

Our search for clues about the Scuncath's whereabouts brought us to a small stone cottage that was an hour's trip away from the train station. Tucked between a grove of trees and off the beaten path, it was a picturesque place to make a home – but it had sadly been spoiled by the arrival of malicious actors. This was the site of one of the murders.

“Why did they come here, exactly?”

Veronica straightened out her bangs, “We're not sure. It doesn't fit with the pattern of other crimes committed that day. It could simply be a random act of violence. They're known to do that.”

I took in the smaller details of the cottage. It was clearly a labour of love – with freshly painted wooden shutters over the windows and a finely kept front garden. I felt a twinge of sympathy for our anonymous victim. They probably thought they were safe out here, happily making a quiet place for themselves while the world moved on around them.

It wasn't so easy to shut yourself away from the world at large. No matter how far you ran, or how obscure your choice of home, it was inevitable that you'd be drawn into conflict with other people.

As for the police, they were no longer here. The area was cordoned off with some barriers and the front door was locked, but Veronica already knew where the spare key was hidden. We took our shoes off by the footwell in the front room and took extra care not to disturb any of the scene.

The house consisted of a common layout. There were three rooms on the ground floor. A front kitchen and dining room, a sitting room in the back, and a storage area for food to the left beneath the stairs. The sitting room was the sight of the murder.

Even with the body removed so that it could be taken to the local morgue, it was a grim sight. The room was in a state of disarray. Furniture was strewn around and left where it fell. A large blotch of blood covered the living room floor, and several runes were painted on the plaster-covered walls using that same substance.

Genta turned white as a sheet, “Goddess above. What a ghastly display!”

“Not used to seeing so much blood?” Veronica queried.

“I’m rather proud to say that my research into intra-veil summoning has progressed thus far without the need for spilling any blood.”

“Why do they use blood, anyway?”

Genta adjusted his glasses, “It’s the easiest way to summon an aggressive creature. They’re attracted to the smell, and the violence.”

“They can smell violence?”

“Yes. Some of these creatures have senses that we humans do not. Remember – they are irrational. They connect with emotions and deeds. Do not make the mistake of presuming that they react to stimuli the same way we do, or that they regard objectiveness as a quality worth valuing.”

“How much do you know about Scuncath psychology and practice?”

“Not a lot, I’m afraid. I focus more on the outcomes than the methods.”

“That’s okay. I need you to tell us what these symbols mean.”

“Very well. Allow me to record them down and put it together.”

I left Veronica and Genta to do their business and inspected the living room from my own perspective. It was obvious that the victim took great pains to decorate the interior to their liking. There were soft blankets and pillows, plush curtains and other niceties designed to make it a comfortable place to sit during the colder months. The fireplace was still filled with the remnants of burnt wood.

There were several pictures left on the mantelpiece. Taking portraits was all that cameras were good for at the moment. They demanded that the subject remain still for a significant amount of time. The pictures showed an older man, an older woman, and a younger duo who I presumed were related to them. Given that the old woman stopped appearing by the second image, it seemed that the occupant was a widower.

What a terrible way to go. He was probably imagining his end to be more peaceful than the likes of this. Some would find that thought odd. I dealt with dispensing some

terrible people, and I didn't feel bad about it, but I knew nothing about this gentleman. He might have been a good friend, a caring father and an upstanding person. I just didn't know.

I was not necessarily a cynical sort. Taking a negative attitude while also being an assassin would drive me crazy. There was a balance to be struck. I could save all my dark thoughts for when I was stalking a target and planning to put a bullet between their eyes. It was too easy to fall into the trap of seeing everyone the same way. There were good people out there, it merely took time to find them.

The more I looked – the more personal touches I spotted. There were a series of lines carved into the doorframe where someone had measured their height. The wear and tear of a home turned from a family dwelling to a retirement palace. A building filled to the brim with memories.

I turned back to see what Veronica was up to. She was taking a measured approach to investigating the house. She was particularly interested in what was on the floor. The police had been careful not to erase or modify the muddy marks that had been pressed onto the tiles in the kitchen.

I approached as she knelt by a pile of discarded shoes. She took one from the pile and flipped it over. She was interested in a black, dusty residue that was caked into the sole. Now that my eye was drawn to it, a similar shade of slate was scrubbed onto the floor too. It had been trudged in from the outside.

