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# The Knights of Erebus:

The Dagenhart Chronicles

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# Chapter 1

## Hierarchy

### i.

It's never easy being surrounded by your elders on a constant, if not daily basis. The elders of the Order of Erebus were staunch in values, their rituals, and rites of passage, and most of all they were staunchly rooted in their privilege.

With age... came *ego*.

At least with humans, the old *died* and so too with them went their rotten traditions and terrible ideas on how the future should be run and what cause to cater to... not us. Our elders were still with us and not limited to fragile forms like sweet grannies or bigoted great uncles. No, our Great-Great Grandmothers were very alive and very well. Well enough to run marathons and their own business; while simultaneously minding the business of others. And those bigoted uncles, tend to rot even the shadows and we cannot have that. We weed them out. The Order of Erebus is no place for such a human idiocracy.

Shadowmancers that is what we are and we've nothing but time. We had centuries to repair the damage of our predecessors. The darkness gives us longevity, our prowess, finesse, and damnation. Damnation for all parties involved... *A Doom Party*. Again, something that humans can escape in their lifetime. Both lifetimes, human or Shadowmancer, have their ups and downs... Regardless, Shadowmancer or Human...

*Existing is a Shit Show.*

Imagine your elders that are still walking around. Still thriving with their airs of privilege, a privilege not only afforded by old money... but ancient titles. The very

thing that gave them their arrogance was their *power*. What was a title if not a letter of entitlement? For the Knights of Erebus, we're divided by power. Aren't we all? This wasn't power by societal measure alone; it was also by physical power.

Our elders that held active positions in the Order of Erebus were on the Tribunal. A large group of our eldest on a council. Responsible for dictating how we should handle our affairs and the affairs of humans. The American Branch West held 90 of the Tribunal's strongest. Together they could darken seven neighboring cities and hold the blanket of blackness until the mid-day of the 3rd day. Their talent with the Obsidian Arts was second to none. Such fantastical finesse, ribbons of black threading and weaving through the air, through earth and flesh as if physics were a concept from a far-fetched dream. There were those that could summon beasts from their imagination to take form in this world to pillage landscapes. Others were weapon summoners, and then those that endlessly spilled horror from the depths of logic and morality; the dreaded Nightmare Machines. When they fought or rather *when they are called to fight*; it is like watching Titans carve their tales into the living earth. The Tribunal held power and stature... they had weight and presence. They were the few that held a firm grip on the reins...It's neither good nor bad... They held a firm grip and were very cautious of letting those reins fall.

Then there were our Knights... We're split into two categories. Knights and the Exalted. The Knights were the bread and butter of the Order of Erebus. Without us, there would be no Order.

The Tribunal, as strong as they are and as powerful their fortunes are; they're fucking lazy pieces of shit for the most part. To quote Eris, '*We are much more than their hands. We are not simple tools. We are Force, itself. WE alone steal the shine from the lightning. Together we are a wave of endless night.*'

That was also a part of the Tribunal's control. Honeyed words and promises of power sworn on old oaths. Their charisma roped our families in or if the

happenstance struck... if we were so *lucky*, they came to us as individuals during the natural years of our humanity.

Yes... some of us were humans at one point. Chosen to take up the darkness in the name of a great house; chosen by a fellow Knight to be inducted into a fold of limitless possibilities and wealth. The offer to change the world. It was intoxicating how good they were at luring those into our existence. They had to be good at it, strength in numbers... But I digress...

Knights of Erebus. We are each as unique as we are willing to learn our gruesome craft. Each house has different rites and rules. We are also trained in their techniques while developing our own. For instance, my house... The house of Spiders. Our webs are vicious, invisible, and silent. Made to melt flesh and bone once touched. It goes without saying that our skills mimic spiders. Our breed of shadow magic is rooted heavily in the art of transmuting shadows into webs, strings, and wires. Our threads can be comforting and soft to the touch and with a flick of a wrist, thin surgical wire.

My Great Great Grandmother and her twin sister are our house founders; Margot and Marguerite Carlisle, known throughout the Order for their Casting Nets. Razor-thin webbing nearly invisible to the human eye... nearly. Hell, depending on your age in the Order... you could miss them still. Uniquely enough only near-sighted children under the age of 14 years can see them clear as day. Children are exceptionally sensitive, they say.

As Knights, we strive to be at the very top of our houses. We rise in rank for our notoriety, *I'll leave that for you to interpret how that's achieved*. Once you reach the top of the ranks of your various squadrons you become what's called an Exalted Knight. Now, these were considered the true hands of the Tribunal. Their skills with the Obsidian Arts were to be unparalleled and were to rival that of their Tribunal representatives. They were the representatives of their houses whether it be on the battlefield or conference room. They were the proverbial knights in shining armor.

Ever coming to the rescue, ever holding their honor at the highest degree, ever ready to darken the sky, land, and sea on the word. Or at the very least that is what the Tribunal *expects*.

Nonetheless, the Exalted were their personal champions; they bore the weight of leading and coordinating squads, training, and mentoring lesser Knights, Gods be helped if they have families they must attend to. Let's not forget the orders and missions. The Tribunal is a retired bunch and some orders straddled the line of obtuse and lazy. The duties of an Exalted were never over. But we were the poster children for what the rest should be able to accomplish and surpass; if the ambition was great enough. I failed to mention... Exalted are also expected to carry on their normal masquerade as a human of high regard.

Lastly, you have the Squires... these are mostly humans of all ages along with those born into the Order. Typically those born into the Order begin their training at the age of fifteen. You're given a choice to remain a part of the shadows and learn your House's craft or be cast into the realms of mortality, mediocrity, and suffering. There's not much of a choice. There are some foul rumors concerning some of the more senior Houses being *ready for their disappointments*. No child can survive their brand of free will and they understand that better than anyone.

When you're born into the Order there isn't the worry of the Lama Kiri rejecting you and devouring you from the inside out, but if you do not know how to maintain it... you might as well greet the void with silver between your teeth. It's poisonous to know that we're forced to trick our young into a lifestyle for mere survival... Unless you are a smaller House then the stakes are much higher when it comes to acquiring squires.

