

Franklin was the one left holding the pieces of our once pristine estate. He wasn't entirely sure where I was going or why, but I told him to give the police a convincing cover story about moving away from the house while everything was being cleaned up. They weren't going to check on me after already giving them my side of the story.

What followed was a supremely awkward carriage ride with Veronica sitting directly across from me, arms folded and brow furrowed. My games were putting her in a bad mood. She didn't want me here and she had good reason to feel that way, but I wasn't going to compromise on this.

There were still a lot of questions. My theories were only that, theories – and I was only applying assumptions based on the 'story' I was living through. Everything had to connect together neatly, every antagonistic force needed a sympathetic backstory, and every action that seemed mysterious had a reason behind it.

The first conclusion was a simple one. The fact that she hadn't perforated my head with a new breathing hole meant she was trying to keep me alive, either out of personal or professional reasoning. That would also explain why she wanted me to stay away from her dangerous line of work. It was a convincing façade for someone not invested in analysing events through the lens of a visual novel.

When we arrived at the train station to head to the University, she finally broke her silence.

“Have you ever ridden one of these before?”

“I know what a train is, but no.”

Veronica grinned that crooked grin, “They make my life so much easier. Trains are the greatest invention wrought by man's hands.”

“You must travel a lot.”

“I do.”

No elaboration on where and why, though.

I was already on edge before we reached the main platform, which was a beautifully constructed brick and stone, two-story building. This was a busier place than I'd

visited in some time, with at least a hundred people mulling around the area and doing their business. The Scuncath we were hunting had eyes and ears. How else would they have been able to launch such an ambitious kidnapping scheme if not?

Veronica was a wild card. The agency she worked for, WISD, was secretive, but Thersyn proved that Scuncath beliefs could be harboured by people in high places. I didn't have time to look into how publicised the existence of the agency was. This was not an age of free-flowing information that could be accessed by anyone with an internet connection, nor were there strong legal norms or precedents for civilian control over that information. It was a black box. Democratic rule hadn't been around for long enough for such matters to come before the courts with any regularity.

As for the revelation that the 'Sturmläufer' were real, just with a different name, it was curious to me that Veronica focused on the name more than the context of their actions. She wasn't going to share her opinion on them with me unprompted, so I filed it away for later investigation.

I bought a ticket using my own money at the booth. The train wouldn't arrive for twenty minutes or so. We found a wooden bench on the platform and sat down to wait.

"You're really going to follow through on that threat."

"Threat? I don't have anything to threaten you with. I'll hold on to your leg until you give in if you try to leave."

"I doubt a refined lady would debase herself like that."

"How would you know?" I responded, "I'm willing to do many things so long as they assist me in reaching my aims. Besides – presuming you aren't lying about our relationship, we could call it your influence passed down from your genes."

Veronica sighed wearily. She was wishing she never brought it up with me now. I kept my eyes glued to the various faces coming and going from the platform area. Most of the platform's users were businessmen and women travelling to and from work. Areas like these were made more reachable with the introduction of train lines, meaning a new class of commuters was being born as we spoke.

Train platforms were decent places to slip into a crowd too - though spying on someone was harder. They were very linear and if there weren't enough bodies around to distract from your hawkish gaze, the target may notice. Killing a target here was a bad idea too since every platform was rammed from end to end with CCTV cameras. Here? Not a problem. They weren't invented yet.

Travelling 'back in time' and seeing how life used to be, it was a small wonder that assassins weren't a more prevalent criminal element. I could get away with killings I'd never dreamed of in my old life. It was almost a waste given that I had no financial incentive to go back to my usual ways. Durandia would probably bust a blood vessel too if she had them.

"What's got you so on edge?" Veronica asked – drifting back towards her usual accent.

"I'm keeping an eye out for any Scuncath who might be following us."

"Following us? Listen, I run a tight ship while on the clock. The only way any of those cultist maniacs are going to know who I am is if they're inside my dispatch agency."

"The WISD? It's entirely possible. The public was not aware that Thersyn Bradley was a Scuncath either until he was caught red-handed. Who is to say that there is not a similar sympathiser hiding in your ranks?"

Veronica did not confirm my guess about the agency, "We work in segments. All of that information is strictly controlled and only distributed to the people who need to hear it. A leaker would have a deathwish if they gave it out. It wouldn't stay a secret for long."

"That sounds like a perfect summation of the Scuncath I've seen thus far," I observed, "Is it so hard to imagine one giving their life for the cause to protect the rest?"

