

The Outsider in Nancontaeul

by James Thomasos

Reina Tethas

What am I even doing?

I'd had this thought several times a day ever since I left Riveiranja and headed Northwest to the city of Nancontaeul. Heavily armed and well-stocked, I'd caught a merchant caravan heading out of town that had taken me to a town fairly close to the border of Nancontaeul's country, which shared its name with the capital. From there, I'd made my way on foot across Nancontaeul's border, which they had closed a few months back. Well, everyone knew they had closed the border... but as I understood it, there had been no guards manning the border for some time now.

Ever since I entered the country from its South-Eastern border, things had gotten very quiet. It was like night and day; outside of the country I was passing people going in either direction on the trade routes, and inside of it... not a soul. As I made my way further into the heart of the country, it seemed as though the colours of everything around me was becoming more and more muted. The air was stagnant, not a leaf danced, and the temperature was neither warm nor cool.

Creepy. But I pressed on regardless.

Why did I continue to press on? Well a letter appeared on my counter while I was eating a few weeks back:

Reina,

I need your help!! O_o

I'm in the capital of Nancontaeul and things are pretty weird here... The denizens have been afflicted with a disease of the mind. I've been looking into it for a couple months now, but my research is too slow. >_<

*Your particular skill set will be useful in my investigation. And since you are you, I think your **Mouth** will keep you safe. =D*

Come immediately. Bring a weapon or two.

Your favourite lab partner,

-E.V.

Yeah.

Evelynn Vandree Magic'd a summons directly into my home... apparently all the way from Nancontaeul. 'Help'? 'Pretty weird'? 'Disease of the mind'? But apparently the Mouth will keep me safe? It was all strange, but there was a lot being conveyed in this letter. First, 'things are pretty' weird'... whatever this 'pretty weird' was... it was keeping her from just using Magic to just walk into my home and strongarm me into coming with her... She was *not* one to waste time like that. Second... a disease of the Mind? So 'something weird' having to do with Psychic Energy that was keeping her from using Magic in her usual way... Whatever *that* could be... it would behoove me to understand - and possibly get my hands on - such a 'weird' thing.

I'd had plenty of time to mull over all of this during my travels, but it was when I got within a couple dozen kilometers of Nancontaeul that my suspicions were unfortunately confirmed. One step and everything was normal, if not a little washed out... but when I took the next step, the Mouth started chewing.

And chewing.

And chewing.

And it just would *not* stop chewing, which meant someone or *something* was - with unbelievable persistence - trying to get into my head. Since the Mouth has a vested interest in being the only entity with access to my thoughts and actions, it has always defended my mind with great prejudice against any who would try to access it. Even myself to some degree, as it had steadfastly refused to let me dream since it first appeared. But aside from the persistent attempted invasion of my mind, there was something else that I found deeply unsettling.

There was a tower on the horizon.

Normally this wouldn't pique my interest much, but at this distance, for me to be able to see this tower so high up in the sky... it would have to be at least a couple kilometer tall itself. I'd never heard of such a structure in the Human territories... and certainly no Human architect could make such an audaciously tall building stand on its own.

"*Things are pretty weird here*" Evelynn had written. Between the impossible architecture and the constant antagonism of my mind... I already was forced to agree and steeled myself as I continued to move forward and closer to the tower on the horizon.

Iris Isolde

"Something is... wrong here." Amber said, slowing her lizard mount considerably. I agreed with her... things had gotten quieter and quieter ever since we entered the country of Nancontaeul. Normally I'd be pretty hype about that fact... but something felt super off about all of this.

"It was fine when we hit the first town near the border. But don't you normally see higher and higher densities of people the closer you are to a capital city?"

“Certainly. I know we were expecting at least a little bit of strangeness, considering we are looking for one dead Hand and another *missing* Hand. But... hmm.” Amber trailed off noncommittally. We picked the pace back up and continued on, we were still a day or two out from Nancontaeul’s capital, which shared the country’s name. A few months back we had received a mission from our terrifying and powerful benefactor - Isolde Kageonna - to investigate the capital city of Nancontaeul. The other seven Drax wanted in on the expedition for various reasons, which led to *months* of logistical bullshit and infrequent meetings that resulted in the painfully obvious: every Drax sends two Hands to Nancontaeul.

Well, except for Isolde, who was sending Amber - her dominant Hand, so to speak - and myself who was... actually still not sure where I stood in the Isolde family. Not quite a Hand and my only responsibility was acting as Amber’s partner... so fighting alongside her, sharing meals, loot, feelings, and sleeping together.

Which I was already doing anyhow, so it was a pretty sweet gig.

All of the details for this large-scale, collaborative mission to Nancontaeul were solidified just after we picked up that Reina Tethas chick for cataloguing. Before I arrived in Svetholme, I probably would have found that Mouth-Eye thing of hers creepy, but after dealing with Isolde... it didn’t even make the top 10 strangest things I’d seen that *week*. But that-

“Something is coming.” I could hear a stomping, shuffling sound from up ahead and a... sloshing? “Doesn’t sound human.” Amber looked at me curiously, but dismounted from her lizard anyhow. Losing our mounts by recklessly charging past an unknown opponent would be a great way to get ourselves stranded out here. We held our position for another couple minutes until the source of the noise came into line of sight.

“Huh.”

“The *fuck* is *that*?”

A vaguely human-shaped... thing was tottering towards us unevenly. It’s head was twice the size of a normal human head and it had no facial features. No, that wasn’t quite right. It was as if something had sloppy gone back and forth over its face with an eraser, such that its face was as inconsistent as its gait. The head was weirdly slightly see-through as well and its brain was just... too big. The naked, sickeningly pale creature had hundreds of long strands of what looked like human hair hanging from its shoulders instead of arms. Its legs were grossly over-muscled and the ground itself seemed to struggle with each of its over-balanced stomps as it made its way forward.

“Is that a magirradiated beast?” I asked Amber without taking my eyes off of the thing.

“...Definitely not. This thing is... *Wrong*.” We both opened our Third Eyes and... nothing about it changed. However, when we did so the thing stopped moving and its head began... pulsating. Suddenly we saw an opaquely dense orb of PsyEn gather within its oversized head.

“GET BACK!” Amber shouted as we both did exactly that. What kind of attack would it be? That was a shit ton of PsyEn and-

A massive pulse of pure PsyEn shot out in a huge sphere.

Inside of the few seconds it took the Pulse to reach us, I reflexively threw several layers of *Silence* over both of us and Amber covered us both in a dense cloud of *Vanity*. *Silence* didn't necessarily function as a sponge against PsyEn, but anything made of PsyEn could technically push back against anything else made of PsyEn. The Pulse shattered every layer of *Silence* I put up, only slowing down a bit. Pulse started to deteriorate when it reached *Vanity*, however, and when the Pulse reached us, it didn't seem like too much happened.

Vanity was such an absurdly powerful Ability.

With the Pulse done, I zigged and Amber zagged as we rushed this psychic monster and came at it from two sides. I whipped my Needle at the back of its exposed head and followed after my attack with my Psymetal sword, running it through the heart, or at least where the heart *should* be. As I did so, Amber separated its now leaking head from its neck with a single Reinforced swing of her axe. Before the head could fly too far, she jumped and snatched it out of the air, throwing it to the ground and shredding it with a point blank shot of her blunderbuss.

That flurry of activity only took a few seconds and we both looked at each other, confused.

"Really thought it would put up... *any* kind of fight."

"Agreed. Perhaps it thought that the Pulse would be all it needed to do?"

"Maybe? What was it *supposed* to do?" I asked, approaching Amber. Once I got within arms reach of her, I re-opened my Third Eye and peered closely at her.

"What are you..."

"I'm checking your Coating; is mine okay?"

"Ah. Let's see..." She started to say, her eyes suddenly widened and I saw her Focus the entirety of her Coating around her head, "*Guard your mind.*" She commanded with a serious drop in her tone. I did as she said and... the world around us immediately became eerily quiet.

"...What...?" How had I not noticed *that* much background noise?! Was it because it originated from within our minds? Even worse, now that it had stopped, I realized only now that whatever had been invading our minds had been whispering to us, 'why' 'how' and 'what' over and over and over.

How had *neither* of us noticed?!

Amber took off her sunglasses and looked around us very concerned, before focusing far in the distance down the path where the creature came from.

"I do believe we should focus on completing this task sooner rather than later."

"I mean, that's always the case, right?"

“Of course but...” She trailed off again and shook her head, as if banishing some intrusive thought from her head, “I am concerned about that tower on the horizon.”

Amber Isolde

We had a very specific mission here in Nancontaeul.

Several months back, a Hand each of the Drax known as Indaleco and Decus lost contact with their respective masters. They had been sent to investigate the same city that Iris and I were currently investigating in light of some massive pulse of Magic following the alleged complete and instantaneous disappearance of a Fae Magirradiated Zone. They apparently lost contact shortly after arriving in the capital city of Nancontaeul. Indaleco’s Hand was severed in such a way that indicated death, but Decus’ connection with his Hand was cut off by unknown means.

The Drax did *not* appreciate this mysterious breakage of connection.

Thus our purposes here were two-fold: 1) To locate and confirm the death or otherwise indisposment of the Hands and 2) To determine the source of the Magical interference permeating Nancontaeul and how that interference was used to sever the connection between Master and Hand. Once 1 and 2 were complete, all Hands were to converge and return to Sventholme together using Isolde’s Grand Lake Haaole route.

But we had already obtained worrying new information.

Unfortunately - as I had predicted - the massive tower on the horizon was protruding from the Northern side of Nancontaeul. Once we were just under a kilometer out from the city walls, the scent of acrid smoke and burnt flesh assaulted our noses. There was also a musty undercurrent of old rot underneath the more acutely offensive scents, but the worst part was that Nancontaeul appeared to have become a windless country. The air felt both sticky and dry at the same time and our lizard mounts had become more and more agitated.

“Okay. So what’s the play here, Amber?” Ever since I noticed the disturbances in Iris’ Coating, we had both Focused 90% or so of our PsyEn on guarding our brains. This had left her pretty agitated, as she was significantly more dependent on PsyEn Reinforcement for evasive maneuvers than I was.

“It is unlikely that other Hands would have succumbed to such a creature, so we will continue forward. Between the vestigial arms, high levels of PsyEn, and the overdeveloped legs... that thing almost seemed like it was designed specifically to move long distances. At the very least, it was **far** too specialized to be a naturally occurring condition. That is my theory, anyhow.”

“...Can something even warp Substance like that???”

“As far as I knew - outside of the Elemental Gods themselves - certainly not.”

“Yet here we are.”

“Yet here we are, indeed.”

Iris heaved a melodramatic groan, “Ugh. Onward then, I guess. Give me the Corpse Signal though.” I tilted my head at her curiously. Each pair had been sent out with a pair of modified flintlock pistols that released a coloured smoke signal related to this mission. One signal for the completion of task 1 - the Corpse Signal - and one signal for the completion of task 2, the Source Signal. Additionally we had been given a third pistol - the G.T.F.O Signal - which called for the immediate abdication of the mission.

I pulled out the Corpse Signal and offered it to her, “Why, though?”

“If something is attacking our Minds, I don’t want us firing off the wrong damn one in the heat of the moment. Speaking of which, let’s make our plan kill first and ask questions later. Especially in regards to those... *things*. It looks like there is a bit of a wind-up time for that PsyEn Pulse of theirs.” She took the Corpse Signal, holstered it, and looked up at the now looming walls of Nancontaeul.

“So we’re climbing up or...” She trailed off as she did a little stretch and warm up routine.”

“Normally I would say ‘of course not’, but in light of the bizarre things we have observed during our approach, that will probably be the best course of action. We will want the high vantage point immediately anyhow... So do your thing.”

“Sounds good. Boost?” She gave a half-hearted smile over her shoulder along with her request.

“As you wish.” I pulled out my axe and Iris placed *Silence* on it just before pressing the button near its head and transformed it into its polearm form with naught but a brief shower of sparks. I activated *Vanity* and *Pride* on the two of us and took two wide, spinning steps forward to build up some rotational momentum. Iris took a running start and jumped from behind me, landing just below the head of my polearm’s diagonally arcing swing. With the slightest pause and a grunt, I finished my swing as Iris made a slightly Reinforced leap with my assistance, catapulting her a couple dozen meters up the wall. She silently slammed a piton into a crack in the upper part of the wall, then started picking her way up the wall using various small crevices to rapidly complete her ascent. A few seconds later a long length of hempen rope came tumbling down the wall, which I scaled with ease.

At the top, Iris was squatting at the other end of the wall’s width and peering over the city. The harsh, angular grey and blue and black architecture of the capital city of Nancontaeul seemed a natural fit for the other cataclysmic adornments that the city wore. Black smoke rose from the smoldering remains of older buildings and collapsed market stands and even from up here, I was able to spot a few mass corpse piles. The sky itself was darkened despite being mid afternoon. Was it the smoke, or was there also a thunderstorm rolling in too? I couldn’t help but find the occasional flashes of lightning on the opposite side of the city from us *very* concerning.

Just what-

“-happened here?” Iris finished my thought for me, “Or rather... *how* did this happen.” A good question... How did *no one* hear about this? Not even the whisper of a rumor indicated any such calamity befell Nancontaeul.

“I suppose it is as Isolde said before: something *new* happened. We need to figure it out.”

“...Yeah I guess. But also fuck me that tower is *huge*. No huge doesn't cut it... help me out here.”

“Colossal? Gargantuan?” I offered wryly.

“Yeah one of those... That has to be the tallest tower in existence. I mean, I've seen shorter *mountains*. What do you think, one? Two kilometers tall?”

“It must be at least two.”

