

Insight: Your Biggest Fan

by James Thomasos

Reina Tethas

Gotta love a new city, right?

Big city living was fairly interesting, rather by default. I had spent a solid seven-ish years living, loving, and working in the city of Shanae to the North East. Shanae called itself a city, but wasn't really all that large. Sure, it had a few districts and a small port, but it really was an awkward size: too big to be a town, too small to be a city. It had been several months since the Bonesaw Incident in Shanae and a couple months after reaching an agreement with the chain smoking zombie upstairs who owns my new flat. I feared it would take much longer to get all my licenses and permits worked out for the city of Riveiranja, but a couple of letters of introduction from Lyra Tethas can get one *pretty* far.

Sprawling along the Pelopo river and sitting comfortably within the borders of Quellos, within spitting distance of both Kellthane *and* the Drax-controlled Sventholme, it ended up being quite the hub for the exchange of goods, ideas, and people of all kinds. As far new, deep waters one could throw themselves into, you couldn't do much better than Riveiranja. Plus, if someone was in the business of the uncanny, it was best to come somewhere that had a lot of opportunities for the uncanny to occur. So the obvious question would be: why had I dropped everything in Shanae - rent-locked apartment, investigative contacts, unbelievably hot lover, etcetera - to come to some huge new city like I was a country gal looking to strike it big?

I was tracking Evelynn Vandree, of course.

Evelynn Vandree - or 'Bonesaw', as we had taken to calling her - had kidnapped, tortured, dissected, *then* murdered a dozen people. All of that to satisfy a twisted curiosity she had about how the Mouth that resides in my right eye socket works. In the end, she revealed herself to me - quietly taking an entire restaurant hostage - and proved without a shadow of a doubt that she was a monster beyond monsters. Not just in *what* she had done, but her tremendous psionic control and baffling multi-casting skill as a Magician... when she wasn't even a Witch. She was completely and utterly beyond the means of myself or anyone I knew to defeat.

So my goals were two fold: to expand my knowledge concerning the world, Witches, and Magic, and to find some means to defeat Bonesaw without *anyone else* getting hurt in the process. Simple enough, right?

As if.

After a few months of calling in favours, connecting with old contacts, visiting my mother and abusing her considerably vast network, I was able to connect various sightings of *her* to this city. Based on where she would be seen causing trouble as well as the time in between incidents, it seemed Riveiranja was a central point she returned to often; perhaps where she actually lived.

Going out, doing something horrifying, coming back here, and then going back out to start it all over. If I was going to try to catch her I needed to be able to reliably find her, even if she did not want to be found. Thus I relocated to where I was certain I could cross paths with her; banking on the fact that I was more valuable to her alive than dead. I would be able to take advantage of this unique position of safety that I had in dealing with her to be able to investigate her from up close. I would be able to focus on expanding my insight and deepening my understanding of the mechanisms that she was abusing to wield such mind numbingly vast power without too much concern for my own wellbeing. I was just at too much of an disadvantage intel-wise.

She obviously was not a problem a simple pistol could solve, as I had learned first-hand.

Consequently, I've found myself working in Riveiranja and doing my usual private detective work on top of looking into the types of rumors and problems that official security force investigators write-off as impossible or 'too weird to be true'. As a result, I've developed something of an odd reputation as something of a 'fixer' who will take pretty much any job. I end up encountering a good number of crazies due to this rep of mine, but - every now and then - I end up stumbling upon the type of weird shit worth following up on that I did today.

"Someone broke into... a library? Why?" I had run into a few off duty sword dancers when I went to a local cafe and they cordially invited me to sit with them. They were amongst the minority of Riveiranja security force members who DID recognize my value in solving murders, but were amongst the majority that absolutely wanted nothing to do with the Mouth that made its home in my head.

"Eh we're on the beat so... I don't know many of the details: just that a bunch of books were stolen and the perp made a fuckin' mess while doing so." Alaana never really minded sharing what little intel she had with me and I never really minded throwing some info her way to make her look better at work. We had a decent arrangement going on.

"Oh! What about the school too?!" Kale chimed in suddenly. He wasn't much for words at the best of times, even more so when I was around. Or perhaps it was whenever anyone else had Alaana's attention? He did seem sweet on her.

"The school?"

"Ah right. Yeah an intermediate PsyEn academy was broken into as well; again there was a big mess. The- oh finally!" Alaana had started to explain the situation when our food arrived. Some apple and honey-based spicy curry that was this establishment's specialty. We ate in relative silence for a few minutes as I thought about all of this. It honestly didn't seem that weird; break-ins happen to some degree or another all the time, so I figured this probably wouldn't be something I'd end up looking into.

