

Dalia gathered her war council promptly to field new ideas about knocking Samantha down a peg. Wendy was still keeping her distance, which was fine by her, she had some serious nerve to accuse her of spreading ill rumours without any evidence. Instead, she was forced to rely on two other friends; Rebecca Blackwell and Caroline Lüttichau.

'Friend' was a stronger word than Dalia preferred to use. She saw almost all of her relationships as purely transactional in nature. If the girl she was associating with did not provide her with any benefits, she would cut them loose and replace them with someone new. Wendy was the first to take the fight to her instead. Dalia was still steamed over both that and Samantha's mocking words in the aftermath.

That smug sense of satisfaction on her face was all the evidence Dalia needed. Samantha knew exactly what she was doing, sucking up to the most popular and desired girl in the academy to cover up her lack of good breeding.

Rebecca was hesitant; "Are you sure it's a good idea to mess with Maria's friend?"

"That charity case is not Maria's friend. Maria would never dare be seen with a girl like her unless she was forced into it."

"She is seen with her - all the time," she observed. Maria was not shy about it by any means.

Caroline was also being a wet blanket, "Rebecca is right. She keeps a close circle of friends. Beatrice, Felipe, Talia, Samantha. She does not seem to be ashamed of being seen with them."

Dalia glared, "And I simply must take issue with Talia having that name. Did her parents have the good sense to check with our family before using it? I was born two months before her!"

Rebecca sighed, "They sound completely different. Are you honestly worried about people confusing your names? And did you honestly ask for her birthdate just to confirm that?"

Dalia smiled, “Naturally. If there is information to be gathered that might be of use, then it is my duty to do so. My elder brother is an experienced lawyer, and he is always one to stress the importance of laying the rhetorical foundation of your case.”

Rebecca and Caroline shared a weary look. Dalia wasn't going to take Talia to court for having a name that was too similar to hers, to even imply that her mud-slinging came with that kind of sophistication was an insult to her brother's hard work. The two girls had no moral opposition to it, of course, they were here to muddy the waters all the same.

“Now, do you two know anything about Samantha that we can use against her?”

Rebecca was the first up to the plate.

“She scares me.”

Dalia groaned, “We can't use that against her!”

“I felt like it needed to be stated clearly. She's really scary.”

There was no single noble girl willing to even risk harassing Samantha physically. She was the tallest girl in the year by a significant margin, and years of hard work on the farm meant she could (theoretically) contort any of their bodies into a delightfully morbid recreation of the balloon animals one might have found at festivals within the city.

“That's why we use our words – Rebecca. When have we ever debased ourselves by trying to fight someone?”

“Didn't you fight with Wendy yesterday?”

Dalia roared, “She was the one who started it!”

The other girls shied away and resolved not to bring her up again. That was a raw nerve that Dalia did not want to be touched at the moment.

“Now, I'm talking about her personality. Surely there are tales of woe from people unfortunate enough to be forced into her company. Her table manners, cleanliness, her oratory skills, those are not things taught to tawdry country girls.”

Rebecca nodded, “Her table manners! Let me think. Frankford told me that he was seated next to her during the term start dinner.”

“Oh? That sounds interesting.”

“He said that Samantha had already learnt how to utilise all of the different utensils.”

Dalia covered her face in despair. She was hoping to hear that Samantha proved herself to be a boorish and messy eater, who refused to adapt to the high standards of the academy. Instead – Rebecca could only regale a measure of her willingness to learn.

“And she did not splash herself with the soup?”

“No. None of it even landed on the tablecloth, at that.”

Caroline gasped.

“I need negative impressions, not good ones! Caroline, do you have a story?”

Caroline stood up from her spot on the bed and wracked her brain.

“Uh. I heard that she bumped into Philomena and knocked her to the floor a few weeks ago.”

“A brutish assault of a small girl! Perfect.”

“Oh, but then she helped her back to her feet and apologized profusely. There was no harm done.”

Dalia almost ran across the room and strangled her for leading her on.

“What is wrong with you two? Do you honestly not have a single story about Samantha that we can tar and feather her with? There’s no such thing as a girl without a secret or three!”

Rebecca and Caroline shrugged. They hadn’t heard a single negative story about Samantha that wasn’t rooted in her background as a farm girl admitted through the scholarship programme. By all accounts, she was kind, intelligent, ambitious and well-behaved. It was easy to mock her from a high-minded position, but the kind of real dirt that Dalia desperately sought was in short supply.

“I don’t believe we do,” Rebecca conceded, “Aren’t you projecting a certain type of behaviour onto her because of her background? It won’t work if there’s no basis in truth to hook people. There might be people like us who don’t approve of what she represents – but they aren’t going to believe any old fib we tell them. They know how she behaves.”

