

Silence & Vanity



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by James Thomasos

Iris

Killing a human for profit is a difficult and delicate process; mechanically difficult - I mean - not emotionally. When one human puts a contract on another human's life, it tends to be the case that neither parties involved are particularly good people. No, the mechanics are quite difficult, as in order to kill a psychically developed adult, you have to be extremely thorough... but if you're too thorough, then you'll find yourself lacking proof that the deed was ever done.

As such, one needs to be thorough, delicate, and *perfect* in her execution.

But the biggest obstacle to perfection is the unexpected and there are very few things in the entire world more unexpected than any given human's PsyEn Ability. The extent of a human's mastery they might have over their basic use of Psychic Energy aside, the one thing you can never quite predict - unless you have an excessive amount of intel - is how they've developed their PsyEn Ability. The unique manifestation of one's will and obsessions on their immediate environment was completely unpredictable as far as most were concerned. After all, how could you possibly know all of a given person's circumstances? Especially a person you've just met and intend to murder.

Speaking of which...

I spotted her campfire before I saw her. Amber Isolde...some kind of hunter from outside of the country of Alachara, although what she hunted was unclear from the intel I could gather. I knew she was a close quarters combat specialist who was known to win brawls with groups of Psychically-Capable human opponents - no small feat - and did not have a particular proclivity towards subtlety in her fighting style. For someone who had audaciously pissed off as many big wigs as she had, there was precious little information out there on her.

Likely due to a lack of survivors.

She was sitting on a log next to the campfire; a bloodied lump on the ground not 2 meters away. It was not a particularly chilly day, so to light a fire seemed like almost a deliberate invitation to any would be attackers or bandits. I stayed in the trees as I hopped closer; she hadn't noticed me yet and the wind favored me here. I could smell smoke and blood. I looked again through my eyeglass: the corpse was some manner of beast; there were huge chunks carved into it, probably with an axe or something.

I've got this.

I concentrated and activated my Ability to cancel all sound that my body might make and got into position behind and above her silently; maintaining absolute silence was probably unnecessary, as the crackling and popping of the fire was loud enough to set my nerves on edge. Looking down upon her more closely, she was wearing a long, dark, loose coat of some

sort along with a matching hat, definitely foreign in design. As I had guessed earlier, she had a large axe with a fairly long handle, stuck in the ground within arms reach. It looked reasonably heavy; she must be using PsyEn to Reinforce her muscles to be able to swing that thing around at her size. So more of a brute strength fighter than a speed fighter, which meant I was probably at an advantage even if this went somewhat wrong.

There was a massive price on this woman's head, roughly five thousand silver; she had **seriously** pissed off some very rich person. I briefly considered taking aim at her head with my hand crossbow and being done with it, but thought better of it. At that price, she was no doubt fairly powerful, and this weapon that was small enough to just attach to my forearm wouldn't pack nearly enough of a punch to puncture both a human's high density cranial psychic Coating AND their skull afterwards. Instead, I used my Ability to place a large, Silencing PsyEn sphere over the entire mechanism, I took a brief moment to measure a tight arc nearly straight into the air and fired.

15 seconds; I exhaled. 10 seconds; I felt my heart starting to race. 8 seconds; I confirmed that I was still *silenced* and drew my Needle. 5 seconds; I leapt out of the tree and landed without a sound, 3 meters behind her. 3 seconds; I approached. 1 second... there is a loud pop from the woods in front of us as the bolt 'thunked' into a tree with perfect timing. She jumped to her feet as I sprung in for another easy, perfect kill and-

The back of her coat flew up as the end of a fucking blunderbuss appeared under her left armpit, and I was staring right down the barrel.

Shit.

I immediately focused my PsyEn, Silencing the gun as I shot the barrel with my hand crossbow. It swung out from the impact at the end of its barrel and discharged without a sound; I heard the metal pellets crack into the woods behind me... that was almost my fucking head. I followed up quickly, deftly lunging forward and stabbing straight at her. Maybe it was the panic setting in, but I felt like I was suddenly moving much slower than I was used to. Meanwhile, she had spun in the opposite direction that she shot her barrel towards and her blunderbuss swung back around impossibly fast to deflect my thrust. This woman... she used the recoil from her own shot to reposition herself!?

Now she was fully facing me and before I could recover from the deflection, she kicked me right in the chest. By the fucking Wind she is *strong*; I managed to un-plant my feet when I saw the kick start and take the blow, but didn't have the time or accuracy to focus my psychic Coating around the point of impact. I hit the ground rolling backwards and ended up back on my feet, putting some distance between us. She reached up with her left hand and adjusted some small, darkened glasses, peeking over them at me with strikingly bright red eyes. She flashed a smile at me and reached behind her and pulled that large axe with a meter-long handle out of the ground.

“You are pretty aggressive, young lady. Did something good happen to you?” Her voice was startlingly forceful; a deep, mature voice forced its way past her dark lips with a slow, aristocratic cadence that clashed heavily with her brutal combat loadout. As she looked me up and down - sizing me up - she dropped her blunderbuss to the dirt with a heavy metallic clank and casually took a balanced stance with her axe.

I chose not to respond as I continued to catch my breath. She was faster than I thought and I'm an assassin, not a fighter. I was perfectly silent... but she knew exactly where I was coming from anyhow... is this her Ability? Was she some kind of sensory type? Did she feel the impact? Why did I feel so slow? Did she smell me coming like some Fekthal? One look at her focused red eyes and slight, cruel smile, and I had a feeling similar to when I had once faced that one doe-eyed bitch. This woman was 100% a predator and I could feel the familiar lump of fear settle into my throat. That was the trouble with Abilities, I just didn't have enough info to approach her. If she knew I was coming even when my approach was perfect, then I'm the wrong woman for the job and maybe I can just return the upfront payment and-

She began to approach me casually with heavy, but balanced steps, as if she just recognized someone she knew across the market. I took a deep breath and threw several dust poppers at our feet; a smoke screen went up around us and I fired my last preloaded bolt at her as I silently moved towards and slightly around her into the smoke screen. I heard it deflect loudly off of her axe, followed by a large metallic clang and a thud.. If I was trying to cut line of sight, no doubt she'd assume it was a defensive maneuver, there was no way she would expect me to approach her. I continued moving past where I had heard the deflection of my bolts, following my ears within the opaque cloud, planning to just disengage behind her. I heard the flapping of her long coat - Hah! That's why I never wear loose accessories - and committed to my silent sprint to leave this terrifying warrior behind.

My world suddenly became flashing lights and darkness as I fell to the ground, a fist cracking me in the back of the head. What the fuck happened to my Coating!?! I landed painfully on my knees with no strength to even lift my arms. Fuck. I should have pulled out as soon as the first attempt failed as usual. I heard a small 'fwip' and then my arms snapped tight to my torso, she tied me up with something. Shit. Shit. Shit. I fucked up. I'm gonna die. I felt a sting that screamed a bit louder than the rapidly forming welt on my head briefly and yelped as I began to slide across the ground... this bitch was dragging me by my hair out of the fading smoke screen.

I grunted as she threw me to the ground and turned to retrieve her belongings, I peeked up at her from the ground, her back was turned, but I could tell she had been wearing armor under that coat. It seemed very, very light and bizarrely feminine; I don't think I've ever seen armor that was both so well-fitted to a female form yet so... decorated before. Not to mention that it made surprisingly little sound as she moved about. She must not be from this country. She had short hair, barely visible in the shadow of her hat brim. It was filthy, she had clearly been on the road for a while, a decent amount of dirt in it along with a lot of blood that made the colour hard to guess at. I glanced off to the side at what I now recognized to be a massive, mutilated,

magirradiated beast. Blood was still running out of it, she must have killed it just before I had arrived at her camp. There were no signs of battle here before I had arrived, which means she dragged it here... on her own? Damn. That beast's blood must be what's in her hair right now.

She reached her coat, hanging from a polearm stuck in the ground... where the hell did she get that? She inspected a small tear in it and clicked her tongue before putting it back on. She pulled the polearm out of the ground, then slammed the bottom of the long handle into a nearby tree, the bottom half of it slid into the top half and locked with a grating metal thunk, oh. Ooooooh. Some of my strength had returned and I tried to stand up and stumble towards my fallen Needle when her back was turned, but everything hurt. She walked briskly over and kicked out my legs, as I fell backwards she grabbed the front of my vest and lowered me down to my knees. She lifted her axe in the air and my mind went blank with fear.

Amber

The lady assassin on her knees in front of me tensed up as I lifted my axe, her eyes were wide with terror and she bit down on her trembling lip, barely in control of her breathing. It was baffling, really, she had looked terrified since the moment I foiled her attempt on my life. She lost to me handily, but she was far from bad; a true professional, not like the other ones I was out here hunting. Her PsyEn Ability was intriguing as well; she had completely squelched a combustion propelled blunderbuss shot...

Hmm.

I slammed the axe down into the earth next to the woman and she let out a small yelp, her eyes flickered to the side, concerned, then back up to me, confused. I squatted down in front of her and took off my sunglasses; she was a pretty young specimen and couldn't have seen more than 24 or 25 winters; at most a half decade younger than me. Dark black eyes and a deep caramel complexion, a scattering of freckles that did nothing to distract from a set of full lips and a slim nose. I grabbed her chin to swivel her head about to continue my inspection. She went absolutely still, but wasn't strong enough to resist. I sighed melodramatically; she was practically dressed for the job she came to do. Not a single adornment, trinket, or really any sense of personality about her presentation. Even her mid-length, dark brown hair was tied back in a basic ponytail with loose, bouncy curls jutting out chaotically...

