

Samantha, Max and Claude weren't certain how long they waited for after he cried out for his Father. There were no clocks - and only small slits in the walls to allow fresh air into the cells from outside. They were already starting to feel the emotional toll that being kept in the dungeon levied unto the other prisoners. They'd been here for three days now.

Their ears perked up, when finally, the sound of footsteps descended the spiral staircase at the far end and approached their cell. Two armed guards stopped in front of the bars.

"One of you shouted an hour ago. Who did it?"

Max felt a brief surge of regret. His cries for his Father had the intended effect. Hoffman was calling for him, and the men standing in front of the cell were going to find out who was responsible for it. He was already resolved to follow through now, and he wasn't going to let someone else take the fall if they intended to punish him for it.

"It was me," he admitted.

One of the men pulled out a key and unlocked the gate, motioning for him to step out and follow them. Max shared what may have been his last look with Claude and Samantha before moving out of the cell and following them. They led him back up the stairs and onto the first floor of the fort, where a small office space had been commandeered by Hoffman.

He was definitely the man in charge, given the level of deference that the other cultists were showing him. That itself was enough to afford him an ominous reputation. What kind of man could control a horde of monsters like this? When they walked through the door - he was busy toying with a quill and shuffling through a pile of documents, a pair of reading glasses perched atop his nose.

Not exactly the image that he was projecting in the courtyard.

The guards left him standing by the door with no further instructions on what to do. Max waited patiently until Hoffman was finished picking through the pages. He peered up to greet him with a smile.

“Hello, young man. How should I address you?”

“Maxwell Abdah. Just call me Max.”

He intentionally made sure to emphasize his name so that Hoffman knew he was related to the same Abdah who was locked up in the basement. Max walked to the chair and took a seat in front of the desk while Hoffman swept the papers aside into neat piles so that they did not obstruct his view.

“A young Abdah! Interesting. Where does your family hail from? I was always curious.”

“Furah, but Walser is the only nation my Father and I have ever called home.”

He stroked his chin, “Furah? I suppose that makes sense. It is the crossroads of the world after all. The perfect place for an enterprising family to make their fortune in trading. I visited once – a town called Sumenia. It was only a brief stay. It was back in my naval days.”

Max had never been to Sumenia. He’d been to Furah twice in his life, and both were for family functions that occurred when he was too young to fully recall the context and events while he was there. As his Father always said, the only reason they went back was for ‘funerals, succession fights and weddings,’ in that specific order.

“Is my Father here?”

“He is. I wasn’t anticipating more guests. What’s a well-to-do young man like yourself doing in Channery?”

Max took a deep breath and tried to unwind the tension in his arms and shoulders. He looked like a scarecrow posted onto the back of the chair. He kept his eyes focused on the objective of this meeting. He needed to convince Hoffman that his loyalty was wavering and that he was ripe for recruitment.

“We came to this town to get away from you, some good that did us.”

Hoffman chortled, “An unfortunate brush with fate. You would have been fine staying where you were. We never had any intention of taking you.”

“No. You were going to kill me and leave me with the rest of the victims.”

“I won’t deny that our methods are violent,” Hoffman said dismissively, “But a few lives are nothing in comparison to the change we seek to enact. We are speaking of a far grander mission than attacking the noble class or begging for money.”

“A change? What kind of change?”

“A change that will shake the very foundations of our society, Maxwell. It is more accurate to describe it as a return to the way things used to be, before the followers of Cath were chased from public life by the overzealous rulers of Walser. I’d like to ask you a question independent of that, are you happy with the way things are now?”

Max paused and considered his words extremely carefully. This was his chance to project a particular image to Hoffman and convince him that he was genuine about joining his cause. He wanted an influential and wealthy person to toy with, he needed only give him a small push in the right direction.

“I count my blessings every day. I don’t have to worry about going hungry or unhoused. I can do anything I want. I’m the third in line to become the head of the family.”

Hoffman inserted his own ideology into the blank spaces he left unsaid; “But that isn’t what makes man happy. Money, a roof over your head, those are not necessarily the things that fulfil us.”

“So, what does?” Max asked, fully tipping the discussion into Hoffman’s preferred direction.

“What people want is purpose. They want to wake up in the morning and have a meaningful goal to strive for. It has to be a goal that they cannot attain simply through wealth – and it has to benefit the greater whole. Motivations that are purely selfish will always fall by the wayside in time.”

Max shrugged, “And you believe that I’m one of those people.”

