

“*Satisfaction.*”

The cannibalism had been a necessary safety measure.

Arbiters were meant to track down and eliminate dissenters, those who might expose their existence to humans; that was the purpose for which they were bred for. Libra was no different than any of her contemporaries. Usually, this was just a matter of making a clean, straightforward kill. Pushing a stake into someone’s chest cavity wasn’t enough to do anything past paralyzing, but it *did* stop someone from squirming when Libra removed their head from their bodies.

Although, she was fairly certain none of the other Arbiters had gone as far as she had to tonight to carry out their task.

She’s done it before, though only a handful of times. It was risky—there was a chance that she’d lose her mind to the victims as she drank down their very souls, absorbing the essence into her psyche. By definition, it would be possession. But she was stronger than the whelps she was sent after, and hadn’t heard so much as a whisper invade her thoughts since she began flirting with the act. A small part of her wondered if her bosses—Elders who had been alive for more millennia than she could comprehend—played up the danger, just to keep everything orderly. She wouldn’t be surprised; Libra’s world ran on secrets.

The asphalt inside the parking garage will be permanently stained with a burn mark from where the target fell, combusting on death. Libra tore his throat out with her teeth, elongated canines pushing through the column of his esophagus easily. He’d put up a decent fight, for someone from such a watered-down bloodline. She remembers the way he’d tried to flash his

fangs at her in warning; small pathetic things that they were, they never stood a chance compared to Libra's impressive incisors.

Perhaps she could have killed him in a way that didn't open herself up to potential consequences, but that would have taken too long for her liking. She saw little point in wasting more time on dissenters than they deserved.

She runs her tongue across her bloodied teeth as she pulls a burner phone from the internal pocket of her suit jacket, cleaning up any drops that may have remained. Her superiors conceded that sending a vague confirmation text was fine, so as to avoid potential interceptions of an actual call. She didn't particularly care either way; Arbiters occupied a strange place in between *valued* and *expendable*. Her life only meant as much as the work she was able to carry out.

---

"It was that fast?"

Quinn is young, still curious and amazed by everything she encounters in *their* world. It would be irritating to Libra, if she didn't pity the girl so much.

"He fought back," she carefully soothes.

*It wouldn't have made a difference either way in the outcome, but perhaps she likes the idea of the struggle?*

"Oh, that's fine, I don't care about that." She's quick to dismiss it, but there's a catch in her voice, like it's being forced out of her. She's still too chipper and human for the reality of her existence now.

Quinn stays at least two steps behind Libra, just in her periphery. She's clutching a stack of files to her chest that contains sheets with names, photographs, records of transgressions, and deaths. Libra is about to add another to the stack, once they make it to her office.

"I'm just always so impressed with how *efficient* you are," she says earnestly. "Almost makes me wish I was *your* intern instead of the office secretary's, you know?"

"I don't know, actually," she says mildly. "If you were qualified, that's what would have been assigned to you. Bookkeeping is vital. You should be satisfied with that knowledge."

Quinn clams up after that, painfully aware that she's shut down any attempts at conversation that may have been granted to her. They arrive at Libra's office under a cloud of one-sided awkward silence.

Record keeping *was* important, which is why she was so meticulous about her reports. Running a discrete city of the undead was surprisingly bureaucratic and dull. Their government offices were just as plain as humanity's were, the paint on the walls just as dull and office chairs comparatively uncomfortable. With Libra's kind, the term 'cut-throat' was simply no longer metaphorical.

Once inside, the act of signing and notarizing is quick. Libra uses a pen with a separate inkwell, a weighty thing that she still considers to be a frivolous purchase. But it made pleasing scratching sounds whenever she signed death certificates, and the inkwell looked as if he belonged on her antique desk. Unspoken frivolities for her unusual success rate as an Arbiter.

Quinn fidgets while they wait for the ink to finish drying on the page. Regular office printer paper had the worst rate of absorption for Libra's pen, without enough of a tooth to let the pigment settle onto the page in a timely fashion. It averaged out to an approximate thirty seconds of waiting time before it could be put back into Quinn's folder.

Libra sits in silence, unfocused stare resting on the bookkeeper. She's not really looking at her, but Quinn can't tell the difference. Several short months ago, she would have been just another potential prey animal for Libra and her kind. There was no doubt some part of her subconscious mind that still recognized that. Or, barring even that, then Quinn also knew that they were far from equals.

Quinn clears her throat, bringing Libra to attention. She blinks, and the room comes back into focus.

"Is there something amiss with the report?"

"No!" She shakes her head with a little too much enthusiasm, as if she wasn't quite expecting her interruption to be acknowledged. She's too stiff and uncomfortable to sit, and Libra isn't going to pull a chair out for her or insist.

"I was just wondering if you were... alright?" She hedges. "Not that I don't think you are, or anything like it. Or that you got hurt—I know this man wasn't exactly a high-level threat, so I wouldn't think that—you just seem like you're somewhere far away, that's all."

Quinn finishes with a wince, having tripped over her words and stepped past professional boundaries. It's another wave of pity that keeps Libra from snapping at the girl, which she's sure is the first sign of becoming soft.