What a waste.

"Pretty." I muttered, she flinched at the sound of my voice, or perhaps at the compliment. I stood up and moved to the other side of her and began patting her down for weapons. She chose to exercise what remained of her pride by not moving or flinching as I did so; or perhaps she was simply too scared to. As I felt around her torso, arms, and legs, I could tell she was no amateur... this woman was a well-practiced fighter... or so I thought... her hands felt suspiciously soft compared to the rest of her body, the exception being her finger tips and top of her palms, callused not from gripping a blade tightly or repeatedly blocking impacts... but from... climbing, perhaps? So not a warrior playing at contract killer, but an assassin or operative

through and through. As if to confirm my suspicions, I found another small knife... maybe a sharpened letter opener, several other improvised stabbing implements, and several pitons. I'm amazed she could move so quietly and elegantly with this many tools strapped to her person. How did one reach this level in their craft and still be so paralyzed in the face of death?

"From where do you hail?" I asked, she remained quiet, now glaring at me rather than trembling, "Who sent you?" still nothing.

Ugh. This was always so tiring.

"Well then, Miss Killer. I will be honest with you: you are reasonably competent. I think most other people would have been done for. It was a nice little trick with the crossbow bolt; I didn't even hear you fire the first one. Was that the same trick you used to silence my gun before it blew out your eardrum? That was expediently executed, so that must have been your Ability, correct? No Magic could have gone off so quickly and you do not strike me as a Magician anyhow. Answer my questions... and I'll tell you how I knew you were coming." She seemed to react to my last statement. I seemed to have her curiosity now; I suppose it is good to take pride in your work. As I spoke, I reached into my belt pouch and grabbed another shell for my blunderbuss, reloading it for later.

"Now since you came here to kill me, doubtless you know my name. So how are you called?"

"...Iris." Her voice was almost excessively quiet, as if sound was having trouble making it out of her mouth.

"That so? Iris... what?"

"...Just Iris." A family-less waif, then.

"Quaint. Where are you from? The southern isles?"

"More or less."

"Who sent you?"

"..." she hesitated. I sighed. I planted my foot on her shoulder and shoved her into the ground, squatting over her with one planted on her shoulder. She was quite flexible, bending all the way backwards with her calves and feet folded under her... Nice.

"I do not think you quite understand the situation you are in. If you had allies, you would not have needed to make your own distraction. So no one is coming to look for you. If anyone cared about you, they would have attacked as I brought my axe down next to you. So..."

"Fuck you." she spat, by the Old Blood this girl is ready to die for nothing. Or is she just THAT upset about losing?

“Play your cards right and that can be arranged.” I teased, she stiffened like a board and sneered before breaking eye contact with me. Oh, how precious...

“I’m sure your head is hurting; who sent you, and how much are they paying you?”

“Some middle man for some nearby regional nobility, Spencer I think he was called,” Ah yes... that tracks, “And not nearly fucking enough for someone of your skill. Just what the hell are you?”

“I’m a bounty hunter, of sorts. But truly - this is important - how much?”

“...2k up front; half in silver notes and half in bullets, another 3k after presenting your head.” She admitted sullenly

Wow, is that all? I’m actually kind of offended, “Well well, *someone* is an expensive killer.”

She briefly glanced up at me, then back off to the side, “I’m not cheap.” she pouted.

I could not help but laugh, “Did I break your winning streak?”

“Kill yourself.” This girl is too much fun.

I reached out and pinched her chin between my thumb and index finger, forcing her to face me, “If I let you go, what are you going to do?”

She shook my hand off of her chin and glared at me, “I’m going to get as far the fuck away from you as I possibly can. I’m going to have to get out of this country anyhow, can’t fail a job this badly and stick around long.”

“So you’ve no local ties at all?”

“...No.”

“5,000, right?”

“What?”

“The contract. How about this: Let me buy your contract.”

“What!?”

“If you’re going to leave this area anyhow, let me buy out the contract. You get paid and you don’t have to kill me, right?”

She snorted and rolled her eyes, “As if I could. What do you want from me?”

“I need to use you. Your Ability, specifically. It’s a quiet and delicate mission”

“...Uh...” she squinted at me like I’d lost my mind.

I picked up my axe and grabbed my blunderbuss, “Iris, was it? Look at me; do I look like the type of person who favours stealthy procedures? I am most certainly not equipped for that. You have a useful ability... and you are quite easy on the eyes.”

“Can you not?”

“No. Anyhow, I must complete this job in a nearby city. After we turn in **that-**“ I gestured towards the beast I had slaughtered before she had arrived, “We can continue onto the stealth mission. I am fairly well off, so you will be compensated properly. Besides, it will be nice to have someone to drink with. How about it?”

Iris

I stared blankly at the handsy, brazen hunter who still had me pinned down... My goddamn head. She can’t be serious, “Why the fuck would you need a partner who’s...*weaker* than you?” I nearly choked on the word. But I had to swallow that pill, I was completely outclassed in this situation.

She tilted her head at me, her glasses sliding slightly down her nose. Even seemingly confused, she struck an incredibly intimidating silhouette, armed to the teeth with bright red eyes against black skin “*Partner?* Sounds like you are making many assumptions here. Obviously I do not need you for your strength,” I grimaced at that, “I need your Ability. Nothing more and nothing less... We can work on your judgment along the way”

Eat shit. I kept this thought to myself, though I’m sure it showed plenty on my face. It was true enough though; she didn’t even seem to be sweating, but still... It was like I was moving in slow motion.

“Perhaps you can take it as a compliment for now? You have potential, or at least some uses.”

“...I’m not much of a fighter...” I looked off to the side, my shame was showing despite my best efforts. I can’t really win...But maybe... if I can get paid, I can probably ditch her somewhere along the way anyhow, so-

A crunch of leaves off to the side, multiple footsteps, I looked up first and - a few moments later - she heard it too. We both looked in the direction of the noise. Bandits? *Loud* bandits?

“Hey... untie me, I can hear them clearly, there are four of them. You want my help, right?” I whispered harshly.

She looked down at me and her unflappably smug smirk twisted into something resembling a gentle smile “Ah good. They finally noticed my fire... I shall take that as a ‘Yes, Amber, I would love to join you!’ But you are likely concussed at the moment, so how about you sit back-“ she removed her foot from my now very sore shoulder and pulled me up into a sitting position, “-and

relax... Oh, and take this” She took her long coat and threw it around my shoulders, she moved confidently between myself and the source of the noise. She could at least fucking untie me.

Three men and a woman exited into the clearing, one of the men shouted, “Drop your weapons and valuables, and no one gets hurt.”

“I fail to see how those two ideas are related,” Amber taunted.

“Hey, come on, there are four of them what are you doing?” I whispered angrily. I’m no coward, but I’m no warrior either. I’m not a duelist or a sword dancer. Not a fighter or a crusader. I’m just an assassin. I don’t really do... fights. I just kill: one and done.

“Showing off. Now watch me!” She glanced over her shoulder with a cold grin, then focused her attention forward, blunderbuss in her right hand and axe in her left.

To describe what happened next as a ‘slaughter’ would be a gross understatement. My only contribution to the situation was to focus on the woman in the back as I saw her inhale to give some orders and Silence her. As her face scrunched in confusion at the perceived lack of sound traveling, Amber didn’t miss a beat. She moved forward slowly but unerringly with her blunderbuss pointed forward...one handed... and axe off to the side. The man furthest back cocked and drew back an arrow in one motion and released it. Amber anticipated it and ducked forward into a shallow lunge, the arrow flying harmlessly over her shoulder; I flinched as it whizzed over my head into a tree somewhere behind me. Shocked that his partner missed - but not hesitating - the burly man in front with a mace just a tad larger than seemed reasonable - undoubtedly Reinforcing himself with PsyEn - swung horizontally just above Amber’s hip level, daring her to duck, most likely trying to drive her into the air for one of her partner’s follow-up attacks. Instead of taking the expected aerial route, she ducked impossibly fast under the swing, as if her attacker had hesitated in the middle of his attack. No, she wasn’t suddenly faster; he was suddenly slower.

Ooooooh. That explains a couple of things. It must be her Ability, and it must exist in some kind of vague bubble around her. Which would explain how she could react to a perfectly silent attack from her blind spot while distr-

KRABOOM - I yelped involuntarily at the boom of her blunderbuss, squeezing my eyes shut until I heard, “OH FUCK! DAMIEN!” the archer was screaming... justifiably. Amber had completely ducked the two-handed swing of the mace wielder and had ruthlessly placed the end of her blunderbuss in his face - chin literally in the barrel - and pulled the trigger. His head was... messily blown off: white and grey matter, skull shards, and blood all falling down in a heavy crimson mist behind him. Unfortunately for the three of them, they were distracted by the carnage in front of them; Amber had dropped her blunderbuss and slid passed the still standing headless corpse unerringly toward the archer, who had lowered his bow over the course of his screaming. Before he could knock another arrow or even drop his bow to pull the short sword at his hip, Amber shot forward and brought the axe down heavily right on his collar bone, digging towards the center of his chest with a sickening crunching noise. His eyes widened and his

knees suddenly buckled under the weight of the blow, the blood-stained woman slamming her axe down with enough force to plant his face into the ground

She planted a foot on the fallen archer's head and yanked the axe out of him. Stopping to regard her opponents, both of whom hung back wearily. Four versus one turned to two versus one in the span of a few brutal seconds. Amber slowly walked towards me, keeping the distance between her and her prey constant. As she came to a stop in front of me, her back turned towards me, the man and woman left over from the group glanced at each other.

