

I got the impression that Veronica still wasn't taking me seriously. Or more accurately – something was stopping her from fighting earnestly. This shouldn't have been so difficult for her. She was older, stronger and had a longer reach than me. She was fighting a teenager in the throes of puberty, any muscle mass I tried to put on was a coin toss as to whether it would stick.

Technique could go a long way, but there were limits to what I could achieve without waiting a few years. I continued to press the advantage and force her back towards one of the still intact buildings in the yard. The rest of the group tried to keep us in eyesight without exposing themselves to the cultists who survived.

One of those survivors emerged from the door to see what the new commotion was about. He never stood a chance. Veronica moved behind him, reached out and pulled him into a headlock, using him as a human shield while I pummelled him with a series of punches. His head whipped back with a freshly broken nose before she dumped him into the mud like a piece of garbage.

She moved left and caused me to kick the stone wall.

“What’s wrong? You don’t seem eager to throw punches anymore.”

Veronica scowled, “Is that accent your way of mocking me?”

“No. This is how I sound when I drop the pretences.”

“You’re a stupid girl. This fight is pointless. We could be out of here and home free by now!”

“I’d rather not spend the rest of my natural life experiencing sleepless nights, waiting for a fool like you to kill us all with that book. Surely a cynic like you understands what’s going to happen if your handlers get their hands on it.”

Another flurry of blows was exchanged between us, our defences becoming weaker and less pristine with every passing second. This was no longer a pretty duel between two trained fighters, it was a brawl, bare knuckles and bloodstained shirts. Veronica’s dress was already caked with mud and blood. A trickle of the red stuff came from her nose and rested atop her flared upper lip.

She struck back, striking me across the brow and leaving a nasty cut. The blood flowed immediately and heavily, threatening to blind one of my eyes and make life much harder. I was forced to wipe it away and keep my vision clear, which meant defending against her was almost impossible. I had to step back and keep my distance.

Veronica was waiting for that. She charged at me and wrapped her arms around my midsection, lifting me up into the air and through the wooden boards that kept the stable held together. We crashed through them and into a pile of unused hay. It stole my breath, so she took the opportunity to gather her thoughts and recover.

She wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth, “It doesn’t matter what I understand or what I want. I follow the orders they give me and that’s that.”

I wheezed, “Then why don’t you destroy it, or lose it? If it’s anything less than forfeiting your life – that would be preferable to letting them have it.”

“You’re too idealistic – Maria. The military men upstairs want the book, and they’re leaning on us to get it for them. Do you think that life is a series of choices that you’re free to take? It’s not. Most of the time we don’t have a choice at all!”

“You can’t choose? So, what the hell was it when you met Damian and had me?”

Veronica tensed up as I neatly encapsulated her past in a single statement. That was the truth, the one which she tried to obscure with non-committal words and that ever-present smirk. The reason I’d never met her was because she feared what would happen to me if they found out.

“Falling in love with a nobleman, getting pregnant – they would be furious if they found out. So you hid it. You ran away from them for months and months until you could deliver me and wash your hands of it, even when you risked your life in the process. If that wasn’t a choice that you made, then what was it?”

Veronica reached down and pulled me back up from the floor by the shirt, throwing me back through the front gate and into a roll. The floor beneath our feet was a mixture of dry patches and puddles brought about by the disturbance of the ground water. I barely avoided dousing myself in the muddy swill and potentially infecting my wounds.

She gritted her teeth, “What do you know about me? What do you know about what I’ve done, and what I’ve been forced to do? You’re right. They would have killed me, tied me up like any of their other little loose ends, but I never had a choice! It was keep you from them and beg for forgiveness, or let them catch me and die. There was only ever one path forward!”

She punctuated each declaration with a heavy blow – forcing me back further and further.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. That’s the whole truth. When I delivered you, I promised Damian that he’d never see me again, but life always finds a way to shovel a fresh load of shit into my face. I was right about everything. The moment we met you were dragged into this, the one thing I didn’t want to happen.”

“We live in dangerous times, Veronica. I got into plenty of trouble without you.”

I countered one of her punches and swept her leg, pushing her and leaving her off-balance. I charged in and grabbed at her left arm, wrenching it around her back and trying to apply pressure. Veronica was wise to my plan and quickly unwound herself from my grasp. In return she slipped an arm under my crotch and lifted me up into the air, legs and arms flailing on instinct.

“I didn’t want you to have the same childhood that I did. Waking up and learning how to kill. Never getting to be a kid,” she chuckled deliriously, “But some good that did. Look at you. You’re everything I didn’t want you to be.”

I was brought back down to earth as she released me. I protected my face during the fall, but the land robbed what little air remained in my lungs and stunned me. Again, Veronica refused to follow up and seal her victory. She just stood there and stared as I collected myself. I gripped the dirt between my fingers and glared up at her.

