

The person in charge was no slouch when it came to exterior security. A two-bit cult leader would normally barricade themselves inside of a 'secure' location with no escape routes or perimeter defences to speak of, but the Scuncath were more organized than that. Men armed with rifles were posted on the walls, and lookouts surround the fort by residing in the trenches.

If Veronica could slip inside with Genta in tow then it was more than doable for me too. No offense to the gentleman – but he seemed rather out of his depth when it came to physical activities and had a clumsy manner. So much for keeping ill-suited people away from dangerous situations.

The trench we'd selected was to the North of the fort, which was not the direction from which a potential attack would be launched. While I was moving towards our infiltration point I kept a close eye out for the police's staging area. They were already in the town, so they had to be hiding somewhere nearby and keeping a close eye on what the Scuncath were doing.

I did see a few tell-tale signs of their presence, like fresh cart tracks and footprints on the road, but I didn't find the staging area. It was just as well too – I didn't want them to apprehend me and stop me from getting to the fort. It was likely that they'd also approach from the North, since it was the angle where the least guns were being pointed.

I hung under the shade of a nearby tree and concealed myself behind some bushes to observe the patrol pattern on the outside edge of the trench system. They only needed to alert the main building if they saw a big attack coming over the horizon. No amount of discipline from the top down was going to change the nature of these volunteers. If it was anything less than what they could notice over a game of cards or while napping the day away, they weren't interested.

Amateur stuff – but I was not going to let my guard down because one or two of them were enjoying some leisure time in the trenches. It was a dry day so the ground was firm and did not run the risk of giving them trench foot. I imagined that the post would be a lot more miserable once the weather turned.

While the point man's back was turned, I found my entry point and dropped down into it. I kept my head low and started to creep through. There were many artefacts left in the trenches by their current occupants. Discarded pieces of food were the main feature to enjoy, but there were also pieces of torn clothing and leftover weapons.

A few of the guards were gathered around a small wood fire in one of the dead ends. I caught the tail end of their conversation while creeping past.

"You should have seen the look on his face when he found out that Hoffman was waiting for him."

"What did he do, exactly?"

"The idiot went out and grabbed a group of locals so that he could execute 'em. Hoffman nearly blew his cap when he found out about it because they were meant to be keeping watch on one of the walls."

"Seriously? They're going to get us all bloody killed with rubbish like that."

"I thought you were happy to go gently into the Dark Goddess' embrace?" the other man joked.

"Aye, but I'd rather not meet her because George and his gaggle of fools are too busy messing around to watch out for the police."

"George got himself arrested. They tried to get back at the people who caught him without his say-so."

"I don't care what they were trying to do. They should start listening to Hoffman."

It sounded like this 'Hoffman' character was the one in charge, then. It was impressive that he'd gathered so many disparate strands of their movement together like this – but even he showed his limits through incidents like the one they described. There was a strong individualist streak given that this was not a formal organization, and some of them would take advantage to do what they pleased.

I didn't have time to stick around and listen to them talk. I continued on my way until I was overshadowed by the towering outer walls of the fort itself. There was a stone

gateway that led into the first courtyard out back, but that also came complete with a cellar that gave direct access to and from the trench line, with the idea being that the defenders could trigger a retreat should things go sour. There was a single door at the end of the tunnel.

The door was not locked for convenience's sake – or on second thought, Veronica might have jostled it open before I arrived. Finding her was going to be difficult in such a large complex. It would be easier to focus on completing my objective first and worry about her later.

I had strong words for her, but they could stew a little while longer. I stepped through into the gatehouse and shivered as the cold became apparent. These stone walls were not ideal for insulating the rooms inside, and the black stone floors were even worse for it. There was nowhere for warmth to linger here.

I drew my handgun and walked to the steep set of wooden stairs that pushed through the floor of the ground level above. I stayed there for a moment and pricked my ears up for anyone watching the hatch. When I was happy that no one was going to blow me away the moment I peered through, I started to climb. I slowly pushed the hatch aside and scanned the room for potential threats.

There was nobody here, just various crates that contained the supplies they needed to live in the fort. Food, clothes, fuel, and some ammunition – none of which was the right calibre for my weapon. The firearms were notable by their absence, they were being kept somewhere more secure. I wouldn't trust these lunatics with guns either. Hoffman wanted to keep a firm control of who got them and how they were allowed to use them.

There was one more tool that I found in the storeroom. Someone had left a balaclava on one of the crates and left it there. It wasn't the nicest garment in the world, but it had a practical application in hiding their identities and keeping their facial features warm over cold nights. I decided to take it for myself. I did not want more retaliatory attacks against our estate if they got a read on who I was, especially after I was lucky enough to have all of the Scuncath on the train die during the fight.