"Mmm, man that shit's delicious. Anyhow, they broke into this small academy's library," Huh, library again, "Took a bunch of books, or so I heard."

“Just books? No PsyEn manuals or Ability registries or anything like that?” Normally if you were stealing texts you were after intel on some person or group of persons’ PsyEn Abilities. Honestly that’s the only kind of value I could see in robbing an academy’s library. Which definitely would have made the break in a *very* internal issue.

“Nah none of that. Just like... fiction... But yeah, the least they could do is assault someone on the way in or out of the place and make things interesting for us!” Alaana snickered at that.

“C’mom Kale... not in public!”

“Oh please Reina ain’t no snitch! Isn’t that right?”

“Wouldn’t *dream* of it, Kale. But just a bunch of fiction? Really?”

“Really!” They confirmed in unison.

“Huh... weird. Anyways, thanks for letting me join you two... it’s pretty chilly and that curry warmed me right up, so I’m outta here.” There was a murmur of ‘Later Reina’s as they sipped at their coffee slowly, waiting for me to leave... Oh shit. Maybe they’d been on a date!

Cuuuute.

I exited the cafe and continued to consider what I had been told. If all you want are books, there is literally no point in robbing a library... Just check the books out. They are fine establishments that don’t limit the number of books you can check out at *all*. It was certainly weird... but was it ‘my-landlord-is-literally-an-undead’ weird?

Hardly.

Lost in thought, I passed by a bookstore where the shopkeeper was taking down a sign advertising a new book called ‘*A Paper’s Weight*’ by some presumably popular author I wasn’t familiar with named Salaria Vaughn. She wrote fantasy-action-romance stories according to the sign that was being taken down and haphazardly folded up and tucked beneath the proprietor’s arm. Oddly, the date that was written on sign for the book’s release had not yet come to pass. Curious about this fact, I approached and called out to the store owner, “Not into that author?”

“Hmm? Oh hello there miss. Looking for anything specific?”

“Oh not really, I was just curious about that sign you got there, but I’ll probably look around regardless. I really should do more leisure reading.”

“Ah... this. Don’t get me wrong, we’ll absolutely be carrying this book when it is officially released... but I don’t want to invite trouble either.”

“Trouble?”

“Haven’t you heard the rumors?”

"Um... sorry, I haven't. I'm actually fairly new to the city; only moved here a couple months ago."

"An outsider, eh? Well, welcome! I'm Zephyr and this here's my store, the Turning Page! Anyhow, it started... I want to say 4 months ago. Some creepy bloke, real big and real tall dude started showing up at bookstores and archives all over the city and just... buying up every single book written by Salaria Vaughn. All of them, multiple copies of whatever was in stock."

"...Weird..."

"Right?! That's no cheap endeavour! I know most of the people in the business around here, and they all say the same thing. Big dude, creepy dude, and all wrapped up in this dark green trench coat. Scraggly hair down over his eyes and a face mask to boot. So yesterday a buddy of mine saw this dude entering his store for the second time. Guy just stomps around for a while, then comes up to the counter empty handed and asks where the new Salaria Vaughn books are. As you saw from this here sign, it ain't out yet. But then my buddy tells me - get this because I am not making this up - the dude just keeps standing there, his hands on the counter... scratching at the counter. He told me the dude stood there, not moving except for the scratching for a solid couple of minutes before suddenly turning and leaving. My friend was so creeped out he almost called an SF enforcer." Zephyr recounted this tale with a campfire storyteller's glee, clearly excited to be able to tell this story to someone who hadn't yet heard it.

I mulled over this for a moment before asking, "You hear about those libraries that were broken into lately?" I was already betting if I looked into those library break-ins, the stolen items would be Salaria Vaughn novels.

"Libraries? Why would you break into a library?"

"Heh, of course. That's quite the interesting story you told me, sir. I'll have to follow up on that."

"Hmm? You a detective or something, lass?"

"Private, yeah. Want me to look into big-tall-and-creepy?"

"I honestly wouldn't suggest it... The crazies are best left well enough alone in my experience. But if you're gonna do it anyhow, I'd be happy to help however I can."

I pulled out my little red notebook and pen, "Alright then, more details then: from the top."

The sun was just settling in over the horizon when I returned to my new home in-between the market and warehouse districts. I spent a few hours questioning Zephyr exhaustively and could understand why I hadn't heard anything about this rumor from Alaana or Kale: there really wasn't any kind of crime being done here. There was just a very creepy dude with too much disposable income and a Salaria Vaughn obsession. However, I made the cross town trip from the Turning Page to the aforementioned libraries and found - as I suspected - that the stolen

books had all been Salaria Vaughn novels. The look on the young library assistant's face when I inquired about those novels specifically told me everything I needed to know about the crime.

