

It took a moment for me to collect myself after the shockwave.

My ears were ringing, my vision was blurred, and my entire body ached after being thrown through the wringer by the Horr. The fighting continued. The men and women who came here in the hopes of finding salvation by its hand were now trying fruitlessly to fend it off with their guns.

Every time one of them was unlucky enough to attract its attention – they soon discovered why it was a bad idea. I had seen a lot of screwed-up ways to go in my life, but this was something special. The Horrcath was boiling them from the inside out, summoning molten gold into their bodies and allowing it to seep through their orifices. Each death was accompanied with a harrowing wail.

A part of me wanted to stop them before they made that fatal mistake, yet I couldn't imagine a more appropriately ironic way for them to go. Here it was! The saviour they longed for so strongly, the one they shed blood for. It wasn't pretty or what they had in mind. They rejected it and tried to kill it, and in turn it was killing them.

I nicknamed it the Alchemist – because of its ability to generate gold out of thin air.

I snapped out of my reverie and tried to focus on what was important. It hadn't burst through the side of the fort where Samantha and the others were, and for the time being it was content to sit in the first courtyard and soak up all of the bullets being fired in its direction.

Veronica and Genta could take care of themselves from here too. My best option was to dart away from the semi-collapsed wall I was peering over and make a run for the trenches with the others. Claude had the book. All of the pieces were in place to make this a perfect victory for me.

Now that wouldn't make for a dramatic ending to the story. It wasn't going to last. I could feel it in my bones, or maybe that was the blunt force trauma again.

I was faced with a difficult choice. There was no realistic way to kill the thing, nor was there any effective place to shelter given the incredible destructive power it demonstrated simply by moving from one place to the next. It could easily blow away the very hill that the fort stood atop like a house made from straw.

Were my only options to run away or hide?

No. I thought it through again, about what I knew. Genta and Veronica were in the throne room alone. There was no way that Veronica passed up the chance to sabotage the summoning circle while they had that opportunity. That small window was what she was fishing for.

Summoning circles were contracts. Genta was adamant that there was no 'good' way to control a Horr – the circle was as good as it got. They were fiendishly complicated with hundreds of known symbols that all had different meanings, and none of them were truly understood or codified, even in his family's book. Trial and error had cost the lives of many men who sought to exploit the Veil's power.

Genta was being hyperbolic when he said there was no way to control them. You could, but you didn't get more than one chance to try, and Durandia only knew how they'd react once they were through the gate. You would need to be able to see the future to get anywhere. That was possible, but I couldn't imagine them giving out that sort of power to anyone who asked.

But even if one could control this creature, were they capable of managing the damage it caused? Even asking it to move its body was enough to rip walls from their foundations and send a gust strong enough to throw people from their feet. Under these circumstances what good would 'control' really do?

Regardless of what I thought, Genta was the one who knew the most about how the summoning circles worked. He must have taken the chance to sabotage it, and then Veronica did her best to pile on the pressure by implying that the police were on their way. They wouldn't have time to double-check it or correct the mistake.

All of my rumination was ultimately pointless.

The Alchemist continued to slaughter everyone who attacked it en masse using its incredible magical power. Until it stopped. The carnage came to a sudden and uneventful conclusion. The beast was struck still by an unseen force, and moments later its body started to deteriorate right in front of my eyes. Skin, muscle and bone lost their structure and fell into nothing.

That same power which it wielded like a crude weapon was now cut off and it could no longer exist in a world commanded by our physical laws. The Alchemist was quite literally falling to pieces as the reality of the body it inhabited caught up with it. The rate of decay was frightening and unnatural in its own right – almost as if I were witnessing a recording that was being fast-forwarded.

And then it was gone.

An eerie silence settled over the fort. The cries of the birds and the crackle of gunfire ceased. The carnage was sobering. Half of the fort had been demolished. The fires started by Veronica were burning out of control and consuming the inner walls. Dead bodies, covered in magically generated gold, littered the open yard. The smoke rose into the air and cast a long shadow over the fortress.

The Alchemist was only in our world for two minutes, and this was what it could do in that short period. I was left to wonder what would have happened had Hoffman succeeded in summoning his original target using the nobles, and how much longer it would have been in Walser had Genta not modified the circle.

One thing was for sure – Genta deserved some credit for saving lives.