"They don't work in groups, not normally."

"But we're in a highly abnormal situation. There is a unifying figure bringing them together, and now they have the means to unleash some sort of chaos upon Walser through their actions."

My eyes met with a man further down the platform, and he quickly averted his gaze in an attempt to stop me from noticing. The woman standing next to him reacted too. I noted them down for later.

Our conversation was drowned out by the arrival of our train. The rails squealed and steam bellowed. The commuters eagerly lined up by the doors and waited for it to come to a full stop. Once it did, a free-for-all broke out as they were pulled open and they tried their best to squeeze inside. Veronica was in no great hurry, and neither were my two new friends who were spying on us.

When we did decide to move into one of the carriages, it was a big pain finding a pair of open seats where we could face each other because of how long we waited.

“Why are you so obsessed with this?” Veronica murmured.

“Trust me. You’ll regret it if we don’t.”

We did manage to find an open booth eventually. The benches themselves were the bare minimum, wooden planks laid out across iron brackets to form an uncomfortable curvature. The cabins were not insulated. I could hear every rumble of the engine and movement of the trucks below. My centre of gravity shifted once the train started moving.

The trip was going to take twenty minutes.

“If you knew, it would only hurt you.”

“From my perspective, you’ve already revealed the most important details. I hardly need to look to the WISD’s operating procedure to understand what’s going on.”

“I only said what I said to try and keep you at arm’s length, and there’s no reason to hide the obvious. You’re a smart girl.”

While it would have been nice to enjoy the views of the rolling countryside beyond the glass window, I was still paranoid about the people who were spying on us on the platform. None of them were in the carriage with us at the moment, but it was a simple matter to stand up and navigate your way down each one.

As I expected, the door behind Veronica opened, and a familiar face peered through. I kept my eyes unfocused and away from the woman as she meandered her way down the aisle, struggling to keep her footing as the train passed over some bumpy terrain. She paused a few feet away from us and held on to one of the benches to keep herself steady.

“Honestly, I don’t understand why you’re so paranoid all the time.”

I must have inherited my dramatic irony from her, because the exact moment those words sparked in her brain and leaped from her lips, the woman drew a dagger from her cloak and raised it into the air. I jumped forward and grabbed the front of Veronica’s dress, pulling her up and out of the seat before it came down and embedded into her skull.

I kicked the woman back further down the aisle and got to my feet.

“If I wasn’t sitting there, you would have died.”

Veronica was not amused.

“I suppose that means you were correct.”

“Correct? I always assume the worst. Being wrong becomes a pleasant surprise.”

The knife-wielding Scuncath was problematic because I hadn’t delved into my trunk and grabbed my gun yet. I was expecting some more runup to the murder attempt, during which time I could slip into the bathroom with my bag and pull it out. The Scuncath didn’t work like that. They were all action, all the time.

There was a shrill scream that acted as the starting pistol, the other passengers on the carriage took notice and scrambled for the doors. It was actually to our benefit because they blocked the way for her friends to come and pile on in the fight.

She switched targets and ran towards me, but Veronica was a step ahead. She leapt over the bench and got behind her. She hooked her arms beneath the assailant’s armpits and lifted her off the ground. Her legs flailed as she tried to force her to let go, but Veronica was incredibly strong, far stronger than a cultist who could only fight using a knife.

I stepped between her legs and delivered a jaw-cracking left hook. I swore that a tooth flew free from her mouth as her head snapped to the side, with a whip-cracking noise that even made Veronica wince. The woman went limp in her arms and dropped the knife - which I took for myself.

“Bloody hell! Where did that come from?”

“A good punch is all about positioning.”

Veronica carelessly dumped the unconscious cultist into one of the booths so that she wouldn't get in our way. The commotion was still ongoing, but her friends were already pushing their way through the human blockade and coming for us.

“I really hope they don't have guns,” I complained.

“Hm? What happened to always assuming the worst?”

Two of them finally broke through. It was the same two who I spied looking at us on the platform before. So much for their careful intelligence controls, they were already onto us somehow. The WISD had some leaks to plug, and fast.

I gripped the knife tight and got ready for a difficult fight.

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Eugene could feel the tension building in the air.

It was exceedingly rare for the troubles of the outside world to slip through the cracks and infest Channery. The newspapers were the only real connection to the goings-on in the urban areas of the nation, and events occurred thick and fast out there. Eugene was not a fan of the national papers himself – there was too much doom and gloom for his liking.