"...Don't..." Amber warned. However, as soon as the words left her lips, their eyes widened and they sprinted in opposite directions into the woods, loudly crashing through and tripping on brush and roots. I heard her sigh and she whipped around to face me flinging droplets of I-know-not-what at me. I cringed, she was a mess; I could make out no features or expression on her face due to the blowback from the shrapnel-induced decapitation she just performed. Being completely drenched in the contents of another's head on the front of her upper torso seemed to be of very little concern to this butcher.

Gross.

She cleared her throat, "You are a killer, yes?" she removed her blood-splattered bispectacles, revealing two red eyes that may as well have been staring right through me.

"...Er... Wh-"

She snapped her fingers with her free hand and the - now clearly - magic cord binding me fell to the ground. Who the hell just has a *magic* item?

"Arm yourself, pick one, kill it and-"

"It?"

"-AND bring it back here. I need the bodies for something." Okay, glossing over that. I stood up cautiously - letting her coat fall from my shoulders - eyeing her as I walked to my fallen Needle. I asked the obvious question:

"How much?"

"Pardon me?" Amber, who had turned to follow one of her prey into the woods, whipped around incredulously.

"I'm not a killer. I'm an assassin. I don't kill for fun; I kill for profit. So how much?"

"I...you-Twenty-five percent." She was clearly flustered that I was wasting time as far as she was concerned. Eh, maybe under different circumstances I'd haggle a bit, but I try to avoid arguing with blood-drenched, axe-wielding butchers with anything less than an entire mountain

valley between us, "Sounds good, I'll be back." and I took back up to the trees, some man panic-stumbling through the woods couldn't have gone that far...

Amber

Unbelievable.

I left my coat and gun in the camp and followed the clear path through the woods left by the woman who appeared to be the ringleader of the group. I would catch her soon, she had clearly fallen a couple of times in her panic. I would catch her, and as long as **she** did her job...

The fact that she had the nerve to try and make *demands* of me in that situation?! She was clearly terrified of me, I would undoubtedly have to hunt her down next... she'd most likely go to the closest border town and-

In the distance between the trees I caught a visual on my prey. For a forest bandit she was incredibly slow in her retreat through the woods. I picked up the pace and continued to close the distance... she'd tire long before me.

They always do.

This Iris woman... demanding more money after I told her I'd buy her contract. Utterly shameless, greedy... But... humans tended to be and greed made people are very predictable and thus, reliable... if you have the funding. And I most certainly **do** have the funding. But more importantly, I have never been one for stealth of really any kind and this next job will require a certain amount of...finesse, more likely than not. So in a way, I really lu-

"Wait- No- Please. I'll give you everything we have! Just sp-NO!" I had caught up, grabbed her hair, flung her down and pinned her under my foot. I cut off the begging absentmindedly with an axe to the crown of her head. I re-holstered my axe behind me and scooped the woman up over my shoulder. Well then, that makes two hunts taken care of... almost.

Iris

He hadn't gotten far before losing his nerve and hiding in a ditch under a log with some leaves over him, gripping a short sword tightly and taking loud, laboured, gasping breaths. I sat on a branch above him undetected, spinning a large stone around in my hand, considering my options. Kill her, fight her, flee her, or work with her. Killing her already failed and I'll probably never get a chance like that again. Plus - assuming that I read the situation correctly - that Ability of hers rendered catching her completely off guard impossible. Fighting her is definitely out of the question, Ability aside, the way she swings around that axe AND uses a spreadshot gun... I can't go blow for blow with someone like that, or with anyone really. With that Ability of hers, I'd have to Clad my own weapon in dense enough Psychic Energy to pierce the bubble and render it inert... Even with the Psymetal that made up my Needle making the process easier... I'm not particularly good at Cladding. It takes too much concentration for me to perform in the heat of a battle. So flee? She has enough on her hands with all of these corpses, she

probably wouldn't just leave them, but I don't know where she is going with them. Plus, I don't think I want someone like that tracking me.

So then I guess I work with her, starting with killing this guy. Being on her side is easily the safest option and chances are if I don't carry out this particular hit, I won't get paid either. I silenced myself and leaned back on the branch, hanging from the crooks of my knees. I drew my Needle with my right hand and dropped the stone I was playing with from my left. Predictably, as soon as it landed on the log above the ditch, the man sprang into action. A fast, overhead chop, cleaving in half a phantom who'd never been there to begin with. As I straightened my legs and went into a freefall, the man stood there, stunned and confused; I could only imagine the look on his face. I tumbled smoothly in the air, landing feet-first on his hunched shoulder-blades, violently sprawling him over the log that had been his safe house. A quick in and out of my Needle up through the back of his neck into the brain; nice and neat...I DO have to carry him back after all and my head is killing me too much to properly draw in my PsyEn Coating to Reinforce my physical strength.

...

...

He's a big dude.

...

...

Shit.

Amber

I arrived back at the camp promptly, I looked around before tossing the corpse down with the others. They were all still there and still dead too, which was a good sign. You can never be completely sure about such things.

Still no Iris. I guess I can give her another minute before I go after both of them. I took stock of what I had accomplished today. One overly large wolf-like beast, seemingly mutated through magic; I had already carved up a couple of nice samples of it. If there was any Magic to it, perhaps it would be self-preserving... THAT would be convenient for everyone involved. I could hand this in at that nearby human village. They did not have a lot of money, but they would stock me up with enough food for the next leg of my journey.

I walked over to my discarded travel bag and pulled out my tent's tarp. I looped some rope I had in my bag through it to make a handle to pull it by and threw the magi-beast's corpse onto it. Then I set about stacking the scattered human corpses upon the tarp as well. This set was a bit of a longer haul, but much more worth my time. I threw the third body onto the tarp and let out a

deep breath. It had been essentially non-stop since I slaughtered the beast, I ran a hand through my hair- oh. **That** is sticky, I definitely need a bath... badly. But first, I need- Oh?

I heard crunching, rustling, and feminine sounds of exertion. Stepping out of the trees I was met with the furious black-eyed glare of a sweaty, exhausted Iris. Upon entering the clearing, she dropped the... corpse(?) Where she stood. I looked at her quizzically, but she went and dramatically flopped herself down on the ground with her back against a tree. She brushed some loose hair out of her eyes before settling her eyes back on me and making a face, "You look... gross. Here's... your damn body." She said between heaving breaths. I strolled up to the body on the ground next to her and inspected it. He was certainly dead; I just couldn't tell how.

As if reading my mind, "Move his hair. I went in through the back of the neck. Unlike you, I am neat." I chuckled and moved the human's unkempt hair; just as she said, a single puncture, with only a small trickle of blood. Wow, she was a professional alright...this was *art*.

"Who taught you to kill like this? It is impressive work." I asked as I dragged him by the ankle to my tarp.

"Taught?" she scoffed at my inquiry, "Why should someone teach me to stab something? It's really, really easy. See?" I glanced over my shoulder at her, she was making a crude overhead stabbing motion towards me with a closed fist above her head from across the camp.

"Do not be flippant with me. So you learned your trade completely on the job?"

"Where the hell else does someone learn a 'trade'? What? Do they have *murder schools* where you're from? I mean, I guess you do talk sorta high-class and what not. I certainly couldn't afford to go to a *murder school!*" She seemed to have gotten over her fear of me reasonably quickly... such confidence. I had thought her voice was quiet due to her recent head trauma, but it seemed like she just naturally spoke in a breathy, quiet voice just above a whisper.

I tossed the fourth body on the tarp, folded it over, and grabbed the cord I had used on Iris from the floor. I whipped it at the tarp and it wrapped the bodies within the tarp tightly together. I turned back towards her; she was regarding the tarp with some curiosity, then nodded to herself as if understanding something.

"It was a gift from my ma-client. When you work at as high a level as I clearly do, you have-

"-Clearly?" She gave me an exaggerated look up and down, then clicked her tongue. This woman...

I let the topic drop, "I'm surprised you came back." I said flatly, leaving the question unasked.

"You said you were buying my contract, and giving me a quarter of-" she gestured toward the neatly wrapped pile in the middle of the camp, "-why would I run away before I've been paid?" I snickered at that, confident that I had made a fine choice. I walked back towards her to grab my bag; she was milling about picking up all of the various tools and concealed weapons I had

removed from her person. She had sheathed her curious weapon, a roughly half-meter long spike about a couple centimeters in diameter at the base with a small handle and no guard that slimmed into a viciously sharp point. I don't think I've ever heard of such a weapon, perhaps it was a custom creation? Maybe this one is craftier than she looks. She was walking back towards the woods from where she had attacked me with a piton in hand.

"Gotta go grab my bag, I'll be back."

"In the woods? And why do you need that?"

