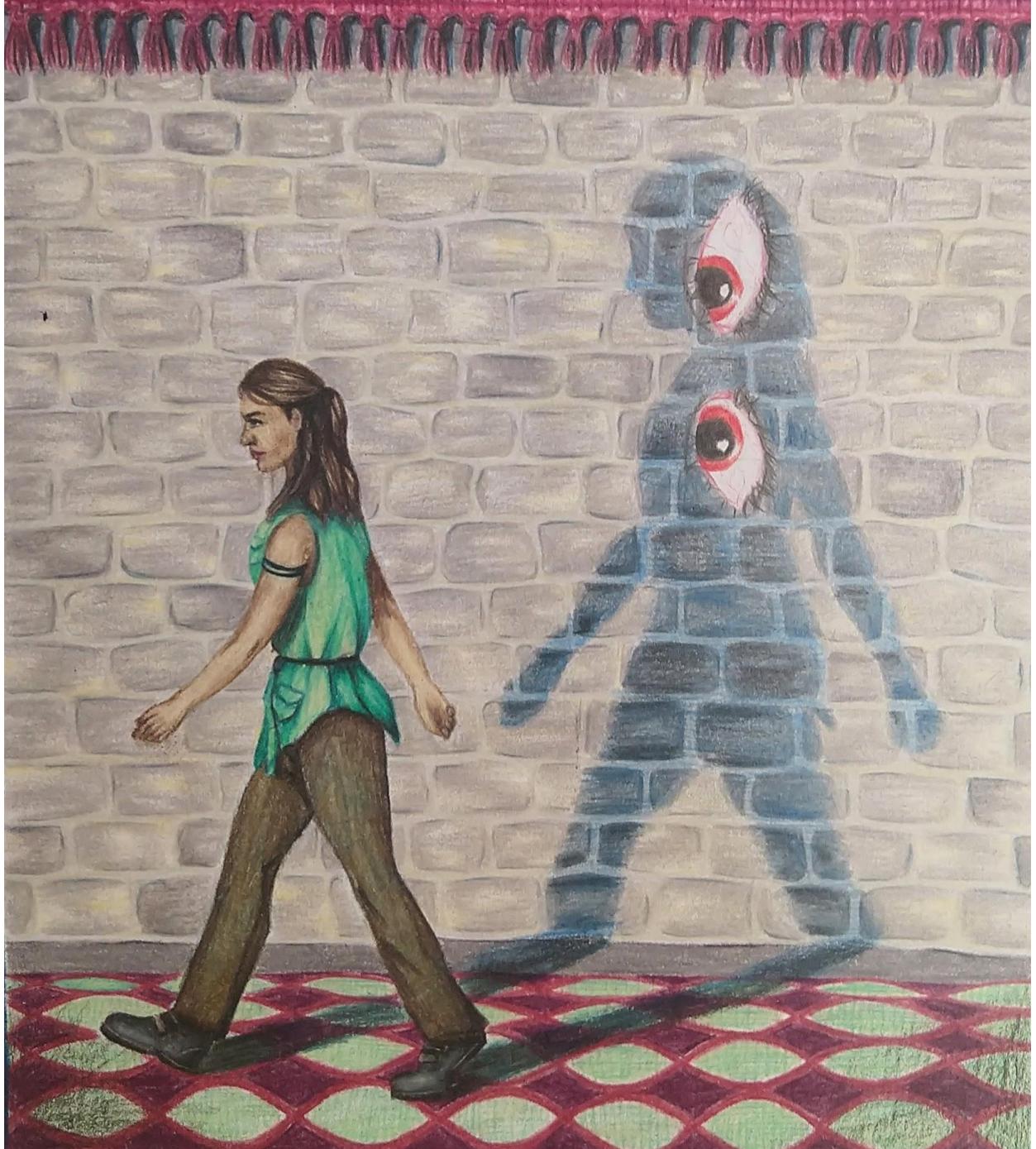


Silence & Vanity
FAMILY AFFAIRS



Silence & Vanity: Family Affairs

by James Thomasos

Amber

Iris fell away from me with a small yelp; the PsyMetal, curved short sword I had given her months ago flying through the air and clattering to the ground with a high-pitched ring. From her seated position on dew covered grass just outside of the quiet roadside inn we'd been staying at for a few weeks now, she glared at me through long, messy black curls. My axe blade had come to rest a few centimeters from her neck, the shining black blade contrasting in the morning light against her caramel neck. These morning training sessions of ours had become something of a reluctant ritual for the both of us: for me because teaching a coward to stand her ground was beyond frustrating and for her because in the past few months she'd not even come close to landing a proper hit on me.

"I have not yet struck you nearly hard enough to justify letting go of your weapon. I'm not even using my Ability... are you certain you're actually *cladding* any PsyEn onto the weapon at all?" I sighed at her, disappointed. She had shown no marked improvement lately in receiving an arcing swing from below and every time I used this method of attack the fight ended with her on that delightful rump of hers, completely disarmed.

"Yes I'm fucking *cladding*, you're just way too fucking strong." Despite her voice being as ever just above a whisper, she was remarkably capable of conveying her anger verbally.

"Strength should be a non-issue. A parry is a deviat-"

"I know what a parry is!"

"Then. Do. It. Right." I punctuated each word by tapping her on the crown with the flat of my axe, she winced slightly each time as her head bobbed down then up.

"Cut it out! We're done here for today... Great. Now I'm filthy *and* hungry."

"My my, *someone* has gotten used to the finer things in life!" I cooed at her

"Piss off!" Iris spat at me and I snickered at her expense as she retrieved her sword, wiped it off on her pant leg, and resheathed it in the side-facing sheath she wore just above her tail bone.

The persistently rising sun had finally started melting away the morning fog, and the brightening sky forced me to reach down my shirt to retrieve my dark, round sunglasses that served as the guardians to my sensitive red eyes. The large, mottled stone inn that had served as our temporary base of operations for the last several weeks was a sturdy structure. Though storm and flame at various points had tried their best to wear the place down, it withstood the elements as implacably as it had the test of time. Both its age and robustness had seasoned it with an almost manorial mystique that I found myself drawn to as I took it in each morning.

I sighed in relief as I entered the dark interior of the main hall and inhaled the smell of food made by cooks that we had never seen. This was one of **those** places: the kind that are so far out of the way and so seemingly lacking in clientele that you could not help but brew suspicions as to how the business stayed afloat. Then again, if your customers were both high-rolling and clearly trying to be discreet like Iris and myself... Well, I had resolved not to think too much on the subject.

The Host of the inn was the sort of human that kept himself wrapped in a chilling air of ne'er-do-well; an air that clashed confusingly with his clear professional self-seriousness. While we could (and certainly did) slide him plenty of silver to not ask any questions, not talk about us, and place our rooms close to a convenient back exit... The service was quite frankly impeccable; expedient, efficient, and detailed. Nothing all that strange if one was paying good money but...

There was definitely nobody else working here.

...But I resolved not to think too much on the subject.

I sat down at the usual corner table that afforded me a full view of the entire main hall; all of its various inlets and outlets in line of sight. As if summoned by the scraping of the chair's legs against the hardwood floor, the Host suddenly appeared on the second floor walkway overlooking the main hall. He looked at me, I pushed the chair out across from me as I made eye contact and he nodded stoically; disappearing from sight. Just then, Iris came out of the 2nd floor's Western hallway and hopped lightly over the rail, landing in the main hall with perfect silence and making her way over to the table, taking a seat across from me.

"That was fast."

"I just wiped myself down. No need to draw a bath this early in the day. Anyhow, I know I've mentioned this before but the floorboards don't creak when Tadaq steps on them." Oh by the Old Blood not this again.

"Tadaq?"

"Tall And Dark And Quiet." She explained her mnemonic, I just sighed.

"Just ask for his name, you strange, strange woman."

"I tried, then he just smiled all creepy-like and fuckin' disappeared around a corner."

"He **is** fairly slippery. But I refuse to dwell on it too much. Besides, the floorboards do not creak when *you* walk upon them either."

"Yeah, but I use my Ability to actively mute where I step. I have no idea how *he's* doing it."

"I do not understand how nor why you are still so hung up on this."

"It's. Weird." Iris tapped her index finger on the table in emphasis before suddenly turning her head to look towards the northern hallway beyond the front desk. Sure enough, 'Tadaq' appeared from the darkness of the unlit hall effortlessly carrying two large platter dishes: one full of freshly cooked, steaming food, and the other of cold cuts of cured meats, cheeses, and other small vegetables. He set them down between us and then - seemingly from thin air - produced a bottle of red wine and two stemless glasses. As he set them down, I glanced across the table at Iris who had - while still seated - adopted an open armed, open handed pose with wide eyes. As soon as I made eye contact with her, she contorted her wrists to point down at the scene in front of her as if to say "See?!"

I sighed at her and thanked the man. He bowed slightly, slow turned his head to look at each of us and whispered, "...Enjoy..." Before silently backing away and disappearing down a nearby hallway. Iris was already pouring herself some wine, shaking her head back and forth in resignation as she prepared to dig into our meal.

"So... How long are we going to stay in this 'strange, strange' place?"

"Do you have somewhere you need to be?"

"No."

"Are you hurting for food, shelter, sex, or money?"

"No, though I can't imagine someone like you being good on the third."

"I leave here on occasion and get what is mine... Though if you are offering then I would not have to make the trips."

"No, thank you."

"So selfish. As I was saying: do not mistake movement for action. If there is no *need* to go out and find work or trouble, then sit still and enjoy yourself. You clearly have done precious little of either in your life. Consider it part of your training."

"Mmm." She grunted at me neutrally with a mouth full of meat and cheese. She downed another glass of wine savagely, "He definitely didn't open his mouth at all when he said 'Enjoy' either."

I sighed melodramatically, "It truly is every little thing with you, isn't it?" Our meal proceeded in blessed, relative silence after that. We stayed at the table for several hours, as the bottles of wine he brings us with our meals never quite seem to fully empty until we have decided to be done drinking; resulting in a buzz that we can ride out from high morning to sunset. Iris, to her credit, can hold her wine fairly well and becomes amusingly loud (read: tolerably moderate) after 4 or 5 glasses. As high noon passed and even I was pleasantly warm and fuzzy, I decided we should cease imbibing for the day.

"...Okay... I think... we are done here."

“...Yeah...” As ever, ‘Tadaq’ was suddenly in the center of the main hall in which we sat.

“Oh come on!” Iris angrily shriek-whispered at me, gesturing at the man holding a stack of our platters, suddenly empty wine bottle, glasses, and leftovers. He was slightly levitating a few centimeters off the ground, having abandoned any pretense that this place was not clearly haunted.

“Where I come from, it is quite rude to point, Iris. None of this is really all that bizarre. You need to open your mind to the possibilities of the world.”

“...”

“...”

“Fuck it. I’m going to take a bath and relax. Bye.”

“There you go, now you are getting the hang of this!”

“&*^@*&\$&%*!^@%^^)” She wordlessly flailed at me before walking off towards our rooms. I had a little laugh, and then gathered myself to follow suit.

