

The ride to the fort was long and uncomfortable, both physically and emotionally.

Samantha, Max and Claude were put in close proximity to a group of aggressive and potentially violent captors. They were all heavily armed and more than happy to use their weapons should the need arise. Samantha found them despicable, if not only for their crimes but also for their perceived enjoyment of terrorizing others.

Eugene was the only one who could guess as to where they were going. He was already familiar with the dozen fortified locations that existed within an hour or two's journey from the middle of Channery. He'd always believed that they'd remained unused for the rest of his life, but he was not the kind of person who demanded their immediate removal.

But this was exactly the sort of issue the removal crowd were worried about. They were the perfect place for ne'er-do-wells to conceal a large-scale criminal operation. The trenches would make it a defensible location, while the fort building itself was large enough to house hundreds of people comfortably. For them, it was yet another example of how the countryside was being left behind by the national government.

"Not so pleased with himself now, is he?" the driver commented.

Eugene did not rise in response to his taunts. He remained steadfast in his silence no matter what insults or mockery they threw his way. The fact that he refused to reply frustrated the captors, who wanted to knock him down a peg before killing him.

They arrived at the front gate of the fort, which was perched atop an elevated dirt road that was designed to be treacherous for any attackers. A pair of towers overlooked the embankment, offering many opportunities for a group of riflemen to deter advances through the entrance.

Beyond those doors lay one of the three separate courtyards contained within the walls. Originally intended as a staging point for attacks with artillery, it had instead been converted into a storage area for various non-perishable supplies. The Scuncath did not have cannons with which to attack any besieging forces.

Hoffman was already waiting.

He cut an intimidating figure to those who were not already acquainted with him, but his ire was aimed firmly at the foursome of Scuncath who were meant to be keeping watch on one of the outside walls, whom were now arriving at Spurbank with a new set of hostages in tow.

The cart was halted and the man steering the horse was forced to step down to ground level and endure an eye-to-eye verbal lashing from the man in charge.

“What is this? Who are these people?” he barked impatiently, “You were meant to be keeping watch on the west side!”

There was an awkward silence. The four men believed that they’d be in and out before Hoffman could find out about their excursion, but one of the others had ratted them out. A small gaggle of onlookers were gathering across the way to see what was going on.

“Do you understand how important it is that we keep intruders out of this fort?” Hoffman continued, “The police could be here any minute – yet you are all risking your, and our, lives - by heading back into town!”

It was not the welcome that Samantha and the others were expecting. Hoffman was marching back and forth, admonishing them with words and verbal lashings that made him sound more like a school teacher than a mad cultist.

The man who drove the cart kept his voice restrained, “We... we decided to go and grab them after what they did to George and Wilson.”

“Did you now? I don’t seem to recall asking you to do that.”

“You always said that we have to stick together, boss. Are we going to leave them to rot in that prison? Or let people like this get away with fighting ‘em?”

Hoffman scowled, “Solidarity is important – but you should remember well that there are more of us here in the fort than down at the jailhouse. If your decision leads to us being attacked and captured, then you aren’t acting with solidarity in mind at all. We have to make some tough choices, and one of those choices is to put our freedom and health on the table to save Walser from itself.”

Samantha and the others were hastily bundled off of the cart and forced to line up in front of Hoffman.

“Since you all decided to bring us five extra mouths to feed, I’m going to dock your rations and give it to them.”

That kind of novel punishment was not unusual for Hoffman – but it also made clear that he had no intentions of killing them and preserving those supplies to rectify their mistake. They would be forced to own it and take responsibility.

“Now, I take it that you are the fellow who escorted two of my men into the jailhouse yesterday.”

Eugene finally broke his silence, “I am.”

“And do you understand who we are and what we’re here to do?”

“No. Not really.”

Hoffman considered elaborating more – but eventually settled on leaving it there. The driver was the one who leapt in against his wishes.

“You messed with my mate, and I’m not going to let you off easy.”

“He burnt my barn and threatened to kill my son,” Eugene objected, “Those two could have ended up dead if things went differently.”

Hoffman tugged on the driver’s shoulder and forced him back; “I know. Unfortunately, it seems that some of my followers saw fit to extract their own kind of retribution for that incident. I did not order them to bring you here, which is problematic. I can’t release you now that you’re here. You’ll have to wait in the jail until we’re done.”

“You’re going to listen to him?” the kidnapper objected.