There is a great distinction between surnamed houses and titled houses. I'll further use my House as an example. The House of Spiders is a titled house. Smaller Houses lack the numbers to be given the notoriety of being recognized by name alone. You hear the last name and you know right away whose family they were or

represented and how quickly your day could go from fine to worse to the end. Typically older Houses, Tribunals usually were surnamed houses. *Usually.*

Titled houses are not large in number. Our family trees aren't so easily traced. There are members of my family that face several walls; while I do not. Smaller Houses are made of many names and many families. Families do indeed come in all shapes and sizes. The duty of an Exalted Knight of a small house is to recruit willing individuals that could advance not only the world at large but the House's strength. If we couldn't have the numbers then we needed sheer skill alone. That was something their prestige couldn't strip from us. Talent was something that money and stature couldn't buy. The act of recruiting wasn't hard. It's never hard convincing a human to join; especially if the Exalted Knight is your attorney, your senator, that odd professor at the university... We offer you something extraordinary; a gift to change your life and your reality. We offer the chance at a new life and fortune. A life of longevity, espionage, and power. It's the entire fantasy package, really. Fast forward to the well-warranted accusations of pure insanity and proving the existence of other realities and powers beyond human comprehension

*... Fast forward to the ceremony of Squires...*

Thankfully there are two separate ceremonies. One for those Squires born into The Order of Erebus Another for those recruited into the Order.

Both ceremonies are momentous events that have their own elaborate preparations... one just possibly can end in death. The Lama Kiri is a fickle thing...

That is what... *it* is called. The Darkness. The very thing that lives in our veins, that hollows us out; figuratively and to an extent quite literally. With the Lama Kiri, we twist and pervert reality into nightmares. The blackest of fruit that was never grown by human hands let alone a mortal. The Lama Kiri is ancient and malevolent to those it deems a stranger. Some of the best humans I have ever met were turned into fatty oil before my very eyes because of arrogance, greed, and low resolve after eating

its fruit. The mortal soul's hunger must be significant enough to vessel the insatiable hunger of the darkness... If not, that soul and its body will be crushed. If the Lama Kiri already lives in your blood, already imprinted on your soul it has no problem further blooming and growing from within. Imagine finding a great mind, someone you know could bring the world into a new age and the peak of their skills to match... only to watch their writhe in pain. To watch onyx opaque slime pour from their orifices, their screams echoing in a silent hall... I remember each one that failed... I remember seeing their flesh roast from the inside out. At first, the scent was intoxicating, the first few whiffs... is divine but then the boiling froth of fat is something else entirely. With the sickeningly sweet smell of rot, the muscles, fibers, and cartilage shred and peel apart, and the body blooms as if they were time lapsed flesh painting of a sunflower. There was always a chance for rejection... At least the Lama Kiri recognizes offspring... some Houses are only lucky for at least that...

There was a good number of us that were squired at the same time. Regardless of House size, you were trained together, you worked together, you were friends; you never notice politics that young. We all were trained together, except for Eris. She wasn't allowed to join our reindeer games until after the ceremony. We were under strict orders when in her presence. I remember the rumors the children spread from their parents. From what we were told and the rumors that we heard, you would have assumed that Eris was a juggernaut... an absolute beast. I remember Christina's initial expression. She was shocked to see that Eris looked no different than us. We didn't even know who she was until she was announced onto the center stage. It translated into something simple...

*Eris Dagenhart and the House of Wolves were a problem.*

It's a very broad statement, yes, however concise. There was a hierarchy, clearly. No one can truly escape the disparities of societal hierarchies in this life. On this planet, the higher you climb the more comfortable you become eating your own...figuratively and literally. You can excel in your human life, then become a Knight with riches beyond your very limited dreams and you will still have noses turned up at you. As I mentioned before the Surnamed Houses have great age on them while the Titled Houses struggle to build and we must rely heavily on our talents. The Dagenharts and the House of Wolves were a small force but they are nothing but talented.

The auditorium was massive, in the center it held a perfectly crafted hexagonal stage. Roughly twenty-five feet in diameter. The flooring was marble. Standing on the marble stage wasn't very spectacular, I supposed this was out of kindness. The stage was warm. Not because of the lighting. Because directly below the stage was more or less hollow, and inside swarmed a ravenous Lama Kiri in its... what we could assume was its frenzy state. The uncultivated darkness swarms warmed the stage and bit of the area around it. The Lama Kiri is grown and cultivated beneath the building the Order dubbed The Crossed Blades. The building itself was only four stories, located on private commercial property owned by the Order of Erebus. The Crossed Blades was far enough out of the way that not many humans questioned the lone building.

*Out far enough that humans wouldn't question the screams*

Three floors beneath the basement is where the Lama Kiri is maintained and secured. There is little to no ventilation in the actual facility where it's held. If you can say that. How can you truly secure a creature that thrives in the darkness with or without your aid? We're merely just containing it; hindsight is 20/20. Somehow over the centuries, a small part of the Lama Kiri eventually took up residence beneath the marble stage. It was aware of the potential of access to flesh. The flooring had no groat work and was dangerously slick when wet. I suppose everyone likes the food cooked to flavor. The Lama Kiri is not a merciful creature. Just as I stated previously,



human flesh smells delectable, I often wondered why didn't simply attack from the instant the poor soul took the stage.

One of our newest family members said that it reminded him of his grandmother's hands. Soothing though completely ready to snatch him off the world if he misbehaved. It was that familiar tenderness that radiated from the floor that could be felt from all parts of the stage like a constant wave of energy. The warmth halted while Eris was Squired. The floor was cold and stagnant. When she knelt down on one knee, her head bowed and her fist touched the stage; the Lama Kiri stilled.

*We were young*, and barely knew better but we knew what mortified us. All of my days into my adulthood, I had never known this corner of its voracity to quail. Our elders weren't on that stage. They were behind and under the comfort of our House banners so they didn't and couldn't feel our sense of security ripped from us. The only ones that were on that stage that didn't have a visceral reaction were Sir Augustine Dagenhart and his keeling granddaughter, Eris Dagenhart. I saw James of House Grey grab his stomach and mouth, my friend was either going to vomit or scream. He was trembling and looked as if he wanted to glance at his father, Markus Grey, very founder of House Grey and Tribunal. He was a grave man not known for coddling. Poor James just stood there shaking staring at me as I glanced at Christina. She was already looking back to her family; it gave me permission to turn to mine. The Twins were confused by our expressions. They didn't understand why there was horror in our eyes. They couldn't feel the chill, the absence of the warmth of the stilled creature beneath our feet. It wasn't until they heard the shifting armor of those who guarded the stage in front that they figured something was amiss. The guards were close enough to the stage to feel the comfort of the heat being snuffed out. There was always armored detail for the event, whether they bore kevlar vests and shotguns or in their ceremonial knight regalia and swords in the Crossed Blades.

