

The fort was plunged into the depths of a conflict that it was always intended for but never had the chance to see. Twenty armed cultists waited at the junction by the throne room in a desperate search for an approach into the chamber. Veronica was not making it easy for them, with four dead bodies already pooling at their feet.

One of the gunmen struggled to work the bolt of his rifle. His hands were shaking and adrenaline was flooding his system. In his rush to eliminate Veronica, he leapt around the corner and attempted to take aim, but the unwieldy nature of the gun in hand meant he was a sitting duck for the trained killer – who was waiting for him on the other side. Two bullets ripped through his chest and splattered blood onto the man next to him.

A second later, another set of hands reached out from around the corner and tugged the gun out of his clutches. It was too fast for Veronica to shoot at them and score a second kill.

“Son of a bitch!” Veronica whispered. There was no way to stem the tide of warm bodies being thrown in her direction. The moment she gunned down one of the armed men, the next would pilfer their body for a dropped weapon and continue the push.

Even worse was the ammunition problem. Veronica could only carry so many magazines on her person at once. She was already starting to run dangerously low trying to keep them at bay. This was the whole reason she elected to run her diversionary strategy in the first place.

In retrospect, it was overly optimistic to expect all of them to remain outside given the circumstances. There were over a hundred Scuncath in the area, and some were bound to be curious about why a series of explosions were tearing the fort to pieces. It didn't take a genius to realize that they were distractions from the real objective.

Hoffman was next to her – still half-unconscious after she struck him with her gun. It wouldn't be long before he became lucid again and made life even more difficult. She wanted him alive so that WISA could have a nice long chat with him about his operation and whether outsiders were helping him. More than ever the government was demanding swift, pre-emptive action against criminal conspiracies like these.

The Rentree affair was still fresh in their minds. Officially it was a random murder, but WISA and some government insiders knew better than that. Rentree was a monarchist agitator who had been marked for observation last year. They even had a firm idea of who was responsible for the shooting, but she'd all but disappeared from the face of Walser afterwards. Nobody knew where she was.

They were right about one thing; these sorts of schemes were becoming worryingly regular. It had only been a few months since the last one!

Veronica had broad discretion with which to act during her assignments. Every WISA agent was expected to direct themselves and make appropriate judgements depending on the situation. Hoffman was a burden. She could use him as a human shield, or shoot him and be done with it. But at the same time, he was a treasure trove of potentially useful intelligence.

The book would have to wait. It was a pain in the arse, but Veronica would have to rely on gaining custody of it once the police moved in and cleared the place out. She hated having to pull rank on a normal officer because it dumped a huge pile of disclosure paperwork onto her head every time she did it.

This was a losing battle. She was wasting ammunition to preserve a position that didn't offer anything that the throne room couldn't. She fired a shot to keep them at bay and dragged Hoffman to his feet by wrapping her arm around his neck. They fell back to the chamber, where Genta was waiting with a look of sheer panic on his face.

"What is that horrendous racket going on out there?"

Veronica threw Hoffman to the ground and tied his hands behind his back using a length of rope she had found in the storehouse. She then barred the main doors by using the internal latch. It probably wouldn't last long under duress.

"They know we're here. This is troublesome. Did you remember the lock the other door?"

"Yes, of course – but how are we going to escape now that both exits are sealed?"

"We can go through the passage and open it again."

“You know what I mean! They’re all outside in the courtyard now. We’ll be spotted if we go back that way.”

“Give me a minute to think, Genta.”

Her tone made it clear that there was no room for argument. Veronica considered all of the pieces on the board and tried to manipulate them into a winning formula. She’d gotten out of tougher jams than this before, it was just another day at the office. Genta paced back and forth over the summoning circle, double-checking that it was as he believed it to be on first glance.

He shook his head and spoke to himself aloud; “What were they thinking with this?”

Far from ‘saving’ Walser, the circle would summon a Horrcath with an unprecedented amount of power. Genta’s summoning experiments were conducted in tightly controlled conditions. One of their key discoveries was that the loss of a human life was not necessary to breach the veil, the spilling of blood took on a symbolic power that attracted more aggressive creatures.

There was no record about what would happen if they succeeded with their plan. Two violent emotions thrown into the stirring waters like bait for predators, with a circle that was both great in size and mind-bogglingly detailed. Genta was of the opinion that those records were missing because none of the summoners lived to tell the tale.

After all, so long as there was uncharted territory someone would seek to explore it. With a potentially powerful force on the other side, it became attractive to all manner of violent criminals and power-hungry schemers.

