

With some smart timing, I managed to escort the group to my exfiltration point in the storehouse. It was not good for my heart to be moving a large group of people through a building that was being patrolled this heavily, but I managed somehow. We reached the exit route entirely untouched without anyone catching a glimpse of us on the way.

After a quick sweep of the area to make sure that none of Veronica's time bombs were planted inside, I decided to delegate some responsibility to Samantha and her newly acquired crisis management skills. There was still another matter for me to attend to before I left.

"Okay – you should be safe to stop here for a moment while I go and check the throne room again."

"Wait a second. You want us to stay here while you go running looking for that woman?" Claude said, "It's suicide!"

"I'm the only one who is armed and prepared to fight back. It will be easier for me and safer for you to remain in this storeroom for the time being. Once I return, we can escape using the trench and hopefully avoid being caught in the crossfire."

With that said, I was not certain if this was the right move. They would have men manning the walls and watching for the police advance. It was possible that they would fire on us if they saw us sneaking through the trench line to try and escape.

"Are you sure about this?" Samantha asked.

"I want you to keep an eye on everyone. I don't feel that the time is right for us to move yet. It won't take me long. We already have the book. All we need to do is keep it away from those cultists."

Claude was still holding onto it, though he was once again teetering on the edge of opening it up and trying to comprehend the information that was inside. His objection to my solo mission gave way easily once he recalled what he'd seen just moments before. Was he honestly going to argue with the girl who killed three men without breaking a sweat?

“I don’t feel safe letting you go out there alone.”

“They have guns. Unless you’re willing to stain your hands with blood, you won’t be able to help.”

“What about my magic? I blasted one of them when they burned down our barn.”

I shook my head, “And how many times can you use a bolt before you run out of energy? Five, six? The reason armies have moved towards utilising guns is that they do not suffer from such limitations. They can continue to attack from long range so long as they have the ammo to fire, and producing bullets is easier than waiting for your magical energy to recharge.”

“But you...”

“I taught you how to defend yourself in an emergency. Not how to kill.”

“Were you afraid that I would?”

I stepped back, “The opposite. You would never have use for it.”

I had to go. There was no time to waste debating this any further. I ran through the door and left them behind before she could protest. If I didn’t make it to the chamber before Hoffman launched the ceremony, there was a chance that Veronica could be amongst the dead – and any answers about her real identity, and my birth, would go along with her.

Each delay frustrated me further. There were guards everywhere now that they’d learnt what Veronica was trying to do with the explosives. They still weren’t the most aware, but having to peer around every corner and wait for them to avert their eyes was a problem I’d rather not have dealt with.

Security was lighter closer to the throne room. If Hoffman was replacing the sacrifices with members of the cult, they will have gravitated towards taking the people closest to the room the ceremony was being held in. That, or the Scuncath weren’t as eager to meet their otherworldly messiah as they let on.

After evading one last pair of armed guards, I reached the door to the throne room. I swapped my magazine out for a full one and approached the door, holding my breath

and trying to make as little noise as possible. The door was ajar. I could hear Hoffman speaking from the inside.

I was just in time for the party.

Through the crack in the door I could see what was going on inside. Exactly as I expected, Veronica and Genta had been captured by Hoffman once the reinforcements arrived. The only positive of this situation was that Hoffman wanted to use her as a sacrifice because of how potent it would be.

Hoffman pulled Veronica towards her spot at the north end of the summoning circle and held her there. His other hand held an ornate dagger, which he was planning to use to spill her blood into the channels and complete the bloody outline. The other cultists I'd seen moments before had already shuffled their way to the other sacrifice marks. They were going to kill themselves.

Veronica, for whatever reason, did not resist and stood there with a patient smile. Did she have a plan in mind, or was she waiting for me to swoop in and save the day? Whatever she was thinking of, I couldn't sit back and assume she had a way out. Her hands were bound behind her back.

Happy that she wasn't going to move – Hoffman stepped around her and climbed halfway up the dais' stairs to get a bird's eye view of the ceremony. He must have memorized the words needed before the book was stolen.

There were two armed guards standing on both sides of the room. I would need to kill both of them before trying to stop Hoffman from completing the ceremony. I only had one chance at this, and that meant waiting until the time was right. A simple lapse in concentration from one or both of them would be my opening.

“Hear me! Hear me! The blood of our physical bodies will be subsumed!”

The sacrifices joined him in turn, “The blood of our physical bodies will be subsumed...”

“In the name of Cath! At the direction of the Goddess, we offer thee this sacrifice! Siat Horrcath, smar aleg hotor!”