Approaching the duplex where I made my residence on the ground level, I saw my landlord - Greg - engaging in his usual evening ritual of chain smoking sear bark in alarming abundance on his balcony above the front porch. He gave me a slight wave before returning his attention to some invisible point in the distance. No skin off my back; he was a weird 'guy', but otherwise he was alright, and since I had decided to make 'weird' my business, I guess I couldn't really complain. I returned his wave and keyed into my flat, grabbing and activating the lumen crystal off the window sill that had been charging in the day's light. I had been utterly flabbergasted when Greg handed the expensive, magic-infused crystal to me as what essentially amounted to hush money concerning his... condition. I honestly never thought I would live somewhere that had one of these; a thought that occurred to me every evening as its mysteriously captured sunlight pushed back against the gentle darkness of my home.

On one of the walls in my office hung a map of the human-controlled territories that made up the middle and Southeastern chunks of the continent, with the Untamed Fek'thal territories to the West and the Encroaching Fae Magirradiated Lands to the North. There were various pins from which hung notes I had made on various rumors I had collected before and since arriving here; most of them were related to Bonesaw. A string of disappearances in a town to the East, a mysterious plague that vanished almost as soon as it appeared to the South East, a traveling 'Witch' that appeared to be passing itself off as a merchant all across the human territories, and of course several pins on this city related to a mysterious red-headed doctor that appeared from time to time to perform miraculous surgeries on the dead or dying... with or without consent.

That last bunch was - obviously - why I had decided to make this city in particular my new home base. The point of commonality between all of them being no discernable, reasonable motivation or patterning to any of the activities. As if someone were carrying out these activities with the express purpose of building up a varied sample size. I could not think of anything that was more Bonesaw's M.O. than impromptu, non-consensual surgeries.

The other non-windowed wall of my office was covered in district maps of the entire city of Riveiranja. Standing in front of this map, I opened my little red notebook and began placing pins at the various locations where big-tall-and-creepy had shown up and wiped the stores clean of their Salaria Vaughn novels, scribbling additional notes with dates and times. After placing all my markers, at first there seemed no discernable pattern, other than that there were three days exactly between each appearance and purchase.

What was this guy doing with the books that took exactly three days?

There also didn't appear to be a specific direction through the city, sometimes two in the same direction, sometimes bouncing back and forth between opposing cardinal directions... Hmm. Over time, the stores visited by this person unerringly got closer to the city's walls. There are far less residential areas on the outskirts, so then... he's working his way further and further from

his home? And then of course, he recently returned to a store he previously visited looking for the upcoming release... Just after robbing two libraries, perhaps?

Where **is** he bringing the books? Of course he must have a home.

There was a cheap residential area near the first bookstore he visited; I pinned it and ran thread from it to the first bookstore, then from it to the second, and the third, and the fourth... As I thought, each subsequent bookstore was just a little bit further from the residential pin than the last. That was the pattern and that must be the area that he lives; if I waited around there, then I could probably catch him on his way back one of these days. It was probably nothing sinister, but it wouldn't hurt to ingratiate myself with a community as well connected as the booksellers by digging just a tad deeper into their creepy patron 'problem'.

Satisfied that I had come to a conclusion so quickly, I fed the Mouth that had been starting to play with my bangs, started a bath, and readied myself for my upcoming investigation.

Two days later, I sat on a bench on the southern edge of the residential district that sat between the market and wharf district. It was a pleasant enough area if you didn't mind the smell of fish and other such goods traversing up and down the Pelopo river. All wind-worn faded yellow and pink and red bricks on the wharf side and more intentionally muted earthy colours on the market side. This city being the rapidly built crossroads that it was, there was little consistency of design, especially between different commercial sectors.

Over the last couple of days, the more I thought about this case the more it felt to me like it could be related to Bonesaw. There was nothing motive-wise that I could wrap my head around here, nor anything about the execution of whatever was happening. Did she already know I was in this city? Was she putting into play this nonsense to get in my head? It didn't seem like her to not just show herself if it was me that she was after... Once I got these thoughts in my head, I couldn't shake them, no matter how self-centered the lines of thought were.

Come on. You know better than to get paranoid like this.

I think.