“When was the last time you passed through this city?” She finally managed to tear her eyes away from the structure and look me in the eyes.

“A couple of years, at least... And you are correct; no way they could have built something like this in that time.”

“Ugghhh I don't like this at all. And there are *tons* of those **Things** down there. I'll take the lead; let's get this shit over with...” She gestured at the tallest building within leaping distance and I nodded, eyeing the distant lightning, which had worryingly moved a few blocks East at this point.

Reina

I had finally reached the South-Eastern part of the wall and scaled it with relative ease. Looking down at the ruined city below, I felt my chest tighten and the sheer scale of destruction alongside the empty streets. How could something like this have happened without any of the surrounding countries hearing about it? And how was it that lightning had been striking over and over again on the Northeast end of the city?!

The Mouth had not ceased 'eating' whatever was trying to probe into my head and I was concerned by what manner of entity could be so persistent that it kept the Mouth from even demanding eyes. I pulled out my map and confirmed the location of the Nancontaeul Security Force. Looking out into the city, I thought I could pick out which building it was. Since I hadn't the slightest clue where Evelyn was - and since she had a nasty habit of finding me no matter what I did - I would perform my own investigation until that happened. If there were any survivors or *anyone* with information concerning what happened here, they would likely be holed up in the Security Force Building. With that, I folded and pocketed my map and descended from the top of the wall to the streets below, keenly aware of the preternatural stillness blanketing the surrounding residential district.

My feet clotted unnervingly loud on the dark grey and blue cobblestone path and my eye darted back and forth. Despite being equipped with a handgun, break-action blunderbuss, and a short gladius, I found myself feeling suddenly quite vulnerable as I walked along this street. I could hear some manner of shuffling sound, but could not seem to properly triangulate its origin or distance... everything felt terribly muffled. As I approached what once was a major intersection, all of the movement I was hearing ceased at once. I slowed to a stop just at the mouth of the intersection.

And waited.

After a long, long 30 seconds I began to hear the stomping approach of dozens of stomping footsteps. I Reinforced myself, ready to leap up into the rooftops if need be... but as the sound got closer, I also started to hear... weeping? From around the corners in front of me, from nearby alleyways beside me, and back down the street behind me emerged... *people*. Humans - that much was certain - but there was definitely something *wrong* with them. Was this the result of that *disease of the mind* that Evelyn mentioned in her note?

Humans of various backgrounds, heights, ages, and sizes were slowly stomping towards me; knees coming up above their waists before slamming back down unnervingly loud. Some of them had some tattered remains of clothes on them, but they were mostly nude. Their upper torsos showed evidence of starvation, yet their legs were overly muscular like some kind of body-builder. Each one of them had one arm pulled tight to their emaciated chest with their hand reaching up over their mouth and their middle and index finger pulled viciously down on their faces just beneath their eyes. Their other palm rested unnaturally on the tops of their heads as the same fingers on that hand pulled up on their foreheads... forcibly keeping their eyes open.

And they were all weeping, or at least trying to.

I felt a tingle on my Coating and I activated my Third Eye... then blinked several times at what I was seeing. Every single one of them had the *exact* same Psionic patterning on their Coating... but more pressingly, every single one of them was gathering a disproportionate amount of PsyEn as a prelude to a Pulse-type attack. I raised my hand gun to take aim at the closest person to me... but hesitated when I looked into their terror-filled eyes. I opted to take to the roof tops instead, as there were still a number of intact buildings in the area. But as I leapt through the air, another one of these twisted people smashed their head through the boarded up window on an upper floor nearby and released a PsyEn Pulse. The force of the PsyEn shockwave hitting my own Coating sent me spiraling through the air and I hit the ground in the middle of the intersection rolling.

But other than an increase in the Mouth's activity... nothing seemed to happen.

I quickly got back up to my feet and steeled myself against the oncoming onslaught of PsyEn Pulses. One then two then six then twelve, one after another. I was being jostled about... but not too much else was happening. This was obviously supposed to be an assault on the mind... but the Mouth's presence in my head - as ever - rendered me impervious to such psychic damage. Just as I was steadying my breath and Reinforcing once more, every single one of the

twisted people ceased their shuffling and - regardless of where they were standing or facing relative to me - snapped their gazes towards me.

And started screaming.

Yeah... *Nope*.

I turned towards the path of least resistance - which was conveniently in the direction of the Security Force Building - and took several Reinforced, leaping bounds across the intersection.

“WHY?!”

“WHY”

“WHY!?!?”

“WHY!”

“WHY???”

“Why.”

“WHY!?”

“WHY!!!”

“WhY?”

“WHY!”

“Help.”

“WHY!!”

“WHY?!”

“WHY”

“WHY?!”

“WHY!?!”

I winced at both the volume and the dissonance of the voice screaming a question that clearly wasn't their own at me. Between the similarities of movement, the identical physical positions their bodies were twisted into, and the creepily identical Coatings... **something** was controlling these people.

Could this have seriously happened to the *entire* city?

There was a crashing sound far behind me and I glanced over my shoulder as I ran down the street with my handgun out. There were four of the twisted people hurling through the air head over heel towards me with alarming speed. Knowing they would catch me any moment, I skidded to a stop, whipped around, took aim and fired four times in rapid succession. Sudden fear for my life relieved me of the hesitation I had felt prior and the bullets seemed to have *some* sort of effect, slowing down the four bodies' flight disproportionately to the momentum of the bullets. I dove to the edge of the street and they crashed to the ground around where I was standing, as if they had been haphazardly chucked by some large hand.

They began to float in the air limply, still steadfastly maintaining their twisted postures, but otherwise limp like marionettes. Their Coatings warped strangely as it happened, as if they were being squeezed by a large, invisible hand. Before they started moving again, I lined up my aim much more carefully and pulled the trigger four more times, landing a shot in each of their

heads. Just like that, their PsyEn Coatings dispersed violently and they fell to the ground. Which meant that whatever was controlling all of these people I'd seen was doing so by manipulating Psychic Energy on an... *impossible* scale.

Yeah... fuck that.

I continued on with my near fully Reinforced sprint down the darkened, cobblestone streets. Every now and again I'd come across another group of twisted citizens, but blew right past them while they were charging up their PsyEn Pulses. They didn't seem to be specifically controlled until after the initial Pulse failed to do whatever it was trying to do to my mind. I made it to the tall front gates of the Security Force Building; a structure that struck an intimidating silhouette, bearing more resemblance to a fortified tower than a civil deployment building. I jumped then over the gate, which predictably had no guards stationed outside. Worryingly, I found the front door to be slightly ajar.

I guess given the state of the city so far, the idea that the Security Force may have already fallen wasn't that strange.

As I slowly pulled open the door and - sure enough - the atrium was a mess. Tables and chairs scattered about, dimly flickering lumen crystals that hadn't seen sunlight in perhaps months, the place was covered in debris as if the building itself had been specifically attacked... or - more likely - looted. I took my time picking carefully and quietly across the room towards the front desk, where I rummaged through what was left of it and managed to find a mostly intact floor plan amongst the various files. I had *just* arrived in this city and had already fired off most of a clip: that did **not** bode well for me.

I made my way to the back of the main hall and found the stairs down to the ground floor. I made my way down carefully, as there were papers and rocks and discarded improvised weapons and clips and shells all over the place. As I descended the steps, I came into earshot of a rhythmic pinging noise that sounded like PsyMetal clashing against PsyMetal. It was too steady to be the sounds of combat, so I rushed down the myriad hallways, following the noise. I turned a corner and saw for the first time since I'd arrived in this country, two non-twisted individuals standing in front of a steel doorway.

““AHHH!” They both immediately yelped in fright and raised their arms; one of them was a sword dancer and the other was a shield bearer with a short spear.

“Wait! I-I'm Human!” They both gasped and started to lower their guard as they heard me speak and the sword-dancer started giggling to himself. After a few moments, the shieldbearer joined him in laughter. It was only then that I noticed two things: one, that they looked very beaten up and two, they were both wearing small, cube-shaped cages over their heads.

“H-hey... Are you okay? Do you know what happened here? Why are you wearing... cages?”

“Hehehehehehe... How are you not wearing a cage... young miss? The cages a-are PsyMetal... It keeps the V-V-Voices from t-telling you what t-t-to do...” As if to prove it to me, the shieldbearer tapped her own cage with the PsyMetal tip of her spear, which resulted in the

hallmark ringing sound of clashing PsyMetal. These people were somewhat in their right mind... but only barely.

"I... see... How long have you been down here? And what is the sound coming from that door? I came from Riveiranja, I want to help."

"Who knows? I wonder? Months? Probably? Maybe not years. If it were years, we'd be out of food. If it were years, that would mean the 12 Elementals abandoned us. If it were years... even the blacksmith would have to sleep."

"The blacksmith?"

"He... makes the cages. The cages that let us think. The cages that keep us safe. As long as we stay underground, we don't have to cry." The sword-dancer giggled to himself once more, "The Tower is too tall now. As long as we don't try to leave... the Voice can't see us. The Voice won't bend you and twist you..."

Months of this.

Of *this*.

I mean... I figured such a complete calamity could not have happened *fast*. But still... this had been going on for *months* and nobody knew. This... was way bigger than investigating what horrible things Evelyynn was up to in the city. If we can lose an entire city like this once... it could happen again and-

I shook my head to banish that particular spiral. This wasn't what I came here to do. I did *not* have the time or ammunition to get caught up in this.

"D-d-do you want t-t-to come in?" The shieldbearer offered tentatively. I regarded the steel door dubiously; I did *not* want to get myself stuck in a room with people who were losing their minds.

"I'll pass. I don't see any guns on you two. Are there any sharpshooters left alive? If not... would you spare me some ammo?"

"Y-y-you're... going back up?!" The sword-dancer was gawking at me in utter disbelief, "You didn't come here to be saved??"

"Yes I'm going back up. I can't stay down here and wither away. I'm going to try to do something about this. About *all* of this." The two of them looked at each other for a few moments, then back at me.

"N...nothing comes down here anymore. Even the monsters f-forgot about us... It's... fine..." The sword-dancer turned around and used one of their keys to open the lock on the steel door. It swung open and I saw inside: a bouquet of Witch Flowers hanging upside down from the ceiling in the center of what appeared to be a vault. Inside, I saw a ragged, well-muscled, but clearly starving man with a hammer bent over a makeshift workbench just... repeatedly hammering PsyMetal weapons into various shapes. Every now and then, he would turn to

half-broken but still glowing forge and remove or place something inside. He paid me nor the entering sword-dancer any mind whatsoever and simply continued to *ping* away at the metal.

By the Four... were these three the only ones left in the entire building?!

The sword-dancer walked passed the blacksmith over to a chair in the corner where a single skeleton sat, still wearing its clothes and with the top part of its skull missing. Judging from the damage and the stains on the wall behind it, they had eaten their own gun weeks ago. The sword-dancer snatched a gun from the skeleton's grasp - sending it clattering to the ground - and picked up a purse that had been on the ground next to the chair. He returned with his loot and handed me a bolt-action rifle and an unfortunately light purse that clinked with the ammo contained within.

"The s-s-sharpshooters were the most effective... So they w-were the first t-to go..." Damn. Some part of me hoped that the destruction was random and that whatever was doing this was acting out of some kind of macabre instinct. I wasn't looking forward to trying to deal with something that was both *this* powerful AND capable of strategy.

"I see. Thank you. I'll... come back for you three." I returned up to the main hall and inspected the sharpshooter's possessions. The rifle was still in good shape; it must have been obsessively cared for by its old owner. I turned and pulled back the bolt and discharged the spent case from the skeleton's likely psionically-assisted suicide. There were still three rounds in the magazine which - along with the bullets I had taken out of the purse - left me with seven rifle bullets and eight additional handgun bullets.

Well, at least I netted positive on the rifle.

I exited the Security Force Building with something akin to renewed determination as I went over the new intel I had acquired down in the basement. First and foremost being that if there were a few people left in the basement of this building, there might yet be a few people left in other basements throughout the city. That meant that there were still lives worth trying to save in all of this. Second, we knew that whatever was psionically devouring this city was building that tower on the horizon... and that that tower was somehow increasing its effective range. And three, PsyMetal seemed to be able to interfere with the entity's psionic connection.

It wasn't much, but it was a lot more than I had. Now where the fuck is Evelynn?

I had just jumped back over the gate to the Security Force Building when I heard a voice call out to me.

"To think... someone else was still alive and *trying*... Hmm?" A lightly armoured woman with light brown hair and a grave demeanor walked down the street from the city's center. She wore a tattered, ceremonial pearl dress over dull, grey armor that covered her upper and lower torso for the most part, but left her joints free for agile, Reinforced movement, "You are not one of us... an outsider then. How *despicable*."

As she entered the harsh light of the nearby burning building, I could feel her contempt and mercilessness like warmth of the sun itself. I tried my best to get out ahead of this situation.

"Wait wait, hold on. I'm here to help. I'm an investigator from Riveiranja and I'm equipped to resist the sickness that's overtaken this city. Please, tell me what has happened here!"

"*You're here to help*, so you say. Sickness? Hah! You know nothing of our plight," She brought a hand up to push her mess of sticky, sweaty hair out of her eyes, leaving a bloody smear on her face, "Maiden bearing black powder and cold steel... you are not one of us. Perhaps you cull our numbers at behest of the Voice that devours this city... or worse, do you seek to satisfy your wretched curiosity along with the Mad Doctor?" For fuck's sake, Evelynn.

"No! It's not that at all!" Her eyes were... too focused. The men wearing cages on their heads beneath the Security Building had clearly snapped but this... this was *different*, "Let's talk and try to save as many as we can!"