“Don’t ditch me for thirteen years and then act surprised when your ideals aren’t faithfully executed. I’m not just some toy for your amusement.”

“That’s a load of pish and you know it. Your Father’s been keeping a close eye on you ever since. How could you possibly turn into this without him finding out?”

I laughed, “Wouldn’t you like to know? Damian isn’t always at the house - he’s busy with business. A mischievous young noble is liable to find themselves means of entertainment.”

I lunged at her by kicking myself up from the ground and headbutting her in the gut. Veronica gasped and staggered back into the wall, bouncing off of it and moving back towards me. I took advantage of my surprise attack and continued to throw my fists at her with wild abandon.

“I never needed your protection! I can handle myself!”

Her head whipped to the left with a spray of blood escaping her mouth. She staggered back, but reversed the momentum and came back at me with a violent swing of her own. I was too tired to put my arms up in time to block it. I gritted my teeth and bore the pain instead. My vision blurred and my neck was forced ninety degrees to the right.

“I did all of this for your sake! I didn’t want you to be here! I didn’t want this to happen!” she roared.

She grabbed me by the collar of my blood-soaked shirt and hit me again, and again. I’d riled her up. She was using all of her strength to overpower me. All it took was to touch her raw nerves. To mock her for everything she believed she was doing and the hard reality of what she could not.

In that moment – my mind was a million miles away from the fort, or the book, or any of the problems that were eating at me. My eyes were focused squarely on the man waiting in the wings with a rifle in hand. I had to move. I used the last of my strength to draw my gun and slip it beneath her arm. Just before he could shoot Veronica in the back, I took him down with a return shot to the skull.

Veronica took advantage of my decision. She came down with another firm punch to the bridge of my nose while I couldn’t defend myself, leaving another cut and sending

a fresh flood of red stuff into my eyes and mouth. The taste of iron submerged my other senses.

He fell. I fell.

That was it. Veronica had won. I made a choice. I chose to shoot that cultist and save her life. The rank brutality of what happened was starting to sink in. Damian, Genta, Samantha and the others watched in stunned silence, and gasped at the state of my face when I turned my head to the side.

Veronica stared down at me. I couldn't move. My legs collapsed under their own weight when I tried to get up again and I found myself lying on the floor with black spots pecking at the edge of my vision. I tried to will my uncooperative body into moving but it was no use.

“Stay down. Please. Just stay down.”

I looked like hell. Veronica couldn't even stand to gaze at the damage she'd caused without wincing. Bruising, swelling, ugly yellow and purple splotches covering my cheeks and brow. It was the first time since my rebirth that I'd been seriously injured.

She would have preferred for this to have blown over and for the plot to be executed without a blemish, but that was stupid. No plan survived reality. There were too many people gunning for you, waiting in the wings to screw it up. She was always ready and willing to get her hands dirty to complete the job – just like me, but this was personal.

Suddenly that same act which she performed so many times before took on a new, disturbing meaning. She took it for granted. Now it had brought her to the gruesome sight of her own daughter beaten and bloodied. When she turned back to speak with Genta and the rest – she hesitated. This was the last situation she wanted to be in. Now she had to be the 'bad guy.'

Veronica wiped her bloodied knuckle clean on her dress and walked towards them.

“Give me the book.”

Claude, staring down the barrel of a metaphorical gun, was left with little choice in the matter. He chose to do the correct thing and hand it over. There was no good

outcome to denying her now that she was willing to use force. Veronica snatched it from his hands and shoved it into Genta's chest without looking back at him.

"Hold onto this, and don't let go no matter what."

"Veronica – you're threatening this young man..."

She turned on him, "This is a lot bigger than one or two people. That damnable monster they summoned just killed half of the fort by looking at them, I needn't wax lyrical about what might happen if someone else gets their hands on it."

Genta found her actions visibly distasteful. He stepped away with the book cradled in his arms and refrained from complaining any further. Veronica and him both recognized the clear hypocrisy in what she was saying. The book was too dangerous to be left in irresponsible hands, yet that was what she was planning to do all along. Anyone who wished to use the book were not suitable guardians.

"Gwyneth."

The simple mention of her name gave her pause.

She was trying desperately to ignore what this meant. Damian had witnessed her brutally beating their daughter into a pulp, all for the sake of a book that would endanger the lives of millions of others. In her mind, there was a small recognition of what she could have done. I was right, she thought, destroying the book and making an excuse to the handlers would have been easier and safer.

The ultimate weakness of any person is their stubbornness. Their refusal to accept that they were wrong. Self-reflection was presented as an important virtue, but how many people in Walser could honestly claim that they never dug their heels into the dirt and defied reason to save face?