I had placed myself inconspicuously at my current bench with a newsprint in hand, casually monitoring passersby. If my hunch was correct and big-tall-and-creepy's pattern held steady, then I should catch him either on his way out of or into this residential district. Two big 'if's' of course, but I'm pretty damn good at this by now. I had arrived here fairly early in the morning, well before any of the bookstores opened, hoping one way or another I'd be able to figure out what building he lived in.

The morning was fairly brisk, it being the beginning of the 3rd Wind month and while I didn't expect many people to be out and about... there was still something oppressive about the silence. The air felt heavy and the distant bustle of the wharf district seemed particularly muted.

Perhaps that was just the low key fight or flight response that comes with running a stakeout in plain sight. Regardless, I held my position for another couple of hours, the number of folk passed by and took nary a glance at me. As the sun rose higher in the sky and burnt much of the early morning fog away, it again occurred to me that there were less people out than should be this late in the morning. But as I paused my reading to consider this, I heard a strange and irregular shuffling sound.

Glancing up above my paper, I saw him; the first thing I noticed was his height. He really was as tall as everyone had said. He had to be just over 2 meters and that was with what was remarkably shitty posture that I could recognize even through the massive long, dark green coat that covered his feet as well. I was amazed that he wasn't tripping over that coat as he seemed to be limping, though for some reason I never saw his knees poke out of the front of the jacket no matter how exaggeratedly injured his amble appeared. As Zephyr had relayed; scraggly, almost filthy in the morning light brown hair (or was it blonde, I wonder?) hung over his eyes from under his hat, brushing against a heavy duty face mask. He was an intimidating figure to be sure, but easily the most unsettling thing about him was the *smell*.

Why had no one mentioned the **smell**?

I flinched momentarily as the Mouth clicked its teeth together behind my bangs, as if in response to my barely concealed disgust. I was no Fek'thal, but I was sure even I would have no problem tracking this guy by scent. He reeked of shit and sweat and... disease; that unmistakable scent that assaults you when you open the door into a room that a sick person has been unable to leave for several days. He continued past me without ever breaking out of his irregular pace and as he approached the intersection, I folded my paper and set it down on the bench; beginning my pursuit briskly such that he wouldn't leave my line of sight for more than a few seconds. I needn't have bothered with any manner of stealth, the man was purely focused on making his stumbling way forward. Strangely, we passed a number of people in transit yet not a single one seemed to react to his presence. Perhaps he was a common sight?

For some reason this did not sit terribly well with me.

After a few minutes of winding down pedestrian streets and a couple of alleys, the man's destination came into view: a tall, if a little washed out red apartment complex. It was the kind of building that had clearly once been a storage facility of sorts early on in the town's history, but had since been converted to somewhat cramped, but effective and cheap housing by some ambitious landowner. There were a surprisingly large number of tacked-on-as-an-after-thought, rickety, wooden balconies where I could see a scattering of people engaged in various chores and/or relaxations.

The hulking man opened the front door to this building and was swallowed by the darkness within. I reached the door as well after a few seconds and was just about to grab the door handle when something about it made me pause. I leaned in to inspect it and saw that it was weirdly...greasy... as if some animal oil had been rubbed on it and allowed to solidify. Unfortunately, it had the same rancid stink as the man himself. Making a face, I pulled on some

thin, tight brown leather gloves, scooped up a bit of dirt from the ground onto the handle and gingerly twisted it open. There was no lock, so the door creaked open loudly. I glanced over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching me with any suspicion, but found to my surprise that the square in front of the building was suddenly very empty and very quiet. The local silence was accompanied by the realization that I couldn't remember the last time I had heard any distant sounds from the wharf at all.

I shook that inevitable line of thought from my head; why was I so nervous? The plan here was simple and non-confrontational: I would go inside, following that impossibly disgusting scent and just figure out where in this apartment building the guy lived. Once I had an exact address, I could hand the information I gathered over to the Riveiranja Security Force Investigative Squad. I was going to perhaps question him a little bit myself, but after encountering his putrid scent, I decided to leave it to someone else. I could earn myself some brownie points with both the booksellers AND the R.S.F.I.S; the latter of whom were still weary of me.

I stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind me. The smell of big-tall-and-creepy had begun to intensify and as my eye began to adjust to the dim light, I saw that the building looked significantly more dilapidated inside than out. Chunks out of the wall and stains on both the ripped brown carpet AND the ceiling. I began to climb the creaking, dimly stairs as I followed my nose and tried to suppress my gag reflex. As I climbed higher, the smell was getting more intense, but by the third floor, my nose had finally begun to tolerate the smell of the book buyer. As his scent faded into the background of my senses, the unmistakable scent of both dried and freshly spilled blood hit my nose. Just as I processed the change in scent, I heard screaming from above me. It sounded garbled, like a woman screaming with lungs full of river water.