"**There is no one left to save.** There is *nothing* left for us now, but to carry out our duties. And I won't let some damned outsiders come in here and bolster the mangled forces of the Voices." She came to a stop a little over 4 meters from me. She had a good half of her Coating Focused around her head, but everything else was Reinforcement. She had completely foregone any notion of defending herself against anything but this 'Voice'.

"...*Duty?*"

"Yes. As the Pardoner of the Court it is my duty... to seek out these wretched souls to act through no fault of their own. To forgive them the pain and desolation they have caused... and see to it that they hurt no more the city they loved. It's all I can do... All I can do... The Spear Saint has her hands full hunting the vultures from Sventholme that seek to peck at the corpse of our beloved home." **There was a Saint here?!** And all of this **STILL** happened!?

"Bu-"

"*Enough.*"

Her stance was somewhat shaky and uneven, with one foot slightly forward and her shoulders hunched forward. Mouth slightly agape and clearly in pain, she took a deep breath and slowly let out a noise somewhere between a sigh and a hiss as she slowly raised her strange pink blade and pointed it straight at me. I drew my blade in kind; if possible, I did *not* want to kill her.

As unlikely as that idea felt at that exact moment.

The Pardoner leapt at me with a strange twirl - closing the distance between us instantly - and swung a back-handed slash at my collarbone as she landed in front of me. I blocked it deftly, raising my sword horizontally above my head and tipping my blade down so it slid harmlessly to the opposite side of my body. Her bloodstained stained off-hand flashed out to try to grapple my sword arm while pulling her main hand back and thrusting the blade at my abdomen. I flashed my own offhand across to push her own aside and hammer-blocked her sword's tip with the flat of my own before kicking at her chest, creating some distance.

This woman's *only* thinking of killing me... she isn't trying to prolong her own life at all.

"Tch. Reinforced **and** an even Coating?! You really **can't** hear the Voices." She spat at me before coming right back in with a flurry of slashes aimed at my vitals that I was parrying well enough, but left me unable to get in my own counters.

"That's... what I was... saying! I want to *help!*"

"**JUST LEAVE! YOU ACTUALLY CAN!**" She screeched at the top of her lungs throwing me backwards with a heavy horizontal swipe, "As long as we're within the city, it won't focus on you too much! But if you try to leave the range of the Voices, it'll collapse you into **nothing**. As long as that unapproachable Tower is on the horizon... we're all doomed."

"I...I can't. If this Voice is trying to spread-"

"Ah. There you are Reina!"

Evelynn Vandree was suddenly just walking down the stairs from the Security Force Building's front door, as if she had been in there the whole time. She was unnervingly casually dressed for the present apocalypse: hands pocketed in a white, drawstring hoodie and loose- black slacks. Her mess of red, curly hair was longer than the last time I'd seen her in person, and she was - as ever - as pale as a corpse. Her creepily opaque, glass-like Coating was half Focused around her head and the rest was distributed across her body defensively.

I did not feel any safer with *Her* here.

"...*The Mad Doctor*... I knew it. You're with **Her**."

"No wait-"

"Oh? And you brought me a present too?" She smiled vacantly at the Pardoner, who was trembling with barely contained rage, "Also - *Pardoner* - I assure I am well within my faculties. You folks on the other hand... I mean, aren't you all the ones who brought **That Thing** into the city in the first place?" The Pardoner's face fell briefly, then twisted in indignation.

"**We didn't know!** How *could* we?! The first ones to investigate the crash site were the first to fall! They couldn't have known... we couldn't have... they must have been *compelled* to bring The Outsider into Nancontaeul..." Evelynn just scoffed and rolled her yellow eyes at this tortured woman's rambling, who sneered and leapt at Evelynn with an overhead strike.

"NO DON'T!" I tried to warn her, but it was too late. The Pardoner of the Court stopped suddenly, her face twisting in confusion, as a line suddenly appeared down her entire body, bisecting her. The two halves of her still stood independently, tottering clumsily as she tried to wrap her head around her split field of vision. From where I was standing I could clearly see her entire internal structure, but nothing leaked out, not even a drop of blood. I sheathed my sword and whipped out my new rifle, pointing it at Evelynn.

"Evelynn. Stop it now! Or I'll-" My voice caught in my throat as my arms from the elbows and down just... fell to the ground, still holding the rifle. Two hands made out of PsyEn had extended out of Evelynn's back in a flash as soon as I raised my weapon, touched my arms, and detached them from the rest of my body.

My Coating hadn't mattered at all.

"Now Reina, I'm going to need you to behave! I know it's been awhile since we've seen each other, but please don't take those hands of yours for granted. Or next time I'm keeping them." She tsk'd at me like I was a child and lectured me before turning her attention back to her prey.

"Ahem. Anyhow, don't worry, Pardoner! I left the space inbetween theoretically connected so you won't die yet!" Evelynn walked towards her slowly and the Pardoner who - to her credit - attempted to swing her blade at the approaching monster, but her depth perception was completely destroyed by the misalignment of her two trembling halves. Evelynn reached up and placed a hand on each of the Pardoner's shoulders, shoving her face in-between the two halves of the woman.

"This part was important - you see - since I've always wanted to take a look inside of a *civil servant*," she slightly adjusted the Pardoner's right half while bobbing her head up and down like a curious bird, "I really wanted to see just what made all of you... so... **Righteous**." her voice suddenly dropped from her typical high-pitched, feminine, sing-song voice to a low register, dripping with venom. I wanted to do something - anything - to help the poor woman who was struggling with every last drop of discipline to maintain her consciousness in full glare of her own panic.

But that would have to wait until Evelynn gave my arms back.

Amber

"...Yuck." Iris had a sour look on her face as she observed the carnage we had stumbled upon.

"Agreed." I looked down at the perfectly and cleanly bisected corpses scattered about the smoldering intersection we had descended from the rooftops down to investigate and just sighed. All of them were the freakish, PsyEn-Pulsing-Beasts that we had been encountering since our final approach into Nancontaeul; so the one responsible for **this** was not aligned with the entity that had caused all of this. Every single one of them was cut exactly down the center, their strange innards spilling out in between the disconnected halves; so it was likely the work of a single person. One would assume that even if someone was immensely skilled, that they could not possibly so carefully and elegantly divide so many aggressors swarming them; so it was not a matter of skill, but a sheer, mind boggling **power** difference.

Unfortunately, I was fairly certain I knew who carried out this particular massacre. I suspected we might encounter Her when we started seeing all of the monsters that She would surely be

intrigued by. Now that we were here, our best bet intel-wise was - unfortunately - to try and make contact with The Doctor, Evelyn Vandree.

“Anyhow. You are certain of what you heard?” She had mentioned it just before we came upon this bloody scene laid out before us. I certainly did not distrust Iris’ hearing, but sometimes the amount of mental energy she devoted to the dissection of all sounds occurring at all times left me flabbergasted.

“Definitely. A whole shit load of inhuman screaming, four handgun shots went off and a little bit later, four more... then nothing.

“Hmm. There are a couple Hands who favor smaller guns in their offhand, so it would be a good idea to meet up with them and exchange intel. However, if they fired off that many shots and then stopped, they are likely no longer present.”

“True. So where to then?”

“Well... We should follow this vague trail of corpses.”

“...Why...?”

“Because I am fairly confident I know who did-” I gestured at the split corpses all around us, “-this. And we are *very* much lacking information here.”

“You **know** who did this? And they’re **here**?! Are they a hand or-” Just then, Iris’ head snapped to the side and she looked up into the sky. A few seconds later, we saw a crimson plume of smoke to the East.

“Crimson? Shit. Isn’t that the-”

“G.T.F.O Signal? Yes. Which means Hand down, unfortunately. Which also means that those lightning strikes are definitely going to be a problem for us soon.” I started down the trail of corpses East toward the distant flashes of lightning.

“Yeah... I was wondering about those earlier... That’s not an Ability, is it?” She sounded like she knew the answer to that, but was hoping I would prove her wrong.

“Likely not. It has been many years since I last came through here, but I do seem to recall there being a Saint present in this city.”

“Damn. I was thinking it didn’t *sound* like natural lightning. Not enough *boom*, you know what I mean?”

“I do not.” Honestly I was just glad that the distant noise was not hurting her. We will have to take precautions if the worst comes to pass.

“Eh, figured. Speaking of Saints though... given that we are seeing lightning... probably the Saint of one of the Wind Elementals, right? Seems a bit flashy - ...ugh... - for Cephea. So the Wind Queen Irrias herself? Or maybe Cyzaine? Tempests and destruction DO seem to go

together with lightning to me.” She was certainly nervous, given the theological small talk. I could not particularly blame her; even I was hesitant to tangle with a Saint in mortal combat.

“I am unsure on the specifics of their worship, but I *do* believe that they wield a spear.”

“Bleh... A lightning Spear Saint? How frustratingly fitting.”

“Hah! Seriously.”

We continued along the dark grey and occasionally scorched cobblestone street in perfect silence for several minutes unmolested by any Pulse-Monsters. At some point along the way I had Iris dismiss the *Silence* on our feet to have her conserve her PsyEn. Although she had ludicrous psychic endurance, everything else out here was loud enough when it moved that we could afford to let her relax a bit. She grumbled at this for a bit but ultimately relented, and as the bisected corpses became less and less frequent, I began to brief her on the... *person* we were looking for.

“So...” I began awkwardly. By the Blood where do I even start with *Her*?!

“...So...?”

I heaved a great sigh, “So the person we are looking for right now is Evelyn Vandree. All of these bisected corpses are likely her doing by way of her Ability. You could say she is a... Doctor, of sorts.”

“Of sorts?”

“Well... When it comes to treating wounds, mixing medicines, and putting a person back together... there’s no one better. Her mastery of internal biology is second to none; between you and I, a couple of the Drax consider themselves learned medical doctors but... like I said: second to none.”

“That’s... Wow... There’s a lingering ‘but...’ in your voice.” I snickered mirthlessly at that comment.

“She is extremely well practiced... and she does *not* work with cadavers. Also- Ah.”

”Also wha- Oh!”

We had been walking along a main street and had turned down a side street, and saw that the expected geometry and layout of the side street did not match what he had just been able to see over the buildings earlier. In fact, this particular street was the *least* damaged of any we had encountered in the city so far. Which meant that someone connected the space we just turned into to a separate space within the city. This type of spatial-connection Magic was *not* common; in Svetholme we dedicated entire *rooms* to the endeavour to keep things simple. As we continued walking, I felt something akin to the pull of gravity towards a particular storefront that read ‘Tools, Herbs and the Likes’.

It seems we were expected.

“...I didn’t like *that*.” Iris commented, referring to the sensation of forced bodily drift.

“She is like that,” I paused just in front of the door, “The only warning I can give you is the following: no matter what you see in there or what she does - short of attacking us - **do not** engage.”

“Wait... So you said this person is a *healer*, right?” Iris asked me tentatively.

I pushed open the door that responded with a gentle ringing of a bell, “Oh... and sometimes... she sings while she works.”

Iris

I flinched as a small bell rang loudly in my ears as we entered the shop. I silently pulled the door shut behind us and let my eyes adjust to the soft yellow lighting inside. Looking around the dimly lit room, every wall was lined with shelves, all filled to capacity with a vague semblance of organization. The far wall behind the counter was lined with large, handwritten texts; perhaps books written by the proprietor of the establishment. To the right side of the entrance was a number of wheeled tables with straps for wrists and ankles; I noticed what seemed to be a trap door underneath. The shelves passed them were covered in what seemed to be fairly standard tinctures and what not that one would find in such an apothecary.

“**Evelynn give me back my fucking arms.**” I heard a familiar voice demand in completely unconcealed frustration. Also... *what?!*

“Are you going to behave? *My guest-*” A pale, red headed woman with a round face and an unsettling smile walked out from the back room behind the counter, “-Guests, are here.” This must be the ‘doctor’ that Amber was talking about, given the bloody, off-white apron she was wearing over a pure white hoodie and black slacks. A quick Third Eye revealed a terrifyingly opaque, completely still, glass-like Coating and two long, PsyEn appendages sticking out of her back that led to a pair of hands each holding someone else’s disembodied physical arms.

“Hello, Doctor.” Amber greeted her flatly and curtly... was she... nervous?

“Ah Amber - my favourite vylette - once all of those Hands started showing up in the city, I knew it was just a matter of time before they sent *you*. And you brought a friend! How wonderful! Entrapment is always better with company!

I don’t think I like her one bit.

Before Amber could respond to Evelynn’s vaguely creepy statement, fucking Reina Tethas - that strange woman we kidnapped for Cataloguing purposes a while ago - walked in from the back room as well. She looked more annoyed than anything else at the fact that her arms were missing from the elbows down.

“Evel- Woah! Iris and Amber? Small damn world, I guess.”

“Oh?! You three know each other already? Excellent! This simplifies things considerably. Come with me; oh and Reina, *arms.*” Evelynn turned to leave as Reina’s arms suddenly became whole.

“**Stop.**” Amber commanded and all movement in the room stopped. I couldn’t help but smirk a little bit at her ability to silence a room, “Before we follow *you ANYWHERE...* You need to answer three questions.”

“Hmm? Shoot, then.” Evelynn pouted over her shoulder at us.

“One: Why is **she** doing here. Two: Why are **you** here. And Three: Have you been killing our Hands?”

“Hmm... Reina is here because she is critical to my plan. *I’m* here because much like you and the rest of your colleagues, I’m **trapped** in this city. And no I haven’t had the pleasure of coming face to face with any of the Hands; it’s probably the Spear Saint that’s been picking them off.” She rattled off an answer to Amber’s question in rapid succession before the smile she had been wearing dissipated as she finished, “Satisfactory?”