He really did remember the chants from the book. That was Old Walserian. It sounded like a bunch of god-damn nonsense to my ears.

“Take our anger, take our suffering – feast upon it until you grow fat with avarice, and come forth to us through the Veil! Unleash your great fury without restraint. Unchain thyself from the ties that bind you – and manifest here before us. The brain sees lies, the heart feels truth.”

“The brain sees lies; the heart feels truth!”

He raised his dagger into the air, and in that moment all eyes were placed on him.

I pushed my way through the door and struck. The sacrifice standing directly in front of me became a convenient human shield. I shot the first guard to the left and killed them, tucking behind the cultist before the second could react. When he finally drew his weapon and fired back, he only struck his compatriot in the chest.

I stepped out and blew him away with a volley of return fire. Hoffman turned to face the source of the commotion, only to receive a pair of bullets. One to the stomach, and the other to his chest - close to the heart. He looked down at his own body and shivered as blood seeped through his shirt. His palms reached up and pressed down on the wounds to try and stop the bleeding out of instinct, but he gave up.

“I understand now,” he croaked, “Stand firm! Stay... right there.”

The cultists remained in place. Hoffman walked down the steps and pushed his way past Veronica. He kept walking with wild eyes and a belligerent grin. The last of his strength was being used up to reach a particular point in the room. He stumbled and fell to his knees, crawling on them until he took Veronica’s place in the circle.

“Take it. All of my sorrow, and my hope for tomorrow...”

Just like that, the leader of the cult was felled. His body crumpled down to the floor.

I made a significant miscalculation.

The rest of the cultists did not wait. They plunged their daggers directly into their hearts and got down onto their knees to help the blood flow into the channels of the summoning circle. Hoffman was the missing piece – and I’d just blown his brains out

right on top of the last perimeter ward. An unnatural force drew the blood directly from the open wounds, spreading across the carved channels at a speed that defied reason. There was an unearthly howl what little warmth remained in the air disappeared like the flip of a switch.

Hoffman used himself as the last sacrifice – and he believed that it was his ultimate fate to do so.

Genta hurried to Veronica's side and untied her restraints. He spoke from the side of his mouth in a blind panic; "I suggest that we leave, immediately!"

"What about the Horrcath? How do we kill it?"

"You don't!" Genta replied, "The only thing we can do now is survive!"

Veronica took Genta by the collar of his coat and dragged him towards the rear exit as the entire room started to shake. A powerful gust of wind threatened to knock me from my feet, pushing me back against the main doors. The bodies twitched in a vein mockery of life, before being moved towards the centre of the circle and forming a grotesque pile.

What happened next was difficult to describe with words.

The circle opened. What lay beyond the stone floor of the chamber was nothing, simply nothing – an inescapable black void from which no light could escape, nor could it enter. My mind recognized that there was a space beyond - simply through perspective, but there was no way for me to peer any deeper than that.

The bodies sunk into the void, and then a gigantic, off-white hand clutched the edge of the portal. I stepped back and towards the door, but found myself unable to escape the dreadful sight playing out before me. Whereas the previous demon was a disgusting amalgam of human bodies, morphed into the costume for a hellhound, this Horr existed on a different level of strange.

The oily, white skin was interrupted with vivid veins of sparkling gold, with spread outwards like branches. It had an elongated torso with double-jointed arms, ending in

four-fingered claws that were the size of my full body. It was a profoundly bizarre creature in form and function.

A single yellow eye peered from a canine skull, along with a maw filled with hundreds of teeth and a tongue dripping with golden saliva. In fact – every pore of the creature seemed to ooze with the substance, though I was not foolhardy enough to get any closer and confirm what it really was. The steam that rose from it suggested that it was scalding to the touch.

It was a very different beast from the one they summoned on the train. Unrestrained by what was practical or even physically possible, this lumbering monster was the very definition of the word irrational. It should have collapsed under its own weight, or struggled to breathe outside of its home in the Veil – yet here it was.

I turned and ran. There was no time to worry about being spotted now. I wanted to be as far away from that beast as humanly possible before it started to rampage through the fort. My pathetically sized handgun wasn't going to put a scratch in it if our prior experience with the Horrcath was anything to go by.

I was only just on the precipice of the first junction before it finally moved.

If describing its appearance was a challenge, then trying to explain what the hell happened next was even worse. One second the building to my right was there and intact, and the next it was not.