Margot grabbed onto her sister Marguerite, they were reading the visages of the other elders and Tribunals. What was left...

A large portion of the Order of Erebus and Its Tribunal narrowly escaped an attack less than 72 hours prior. That was very the reason for the ceremony. It was impromptu; we were promised something still lavished nonetheless for sake of posture alone. Everyone there was pristine. No marks or bruises on the lot, thanks to the Lama Kiri and its healing properties. The look in their eyes held their wounds instead. One of the largest bases and worksites for the Order was ravaged, Harborage. There were many casualties that night not only there but apparently at the Tribunal business event in Iceland. It was a Dagenhart that supplied the tourniquet for both locations.

For public sake, both incidents were classified as *domestic terror attacks*. The attack on Harborage left seven Knights dead alongside one hundred and fifty human civilians. The explosions were starting from the bottom to the top. While Sir Dagenhart's only daughter, Moirai, started working her way from top to the bottom. Her brother, Ares fled. Not to his father.. He just fled. Meanwhile, in Iceland, it was Eris who bit down on the throats of the uninvited guests to the Tribunal's meet.

All three descendants were Knights of a different caliber. They were what Augustine called his family Gravis Knights. After paying his dues to the Order, Augustine ascended to Tribunal. The bloodline had suffered before coming into the Order. The remaining members agreed to start a House rather than suffer at the whims of the other elders. Which most of the elders respected, aside from *the few*. The members at the time placed the blockade of legacy to temporarily keep the young blood out. Once you're a Knight of Erebus time & aging are on your own terms; once you're a Tribunal you are guaranteed nothing but time. Rather than utilize his abundance of such, Augustine reverted to what brought him into the fold in the first place. His deviant touch for marrying the arcane and science. It would be a full three years before they realized his creations were already among the living & breathing world serving as his children. He created two fully formed humanoids with a frighteningly sharp intelligence along with physical strength to match. He would never admit it allowed but he used them and his granddaughter as his protectors.

It was dreadful how beautiful his children were and are. Lord Dagenhart would tell you that he named his children before he saw them and their forms were of their own design; and that he loved them regardless. Ares was the embodiment of the weight of such a name. His skin was a gentle olive, his hair bronze waves that coiled at the ends. He was nearly as tall as his father at roughly 6'3, he was his name's sake, Ares possessed the physique of a sculptor's dream. His sister on the other hand was graciously his opposite. If Copper could dream to alter its state and embody a living creature, it still would not come close to the perfection of the woman that would later give birth to a nightmare. Her name was Moirai and her hair was in locs that seemed alive and darker than shadow and shade. I can remember staring into her hair and being lost in the kinks and coils. It was like watching kinetic art move. She was an African goddess, awe-inspiring and atrocious to cross. Her eyes were ripped from the sun itself and they were always hunting and starving. It was rumored that devoured three of the informants that the Tribunal sent in secret. It was untrue. Five were sent and she devoured them all nearly down to the bone.

The Tribunal wasn't mortified that one of their own was able to bend fabrics of the natural order that even they knew they should not touch... No. They were mortified that it was done by an up-and-comer. Augustine was still in his natural age after joining the Tribunal. A mere sixty-five with the visage of a fifty-year-old. His peers however were well into their second or third century. There were some that were elated that their own showed such prowess; they thanked the Void for finding the young lord. The others were grotesquely astounded that such a feat was committed in the first place, let alone they had never known for three years. There would be a cataclysmic fissure among the Tribunal. They threatened to convene and order his children dispatched. There was a trial where he had to show their humanity...

The whole ordeal was hypocritical and outright obtuse. Shadowmancers are... far from humble, to say the least. Our moral compass is non-euclidean by comparison. So why teach virtues that Shadowmancers don't and moreover can't live by? Let's face it; why ask monsters to live as humans? We are monsters with human skin and they

were no different. They're just more beautifully crafted by the Void itself. The latter you cannot tell me otherwise. The young lord had to convey other reasons why his children should live. The opposing feared his children so much that they could barely even see them as such. 'His creations; his children. Regardless of how they were crafted, Augustine Dagenhart shamed them for not having the wisdom to see beyond the blood of the womb. They were his children and chosen heirs. With that, the opposing argued that he could have heirs at any point in time. Why were these creations... his children so special right now?

One of the selling points to let his children live was the fact that there were indeed sterile. He stated that the process was through modification out of fear of the rite's cycle starting again. The truth was those that who gravely opposed Ares and Moirai's existence were stricken with fear, cowardice, and the unknown possibilities that Moirai and Ares presented. They knew that at least one of their own could succeed at playing God, what else could he do? What could his *children* do? Could beasts beget beasts?

Then the question became what could they *gain from the Dagenharts as their own House*? What structures could they dwindle down by the sheer ingenuity of this House? Would they be able to reclaim seats of power that have been lost to them? Could unforeseen tables turn? If for only possibility sake... then, yes. But as it stood... This was poor planning on their part... If only they were nice... they're gain could have been exponential. Their fear ripped them from the bargaining table and their pride dragged them out of the door. They wouldn't let such youthful talent go unchallenged or unchecked, but now the schism between the Tribunal began and it was brought about by their own hands. They had to see this out, even in the face of hindsight.

Their point was to his arcane that had been cycled the Dagenhart bloodline, another point to gain was that even if the skills couldn't be learned; the young lord can produce an army if he so chose. All bearing an undocumented skillset based on their bloodline alone. If he ran out of his family, Lord Dagenhart could manufacture more.

Augustine implored that it was far more difficult than what they can imagine. He refused to lay out the process of creating Moriai and Ares, that would be something that he would take to his grave. That alone lengthened the decision-making process.

