also be considered country bumpkins."

That was the innate hypocrisy of the noble class. They enjoyed the benefits of rural life but thought themselves above the people who did the same but with less money. Locked away in huge compounds with massive gardens and hundreds of servants – they were more isolated and backward than any modern farmgirl. Urbanisation in the cities meant that a huge number of them were moving out into the country.

"I've never seen anything like it. It's hard to believe just how big this city is until you actually see it."

"I do believe that this is the only place like it in Walser."

That would change in time.

Felipe smiled, "I got lost the first time my Father brought me here. He's always been eager to involve us in the family business, so we headed down to the docks to see one of our ships before it departed. He nearly had a heart attack when he saw that I'd disappeared."

Samantha oo-ed and ah-ed at the various sights and sounds leaking through the sides of the carriage. The city was waking up, and many people were already on their way

to work. Gangs of children played on the steps of the townhouses or caused mischief for the commuters with their games. As we crossed from the dirt streets to the cobbled ones, the ride became much less pleasant as the carriage started to rock back and forth. They didn't splash out for ones that came with rudimentary suspension.

We took a sharp left and passed through a pair of iron gates. A small courtyard was placed at the front of the building, once used as an attempt to beautify the area, it now served as a convenient location for political rallies, or as an extra defence cordon when people weren't happy with the government – and they very rarely were happy with them these days. Felipe got up first and opened the door as we came to a stop. Hershel, Maxwell and Claude departed without saying a word. In conclusion - it was the most profoundly awkward trip I'd been involved in over two lifetimes.

Samantha sighed and rubbed the corners of her eyes, "I thought they'd be done with this argument by now."

"If you need someone to occupy your attention, I am right here."

"This coming from the girl who said she didn't want to be friends."

"Just because we aren't friends doesn't mean I cannot speak with you."

Samantha didn't get where I was coming from and she wasn't going to. I had my own reasons for acting this way and that was all she knew. She followed me out onto the main driveway of the parliament building and took a moment to stand back and admired the circular structure from a distance. It was a genuinely impressive piece of construction, the type that would make most construction companies break out into a cold sweat with how many unneeded expenses were utilised to decorate the exterior façade.

From top to bottom, it was constructed mainly out of white marble. High arched windows allowed a lot of light to pour into the respective office spaces, giving it a modern, open-plan feeling that stood in sharp opposition to the dark colours you'd find in other high-class buildings. It stood four stories tall and stretched outwards to dominate a space that could easily house four or five housing blocks. A flat roof and Greco-Roman pillars gave the impression of the Colosseum.

“It’s an arresting sight,” I said to Samantha.

“I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s huge!”

“It has to be big when thousands of people work here. This is the seat of government, and the place where many of their departments are based.”

“Like the treasury?” she asks, parroting something she was familiar with.

“The treasury has its own building closer to the docks. The Theatre is home to the state, agricultural, education, and transport departments.”

Felipe was not happy with my already burgeoning knowledge, “Save some for the rest of the tour, please. You’re going to burn through all of my material before I get the chance to say it.”

“Sorry.”

Once all of the different groups were dismounted and ready to go, we were led to the front steps by the teachers. An affable-looking man in a waistcoat was waiting for us at the top. His face was reddened either by high blood pressure or a love for alcohol, or maybe even both.

“Welcome to the Theatre everyone! My name is Patrick Ablator, I’m a liaison from the education department, and I’ll be making sure that everything runs smoothly for you today during your visit. I’m very pleased to see such an amazing turnout for our open day.”

His enthusiasm was not going to rub off on the students, no matter how hard he tried. Regardless of the reaction from the lethargic teenagers he was overseeing, Patrick only planned on doing this tour in one way, so come hell or high water he was going to stick to his guns and try to get people pumped to explore what was essentially an overblown office complex.

“For the first part of the day, we’ll be exploring the history of the building and how Walser’s parliament came to be. After that – we’ll be attending a live session where the members will be debating a new bill that might become law in the near future.”

The prefects and teachers hung around the back of the herd and forced us into a tight formation as we entered the lobby. Despite being called the Theatre by most people in the know, there was little evidence of its former use remaining within the building itself. This was originally where the tickets were checked before people were allowed to enter the main atrium. The floor was patterned in a dazzling array of black and white tiles. A large statue of a bearded man stood between the doors at the back of the room.

“This statue was commissioned and placed here on the opening day of the Walser parliament. The man who stands here is Douglas Rory Smith – a man who found himself thrust into the centre of the events that led to its formation. He was a republican activist and speaker, who was the key individual that led to the ratification of the Van Walser Compromise and Treaty. He now serves as a reminder of what good temperance and cooperation can achieve.”