The doors shook and rumbled on their great hinges as Veronica’s pursuers finally made their way to the throne room. Time was running ever shorter, yet she seemed no closer to finding the answer to their problem. They were trapped, but Genta saw slipping out through the back tunnel as an option that was growing less viable by the second.

“Veronica – we have to make a choice. They’ll send more men around to the courtyard to cut us off if we don’t move now.”

“It’s too late for that. They will have sent someone running to alert the others.”

“So we’re trapped in here?”

“That appears to be the problem, yes.”

Genta knew better than to become outraged with her words. In the short time they’d spent together, he had come to see her in a variety of different lights and perspectives. She was forceful, and analytical, and was not so concerned with sparing other’s feelings if she deemed it unnecessary.

Perhaps she saw it as reassuring to have someone instilled with confidence in trying times like these. She wasn’t abrasive – just curt. It was tough to get a read on how she felt about any given issue. The only time she seemed to reveal a crack in her armour was with Maria.

He wasn’t certain what was going on between the two, but she was insistent to an unusual degree that they leave her behind. Genta agreed. He did not see the value in bringing a young girl along to a dangerous place, but there was a more emotional element to her assertion. Was it because they were Mother and Daughter? She swore on her life that she had no family to speak of.

“I hope those kids are taking the book with them,” Genta muttered, “At least then they won’t be able to complete their ceremony.”

“We can’t trust a group of teenagers to do that.”

“I know – but in the absence of any better options...”

“I can’t fight them all. I was hoping that my gifts would distract them for a while longer. And by the way, why the hell would they need the book when one of the people who wrote it is standing right here?”

Genta’s face fell even further, “Oh. You’re right.”

“But you already sold them that tall tale about the book being erased if they kill you. We can use that. Sorry in advance.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Genta did not receive a verbal answer. Veronica darted towards him like a predator and wrapped her arm around his neck, pushing her gun against the side of his head as the doors were finally forced open, the weak wooden brackets no longer able to hold back the wave of bodies pushing into it from the other side. They tumbled through in their masses, but the sight of their golden ticket being held in her clutches prevented them from becoming overeager and firing at them. Hoffman quickly squirrelled away and out of Veronica's grasp.

"What in the Goddess' good name are you doing?" Genta squawked.

"Shut up," Veronica whispered, "The safety is on."

Hoffman pushed his way to the front of the crowd and forced their guns down to the floor with his tied hands, fearful that one of them may pull the trigger and scupper their plans completely. Hoffman wished more than anything that he had the capability to memorize the contents of the Book of Cambry – but he did not. Losing it and one of the men responsible for creating it would make the summoning much harder.

"Put them down! Don't shoot!"

They did as he commanded, though they had no information as to why their leader was speaking with such immense urgency. Hoffman received the report from the men he sent to take the book, and they spoke at length about the curse that was placed on its pages. They couldn't risk killing Genta lest a third of the contents be wiped clean.

Of course, this was all a convenient fiction concocted by Genta in the midst of his panicked pleas for mercy after they forced their way into his office. He didn't foresee it at the time – but his storytelling abilities were now actively saving his life.

"We both know you aren't going to kill the poor man. Why don't we end this farce before it gets out of hand?"

Veronica stood firm, "I don't like the idea of killing one of my sources without a good reason, but you're making a strong case for me to tie off this loose end here and now."

“Bah! You charge into our home, murder our compatriots, and then have the gall to position yourself as a victim! You must see yourself as a righteous sort. I can smell it on you.”

She laughed, “Righteous? I’m the one they send to do the dirty work, Hoffman. I’ve never once been under any illusion about what that means. I’m another tool in the armoury, going where they point me and killing who they want me to kill.”

“Your actions state otherwise. I can see it now, someone split between two objectives – unable to fulfil them both, desperately trying to cling on and have it both ways.”

“I’m not here to listen to your recruitment pitch.”

“Then what are you here for, really? To get the book back? To arrest me? None of those things are going to happen. You and I both know that.”

Hoffman was untied by one of his men. He pointed an accusatory finger in her direction.

“You don’t even understand what you’re fighting for.”

It was hard for her not to laugh at how suddenly he leapt from accusing her of being too high on her own self-interest to then pillorying her for being a disconnected mercenary. These were the rhetorical tactics of a shady recruiter or a snake oil salesman. Attack from all angles, never let the opponent have firm footing and try to exploit their weaknesses before appealing to them emotionally.