"I'm fine," she says—*thinks* she says. A pulse reverberates through the atmosphere at the moment she opens her mouth, churning through the air and bringing everything out of focus. The warm light overhead flickers in time with the disturbance. She's not sure if she actually managed to speak through it all.

Quinn doesn't seem affected by it.

*Did I stutter? Stammer?*

*Why is she looking at me that way?*

“I—are you sure?”

“Are you questioning my perception?” she snaps.

*That* makes the bookkeeper wince.

“Definitely not!” She protests. “But if something happened and it’s not in the report... your record is incredible, Libra. No one wants to see it come to a grinding halt because of an incident that was swept under the rug.”

Another pulse. The light flickers out 2.6 seconds longer than the last time. It’s brighter and cooler when it settles again. The shadows in the corners of the room feel deeper. More cavernous.

Alive.

Quinn asks another question, but there’s a distortion tugging at the edges of her voice. Libra feels her mouth tugging down at the corners, a crease forming between her brows. The harder she concentrates on trying to figure out just where exactly Quinn’s words are going *wrong*, the worse it becomes.

“What are you implying?” She asks the question as a way to try and focus herself. Radio static rushes through Libra’s head—she feels like she’s rapidly switching between channels on a country road that’s too far away from the tower to receive properly.

*Come on down to our Premium Used Car Lot and see—!—Try the new spicy chicken sandw—!—Have you or a loved one been diagnosed with—!—Today’s weather in the downtown core will be—!—Unknown man seen being attacked in a Hospital parking garage—!—Woman in white suit—!—Blood on teeth—!—No traces found of body—!—Police are—!—Police are*

*searching—!—Witnesses say—!—Tore out and ate—!—Flesh—!—Not allowed—!—Not allowed—!—Done for—!*

“Miss Libra?”

The radio cuts. Libra counts the heavy *tok–tok–toks* of her antique wall clock. One, two, one, two, one, two.

Quinn asks her is she’s alright again. Or she’s asking if she heard the answer to her question.

“Repeat that.” The syllables form too-sharp in her mouth, like she’s never used the words before.

“I asked if you were sure anything happened. Or didn’t happen.”

*Fidgeting again. Quinn is biting her lip, looking like she would rather be anywhere but here. Is the door locked? Have I remembered the latch? No, but that’s alright. Oh, yes, it should be fine, I’ve done this before. Done it before—done it before—did it tonight. God, she’s so new here. Talented. But still replaceable. Should I?*

Quinn interrupts her racing thoughts again. “You don’t seem well. Or yourself.”

When she looks up again at the bookkeeper’s eyes, something isn’t quite correct with them. The colour is the same when they flicker at her. The gaze is too steady. It doesn’t match the nervous questions or the shuffling feet. It reminds Libra of the man she consumed.

“I’ll *bet* it does,” something says caustically from below. Carefully, she keeps staring straight ahead at Quinn. Watches her outline against the backdrop of her office, counting the false breaths she takes to maintain a deceptively human facade. The voice is from the man on the page—the signed confirmation of a kill. Her signature, his blood spilled. A promise made between two monsters.

“You know what this is, don’t you?” asks the headshot on the page.

“I am perfectly in control,” she asserts. Whether it’s to her shrinking violet of a companion or the disembodied voice of the dead man, she can’t say.

“You did it one too many times, you know. Got cocky. Or sloppy. Said it yourself—I’m a *fighter*, aren’t I?”

Lecherous and laced with innuendo, she chances a rapid glance downwards. Nothing there—the voice has moved on to another location, leaving only an echo behind to track.

“I haven’t lost anything,” she forces out. Libra’s jaw is tightening, muscles locking down hard onto nothing. The sound of the clock is replaced by the tapping of her nails on the desk—since when did she even *have* that clock, anyway?

Quinn—and it’s just her this time, no trace of anything parasitic in her psyche—has the grace to seem confused. It’s tempered with her growing discomfort with the situation (or *fear*, as some might venture to call it).

“I never said anything like that,” she says with an uncertain smile.

Libra’s hand picks up its pace.

*Tap. Tap tap.*

“I supposed that wasn’t your accusation, no,” Libra says in a voice that’s too-casual.

*Tap. Taptaptap. Tap tap.*

“It doesn’t have to be,” says the male voice again. “You *know* what she means.”

Quinn’s outline vibrates again, and the radio static picks up. The airwaves become more and more muddles, skipping through stations at a breakneck pace until Libra can barely pick out what the voices are saying. They layer over each other, fighting for supremacy.

*Taptaptaptaptaptaptap.*

Each tap of Libra's nails brings the shadowy form separating from Quinn into its own existence. It dances with the static, twitching violently every time a new voice comes in through the cacophony.

*Taptaptaptap tap tap.*

“You know what the saying is, don't you? That bullshit one from sanctimonious racist vegans and the dumb cunts behind PETA's advertising? Yeah, yeah, all those *enlightened* ones—just like your bosses. You are what you eat.”

Quinn's borrowed voice is grating, the sound of metal being pulled through a grinder while it mixes in with the man and the radio's screeching white noise.

