

Insight: Insomnia
by James Thomasos

Reina Tethas

“You really are pretty hardcore, huh?” Temra - the woman I had gone home with earlier that night - commented as she ran her fingers absentmindedly down my ribcage.

“You think so?”

“For sure.”

“How so? I thought that was rather vanilla, to be honest.” I stuck my tongue out at her, laying on my back and looking at Temra on her side, propped up on her elbow examining me. She played at nipping my exposed tongue before throwing the sheets off of both of us, exposing our skin to the chilly Autumn air that had suffused the room from the slightly opened window.

‘I didn’t mean **that**; though if you’re down to spice things up I’m not complaining...’ She traced a finger tip amongst various scars I wore with varying degrees of indifference; they were mostly indicators that I had - at some point - screwed up, “At a glance you seem so... demure. But then you get a bit closer and it’s like... ‘Oh damn, this bitch is kinda *cut!*’ and then it’s ‘Oh wow, she’s seen some *action*.’” That drew a small chuckle out of me as I reached up to play with her hair; honestly it sometimes seemed almost overtly conspicuous whenever I took someone to bed and they **didn’t** mention the Mouth I had in place of my right eye.

I gave a sharp gasp as she suddenly reached over and roughly grabbed my right side just behind my ribcage, “Then - once it’s too late to turn back - there’s the giant fucking spider tattoo.” She briefly dug her nails into the abdomen of the vaguely black widow-ish spider that was tattooed on my obliques: four of it’s long, segmented legs reached down the length of the four ribs directly beneath my breasts. Something of an impulse decision that I was glad I did - very temporary pain aside - back when I was in my late teens. It-

“What’s this about, anyhow?” She asked, drumming her fingers along the edge of the black and red inked arachnid. I looked up at her for a moment - this wasn’t the first time I had been asked this - and started to consider my options... But you know what? Fuck it, this is just a casual hookup; who cares if I’m the crazy spider lady to her after this?

“Well, you remember what I told you about when It eats a dead eye, right?” I pointed up to the Mouth that resided in my right eye socket; It was still fairly calm at this point. I fed It yesterday evening and It has since then been more than content to feed off of my Psychic Energy. I probably had another night of sleep before it started making demands in the form of piercing headaches again.

“Like the eye plucked out of a deadman? Yeah, you see the last couple minutes of that person’s life. You’re bloody awful at pillow talk, you know that?”

“Hey, you asked,” I decided to just commit to give her some shit, “So what do you suppose happens when It eats an eye pulled from a person who still lives?”

"I... Hmm. Not sure actually. Is that a thing that happens?"

"More often than you'd think: It does something similar to using PsyEn to Reinforce your vision. Tell me, what were you taught was beyond the Elemental Planes that loom just above our Material Plane of Existence?"

"What's that got to do with the spider tattoo?" She gave the tattoo a little flick.

"I'm getting there; what did you learn?"

"...Nothing. It's all just empty space robbed of all matter after the great Battle of Concepts."

"Right, that's what I was taught too."

"So... what? Are you going to tell me that your weird PsyEn Ability lets you see something else?"

Heh. People always assume that the Mouth and all it does is my Ability, "Well..."

The Elemental Gods of our world - Solbalim - are exactly what they sound like: sentient clusters of Earth or Water or Fire or Wind with power of such an incomprehensible magnitude that they were literally and figuratively able to claim entire *ideas* as their own. Existing at a mortally impossible intersection of *absolute* Substance, Soul, Element, and Mind... they were able to wield the power of Creation to make not only domains for themselves to call home in the vast nothingness that was 'existence', but created the vaguely renewable, completely chaotic power source that was this planet and all the life on it.

But everyone knew all of that.

I suppose I should talk about something only *I* know.

After years of consuming all manners of eyes taken from both the living and the dead, a funny little thing happened. For the first few minutes after consuming a living eye - if I look up - I can see something else up there, beyond the sky, maybe even beyond the stars. Something else living high beyond our realm other than elementals so powerful they gave **themselves names** and *physical forms* and created their own Planes to reside on.

"What else could possibly be out there?" She had asked me skeptically.

"Spiders, of course." I had replied, man did she get a kick out of that nonchalant response.

That's right, it's just indescribably large spiders all the way up. Sometimes, in the first few minutes after I consume a living eye and I think 'Wow! That's the biggest Spider I've ever seen!', I inevitably see an even larger one I never noticed before. Nothing super fancy, nothing 'out of this world' or 'alien'. Just... fucking Spiders, you know? *That* is my big secret... and just like most people's PsyEn Abilities... it's just super fucking mundane.

I told Temra about the Spiders and pissed off for the night. It was early in the morning - just passed 1 A.M. - but I wasn't really in the mood to stay the night after *that* conversation. She got a kick out of my explanation: saying that she didn't expect that I'd be, "Hardcore, Hot, **and Funny.**" So... that was cute I guess. I took the compliment in stride and got myself out of there; I'll never not prefer the comfort of my own home, regardless of the hour.

The streets of Riveiranja were quiet with the occasional drunk straggler looking for an establishment that had not yet made last call; a fruitless effort this close to a residential district. Nighttime in Riveiranja had an odd, dream-like atmosphere to it with all of these magical, softly glowing pink flowers that the city apparently had bought off of some traveling mercantile Witch some time ago. They were extremely useful, super sustainable night light sources that you could find most places these days. Apparently this Witch traveled all over the Human territories with utter impunity... which is terrifying since they're typically cannibalistic creatures that eat both Humans and Fae to power their immortality and terrible Magics. There was a certain irony to the notion that such a creature of fear and loathing would provide Humans with a tool to combat the darkness.

Huh, I must still be a bit tipsy... pontificating about Witches.

I left behind the heavily flowered streets of the trade district and entered the relative darkness of the North-Eastern residential district where the duplex I lived in was located. I climbed the winding path that only had a scattering of flowers that some kind souls had donated to change the path from 'excessively dark and windy' to merely 'annoyingly dark and windy'. I walked up the short path from the road to the duplex, not surprised to see that Greg - the chain smoking zombie that was my landlord and upstairs neighbor - was absent from his usual spot on the balcony above my front porch. He was only ever there while the sun was setting, never at night. At my door, I fumbled for my key while I tested my door knob... which was unlocked. I let out a long, frustrated sigh; this was Greg's weird way of letting me know that he found someone trying to break into my home, and just let them in to avoid property damage.

I wish people would stop just entering my apartment, for fuck's sake.

I crouched down and went around the back of the building, making sure that my head stayed out of sight and below the windows. As I made my way around back, I grabbed one of my improvised weapons that I leave hidden under a bush for this exact situation: a small, dense club a little under 3 centimeters thick and 40.5 centimeters long; just short enough to swing around indoors **without** breaking all of my shit. I slipped my hand through the tight wristband that was connected to the handle of the bat with a strong, but flexible ribbon that gave me a limited ability to javelin the thing into unsuspecting criminal's faces and have it return to my hand or let me build up some dangerous centrifugal force for bigger, tougher foes.

I silently pushed open my backdoor which Greg also kindly left unlocked in these sorts of situations. I had him grease the hinges to the Outer Planes and back so I could keep the element of surprise whenever I needed to do this. Quietly picking my way through my dark kitchen, I Reinforced my vision and peaked over the bar counter that separated my common room from the kitchen. Sure enough, I could see the dim PsyEn outline of someone sitting on

my loveseat near my weapons cabinet. My lumen crystal was on the bar counter, rather than by the door like it usually is, so they must have used it while I was gone. With that in mind, I snuck around to the other side of the counter and faced her. I slowly reached behind me with my off hand, Reinforced my body and touched the lumen crystal.

Warm yellow, stored sunlight filled the room suddenly and the woman who had been curled up on my loveseat, wrapped in a blanket that didn't belong to me, jumped up with a scream and raised her arm to fire a small, arm-mounted crossbow in my direction. My club flashed across the room as I moved towards her, crushing the left limb of the crossbow. I yanked it back by the ribbon, caught it, and sprung in close; delivering a swift upper-cut to the tricep of her shooting arm and smashing the butt of my bat into the bicep of her off-hand. Both of her arms dropped limply to her side as I grabbed her hair and held the bat up behind me overhead menacingly.

“Wa-wa-wait-please-I’m-sorry-you-scared-me-please-stop-hurting-me!”

“You broke into my apartment and were about to nail me to my own countertop.”

“I... was startled.”

“Well me too...” Wait a minute. Why do I know this face? I blinked a few times, still holding my bat in the air. Oh shit-

“You’re Deirdre Somnus. Wanted for-”

“-DON’T! *I. Did. Not. Kill. Him.*” The brutal evisceration and exenteration of Cairn Alexton, a dock worker native to Riveiranja. I had heard about it through various channels and since there were no eyes... there was no work for me. I did not have the same relationship with the detectives of Riveiranja that I had with the various precincts of Shanae. While they *did* have a system for making use of civilians with useful PsyEn Abilities, they were generally unwilling to make use of my investigative abilities if what they regarded as my ‘Ability’ wasn’t involved.

