

Channery was dreary when we arrived on the train that evening. It was late thanks to some delays to our departure, and the sun had already set behind the rolling hills of Samantha's hometown. To make matters worse, we were then forced to spend another hour tracking down one of the few inns located in the centre with rooms available. We were lucky to even find an inn at all. Small towns like this didn't see many visitors.

We ended up not doing anything at all, which was frustrating, but stumbling around in the dark in an area where electrical lights weren't widespread was going to get us nowhere, or potentially even kill us. The innkeeper, who was a sweet old woman, loudly questioned why we wanted to stay in town given the recent trouble.

'Trouble,' as it turned out, was a deluge of petty criminal offenses committed by a group of strangers. Fights, robbery, and more. The jail was apparently overflowing with oddities who'd been caught stirring shit up. The following morning was key to our investigation.

"Do you have any idea of where to start?"

Veronica tapped the side of her nose and unfurled a map that she was keeping in her pocket onto the table. It was a surveyor's map, once used by the locals to plan out expansions for farms and mines. These maps weren't as precise as the ones made by professionals with all of their mathematic tools, but they utilised high ground and important landmarks to ground the reader in a specific place.

"It'll be hard to miss the forts and trenches once we start looking. With that said, it would be extremely inefficient for us to check every single one at random. There are dozens of forts within walking distance of here."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to speak with the constabulary and see if they have any pointers. From what I can tell, there's been a lot of reports made about the Scuncath's behaviour here. I heard rumblings that one of the farms was victim to an arson attack too."

That didn't sound good. There was only so much that their enigmatic leader could do to curtail their most violent impulses. The law of averages meant that out of the

hundreds that were taking part in his plan, at least some were going to ignore his orders and bring a lot of heat into the town.

And the heat was very much on the way at this point. Veronica had stated that they were already redeploying a large number of police officers and military reservists to the area to smoke the cultists out and rescue the kidnapped nobles. My cynical mind idly wondered if that kind of response would occur if they were people of common birth instead.

It was true that this situation was a profound humiliation for the government and security apparatus. A rag-tag group of wanton murderers managed to pull a fast one and slip away with a lot of important scalps. They needed to show the public that they had the ability to secure Walser and prevent these types of attacks from happening.

It was all about political convenience. Rescuing wealthy party donors and businessmen who could throw their clout around was convenient, but was the hit to public perception alone enough motivation to deploy the national guard?

“The police won’t be here until the evening, and they’ll still take another day to launch their assault.”

“And by then they might have killed their sacrifices,” Genta speculated, “It’ll be the right time to begin any Horrcath summoning attempt. We can hope that they need more time to draw the circle. It’s very intricate.”

“How intricate?” I asked.

He pulled out his notebook and flipped to a page covered in complex runic designs, “The circle must be large enough for the Horrcath to step through. Now, I don’t know what they intend to summon exactly, but given the number of sacrifices taken – I suspect that it’ll be very large. They would need about four accurately drawn ‘surings’ to achieve their goal. Each suring will contain a hundred of these, but a single mistake will make the ceremony fail.”

“Can they try again?”

“Yes – but they would have to quickly identify the issue and rectify it before the sacrifice’s blood runs dry. It would make the Horrcath very grumpy to have cold bodies, and that would run the risk of nullifying their contract.”

I chewed on his explanation for a moment, “Wait – you never mentioned a contract before.”

Genta pushed his glasses up, “We were in such a hurry that I decided to skip over that. The runes in the suring play a part in determining how the Horrcath behaves, but intelligent veil-creatures may speak with the invoker and request certain concessions. The... dog you described that attacked you on the train before would be incapable of such a thing, for example.”

“It attacked everyone.”

“That is because it was summoned using ‘violence.’ The method of summoning, and the strong emotions used, are what direct them in such a case. Horrcath are dangerous because they embody violence and revenge. Those feelings are all too common, but also the most destructive.”

“But you said they want a ‘greed’ demon.”

“It would be more accurate to describe it as envy,” Genta elaborated, “They may represent more than one emotion, but those combinations can be unpredictable and difficult to control. Envy and greed are adjacent to violence, they’re motivating factors, so there are Horrcath who breathe both like air. The worrying element is that envy is often an intelligent vice. They may be able to direct its ire in a certain direction.”

Veronica shook her head, “It’s not going to get that far. We’re going to stop them and get that book back before they lay a finger on any of the hostages.”

Genta chuckled, “When you put it like that – I feel as if you may be able to, but I would warn you away from diving in headfirst if at all possible.”

“Of course. We’re going to find out where they’re hiding, see what type of security is in place, and then come up with a plan to break in and interfere with their plan.”