“Oh, come on, you know how true that is for our kind. We're all told not to fuckin' do it—you are what you eat, so you eat some criminal deviant, some scum who never should have gotten a pair of fangs in the first place, because if he were worthy of them, he'd have already been chosen *special*, right? Just like you. You were chosen. Strong, fast! Obedient!”

*Tap! Tap! TaptaptaptaptaptAPTAPTAPTAPTAP!*

Libra is overwhelmed with the instinct to *run*. Her limbs twitch, injected with a corpse's memory of adrenaline and the memory of what it means to survive. The hand that isn't drumming atop her desk—*Rosewood!* Cries out the part of her that still cares about such specificity—is latched onto one of her thighs. Her nails dig in and start gouging trenches that overflow red into the meat through barriers of silk and muscle.

It's laughing. The shadow is laughing, and there's nothing she can do about it. Her eyes are *so* dry—had she blinked at all since this whole thing started?

“So obedient!” He laughs more. The overhead light starts to hum, a pitchy noise that seems to make the filaments grow white-hot with it.



“The perfect lap dog for your bosses, meant to get out onto the streets to play executioner. Don’t they pay you well enough? Don’t your people give you vessels? So thirsty, even now—you drained me dry, Libra, and now you’ve really done it. Your name? Mine. Your body? Mine, unless you feel like tearing it apart by sharing.”

“I’ll kill you,” she hisses. “I’ll kill you *again*, and *again*, and *again*!”

“As many times as it takes?” It asks, too eager for her answer. A grin splits where the mouth should be, revealing a cavernous depth of *nothing*.

Did shadows have teeth? Did blood run like saliva down the pillars of bone, leaking down, down, down, all over Quinn and her papers and the desk and floor? Did shadows get hungry—hungry like Libra did?

Like she still was?

“Your mouth is dry,” it taunts, letting the blood fall out in thick, sensual strings. “If I expose my neck for you this time, will you make sure to at least jack me off this time? *Pretty* please? It was just *this* close to perfect when you killed me first. I’ve been thinking of it ever since, right there in the back of your mind.”

*TAPTAPTAPTAPTAPTAPTAPTAPTAPTAPTAP.*

Libra digs harder into her leg, trying to bring herself back to normal, but it’s not *working*.

*My God, is this why we’re not supposed to cannibalize?*

“Clean kills only,” the shadow agrees. “Sorry you had to find out this way—better luck next time!”

Libra’s jaw cliches hard enough to shatter three molars. She feels the splinters burrow into her cheeks instead of any pain that makes sense.

An inhuman screech tears its way free of her lungs. Her bloodied palm makes fantastic leverage when she vaults across the—*Antique! Rosewood!*—desk. She’s going to do it again. She’s going to make sure he stays dead. *She will!* She will.

“Want to play again?” It’s still screeching, delighted at the outburst. Quinn is no longer anywhere to be seen—the shadow has swallowed her whole, and Libra no longer cares for the collateral damage. So what? One more dead fledgling—*so what?* Quinn was replaceable. They would have her desk filled by tomorrow night. Someone else just as pathetic and weak would be fluttering around the office hallways, cowering under the gaze of creatures older and more powerful than they could comprehend. Beautiful, terrifying predators like Libra.

Libra, who was treated well by her superiors.

Libra, who could finish a job without sullyng her suits.

Libra, who has to claw off her own ears to *make it stop, make it stop, make the noise stop!*

Libra, who is on her hands and knees in her office on the second-to-the-top floor of the internationally generic highrise downtown. Who is viciously dismembering the shadow of a man she killed this evening, a man who has decided his final crime would be squatting in her consciousness. A man who is happy to lay back as his shadow self and let her pull his guts out to decorate the walls with as if they were party streamers, because he knows that it’s not really *him* that’s getting torn to shreds.

After all, shadows can’t talk.

Shadows don’t bleed.

But bookkeepers do.

---

“No kidding? Just lost her mind on the girl?”

“Completely. I heard she cannibalized one of the dissenters and ended up possessed.

Secretary was just in the wrong place at the wrong time and got herself killed in the crossfire.”

“What was her name again? Kiera? Carly?”

“The Arbiter? That was Libra.”

“No, the secretary. I can’t remember her name.”

“Something like that. It doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Yeah, maybe if you aren’t on the cleaning staff. I heard it was a nightmare in that office.

I mean, smelled fucking *fantastic*—”

“—Yeah, fresh blood will usually do that—”

“—but those walls were just completely painted. Everything needs to be burned, probably.”

“Too bad. I was going to ask if she was planning to get rid of her desk any time soon.

Good taste in furniture.”

“The secretary?”

“The Arbiter.”

“Oh yeah. Can’t believe they had to put her down like a dog. She was pretty good at what she did, I heard.”

“It’s whatever. She was a freak around *us*, somehow. And now she’s a dead freak.

They’ve got someone ready to take up the title probably.”

“Should probably be expecting them soon, then.”

“Tomorrow night at the latest, I’d say. You know how it is.”

“At least the higher ups are consistent about *that* policy.”

“True. At least there’s that.”