Amber glanced at me and I shrugged, “What do you mean we are trapped here.”

“You said *three* questions. Now follow.”

Amber sighed and beckoned me to follow; I did so cautiously. We pushed our way through the curtains into a short hallway and descended a long flight of stairs. We entered a large rectangular basement area filled with an uncomfortably bright white light that gave everything in the room a sickly, pale hue. There were a couple dozen tables set up that had those Pulse-Monsters Amber and I had been encountered strapped to them. I tried my best to suppress a gag rising up as each of the monsters were tied in different positions with different portions of their internal structures exposed. Their bodies had been flayed open with a level of precision that I hated to admit even *I* wasn’t capable of approaching.

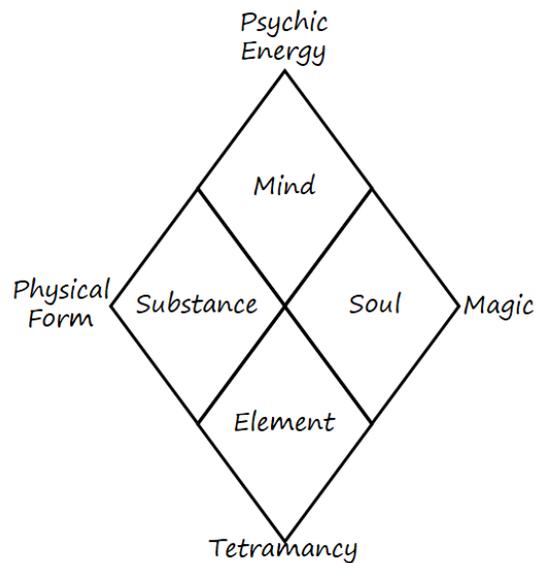
Amber’s earlier words weighed a bit more heavily.

Evelynn walked over to a standing chalkboard and beckoned us over, “So, I can tell by the way *she-*” The Doctor gestured towards me, “-walks that she’s a *professional*, so I won’t waste time on the basics. Amber. You must have arrived recently since - based on your fourth question - you’ve clearly not tried to leave yet.”

“Yeah. You said we’re trapped. What’s that about? And **you-**” I interjected before Amber could answer and looked at Reina Tethas, “-when you were catalogued, you didn’t seem like the type to be involved in...” I gestured vaguely about the room, “...This...”

Tethas rolled her eye but said nothing, which told me everything I needed to know.

“Moving on. Yes, you two, myself, and everything else in this city is trapped here. Let’s start from the beginning.” Evelynn proceeded to draw the standard metaphysical diamond on the chalkboard:



“So as everyone knows you derive PsyEn from *Mind*, Magic from *Soul*, Tetramancy from the Elements, and Physical Form is derived from *Substance*. Those are the rules - the laws, even - of our world, Solbalim. Now you might notice that I said *our* world and not... let’s say... the Universe. I can say that with such certainty because of what the Outsider has done.” The Doctor had entered full teacher mode and was getting more and more excited as she spoke. It might have been endearing if we were surrounded by all of these dissected corpses.

“You’ve been saying that word - Outsider - for awhile now. The... Pardonner also mentioned it a few times... you can’t possibly mean-” Tethas chimed into the conversation for the first time, leaning against a wall next to the chalkboard.

“-Oh but I absolutely *can* and *do* mean **that**. ‘That’ of course meaning that the entity is an ‘Outsider’ in the most literal sense; not an Outsider to this city. But an Outsider to this very *planet*.”

““...”” We all stared at the smiling redhead with various combinations of doubt and incredulity as she turned her head this way and that to make unsettlingly earnest eye contact with each of us.

“That’s...-”

“-not possible... right?” Amber finished for me. I nodded along with her but Evelynn merely rolled her eyes at us.

"I would not make such statements if I didn't think I had reasonable evidence. You believe me, don't you, Reina?"

"...Just show us your evidence."

"Ah, I knew you were excited! You're just like me in so many ways!" The one-eyed blonde's face soured as she clicked her tongue loudly at the supposed compliment, "So The Outsider is doing everything all *wrong*."

"Wrong?"

"Definitely. It came from the beyond the sky - that much is unquestionable; I've seen the impact crater - and when it landed, it devoured *all* of the Magic within a *massive* radius."

"The 'Magic'? Not the *Soul*?"

"Ah! You get it Amber! Right! How does one eat Magic? Devour processed *Soul*? Delete magirradiation? I don't know... I have ideas but- no. I don't know..." She trailed off absentmindedly, lost in thought until Tethas blew out a sharp, loud whistle.

"Ow."

"*Evelynn. Focus.*"

"Oh! Yes! Mechanics of consumption aside... It took in all of the Magic in that huge area upon impact... and it seems both immediately and *instantaneously* converted that Magic into Psychic Energy." She drew an arrow from Magic directly to PsyEn on the chalkboard.

?!?!

What.

Amber scoffed, but when I looked at the detective... she sighed and seemed to agree with Evelynn.

"I guess I should throw my intel in the pool." Tethas began before either of us could respond to the doctor's hypothesis. She pulled back the long, straw-coloured bangs that covered that weird Mouth that lived in her right eye socket. Pinning back the hair, we could see that the Mouth was aggressively... chewing? On what appeared to be nothing.

"As you two well know - because of this thing living in my head - nothing else can attempt to interact with my Mind. I've not yet found a limit on what the Mouth can block from my head: Watchers, Archivists-" She nodded at me and I smirked, "-Evelynn, Nightmares, and now The Outsider."

"Oh? You noticed?"

"I did not. I just assumed. Thanks for the confirmation."

“Oof. She got me!” Evelynn tilted her head and knocked on her own head with her knuckles in a deeply disturbing attempt at being playful. Reina ignored her and continued on.

“Nothing has ever been more *persistent* about attempting to access my Mind than the ‘Outsider’. It has been doing it since I crossed some invisible threshold after entering this country. Moreover, the Mouth’s chewing has only gotten stronger as I’ve gotten closer to that tower on the horizon.” I still have so many damn questions about that creepy Mouth and why she’s able to be so fucking casual about a parasite infesting both her body and Mind.

“It’s had the psionic range, power, and endurance to keep the Mouth busy for the last several hours we’ve been here... **while** twisting and manipulating all of these poor people and-”

“People?” Amber piped in.

“...Yeah? Ah. Right. Evelynn did mention this. No matter how much you two guard your Minds, they are all going to look like monsters to you. But all of these-” She gestured around the room and the many open corpses, “-Are civilians. Victims first of the ‘Outsider’, then again of Evelynn.”

There was a long pause as the four of us exchanged glances.

“What... do they look like to you, then?” I ventured tentatively.

“I’d really rather not go into it.

““ ...”

“This...” Reina gestured at a nearby opened corpse, “It what happens to people who try to leave the city. And obviously, almost everyone here tried to leave when the entity started its psionic broadcast. But the moment it entered the city, it was too late. This is what Evelynn means by the three of you being trapped. Although I’m not entirely sure why it didn’t just turn everyone right away... It’s not like it doesn’t have the power to.

“...And you’re certain trying to leave is the trigger?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Evelynn has already... Ugh... *tested* this six or seven times.”

“Biological replicates are important. And unfortunately the nature of the output precludes technical replic-”

“*Stop it.* So that’s where we stand. As I understand it, you two came in here searching for some missing Hands? One dead, one cut off?” Reina turned her attention to Amber after cutting Evelynn’s rambling off.

“That’s right.”

“Well, if they were cut off, but not killed... Well, I think you know what happened based on my explanation. I’m sorry.” Reina seemed to honestly mourn the loss of our missing Hands.

“...Unfortunately, yes. And the same thing will happen to us if we try to leave. So then the path forward is quite simple, no?”

“I was thinking the same thing, Amber. If the Outsider won't let us leave, then we just go kill the Outsider. Nice and simple.”

“Ah. They really are *professionals*, aren't they Reina? You are absolutely correct. However, it's unfortunately not so 'nice and simple'. We are certain that the Outsider is set up somewhere in that strange and tall tower. But getting too close to it is about as problematic as trying to leave the city.”

“Bleh. Of course.” Man. This *sucks*. “So what do we do?”

“If you move at street level, the closest you can safely get is about a kilometer away from the structure. After that, you get swarmed by the - oh how did you call them, Reina? - The Twisted. Then after that-”

“Wait. Isn't that weird though?” Something hadn't been sitting right about all of this.

“Pfft... which part?” Evelynn snorted at me.

“Kind of all of it? It's just like Tethas said, right? It has the power to do *all* of this. So why isn't it hunting down those that are resisting? Why was that Pardonner able to fight you? Why is the Spear Saint still able to kill our Hands? Why does it need us to reach certain thresholds for it to react?” They were all silent, mulling over what had seemed very obvious to me.

I continued explaining my reasoning, “Because it **can't** actually *be* everywhere at once. Amber and I noticed that these 'Twisted' only start charging up their pulse once you get within a short distance. You can rush them and kill them *easily* as long as you aren't afraid of them and there aren't more within range. No matter how powerful this 'Outsider' is... it can only pay attention to so much at the same time, right? That's why I don't hear them shuffling and stomping around all the time- and trust me, if I don't hear it, it's not happening.”

“...They are just going through the motions. Just following a path with a sequence of predetermined actions laid out in front of them.” Leave it to Amber to actually have the words to describe what I can barely conceive.

“Yup. That is... until that predetermined response likely pings back to the Outsider. **Then** it moves more 'Twisted' to the area of intrusion.” This was all so damn creepy.

“So it isn't *all powerful*.” Reina began to muse outloud.

“Of course not! Ah this is perfect perfect **perfect!** The plan has *really* come together here.” Evelynn cut her off, practically vibrating with excitement.

“Yes. The plan. What **is** it, *doctor?*” Amber brought us back around to the point of this discussion.

“We need to get Reina here inside of the tower.”

"That seems like something *you* could have done alone."

"Oh you flatter me, Amber Isolde. But no. We need a few moving parts to this operation. Specifically we have three pieces that need to be taken care of here: the Twisted swarm, the Outsider's Psionic intrusion, and of course the Spear Saint problem."

"Ah yes. The lightning we have been seeing. We **do** need to kill her." Amber practically growled.

"What?! Why!?"

"Because - **Tethas** - we will not let the indiscriminate murder of Sventholme's Hands go unpunished."

"But we should-"

"Perfect! I was just going to say that you two should escort Reina to the threshold East of the tower."

"Why from the East?"

"Because by the time I've done my part, it will be the path of least resistance. With a bit of preparation, I can lure and slaughter many thousands of these Twisted. 'Cause once you reach that kilometer threshold... they do NOT stop swarming. Nancontaeul *was* a very dense city, after all." Imagine being confident in your ability to kill *thousands*...

How does a Human even get like this?

"So then what is *her* role in all of this?" I asked the obvious question concerning the detective.

"Well, since Reina's the only one who is truly immune to the Outsider's intrusions - if we can get her inside - she should be able to kill it." I looked the detective up and down doubtfully; she didn't seem like she had it in her to take on a *Human*, let alone a *psychic monster from space*. When we nabbed her for cataloguing purposes, she had already been all beaten up. Something about her tells me she doesn't actually win most fights she gets into.

As far as aces in the hole went, she really didn't seem like much.

"I feel like you're making a **lot** of assumptions here. What makes you so certain that I can kill a thing capable of all of *this*!?" Oh great, she doesn't think she's much *either*.

"Oh. **What?** Are you *not* going to throw yourself headfirst into danger for the first time in your life here?"

"I don't trust *you* in the least."

"**Trust** has nothing to do with any of this. This is a *mutually beneficial* transaction: The three of us want to be able to leave this city and these two want to kill the Spear Saint and gather the corpses of their kin so *I* don't get my hands on them," She shot us a vicious grin and I could *feel* Amber glowering at her. I hadn't even really thought about *that*, but...

“And me?”

“And **you** don’t want this entity to spread its influence and do any more damage than it already has because you *think* you’re a hero.”

“I *th-*”

“**Enough.** We have a plan. Reina Tethas, are you joining us or not.” *Thank you.* All of this posturing was getting tiresome. The detective glared at the doctor for a few more moments before sighing and turning her gaze towards us.

“Kidnapping aside, you two have been reasonably good to me. I’m not going to let you or anyone else die if I can avoid it. And if I’m the only person who *can*, then I guess I *must*.”

“Perfect!” The doctor clapped once and pranced over to a large cabinet, “I don’t know when the last time you all ate was, but combat on an empty stomach is a definite ‘no!’” Her smile was cold and clinical as she looked over her shoulder at the rest of us.

“Come now, *doctor’s orders.*”

Reina

I hate this.

Why do I always have to be at *her* mercy?!

“Stop sulking and *focus*, Tethas.”

“I’m *not* sulking, **Amber.** And could you two *please* just call me Reina? You’ve already kidnapped me once for fuck sake. I feel like we have to be on a first name basis now at least. And all of that aside, how are you two *this* okay with going along with her plan?!” We were moving through the streets unerringly North Eastward from Evelyn’s stolen hideout quickly and with absolute silence, courtesy of Iris’ Ability. The dangerous and elegant assassin was in the lead, avoiding triggering any Twisted using her freakishly acute hearing.

“Fine, *Reina.* I do not know why this is so hard for you to grasp, but if not a soul has a better plan, then you go with the one you have. It matters not the source of said plan and your own personal hang ups in regard to that psychopath **certainly** do not come into play. By the Blood I still cannot believe you are Lyra Tethas’ daughter...” She left the words ‘*what a disappointment*’ unsaid, but it was all over her face.