The ruling was unfair. The statues that were in places were one-sided... and the decisions set forth were made out of jealousy and bigotry. That is what any elder of the House of Spiders will tell you along with the rest of those that were Titled houses would agree as well. There was a stark line drawn in mud. Lord Dagenhart was allowed to keep his children leaving them with the title Gravis Knights, never to become a Knight of Erebus. However, any offspring of Dagenhart descendants were entitled to become a Knight of Erebus. He was forbidden from creating more. It was cruel knowing full well the circumstances and the unlikelihood that he marry and sire his own children. They had the rest results proving the sterility of his children. He could recruit those into the Order of Erebus but there was no House to call his own. It was wrong. It was privileged. Yes, he was thankful for the lives of his children, but he was robbed of the rights that were due to him. The fracture they wanted to avoid happened anyway just with more candor. The Order was still intact, but lines were drawn and haphazardly swept away. It didn't negate the memory or the record that they were drawn in the first place.

Then call it Fate, Nature, or just plain... Happenstance. Moirai became pregnant, two decades later. . According to my Marguerite, Augustine stormed his way into the conference room and shouted from the top of his lungs, " I'm going to be a fucking GRANDFATHER YOU PIECES OF SHIT!" Then proceeded to throw rum-soaked cigars at them cackling about like a 6'4 leprechaun. It's one of her favorite stories to tell about Augustine.

There wasn't denying the situation on any front. During their trial, they ran all the tests they could to prove that Moirai and Ares were sterile. Augustine never told them what exactly he used to craft his children, maybe that was his point. During the

trial, Augustine made sure to include one careful phrase, *at this moment in time*. It was in the Erebian code, previous rulings cannot change due to new events due to the length of Shadowmancer's life. This is challenged in instances of Order disruption, such as treason against the Order itself.

The young Tribunal member had a reputation for tallies and playing long games. The nail in the coffin started to rise to the dismay of a few. But out of dismay came opportunity. The first to congratulate him was Lord Grey. Lord Markus Grey, A First Generation Knight, Now Tribunal. He wasn't the loudest in opposition, he had others to do that for him and were happy to do so. Lord Grey was the first Knight Summoned by the then radiant and youthful hands of Queen Victoria herself. He was already among English knighthood some years prior to taking his dark oaths. His house was the largest. His newest son was born some months prior to Augustine's dramatic announcement. His son that was recently born was James.

The man that would usurp them all was standing before him, and Lord Grey knew it then and it dawned on him yet again as Eris was getting sired. Eris Klytemnestri Dagenhart was the start of a House that was never meant to be and plotted against so that it would not be... yet here she was.

Her hair was in twin braids; black as night, no different from her mother's. She adorned the icons of her newly formed House. The relics were just that... relics. Call it youthful nativity but I assumed they wouldn't have such, as their house was now being built. Lord Augustine towered over Eris, in his left hand was a large stone, black agate. The gem was larger than a softball with a quarter of it missing, the core was hollowed and jagged. In bedded... That wasn't the correct word. *Skewered* through the gem was an anelace, an elegant long slender dagger. Its hilt was nearly in the form of the lemniscate. The infinity of the hilt was broken by what looked like the bone maw of a canine. The effigy was old and appeared to have weight to it. My eyes were attracted to it, but my mind screamed the longer I stared. It pained me to look at the thing but I was ultimately drawn in by it. My vision blurred, and the chill from the

still floor made my stomach churn something was all wrong with that object. In the maw of the effigy was the dark fruit of the Lama Kiri.

It was archaic, it was... it looked wet, or viscus was covering it. It was wrong. Everything in my core told me so. Looking over at Christina, she felt the same. Her hands were over her ears. Her fingers were digging into her scalp. It was like she was actively hearing something. She looked at me, pleading for me to do or say something to make it stop. I didn't realize I was trembling alongside her until I looked down at my own feet. I didn't want to look at James again. I didn't want to gaze across the stage to see his face to see his human reaction. He wasn't the strongest among us to start with. Lord Grey was his greatest bully; I couldn't look across to my friend and see him at his weakest...and confirm what Lord Grey was already sensing. I couldn't be the one to confirm that his youngest was not living up to the grand standard of bravado and chivalry of House Grey.

*We were all, goddamn children.*

There was no poker face I could wear if I looked to James, and his father would read me down. The Knights around the stage were still enamored by the Lama Kiri state or lack thereof. Their mummings among themselves grew. Rather than facing the crowd, they stared turning towards the stage. Armor clamored, confusion began to stir; all the while our senses started to drill into our skulls. Lord Augustine came to a full stop before his kneeling granddaughter, who seemed unphased by the foul aura being emitted from the relic. Hindsight, why would the Dagenharts be affected by their own device...

With his stop, the Lord snapped his heels together to silence the slow-building rumble of all those in the auditorium. There was a ghastly smile etched on his pale face as he started to give the commencing speech. This was a dual event the start of a House and squiring; the normal vows for this occasion wouldn't have done.

"Here on this remarkable day, the last of *Her* blood kneels before us. She walked this realm before Axsum knew its name. She was stolen from her home and dragged to Old Cornwall before the Nri Kingdom could even wake. The Matriarch of All Dagenharts would see their downfall in France during her third cycle of the Rite of the Crimson Anathema. Last of her blood, third-generation survivor of the Rites, Eris Klytemnestri Dagenhart, the future of the once fruitful House starts anew."

He lowered the relic to Eris. We all were in pain on that stage in one form or another our senses had been assaulted. But Eris... she stared right into the aged bone's jaw without being phased by the gruesome object. For a moment it looked as if she was admiring her own reflection in the broken agate. My eyes snapped back to Christina her fright became to grow her grip on her ears tightened; she wanted to pull them off, but her expression alone indicated that she was hearing something new and more foreboding than before. She had been fighting back her tears just like the rest. We were just squires. We were supposed to represent the incoming Knights... WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE THE PRIDE OF OUR HOUSES. We were told that each moment of our rising, while we were on that stage we needed to exemplify our House. This was our first step into not only the Knighthood but the first step in becoming agents of change for the world. We were letting each House know who we were growing into, cards the Elders were playing with. We were faces that would go out and fight the wrongs of the world... we were children and we were forbidden from having childlike reactions. We could not afford to be weak...