I slipped it on over my head, but my shoulder-length black hair ended up sticking out of the back regardless. It was good enough for the time being. I'd considered finding a more practical mask after the Rentree debacle but didn't have the time to do it. Those festival masks that Caius brought along were too identifiable.

I felt that I'd come to regret this decision later because I could already feel the stitching irritating my skin.

“Hostages.”

I repeated my objective and focused on what needed to be done. I could theoretically lockpick the cells or melt them using my magic, but that would tire me out before the fighting really started. It would be easier to preserve my strength and find the keys. These forts were not designed with prisoner security in mind, the cells were simply an afterthought and they all used the same locks.

I could also force them open using my lockpick – but that would make me look the fool if they were resistant to attacks like those. If they had the faintest idea of what they were doing, they'd have brought proper, secure locks with them instead of relying on the rusted scrap left behind by the army. The person in charge was no moron. I wasn't going to take that chance.

Featureless stone corridors and rooms stuffed with crates were the full extent of what was on offer in terms of visual navigation. Remembering all of this would demand a well-trained memory, which I was thankfully in possession of.

It was easy for people trained on media depictions of 'stealth' to assume it meant crouching down and staying out of sight. The truth was much different. In my past life as an assassin, I regularly entered places I shouldn't have just by looking confident in myself.

The fort was cramped, with long sightlines and lots of blind corners. It was a recipe for doing everything right but still being seen. I could minimize the odds of meeting someone else, but if that did happen I was not going to panic and dive for the nearest room to conceal my presence. Confidence was the secret. I had a mask, a gun, and mud-covered shoes. I fit right in.

Keep your head high and your eyes straight. It was perhaps an inevitability that I'd run into someone in these corridors. The problem was figuring out where to start. The cells were going to be downstairs where the conditions were the worst, but they could be using any of the rooms for sleeping quarters.

I was forced to peer into each door I came across to try and find what I was looking for. Endless empty spaces met my curiosity, and if they weren't empty they were usually just filled with more supply crates or other discarded objects.

The first break in the pattern came after ten minutes of searching. I opened the door to one of the rooms and was almost jump scared by the presence of a dead body against the left-side wall. On closer inspection, the man had been stabbed in the neck and left to bleed out. It looked like Veronica's handiwork – but why was she starting to pick people off before finding the prize?

There was no time to worry about it. She wasn't leaving a convenient trail of bodies for me to follow regardless, and finding her was the only practical use for the knowledge. I checked his pockets for the cell keys but came up empty. No luck there. Was it asking too much to expect some divine assistance? Surely Durandia could drop me a hint as to where the damn keys were.

They must have been in someone's possession. That posed the question of whether I could approach them without being sniffed out as an infiltrator. I left the room and closed the door so that none of the other cultists would spot the body. I took a left and headed up the stairs onto the first floor of the main building. I could see a lot of them mulling around in the courtyard outside, drinking, talking, and warming themselves through open fires.

Thoughts of concealment were taking a backseat to keep everyone frostbite-free. They knew the police were coming, so what was the point in trying to stay hidden now? I maintained my low profile even as I approached the highly trafficked areas of the fort.

The problem became evident once one of the cultists rounded the corner in front of me, too quickly for any evasive action. I kept my head straight and walked straight past him without a word.

“Hey!”

I paused but kept my cool and turned back to face him. I anticipated a lot of different questions and had answers prepared, but he didn't ask any of those questions. He expressed a shocking lack of curiosity about the very short woman walking around in a pilfered balaclava.

He pointed to my right hand, “Where did you get that pistol? Last time I checked – Hoffman was only giving out old rifles and shotguns.”

That knocked me for a loop. I acted fast and pulled aside my coat, revealing the leather holster which I was using. I'd switched positions because the leg strap was too difficult to reach in a pinch. He got the message and filled in the gaps for himself.

“Oh, you brought it with you. I see.”

I waved in acknowledgement and carried on my merry way.

That was odd even by my standards. I estimated that there were around one hundred fifty people living here, give or take a few dozen. I didn't have a grasp on how long they'd been running as a pack together. It was reasonable to assume that the people who were in it for the long run were already well familiar with all of the names and faces.

I reconsidered what little I knew about the initial attack. It was a series of unified efforts all executed individually. WISA was not capable of putting a pre-emptive stop to it and seemingly had Scuncath agents within its ranks. Organising a large number of people with weapons, directions and purpose would surely attract the wrong type of attention normally. They relied on bureaucratic delay to evade their reach.

A diffused network of Scuncath extremists – all acting under their own discretion after being provided with the tools needed. Each cell would have an assigned leader to give the orders and pass the information through the chain, but they would otherwise keep everything on a need-to-know basis.