As my heart rate slowed down and the adrenaline rush of combat faded, I started really thinking about our situation.

“...Why were you wrapped in a blanket on my couch?”

“I was **scared!** *Why* didn’t you enter through your front door!?”

“...Because my door is only ever unlocked when Greg *lets* a would-be intruder into my home. Why can’t you people ever fucking wait **outside?**” Talking to Greg about this was essentially useless; he just did *not* understand modern standards

“*Because* I’m wanted for a crime I didn’t commit!” Hmm.

“...Sit.” I ordered her, pushing her back into the loveseat that she had originally been balled up in. She didn’t seem like she was lying about being scared... What’s going on? I backed away from her, opened my weapons cabinet - keeping a wary eye on her - and grabbed some lengths over rope. She slouched a bit in the loveseat and looked quite defeated as I tied her ankles and

wrists together. I stepped back and took in the woman I just tied to my couch: she looked to be about my age; in her late 20s - maybe early 30s - with long, black hair that was presently tied up in a loose ponytail, but probably went most of the way down her back. She was wearing an overly large, dark blue hoodie that clearly didn't belong to her and some loose, blonde wind pants that did appear to be her own. Just as the perp-description of her noted, she had streaks of white in her hair - they had said two in the description - but there were four now.

It didn't look dyed.

"Alright. Talk." I commanded her, placing the various objects I had taken off of her person onto the coffee table between us. There was a broken arm-mounted repeater crossbow, a small leather bag that seemed to have a glass bottle inside, a wallet, a pocket knife, and another bag that reeked of various familiar herb mixtures: painkiller, sleep agent, and birth control.

All extremely concentrated doses.

Her eyes were darting all around before settling behind me on my lumen crystal, "Lucky. You must be well off... to have such a thing..." She grimaced as she spoke, as if doing so hurt. I Reinforced my eye once again; her skin had a sickly pallor to it and her eyes were sunken in too far for her hastily done make-up to be of any use in obscuring her exhaustion. Earlier I had simply thought she had been Reinforcing her own body heavily and that's why her Coating looked so faint. But looking at her in full glare of lumen light, I was forced to conclude that this woman hadn't slept in *days*.

She looked off to the side out the blinded window, "I... um... So I guess you know that... my name is Deirdre Somnus. I've been... living in Riveiranja for... 7 years now. I work part time as a lookout on one of the... Southern Outer Watchtowers and otherwise make my living by... cooking at the Cat's Tail... you know the place?" This woman could barely finish a sentence without yawning now that the adrenaline of my ambush was wearing off.

"Sure. Can't say I've been there though." She turned to look at me abruptly upon my speaking, as if she'd forgotten I was there; her blue irises were particularly striking due to the puffy, teary redness of the rest of her eyes.

"A shame... anyhow the- they-" She took a sharp breath and shook her head in frustration, "*Everything* started three... maybe four months ago? The passage of time has been funky with my sleep being so... irregular. Every night - assuming no one else was sleeping over - around... probably two in the morning... **Something** enters my apartment."

"Something?" She clenched her jaw and shook her head vigorously up and down. She seemed to get slightly energized by me entertaining her story.

"**Something**... I've never gotten a clear look at It. The first time it happened I had been asleep and I woke up *scared*. I couldn't hear anything and nothing smelled particularly off. So I pushed back my sheets, grabbed a knife, and tip-toed toward my bedroom door and listened. It was closed and I couldn't hear much over the... pounding of my heart in my ears... But... I could **not**

reach for that door handle. No matter how hard I tried... my body just... wouldn't listen to me. Has that ever happened to you, Reina Tethas?"

"I might know a thing or two on the topic... Continue." I prompted her, still skeptical. Perhaps - if nothing else - I'd get a pretty cool ghost story to tell at a bonfire out of this night.

"I see... So... I was paralyzed in front of my own bedroom door, super certain that if I opened that door... **Something** worse than death awaited me. So I backed away from the door and peered out my window. My apartment is up on the 5th floor - you see - and I'm not so confident in my Reinforcement to try to land a jump like that. You will laugh at me, but when I heard my doorknob start to jiggle, I whimpered like a child and... dove back into my bed and under the covers and prayed. And prayed. And prayed. And when I heard the door open... I just kept praying to Nashtav that I'd live to read another book. Isn't that funny? The things we think about at the very end..." She was trembling and I was even more confused. This was clearly no act; this was genuine, unadulterated, pure terror pouring out of this woman.

"It was so still in my room. So quiet except for my prayers and then... Nothing. I heard the door creak shut after some amount of time and... I just stayed under the covers until I felt the warmth of the sun on my sheets... I had a few friends let me sleep over after that; I doubt they believed it to be... anything more than a bad dream. But you have to believe me: **It was real**. No... You **will** believe me. I haven't been able to sleep if someone else isn't in the apartment with me since then. And without fail... every time I'm alone... It happens again. **Something** comes to my room, opens the door, and closes it. And... and..." Tears began streaming down her face.

"...And then?"

"My friends eventually got sick of it... But I work at a bar, you know? It's n-not difficult t-t-to find some willing guy or gal to go home with after my shift... So I did that for a couple months, right? But recently... I had to c-close shop and- and they didn't *wait* for meeee!" It felt weird having a crying woman tied to a chair in my living room. Am I the bad guy here somehow?!

"So I had to go home alone and -and as soon as I got home," She was starting to hyperventilate, "**It** appeared! So I ran to my bedroom and I closed the door and I-went-under-the-covers-and-I-heard-the-door-open-and-then-I-felt-it-getting-closer-and-then-it-"

"Calm down. At the very least, you are safe he-"

"DON'T YOU DARE!"

““ ...””

"And then it..." I began for her.

"And then I... felt the pressure of it getting... on the bed... and looming over me... and it got close. Oh dear god it got so **close**... a-and it said-

*You were never **safe** under the blankets.*

That is what this 'something' said to her, allegedly, in the deepest voice she had ever heard. The rest of her story was a jumbled, sputtering mess after that. From what I could piece together the following evening she did not go to work and instead went down to the docks and flirted with a number of dockhands until one unfortunately fellow by the name of Cairn Alexton encountered her. He wouldn't take her to his place because 'roommates' or something to that effect and she eventually relented and brought him home. They were in the middle of another round of sex in the early A.M. when a 'Nightmare' came out from under the bed and attacked them. She tried to run away while he attempted to fight it off, but she once more was unable to open the door, so she dove back under the covers without him and let get killed by the nightmare.

Ugh. I couldn't help but roll my eye.

You can ask any detective - private or otherwise - what the most common, sorry-excuse-for-a-criminal-defense they've heard is. They'll all tell you something along the lines of, "It wasn't me! It was a monster from the Plane of Nightmares!" We've all heard someone try it at least once: "The Beast emerged from beneath the bed/the closet/the ceiling/the darkness/etcetera and did X, and it just so happened to not touch me because Y. Therefore I'm innocent!"

It's "The Dog Ate My Homework" of criminal defenses.

Sigh

But before she passed out, she had muttered, "The proof is in the bag." I looked back up at her - still tied up - she was having a fitful sleep, twitching, wincing, gasping and muttering to herself. Perhaps she'll be more coherent when she wakes up. I pulled the drawstring and the bag fell away, revealing-

Eyes.

Two sloppily removed eyes in a glass bottle.

I sighed again, but the Mouth drooled hungrily.

...Well we've already spent *this* much time. May as well give it a look. I grabbed some homemade saline solution and poured it into the bottle of eyes, stoppered it, and shook it a bit so the eyes no longer stuck to the wall of the bottle. I checked Deirdre's bonds before sitting down in my rocking chair and using my improvised spoon-tongs to fish out one of the eyes from the bottle. I took a steadying breath to prepare myself for the coming death vision and fed the eye to The Mouth.

*Man this is one **thirsty** chick. Hot as hell too. Fucking. Score.*

In a career-first for me, the trance from Cairn Alexton's perspective began well into their ill-fated sexual encounter. On her bed and standing on his knees, her legs and arms wrapped around him as he deftly held her up by the thighs and rocked her up and down on his erect penis; an erection mid-trance being another first. People aren't usually so turned on mere minutes before they bite the dust.

Pfft and everyone gave me shit about going home with her too. Sucks to be the- the fuck?!

As he opened his eyes to take in the sight of Deirdre's gasping face underneath the dim pink glow of a single magic flower. He noticed a slight movement out of the corner of his eye over her right shoulder.

An enormous, brown, sharp clawed hand reached up from underneath the bed.

"YO WHAT THE FUCK?!" He shouted as he threw her off of him onto her back. The poor bastard had leapt back off the bed to get his feet planted on the ground, ignoring the shock and pain from his sudden movement on his rapidly wilting erection and swinging balls. How do men even move with all this extra baggage?! Deirdre screamed across the room, she sat at the head of her bed with her back up against the corner. There was a breathy hiss as this uncanny... thing reached out another claw and with a pull that shook the entire bed, slid itself across the floor.