“That’s right. It’s only natural that you would feel disillusioned with how your life is. Third in line to the throne, left with a repletion of choice that is far too overwhelming

for a boy your age to process. When your Father pulls you aside and states so confidently that you can choose any path you like, does that reassure you? No. In many senses choice can be constrictive.”

Max understood what was happening here. Hoffman had identified a potential weakness in his emotional armour and ruthlessly locked onto it. From there, he could crowbar it open and try to convince him that there was some greater purpose to be found with his flock.

It was smart and terrifying in equal measure. Hoffman was not a blind zealot. He was a man who was skilled in manipulation and rhetoric. Making grand speeches was easy, anyone could do it with enough practice. This was the type of cold-blooded attitude that could only be forged under specific circumstances.

It reminded him of Maria.

This was what Max was hoping for when he called out for his Father. He couldn't appear too eager to agree with his perspective. The bait would need to be laid first, and only then would Hoffman believe that his words were having the intended effect.

“And what leads you to believe that I cannot find a path of my own? I know that there are fields and subjects that I enjoy more than others. Patience is a virtue. I will find the correct burden one day, as is the the inevitability of living.”

“That is an optimistic view of the matter.”

“You haven't exactly given me many reasons to believe that what you're offering is worth hearing out. All I've seen from you are the lives you've taken to get here, and nothing else.”

“They didn't tell you what we're trying to do?”

“Nobody was interested in talking with me.”

Hoffman steepled his hands together and considered what to do with the young man. Having a member of the Abdah family in his back pocket could be useful, and there was little risk of him interfering with their operation before then. He was confident

that there was no potential for them to break out, nor was there time for that information to be useful to the authorities that were seeking them.

“I’ll show you, then. It’s better to hear it from the horse’s mouth.”

Max was forced to stand and follow along as the cult leader led him deeper into the compound, through winding corridors, up a set of stairs, and then back down again. Their destination was a particular location within the Spurbank Fortress that was known to few, concealed behind an inconspicuous pair of doors.

The interior was not so restrained.

This was the single largest space within the fort’s grounds, and it was dedicated entirely to a long, mostly empty chamber. A set of stained-glass windows, otherwise concealed by the surrounding buildings, allowed natural light to seep into the room and illuminate the dais that stood at one end. Atop that was a wooden throne with red cushions.

“This is... a throne room,” Max murmured.

“Correct,” Hoffman held his arms out wide, “This is a throne room. Intended for the then King Walser to utilise in an emergency. Spurbank is special. It’s one of the chosen few locations that were prepared for his usage, should the capital city fall to the enemy.”

“You knew about this?”

“It was something of an open secret to us military men. They never used it for that intended purpose, but it serves our needs just fine. An appropriate space with which to summon the weight that will balance the scales of this world.”

Max’s eye was next drawn to the enormous circle that had been carved into the formerly pristine floor. Hammers and chisels lay discarded in the corner, having been used to carefully craft a series of channels that would allow blood to flow from corner to corner. There were several smaller circles around the edge that were marked so that the sacrifices could be killed there and drained of their essence.

“What is this?” he asked, “What is this circle for?”

Hoffman was waiting for that question. It was time for the grand reveal.

“Max, are you unaware of the ‘irrational?’ The unseen, the untouched, yet the still felt. It stands in opposition to the physical world we inhabit. It is formed from our thoughts, desires and deepest feelings. We cannot perceive it, but we can interact with it.”

He approached the wooden altar before the throne and held up a red-bound tome that was being kept on it, entitled the ‘Book of Cambry.’

“Governments fear what may occur should the public be made aware of it. It is a power that cannot be stemmed by money, law or military force. It transcends the structures they have constructed for their own benefit and lays bare a worrying fact – that they are not the real masters of this world.”

“Did the book tell you that?”

“Nay. The Scuncath have always been aware of this. It is the foundational creed of which we all concur. There are a brave few scholars who defy the government’s wishes and study this ‘other side’ regardless. The Cambry family has done so for three generations, and this tome is their collective masterwork. There is no greater collection of information about the ‘irrational’ than this.”

Max was putting together the pieces using what he’d learned in magic class. Miss Jennings had mentioned irrational magic before. Most all of the spells they learned were triggered by utilising the natural laws of the world to their advantage, moving energy and manipulating elements to conjure the desired effect. That was rational. It subscribed to known reactions.

Irrational magic was the opposite. It was a theory more than a practice. To use magic irrationally and in objection to those laws required an entirely different perspective on the world than what one could normally internalize. Some believed it to be impossible, beyond humans entirely, and those who tried harmed or killed themselves through magical fatigue.