“This black stuff – that isn't from around here. It's all over the cottage.”

“Residue. Do you know where it's from?”

She ran through her thought process, “The smart ones bring an extra pair of shoes to wear. They get blood on them, which makes for easy tracking when looking over a crime scene. For whatever reason this Scuncath left theirs behind in a hurry. If they didn't use them – then this is a clean sample of what's underfoot at whatever location they use to gather.”

“Which is?”

She mulled it over, “The closest place that has stone this colour is to the West. The areas in and around Channery are notable for it. But that’s a wide net to cast. There are a lot of good places to hide around there.”

“It’s where the fighting happened.”

“Exactly. Tunnel systems and old fortifications, too many for a small group to track and search. A lot of them are in inaccessible locations too. They could be anywhere.”

“Why does it all have to be such a pain?” I griped.

“Investigative work is never easy. I take it that you don’t have much experience?”

“Not exactly, no.”

My ‘research’ was usually easy. My employers usually had a firm grasp on when and where I could find the target in question. Failing that, people who made a lot of enemies tended to broadcast their every move online to try and cultivate followings.

If that also wasn’t enough – I could access illicit databases of leaked social media data to figure out their daily routine. Where they worked, what they liked to do in their free time, and specific locations tracked from their phones. It was terrifying just how much information those companies kept on record. Most never even comprehended that all of that data was up for grabs for anyone willing to pay the entry fee to the people who leaked it.

Your entire life, summed up, packaged and sold to advertisers for their convenience. I was lucky to never cultivate a group of friends myself so they could drag me, kicking and screaming, onto one of them.

“It’s safe to say that they’re near Channery, at least in my expert opinion. It’s close enough to a rail line that you can move a lot of people there in a hurry. It offers all the abandoned real estate they need to summon a big Horrcath too.”

Veronica’s theory was firm, and a larger piece of stone wedged into the leather was further evidence of where they’d been hiding. She held it up to the light and frowned.

“It’s odd. I would have thought that a town like that would have alerted the authorities with so many Scuncath running around.”

“They’re more organized than usual – perhaps they have someone capable of making them behave too.”

“I agree.”

Veronica put the shoe back but kept the small piece of black stone for later inspection. Genta was almost finished noting down and translating the icons on the walls. The summoning circle was elaborate but clumsily executed, a fact he’d picked up on.

“I believe the reason there was no report of a demon here is because of this circle. There are several minor errors that would prevent it from working as intended.”

“Even with the book?” Veronica inquired.

“Even with the book and illustrated examples the precision required is rather intense. It’s entirely possible for an untrained hand to follow it closely and still fail to complete the circle.”

I had an important question, “If they did summon a Horrcath here – would it remain until it is killed?”

“No. They will eventually return to the veil from whence they came, still, even with a short stay in our world they can cause significant damage.”

“Yes, we know.”

“What were they trying to do here?” Veronica asked, cutting to the point.

“They were attempting to cultivate that scent. Creating a widespread environment of violence, or other strong emotions, makes summoning easier. When a creature passes through the curtain the barrier also becomes weaker. It’s a vicious cycle that they hope to exploit to achieve their main goal.”

“You mentioned greed, not violence.”

“Yes. Violence and fear are the easiest emotions to create on demand, but resentment for the powers that be and those in stations of wealth are also powerful motivators.

The scars of the civil war have not faded, and will not for some years yet. That hatred and a desire to replace them are what summon creatures who love the smell of greed.”

“And with the entirety of Walser’s high society in one place to offer their blood – it will be a very powerful creature indeed.”

“That is what I worry about. These runes are intended to ease the process. We must make haste, lest they kill them all and many, many others.”

It was all sounding a little apocalyptic to my ears, yet I still received the impression that this was not the world-ending threat that Durandia wanted me and Samantha to prevent. Samantha wasn’t even with me, not much of a team effort when we were separated into two different places.

But Veronica was confident that the Scuncath were in Channery. Samantha’s farm was in Channery too. Things were leading to a climax. I could see it all lining up in front of me like pieces on a board. There was still more for us to learn, and more Scuncath to fight our way through. It was not going to be easy.

“That’s everything we can learn here. A productive visit,” Veronica concluded.

But Genta stopped us before we could leave by standing in front of the door.