Christina sobbed. I wanted to run to my friend and console her, I just wanted to drag her and James off of the stage and let whatever madness happen without us present any longer. Lord Dagenhart continued his preamble but I couldn't focus on his words for Christina's sobbing. Before I could move, I felt my mother's webbing holding my shadow in place; halting my very frame. No doubt it was the same for James. I finally dared to look up to Lord Grey across the amphitheater's stage.



He was leaning into the stage. It wasn't disappointment on his face; Lord Markus Grey was smiling. There was a grin as bright as the day on his face. His hands were gripping the seat of one of his children. His older brother and sister were holding out one arm each. Fists trembling. How hard was James pulling against them for both of his siblings to be keeping a hold of his shadow? I didn't realize until then... it was his siblings keeping his hands over his mouth. He was struggling to remove them and run to Christina or even just plainly run off the stage. Just as her cries were getting louder, her own parents intervene the only way they could. Christina was snatched to the ground soundlessly but force could be felt; so much so that my mother's webbing for a moment recoiled from the sharp jolt. She was out cold. With her silence, I could hear, Lord Augustine once again, but I wish... I wish that I hadn't.

" Take, the offering of the Lama Kiri and be founder just as She, journey into Knighthood that was robe from your mother."

Eris snatched the blackened fruit from the maw and inhaled in merely two bites. She enjoyed it beyond what I could have imagined. The taste is different for each and every one of us but all the same, there is a pain that comes with ingesting it. Eris didn't wince, she didn't flinch, she giggled. IT was wrong, it was reversed then forward and back again. Hearing her own laughter caused her chuckle to grow. She grabbed her sides, either she was laughing that hard or the fruit's effects were taking hold. The Lama Kiri could be seen writhing beneath the surface of her skin swimming along the sides of her face and neck. Leaving trails of opaque impressions that faded away just as they appeared. It swam before her eyes, up her forehead finally into her scalp. Her twin braids of kinks and coils unfurled and held its form and matter and yet it flowed into the air as if she submerged in water. As the Lama Kiri took its root inside of her, it traveled down the back of her neck to her spine. It gripped her spine causing her to let out a brief sigh. A slow stream of shadows poured from her back, leafless tendrils sailed into the air in a steady blossom. But the expression on Eris's face didn't match the serene display. Her amber eyes were alight with hunger; her smile was that of a rabid dog. Without warning, Lord Dagenhart leaped backward and

his own tendrils released from his back but sharply took their hold on the floor and hoisted him into the air several feet above his granddaughter.

"Eris Klytemnestri Dagenhart of The House of Wolves, stand and howl."

Eris too followed suit, her shadows were a woven combination of the tendril and the sharp stakes hoisting her in the air, respectably not as high as him. She was art... an omen... I could recall only thinking how pretty she was then...

I don't know what that was but a howl that was absolutely not. That was beyond a scream, it was a roar yet there was some humanity to it; an immortal rage that was summoned from the same hellscape that the artifact hailed from. The strength of the roar was enough to tremble the room. My mother lost her grip again and I stumbled. Or maybe she let go much earlier but I didn't notice because of the metamorphosis before me. The same could be James's siblings, I saw his mouth fall agape as his hands lowered. hearing anything at all far beyond the *whisper on a scream* metaphor. The roar spiraled downward into silence. I heard James's gasp as from the shadows below Lord Dagenhart climbed out two phantasmic giant Irish Wolf Hounds they clawed at the surface from the depths of an unknown plane flanking both sides of his stakes.

"Call forth your Shadow Egos!"

Her own beast spawned forward but these two massive creatures materialized from the ground up. They stood nearly to Eris's waist while hoisted. The festering beasts' fur looked as alive as their summoner's hair, Peering into the darkened fur, I found it staring right back at me. Their jaws are far too long and wide for a normal wolf even of that stature. As they walked, there was a grinding sound as they passed. To this day, I could have sworn I heard children's laughter when it passed me for a moment.

" They are Scylla and Charybdis!" She shouted as she welcomed them to her side proudly as the beast flanked her sides. The pride on her face beamed through the hunger in her eyes. Those of the folk side of Shadowmancy believe that Shadow Egos can either be created or if your connection to the Lama Kiri was deep enough it could be created. I couldn't tell with what was before my eyes, but it was a nightmare on acid.

This was why we were never allowed to train with her. She already had an ego! She was several stages before us and yet she was NOW being squired. We were all the same age! I stumbled backward in the sheer fright of the thought alone. You were supposed to announce your ego at your Knighting. Looking back now, it was Augustine's show of absolute force. If you did not have the numbers... you needed the talent.

For the first time during the entire event, the silence of the crowd was broken by the cheering of Lord Grey. His howl and claps were alone until his frantic jubilation strummed up his followers then so proceeded the rest of those in attendance. The Titled Houses roared, dues were being met it seemed. I studied the look on Lord Grey's face. It wasn't just that celebration, congratulations, and acceptance. Lord Grey's joy was that of... it can best be described as Florida Man. The ancient Lord's joy was equivalent to Florida Man, finally getting to the Fuck Around part of the, *fuck around and find out*. He finally had a partner willing to play his games. But to what end?

The next move wouldn't be made until the Knighting ceremony

## Chapter 2

### i.

#### Pacts

Uniquely enough, Houses did train together on a formal and informal basis. Surnamed Houses only visited their *lesser* counterparts in times when they needed to save face... House talents cannot be copied and passed around however certain skills from other techniques could be studied and utilized.

The House of Thistle was the self-proclaimed Folk Shadowmancers. The Order's residential pleasantly nihilistic hippies. Their biggest concern was the health between Shadowmancer and the Lama Kiri as a whole. The darkness had a copious amount of uses but the House of Thistle's specialty was primarily healing. There were herbalists, chemists, doctors, botanists, and virologists in their ranks to attempt to map the Lama Kiri's knowable functions; while their Divulgers form telepathic links with the Lama Kiri in attempts to commune with it. Often they were left with more questions than answers.

As it was explained by elder Divulgers, imagine the make-up of a membrane. That single membrane contains life and knowledge that spans a millennium of lifetimes all touched and connected by the Void. Time without consciousness to Time when the last thought was extinguished— is what was held in a single membrane. But that membrane is a part of a sea of millions if not billions of membranes that make up the ever-encompassing black tree whose limbs and vines were coiling around shapes euclidean and non. More or less, it was nearly impossible to commune and understand the information to a moot point. Divulgers that dare commune as far to see the tree... reveal findings then kill state the same thing in the end.