“Well-”

I suddenly could not hear my own voice. A quick Third Eye revealed a *Silence* bubble over my mouth.

“Oy. You two need to shut up for... I dunno... a **second**.” Amber snickered audibly, clearly amused at my apparent indignation. Iris slowed down in front of us to a halt and crouched behind some debris in the alley. We followed suit and - 10ish seconds later - I heard a group of Twisted marching unevenly down the street. We waited while the patrol - which was a new behavior - passed and made our way in the opposite direction of the passing Twisted; further East into the city.

We were approaching a town square of sorts with a massive - albeit ruined - fountain when I suddenly felt a nearly crushing sense of foreboding. I glanced at Amber, who definitely seemed on edge as her eyes focused squarely on the upcoming plaza passed her partner. I pulled out my newly acquired rifle and gripped it tightly as I saw Iris invert the sheath containing her PsyMetal blade.

Whatever was waiting ahead... we all felt the weight of its presence.

Amber took point as we stepped into the plaza and Iris began to fan out to the left. I drifted to the right and hung back some, not wanting to be anywhere near Amber when she started swinging that axe around. The plaza overall was shockingly tidy: the debris from the ruined fountain that the surrounding buildings had seemingly been pushed into a pile off to one side. There were charred piles of scorched bones, but no ashes in the area to speak of. There were several large - **large** - piles of both Twisted and normal Humans; some seemed a couple of days old, while others appeared worryingly fresh.

I unfortunately had a pretty good idea of who was tending to this plaza.

I felt a strange, unfamiliar tingling sensation across my skin - not my Coating - and the sense of dread that had been looming before now weighed heavily across my whole body. Iris was cocking her head this way and that, trying to triangulate the source of some noise that I had yet to hear.

“**You three...**” A voice that growled like thunder resonated from every direction at once. Rather than try to locate its source myself, I simply followed Iris' steady gaze up towards the top of the nearby broken cathedral that towered over the North end of the plaza we had spread ourselves out within.

I gripped my rifle tightly for what I hoped wouldn't come next.

Amber

“**You three...** you're not natives... you don't look **tired** enough... no. Just three more vultures come to pick at the corpse of our beloved home.” The deep, velvety accusation was followed by a near-blinding flash of light. Suddenly, atop the ruined fountain, stood a tall woman with messy, long black hair and narrow, predatory eyes. The pulsing silver streaks in her hair that marked her as being blessed by a Wind Elemental seemed to flash gold in the glow from a nearby fire. Her torso was protected by a lightweight chainmail vest and skirt along with sturdy, dented vambraces guarded her forearms but left her with a full upper body range of motion. Her shins

were similarly protected and what was presumably once ceremonial robes hung in tatters from various parts of her body.

Just how long had the Spear Saint been fighting?

What a worthless question. I thought to myself... obviously the answer was: the *entire* time.

“You must be the Spear Saint. How *admirable*, still fighting to the very last. Tell me: what good has it done for this city? Running Sventholme’s Hands through with that spear of yours?” I gripped my axe tightly. What a phenomenal pressure this woman exuded! Like a cornered magirradiated beast, there were precious few parts of her, her armor, **or** her spear that were not covered with blood. And the way those streaks in her hair glowed so brilliantly... undoubtedly her chosen deity was harvesting an incredible amount of expended Psychic Energy from her... surely in direct proportion to how much elemental power it was feeding her.

“To think there was still another *bloodhound* left. There is nothing admirable about respecting the dead; it’s simply the right thing to do. Nothing more and nothing less. So I shan’t suffer any more outsiders invading our city and slaughtering our friends and family.” Ah, so she has gone mad as well. I let out a long breath and activated *Vanity*. I would not be able to keep both *Vanity* **and** *Pride* active while still protecting my mind from The Outsider and slightly Reinforcing; Iris was just going to have to try to fit into this fight where she could, if at all.

Just then, the ground rumbled slightly and all four of us in the plaza caught ourselves deftly. Iris turned her gaze West.

“It’s started.” She commented quietly.

“Excellent timing. Well then-”

“-Wait, Amber, please.” Ugh. Reina Tethas stepped forward, drawing the Spear Saint’s attention, “I’m Reina Tethas, I came from Riveiranja and I’m here to help. I am immune to The Outsider’s psychic attacks! If you work with us, we can end this!” I cannot believe she is still trying to do *this*.

“Ah... I thought I had heard distant gunfire... Tell me - daughter of the Hummingbird of T’telira - when you entered this city with your supposed immunity. After you saw the state of things... why did you not simply flee? You could have left, but you throw yourself on someone else’s funeral pyre... I am here because I have a *responsibility*. It was **my** responsibility to protect this city and its people. I could not save them from the psionic threat that beckons from the tower on the horizon.” This was good. Reina had the Spear Saint’s attention and Iris was silently picking her way around to a good blind spot. I let Tethas run distraction while I-

The Tower on the Horizon.

Why is **everyone** calling it that?...

In fact... Even Tethas is calling it-

“But I *can* save them from further indignity at the hands of strangers who have ***no business*** here. Do you even know the name of this plaza that sully with your presence? Do you know the names of the streets you have torn through? Did it even occur to you to *care*? None of you will leave this plaza alive; you will fuel the flames that finally free the sickened minds of Nancontaeul’s people.”

“Then get down here and show me what a *Saint* can do. You felt that rumbling earlier... That was the rest of your citizens on their way West to be slaughtered by The Doctor... I **know** you know who I speak of.” That was about enough. The Spear Saint snapped her gaze to me and sneered at me with clenched teeth. There was a sensation not unlike static electricity dancing between one’s skin and clothes on a dry Winter day in the air. The streaks in her hair glowed even more harshly and a multitude of pebbles began to float in the air. She leapt in the air towards me, bringing her spear back as if to javelin it at me.

Suddenly she shot forward with a flash of light, *Vanity* slowing her down just enough for me to slam my axe directly into the cross of her yari. She continued to press her aerial momentum down into the spear, trying to force me to my knees by sheer brute force. As the PsyMetal blades sang against each other, Iris dropped from the shadows towards the Spear Saint. She swooped in like an owl with perfect silence, opting to use her katana instead of the Needle. As soon as Iris came within 3 meters of the Spear Saint - however - she gave a nearly imperceptible indication that she noticed.

“***DODGE IRIS!***” I managed to shout as I dropped *Vanity* and activated *Pride* over her. The Spear Saint gripped her yari with both hands and pushed herself up onto the butt of the spear, an action whose full force nearly broke my stance. She balanced herself on a single palm on the butt of her spear and spun her legs around elegantly, with one of her heels suddenly whipping out to kick Iris right out of the air. Thanks to my warning and *Pride* enhancing her movement speed, Iris was able get an arm up between the oncoming kick and her own temple. Despite *Pride* weakening the Saint’s strike... Iris went flying across the plaza, tumbling upon the cobblestone several times before shakily coming up to her feet.

“And as for you...” The Spear Saint stared straight down her spear at me with a vicious grin before the streaks in her hair flared to life. There was a flash of light and lightning began arcing out of the palm of her hand and out of the shaft of the spear. Just then, there was a loud boom and the Spear Saint seemed to blink out of existence temporarily before reappearing on her feet next to the fountain. She reached a hand out towards the spear she’d left behind and lightning reached from the spear as the weapon returned to her.

Just that brief electrical discharge left my hands numb.

“Tch,” The Spear Saint clicked her tongue at Reina Tethas as she held out a fist towards the would-be sharpshooter who had a bolt-action hunting rifle pointed at her. She unclenched her fist and the bullet that the detective had fired fell uselessly to the ground, “That’s one of our rifles. The arms of Nancontaeul will never prosper on me.”

"Isn't **The** Outsider the real problem here?! This fight has no meaning! Why can't you see that!? We are trying to help! To put a stop to all of this! Can't you all take care of your vendettas *after* we've dealt with that?!" Reina was backing away slowly towards the Western outlet from the plaza that would take her straight to the tower on the horizon. Just when it looked like she would be able to make it out, there was a flash and she flinched forward, nearly dropping her gun in the process.

"Did I not tell you: *None of you will leave this plaza alive.*"

"Dammit! You aren't listening! This is for the greater good! Maybe we can't fix this... but we can **end** it!" Tethas was shaking from the electrical shock. This was not standard Tetramancy... With a bit of attunement, *anyone* could achieve Pyro-, Geo-, Hydro-, or Aeromancy... but outside of those four... Only the Gods could empower one to perform things like Voltamancy..

"Greater good? Hah! What greater good is there than to keep safe my people? The innocent, sickly citizens who I promised to protect? Who - exactly - asked you for this coveted assistance you force upon us? Who saw it fit for you to force your way into our capital? To fire upon our citizens, afflicted with a pestilence of the mind that projects its horrors? No. We did not ask for this. They did not ask for this."

"We didn't-"

"Enough, Tethas." Feeling had returned to my hands once more... Can Psychic Energy block Elemental Power? All I knew was that I could **not** afford to drop *Vanity* again.

"But..."

"That's always the case, isn't it? I've seen your ilk... Over and over and over again. Every supposed monster unmasked, every locked door keyed, every secret out in the open, no rock left unturned and not a deadman left walking... You think that if you **can**, then you **must**... You: the self-proclaimed Hero. But in the end, you can't shoulder the responsibility of the suffering you cause."

"Are you done, *Spear Saint*? Or did a single round drain you *that* much?" I goaded her as best I could, "Iris. Privacy. Three of us."

I kept my eyes on the glaring Spear Saint as the world went silent around me, the Spear Saint was taking cautious, measured steps towards us. Likely trying to figure out just what the *Silence* bubble actually was.

"Tethas. This fight is Sventholmik business. You have a different job to do."

"I-"

"**No**. You are done here. As soon as we force her to focus her Elemental Energy, you leave and handle The Outsider. Take your pot shots if you can. But do not *dare* get in our way. You are a decade too young to be performing on the same stage as *us*. **Done**." At my word, *Silence* dissipated and the two fighters who actually mattered on our side began our approach.

“Done scheming?”

“Hardly.” Iris smiled at the Saint as she darted to the side. As Iris circled around, I closed the gap between myself and the Spear Saint and whipped out my blunderbuss from just a couple meters away. She raised her palm at me as I pulled the trigger - the gun jumped silently in my hand - and saw the metallic beads suspended in the air in front of her. My Third Eye picked up a slight distortion in the air, but nothing definitive... she seemed to be doing something with her God-given Voltamancy that was similar to Magnetism.

As I moved in to attack, she pulled in the beads to her palm and pushed them gently outwards in my direction, letting them drop to the ground to interfere with my footing. As she did so, Iris threw her Needle at the Saint's back, who deftly rotated her yari and deflected it at the tip with nary a glance back. I leapt in with a powerful underhanded swing at our opponent's mid-section as Iris followed behind her deflected Needle.

The Saint only smiled at me.

She jabbed downwards to meet my blow halfway, robbing it of its full angular momentum and letting the impact slide her back towards Iris slightly, jabbing at my partner with the butt of her polearm. Iris parried it handedly but the Saint simply spun with the momentum of the parry and brought the three-bladed end across at my neck. As the weapon entered *Vanity*, it began to slow down and - at that moment - released the Ability. The Saint's eyes widened as her swing accelerated suddenly - defiling her rhythm for a split second - and Iris did not miss this opening as she saw my *Vanity* drop. I activated *Pride* on her as she went in for the killing blow on the slightly off-balance Saint and-

Lightning arced out of her spear instantly and violently.

I managed to hop back a couple of steps as I noticed the first sparks, but Iris had committed to her attack - a warrior's most vulnerable position - and in a near-blinding flash of light, was thrown across the plaza. Tethas - who had been lining up a shot - dropped her rifle to the ground and intercepted Iris' ragdolled, airborne body. Reina looked down at my partner, limp in her arms.

Iris was not moving.

Reina

Oh **fuck**.

After a prolonged exchange where I could not get a clean shot off on the Lightning-spewing Saint, Iris took that powerful shock as she had gone in for the attack.

"Check. Her." Amber commanded with a Queen's disposition.

I ran Iris around to the other side of the ruined fountain - away from the fight - uttering a brief prayer to Ourana that she was still breathing. PsyMetal sang and light continued to flash as the two incredibly stubborn warriors continued their attempts on each other's lives. There was a

weight and power behind these blows that could be felt all the way across the plaza. Amber was still managing to keep the Spear Saint at bay for now, but the bitter reality of our situation is that the Vylette hunter was bleeding from a dozen barely avoided wounds... and she had yet to land a *single* blow on the Saint.

A look at Iris with an active Third Eye told me she was still alive and - leaning in close - she was still breathing gently. It seemed that she managed to pull in a significant amount of her Coating at the last moment to not get completely fried. As I dragged her further off to the side, I could not help but marvel at the skill, psychic control, and reflexes that both of these women possessed. I had no place in this fight... really, only the Mouth had any place in this **plan** at all. This had been an unfortunate and frustrating trend in the last year ever since Evelynn invaded my life. I used to think of myself as pretty strong, competent, and skilled... doing everything I could to succeed in my own right even to live up to the names Lyra Tethas and Nozen Keera...

But it turns out... I'm just the host for a Mouth-shaped parasite.

"Hey, Iris, come on, I need you to be able to stand somewhat!" I slapped her cheek a few times, and she stirred. Her eyes weren't entirely focused and she shook her head back and forth a few times.

"Did we win?" She whispered weakly.

"No we have to go, this isn't worth it."

"Oh...damn. I messed up."

This was insane; we shouldn't even be fighting this woman. She's completely lost her mind in a far different way from everyone else in this city. Her lunacy stemmed from loyalty and rock-solid principles and - on top of it all - she was protected by the Elements themselves.