“Something on your mind?” Veronica asked.

“I want to speak with you before we leave for our next destination. It’s about the book.”

“Go ahead. You are our expert, after all.”

“I understand that it’s difficult to understand my perspective, but I want to get it back. It can cause serious harm to a large number of innocent victims, but it is also something very near and dear to my heart. Three generations of our family worked to explore a subject most considered deeply taboo. We took that risk for the sake of enlightening people, and protecting them through that knowledge.”

Veronica sighed, “That is perfectly rational of you, but how can you be so certain that having this information come to light will help more than it harms? We’ve already seen how much damage it can cause first-hand.”

“When people are aware of the harm that it can cause, they are more likely to shy away from it than abuse it.”

“Do you agree, Maria?”

I didn’t know why she was fishing for my opinion. I shrugged, “It all hinges on what information we’re talking about, but I concur that a more educated society is a less violent one.”

Genta stepped forth, “I have a responsibility to get that book back. It’s been in our family for a hundred years, and now it’s being used for reprehensible purposes. Please allow me to come with you.”

This was a sudden change in tact from Genta. He seemed scared witless about the blood, and his voice quivered when speaking about his prior brush with death. What good would he be once we started trying to get it back? It would be safer for him to stand at a safe distance and wait for the results.

Veronica posed a question to gauge his response, “If it comes down to a choice between destroying that book or letting the Scuncath have it, what would you choose?”

Genta was firm in his response; “I already said that the book is my responsibility. If I have to destroy it and start all over again, I will.”

Veronica’s reply was the more surprising side of this discussion, as it seemed that his willingness to sacrifice the book impressed her.

“Good. I don’t want to cross out any options before we get there. Ideally, we can take care of the Scuncath and recover it intact.”

“But I thought you believed it was dangerous to know.”

“I do believe that. Sometimes information can be more dangerous than helpful, but I won’t spite you and your family by needlessly destroying your life’s work.”

Genta smiled, “Thank you.”

There was an ulterior motive here. Veronica strongly resisted my attempts to tag along on this investigation, but she was more than willing to let Genta put himself into the line of fire. Did she value his expertise about demons that much, or was there something else I was missing? I doubted that Veronica was in the business of protecting me from harm – given her prior lack of concern about raising me.

Regardless, she wanted to make a quick stop at the nearest telegraph box so that she could relay her orders to the people in the city. It would be an hour's detour, and from there we could return to the train station and head West to Channery.

I crossed my fingers and hoped that Samantha was staying out of trouble.

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Samantha had intended for her tour of the town to be a relaxing distraction from the very serious events that were occurring around them. That logic was soon tested – because it was impossible for them to walk for more than a few meters without running headfirst into a frank reminder of those exact circumstances.

Max could feel their eyes bearing down on him from every angle. Those beady eyes, always staring, always observing, sucking the life from him like a pack of vampire bats. There was no escaping it. Every new grouping alarmed him further. How many of them were hiding in Channery? It must have been well over one hundred.

“This is crazy, now that I know about it I can't stop seeing them everywhere!” Claude whispered.

“There's no way to tell if they're really Scuncath,” Max cautioned. Claude was going to get ahead of himself again if he kept talking like that.

“Samantha is friends with most of the people who live in this town. She should know who the strangers are.”

Samantha tempered his expectations, “I can't pretend that every stranger here is a Scuncath, Claude. There's simply no way for us to tell.”

Channery was a big town. Saying that she was familiar with every resident was a significant exaggeration. They came and went with some regularity. In the time

between her leaving for the academy and returning a few months later, hundreds of new names and faces would have passed through – with some choosing to stay permanently. That kind of familiarity was on the way out.

“They like to get drunk and there are a lot of them. They must have bought the entire stock of alcohol from the local stores.”

“And they didn’t turn them away?” Max asked.

“The store owners aren’t going to turn down good business,” Samantha said, “Every mark counts.”

Max winced. He was showcasing his ignorance again. He didn’t consider the economic pressures they would face if they kept refusing buyers.

“But, I do agree with you. It’s very irregular for them to let their stock get bought out completely. They must be offering enough to cover the whole lot. My Father loves it. He can never find a good price for our produce around this time of year – but suddenly all of that waste is worth its weight in gold.”