"Uh...yeah? Do you carry your bag on you while fighting? I hung it up as soon as I spotted you. And my head is still fucking killing me - thank you very much - I can't Reinforce my legs well enough to jump all the way up there." As if lecturing an annoying servant on the most obvious thing in the world, she paused at the base of a tree with a semi low branch, still out of reach. She took a quick, short lunging step forward and leaped into the air; surprisingly high considering she was not Reinforcing her limbs. Her back arched smoothly as she brought fist back in an exaggerated windup, before snapping forward, driving her weight and momentum behind the piton clutched in her fist. It sank into the bark easily and she hung with both hands, bracing her feet against the trunk.

"Hey, you're like, super strong right? Pull this out for me, would ya?" She called over her shoulder barely audibly before flinging herself up towards a branch. As soon as she reached it - as if flying - she gracefully ascended before disappearing into the darkness. I let out a slow whistle; I definitely made a good choice with this one. I could not help but smile to myself as I walked over to the tree to retrieve her piton.

Iris

My headache finally started fading as we got closer to the town that Amber was apparently carrying out the hunt for. She was dragging all five corpses fairly effortlessly on her rope-handled tarp, the sturdy material crinkling loudly across the well-worn path. I was walking a few meters away from her whole set up, sometimes in front, back, or off to one side or another, trying to stay upwind of her and her grotesque caravan. Even if she hadn't accidentally gotten some brain matter on me, just seeing her made me **need** to take a bath. She promised that we'd be plenty well-off after she turned in her- **our** corpse pile, and that there was a bathhouse attached to the inn within the town.

With the gate finally in sight, I decided to do a brief self-diagnosis of my brain in light of my probable concussion. Focusing my PsyEn into my eyes to generate the Third Eye effect; my vision shimmered slightly as Psychic Energy became visually perceptible. As I walked, I held my hand out in front of my face to begin my diagnosis. My PsyEn Coating normally extended about 5 centimeters from my skin and was fairly transparent; the pale white aura giving a slight tint to my copper skin tone. I was pleased to see that my Coating looked as it typically did, a gentle

wave motion punctuated by the occasional sharpened peak whenever there was a loud noise. Satisfied that my brain's passive activity saw no permanent damage, I Focused some of my Coating into my clenched fist, and watched its opacity increase as the PsyEn gathered around it became denser, shrinking my overall Coating's volume somewhat. Finally, I pulled most of my Coating within myself and felt my limbs became lighter and stronger as my PsyEn permeated and Reinforced my body.

Sighing as I released the Reinforced PsyEn, I skipped for a couple of strides, happy that there was no permanent damage. It's hard to exist as a human and not-

"We have arrived." I flinched as Amber broke the relative silence and pulled her cord from the corpse-tarp, exposing the thankfully still bodies, "I shall handle negotiations, so keep quiet."

"Tch, fine by me, I hope they brought some buckets, I can't imagine them letting you in town looking like **that**." Seriously, the fact that she hadn't even taken some time to scrub off at least her face was killing me over here. She rolled her red eyes at me from behind her sunglasses and stepped forward to meet the approaching gate guard. He made a sour face as he looked her up and down, but his eyes widened as he looked over her shoulder to the grotesque pile behind her.

"I...Is that...?"

"Yes. The wolf-type, magirradiated beast, and the whatever-they-were-called Crew, all four of them. I already took my samples of them, so you may do with them what you will."

"Did you hunt all of these by yourself?"

"All but one," She gestured over her shoulder to me, "The least dead-looking one was taken out by my partner over there. She'll be staying in the town for a couple of days with me. Kindly have one of your boys direct her to my room at the inn. Shall we discuss payment inside?" He nodded and let out an ear piercing whistle. Some boy - probably an apprentice of some kind - stumbled over and stood at attention. He nodded forcefully as his task was explained to him. The kid ran over to me - he couldn't be more than 16 years old - and began stuttering out some directions.

"Um.. hi- I mean, Hello. Ma'am, or Miss? I mean, we-"

"Relax, kid, I'm just a lady in dire need of a bath and a meal. Let's just go." I decided to take charge of the situation and save myself the second-hand embarrassment of letting him continue. He blushed meekly and I followed him through the gate, several paces behind Amber and the gate captain. They broke off to the left towards a watchtower door and we split off to the right. After a few twists and turns throughout the town, drawing curious glances wherever we went, we finally paused in front of a small inn of a couple stories.

"Here we are, miss!" He seemed to have worked up enough courage to complete a sentence during transit.

“Cool. Thanks. Bye.” I began to brush by the boy, who was standing still, awkwardly gesturing toward the inn, “What. You want a tip or some shit?”

“Oh! No it’s just, um... You and the bloody woman-”

“Hah!”

“-are you two... like... you kno-”

“Yuck. Get outta here. No tip for you.” With that I continued inside. I approached the front desk and asked for Amber Isolde’s room, which they were weirdly quick to lead me to; I guess they aren’t a discreet inn. I used the old key I was given to click open the door, and cautiously opened the door and-

Nope.

I went back down to the front desk and bought my own room for a few nights along with an unlimited bathhouse package.

It was probably an hour after my own bath that I was startled out of my nap by the sound of someone stopping outside of my room before sharply rapping on my door. I ducked down behind the door with my Needle drawn before asking, “What?”

“What do you mean, what? I should be asking ‘What?’. Open this door immediately, Iris.”

“Did you bathe?”

“...”

“...”

“Yes! Now open this door before I do.”

“Tch, hardly necessary.” I complied, unlocking and backing away from the door. She entered aggressively, but deliberately, accompanied by a variety of scents; the soap and shampoo from the bathhouse, as well as food. After closing the door behind her, she flicked her arm out, tossing something my way. I caught it and immediately started bouncing it between my hands. It seemed to be a fresh baked yam of some kind, which she appeared to have no problem clutching one in her own hand.

“Good evening to you. Let us begin with previous business before discussing new business: Most of my payment for the two jobs was in food and favours. You do not strike me as the type that makes use of either of those things, so take this on me.” She tossed me a parcel that weighed heavily of silver notes; I tossed it over my shoulder onto the bed, I’d count it at my leisure later.

“First. The fuck? Making a lot of assumptions here.” I’ve always had a strong distaste for people who hid their shit talking behind flowers and inside of talks of mutual interests. Still one-handedly juggling the yam, I snagged a hand towel from the night table and wrapped it for more reasonable eating, “Second, are these yams all there is to your food-based payment? You struck me as a stronger negotiator than that.”

“Of course not, I have the inn’s kitchen help preparing most of it for the road.”

“...At what price...?”

“A trivial amount, worry not. I’ve saved these humans a tremendous cost with my hunts.”

“Hum-”

“Enough,” She clapped her heel against the hardwood floor emphatically, “Time for you to answer all of my questions. This is my right as the absolute victor over your attempt on my life!”

Ugh. I really don’t like her.

“Fine.”

“I told you to go to my room, why did you buy your own?”

“...?”

“Well?!” She demanded loudly.

“...You... your room obviously only has one bed. I’m a grown woman with actual money, I’m not sleeping on the floor.” **That** is what she wants to know first and foremost?

“...You are being serious.” She looked absolutely perplexed. Now that she was cleaned up and I could finally get a clear look at her, she actually had a very expressive face. I had initially suspected that her hair was dyed purple, but looking at her now up close without abundant blood staining, her hair was actually a light purple through and through. Paired with the red eyes now absent of any sunglass shielding, I had to conclude that she was a real live *vyllette*. Apparently they were a mutation that would sometimes pop up in a family’s lineage if someone in their line was a Witch.

Or so they say.

“What? Like what you see?” She cooed; I guess I’d been staring as I mulled that over.

“Hardly. I was just thinking I’d never seen a *vyllette* in person before,” I took a bite from my somewhat cooled down yam, “...Anyhow... I tried to kill you just a little bit ago, so I’m not feeling up to sharing a room with you, let alone a bed.”

“...Well aren't you bashful. I'm hardly going to force you, so let us move on for now and talk business.”

Amber

“Now if you recall - aside from the answers I want from you - I do indeed owe you a couple of explanations; I will start with the first explanation because it is shorter, in regards to my PsyEn Ability.” She will certainly be more tractable if I give her the explanation that piqued her interest in the first place. She was perched on the corner of her bed, holding her feet together with one hand and knees spread in a relaxed butterfly position, intermittently taking completely soundless bites out of the yam I had given her.

“First. You have observed me in combat from a distance once now. What are your thoughts?”

“Messy.” she drawled quietly.

“About my Ability” I sighed, her little acts of defiance were tiring.

“Ah. It's a bub-” there was a snap followed by a shifting of logs from the woodstove across the room. It was not terribly loud, but she was so quiet as to have been completely drowned out.

“Okay... I am going to need you to actually speak up for a change. It takes far too much effort to hear you!” I snapped at her impatiently, pacing away from her to go adjust the woodstove.

And suddenly my world went completely silent.

I whipped around indignantly, activating my *Third Eye* at the same time. Sure enough, there was an elongated, worm-like, head-sized bubble of semi-transparent PsyEn extending from her head to mine.

Excuse me!?

“Maybe it would be in your best interest to put more 'effort' into **listening**. As I said, your Ability is a bubble that slows down attackers, right? It probably also behaves like a PsyEn Pulse, so you're aware of when something enters the bubble?” With her cutting us both off from outside, ambient noise, her voice carried with perfect clarity. I just stood there, staring at her briefly, before quickly stalking over to her bed. She scampered backwards like a startled feline to the other side of it. I sat down and scooted towards her until she was within arms reach. Backed into the wall, she dissipated the silencing bubble she had cheekily placed over us.