It was naked - much like everyone else in the room - it had to be at least two and a half meters tall, judging from how its 'head' nearly touched the ceiling as it planted its feet and dragged itself up to its feet without any assistance from its hands like a marionette. Its flesh was brown, splotchy and glistened with an amphibious moisture in the faint pink glow of the room. Its head was too small for its huge, lanky form. It had a face that vaguely resembled a human... but it was upside down with hollow eye sockets on its 'chin', an inverted nose, and a mouth that was wide open revealing disturbingly normal human teeth and a long, lolling tongue hanging down near its eyes.

It had no ears.

"FUCKING RUN WOMAN!" He had abandoned yelling in favour of screaming as he bolted for the door to the room, reached for the handle and-

I'm going to die.

If I open this door, I am going to die.

But I need to run.

Why?! Why can't I open the door??!

He knew he needed to run; that even armed he was no match for this monster. But there was such a profound certainty in this man's heart and mind: if he opened that door, it would somehow be **so much worse**. He spun around to face the fleshy monster that seemed unable

to move steadily. It was taking tentative steps in multiple directions as if unsure of how to move its body properly, it's limbs and head wriggled spasmodically like a worm in a bird's beak.

Where... What.

He could see her from the door - just passed the moist, twitching abomination - quivering underneath a blanket like that was going to save her.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. She's so fucked. I. Need. To. Run.

He looked to the window and tried to calculate how high up he was and if he could tank the landing by fully Reinforcing.

Better than being eaten. He ultimately decided as he sprinted for the window, but-

Pain.

My mind slammed back into the present with a gasp as I reflexively clutched my belly.

The Monster from beneath the bed rammed its claw effortlessly through his un-Coated back and out through the front, it's nails tangled up in his intestines and parts of various other organs. I've not experienced **pain** like that from an eye-induced trance even at the hands of **Her**. I grabbed a small towel and wiped both sweat and the incidental leftovers of the Mouth's meal from my face. I took a few deep breaths to steady myself and thought about what I just witnessed.

...

Well I'll be damned.

She was telling the truth!?

...**Wow.**

As I started from the eye-induced trance, I looked across the table at this poor woman whom I suddenly felt very bad about tying up. She was awake and regarding me with a mixture of awe, disgust, and fear. I felt myself flush and glanced away, having just had the oddly unique experience of a second-hand sexual encounter with my new client. Perhaps I was mixing up my own thoughts and the memory of the Cairn Alexton, but somehow the fact that he didn't even finish before being brutally murdered seemed like particular salt on the wounds.

Moving on.

I cleared my throat, "Well - Ms. Somnus - it seems I owe you an apology," I quickly walked over to her and undid the bindings. She seemed fairly unbothered, simply folding her hands in her lap rather than rubbing at her wrists or ankles, "Can I get you some tea? Some juice? Whiskey? Hot cider with whiskey in it?"

“Deirdre, please... and the last one, please.”

“Good choice. Give me a minute.” I made my way over to the kitchen to get a fire going and she followed me into the kitchen with a blanket over her shoulders; I guess she didn’t want to be even a little bit alone. I had to shake my head at the courage it must have taken to sit in the darkness of my apartment; I wonder if I would have been brave enough to sit in the dark alone after going through what she’s been through.

Likely not.

“So you came to me because you needed *someone* to believe you - I get that - But surely you aren’t expecting me to go 1-v-1 a **Nightmare** and bring it to justice. ‘Cause I’m pretty good at my job... but that seems like a bit much.” I poured some cider into a pot and set it over the flame on my stove. Deirdre was half sitting, half leaning against one of the stools in my kitchen; she clutched at the blanket that hung from her shoulders like a shawl with obvious desperation. She still looked incredibly haggard; she was going to need a **lot** of sleep and a **lot** of therapy to ever go back to looking or feeling normal.

“You’re wrong. If I thought that being imprisoned or executed would end this, then I’d have just gone to the police. I came to you because I want this to **stop**. I can’t keep doing what I’m doing... and I can’t let anyone else get killed because of something clearly after **me**.”

Ah.

That struck uncomfortably close to home.

I sighed as I poured a double shot of corn whiskey into one mug and a half shot into the other. Then I killed the fire beneath the pot and filled our mugs almost to the brim with hot apple cider. I offered her the stronger of the two mugs and she accepted it gratefully. She took a small, tentative sip, thought about what she had imbibed for a second before a look of approval crossed her face and she continued to drink it. Once you go hot cider and whiskey, you never come back.

Or at least I like to think so.

“Alright. Looking into this is the least I can do after doubting you and tying you up.”

“Really? Thank you. For real. I don’t know what I would have done if you had turned me away.” Based on what she had told me, it seems like she might not have survived her next encounter with these Nightmares. There is no way that what she’s going through was any kind of common, otherwise it wouldn’t be such a joke whenever someone made the claim that ‘a nightmare did it!’. We continued to sip our beverages in relative silence as I thought up what I was getting myself into.

What did Deirdre need, exactly? Evidence. She needed some kind of proof that she was not the one who killed Cairn Alexton. Worst case scenario: I actually encounter a Nightmare. But if the monster from underneath the bed DOES show up... that gives me an idea. Since I’d already seen the jiggling monstrosity and felt the presence of that mysterious intruder on the other side

of the doorway, I don't think I'd freeze up so long that I'd be unable to bail out through one of the windows; worse comes to worse I can get myself out of there.

What to bring then?

Mug only half empty, I brought it with me over to my weapons cabinet and keyed into it. My gaze drifted towards my Fekthal-made handgun, but I shook my head. It didn't quite have the kick I needed to deal with a monster as large as the one that came from beneath the bed and I was worried about wall penetration with the bullets it used. When I was doing a routine investigation I tended to use more non-lethal, blunt melee weapons... But holding back in this case could very well be fatal. Stopping power and rapid, lethal force for the purpose of retreat, then. I took a short-barreled, break action blunderbuss as my main firearm; compact, powerful, and pretty low kickback. If it's just a quick in-and-out in the apartment, I shouldn't need much in terms of ammo. I couldn't help but cringe as I took a single box containing six shells and emptied them into one of my hip pouches; these things were NOT cheap. I grabbed my usual dagger and strapped it perpendicular to my back on my belt and also took a sturdy hatchet for good measure and holstered it along my right thigh. Armed and ready.

So what to do with Deirdre, then?

As if reading my mind, she asked, "...What should I do?"

"Well... You're currently wanted and being around you is dangerous for those not in the know... and honestly probably those in the know as well. I would ask you to stick by me, but I don't think that it's a good idea to bring you back there. If possible, I'd ask you to stay here."

"...Alone?"

"Yes... ugh, well maybe not? My landlord lives upstairs and he's... uh-," A zombie and thus would probably be fine? Can't say that though, "Quite capable. We'll grab a few more blankets and some candles and set you up on my front porch. He'll chill and smoke right above you. He's got a lot of stories, I think you could get along." That was the best solution I could come up with on such short notice; there really was no time to lose with this. Each additional night that passed was another potential victim and another step closer to breaking point for Deirdre.

"...Okay. Yeah. Okay I think I can do that."

"Excellent. You're being quite strong - for the record - let's get you some blankets and I'll see what I can do to help you. We can discuss payment if we both make it through tonight."

I was **definitely** the most suspicious person out tonight.

Taking side paths and rooftops when I could and armed to the figurative teeth, this was not inherently all that different from when I'm actually working as a private investigator as opposed to a Civilian PsyEn Contractor. CPECs like me didn't technically work for city security forces or investigative squadrons, but had useful PsyEn Abilities that could help with investigations or

information relays. The security forces of Riveiranja did not mind me acting as a CPEC, but were usually very bristley about my history as a PI. But hey, gotta put food on the table somehow.

I had stopped by Greg's place as I was leaving, explained the situation to him and promised to bring a keg - Yes, **a keg** - of something to drink with him on my next free evening. He came out on the balcony and started immediately inquiring about Deirdre's origins in a near endless barrage of questions that I quickly distanced myself from. Surely if anyone could keep her distracted tonight, it would be that chain-smoking zombie. As I exited the residential area that I called home and my boots made muffled clicks on the cobblestone, I couldn't help but find the thick fog that had fallen over the streets a bit heavy-handed. The pink glow of the light-giving flowers gave the fog a muted, distractingly opaque hue.

It was unsettling to say the least.

Or maybe I'm still a bit rattled by that death vision.

The apartment building in question was fairly standard as far as living quarters in the trade districts went: skillful, if not a touch old and faded brickwork, a collection of storefronts specked all four walls of the ground level and each floor contained a sizeable hallway with four small apartments on either side. Not quite up to code enough to run businesses all the way up, but *just* up to code enough to be able to rent the rooms reasonably cheaply to people working in service industries. This particular building was five floors of faded, yellow brickwork; years of repainting did nothing to hide the fact that the bricks themselves were starting to wear away; my target was up on the top floor.