It was just after midnight when it happened.

Like always.

I was seated at the small desk in my room with a few candles lit, reading a book I had picked up in some town along the way here while I sobered up. As usual, the hotel was overtly quiet, and even with my window open, the timid breeze was silent and not even a whisper of movement could be heard. The first indication that something was amiss was the sudden dancing of the candle flames. With no significant convection, fire should not dance. I glanced up and saw my shadow flickering off to the side, dancing along with the flames movement and sputtering.

Then the candle stopped its flickering as suddenly as it began.

But still my shadow danced.

I sighed as I realized I was unable to move and watched out of the corner of my eye as my shadow stood up, walked over to my bed, and began rummaging through my bag. Eventually, it pulled out the dark, magiwarped wooden box where I stored my dwindling supply of blood shards. My shadow opened the box, shook ‘its’ head, and brought the box over to me, setting it down on the desk where I was sitting. It then - with painful indolence - laid back down on the ground and eventually mimicked my position perfectly; as any good shadow should. After a few moments, I had control of my body once more, and wasted no time in standing up and crushing one of the blood shards in my hand. The ruby dust hissed to the ground in a disproportionately large, unbroken stream, and was drawn into my shadow. The shattered crystal - made from a

mixture of my Master and I's crystalized blood - strengthened the connection between us, sharpening, solidifying, and ultimately liquefying my shadow, and allowing the Drax, Isolde Kageonna, to project her own shadow through mine.

"Master Isolde. I do wish you had a less intrusive way of asking me to call home. I cannot move my body separately from my shadow like you." Their shadow - which appeared to be the shape of a well-dressed gentleman - tipped its 'hat' at me, drew a semi circle on the front of the hat, and then began speaking out of its newly formed 'mouth'.

"Where are you? We cannot see you." A deep, aristocratic baritone oozed out of the darkness given shape.

"A roadside inn out in rural South-Western Quellos, laying low after what happened at our last job."

"So close? Then why...No. Our? Our... You are not... When... Oh. Oh yes. You adopted a *pet*." I kept my face impassive. But for some reason, I felt some manner of twinge at that comment.

"Ye-"

"Come home."

"Wha-?"

"Come home. Now."

"I... understood. I will return promptly."

"Bring your pet."

"!?"

"It needs to be catalogued."

"...Understood, Master Isolde." The shadow reached out with a hand that had too many fingers and I closed my eyes as it cradled my cheek.

"You are longed for. Arrive soon, our precious child." And with that, the shadow liquefied and splashed down into my own, severing the enhanced connection. So she was trying to find and contact me, but was having trouble...

I guess this place *is* weird after all.

Iris

I woke up with a groan to Amber's stomping loud footsteps approaching my door. I had just barely managed to skirt around a hangover, but I still didn't feel particularly *good*. It was daylight out and late enough that the blinds on the window were no longer keeping all the bright out. Amber came to a stop outside of my door, but thankfully refrained from pounding on the door; opting to simply wait a few moments before saying, "Open up. We need to talk."

Huh.

"Sec," I told her as I found something to tie back my mess of curled bed-head, and used the rest of the water I had been drinking yesterday to rinse my face and mouth. I *silenced* the lock and hinges on my way over to the door and opened silently. I was surprised to see Amber fully dressed and packed with her bag over her shoulder, "Sup? Gonna go buy some ass? You hardly need to check in with me ab-"

"Take a seat."

"Uhh, okay?" I plopped down on my bed as Amber came in and closed the door. Her boot clacked loudly on the creaky floorboards as she picked up the desk chair, and brought it over to the bed, such that she wasn't sitting more than a meter and a half away from me. Then she just sort of... looked at me - as if appraising my posture - and her red eyes seemed brighter than usual to me.

"So... 'We need to talk' and 'Take a seat'... heh, you dumping me or something?"

"We are leaving today." she said somberly.

"Hmm? Didn't you JUST say yesterday 'Oh Iris you need to take your time and relax more! Look at me! I'm Amber Isolde! I'm so cultured!' or something to that effect?"

"Change of plans. We are going home." She ignored my jab, what the fuck is this mood?

"Home? Hasn't that been *here* for awhile now?"

"No. My home country. You need to come with me."

"...So...?" Seriously, why was she being so weird?

"I am from Sventholme."

"And I'm a Priestess of Nashtav! Wanna read a book?"

"..."

"..."

"...You're... *not* joking?"

“No.” Bullshit.

“But you must be. Right? I mean, no one is **from** Sventholme? Right?”

“Oh. So we are starting from square one with this. Tell me, what did your schooling teach you about Sventholme.”

“Bitch do I sound like I went to school?” I swear we’ve been over this.

“Huh. Actually, you know what? That might be better. Pack up your things, we shall meet outside and-”

“Nuh-uh. You’re staying **right** there while I pack. ‘One final walk through this place just before I leave forever’? Fuck that. Tadaq is probably gonna eat us or something.” I quickly packed up my things. I always traveled light and was more than happy to finally get out of here.

“...Wow.” Amber was looking at me with something approaching wide-eyed admiration.

“What.”

“It just... you sounded like you might have picked up a book more than once just now.”

“Die in a fire, let’s go.” I spat, tossing a generous bag of coins on the desk as some sort of offering to appease whatever supernatural and bored force ran this place. Amber seemed to nod with approval, as if to say, ‘Good. You’re learning.’

Why do I hang out with her again?

I followed her out of the room and left the door open with the key on the desk next to the money. As we entered the hall, the concierge - who definitely hadn’t been in the room as we approached - sat at the front bar, writing methodically in a notebook.

“We are leaving. We appreciate both your hospitality and discretion.” I did not particularly like Amber drawing attention to us like this, but it seemed to be a moot worry, as Tadaq raspily replied, “Yes... Release the... Horses... When you reach... Your destination.”

“So he’s giving us horses.” I commented flatly.

“We paid quite handsomely for this stay, after all.” Amber, ever the optimist it seemed.

“Our horses... Always come home... In the end.” Wow. Yeah. I’ve had enough of this terrifying place and clearly-a-lost-soul man. We exited through the front door without further issue and confusingly, saw 5 groups of people at various distances from the inn approaching. All weary-looking, but excited travelers happy to see a proper place to stay. I trotted up next to Amber, and gave her a light punch on the shoulder and pointed down the road. She just glanced my way and shrugged. As we walked down the path on our way to the stables that also weren’t

there when we first arrived we passed several different groups and they acknowledged us with tired smiles before continuing their whispered conversations.

“Finally we can rest and-”

“We made it, now we-”

“We’ll solve the mystery of-”

“-highly recommended-”

And so on and so forth. We came to a stop outside of the stables and two horses simply... let themselves out and stood before us with rippling muscles and hollow eyes.

“There wasn’t a single other customer here for weeks.”

“We paid a great deal for service, discretion, and **privacy**. I do not see what is unclear about this.”

“That...that doesn’t even *begin* to make sense and you know it!”

“Okay, Iris. I really, truly need you to calm down. What we have experienced here is nothing compared to where we are journeying to next. Mount up and *silence* their feet; I will explain in transit”

“Fine. Whatever.” I resigned, hopping deftly up onto magic, haunted inn’s magic(?), haunted(?) horse.

By the Wind am I bored.

Before my ill-fated (lucky?) attempt on Amber’s life, I had gotten pretty good at keeping my brain occupied with all of the little plans and potential issues one might encounter when going into a dangerous situation. I could keep myself busy by considering all the possible courses of action, and how everything might go wrong. However after only 9 months or so of traveling together, I was ashamed to admit that I had already gotten used to the idle chatter we would occasionally engage in or her broad, unsolicited lectures on world history. So today, after saying ‘I will explain in transit.’ She hadn’t said a fucking word in the last few hours, and didn’t respond to a single jab or attempt to get her to say **something**.

What’s with her?

I had let my tireless, definitely magic and certainly haunted horse lag behind her for a bit, but she seemed not to have noticed. With a sigh, I galloped up to her once more, “You’re just brooding now. So you got called home and it was demanded that I come with. You usually won’t

shut up about various international trivias; so why clam up now about the place you ought to know best?"

"I am not brooding."

"...And...? Are you going to tell me allegedly true stories about vampires?"

"Fine. We may as well start there. Call them Drax, not vampires. They take exception to themes of parasitism. They are greater entities that also just happen to be sanguivores. So-

"San- what?"

"They depend solely on blood for nutrition and energy. Everything else they consume is just for fun and flavour."

"Huh."

"Moving on. Sventholme is 'run' by 8 of them: my master, Isolde, and seven others who do not particularly factor into this trip. I rarely interact with them and ideally, you never will. I say 'run', but they really do not have a direct hand in the logistics or the external politics of Sventholme. Such things require a sense of timing and a sense of urgency; neither of which any of them possess anymore. They have humans in their employ that manage all of that, Mouths and Brains, for international relations and statecraft, respectively."

"O...kay? So does that make you something like a 'Hand' and the Drax are 'Hearts'?"

"Yes. Actually." Amber looked at me for the first time since she started talking, seemingly shocked that I had predicted the rest of a fairly simple motif.

"So any idea why you're being called home?"

"Isolde most likely wants to play. I'm reasonably favoured amongst the Hands."

"Play? I'm guessing this is some sort of sparring thing? Isn't that like... impossibly dangerous, even for you?"

"Well, yes. But that's why all Hands have *Vanity* as an Ability, so we can-

"What."

"What?"

"Specifically *Vanity*? Not something similar?" What the fuck?

"...Yes."

“That’s not possible. How can you all have specifically *that* Ability? Even long distance communicators like Watchers are different enough to not call their power the same thing.”
PsyEn Abilities were a function of individual experiences and obsessions, everyone knew **that**.

“Conditioning, obviously.”

“And that doesn’t strike you as... super **fucked** up?” I mean... I’ve heard people *talk* about the idea, but to think anyone could actually-

“Moving on. Are you familiar with the Library of Sventholme?”

“...Not even a little bit.”

“I see... It’s the single greatest repository of knowledge in the entire world.”

“That seems like a bold claim.”

“In the presence of greatness, the ignorant and weak tend to call existence an arrogance. But no matter. If there is one point of commonality between the 8 Drax, it’s their obsession with understanding Psychic Energy and PsyEn Abilities. I think it reminds them vaguely of what it is like to be human.”

“...Aight.”

“So... your Ability: *Silence*... It is interesting. There is much concerning the mechanics of its function that I do not understand... and I am sure you do not either. As a result... Master Isolde wants *you* catalogued.”

“...Which entails.”

“You shall be taken to The Library, put through a number of tests in order to understand and commit to ink the nature of your Ability, and then interviewed about your early life in exhaustive detail.”

“You sure know a lot about this. Do you work in the Library too?”

“Oh certainly not. I’ve just delivered enough materials there to understand how they operate.” I gave her a look at the term ‘materials’, but she either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“...And what happened to these ‘materials’ after they were catalogued?”