As in, he was the friendliest and most palatable republican figure they could erect a monument to without getting the monarchists into an incandescent rage. He was important, but there were many other people involved in a more violent struggle that helped contribute to the Compromise being introduced and passed. Given the nature of that compromise, it made sense to use him as the gatekeeper to the parliament chamber. He stood to represent a new era of politics in Walser, one where the people held more power than the royal family, at least in theory.

It was hard to keep a straight face thinking about that. The entire point of this trip was for the respective families in parliament to show their credentials and maybe get their kid's foot in the door. The royal family's power was now wielded in an entirely different way. It all depended on the balance between the republicans and the monarchists.

Patrick had lots of other similar anecdotes to dispense as we were escorted through into the parliament chamber itself. It hadn't been around for long enough to be seasoned with strange traditions yet, so they were mainly focused on the actual function of the space and giving us a chance to get up on the stage to look over the desks where the representatives would be seated. The building's artful heritage was

more obvious from the other side because you could see up onto the balconies that ran around the top of the room. That was where the press and other permitted individuals would be seated during a session.

“Wow. I don’t think I could stand up here and speak to all of the people who’d be sitting down there,” Samantha fretted.

“Speaking skills are not essential to a politician, no matter what they tell us at the academy.”

Samantha smirked, “I can see you standing up here and holding their attention.”

I positioned myself behind the podium, only to discover that I could barely see over the top of it due to my short stature. I sighed, “I believe they’d find it more comedic than enrapturing.”

Samantha giggled nervously, “I’m sure you’ll get taller soon!”

Politics wasn’t really my thing anyway.

As we moved to leave the chamber and move on to our next stop, movement caught my eye from one of the balconies. A lone figure backed away into the shadows. This place was exposed. There were hundreds of ways to look down into the chamber, including the glass dome that was held aloft above the ceiling. At least if they tried to kill Felipe while we were on the balconies, there were only two doors that led onto them. I could keep track of that much.

Patrick skidded to a halt, “Oh, and before we leave – you might have noticed the two flags that are hanging behind the speaker’s chair. The first is the ever-recognizable flag of our Republic.”

The Walser flag bore the orange-yellow colouration of the republican movement along the top, with a thinner white stripe beneath, and finally the royal family’s traditional purple on the bottom. The positioning of the colours was almost contentious enough to start another civil war when it was being designed, but the republicans got their way in the end and took top billing.

“The second is the personal banner of the Van Walser family. Just as Douglas Smith stands at the entrance to remind us of our roots, so too do these twin flags hang before the parliament.”

The Van Walser’s personal flag was much more complex, veering away from an almost-tricolour design in favour of the family’s crest, which depicted a shield split between a deer mid-flight and a pattern of flowing waves. Purple was the dominant colour once again, with touches of violet and white. It was odd that the democratic arm of the nation’s government was forced to display the mark of a displaced monarchy, but those small details were what allowed the transition to happen in a mostly bloodless manner.

Besides – it was common knowledge that the Van Walsers still had a lot of sway over national politics. Anyone with money and power could worm their way into a parliamentary seat or twelve. The parties served their purpose but a lot of what happened in this building came down to the individuals and their motivations.

We left the main room and walked up a flight of steps to reach the first floor. The entire time I was keeping a vigilant lookout for whoever may be trying to kill Felipe. Aside from the person watching our group from the balcony, there was nothing too suspicious. The people running back and forth with bundles of paperwork in their arms were far too occupied with work to help with that conspiracy.

The tour was suddenly halted as a familiar-looking man rounded the corner in front of us. His face broke out into a disarming smile and his eyes locked on Adrian, who was skulking at the back beside me. Adrian’s face fell like a stone as he noticed who it was.

“Old man...”

Adrian was the spitting image of his father, a youthful mirror that didn’t bare the same scars of age that he did. The elder Roderro clapped Patrick on the back and hummed to himself.

“I see that our latest guests have made their appearance! I think this might be our largest group yet.”

Patrick nodded, "I said the same thing. Are you headed for the session?"

"That I am. Make sure you all pay attention to Patrick here – he knows everything there is to know about the Theatre and what goes on behind these doors. You might find that information valuable in the near future. And to those of you who are dropping by my office later, I look forward to fielding all of your questions. I'm sure you have a lot of them."

Way to put unneeded pressure on us, Mister Roderro.

While he was pleased to see his son attending the tour if only at the behest of his orders, Rederro soon looked and regarded Felipe, who was standing on the left side of the pack. He said nothing but the way he targeted him immediately raised an alarm bell in my head. The Rederro family was one of many who tried to claim Beatrice Booker's hand in marriage. He may have kept his silence, but the eyes of a man could contain more emotions than his words ever could.

He snapped out of it so quickly that nobody else noticed. Another cheery smile and wave to his son, and he was away towards the stairs so that he could attend the upcoming debate session. I released a breath I didn't know I was holding, joined in concert by a nervy Adrian.

Patrick ploughed on, "Right. Our next stop is the Department of Transportation."

Did wonders ever cease?

