

Silence & Vanity: Something Precious
by James Thomasos

Iris

We're finally getting ready to leave Sventholme.

Finally.

Don't get me wrong; it certainly hasn't been a boring stay here the last few months. For instance: many times - if I'm quick about it - I've been able to catch several sets of eyes staring up at me from my own shadow. Those eyes belonged to Isolde Kageonna, the vamp- er, **Drax** patron of my partner in crime and many other things, Amber Isolde. Ever since Isolde decided that I deserved to live a few months back, they had taken an unsettlingly high interest in me. Well, me and Amber together specifically. During my little 'sparring' match with the immortal entity of blood and shadow, Amber's PsyEn Ability - *Vanity* - **evolved**. Before, it only enhanced Amber's physical abilities, but now it accelerated both of us and both of us could be the point of origin for the *Vanity* bubble.

This apparently caused quite a stir amongst the eight va- Drax that run this country. Cue a whole slew of bizarre meetings, demonstrations, and a couple of additional 'cataloguing' sessions with that archivist bitch Tasha over at the famous Sventholme Library. Oh the look on her fucking *face* though when I turned back up with both Amber **and** Isolde. It is seared into my memory with crystal clarity.

I will cherish that look on her face for the rest of my life.

They ended up naming *Vanity's* new derivative Ability '*Pride*' which was... kinda sweet, I guess? So we've been running all over the country on Isolde's coattails to go bother other immortal Drax of incomprehensible power, which has been terrifying. We've been doted on by the Isolde Manor's staff and by Isolde herself, which has been uncomfortable. And of course just the fact that we have been trying to describe our relationship to creatures *centuries old monsters* that barely remember how to be **people**... Well, **I've** been more than ready to leave for **months**.

And at this point... it kinda seems like Amber's ready too.

So when she did her usual stomping approach this morning down the hallway in the unused west wing - I had insisted on being moved to because all the servants putzing about every morning were way too intrusive - I was happier than usual about it. As usual, she waited outside without knocking for me to open the door. I popped off the bed, stopped by my desk to put away my notebook and swung the door open the door more forcefully than I intended.

"Are we leaving?" Come onnnnn!~

"Good morning to you as well." She replied with a raised eyebrow, looking down on me with her strikingly bright red eyes.

“Yeah good morning and what not, you haven’t come to get me *yourself* in a good bit. So I figured this time must be special.”

“Mmm. I wonder...” She was such a pain in the ass some - no most of the time.

“Cut it out!”

“You are testy this morning, something good happen to you? Anyhow: yes, it is time for us to leave Svetholme at last.”

“We are heading to Nancontaeul, then? To investigate the disappearance of those two Hands?”

“Not quite yet. After that came up in one of the Circle of Eight meetings, more of the Drax want to be involved and are recalling Hands and making various other preparations. That should only take a couple weeks, so I guarantee it will take a couple of months minimum.” I snickered at that; the Drax either did shit immediately, not at all, or month after any reasonable deadline.

“Knowing this, we’re going on a Cataloguing Trip.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. There is some woman in Riveiranja with a truly bizarre Ability that Isolde wants to Catalogue before the others get to her.”

“Riveiranja? *That* old crossroad? Haven’t passed through there in a *minute*.”

“Ah good you are familiar. It is North and East across the Grand Lake and a week and a half, maybe two by horse.”

“I see... Aren’t we cutting it a bit close to Winter to be heading any further North?” We were well into the third Wind month and in two weeks it would be the first Ice month. Sailing North across the Grand Lake Haaole was a vast distance and while we might avoid the worst of the beginning of Winter here... I’d worry that even if we made it to our target and located her, we wouldn’t be able to make it back to Svetholme.

“I think we will be fine,” I feel like things always end poorly when she says that, “Now then, come. Breakfast.”

“Cool.” I followed her out of my room and trotted up to walk beside her. She glanced at me briefly but said nothing. I’d been trying something a little new these last few months, where I walked next to her instead of behind her. It seemed to make her feel *some* sort of way, though I couldn’t really figure out what she thought about it. But I figured that now that I’m like... sort of *in* the Isolde family in every way but name, I maybe should start trying to act like I’m on Amber’s level a bit. Before meeting her, I pretty much just went from job to job back to back to back without ever really staying anywhere particularly long. It was a pretty good and simple life since I’m good at what I do. But ever since throwing in my lot with Amber, I’ve really lacked nothing. I’m always well fed, well drunk, I stay in fancy inns - sometimes a fancy mansion - and I’m

protected. Really I want for nothing and all that's required of me is that I do what I'm good at and do what I'm told.

Honestly... It's a pretty fucking sweet deal; after all, I'm not really the type that gets their ego in a knot because I'm not calling the shots. Though sometimes... I **do** feel like I should be trying a bit harder to... I dunno, protect *her* too?

I slowed down to take the upcoming left, but Amber continued forward.

"Um?" Was all I said in confusion as I stopped at the intersection of hallways. She wasn't going towards the dining hall, she was walking to-

"Isolde always expects to dine with me before I leave. So we three dine together this morning."

"...Oh." Was all I could say, reluctantly following her down the hall towards Isolde's primary chamber. This was part of why I was excited to leave here: it turns out there were many things I'd been taking for granted over the course of the last 26 years. The first is the privacy that comes with physics and reality playing by *any* hard and fast rules. It doesn't matter if I can hear somebody coming if they are able to simply walk **through** the ceiling or floor or walls into my room from any direction. Related: the second would be that my overly keen sense of hearing means I've never, **ever** been snuck up on in my entire life. But my hearing does me no good when Isolde simply jumps out of my shadow mid-sentence to ask me what I'm doing. The third - and by far most extreme - idea that I'd taken for granted my entire life was the simple notion that my blood was **my** blood. For as long as we were in Isolde's domain here in Svetholme, my blood was **our** blood.

It's fucking nuts that Amber has dealt with this her *entire* life.

"Ready?" She asked me as we came to a stop outside of Isolde's door.

"As I'll ever be." At that she nodded and knocked on the door. There was a sound akin to that of tearing flesh behind us that I didn't have to turn towards to know was a mouth opening from the shadows.

"Come in, sweet children." A deep, masculine voice with a texture not unlike gravel emerged from the mouth born of shadows. We each grabbed a knob and pushed into the front chamber, which was set up with way too much of a banquet - that was mostly meat - for the time of day that it was. At the head of the table sat Isolde in a form that was unfamiliar to me. They had taken on the form of a light brown-skinned man in a very, very stylish, two-piece, white suit with black trim. They wore a black collared shirt beneath and a shiny white tie as well as some weird, wide-brimmed, dented white hat with a black ribbon around the base. Of course underneath that brim were a pair of black eyes dotted in the center with dancing flames.

"Be seated you two. Amber, to my right. Iris, to her right." We did as we were told and once seated, Isolde raised her left hand. At that signal, a dozen servants - Keepers I guess they were called - swarmed from various connecting chambers. They began pouring wine and placing food on our plates with the same level of precision that I typically reserved for assassinations. We ate

in relative silence for a few minutes as I kept my eyes firmly glued to my food. Not really understanding why we were dining together if no one was saying a word, but not wanting to be the one to break the silence. After ten or so minutes though, Isolde finally spoke up to make an unfortunately expected statement.

“One would taste them as well.”

One Keeper each approached Amber and I with a single knife in hand, bowing slightly. Amber offered her forearm immediately and I resigned myself to doing the same. I'd have to find someone - decidedly *not* Amber - to slap me if I ever found myself getting used to this. I winced as the blood began to well up from the small incision, then the pain immediately faded as blood began to dance in the wound and finally lazily flowed out of the wound, through the air, and gathered in a globe in front of Isolde's angular face. After she was done manipulating pulling our blood, two long tongues snaked out of the arms of the shadows we were casting on the table with the usual tearing noise and licked our wounds clean; which simply disappeared as if we had never been cut. Isolde's chin rested in their left hand as they impassively considered the two globes of blood floating in front of them, likely deciding which of them to drink first.

Instead of swallowing one of the orbs - to my surprise - she flicked her free hand slightly and the two globes of blood split into several smaller ones: Amber's into 11 and mine into 12. One of Amber's and one of mine each went into Isolde's mouth, who then closed their eyes and shuddered with apparent delight. Licking their lips, they sat up straight in their chair and brought a pointed thumb up to their neck, drawing it across their throat in the universal throat-slitting gesture... except they actually cut their neck open. I gasped audibly despite myself and I heard Amber suppress a chuckle next to me; clearly she knew what was going on here. Isolde's blood avoided staining their immaculate suit and instead flowed directly into all but one of the floating orbs in front of them. Once the orbs were about the size of my palm, all the blood stopped flowing and Isolde clapped their hands with ear-popping force. All of the globes of blood - save one of mine - began to bleb and morph and shudder rapidly before - with several crackles and pops - taking on jagged, crystalline shapes.

Oh. So that's how those freaky Blood Shards things are made.

Two more keepers walked over to Isolde with fancy-looking wooden boxes lined with some sort of soft, slick material, and the newly formed Blood Shards floated into their respective boxes. Amber and I regarded Isolde curiously, as the question on both of our minds was: What was the last globe of my blood for? Isolde suddenly stood up and looked me in the eyes.