Knowing that the crime scene had already been picked over at this point I went around back and used the normal back entrance; no need to get fancy on the way in. The outer door brought me to a vestibule with a locked inner door on the other side. I grabbed a pick and pressure wrench and made short work of the three pin tumbler. After letting myself into the building proper, I put away my tools and pulled out a vial containing saline and an eye removed from a living creature. Considering the nature of this assignment, I decided to bring a couple of eyes that had been removed from living humans from my stock; I wanted maximum fortification of my Insight for this investigation. Not to mention the Mouth would stay 'full' a lot longer with a human eye; one of the many strange quirks of that thing. I emptied the vial into my hand, moved my bangs off to the side, and slipped the eyeball up into the Mouth before *It* started straining for control of my neck.

Making my way inside and up the stairwell, I found it to only be dimly lit by the small amount of light entering from drafty windows going up the side of the building in regular intervals and by a single pink glowing flower hanging from a wire above each landing. These dim, indoor flowers I once heard were very, very old; I guess they lose their shine over time just like anything else. I've yet to get over just how rich this city must be to have these Magic light sources be so ubiquitous. They *had* to have been quite expensive.

I finally reached the top of the stairwell; the last few steps creaked uneasily. The top floor was set up exactly as the others: one long hallway with four apartments on each side connected two stairways leading to the front and back entrances. The room in question was the closest on the right - room 52 - and had a small wooden plank attached to the door that read "KEEP OUT: CRIME SCENE. -R.I.S" The Riveiranja Investigative Squad posted such plaques up when they hadn't yet completely cleaned the mess left by a crime, but after evidence was collected. I pulled on my slim, brown leather gloves and tried the door and-

It was open.

It squeaked open far louder than I would have liked and I slipped in quickly; leaving it wide open. I didn't feel the same sense of foreboding and danger that I had when I experienced Cairn Alexton's dying moments, but it was uncomfortable and strange that the door wasn't locked. After all, what's the point of putting up such a sign and NOT locking the door? I started to reach for my hatchet and dagger, but decided against it and grabbed the blunderbuss instead; I didn't want to turn a corner and come face to face with that thing without some stopping power at ready. Slowly and quietly I picked my way down the dark hallway whose corners were barely visible due to the compounded effects of Reinforced vision and fortified Insight. I passed by the empty restroom on my left, the empty kitchen on my right, and approached the bedroom door at the end of the hallway.

Keeping the blunderbuss' butt braced against my left shoulder and tentatively grasped the door handle with my right hand... No strange feeling. I turned the knob quickly and threw open the door, bringing my right hand back to position on the barrel. The room was still filled with that gentle pink glow, so I allowed the PsyEn Reinforcement of my vision to fade and strengthened my Coating instead. I could see the familiar window from the vision on the left wall of the room and a bloodstained on the ground not far from it. Not dropping my guard, I slowly crossed the threshold into the room and - turning to keep my back to the left wall - I panned around the room. It looked mostly the same: the dresser immediately to the right after stepping through the door had been shifted around a bit during the investigation, as well as the bed in the back right corner of the room opposite of the door.

I first sidled over toward the window to open it; I thought it would be prudent to secure the emergency exit in this case. Unlike our two victims, I was confident enough in my PsyEn Basics to be able to tank that drop if I *absolutely* had to. With that taken care of, I approached the bed and then-

What the fuck?

As soon as I got within a couple of meters of the bed, I felt... tingly? Even as I tried to grapple with what the sensation was, I had the presence of mind to jump away from the bed and towards the door.

Which was closed.

When? How had I not heard it?

Keeping my eye on the bed, I felt for the doorknob with my right hand and as soon as I grasped it I felt the Mouth begin moving around as if it were chewing. This must be the fear-inducing trigger that Cairn and Deirdre felt whenever they tried to leave the room... but the Mouth doesn't allow for anything to be able to tap into my mind except itself, for better or for worse. I opened the door and was met with nearly impenetrable darkness, but as my eye adjusted from the pink glow of the room, I managed to make out a silhouette at the end of the hallway. The sense of absolute dread I felt at seeing that shadow was quite real - certainly not a trick of the mind - considering the Mouth was still actively chewing on *some* sort of mental effect.

A voice deep like a magibeast's roar quietly inquired, "You. How **Are**. You Here?" I shut the door quickly, retreated from the shadow at the end of the hall and went for the window, but - of course - the thing from underneath the bed was in the process of emerging.

Perfect.

I held the blunderbuss in my right hand and drew my hatchet with the left as I changed course towards the bed. I spang towards the bed where the Nightmare's claws had grasped to extricate itself from whatever pocket dimension existed beneath the bed and pulled in all of my PsyEn to Reinforce my swing. The hatchet dug deep into the base of its finger and there was an otherworldly, echoing shriek that pierced the ears like a dagger. I grimaced, yanked the hatchet out and slammed it back down in the same place, severing the long, clawed finger with a crack. I snatched it and shoved it into the larger of my two hip pouches; this was the evidence I was hoping to acquire if this thing really did reveal itself: the murder 'weapon' that would perfectly match the wounds that Cairn Alexton received.

I jumped backwards - keeping my eyes on the screeching Nightmare that was still halfway under the bed - until I felt the draft of the open window. I whipped around in midair just before I landed to face the window. But just as my foot came down on the ground, the door to the bedroom flew open and a shadow swept across the room impossibly fast. Figuring that it was coming to block the window, I pivoted and dove left towards the bedroom door; effectively switching places with the shadow. I hit the ground rolling just before the threshold of the open door, grabbed the doorknob as I stood up, slammed the door behind me and sprinted down the hall.

Mere moments later, there was a crash behind me and I reflexively glanced over my shoulder. The Nightmare from beneath the bed had not bothered standing or turning around, but had assumed a back bridge position and charged full tilt right through the closed door, shattering it in rain of splintered wood. It's upside-down 'face' was now somewhat more normally oriented and all the more disturbing for it. I managed to tear my eyes off of it and kept running as fast as I could down the hall. As I reached the still opened front door, I heard the Nightmare come up right behind me. I took a Reinforced jump through the doorway, turned in mid air, and fired my blunderbuss.

With its open maw less than a meter away from me, it took the entire shot to the head with a powerful CRACK. It screeched even more loudly and stumbled backwards as I hit the wall opposite of apartment 52 back first. With no time to catch my breath, I turned from Deirde's

apartment to run towards the stairwell, confident that it wouldn't be able to recover immediately from that much fire power at near point blank range. I was three Reinforced bounds from the stairs. During my first bound I cracked open the blunderbuss to load another shell. During the second bound I shut it with a satisfying snap, successfully reloading it.

It was halfway through the third bound where my luck finally ran out.

I suddenly felt a violent yank at my trailing ankle and was whipped into the floor with a shocked scream. My leg or hip might have broken if I hadn't already been Reinforcing my body. It began pulling me face down back towards apartment 52 alarmingly fast. I pushed off the ground with my free leg and clenched fists - one of which had managed to maintain a hold on the blunderbuss - in order to flip myself over and get another shot off on the thing. But to my shock and horror I didn't see the Nightmare, only it's long tongue coming from the open apartment door. It pulled me back into the apartment and continued dragging me on my back closer and closer to the bedroom. I - with considerable effort - sat up and let it drag me on my ass momentarily. Straining at my core to stay up right, I drew my dagger from behind me and started slashing at the thing's tongue... but to no avail. It was rubbery and flexible like a frog's despite being shaped overall like a human's.

I crossed the threshold into the bedroom and saw that the shadow from before was gone, and the beast was entirely absent. The tongue - however - relentlessly dragged me towards the space underneath the bed. It was going to take me to... where exactly? It had me, why not just eat me? Did the blunderbuss spook it **that** badly? That seemed unlikely. Could I shred the thing's tongue with a gunshot? Not at this angle with a blunderbuss, not if I wanted to keep my foot anyhow. Even if I destroyed my foot to escape, I couldn't guarantee that this thing or the shadow from before wouldn't just come and get me again whilst I bled out... Best to conserve my next shot then for when I can see its face again. My mind raised through all of these myriad thoughts in the couple of seconds it took for me to reach the bed from the door. All along, I let my dagger drag on the floorboards behind me with my right hand - some indication for any investigators that *something* supernatural happened here - whilst holding the blunderbuss at ready in my left hand.

I leaned backwards and resheathed my knife, getting both hands on my blunderbuss and peering into the impenetrable darkness under the bed. I didn't hear anything. I didn't see anything. But if I felt its mouth, another round was going into this thing's head. As my lower half disappeared underneath the bed, my legs felt chilly. Then my stomach. Then my chest. Then my neck and-

My world was swallowed by cold, engulfing darkness.

I woke up with a quiet gasp seconds - no, maybe days? - later. Where am I? I got pulled under Deirdre's bed by a monster and...

Oh. **Shit.**

After confirming that there were no entities in my immediate vicinity, I sat up; the painful bump on my forehead and bruising on my forearms told me that I was possibly, probably, definitely **not** dreaming. I was on top of a tall hill covered in dark, emerald green grass almost a meter tall that swayed gently but inconsistently in a breeze whose direction could not seem to pinpoint. There were rolling hills in every direction and various light sources in the distance. Under any other circumstance, this could have been *anywhere* in or near Fae territory. But considering how I got here and having passable education on the Elemental Pantheon, I knew exactly where I was:

The Dreamscape, The Domain of the Wind Elemental - Cephea - Goddess of Dreams and Nightmares.