“Oh. Ah, I think they are simply sent on their way. But worry not, you are my guest and will be staying in the manor with me before and after your cataloguing. I have been considering the logistics of this exact situation for some time now.” Somehow, that fact did not bring me a great deal of comfort.

Amber

We reached the border without incident; it was a small town called Chamkor that had historically been set up to house the soldiers that kept an eye on the Grand Lake Haaole, back when everyone was convinced that the Drax were mere days away from attempting to cleanse humanity from the world. The Grand Lake - affectionately referred to as 'The Pond' by Master Isolde - was a massive oblong covering what our scholars had calculated to be a staggering 92,000 square kilometers. It was fed a tributary branching off the Cheng River, and served as the focal point of Sventholme's North Eastern border with the country of Quellos. There had been several centuries of unspoken amicable sharing of the Lake before anyone had gotten around to signing the paperwork to make any of the resource-sharing official. My Master oversaw this Lake; having had her estate built near the mouth of the mainstem. Since Iris' incessant questioning had eventually tapered off, I filled the oddly unsettling silence by explaining all of this to her.

It was very clear to her that there were elements of this homecoming that I was not communicating to her, and her quiet anxiety was fairly obvious to me. I do wish I could make her understand the gravity of this situation without her panicking. Although once we are on the lake, it will be too late for her to get cold feet on the matter. I could *not* return without her and for some reason, the idea of dragging her kicking and screaming like I normally would... bothered me. We approached the sparsely guarded gate quickly; I suppose the majority of the guards were along the Lake's watch towers. We dismounted just before we reached the gate's checkpoint.

"So... I guess we just let the scary magic horses go?"

"I guess so." Iris turned to her mount, reached up, hesitated... then shook her head and awkwardly gave the horse 3 light pats on the head. I snickered to myself... It was precious really: she thought that *anything* that has happened in the last few weeks was 'scary magic'. Our mounts turned away from us, took three galloping steps, and then began slowly fading away into nothingness. Iris stood just there, staring at where the horses had disappeared.

"Shall we then, Iris?" Her head snapped back towards me, and I turned to approach the incredulous and rapidly paling check point guards. I took a few deep breaths; I had not needed to be 'on' in quite some time.

Remember. You are more than a mere human.

"Attention Quellian guards of the North-Eastern border!" Suddenly all eyes within ear shot were on me. I smirked, imagining Iris flinching at the volume of my voice behind me. I reached into my coat and produced an insignia that depicted a single, closed eye, "I am called Amber Isolde: the returning emissary of They With the Bottomless Shadow, Isolde Kageonna. We demand that myself and-" I turned slightly to gesture at Iris with a slight unfolding of my empty hand "-This

one are escorted to dock number one unmolested.” The guards gawked at us for a few more seconds before I saw someone sent running off to track down a ranking officer.

“So we wait, then?” Iris whispered to me trepidatiously.

“Of course not. Come.”

“Wha-?” I simply strode forward to the still closed gate, the ground level guards were suddenly scrambling into formation.

“Halt!” A young sword dancer - who could not be much younger than Iris - stepped in front of me, his hand on the hilt of the larger of his two crescent blades.

An amateur’s stance.

“...Are you sure about this?”

“Huh?”

“The lot of you cannot be guarding the Sventholme-Quellos border and not understand what is going on here.” I held Isolde’s insignia in front of me and *clad* a little bit of PsyEn onto it. The young soldier in front of me paled and hopped back with a yelp. Most humans weren’t familiar with items infused with magical power, let alone one so complicated as to be activated by *cladding* Psychic Energy. Thus, the eye in the insignia suddenly opening and staring was usually enough to convince border guards that I was a Sventholmian V.I.P.

I would argue that was not **untrue**.

“Javon, stand down. Amber, please stop playing with my men. It’s hard enough as it is to get bodies to man the Sventholmian border.”

I turned towards the approaching officer, holding the eye towards him. He grimaced slightly and a brief flash of my *Third Eye* showed that he was focusing his PsyEn around his head, “Victor, would it not be wise to place a portrait of me here for your men to be familiar with?” I peeked over my sunglasses at him and flashed a coy smile.

“Put that thing away, I don’t want it poking around my brain any more than it already has. And we’ve got pictures of you alright... They are damn wanted posters; what did you **do** in Alachara? Actually, she looks familiar as well; are you also-”

“Enough.” I pocketed the insignia; my point had been made, “Kindly escort us to the usual dock; they know we’re coming... and I abhor keeping them waiting.”

“Absolutely. Gabriela and Oksana, to me. Javon as well, clearly you need to be educated.”

“““Sir!””””

“Please, Lady Amber and...” he trailed off awkwardly.

“Iris.” she said in her typically quiet, barely audible tone.

“What?”

“Iris.” I jumped in, not wishing to waste any more time.

“... and Lady Iris, then. Right this way.” Victor turned to leave as two women of unknown specialty and the new blood who had been in the way earlier took a flanking formation. I gestured forward to Iris and we walked briskly in the center of their small diamond formation. I was amused to see the curious glances of various soldiers milling about. Many of them recognized me, what with Grand Lake Haaole being my main method of egress from Sventholme. I glanced over at Iris and saw that she was staring at me with an eyebrow raised.

“Can I help you?”

“...So what’re you supposed to be, exactly? A servant or a queen?” I never really know what this woman is thinking when she asks me these esoteric questions.

“I am not so sure I follow.”

“You said you’re nothing but a ‘Hand’, but here you are walking and talking like some skeezy noble.”

“Ah, of course **you** would get caught up on that. You are clearly the technical sort. Is it problematic for you if I am intrinsically more than other humans?” I purposefully made no effort to hush my voice and I could feel our escorts bristle around me at the question I posed to Iris.

“Not really, condescension is your default tone with me; I learned to ignore that shit from you almost immediately. But this is certainly making some sense of how you’ve talked about people in the past.” She responded flatly, her face unreadable.

“I would hardly say-

“We’re here.”

We were taken right from the gate to the closest dock, I could see a small sailboat with a closed eye insignia emblazoned on the sail; a shame, I had been hoping to beat them to the dock. I recognized a number of the lake sailors, but this was not the usual crew that picked me up whenever I came home. I wonder why the change?

“Many thanks, Victor. Unless you have business with us... until next time.”

“Yeah get outta here.”

“Mmm.” I returned the slight bows of the sailors with a nod and stepped onto the boat. Finally taking a proper seat after the last couple of days of frantic traveling left me suddenly much more

exhausted than I was willing to show. Iris silently flopped onto the floor of the boat within arms reach of me, regarding the sailors who had not said a single word to her or myself apprehensively. She wobbled slightly as the boat pushed off from the dock and into the waters of Grand Lake Haaole, and sighed audibly before craning her head towards me over her shoulder.

“So... *your majesty*... how long does **this** leg of our trip take.”

“The distance from dock number one to the manor’s private dock is just under 400 kilometers if I recall the maps correctly.”

“Ugh at least get annoyed... So we are on a boat for the rest of the day and night, then?”

“Indeed.”

“Boo~” I gave her a slight chuckle.

The first half of the ride passed without incident or commentary. Both of us were tired enough that the silence that had never before felt this awkward did not bother either of us. The waves were gentle and constant underneath the sinking twilight and the wind found that happy medium between pushing us on expediently and being pleasant on the skin. I took off my sunglasses and enjoyed the fading light of day as we bobbed along home.

“Ah.” The captain of the vessel suddenly spoke up, “We’re about halfway there, Ma’am. I was told to give this to you once it was too late.” He approached me and produced a small oak wood box. I recognized it as the type of vessel that Isolde favoured for transport of items infused with the blood-based shadow magic that she specialized in.

I see, so Isolde was planning on marking her. The thought filled me with the twin sensations of hope and dread. If Iris was marked, then she would be treated as a native... for the most part.

Opening the box, I found a muted crimson stone - an incomplete blood crystal - and pulled it out.

“Iris.”

Her eyes snapped open, “Hmm?”

“We are a little over halfway there. Since you do not carry an insignia like the rest of us... we need to mark you as being welcome in Sventholme.”

“Gonna put a stamp on my forehead?”

“If by forehead you mean soul, sure.”

“Soul? But I don’t use magic.”

“Yes, neither do I... but we still have Souls, just not particularly strong ones like the Fae or Drax. Anyhow I need you to come over here and give me a bit of your blood.”

“Blood, aren’t we talking about Soul?”

“Ugh. I cannot even begin to think of how to explain this to you in terms you would understand... I guess... Consider blood to be the currency of the Soul; much like it carries nutrients through your anatomy, it also communicates the Soul’s... intentions? I guess that would be one way to put it. The metaphysical balance of Substance, Soul, Mind, and Element was never something even I understood particularly well. I doubt anyone *really* understands it that... thoroughly.” I noticed Iris’ eyes slowly glazing over at my explanation. Having given up on understanding what I was saying, she just got up, walked over and drew a knife. She tilted her head at me curiously, and I held up the incomplete blood crystal for her.

“How much?”

“Just a drop is fine.”

“Pfft! We shoulda just done this last week then.”

“Hah! I shall keep that in mind for next time.” She seemed to be in better spirits after a short rest.

She brought a small paring knife up to her forearm and gave it a small pierce; a small drop of blood immediately appeared. She briefly flexed her fingered in and out of a fist a few times, before holding her arm over the crystal and quickly inverting it. A single, large droplet of blood fell onto the crystal, and it immediately lit up with a shining vermillion glow.

“Huh, that’s pretty. So am I marked now?”

“Not quite, take the crystal and crush it in your hand. It will be easier than it looks.” She took it out of my outstretched hand and turned it over in her own, inspecting it doubtfully.

“It’s spiky as shit though.”

“Do not worry, it will crumble to dust easily.” She glanced at me skeptically once more, but then shrugged and gave a small sigh.

“...If you say so!”

Iris

I took the glowing red stone out of Amber’s hand. It was an irregular formation, spikes jutting out at all sorts of angles like some kind of pricker bush. She said it’d be easy, but no matter how I looked at the thing... it looked like it was going to hurt.

Fuck it.

I held the spiky stone up in front of me, took a deep breath, and squeezed it with all my might. I expected that I would have to suppress a squeak of pain but - to my surprise - it instead crumbled into a soft, warm dust. The lake's wind immediately took the pile of now blood-red dust out of my hand, but instead of being carried off towards the rapidly darkening horizon, it swirled around me before diving into my flickering shadow that was being cast by a number of oil lamps hanging around the boat. I activated my *Third Eye* out of curiosity, but didn't see anything else unusual about my shadow.

And then suddenly everything went dark.

I whipped around. I could see my own body, but nothing else. There was no water and no boat and no other person; I was alone in a void of unyielding black. Suddenly I heard someone... everywhere... inhale to speak.

“Oh?” A dozen or so voices all expressed their interest in me, not quite in sync, not quite out of sync; it hurt my head. Cringing and clutching at my skull, I squeezed my eyes shut and realized with rapidly growing horror that what had once been my own personal, private darkness was now occupied by a single, wide open eye. I think I screamed as I fell down on my ass on the hard ground(?) of the void. I opened my eyes and held my hands in front of my face to be sure that they were indeed open. Between my fingers both in the distance and frightfully close, I saw more and more giant eyes appearing everywhere in the dark and I could hear a sickening fluidic ‘clicking’ each time one of them blinked.