“Iris, come to me.” Oh shit. What now? I did as I was told and walked around Amber to stand face to face with Isolde, who was taller than me in this form. Looking down at me, they smiled with bared fangs - which was threatening no matter how I looked at it - and placed their hands on my face. They were hot as flames today.

“You do fine work for Amber, child. Which means you do fine work for me. You will continue to work with Amber; *make her grow*. To that end, **this** will be more convenient.” Another surge of blood shot from Isolde's neck to join my final floating blood orb. But rather than flicking this one

into her mouth, she bent down and pinched at the shadow I was casting in her direction. This time it was Amber's turn to gasp as she apparently realized what Isolde was doing - which made one of us I guess - and then I heard that familiar tearing noise.

But instead of a mouth or a tongue or something weirder, they stood up with what I can only describe as a wriggling piece of my own shadow. They began to squeeze and knead it like a dumpling in her hand before flattening it and every time she molded my shadow, I felt a painful lurch in my chest. The blood globe drifted into the center of the paper-thin leaflet of darkness. Then the little piece of my shadow suddenly snapped shut around the globe of blood.

"Your right hand, Iris." I held out my hand, palm up and Isolde plopped the small sphere made up of our blood and my shadow into my hand. It felt oddly cool to the touch.

"Look at me. Yes, very good. Now make a fist. Good." I could not even begin to describe the sensation of squeezing my own shadow.

"Now then," Isolde placed both of her hands on my face and brought her face just a few centimeters from mine, "By your blood and my blood, you are *one of us*. By my blood and your blood, **my** power is the **only** power. Understood?"

Sometimes, you have zero options and you just have to roll with the punches. Oh well.

"Understood." As I said the word, my clenched fist suddenly felt empty. I winced as I felt my left hand burning.

"Magnificent. You are now Iris Isolde. Amber Isolde - as I understand it - you two were just leaving, no?"

Amber

Holy Fucking Shit.

What?!

Literally and Figuratively: What?!

I had no idea.

I-

They... ***fucking adopted her!***

"So... you gonna say something to me? You seem to feel some way about this, but I could *really* use some guidance here." My head snapped towards Iris. At this point we were in a boat on the Grand Lake Haaole and she was sitting across from me looking down at her opened left hand where she was now **forever** scarred with the mark of Isolde. After our meal, we said our farewells to Isolde and excused ourselves, finished packing, and went on our way. My head had been spinning since the moment I realized Isolde was creating a **family crest** for Iris. This

was... too much, This was not something I could have ever anticipated in my wildest flights of fancy. Iris-fucking-Isolde. What a n-

“**Amber Isolde**. Quit brooding and fuckin’ talk to me, okay?” I took a deep breath and sighed in frustration.

“...What do you wish to know, **Iris Isolde**.” That rolled off of my tongue *unpleasantly* and I immediately regretted it. She gave me an unreadable look and continued speaking.

“This mark... does this mean she can hear my thoughts or see me or something?”

“No. She now *forever* has a decent notion of **where** you are. And within a certain distance, she is capable of piloting your shadow, projecting herself through it, manipulating it and what not.”

“Okay... is that it?”

“...I guess you can come and go from Sventholme as you please and use any magical mechanisms within Isolde’s dominion without an escort now?”

“Neat.” What is with her today?

“I thought you would be more... freaked out?”

“Why bother when you’re clearly ‘freaking out’ for me?”

“I surely am not.”

“You definitely are. All because you were *worried* about little ol’ me!” She crooned mockingly at me.

“Enough. I do not think you understand the position you- we are in.”

“No. I don’t think **you** understand. What does this change, exactly?” She shot back. The nerve.

“You DO realize that your **life** is now entirely contingent on *my* growth and *my* life.”

“...And?” This woman...

“What do you mean ‘and?’? How does this not bother you?!” She rolled her eyes at me.

“Were you planning on not growing at all going forward? As a person? As a warrior? As a Hand?”

“I...”

“Like I said before: This seriously changes *nothing* about our relationship, if you stop freaking out and think about it for a sec.”

“Wow. I hardly wish to hear such words from **you** of all people.”

"I bet. If we get into a situation where **you** are dead, then I'm probably dead too. We are *partners* and that is the nature of our business. If you are already in the Isolde family, then that means Isolde *already* knows where I am and where I'm going to be. So that's a non-issue too. And if you weren't going to grow or change at all, then you wouldn't be a human. And I know you like to disagree with me, but Vylette or not, Hand or not, you're still just a human. Need I continue?" I gawked at her and took off my sunglasses. I do not believe I have ever heard her speak so much all at once, or so logically.

"...It does mean we **have** to work together *forever*, though."

She looked down at her hand again, then back up at me, her gaze somewhat softened, "You really seem caught up on that word. How does *forever* even mean **anything** to you? It's nonsense to me, so I don't think about it. I don't know what you intended to do with me in the short and medium term... but now I've gotta ask: does the notion of working together long term really displease you that much?"

I swallowed past a lump that suddenly appeared in my throat, "I... suppose not."

"There ya go. In our line of work, our partnership has *a/ways* been a death sentence, at least for me anyhow. Now it's just official. I'll do my best to keep up with you, so don't leave me behind." At that I had no choice but to shake my head and concede this first and - I vowed on the spot - only victory she would have over me.

The long boat ride North continued without incident. Iris spent most of the time staring off into distance over the bow, hair buffeting in the wind. Every now and then I would catch her stealing a glance at me with a look of - in my opinion - unwarranted self-satisfaction on her countenance. She seemed to take a bit too much pleasure in the fact that I was concerned for her well-being, for reasons I did not particularly understand. I suppose even *I* was surprised at the physiological reaction I had had to the whole situation: heart rate and temperature increased, stomach flighty, sweat. It was not unlike being faced with a large magirradiated beast or what I imagine it would feel like to face off against one of the Elemental Saints.

Truly a season for strange happenstance.

"Ah. Finally. I see torches."

"Excellent. We will be able to grab some horses at the docks.

"Sounds good."

A while later we finally touched down at the docks and Iris was the first to hop off the boat with a pleased sigh. She dropped her bags and lightly stretched in preparation for the upcoming horseback journey. We waited for a few minutes until a couple of crew members returned with our horses and additional supplies. Iris and I would be on the road for a good bit, with two larger towns along the way that we could stop at for a nice, warm stay at an inn.

We both hopped up onto our horses and I beckoned her to follow me. After a few moments both of our horses' trots were *Silenced* - which doubtless was just as strange for the horses as it was for any onlookers - and Iris brought her horse up next to mine, rather than falling in line behind me. She had started doing this recently - both on foot and on horse/lizardback - and I was unsure as to why. Perhaps it was some manner of unsubtle power play? Such pettiness *did* seem in character for her, but I could not imagine the reason behind such a maneuver.

"Pretty chilly out." She broke the silence as we left through the gates of the lakeside town.

I exhaled slowly and deeply, seeing the steam tumble out of my mouth in the moonlight, "So it is."

"We're definitely gonna get snowed in." She is so insistent about this.

"Did I not tell you we would be fine?"

"Wanna bet?"

"Bet on what?"

"Bet on whether or not we get hit with a blizzard and have to hole up in a town other than Riveiranja. What do we have on the way... Karthas and Montatia, right?"

"Right... Fine, let us make a bet. So then - Miss Shaman of the Seasons - clearly we know where we both stand on the topic, so what are we gambling?"

"Oh. Uh... Hmm..." Ha! She has nothing.

"We want not for funds or food or shelter, so what exactly do you intend to wager? Come now, do you not tout yourself as an excellent planner?"

"Pfft, better than you for sure! Starting this trip at the end of the Third Wind-"

"The wager."

"Oh fine. Okay so... I'm super confident about this so I'll just put it out there: if we don't get hit by a blizzard between here and Riveiranja, then you'll finally get to fuck me, no strings attached. How's that sound."

.....!?!?

"Uh... Amber? *Amber Isolde*? Chick-whose-family-name-I-now-share?"

"*What?!*" Completely lost my train of thought there.

"You okay? You looked like you went to your happy place there for a sec there."

“...I was just surprised you would go that far, is all. You have rebuffed my advances so icily thus far, after all.”

“Eh. I’m not too worried. After all, if the noises I’ve heard down various halls over the last 9 or 10 months are to be believed, you appear to be pretty good at it.” Who the actual fuck am I talking to right now? *Something* changed sometime in the last few months. Also, she has been weirdly talkative today. Is it just that we have left Svetholme?

Or had she just warmed up to me *that* much?

“And what is it that I must do on the off chance that we are hit by a blizzard.”

“I already said: if I win, then you have to be honest with yourself about me.”

“I do not believe I follow.”

“Yeah of course you don’t. I’ll have you admit that this isn’t just *business* and hasn’t been for a long time.”

“Tch, how presumptuous of you.”

“I wonder...” She leaned forward over her horse neck and wrapped it in a hug, “You think so too, don’t you, Tundra?” She heaved a melodramatic sigh, “So, do we have a deal?”

“Deal. And you named the horse? You sure have become accustomed to horses.”

“It helps that this one isn’t clearly undead and creepily magical... but yeah, with all the traveling we do I’d say I’m pretty used to horses at this point. I’d love to try a riding lizard outside of Svetholme sometime though. *That* was pretty fun.”

“That can be arranged come Spring.”

“Oooh a lizard date. How romantic.” She drawled, turning her head towards me with a smile as she continued to lean forward on her horse.