I got fucking *Plane-Shifted* - Physically. Actually. And Entirely - To the fucking *Dreamscape*. I didn't know a TON about The Dreamscape. I knew that there were two distinct planes that are layered essentially on top of and within each other: one plane for Dreams and one plane for Nightmares. As a result, it's fairly easy to slip from Dream to Nightmare and vice versa. But that's only if you're here *properly*; I hadn't been here in my sleep since before the Mouth appeared when I was a child. But most importantly: I knew that you're **not** supposed to be here *physically*. Only Cephea and her Saints knew what would happen if I stayed here for too long... nothing good came to mind.

I took a few deep breaths and was about to reach for the other Living Eye I brought with me, when I noticed movement above me. My gaze snapped back upwards and-

Spiders

But it had already been a bit since I last had a living eye!

I could see them so... clearly: some at rest, some skittering here and there, sometimes on near imperceptibly thin, sometimes terrifyingly thick spider webs. I even saw the gargantuan, black widow-like Spider that was tattooed on my side skittering upside down across the Web like it always did... My favourite of the Spiders that I had been able to see since I was 10 years old. Was it just me, or did it feel... **closer** here? Wait... could *everyone* see the Spiders when they came to the Dreamscape? Or was it only when you were here *physically*? Could the denizens of this plane see them too?

I don't have time for all of these questions.

With the Web and the Spiders normally visible on this plane, I had no way of knowing if my Insight was active after Plane Shifting. I decided to pull out the living eye after all, figuring this may be the last quiet moment I get from this point forward. As I fed it to the Mouth, my vision shimmered more noticeably than usual and I suddenly felt drawn to - huh, which way's North? - my right. There were what looked to be flickering, grey torches in the distance. I cracked open the blunderbuss to ensure that it hadn't gone off when I got swallowed by darkness - it hadn't - and ensured I still had my knife and hatchet. Seeing myself still well armed, I focused my PsyEn in my eye briefly to generate a Third Eye effect and checked my Coating. No head-trauma associated anomalies... so I guess no more reason to stall.

Deep breaths.

I can do this.

I made my way down the hill, moving unerringly in the direction of the grey lights, but never looking in one direction for too long. It didn't seem *right* for this place to be *this* quiet; just the rustling of the dark green grass in the directionless breeze. There were rolling hills in every direction and very few large stretches of flat land here; just too many blindspots in this place.

I don't like this place.

I don't know exactly how long I walked - with no proper frame of reference for the passage of time on me or in the environment - but it must have been a little over two hours based on how my feet were starting to feel. It was then that I started to get that slight tingle on the back of my neck like I was being watched. I gave no indication of this knowledge and continued unabated, trying to figure out the mostly likely angle of attack. Whatever was watching me was stalking me magnificently in terms of stealth, but was not doing a particularly good job of hiding its bloodlust.

Not unlike a wild beast.

But this was The Dreamscape... the same rules don't necessarily apply here.

The sensation of being watched continued for another long while, aggravating the sinking dread that accompanied feeling like I wasn't getting any closer to the lights. I had slowed my pace somewhat, which served the dual-purpose of trying to bait out my would-be stalker and conserving energy. Since I was here physically, hunger and especially thirst were going to be an issue. I always had two small flasks on me; one of saline for storing newly plucked eyes and one of water for drinking or rinsing. I had been sipping at the water intermittently and it was already halfway drained. My only hope was that me not appearing to make any progress towards the grey lights was some manner of illusion even the Mouth could not protect me from and that it could be dispelled by confronting the Nightmare that was following me.

Fortunately and unfortunately, it seemed my hunter was getting as impatient with my constant guardedness as I was and finally made its move. I noticed a near imperceptible shift in the sway of the grass ahead of me and to the right about halfway down a hill I was about to pass. There must be something crouched low on that hill ready to pounce. I reached for both my hatchet holstered on my right thigh and my dagger behind me and partially drew them without breaking my gait. I took one step... and two... three... four... five... in 4 more I'd be right next to the ambush... eight... Nine!

It was a perfectly silent leap with unimaginable speed; if I hadn't been ready for it that would've likely been my ass. The instant it moved I threw my dagger towards it and slightly to the right and started swinging my hatchet across my body, hoping to hit my stalker mid-leap. As I anticipated, the hunter managed to change its trajectory, dodging the knife towards the left, directly where my hatchet was swinging. My Reinforced strike sliced through something before coming to a stop just shy of my target, whom I finally got a good look at for the first time.

Compared to the other two Nightmares I'd encountered so far, this one wasn't huge, standing at about 20 centimeters over my own head. It had a mostly human face, with a bizarre patch of hourglass-shaped, black fur on its forehead, nose, and chin. Its irises were red, vertical slits atop black sclera that were reminiscent of Fae eyes. It was baring several rows of feline fangs at me as it breathed the rancid smell of rotting flesh at me; it was all I could do to not retch at the scent. It was blocking my hatchet with one huge human-ish hand with claws the length of any one of my fingers and I was holding its other set of claws at bay with my bare right hand by the monster's wrist. Black mist poured from the hand in which I had buried my hatchet while my left hand struggled valiantly to keep its claws from reaching my face. Even using 75% of my Coating pulled within to Reinforce my strength and speed, I wouldn't be able to hold this for long. Weirdly, despite having large, canine legs and feet, it was not using them to attempt to pull out my stomach.

No, instead of doing *anything* to follow up, it was instead giving me a look that could only be interpreted as confusion.

I guess we had *that* in common.

"You... It's you. And here I thought. *WE* had a *lucid dreamer*. In the Field Where The. Hunt Never Began. But it's. Just the **new guy**." Uh. What the fuck? It opened its mouth when it spoke... but there was no matching movement to its words. Its jaw agape, words just poured out of it stiltedly in a vile whisper that had a bestial, growling undertone.

"...What." I couldn't help but comment. Its eyes seemed to double in size as it jumped away from me. What in the thirteen planes is fucking happening?!

"YOU. CAN. TALK. NOW?!" It roared tumultuously, leaping backwards and taking my hatchet with it. I took this opportunity to quickly pull my blunderbuss off my back and draw a bead on the bizarre mishmash of a chimera, "Wow. That... How did you get. Out of The Hedge Maze?! Does *The Boogie Man*. Know you got out?!" This was insane. And confusing. But mostly maddening. I was always under the impression that most entities of the outer planes were just elemental sprites with enough power to acquire some semblance of Substance - a physical shape or form - to solidify the idea of themselves. This thing had power, but also seemed to have a personality, a sense of what should and should not be, and apparently a sense of hierarchy. What is going on here?

"What are you?" I asked it with as steady a voice as I could.

"*That Which Consumes*. How did you leave? The Hedge Maze? The Bumps in the Night. Should *not* have let. You by."

"...I... just walked out?" I had little choice but to play along with whatever this was.

"...That's a problem. A new Fear like. You should be incapable. If *The Boogie Man* catches. Wind of this... And of me almost. Disassociating you..." So it held back whenever it realized I was this *New Guy*. That makes me feel a lot worse about reflexes and my place in the food chain here. Not that this was unexpected, but I was hoping that plane shifting my entire physical

existence would confer me *some* advantage. If I make it out of this, the first thing I'm doing is studying up on the outer planes.

"...Why do you... smell like *The Beast. Beneath the Bed?*" My heart leapt into my throat. I still have the claw. Of course if I can smell its breath, then *I* have a scent here as well. Fight is out. Flight is out. Submitting to a predator never works. Posture? Then? I reached into my bag and produced the claw I took from the monstrosity in the bedroom.

"We had a... disagreement." I tried to keep my tone both steady and malevolent.

““ ””
...

Like an explosion, cacophonous laughter shot out of the beast.

"So that's. How it is... Childish Nightmares like. Them are quite powerful... But then again. There hasn't been such. A **Strong** and... specific Nightmare like *The. One That Sees*. In centuries." Why did that statement make me feel so... uncomfortable, "*The Beast Beneath the Bed. And The Intruder. at the End of the Hall.* Have been working. ON a **project** lately. But there was an anomaly. So they came back. Around when I. Found you actually. *The Intruder at the. End of the Hall.* Will be able to. Put you back into. The Hedge Maze where. You belong. You may be able. To steal some power. From them if you. Show them you can talk. I'm sure it will. Shock them. Let's go." It turned and started walking away, yanking my hatchet out of its hand and dropping it in the grass... With literally no other option, I retrieved my melee weapons and followed the weirdly amicable chimera known as '*That Which Consumes*' in what appeared to be an arbitrary direction.

The geographical logic of the field and rolling hills warped as the predator who lorded over this domain walked with purpose. Suddenly the field did not seem so large or so... empty. Every direction I looked I could see people - Humans, Fekthal, Fae... others - running, fleeing for their lives. Their faces or closest approximation thereof being portraits of terror and desperation. I could not see what they were fleeing from, but even when I thought they would collide with each other they simply passed right through one another. I could, however, hear them loud and clear.