Like someone was drowning somebody else in a sink or tub.

Hearing another person in immediate danger forced any nervousness from my mind as I ran up the stairs, following the sound of screaming. I followed the harrowing screeching up to the fifth floor, looked down the hallway, and could see a fresh, dark blood splatter on the wall of the dilapidated hallway just across from what appeared to be a door that was partially open. I had thought that at least one of the people living in this building might curiously stick their head out their doors. But I saw not another soul and Reinforcing my ears told an even stranger story: it didn't sound like there was anyone even moving around on this floor.

But I had **just** seen them from the outside just a minute earlier.

I heard yet another scream from the open door down the hall. I drew and double checked my gun and patted the small, dense, round bat that was concealed down the outside of my left thigh. Making my way up to the door cautiously but quickly, I arrived at room 302... which did not track at all, as I was certain I had climbed more than three flights of stairs... had I miscounted? No. I definitely did not miscount: this was room 302 on the fifth floor...

"Excuse me?" I said gently as I slowly pushed in the slightly open door, the smell of human waste and blood rapidly reached a crescendo and I barely kept down my breakfast from hours

earlier. The screaming had ceased as soon as I reached the door; hopefully the worst hadn't occurred, but I proceeded inside regardless. I could never forgive myself if I walked away when I could have saved someone. It was very dimly lit in the small one-bedroom apartment, even dimmer than the slightly run down building that contained it. As my eye adjusted to the low light, I could see that the window in the back of the room was pasted over haphazardly with what appear to be pages from a book.

Holy shit it reeks in here.

"Hello? I am private detective Reina Tethas, I heard a scream from downstairs. Your door was open and there was blood outside. Sir? Ma'am? Are you home? Are you okay?" I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and decided the best course of action would be to get some more light in the main area of the apartment. Quickly and quietly, I went over to the window and messily tore off a number of pages that were... glued(?) to the glass. Daylight spilled into the room, revealing that not only had the window been covered in book pages.. But so had everything else in the apartment. Meticulously, every single centimeter of the floor, walls, ceiling, furniture, doors... All of it was covered in what must have been pages from Salaria Vaughn novels. Layers of them, and all stained with fingerprints, grease, and other unknown... fluids.

This was not the product of a stable mind.

I considered leaving then and there, but I still hadn't confirmed the source of the screaming that I had heard earlier. What if this person had attacked one of their neighbors and dragged them in here? Even with sunlight streaming inside, the darkness cloyed at my vision as if actively swallowing the light. After a moment of consideration I reached into my hip pouch, pulled out a vial with a living eyeball and plopped it right in the Mouth; it devoured the meal quickly and gratefully. The world around me shimmered briefly as it chewed and swallowed, and I wiped away the incidental leftovers from my face with my jacket sleeve; not like I was going to feel clean anytime soon after being in here anyhow.

The room appeared a little bit brighter after the Mouth finished its meal and I approached the bedroom wearily. I could hear... something... it sounded like paper crinkling and something... wet. I slowly and deliberately turned the door handle to the bedroom with my gloved off-hand and began to open it. I encountered some resistance, and upon pulling a bit more forcefully I could hear the tearing of paper as the door opened out into the apartment. The smell that billowed out of the room was sour and sickly beyond description and I could taste bile in my mouth. I knew that he was in here from the smell alone before I ever saw him. This room was also covered entirely in book pages, and was even more deeply and troublingly stained than the rest of the apartment. In the very center - however - was the man that I had followed here.

As soon as the door was fully open, the hunched over figure began to turn. No longer wearing its trench coat, the book buyer's form was fully revealed. Where his frame had seemed bulky under his coat, I could see crumpled paper spilling out of the fallen coat. Now completely nude, his skin was almost translucently white, rail thin, and his limbs were far, far too long; as if something had dislocated every bone and he never bothered resetting the bones. He was

absolutely filthy, dried blood and shit seemed to slough off of him with each minute, jerky movement he made as he continued to bend his back, then his neck, to crane his head over his shoulder.

