

The railyard was not the ideal location to make our stand, but there were no other options available to us now. The demon was too fast for us to run away from forever. It would outpace and outlast us like a hunter. While dying in a train accident would be a humiliating conclusion to the story, it was slightly more respectable than being turned into dog food.

We were surrounded on both sides by other trains that had been left for assignment onto lines across the country. We were in a kill-box, with a bloodthirsty monster nipping at our heels. With every second that passed I came closer to feeling the sting of its fangs digging into my back and dragging me to the ground. I could hear it, but I daren't turn around and see how close it really was.

Soon we came upon the turntable. The yard's main area was gigantic, and perhaps overkill for a town of this size. A two-story warehouse circled around the back, while several separate rail lines converged into one so that the engines could be turned and stored in each of the doorways.

For us, it was the only place we had left to go. Leading this demon into the town was a recipe for disaster. It would start killing everyone it could see, and firearms weren't enough to pierce whatever otherworldly hide its skin was made from.

The beast leapt in a last-ditch effort to catch one of us, but we managed to squeeze through the employee entrance before it could reach us. The brick wall buckled under the strain, coming apart at the edges and foretelling future problems if we trusted it to hold the demon back. The beast roared, sending spittle and blood flying, before backing away to try again.

My head whipped in every direction, "We need something big enough to kill that demon, and fast."

I was not optimistic about finding anything of use in a railyard's warehouse.

"They don't keep gun carriages in here anymore," Veronica panted.

"Gun carriages?"

She chuckled, "Nothing, just a civil war plan that they tried – way before your time."

We couldn't sit around and wait for it to murder us. I led Veronica through the building and away from the damaged wall before it came back. My frustration grew as we found nothing but tools, discarded parts, and the occasional half-constructed carriage or engine held up on jacks. This was an old-school workshop where all of the hard graft was done by hand. There were no industrial machines or dangerous areas to lead it into.

The sound of the wall collapsing echoed through the garage. We ducked behind a workbench and took a moment to catch our breath. There had to be something we could use, something that would turn the tables and put this demon to rest.

"Did you use magic earlier?" Veronica whispered.

"On the rifle, yes."

"I've never seen anything like that. I felt it, but I wrote it off as an accident."

"They don't teach that kind of magic to students. I did some extracurricular learning and discovered nihility magic. A snap of my fingers can destabilise whatever I can see. Very effective against delicate firearms that need their components in working order."

Veronica smirked, "That sounds pretty amazing to me. Could you use it on a person?"

I'd considered it once or twice before, but it was ultimately a less efficient way of shooting them with a gun, which also exhausted my physical energy in the process. It would be perfect for a discrete kill though. There were veins and organs in the body that could go wrong without warning, after all.

"I can't use it on that demon. I don't know what it's like on the inside. I might waste my shot and collapse from overexertion. It works by saturating a small area with a huge concentration of energy."

"Limited use..."

"I wouldn't put my trust into it as an answer, is what I'm saying."

"I wasn't going to. If that isn't worth the attempt, then what else can we do?"

I peered over the edge of our hiding spot and saw movement between the cracks of the carriage in front of us. It was in the building and stalking around the place to try and find us. The smell of oil was thankfully strong enough to make our scents less obvious.

Could I trust her to do what I asked?

This was the perfect window of opportunity for her to see me off. I didn't have a good read on how much she cared for me as her supposed daughter. If she was willing to leave the estate for so long and stick to her duty as an intelligence officer, was it a sign of protectiveness or rejection?

There wasn't enough time for me to decide or find out now. This demon was going to kill both of us if we didn't act quickly. Veronica was the only 'resource' I could rely on now that the guns had proven ineffective.

"That carriage over there is suspended from the roof," I whispered, "If it comes down on top of that demon..."

"It might exert enough force to kill it."

I popped the trunk open and grabbed an extra magazine.

"Your legs are longer than mine. I need you to lead it there and get out of the way once I shoot it down."

"Trying to get rid of me already?"

"Why would I do that? You're the only one who knows anything about what's happening here."

"I'm joking."