“Look at you!”

“Fascinating!”

“We cannot believe it!”

“A partner?”

“How shocking!”

“How surprising!”

You really do seem to be what you say you are.

Amber

Iris crushed the blood crystal in her hand and the magic ruby dust caught the wind before swirling around her. Once it dove into her shadow she turned to look at it curiously. I turned from her to look over the bow of the boat; it was dark now and I knew I would be unable to see the coa-

Suddenly there was a shriek from behind me that froze the blood in my veins.

I jumped to my feet and whipped around to face the source of the scream, activating both *Vanity* and my *Third Eye* at the same time. On the ground in front of me was a wide-eyed Iris, tears streaming down her face and jaw twitching open and closed as she tried to process what was

happening to her. I noticed she had opened her *Third Eye* and immediately regretted forgetting to warn her against that. I scrambled over to her, kneeled down and slapped my hands moderately hard on both of her cheeks.

“Iris! You are okay! Disable your *Third Eye*! Hey! Come b-” Slapping her cheeks must have worked because her face suddenly twisted into a desperate fury as her hands wrapped around my neck - hard - despite my active *Vanity*. Her thumbs compressed my trachea with practiced precision and the distant look in her enraged eyes told me she still was not quite seeing me. Her arms were on either side of my hands which still clasped her face, so a brief twitch of my hands outward broke her grip and a swift (but comparably light) kick to the chest sent her sliding across the floor. She laid there gasping and coughing for several seconds before raising herself back up to a seated position and looking at me.

“...I didn't like that. At all.”

“It did not seem so, no.”

“It was really scary. And now my throat hurts.”

“I have never heard a noise that loud out of you. I did not think you had it in you.”

“I'm really mad at you right now. Why did nobody else react? Did they know...*that* was going to happen?” True enough, the crew had not even flinched at her screech, but went about their duties with looks of slight amusement on their faces.

“It was a possibility. I am... sorry, that I did not warn you to not enhance your sight. It would have felt much less real if you had not done that. But now you will be relatively safe as we enter the country.”

“...” She sat there scowling at me, her eyes red from tears that she still had not bothered wiping off of her face.

“We will arrive there soon enough... and... ah...” Why did this suddenly feel so awkward? Why is breathing a little bit harder, she could **not** have done that much damage with a brief choke **inside** *Vanity*.

“...” She just kept pouting at me, a portrait of misery and betrayal.

“Y-you did quite well. Truly. You said that was scary, right? But you did not shut down like you normally do when overwhelmed with fear... You behaved with aggression... T-That is a huge step,” I was rambling for some reason, this reframing of what had just occurred tumbling out of my mouth inelegantly like pebbles out the mouth of a river. Her face was slowly changing from one of anger to one of confusion.

“What I mean to say is... it seems like you have internalized my lessons somewhat... and... I am... proud of you.” At my final statement her eyes widened in surprise before she finally broke eye contact and looked to the side, muttering something under her breath.

“What was that?”

“...I **said** ‘Thanks for the awkward praise, Amber’... If I had known this was all it took to get you to say something nice to me, I would’ve found a traumatizing event waaay sooner...” She gave a slight, mirthless laugh before finally struggling up to her feet, “On a brighter note, that’s the closest I’ve come to killing you so far.”

I could not help but chuckle at that, “I mean, if you wanted to get your hands around my neck you could have just asked.” I replied with a wink, sitting back down where I had been before her outburst..

“You’re the worst... Great. I had just finished resting and now I’m tired again.” She walked over to where I was sitting and plopped herself on the ground, her left shoulder brushing against my right leg as she leaned her head ever so gently on my knee.

“Don’t touch me; I’m still pissed at you... But don’t move. I can’t blink without seeing... **eyes**”

“I see. It will fade with time.” I assured her.

“It better.” She whispered petulantly, staring straight ahead into the darkness over the starboard water.

The rest of the ride was completed in peace. The crew appeared to have few comments about what happened, and whatever said comments were, they were not audible to me but were certainly amusing to Iris. We disembarked at the private manor dock in the early hours of the morning; it had been an extremely long day and then some at this point. The clouds were thick and the moon was nowhere to be seen, so the night was dim even for myself. The manor, however, was lit by candles in the many dozen windows cut into the yellow stone. The stone walkway had been prepared with torches every 3 or 4 meters as a sign of welcome. The pair of us walked along the path silently, Iris having quickly grown irritated with the sound of my boot’s heels and using *silence* on my feet.

Unlike manors in other countries, Isolde’s and the other Drax’s abodes were not surrounded by any kind of defensive wall. Not so much an oversight as a deliberate invitation; I always thought they secretly hoped beyond hope that some neighboring country would finally breach their long standing agreements and alliances and give them an excuse to go wild. However if these immortal higher-beings were one thing, it was patient.

Except when they are not.

The doors opened just as we reached them and we entered without breaking our stride. Once within the vestibule, I stopped and gave a slight bow to the grey robed door keepers and Iris followed suit. They returned our bows and a pair of them each wearing gloves approached each of us.

“Wha-” Iris began, confused and unsettled.

“We have to be Cleansed before we can enter the manor proper,” I held my arms out to the side and allowed them to begin undressing me, “You are marked and you are with me, so they will clean all of your clothes, your bag, and all of your tools. Think of it like a spa and then some. Let them undress you.”

“I seriously don’t understand your rank here. The fuck is this noble-style treatment? It’s gross” That said, she was letting them undress her all the same. The word ‘spa’ seemed to have piqued her interest.

“There is nothing ‘noble’ about it. If you are to have audience with a higher-being, it would behoove you to clean up.” As my pair finished undressing me I observed the pair working on Iris wryly, enjoying their ill-concealed surprise at just how many little weapons, tools and other nick-nacks Iris manage to keep on her person. After they managed to undress and disarm her, I made my way to the side door that led to the bathhouse, everyone following suit behind me. We made our way down the lengthy, candlelit corridor and approached a heavy door. The two door keepers that had assigned themselves to me scampered ahead to handle the door for me. It began to creak open loudly before suddenly squelching; I glanced back at Iris to see her face relaxing from a cringe at the volume of the creaking.

I will have the door keepers lubricate all the hinges in the manor.

...

That was a weird thought.

Steam billowed out into the corridor as the doors fully opened and revealed the prepared bath house. The largely uniform, pearl ceramic squares were punctuated at regular intervals with a muted red tile depicting Isolde’s closed eye insignia. At the center of the room sat a fountain that used some combination of underground heat source, a siphon tube, and differential pressures to move fresh hot water from below the bath house. I walked under one of the streams without hesitation - it had been quite a long time since I could indulge in a fountain bath - and ran my hands through my hair. I could feel the grit trapped within my short lavender hair and welcomed the door keepers whole heartedly when they guided me out of the stream and began and allowed the door keepers to begin applying all manner of soaps to my body and scalp. I was then guided back underneath the stream, and repeated this process two more times until the water flowing over my body ran clear.

The door keepers guided Iris and I over to a pair of adjacent, foggy mirrors and sat us in fairly comfortable chairs in front of them. They then filled a couple of buckets with fresh, hot water from the fountain and poured them into a hidden space just behind the mirrors, which quickly cleared the mirrors up. I heard Iris gasp next to me and I could not help but crack a smile as I leaned back and prepared to enjoy the oncoming manicure and pedicure.

“Well this kicks all sorts of ass,” Iris shockingly was the first one to break the otherwise pleasant and relaxing silence. With one door keeper working on her hands, a second on her feet, and a third brushing her hair, she looked like she would pass out any second now.

“There are probably more accurate ways to describe this but... I must certainly agree with you.”

“Heh, that’s rare... Seems like being home has you in a good mood.”

“I wonder...” It was a feeling that had been nagging at me since we approached the Sventholme:Quellos border. It was normally joyous - if not a tad annoying - to be suddenly called home, especially when I had only recently been told to stay put. If nothing else, I was important and wanted here; I had Isolde’s favour. Compared to that favour, nothing else really mattered and I could not possibly need anything else.

Right?

Our caretakers finished their work and guided us to the next room to towel down and dress us. They clearly obtained an outfit for me from my room in the manor; a simple, claret coloured, pleated shirt and loose fitting, pearl linen trousers. After being away for so long, I would have personally gone for a slightly fancier outfit, but I wasn’t one to question the fashion sense of those actually living in the manor. Iris was dressed in a black chest wrap under a maroon, button up suit vest and loose black wind pants; it was similar to her favoured work clothes. They then quickly and efficiently braided her hair and wrapped it into a small bun; definitely a good look on her.

Once they were satisfied with their primping of us, they stepped back and wordlessly looked to me for direction. I nodded at them and dismissed them, “I will bring her myself. Where are they?”

“The Sunrise Lounge” One of the door keepers replied quietly.

“Of course. You have my gratitude.”

“Oh. Yeah uh, thanks for the spa treatment!” Iris awkwardly interjected. They looked at her, turned back to me and excused themselves. We exited the changing room and finally entered the mansion proper. I led us briskly down the winding halls and corridors, passing various manor keepers of various types, all who knew to give me the half-bow my rank demanded. Iris kept up a step behind me and to the right, I could hear a small, breathy snicker from her every time

someone bowed to me. As we entered the final hallway of the Eastern wing - at the end of which the Sunrise Lounge was located - I ceased our approach, and turned to face Iris.

She tilted her head at me slightly, “Sup?”

“We are about to stand in the presence of the Drax known as Isolde.”

“Yeah you’ve been mentioning that for a few days now.”

“They are my master, my benefactor, my patron, and indirectly **your** employer. Respect goes without saying, but you have never stood in the presence of **absolute** power.”

She looked me up and down in a slow, exaggerated fashion before saying, “Haven’t I?”

“Cute. But no, you have not. Remember what happened with the blood crystal?” She grimaced slightly as I said that, “This will be worse.” Iris took a deep, steady breath. Good, she gets it.

“They abhor fear as well, so... try to remain steadfast... Somehow.” With that I began walking down the hall towards the Sunrise Lounge. After a few moments of hesitation, I felt Iris following me once more. As I approached the door, I became sure that they were on the other side. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, pulse quicken, and despite myself I was beginning to perspire. I turned to glance at Iris, whose breath was already shaking at the pressure of the presence on the other side of this door. Her eyes met mine and she once again steadied herself. From the hall, I could hear the skillful plucking of a harp and low, gentle feminine humming. I took a moment to catch my own breath before knocking on the door: once, twice, pause, and once again. The music on the other side of the door never skipped a beat, but the door knob slowly turned and the door was pulled open by another manor servant.