Dalia was red-faced from sheer frustration. She thought that it would be a simple matter of gathering dirt about Samantha and recirculating it through her network of followers and friends. That transition from working on a farm to attending the most prestigious academy in the nation had to have resulted in some embarrassing stories. Even noble girls like herself were capable of making such mistakes.

Caroline and Rebecca sat in ashamed silence, awaiting Dalia’s next word so that the discussion could move on. Dalia didn’t want to say anything. She sat by the desk and stared blankly at them. It seemed like now was the best time to address the Wendy situation.

Rebecca was the one to broach the subject once more; “Dalia, is now really the best time to be worrying about this? I know you don’t want to talk about it – but I think it is better to focus on the Wendy issue before starting a feud with Samantha.”

“There is nothing to address. Wendy and I are no longer friends.”

“It is not ‘nothing’ at all. Why can’t you admit that you’re angry about it?”

“I can admit that I’m angry about it, but there is nothing to be done. Wendy took my presence for granted, and thus we have gone our separate ways. What else would you want me to do? I’m not going back and begging for her to forget all about it. She was the one who started a fight with me!”

“If you say so.”

Rebecca and Caroline were both convinced that Dalia was looking for a new enemy to distract herself with. Samantha served as the perfect scapegoat for her to unleash her righteous anger upon. The real question was why Dalia refused to confront Wendy. Wendy was a wallflower, meek, always following with the crowd – which was why

Dalia found her useful. It should have been a simple matter to completely trash her reputation.

Rebecca was convinced that Dalia liked Wendy more than she let on. Caroline was on the opposite end of the spectrum in her belief that Dalia was too lazy to keep up a prolonged offensive against a girl who demonstrated her willingness to fight back both verbally and physically. Dalia only liked tussling with easy target.

Dalia had heard enough. She stood from her seat and waved the duo away from her bed, towards the door.

“Get out and don’t come back until you have something useful to me!”

Her choice of words, intentional or not, revealed that she only had one reason to speak with them. Rebecca and Caroline stood in front of the door as it was slammed against their backs.

“That Wendy fight has gotten to her head,” Caroline griped.

“True. I don’t feel like doing work for her now.”

“No way. Not in a million years. Let’s ignore her until she cools her head.”

Dalia was so used to getting her way that she was now blinded to her alienating behaviour. A hard lesson to learn, and not one that would be taken any time soon.

Not only could I not find a moment of peace in real life, but it was clear from the outset that I couldn’t find any in my dreams either. I was out like a light from the second that my head hit the pillow, as always, but I soon found myself standing in a familiar hotel lobby.

I was lucid.

That meant I was about to endure an irritatingly realistic nightmare while stuck in my bed with paralysis. I looked down to the ground and saw my imagination recreating the moment that I died in the old world. It was more dignified than the reality – there was a cinematic touch that my pride infused into the gruesome sight. This was the

last stand of the man I used to be, and I wouldn't settle for it being any less than striking in appearance.

What I found odd was how little the sight affected me. If this was supposed to be my own lucid nightmare then I was lacking in an understanding of my own fears. I'd made my peace with how I went out. They caught up with me and I got greedy. That was the way of things when you worked in that dirty business.

The lobby was formless. When I moved my gaze from one end of the room to the next, details and architecture changed like the tides. They morphed and shifted, and none of the lines drawn could stay in place once my mind discarded them with their occlusion. I sat down next to my dead body and stared at the back of my head.

I should have gotten a haircut before biting it.

"My, my – what an interesting space your mind has conjured for me."

I groaned. Were we really going to do this?

"I didn't make it for your sake, whoever the hell you are. It seems pretty rude to break in while I'm enjoying it so much."

The voice paused.

"Ah. Apologies. The mysterious and brooding act is not the best first impression to be given under these circumstances. Give me a moment and I'll congregate a lovely body for you to look at."

True to their word - a physical body manifested from behind the receptionist's desk and lumbered over to my position. They looked very strange indeed.

"Who are you?"

"Call me a dream demon if you must. Or perhaps a figment of your sleeping imagination. I prefer to be called by my name. I am Xenia. I am one of the existences from beyond the Veil."

Unlike Durandia, Xenia was appearing before me in a form that I could perceive. Despite their best attempts to create a figure I could associate with, there were still

many rough edges to the guise. They were shockingly pale, almost white, with no blemishes on their skin. They were also extremely long-limbed. Xenia was around six and a half feet tall with a body that was far too thin to match.

Their hair, eyebrows and eyelashes were all a vivid shade of cyan – like the blue seas you’d find around a tropical island. When they smiled, the sides of their cheeks and their dimples bunched up giving them a menacing impression. They had a masculine voice, but a feminine face. I wasn’t certain if they understood gender beyond observing us from a distance. This was all topped off with a long, flowing robe of white silk that hung lazily across their body.

“For goodness sake. Can’t I go for one month without a power beyond my comprehension sticking their fingers into the pie?”