The face mask that had originally covered his mouth was instead covering his eyes and forehead.. And the lower half of his face was... wrong. Distended, the... creature's jaw had taken on a protruding, rectangular shape. It's partially opened mouth revealed far too many teeth, many of them growing on top of each other or even sticking out of other teeth at odd angles. As it sightlessly stared at me, its head cranked back at an impossible angle, I could see that there was an entire novel halfway into its 'mouth', the book seemingly the exact shape of the thing's warped jaw. There was a precious couple of seconds without any movement, and all of a sudden a wet crunching noise as the rest of the book was pulled inside the creature. After a moment, there came the screech I had heard earlier... but up close, it was a gurgling, almost sexual scream of pleasure as the creature's entire body began to twitch violently. Just as suddenly as its spasms began, they ended, and the creature fluidly flipped itself over on all four limbs in a back bridge that had its joints sticking out at uncomfortable angles.

As its head tipped back towards me, its distorted jaw that pointed towards me opened with a sickening flesh-tearing noise and a thick, dark pink, syrupy goo poured out of its mouth with a low, wet growl. Its entire body began to twitch and wriggle as if it were being shaken by an outside force as it began to stammer nonsense at me, "It's- it's m-m-m-mine... You **can't** have THEM. No one can **HAVE** them. **No** one-one U-U-UNDERstands **HER** w-w-w-WORDS like I d-d-do!"

I Reinforced my legs.

"MINE!" The *Thing* flexed its exposed limbs and kicked off of the crusted, paper-covered floor towards me. I kicked myself back towards the living room at the same time with a small yelp, and then kicked off the window sill towards the front door before I ever touched the ground. Whatever *that* was, it was **wrong** and I needed to run and get out of this place *fast*. I hit the ground in the hallway with a roll. Coming up to a kneel, I took aim through the door frame, but my stance faltered as I noticed that the once drab, filthy, but relatively normal hallway I had left behind upon entering Room 302 was now covered - every bit of it - in filthy book pages. Unfortunately, I had no time to question the non-logic of the situation, as the deformed creature came into view and immediately lunged with another gurgling screech, spraying dark pink goo everywhere.

I sprang several meters down the hallway towards the stairs before returning my PsyEn Coating to its basal, protective state. If the utterly crushed door frame and wall where I had just a moment before been kneeling was any indication, then even purely on defense, it didn't look like I could really take a hit from this thing. I aimed quickly and fired two shots at the *thing*: two holes appeared, one in the shoulder and one in the head of its writhing form. Little blood splattered from the bullet wounds, but plenty of red soaked fibers and pulped vegetation discharged into the air like so much repugnant powder. More importantly: the creature barely reacted to the

damage, so I sprinted down the hall, coming to a sliding stop in front of the stairs as I heard it clambering after me, tearing up paper with each step it took on the floor, walls, and ceiling. With each sticky mass of paper it tore up, it seemed as though the monster were getting bigger...

Or was the hallway getting smaller?

I jumped over the paper-coated rail and began my rapid descent back down the building. If I could just get outside, then I could get help. I heard it crashing around above me, attempting to squeeze its way down the stairwell. Finally, I reached the front door, grabbing the handle, I was relieved to find that it pulled right open towards me.

But there was another door in its place.

And another one in that door's place.

Why?! I mean... *how*?!

Looking to my right, the horrifying realization that the door handle, along with the rest of the door, was paper thin. As if someone had constructed the entire door from large sheets of paper, and I had only opened a single page. I holstered my gun and began pulling the door open frantically, over and over and over again but it was to avail. I had opened the door several dozen times across a few seconds; I didn't have time for this. I whipped around to face the stairs as the creature's now enormous hands reached down from above, gripping the first floor rails and part of the wall, and pulled its disfigured head into sight. It's face mask that had one covered its whole forehead was now merely a loose eyepatch the flapped uselessly over its milky, right eye.

"Don't."

"Read."

"My."

"Books."

It's jaw did not move or seem capable of speech, but I heard the words with chilling clarity. How could I get out of this? How could I get away from this thing? Would it get too big to move? Or would it simply tear the whole building down around me? Where the *fuck* did everyone go?! How had no one noticed? It was so fucking dark in here. When was the last time I'd seen the su-

Room 302.

I had seen the sun through the window, and that had been glass still, even when I had kicked off of this window sill and landed in the hallway. I looked at the creature squeezing its way onto the first floor and made a snap decision. Foregoing defense, I pulled my Coating inside and Reinforced my whole body, intending to fling myself passed the stairs and well down the first

floor hallway before the creature could react. Unfortunately, it shot its hand through the first flight of stairs in a desperate grab attempt, which smacked the upper left half of my body with an inconceivable amount of force. I screamed as I smashed into the wall and my flight through the air became an uncontrolled spiral as I smacked into the ground, tumbling for several meters before stopping with a groan.