Hoffman turned his ire back onto him, “Is it not a natural response to defend one’s family? What do you suppose you would have done in his position? There will be enough blood spilt here without the addition of these five. I want them locked in a cell

and treated as guests until the time comes to leave, and if I hear anything more out of you, or find that they've been harmed..."

He let that threat hang in the air. The cultists understood what he meant regardless. None wanted to cross Hoffman. When he was enraged, it was like a storm rolling through the fort and consuming everything in its path.

"Aye, sir. I'll show them to the cells."

Hoffman smiled, "Very good. I want you back on watch once you're done. As I said, the police will be here to try and disrupt our ritual. I do not want any interference while it happens. Even a small change in environment could ruin it."

The kidnappers chose to return to their posts rather than risk incurring any more of Hoffman's anger through their rogue actions. A different pair of armed men walked them through the second line of defence and into the underground area of the fort. A trip down a short flight of stairs left them in the jailhouse.

A cell was opened, and they were pushed inside. It was barely big enough for four to inhabit comfortably, but there were five of them. Samantha found herself squeezed up against the bars with Max to her right. The cell slammed shut, and the tension that had been building since they were taken unwound as the imminent threat of death was warded away.

Ben spoke first; "You've really buggered us now, Dad."

"Don't blame this on me!" he replied defensively.

Samantha cut them both off before they could give her a headache, "Can you two not have this argument now? This is bad enough without your idiotic bickering!"

Eugene and Ben tensed up as she raised her voice. It was a rare display of impatience from Samantha, which meant she was very close to exploding and giving them what-for. The argument diffused, they tried to find a more comfortable arrangement within the cell by shuffling back and forth.

Max stayed near the bars and peered into the cell across from theirs. Their neighbours weren't much interested in them. They remained downtrodden, with

hanging heads and bleary eyes. The low light of the hallway was already starting to sap the energy from his body, and soon it would hurt his eyes too.

“This day just keeps getting worse.”

Max was not expecting to hear a response from the cell next to theirs.

“Hey. Is that you, Max?”

Samantha and Max turned their heads to the side so that they could hear the whispering more clearly. There was a lot of noise coming from upstairs with cultists cheering, drinking and squabbling at all hours of the day.

Samantha spoke in a low tone of voice, “Adrian? Is that you?”

“Yeah. There are three of us in here. I’m with Sir Walston-Carter and Escobarus.”

Samantha frowned. Even snatching one of the three was a serious statement of intent, but the Scuncath had squirrelled away three of the wealthiest and most influential men in the country. How in the name of the Goddess had they gotten away with planning a heist so audacious?

“What are you doing here? Did they come back to grab you too?”

Max sighed, “No – we happened to get caught up in a spot of bother. They don’t even know who I am.”

“Did the man with the scars say something to you?”

“No,” Max replied, “He got mad at them and told him to put us in here with you.”

“If they figure out who you are, he’s going to pull you out of there and talk with you in private.”

“Why?”

“He was going through every one of the hostages and trying to recruit them as spies, I think. He wants people in high society to feed him information and money. I don’t know if anyone took the bait. It’s that or be killed.”

“I can see why they’d consider it – but I imagine that trust is in short supply.”

“Someone may have taken the deal,” Adrian elaborated, “But we can’t see every cell from here, and we don’t know who was kidnapped and brought here originally to compare it with.”

“Why don’t you shout down the hall and find out?”

“The guards will come down and try to find out who did it. None of us are willing to risk making them angry.”

Max could already feel an idea fermenting in his head. If they were trying to recruit people to join their cult, why not accept the offer and look around the fort for a way to let everyone out of the cells? It was risky – but Claude and Samantha couldn’t hog the spotlight forever. This was his chance to repay them for the danger they faced when helping him.

Samantha was thinking similarly, “What if Max agrees to join? Do you think they’ll let him out?”

“Under watch, probably,” Adrian concluded, “It’s too risky. There’s no guarantee that they’ll let you look around, and there are way too many armed guards for us to sneak away without them spotting us. They have two men watching the stairs at all times. I can hear them talking to each other.”

Max disagreed, “It’s better than sitting here and doing nothing. What’s the worst that could happen if they refuse?”

“They could kill you.”

“They’re already threatening to kill us. That doesn’t seem like much of an escalation from where we are right now!”

“We can wait here and hope that the police show up,” Adrian contested, “I don’t see how sticking your neck out is going to help matters any.”

“Well sorry for not trusting them to come and save us after what happened at the theatre,” Max griped.

Damian cut in, “I don’t believe that this debate will deter him, Adrian. He’s already made his mind up.”