He changed how long it would be on the other side. It must have been the most effective way to limit the damage it caused without potentially running into other problems. In a basic way, it was the only level of control that the summoner had over the Horrcath, they were not receptive to spoken orders as far as I knew.

I wasn't going to try and find out either.

I took a moment to sit there and comprehend the scale of the damage. We were lucky that the hostages weren't killed and used to summon a Horr even stronger than that. It could have wiped out half of the country with sheer magical strength if all of the conditions were perfect.

Now more than ever I was convinced that the book needed to be kept away from the cultists and Veronica. Genta was the only one who seemed to worry about how destructive the information inside could be. It was the reason why he handed it over to the University and allowed them to keep it in a place he felt was safe. That

responsibility must have eaten at him, being the only man in the room who believed that the demons were not merely tools to be trifled with.

Ambitious and desperate people were going to want the book. This was not a disaster, it was a prime example of what kind of destructive force the Horr could bring from beyond the Veil. They didn't care about the potential disaster they were unleashing, they could justify it as a national security project.

And who was in charge of Walser's national security these days?

WISA; they sent Veronica to collar Genta Cambry before the cultists got to him, but the discovery that the book was still out there brought her to the fort so that she could recover it. The only prize bigger than a morally composed expert in a particularly hazardous field was an amoral book that contained all of his knowledge and wouldn't protest when they tried to utilise it as a weapon.

I clutched my ribs and tried not to groan in pain. The damn beast sent me flying across the hallway just from the air it disturbed, sending me rolling across the floor and into the nearest wall. That felt bad. Not painful enough to be a broken rib, but it would leave a nasty bruise given a few hours to linger.

All of that aggression building had dissipated into an overwhelming sense of despair. I could hear voices behind the screen of smoke, some were crying, others roaring in anguish. They weren't in the right space mentally to fight off a police siege now. There was very little left for them to assault anyway.

I honestly couldn't believe how quickly it came and went. It was surreal. I was living through a fever dream. The threads were not connected, and cause and effect were becoming difficult to establish. It arrived, destroyed most of the fort, and then killed a majority of the cultists that were hiding inside.

"Maria! Are you out here? Maria!"

I ducked behind a broken wall as someone's voice called out for me through the mayhem. What a stupid idea! There were still armed cultists waiting in the wings, and they wouldn't let an apocalyptic event stop them from shooting at anything that moved.

“Hey, are you sure it’s okay to shout? They could still be hiding out here!”

“There’s no way. Look at this mess!”

“Speaking of which – what caused this? My ears are still ringing from the blast.”

I caught on to who I was listening to. It was Claude and Max having one of their usual arguments at an inappropriate time. Even worse, the entire gang was here. Samantha, Adrian and my own Father included. He must have stayed back rather than escape with the others out of concern for my safety.

What a fool. He was weak from being kept in confinement for days without proper food or water. It would be impossible to escape if the situation were to turn against us now. I considered my options. Claude was still holding the book, so all I needed to do was meet them and hightail it to the exit before the police came knocking and the fighting started all over again.

At least, that was the plan until Genta and Veronica crested a pile of rubble and attracted their attention. They were none the worse for wear, which was impressive given that they were in the line of fire when the Horrcath moved. I was nowhere near it and it still blew me into the nearest wall with serious force.

“Oh my, what do we have here? A group of civilians who haven’t fled the scene yet?”

“You were the one who grabbed Hoffman earlier,” Adrian replied, “What do you want with us?”

She looked between the different members of the party – her eyes resting on Damian for some time before moving on.

“As you might know, I was sent here to disrupt the Scuncath’s operation. This gentleman beside me is Genta Cambry. You might recognize the name.”

Claude turned the book around in his hands and double-checked the cover. Indeed, three separate members of the Cambry family had their names engraved into the red leather.

“He’s here to retrieve that book – which the Scuncath decided to steal from the University. We would be in your debt, should you choose to return it to the rightful owner. I will escort you from this horrible place, and the nightmare will be over.”

Claude clutched it tight and showed no signs of budging to her demands.

“I don’t know about this,” Claude murmured, “It sounds too convenient to be true. Why the heck would the guy who wrote this be here, of all places?”

Genta adjusted his glasses, “Ah. I can assure you that I am indeed the real Genta Cambry! With that said – there are seldom few ways for me to prove that at the moment...”

“I don’t trust it,” Adrian concurred.

“Yeah. It’d be better for us to get back to the police first before letting go of this book. How are we supposed to know that this isn’t another dirty trick? You two might be members of the cult!”