I left Iris on the other side of the fountain and took a wide circle around the vicious battle, "She's alive, we need to get out of here." I shout at Amber as she tanked yet another heavy, lightning-charged blow with her axe. She pushed her opponent back once more and deigned to glanced over her shoulder at me.

"Get out of here? **Really?**" Her left eye burned with a fury and indignation I immediately knew I was incapable of. I began to stand up to try to talk some sense into her, but-

"What the fuck?" I was looking at my own hand; my body suddenly seemed like it was moving through syrup. I looked up, Amber was nowhere near me: *Vanity* can't function at this great of a distance, right?

Iris was suddenly right next to me, much more aware and with her strength returned. She grabbed my arm painfully hard; was she always this strong?

"Reina-" Her voice rose above the half-whisper she typically spoke in for the first time since I had met this pair, her eyes wide.

"Run!"

Wasting no time, I pulled in my entire Coating and Reinforced my body to leap as far away as I could, leaving Iris behind. I sailed lazily through the air before suddenly accelerating as I exited the affected area. With my Third Eye, I could see that there was a *massive*, misshapen miasma of *Vanity* surrounding Amber and Iris; the latter of whom seemed to have no problem at all moving within the cloud. Whatever Amber was about to do, she probably wasn't going to hurt Iris while doing it.

But wasn't she expending far too much PsyEn to be protecting her Mind anymore?!

"*Pray*. Spear Saint. This will be your last chance." Were Amber's final words on the matter.

Amber

I once told Iris - just under half a year ago - that I did not use Magic.

That... was a bit of an... enhancement of the truth.

"I will express my gratitude to you - just this once - Spear Saint."

"Oh?"

"Yes... Thank you... for preparing the battlefield so perfectly. You are going to die here and now... and your misbegotten sentiment for the dead will be the reason." I let out a deep breath as *Vanity* reached its maximum range, covering almost the entire plaza.

"A ridiculous bluff from a cornered beast... Expending more PsyEn won't- What... are you doing...?!" The Saint saw that Blood - liters and liters of it - had begun oozing out of the corpses she had so kindly been gathering here to put to rest. The Blood floated through *Vanity* towards the center where I stood and began to swirl around me before vaporizing into a crimson mist.

"Whatever *this* is I won't let you!" The Saint seemed agitated as she drove forward to run me through with her yari. The shock on her face as she was moving even more slowly than before was a thing of beauty.

"...I think you are confused, Spear Saint." *Vanity* blushed a deeper and deeper red as more Blood infused my Psychic Energy with the masterless Soul contained within, "Do you know what makes the Drax so terrifying? It is the fact that if they can see the Blood within a living person... then it belongs to them. But anyone can do a bit of Blood Magic with a bit of practice as long as the Blood does not belong to any living being." She was still trying to reach me, wide-eyed as she witnessed more and more Blood pour out of the corpses of her precious citizens.

"ENOUGH!" The Saint's streaked hair glowed to life and her yari sparked. With a flash, lightning discharged from her once more... and crackled uselessly in every direction, "...H-how...?!"

I felt a toothy grin crawl onto my face.

Poor thing.

Iris

What... the fuck am I looking at here.

Amber was using *Vanity* at an impossibly large scale... barely even protecting her Mind, let alone the rest of her body with a Coating. All the Blood in the plaza was pouring into *Vanity* until it became a thick cloud of crimson that was almost visually impenetrable. The Spear Saint was trying to approach Amber and failing before trying to strike Amber with lightning which... also failed? After witnessing the failed discharge of lightning, Reina finally followed Amber's orders and had pissed off towards the tower on the horizon without another word. The Saint seemingly unable to block the exit anymore.

I flinched as Amber slammed her axe into the ground next to her and held her hands out to the side, palms facing forward. Dense red fog gathered around her hands before suddenly crystallizing around her fingers as vicious claws made out of blood shards. A guttural, ragged breath came out of her mouth and she leapt forward recklessly and thoughtlessly.

The Spear Saint - to her credit - was able to dodge or block the first six or seven strikes. Amber's movements were *way* more straight forward than they usually were and lacked the usual measured tactics that put her a cut above other warriors. It seemed that Amber's new plan was to overwhelm the Saint by sheer brute force...

And it was working.

The vicious onslaught was relentless and - for some reason - the Saint's lightning kept discharging useless to the outside of the red *Vanity* cloud. The Saint was unable to retreat to an effective range to combat Amber and took a violent blow to her ribs in order to simultaneously kick the bottom of her yari and palm the center. The weapon broke into two shorter pieces under the weight of what must have been a heavily Reinforced blow. With her new shortened, improvised weapon, she continued to desperately try to push Amber back... to no significant effect.

Every time the Saint's weapon looked like it might get close to hitting Amber, a spike of crystallized Blood would shoot out of one of Amber's many small, open wounds. These violent defensive maneuvers left Amber with bigger wounds that she had started with. I was still shaking from the earlier electrocution, but we needed to finish this *now*. I looked at my own Coating around my hand with my Third Eye - I had lost a lot of my stored vibrations when I lost consciousness - and decided I'd just have to do this the old fashioned way. I ran across the plaza and grabbed my fallen sword. As I did so, I gave Amber a split second pulse of *Silence* to let her know that I was back in action and I quickly hopped up atop the ruined fountain from the opposite side that they were fighting on.

I heard the telltale ringing of PsyMetal hitting the ground. Looking down, I saw that the Spear Saint had... thrown down their spear and intercepted both of Amber's attacking hands with her own. I could easily hear the crunching and cracking of the Saint's hands in Amber's grasp over the gasping breaths of the combatants below.

“...I don’t know... how you keep... dispersing my lightning... But... ***I win.***” There was a crackling sound as lightning arced out of the Saint’s body in every direction, but focused around her grappled hands.

Shit.

I leapt down with my sword in hand with no time to think about the consequences of mistiming the action. I threw a *Silence* bubble over the Saint’s head as a brief distraction. She hesitated slightly to discharge her lightning and-

She never saw me coming.

I came down with my PsyMetal sword in a reverse gripped stabbing motion, my left hand coming down on her left shoulder a fraction of a second before my blade dove into her neck from the right as I wrapped my legs around her waist to stabilize the impact. Continuing unabated through her muscle and fascia, the slight curve of my sword cut a steep angle across the inside of her torso, plunging into her rapidly beating heart. The Saint’s concentration fractured as I viciously twisted and yanked my entire sword out of her neck, and the accompanying spray of life blood got lost in the cloud of red mist. Her final buildup of lightning discharged uselessly into the red haze of *Vanity* and her PsyEn was pulled into the blessed silver streaks in her hair to be delivered unto her God.

A proper Saint’s death, for sure.

I took a few moments to calm down and unwrapped myself from around the Saint, whose hands were still being held - being crushed, rather - in Amber’s own. Amber was very still and staring almost sightlessly at the Saint who had died standing in her grasp.

“Hey.”

“...”

“***Hey.*** Amber. It’s done. Stand down.”

“...”

“Please?”

“...” Oh. Oh shit!

I threw several layers of *Silence* over her head, hoping that the PsyEn constructed spheres might run some interference between her and the Outsider’s Voice. It seemed to work to some degree, as she blinked several times and disabled whatever strange variant of *Vanity* she’d been using. She Focused her Coating around her head but... she was *not* working with a lot of PsyEn at this point. I slowly removed *Silence* layer by layer until she nodded at me slowly... and I heaved a sigh of relief as she finally let go of the dead Spear Saint, whose lifeless body finally fell to the ground..

“Are- You- okay?” Amber asked me between sputtering coughs. By the Wind she was beat the fuck up... and she’s checking on *me*?! I pulled her into a fierce hug over the corpse of our fallen adversary. For once, she leaned into it and I could feel the full weight of her exhaustion. My concern had made me largely forget about my own burns, scrapes, and bruises as I pulled her arm over my shoulders and walked her to a nearby dilapidated building. I sat her down inside and began rummaging my own travel pack for some first aid.

“To answer your question... I’m *fine*, comparatively. You on the other hand... that was *reckless*. What was I even looking at?” Amber was quite literally drenched in Blood, so I tossed her a few rags and she wiped down her face, head, and hands as I coaxed her overcoat off of her.

“...*Blushing Vanity*. A combination of... Blood Magic... and *Vanity*... Masterless Soul... boosts PsyEn... more or less.”

“I... definitely don’t get it.”

“...*Shocking*.”

“Pfft. Speaking of which. Why wouldn’t the Saint’s Lightning work?”

“Hmm? Oh. You know how pure water... fails to conduct electricity?” She was starting to catch her breath somewhat. I was relieved to know she wasn’t struggling to speak because of pain.

“Nope, but go on.”

“Well, salt water and impure water *does* conduct electricity... And do you know what there is a lot of in Blood?”

“Iron?” I raised my voice a good bit, as I was wandering around the first floor of this building, looking for anything I could use to clean and comfort us.

“Context, Iris. **Salt**. Once I surrounded the Saint with a vaporous medium that contained *that* much salt, she could not control the path that the lightning took. She realized it too late... that is why she tried to grapple with me in the end.”

“...I see. Would that have worked?” I finished wringing out her coat and dunking it in a mostly intact barrel of stagnant water I found in the cooking area of the building.

“Most likely... so... thank you. For saving me.” Gah. Gratitude is always so adorably awkward coming from her.

“You’re welcome. So should we start calling you *Saint Slayer Amber*?”

“Hmm... the killing blow *did* technically belong to you...” Woooooow modesty too. She must be *exhausted*.

“Careful, you might lose your *Vanity* if you keep talking like that!” I teased as I took her sullied rags from her, “But anyhow, you did all the work and set me up for the kill.”

“I guess it is **our** title then...”

“Wow, sharing both a family name **and** a title.”

“We have shared *much* more than that, Iris.” I beamed down at her and scratched her hair a bit before sitting down and leaning on her. I enjoyed engaging in our usual chatter for the first time since we arrived in Nancontaeul, even if it felt a bit stiff. After all, we were merely trying to distract ourselves from the fact that - regardless of this tremendous victory - we **were** going to *die* unless *Reina Tethas* managed to kill The Outsider.

Which did not inspire much - if any - confidence in either of us.

Reina

The Tower no longer stood on the horizon, but right in front of me.

There was a loud buzzing sound that I couldn't be sure was physical noise anymore, or if there was some level of psionic interference leaking through into my Mind. Did my head hurt because of this supposed Voice? Or did it hurt because the Mouth hadn't stopped chewing in... how long had we even been in Nancontaeul at this point? Was I hallucinating, or could I hear the Mouth *hissing* on occasion?

I tried to shake these extraneous thoughts from my head. I was here and - like the others said - I had a job to do; one that **only** I could do.

There were Twisted beings near the Tower, but they paid me no mind. I had passed several like them on the way here. None of them were responding to any stimuli, but instead were focused solely on scaling the side of the tower. Hundreds of them - many of them with small pieces of debris held between their legs - pulled themselves up the outside of the Tower with near supernatural speed. Observing them for a couple of minutes, I spotted the ultimate goal of each and every one of these poor, stone-carrying, Twisted souls. As they scaled the wall, they homed in on cracks and crevices and other such structural weaknesses in the massive structure and started...*forcing themselves* into it. Grinding their heads and hands in and releasing tremendous amounts of Psychic Energy as some other invisible force seemed to be dissolving and... molding their Substance... eventually pulling in bits of debris into the horrid mess of flesh and sealing whatever they were fixing.

I really wish I had time to vomit.

I approached what appeared to be some kind of door; it was really just a large circle that seemed to have been pressed a centimeter or two into the wall. As I approached it, I stumbled slightly as my feet scuffed against some manner of invisible ramp. There was certainly Substance here... but no visual indicators. I reached the circle in the wall - which had to be at least 10 meters tall - and being within arms reach appeared to have the colour and consistency of melted paint; all browns and yellows and magentas... despite looking blandly grey from a distance. I tapped the circle with my rifle... to no apparent effect. Next, I pulled out my PsyMetal gladius and Cladded it in a dense coat of PsyEn before tapping the circle again-

The circle opened and I jumped back with a gasp.

The shock came not from the opening of the door, but from the immediately apparent fact that 'opened' was too harsh of a word. Human architecture tended to have doors that creaked open, and Fek'thal doors tended to swoosh open as I understood it. According to my mother, Fae 'structures' would allow entry with a small 'hum'. And all of these would have *some* preamble: a grinding of gears, a tickle against the brain, pressure on your Coating, etcetera...

But the stone circle simply... unfurled. With no sound and no ceremony... it was there and then it receded into some hitherto unseen compartment. After several moments of deliberation, I flicked on my further Reinforced my eye and crossed the threshold. After a few steps, the ambient light from behind me was cut off; I turned to see the door's position had reset, not unlike a flower folding at night. As I tried to make sense of the level of technology around me, the room was all at once illuminated in a soft, purple light.

I held my PsyEn Cladded gladius in my main hand and readied my handgun with my offhand. I was a... passable shot with my left hand, but I need to be ready for *anything* in this strange tower. Looking around, the purple light seems to come from every direction at once. Even as I began to cautiously pick my way into the room, I found that neither myself, nor any of the strange, semi-organic pillars I was passing cast any shadow. The irregular, tree branch-like formations that seemed to be made of a clay-like slurry of both Nancontaeul's ruins and citizens, gnarled out of the ground and pushed out against the inner walls of the structure.

How could I possibly ascend to where the Outsider likely resided?

The ground floor seemed to be empty and already I was at a loss. More of these creepy stone supports crisscrossed as high up as I could see... perhaps I could make Reinforced leaps all the way up... But for close to two vertical kilometers? Not likely. How then, did the Outsider ascend?