Seriously. What has gotten into her?

We made it to the inland city of Karthas in three days of riding and camping and I had to say I was feeling pretty confident about the bet Iris had talked me into. Although it was definitely getting colder by the day, it had not been getting any more humid; if anything the cold was feeling dryer and dryer as we continued East. We came up to the front gate and made it through without incident. City guardians tend to be a lot more lenient when you open by letting them know that money is no issue. I tipped them well and the gate guards sent a young page to guide us through the city’s winding, cobblestone streets. I had passed through Karthas in the past, but that didn’t stop me from admiring the extremely function-over-form architecture of the place. The buildings were largely made of externally facing hard-fired brick, a layer of soft, porous

insulation, and interior facing salmon brick. Not particularly appealing to the eye, but this far North you had to appreciate how warm they managed to keep the interior of their buildings.

As we requested, the page brought us to the largest, most expensive inn in town: The Tawny Owl. Iris tipped the page and we made our way inside and up to the bar which appeared to serve as the front desk.

“Two large sui-”

“One is fine. Two beds though. Largest suite you’ve got.” I snapped my gaze towards Iris next to me and she gave me a practically feline shit-eating grin. The bartender looked back and forth between us with an amused smile and held out his hand for some cash. I grabbed a couple gold coins and slapped them in the shocked bartender’s waiting hand. He scuttled to the back wall to grab us a set of keys and promised to send us our baths and some wine. We took our keys and headed to our rooms- room...

Iris

Yoooooo.

Amber *likes* me.

Like... **likes** me.

Whether she wants to admit it or not. I am 100% certain of this.

I was doing my usual long soak in the bath, pressing my fingertips deep against various spots on my upper back and moving my shoulder in wide circles as a sort of improvised massage. I wondered if there was a masseuse I could order at this hour in this city. It had been pretty easy to have myself worked on after a day of riding around Sventholme for one reason or another.

Oh shit I got used to the boujee treatment real quick, didn’t I?

Yuck. I don’t think I like how easy it is to adapt to the royal lifestyle.

I settled back into the tub, unable to hear anything outside of the Silencing bubble I had willed into existence around the washroom I was currently in. We had a pretty fancy suite with separate washing rooms and efficient drainage and it was in general a pretty swanky place. Nice and warm and comfy with fluffy-ass mattresses and heavy-ass blankets. There was a fireplace not only in the larger, bedroom area, but smaller wood stoves inside each of the washrooms. Truly a portrait of comfort.

But I’m getting away from the most important point here.

I had been well aware for a number of months now that Amber and I’s relationship went a good deal past ‘simply business’. She was clearly looking out for me far more than any regular murder-colleague would and there wasn’t really any way she could reasonably reframe the narrative around it. She had grown to care about me and honestly... if I didn’t care about her, I would have tried to fuck off a looong time ago. Sure our arrangement was a pretty sweet deal; I

was still doing the stuff I was good at - killing - but I was doing it at a much higher level for a much greater reward. All of the basics were handled just by who we were associated with: food, shelter, clothing - in a word - money.

It is amazing what one is capable of when they don't have to worry about money anymore. Assholes with lots of money and assholes with absolutely no money love to say: 'Money can't buy happiness!'

Bullshit.

Money can certainly buy *peace of mind* and it can certainly buy you *time*. Time to indulge in your desires, time to rest, time to study and learn more about the mechanics of your own Ability. The better you understand your own PsyEn Ability, the more powerful you are by default. And if you have both money **and** power... Then what reason have you not to be happy? So assholes with lots of money say you can't buy happiness cause they don't want assholes with *some* money coming after their thrones. And assholes with absolutely no money say you can't buy happiness because they want to believe beyond belief that there is something - *anything* - that they could possibly have that the assholes with lots of money don't.

But I digress once more, I suppose.

The fact of the matter is that the perks of my situation are pretty much balanced out by the utterly terrifying drawback that our patron is a fucking Drax that has a strange obsession with Amber. So ultimately whether or not I stayed in this situation was always going to come down to whether or not I liked Amber, which - yes - I do. Now do I like her in a more romantic sense? Also yes.

I mean, it's kinda hard not to, right?

I'd never tell her this because her Ability is literally called *Vanity* and she does **not** need my help in that regard, but she's actually *super cool*. She's incredibly strong, hot, *mostly* has her shit together, well-spoken, wealthy, and is kind of both a natural and trained **protector**. What more can you really ask for than someone being fun to talk to, pleasant to look at, and safe to be around?

Nothing, really.

Which is part of why I've been trying my best for a while to become more powerful myself. I think that's really been the biggest change in the last 9 or 10 months together: it's no longer enough for me to just let myself be protected by her. I don't want to just walk and hide behind her... at the very least I'd like to be strong enough to protect her back, not just watch it. But she's been fighting toe-to-toe and blade-to-blade all the way to the death for most of her life; I'm not going to catch up to her as a *warrior* any time soon... But I think our general understanding of our respective PsyEn Abilities are a lot closer, so I think I can reach her on that front.

Especially 'cause *Vanity* **clearly** evolved because she *likes* me.

I couldn't help but giggle to myself and kick my feet with a small splash as I finished soaking in the last of the heat of my fancy bath.

Amber

I beat Iris downstairs as usual and grabbed us a somewhat isolated table and a bottle of wine. She normally took much longer baths than I for reasons I never bothered to inquire about. It was fairly noisy down here, but I knew that would not be a problem for long. We were making reasonably good time on this journey and I was pleased enough about that. I certainly did not wish to eat my words about the coming Winter. Our target - Reina Tethas - as I understood it was some kind of investigator that should not be terribly difficult to find once we made it to Riveiranja. So as long as we do not dawdle around that city, we should be able to beat the first blizzard back to Sventholme.

It was a bit warmer than I would have liked in the main hall of the inn, which had three fireplaces going at the same time. In the corner there was a small group of musicians with a small drum set, string bass, fiddler, and a rapper who was actually quite good at his craft. The blonde haired, porcelain skinned and overly bubbly waitress returned to take my order and I put in for our standard order when we were traveling: a-platter-with-a-bit-of-everything-no-seriously-we-mean-everything. I had always been of the opinion that if one is going to travel as much as the two of us do, then it only made sense to try as many things as possible. Or perhaps not always - now that I think about it - I suppose that was more of an Iris value than a me value and-

The room was suddenly completely silent.

I could not help but snicker when I looked up and saw Iris descending the stairs from the second floor. Her dark brown hair was still damp and not tied back the usual way. She had on a plain black, low cut sleeveless shirt and royal purple, baggy martial arts pants and... she was carrying a bag? She gave a small wave as she approached, crossing the threshold of her Silence bubble and saying, "You should take more time to enjoy your baths."

"You have seen what I am accustomed to in regards to 'baths', can you really blame me for just wanting to get the process over with whilst on the road?" She sat down across from me and poured herself a glass of wine, then gestured at me with the bottle. I pushed my glass across the table and accepted the top off with a nod.

"Eh. A bath is still an enjoyable experience in a tub or under a fancy fountain or in a barrel. Sometimes baths are way too few and far between. Gotta take advantage of 'em when you can. Ah. Third Eye real quick, I wanna show you something." I raised an eyebrow but followed her instructions and focused some PsyEn in my eyes. Iris' Coating was as ever admirably robust - both in its opacity and undulations - even at the end of a long day of travel. Glancing around, I could see the rigid, 2 or 3 centimeter thick Silencing bubble of PsyEn that was Iris' Ability surrounding us. The pulsating sphere had the same waveform as Iris' Coating; a telltale sign that she was the source of the conjured bubble.

"Aight, check this out." She closed her eyes and her Coating pulsed ever so slightly; an indication that she'd done... something. Gradually, I began to hear ambient noises from outside

of the Silence bubble. I peered more closely at the bubble and realized it was no longer a strictly-defined sphere like a glass ball, but was now much softer, more porous, but with depth. Sound was making it through these holes, but it was rather muffled.

“So I’ve been studying the notes I took on-”

“You have been what?!” *Studying? Note-taking?* Who the fuck am I even talking to right now? Did acquiring a surname turn her into a different person?!

“Oh hush. Anyhow, I had some of the Eyes that work for the Isolde family over in the Sventholme Library gather up a bunch of texts on sound-related research that have been done, along with the notes from my own Cataloguing. Most nights we were in the manor I was trying to read through all that shit and write my own notes so I could both understand it AND bring notes with me so I can keep studying and getting stronger!” She pulled out a notebook I had not known that she owned and displayed it proudly in two hands, holding it up just in front of her face before coyly peeking half her face around the side with a smirk.

“...I...” Was at a loss for words, “...Wow. I had no idea you were training your mind like this...”

“Ha-ha!~” She gave a playful fake laugh before continuing, “I knew you’d be surprised! Feel free to praise me a lot. I’m not all that fast at reading **or** writing, so it’s really been a pain in the ass to do all of this. But I’m learning a **lot**, like, did you know that the sounds we hear in the world are just vibrations generated by an action that pass through the air, into our ears and then vibrate a little membrane *inside* our ears? How wild is that?!”

“...I was not aware of this, no. And quite wild, I guess.” It was abundantly strange to hear her speaking about academic studies like this.

“Right? I always thought Sound was just... Sound, you know? Like Substance is just Substance and PsyEn is just PsyEn.”