I strode past him into the windowless room lined with several dozen candles spaced with obsessive regularity along the curved walls of the oblong eastern lounge. The candles up above were half melted and sparking irregularly; I pointed up as a signal to the servant behind me who had since closed the door; doubtless they would replace the candles promptly. I took a deep breath in, then out, in again, and then:

"I'm home." I announced into the dim, dancing shadows of the room. The musician in the corner softened her tone, being used to the order of operations in this situation. The muted music continued for several insufferable moments and then I heard from a long couch deep in the room near the harpist:

“Finally, you have returned, Amber!” A high-pitched, girlish voice called out from across the room. As she uttered my name, every candle in the room flared to life briefly, abruptly changing from the gentle, soft yellow characteristic of candle light to take on the hue that was my namesake. An old joke that delighted me as a child-manor-thrall, but had long since become trite. The nuances of repetition were lost on immortals it seemed. I heard them take a long, exaggerated, deep breath from across the room.

“Oh. Yes. We almost forgot. You had your pet accompany you... Ah... he? They?...”

“She is called Iris. No family name.”

“Iris... Just... Iris. Yes... **Iris**.” On their final iteration of Iris’ name, all of the candle flames in the room suddenly elongated, curled into bright flaming spheres, and then turned into eyeballs that all turned to look at Iris at the same time. I see what Isolde is TRYING to do... but I can only imagine what Iris is thinking right now.

Iris

I am **not** surviving this visit, am I?

The thought had bubbled up a number times since the incident with the blood rock or whatever, but woocooow: what the actual fuck am I doing here? Now instead of candles everywhere, there were eyeballs staring at me, still emitting light as if they were flames, and blinking with invisible eyelids every time the disguised flame sputtered. I had mostly been focused on keeping the pounding of my heart *silenced* during our approach to this room, and I realized how stupid both Amber had been to think that I could hide *anything* from this... thing

“Hmm. Not amusing? Is your pet a tough crowd, Amber?”

“Well-” Amber began, but suddenly stopped as my vision of the room was completely obscured by the face of a pale, blonde haired young girl. Her face was only about 10 centimeters from mine, and she was inspecting me intently with eyes that were... wrong. Her eyes were all black except for the irises, which were the colours of dancing flames; complete with the movement of said fire. It was honestly hard to focus while looking into them... Perhaps that was the point. It didn’t help that she was perpendicular to me, since she was protruding from a wall directly to my right. As she brought a hand to my face, everything fiber of my being was screaming in panic to run. This was a Drax. It’s within arms reach.

I’m going to die.

Amber can’t protect me, can she?

“Ah!” The Drax known as Isolde gasped suddenly and disappeared back into the wall. There was a crackling sound from above as the eye-candles all blinked at once, and suddenly the irises of the eyeballs changed from silver to black, “We forgot to change the colour of the irises.” the monster in the form of a little girl giggled to nobody in particular. I let out a single laugh, out of relief rather than amusement. A distinction that was lost on the Drax.

“See, Amber? This is a teachable moment. One must know their audience or they will never get a laugh.” ‘A teachable moment’, I’ve definitely heard that from Amber before. Just how much of her life did she spend in direct contact with this walking horror?

"Now come; present yourselves. Amber, I've not seen you in close to a decade! Your pet may approach as well." Amber walked the long couch near the harpist with steady, measured steps and gestured at me to follow her. She had mentioned once that immortals of sufficient age couldn't keep the passage of time straight for shit, but it was weird to see it happening in real time. As far as I knew, Amber had last been home a little over a year ago. I kept this to myself as I sauntered over with her. The harpist had taken on a slow, yet major, plucky tune; there were no vocals to go along with this track.

I came around to the other side of the large couch, and took in the current form of Amber's lifelong master, Isolde Kageonna. Last time Amber had described her to me, she took the form of a two and then some meter tall, bald, woman with skin even darker than Amber's and eyes far more red. Apparently that had been a rough approximation of Amber's birth mother, whom I've heard almost nothing about. Today, she wore the skin of a small, pale, human girl; barely old enough to begin her PsyEn Basic training. She wore a doll-like, pale blue dress with white trim, and her hair was tied back with a large black bow. She sat in the middle of the couch and looked each of us up and down very, very slowly. The next minute passed terribly slowly, no sound save the harpist's background music to fill the air as Isolde simply looked at us.

"Amber. Do you still eat?" What.

"Food in general? Yes."

"Ah, then if Amber eats. Then Iris **must** eat too."

"Yes." Amber answered quickly, as if this line of questioning wasn't the most bizarre fucking thing I had encountered yet.

"Iris. Kindly confirm: you **do** eat, yes?" I felt my heart skip at being directly addressed for the first time, but managed to compose myself enough to respond, "Yes... ma'am?" She simply stared at me with her strange, swirling eyes before I heard a sickening ripping sound above me and from the wall beyond the couch. At the source of the tearing sound was two mouths being formed from the shadows, and as Isolde began to double over and cackle at the two words I said, the mouths protruding from the shadows began to echo her laughter.

"You were right, Amber! The one called Iris is **so** quiet! If she did not eat we could get rid of her mouth entirely." She was kicking her little feet up and down and her heels banged supernaturally loud on the plush couch. Suddenly she stopped, looked at Amber, and patted a cushion next to her, "Sit. And bleed. I've not tasted you in so long."

"Of course, Master Isolde." Amber sat down without hesitation while Isolde produced a small knife literally out of thin air and handed it to my partner. Amber looked down and considered her outfit for a moment before shrugging and slicing her forearm far deeper than I was comfortable with. Her blood immediately began to leak from the wound and down either side of her right arm, but before it could drip onto her pants of the couch, the blood suddenly denied gravity. Isolde was staring at it and licking her lips and the blood began to gather into a sphere a couple

of centimeters above Amber's arm. Several small streams from Amber's self-inflicted wound fed into this floating sphere and a single, much larger stream flowed from the top of the sphere and snaked a path through space directly into Isolde's mouth.

The unsettling display of blood-based magic continued, the larger stream only every pausing its flow for the Drax to swallow. Suddenly, as if remembering I was there, Isolde pulled her eyes from the blood globe she had created and looked at me. She seemed to consider speaking, but apparently was too polite to speak with her mouth full.

So of course she brought a hand up to tear another mouth along the edge of her scalp.

"You. Show us your Ability. Make it... **quiet.**"

"O-okay." I looked at Amber, but she was looking off to the side with the closest thing to obvious embarrassment on her face I had even seen. I placed a large *silencing* bubble over the harpist, completely cutting off the sound.

"Ah. Magnificent. Convenient. How does it work?"

"I... imagine a shape that I want placed over a particular sound source, and I burn some of my PsyEn to-"

"No. **How** does it work?"

"I'm... not sure I understand the question then."

The blood drinking being of impossible magic power sitting in front of me sighed and kicked her feet out impatiently, "You are not **thinking**. Perhaps you **cannot**. That is why you are a pet. No matter, that is why we will Catalogue you. That is why we have Eyes at The Library. Apparently, they do not work through the night. You will go after you eat food in the sun phase. You do eat food, yes?"

"...Yes. I eat food."

"I see. If I recall correctly, so does Amber." Blood stopped streaming from Amber's wound - actually she appeared to stop bleeding entirely - and Isolde leaned in and licked her arm up the entirety of the wound... which simply disappeared without a trace.

"You both are dismissed. Amber you taste of exhaustion. Sleep. Iris I will taste you later. Sleep. Following the eating of food at the start of the sun phase, Amber will come to my chamber; we have much to discuss. Iris will be taken to the Library and Catalogued. Go."

"...Yes... Master Isolde." Amber said quietly, her exhaustion obvious to me for the first time.

"Understood, Master Isolde." I followed suit, just relieved to be able to breathe for one more night.

Amber

They drank a lot.

I was **not** ready for that.

Or the sight that greeted me when I woke up and rolled over in my bed.

I laid down on my side, propped up on my left elbow, trying to work through the order of operations that must have occurred last night to result in Iris being curled up on the floor of my bedchamber with a pillow and blanket dragged from her assigned room. We left the Sunrise Lounge... and then I brought her to a nearby room she could use... she had looked like maybe she wanted to say something, but did not... we did not fuck; I definitely would have remembered that... No. She must have silenced the door and picked her way in; she looked so peaceful like this, absent of her typical flippant, whispered commentary.

"Iris." Her eyes snapped open.

"...Mornin'... is it?"

"You were **so** close to my bed, did you trip and fall or something?"

"Funny. No, I just didn't want to sleep in a strange room... alone when I'm probably being watched." She explained between yawns as she dragged herself off the floor and began stretching out her back; the rug was fairly plush, but it was no futon. It appeared that she hadn't changed out of her provided outfit to sleep, only letting her hair down to sleep but otherwise maintaining a high level of martial readiness. Not that it would have done her any good, if at any point Isolde decided she had no value, then she was dead, plain and simple. After about a minute of watching her stretch, she seemed to suddenly become aware of my ogling.

"A-are you going to get up or what?"

"As long as I have a private showing here, I am just fine where I am." I teased, gesturing at her with my right hand. Her gaze softened suddenly and she quickly hopped in front of me and grabbed my hand and forearm.

"He- what are you doing? Unhand me!" She gripped me tighter and I was not exactly in a position with decent leverage. She was gazing intensely at my forearm, and after a few moments, she looked at me with softer eyes than she ever had before and asked, "That was a lot of blood. Are you okay?"

"I. Am. **Fine.**" I said a bit more forcefully than I expected or intended, yanking my arm out of her grasp. She had a similar - if more terrified - look on her face last night. It was embarrassing to be fed upon in front of others; I did **not** want to have to put into words how it felt.

“It looked like it hurt. Is it always like that for you?”

“That is irrelevant; she healed me just fine. See?”

“That’s not...”

“Enough. Return to your room and ring the bell. The room keepers will bring you whatever you want. They know they have to bring you to be Catalogued, so just... Go.” I ended weakly. Her gaze lingered on me for a few more moments before she clicked her tongue and bent down to pick up her pillow and blanket. She exited my room silently and without looking back. Ugh, I was actually feeling a bit dizzy. I dragged myself from bed to the bell near my desk and tugged on it. Within 10 seconds, there was a light knock on my door and I opened it.

“A lot of water. And a lot of meat. Thank you.”

“Enter.” I let myself into Isolde’s private chamber and found myself standing in the middle of a void of impenetrable darkness. Either they had much they wanted to show me without having to actually verbalize it, or they had not yet decided on what form they felt like taking for this conversation. I shut the door behind me and saw several eyes the size of my head blink into existence. An amorphous blob of shadow suddenly rose from the ‘floor’ which was somehow both more and less distinct than the surrounding darkness. Large mouths opened up all over the shadowy form.

“Did you enjoy the euphoria that accompanies sightlessly staring at the back of your own eyelids, sweet child?”

“I did. It is good to be home.”

“Ah yes is it not? Tears then, for I regretfully must inform you once more of your imminent departure.”

“What?! W- Wait. What do you mean by imminent?” I suddenly recalled what I was dealing with here and tempered my outrage accordingly.

“Oh I know not. A month? Two? Very soon, as it were.” Ah, of course. Time.

“During our meeting with your pet. I also attended a meeting with the other seven.” I see. No wonder they seemed distracted last night; their mind was literally in two places at once.