Veronica rolled her eyes; “Members? I was holding their leader at gunpoint an hour ago! For what possible reason could he have organized such a convoluted plan? To lose the book on purpose, have me scupper his scheme, and then fool you into giving back what he already had possession of.”

“Who the hell am I to say that his plans are rational?” Claude fired back.

“He’s right. You couldn’t sound more suspicious if you tried,” Samantha agreed.

“Isn’t it the most logical outcome that the book’s owner is the one who walks away with it?” Veronica pondered, “Give it to us, and we’ll take care of everything.”

Everyone was acutely aware of the damage that had been wrought, and it was obvious that the book they held was part of the reason why. Handing it over to a total stranger without any more information was foolish. Veronica sighed and held out her arms, intentionally revealing the holstered gun strapped to her left side.

“This isn’t a fight worth picking. You’ve all survived what happened here, why would you choose to throw that away?”

Samantha shook her head, “Someone who uses violent methods like you only understands one thing. I don’t expect compassion, which is why giving up that book is the worst possible idea. If you want it - you can wait until we get to the police line and our safety is guaranteed.”

I wonder who taught her that.

Veronica pinched her nose, “Now that would be very inconvenient for me. Don’t you have a compassionate bone in your body?”

“Compassion has nothing to do with it.”

“You’re right. It does not.”

Veronica was tired of the games. She drew her pistol and made them acutely aware of how easily she could blow them away with a single pull of the trigger. She let the implication hang, unspoken, for several seconds – but nobody was convinced to move. This was too much pressure for them to handle. It was time to play my last card.

I stepped through the swirling dust and made my presence known.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that.”

Claude and the others took the book and hid behind the nearest half-demolished wall. Damian remained standing between us with a confuddled look on his face. He had no idea what was going on, or why I was already familiar with the woman he’d hidden from me for thirteen long years.

Veronica’s smile dropped, “Maria! So happy to see that you’re still alive. But you can’t let me take the book? Would it be rude of me to ask why that is?”

“After all of this, you still seem to take me for some kind of fool. That book is the real reason you’re here. You’re very transparent.”

Genta did not look like he was on board with the idea. He wanted to say something in defiance of Veronica’s orders, but she was the one with the gun, and she could probably break every bone in his body otherwise. All of his enthusiasm for retrieving his family’s generational work was cowed by the Faustian bargain he made to get here.

If the Book of Cambry ended up in her hands – he would never see it again.

I allowed my coat to slip from my shoulders, rubbed the dirt from my face and allowed it to fall to the floor. The white shirt I started the day in was ruined, with dried blood and dirt, and frayed edges from the rough treatment that I'd been lavishing onto it. I looked like I'd been through hell and back.

“Is that your way of challenging me?” Veronica scoffed.

“A challenge? You aren't fit to shine my shoes. You've done nothing but underestimate me since the start. It's time for me to correct your misconceptions.”

Veronica scowled. She wasn't going to get her hands on the book while I was here, but at the same time she didn't really want to hurt me. Until now – it was all bluster and bluff. I was going to force her hand. She couldn't get what she wanted without fighting me. Everyone was left to sit there and wonder what was going to happen. It was the first time that Adrian and the others had seen me get serious.

She put the gun away.

“Discipline it is, then.”

If Veronica believed that she was getting the opportunity to deliver thirteen years of missed spankings, then she was in for a rude awakening. I wasn't going to let her so much as touch that damn book, not when the potential consequence were more scenes of abhorrent destruction like this. That fury would not be directed towards Walser's enemies – it would merely hasten the end.

Damian was still standing on the side-lines, and with a panicked wave of his arms he tried to defuse the fight before it broke out in earnest.

“Ladies, ladies! There is no need for violence! Why don't we split it down the middle and leave, and we can hand the book over before we reach the police camp.”

No. I wasn't going to let her get the book - not even under those circumstances. It was either she leaves empty handed or I die trying to stop her.



“I’m sorry Father – but the time for negotiation is over. Or rather, there is no room for negotiation. Giving that woman the book might just be the single most dangerous idea ever conceived by anyone.”

“And you suppose that it’s safer in the hands of a teenager?”

“Yes. Claude isn’t craven enough to try and use it.”

Damian, sensing that there were no words of aid in disarming the situation – backed away and joined the others behind the wall. With him out of the way, it was all but inevitable that we’d come to blows. I readopted my fighting stance and started to close the gap with tentative steps.

