

“Never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down...” Liam sang a jaunty tune, focused on the mind-shade’s form as he did. It was like etching a mural, where he was making sure to record every single one of the most annoying songs he’d encountered.

A mind-shade was a kind of symbiotic creature that Maridah had created back when she’d been a part of the pantheon. Its existence was mostly within the planes of existence that were superimposed to the physical one. In a way one could claim it existed within theoretical realms, such as the reflection within mirrors, though the mind-shade sat snugly within more psychic-inclined spaces.

Though to detect it would be near impossible, as a creature made by the Goddess of Secrets, it had an uncanny ability to mimic the impressions sentients gave off. More specifically, the mind of its host. At the cost of needing one less hour of sleep, Liam now had a cosmic-horror monster coiled around him, a “fake” brain that psychic probes would dwell into and poke around.

Liam’s mind was completely and entirely immune to getting probed.

It also gave him a bit of protection against other forms of mental fuckery, but overall it kept his thoughts secure.

At least as far as the mind-shade wasn’t too exhausted or injured.

If there was one problem with the mind-shade, it was that its ability to mimic the thoughts of its host was an extremely slow process. Anyone trying to read Liam’s mind would get a very obvious sense that something was blocking them out, and that it was doing it by blasting out a list of the best troll-hits the internet had to offer.

“Note to self, spend an hour a day giving the mind-shade snacks.” He muttered.

The mind-shade could do plenty on its own, but at the end of the day it was meant to be about a little less smart than a dog. Just one with a very good memory. It was almost like trying to make a computer program that had only the bare-bones structure. Liam had to fill out the library, and then determine how to layer things around.

With time and a little bit of love and attention, the critter would become an extension of himself.

“What in the torturous hells is that gibberish?” Bunny cried out, popping into existence next to him.

“You stepped into my nyan-cat theme song,” Liam said. “Next up is the Crazy Frog song, then there’s the ‘It’s Wednesday my dudes’ compilation, followed by ‘What does the Fox say’, the ‘Pen Pineapple Apple Pen’, and many, many, MANY more.”

“You’re not making any sense.” The aspect glared. “Wait, it’s a mind-shade!”

“It’s weaponized memes, that’s what it is.” He cackled evilly. “And these are just the songs, the deeper layers will be so much worse because they’ll include images and mind-games. There’s going to be so much Shrek and Sonic in there.” Rubbing his hands together, he kept chuckling. “All those things I should’ve never googled... I’ve got material for months!”

Bunny took half a step away, warily eyeing the manic shark-like smirk. “I think you’re having a bad reaction to the mind-shade.”

“Oh, I’m reacting exactly how I should!” He laughed, borderline hysterical. “Having this means I no longer have to worry about whether some God-damned power-tripping manipulative divine asshole is sending mind-readers my way or not!”

One could even argue that it should’ve been part of the reward packet from getting Maridah that massive chunky piece of divinity that she was currently gnawing on. But he wasn’t dumb, he knew it was a massive upgrade compared to having just an enchantment based mind-blocker. The only option that might have been better than this was exclusive to a long-since dead God, so this was as good as it got without Liam developing his own options.

It also gave him a considerable peace of mind.

As much as he trusted Maridah, he also wanted hard lines on the ground that he could be absolutely certain she wouldn’t get through. At least not without him knowing about it. The mind-shade was a living creature, unlike a divine tool, its powers were its own. It lacked aspects of divinity, thus being entirely disconnected from the Goddess’ direct influence. She could still shred it or brute-force her way through, but at that point Liam would know.

“Should I just... leave you to this, then?” Bunny appeared hesitant about the whole thing.

“I’m about done setting up the basic playlist.” He muttered.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to be this blatant?”

“I know that in some cases the better protection is to just not draw attention, sure. But I still prefer some mental privacy.” He poked his temple. “I just don’t like the idea of anyone being able to just look in here without my knowing.”

“Cultural thing?”

“There’s no such thing as mind-readers in my world. That means that I’ve spent a lifetime under the assumption my thoughts were my own in their entirety.”