“Oh really? My apologies for interrupting an important meeting.”

“Pay no mind. Indalecio and Decus demanded an emergency meeting.”

“Emergency? Of what variety?”

“They both lost one of their Hands.”

“Oh? Did they get themselves killed?”

“Yes and No.

“I do not follow.”

“It is something of a riddle, sweet child. Their connection with their Hands was severed. That much is certain... But there is also evidence that at least Decus’ Hand is alive as well. A Hand cannot refuse contact; you know this much quite well. Not unless there is powerful - **powerful** - magical interference.” Like with the weird Inn Iris and I stayed at; I held my tongue about this for now.

“I understand Indalecio being unable to reach out; but does Decus not specialize in Far Sight?”

“Ah, see? Now you are thinking. Indeed, They were sent to investigate something *new*. They both tried to get ahead of the rest of us with their investigation, and now they have both lost Hands in the process. But the fact that whatever this *new* thing... is... it possesses strong enough Soul to interfere with our connections. Unacceptable. We **must** know what *it* is.” I had not heard this level of indignation from Isolde in quite a long time.

“Where were they sent?” As I asked this, the unbroken void around me pulsed, and a large map appeared to float in the air in front of me.

“This is the most up-to-date military map in the Library. They were sent here.” A large black circle of cloying darkness appeared around the city of Nancontaeul, just east of the Wathunda border in Tanthilian. It was reasonably famous for its contribution in holding off Fae encroachment long enough for a magirradiated Dead Zone to form in the wake of the Fae’s retreat. The Dead Zone was some 150 kilometers at its thickest and just over 2400 kilometers long from East to West.

“What ‘new’ thing were they sent to investigate?”

“Three things happened one after another: We felt a pulse of something similar to magic emanate from Nancontaeul, A rumor began spreading that the Dead Zone directly North of Nancontaeul returned to its natural state all at once, and Nancontaeul suddenly shut itself off from all outside contact; gates sealed, no outsiders in or citizens out.”

“When did this happen?” I was surprised I had not at least encountered a rumor of a Dead Zone reverting back to normal. If that was a thing that could happen... it would be **huge** for the various countries bordering Fae territory.

“...Shortly... after you last left?”

“You have no idea anymore.”

“I have **no** idea anymore, child.”

“I will look into it, then. But I am confused; we have lost two Hands already and now you wish to send me in? With all due respect...”

“Such modesty, child. We **know**, you are the best of them. Not a single one of the others is in possession of a more powerful Hand. Not a single one can utilize theirs as deftly as we can.” I felt my face grow unbearably hot and thanked my mother silently for my dark complexion that hid the childish pride I felt at my Master’s praise. She continued the briefing, “You will not enter the city alone. The other four who have not yet investigated Nancontaeul will be separately sending Hands to that area. Two to confirm the rumor about the Dead Zone and three to enter the city itself from different directions, including yourself.”

“Why separately?”

“You shall see soon enough.”

Iris

As had been increasingly becoming the norm: what a weird fucking morning.

After ringing the bell and acquiring both some breakfast and hot rinsing water, I had been fairly aggressively escorted to an obsessively spotless room with silver walls, then demanded that I let them blindfold me. I didn’t really understand why, especially considering that everyone had already told me that the Library was in the center of the country... but I rolled with it out of literally any sense of self-preservation. For the most part everyone felt and acted like normal humans, but every now and then I could feel a stronger, more sinister presence watching me. It wasn’t as overwhelmingly horrifying as having Isolde’s attention, however, so I figured it must have been a curious Hand keeping an eye on me at some Drax’s command.

As I sat there clearly hearing the hustle and bustle around me, there was a tickling sensation at the outer limit of my Coating. Suddenly, it was mostly quiet and my ears popped slightly, as if the pressure in the room changed all at once. I heard someone quietly making their way towards me, stopping just two short strides behind me.

“Excuse me. Um. Iris, subject of Amber, correct?” The meekness of the question startled me, as no one other than Amber had spoken anything but a command or a condescension or something utterly terrifying to me since I entered this country. I guess they kept all of their shy guys in the Library... which sounded right, at least.

“...Yeah.”

“Oh, uh. Good. Yes, very good. Please come this way before... well no, um, I’ll just take your wrist. Please come with me.” The timid man gingerly grasped my wrist and began to pull me

somewhere. After a few moments we crossed a threshold and I heard the door shut behind me. I again felt the same tickling sensation that I had earlier, and could tell that... something had changed in the room I had just left, but couldn't put my finger on what.

The timid man removed my blindfold and I found myself in a small room with a desk and chair in front of an impressively large wall lined with over a dozen shelves of books from floor to ceiling. Across from the desk was what looked to be a large, overstuffed, absurdly comfortable looking, brown rocking chair. Excluding the door we had just come through behind me, there were exits on either side wall as well. The room was otherwise sparsely decorated with wood paneling on the bottom half of the walls and some manner of dark green felt on the top. The hardwood floor seemed super old and spotted and the rug under my feet felt well worn.

"So, um, yes if you'll follow me to your left here, thank you, yes. W-we will be back here later to take your final statement." The timid man awkwardly stammered out his directions and I fell a couple steps behind him, following him through the door and into another long, dimly lit hallway.

"Ooooookay. But hey, what's your name, nervous guy? And doesn't working in the Library make you pretty important? Why are you so nervous?" If I strained for it, I could hear this guy's heart slamming in his chest.

"Oh. Um, haha. Yes of course how rude of me, my apologies!"

"...And your name?"

"Oh! Of course, I am called Cauffin Isolde." Isolde again, was this like... a thing? He certainly didn't **look** like Amber, all pale skin and slick, raven black hair with an unfortunately receding hairline for how young he otherwise looked. I probably had a good five years on the guy at least.

"Isolde?" It's a Library, I guess I should learn some shit.

"Ah, yes. But of course I am. Everyone living under the protection of the magnificent Isolde and has the honorable pleasure of being fed upon by them is part of their Family. Thus we all take 'Isolde' on as our family name!"

"Huh. Okay. And again, why are you so damn nervous?"

"Oh! You noticed! Hah, well, of course you did. We were briefed that you could sometimes be quite sharp," *Sometimes*; sounded like Amber to me. But you did NOT need to be sharp to notice this guy tripping over himself, "I must confess, this is my first time solo escorting a subject to be catalogued! We are currently heading to a testing chamber that has been set up for you in accordance with what we already know about your Ability."

"...I see..." I followed him through a heavy wooden door into a smooth, featureless grey room that was lit by several oil lamps. There were several tables full of random objects, devices that I

largely didn't recognize, with the exception of my Needle and the sword that Amber gave me. I've gotten pretty good at handling that sword, so I should probably give it a name...

"Since they are Psymetal, we retrieved your weapons and made them part of our planned experiments. Kindly retrieve them." I did as I was told and strapped the sword on my left and the Needle on my right; taking comfort in being armed for the first time since we arrived at Isolde's manor. Cauflin beckoned me over towards a table where two other researchers also stood, and gestured for me to take a seat. As soon as I was seated across the table from them, they whipped out notebooks and pens and took turns questioning me:

"What's the softest sound you can silence?"

"The softest? I don't fucking know... My heart beat, I guess?"

"What about externals? Like a mouse's whisker brushing against a wall?"

"Weirdly specific and... maybe an oil lamp flame's sputtering? I don't really use *Silence* on non-irritatingly loud noises..."

"The loudest?" Another researcher spoke up suddenly, not even looking up from her notebook.

"...Probably Amber's gun? Is this going to be the extent of the 'cataloguing'? If so can I get a snack or some shit? This is gonna get exhausting real quick."

"Interesting. And no, we just need to establish some base lines from your perspective before our own tests. Cauflin! Fetch snacks of the highest quality; it is the least we can do, after all." I guess Nervous Guy doesn't really have any clout worth mentioning if other researchers can send him on a snack run. Poor guy.

"It says here you don't understand mechanically how your PsyEn is acting on sound conceptually?"

"That's right. I place the bubble and the sound goes away."

"What if you were inside the bubble?"

"Then you could hear it."

"Hmm, So the PsyEn itself forms a boundary... there are probably only a few options here: the vibrations are either being canceled out by an equivalent but negative waveform or...."

"Wait-wait-wait. Vibration? Waves? What are you even on about?!" These guys may as well be speaking a different language. The two researchers both snapped their heads up to look at me, then each other after a beat, and started scribbling furiously in their notebooks.

"She does not know?"

“I suppose not!”

“But she can interfere with it!”

“There is likely precedent for it!”

“But still! Perhaps the understanding is subconscious?!”

“Fascinating!”

““.....!!!??!!!!”” They were visibly shocked to no longer be able to perceive their own voices, then confused, then excited as they both turned towards me with grins on their faces.

These people are super fuckin’ weird.

“Listening to you two talk about me like I can’t hear you is awkward. I’m going to release your voices now, so don’t make this weirder than it’s already been.” I dismissed the spheres I put around their mouths and they both began speaking at once before stopping at the same time... and both bursting out laughing after a few beats of silence.

I guess I’m glad they’re having a good time?

“Let’s move on to the practical experiments then.” I got up and followed them from the table we were at to another set up a few meters away. It had a couple of metal prongs that I’m pretty sure I’ve seen some musicians use before sticking out of a pair of hollow, wooden boxes. They explained to me that they were tuning forks that both rang at the same tune when struck, and they wanted me to play various shaped *Silence* bubbles on and around them. Apparently when you strike one fork, any nearby identical forks will also start ringing... which they insisted wasn’t Magic, but a function of sound I had never heard of called resonance... But I don’t think I really buy that.

They also brought me to some bizarre setup involving various strings and yarns and droplets of coloured dyes on them. Again, they seemed more concerned with the concept of ‘vibrations’ and ‘waves’ than sound itself. To be honest, a lot of what they talked about went over my head, ‘node’ this ‘anti-node’ that, it was tiresome. Much like Amber, however, they were visibly impressed that I was able to keep up this much constant and repeated usage of my Ability... do people really get **that** worn out so quickly? What even is the point of having an Ability if you’re not able to use it constantly and all day?

“Okay, Miss Iris, we just want to test the upper limits of what you can *Silence* now and then you’ll be ready for your final statement.” There was that ominous phrase again... ‘final statement’. While I appreciated that I had finally earned enough respect throughout this day to at least be referred to as ‘Miss’... did everyone here have to sound so damn sinister whenever they talked about my schedule?

“*Silence* this, please.” One researcher pointed a high-end, Fekthal-made handgun - a pistol I think they were called - at a target a couple of meters away. I did as I was told and she activated her *Third Eye* to confirm the presence of the bubble. She pulled the trigger, the gun jumped in her hands, and there was a little ‘poot’ sound as the bullet landed in the target, but otherwise the pistol was silent. The researcher looked at me, then at Cauflin and the other researcher who themselves were wide-eyed. Her face broke into a huge smile as a small chuckle escaped her, her head bobbing forward slightly as her shoulders shrugged slightly. It was - in a word - adorable.