“I mean... I do not know if THAT is strictly true, but I certainly do not have enough knowledge on those topics to argue that.”

“Heh maybe so. But all that vibration business got me thinking-”

“-*Oh my...*”

She responded by briefly blowing raspberries at me, “It got me thinking that if Sound is like a physical, mechanical thing that is getting blocked by my Silence bubbles, then I can probably just absorb it - fully or partially - which should let me change the volume of incoming sound. It’s sort of like *Vanity* or *Pride*, you know? They don’t block attacks, but they slow them down as they pass through. Same principle... I think, or at least a similar one.”

“Huh. Interesting, and where does the *absorbed* sound go, then?”

“It just kinda... stores away in the PsyEn that it’s coming in contact with the sound. I’m pretty sure it goes away when I dismiss the bubble.” Hmm, that was indeed pretty interesting, but-

"I understand wanting to improve and expand your repertoire. But why *this* specific application of *muffling* sound? Doubtless it is still significantly louder to you than to me currently."

"Well yeah, but most people don't do as well with pure silence as I do. I figured maybe our meals might be more comfortable for you if I let a *bit* of ambient noise in for you."

Oh.

"O-oh. That is- well- You have my gratitude." She chuckled at my loss of composure. This was a more recent development in the last couples of months. More and more frequently I was seeing this unexpectedly sweet and considerate side of Iris. At this point, it was not just that we were out of Sventholme and away from the direct, ever present eyes of Isolde. Perhaps, then, she truly was warming up to me? Mercifully - before I really had time to mull over that question - the waitress arrived with some backup to place down several platters containing 'a bit of everything' in front of myself and a visibly delighted Iris.

"Fuckin'. Sweet." She exclaimed and I laughed, thanking the waitresses in her place.

We consumed our eclectic feast quietly over the next few hours, drawing many interested glances from various patrons. Many of them started to approach, but seemingly activated their Third Eyes as they walked over and did not know what to make of the orb of Psychic Energy surrounding us. Amazingly, we managed to mostly clear the various platters on our table and were now sitting back and filling what little space remained in our bellies with a fine red wine. After our little blonde waitress returned to collect our lonely platters, Iris requested a wash basin and a rag to clean up her hands a bit. From then on, she tied back her hair and was pursuing her little notebook that she had so proudly shown off earlier.

It was quite the captivating sight.

After what was apparently a tad longer than I had realized, Iris glanced up at me suddenly with a smug little smirk.

"Like what you see?" She said as she closed the pores in her Silence bubble.

"Typically. Is that an invitation?"

"Not so much, but thank you for the compliment. If you're not doing anything else... what do we know about our target for this cataloguing trip?"

"You are only asking now? You really *have* calmed down a great deal."

"Or maybe I'm just used to your bullshit." She smiled at me and continued to peruse her notebook.

"Honestly, I am a bit shocked that you're not more familiar with her, considering your line of work and all."

"What? Oh you mean in regards to her Ability."

“Yeah, Death Sight or whatever I think is what the Eyes over at the Library have been calling it,” I reached into my bag and pulled out a small notebook of my own where I had copied down some details from one of our target’s Pre-Cataloguing dossier. I cleared my throat and started my explanation, “Target name: Reina Tethas. Occupation: Private Detective. Description: Blonde, fair-skinned, one green left eye, additional mouth in place of right eye, slight frame and-”

“Pause. She has two mouths?”

“Yes. One beneath her nose and another where her right eye should be.”

“That is an actual fact? I thought that was just embellishment.”

“Not so much, no. Moving on. Ability: Death Sight; according to various sources and rumors, she can feed the eyeballs of the deceased to the extra mouth and see the last few minutes or so of their lives.”

“Hmm, neat. Not terribly useful though.”

“Why so?”

“Well like - if it’s only what the deceased sees - she’d never catch a glimpse of me from the point of view of someone I’m assassinating.”

“Hmm. I suppose she would not. I do recall the first man you murdered for me after you failed to murder me.”

“Good times...”

“Hah! Apparently this Reina Tethas- hmm, wonder if there is any relation to the Vortex Dancer Lyra Tethas... **That** could be interesting. Anyhow, it seems she lived and worked in Shanae **way** far to the east for a good few years before suddenly relocating to Riveiranja recently. Apparently there had been a number of the Circle of Eight who wanted to catalogue her, but Shanae was quite frankly prohibitively far away for transporting a potentially unwilling participant.”

“Okay yeah I’d been wondering about that. Obviously I know what happens during a Cataloguing session. But... I was sort of afraid to ask when we were still in the Isolde Manor: what *normally* happens to people after you Catalogue them.”

“Hmm, it depends.”

“On?”

“A variety of things: uniqueness of the Ability, strength of the subject, politeness of the subject, how hungry Isolde happens to be that day, etcetera. Based on all of that, they are either released back outside of the country with a bit of coin to be polite, or they are consumed by Isolde. I know not how the other Drax do things, but that is how We do things.”

“Oof. So it was gonna be up to chance for me either way?”

“Oh! Well... no. You see...” Ugh, it really is too warm in this room.

“I see...?”

“Th- The plan was to... step in near the end... and ask for an exception to be made.” I had never actually intended to tell her that but the words tumbled awkwardly out of my mouth regardless. But things *did* get a little bit out of hand. We DID luck out though... she was definitely in a fairly good mood and reasonably satiated after feeding on me so much.”

“You *know* muttering under your breath won’t actually hide anything from me, right?” She wore a mercilessly amused expression on her face.

“**What of it!**” I challenged her, trying to save some face.

“Hmm? Not a thing, not a thing at all! Just happy to know you were going to get worked up all over again... Just...” She placed her elbows on the table with her wrists together and hands pointing out.

“For...” She leaned forward and slid her elbows along the table.

“**Me!**” She placed her chin on her hands and tilted her head slightly, a massive grin on her face.

“Ugh, I think you have had *enough*.” I leaned forward and swiped the bottle of wine from her side of the table and she stuck her tongue out at me before shaking her head, sitting back, and looked back down at her notes. She still had a small smirk on her face.

Thankful that she decided to let the topic drop for now, I sat back and enjoyed my wine until late in the night.

Iris

Unfortunately we only stayed at the Tawny Owl for two nights. I imagine that as the temperature continued to drop, Amber would be feeling less and less confident about that bet of ours. We were on the road further inland to the city of Montatia. I hadn’t been there in awhile, but it had been a pretty interesting place covered in these magical, glowing pink flowers that gave the streets this sort of dream-like feel at night. Every city has its weird quirks and Montatia’s seemed to be that their merchant class had a strange and fervent worship for some traveling mercantile Witch. Apparently said Witch was the source of all the magic flowers that you sometimes found scattered arbitrarily across Human-controlled territories.

Or so they say.

We were about a day out of Karthas and another few days yet from Montatia when the first snowflakes began to fall.

“Ah!”

“Ah dammit.” We seemed to notice at the same time and had very different reactions.

“I fucking told you so.’

“They are... just flurries. I believe the nature of our bet dictates that we must be ‘...snowed in by a blizzard.’ So this is hardly an end point.” Whhhaaat.

“Oh bullshit that’s just petty.”

“Specificity of language is important, Iris. Especially in the naming of stakes in a bet and the writing of contracts. You would do well to remember that.”

“*SpEcFciTy oF LaNguAgE iS iMpOrTaNt, Irls!~*” I mocked her smart-ass tone with tremendous maturity. She was too fuckin’ much sometimes.

She laughed at my overtly clownish mockery, “I do wish you did not reserve your ability to actually project your voice for when you are playing the role of court jester.”

“Pfft, whatever!”

We continued to ride until the sun fully set. We found ourselves a nice, large, sheer cliff face that largely protected us from the biting wind and made camp. Amber went to chop down a nearby birch tree while I set up the tent. She gave a sharp whistle once she was ready and I placed a giant, oblong shaped Silencing bubble over the whole thing. I probably wouldn’t be able to absorb all the resulting noise from the tree knocking into shit as it felt, but we at least shouldn’t make it easy for other ne’er-do-wells to locate us.

I finished setting up our camp and Amber came in with *Vanity* activated, hauling a shit-ton of chopped wood. With her strength and Ability, that wood axe made short work of the tree. We got a nice big fire going and slept in shifts as I kept a Silence bubble over the crackling flame. I really did enjoy these sort of nights, being outdoors and away from the city ‘n’ shit. It wasn’t quite as quiet as you might think out here, but it was still way better than the hustle and bustle of the city. When we were particularly far out, sometimes I could almost pretend like she and I were the only two humans on the planet.

What a nice dream that would be.

It was near the end of my final shift keeping watch that I heard a repeated sound in the distance. It sounded like someone sniffing harshly against the cold, which wouldn’t normally bother me, but I had heard the same snuffle yesterday too; at roughly the same distance away as well... I Reinforced my eyes to be able to see into the night around me a bit better but other than that made no obvious changes to my behavior. If we were being watched I didn’t want to tip off that we had noticed them. The best way to deal with an ambush was with an ambush of your own, after all. Another hour went by before it was time to wake up Amber and there hadn’t been another sound since the snuffle from earlier; whoever was following us was pretty disciplined.