Xenia laughed earnestly at my complaint, “Now that is a unique reaction! And to think that I wouldn’t get to enjoy the surprise of hearing it had I used the same methods that Durandia does.”

I was not happy about this. Having one of these sorts astral projecting themselves into my dreams was extremely annoying. I couldn’t get a moment’s rest in this place, even my dreams were being turned into vehicles for burdensome litigation. Xenia was surely going to have a lot to say in an attempt to make me do the thing they wanted.

“Durandia’s methods are more polite. She even sent me a letter inviting me over for tea.”

“I am well aware.”

“For that matter - Durandia needed a special device to speak with me. How are you doing it?”

Xenia steepled their bony fingers together, “This is a very expensive exercise indeed! Durandia is always interested in doing things efficiently. That’s why she directed Snow to create the catalyst chamber in the first place. I admire that about her – but I do not have the same benefit of time and planning on my side. Thus, I spend my power more freely to speak with you now.”

“Why?”

“Why? I had a lot of things to tell you, but I realized that there was no point in doing that if you didn’t trust me. The outcome of this conversation will not be what I want, but I prefer it to the outcome that would occur had I not reached out to you as we speak.”

“And what is it that you want? The real objective – not the compromise.”

Xenia sighed and planted their hands on their hips, “If you must know, Durandia and I have a difference of opinion about how this whole ‘interfering in the mortal world’ scheme is implemented. I was one of the empanelled who dissented with the majority on bringing you here.”

“I understand. Unleashing a murderer onto a new group of people would make me think twice too.”

Xenia laughed, “No, no. That’s not the problem! When you work on the grand scale that we do, a few hundred dead by your hand is... a drop in the bucket. How much the council cares differs from member to member. The more fundamental moral problem is tweaking the mortal mind to make them compliant. I felt that averting your gender identification was a step too far.”

I frowned, “What’s done is done. I don’t see how you can change that now, and to be honest, I’d rather not endure the consistent anxiety of not recognizing the person looking back at me in the mirror.”

“That is my point. Telling you that I’m ideologically opposed isn’t going to sway you, and I did agree that something had to be done. I merely wish to warn you that Durandia is not pure-hearted, and she was not forthcoming with you because she values honesty. The Red Tree told her to do it.”

“Red Tree?”

“Sorry – I’m speaking over your head. That’s what we call the Prediction Engine. Durandia is always consulting it. This is why I don’t like it. Far from becoming wise



and faultless, we merely become slaves to the design of that great machine, created by one of our own.”

Suddenly we were in a pure white room. Against the back wall was a featureless black box that was around human height. The wall itself was decorated in a deep, crimson red, spreading outwards to form hundreds of large and small branches. A literal red tree. The striking contrast of the three colours was menacing in form. The sight seared itself into my dreaming memory within seconds.

“The room leaves a lot to be desired too,” Xenia joked.

“So, this is what it’s like beyond the veil?”

Xenia defused my curiosity, “This is but a single space. Would you say that the bedroom in your manor is the full measure of the mortal world you live in? Mercifully, our reality is more beautiful than this abstract nightmare. Alas, we drift away from the topic of my visit.”

None of this was news to me. Xenia was labouring under the assumption that I believed everything Durandia said to me. It was clear from our meeting that Durandia had her own motivations that drove her actions. I never once saw her as an unbiased observer. She had every reason to keep the facts from me if they benefitted her chosen outcome.

“Did you use the Red Tree too? You mentioned wanting a better outcome.”

Xenia shook their head, “No. To live is to march into the unknown, at least in my opinion. I already know a great deal about you and the situation. I am using my own intuition and making a decision based on that.”

“But if Durandia used this engine to see the future, wouldn’t she know about this too?”

“You’re starting to understand the problem,” Xenia said forlornly. Expressing human emotion using a physical body was evidently new to them. There was an awkward disconnect between their tone of voice and movements. “It’s enough to drive someone mad! Layers of plans upon layers of plans, all caused by this machine. My

peers seem to believe that it is more ethical for us to use the Red Tree for this express purpose, that we can predict threats and deal with them without sacrificing too many lives.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Does Durandia know about this?”

“The Red Tree combines behavioural simulations with supremely accurate physical recreations of the world in question. To answer your query, it is capable of predicting that I would reach out to speak with you behind Durandia’s back, but as we are presently in a realm that does not subscribe to either of those laws, it cannot specify our exact words. Here, your mind is free to wander and let itself free, and none of the world’s physical rules are in effect.”

“But she can try.”

“Yes – Durandia can try, but there is no certainty.”

I groaned and moved over to lean against one of the blank walls.

I hated this. This sucked ass.

What the hell was this otherworldly being thinking when they came to me with this crap? I didn’t care. I didn’t give a shit. It was physically impossible for me to care any less than I did in that moment. All of this was meaningless noise drilled into my head by a group so high on their smell of their own shit that they thought I’d go along with them out of the goodness of my heart.