“There are intelligent creatures who live on the other side, Max. They live in a slurry of our chaotic emotions, they feed using it. They have no physical forms lest we offer

them one. They see this reality differently, though we are as much a mystery to them as they are to us.”

And because they lived in that ‘irrational’ world – one fuelled by emotion rather than laws, they could potentially use irrational magic. Max tried to stop himself from looking too shocked by the revelation he was enjoying. Hoffman wasn’t trained in magic. He didn’t know this or even consider it.

“We intend to summon one of them here and to ask them to deliver unto us the struggle that we so desperately need. We must take on the responsibility of the Dark Goddess and present a difficult trial for our world. We will allow the virtuous and the strong to prove their worth, so that future generations may live on in safety.”

He was going to plough ahead no matter what the potential consequence. Max’s imagination ran wild with scenarios. What was irrationality really capable of? Could it control time, or drive a person to madness, or wreak untold destruction at the snap of a finger? Could this creature from the other side, born from emotion, become tired and run out of energy like a human could?

An unstoppable monster. A beast given purpose by a group of lunatics. This was no simple matter of striking out against the nobility. They intended to plunge Walser and the surrounding nations into chaos by using that power. Such a perverse purpose was enough to make him feel sick to his stomach.

“This plan of yours. Why? Why do you need to do this? Wouldn’t summoning this creature be even more destructive than sitting back and waiting to see what happens?”

Hoffman placed the book back down and nodded, “I understand your worries, Max – but let me ask you a question in return. Do you think that humans are best placed to decide when enough is enough? When the civil war killed thousands and thousands, did we step back and reckon with that loss? Call for an end to the bloodshed?”

Max shook his head. He didn’t have an answer that would satisfy him.

“No. They lived in their ignorance and issued more marching orders, to kill more, to shed more blood, to extract an emotional toll from us that still has not been paid off.

Using this circle – we can summon the Horrcath and slowly tighten the noose until it leaves this reality and returns home. There is no question and no ignorance that can allow it to continue with its slaughter. It is like a great industrial machine, working until we tell it to stop.”

“But how can you be so sure that you’re not the same?” Max asked.

Hoffman grimaced, “You can’t. Nobody can ever truly be certain of that. I do not ask of others for their blind faith in my good nature. I only understand what I wish to do. To worry about how others may see me is folly. I am not in the business of drowning myself in what-ifs. This circle will sever the contract after two months, and there is no ability for the Horrcath to break from that limit.”

Max could only shake his head. What else was there to say when faced with such an insane plan? He was meddling in matters he did not understand solely for the purpose of causing death and destruction which he foolishly believed he could control. Max knew one thing for certain – the first victims would be Hoffman and the rest of his flock.

“I’m happy to open our arms and welcome you to the cause, Max. Should it come to this, I would lend you my support in securing your place at the head of the family. There will be a vacancy, after all.”

The pained expression on Max’s face was not from a genuine sense of indecision about the offer, but rather a deeply felt sense of shame about the act he was being forced to put on. Every word Hoffman spoke only inflamed the outrage he felt, yet he was not permitted to take him to task for them. It would ruin his chances of getting out of the cells for good.

He’d already gathered a lot of helpful information about what they intended to do. That book was the key to all of this. He had to find a way to get it out of the throne room and to somewhere that was concealed from the Scuncath. It wasn’t lost on him that Hoffman was wearing a gun holster beneath his coat. Now wasn’t the right time.



“Do I even have to say that I remain mostly unconvinced? You seem to believe that this world isn’t acceptable as it is, even though everyone in Walser is enjoying the peace. I thought that a military man such as yourself could appreciate that.”

Hoffman was not upset by the observation, “I don’t like conflict - but conflict is a natural part of life. It flows through everything we do, from the actions we take to the cruel words we speak. I intend to cause a controlled release of this despair before the tides grows too great and drowns us all.”

Max timed his response to perfection, “I’m stubborn, but not that stubborn. If I see evidence of what you say with my own two eyes, then there’ll be nothing left to debate, will there?”

Hoffman was so eager to pull the youngest Abdah to his side that he leapt at the opportunity. That killer instinct of his was a great strength when it came to manipulating others, but it could also serve as an equal source of weakness. He was so assured of his success that he never considered that he was being taken for a fool.

When the prize was right in front of him, why would he have any reason to delay?

“I want you to see the humanity in these people, Maxwell. Their kindness and their passion – which burn even brighter than mine. If you’ll allow me to invite you to one of the rooms. I’ll assign another member to watch you and make introductions.”