"HELP! SOMEBODY! PLEASE!"

"NONONONONONONO!!!"

"...I can't run anymore..."

"WHY!?"

"I WANT TO GO HOME!"

"SOMEBODY WAKE ME UP!"

"ANYBODY!"

How often - I wondered - did these people have nightmares about the chase? How much fear, then, did they experience in their everyday lives that they could be tormented like this? Not only that, as the screams passed by us and the waves of fear washed by me; I could see *That Which Consumes*' hand regenerating... and was it just me, or was its body getting slightly bigger? There was still far too much that I didn't understand.

I don't like this place.

"Ah... That is. High quality. We still don't. Get how you feed. That's why we. Stuck *The One That Sees*. In The Hedge Maze. A lot of humans. And Fae have. Been caught up in. The Hedge Maze lately. That's your fault. Isn't it? Not *The Boogie Man*. But *The One That Sees*." It was explaining... *something* about the ecosystem of The Dreamscape to me. But most importantly, whatever *The One That Sees* is... apparently it resembles me at least a little bit. At least enough that this Nightmare thinks I am *that* thing.

We passed around another bend between two hills and suddenly the tall grass and rolling hills disappeared. We were simply elsewhere now, not unlike when you have a dream and the scene simply 'changes' with no rhyme or reason.

Or so I've heard.

"We are here." *That Which Consumes* pointed ahead and I saw an enormous wall of hedges that were easily over 30 meters tall. Looking off to the sides, I saw no obvious entrance or exit to this hedge maze... and it was way too thick and dense to push through. I suppose this is where *The Intruder at the-*

That Which Consumes. Why have you? Left the field?" I froze, recognizing the cavernously deep voice I had heard from down the hallway in Deirdre's apartment. I slowly turned back towards *That Which Consumes* and looked passed it towards the source of the voice. There was a tall, tall figure wrapped in wispy, undulating shadows that ran from the 'feet' of this creature, all the way up to its 'neck'. Its 'face' was very, disturbingly obviously just a skinned face haphazardly stuck onto a grey mannequin head.

"I found this one. Almost disassociated it. It got out of. The Hedge Maze. *The Boogie Man* doesn't. Know that they got. Out." *That Which Consumes* gestured over its shoulder towards me. The inky body of *The Intruder at the End of the Hall* was stationary, but its head began to protrude from its neck like a snake. The 'neck' warped and twisted as the head came to a stop above *That Which Consumes* and stared down at me.

The One That Sees. One must wonder: how? This one will return. You to the Hedge. Maze." With every word it uttered, there was suddenly a different skinned face on the head. These Nightmares... did they steal these words from the victims of their torment? How long had they existed in these forms, that they could carry out entire conversations?

"Good. Bye." *That Which Consumes* walked back from where we had come. Upon reaching a certain invisible threshold, it simply disappeared... presumably warping back towards the field where I had encountered it.

"Now. Then." I drew my blunderbuss in a flash in response to the overwhelming sense of bloodlust and contempt that accompanied those two words. At the same time, the shadows surrounding its body flared out to the sides, around and behind me, surrounding me in a vortex of shadow. A large hand shot out of the darkness that had trapped me and wrapped around my upper torso - failing to trap my arms - and lifted me clear off the ground. The world was naught

but darkness for a few moments and when light returned to my eye, we were within The Hedge Maze; I was still suspended in the air by the shadow's hand, its peeled mannequin face a mere half a meter away, my arms up above the hand and my blunderbuss against the mannequin forehead.

"What are you doing here. *Human*. And why is your mind... Occupied." I could feel the Mouth chewing again. It was clearly trying to overwhelm my mind with artificial fear like it did those who touched the doorknob in Deirdre's apartment. As ever, the Mouth had its own opinions on who had access to *my* head.

"*Your* colleague brought me. Did they also tell you how badly this-" I gave the blunderbuss that was pressed against its head a small shake, "- thing hurts? Put. Me. Down." A threat made more for my own vanity than anything else. It was squeezing me so hard I could barely breathe.

"...It really is true. *The One That Sees*. It coalesced from a *single* idea. You look... Different, however. Fascinating. Fascinating."

"What the fuck are all of you on about? '*The One That Sees*'-"

"Silence. You entered that place. *You knew*. How did you **know**. Why did you **know**. One does not understand. **How** did *You understand*." At this range, its barrage of inquiries shook my entire body, the bass of its voice being *that* powerful. *That Which Consumes* said *The Intruder at the End of the Hall* and *The Beast Beneath the Bed* were working on a project. Does this Nightmare serve some sort of researcher-based role in The Dreamscape? Can I take advantage of this?

"...You want knowledge? Then trade me knowledge... Let's make a deal."

"A deal."

"Yes. You tell me why you are so aggressively haunting Deirdre. And I'll answer your questions." It made a noise not unlike a growl and a chuckle at the same time.

"Ah... The Human named Deirdre Somnus. Why. Because she is resilient. Of course."

"Resilient."

"Oh yes. So scared. Yes, such terror. But never succumbed. I spent much energy. So much planar **time**. *Grooming* that one. The Human's strength of Mind. Incredible. No? So much **power**. So much **fear**. Enough **fear** to open a door. Not just open once. No. Enough to **keep** it open. Enough to bring *it* through. To bring *The Beast Beneath the Bed*. Out into The Room. Enough to **leave** the room. Enough to steal **Substance**. Enough to **feed**." Doors and Substance. *The Intruder at the End of the Hall* is trying to connect The Dreamscape and the waking world... physically?! And then there's *Substance*. Whenever anyone says it like **that**, they were referring to the metaphysical concept of Substance, that dictated how solid the *idea* of something was... Whether or not it could persist in the absence of observation.

"You think you will fade?"

“Of course not. So long as entities. Have homes and... safety. They will fear subversion. Of their precious safety. But I am *The Intruder at the End of the Hall*. You humans say. Function Over Form. But here: Function **IS** Form. What better *intrusion* is there. Then to intrude into the Waking World?” This thing... found a loophole in its function and was milking Deirdre’s terror to create a door to move Nightmares out of the Dreamscape physically... And since Deirdre wasn’t there to haunt... The point then would be to be able to *haunt* a **structure** from The Dreamscape.

That would be... impossible, right?

“Now then, Reina Tethas. Yes. Yes. I know who you are. But I don’t understand. How you are. And **Why**.” I guess at this point I had no choice but to continue keeping it distracted. It had started to lighten its grip as it monologued its plan at me... But not quite enough just yet.

“I-” There was the unmistakable clap of handgun fire just as I was about to speak, a single bullet struck the mannequin head, stunning it and loosening grip around my torso just enough. I pulled the trigger on my blunderbuss and sent its head reeling back. It dropped me to the ground and I immediately sprung back away from it. I had no idea who could have possibly helped - no, that’s a lie - I was reasonably certain I knew *what* had helped me. Just not *why*. That, however, did not change what I had to do next:

I ran.

Scrambling on the impeccably trimmed blue grass that made up the floor of The Hedge Maze, I sprinted as fast as I could while still reloading. Don’t panic. What do I know about The Hedge Maze? What did *That Which Consumes* say to me? There are at least three entity types: *The Boogie Man*, *The One That Sees*, and multiple entities referred to as *Bumps in the Night*. I finished reloading my blunderbuss just before I turned the corner, leaving the line of sight of *The Intruder*. I clearly don’t have enough firepower to *kill* any of these things - if they can even be killed in the traditional sense - and the best I could do is track down the source of that gun shot. If I had something approaching an ally here, then they would be my best bet to getting out of here... If I even *could* leave.

I turned another corner and was greeted with two approaching Nightmare. Lumbering forward at an alarming speed on ghastly pale arms that were too long and double jointed hind legs, these things’ torsos and the entirety of their heads were covered in ashen buboes. There were no features that could be identified beyond those pulsating bumps of flesh other than a crude, gaping hole where a mouth should have been. Unsettlingly normal human teeth lines the hole and two tongues about a third of a meter long lolled flapped along their ‘cheeks’ and over their shoulders as they stomped towards me.

With nowhere to run or even dodge, I had no choice but to allow these things to get far closer than I’d really like and shoot both of them at once. Ready my blunderbuss, I continued my charge down the hall. The two monsters leapt at me side by side simultaneously and I pulled the trigger; the shot spread and caught both monsters in their ‘heads’. My aim was just slightly off

center and the one on the left went spiraling through the air passed me from the multiple impacts of the shot and the right one-

Disappeared.

I skidded to a halt and whipped around, drawing my hatchet defensively. I had thought that maybe the other thing - what I could only imagine was a *Bump in the Night* - had split around to my blindspot on my right side. But no... it was just gone... and the other one - writhing on the ground - was starting to turn itself over to get back up. Fucking... nothing *dies* around here! Around the corner, I thought I could hear *The Intruder* begin its pursuit.

I don't have *time* or *bullets* for this shit.