“That... explains so much.” Bunny hopped onto his shoulder. “Anyway, I’m here as a reminder you promised to participate in Aisha’s rites.”

Liam was a bit surprised that Bunny had bothered to use Aisha’s name, but kept the comment entirely to himself. “I thought they’d wait until nightfall... well, I guess I do have time to spare.” His eyes trailed off towards the backpack. “Preparations seem to be ready anyway. Just need confirmation of who’s coming with me.”

Bunny grumbled something under her breath as he followed his way towards the gardens. “Stupid teleportation restrictions.”

“It’ll only be a couple weeks. Maybe a month? If we reach two months, we’re better off coming back.”

“This sucks.” Bunny mumbled dejectedly. “I could go, but I’d need to be weakened so much I’d basically be useless. Unlike Origin, I can’t just project myself remotely, I’d need to be fully present.”

“Aw, even if you were no smarter than an actual rabbit, ninety percent of your appeal is how cute you are. That won’t go away.”

She bapped the back of his head with her ear, pouting at him but not denying the statement. “So how are you going to play the rites out? It’s not like you’re joining...”

“Origin and I hashed things out, since she wanted to set down some lines now before her following actually grows. Officially speaking, I am a ‘Voice’, meaning I’m sort of an advisor.” Liam chuckled as he shook his head. “I’m not a part of the Whisperer’s cult, but I am allied to it. It’s Origin’s way of acknowledging I know too much to be called an outsider, but I’m also not stamping on the three-eyed insignia, so this is the middle ground we worked out.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m getting there.” He waved her off. “As far as the cult is concerned, I hold no direct authority over anyone, which is great; and no one holds direct authority over me, which

is better. Any and all 'direct' authority is entirely decided case by case, and on Origin's discretion. This time around, I've volunteered to fulfill the role of Cult Elder."

Bunny gave him a long look. "You want to wear a fake beard and hooded cape."

"Of course I want to wear a fake beard and hooded cape." He chuckled. "Origin shot down the idea, though."

"Spoilsport."

"I know, right?" Waving his arms over his head, he let out a disgruntled sigh. "The only thing that matters is getting the stamp. Everything else is just needless showmanship."

"Be that as it may, Liam, customs are born from showmanship." Maridah popped into existence next to him, having taken the form of the charred dryad. "The participants must feel that the rites hold importance, to not just show respect to them, but to feel respect is due. Respect turns to belief, belief turns to reverence-

"And reverence turns to divinity." Liam rolled his eyes. "It's Aisha, and this is basically just a *'sign on the dotted line so we can work together'*."

"Is that how you view belief, Liam, as mere contractual obligation?" Her blazing eyes regarded him. "What would you describe hope as?"

"Hope?" With a frown, he looked forward, through the garden. "Hope is a medic during a cataclysm. She's down there, surrounded by too many victims, just two hours of sleep in three days, barely holding on to her sanity, yet giving it her all. All of it just to try and save one more life before she collapses."

The momentary silence was punctuated by Maridah's brows creasing ever so slightly.

"You believe hope is self-destructive."

"If you're running on hope, then you ran out of fumes a week ago," Liam said. "Anyway, not sure what hope has to do with having some show and pomp."

"I suppose it does not matter. This took an unexpected turn." The Goddess was pensive as her fiery eyes looked at him. "How would you run things were you the God and not I?"

"That's a trap question, if I ever saw one." He laughed.

"I am genuinely curious," Maridah said. "You have a grasp on how I structured things, would you not have feedback?"

"From where I stand, how a God organizes their religion and followers is deeply personal. It's meant to reflect and empower their divinity, it's why most budding Gods

that take aspects of chaos will fight tooth and nail against giving their cult a structure or official hierarchy.”

“Avoiding the question, I see.” The corner of her mouth curved up into a half-smile.