“You are half correct. It's called *Vanity* and it also accelerates my strength and speed. So tread lightly.” Making my disapproval clear, she swallowed silently and nodded her head, “Now then, your Ability absorbs sound. Is there a limit to that?”

“...I don't know about absorption, but the sound goes away. So far I've not encountered a sound I couldn't cancel.”

“And you can place it anywhere? How large of a bubble? Can you do other shapes? An-”

“You’re really nosy, you know that? And you’re waaay too close.”

“If we are going to work together, Iris, then I need to know the limits of your ability. And since you are incredibly stubborn, I MUST be this close to hear you.”

She sighed dramatically, “Anywhere I can see. About 20 meters. And yes but it’s harder.”

“Noted. And have demonstrated a high level of acrobatics, precision, and delicacy. So then, about the job then. I require your skillset to simplify the theft of a rare book.”

“A rare book.” She repeated flatly.

“Yes. An unpublished military research manual, to be precise. That is the true reason for my presence in this region. While you were tracking me down, did note the mansion on the edge of that sheer cliff outside of town?”

“Yeah.”

“Excellent. That is the Spencer Mansion.”

“...Wait as in **the** Spencer that hired me to kill you?” Her mouth was slightly agape as she put the pieces together in her head.

“Good. You are thinking, do not stop doing that. So we need to enter the mansion, make our way into his private library, and swipe this text. Did you get to look inside when you were hired?”

“I did not. I was approached in the next town over to the North. I did see the outside of it though... Pretty cocky to build a house so flush with the cliff face. Anyhow...Why would you need me for that? You’re strong. Can’t you just kill everyone and take whatever books you want?” How uncreative, we were going to have to do something about her imagination.

“Master Spencer is an excellent rare book collector. Maybe the best rare book collector I am aware of. With his wealth, connections, and small private army dedicated to the cause... there is no text he cannot obtain. Rather than wasting his life, talent, and resources, my m-client has decided it is best to just ‘borrow’ texts from him on occasion,” I explained to her with as much information as was required. She didn’t need the whole story at this point, if ever.

“...Okay...?” Her confusion was fairly understandable, she couldn’t comprehend the immortal, unflappable egos I was dealing with, “So you’ve stolen from here before. Security is probably bulked up, and...?”

“There are these new alarms that were installed recently. I know not their mechanism of action, but they probably utilize some manner pressure plate or some other proximity-based detection system. Myself and a couple other acquaintances have tried various methods, and we cannot

seem to figure out how to properly approach the place without setting them off and bringing all of his security force down on us.”

“And since you can’t figure out the alarms, you wish to use my Ability to make their activation a non-issue.”

“Exactly.”

“Cool, give me a couple of days.” she was brimming with a quiet confidence. I suppose this did play to her strengths.

“For what?”

“You said you were having trouble even approaching the place, so I’ll figure out a way in for you. Map out the general layout for me as well.”

Huh, perhaps she’s pretty reliable for this type of thing in general. I was just planning on abusing her Ability, but this might go smoother than anticipated.

“Alright, then.”

Shortly after I dismissed a bar girl I had picked up earlier that afternoon, there was a light tapping at my door. True to her word, it had been close to 48 hours since I had left Iris’ room; I sighed and told her to ‘come in’ in as low but audible a voice as I could. The door opened quickly and she stepped in, suddenly wrinkling her nose.

Her hearing really was something else.

“Damn. Smells like an ill-kept sauna in here. What did you **do** to her?”

I grinned lasciviously, “What *didn’t* I do to her? Why, you lonely? Polite of you to wait until I was done.”

“Ugh. Anyhow, two things: first, do vyllettes really have better vision than other humans? Second, are you competent with a heavy crossbow?” She stayed by the door, making a big show of the smell of the room, waving her hand under her nose.

It felt like we skipped a few steps, “Hold on, have you found a quiet way in?”

“That depends on you. Do they and are you?”

“We do indeed see better than humans, hence the sun shades. There is a bit too much detail most of the time and the daytime is a bit too bright.”

“So your night vision is good? And it applies to your Third Eye?”

"It is *exceptional*, and yes it does."

"...And?"

"And of course I can use a heavy crossbow. Now why?"

"Excellent. We'll be taking the back route into the manor, scaling the back wall."

"...Iris there is-"

"I know and I saw. That's what the crossbow is for. My job is infiltration and silencing alarms. Your job is to know where to go and what to get. Anyhow, I took some time to procure a couple small boats. You've got money, right? Go buy a heavy crossbow and 60 heavy bolts. I'm gonna go take a bath."

Iris

"Look, can you see the bubble on the cliff face?"

"...Yes I can see it."

"Good. Then just aim and fire."

The water near the cliff's edge was pretty calm today, so we decided to make tonight the heist night. The last couple of days had been irritating; Amber was annoyingly insistent on me explaining the mechanics of the plan. Eventually, after going through the map she had drawn out of the manor proper, I relented and explained the plan... which was met with a blank stare. In the end, I just gave her a, "It will make sense in action." And with that she backed down and bought the supplies I had requested.

She steadied herself on the gently rocking boat and took a careful aim; I had placed a *silencing* bubble over the entirety of the crossbow, so the only indication that she had fired was a slight twitch of her shoulder from the kickback. She really was super strong and her aim must have been true, since there wasn't a sound on either end.

"See? Now I'll go over there, and every time you see a bubble, just shoot a bolt into it, and I'll keep climbing and placing them!"

"Impressive, you are more clever than I gave you credit for." Her unending condescension was wearing on me. I look forward to my payment and the end of this job.

"Fuck you." And with that I rowed off towards the cliffside. Quickly and quietly docking, I activated my *Third Eye* so I could clearly see the bubble that I had left as an indicator. I grabbed onto the bolt buried a little over halfway into the wall, and let my full weight hang from it... it

would hold. At least, it would certainly hold me; Amber *did* look like she weighed a bit more than me. Perhaps one of these would snap way high up and solve most of my problems at once.

Confident in my improvised bolt-ladder-technique, I dismissed the Silence bubble, grabbed the bolt with my left hand and braced my feet against the cliff. Reaching up, I pointed at the wall and willed another Silencing bubble into existence. About five seconds later, a bolt suddenly appeared in the center of the bubble. I dismissed the bubble, swung my body up to it, and grabbed it with my right hand, simultaneously exchanging my left hand for my left foot. Pulling myself close to the wall and peering straight up, I now had a much better idea of the topography of the wall, and began placing one bubble after another until I could no longer clearly see the bolts. After climbing for a few uninterrupted seconds, I paused and did the same, counting off in my head how many bolts had been fired. We should have a few left over for an emergency.

After several minutes of this treatment, a final bolt landed just above me. Reaching up, I used a small mirror to peak over the wall. As I suspected, no one was anywhere near the back wall. I took my time scanning back and forth, the outer walls of the manor that ran almost flush with the sheer cliff made this an easily defensible fixture in the region. Now if I were setting up my big-ass manor to be impenetrable, but wanted to minimize the size of guard shifts, where would I put my alarms?

Since the back walls weren't particularly well lit, I pulled myself up over the ledge silently and crawled over to the edge of the outer wall's parapet to look down into the courtyard in front of the manor. This place was structured more like a military fort than a cloistered manor; the man must take his books pretty seriously. There were two towers on either side of the large, wooden front gate, and the tall stone walls extended out from there, coming around in a large square that was incredibly tall all the way around. I wonder if some of this was put together with Geomancy or Magic; building such a tall stone wall seemed wildly impractical otherwise. Immediately to the left of the gate the manor itself was some sort of barrack-looking building, and to the right appeared to be storehouses for various consumables.

I heard a scuffling noise from behind and several meters below me, looks like Amber was getting close. I scooted back and looked over the edge, her silhouette barely visible against the backdrop of inky water far below. I did both of us the favour of putting a large silencing orb around the rest of her ascent, wiping away sweat as I did. I still had a solid amount of PsyEn available to me, but I had already used up quite a lot for the day; we needed to get this done sooner rather than later. Several moments later, Amber pulled herself up over the edge silently,

"I must... say... you made that... look... easy." Amber whispered harshly while trying to catch her breath, "So... what do you think?" I snickered, it was nice to find something she wasn't great at.

"It's laid out just like you said... But of everything down below, the lighting situation bugs me the most. See there? And that row and that row?" I was pointing over the parapet and rows of free standing torches, "They can afford to keep all of this lit all night, and I'm guessing every night.

So look, why the blind spots?" I pointed at various conspicuously unlit areas, including directly below us where the back of the manor was located.

"I think I see what you are saying... almost like Spencer is **begging** for someone to duck into the shadows... You *are* quite the cautious one." She voiced my concerns, now pocketing her sunglasses fully, in the darkness of our cover, her red eyes seemed to sparkle all on their own.

Squinting into the darkness directly below us and eyes flickering towards the various shadowy patches within the compound, she clicked her tongue, "Yes. You are absolutely correct. The darkness itself is bait. Spencer is toying with would-be thieves. If you look carefully below us, you'll see an unlit pole shaped like a torch. In the light, it would clearly not be a torch; that is actually one of the alarms." I followed the line of her finger pointing straight down and squinted into the darkness. Finally, I saw it... it was smaller than I thought it would be; she claimed she didn't understand the mechanism that set it off, but assured me the alarm sound came out of the top. I took a deep breath and glanced over at my new partner in crime.