Cauflin moved first, running to the table to pick up a blunderbuss of similar design to Amber’s and looked at me expectantly. I obliged and he aimed and fired at the target wall; I saw the recoil shake him and he stumbled back slightly. Even nervous as he was before, he seemed to be having a good time. Honestly this was probably the most relaxed atmosphere I had been a part of in quite some time, so I humored them for quite awhile as they picked up weapons and various other apparatuses and made as much noise as they could. In the end, they did not appear to find a volume limit to what I could silence, though I was sweating by the end of that particular test.

At the end of the tests, they thanked me for my hard work and Cauflin escorted me back to the first waiting room and sat me down in the rocking chair that was as comfortable as it had looked earlier. He waited with me for a minute or two, casually perusing a book from the shelf while I sat in the chair and fanned myself with my hand. They had sent me back with my weapons, which I found odd but they refused to answer my question as to why let me be armed now? Perhaps they trusted me a bit more after working with me?

Doubtful.

A woman walked in carrying an air of ill omen about her... Which was not a thought I’d ever had about literally anybody ever, but here we were. She wore a closed-eye necklace, marking her as a part of the Isolde family. On her black slacks was a badge of sorts that read ‘Archivist’, and her dark red cardigan fit was cut just below her rib cage revealing a miniature silver rapier pierced through her belly button. The long sleeves suddenly loosened and flared out at the elbow, revealing arms that were tattooed all the way up with intricate, geometric patterns. I once heard certain types of tattoos could augment magic casting abilities, perhaps that was the foreboding sensation I was getting from this woman?

“Excellent work, Cauflin. Dismissed. I am Tasha Isolde, Miss Iris, would you kindly remain seated?” She sat across the desk from me and spoke with a slow nobility that was somehow more pronounced than Ambers and it definitely rubbed me the wrong way. Cauflin ‘Nervous Guy’ Isolde bowed, gave me a slight smile and wave, then exited the waiting room towards the silver room we had arrived through.

She cleared her throat quietly, then began writing in a notebook and speaking at the same time, “Subject name: Iris. No family name. Age: 25. PsyEn Ability: *Silence*. See Catalogue Number: P-E-A Dash Sensory Dash 87 Dash Silence. Iris, *tell me your story*.” At her last statement, she

pushed jet black hair with a single bright red insert in it out of her face and looked up at me with eyes that were as strikingly blue as they were cold.

“What do you-” My *Coating* abruptly felt... heavy? My heart began to race and my head began to fog. I clutched at my head with one hand and started reaching for my sword with the other, “What...did...you...do...to...me...” I managed to gasp out.

“I am an archivist and the current principal historian of the PsyEn Ability branch of the Library of Sventholme. As such, my Ability allows me to compel humans to tell me their story concisely... and accurately. You are as stubborn as was reported; Iris, *tell me your story.*”

It was as if me and my horse suddenly switched perspectives. I knew that I was Iris and that Iris was me... but I wasn't talking... Iris was. As Iris spoke, the archivist known as Tasha Isolde wrote faster than any Iris had ever seen.

“I... never knew my parents; didn't miss them either. My earliest memories involve hearing people coming and avoiding them; nobody ever snuck up on me. I don't much recall how I stayed somewhat clothed and somewhat fed before I was five, but apparently I managed... By then, I was already fairly adept at picking a lock, climbing a wall, and going unnoticed. The slums of the southern isles were far too loud for someone with hearing as sensitive as mine, so the ambient noise of the city's night kept me awake until the earliest hours of the morning. Since there is no winter cold down there to keep people huddled inside or snowfall to muffle the city's noise, it just became practical to be nocturnal. I would work by night, breaking and entering and stealing until the sun began to rise, and even the worst and most obnoxious of the drunks finally passed out. I maintained this for nine long years until my Ability first developed at around 14.” Iris had never said a word about her childhood to anyone, not even her first ever partner, Amber. I got the sense that Iris wanted to stop talking, but it had not yet occurred to her that she could.

“I don't think I'll ever forget it: almost three days without sleeping. I couldn't stop crying because my body was changing, it was just too loud and nobody would help an uneducated waif like me. I was just so tired, you see: tired of how fucking loud everyone was, tired of not sleeping at night, tired of being forced into a lonely existence but still having to deal with everyone's grating laughter and audacious screams. I thought I would do **anything** to be able to just cut myself off from all of it. And just like that... all the sound was gone. For a blessed, blessed moment, I thought that maybe I had gone deaf, so I could finally rest. But along the way I had learned that if something seemed off, one should open their *Third Eye* and **see**. And there it was: the *Silence* bubble, activated subconsciously out of desperation to finally sleep a full fucking night. It would be another couple of years before I got good enough to keep my entire body Silenced” Iris knew that the events that led up to the manifestation of one's PsyEn Ability were deeply personal and something shared only with the people closest to one's heart. But despite her parched mouth, slamming heart, flushed face, and the archivist known as Tasha Isolde's apparent satisfaction... Iris was unable to hold her tongue.

“It would be a couple of years of refining my new Ability before I had a run in with Smoke and took my first human life and-”

“Pause. Skip to the development of your next derivative Ability.”

“I... don’t have one. I thought that-”

“Pause. You developed *Silence* almost 15 years ago. But you have generated no derivative techniques. How? Why?” The archivist known as Tasha Isolde seemed almost offended, as if - as far as she was concerned - Iris had wasted her life up to this point.

“I never wanted anything as badly as I just wanted it to be quiet. Is that so bad? Creative application of *Silence* has allowed me to accomplish almost anything... Almost. Then Amber came into-”

The archivist known as Tasha Isolde’s eyes widened and she harshly rebuked Iris, “**Enough.** Master Isolde’s favourite child is **not** for me to hear about. We are done for now. *Thank you for your statement.*”

Suddenly I was back in the steering seat of my own mind and I snapped forward out of my seat, my sword half-drawn, glaring at this invasive bitch that just hijacked my memories for fucking posterity. I felt my lips and nose starting to twitch into a snarl over clenched teeth as she met my stare with an unblinking, impassive look of her own. Slowly, I sheathed my blade and came back to a neutral stance, taking a couple of deep breaths to calm my racing pulse.

“Interesting. It seems you are more intelligent than I was led to believe.” Why the fuck does everyone here think I’m an idiot?! I am going to have to prod Amber about all the shit talking she has apparently done about me.

“I will make you pay for... all of **this** some day.”

“Oh? I look forward to it. **Cauflin.**”

“M-Ma’am?” Nervous guy poked his head through the door. I had so much attention on Tasha that I hadn’t even heard him hanging out outside of the door with a book.

“Where is she to be taken next?”

“Um... back to... Master Isolde’s manor?” Cauflin sounded confused and Tasha’s face went through a series of discreet, ill-concealed emotions, from shock, to confusion, to epiphany, to amusement, and finally, smug understanding.

“Is that so? Well, we will have to take your weapons once more. We can’t very well have an assassin, even a **guest**, walking around the manor armed.” I gave her a suspicious look, but unclipped my weapons and did as I was told. I guess now that I had been catalogued, this trip

was likely almost over. I'd almost made it out of here alive, so I could suffer the indignation of being disarmed for just a bit longer.

"Please try to fall face first on the point ends, if you would."

"I will see what I can do, but I doubt we will be seeing each other again. Your story was almost interesting, thank you, **Iris**."

"Choke on a bag of dicks, **Tasha**." With that, I followed Cauflin out of the room and prayed to the Wind that I'd never have to blow through here again.

Amber

I felt the displacement room's magical fallout tickle across my Coating and sighed with relief when I heard Cauflin asking 'Miss Iris' to follow him. I had not realized just how tense I was all day since she had been escorted out; I'd have to call on some keepers for a massage later. The door in front of me opened and the two of them stepped through and stopped, surprised to see me waiting in the hall.

"I'll take her from here, Cauflin."

"Uh-y-y-Yes Ma'am!" He gave me a half-bow, turned and nodded at Iris, then scampered down the hall. With Iris and I alone in the hallway, I looked her up and down; she did not seem worse for wear. In fact, she looked more annoyed than tired or hurt.

"...How did it go?"

"I'm going to fucking kill Tasha some day."

"...Well enough then, I take it. Is she higher on your list than me?"

"That depends. Why the fuck is everyone so shocked that I'm not an idiot?"

"Oh. My... initial reports on you may have been less than glowing." I was feeling oddly... embarrassed I suppose.

"Ugh. I fucking figured. Whatever. **Yes**. She is definitely second after that one doe-eyed bitch. Which makes you third." One of these days I need to have her tell me the story behind 'that one doe-eyed bitch' that she brings up with alarming frequency.

"I am... vaguely offended by that, actually."

"Work harder? I guess?"

“Careful, I just might.” Instead of the usual eye roll at my teasing, she actually gave a small laugh. I gave her a quizzical look over my sunglasses.

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just that this place is so fucking weird I actually kinda missed you today. So what happens next, do we go home?” Her confession threw me for a moment, causing me to pause my gait ever so briefly as we walked down the hall. She definitely heard the change and definitely chose not to address it, but I could practically feel the smug satisfaction rising from her otherwise stoic form.

“What is home for **us**, exactly? What, do you want to go back to the ‘scary-magic-mystery-inn’?”

“Huh, fair enough. So what then?”

“We have another job from Master Isolde, it will require a fair bit of travel. I will explain it to you in time but for now let us continue to rest.”

“...Eh I suppose that’ll have to do, though I don’t think my nights will be super restful here with-” Iris had lagged behind slightly as we had made our way through the winding corridors and she stared wordlessly at the wall to my right, a liquefying shadow on the wall heralded Isolde’s imminent arrival. The small blonde head of their child-like form poked out of the shadow.

“Ah! Amber,” All of the light sources in the hallway as ever briefly changed colour, “There you are, sweet child. We simply must-” Their head suddenly twisted a full 180 degrees with an uncomfortable snap so they could look at Iris, “...Iris...” All of the flames in the hallway turned to look at her, “...Has already been catalogued. Amber, why is this *Human* still here?” Iris’ eyes widened in obvious terror and her eyes met mine desperately.

“I put in the order to have her returned here, Master Isolde. We are par- We work together. I would have her accompany me to Nancontaeul soon, remember?” Isolde whipped their head back around, something resembling an incredulous look on their face. They abruptly collapsed back into the shadow on the wall and two black tendrils shot out towards Iris and I’s shadows, splattering liquid darkness through the air. As soon as the darkness made contact, my own shadow reached up and grabbed my wrist, violently yanking me into the ground. However, instead of cracking my head against the floorboards, I kept on falling inside my own shadow, spinning head over heels several times before suddenly landing on my feet inside of Isolde’s private chamber. Their control over reality within their own domain was awe-inspiring. I looked around quickly and saw Iris on her hands and knees, gasping for air, the sudden shadow stepping both broke her composure and knocked the air out of her.