“I know better than to tell a gardener how to run their garden.” He chuckled. “My only advice is that you consider that most new budding Gods aren’t going to be friendly, and many mortals are going to not be very fond of Gods in general because of it. I’m not a big fan of monotheism, but it might be a viable option for you.”

Maridah’s features froze as she blinked, expression slowly turning blank with only slightly wide eyes. She looked just about ready to drill him to elaborate on that little snippet of information, but they’d arrived at the back-end of the garden, where a blackened tent had been set up.

The Goddess gripped Liam’s shoulder. “I’ll let you do the thing if you tell me **exactly** what you meant.”

“Asteroid’s going to choke out the planet in more mana than it’s ever seen, which means every two-bit spirit and monster is going to gorge on power. There’s going to be a brutal amount of survival-of-the-fittest going on, and with all that aether lying around, mortals will have the means and incentive to learn how to kill these new violent Gods.” He extended his hand. “Now, beard, please.”

“What of the previous Gods? What of the Triumvirate throne?” The tone grew darker, there was even a slight desperate edge to it.

“Won’t tell you, it’s a surprise. Our plans already account for events as best we can under our given circumstances.” He smiled, the amused grin of a pyromaniac that held a lit match. “Suffice to say that the playing field will be more level soon.”

Maridah snapped her fingers twice. The first one replaced his clothes with an overflowing ebony cloak covered in golden embroidered eyes that blinked and shifted. Underneath the cloth, he now wore a tunic that was so dark it was practically a silhouette. The second snap placed upon his face a porcelain mask, one with a long flowing white beard that reached all the way to his ankles.

Bunny summoned a reflective image, and Liam grumbled. “Dammit, you made this look distinguished.” With a defeated sigh, he twisted this way and that, marveling a little at how comfy the garments felt. Even the fake beard was smooth and soft, as if made of spider-silk. “Could I ask for a dozen pieces of underwear to be made out of this?”

“That’s a privilege reserved to an Elder.” Maridah chided, amusement bleeding through her as she stepped into the tent, her appearance shifting to become a heavily robed figure, every feature hidden in darkness.

Bunny stayed outside.

The inside of the tent was pitch black save a single soft orb of blue light that was suspended a little over the ground. Aisha was inside, dressed in a simple cotton toga, kneeling with her head bowed low, hands clasped in front of her. Liam found he didn’t much like seeing her like this, but the sooner the rite was over then the sooner they could move on.

“What is your name?” He called out, following the standard procedure.

“Aisha al-Hakim.” She answered, bowing her head slightly further.

“What is your secret, Aisha al-Hakim? Be free of your greatest burden.” He asked the second question, and with it the light on the ground split into two, taking a slightly greener hue.

Aisha winced as Maridah’s hooded figure walked around her once. The standard induction would involve a mage applying pressure upon the supplicant, a role the Elder should’ve done... if said phony Elder wasn’t a mage just yet. So the Goddess had filled in that gap, dispensing some of her own presence.

The ‘official’ procedure also typically involved the applicant spending a week in absolute darkness, but they’d foregone that part since everyone was a bit too busy.

“I seek to betray the Caliphate and the Pantheon.” Aisha answered, voice straining as she swallowed heavily.

The two green lights shifted into three yellow ones, twinkling as they began to slowly spin. At first, they moved slowly, a pulsating rhythm that made the shadows dance and twist. But with every passing second it moved faster, reflecting the increasing pressure Aisha was surely experiencing.

With a slight gasp, she shuddered.

Maridah came to a stop in front of Aisha, which confused him a little, as she’d done so specifically to block his line of sight. “Look upon the truth, Aisha.” The Goddess proclaimed, opening the cape and dropping it, revealing there was nothing inside.

At the exact same time, Liam’s mask vanished, his eyes meeting Aisha’s as her deep emerald eyes were not looking at him but through him, trapped in an illusion or vision.

The yellow spinning lights silently accelerated until they became a disk, shifting to an incandescent white blinding glare that ascended from the ground, pressing against Aisha's forehead.

"Yes." The woman whispered to a voice only she could hear.