I turned back around and left the Nightmares behind me. I lucked out with getting enough bullets into the real *Bump in the Night* but... if they aren't always real, then I can't afford to be wasting my limited shots on them. I considered this as I continued my blind run through The Hedge Maze, making sure to take large leaps when at four way intersections to try to hide any prints I was leaving in the grass. As I snapped my blunderbuss shut again, I rounded a corner and was confronted with two more *Bumps in the Night*... they were rushing me in the exact same way, and were the same distance apart from one another; no way that was a coincidence. I continued charging them, but this time I drew and whipped my dagger at the one on the left... which disappeared as soon as the dagger made contact. When the right one leapt at me, I lunged forward - blunderbuss first - and pulled the trigger point blank at the creature's 'head'.

This time it *shredded*.

Its bulbous body flew backwards through air, pallid limbs flailing uncontrollably as it hit the ground rolling. It twitched three or four times before finally falling limb and a black mist began to ooze from the leftover stump that was the bottom of its 'head'. After a few moments, the rest of the body began oozing the same mist and the corporeal form of the Nightmare faded to nothingness. The Wind sprites that embodied this *Bump in the Night* must have lost their ability to maintain their Substance after taking so much damage at once.

So they *can* 'die'. In a manner of speaking.

With no time to savour this first, tiny victory, I ran passed the body, swiped my dagger back up and made several more winding turns and remained unmolested for another couple of minutes. I could *hear* the *Bumps in the Night* all around me on the other side of the hedges in every direction. The exhaustion and nerves were catching up to me; I couldn't keep this up much longer. I only had two shells left; if I ran into *The Intruder* again or this '*Boogie Man*', then I was well fucked and far from home. I can't even count on this *One That Sees* to be non-hostile, but it was the best lead I had. I just had to pray that I ran into the latter first.

Fortunately and Unfortunately, I did not have to wait long.

The next turn I took put me into a fairly open looking courtyard. I skidded to a halt on the grass and took in the area. It was the large sort of courtyard you'd see in front of a duke or other such

wealthy person's mansion, complete with a fountain producing what appeared to be normal water. I heard a rustling behind me and leapt forward - doing a 180 spin in midair - and staring down the sights of my blunderbuss. The hedge wall had closed behind me, trapping me in the courtyard. Weirdly I found it comforting, at least nothing would be able to follow me from *that* direction. Breathing a sigh of relief, I slowly lowered my gun and took a moment to let my heart rate come down just a bit. It was then that I turned around and saw-

Me.

A mere single meter away stood... me. Not quite a reflection - I realized as the moment of shock passed - this version of me looked so **almost** like me that I felt a visceral sense of revulsion. The other me was a bit more pale and its hair was a bit longer and pulled back into a ponytail. The Mouth on the other me had much sharper, shark-like teeth and its tongue was hanging so low as to be nearly brushing against the corner of 'her' actual mouth. The one eye that it did have was blue, rather than the green that mine was and the nose was a little bit small, while the mouth seemed a little bit large. The other me's outfit was reasonably standard for me, black slacks, a gun holster on the left leg, a white button up shirt and a dark grey vest. It was however much more... form-fitting than anything I would ever wear on assignment.

"...Who... or what-"

Without word or warning, the other me cupped my face with both of its hands.

"Wha- Stop-" I'd love to say that it was because there was no perceptible hostility in the action that I failed to react to it. But truly - despite the myriad small differences - I was having trouble exercising a willingness to kill something so human-shaped, let alone so... Me-shaped. As I stood there - frozen with indecision - the other me was clumsily touching my face: patting my features with its palms, running its fingers up and down my face, poking at my mouth, cheeks, and even sticking a finger into The Mouth. The Mouth bit the other me's finger, but it seemed not to care, eventually yanking its finger out - and nearly snapping my neck with the effort - after it was done feeling the inside of The Mouth. I wanted to tell it to stop, but I did not want it to stick its fingers into my actual mouth if I opened it.

Just as my brain was catching up to how intensely violated I was feeling, the other me cranked the discomfort level of the situation up another notch. After it was done touching my face, it started squeezing its own features - hard - and... changing them. It stuck its fingers into The Mouth on its own face and pushed on the teeth until they were regular-looking human teeth, then it grabbed the tongue and pushed it into The Mouth until it was the same length as the one that resided in *my* right eye socket. It continued touching and molding its face until it was like I was looking at a mirror; an exact replica of me in nearly every way. It reached forward again and felt my hair, then released its ponytail and altered its hair colour and texture to match my own. Finally, it reached towards its own eye and plucked it out with its nails, then held it out next to my left eye, tilting its head and considering me sightlessly. It popped its left eye back into its socket and blinked; its iris was now green.

Just like mine.

It moved on from my head and face began moving down my body audaciously with its invasive inspection, occasionally stopping to alter something about its own body.

“Hey! That’s enough! Stop it!” I worked up the nerve to speak to my doppelganger, but when I tried to move away from it, its hand shot out impossibly fast and grabbed my shoulder painfully hard in a vice-like grip. Once I stopped struggling, it released its grip and continued its quest to match not just my face to its own, but my body as well. After patting down over my clothes and changing itself, it seemed fixated on my right ribcage. It grabbed at my shirt and pulled it up; slowly meandering around to my side as if fascinated by the spider tattoo that encompassed most of that side of my upper torso. It pulled up its own shirt and the same tattoo appeared on it. Weirdly enough, it was the copying of my tattoo that felt the most offensive so far. As it was gazing at its own tattoo, I was able to hop away from the doppelganger and bring my blunderbuss to bear on it.

“Now then-” I began.

“Wha-”

“?!”

“Stop-”

It’s talking to me.

“Hey!”

“That’s enough!”

“Stop it!”

My aim wavered. Intellectually I knew that it was only parroting back what I had said to it minutes ago. But seeing and hearing the perfect replication of my own face and voice in distress shook me to my core.

“I...”

“I...”

I can’t fucking do this.

“I need your help.”

“I need your help.”

“I have to go back to the Solbalim.”

“I have to go back to the Solbalim.”

“You don’t appear to want me dead, can you show me how?”

“You don’t appear to want me dead, can you show me how?”

This was getting me nowhere; I knew I couldn’t blow my own mirror image’s head off. If it couldn’t help me, then I would just have to-

“I. Can. Show. You. How.”

!?!

I had started walking away, but now I was fully facing the other me in time to see it holding an exact replica of my Fekthal-made handgun straight up in the air. She fired it three times in rapid succession.

“**What are you doing?!?!**”

“I. Need. Help. To. Help. You.”

“**YOU!**” Came the impossibly deep voice of *The Intruder at the End of the Hall* a few seconds later. The mass of writhing shadows came slamming down in the courtyard just five meters away from myself and the other me. It immediately darted in, tendrils of darkness shooting out to encompass me from every angle. Its - totally fucking uninjured - mannequin head extended and unhinged at the jaw, revealing a dribbling mess of teeth jutting out at chaotic angles. I brought my blunderbuss up once more, only two more shots left and the first one didn't do a damn thi-

“Hey! That's enough! Stop it!”

There was a massive crunching noise as *The Intruder at the End of the Hall* crashed right into my doppelganger, the shadowy monstrosity's teeth clamped down on her shockingly unscathed right arm.

“*The One That Sees. What-*” The mannequin head cycled through several skinned faces as it oscillated between shock, contempt, and indignation.

“I. Don't. Want. Me. Dead.”

“You... Speak!”

“I. Need. Help. To. Help. Me. Go. Back. To. The. Solbalim.”

“*The One That Sees...* Your Substance... how did you grow... So much. So fast... **You.**” *The Intruder* turned its attention to me, cycling faces of frustration. *The One That Sees* had stopped *The Intruder* dead in its tracks effortlessly. Was that because it had met me? It continued to clamp down on *The One That Sees'* arm for several seconds until its own teeth shattered all at once.

“HahA. HAHA. **HAHA. HAHA!** Simply. Magnificent. You confronted the source. Of your Substance. *The One That Sees.* So that can be. Done as well then. How efficient. I see I **understand.** A new approach then. I too can confront. **The source of my Substance.**” After its forced, dissonant laughter it muttered more to itself than to us. It slowly released *The One That Sees* and lifted its head, looming over both of us and 'looking' down at me. I could only stare forward at the entity looking at back me: *The One That Sees...* The Nightmare that was created

unbeknownst to me in my own image. That apparently - simply by *being* and *doing* - I had created in the minds of others.

“Yes. Yes if you return. With proof of. *The Beast Beneath the Bed*. I wonder how It. Will grow. Reina Tethas I think. You will do quite. Nicely in the *future*.” All of a sudden *The Intruder* blinked out of existence and I felt its presence immediately to my right. The content of its final words shook me just as much as the fathomless depth of its voice.

“We aren’t finished with you.”

And once more, I was swallowed by darkness.

And I was spat out from underneath my own bed, rolling across my bedroom floor, and hit my dresser with a painful ‘thud’.