They've come to understand nothing. Coming to comprehend boundless knowledge and age beyond the understanding of what could not be thoroughly perceived found them with nothing. The Death.

The Divulgers are careful not to go as far; *these days*. Death is avoidable; why go headlong into it for the sake of curiosity, when it's already been proven again and again communing too much will drive Knights all to an early end. Now the Divulgers use their collective knowledge in a more *hands-on* healing approach. Medics of every House were encouraged to learn critical care and field medicine with them.

However, Eris Dagenhart came to the O'Brien Estates to meet with one of their Divulgers to do just that... divulge. She was twenty-eight and working on her Ph.D. in virology. In all honesty, her degree and doctorate were busy work for her until she inherited Harbourage from her grandfather, Augustine Dagenhart. She was meeting with Niko, the head of the House, to work out an extraction tactic.

Eris was preparing for her Knighthood. Being the heir to the Order's cover company didn't entirely sit well with the young Dagenhart. Her blood was a fury of energy and ideas. Sitting behind a desk for the remainder of her existence until she deemed it necessary to pass her mantle... was not how she wanted to spend her days. Eris figured that she needed to start enjoying her active free time before she was forced into being the figurehead. There was no better way than becoming an Inquisitor and heading the Extraction Unit. An Inquisitor's duty was two-pronged. Extract information or extract a target. If the extraction cannot be processed then the target is dispatched. If the information cannot be achieved or then the area could be wiped out and turned into a shadowy hellscape. Depending on the risk to satisfaction margin. It could either be an elaborate game of hide and seek or seek and destroy. It was decided when the command was cast down. Then the hunt began.

Obsidian Trace Detection. She theorized that the Divulgers should be able to trace lingering whereabouts and Shadowmancer has used their ability. The Divulgers, like the historians of the Order, have a record of techniques and signature

specialties to varying Houses and the individuals that created said technique. However, unlike the historians, the Divulgers are able to see patterns in the material plan that connect back to the Lama Kiri. Eris surmised that there could be a way to track the movements of Shadowmancers in places where they would have used their abilities. There had to be a way to track Shadwomancers beyond sight and smell. The Hunts were easy where the trail was fresh and she could literally smell the Lama Kiri simmering below the surface scents no matter how they tried to disguise it. It was when the trails were bone cold, that she nor the Elders could get a read. There had to be a way to formulate a device to amplify their senses and acuity ' *What is a hunter without a means to track even those like it? Future prey.*' There were potential pieces to be laid out in front of her. Either the Divulgers could track and none have thought to utilize their gifts or there needs to be some sort of conduit constructed. Combined with the resources of Harbourage, the Dagenhart Archives, and knowledge of the Divulgers there was no excuse. More or less, she was there to have them prove to her that it couldn't be done.

Eris was escorted to Niko's personal greenhouse. His staff was setting up for their meeting, bustling about moving around the tea tables. Niko was never one for formal meetings and rathered the comfort and privacy of gardens. Apparently, he had a meeting previously and wanted the area spruced before Eris arrived, however, she came a few minutes early.

"Just like your Grandfather."

A whisper came from behind. She didn't see who spoke but she could certainly smell them. Their fragrance was subtle yet savory, she was put in the mind of breakfast rolls. The voice wasn't of her host's, however.

"Oh?" She replied looking over her shoulder. "And how's that?"

"You both cause quite a stir when making an entrance, Ms. Dagenhart. Or should I say, soon to be Lady Dagenhart" The voice chuckled before from the

shadows of the greenhouse appeared a gentleman. A husky fellow, around 5'10 possibly taller if he didn't slouch. She made a mental note. Brunette with a slight butt chin; if she were being generous she would say his appearance would land him about forty-five years of age. *If* she were generous.

"Forgive me, you look familiar. I want to be as respectful as possible, I know you're a Tribunal Member...I cannot place your face" She nodded in respect.

Eris merely needed to know how far she can be disrespectful if need be. It wasn't that she didn't like the comparison; it was the fact that males of the family have ongoing...*feuds* with the most random assortment of people.

Two months ago, Waverly, Augustine, and she attended a charity museum; during the silent auction, Augustine grabbed them both and whispered that they all three make a dash for the door or they would need to get ready to '*fold omelets*'. Before anyone could make a move a man came screaming toward them while he was dragging his wife. Apparently, Augustine had come on to his wife, then when she didn't approve while her husband was mere feet away from the conversation. In order to defuse the oncoming argument, Augustine did the most reasonable thing he could have done... Start coming on the husband as well. Needless to say, they didn't appreciate it. The amount that Eris has had to hear the phrase they *coming let's go!!* was innumerable. For her own benefit, she needed to know, if this was one of those moments, usually when people see her without the men, she's not treated as equally as the target. Usually.

"Nothing to forgive. I was in Iceland and I was very much present for your Squiring." The stranger chuckled. He had an accent, British, his tone heavier and lower to what she's used to. He bowed his head. "Octavian Lennox, Tribunal. Please, don't Lord Lennox me. I get that all day as it is. It's torture."

"I'll keep that in mind, Octavian. Or does hearing your own name drive you up the wall, as well?" Eris chuckled.

There was a salacious thought that crossed his mind as she said his name. He couldn't fight the smirk and thankfully he didn't need to struggle holding in an improper comment when Niko's staff got their attention.

"Sir, Madam, tea, and pleasures are ready for you." The attendant wore long hemp robes and palazzo pants. Their hair was up in a turban and wore a collar that dripped with pearls. "This way."

The pair were seated at a low table with three large foam chairs. Next to the table were two hookahs, three black boxes stacked on the table, and wine glasses. Two were up while one was down. There was a tray of fruits and vegetables next to the wine decanter. Eris knew those chairs immediately. As a parting gift, Niko had sent one to the estates as soon as he learned that she was taking up virology at the start of her college career. There was no mistaking what would be taking place in Eris's mind. She's never known Niko to be open about his activities. There were plenty of times she begged him and his family's pardon for needing a bit of mentoring and at the end of those sessions Niko would pull out the black boxes and they would indulge in the finer things that the earth had to offer. Niko's taste was in virology; but for these ventures, he combined his knowledge of botany, virology, and Divulging, he managed to take the bits of the Lama Kiri and infuse them with cannabis. The Folk Shadowmancer justified that if they came up with groundbreaking ideas... well... sometimes you need a push.