"Well save it for a more appropriate time."

Veronica huffed, "So uptight! Are you sure that Damian was the one looking after you?"

I ignored her snide comments and approached the carriage in front of us. There was a ladder that led onto the roof, and a path I could follow to reach the balcony that

looked out over the entire warehouse floor. I could hit the chains holding the heavy metal undercarriage from there. I kept my head down and my ears focused on the sound of the demon's claws scraping against the concrete.

Veronica didn't move from her spot until she was certain that I was ready to go. She took off into a sprint and started moving down the aisle, making enough noise to catch its attention while I aimed the chains above my head. This was a workplace accident waiting to happen – and that served me just fine.

The problem was making it fall at the exact moment I needed it to. Four different loops were holding it aloft, and I couldn't predict which one would make the carriage come down. Was it already on the tipping point, or did I need to shoot three of them?

There was some leeway with the length of the undercarriage being what it was, but hitting the chains was another matter. They were thick enough to hold up a heavy weight, but thin enough to make shooting them exceedingly difficult. The natural sway of my hands made keeping a bead on them tricky.

I had to focus on what was in front of me. I took a deep breath and laser-focused on the task. If I couldn't do this, then there was no chance of us killing the demon and getting out of here, and if that happened we'd never find my Father. Everything was riding on this. I worked better under pressure – so I piled it on.

Veronica, meanwhile, was putting her leg muscles to the ultimate test trying to keep away from the demon. The carriages provided brief refuge and allowed her to dip between the different aisles and open a gap. She would leap through the doors and come out on the other side, wait for it to track her down, and do it all over again.

She couldn't do that forever. Every so often the demon would get frustrated and force its way through the wooden housing, ripping it to shreds and removing another escape route. Veronica took her time getting into the correct position. She charged down the row and passed beneath the hanging trap. I pulled the trigger but missed my first shot, luckily, I was able to correct my aim and hit it the second time.

One of the four chains unravelled and the entire thing started to list to one side, but it did not fall. The demon charged through the target area none the worse for wear. One chain was not enough.

“Again!”

Veronica knew she was on a tight time limit. She returned a minute after that. I fired again, hitting a chain on the opposite side to keep it from sliding down into an unwanted spot. I could tell that it was almost about to go. The third time was the charm.

“Again!”

Veronica didn't screw around for the last one. I steadied my aim and tuned out the noise. She ran, with the blood-hungry demon hot on her tail. I could imagine the sense of panic she was feeling. She passed under the undercarriage one last time. I unloaded a trio of rounds into the last chain.

The entire arrangement unravelled as the weight on one end accumulated, until they finally gave way under the stress. Veronica slid from beneath it and left the demon stranded as the entire thing came down from above and crushed it into the concrete with a sickening, and very bloody, splat. Bones broke on impact, its legs unable to support the immense weight of the metal truck.

The noise was incredible, enough to half-deafen anyone standing in proximity to it. There was no doubt in my mind that some of the workers would come to investigate if we didn't make ourselves sparse quickly. Dust and metal flakes flew up into the air and blinded me. I leaned over the edge of the balcony and breathed a sigh of relief. That did it.

As the smoke cleared, Veronica dusted herself off and looked up at me with a frown.

“Cutting it close there, Maria.”

I walked back down the steps and approached the almost unrecognizable body that now lay beneath the half-built carriage. It was even more hideous up close and personal. It was a stomach-churning creature, with eyes and teeth in all the places

they shouldn't have been. There were still visible elements of the human they sacrificed to create it.

"Did this monster grow out of his body?"

"I don't know. Genta should have the answers. He's been studying demons for longer than you've been alive."

"That's not impressive. I'm thirteen."

"The point is – he's been doing it longer and with less interference than anyone else. The government decided that a closer look at how they worked would be better for security reasons. Looks like their gamble didn't pay off."

"I wouldn't say that yet. Jumping to conclusions before we see the outcome is how important information is suppressed when it's most needed."

"If you say so," Veronica responded. She wasn't convinced, but it was understandable given that Genta's research was now being used to summon horrible demons like this from beyond the veil.