I looked at my trunk and calculated how many bullets I still had; “I don’t believe we’ll be able to shoot our way through this one, unless you have an armoury you’ve been keeping from me this entire time.”

“I’m afraid that of all my secrets, that is not one of them. Oh, what a convenience that would be!”

We couldn’t steal some from the constables either. They were lightly armed at best, and they were likely suffering from a lack of resources given their remote station. That left waiting for the police to arrive so that Veronica could get supplies from them. That hinged on Veronica being willing to engage with them though. She was very intent on keeping her presence a secret, even from them.

“Are you going to ask the police when they arrive?”

Veronica laughed, “No, no. I’ll do no such thing. They can’t know that I’m here.”

“Oh, but it’s okay if I do?”

“You figured me out during our first meeting! It’s too late to be performing information control now.”

“So why are the police different?”

“My handler explicitly told me not to approach them. Not only are we dealing with a leak from inside the department, but there’s also a risk that some of them are collaborators too.”

I sighed. I was getting ahead of myself again. Veronica was right. We couldn’t trust them, or anyone else for that matter. The only option left in my mind was to find the Scuncath’s weapon storage and help ourselves to whatever we could get our hands on, but there was no guarantee that they had anything of worth. Some would be armed with crude blunt weapons or knives, and a smaller proportion would be given a gun.

For that matter – I didn’t know what calibre the rounds would be in. If we got there and found ammo but no weapon chambered for it, it was as good as worthless. There were too many variables to worry about. Reducing the number would be essential to succeeding here.

“If they’re in one of the forts that I think they are – then the location will be something of a double-edged sword for them. The trench and tunnel networks around Channery are extensive. There are a lot of places to hide or retreat to, but that also means there are many points of entry that they have to watch.”

“Maybe this incident will motivate the government to finally clean the place up.”

Veronica rolled her eyes, “Unlikely. They are not liable to waste a perfectly usable military installation in the event of another conflict.”

With that debate out of the way, we got dressed, ate our breakfast, and moved out to get a start on our search for the Scuncath in question.

When we got out onto the streets, there was a strong sense that something was wrong. There were people everywhere you looked, talking and gossiping, and sporting expressions of outrage that forecast unrest in the future. This was unusual. Everyone should have been busy working.

The problem got worse the closer we came to finding the constabulary building. There was a full-fledged protest going on outside. At least one hundred local residents were standing across the street. At the head of the braying crowd was a tearful woman.

“My husband died in the line of duty, and they didn’t see fit to tell us about it! What else are they hiding from us? I won’t rest until these murderers are brought to justice!”

The crowd roared in affirmation. Veronica whistled, “Uh-oh. Looks like someone let the cat out of the bag.”

“They were idiots for expecting this to stay quiet. This is a small town and people talk. They never should have planned for it to go perfectly.”

“I know. I’m not the one making the big decisions,” Veronica replied defensively. I wasn’t accusing her of being involved, so that struck me as odd.

Genta frowned, “I can’t believe they’ve killed someone already.”

It sounded like the arson attack really was connected with the Scuncath. Veronica left to ask some questions and screen the protestors. I stood back and let her work her magic this time. I continued to listen to the bereaved widow as she spoke about how betrayed she felt, that in her husband's death, she didn't receive the smallest bit of respect by being told about it.

If they were covering up the murder, then the arson attack must have been the one that drew everyone's attention and made them feel that something strange was going on. From what I picked up, there were previous concerns about the way that the Scuncath behaved while in town but the locals were too polite to turn them away without a good reason.

Well, they had a pair of good reasons now.

The Scuncath were notable by their absence. They must have known what was going on and evacuated the town before a mob could catch them and deliver a quick guilty verdict.

Veronica returned, "It looks like some farmer hauled two of them to the jail last night after they burned down his barn. One of them was hit with gunfire, but survived. They're locked up in that jail right now."

"And the murderer?"

"No word on them. The constables said that an eyewitness saw a group of strangers leaving his body in a field down the road."

That was informative - but not helpful to us. We'd need to speak with the constables directly and find out what they knew, but Veronica was trying to avoid flexing her credentials with too many people. If Veronica was not going to inquire with them, then we'd need to do our own research.

Veronica wordlessly led us away from the protest and down that same country road. We kept walking and walking, until we finally came upon a line of trees that separated the road from one of the fields. Veronica wasn't trying to find the area where the body was dumped - they constables had long since picked the place clean for clues.

Putting myself into her shoes, I guessed that she was looking for someone to interrogate. Since they'd cleared out of the town, that meant wandering the countryside looking for them. Our search went on for an hour, briefly visiting some of the nearby forts and knocking them off the list. They were too close to be safe for the Scuncath but it was worth making sure before we moved on.