Once seated, Octavian took it upon himself to start pouring their wine. The attendant apologized for their host's tardiness but he had to take a call and would join their company as soon as possible.

"It's rude of me to ask, but did Niko invite you, or was I the invite?" He carefully passed her the wine glass.

"To be honest, I was going to ask the same. Niko is fairly..."



"Paranoid, beyond reason when it comes to smoking weed or creating psychotropics as if human laws apply and we can't simply hide all traces in a pocket of shadows? Or that he likes to pretend that he's a private smoker when simply he doesn't care to admit he's just an introvert that likes getting high but when small doses of people.- He wants everyone to feel inclusively- exclusive."

"Wow, read him. In his own home, no less." She arched her brow as she sipped her wine. "You could at least wait until he got out here, to defend himself."

"I'd have better luck taking you hostage and he defending you before he defends himself." Octavian laughed behind his glass. "He'd tell you the same, at least. The big question is: are we both here to just get blasted with Niko or have you come for business?"

"I'll let our host decide that." She smiled coyly. "Besides, if he has a surprise for you, I wouldn't want to be the one to ruin a good time. After all, who doesn't enjoy a well-timed and well-devised surprise." Eris gave a slight shrug.

"Not everyone." He adjusted his seating on the foam chair; so he didn't topple over to the side as he leaned to his left. He was counting the number of wine bottles, in an attempt to answer his own question while engaging the youngest Dagenhart. "Too much planning, if you ask me.-"

"Good thing, no one did" Their host finally appeared. Niko materialized from the front of the greenhouse, walking towards the seated pair. His robes were still forming from shadow at the cuff of his sleeves as he sat to join them. "Many apologies, a few panicked politicians from the start of the day, but a few of their experiments got out of control. That's a *thing*." He shook his head pouring a glass of wine.

"So, that's why we're *day drinking*?" Eris snorted giving her mentor a sympathetic brow. "Another formula mishap?"

Niko started the art of rolling joints. Methodically, he laid out his roller, grinder, tray, and papers. Without looking up, Niko handed Octavian a separate black box. Octavian recognized it for the hookas between them. "Pick a flavor. Pass." He muttered before addressing Eris while grinding the Lama Kiri laced cannabis. "If it were only that simple. We have missing loose lips. Loose sample host... and a watch"

"One of ours-wait. A watch??" Octavian gently thumbed through the Shisha flavors with his brow raised. There was one particular flavor that took him back to his darker days in Leeds before joining the Order. Satisfaction formed in his eyes as he plucked the Shisha dubbed Victorian Delight from the box; he gingerly passed the box to his right.

"The clock is stupid... but they want the clock..." Niko grabbed the bridge of his nose and pushed his glasses upwards. "The humans spent a whole hour going on about a fucking clock. Actually no. Not even a watch, it's a watch box. I'm not talking about it anymore, fuck that thing."

"What the fuck a watch box" Eris muttered, her brows knitted together in confusion. "Well, for the rest you can just send out a group to flush them out from their hidey-hole Unless there's a request of sanity." She nodded in her thanks as she thumbed for the plum flavor. A small happy sound came from her throat before she continued. "You know, Niko... I'm not-"

"No, Ma'am." the folk Shadmancer looked up from rolling, not before finishing all three; then sliding them to his company. "First of all, you're still a squire. I'm not sending you on a mission-"

"What's wrong with sending squires on missions?" He nodded in thanks for the joint Niko slid. Eris couldn't tell if his lifted brow was in mock or if Octavian was actually offended. "Think about the number of years between ranks. It's a good while of training and development, you know that."

"I also know, you have no problems sending children to war." Niko offered them all a light.

"I'm not a child, Niko." Eris waved him off. She dug herself deeper into the cushion for a bit for back support. "And to be fair we're not talking about war. Maybe a simple task of Hide and Seek. Which-"

Niko held up his hand, the bracelets he wore maybe a slight chime after shaking his raised palm. "Let's light up first. Today is going to get longer if, we don't"

After a brief toast, the trio began smoking to their heart's content. There were stifled whispers from the embers of the joints rather than the sounds of soft crackles with each drag. It wasn't long before the greenhouse was fogged from their combined smoking. The sunlight cascaded on the rooftop beaming into the stained glass ceiling. Octavian spun the stem of his wine glass between his thumb and middle finger. He noticed how the sun caught Eris's eyes and curiously they caught his. It was the way sunlight brightened her embers. Their color beckoned him to recall something faintly from a dream. A blazing sunset sinking on a burning wheat field. Glory.

"Tell me, friend. Why I've been summoned? Not that I don't enjoy day drinking and smoking; I simply feel as if there's more to my invite." Octavian spoke warmly slowly taking his gaze back to their host.

"I called you here so you can also, weigh in some new torture tactics and devices?" The latter Niko smiled towards Eris, proving that he indeed felt some sort of interest in her idea of the tracer.

Curiously, Octavian looked between them both "sounds like something I'll like-"

"Then you're in luck, Lord Lennox." Eris dragged on the joint and then blew the smoke over her shoulder. "I'm suggesting we use the abilities of the Divulgers to

trace our own shadow signatures. In the event, someone betrays the Order or someone is lost to us." She gingerly slid her glass over to the Tribunal member.

The hairs on the back of Octavian's neck rose, hearing his surname. Huskily a chuckle slipped from his lips. Charmed, Octavian obliged and filled her glass. "Please, continue." It was nonchalant and yet blatant. It caught the Elder off guard.

"I propose the Obsidian Trace Detection devices. A portable device that can be adapted for vehicles and for personal protective gear smaller than a quarter that can trace Obsidian signatures even after the trail has gone cold. The Divulgers have records of our signatures which is an indicator of House or a singularity. We can use the extractions tactics built by my grandfather, copy the collective knowledge of the Divulgers and transform that into live data that's translated and relayed back to the device's operator." Eris paused, sipping her newly refilled glass. She looked between her host and Octavian. She was more concerned about Niko's reception of the idea. She watched his visage, he was enjoying the atmosphere all too much for Eris to get a read on him. . Eris didn't need to guess about Octavian. He was either taking the bait or he was annoyed that she directly disobeyed an order by a Tribunal Member.