"It's a shame though..."

"It is?"

She laughed and kicked its head with the tip of her boot, "There's no way that my boss is going to let me put a demon on my kill list. I wonder if I can beg them for a raise?"

"Let's leave before the police come to investigate," I insisted. The demon was without a doubt dead as a dodo. Organs and entrails were spewed outwards onto the floor like an impressionist painting. All of that effort was to kill one low-level demon. Veronica was right, letting the Scuncath prepare a bigger ritual was not an acceptable outcome. They were nigh invulnerable.

"I can show them my badge if they ask," Veronica revealed.

"You have a badge?"

“Yes, enough to get by a cordon or get the heat off of my back. I don’t like using it. It attracts too much attention to what we do, and my boss would have my head if a leak happened.”

“They already know who you are.”

Veronica frowned, “Oh, I almost forgot.”

“We should get to Genta before they think twice about letting him live.”

We exited the warehouse and looked across the way to the train. The police were already swarming it, retrieving bodies and taking witness statements from the residents. It was unlikely that any of the other passengers survived once the Scuncath started their rampage. The signs were obvious as to who was responsible, so we slipped away from the scene and headed to the University, which was a short walk from the train station.

The town, Cernbrak, was defined by the University and the institutions that sprouted from it. It was a neatly kept and high-class neighbourhood, with well-maintained midrise buildings and plenty of greenery. It was the model of a carefully designed urban area, established by accident long before that kind of planning knowledge became widespread.

Veronica remained in a disquieting silence during the trip. She was digesting the prior battle, and the sight of me getting up close and personal with those cultists. It was far from what she expected when I insisted on coming along.

I was fairly shaken up too. That entire sequence of events was unlike any job I’d done before. Fighting in close proximity against insane odds, being chased by a demon, and nearly getting my head ripped off by a passing tree while hanging from a speeding train. The adrenaline was still racing around my body. I was shaking.

“Are you sure he’s still here? The sun went down half an hour ago.”

Veronica finally spoke again, “The one thing that everyone I spoke with said about him, was that Genta Cambry is a workaholic. If not for the campus closing at nine o’

clock sharp, he'd be in the lab every night working until he collapsed. They had to drag him off of the premises once because he refused to leave until he was done."

"Oh. I see."

"And I told the faculty that it was police business in a letter a few days ago. They should let us through."

The University building we were seeking was off the beaten path. It was across the road from the main campus, tucked away between a pair of commercial properties and marked only with a plaque by the front door. Veronica didn't have to flash her badge or use her charm, because nobody was watching it for intruders.

"Shows how much they respect his work if they've bundled him into a building like this," I commented.

"Being pushed into a broom closet would be considered a prestigious position here. Tenure at the Walser University is highly coveted, from the main building to the farthest extremities. They have their pick of every expert and scholar the world over."

"You know a lot about this place."

"I always research where I'm going before I arrive. Preparation is half of my job."

Veronica stopped by the empty reception desk and studied one of the signs drilled into the wall. There were several departments located within this building, but the one we were looking for was called the 'Walserian Common History Department.'

'Common History' was a strange way of saying domestic folklore and practice. They were a subdivision of the larger national and international history wings. Those two teams got big, fancy rooms on the main campus. Veronica led me up the steps and onto the second floor, where a narrow hallway led into each room.

Veronica knocked on the door thrice and awaited a response.

"Come in!"

What a whirlwind experience this was turning out to be. We were only twenty minutes removed from almost being eaten by a demon, and now we were changing



gears and asking this guy about the book they stole to summon it. Veronica was going to do all of the talking, so I stepped back and remained by the door so she could handle it.

When we stepped through, it became evident at first glance that Genta was not being inundated with requests for assistance or participation. If anything – it looked as if he'd been living in this small room for a year without going outside. There was a kettle, a stove, dirty dishes and piles of personal items wherever I looked. This was not the office of a collaborative team.

Genta himself was too busy scribbling down notes onto a chalkboard to give us any mind, at least not until Veronica cleared her throat and forced him to turn around.