I got up and stretched my back out a bit; doing some brief and silent calisthenics to wake up my chilled muscles. Once I was sufficiently stretched out, I placed a Silencing bubble over the tent and waited; someone of her skill and readiness always wakes up to such a drastic change in ambient sound. Sure enough she lifted the tent flap a few seconds later and walked out, gently

yawning and rubbing her eyes, but fully armed and ready to move. I moved the Silence bubble I had summoned with her as she approached until it encompassed both of us.

“We’re being followed.”

“Oh?” Never a sense of urgency from this one.

“Yeah, they’re pretty good too. I’m not sure for how long, but one of them just sniffed slightly from the cold an hour or so ago.”

“Your aural acuity is - in a word - unfair. You realize this, no?”

“Oy. Focus. I only heard one person, but that’s hardly any guarantee. Be wary but don’t change anything about you-”

“Yes. Yes. Noted. I know how to deal with an ambush.”

I rolled my eyes at her and expanded my Silencing orb as we took apart our camp and packed back up, “You know this area better than me, any good places for an ambush coming up?”

“Hmm... Yes actually. This evening we’ll be passing through something of a ghost town. Place got razed a few decades back. I cannot recall the name of it, but it made fairly heavy use of the nearby stone quarry in its architecture. Consequently, although it was pillaged and burned, the corpse of the town itself remains to this day in a reduced form. There would be plenty of blindspots for a proper hunter to take advantage of.” She concluded her explanation as she finished breaking down and packing up the tent.

“I see. So we can figure that some sort of message will be sent once we are within range of the ruins, then?”

“I would say that is quite likely.”

“Word. Alright, let’s get moving then.” We got our horses ready to go, mounted, and took off at a fairly brisk pace. The idea would be to go a bit faster today and see if we couldn’t get to the ruins unexpectedly fast. If we arrived ahead of schedule, if there was just the one person hunting us, we might miss the ambush entirely and make this whole thing a non-issue. It would be nearly impossible for them to both catch up to us *and* be stealthy about it.

Not that anyone outside of shadow-stepping Drax could sneak up on **me**.

Our transit through the morning and afternoon was fairly uneventful all things considered. Despite our best efforts we were only really an hour or so ahead of schedule - going too fast would only tire us out, after all - and the sun was well into its descent when the ruins of the nameless town finally came into sight. Amber and I glanced backwards and - though I saw nothing of note - Amber brought her horse closer to mine and whispered, “No way that isn’t a smoke signal on the horizon.

“Damn. How long?”

“Judging by the height? About a half hour.”

“I guess we’re doing this, then.”

“You guess correctly.”

“I’ve got your back.”

“Heh.” Oof. She really didn’t have that much faith in me, did she?

Is she wrong, though?

We entered into the ruins of the town and it was pretty much as Amber had described. There were still plenty of scorch marks on broken stacks of stonework that used to be homes. We passed indents in the ground that clearly used to house wooden fences that had since been reduced to ash. While various plant life had since It’s amazing how a place with such enduring ruins can still be forgotten like any other place if no one is left but the cartographers to remember its name. I don’t think this place was listed on the regional map that I had in my possession.

“...Anything?” Amber asked under her breath as our horses plodded along in perfect silence.

“No. Hush.” Was all I said as I strained my ears, focusing my PsyEn on keeping our horses, my own accelerating heart rate, and anxious breathing silent. We had reached what appeared to be the center of the town, otherwise known as the spot with the most potential directions of ambush. I didn’t hear anything yet... but the anxiety I was feeling didn’t *feel* like it was entirely of my own making. I brought my horse slightly in front of and to the right of Amber’s and continued the pace, hoping that she’d understand why. We were just about to hit the Northern edge of the now defunct town square.

And then it finally happened.

I’m sure Amber heard it too - how could she not? - the massive click of some enormous weapon going off from a long distance away. But I was able to determine the direction of the attack in an instant and pointed accordingly in said direction accordingly before diving off of my horse and rolling along the ground. I came up off of the ground quickly and saw that Amber had done the same; a second or two later, a *huge* - I’m talking an arms length and half as thick - crossbow bolt flew just over Amber’s abandoned horse and slammed into a nearby broken stone wall. Based on where it had landed and the angle it was sticking out of the stone, I immediately started moving in the direction of the attack.

Amber quickly caught up to me but kept herself two steps behind me, clearly understanding that I had figured out where the attack came from. Not hearing any follow-up of the crossbow being reloaded, we barreled straight forward down the street fearlessly until we came up to the derelict, two-story building the attack must have come from. I pointed at it and Amber wasted no time Reinforcing and leaping up to the second floor through a broken wall on the front of the building. I immediately heard the telltale ring of PsyMetal clashing against PsyMetal before I suddenly saw an unknown figure exit from the right side of the derelict structure, somersaulting

through the air and landing deftly in a clearing that had been reclaimed by knee-high grass. Amber followed right behind, landing a mere four meters in front of our opponent.

“Well. Well. Well. I heard you were pretty aggressive but **damn!** Here you fuckin’ are: Amber Isolde the gun-totin’, ax swingin’, red-eyed pet of the Vampires. That leash of yer’s must be straining pre-TTY hard *this* far North, ain’t it?” The woman glanced down at what was now a clearly broken heavy crossbow - large enough that it should be tripod mounted - in her left hand and chuckled to herself before tossing it far to the side. With long black hair, golden skin, and ruthless hazel eyes, she struck a menacing figure with her PsyMetal shortsword in hand against the last bit of light the sun had to offer.

“You have done your homework, it seems. Who sent you?” Instead of continuing to prod at Amber, she turned her head towards me and gave me an exaggerated look up and down.

She smirked to herself before saying, “And then there is Iris - no last name given - perhaps we should say Iris N.L.N.G for short? I’ve gotta say, I was pretty surprised to hear that **this** lil’ monsta took a pet! I guess that makes ya a pet of a-”

“**Bite your fucking tongue.**” Amber stomped forward two steps, gripping her axe tightly and oozing an uncharacteristic anger, “State your name, warrior.”

“Aw strike a nerve did I? *Good.* Now I didn’t intend to introduce myself here. But since my ambush failed on y’all and y’all’re gonna die by my hands... the name’s Robin Aniata. Got it? Cool? Cool. Die.” Suddenly she was right in front of me, mid-thrust with her shortsword right at my belly.

So fast!

Suddenly she slowed down and I sped up as Amber placed *Pride* on me and I performed a quick draw strike with my own PsyMetal blade, parrying the attack... barely. Despite being inside of a *Vanity* field, it was all too clear that this woman was *strong*. There was no way I’d be able to tangle with *her* blow for blow.

“Oh? Oh! So she can put her Slowin’ field on allies huh?” She hopped several meters to my right, away from me and my approaching partner, who was moving towards Robin wearing her usual cruel smile. It was then that - despite the ruckus right in front of me - I heard two muffled sounds in the distance; a stomping sound and some kind of light whistling noise. At that exact moment, I saw Robin drop her guard, as if inviting - no, encouraging - Amber’s attack.

It was a nested ambush!

With no time to communicate the trajectory of the projectile I could hear whistling through the air, I did two things simultaneously: I raised my left arm, activating my arm-mounted crossbow and put one small Silencing orb over Amber’s right ear just before she passed in front of me. The Silence drew her attention towards me on her right side and I fired off a single bolt directly in her path between her and Robin. Amber’s eyes widened and she skidded to a stop and immediately jumped backwards as I dove with her to my left.

A split second later a steel spear buried itself a meter and a half into the ground.

Robin clicked her tongue and looked at me, "Hmm? Seems like we got bad info on your Ability. The file said ya had some sorta sound-interfering Ability. Didn't say shit about no sensory Ability." She was practically growling at me, clearly frustrated that their nested ambush had failed. I made a split second decision.

"I'll handle the sniper!" I whipped around and started running before she could respond, certain that Amber would protect me from any rear attacks.

"The fuck you are!" Robin shouted - probably approaching me - but I heard the loud clang of axe against sword and didn't even look behind me. I would have to trust Amber to fight while having some cover between her and the spear thrower.

The sun had since set over the horizon and it was nice and dark out as I made my way silently and unerringly towards the source of the sounds that had telegraphed the attack. The sky was clear with a bright, nearly full moon and sparkling stars lighting up the night. There was a fairly large hill on the edge of the town whose silhouette I could see in the moonlight; that was probably where the sniper had set themselves up. I was making sure to dash between ruin walls before finally hitting the wooded area beneath the hill.

Nice.

With this kind of tree cover and my perfect silence, I should be able to get the jump on the sniper and go help Amber with her fight... if she hadn't already ended it by then. I made my way up into the trees and jumped from branch to branch up the hill. I reached the top of the hill in short order and found myself overlooking the top of the hill, where I could see a person shaped shadow against the moonlit ruins below. There were a few more large spears in the ground next to them... did they seriously just fucking javelin them at Amber from **here** with such precision? I could hear the clashing of PsyMetal in the distance; Amber was still fighting Robin.

Time for me to do *my* job then.

Amber

"I'll handle the sniper!" Iris very nearly shouted as she pivoted and scampered away through the ruins. Leaving her back open for attack, this Robin character immediately shouted something irrelevant and went for the kill as if I was not standing here waiting for her to do just that. I intercepted the blow, blocking her vertical slash with the blade of my axe. Despite activating *Vanity* on myself, that strike was **heavy**. The satisfying ring of PsyMetal impacting PsyMetal echoed throughout the ruins around us as she jumped backwards. Iris made a clean get away and I decided to leave the sniper to her; if she could close the distance then even *she* should have no problem with a long-range specialist. Regardless, all that I could do for now was end this quickly and go bail her out. Now then, for this close quarter specialist...