“I have to say, I’m disappointed. When I heard that some madman had rounded up the Scuncath and started tearing arse across the country, I was expecting someone who wasn’t as shoddy as you.”

“Shoddy?”

“That’s right. Shoddy. You’re selling people the answers to a question you forced into their heads. Drop the bloody act already.”

The back door was forced open, and another group of cultists forced their way into the chamber. Her plan to ‘kill’ Genta wasn’t going to work now, but she only did it to buy herself a little more time and prevent them from gunning her down on the spot.

So, she let him go and dropped her gun onto the floor. Unbeknownst to them, there was another reason for Veronica to surrender. Hoffman took the gun and then held his palm up in the air to signal a halt to the hostilities.

“Don’t worry. We won’t kill you yet. I have a much better use for that bloodlust.”

Understanding his meaning – the cultists relaxed their stance and fell back. If he couldn’t sacrifice the wealthy and powerful, and exploit their greed, then he would simply have to find suitable replacements. Summoning was not a precise science in the best of circumstances, he simply hoped that his path was one intended for him by the Dark Goddess and that through this notion success would come.

Veronica was perfect. Her bloodlust and the seething anger beneath the calm façade, it would be an attractive scent to the kind of violent Horrcath they sought to bring through the Veil. Hoffman did not rue or curse at the downturn in his fortunes, instead, he looked to what he had and adjusted his plan accordingly. Perhaps the arrival of this woman was a blessing in disguise.

A simple gunshot to the head was not a worthy punishment for her crimes.

“Now, I assume you have more explosives planted?”

He turned to one of the men and barked an order.

“Get them away from the walls and storehouses. There might be more of them.”

The man nodded and left to spread the warning to the rest.

“Smart. But do you honestly think that I’m the only person they sent to stop you?”

Veronica scoffed, “Obviously not. The main police force are the ones who want to bury you and your friends six feet under. They don’t send a single woman to do all of that.”

“I already know who you are. We’ve got eyes and ears everywhere, you see.”

“I figured as much after that train ambush. A cute attempt, it was almost endearing. I hope you don’t anticipate them remaining embedded with us for long. They’re very good at sniffing out traitors.”

“A position is merely another resource to utilise. It was a shame that our attack failed – but that is why we have contingencies in place.”

Veronica was not worried about finding the mole. As she said, they were extremely good at smoking out people who leaked classified information. It would be a full sweep of every safehouse and office used by WISA, and a lot of interviews with agents and eyewitnesses.

WISA’s systems were designed with that in mind. It was difficult to find space to be alone when working with a handler and the paper pushers were always under close inspection by the managers. Every document and assignment note from the past two years was going to be collated together and the source found.

The last task would be to dig them a very shallow grave.

Veronica knew full well their reputation for cruelty and violence, and she was subject to some of it, but never for directly leaking the identity of another officer. That was one line she was unwilling to cross. They’d happily chase the culprit down for the rest of time. There wouldn’t be a moment’s peace for the rest of their newly shortened lives.

WISA was a softer, more public-facing agency than the informal collection of mercenaries and spies it was before the reformation. That did not mean that the cold-blooded streak was gone, it was actually the opposite. There was a harsh cynicism to everything they did, a bunch of suits sitting at the top and dispatching orders without ever coming into contact with the lives affected.

Hoffman held his arms out wide as if to bear the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“Adversity is to be expected. We would not be standing here today if not for our dedication to seeing the plan through to its conclusion. Forces beyond our understanding will attempt to interfere, we need only keep our faith and charge ahead regardless to summon the change we desire.”

“You don’t even have the sacrifices. It’s over.”



He frowned, “And when did you ever receive that impression? We have enough sacrifices right here! The circle will still work, even if the result will be lesser than it would have been before.”

Genta answered her silent question; “It’s true, though I sincerely doubt the efficiency of that versus the original plan. The offering will likely be too little to summon a truly powerful and long-lasting Horrcath.”

“You misunderstand our intent. We are not seeking to needlessly destroy Walser. We simply wish to put our fingers on the scales and tilt things in the right direction.”

“Are you mad?” Genta responded in outrage, “There’s no controlling a Horrcath once it comes through the Veil. It would sooner direct its ire in your direction than wreak the special kind of havoc that you’re hoping for. You should be thankful that your prior sacrifices escaped – the scale of the destruction would be unfathomable.”

Hoffman stroked his beard, “And you are?”