The light vanished, and Aisha slumped forward, caught in Liam's arms, right as the darkness around them began to disperse. He glanced around, confused. "Maridah, what did you do?"

"I changed the protocol a little." The Goddess answered from nowhere in particular. "Now do what you mortals normally do and celebrate or bemoan. We leave to recruit me Champion tomorrow."

Aisha's mind spun, body drenched in cold sweat, head burning. She was kneeling, the world around her spinning as an unbearable weight came down upon her and squeezed her very soul. It wasn't painful, but it made it hard to breathe. Even then, her mind was not entirely present, the darkness of the tent had been replaced.

The world was spinning, she could see it, see the world as it slowly shrunk. Aisha was flying away, rising up like a bird, soaring higher and higher. At first, she could see Doeta and the claw that was a beak. Then she flew higher, seeing the Blue Mountains as they extended far into the horizon. Then higher still and the air grew thin, darkness began to creep in despite being the middle of the day.

In a flash, she stood upon the vast nothingness, staring down at the brown and blue marble that was the world.

"There is a secret, one you know, but that you do not *know*." The Goddess' spoke to her, not through words or thoughts, but through existence and reality itself. Every grain of sand, every breath of air, each and every one spoke with a singular voice.

The multicolored pearl began to shrink, growing more distant. The moon and the sun joined it, becoming minuscule, making Aisha feel ever so insignificant. The universe could swallow her and her every concern and still not notice, everything shrunk further and further.

“You do not have faith in me.” The Whisperer spoke the cold truth. “You pray to the Pantheon, to the Merchant, not out of belief but out of habit and fear.”

Yet Aisha did not feel fear or concern. She was so small that what was her death but dust in the wind? She was insignificant, even the Gods were. Aisha knelt, looking as everything kept shrinking, further and further away. The sun was barely a mote of light by now, buried and lost in a sea of stars.

“But you do have faith in someone else, don’t you? You have found something that transcends all boundaries of logic and reason.”

In a sea of stars, the blackness of the universe swallowed it all. A blackness that swirled and stirred, contained within an inkwell. A single drop of infinity was caught at the tip of a quill, and with a stroke it turned it into an infinity of possibilities.

Standing on the page, smaller than an ant, Aisha looked up and into the eyes of the one who wrote, directly into the eyes of Liam.

“You hold doubts in your heart, whether you love him, whether you were made to feel the way you have, and whether Liam’s words of having made the world are a delusion or truth.” Maridah whispered gently, a soothing voice that trickled through Aisha like cool springwater. “I will put those doubts to rest. Belief, faith, and love are very similar in nature. A spark can be made at the hands of another, a God could easily plant that seed, but we cannot make it bloom. If you do not embrace it, nurture it, and make it your own, it will only wilt.”

Aisha knelt there, staring up at the image of Liam as he slowly scribbled entire universes into existence, his eyes holding a deeper darkness within than the very ink he put on the parchment.

“I have shown you what it means to truly believe Liam speaks the truth, that he’s made this world and every facet of it.” Maridah whispered. “Do you wish for it to be your faith? Do you want it to be your truth? Your secret?”

“Yes.” Aisha whispered hoarsely, the immensity of the realization crashing down all around her.

The illusion broke, and she collapsed into Liam’s concerned arms.

Though too exhausted to move, barely able to remain conscious, Aisha realized something was off about the world around her. Weakly looking around, trying to regain her bearings, her eyes fell on Liam. Looking at him revealed two images at once. The first was that of the pale man with only the barest hints of sunburn upon his nose,

cheeks, and ears. The second was of a figure shrouded in a darkness not unlike that of the cosmos, occupied in its entirety by countless swirling stars.

As the odd double vision returned to normalcy, Aisha was left wondering what, exactly, she'd just witnessed. Even her divination spell paled in comparison to this.

"I have given you a blessing to see secrets." Maridah's voice whispered into her thoughts. *"Use it well."*

Aisha knew of naked bribery when she saw it. But being held in the arms of a living sea of constellations, she wasn't about to complain.