"Ready?"

"Lead the way."

"You'd best follow then." I exhaled and clenched my fist to mute the pre-game tremors that always preceded stealth missions for me. *This is fine. Nothing will go wrong.* I reminded myself before placing one large *silence* bubble over the alarm directly below, and another one several meters to the right of it. I nodded at her and tapped the center of my forehead, then jumped down to the empty bubble, landing soundlessly and moving towards the back right trapdoor, which Amber's map had labeled as the wine cellar. I turned to check on her and saw her landing perfectly inside the Silence bubble. As she continued towards me, I centered the bubble on her, moving it along with her. I kept an eye out as she simply slashed the lock and crossbar of the trapdoor with a single swing of her axe.

...?!?!

Something weird just pinged across my awareness. I stared at the alarm... I didn't see anything out of the ordinary; no one had entered it... my Ability doesn't even work that way; I don't feel people enter or exit a Silencing bubble. What **was** that?

Did I imagine it? Are my nerves THAT frayed already?

I shook my head and followed Amber down into the wine cellar.

Amber

The rest had followed easily enough.

Obviously, the layout of the manor had not changed, the only difference was these alarms cheekily placed around corners. I'm ashamed to admit I would have walked right into the first one if not for Iris. This woman was excessively cautious, bordering on paranoid. Just before we exited the wine cellar, she suddenly grabbed my sleeve, and when I looked back, she had a fearful look on her face. She then pointed to the top of the stairs and placed a large *silencing* bubble there. When we did finish climbing the stairs, low and behold, there was an alarm blaring, but as we exited the sphere, not even a peep escaped from her impressive PsyEn Ability.

Overall, Iris was shockingly impressive. It took 57 bolts to create her highly implausible ladder, and she had maintained her Ability over the crossbow I was firing at a large distance, while she had been climbing and placing a new bubble for each bolt. And now, she was maintaining *Silence* over every single alarm we had passed. She was leading at this point, as she seemed to have a clear memory of the map I had shown her. I could see from behind her that she was leaving behind 'damp with sweat' and approaching 'soaked', her shoulder rising and falling more and more as the weight of psychic exhaustion was draining her of her physical stamina. Yet here she was, silently continuing on and placing additional bubbles around corners, and molding them down to a smaller shape after confirming the alarm's presence.

When we first met, she appeared to be weak of Mind... But she was demonstrating a level of psychic endurance that bordered on the supernatural.

I had suggested a couple of times that she release the earlier alarm bubbles, but she shook her head 'No' quite emphatically. She was still very clearly worried about something, but following her had made approaching the hidden library on the opposite end of the manor from the main library an easy task.

A very easy task.

Was this not too easy?

As the dead end where I knew the secret entrance to be located came into sight, she seemed to have the same misgivings, glancing at me over her shoulder with slight bewilderment. After placing a large bubble halfway into the wall, I approached it and performed the series of tapped steps that activated the hidden door mechanism. Quietly, a tall, thin slit appeared in the wall, and I pushed the doors wide open with little effort. Iris, looking over her shoulder back down the hallway, entered quickly behind me and began to peruse the room and I made my way toward where the book in question must be. Sure enough - well-organized as ever - I found the text my Master desired, *The Nature and Nurture of Obsession*, by Nozen Keera. This was just the type of Psygenics-related texts that Isolde and her ilk loved to study over the course of their infinite lives.

Incoming Mind-Linked Message from Oswell Spencer.

Accept.

Decline.

A small box appeared across my vision as a Watcher message request infiltrated my mind.

“Spencer?!” I growled out loud despite myself, causing Iris to startle and turn towards me, eyes wide. I ignored her and accepted the message. A cooling sensation permeated my head before a woman’s voice spoke, “One moment please.”

*A-ha-ha-mber. So good of you to return here. And you even took the time to deliver a traitorous little failure back to me. Here I thought you and I weren’t on good terms! But here you are, proving me wrong as ever! Finding a way back in here, finding a way to silence my Psymetal alarms, and stealing my **fucking** books again you irritating beast of a woman.*

The alarms were *Psymetal* and he’s now employing a **Watcher**. Are you kidding me? Watchers were a class of communication specialists whose PsyEn Abilities involved the direct conveyance of information into a recipient’s mind. As ever, the specifics of the Ability varied from person to person, but they could usually dump information inside another person’s mind across massive distances, and this one appeared to be able to channel someone else’s thoughts in *real time*.

By the Old Blood, how the fuck much money does this man have?!

“Iris. They got us. The alarms were *Psymetal*, their Watcher was probably pinged between them as we tripped-”

*Anyhow. You seem to value knowledge as much as I do, as evidenced by you and your organization’s repeated presence in my library over the years. So if you’re going to be your usual self about this, put down the book, and then come out and die. While you’re at it, hogtie that useless, whispering quim, I’ve got a special place for traitors who take upfront payments and piss all over them. Oh and do know that you ARE surrounded, and we aren’t going to fight you on **your** brutish terms. If this weren’t a one way communication, I’d ask you whether or not you can dodge **bullets**. But I guess we will see either way.*

Watchers seriously annoyed me.

“Iris, we need t-” I stopped mid-sentence, flabbergasted. Iris’ was just half sitting, half leaning against the center table of the hidden library, her wide eyes stared sightlessly at an invisible point on the floor in front of her. Perspiration pouring down her face more aggressively from fear than the plethora of Silencing bubbles. She was panicking.

You have got to be **fucking** kidding me.

“Hey.”

“ ... ”

“I said, **Hey.**”

She mumbled something incoherently.

Enough of this garbage,

I stalked up to her impassive form, slapped my hands on both of her cheeks and forced her face to tilt up and look at me.

“You. Listen. Now.” I said quietly in her face through gritted teeth, “They have the place surrounded, allegedly with blade, arrow, *and* bullet. They have a Watcher pinged between Psymetal sentries. They know better than to engage me in close quarters combat, but as soon as we exit, they are going to shred us. Now tell me, what is the emergency egress plan?”

“-ve one.” she quietly mumbled something at me.

“What?!”

“I don’t have one. I didn’t plan on this. I never plan on this. If it isn’t going to work out. Then I don’t do it. I run. But we can’t run. We can’t climb down. If we try to rappelle they will cut the cord. If-” I clamped her muttering jaw shut with my thumbs.

“If you have energy to ramble, then **improvise.**” She struggled to get her mouth open and brought her hands up to try to pry my hands away. A futile effort.

“Now Spencer told me that I should tie you up and leave you here for them to do as they please, since you are, and I quote, ‘that useless, whispering quim.’ And if you keep this shit up, I will **absolutely** do that. Do *not* prove him right. Now I am going to *allow* you to speak. Be certain that the first words out of your mouth are **the plan.**”

Her gaze sharpened to a focus and met my eyes with ill-concealed contempt. Slowly, I released her jaw, then took my hands off of her face. Her smoldering eyes quieted down to a cooler simmer over the next few moments. She took a deep breath and I could practically see the gears turning in her head as her anger and fear of me overcame her panic of the plan falling apart. Finally, she whispered, “Armory.”

Iris

“Armory.” I told her after visualizing the map she had shown me a couple of days back. As soon as I heard from Amber, of all people, ‘They got us’, I panicked. *They got us?! Isn’t she kind of invincible? Ugh. She doesn’t respect me at all does she? Then again, twice now this woman had witnessed my frustrating panic response and both times trusted me despite the circumstances. Perhaps I had the disrespect coming in this case. She was demanding an auxiliary plan for this busted situation. I suppose we aren’t in as bad of shape as I initially*

thought; we DO have the book. We just have to get out. Sure, we're surrounded, but is this really worse than being directly at Amber's mercy?

Hardly.

"I've got a shit ton of cord, we just need tools from the armory."

"Excellent. Let's go." and she dashed from the room, her book neatly tucked away in her hip bag. I sprinted after her, crossing through hallways that we had carefully picked our way across minutes at a time in a matter of seconds. As we rapidly approached the next crossroad of halls in this complex, I could hear people getting into position down the halls to the left and right.

Click. Click.

Sharpshooters.

But there is an alarm down the right hall and just outside the walls behind the left gunner. Closing my eyes to imagine the spatial arrangement of my Silencing bubbles - without warning Amber - I released the two bubbles and braced myself for the incoming-

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEECH! So.

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEECH!! Fucking.

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEECH!!! Loud.

We simply dashed across the intersection, the sharpshooters likely too startled to even realize we had passed. On top of that, their Watcher was going to have to *ping* to both of the Psymetal sentries to check the disturbance. I couldn't really tell at first that the alarms were continuously screaming, and I had left the Silence in place over them as a mere precaution. But I could feel myself getting tired faster than I usually do when leaving a bubble out, so I figured extra PsyEn was being spent to maintain the zones of Silence against the continuous sound.

"Make a mess!" I tried my best to shout... unsuccessfully. But Amber apparently was actually using her ears, since without a word of acknowledgment, she simply drew her axe and started knocking shit over as we passed and slicing through the ruby-coloured carpets with childish glee. As we approached the doors to the armory, I Reinforced my body to spring ahead of her a few steps, then began to slow down immediately. She followed my example and I briefly put an ear up to the door, heard nothing, and shoved the doors open.