The force of the turbulence caused by that single movement threw me into the air like a discarded piece of trash. A second later, the entire building dismantled itself right in front of my eyes. Stones and timber flew in the direction of its attack, falling back down to the ground and kicking up an obscuring cloud of dirt and dust. I could faintly see the Horrcath through the chaos, and it was only by that did I realize that it had simply moved from one place to another at such a velocity that it tore the fort to pieces.

This was far worse than I anticipated.

Despite the size of the Horrcath, it was so fast that it was essentially imperceptible to the human eye. The mere act of moving from its summoning location was analogous

to the detonation of a bomber's payload, ripping the foundations of the fort from the ground it stood on.

Vigilantly it waited amongst the ruin. This was the devastation that the Scuncath had sought. This was Hoffman's final and most terrible gift to the world, his revenge for all the suffering it had levied unto him across decades of his life. There was a profane beauty to the way it perched atop that pile of rubble, with its head held high and its claws ready to lash out.

The cries of panic pierced the momentary silence after the explosion. Suddenly, the very same cultists who conspired to summon the damnable creature tried to fight it off by firing their weapons. I picked myself up from the ground and snuck over to the other side of the former corridor so I could observe.

What I saw was even more terrifying. Three men took aim and fired with their rifles, the shots bouncing harmlessly from the creature's body. The creature did not retaliate with those menacing claws. It didn't even move. A few seconds after they attacked, all three men began to scream.

That same molten gold that leaked from its pores and mouth was somehow being generated from within their bodies. They cried tears of the viscous, scalding metal, scratching at their own skin and leaving bloody nail marks in their wake. They fell to the floor and writhed in agony before quickly passing out and dying on the spot.

It defied all reasoning. How had the creature fought back without touching them, or without manipulating the base elements? There was no reasonable path to transform magical energy into something like gold. A process that complex and multi-faceted was more the realm of industrial production, demanding the efforts of hundreds of mages working day and night.

This was a display of a strength more foreboding than the physical. It was sheer, undiluted magical power, the kind that allowed the creature to effortlessly evade the laws and rules that dictated my own usage of the art. Thinking back to what Genta said while he fled the throne room, and the devastation it unleashed with a single movement of its body, I was struck with a more pertinent question.

How in hell was I supposed to run away from this thing?

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Samantha, Max, Adrian and Claude were left to stew in silence about what they had just witnessed. Maria – the school’s most popular and respected student, knocked a fully-grown man out cold with her bare hands and then killed two more with a pistol. Even for Adrian, who was used to seeing the doll-like girl with a gun in her hands, it was an immense shock.

Claude was busy scribbling down his last will and testament onto the blank back page of the book he was tasked with defending.

“What are you writing in there?” Max whispered.

“Since Maria is a Sturmläufer and we know her true identity, it’s only a matter of time before she kills us so that we don’t leak the truth to anyone else. I’m putting it down in writing so that the police can find it later.”

Max peered over his shoulder at the pencilled ramblings of his best friend. True to form, they were long-winded and eloquently worded – dancing around the central point as if to build some kind of dramatic tension for the reader. Eventually, the note did launch into an explanation that Maria Walston-Carter was some sort of trained killer, and that the ‘author’ had been killed to keep that information secret.

Max thought it was immensely stupid of her. She was going to a hell of a lot of effort to keep them alive already, so why would she then pick them off later? She could have left them in the fort and let the cultists take care of it if that was her real objective. He rolled his eyes and said nothing. Claude carried that pencil with him at all times for a reason, and there was no reason to spoil his fun now.

Adrian sighed, “I doubt that they’ll believe whatever you write in there.”

“Why?” Claude replied while keeping his nose down and eyes focused.

“They’re not going to arrest her or convict her of anything without physical evidence. Do you have any idea how hard it is for the police to arrest a noble, or even get



permission to look at their residences or places of business? They all have friends in high places, like parliament.”

“And you say that like you aren’t a noble yourself.”

Adrian shook his head, “I don’t have any friends, and I’m not much interested in playing the influence game like my Father did.”

Even so – the bar was higher than it was with a normal person. The impression that the police might start cracking down on affluent criminals was enough to send most nobles into a spiral of paranoia, which was telling in itself.

The evidence problem was the biggest barrier. Adrian reconsidered the previous three incidents that he was aware of. The death of Prier on the campus, the shootout at the party, and the second shootout at the theatre. Maria was present for all three of them and conspicuous in her absence at the same time. It was too convenient to be a coincidence.