The morning headlines were unusual in their unification of message. It was the singular topic of discussion across the town and outlying farm communities. An attack on a scale not seen since the darkest days of the civil war, with hundreds of victims being murdered by a marauding gang of killers across several hours the evening before. That would have been enough kindling to ignite the public's interest, but the victims of the raids were all affluent people.

It was a who's who of powerful nobles. Walston-Carter, Abdah, Roderro, Escobarus, Rentree, and even one of the men in line for the throne from the Van Walser-Taryn cadet house. If it was intended to be a decapitation strike from a foreign adversary, then it was an effective one.

This group collectively held the keys to many of the key industrial functions of the country, and those businesses would be paralyzed while their leadership was missing. In the fast-moving world of industrialisation, even a few weeks' delay could turn a company's fortunes.

The shock this news sent through the town would be bad enough on its own, but there was also something else. The visitors who arrived in town a few days before and cleared out every produce store they could find were starting to cause trouble. Channery was the friendliest town around and it was rare for anybody to propose an insular idea, but their behaviour was the fastest way to get into people's bad books.

There was already talk of one confrontation at the tavern between a local and one of the tourists. Both men were collared by the local constable and forced to spend an evening in the drunk tank at the nearby jail so they could cool off.

Meriden was worried, "I really don't like the sound of what's happening in town, Eugene."

"Samantha and I visited yesterday and there was nothing unusual happening then. It's just someone drinking too much and getting into a scrap."

"But how often does that result in a fight? I can't remember the last time the constable had to arrest someone."

Eugene wanted to assure his wife that nothing bad was going to happen, but he was not convinced either. What good would such assurances be when he didn't believe in them himself? There was something very strange happening in Channery but he couldn't put his finger on what it was or why it unsettled him so. Ben and Tobias were happily going about their business without paying it any mind. Ignorance could be bliss so long as the consequences weren't dire.

“I’ve always been of the opinion that a handful of constables isn’t enough for a town like Channery,” Meriden held, “The population has been growing rather quickly lately, and we’re still dealing with numbers and funding like we had twenty years ago when everyone moved away to get jobs in the city!”

“There ‘ain’t enough money to go around it seems,” Eugene sighed, “Same story from everyone I speak with at the market. They’re all too interested in building big fancy railways that run from end to end instead of us little people.”

“You were singing those thing’s praises a few years ago,” she observed.

“To a certain extent – yes. It makes it easier for folks to move around, and the businesses like it too, easier than hauling everything on a horse and cart. You really have to wonder how many more of them they can build though.”

Samantha came down the stairs while drying her hair with a towel, “Do you want to use that hot water?”

Meriden nodded, “Leave it for now. I’ll jump in soon.”

“Oh, and I was hearing some weird noises coming from the bottom of the pasture.”

The window in the washroom was not installed perfectly, so sound often crept through along with a strong draft. Eugene had been promising to fix the problem for five years running by that point, with no end in sight.

“It’ll be the cows getting restless again,” Eugene said.

“That doesn’t sound like any noise the cows have ever made around me. It sounded to me like someone was messing with the gate.”

If there was one thing that would make Eugene listen, it was the threat of someone rustling his animals while he was in the house. Eugene’s obsession with the hypothetical crime was so strong that he kept his shotgun by the door so he could go chasing them away. To date, Samantha had never once seen it actually happen. A predator may stumble across the henhouse or a dead carcass and make a mess, but not a human.



The mere thought of getting to live out the fantasy was enough to coax him towards the doorway, where his coat was hanging from one of the hooks. “I’d better take a gander then. The last thing we need now is for some damn fool to take off with our livestock.”

And just like that – he was gone down the path with gun in hand.

Samantha sighed and sat down at the table. She was only saying it so he could go out and check. She could never understand why he found the prospect so exciting. Cattle rustling was an incredibly rare crime. It was more common pre-industrialisation, but the live value of animals had plummeted in recent years making it not worth the effort to steal them.

Even before that, Eugene had only experienced it once, when he himself was a young lad watching his Father work the land they now lived on. For one of the ‘little guys,’ exacting some form of justice onto people who wanted to do ill was a fulfilment of a long-standing fantasy. An urge that was shared by other farmers in the town too.

Samantha was not going to carry on with that tradition. She had her fill of violence and then some from dealing with Maria, and all of the trouble that was attracted to her by chance and circumstance. To willingly put oneself in those situations was a personality she couldn’t see herself getting along with. Eugene had even forgotten to close the door in his rush to confront the rustlers, allowing a cold breeze to roll through. Samantha jumped back up from her chair and moved across the dining room to close it before all of the heat escaped.