“You’re just saying that because you can’t control Maria.”

“I don’t need to. She’s a very polite and rule-abiding girl.”

Samantha almost choked on her own saliva hearing that coming from the mouth of Maria’s Father. Either he was playing ignorant, or he really didn’t know a single fact about his daughter.

Adrian was not deterred, “I’m going to try it. I need to let them know that my Father is here without arousing their suspicion.”

Samantha tried to get a better look down the hallway by squeezing her head between the bars, but it was no use.

“Shout out to him,” she suggested, “The guards will hear, and they might report it to that Hoffman bloke.”

Max took a deep breath and did as she instructed, “Dad! Dad! Are you in here? Dad!” He continued this process for several minutes, but there was no response from his Father – who he knew for a fact was supposed to be in one of the cells.

“He must be asleep,” Adrian stated.

Having him respond wasn’t important anyway. Adrian needed only to plant that seed of intrigue for Hoffman to catch onto. In time, he would also get to enjoy a one-on-one audience with the man behind the madness, and unlike the others he would ‘willingly’ agree to join his side.

As for what came next, he had no earthly idea.

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Veronica already had a plan of attack prepared, and she was not going to delay matters any more than she had to. We were going into the fort the same day and getting the hostages, and the book, back from the Scuncath before they could unleash havoc unto Channery and Walser as a whole.

One of the trenches was identified as the best route to enter the fort. It had the least eyes on it, and Veronica knew that one of the secret entrances was located at the end

of it. It wasn't the most convenient place to move from when it came to reaching the prison area, but getting inside in the first place was the most important consideration.

The Scuncath were numerous and fairly well armed. What they lacked for in training they made up for with almost suicidal zeal. They wouldn't hesitate to try and take us down with them in a fight, using whatever they could get their hands on.

Escaping with all of the 'sacrifices' was going to be difficult. They needed them, but that didn't necessarily mean that they would avoid killing them if they tried to escape. There was also the issue of breaking through the locks. I couldn't use my nihilism magic on each and every one without causing myself to pass out on the spot.

Not ideal, given the circumstances.

So that meant finding the person who was holding the keys. They could be anywhere, but they were likely to be somewhere in the vicinity of the cells. I just didn't know the facts on the ground. It demanded quick thinking and adaptability. I was good at those things – but I'd never willingly put myself into a situation where I was forced to rely on them. It was too dangerous.

"So, are we all on the same page?" Veronica asked.

"Are you sure it's safe to bring Cambry with us?"

He adjusted his glasses and smiled, "I'm not short on bravery. It's the least I can do given the dire circumstances that may arise from their continued possession of the book. We're speaking of tens of thousands of deaths at a minimum."

I couldn't quite believe that the Horrcath was going to be that dangerous. The hound that pursued us was terrifying as it was vicious, but it was still bound by what I could call a reasonable tether to reality. It possessed no special abilities or powers beyond its unusual durability. Clearly, this violent greed amalgam was a different matter entirely. It could supposedly kill thousands in an area with a fairly sparse population.

I nodded, "I'll be responsible for rescuing the prisoners, then."



“Yes. We’ll regroup at the same trench and exfiltrate the area. Don’t stick around if you don’t have to though. You should focus on recovering as many of the prisoners as possible.”

We were almost ready to go. I grabbed as many magazines as I could carry from my trunk before making a quick bathroom stop. I used the toilet, washed my hands and dried my face, before turning around and unlocking the door.

Genta and Veronica were no longer in the room.

“You’re kidding me.”

I checked under the bed and inside the wardrobe. I even peered out into the corridor outside and the tavern downstairs. There was no sign of them. They’d disappeared on me.

I saw this coming. I was anticipating it for days, but I was not expecting them to dip while I was using the toilet of all things. They’d packed their bags and disappeared in the handful of minutes it took for me to finish. If that was how she wanted to play it – then I had no choice but to go it alone.

She probably, stupidly, thought that I wouldn’t follow them given the risks associated with it. What she didn’t know was that Durandia decided to make me a protagonist of this ridiculous story. I hadn’t death-flagged myself yet, and I wasn’t about to start now. There was no greater power in this world than the person writing the script, so to speak.

I did not trust Veronica to actually rescue them without me anyway. She was a government agent, not someone invested in acts of charity. Her primary concern was stopping the Scuncath from compromising Walser’s security and stability. If a few blue-blooded nobles died in the process, then it was mission accomplished as far as she cared. But was that sense of duty enough to make her abandon my Father?