Max averted his eyes to the dirt road below. Samantha’s tour was enthusiastic, and many of the sights were beautiful indeed – but there was a lingering sense of dread hanging over them. Had Claude’s mother accidentally sent them into the belly of the beast?

It was too dangerous. They were everywhere, and if they recognised him it would be nothing but trouble. There was no indication that they’d decide to stop and rest with the people they’d already kidnapped.

The braying of a horse caught his ear. The trio stopped midway down the road and turned in that direction. There was a field out there that hadn’t been tended to in some time, leaving tall grass to grow over the once-tilled ground. There was movement through the reeds – a horse-drawn cart with multiple people riding in the back.

Claude peered through a gap in the treeline, “What are they doing over there?”

The cart came to a stop and three of the passengers hopped down from the back. One of them bent over and started to push something out from the cart, where it landed with a loud thud. They couldn't see what it was. Once the load was dumped, the cart departed with the three passengers walking behind it.

"I have a bad feeling," Max muttered.

Samantha was the first to hop across the ditch and pass through into the grass. She walked in a straight line, keeping her head low in case they decided to return. This was the perfect spot to hide something untoward. Nobody would come this way without reason, nor would they spot the disturbance in the vegetation.

Samantha pulled aside the final barrier, wincing as the sharp brambles nicked at her skin. What was left in the clearing was a brown bag bound with ropes. The length and size sent alarm bells ringing in her mind. There was only one possibility.

"Is that... a body?" Claude whispered.

"What else could it be?" Max fretted, "This is bad. This is really bad."

Samantha kneeled next to the bag and undid the knot tied around the top end where the 'head' was supposed to be. Peeling aside the burlap wrapping revealed her worst fears were true. Unblinking, unmoving – a pale and squalid face staring out at her from between the folds.

"Oh Goddess, this is Constable Fernwell. They killed him."

There was no denying it now. They were in Channery and more than ready to kill anyone who got in their way. Fernwell must have run into them while responding to a resident's request for help, and matters got out of hand leading to his death. They bagged his body and dumped him in a remote area in the hopes that nobody would find it.

His face was covered in bruises, ugly and bulbous – beneath his eyes and around his cheeks. His nose was broken too. The Scuncath had mercilessly beaten him before dealing the finishing blow. It was gruesome. It made Max and Claude sick to their stomachs. Samantha redressed the body and stood up with a furious glare.

“I can’t believe this. How many people have they killed already that we haven’t found?”

Max could hear them nearby; “We have to leave, now.”

Samantha turned and followed him back into the weeds. They hadn’t left the area yet for some reason. She could hear the wheels trundling down the road. The men were arguing and cared not for keeping their conversation away from prying ears.

“I told you, you should have left him well enough alone!”

“He was going to arrest us. I’m not getting thrown in that jail with the rest of them.”

“We’d be out within the day, except you had to go and make it serious by knocking his lights out. A jail cell is practically a holiday compared to what Hoffman will do if he finds out you’ve killed someone without his orders.”

“He’s not going to find out. By the time someone stumbles across that body, we’ll be long gone. This field isn’t in season. It’ll be months before the farmer even thinks about coming this way again.”

“I don’t trust you to keep this quiet. You’ll be bragging about killing a copper for the next week solid.”

“I’m not that stupid.”

“Yes, you are! You can’t pass up a good opportunity to come off like a hard lad.”

It was an extremely revealing conversation – not because of the illicit subject matter, but because of the casual approach all three men had towards extreme violence. They didn’t seem at all concerned about the toll of killing another person. Samantha recalled Maria’s outward statements about being willing to kill, now in a new light. She was willing, but she did not enjoy it like they did.

To the Scuncath this sort of violence was as natural as breathing. Through intimidation, peer pressure or induction, they minimized the emotional toll. They were taught to express their creed through casual bloodshed. The stories were true. Samantha wanted to believe that they were exaggerations sensationalised by the

press, as they often were liable to do, but there was no mistaking what she'd witnessed with her own eyes.

Dozens of them, potentially hundreds, were already in her hometown and wreaking havoc. Constable Fernwell would not be the last. They needed to get back to the jail and report his death as soon as possible. Once the voices faded away, Samantha leapt out onto the road and broke out into a sprint, with Max and Claude in pursuit behind her.