Meriden turned away from the stove, “Oh, thank you – Samantha.”

Standing in the footwell at the front, Samantha reached for the edge of the door but paused. Eugene was shouting at someone down the bottom of the garden. Her heart skipped a beat, a strong pulse of paranoia rushing through her veins. All of the recent events had conditioned her to react this way.

Without asking her Mother for permission, Samantha hurried and laced up her boots, running through the door and down into the darkness. It was difficult to see what was

going on all the way at the far end of the pasture by the road. She was guided only by the faint glimmer of a lantern that was calling out like a lighthouse's beacon.

The muddy ground was treacherous, especially when she was wearing nothing but her evening clothes. Bumps and lumps were left languishing beneath the grass. She should have brought something to light her way, but it was too late to turn back now. She was so close to where Eugene had stopped.

When her Father came into focus, she finally saw that two other men were jostling for a fight by the fence. Eugene was still holding his shotgun - so any confrontation with him was an inadvisable course of action.

"Get off my darn land before I get the constable up here!" he demanded.

"What's going on?" Sam asked, skidding to a halt in the dirt.

Eugene took a step back from the fence and got in front of her, "Just some drunken fools making trouble where they're not wanted."

Samantha recognised them. She was certain that they were at the store where they dropped their off-season goods. Both men stunk of alcohol. It was enough to cut through the crisp smell of the cold air that surrounded them on all sides. They brayed and rocked against the wooden barrier like a pair of belligerent horses. They were trying to provoke her Father.

"Clear off!" Eugene demanded again, "I'm not moving from this spot until I see the arse end of both of you!"

The man on the left was not going to leave because of his demands, "Yeah, yeah - keep running that big mouth, flapping those gums. We know where you live now, bastard, we'll be burning this farm to the ground before long!"

"I'd like to see you try. You'll be dead before you hit the floor!"

Samantha tugged on his jacket, "Dad!"

He waved his gun at them, "Bugger off, the both of you. If I see you loitering by the fence again there will be trouble."

The men laughed and staggered down the road, bottles of empty booze in hand. Eugene may have come into this situation filled with thunder, but the threats they were making had a visible effect on his nerves. He followed them with his eyes as they descended down the hill and out of sight.

“You shouldn’t have come out here, Samantha.”

“I heard shouting. What were they doing?”

“Just being a pair of drunk arses,” he stressed, “Trying to get through the gate and into the barn. They were too hammered to get that far.”

Samantha did not like what she saw in his gaze, nor the subtle tremble of his hands against the barrel of the shotgun he wielded like a club. This was it. The moment where he collided with the reality of dealing with potentially violent people. There was no harsher form of cold shower. All of that fantasy withered into nothing. He’d never say it, but he was not prepared to pull that trigger.

She gently pulled him away from the fence and towards the house, “Come on. You’ll die of cold if you stay out here any longer.”

With the lantern by her side, the return trip to the house was less treacherous than before. They kicked away their shoes and tried to push the confrontation to the back of their minds, but Eugene was still focused on the words he threw so glibly. It took a gutless coward of a man to make threats like those. The sheer gall of him to suggest arson in response to a verbal spat.

Meriden stood with a stern expression and her hands planted firmly on her hips, “What are you two up to? Was there someone at the gate?”

“A pair of drunks,” Eugene said dismissively, “Nothing to worry about.”

Meriden accepted his answer and left the room to attend to her other evening chores. Samantha was not so accommodating. What benefit did he gain from concealing the true nature of that confrontation from her?

“Why didn’t you tell her the truth?”

“It was the truth. A pair of drunks with flapping gums, that’s all. I hear talk like that all the time. They just want to get into your head. None of them have the guts to actually follow through with it.”

“I feel like you missed some important details.”

“It’ll do us no good having Meriden worry her head over that. Like I said, they aren’t going to do anything on my watch. They’ll be nursing those hangovers for so long that their stay here in town will be over before they can find the kindling.”

Samantha was getting the sense that he was trying to convince himself first and foremost. She didn’t object to his concern about them. It was natural for him to be focused on their health and the safety of their property.

“Maybe you should speak with the constable.”

Eugene shook his head and said nothing. That was a signal that the discussion was over for the time being. Samantha returned to what she was doing before the confrontation and looked out of the window into the garden every so often. She could smell trouble in the air, and it was strong enough to overpower the cow manure.