Understanding and Perspective.

Evelynn's words from about a year ago now flashed across my mind. Back then, she had chided me for not utilizing all of the tools at my disposal to assess the situation I was in. I put my back to one of the inner walls, holstered my handgun and pulled out a Living Eye for the first time since I had arrived in this country. Unsure if the Mouth could even consume eyes while it was busy chewing on an invader's mind, I unscrewed the bottle deftly with one hand and inverted it so the preserved eye slipped down into my palm-

And it smelled *good*.

I shook away that intrusive thought and brought my hand up to the right side of my face, pushing away my long bangs with my fingertips. As soon as I did so, my entire head lurched forward out of my control and the Mouth devoured the Living Eye voraciously and messily. I could feel the incidental leftovers on most of the right half of my face as it *violently* chewed its first *real* meal in days. I felt an overwhelming sensation of comfortable warmth spread through my body that made me weak in the knees.

I habitually brought my gaze upward to look at the Spiders I knew I wouldn't be able to see indoors, but instead saw a spiraling, circular column of purple light that extended far past my line of sight, weaving in-between the various biosynthetic branches that kept this tower together. Looking at the center of the room, the column seemed to begin at the ground floor. There was something... different about all of this. I'd had my Third Eye activated pretty much since I left Iris and Amber to fight the Spear Saint in the plaza... and had been completely unable to detect this column. The Spiders and the Web were normally the only things that eating a Living Eye showed me that my Third Eye didn't.

Were we dealing with something of **that** magnitude? Just *what* was waiting for me up there?

I stepped into the base of the column of light unobstructed. I staggered as I neared the center of it and saw - much to my shock in horror - that I was suddenly ascending on some invisible platform that seemed to be made of the same purple light that enveloped the inside of the entire tower. The platform was almost 15 meters across and was rapidly ascending; I would likely reach the top in a few minutes. Thankfully, I did not drop my guard and something urged me to look up. Several Twisted were falling towards the rising platform at an alarming speed. I dove out of the way and they hit the platform with a loud splat... but the platform didn't stutter for a moment from the impact. They stood up and whipped their gazes at me; their faces were half caved in from the impact.

They started crying. Weeping like babies.

...And talking...

"Why are you doing this?!"

"We didn't do anything wrong!"

"Stop it! Why are you being so mean!?"

"Don't come any closer!!!"

There were too many voices coming out of each of the Twisted, as if the collective of all remaining Twisted were protesting through these four mouths. They began charging at me, trying to drive me off of the solid-light platform. I shot one approaching one in the face, but it continued barreling forward, so I dove off to the side. I came up and immediately shot the next approaching one in the knee, this time causing it to stumble. With a grimace, I darted up to it and shoved my gladius through its neck, flicking left and right to ensure that I cleaved the spinal cord. It fell limply on its face to the platform... and then phased through the platform and went into a tumbling free fall after its PsyEn dispersed.

So my Coating is the only thing keeping me on the platform.

I quickly dispatched the other three in much the same way and stayed on guard for any more attackers. Why did it feel like *I* wasn't the one who was desperate right now? Why did it seem like it was the Outsider who was panicking. Along the inner walls of the tower, I could see several dozen Twisted trying to squeeze themselves inside through cracks in the wall, but none

of them could do so quickly enough to fall onto the solid-light elevator where I stood. After several blessed minutes alone on the platform, it finally came to a halt within another room that was nearly identical to the base of the tower. The room was much smaller and as I exited the column of light that contained the rising platform, the ground closed without a peep behind me.

Seeing and sensing no immediate danger, I took the time to feed the Mouth another Living Eye; the last one that I had on me. I spiral staircase of solid-light appeared in front of me and I followed it to a chorus of accusations and excuses that had no apparent origin:

“This isn’t fair!”

“Why are you so mean!”

“It’s not our fault!”

“We don’t want to be here either!”

“We just want to go home!”

“They threw us out!”

“Go away!”

“We had no choice!”

“What were we supposed to do!?”

“You’re awful!”

“You’re too weak!”

“You’re too strong!”

“Stop picking on us!”

“WHAT ARE YOU?!”

With each successive - uncomfortably Human - statement it made, I was hit with stronger and stronger pulses of raw PsyEn. Unfortunately for its source - while it chipped away at my Coating somewhat - even at this range, it was unable to penetrate the Mouth’s infestation of my Mind. I climbed step by step through it all with a blunderbuss in my right hand and my sword in my left. And when I took my last step-

I found myself face to face with the Outsider.

It sat in a large, simple wood cradle atop a bedding of unidentifiable organic matter. It had a slimy, black, tubular body maybe half a meter in diameter and a meter and a half tall. On the top of its slug-like body, there were two dozen appendages that were perhaps fingers width, but inconsistent in length. Over half of these small finger-like tendrils became disproportionately thicker to the size of an octopus tentacle by the end of their several meter span. At the end of these larger tentacles were thirteen people of varying age, size, and health. The tentacles were

next. The Outsider appeared to shed iridescent tears and the bodies behind us screamed their nonsense. We drove forward through pitiable pulses of Psychic Energy and - holding its right eyelid open with our offhand - plunged our right hand into its eye socket. We yanked the massive eye out of its body. As it writhed in pain, our other hand took its left eye out. Our- **My** breath came in deep, violent heaves.

Eat.

The Mouth - having done the work of acquiring its own meal - demanded that I feed it. The Outsider was still twitching in its crib... If shooting it, stabbing it, slashing it, and exenterating it wouldn't kill it... Maybe eating the eye would?

Please! Don't eat us. It had said.

Fear is a very transparent emotion.

It always tells you how best to hurt someone.

With that, I brought my right hand up to the Mouth and it began its feast in a frenzy. As if it were still somehow connected, the Outsider started writhing anew, seemingly *feeling* the pain of its disembodied eye being devoured. It chewed and slurped and popped and sipped out of my hand, I felt my right hand practically reaching inside the Mouth so that it didn't miss a single bit of it. And-

I fell to my knees. Waves of warmth washed over me.

I felt si-

No?

I-

I felt... *amazing*.

I was... **full**.

My vision wavered as I was brought to tears, I heard laughter and looked around for its source... only to realize that it was coming from my own mouth. I barely noticed that the tower was **shaking** uncontrollably. I looked down at the crib and the Outsider stared sightlessly back at me, its body beginning to calcify. The tower was shaking around us, so I pulled out my handgun with my free - albeit slimy - hand and pumped two more shots into the Outsider.

I guess that's it, then.

I suddenly found myself in a freefall as the solid-light platform that the crib had been on disappeared; likely having been maintained by the Outsider itself. I Reinforced myself and tanked the three-ish story fall well enough, keeping a hold of the other eye in my left hand. Not that I could drop it if I **wanted** to - and I certainly did - as the Mouth was controlling my grip on it.

With no other option, I opened up my empty extra ammo pouch and slipped the viscous organ into it. With that out of the way, the gravity of my situation started to settle in.

Without the solid light platforms, there would be *no way* down.

Smaller rocks were starting to fall above me and I ran up to the once again open hole where the platform had originally landed and saw-

Webs.

Like... **the** Webs up above. But much smaller and so much more... corporeal than they'd ever looked. One strand just within arms reach stood out to me in particular and something made me reach out and strum it gently. Just then, the walls adjacent to me broke and fell towards me. They smashed into each other and formed a protective pyramid above me. I took this brief moment of respite from the rocks falling above me to focus on discerning the pattern in the various strands. Maybe my Mind was overwhelmed with the hopelessness of my situation, or perhaps it was the new insight I'd acquired from consuming The Outsider's eye... but the plan felt so much more *simple* now.

After several moments, I jumped out over the hole, let myself fall for several seconds, and reached out for what I **knew** was the correct *Silk Road*.

Amber

"Kindly tell me they are both dead." By the Blood *everything* had already hurt, the earthquake that emanated from the collapsing tower had *not* helped anything.

"Why *both*?"

"When thinking wishfully, it is imperative to keep the scales balanced somewhat. Even if we lose something from Reina Tethas' death - which I **do not** think we do - this entire *planet* gains tremendously from Evelyn Vandree's death."

"Is it really **that** wishful to think that throwing nearly an entire capital city's worth of psionic monstrosities would be enough to kill her?"

"**Extremely** wishful."

"...Yikes. Well... I hear way in the distance the striking of a hammer against PsyMetal. Very rhythmic... There are a couple small pockets of people who seem to be moving about... but not a lot. I'm hearing a lot of grinding of stone and glass around the collapsed tower... Fire off the G.T.F.O Signal, maybe there is a Hand or two that the Spear Saint *didn't* kill." Iris was standing on the edge of a rooftop, Reinforcing her hearing and trying to gather any intel on Reina Tethas and Evelyn Vandree's whereabouts. If she found that Reina was still alive, but wounded, we would consider a brief rescue operation. If she found Evelyn was still alive, but *heavily* wounded, we would go finish her off. Even if we got *nothing* else out of this mission... killing The Doctor would make it all worth it.

“Good call,” I pulled out the smoke signal gun, paused a beat for Iris to *Silence* it, and fired it off, “*Silence* around me as well, I want-”

“-Ah! I hear coughing from near the fallen tower. Sounds like Reina.”

“No Doctor?”

“No Doctor.” Damn. I **do not** believe for a second that Evelynn is dead.

“Well... shall we retrieve her?”

Reina

“**Tethas**. Wake up.” I snapped awake violently to a pain in my scalp. Amber had yanked me up into a seated position by my hair. I slapped her hand away and shook the fog from my head. I barely remembered what happened, but I could feel an unnatural gravity coming from the pouch that held the Outsider’s other eye. Iris and Amber were staring down at me with some mixture of emotions that overall resembled surprise; their Coatings were back to their basal states.

“Not gonna lie, super shocked you actually succeeded.” Iris commented after several moments of silence.

“Yeah. *Thanks*.” These two *really* didn’t think highly of me at all, did they?

“Any chance you noticed The Doctor being dead on your way out of there? Also, how *did* you manage to get out of there.”

“Evelynn? I haven’t seen her. I assumed she would be waiting out here when I finished up there.”

“So you don’t think she’d die from her part in all this either. *Joy*.” Iris turned away from me at that and cupped her hands around her ears, listening for any approaching persons.

“Not likely. But we three should get out of here while we have a chance. I’m sure Evelynn is somewhere in this city doing something *awful* to **someone**.”

“We have to meet up with the other Hands - if there are any left - and then we shall move out. You are on your own. Finding and checking on you is as far as I am willing to extend this alliance.”

“Tch. *Fine by me*.” Honestly I was as sick of this woman’s attitude as I’m sure she was of me. And that aside, I needed to-

“Oof! That was **exhausting** wasn’t it?” All three of us flinched at the sound of Evelynn’s voice. She had not ‘approached’ in the traditional sense, but simply appeared out of thin air atop a pile of debris. She was completely drenched in blood from head to toe with the exception of her gloveless hands. Her back was turned to us as she focused on the rising Sun to the East, “I’m quite glad that the plan went off without a hitch, quite glad... Good job everyone! It truly is useful to know such dangerous people.”

Evelynn held up a mason jar to the rising sun and - squinting at it - I saw that it contained calcified pieces of the dead Outsider. So she must have been digging around the collapsed Tower this whole time. I shakily stood to my feet while Evelynn marveled at the alien being's remains. I activated my Third Eye and saw what I suspected: for the first time since I'd met her, Evelynn was low on Psychic Energy. Not only that, she did not appear to be actively channeling any Magic from her limbs and none of her *Phantom Limbs* were out.

This... was our chance, right?

I lifted my handgun - which still had four shots in it - and pointed it at her back while she was still talking to herself. I glanced to my left at Iris who was still on one knee a few meters to my left, who was looking at me wide-eyed. She turned her head to look back at Amber who was similarly surprised for but a moment, then nodded her head affirmatively. A *Silence* orb instantly appeared over my gun and I immediately squeezed the trigger four times in rapid succession, aiming right for her back.

Just then, a black and red blur flew across my line-of-sight, followed by a crash and a cloud of dust.

"Welp. I suppose I expected *someone* to do **something**. I'm actually *very* impressed that it was **you** though, Reina." I bit my cheek in frustration as the dust cleared and saw - standing between us and Evelynn - was Takos. The oversized, pointed hat that the monster typically wore drifted to the ground like the dust around it. Standing at full height for the first time since I had met the monster, it had to be at *least* 3 meters tall and for the first time its full face and head was exposed. Its deep red skin seemed to be pulled excessively taut over an oversized skull; as if two different skulls had been stitched together. His red arms hung too low and I felt a chill run down my spine as I recalled its enormous hand nearly crushing my head almost a year ago.

I heard a scuffle off to the side as Iris and Amber readied themselves for combat once more. We had never discussed any of this, but they seemed to agree that this might be the best opportunity we *ever* get to deal with Evelynn. Stepping just in front of Takos, Evelynn - with a blue right eye that almost seemed on fire - glanced at the two incredibly dangerous women off to my left, skeptically appraising them before letting out a sharp sigh. Her blue flaming right eye cooled to a simple blue tint of her iris and she glanced up and over her shoulder at Takos.

"This much should be enough. Take care of those two: don't kill them, but get close; there's something I want from them. Meanwhile, Reina and I need to have a little... *talk*." She returned her gaze to me at her last word and stepped in front of Takos; four *Phantom Limbs* unfolded themselves from her back. I slammed my last clip into my gun and drew my blade, Cladding it with as much PsyEn as I could afford to while keeping my Third Eye open, Reinforcing, and still keeping myself Coated for *any* semblance of protection it might provide against her *Dissection* Ability.