"Tch. Fine, whatevs. Was hopin' to not work too hard here. But I guess that was outta the question for a hunt like this..."

“You guessed correctly. Now then - Robin Aniata - I will ask you once more: who sent you?”

“Hmm? What’s it to a dead woman?” She began to approach me confidently; her short sword held at ready in front of her and her left hand opened and held up near her face.

“What use is keeping secrets from an alleged dead woman, I wonder?” I had already had my Third Eye activated since I first engaged her and could tell that she was extremely competent at her PsyEn Basics. Such precise control: she had to be about 40% Reinforced, 10% Cladding her weapon and had the rest balanced somewhere between her Third Eye, Coating and likely readying whatever her Ability was.

She slowed her gait just a little, “Huh. I s’pose you ain’t wrong ‘bout that. I’d tell ya to guess, but we’d be here all night with the number of pissed off rich boys y’all’ve left behind ya! The name Oswell Spencer ring a bell?” Oh God Damn It.

“Ugh. Truly?” Just a bit closer.

“Yep.”

“Shame. Well, I can guarantee he will be getting two corpses back for sure.” As soon as she was a mere two meters away, I snatched my blunderbuss out from its holster at my side and opened fire from the hip. Reacting immediately, she jumped straight up in the air, knowing that the vertical spread of this particular model was shorter than the horizontal.

Not bad, she understands a thing or two about preparedness

As she sailed through the air, her Coating seemed to almost lag behind her... this must be part of her Ability, there was no proper reason for such a visual phenomenon to occur otherwise. I tossed my blunderbuss to the side and charged forward to hit her on her way down. As she fell, she threw two daggers at me that slowed down enough upon entering *Vanity* for me to pluck them out of the air with my off hand. Her eyes widened as she comprehended her mistake and I whipped them back at her with a grin. They were just about to reach her when she returned my smile with one of her own. Suddenly there was a ghostly figure on the ground in front of me, just beneath the falling warrior. It made a motion as if to yank rigging to set a sail on a ship. At the same time, my opponent’s descent accelerated considerably, allowing her to dodge the flying daggers, touch the ground, and ready her weapon before I was able to cover the last couple of meters to reach her.

Unperturbed, I reached her and brought me axe down diagonally; aiming for her clavicle. Knowing better than to take the blow head on, she skillfully parried the awkward angle of my attack, pushing the strike in front of her body as she hopped backwards. I continued to step forward, conserving the momentum of the deviated strike cyclically to bring my forearm over my head and my axe around behind me before finally striking horizontally from the right once more. Confident that she had dodged my follow up strike, she started to ready an attack, but just before the apex of my swing’s arc, I pressed down on the two buttons on the handle of my axe, transforming it into its polearm form midswing with a satisfying clank and a shower of sparks.

She just barely managed to get the flat of her blade between her arm and my axe.

She tumbled across the grass-reclaimed cobblestone of the ruined streets for half dozen meters with a yelp, before - semi-gracefully - rolling up to her feet and skidding the last meter. Her face was well scraped from her high-speed tumble across the ground and she spat out some blood from a bitten cheek or tongue before saying, "...Neat trick."

"Yours as well. Where - pray tell - is all of that bluster from earlier?" I goaded her as I made a somewhat more cautious approach. She unfortunately did not seem concussed and I still didn't quite understand the depth or breadth of what her Ability could do.

She wiped a dribble of blood from her chin on the back of her forearm, "...You're awful calm for someone whose partner is probably dead by now." Aw, look at her trying to buy some time to catch her breath. I sped up my approach just a tad; this one was not long for this world.

"She may be weak, but even she can handle your spear-sniper. The fact that you have received no cover fire thus far should make that fairly obvious."

"Hardly." As if to punctuate her statement, we heard the distant ring of clashing PsyMetal. My heart froze for a split second. Did... Iris actually fail to sneak up on someone?

"The first spear skewerin' you woulda been a nice bonus, but hardly expected. Nah, bitch, I'm here to kill ya and Keena's here to kill ya partner. Makin' y'all think there was a sniper was just to separate ya." I sprung forward to decapitate her, but the ghostly figure appeared in front of Robin swinging a ethereal blade made of PsyEn. I abandoned my attack and dodged it instinctively, unsure of whether or not it could actually hurt me. Whether it could or not - however - I noticed that *Vanity* warped around the ghost image's attack. In that brief window of *Vanity* bending, Robin darted forward agilely with a deadly thrust at my abdomen. I collapsed my polearm back into an axe and barely managed to spin the head of the axe to partially block the attack. Her short sword slipped along the blade and bounced off of my scalemail chest plate, taking several scales with it and probably bruising my ribs underneath.

She spun about for a follow up swing, but this time I jumped away from her. She shot a bloody, toothy grin at me from behind her PsyEn ghost.

"Y'all been played, pet."

Iris

I dropped from my hiding spot in the tree down onto the hilltop clearing with perfect silence.

No reaction whatsoever. Good. Things can be simple for a fuckin' change.

I took a deep, Silenced breath, drew my Needle and took three discreet hops for a easy lunge to put the point right through the base of her skull and-

She whipped around with a sabre and deflected my attack; the impact of two PsyMetal weapons rang painfully in my ears. The impact nearly disarmed me and I barely managed to hold onto my

weapon. It didn't matter though since - just as she finished her swing - she took one precise step towards me, palmed my right wrist with her offhand, opening my hand and forcing me to drop my Needle. She used her sabre to slap the falling Needle off to the side and her offhand shot out, grabbing my neck and strangling me as she lifted me a couple centimeters off the ground. I brought my hands up to her wrist but her grip was too strong for me to break. The panic started setting in as she brought her sabre back to execute me.

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfu-

I let go of her arm with my left hand, twisted it slightly, and tapped the button at the top of my wrist; the arm mounted crossbow on my forearm sprung back open. Her eyes didn't even look at it, but they widened as I fired off my remaining two bolts at her face. She twisted her body awkwardly, bending her head to the side and bending at the hip to duck. I took this opportunity to slam my knee into her temple and punch her forearm, forcing her to release me. I sprung back from her as she swung at me in vicious retaliation. I coughed and glared at her as I drew my curved, single edged sword. She cracked her neck and shot back a hateful glower of her own with smoldering blue eyes.

"Hmph, and here I was led to believe that you'd be completely useless when your sneak attack inevitably failed. I do so love *bad intel*." Shit she was strong. If she hadn't been focused on running me through with her sabre, she might've easily just crushed my windpipe. She pursed her lips and blew the stray strands of platinum blonde hair out of her face, seeming unconcerned about anything that had happened so far. I sized her up as best I could: Third Eye open and eyes additionally Reinforced to pierce the night. She was dressed like a knight or a town guard of some kind of well off fortress city - clothing all royal blues and golds and whites - and carried her PsyMetal sabre with ease.

"...Guess we agree on that. Here I thought you were a long range specialist."

"Naive. Who specializes in just one extreme? *Just* close quarters combat. *Just* sniping. *Just* stealth. What happens - I wonder - when the sniper cannot snipe? When the sneaky girl cannot sneak?"

"I-"

"She dies. That's what." She began her swing before moving, but was up in my face in an instant. I brought my sword to bear - Cladded both in PsyEn *and* Silence - and parried the blow in a shower of soundless sparks. She continued to hit me with heavy, one-handed strikes, pushing me back a step with each swing as she continued to press forward. I haven't fought many people head to head... but there was something weird about her. Most people can't help but glance at where they are attacking... but her eyes bore no telegraph whatsoever. On the contrary: her eyes were entirely unfocused, like she wasn't seeing me at all.

It made her attacks that much harder to anticipate.

"I have to say-" What the shit? She's talking while she fights?

“-you were not supposed to be worth anything in a fight.” She’s taking advantage of the Silenced blows to try to get in my head.

“This must be that vampire’s pet’s doing.” She brought down an overhead slash and I did as I was taught: moving inside of her reach and meeting her blade with my own near the hilt as hard as I could, putting my legs behind the blow as best I could. I was rewarded with a bit of breathing room as she hopped backwards to avoid being overbalanced. I let out a long, slow, steadying breath as I adjusted my stance and fixed my posture.

“Still, if all you can do is defend, then you are still useless; even as the pet of a pet.”

“...Just who are you?”

“Hmm? No inquiry as to who sent us?”

“Who gives a shit? They aren’t here trying to kill me.”

“Hah! Wonderful. Keena Sikora. You are just as quiet as I’d heard. Normally Robin does all the talking, but it would be creepy to kill you in total silence. She should finish up with your partner soon.” She pointed her sabre at me and smiled seductively... but her eyes seemed to be looking over my shoulder.

“Doubt it.”

“Well, once I finish you off and get down there... It will be over for sure. But I guarantee you this: *no one* is going to save you tonight.” She flicked her arm and wrist dramatically, her sabre pointing to the ground beside her. She was toying with me... all these theatrics. It was hard to focus though; we had been fighting for some time and I could still hear the sound of combat in the distance. I wasn’t used to **anyone** lasting this long in a fight with Amber.

What if she was losing?