“Doctor Genta Cambry. That book you stole belongs to my family.”

“Doctor Cambry? To think that we are privileged enough to enjoy your erudite company once again.”

“Don’t try to butter me up. I’d browbeat you even more if I thought that you’d listen to me! If your intentions were to avoid the destruction of Walser, then you wouldn’t be dallying in such dangerous practices in the first place. Not to mention the overindulgence of this summoning circle.”

Hoffman glared at Veronica, “And you expect me to accept your perspective, tainted as it is by the words of that woman by your side?”

“I am not some puppet for her to toy with. I have my own interests. I would very much like for Walser to continue existing, preferably for as long as possible.”

“The book that your family wrote states clearly that any ‘intra-veil’ creature must abide by the circle it is summoned from. We are in control, and we have set an exceedingly short time limit for it to manifest in our world.”

“It doesn’t matter how long they’re here if they possess the power to devastate an entire continent! They could cast a single spell and annihilate every township from here to the coast. It’s impossible to predict or measure what will come through! Even the most unethical practitioners of the field never sought to do something like this. You are a damned fool – a fool who thinks that the fire will not burn him, and him alone.”

“I respect your work, but I’m afraid it’s too late to debate the matter. This is the path that we must walk. It is the one illuminated by the touch of the Dark Goddess.”

And thus, Genta was struck with the harsh realization that there was no reasoning with Hoffman. He was always hesitant to go along with what Veronica said and her violent means, but now it was clear that violence was the only language that they spoke. When one person refused to sit at the table and play by the same rules, physical conflict was inevitable.

He was also starting to sense that Veronica didn’t have any other great ideas to get them out of this jam. Even so, she was mostly unperturbed about their threat of using her as a sacrificial element for their ceremony.

Hoffman sent a number of the guards away so that they could keep watch for any other attacks, but their numbers still outstripped Veronica’s ability to kill them. Hoffman was not going to take any more chances.

“Should we wait and try to get the nobles back?” one of the gunmen inquired.

Hoffman shook his head, “I’m afraid we don’t have time. If none of the exterior watchmen spotted them, they’re already be in police custody by now. Those explosions are going to spur them forth. If we are to succeed in our ceremony, then we must compromise and summon the Horrcath now.”

“Shall I gather volunteers?”

“Yes. Twelve of them, please.”

He left the room to collect the zealous worshippers and bring them to the throne room. They originally kidnapped more people than they needed for the sake of

recruiting a handful of them to the cause, but now that most were free from their clutches replacements had to be found. It was frustrating, but Hoffman knew that there were willing participants among the flock.

The circle demanded thirteen sacrifices to be arranged in smaller spheres around the outer edge. Even those smaller circles were punctuated with dozens and dozens of intricately designed runes, engraved into the stone floor by hammer and chisel. The book was indispensable when it came to creating the full picture. Luckily, the masons finished their work before they fled the room. They were further along than Hoffman initially thought.

His considerations were proven right as a breathless cultist burst through the doors and ran over to him.

“Hoffman! One of the lads was making a scouting run to the east road and he said that the police are already starting to move in. They nearly shot him in the back!”

“Already?”

It was worse than his pessimistic estimate. There was simply no time left to consider matters. They had to act, or they would forever lose their chance to leave their mark on Walser and do the Goddess’ bidding.

“I want everyone who’s still available to grab a weapon and keep them away from the fort. We do not need to defeat them in battle. Delay them for long enough and the Horrcath will do the hard work for us. The Dark Goddess is on our side! Do not falter in the face of doubt!”

The men roared in agreement. Hoffman delegated several of the guards to leave and man the walls, as they were armed with guns. Only four were left behind to keep an eye on Veronica, but without a weapon of her own, it was still a fight that did not lean in her favour.

Each man took a different position in the room. Two waited at the twin entrances, the other pair on opposite sides of the chamber by the marble pillars. Veronica wished that she had the speed to outrun a bullet – but she did not. There was no conceivable

way for her to dispatch all of them when they were standing so far apart and covering one another's blind spots so effectively.

She hated to admit it – but Maria was the only one who could intervene at this point. She was not going to rely on that occurrence though. Her first and only aim was to get out of the room and avoid being used as a sacrifice. Everything would resolve itself if she could do that, all of the pieces were in their proper places.

She lurked on the edge of the room and waited until the time was right. If Hoffman truly believed that he was in control of the situation, then he was sorely mistaken.

Veronica only gave up control to him because she willed it.