I didn’t know who Xenia was. I didn’t know what Xenia wanted. I didn’t even know if Xenia was real. I could be making this entire story up to fill in the blanks and not even realize it.

Xenia cut back in, “Protecting the mortal thought is our most important duty.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Xenia hummed musically, “We can handle a lot of punishment. We can influence other realities using our powers. These facts are known – but we are also vulnerable in the same ways that any mortal can be. When the physical is no longer a threat, what else is there to fear but damage to our essence, our minds? The ‘thought,’ the soul,

the essence – whatever you wish to call it. That is the most important belonging to any living being.”

“Cut the bullshit and get to the point.”

“I wanted to learn what side of the coin you fall under. Do you think it’s fine to manipulate someone’s basic being to bring them comfort, or do you believe that this sort of power should be restrained?”

There was a scary conclusion buried in there. That one of the creatures from above the Veil could openly tweak with us without us knowing. Durandia claimed that the only change was to my gender identity to avert any serious problems with my new life. I went through a lot of toil and effort to perfect my persona as a spoilt noble girl – I was fairly confident that Durandia didn’t give me a helping hand there.

I made a judgement. When I wasn’t pretending to be ‘Maria’ from the game, I was my usual self. I couldn’t identify moments where my usual course of thinking was disrupted by a stray thought. I had no qualms about using my talents to dispense with problems. Durandia influenced the creation of Love Revolution somehow to give me the knowledge I needed. She needed me – the killer, and nothing more.

All of that preparation worked. I blended into my new world and new identity and started to tangle with some of the history-altering events that Durandia was worried about. These were not the main events. A God wouldn’t give a cold-hearted bastard like me a second chance if it wasn’t a serious threat to the world at large. So far, I’d mostly dealt with petty noble politics and man-made conflict.

The Scuncath were an eye-opening experience. There were great and dark powers bubbling under the surface of this setting. The Book of Cambry contained information that one could use to summon an almost apocalyptic event.

“I don’t like the idea – but I cannot say that I would act differently if I were in her shoes. One modified soul for the sake of an entire world, it’s an equation hardly worth considering. You should already understand that I am not well-placed to act as a moral barometer anyway.”

Xenia shook their head, “You may have sinned – but your opinion still has weight. To achieve a full appreciation of the universe and its many complexities, one must open their eyes and ears to many perspectives. You are a man who values results more than methods.”

“Isn’t this first year philosophy crap? Durandia could kill me tomorrow for whatever reason and I wouldn’t blame her. My life isn’t worth every single other person living on this planet.”

Xenia pinched the bridge of their nose, “You’re correct. This conversation is far too juvenile for a pair of beings our respective ages. Then allow me to leave you with this information. There are more individuals involved in this than just Durandia. The panel has already given their approval for her operation, but they can also retract it just as easily if she oversteps her bounds.”

“And did they approve you speaking with me?”

“I need no such approval for a simple act like this. They will know that I have spoken with you – but just as we have ways to predict the future in all of its boundless complexity, we have also developed methods to evade the watchful eye of the Red Tree. For example; speaking to someone inside of their dreams.”

“You aren’t going to reveal all of your secrets to me now.”

“No. I’m afraid I cannot. Even if I was willing, the description of how would go over your head. We have a lot of silly words to describe concepts that mortals don’t worry about.”

Our location changed for the last time. We were no longer standing in the white room where the Red Tree lurked. A thin layer of pristine water covered an infinitely flat plane. It perfectly reflected a nebula of different colours and moving shapes in the black void above.

“We live in a world of unfiltered emotion and pure thought. It is simply impossible to show you even a brief glimpse as to the reality of it.”

“Consider me curious.”

Xenia's voice took a grave tone.

"I hope that your curiosity does not bloom in envy. When mortals learn of our existence, many become convinced that they are destined to become one of us. They feel in their hearts that the other side we exist within is a paradise, intended to reward their good deeds. They feel entitled to it."

"They do say the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

"It is. One might see eternal life and some power as everything they need to be fulfilled. I'm afraid that megalomaniacs will find the experience rather disappointing when they cannot directly interfere with the course of history."

It sounded like a nightmare to me. I didn't know what was waiting for me at the end of this second life – but I didn't want to spend eternity as a spectator moving little pieces around on a board. With my free will confirmed for the time being, Xenia called an end to our impromptu meeting.

"I can rest easy knowing that Durandia kept her word, so long as you have no complaints?"

"I have a lot, actually, but they're not ones you'll be interested in solving."

Xenia laughed jovially, "I'm afraid so. I will leave you to your rest. Have a restful slumber, friend."

I was subsumed back into the unconscious, unsure of how much I would remember of this the next morning.