Eris gingerly turned to gaze to Octavian. He seemed lost, not in her explanation but in thought. She took a slow drag from the joint. She coiled the smoke around her tongue and for a brief moment she thought about blowing ringlets to snap him out of the trance he seemed to be in. In better judgment, she blew the smoke over her shoulder and cleared her throat. "You're interested?"

The pair of men sat in their silence both in some form of a daze. One looking away and the other staring at her but somewhere far from her being.

"We have been interested in such a device since before Augustine was born." Octavian kept his fixated in a place beyond them right now them all. Then her eyes guided him back to their cloudy present where a horrible past and future faced. "So has the Order of Gaisma... You've tussled with them yet?"

"No, I simply know them as partners of Harborage. For the moment."

"You'd be well to know more of them. They've wanted to track us, as well. Then again when isn't the light chasing the dark? Small yet powerful bunch of menaces, our Light Weilding brethren. If we have such a device then they would also as equally have access to it. We're the Eyes of the World, what's good for the goose..."

"What if not for the Knights of Erebus alone them... what if for a competitive edge?" She offered. There was a darkening in the grin she presented.

The two men before her weren't born Shadowmancers. They were humans at one point, though they be damned that they associate themselves with their prior biology. While Eris on the other hand was born something else entirely. Her grin was slow and growing seemingly displaying too many teeth for a brief moment. "If it's good for the gander, fine. Everything in this material plane has a price, but it doesn't have to be... for everyone. Quality has a price. Who can quality check a product that no one but the creators has the specifications for? Or better yet, a separate product altogether? I understand the plight of being a Titled House or an Independent Knight in comparison to a Surnamed House. It is because I understand our worth that I purpose that we make those at the top pay for a lesser product. There aren't instructions on how to tip the scales; just not to *destroy the scales*. However the larger question still stands, would it be permissible to at least attempt something of this magnitude?"

"And that is the reason why you're here Octavian." Niko's hazed eyes found their focus on the opposite Tribunal Member. " You handle more Independent and Stand Alone Knights than anyone else. I need you to be my voice to them. Because this is more than possible. In our combined histories have you seen progress?"

Octavian clicked his tongue. There was something double-sided in Niko's comment. Admitting that there was no progress meant admitting a failure in leadership. His included. He wanted to defend his two hundred and fifty-year lifespan;

he knew it'd fall on deaf ears. "If we make them pay at a higher price for a defunct. Then what? How is that going to advance our standing?" He scoffed.

"Think about it, Lennox." Niko snorted. "We would be able to fund our squads, to make sure our Knights are well trained, housed and most of all compensated for their humanity. Have you not seen the shit show the material plane is becoming? We can back our own chosen few. Look at Humanity... power keeps begetting power and the Eyes of the World was put in place to stop it and look at us, my friend. We're failing because we are still under the thumbs we thought we ascended from. It's not enough to be talented anymore. We'll easily harvest the resources to change it all. "

"Already acquired." Eris coughed unironically time. She had taken a larger hit. "We have the resources now. The House of Wolves has had the resources and enough resources to ensure that equity is paid fifty times over. You forget, Harbourage caters to the needs of both Shadowmancer and Human. We could put a chokehold on the market for this device. Just different products for different qualified buyers." smoke seeped from her lips between her teeth as she spoke, the glowing embers in her eyes made her look like an old God. Or one of their many faces.

Octavian was still a man that held on to his faith in Hekate despite the Lama Kiri. In his day, the days when his Coven was alive, he was a pious believer. His Goddess tested him to ensure he was worthy of Her eternal graces. When Hekate sent her demands; Octavian executed them with precision. When he faltered the consequences were measured just so that he could see his error of not following his Goddess. This would be the third time this conversation had occurred in his long lifetime. The age where the device could have been used the most had passed. It was more of a question than a statement; boiling in his mind. The longer he spent watching Eris, listening to such a brazen yet cunning, something eat at him more than the Lama Kiri demanded. It was the way her shadows bounced off the walls; the way they furlled and unfurled and crawled between the ethereal and present, Octavian's

mind shuddered and he ponder but pushed the thought away as quickly as it appeared.  
*What is she; this offspring of the Dagenharts?*

The emerald hues from Octavian's eyes couldn't escape from Eris. He didn't try or was incapable without his own admittance. His silence was brief but enough, "If Niko truly decides- Can I justify to the Knights a possibly pay cut, and the possibility of series bridges being burnt? If I can even convenience the lot, they would need a comfort set aside in the event-"

"He's already decided." Eris rolled her eyes. She leaned back. "Outside looking in there's been this hesitation and timing? Why? Also, if cards are played correctly, no bridges will be burnt. Detours yes, burnt? No-"

"The knighting ceremony is in two years- conveniently" Octavian narrowed his gaze. "I don't suppose your work would happen to take the same amount of time. Hm?"

The grin that was stained on Eris' face from their libations only widen and a low vibration exited her throat. A cheerful rumbling caught between a growl and a purr. "Lord. Lennox. Did you not just hear me? I have the resources now. We can have testing started in six months. . The opportunity isn't lost on me, my Lord. Though, I fear the opportunity I see for myself differs ever so slightly from the one you're envisioning for me?"

*"The seasons of fruition are never timed...* is what the bullshit we've been feeding each other for ages. It is a time for calculation and balance. In six months we'll have a private showing for progress reports. At the ceremony, the masses can have the leftovers as they've given us. We know without a shadow of a doubt that the Titled Houses will eat this up; we need you to sway the independent Knights that are in wanderlust with the fortunes of our brethren. Save their hunger for their own spoils of war. Can we count you?" Niko spoke between them. There was a sense of

exhaustion in his voice; not simply from today's events, but it felt as if the founder of the House of Thistle was carrying away that he was tired of bearing.

"Can the House of Wolves count on you to help create the wave to turn the tide?" Her smile shrank into something more *human*, more compassionate...

It was something tender beyond the fire and Octavian saw it and it was comforting, it was nostalgic and there was a deep sinister poison that not even he could antidote as if he wanted to. "Have the Pacts drawn, Divinity." He referred to Eris, "I'll rally the Knights to your Battle Cry. So long as you never address me as Lord Lennox from your lips again."

"I thought you enjoyed torture."