"**As if.**" I heard Amber growl as the pair darted forward - seemingly **both** using *Vanity* - to finish off the woman who was walking in *front* of her bodyguard. Just as Amber began to swing that vicious axe of hers, Takos enormous hand flashed over Evelynn's head and intercepted it,

stopping the swing cold as if she'd struck a wall. At the same time, Iris - who had taken a wider circle to get to the otherside of their target - dashed towards Evelynn and-

Takos *roared*.

It wasn't loud. In fact, I don't think it made any noise at all. But a tremendous force was emitted by the utterly silent scream that made the three of us cringe and hop backwards reflexively.

Evelynn didn't even bat an eye.

"Ah it's good to have him by my side again. There was **so** much interference with the Outsider here that I couldn't really connect with Takos; I was really quite sad. Now then. **Reina**. I suppose this has been a long time coming, hasn't it?" She raised a hand at me lazily and it oozed the glowing, fractal geometric shapes that were indicative of her Magical Focii. I zig-zagged towards her and felt the air crackle behind me as some sort of Magic effect played out where I'd been standing. I feinted a thrusting attack at her and successfully baited out two of her *Phantom Limbs*, which plunged towards me in the blink of an eye. I dove to the side and took a single shot at her which pinged off of a briefly revealed opalescent barrier

"I've always been so curious as to what you were *actually* capable of, Reina. Just what could the daughter of the legendary Lyra Tethas do in battle."

"I suppose we'll both be learning things today. I knew you were a monster among monsters, but part of me hoped you wouldn't be worth much in real combat." I couldn't waste bullets on that barrier of hers. If it was Magical in nature, then I should be able to pierce through it with PsyEn. I Focused the PsyEn Cladded around my blade into a denser, almost glass-like coating.

"Well, I **do** enjoy a good bit of *field research*. And a proper researcher goes into situations prepared. Unlike yourself..." She grimaced at me in disappointment, "I mean, even if Takos *hadn't* been watching. You still would have hit my barrier. Do you see what I did there? I didn't reveal my whole hand at once! And that way, you took another useless shot! Now you don't know whether or not I'm maintaining this barrier... because checking for it could result in a wasted bullet!" I went in once more on the attack, trying to ignore her taunts. Her *Phantom Limbs* intercepted me and it was all I could do to dodge and parry all four of them... I just couldn't close the gap between us alone.

Alone.

Am I really *this* useless by myself?!

"And the worst part of all of this Reina? Is that I **know** you know all of this! Because you've done it before! After all, ever since we met, you've been lying about what your Ability is." I parried one last flurry and leapt away from her *Phantom Limbs*, which made no effort to chase me. I kept my gun pointed at her and did not reply.

"The existence of organisms like The Outsider. The *Wrong* places that damn *Witch* favours. The incongruence of Meteoric Iron and Magic... They are all **other** things that exist outside of our world's metaphysics. And just like those *other* things... that Mouth doesn't follow *the rules*." She

was... onto something. The Outsider had *recognized* the Mouth; had been terrified of it. Why would consuming the eye *after* it had been removed further damage the entity?

Don't let her distract you! I admonished myself. Engaging her in conversation is letting her have her way.

"Nothing? Nothing at all? This is *supposed* to be a **talk**, Reina. Not a lecture... Ugh. **Fine.**" The ground shook and shifted beneath me and I found myself once more in freefall. Evelyn split the street beneath me in an instant with her Ability and a *Phantom Limb* shot down after me and grabbed me by the face. I was whipped back up the whole she'd made in the ground and held aloft in front of her. Her mismatched blue and hazel eyes were completely devoid of any thought or feeling as I tried to cut at the transparent limb with my densely Cladded blade. Another limb simply intercepted the attack and squeezed my wrist until I dropped the sword. With no other options available, I just kept shooting at her from where I hung, the bullets pinging uselessly off of her barrier. After my empty gun clicked several times, yet another limb simply twisted it out of my grasp and dropped it to the ground..

She sighed... and her two available *Phantom Limbs* began striking me. Punching me. Slapping me. Striking me... Just beating me, but never using *Dissection* on me.

"...Knowing you... you probably thought that talking to me was just giving *me* what I wanted."

"The thing that baffles me is: you can't **not** know that your only chance of escaping this situation unscathed was to just *talk* to me! We're supposed to be lab partners!"

"...Fuck...*you.*"

"I mean... This plan was a *stretch*, sure. But we all did our parts! We all made it work! We could have all gone our separate ways, no problem at all!" She glanced over at the now unsettlingly quiet battle that had been happening off to the side, "Did you all *really* think you were anywhere near my level? Did you think that tearing through thousands of mindless, automated *samples* was going to *'tire me out'*? Unbelievable." She continued to vent her frustrations at me in the form of swinging *Phantom Limbs*. This abuse continued for what felt like minutes, but in retrospect, she probably wouldn't have bothered keeping it up for that long. Eventually, my Third Eye, Reinforcement, and Coating all failed me and she finally tossed me to the ground.

"...Dammit...Why... won't you *kill* me?!" I was completely tapped out. My PsyEn was hanging on by a thread and the physical fatigue was overwhelming. I could barely keep my head off the ground and had no choice but to curse the wet, cracked stonework in *Her* stead.

"Oh Reina... we've been over this before, haven't we? If there were even a *single* other one of you... well, you know the rest, right? But unfortunately you **do** keep misbehaving." I heard her footsteps stop right in front of me and a - now invisible to me - *Phantom Limb* tipped my head upwards uncomfortably, forcing me to look at her looking down on me, "And while I'm not so foolish as to sacrifice a valuable specimen **just** because it nipped at me but... such behavior ought to be *punished*, don't you think? I mean, have you *ever* stopped to think about why you are **always** losing? Losing to me. Losing to them," She gestured at Iris and Amber; the two of

them bloodied, battered, broken, and suspended in the air from Takos' hands, "Losing to monsters. And of course, Losing to that Mouth living in your head?" She once more wore a mask of sympathy as she looked down on me, hands casually in the front pockets of her blood-drenched hoodie.

"Here's a hint: it's the same reason why you won't talk to me when I'm clearly showing you mercy... It's because you *think* you're a **hero**. I *knew* you'd come running into danger if I could get a notice to you. After all, that's what *heroes* do, right? Don't get me wrong, I *do* admire how you believe there is a certain way things *ought* to be done. And the best part is: you can't even stick to your own order of operations! And that's fine! I was *counting* on it, in fact. You think laterally, you sneak around, you ally with the violent and consort with monsters. Now look at you: battered and broken once again because of your poor decision making. A decision - let me remind you - that was to shoot your *recent ally* in the back." She reached with her own hand and cupped my cheek gently.

"You're not a hero, Reina. You're just a **sore loser**."

I felt her rummage around my belt and remove the pouch where I was storing the Outsider's left eye.

"Ugh... this was *not* properly stored... But I suppose it's the best you could do. I assume the Mouth ate the other one. I'll have to ask you about that later."

"...G-give it-"

"Shush. None of you get to make demands. You see - Takos, put them down - consider what I take here to be a transaction. Reina... well, you know I won't be ready to sack you until I've learned everything I can from your experiences... So *do* try to take better care of yourself going forward." She walked away from me towards Iris and Amber and started poking around them and their nearby bags.

"Ah! Here they are! I've always been *very* curious about the nature and composition of Drax blood. I saw a couple of the other Hands crush these stones to try to do some combination of Blood and Spatial Magic, so I figured they must be made of at least *some* Drax blood. Unfortunately, all the Hands I came across had been completely fried by the Spear Saint, so that was really frustrating... But with that, we can consider this little debt settled as well!" She had taken some small, dark wooden boxes from the two fallen women. Amber groaned in protest, somehow still conscious despite it all.

"Well then girls, until next time!"

As her footsteps faded away along with my consciousness, the last words I heard were:

"What a fun day!"

Iris

“An *Outsider*, you say?”

“Yes. It-”

I cut myself off from Amber’s explanation of events. We were in separate beds in the Isolde Manor infirmary. It had been a couple of weeks since the curb stomping we suffered at the hands of Evelynn and her monster. The last four Hands who had not been slaughtered by the Spear Saint or Twisted by the Outsider located us by the smoke signal we had fired off before our final battle. They got us - as well as Reina Tethas - out of the city and back home. After we got out of the broken country, we kinda just tossed Reina into the first inn we encountered; I figured we owed her *that* much for killing The Outsider.

Shit always gets really fucking weird around that woman... I’d prefer to never meet her again.

A pillow came flying at me and I snatched it out of the air while dropping the *Silence* bubble that surrounded me, “Sup?”

“***I said...***” The Archivist began with undisguised annoyance, “Do you have anything to add concerning the Outsider or the Doctor? Your report will be necessary for bookkeeping purposes.”

“Like Amber probably told you: we were unable to approach the Tower. Even while we were protecting our Minds... the Outsider’s vocabulary kept slipping inside our heads... *The Tower on the Horizon*... I mean shit, even Tethas was calling it that.”

“That... is concerning...”

“Yeah... I guess Reina would be the one that would have actual intel on The Outsider.

“...And you *left* her- Ugh. Nevermind. And The Doctor?”

“Tch... She was... ***I’ve*** certainly never encountered a Human **that** powerful. She wielded Magic like a... *Witch*.” I wanted to say ‘like a Drax’... But I felt that *that* wouldn’t go over so well.

“And the Construct?”

“We couldn’t touch it. And she was using her right eye as a Focal Point *while* fighting Tethas with both Magic *and* her Abilities.” I suppose Amber didn’t exactly have time to keep an eye on what Evelynn was doing the way I did. Amber had most of that golem’s attention for the majority of the ill-fated battle.

“It does not seem that this one can be ignored anymore... The healers will continue to monitor you two for the time being.” She turned her attention back to Amber, “Isolde will likely be here after the Circle of Eight meeting. This Operation resulted in *heavy* losses for everyone. But I am glad at the very least *you* are alive.”

“Thank you.” Ugh. I hate that they got along so well.

“Now then. What to do about Evelynn Vandree...”

Reina

Two strangers with long overcoats and vicious weapons dumped me on a bed that didn't belong to me in a room with an unfamiliar ceiling.

"Is this suitable?" One of them asked an unseen shot-caller.

"Yes... just... leave her." I heard Amber struggling to speak from outside the room, "We have... done more... than enough..."

"Think- okay?" Iris' voice barely tickled the edge of my awareness, "She- a word- *days*."

"Not. Our. Problem. She's lucky- this much." A set of keys was thrown on the bed in front of me and the door creaked shut behind them. I curled into a ball around the keys and held my head, alone for the first time since Evelynn nearly killed all of us. I had been in better shape than Iris and Amber had been... Evelynn had been excessively precise in her beating of me... hitting me where it would hurt, but not hard enough to do permanent damage. Never hitting my head which housed the Mouth that she was so interested in and never breaking a bone so that I'd be stuck there after she left.

At her mercy - figuratively and literally - as ever.

I thought I had grown in the last year since we had met. Thought I'd grown stronger, smarter, and maybe - just maybe - a tad more capable and independent. But I still just rushed in just to get mulched. It was the *right* thing to do, wasn't it? To try to stop her no matter the cost?

Is no cost too great - though - *really*?

Do I have to keep losing like this?

I *hate* this.

Everything was so much more *simple* before *She* came along.

How is she so powerful!? It's just *not fair*!

I just can't fucking beat her alone!!!

...

...

...

But...

Where exactly did I get the idea that I needed to - or really - *had* been doing it alone from? Back in Shanae, I had been working together with the Security Force to try to corner her. In Riveiranja I was constantly putting Greg at risk and even having Deirdre poke around finding strange rumors for me. And in Nancontaeul, if I had *thought* about it for a second it should have been

obvious that Evelynn would *never* be more exhausted after mowing down a city's worth of monsters than Iris and Amber would be after killing a Saint; than *I* would after killing The Outsider.

What did I think I was going to find, exactly? Some *Magical* weapon that could one shot Evelynn and Takos? Some fool-proof plan where she could be defeated without any risk to *anyone* else? Or maybe...

You're not a hero, Reina. You're just a sore loser.

Yeah... All of *that* is what a **hero** would do. And maybe just because I tried my best to do good things for people and threw myself at those that lived at other people's expense... But maybe she was right. Maybe I'm just *absolutely fucking livid* that she can toy with me however she wants, whenever she wants.

Hungry.

There was a sharp pang in both my stomach and head. As much as I wanted to keep moping on the bed, I would be in a lot more pain if I didn't answer to the Mouth's needs. The parasite that had occupied my mind for almost as long as I had; a separate yet not entity from *elsewhere*. I leaned against the door to my room and slid down it to a seated position, rummaging through my bag until I found a bottle with a Dead Eye. I couldn't stay here for too long... I could **not** let myself be caught out without any eyes left. I fed it and dealt with the death vision for the next few minutes.

I slipped out of the vision with a sigh. Having that earlier sensation of being *full* after consuming The Outsider's eye was going to *weigh* on me for a long time. I'd gone to the Plane of Dreams and Nightmares and back just to find that the real nightmare was still just the bitter reality of my relationship with Evelynn. For better or for worse, she had decided that we were in this for the long haul. She *wouldn't* kill me and I *couldn't* kill her. Somewhere in the last year I had abandoned the idea of 'bringing her to justice'. What could possibly **contain** someone of her power?

I guess *I* just killed the one thing that actually *did* contain her.

But that *definitely* was the right thing to do. Because some costs **are** too great.

I'm too weak to do this on my own and I'm not smart enough to figure out the answer on my own...

I guess I need to head home, then.

I need to talk to Mom and Dad.