A handler. Hoffman wasn’t going to give him free rein of the fort yet. It was still progress. Perhaps he could find something else of note during that time that could help the others escape.

Max maintained the ambiguity so as to not close off his chance, “I don’t want to be in those cells any longer. I’ll see whether they measure up to what you claim.”

Hoffman smiled revealing his crooked teeth. That was it, he’d secured his victory against Max in the rhetorical war of words. The opportunity cost of releasing him from the jail was low, but the potential returns if he became the head of the Abdah family in Walser were huge. Max could single-handedly fund his entire operation for the rest of time if only he could sway him onto the Scuncath’s side.

Which was exactly what Max was hoping for him to think. It was perfectly understandable for an arrogant man like Hoffman to believe that he held all of the cards. His opponent was a thirteen-year-old boy who hadn't been through a quarter of the things that he had.

Hoffman placed a hand on his shoulder and led him away from the chamber just as a group of stonemasons entered to continue their work on the summoning circle. A short trip through another building brought them to one of the living quarters. Hoffman was looking for someone to hand Max off to, and it had to be someone he could trust to follow his orders down to the letter. The incident with the wall watch was still fresh in his mind.

"Feldstein, are you here?"

A head popped out from one of the bunk beds, "You called?"

Hoffman waved the new face over and introduced him to Max, "This is Maxwell – a new associate of ours. I want you to keep a close eye on him during his probation period."

Feldstein frowned, "A new associate. Where did you find him?"

"Some of the idiots on the wall abandoned their post and kidnapped some townsfolk while I wasn't looking. This lad here is the third son of Abdah. He seems curious about the creed."

"He's an Abdah? What are the chances of that? The Dark Goddess must really be smiling down at us right now."

He spoke those words with an friendly sincerity that was a hard contrast to their actual practices.

"I have to watch the last stages of the process and make sure that everything is perfect before the summoning ceremony. Can I trust you to take care of it?"

"No problem. I'll give him the best Scuncath welcome I can."

That was all Hoffman needed to hear. He turned without saying goodbye and marched away, leaving Max with a new face to guide him through the complicated and messy world of the Scuncath cult.

“I say that, but I don’t know where to start! You must have a lot of questions about us and what we’re trying to do.”

Max crossed his arms, “Naturally. Hoffman said a lot about finding meaning in my life, but I’m really the most curious about him. It must take a special sort of person to organize so many people under his banner.”

Max resisted the urge to talk about their bloodthirsty, selfish manner when it came to operating without him holding their leashes. This softer language was a concession made for the sake of winning them over and maintaining his newly acquired privileges.

“You’re right about that. Hoffman cuts an intimidating figure, but he wouldn’t be in charge if he did nothing but bark orders. Scuncath have been scattered to the four corners of this nation for a long time now, and he’s convinced us all that he’s going to bring us back in a big way.”

“Bring you back?”

“Yep. The Cath weren’t always a bunch of people worshipping in their basements. Back in the day, they were equal partners with worshippers of the light. The government didn’t like that – so they dissolved the church and pushed us underground with each passing generation. They’d fill the kid’s heads with a bunch of scare stories about the carnage the Dark Goddess unleashed, even if that went against the texts they themselves believed in.”

“It’s difficult to see how Hoffman and fix that.”

“He never said it’d be easy. That’s what I like about him. He doesn’t sell us a load of rubbish and promise the world. We have to reach out and make that change ourselves, instead of relying on other people to do it for us.”

Max was struck with the kind of deception that Hoffman used on Feldstein. This situation couldn't be interpreted as anything but a suicide mission. They were holding up inside of a fortress and taking the fight to the police, and potentially summoning a monster that could kill them all in the blink of an eye. These were not actions one would take in the interest of preserving a religious movement.

Hoffman filled his head with promises. They weren't big promises or wild exaggerations, and he was frank about their odds of success, but they were promises nonetheless. Feldstein was blinded by his persona.

"But bringing back the church is the second priority right now," he rationalized, "Hoffman thinks that there's a big calamity coming to Walser if we don't do something to stop it. That's why we're here."

"Uh-huh, that's what he told me too."

This was dangerous. He was in the hornet's nest and he didn't know how any of them would react to his presence. They'd tell themselves whatever it took to keep the charade going for as long as possible. The whole scheme stunk to high heaven but Feldstein was blind to it.

"Ah. You don't want to hear me ramble on about greater purpose and all that. I think we'd be better off walking around the fort and seeing what everyone is up to, I can show you where the food is served too."

Max meekly followed his guide out of the barracks.

*'Goddess help me.'*