I tried to push myself up but my left arm collapsed under me uselessly. I looked at it dangling at my side, grimacing as I realized the arm was out of the socket. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to dwell on it, as the creature that was now too big to crawl normally was dragging its now bulbous body down the hallway towards me too quickly. I continued to keep my PsyEn coating inside me, more bounding forward than running as I reached the stairwell at the back of the building. Quietly blessing building fire codes, I climbed the back stairs as fast as I could, fighting back the waves of nauseating pain radiating from my dislocated shoulder as I tried to hold my left arm steady with my right. I climbed the stairs five flights for sure this time and found that I was in the back end of the original hallway, the other end wrecked beyond recognition by the monster that had crawled through it. I ran to room 302 and actually let out a sobbing laugh when I saw that the sun still shined through the pages I had torn earlier.

I heard a crash from the direction I came from, glancing down the hall, I saw just a huge, bleeding, paper and puss filled mouth that encompassed the hall from top to bottom and side to side pulsating towards me. I shook my head, drew my gun and walked into the room steadily as I unloaded my entire clip into the window, making sure my shots were mostly landing in on the exposed glass. This was either going to work or I was going to be devoured by a *Thing*. I holstered my gun and reached across my body to pull out my small bat. Then - with all my might and will - began striking the window with it. Once, and twice, and thrice and again and again.

Bam.

Bam.

Bam.

Please.

Bam.

Bam.

CRACK.

I felt the window give slightly, and swung again with renewed vigor until eventually, I was rewarded with the sounds of both shattering glass *and* tearing paper as huge chunks of the window fell away, bringing the sticky paper with it. I started to laugh again, and felt my tears moistening the blood on my lips and putting a metallic taste in my mouth. I didn't even glance

back towards the hall to see if it had caught up to me. I looked down, Reinforced my body with my remaining PsyEn and jumped through the fresh air into the crowded courtyard below.

"Mine."

I spent the next several days in a medical center in my district, where I had to go through the usual rigmarole of explaining that, "No, the eye-mouth isn't why I'm here. That's just like that." They reset my shoulder, which was painful as shit, but allowed me to clean myself, which I desperately needed, as well as wrapped up my ankle, which despite my best efforts I had sprained on my landing before finally passing out from shock, pain, and burning through pretty much all of my Psychic Energy. As per protocol, I was disarmed and kept under observation for three days before the SF investigators were allowed to interrogate me in my hospital room.

I cooperated to the best of my ability, explaining to them that I was following up on some bookkeepers' rumors as well as the theft of Salaria Vaughn novels from the two libraries that had recently been robbed. I spoke to them of my investigation, as well as the tailing of the... 'man' in question to the building that I had been found collapsed outside of. I told them that I'd planned on just finding out the man's address, but I went inside when I heard a scream of distress. Confusingly, they told me that that building had been abandoned for some time, and that no one had lived there for some time. Something about shifting foundations or something to that effect. I swore that I had seen people occupying that building on their balconies and they looked upon me piteously, telling me that I must have been confusing that building with the one next to it.

I definitely had **not**.

When I spoke to them of the monster that attacked me and they looked more than a little concerned, but seemed to have already filed this case away in their heads as 'traumatized PI gets in over her head and gets the shit beaten out of her by her quarry.' To be honest, I couldn't really blame them. Even spinning the perp as having a paper-based PsyEn Ability - at the very minimum - they scoffed at the idea of it being applied over such a vast area as a whole building. They told me the building had been swept, and while they did see evidence of squatters and some destruction, there was nothing at the scale that I was describing. And with that I got a pat on my good shoulder and a, "Maybe you should keep your head down for a bit." before they left for good, deciding against giving me any legal trouble for my trespassing on condemned grounds.

I was discharged early the following evening, I found myself slowly picking my way through the streets of Riveiranja. Although the sun still had yet to retreat over the horizon and the streets were still populated generously with folk milling about their late day business, I couldn't help but feel intimidated by the relative quiet. I knew what I had seen was real; the pain in my shoulder and ankle were certainly real. While there have been some reported cases of slight... distortions of the physical body caused by particularly strong obsessions, that sort of thing was usually the

realm of cheap pulp horror books. And I had never heard of *any* Ability that could alter terrain on that sort of scale.

I turned the corner of the small brick wall in front of my flat's tiny yard and was quite relieved to see Greg on his balcony, smoking sear bark as he always did in the evening. I legitimately did **not** know what this zombie's day job was... he must have one, right? He certainly couldn't be making much of a profit off of what he was getting from me. I gave him a weak smile and a slight wave; he tilted his head curiously as I approached.

"You look like shit, lass. Where've you been this past week?" Greg said, smoke leaking out his mouth and shirt as he called down to me.