Veronica showed him her badge, “Doctor Cambry, I’m Veronica. I’d like to speak with you about the recent incident here at the University.”

Genta snapped his fingers several times in a repetitive rhythm before speaking.

“Ah! You’re the fellow who sent me that letter a few days ago! I’m Doctor Genta Cambry. The pleasure is all mine.”

His voice ducked and rose with an unusual candour. His face was overly expressive. I could read him like an open book with the way his brow contorted with each thought that fired off in his head. His neurotic behaviour was not aligned with his outward appearance. He was well trimmed, with black swept hair and a clean shave.

He noticed me hovering by the door but didn’t comment as he awaited Veronica’s first inquiry.

“I didn’t get to see the report about the robbery, but I’m correct in guessing that the Scuncath came here and stole the book during the evening?”

“Yes. I was the only one working at the time. A group of three entered the building and burst into my office here. They threatened to kill me if I didn’t show them where it was being kept.”

“And where was it being held?”

“Not in here. Valuable research materials are stored in a secure room in the cellar. All of the campus buildings have one. You need a key to get through the door, and then each lockbox is closed with a password that only the University fellows know. I don’t have the foggiest idea as to how they got their hands on the key. There are only a few of them and the managers keep their location a secret. I have to ask for permission to read my own work.”

“And you agreed to those conditions?”

“Not me, my Father. The monarchy wanted any and all books of that sort destroyed while he was still actively working on it three decades ago. One of the Van Walsers was a man of learning and the head patron of this University. He offered a refuge for the book, so long as it kept in a secure place and used what was inside for scholarly purposes.”

“So, they knew who you were and that you had the password to the lock box, they also possessed one of the keys? Are the people who managed those keys accounted for?”

“Thankfully. The police went around and visited all of them. They were unharmed.”

“They must have stolen it then,” Veronica murmured.

Her gaze hardened somewhat, and the reaction from Genta was immediate. He waved his hands in a flurried motion, “I-I already gave the police my statement about what happened to my book. I thought that there was nothing more to share.”

Veronica took a seat at the table, intentionally making herself look smaller to control the direction of the conversation.

“While the theft of the book is a pressing matter – my colleagues at the department have another set of questions they’d like to ask you, ones that are more your area of expertise. I’m not responsible for finding the book.”

Genta adjusted his glasses using his index finger, “I’m sorry, I don’t follow.”

“The Scuncath who stole the book have also launched a series of kidnappings across the state. It’s too sophisticated for a group like that. They want to do something with those people - and with your family’s book. I want to know what it is.”

“Kidnapped people? I presume they must be using them as sacrifices.”

“Indeed. They have no trouble with killing as they please. So what did you tell them to make them leave you alone?” Veronica inquired, with an edge to her voice that made it clear that not answering was no longer an option.

“What do you mean?”

“These Scuncath have shown themselves capable of incredible violence. They maim, kill, torture and steal wherever and whenever they please. It defies rational explanation that you were allowed to live once they found where you’d hidden the book. What did you say to them? What did you offer?”

Genta averted his eyes, “I didn’t offer them anything. Everything worth knowing was inside that book.”

“I highly doubt that.”

Genta thought about it for a moment before speaking with a lowered tone of voice.

“Are you the only ones here?”

“Yes.”

“And can you promise me that this never leaves this room?”

“That is within my authority, yes. Off the record.”

“There’s a reason why they didn’t want to kill me. I had to explain it to them, but once they heard what it was – the person in charge stopped them before they could murder me. I swear, I saw my entire life flashing before my eyes! I was babbling, telling them whatever it took.”

“I’m not questioning your sincerity. What was it that stopped them?”

Genta finally got to the point, “The book is special. My Grandfather, the one who started it, imbued it with a unique contractual curse. He was always afraid that something like this would happen – so he installed a backup to those pages to ensure that it never fell into the wrong hands.”

Well, it didn’t do a very good job...

“Whatever you write into that book becomes bound by the curse. If the text is ruined - the memory of those words is erased from your mind. If someone burned it, everything I know about demons would be wiped from my memory. It’s meant to stop the worst information from being extracted by torture should it be destroyed.”