She must have loved him. She wouldn’t have gone underground, slept with him and evaded her own agency for a year if she didn’t. She was dedicated to following through on her pregnancy and having me, at great personal risk at that. I couldn’t

trust her statements about keeping me safe, but the Damian part of the story had to be truthful to some extent.

What were the odds of that whole story being a lie? I took a step back from my own narrative and reconsidered it from another perspective. We looked the same – there was no debating that, but what if she wasn't really my Mother at all? She could have been my aunt or some other relation, or through simple chance, she wasn't connected with me in the first place.

I was the one who aired the idea of us being mother and daughter to her. What was stopping her from taking that story and wrapping it around her shoulders as camouflage? Besides my Father's name, she never once shared any knowledge which would require a close association with him.

It was a coin-flip of a problem. She was either using that as a cover, or she was trying to keep the details to a minimum. But she was oddly forthcoming with other topics too like the story about how she defied her handlers and hid away during her pregnancy, or her desire to protect me from them through her absence.

That would be a tangled web to weave and manage. She was skilled, but was she capable of that level of emotional manipulation without showing an outward sign of dishonesty? It was a fool's errand to assume that everyone was eternally professional and incapable of making mistakes. People who should know better make stupid errors all the time.

What a conundrum. In the end, I relegated that matter to the holding area of my mind and refocused on the task at hand. I could worry about the potential emotional manipulation later, time was running short for Damian and the rest. The police would still need some time to set up their rescue operation, time which the Scuncath would use to complete their ritual. Genta testified that the best window was already nigh.

They could do it whenever they wanted.

I stuffed as many magazines into my pockets as I could and left the trunk in the room for later. When I stepped out onto the street, it was evident that the police circus was

in town and trying to reassure the local residents. Officers were patrolling every corner and keeping an eye out for troublemakers.

Problem: I was an unaccompanied minor.

Veronica must have waited until they were keeping watch to make her move. I ducked into the nearest alleyway and waited until the first group of officers passed me by. I jogged across the street and stuck close to the buildings, only to discover that they'd established checkpoints at the major roads across town.

Into the fields it was. I was being seriously inhibited by this police business. The last thing I wanted was for them to stop me, or ask where my parents were, or Durandia forbid search my coat and find the platoon's worth of ammunition I was carrying. I slipped down into a ditch and kept my head low, moving past while they were busy inspecting a cart trying to reach the market.

It was still light, but the sun would set in two hours and make life much harder for all involved. It took me thirty minutes to cover a distance that needed ten a few hours ago. Veronica was wily, I had to give her that. She timed her escape to perfection and hoped that said delay would deter me from following.

What she didn't understand was how stubborn and petty I could be. I was not going to let her get away with pulling a cheap trick like that on me. My pride demanded that I respond in kind and get one over on her in return. I was going to get into the fort and rescue everyone without breaking a sweat.

Once I was clear of the checkpoints, I moved back onto the road and made good time getting to Spurbank. I didn't know where the police were setting up the staging area for their assault – but whatever they did it was going to get messy. The safest way to handle the situation would be to get the hostages away before the attack started.

There was also the potential for an early siege if they heard too many gunshots coming from inside. It depended on the temperament of the officer in charge. Were they the sort to carefully plan and execute to preserve their safety or a more reckless sort who dove in at the merest hint that innocents were being harmed?

Too many variables. I had to keep repeating it. There were too many variables. I was confident, but not certain. This was the very worst situation I was willing to subject myself to. Any more than this would be so wildly out of hand as to be an elaborate form of suicide.

But total control was a privilege. I could never safely guess how people would react to what I was doing. They're complicated, contradictory, cowardly or brave – and there's no way to determine who will be which from the outside. This was like those kinds of jobs, but I wasn't presented with any real alternate choices. I could leave my Father to die, or I could try and rescue him.

I wasn't going to let him die. Having him handle all of the problematic business stuff was too convenient for me. I'd seen the weight of bureaucracy come down on Adrian like a tonne of bricks. It was crushing. I did not want to be caught in the same position, forced to learn the detailed inner workings of a business empire decades in the making.

No thanks.

I took the long way around Spurbank to evade the sentries posted to the trenches and walls. The farthest tip of the trench system was where I'd begin my infiltration, and it was also the area with the lightest security. I spotted some of them on watch and considered how to get around them without raising the alarm. Veronica and Genta must have been inside already because there was no sign of them yet.

I drew my gun and released the safety. It was do-or-die time.