No. Not possible. I tried to shake the thought from my head and ignore the distant ringing of impacted PsyMetal. Unable to do so, I just put a large Silencing bubble over the hilltop. Keena blew out a sharp whistle while maintaining her unfocused gaze somewhere beyond me. She began her approach confidently, sabre at ready in front of her.

“Such a massive area to cover... Thaw the permafrost... What a waste of psionic talent. ‘Twould be problematic to allow you to become any more dangerous.” She darted forward, zig-zagging to confound the angle of attack. Two hands on my sword in a deep, poised stance... I readied myself for yet another difficult flurry of blows.

I don’t know how much more of this I can take.

Amber

I. Do. Not. Have. Time. For. This!

It had been at least three minutes since Iris failed to sneak up on their not-sniper.

And then a little bit later a *giant* Silencing bubble appeared on top of a hill in the distance.

What the fuck is she *doing*?!

I ducked another slash at my neck and replied in kind, but the PsyEn projection jumped right in the way of the attack, briefly interfering with the acceleration of my swing within *Vanity*. Consequently, my attack *completely* missed its mark.

This Ability of her's is **really** annoying.

She is quite fortunate that there are no fresh corpses around here, or else this fight would have been *over* minutes ago.

She is effortlessly weaving her attacks between her physical self and PsyEn self, creating gaps within *Vanity* that she could then launch fully-powered strikes through. Meanwhile, whenever I returned her strikes, the PsyEn projection would purposefully get in the way of the strike, rendering the speed and power of my swing inconsistent as my axe briefly passed through the projection, which *Vanity* could not exist within.

Despite her chatty bluster, this Robin character was immensely skilled.

How irritating.

"...I've gotta say... y'all're... one sturdy fuckin' chick."

"Likewise. This is taking too long."

"Couldn't agree more."

I deactivated *Vanity* and she narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"...Bold move." Oh? Does she think I cannot fight without *Vanity*?

How cute.

"Let us hope that you are as strong as you are tricky." I pulled in most of my Coating to Reinforce myself, leaving the bare minimum to keep my Third Eye activated and a slight Coating incase I took a solid hit from that PsyEn Projection. I should not **need** *Vanity* for this - it's only getting in the way - without the Ability to interfere with my swing consistency... this should be nothing more than a fancy two vs one fight.

In a single Reinforced leap, I loomed over her wide-eyed frame of my opponent, bringing my axe down vertically. She was forced to block the full force of my blow without a chance to manipulate her projection which stood behind me. Before she could recover, I kicked her in the chest and gashed her arm with the distal point of my axe as she stumbled backwards. I dove to the side as her projection attempted to plunge its ethereal blade into my back. As I came up to my feet, she was upon me with a zealous bloodlust spread across her face. We clashed blades another dozen times, neither of us giving up any ground, and unfortunately I took several knicks from her blade as I tried to parry her sword and dodge the projection's.

I just could not take the risk that that thing could hurt me.

There was a brief lull between strikes, and just before we reengaged, we instead both jumped at the single loudest noise I have ever heard in my life. Louder than a gunshot. Louder than clashing PsyMetal. Louder than a magirradiated beast's roar. Louder than a crying Witch. It was layered; terribly, and cacophonously layered. Like a woman screaming, PsyMetal ringing, gravel scraping, and a mountain sliding.

And it came from the hilltop, which was worryingly no longer encompassed by *Silence*.

Iris

Fuck me I'm so tired.

More tired than usual.

I've never had to fight this long. Is that why?

My head feels heavy too, am I actually reaching my Psychic limit? What a new feeling.

I was covered in over a dozen light scratches this bitch's sabre, none particularly deep or fatal, but all of them stinging reminders of how I'd had been on my heels this entire fight, barely fending off her attacks. I had been Silencing the impact of the attacks, which seemed to be having the dual effect of dampening the vibrations running through my weapon... which is the only reason I've been able to hold onto my sword long if I'm being totally honest.

Amber was likely still fighting. Otherwise she would have come up here and rescued me at this point.

Ugh I hate this.

Even now I can't stop thinking about the possibility of her bailing me out of this situation.

Wasn't I supposed to be getting stronger?

Wasn't I supposed to *protect* her back, not just *watch* it?

No wonder she found that idea so amusing.

Keena's sabre swung in a tight arc from below - I fuckin' hate this move - and I did my best to parry the awkward angle of attack. I stumbled backwards from the impact as my posture broke and I flew into a reverse dive. I was thankful that Amber had put so much emphasis on defending against these odd angles of attack; it was solely due to her training me that I was able to keep my sword in my hands just now.

Even when she isn't around, she's still protecting me in some capacity.

"Ugh. I did **not** come here expecting to work hard. This is just obnoxious."

“You’re... telling me... I was here... for an assassination. Instead you just... HAD to be a duelist with a Sensory Ability.”

“Oh? You figured it out?”

“Obviously... you haven’t looked right at me once. And you’re reacting to ripostes... you can’t have possibly seen... You must have a bird’s eye view of yourself.”

“Bravo. You can go to the grave confident that I no longer think of you as *completely* vacuous. Worry not, your partner - Colleague? Owner? Master, let’s go with Master - will follow you soon enough.” I could feel myself cringing as she said that word: partners. The more I thought about the word, the more I started feeling weird about referring to us as such, since she was very clearly just looking out for me; protecting me-

Dammit not now.

Why can’t I think straight? This isn’t working!

Why do I feel like I’m going to pass out? Isn’t stamina all I have going for me at this point?!

Only 5 or 6 meters away from my opponent, I straightened out my sword in front of me, which had drifted slightly to the side in my weariness. Arms unbent, I tightened my grip with a steadying breath and dismissed the large Silencing bubble around the hilltop. I was hoping it would lighten the burden on my mind... but I somehow felt even worse. I took a risk and glanced down at my hands, inspecting my coating - if she was seeing me from a bird’s eye view, she wouldn’t notice the shift in my attention - and I saw the expected: my Coating looked different than usual. Normally a gentle waveform with the occasional sharpened peak in response to sound and when I was in combat, a more consistent agitation that I was mostly used to at this point.

But it took neither of those forms now.

It was **completely** inconsistent, mountains and valleys with no predictable spacing, sometimes gentles slopes, sometimes sharp peaks and pits... all over the place as if it were vibrat-

Vibrations.

I had learned recently that Silence wasn’t ‘canceling sound’... it was ‘absorbing vibrations’. Absorbing them and storing them... within the bubbles themselves. Or so I thought... But here I could see it: my Coating was *full* of vibrations. Silence absorbed the vibrations and - since the bubbles were derived from my own Psychic Energy - it was storing them in my Coating.

Then shouldn’t I be able to **release** them too?

All of this occurred to me as the Silence bubble surrounding the hilltop disappeared. Keena looked around to regard the dissipating PsyEn orb, “Oh? Are we finished then? Wonderful. It was a shockingly rousing fight, Iris. But-” She continued to speak, but I could no longer hear her as I placed small Silence orbs over both of my ears. She smiled at me and began her rapid

approach and I focused my attention on Cladding my Coating onto my PsyMetal sword, infusing it with the altered nature of my Coating.

Breathe.

Two hands.

If you can do this, then you can protect Amber too. You can be a *real* partner.

Breathe.

My hands started to numb and the blade of my sword - inside a larger, elongated Silence bubble to hide my intent - seemed to all but disappear from sight. I brought my blade up over my head; a wide open stance full of holes that Amber would surely critique. Keena seemed to shout something as she lunged in for my exposed solar plexus. I stepped in, bringing down an overhead chop with such speed that she transitioned her thrust into an overhead block, neatly intercepting my nearly imperceptible sword.

Which cut straight through her sabre like a knife through flesh.

The split second before I made contact, I released the Silence around my blade and - although I couldn't hear it - I could *feel* my blade **scream**. It screamed so loud blood oozed from Keena's ears before my ultrasonic blade began its precise and disturbingly easy bisection of her body. Blonde hair, pale skin, skull, brain, vertebrate, nerves, muscle, fascia... all of it gave way before the sum total of all the vibrations that I had been subconsciously absorbing and storing since I had first noticed we were being followed. Passing all the way through her, my blade's descent stopped just before the tip reached the ground.

Her only response was to try and mouth the word, "Oh." before falling forwards and backwards in a spray of blood and viscera and other messy unmentionables.

I let out an audible groan and stumbled backwards, barely keeping my footing. My senses were returning to me and I felt much more normal... but that was still a shit ton of PsyEn expended all at once... And I probably look like Amber typically does after a fight right-

No time for celebration or complaint.

She needs me!

Amber

"What the fuck?" I whispered under my breath. Both Robin and I were looking over my shoulder in confusion; on guard for potential projectiles. That must have been her partner, right? Nothing Iris does could possibly make a noise like that. That sound... along with the disappearing Silence. Robin was likely thinking along similar lines.

She could not have-

I ducked as a spear split the air just above where my head had been, crashing into the ground in front of me between Robin and I. Slowly my head turned to see the butt of the spear sticking out of the ground diagonally, and hanging from it was-

"Hmm, well looks like this is 'bout done. Shame what happened to ya pet. Now why don't we-"

My raucous laughter cut off Robin's quipping as it echoed throughout the broken streets and building around us. I walked up to the embedded spear and yanked the half of a severed head that was tied to the butt of the spear, tearing the blonde hair that had been looped through a small hole on the end. She eyed me suspiciously as I stepped around the spear with perhaps the biggest grin of my life on my face.