WISA was not ready to deal with this kind of modern threat. Armies and nations were slow, lumbering things that could be seen from a mile away with their telegraphed

actions. A normal extremist cell was poorly trained and liable to exposing themselves through poor information control and a lack of decisiveness.

They were expecting to find the same Scuncath they always dealt with. Scattered, violent criminals who had no binding allegiances besides that of their devotion to the Dark Goddess. They were more likely to find the Scuncath killing each other over disagreements in creed than an outside third party. The boss who was running this show changed that and they were caught flat-footed.

Military, most likely; highly motivated, manipulative and professional.

Keeping these ducks in a row was frankly impossible but they were giving it a good try. The Dark Goddess provided a convenient proxy by which to infuse their every direction with strong meaning. That was how cults worked. A figurehead needed to gladly exploit their desires and zealotry to keep a hold on power.

Genta was sure that he knew what they were trying to do – but the big question to me was why. What was the point in summoning a dangerous Horrcath from the other side, was it just to kill more people and potentially revive the Dark Goddess? That didn't feel right to me. That wasn't a goal that would earn admiration on the scale required to organize the Scuncath. It had to be immediate with 'real' consequences if they failed.

It seemed that some of the cultists were more familiar with the group than others. That served me just fine – but it did make me ponder about what Veronica was doing at that moment. She did not strike me as the subtle type, even if a disguise would have made her life easier.

It was even more important if she was towing Genta behind her the entire time. Genta was a recognizable face. They went searching for him specifically once before, and his neurotic stance and rounded glasses were memorable. It was a poor choice in my opinion, and I made that opinion clear to her before she ghosted me.

The best outcome would be to prevent them from summoning the Horrcath full stop. That could be done in any number of ways, most of which did not demand his particular brand of expertise in the subject. If it got to the point where the Horrcath

was present and causing unfathomable levels of damage, it was a little too late to be relying on Genta to help dig you out of the hole.

I reached the sleeping quarters and started sticking my head through the open doors to try and spot the key to the cells. Each room consisted mostly of stacked beds made from wood. If they were lucky there was also a cabinet or create nearby to provide storage space for their personal belongings. It was safe to assume that a lot of the Scuncath were impoverished and couldn't carry much with them.

These rooms were intended to be used like this but that didn't mean they were comfortable. I could feel a draft coming through even though they didn't have any windows to try and trap the heat inside. The messy residents also added to the sense of squalor, leaving their trash wherever it could lay and not cleaning up their messes.

The beds were really rammed into these rooms like sardines in a can. There was barely enough space to manoeuvre between them. It must have been chaos whenever they returned to their bunks to sleep for the night. There were a few cultists doing just that, scoring a midday sleep before they were put onto the evening shift watching the walls and manning the trenches. None of them were aware enough to make note of me.

It was in the fourth sleeping battery that I found the last person I expected to see.

Sitting on a chair by the door was Max. I immediately froze where I stood and stared at him. He stared back. There I was – holding a gun by my waist, a mask over my face and my hand caught in the cookie jar.

“Maria?”

And of course, he saw right through the mask as if it wasn't there. I should have tucked my hair into my coat before galivanting through the fort like an idiot. There was only one girl he knew with a brow this stern and a body this short. There was no getting around it. He'd rumbled me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I whispered.

“I could ask you the same thing!”



His eyes darted down to the gun in my hand and the points connected.

“Your Father is here. Did you come all this way just to try and break him out? Where did you get that gun?”

I had my own questions. Did the cultists put him in the timeout corner? He was sitting in the dim light of the room with a glum expression before I walked in. There was a surge of urgency in his voice as he stood up and grabbed my shoulder.

“Actually, never mind. You can’t stay here for long. They’ve stuck me with some lad who’s keeping an eye on me. He’s wandered off to find food.”

“That’s why you’re not in the jail?”

He shook his head, “Adrian mentioned something about the leader, Hoffman, recruiting people from the hostages. I lured the guards down by calling out for my Dad, and I pretended to join his side. He’s real eager to get some noble money flowing into this operation of his.”

“Do you know where the keys are?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Did he show you anything important?”

Adrian was hesitant to toss me headlong into danger by mentioning it, but he did have the information I was looking for.

“He took me to the throne room that they have in here. If you go downstairs, walk straight across to the next building, go back up the stairs and take a right, you should find some double doors. They have some kind of book hidden in there that they need for their plan.”

He didn’t know where the keys were – but he had seen the book. This Hoffman fellow was awfully trusting to show Max after meeting him for the first time, or rather, his arrogance blinded him to the threat that Max may have posed at the time. He was instilling him with that grand purpose, and to do that he had to show some of the cards in his hand.

“This is way too dangerous. Where did you even come from?”