Veronica had done the same. She fell down the slope and refused to admit that I had a point. She bristled at the mere thought of being in the wrong, but she couldn't ignore the widespread destruction caused by the Horrcath. If not for Genta changing the contract and keeping its time short – then it could have killed tens of thousands of

people in a blind rampage across the country. Giving that power to anyone else wasn't keeping Walser safe.

That principle – the one that guided her every action, was now contravened by her actions and beliefs. She wanted to keep Walser safe for my sake. She wanted to create a Walser where I would never go hungry or be placed into danger, and she desired badly to spread that same safety to other parents as well so that there would never again be a generation of children like her. Destitute at the hands of war before being absorbed into it as a new weapon.

All of this was for that purpose, yet she was the one who ended up harming Maria the most. All of her precious principles and wants were nothing in the face of her cowardice. She was going through the motions, following orders like a good little soldier. At the most critical moment she failed to do what she intended.

That was the reason she didn't keep the book in her hands. She didn't want to touch it. She didn't want those ill-gotten gains, or the responsibility that came with.

Damian wavered between confronting her for what she'd done or running to render aid to his daughter. I was still lying flat on my back and trying to keep the blood from stinging my eyes.

"What is this? What was the purpose?" Damian demanded.

Veronica shook her head and said nothing. She was not the one left holding the Book of Cambry between blood-stained palms. It was Genta. She had handed it over to him without fully thinking about the implications of doing so.

I saw his feet moving out of the corner of my eye. He stepped away from his protector while she was distracted by a confrontation with her former lover. He was being carried by a sense of responsibility – the very same that brought him here to recover the book in the first place. He understood now that there were only two choices left.

Recover the book and have it used for ill, or destroy it.

He was getting dangerously close to the fire that burned behind us. Veronica's mind took a moment to catch up, before she connected the dots and comprehended what

he was trying to do. He was going to burn it. He was going to destroy the book and keep her handlers from seeing what was written inside.

In an instant the balance of power was flipped on its head. The time I spent fighting Veronica was time wherein he thought about all of the words and actions she'd committed until this point, and within that reflection was an important realization for Genta. Veronica was always after the book.

Genta knew what was inside but he was also a squishy human with troublesome issues like 'morals' and 'standards.' That wouldn't do for a government agency trying to get its hands on a secret weapon monopolized exclusively by him. They needed the book because the book couldn't withhold information from them.

Bringing him to the fort was another part of her calculated risk. He could provide all of the expertise she required to avoid fighting the Horrcath directly, and she could then pilfer the book and leave him with nothing. It was more worth it to risk his life in the fighting than to go without his experience in the field, and she could always get the book later if he bit the dust.

He was right in front of me now, approaching the burning timbers created by Veronica's explosive surprise. She sprinted towards him as quickly as her injured legs could carry her, but it was too far a distance for her to cover before he was at the burning pile of lumber by the collapsed internal wall. She skidded to a stop in the dirt and changed tack on the spot.

Veronica held out her palms and tried to plead with him, "Genta, think about what you're about to do! That is your family's life work! Three generations of your family have been adding to that tome, and it'll be lost forever if you burn it! Have you lost your mind?"

Genta shook his head and nodded in my direction, "I should ask you the same question. You told me that you wanted to protect that girl come what may. Was that all just a lie so that we'd leave her behind?"

Veronica gritted her teeth; "That was a lie. I made it up."



“I’m afraid that I’ve already made my conclusion, Veronica. Of all the things you’ve said to me since this ordeal started – that was the one and only time you have been truthful with me. I could tell. If you truly meant what you said back then you would agree with me that this book is too dangerous to be left intact.”

“And what about your family’s legacy? That book means everything to you!”

“There could be no greater stain to my family’s legacy than to let you use this book as a weapon of war. To unleash destruction on an even greater scale than the Civil War would leave millions cursing our name for the rest of time. I won’t have it. I will not allow my Father and my Grandfather’s work to be appropriated in such a way!”

Veronica wanted him so desperately to be available to her for negotiation. She wanted to believe that a specific combination of words and rhetorical arguments would prevent Genta from taking the step he was threatening to. Genta was not available for negotiation, nor was he willing to listen. Seeing her point a gun at Claude was the last piece of evidence that he needed to see. This book was driving people to madness.

They weren’t ready for the truth. Not yet.

“Nobody will even know that you were involved!”

“No. You don’t get it. The truth always comes out in the end. Brilliant men and women will make sure of that. They’ll correct the record, make history, and bring light to the darkest corners of our society. If not that, then the guilt will compel me to tell! We might not be ready for the truth, or even satisfied with it, yet we seek it all the same.”