“...Ow...” A groan was all I was capable of at that moment. I was certain I was dead when I was encompassed by *The Intruder*. I rolled over onto my back and stared up at the familiar - albeit now much more seemingly sinister - shadows on my ceiling. It brought me no small measure of anxiety that the Nightmare was able to eject me from the Dreamscape directly into my own bedroom... despite having entered the Dreamscape from underneath Deirdre’s bed. They seemed to understand so little *and* so much at the same time on that ‘other side’. As the adrenaline rush wore off and my safety for the time being seemed assured, I winced as I began to hurt all over; my legs felt especially awful after all of that walking through *That Which Consumes*’ field and sprinting for so long in The Hedge Maze. My ribs were definitely bruised from when *The Intruder* had picked me up initially despite having half my PsyEn Reinforcing me and the other half Coating me.

Suddenly I heard two sets of footsteps running down the hall and my bedroom door flew open. Light flooded the room, banishing the angular shadows of the night.

Night?!

How long had I been gone?!

“Oh! Yer back lass!”

“Reina?!? You’re okay...?- Shit, what **happened** to you?!”

Greg and Deirdre were standing over me - Deirdre holding my lumen crystal - portraits of confusion and concern, respectively.

“Uh... a lot. How long have I been gone?” Where the fuck do I even start?

“Like... a couple of hours tops...” I felt like I had been up for **days** at this point, “...Did you... find anything?” She asked tentatively.

I put considerable effort into trying to sit up with no results, so Greg offered me a hand, and pulled me up into a sitting position. I reached to my side into the deeper of my hip pouches and

pulled out a - thankfully still tangible and intact - large, clawed finger from *The Beast Beneath the Bed*.

“Does the murder weapon count?” Her eyes seemed ready to roll out of their sockets. I replaced the claw into the hip pouch and took a deep breath, “We are going to need to discuss payment, in a big way-” I got cut off by a tackling embrace by Deirdre - shaking with relief - who squeezed me painfully tight as she straddled me.

“Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou so fucking much!”

“Okay- Sure- but please get off this really hurts.” She flinched and leapt off of me, red faced as she picked up the now flickering lumen crystal that she had set down before hugging me.

“Anything I can do for ya lass? Need a drink?” Ah Greg, this zombie gets me. I can’t even be annoyed with him for being in my apartment this time.

“Water and cold, cold wheat ale please, Greg.” He grinned at me and left me and Deirdre in my bedroom. She offered me a hand, pulled me to my feet, and helped me over to my dresser. I began disrobing as quickly as my sore and bruised muscles would allow me. In the fading light of the nearly spent lumen crystal, I looked at myself in the mirror and felt my heart squeeze. My face looked the same as it always had - I had been afraid that the doppelganger might have traded our features - so that was a little win. As I peeled my damp, sweaty clothes from my body, I couldn’t quite put a name to the sensation that accompanied the knowledge that my exact form was no longer unique.

“-help?”

“Sorry what?” I had been lost in my own head and had ceased undressing myself.

“Do you need help?” She offered quietly in response. It probably looked like I was having trouble. Which I sort of was... so...

“Actually, if you don’t mind...” I could see her face light up in the mirror behind me as she was given a task she could focus on. I allowed myself to be pampered a little bit, as she briefly left and came back with a couple damp rags from my kitchen that we could clean me up a bit with. It was no bath, but it would have to do for now. As we finished up and got me into some clean clothes, Greg returned with weirdly impeccable timing carrying three steins of ale and one of water. Deirdre and I accepted our drinks gratefully as we moved towards my kitchen and gave a quiet ‘cheers’ before drinking in relative silence.

It was just before sunrise when we finished our drinks and Deirdre asked, “So... what’s the plan?”

“In a few hours, you’ll come with me to the precinct I deal with the most. I am reasonably confident that when they match the claw to the puncture wound, your name will be cleared for the most part. The yanking of the eyes was a good move for getting me to believe you, but I have no idea how they’re going to react to *that*.”

"I see... and... what about the other... **thing**. The one outside my bedroom?" *The Intruder at the End of the Hall...*

"...I don't think that will be a problem anymore... for you."

"**Really?!** H-how can you know that?"

"I'll explain everything all at once during my report to the security force's investigative squad. They'll need to know all of the details." I dodged the question for now. The reason why I didn't go right to sleep was I needed time to figure out how I was going to organize this entire report. The entire thing was so fantastical, but so real, and I really - *really* - needed to make sure that I didn't say more than was necessary. I couldn't tell Deirdre that there really was no particular reason that she was being haunted. That all of that terror she experienced, as well as the death of Cairn Alexton was just some nightmarish Wind sprite's experiment. I couldn't tell any of them that there was an exact replica of myself in the domain of Cephea, Wind Goddess of Dreams and Nightmares. I *could* tell them that Deirdre's fear was being harvested to physically pull through other Nightmares.

But I couldn't bring myself to tell them that I had inadvertently taught the Nightmares how to become much, much more *powerful*.

My report went well, all things considered.

They were fucking *pissed* at me for a variety of reasons: harboring a known fugitive, breaking and entering, trespassing on an inactive crime scene, etcetera. They were deeply unsettled by Deirdre's removal of Cairn Alexton's eyes, but seemed to have largely forgotten about *that* detail by the end of my report and my presentation of *The Beast Beneath the Bed's* claw. There were more and more members of the investigative squad showing up to listen to or eavesdrop on the report as I continued. It seemed enough people believed my story once they saw the uncanny looking claw and finger that I was rapidly rising in several officer's esteem.

After that, Deirdre and I were placed in separate interrogation rooms and questioned for a long while. Hopefully they weren't asking her incredibly obvious questions like 'Why didn't you come straight to the precinct' or shit like that. As for me, it was largely a blur. I was asked to recount several details for increasingly more important individuals within the upper echelons of the Riveiranja Security Force's Investigating Squad. At some point a few PsyEn scholars and Elemental scholars were brought in to hear my story and they were all extremely nerdy academics about my whole ordeal. I got the most questions about how I got out and if I ever saw who fired the shot that helped me escape from *The Intruder at the End of the Hall*. But I stuck to my story: I found a fountain somewhere in The Hedge Maze and dove in and No, I never found the source of the gun shot.

It was early evening when I was finally released and *shit* was I tired. Deirdre was still being held for the time being, probably overnight. I had done what I could and would go back to check in on her tomorrow. I made my way back to my home quickly and resolved to sleep most of tomorrow

away. I had managed to negotiate for half of the bounty on 'finding' Deirdre, since she had technically been Wanted. They told me I should consider myself lucky that they were letting the other charges slide, but when I asked them if they would have preferred to tangle with a Nightmare, they had very little to say. Despite their skepticism... they really were impressed with me. So they gave me half and I'm sure they were going to be eating and drinking well tonight on their little "Private Investigator Tax" they had acquired. I wasn't too bummed; it was a fairly sizable amount and I had every intention of collecting **SOME** manner of compensation from Deirdre.

Although I doubt most people could afford to fairly pay me for what I had just been through.

As always I was greeted by Greg smoking on the balcony as he watched the sun retreat over the horizon behind me. He gave a small wave and held up an empty pint glass, but I shook my head no and mimed a yawn at him. He gave a small laugh, then gestured at my apartment with a thumbs up and returned his gaze to the horizon. As ever, I wondered what it was he saw - or remembered - from his long unlife just beyond that setting sun.

One day I'm sure I'll get around to asking him about it.

I shut my front door behind me and grabbed my freshly charged lumen crystal to carry straight to my bedroom for a change. I was a little hungry, but was too tired to whip anything up, so it'd have to wait until morning. My door was open, so I peeked in carefully first, and breathed a sigh of relief. The reason for the thumbs up that Greg had given me had to do with the main request I had made of him this morning: to remove my bed and replace it with a hammock.

We're not done with you.

The Intruder's words still weighed heavily on me as the sun slowly rose. I had wounded *The Beast Beneath the Bed* and had no intention of letting it get the jump on me. So to avoid dealing with *The Beast Beneath the Bed*, I resolved to remove the concept of a 'bed' from my home. I had always wanted a hammock when I was little, so I guess in light of these nightmares, I could at least make a small dream come true. I stripped down and threw on some night clothes before arranging myself carefully on the hammock. I definitely didn't hate the gentle swaying of it and could certainly get used to it.

As my eyelid became laden with exhaustion, I glanced over at my dresser - now arranged such that the drawers and attached mirror faced away from my be-hammock. I considered covering it up, but felt like that would only make things worse. I would slowly ease myself back into the habit of seeing my reflection again. First during the day, then slowly working my way toward looking at myself later and later. Reina Tethas... *The One That Sees*... to be honest, it had been a very long time since I even considered how other people must feel when they saw me - be it during a night on the town or during work - and I certainly never put a lot of thought into how criminals and murderers saw me. What kind of nightmares were they having? How did their conscience torment them now knowing that as long as I exist, even dead men tell tales? The fact that these terrible people saw me as some sort of all seeing monster that would eventually

track them - all of them - down. Part of me was tempted to be proud and thought that that fact should bring me some level of comfort.

But as my last vestiges of consciousness finally faded... I found that it really, truly didn't.