"Alright... what was that about?!" Amber had a cruel grin on her face as she caught her breath... was she *enjoying* this situation?!

"I want them.. To think that we are panicking an-"

"Well you **were**-"

“Fuck off.”

“Theeeeerre we go!”

“You are the worst person I know. Block the door, I want them to think we are holding up in here.” Again she grinned, and went about shifting some tables and chairs, she was strangely tractable currently. I figured she of all people would have a plan, unless she was more of a brute than I thought? I could hear footsteps all around us as troops were moving into positions where they thought our escape attempt likely: outside the door, far down the hall, and above us. In this windowless chamber, they wouldn’t predict we’d go right through the wall.

How many of these *living* people, after all, had first hand experience with Amber’s brute strength?

I had been poking around the armory for a bit now and finally found what I needed: two sturdy, well-crafted steel javelins, each with a loop near the butt-end for easy storage and hanging. I pulled out both ends of my jumping-cord, which had hooks secured in carabiners on the ends. I put them through the ends of each of the javelins and screwed them shut. I turned to see Amber looking at me with her head tilted slightly to the side.

“You cannot be serious.”

“You said that about the ladder too.” I reminded her as I approached and handed her a zipline hook.

She snatched it out of my hand and clamped it to her wrist, “Where exactly are we planting the ends?”

“Anything we attach to the parapets will be cut behind us shortly. That’s why we aren’t rappelling. And that IS a problem, I was thinking that we’d plant the first end in the trees down where we had originally set out the boats then-”

BOOM

The ear shattering sound of splintering wood against wood filled the room as the door shook. Looks like they took the bait; I grabbed the two javelins joined by the climbing cord and strapped them to my back, “I’ll carry these for now. You’ll take them when we reach the top. Can you carve through this wall with your Ability?” I pointed at the wall that conspicuously had nothing hanging from it and placed a large Silencing bubble.

BOOM

“We shall see. Move.” As she shoved by me, I felt myself feel heavier as she activated her *Vanity*. She brought back her axe, Cladded with PsyEn, and began silently carving through the wall. As she did this, I closed my eyes and one by one, with about 10 seconds in between, dismissed various other *silencing* bubbles throughout the inner and outer complex, making it

seem as though someone else was moving into the manor while we were tucked away in this room. Soon enough, there was only the one bubble that Amber was carving inside of. She stopped, nodded at me over her shoulder, and I got ready to move. With one final swing she burst through the wall into the courtyard area from the side of the building, right behind a pitiful sentry who never had a chance to know we were coming out right behind him. Amber cut him down from behind without a second thought and cancelled her *Vanity* so that I could follow closely behind and we ran alongside the manor towards the back wall from where we had entered.

BOOM-SLAM

It sounded like the door and barricade finally slammed open. I heard distant shouting and panicked voices as they found the hole in the wall we had created. They seemed to be trying to shout orders and update other sentries, but half the alarms in the complex were still screaming, and without people relaying information efficiently to the Watcher, they were effectively useless. As we approached the back corner of the manor that faced the cliffside wall, we Reinforced ourselves for one big jump back up the wall. With all the chaos of alarms and shouting, the sharpshooters on the wall were not prepared for our sudden presence on the same plane as them.

There were four of them spread out in a line along the parapets. The first never stood a chance, as we jumped from the darkness and landed right next to her, with Amber immediately burying her axe in the woman's abdomen. I darted past them and drew my Needle and Amber was extricating her axe from the first sharpshooter's torso. I lunged right for the second one's throat, but he managed to bring his gun up to block my attack. Oh shit. Oh fuck. There are two more behind him and they've noticed and-

Improvise!

The sudden memory of Amber's angry command cut my panic short. Rather than retreating as soon as my attack was thwarted, I let my right elbow bend and my momentum carry me forward. I clenched my left fist and activated my wrist-mounted hand-crossbow mechanism. Both the man's arms were still raised shoulder width and my fist came up right between his arms, cracking my knuckles painfully against his jaw. It wasn't hard enough to stun him, but it didn't matter; I curled a finger down to press the button at the base of my palm and a light crossbow bolt shot right up through his jaw into his head, the tip just barely peeking out of the top of his skull. I ducked down and swept out his legs, taking aim and firing at the other two sharpshooters on the parapet with us with my two additional pre-loaded bolts. They either ducked or deflected the bolts, but it didn't matter, for Amber was charging at them with *Vanity* activated.

She didn't even bother attacking the first man in her line of sight with her axe, opting instead to grab him by his face and toss him off the parapets to her left right onto the manor. The last one in the line, seeing this, opted to drop her gun and jump onto the roof of the manor herself; easily the most reasonable thing I had seen anyone do today. Amber skidded to a halt and came back

up to me. The security force below were starting to notice our presence on the unlit parapets, and I saw them lighting torches to throw up top.

“Alright take these,” I untied the bow around the long cord and handed her the corded javelins setup that I had made.

“You were not kidding. You want me to nail this into one of those trees from **this** far away?” She took the javelins from me and looked at them in disbelief.

“It was the best thing I could come up with. You’re very scary when you’re mad. I just assumed since you were a little strong, and-”

“A little strong?!-”

“But, I guess you’d have to be **really** strong to- *oh shit!*” I had been trying to egg her on a little bit to get her to just shut up and throw the damn thing, as torches were being tossed all along the stone walkway atop the wall. I physically felt ill suddenly, as she activated her Ability at a density I hadn’t realized she was capable of. I couldn’t even back up out of it and I felt so diminished within its area of effect that my Third Eye wouldn’t even activate properly.

“You do not *know* strength!” she growled at me as she took two rapid steps forward, pitched her upper torso back as her left foot came off the ground and suddenly snapped her whole body forward, planting her left foot on the edge of the cliffside wall. Just like that, the javelin had disappeared from her hand, the only evidence that it had been thrown was the rapidly unraveling length of cord attached to the other javelin in Amber’s off hand. Suddenly the unraveling stopped, and Amber turned towards me with a shit-eating grin, “**See?!**”

“Yes. Yes. Now-” Suddenly she pushed my head down with enough force that I felt like my neck would snap and a bullet flew by where my skull had just been. They were approaching from every direction and there was enough light now for pinpoint shots to be taken. Suddenly Amber dropped the second javelin, pulled me in close, her face was a few centimeters from mine, her expression was indecipherable to me, but I had the feeling I wasn’t going to like what was about to come out of her mouth.

“You are going to fly for a bit.” she to me whispered almost gently.

“Wha-hey-WAIT OH F-AAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!” I let out the first ear-piercing screech of my life as Amber picked me up and tossed me into the fucking night. I tumbled through the air until the supernaturally strong toss reached its peak, where I twisted in the air to face my doom below face first. The rest happened in mere moments. Directly after she had tossed me off the cliff overtop the cord that extended into the darkness below, she picked up the 2nd javelin and ran off of the edge. After falling for a second or two, she twisted in the air, and buried the javelin into the cliff face several meters below her, giving her time to ready her zipline hook and catch herself on the not-quite-taut line. Due to the arch of her throw, I had just enough time to Reinforce myself and catch the line just as she passed, allowing me to ride the line a few meters

behind her. We left the noisy chaos of the mansion behind, the sound fading with distance as we disappeared into the darkness over the water.

Amber

With *Vanity* active and my body Reinforced, I was able to take the impact into the tree at the bottom of the zipline with little issue. I immediately spun about, planted my feet, and took advantage of *Vanity*'s deceleration mechanism to slow Iris' momentum and cushion her impact, blocking her incoming feet with my arms and letting her push me into the tree's trunk. I canceled *Vanity*, drew my axe and sliced the cord so no one could attempt an immediate chase; Iris landed on her skinny rump with a breathless groan. After confirming her landing, I dropped down to the dirt; we were safe for the time being, but we were going to have to-

"**You.**" My train of thought was interrupted by Iris' venomous whisper. I turned to see her rapidly stalking towards me, her hands empty but curled into fists, knowing what was coming next, I decided to let her vent for a moment.

"You... you fucking **threw** me! Off of a **cliff!** I... FUCK!" Huh, what do you know? She CAN raise her voice. She's actually pretty cute when she's energetic like this.

"That! Was! Not! Part! Of! The! Plan!" With each hyperventilated statement, her fists came down in an overhead hammer strike, ineffectually against my shoulders, chest, and forehead. There were angry tears mixed in with the sweat we were both at this point drenched in, "Say! You're! Sorry! To! Me! **Now!**" I let her continue her tantrum for a few moments more before catching her swinging fists by the wrists. She struggled briefly and tilted her face up to glare at me, eyes pink and teary with anger and fear.

I sighed, "I apologize, okay? We acquired the book, but we need to get moving. Now. We have a head start and we need to make it to our stash on the outskirts of the woods and get out of here." She continued to glare up at me with trembling lips for an additional few seconds, then her face, along with the rest of her body, slackened in my grip, until she hung like a doll from my hands. I gently let her down to the ground and she sat pathetically with her hands between her thighs, her legs crumpled underneath her.

"Rest time is over, time to go."

She sniffled another couple of times, took a deep breath, and said in her hallmark just-above-a-whisper tone, "I can't move."

"What?"

"I burned too much PsyEn. My legs won't respond." Ah. Damn. That makes sense. She should not have been able to move for a while now.

"Alright, *princess~*." I stepped towards her and scooped her up into my arms.