"I think *this* belongs to you." I teased as I tossed the grisly trophy to the ground at her feet. She glanced down briefly, then did a double take as a look of horror spread across her face. I saw her projection falter for the briefest moment and I abused this small window of opportunity. There was the briefest deadening of sound in my right ear during my attack and I did *not* miss Iris' signal. With a smile, I sprung forward and slashed horizontally at my opponent who just barely dodged backwards; her face a rare assortment of grief, outrage, anger, and disbelief. I reversed the direction of my swing and stepped forward again, attacking with a visibly weaker backswing. She did not miss the opening and stepped forward into the strike to block the swing at my forearm and to thrust her sword into my side.

But she never got the chance, since all of her attention was tunneled in on her right where I was standing... she never saw my partner coming in low from her left.

Robin simply stood there, seemingly frozen: her right forearm crossed with my own, her left arm up inline with her shoulder, blade drawn back ready to make the killing blow. Glancing down over my extended arm with a smirk, Iris was in a deep backstance, her back touching my hip, two hands squeezing the handle of her sword. The edge of the blade was facing the sky and it was plunged right through Robin's heart. Robin convulsed just once as blood leaked out of her mouth along with the light from her eyes. Iris let out a shaky breath and relaxed her stance, planting a foot on the standing corpse's stomach and yanking out her weapon. I stepped back with her as the body hit the floor and her Coating spiked one last time before dissipating forever.

Iris' feet clopped loudly as she walked to a nearby broken wall, flicked a line of blood off of her slightly curved blade, and plopped herself audibly down on the pile of stone. The entire front half of her body was almost opaquely red with blood, which was already beginning to coagulate and was likely already uncomfortably sticky for her.

"You seem like you have seen better days. What happened up there?"

"I cut her in half."

"Oh. Well-"

"Vertically."

“Oh. Wow.” I had just so many questions, “So what was that terrifying keening we heard just before you chucked that spear. How are... um... your ears?”

“They are fine. That noise you heard was my sword... Seems Silence has evolved.”

“Truly?! Congratulations. What-”

“Can we go over this later? I am so. Fucking. Tired.”

“Fair enough. Let us loot anything useful off their corpses and burn them; you never know, after all.”

“Ugghhhhh. Okaaay.” She groaned and stood up with no small amount of effort, “You go do that. I’ll go track down the horses.”

“Sounds good.”

“...Keening, huh?” She said to herself as we reluctantly parted ways to carry out our tasks.

We had been in Montatia for one night when the blizzard hit.

Dammit.

After we had obtained the spoils of our respective battles, disposed of the corpses, and retrieved our horses, we vacated the ruined city immediately. Despite our exhaustion, after such a massive noise had been unleashed by her new Ability was likely to attract all manner of bottom feeders hoping to pick off some wounded combatants. It was another few days of chilly travel and camping without much opportunity for more than a rudimentary cleanup and I could tell it was starting to get to Iris. Her mood brightened considerably when the telltale pink glow of hanging Witch flowers came into view in a clear perimeter at the edge of the city’s distal territory.

Following some light negotiations at the gate along with a few solid coins, we were able to find our way into Montatia without having to answer too many questions. We were escorted through the townsquare that had a bizarrely large empty lot where it seemed like a building *used* to be across from the town hall. Eventually we arrived at a fairly highclass inn deep within the mercantile district and went through the same motions that we had gone through back in Karthas. Dinner was late and quiet, mostly because I knew better than to pester her about her battle and Ability before she got a chance to sleep in a real bed.

She could be so damn particular sometimes.

Which made it all the stranger when in the late morning, *she* woke *me* up. She was perched on the edge of her bed, alternating her feet as she kicked my mattress. I turned towards her groggily and grabbed one of her feet as it neared the bed.

“What.”

"I. Fuckin'. Told. You. So!" She had an almost childish grin on her face as she pointed behind me towards the glass balcony door. The window was a bit foggy, but I knew what she was excited about: a good 12-15 centimeters of snow was already piled up on the balcony floor.

Dammit.

"I... Win!" She pronounced triumphantly, chucking one of her pillows at me. I caught it easily and whipped it back in her face with a yawn. She took the projectile playfully and laid back stiffly as if feigning death. After a few moments she could no longer maintain the bit and quietly giggled from under the pillow laying on her face. God she was cute, but I was way too tired and sore for this right now; we would have to find a spa to relax in today.

"Well... we shall see if it actually keeps this up." She snickered from beneath her pillow and I had to agree with the sentiment: even without getting up for closer inspection, the sky did not look like it would cease its precipitation any time soon. I was glad to see her in a better mood, if nothing else.

Iris sat back up, "Let's go find a place to get pampered. I'm sore as fuck."

"Funny. I was thinking the same thing. How about you go get that figured out and I shall do something about food."

"Eyyy, sounds good to me!" She hopped and began to get ready; stripping down readily and changing into some proper street clothes. Right in front of me and everything, even going as far as to give me a cheeky smirk over her shoulder.

How bold.

The rest of the day and evening proceeded uneventfully enough. We were both fairly re-energized after several hours at the spa, massages included. The snow continued to fall and fall and fall at quite the alarming rate. Unfortunately for me, Iris had been absolutely correct about the looming Winter. It was quite foolish of me to think that the weather might take pause for my own vanity.

There were worse people to be stuck inside with, I suppose.

That evening was fairly festive, as she energetically regaled me with a detailed play-by-play of her fight to the death with one Keena Sikora. It truly is amazing, how many little things happen, how many thoughts pass through one's head, and how many details one both takes in and overlooks during even a few minutes of combat. She likely would have been well fucked and far from home if she did not have such ludicrously high psychic stamina.

At the end of her story, all I could say was that I was proud of her.

Shortly after that we retired to our room. I threw a few more logs in the fireplace at the center of the far wall opposite of our beds. It crackled briefly before going completely silent. I will never get over how utterly mad it is that she can maintain her Ability literally in her sleep. Even while she is clearly dreaming, her orbs of Silence never, ever waver.

What a frightening woman.

I woke up several hours later to a chilly draft sweeping through the room. The fire had been out for a while, but it should not have been **this** cold in the room. I looked over to the double doors leading to the balcony and lo' and behold one of them was slightly cracked open. Damn, even from my bed I could see a couple dozen centimeters of snow stacked up on the railing of the balcony. I was not going to hear the end of this whole 'winter travel business' for a *while*. I glanced over at Iris' bed - which was empty - so she must be on the balcony for... some reason? I slipped into my boots without tying them, wrapped my comforter around me, and slowly pushed open the balcony door. The town was completely blanketed in snow. Iris was standing to the left side of the balcony, wrapped up in a lighter blanket than mine. She must have been out here awhile, as her hair was speckled with many flakes that were slow to melt, and the snow was beginning to pile up on her blanket.

I stood next to her and looked out over the city of Montatia. The ever-present nightly pink glow of the Witch flowers gave the illusion of rising heat off of the thick blanket of white snow. When there was snow stacked around them, the flowers gave the impression of beating hearts trapped within frosted glass. It lent the whole area this aura of mystique that very much felt like the entombed land itself might rise up at any time.

"Do you hear that?" She asked in a near breathless whisper after nearly a minute of chilly silence.

"Hear what?"

"Exactly. I love the snow, so- so- **so** much. Everybody huddles indoors to escape it. They light their fires, they stop their work. There's *so* much less... **noise**. The snow keeps on stacking up higher and higher and covers every surface and it robs the little sound that **is** out there of its power."

"...Hmm. I suppose I had noticed in the past that the night feels a touch quieter just after the first snow."

She turned her head to look me in the eyes, "Isn't it beautiful?"

Whatever quip I might have mustered in that moment caught in my throat. Her black eyes were slightly teary from the cold breeze and even in the dead of night, they were sparkling. She had been out here in the cold enough that even with her copper skin tone, her cheeks were visibly flushed. Her mouth was opened slightly with a smile overflowing with pure, unsullied joy.

She was somehow even more beautiful now than when she was covered in her opponent's blood.

Her smile suddenly twisted into a somewhat amused smirk, "D-did your heart just skip a beat?"

“Horse shit, your hearing is **not** that good.” She giggled at me softly. Seriously... her hearing cannot be **that** strong.

Right?

“I *wonder*...” What is with her lately? Ugh, I am most certainly off my game. Need to get some sleep, “Oh. You lost the bet.”

“...That I did.”

“Well...? Will you admit it?”

I sighed melodramatically, “...Yes. I do admit that this... partnership of ours has been more than simply ‘business’ for some time.”

“Of course. And...” What now?

“And what?”

“And you very, very much *like* me.” !?

“That was not part of the deal.”

“But it’s true.”

“That’s not the point here and-”

“So you don’t deny it!”

“I...”

“Good. I like you too. So stop fussing about it quite so much.” She turned fully towards me now, looking up and shivering from the cold. She reached a hand out of the blanket she had wrapped around her shoulders and traced my cheek so gently as to be nearly imperceptible in the cold. She then turned to walk back inside, letting her hand linger for as long as possible sliding her fingers off my chin with a flourish.

“Since you’re prone to overthinking things in these situations...” She began as she stopped in the doorway, turning her head slightly to meet my eyes over her shoulder.

“**That**... was an *invitation*.”

With a shiver that I knew had nothing to do with the cold, I followed her to bed.