Isolde was pacing around their chamber, sometimes on the floor, sometimes the walls, and sometimes the ceiling, “We do not understand, Amber. In the last half century you never brought back to the manor someone who has been catalogued. What is different? We read her file. She has not grown in a decade and a half apparently. What is different?” I have never seen Isolde this agitated and had failed to calculate that my breaking from any established routine may be

cause for concern for them. I had discussed this with them a couple of times, but clearly they did not or chose not to comprehend what I had meant.

"I... The purpose of traveling together was not for cataloguing purposes until you commanded that I bring her in."

"We do not understand." Oh no.

"It is... more safe? To work as a pair."

"Is it? We do not understand... The one called Iris is a pet, yes?" This is not good.

"...She is... more than a pet... to me."

"...We do not understand. Is she special? How? We must know." Isolde suddenly appeared directly in front of Iris. They cupped her face in their hands, tilting her head up to make eye contact.

"Stand up. We want to play with you." No. No-no-no.

"Isolde. With all due respect, I think playing with her would hardly be worth-

"Worth our **What**, Fledgling? Time? Our time is infinite and we spend it as we please." My shadow once again stood up, grabbed my shoulders, and forcibly guided me to a small couch off to the side. As it did so, all of the furniture in the room started to slide to the walls. I could not save her from this; the one thing I was afraid of happening during this trip. Iris - now standing - looked back and forth between Isolde, myself, and the various pieces of furniture sliding on solid shadows around her.

"Tell me, Human from the Southern Isles: where are your weapons?"

"...I don't know. The Archivist disarmed me before I returned." Her voice was so small that the words seemed to almost evaporate as they left her mouth.

"We see." Isolde reached their arm out to the side through a small pool of shadow they summoned in the air and pulled out both the sword I had given Iris as well as her Needle. They tossed both on the ground in front of her, eliciting a flinch from Iris.

"Arm yourself. We would see for ourselves what makes you so special." Iris looked at me with a sad, confused smile and shrugged, which caused a vicious pain to shoot through my chest. She squatted down to retrieve and clip on her weapons. She was smart enough that there was no escaping this.

"Are you frightened, Human?" I had told her not to show any fear, but it was a bit late for that at this point.

"I'm scared out of my fucking mind, honestly." Her terrified whisper was barely audible from where I stood in the room.

"Ah. What a conundrum," Isolde turned their back on Iris and walked to the other side of the room with slow, deliberate steps, "On one hand... if you are afraid out of your mind, then you are no longer thinking... which means you are even less than Human... a *pet* for certain. But on the other hand," They stopped in their tracks and looked over their shoulder, "We do just abhor *liars*."

Isolde turned to fully face Iris, who had put her right hand across her body and clenched the sword's handle with a white-knuckled grip. Despite Isolde's currently small stature, their presence filled the room, making Iris' back - which faced me - look all the smaller.

"Master Isolde, please lis-"

"-We are going to attack you now, human. A playful little sparring match for us to stretch out these petite limbs that we wear. Kindly do your best to respond in kind." I wanted to help her. I wanted to save her so badly. But there was nothing I could do. What could I do if Isolde had decided that Iris had no place at my side? Isolde smiled wide, fangs fully bared, their knees slightly bent and opened hands out to the side. Iris was going to die in a single leaping swipe. I reached out a hand fruitlessly at her as she took the quick draw stance that I had taught her so many months ago. She was definitely practicing on her own... She really looked amazing.

Isolde flexed their legs, and just before they disappeared from sight, all I could shout was "Iris I'm s-"

Iris

Did she slow down out of pity?

Was she distracted because Amber shouted?

Regardless, my blade flashed out faster than I had ever achieved before, even 100% of my Coating being used to Reinforce my body like I was now, I had never performed a quick draw lunging slash this quickly. Despite all of that, when my blade made contact with Isolde's outstretched hand, it felt like I had just struck a wall. Both of us clearly expected this to end in one strike with my decapitation, so a few long seconds passed before we both scrambled back into action. I brought my offhand and gripped the handle with two hands, stepping forward out of my lunge, and twisting at the hips and shoulders as I tried to fling the Drax back across the room to make some space. Instead of flying across the room, however, I only managed to throw her back 2 or 3 meters. The good idea would be to hop back and give myself some breathing room...

But that was almost certainly what she expected me to do.

Wasting no time, before she even touched the ground, I jumped at her, thinking to hit her with a difficult to parry thrust. Unfortunately - for some reason - my jump took me far further and much faster than I was ready for and I ended up having to take a drive-by slice at her neck as I twisted in the air to avoid body slamming into the immortal creature in front of me. She easily bent her body back in the air to dodge my impromptu attack and I hit the ground behind her, skidding and somersaulting to an eventual halt. She looked at me now with a mixture of curiosity and interest, as opposed to the earlier bratty contempt, which I thought might be a good sign for me until I saw several tentacle-like appendages rise from her shadow, dripping liquified darkness onto the chamber floor.

And here I thought she was only going to try to physically tear me apart, not Magically devour me too.

I figured I didn't have much longer to live here, now that I no longer had the element of surprise. I sacrificed some of the PsyEn I was using to Reinforce my body and used it to Clad my blade. Amber once told me that Psychic Energy was thought to be an evolutionary adaptation to protect Humans from magical fallout. I figured that Cladding my blade might allow it to interact with the magical shadows. They were moving fast enough to blur across my vision, but everytime they got within two meters of me, they slowed down just enough for me to deflect them with my Cladded blade. It happened twice, thrice, half a dozen and a dozen times. All one at a time... Isolde had gone from 'playing' with me to 'testing' me.

After the twelfth successful parry, she hesitated for just a moment, a chance I did not miss even ready to collapse out of exhaustion and fear. I leapt in with an overheard strike, this time landing right where and when I wanted to, and struck at the crown of her head with all my might. She easily side-stepped it, but then - impossibly fast - I changed the direction of my strike from vertical to horizontal. No way she could dodge this!...

...Aaaaannnd she caught the strike in one hand.

Shit.

But she didn't do a single thing, instead she just stood there for a moment looking up at me. Not letting go of my blade, she reached her other hand up to my shoulder and pulled, forcing me down to my knees. I squeezed my eyes shut, preparing for the sensation of teeth tearing into my neck. But instead, I heard her sniffing me, I cracked open one eye and saw her moving her hand in front of her own face repeatedly. Then she started looking all around the two of us, I started to do the same, but saw nothing, so I opened my *Third Eye* and my jaw nearly dropped when I saw what surrounded me.

It was-

"*Vanity*... But that cannot be... Child, how have you done this?!" Her face was just a few centimeters from mine and her eyes were filled with an undefinable mixture of emotions.

“Me?! I-I didn’t do anything! I only do *Silence!*” The words spilled out of me before I considered my tone, but she seemed not to notice. We both looked at Amber, who had been standing there looking super disheveled, her sunglasses askew and mouth half open. Her hand was outstretched desperately, as if she had been trying to telekinetically restrain the two of us from the other side of the chamber. Instead of doing the definitively impossible, however, she seemed to have done the theoretically impossible instead.

“Amber? When... did you... alter *Vanity?*” Isolde seemed to be choosing her words with extreme care, staring at Amber with something resembling wonder, while still clutching my sword and my now aching shoulder.

“...Just now... I suppose.” Amber herself was shocked, she slowly put down her hand and collapsed into the seat behind her. *Vanity* dissipated as she did so and Isolde completely lost interest in me to go sit in mid-air in front of Amber. I fell back onto my ass and kept quiet, as this situation was obviously precarious.

“But that... has never happened. Or maybe it could have? We wonder... But why? But **how?** What variable changed? *Vanity* in its usual form is to Hands as Blood Magic is to Drax: a defining trait and utterly inseparable... What is the new variable? It’s... **you.**” She turned her head all the way around once again to look at me.

“I see. Of course. Of **course** you are special! Of **course** Amber wants to keep you around! You need not grow if you can make Amber grow! You **changed** *Vanity*. Magnificent! Wonderful!” She began clapping and laughing, and dozens of mouths and hands rose from shadows all over the room to join together in a thunderous roar of applause and laughter. I clutched my hands over my ears, but placed no *Silence*, not wanting to cut myself off from any subsequent statements from the cackling horror in front of me.

“Wow... Amazing,” Isolde wiped tears from her eyes and turned to face me, “We are done playing, child. I cannot risk breaking a critical factor in Amber’s growth. Iris, yes? Yes. You eat food, correct? We must feast... Amber! You need to be re-catalogued. Hah! I cannot wait to tell Agrias that **our** Hand **evolved** *Vanity*. In fact, I cannot wait and shall not wait.” With that, Isolde simply fell into her own shadow and disappeared, leaving Amber and I collapsed in our respective places, staring at each other.

Amber

I laid in bed, exhausted but unfortunately wide awake. This day had brought with it far more feelings than I was normally used to dealing with... almost every emotion I could name, actually. Nearly everything I feared would come to pass tonight... did. But somehow, everything ended up pivoting at the last second to work out better than I could have ever imagined. At best I expected Iris to be vaguely tolerated as a mercenary working under me. At worst, well, Isolde would get too curious and want to figure her out in any way possible. The similarities between

the Drax and that one crazy red-headed doctor I had met a few years back were... disheartening to say the least. Instead, Iris ended up being favoured by Isolde - who came just short of fucking adopting her on the spot - and I no longer needed an excuse to keep her with me...

Keep her with me, huh?

I stared at the familiar bottom of the tester of my four poster bed, wanting to turn over, but was unable to with Iris cuddled tightly next to me, her head on my chest. She was solidly passed out, each breath deep and creepily soundless; I don't know if I had ever met who managed to keep their Ability active while asleep. Maybe how she managed that was in her file.

Or I guess I could just ask her.

As to how this had come about... 'Dinner' had proceeded as awkwardly as one could have imagined, with Isolde having done a complete 180 on how they felt about Iris, using too many limbs to offer her wine and sweets. To her credit, Iris managed to keep a thin veneer of festivity on her face for most of the meal. Isolde demanded a taste of Iris and she complied; although mercifully they did not drink anywhere near as much from her as they did me. Vylettes really do drive Drax into some sort of frenzy it seems. It was well into the early morning when Isolde suddenly tired of poking and prodding Iris and performing that... weird motherly act that sometimes possesses her when she gets nostalgic for my early childhood. She dismissed both of us and started walking through walls back towards her chambers. We went down to the bathhouse very briefly and returned to the upper living quarters where my room was located.

I was surprised to see that she followed me into my chamber of her own volition. I offered her some more wine to drink, but she refused and stood awkwardly near the doorway as I went to sit down on my bed. So much had happened that I just had no idea what I could possibly say to console her. I had leaned back and let my cool pillows and blankets swallow me up, figuring she would talk if she wanted. But instead to my shock and frustrating excitement, she took the position that she currently occupied.

"Don't touch me... But don't let go of me. Kay?" she had said in a most fragile whisper.

"...Okay."

I glanced down and pet her still damp head gently. It was not quite what I was hoping for, but this would certainly do. I suppose that - more than pride - over the last almost year, I had grown to honestly like this woman. And if we were more powerful together than not? Well, then that was a win in my book. I glanced down at her again, this time with a smile despite myself.

Yes... Today was a win.