While it was easy to enjoy the sights and sounds of nature, I was starting to get impatient.

"We wouldn't have to do this if you spoke with the constables."

"I'm not leaving a paper trail by flashing my badge to them. I don't need to."

"Every second we waste because of that is a second in which they might just kill all of the hostages we're here to get back."

That got under her skin, "Time is a resource and so is discretion. I've been doing this for longer than you've been alive, so don't cast doubt on my ability to judge how much time we have to use. You can stay at the hotel and wait if you prefer."

That was bullshit. The best way to manage this was to use every resource she had available to her. The odds were stacked against us from the start. The only reason not to was if she had an ulterior motive behind doing this. She was 'aiming' for the same goal as the police, but refused to work with them hand-in-hand. Infighting. It had to be, nothing else made sense.

But I wasn't privy to the conflicts going on behind the curtain. It was nothing more than an educated guess that wouldn't change my approach to dealing with her. I was going to keep a hawkish watch over everything she did until our arrangement came to an end.

A groan from an unseen source ended our petty fight before it got going. Veronica's head whipped in its direction and took off with borderline murderous intent. I followed behind and came across an unusual scene. A man, who was presumably blackout drunk, had tumbled into the roadside ditch and passed out.

In any other circumstance a helpful traveller might have come to his aid and helped banish that hangover he was dealing with, but his clothes, and the tattoos on his arms, immediately marked him as one of the Scuncath we were searching for. Genta was sure to confirm it before we touched him.

“He’s one of them. No doubt about it.”

“Why?” Veronica asked.

“That icon on his bicep is commonly used as a replacement for the more well-known runes. The only sort having that tattooed onto their bodies are bad news.”

The ‘icon’ in question did bear a passing resemblance to some of the runs we’d seen in the cottage. It was a triangular shape with a red circle outlined inside of it. Three distinct dashes were contained within the circle that formed an H shape with an elongated middle, skewering both sides that tried to border it.

Veronica treated him with all of the tact and caution that I’d come to expect from her. She got down onto her knees and slapped him silly. He sputtered awake with a start, only to find a muscular government agent pinning him to the floor using her knee. His struggles did not last for long. He was a weedy man with sunken eyes and messy hair.

“Get off of me you bloody bastard!”

“Apologies, but I was hoping to ask you a few questions.”

His eyes squinted once the sun started to seep through the branches above our heads. He was hammered. I could smell the alcohol from the top of the incline. It was all over his clothes and in his breath.

“I’m not saying nothin’ to you! Now bugger off!”

“I think you’ve been celebrating a little too much,” Veronica reprimanded, “As it happens – we’re searching for any Scuncath who’ve decided to hide out here in the countryside. You wouldn’t know where we could find them, would you?”

His hand reached up and slapped down on her leg, but the combination of her words, and the feeling of the gun hidden beneath the skirt which he was now touching, made him change tact so suddenly that I almost suffered whiplash.

“Scuncath? I ain’t heard of no bloody Scuncath around here! No Madam, I have not!”

Veronica ditched subtlety in response; “Didn’t your Mother ever teach you not to tell lies? I already know that you’re one of them, and you’re going to tell me exactly where your friends are hiding or they’re going to find your dead body in these fields next!”

Being hungover, he immediately cracked and started to panic.

“I swear, I don’t know anything! I’m not a bloody Scuncath! I’ve never even met one before! You’re not going to touch me, not with a little girl standing right there!”

He pointed at me, but I only shrugged in response, “Don’t ask me to get involved. I’m even worse than she is.”

Bad cop and bad cop – that was an equation that he didn’t like. His eyes darted every which way but Veronica’s face. He was trying to come up with a way to weasel out of this. His time was already up. Veronica wasn’t going to pin him down and make him sweat forever.

She released him from her hold momentarily, gripping the front of his shirt and hoisting him back up to his feet. We crossed over the ditch and through the treeline onto the field that rested to our side. It was empty, tilled ground – though the farmer who owned it was maintaining the surrounding flora to keep the area clear. A pile of chopped lumber was left with the axe still embedded into the wood.

“I’d suggest turning away for this bit.”

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before,” I replied.

Genta, in contrast, turned his back and plugged his ears like a child who heard a swear word on accident.

Veronica warned him for the last time, “This is your last chance to give me something helpful. Every time you try to screw with me after this, I’ll start breaking pieces of you until you spill where they’re hiding.”

He remained defiant even as he was being pushed towards the firewood pile, “You’re just bluffing! I’m no Scuncath. The constables are going to have your head if you touch me!”