I’d been studying my memories of our first scuffle in the manor carefully for hints about what fighting style she utilised. To fight with your hands was still seen as a noble pursuit, and not one intended to serve as an effective way to dispatch an enemy. The old ways were alive and well, but Veronica wasn’t using some theatrical methodology.

Even with that being true, it was a far cry from what I was capable of. I was a girl who’d trained extensively in the single most effective ways to knock out a foe. It wasn’t pretty, it wasn’t for the sake of self-improvement, and it would certainly shock most martial practitioners with the brutality of its outcome.

From what I could tell Veronica knew how to box, and some amount of grappling too. Those were good foundations, but that didn’t mean she was familiar with the ins and outs of the human body in the way that I was. Where was best to strike, how to apply leverage to an easily broken limb, and what situations to avoid while on the ground.

Veronica waited until she believed that I was on shaky ground and launched her first strike. Her leg rose into the air and hooked to the right, trying to knock me out in a single kick, but I was ready for it. I held up my arm and blocked it. She quickly backed away without trying to follow up. I shook my aching wrist but remained calm.

The gunshot-like sound of that kick startled our observers, who were now painfully aware that this was not a trifling matter. We were both serious and skilled enough to carry it through.

I probed her defences with a low kick of my own, aiming to hit her shins and prevent her from exploiting her height advantage. She deftly parried my attempt and moved with a punch from the right. I blocked her again and retaliated with a hook. This time I was the one who came out the victor. Her head snapped to the side as she tried to absorb some of the impact.

The game was on. Veronica came back at me with a flurry of punches, trying to slip through my guard and strike the bridge of my nose. I kept my wall tight and prevented her from making any real progress beyond forcing me back. I had to watch the floor carefully, lest I trip over a brick or piece of lumber.

“What the hell is going on?” Claude cried.

“It looks like they’re fighting to me,” Max quipped.

“I can see that!”

I ignored the peanut gallery and silently hoped that they’d get the message and make a run for the exit while they had the chance. Veronica kept up the attack until I was backed up against one of the still standing walls. She swung again, but I ducked out of the way and caused her to strike her knuckles against the stone.

She clutched her injured hand with a furious scowl, but that changed in an instant as I used her recoil to retake the initiative. I pummelled her legs and shins with more low kicks, and threw a selection of weaker strikes at her body to keep her from becoming too complacent. It was a dazzling and terrifying dance between two almost equal combatants.

Veronica was getting flustered. She thought that she could dispense of me quickly and grab the book, but that wasn’t going to happen. She ducked another punch and grabbed a piece of lumber from the ground, swinging it up into the air as a blunt weapon and forcing me back.

Cheap trick, but not one I was overly concerned about. The heavy plank further burdened her weakened legs and allowed me to easily space her out. She hefted it up into the air and brought it down with a vertical swing, but I sidestepped it and pushed her back. Dust flew into the air as the tip of the lumber hit the floor.

“You call this a fight?” I taunted.

Veronica replied in the only way she knew how – by trying to change the equation with a desperate tackle. She was taller and heavier than me, but that was no guarantee of success when approaching from below. I wrapped my arms around her head and neck, pushing off into the air and preventing her from bringing me down by clinging onto my legs.

I touched the floor again and punished her for it with a stiff knee to the chest, and then another to the head. Veronica kept a hold of my waist, swinging over and dragging me to the floor in a seated position. She released me and tried to slip an arm around my neck, but I whipped back with my head and hit her across the nose. She persisted. I took hold of her arm and arched my back while pushing off from the floor, flipping us over so that she was on the ground and I was on my knees.

Veronica rolled out of the way before I could pummel her face into a red mist. We were still in eyeshot of the others, but our battle was beginning to become more problematic. A cultist, who had survived the Alchemist’s magic, leapt from within one of the buildings with his gun bared. Without turning her eyes away from me, Veronica drew her gun in one swift motion and pulled the trigger, splattering his head against the doorway.

Another one was already charging at me. I stepped to the side and kicked him in the stomach, before leaping up and curb-stomping his head into the dirt. He was knocked out on the spot. In any other situation, this would be cause for us to cease our fistfight and move it somewhere else, but Veronica was built differently. She intended to end this debate right here.

“I’m not impressed,” she stated.

That was her problem. I wasn’t trying to show off.