I couldn't answer his questions without compromising myself. Having the gun in my hand was bad enough, if he suspected that I was the one responsible for what happened at the theatre and party, then everything would start to fall apart.

“Max. You need to stay here and make sure your handler doesn't raise the alarm. I'm going to find the keys and let everyone out of the cells. I know where to take them once they're out.”

“Wait a second! Do you seriously expect me to sit here and let you run off to do whatever it is you want to do?”

“Yes.”

Max was stumped by my blunt response. That momentary pause was enough time for him to recognize that he was being hypocritical by even saying it. He was also risking his safety to try and get them out of the cells, so why was it so upsetting when I did the same?

I gently pushed him back down onto the chair, “You needn't worry about me.”

“Kinda' hard not to, given the circumstances.”

“I've already walked past some of them and they haven't noticed anything amiss yet. It's safer for me to look for the keys. When I get them, I'll come find you and we can escape this damnable place with the rest.”

He really wanted to keep me out of this, I could tell from the way he wavered between grabbing my arm and sitting there silently. His body fell limp as he threw his head back and groaned in frustration.

“This is insane. It's totally insane. How are you going to get everyone out of those cells and away from the fort? They have guards everywhere.”

“The back entrance doesn't have as many portholes, and it's easy enough to deal with the men hiding in the trenches. There's no time to sit here and wait for the police. They're already in the ideal window to launch this heinous scheme of theirs. They could kill my Father and the others at a moment's notice.”

There was no more time to stand here and answer his questions. I turned away and left to search the final few chambers. Max remained seated and did not shout out to me for fear of awakening the sleeping cultists in the barracks with him.

I knew where the book was – and presumably where they were planning on summoning the Horrcath too. I was going to keep trying my current plan, but I'd need to shift gears and get to the throne room should circumstances prove unadvantageous. I could cut off the problem at the source if my initial attempts to empty the cells failed.

But that wasn't a problem. The keys were right in front of me, hanging from the back of a cultist's belt loop. It was the only set of keys I'd seen, so I concluded that at least one of them was the key I was looking for. As it turned out, we were close to the dungeon in question. There were two guards standing opposite the stairwell that led down to the jail.

It was the tightest bit of internal security I'd met since arriving at the fort. The cultists felt confident that the walls and trenches were enough to keep small interventions at bay. Their priority was making sure the sacrifices were ready for the big show. Now, dealing with two armed guards without shooting – that was a tough ask.

I did not want to bring the entire fort down on my head just to snag the keys, and I couldn't walk down the stairs and try my luck lockpicking the cell doors with them watching the only entrance. I stood behind the nearest corner and considered my options carefully.

At least until an ear-shattering explosion shook the entire building.

I almost lost my balance. Dust was wrestled free from the stonework, the building rumbled and groaned, and a bright flash of light leaked into the wood-boarded windows from the outside. I steadied myself against the wall.

So much for subtlety. Veronica must have had other ideas. I stepped around the corner and with all the cool I could muster, I shot both men dead with a pair of accurate rounds to the dome. They flopped to the ground in a heap, and my sticky

fingers helped themselves to the keyring on the first's belt. They never saw me coming.

Cognizant of the questions that would arise when I showed up with the keys, I removed the mask and pocketed my pistol, buttoning up my coat to prevent the holster from being seen on accident. I moved into the spiral stairwell and waited for a minute to pass before stepping into the dungeon's main hallway.

Samantha, Claude, and a pair of unfamiliar faces stood out to my left, pressing up against the bars.

"Fancy meeting you here!"

"Samantha?" Claude squawked.

I fiddled with the keyring and tried each one on the lock until it finally fit and the door swung open. Samantha had an expression that combined abject terror with a looming sense of inevitability. Of course, I was here and involved in this mess – when was I ever allowed to kick back and relax? She was just surprised that I hadn't shown my face earlier.

"What was that big explosion?" one of the older men inquired.

"I imagine that someone decided to detonate their armoury. They will be scrambling to control the damage. It's now or never."

I moved down the hall and unlocked the rest of the cells, releasing two dozen people in the process. Some of them had to be shaken back into wakefulness by their roommates, but eventually, they were all lined up and ready to make their exit. They were all filled with good and reasonable questions, but I wasn't going to answer any of them.

"How did you sneak in here?" Samantha muttered as I returned to the head of the convoy.

"Back door. It's not very well guarded. I don't know how, but some police officers are tearing their way through the place as we speak," I lied, "We'd better take advantage and get out of here before they decide to feed you all to a demon."

That was good enough motivation to get their frozen feet moving behind me. This was the easy part of the job, now I merely had to escort them out of the death trap with only one gun and no backup.

The things I do for Durandia.