"Ugh, you wouldn't believe me, no one else has the last few days. Once I recover a bit, I'll tell you over a few pints, how's that sound?" I stopped just in front of my porch, happy that someone else - undead or not - would be right upstairs after what had happened today.

"Don't have to tell me to drink twice, that's for sure. Oh! You got a package, so I put it on your dining table."

"Please stop going into my flat."

"Psh, it's more mine than yours; you're just borrowing it."

"...Yes. That's called renting, Greg. Cut that shit out."

"Aye aye of course. Get some sleep girl, I'm getting tired just looking at you."

"...Don't have to tell me twice." He snorted at this and returned his gaze to the horizon. I wonder what he thought about, staring off into the distance the way he did. I keyed into my apartment for the first time in days and took in the familiar scents of my home; as well as the lingering scent of smoke from Greg's barging into the place. I'd change the locks if I thought that would actually stop him. I sighed and grabbed my lumen crystal off the window sill before making my way into the kitchen where my small dining table stood. The red light of the setting sun shined in through my front windows, casting sharp shadows and bathing the room in a harsh orange glow. I tapped the stone and set it on the table, chasing away the rectangular shapes that had never made me nervous before. As my kitchen was bathed in the soft, captured sunlight, I saw the package that Greg had mentioned.

I turned over the box in my hands and gave it a light shake; it was certainly addressed to me, but I couldn't imagine who would send *me* a package **here**. I hadn't exactly been here long or anything so... Who? I grabbed a knife from a drawer and carefully cut the box open. There was a small rectangular object covered in blank paper and a short note on top written with sparkling pink ink in unsettlingly familiar handwriting:

*Reina! Welcome to Riveiranja! This is magnificent! ❤️❤️
I'm so happy to have you so close at hand; don't worry,
I will bring you a house-warming gift soon. Thank you for
taking care of the boring tracking of Mister Townshend;
I was actually looking into that situation as well! Don't
worry, I've already taken care of the fun part, we can
compare notes again soon! Oh, since you seemed
interested in the book, I got my only lab partner a present!*

*Oh and... you're extremely valuable... so please take
better care of yourself, okay? It would be really problematic
For me if you got yourself killed. If you really want to see
me... Just ask!*

I'll see you very soon!

EV ❤️

I sighed and sat down at my table. I wanted to go right ahead and burn the note, but anything Bonesaw touched was evidence, unfortunately. How long had she known I was here? How long had she been following me? Just ask? Is she watching me even now? Listening? Just how far does her reach extend?

How had I misinterpreted this situation *this* badly?

The only part of this that had anything to do with *her* was that she *too* had been interested in the situation. I had assumed that because I didn't understand the situation, that Evelyn must be behind it. It was only when I'd been in the hospital - dancing around mentioning the Bonesaw Case as part of my explanations - that I realized I had been **obsessed** lately. Obsessed with the idea of Evelyn Vandree and building everything I was doing around her. Part of me had latched onto the notion that she had a vested interest in me being alive and that somehow that would keep me safe. That bias blinded me to the truth of the situation I had just gotten into. I almost fucking died; I just blindly went in and tried to be a hero. I was rash, arrogant even. So rash that a literally serial killer felt the need to suggest that I take better care of myself...

That was *not* a good feeling.

I looked down at the paper wrapped book with a bit of a scowl. I set aside the note and carefully unwrapped the book, which happened to be a signed copy of a book that had yet to be released: *A Paper's Weight*, the newest novel by Salaria Vaughn. Inside the sleeve was written:

"To my biggest fan" - Salaria Vaughn

I set the book back down in the box quietly and walked over to my kitchen cabinet. Up above, I pulled out a small, mostly empty box of bullets, hesitated, then put them away. Arming myself would only provide the illusion of safety against Evelyn. In the end, power wasn't Magic or

PsyEn or raw strength or weapons... It was just the simple ability to 'get what you want', no matter what *that* was. I did not yet have the power to stop Evelynn, or apparently even solve a damn case without getting injured. If I was going to try to do the impossible... I was going to need more time and more access to *her*. Which - like it or not - meant I was going to have to establish a rapport with this monster. I sat down in my knitting chair that faced my front door.

"I'm home. Evelynn." I said into the empty apartment.

I don't know what I had been expecting, perhaps for her to burst out of the pantry or reveal that she'd been behind the couch the whole time. Something stupid like that. The amused smile that had crept onto my face at the mental image I had summoned melted away in an instant though when I swore I heard two sets of footsteps making their way towards my front door.