“Genta!”

He held it above the flames.

“I thank you for your effort, Veronica. This is my favour to you.”

And with that – Genta dropped the book into the pyre.

Veronica tried to run forth and grab it before it caught alight – but the fire was too large and ferocious for her to recover it without burning her hands to a crisp. The old book, filled with a hundred years of family history, caught alight with immediacy.

Those weathered pages served as the perfect kindling. In an instant, the Book of Cambry was no more. It was not only the destruction of the written words but the memories that spilt forth onto the pages. The curse was activated.

Claude and Genta collapsed on the spot.

“Claude!” Max cried, catching him in his arms before he could hit the ground.

I was in such a rush to stop Hoffman that I forgot to tell him about the damn curse. He’d scribbled something onto the back page of the book. Both he and Genta were experiencing a novel sensation. Patches of their memory were died black with ink and obscured from sight, leaving inexplicable gaps, separating connective tissue and rendering them deeply confused.

Genta had it the worst. He’d spent decades of his life following in the family business and studying the book for all of its secrets before adding his own. While part of that learning remained with him, all of the original contributions he made were bound by the curse and wiped from his memory.

Veronica stared, shell-shocked at the blaze and the rapidly withering cover of the book she was ordered to collect. I didn’t know what she felt at that moment. Despair, fear, or relief? She would no longer have to hand the keys to Armageddon to a group of people she distrusted. Walser would not suffer under the yoke of another powerful Horrcath.

Samantha descend on my position and winced at the sight of my injuries.

“What in the Goddess’ name were you thinking?”

I grinned, “It worked out in the end.”

Samantha sighed and used her healing magic to close the cuts, and a clean rag she kept in her pocket to wipe away some of the blood that had covered my face like a red mask. She then helped me back up to my feet, using her superior strength to keep me aloft. I limped towards Damian and tried to conjure up a convincing excuse.

For the time being – he wasn’t interested in hearing any explanations.

“We should go. The police are going to be here soon.”

I was in no condition to refuse. I could barely walk under my own steam. Damian hooked my other arm and all but lifted me from the ground, hurrying my carcass to the exit I'd planned to use originally. Max and Adrian carried Claude. Genta and Veronica were left there, but I saw her reaching down to grab him and make a similar escape. I wasn't worried about them.

It was a relief to finally see the outside of the fort again. We rushed down the trench line, keeping a vigilant eye out for more cultists as we went. Further from the walls, it was easier to appreciate the destruction that Veronica and the Alchemist had caused. The inner courtyard was almost completely demolished, and several fires raged violently, billowing a curtain of black smoke into the air.

I passed in and out of consciousness until we reached the police line over the hill.

I came to with a worried-looking Samantha hovering over me from above.

"Where am I?"

"A medical tent. That woman beat you black and blue – but they said there should be no permanent injuries. Just a faint scar on your brow."

"I know. Faces are fairly durable."

It was a miracle that Veronica hadn't shattered my cheekbones or nose. She was putting her full weight behind those last punches. I may have lost the battle, but that display was enough to convince Genta to hand me the victory overall. The book was gone and for the time being, Walser was safe from another demonic incursion.

I looked down at my body. My shirt, which was white a few hours ago, was utterly soaked through with blood. There was scarcely a patch left untouched. This was what happened when someone cut a vein in your forehead with a glancing blow. It looked worse than it was.

"I have a headache."

"Well that means you need to lie down and rest-"

I swung my legs over the edge of the cot and sat up. The shifting centre of gravity made me feel light-headed, but it was better than lying there and stewing in the misery.

“You’re unbelievable. The Doctor said that you need to rest.”

“I am resting.”

“No, you’re not.”

We stared each other down, but Samantha’s stern expression cracked and she covered her mouth in a hopeless attempt to stop her laughter from leaking out.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just... it’s very funny when you try to look intimidating with one eye swollen shut.”

It was the first time Samantha had seen me defeated in anything, from shooting, to studies, to tennis, to bare-knuckle brawling. A chip in the armour that I surrounded myself with. The mystique of the invulnerable Maria Walston-Carter was partly dispelled.

“I honestly didn’t expect her to hit me so hard. That’s what I get for riling her up.”

“You didn’t expect to win, did you?”

“No. What I said was more important than the punches I threw.”

Samantha exhaled, “You always have to have a little victory tucked up your sleeve.”

What I wanted was not necessarily to beat her in a fight – but to confront her with the consequences of her actions. It was a gamble based on her prior words and statements, and now her response served as the arbiter of truth. She wasn’t full of crap after all, she might not have realised that and lied to herself, but it was true.

We both spoke in concert.

“I want to talk with you.”

“I’d like to have a word.”