That was one hell of a powerful curse. By writing anything down into the book, the author would become bound by the pact. Their mind would wipe itself like a hard drive.

Genta grinned nervously, “I may have exaggerated a little and told them that it also worked the other way around. I tricked them into believing that if I died the text itself would be erased, along with my mana.”

That was smart of him.

Veronica sighed, “So the ringleader heard that and told them to stop?”

“Yes, that’s the plain truth. I promise on my life.”

She leaned back in her chair and stared at the ceiling, “Is there no way to stop the Scuncath from exploiting that information from here?”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way, Ma’am. Only manipulating the book physically can have an impact - and it only works on those who have written into it. The intent was for the current holder to burn it before it could be used for ill, but I was too late to stop them and do that.”

Killing Genta wouldn’t erase information from the book. If we wanted to stop them from summoning more demons, we’d need to find and retrieve it in person. My mind was elsewhere though, “That is an incredibly complicated curse to cast. How did your Grandfather do it?”

Genta exhaled through his nose and relaxed now that the hard part was done with, “He spent every penny he had on stockpiling crystallised mana and spent years learning how curses worked in profound detail. Even then, the odds of failure were high. But he managed. He transcribed his life’s work into the book and destroyed his

old notes. Two generations later, and now it is my responsibility to build on what he started.”

Crystallised mana was a means to store magical energy. It was extremely inefficient, like a low-density battery. To see any real effect, one would have to bring a significant quantity of them along for the ride, and they weren't exactly portable. They were not dense in terms of storing mana but the physical material was another story.

Crystals that could store more energy, like the one used in the Roderro's time-travelling watch, were so expensive and precious that many believed them to be nothing more than a myth spread by enterprising peddlers. They were partly right; your average crystal collector would never see one with their own two eyes. The science behind how and why they contained a higher concentration was almost non-existent. It was almost all speculation.

Genta's face twisted as a sour thought came to mind.

“If you don't mind me asking, who did they kidnap exactly? Were there any commonalities between them?”

Veronica laughed, “Haven't you been reading the news? It's all over the front pages.”

“I tend to get absorbed in my work. No time for politics or gossip.”

“They're all rich and powerful folks. Nobles, businessmen, politicians. They've managed to scurry away with a huge proportion of Walser's high society, and I get the impression they aren't going to use them to ask for ransom.”

“That's what I was afraid of!” Genta gasped, “The nature of the sacrifice is what determines the demon summoned through the gateway circle! If they were to try and summon a Horrcath of Greed – then it would be an extremely powerful one.”

I scowled, “You're saying that they get even worse than the one that chased us on the train?”

“They summoned one?” Genta squawked in horror, “They summoned a Horrcath onto a public train? Have they lost their damned minds?”

Veronica shrugged, “It killed more of them than it did us.”

“Let me make this very clear to you good ladies – there is no controlling a Horrcath once it is through the veil! They are creatures that act entirely on impulse. There is no reasoning with them, nor is there room to bargain. If what you say is true, and they’ve kidnapped those rich men and women with such an intent, then the damage will be catastrophic.”

Veronica stood back up and clapped her hands together, “Now that you understand the stakes, I’m sure you’ll have no problem coming along with us and offering your insight.”

Genta froze like a statue, “Pardon?”

“A civilian expert on Horrcath is just what we need. I wouldn’t have come all this way just to receive your account of the events that another department is handling.”

“But what about my work?”

“They won’t even notice that you’re missing.”

Harsh, but true.

But I did have a point to raise with her, “While I appreciate the urgency, it is getting late – and it’s highly likely that the train station will be closed while they investigate the incident.”

Veronica slumped over, “I hate that you’re right.”

“We should find a place to sleep and pick this up again tomorrow. I could use some peace and quiet after that train ride.”

Veronica was firm with Genta, “You. You’re not going anywhere. I want you to meet us outside the doors tomorrow by eight and be ready to go. Bring some spare clothes and a toothbrush.”

Genta’s eyes were those of a kicked puppy, “Yes Ma’am.”