Prier’s death was the most puzzling. Adrian was only faintly aware of the details, and the police kept most of them under wraps to preserve their investigation. There were no witnesses at the time, and nobody even reported hearing the gunshot that took his life. The biggest question was why. Why did Maria supposedly kill Trevor Prier? As far as he knew, Trevor was only a teacher at their academy.

He turned his scrutiny onto the person in the room who was closest to her.

Samantha’s burgeoning friendship with Maria was the talk of the campus, primarily from disbelieving snobs who couldn’t imagine why Maria found Samantha’s company more palatable than theirs. It didn’t take a scientist to figure out that they became closer after the theatre shooting. The theatre shooting where Samantha, Claude and Max were caught up and taken by the gunmen.

If Maria intervened then and there to help Samantha...

Samantha could feel his gaze boring into her. She tensed up when he asked his question.

“When Claude was shot at the theatre, was Maria there?”

Claude replied instead, “No. I never saw her.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t her who shot me if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“No. I was wondering if she showed up and helped fend them off.”

“Nope. That guy shot me in the pelvis and left me for dead. I only came to after Samantha showed up and patched me up.”

“I didn’t see her either,” Max revealed.

That left only one person who was there. Samantha was starting to feel as if Adrian was accusing her of a great misdeed, but it was only an itty-bitty lie by omission about their classmate being extremely dangerous and willing to kill.

“Why is everyone looking at me like that?” Samantha whispered.

“You knew the whole time, didn’t you?” Max observed, getting to the point before Adrian could throw his accusation into the ring.

Samantha was a lousy liar – and they all knew it. The moment she was cornered by an accurate statement, she started to turn bright red and lose her composure. She held up her finger and tried to come up with a convincing response, but there was no amount of damage control that could fix it now.

“Not... the whole time.”

Max, Claude and Adrian were not impressed with the admission.

“I promised her not to tell everyone! I only found out when she rescued me at the theatre. Don’t act like you wouldn’t do the same thing in that situation. I didn’t have much of a choice.”

The debate came to a sudden end – because the trap door that led down onto the ground floor and the trench entry was rattling. Claude cried out in fear and dived out of the way. His effort was for nought. The head that peered through was not that of one of the cultists, it was Damian Walston-Carter.

“Oh, you’re all here!”

“Mister Carter?” Adrian said, momentarily putting her interrogation on hold, “What are you doing here? I thought you were escaping with the others.”

Damian crawled up the ladder and left the hatch open behind him, “I can hardly run away when my beloved daughter is still in the grip of this madness! No sir, I will not turn my back and leave her here.”

“I’m afraid that we got separated.”

Damian stroked his chin, “I see. So, she’s gone off and disappeared again? I swear, raising that girl has knocked at least five years from my life through stress alone. There’s no need to worry about the others. They all made their way to the road without being seen. It appears that the cultists are not able to stop us once we leave.”

Claude slammed the book closed so that he couldn’t see what he’d written on the back cover. It was a mystery as to how much Damian knew about his own daughter and her recent actions. Bringing it up now didn’t feel like the right time. He had enough to worry about as it was.

“This is way too dangerous for us,” Max reasoned, “Maria said that she wanted to meet us here and that we should wait for her. If we leave, she might have to stick around for even longer.”

Damian nodded, “Then please, by all means, feel free to leave and protect yourselves. I’m only doing this for my own sake. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I left her here in their clutches. And she has to tell me how she got here in the first place, for that matter.”

“I don’t suppose it has anything to do with that woman who looks a lot like her?”

Damian sighed, “That’s almost a certainty. There’s no doubt in my mind that Maria inherited her incredible ability to find the worst kinds of trouble.”

Samantha moved towards the door, “So it is her Mother? Maria always said that she’d never so much as seen a painting of her, and I didn’t spot any during my stay at the house either.”

“Well – the full story is rather complicated and very personal. We hardly have the time to begin discussing it.”

“Ah. It’s rude of me to ask such an invasive question. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I understand. You know, I have to thank you for being Maria’s friend.”

“You do?”

“That girl – she was always so withdrawn when she was younger. Wouldn’t say any more than one or two words in response to me or the servants. When she was ten she opened up, but she really changed for the better when she started attending the academy and met you. You’re the only person she talks about.”

Despite the craziness that was happening around them, it was that which gave Samantha reason to pause. It was news to her. Maria was very selective about the information and feelings she shared. It was a combination of fearing others' reactions, and a belief that those truths would endanger her – but to learn that Maria did care about her in some small way made her reevaluate what she’d experienced.

“Now, we have to hurry and find her before they do-”

But at that exact moment – the Horrcath moved.