“Quit your whining. The constable is going to peg you as a damnable drunken fool, and he’d be right! Goddess knows how you Scuncath pulled one over on us when your ranks are stuffed full of miscreants and ruffians.”

Veronica shoved him into the dirt, before pouncing and grabbing one of his arms. She placed his hand flat against the trunk of the felled tree. He pulled it away again, but the second time was enough to make him get the picture. Hunched over and with his lips sealed tight – Veronica conjured up a cruel way to make his mouth move again.

She threw her boot up into the air and came down on top of his finger. A sickening crack was the signal for both me and Genta to wince in response. The man yelled a short, sharp roar of pain and fell back onto his ass, clutching the shattered fingers with his good hand. I knew how that felt all too well.

Veronica was already on top of him again, ragging him by his collar; “You’ve still got a few more digits to play with. You can save them, or let me have a go with them. Your choice.”

“I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you!” he begged.

“Go ahead.”

He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself, “The fort. They’re staying in one of the forts.”

“There are dozens of them, which one?”

“I don’t know their names!”

Wrong answer. Veronica stamped down on his ankle this time, not hard enough to break it, but enough to make him aware of how fragile the human body could be when it came to blunt force trauma.

“It’s at the top of a big hill, to the north of here!” he gasped, “I promise. I’m not joking!”

“Is that good enough for you?” I asked.

Veronica deliberated on his answer for a few moments before seemingly backing away.

“There are only a few forts that meet that description. Wellworth Battery, Spurbank, and Formstone. But they have to be close enough to Channery so that they can do supply runs.”

The Scuncath nodded, “W-Well, they’ve been stockpiling food for a while now. They won’t need to leave again until everything is done. I swear on my life.” He scrambled back and cowered on the ground. The desperation in his voice was convincing, but the unfortunate truth was that torture never delivered precise results. He might have been making it up.

Veronica had a choice to make. Cut him loose and take a chance on what he’d said, or push it further and risk receiving nothing more than a reiteration of his previous statement.

“You don’t know the name of the fort?”

The Scuncath was desperately trying to avoid mentioning specifics here. He wanted to give enough information to get away while also obstructing our attempts to locate them. The question I had was whether he understood that an attack on the fort was an inevitability. He wasn’t risking anything more by telling the truth to us, at least as far as he knew.

Sensing that Veronica was about to cripple his other hand too, he cracked.

“Okay, okay. You’ve... you jogged my memory. It’s Spurbank, I swear on my life. It’s Spurbank!”

Veronica released his collar, “See. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

He clutched his shattered fingers with a furious scowl. It was pretty hard from his perspective. This was the quality of human they were sending into town? A worthless drunk who didn’t even comprehend where he was or what was happening. What a contemptible sort he was, presumably responsible for causing harm too.

“It doesn’t matter. You can’t do nothing,” he spat, “What are you going to do on your own? Go over there and get shot to death? There’s a lot more blokes than me waiting in that fort. They’ll give you hell, they will.”

“What kind of fool do you take me for?” Veronica laughed, “I’m not a one-woman-army. I’ll leave all of the heavy lifting to the police.”

The penny dropped.

“You aren’t with the police, or the constables?”

She leaned in from above, “That’s right. I’m something much, much scarier.”

He yelped and scrambled back, having seen a glint in her eyes that he didn’t appreciate. This was the silent menace that I’d seen beneath the surface during our first meeting. This megalomania didn’t manifest during the fight on the train – back there she was all business, like it was nothing more than a mild inconvenience or a part of her routine.

Here though, she was enjoying this.

“We’re not here to have fun terrorizing them,” I commented.

“Who says I’m having fun?” she replied, like a petulant child who didn’t want to be called out for something she was very obviously doing right in front of me.

I wasn’t going to get dragged into an argument about it, “We have what we want. Let’s be off.”

Veronica was already reaching to her thigh when I said it. I couldn’t stop her as she drew her pistol and shot the man dead right in front of me, through the chest, and then the head. The carefully tilled soiled was irrigated with his blood. Genta almost leapt out of his skin, having kept his back turned the entire time.

She stared at me as if to ask ‘do you find that distasteful?’ When she received no verbal response from me, she launched into an explanation that I didn’t ask for.

“I can’t let him live knowing I’ve been asking around.”

I shrugged, "If you say so. I thought it would be more constructive to take him to the constables in case he was lying to us."

She hadn't even considered that before shooting him twice at point-blank range.

"Well - these fellows grow on trees around here. If he talking bollocks we can go find another one."

Genta remained mum as we crossed the ditch again and joined the main road. There was no time to worry about hiding the body. We needed to reach Spurbank and find out what was going on. From there we could formulate a plan to infiltrate the place, recovering both the book and the hostages.

I made it sound so easy.