"You-w-w-w-wha-!?!)" She stammered in embarrassment. Wow, she was rather light, even without *Vanity* activated.

"Consider this my apology for throwing you off of a cliff. I would discourage getting used to such treatment."

"I-you... Fu- Fine..." She whispered as she looked away from me and secured her arms around my shoulders.

I walked as fast as I could manage through the woods, unerringly moving towards our destination on the outskirts of the town we had been staying at the previous few nights. Leaves and branches crunched under my feet, and I could feel Iris jumping at the noise. After a lengthy silence, just when I thought she actually passed out, she unexpectedly broke the silence.

"Hey."

"What?" Her voice suddenly sounded quite small and almost hurt.

"You wouldn't have really left me, right? Tied me up and left me?"

"Of course not," I absolutely would have, "What, you did not actually believe that, did you?"

"*Of course not...* but... that was mean."

"Well, you **did** try to kill me." This was unusual... is she making... small talk?

"Are you still on about that? Someone like you should be used to it."

"Hah! I suppose you are not wrong about that." She once again looked up at me, but I did not think this awkward conversation would be improved by eye contact. Eventually, she gave up, letting out a deep sigh.

"I guess you **are** *really* strong... I'm tired."

"Then rest."

Iris

"Hey." What am I doing?

"What?"

"You wouldn't have really left me, right? Tied me up and left me?" You know the answer to that.

"Of course not," *Liar*, "What, you did not actually believe that, did you?"

"*Of course not...* but... that was mean." Of course I did!

“Well, you **did** try to kill me.” Tch, you were never even in danger.

“Are you still on about that? Someone like you should be used to it.”

“Hah! I suppose you are not wrong about that.” That shocked me, I looked up at her suspiciously. That small laugh was the most sincere I’d heard her sound thus far. I glanced around - taking in what I could of our surroundings - we were making shockingly good time.

“I guess you **are** *really* strong... I’m tired.” It was uncanny, really. I was scared when she first picked me up, but when I considered the idea of having someone like this on my side... that wouldn’t be so bad, would it? I would probably be overall much safer. Sure, this job had been terrifying, but it was supposed to be very lucrative; these noble types that were willing to arm someone like her with *Magic* items just to go steal a book... If I could get in on some of that, I could be set for life! And Amber seemed like she might actually treat me well as long as I stayed useful.

Hmm.

“Then rest.” First good idea she’s had all fucking day.

Just before dawn we had reached our stash and picked our way along the road to the Southwest until the sun rose. Along the way we ran into a merchant wagon heading the same direction as us. Mercifully - in exchange for some food and protection - the man let us ride along with him. I faded in and out of consciousness throughout the ride, only really moving to switch wagons in the next town over. Since Amber insisted that we stay on the move for a couple of days, we moved from town to town, unerringly towards the Sventholme border. It was a bit creepy, but it made sense; the closer we were to vampire country, the more hesitant anyone would be to follow. She really was as unflappable to danger as she was to exhaustion.

I mulled over the last several days as I lounged in a tub in my room at the inn. After all that frantic travel and wagon sleeping, there was nothing better than this. I heard Amber’s footsteps coming down the hall and groaned internally. She did not knock or shout, but instead waited outside tapping her foot for a few seconds before turning back to go down stairs; her new way of summoning me to eat with her it seemed. I pulled myself out of the tub reluctantly and dried myself off. I dressed loosely and comfortably and exited my room, the long sleeves of my shirt and pants flapping soundlessly with my stride and my shoes perfectly *silent*. I steeled myself before descending the stairs into the unpleasant, low roar of bawdy townsfolk eating and drinking in the common area. I quickly located Amber and sat down across from her, she nodded at me and waved at someone behind me. A few moments later, two hot plates of food, a glass of wine for her, and a large beer for me were set down at the table.

"I like wine, too." I said to her, sipping my beer gratefully. Frustratingly, she simply tilted her head and held a hand up to her ear. I tsk'd audibly and placed a Silencing bubble around us, sonically cutting us off from the rest of the world. She smirked at me and brought up her glass to toast.

"You really are useful, Iris. I could have a quiet meal anytime and anywhere I wanted if I kept you around."

"If you wanted a quiet meal, you should have just had this sent up to one of our rooms."

"Oh? And here I thought this would be more comfortable for you than coming to my room alone."

"Creepy. Either be considerate or don't."

"Ouch, are you always like this?"

"Maybe you just bring out the worst in me. My turn: what is next for you?"

"Hmm, I guess that depends if there are any follow up jobs, or if I'm called home."

"What kind of vague system is that?"

"What about you, then? You said before you couldn't stay here in Alachara. You don't really seem like the rural type and it doesn't seem like a small country like Alachara has much to offer you, especially now that you have made an enemy of Spencer. So now you are asking me. Why are you dancing around the issue?" She took a long sip of her wine, red eyes peering at me over the glass. Her eyes were unreadable, but I could see a smug smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Dancing around the issue?"

"Oh do not be coy with me. You are trying to fish and see if you can come with me!" Oof. Called out. I took a long drag from my stein, and sighed as melodramatically as I could. It was definitely the more risky option, and I hadn't come to this conclusion easily. But if all she needed from me was the occasional back-up and to soundproof her meals, then there was potential for much easier and much *safer* living than I had been doing up to this point.

"You're the one that opened this conversation talking about keeping me around."

"Well, I've never kept a pet before."

"You're impossible. Do you want me or not?" she responded with an exaggerated, perverted wink. I rolled my eyes.

"That was a joke, probably... You know what? I had fun. So why not?"

“Okay... since you’re clearly too proud to say it out right, I will. Partners, fifty-fifty split on loot and reward.” Her ego was almost comically large.

“Such confidence-”

“Cut it out, you’re sick of traveling alone and you know it.” She didn’t *have* to do any of this. She didn’t *have* to look after me after the heist. She didn’t *have* to snap me out of my panic at the mansion. And she certainly didn’t *have* to eat dinner with me. Whether she cared to admit it or not, she was enjoying... this.

As for me... I don’t think she will kill me. That’s a pretty rare trait to come across in my line of work.

“Hmph! As if.” But she left it at that. I smirked and finished my meal, this one little victory making the meat all the more savory.

Amber

Well that was cute.

She really seemed to have changed her tune somewhere along the way. I wonder when it was?

Regardless, it might not be so bad to have a cute girl with a useful Ability around, but that could wait for now.

After our meal, we retired to our separate chambers. The sun had long since hid beyond the horizon and moonlight spilled through the window of the room. I rummaged through my bag and pulled out the book as well as a small oak wood box. I set the box on the window sill and popped it open, revealing a number of blood crystals. Being this close to the Northeastern border of Sventholme would allow for a rapid summoning. I picked a stone at random and held it up in the moonlight; ruby sparkles danced across its surface.

I took a deep breath to steady myself, what came next was always less than comfortable.

I clenched the blood crystal in my hand until it crumbled into crimson dust and disappeared as if evaporating. After a few breathless seconds, I dared to peek over my shoulder, and saw my shadow sharpening, solidifying, and then liquifying on the floor. Slowly, a vaguely humanoid form rose up from my shadow, gestured around the room briefly before stopping and tilting its head expectantly.

“You need a mouth to communicate with me.” I reminded the shadow. It brought hand-like appendages up to its head and drew a semi-circle across the area of its face, tearing a mouth-like hole and saying, “I do forget I cannot speak to your mind like this, child.”

“You have a lot to remember, Master Isolde. This is a delivery.” I held the book out to the shadow, which immediately disappeared from my hand, snatched away by my Drax patron

before I could process the movement. The shadow briefly vibrated with delight before pulling the book into itself.

“This is good. Yes, very good, child.” the shadow suddenly took on my exact shape, complete with glowing red eyes.

“It was not easy, Isolde, Spencer was ready for me. Even employing a useful... partner, we barely scraped by without being forced to kill everyone there.”

“Partner?” They asked.

“Employed?” Another mouth formed on ‘my’ forehead to speak concurrently.

“An assassin with an interesting Ability. Speaking of whom, I need to pay her.”

“Ah. Humans and Payment. You do not *need* to do anything. You have been away from home for too long. What is it? Two decades? Three?”

“Your grasp of time is off, I’m only barely three decades old myself.”

“Ah. Is that so?” Suddenly on my bed a bag appeared out of thin air, even from where I was standing across the room, I could tell it weighed heavily on the mattress, “Very well. Settle your accounts, Red Blood. Then hold position.”

“Do you not want me to return?”

“Not yet. Something strange is about to happen; we can feel it. Something... New. When it comes, you will seek Truth for us as you always do. We hunger. Goodbye.” And just like that, my shadow collapsed into the floor and lost its opacity. I sat on my bed, opening the bag that had been left behind, and couldn’t help but laugh. This was **way** too much.

Since I didn’t have to return home to Sventholme just yet, I guess this ‘vacation’ of mine could continue.

“So, Iris. You heard all of that as well, right?” I called out into the empty room.

There was no audible response. If she had been listening, there was no way for me to know; even if she was right outside and scampered away, I would never hear her coming or going. If she did hear all that, knowing her, she would confront me about it sooner or later. I decided not to worry about it, and resolved to go downstairs and buy a few bottles of wine. Time to celebrate a job well done.

Iris

Wide-eyed and perspiring nervously, I slid down my door into a seated position.

...

...

Yeah. I heard all that.